

Africa and the Epic Imagination of Camões

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Abstract. This article advances arguments about the metaphoric presence of Africa primarily in the ideology of *Os Lusíadas* (the episode of Adamastor) and secondarily in the chronicles of Gomes Eanes de Zurara. It proposes that Adamastor is a figure of Renaissance melancholy (in both somatic and prophetic terms) and, as such, represents a melding of interior and exterior forms of consciousness or knowledge. Africa and the Moor function in Camões as an index of the “strange,” a principle of Camonian epic in which the foreign and the alien are repeatedly inscribed into expansionist thought and therefore are an integral component to it. Zurara’s chronicles establish Africa as a primordial space of imperialism and its attendant historiographic discourse under the sign of Saturn, planet of time and melancholics.

Os Lusíadas contains at its core a terrifying eruption of monstrosity. Adamastor, arguably Camões’s most controversial poetic creation, emerges from a roiling tempestuousness at the southern tip of Africa to deliver his notorious prophecies of doom and to grieve autobiographically over the impossibility of reciprocated love from a sea goddess. When Vasco da Gama interrogates the apparition with the terse “Quem és tu?” (V, 49, iii),¹ Adamastor writhes under the weight of the question he would, we gather, prefer not to answer but must, like many of the shades who are compelled to respond to Dante throughout the *Inferno*.² With an “espantoso e grande brado,” Adamastor states: “Eu sou aquele oculto e grande Cabo / A quem chamais vós outros Tormentório” (V, 50, i-ii), adding that “Aqui toda a

Africana costa acabo / Neste meu nunca visto Promontório" (V, 50, v-vi). Such is the proclamation of the "monstro horrendo" who is at once sorrowful and ireful. It is no coincidence that Camões allocates to Adamastor's voice one of the very few instances in the entire poem of *ser* conjugated in the first person singular. This "eu sou," which reverberates thunderously in the ears of Vasco da Gama and his crew (and in the ears of the poem's readers) is a discrete act of self-constitution and identity: Adamastor's verbal syntagm inscribes monstrosity, darkness (both psychological and physiological), and Africa literally and figuratively into the center of the text. We might even call it a moment of self-conjuration, a quasi-magical, numinous manifestation of "os segredos escondidos / Da natureza e do húmido elemento" (V, 42, i-ii).

I invoke the episode of Adamastor as the entrance into some postulations of a more general nature about the metaphors of Africa and its inhabitant, the Moor, in the Camonian imaginary and ideology of expansionism. Africa figures prominently in the map of *Os Lusíadas*, both as a geographical space in which expansionist action occurs (recall that it takes Vasco da Gama and his company five cantos to leave its borders) and as a temporal landscape in which the Portuguese (imperial) past, present, and future converge and in which the historiographic discursivity of maritime Portugal is primordially and emblematically located. The interpretive grappling with Adamastor over a period of centuries (decisively initiated in 1639 with Faria e Sousa's edition) testifies to his problematic status in the poem, and this in turn implicates the continent of which Adamastor is the metonymic representation in the form of the *cabo*. More recently, the problem of Adamastor and Africa has allowed exegesis of the text to participate in broader scholarly discussions, for instance, about Renaissance epic poetry, the politics of national identity and identity formation, the genre of shipwreck narrative, or the voice and presence of Lusophone Africa in a post-imperial world.³

A figure of fear, doubt, and uncertainty phantasmally and diaphanously incarnate, Adamastor marks a liminality that is polysemous in nature. Lipking observes:

"Geographically, Adamastor stands for the place where maps lose their potency—here be monsters; historically, for an unknown part of the past, a legend and reality concealed from the ancients and yet to be explored; epistemologically, for a point beyond which human perceptions fail; theologically, for the forbidden." (215)

Adamastor thus emblemizes the epochal demarcation of an expanding, ideological *oikoumene*, the far-reaching transplantation of matrices of political, linguistic, and cultural patterns of order that lies at the root of all expansionist endeavors. The waves of fear that wash over Adamastor's Portuguese onlookers are thus more than the symbolic representation of a human sentiment prompted by confrontation with the unknown and the dangerous. The formal staging of an episode of anguished interiority—one which contrasts with the putatively external, militaristic, and legislated actions of discovery and conquest—fashions Adamastor as a component of what could be termed the psychomachia of expansion, an interior and interiorizing journey through time, memory, desire, and love that is as pervasive and regular in the Camonian understanding of maritime empire as any series of stratagems relating to *conquista*.

