

Hamlet the Brazilian Way (Machado, Reader of Shakespeare)

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Abstract. Through a re-reading of the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet*, this article explores one of the ways in which Machado de Assis appropriates one of Shakespeare's major tragedies, focusing on the parodic procedures employed by the Brazilian writer in his chronicle "A Cena do Cemitério."

My main purpose is to investigate how the European tradition is incorporated in this short text, arguing that Machado displaces the function normally played by European literature from model to motif, used here for parodic and critical ends.

Occupying the bottom of a newspaper's inside page, a space dedicated to miscellaneous subjects where everything and anything could be used as material to entertain the reader, chronicles have been associated since their origin with the circumstantial, the precarious, and the ephemeral. In his art, an idle chat with the reader characterized by humor and wit, the chronicler is always attentive to daily events, feeding on the very matter newspapers offer him as well as on the minutiae of everyday life. Therefore, one would expect that, the facts that gave rise to it having disappeared, a chronicle would also be destined to be forgotten. This is not the case with Machado de Assis. His more than 600 chronicles, written in the course of more than four decades, give the lie to this transitoriness and, outdoing the circumstances that inspired them, take on a permanent character that allows the reader to enjoy them even today, no matter if some of the facts that generated them have been lost in time.

With the fine irony and sagacity that are his trademark, Machado, from the 1860s until 1900, was responsible for the section named *folhetim* (*feuille-*

ton) in several periodicals current in Rio de Janeiro, commenting on the daily events of the city and the country. Even if he declared himself to be interested only in “catar o mínimo e o escondido” (“to cull the miniscule and the hidden”), Machado offers us an alternative reading of history and of the events that he comments on, provoking the reader with his ironic and therefore distanced point of view. Always alert to the cultural and political facts of his day, the writer placed himself “em seu posto de escuta do mundo” (“in his post wherefrom he heard the world”) to delve into the contingency of daily news, transforming the chronicle into a hybrid space between the journalistic and the literary, where different discourses could mingle and the borders between genres be abolished.

This “escriba de cousas miúdas” (“scribbler of minute things”), as Machado defines himself, from the beginning of his activity as a chronicler pointed to hybridism as the central characteristic of the genre. In a chronicle published on 30 October 1859, the proposition of this mix of disparate elements already presents itself with the airs of a manifesto:

O folhetinista é a fusão admirável do útil e do fútil, o parto curioso e singular do sério, consorciado com o frívolo. Esses dois elementos, arredados como pólos, heterogêneos como água e fogo, casam-se perfeitamente na organização do novo animal. (Assis, “Folhetinista” 958)

[The writer of feuilletons is an extraordinary fusion of the useful and the futile, the curious and unique bringing forth the serious consorting with the frivolous. These two elements, drawn apart like poles, heterogenous as water and fire, produce a perfect fit in the organization of the new animal.]

In effect, Machado would explore all the potentialities of these contrasts and obtain from them extraordinary results, using mixture as a formal, aesthetic resource. At this point, however, one could say that there was nothing new in this procedure. After all, the same kind of proposition was made in a manifesto of Romantic drama, defended by Victor Hugo in his *Preface to Cromwell*. Standing against the rule that prescribed the separation of the genres and in favor of the harmony of contraries, Hugo argued that “[the modern muse] will realize that everything in creation is not humanly *beautiful*, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the unshapely beside the graceful, the grotesque on the reverse of the sublime, evil with good, darkness with

light” (Hugo 31). To reinforce his argument that “it is of the fruitful union of the grotesque and the sublime types that modern genius is born,” Hugo resorts to the example of Shakespeare’s drama, in which “just as the most commonplace have their occasional moments of sublimity, so the most exalted frequently pay tribute to the trivial and ridiculous” (66).

Where then would Machado’s uniqueness lie? How would this chemistry of opposites work out in his chronicles? Just to give one example of the transit between the serious and the comical, the high and the low, let us have a look at the chronicle of 28 May 1885, which, by the way, refers to the very same Victor Hugo, and in which Machado, with his peculiar sense of humor, comments on the sensationalist treatment given by the newspapers to the French writer’s death, comparing it to the *frisson* stirred by the low prices at Alfaiataria Estrela do Brasil. If, on the one hand, the press reports the two facts as if they were equivalent, Machado does not miss the opportunity to stress this procedure, so common in newspapers. Thus, the line—“*Rien n’est sacré pour un sapeur!*” (“Nothing is sacred for a sapper”)—quoted at the beginning of the chronicle, is soon after adulterated and changed into—“*Rien n’est sacré pour un... tailleur!*”¹ In this substitution, which also betrays the mocking spirit of the chronicler, poetic language and commercial discourse also come to be equivalent in an explicit gesture aimed at the desacralization of the former.

I would like to argue, therefore, that the uncommon association between two so heterogenous pieces of news constitutes a compositional feature often employed by Machado in order to produce an unprecedented critical effect in relation to the world of information. By doing this, he brings literature, primarily foreign literature, into the space of the newspaper, and treats it irreverently by using playfulness and humor. If, generally speaking, Brazilian authors looked to European literature as a model to follow and obey, Machado preferred to play with it, embracing literary heritage in order to repropose it parodically.

We all know how abundant are the examples of the presence of foreign writers in Machado’s works. What interests me here, however, is to discuss this particular mode of borrowing and embodiment by examining a chronicle that I consider paradigmatic as far as that Machadian trait *par excellence* is concerned, that is, the debasement of literature to the realm of commodity.

Originally published in the *Gazeta de Notícias*² and later included, under the title of “A Cena do Cemitério” (“The Graveyard Scene”), in the book

Páginas Recolhidas, the chronicle of 3 June 1894 establishes a direct dialogue, as its title indicates, with the famous gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* (Act V, scene 1). At this point, references to Shakespearean drama were not a novelty in Machado's works, nor was an allusion to the tragedy of the Prince of Denmark unprecedented, it being recognizably one of Machado's favorite texts. In fact, a more careful examination of the whole body of his work reveals the fascination this play seems to have exerted on him. Many were the occasions in his short stories and chronicles when Machado had recourse to quoting phrases and lines from *Hamlet*, almost always adapted to circumstances in a playful way.³ There seems to be no better example, however, of a Machadian text's impregnation by the play than this chronicle, one of a series of 248 published in the column *A Semana*.

The Brazilian writer's familiarity with the work of the great English playwright dates, according to his biographers, to 1870, when Machado is supposed to have begun to read English authors.⁴ If *Hamlet* was, according to João do Rio, one of Machado's bedside books,⁵ his knowledge of Shakespeare did not come exclusively from reading. Most certainly, Machado had the opportunity to attend performances of Shakespeare's main plays in Rio de Janeiro. Brought to Brazil in the first half of the nineteenth century through French adaptations, it was the *début* of Ernesto Rossi's Italian company in 1871 that, in the words of Eugênio Gomes, had the "advantage of putting on genuine Shakespearean drama in Brazil."

Eugênio Gomes also informs us that,

from 1876 onwards, echoes of Shakespeare's drama began to be heard more often in (Machado's) work, now and again with allusions both to Rossi and Salvini, both having provided the Brazilian metropolis with the best performances hitherto seen in our country of *Hamlet*, *Othello* and other tragic characters by the English genius. (160)⁶

Whether by means of stagings of the plays in the theatres of Rio de Janeiro, whether by means of the countless references common among the Romantic poets, Machado had constant access to and familiarity with Shakespeare's plays, as his work evidences. However, far from transforming the plays into a literary model, he employed them as an element of mediation through which to examine the facts of the week collected in the newspapers circulating in Rio. This is the case of the 3 June chronicle, in which he parodically rereads the scene of the gravediggers in *Hamlet*.

A master of paradoxical associations, Machado opens the chronicle with a piece of advice to the reader, which contradicts the strategy adopted by the writer himself—“Não mistureis alhos com bugalhos” (“Don’t mix up chalk and cheese”). The warning is directly related to the unpleasant experience, tried by the narrator, of combining the reading of the newspaper and the reading of *Hamlet* before falling asleep. The consequence of this weird combination is a nightmare, caused by the “mistura de poesia e cotação de praça, de gente morta e dinheiro vivo” (Assis, “Cena” 56: “mixture of poetry and price-lists, of dead people and ready money”).

Having in the background the still fresh memory of the financial losses brought about by the “Encilhamento”⁷ in the years 1890 and 1891, and the news of the gains and losses in the Stock Exchange that he had just read about in the newspaper, Machado mingles fiction, drama, and history while including, in the same text, the commercial language of the bidding of bonds and debentures, as well as the debased speech of the narrator and of his “faithful servant,” José Rodrigues, in the roles of Hamlet and Horatio.

Machado masterfully takes advantage of the suspension of natural laws that dreams afford in order to place side by side two different orders of experience. As the narrator himself says, “Nos sonhos há confusões dessas, imaginações duplas ou incompletas, mistura de coisas opostas, dilacerações, desdobramentos inexplicáveis” (57: “In dreams such confusions exist, double or incomplete imaginings, a mixture of opposite things, lacerations, inexplicable developments”). This observation, I would say, also fits like a glove the description of the way the narrative itself is organized. The chronicle, structured as a framed dream, is built on homologies created, on the one hand, by constant references to the world of finances, and, on the other, by the reenactment of the preparations for Ophelia’s burial. Thus, the setting is half living room, half graveyard; the gravediggers are at the same time stockbrokers; bones and promissory notes leap from the grave; bonds are also skulls; Yorick’s skull is simultaneously a debenture.