So it is that in one respect we might consider *Os Lusíadas* as Camões's greatest and most elaborate love poem. Love structures the poem not solely as a general, affective disposition expressed through an individualized subject (the kind of love scholars typically find in the *Rimas*) but more importantly as a relational discourse particularly suited to the power dynamics of imperialism and expansion. I am referring to Roland Greene's theorization of (Petrarchan) love in the New World context; Greene argues that love is "a discourse of differences—especially of gender and power. [...] Because of its engagement with such political issues as the distribution of power among agents, the assimilation of difference, and the reciprocal relations of value and desire, Petrarchan amatory discourse finds a new occasion in Europe's encounter with the New World" (6, 9-10).⁴ Adamastor's grief over his unreciprocated love for Thetis coincides with this formulation. Greene removes love (or amatory discourse) from the realm of the purely sentimental and establishes it as a governing conceit through which the more public actions of imperial encounter may be shaped and narrated. In Adamastor's case, this understanding of love allows a reciprocity or oscillation between affective subjectivity and the realization of conquistatorial campaigns.

Adamastor's rageful plaint, then, provides an access to an inward perspective on the expansionist enterprise independent of sentiment. Adamastor is a figure that at once apprehends an outward or geographical/phenomenal world and an inwardly-focused consciousness of time and history. Thematically, Camões accomplishes this perspectival doubling, I want to suggest, by fashioning Adamastor as a figure of melancholy, common in Renaissance litera-

ture. The dual nature of Adamastor's voice signals his melancholic nature: he speaks in a public register when he delivers vengeful prophecies about a collective, national fate, then modulates his speech to an autobiographical, "personal" mode when lamenting his unrequited love and his enduring punishment as rock and earth. On the surface of it, these two registers are distinct: the first might be considered "epic" while the second is more "personal" or "lyric." While this classification of Adamastor's voice into two distinct modes is defensible, it is possible to read these two modes as linked rather than oppositional through the agency of melancholy.

Adamastor boasts traits that evoke prevailing ideas in Renaissance Europe about the nature of melancholy and the melancholic.⁵ Consider the initial description of Adamastor's physicality:

[...] quando hua figura
 Se nos mostra no ar, robusta e válida,
 De disforme e grandíssima estatura;
 O rosto carregado, a barba esqualida,
 Os olhos encovados, e a postura
 Medonha e má, e a cor terrena e pálida;
 Cheios de terra e crespos os cabelos,
 A boca negra, os dentes amarelos. (V, 39)

In ensuing stanzas, other traits become apparent: Adamastor is a self-declared "gigante" (V, 53, viii); he speaks to Gama with a "voz pesada e amara" (V, 49, vii), and cries that his deception by Thetis left him "irado e quase insano" (V, 57, v). The end of his encounter with the Portuguese is punctuated by a "medonho choro" and "sonoro bramido" (V, 60, i and iii-iv).

These characteristics advance a profile of Adamastor in line with two theories of melancholy common in Camões's time. The first, dating to Hippocrates and Galen, holds that melancholy is a physiological condition linked to an abundance of black bile in the body; this forms part of the humoral theory of physiology in which physical and mental conditions are determined by the proportions of the body's four humors or liquids (black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm).⁶ As symptomatic of a predominance of black bile, black is characteristically the melancholic's color, and those suffering from it characteristically exhibit a sad, irreful, morose, or dejected temperament, often placing themselves at a remove from human society. Adamastor's surround-