The tone is one of scorn and derision. There is no vestige of the solemn atmosphere one can sense in the Shakespearean scene. The innocence of Ophelia’s death places her in the sphere of the sublime. Undoubtedly, as Victor Hugo reminds us, Shakespeare in this scene opposes the gravity of the event with the gravediggers’ puns, jokes, and prolixity. Likewise, he mingles the humor and comic nature of the two “clowns” with one of the most sublime moments in the play, in which, in a scene of intense dramatic irony,

Hamlet, unaware of his beloved's death, fantasizes, while leaning over the grave destined for Ophelia.

That which is a moment of profound musing and melancholy before death in Shakespeare's tragedy, already tinged by the gravediggers' grotesque actions and speeches, becomes a sarcastic and parodic scene in which, through the use of playfulness and debasement, Machado juxtaposes literature and the world pertaining to the circulation of commodities, drawing an absolutely remarkable critical effect from all this. What comes out of the grave dug by the gravediggers in the chronicle are debentures rather than bones. While digging, one of them recites a quatrain that directly brings to mind those sung by one of the Shakespearean "clowns":

Era um título novinho,
Valia mais de oitocentos;
Agora que está velhinho
Não chega a valer duzentos.

[It was a brand new bond,
Worth more than eight hundred;
Now that it's old
It's not worth two hundred.]

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* we find, for example:

But age, with his stealing steps,
Hath clawed me in his clutch,
And hath shipped me into the land,
As if I had never been such.

If, in the tragedy, the "clowns" already belong to the realm of the comic and the low, Machado debases his gravediggers even further. They make jokes and puns, talk about banks, bonds, and coins. Machado's Hamlet, with his skull-debenture in his hands, rephrases the original Hamlet's lines about Yorick, transforming the moment of reflection on the transitoriness of life into a comment about the equivalences instituted by the capitalist world between art and commodity. In this, our Brazilian Hamlet's speech, one can hear echoes of his Danish counterpart, and the process of debasement is clear:

— *Alas, poor Yorick!* Eu o conheci, Horácio. Era um título magnífico. Estes buracos de olhos foram algarismos de brilhantes, safiras e opalas. Aqui, onde foi nariz, havia um promontório de marfim velho lavrado; eram de nácar estas faces, os dentes de ouro, as orelhas de granada e safira. Desta boca saíam as mais sublimes promessas em estilo alevantado e nobre. Onde estão agora as belas palavras de outro tempo? Prosa eloqüente e fecunda, onde param os longos períodos, as frases galantes, a arte com que fazias ver a gente cavalos soberbos com ferraduras de prata e arreios de ouro? Onde os carros de cristal, as almofadas de cetim? (59)⁸

[— *Alas, poor Yorick!* I knew him, Horatio. It was a magnificent bond. These holes that were his eyes were figures made of diamonds, sapphires, and opals. Here, where his nose had been, there was a promontory of old wrought ivory; the cheeks were made of mother-of-pearl, his teeth of gold, his ears of garnet and sapphire. From this mouth came the most sublime promises in lofty and noble style. Where are the beautiful words of bygone times? Eloquent and fertile prose, where do the long periods stop, the gallant sentences, the art with which you made us see superb horses with silver horseshoes and old harnesses? Where the crystal cars, the satin cushions?]

Soon after this speech, the equivalence is established for good, when the narrator suggests that, “(uma letra de Sócrates) Talvez ainda valha menos que esta debênture” (60) (“a Socrates bond may be worth even less than this debenture”).

The choice of this scene yields very interesting results from the point of view of the poetics of parody that characterizes Machado’s text. The reduction of Shakespeare’s grave and lofty scene to the world of commodity exchange and of capital displaces the model role normally played by European literature, which, in this case, is no longer a model but becomes a motif, deliberately employed for critical and parodic ends.

The target of the criticism is, obviously, the mercantile wheel that transforms everything into a commodity, into exchange value. In a world in which everything has been commodified, there is no room for the sublime; what remains is the ironic gaze, capable of debasing the world of information itself and of drawing attention to journalism seen as a business and a mercantile activity.

In this reflection, Machado challenges the reader, placing before him an alternative view of history and its events. Machado was extremely aware of the role of the press in modern life, in people’s access to culture, and in the circulation of information in large urban centers. So much so that he collaborated with

several periodicals throughout the years. However, his chronicles were a permanent exercise in contention and controversy. The reader should not let himself be deceived by the mocking tone, by the air of flippant commentary, by the Olympic distance assumed by this narrator who pretends to busy himself only with “uma metafísica das quinquilharias” (“a metaphysics of knick-knacks”), in Davi Arrigucci’s most appropriate definition (Arrigucci 58). Oblique and sly, like Capitu, always in complete control of his acid sense of humor, Machado, the writer of feuilletons, delves into the history of his own time and, as if inadvertently, bares the sore spots of the Brazilian Republic through his comments about insignificant everyday events. Mingling bones and debentures, “alhos com bugalhos” (“chalk and cheese”), he offers a statement about a whole epoch. Still with the very alive memories of the financial speculations that had characterized the years 1890 and 1891, the narrator-Hamlet and his servant José Rodrigues/Horatio, among gravediggers and skulls, sharply aim at one of those evils that devastate the country even today. It is José Rodrigues, the personification of the simple and common man, who says:

Meu Senhor, as batatas desta companhia [Companhia Promotora das Batatas Econômicas] foram prósperas enquanto os portadores dos títulos não as foram plantar. A economia da nobre instituição consistia justamente em não plantar o precioso tubérculo; uma vez que o plantassem era indício certo da decadência e da morte.

[Sir, the potatoes of this company (Company for the Promotion of Economical Potatoes) were prosperous while the shareholders were not planting them. The economy of the noble institution consisted exactly in not planting the precious tubercle; once it was planted, this was sure sign of decay and death.]

These words strike a well known chord. Even today, in Brazil, it seems to be more profitable to speculate on the financial market than to invest in the production of goods. And some similar evils still devastate the country, causing other types of nightmares among its population. Machado has never sounded more familiar and contemporary.

Notes

¹ Note the pun on *Alfaiataria* (a tailor's) and *tailleur* ("tailor").

² Machado's collaboration in *Gazeta de Notícias*, founded in 1875, lasted from 1883 to 1897. The series *A Semana* (*The Week*) covers the period from 1892 to 1897.

³ Just to mention a few examples: the phrase "To be or not to be" is the title of a short story dated 1876, while the lines "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (1.5.166-167) appear generally in changed form in *Quincas Borba*, chap. CLXVIII ("Sem conhecer Shakespeare, ele emendou Hamlet: 'Há entre o céu e a terra, Horácio, muitas coisas mais do que sonha a vossa vã filantropia'") and chap. CLXIX: "D. Fernanda não entendeu esta palavra. *Creio que mais, porque eu o adoro!* Em verdade, a conclusão não parecia estar nas premissas; mas era o caso de emendar outra vez Hamlet: 'Há entre o céu e a terra, Horácio, muitas coisas mais do que sonha a vossa vã dialética.'" Note further the short story "A Cartomante" ("The Fortuneteller"): "Hamlet observa a Horácio que há mais cousas no céu e na terra do que sonha a nossa vã filosofia. Era a mesma explicação que dava a bela Rita ao moço Canilo, numa sexta-feira de novembro de 1869, quando este ria dela, por ter ido na véspera consultar uma cartomante; a diferença é que o fazia por outras palavras." Finally, in several chronicles, such as that of 2 July 1893: "Esta impossibilidade de esconder o que se passa, no segredo das deliberações, faz-me crer no ocultismo. É ocasião de emendar Hamlet; 'Há entre o Palácio do Conde dos Arcos e a rua do Ouvidor muitas bocas mais do que cuida a vossa inútil estatística'; 11 February 1894: "Há duas astronomias, a do céu e a da terra; a primeira tem astros e algarismos; a segunda dispensa os astros, e fica só com os algarismos. Mas há também entre o céu e a terra, Horácio, muitas coisas mais do que sonha a vossa vã filosofia. Uma dessas coisas, como vos digo, é a vertigem dos números"; 10 January 1895: "os *bookmakers*, apesar do nome nunca escreveram livros, e que há entre uma casa e outra mais frontões do que sonha a minha vã filologia"; 27 October 1895: "Abre-se um capítulo de mistérios, de fenômenos obscuros, e concordávamos todos com Hamlet, relativamente à miséria da filosofia"; and 20 December 1896: "Há mais coisas entre o céu e a terra do que sonha nossa vã filosofia. É velho este pensamento de Shakespeare; mas nem por velho perde."

⁴ There is some controversy in relation to this date. While Eugênio Gomes and Lúcia Miguel Pereira propose 1870 as the correct year, Jean-Michel Massa states that in 1870 Machado could not yet have read English fluently and that the translation of *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens, had been done from the French.

⁵ See Gomes 160.

⁶ Gomes explains that Rossi and Salvini were two Italian actors whose companies had visited Rio de Janeiro in the 1870s.

⁷ The years 1890 and 1891 were a period of great financial turmoil known as the "Encilhamento," during which speculation and the unchecked bustle in the Stock Exchange led to the amassing of great fortunes and caused bankruptcies. The economic depression at the beginning of the 1890s affected the whole country. Between 1891 and 1897 the national currency lost half its value, causing people to panic. A considerable part of the country plunged into economic stagnation and chronic poverty.

⁸ The original in Shakespeare reads: "Let me see. Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning—quite chap-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that."

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