ing aura of darkness, his black mouth, and his overwhelmingly irate and grief-stricken demeanor all cast Adamastor as a humoral melancholic.⁷ Furthermore, Adamastor's elemental constitution of earth and rock corroborates the association of black bile with earth in melancholy theory (Schiesari 129). As an earthen or telluric figure, Adamastor represents a melancholic sorrow occasioned by loss—in his case, his loss of the nymph Thetis—as symbolized in landscape. Bridget Gellert Lyons notes, “[t]he heart that was oppressed by gross and heavy melancholy humours was imprisoned [...] there was no clear line of distinction [...] between the state of the melancholic's mind and the landscape that he inhabited or projected” (14-15).⁸

The other line of thinking about melancholy is that it is an inspired or exalted state of intellection or artistic ability. The “genial melancholic” is characteristically endowed with the gifts of prophecy and divination.⁹ Adamastor's prophetic function in the temporality of the poem derives from this kind of melancholy. But it also establishes a continuity or similarity between Adamastor and his Portuguese interlocutors that is largely based on a reckoning with the past and the struggle to overcome a melancholic inclination, an inclination that, if realized, produces a stasis of spirit and hence a diminished moral rectitude.¹⁰ In this sense melancholy is the opposite of adventurous daring. Time is Adamastor's worst enemy, locked as he is forever and punitively in the rock, while it is the explorers' greatest ally. Eduardo Lourenço considers the Portuguese philosophical tradition of melancholy, especially as it is set forth in D. Duarte's *Leal Conselheiro*, arguing that melancholy “não é uma modalidade, entre outras, da sensibilidade e do sentimento, mas uma manifestação estrutural do ser humano, afectado pela sua relação com o tempo” (100). It is precisely this temporal dimension of melancholy that Camões exploits in Adamastor, situated as he is on a nodal point of history. Adamastor's melancholy is simultaneously a plaint of impossible love and a once and future lament about the fate of empire and the possibilities of heroism. In this second, future-in-the-past perspective, Adamastor's lament is what Ian Baucom calls “postimperial melancholy,” that is, “a cause for lamentation and an opportunity to [...] mourn the losses of empire” (165).

Adamastor's melancholic traits, his straddling of both interior and exterior realms of existence, and the fear he triggers among the mariners permit a reading of the text in which the negotiation of the unfamiliar underlies the hermeneutic imperatives of the outward-bound imperial consciousness. Such a negotiation happens under the aegis of the “strange,” and Camões's poem

postulates the strange as a key concept of imperialism. As part of the idiom of *Os Lusíadas*, the strange insinuates itself into the grammatical web of Camões's regulated procession of *ottava rima* stanzas, migrating between the syntactic categories of noun, adjective, and adverb. *A estranheza, o estranho, estranhamente*: this repeated lexicon signals not just an effect or by-product of the programmatic displacement and alienation endemic to discovery voyaging but an iterative principle of interaction and alignment with the realms of geographic and demographic alterity that comprise the Portuguese *imperium* and subtend the historiographic productivity that is its axiomatic corollary.

Africa is a primary locus of European expansion. The Portuguese textual preoccupation with Africa is one of the founding discourses of European imperialism. The chronicles of the first half of the fifteenth century establish a series of codes of writing about the colonial other that will be renewed and expanded by figures such as Columbus and later imperialists. (The complexities of this body of writing have much to offer contemporary discussions and theorizations of imperialism, including the influential formulations of thinkers like Tzvetan Todorov and Edward Said.) Central to this discourse is the figure of the Moor. In Camões, and in the work of his historiographic predecessors, especially the chronicles of Gomes Eanes de Zurara, the Moor is the sign of the strange and indexes the emergence of a new culture of history-writing attending the Portuguese exploration and colonization of Africa. Unlike the Moor/Saracen as it is more commonly conceived in Spain or in other countries (that is, the Arabic-speaking inhabitant of North Africa or Iberia), the Portuguese expansionist use of *mouro* widens the semantic range of this label to include the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa and even India. Such a wide applicability elevates the Moor above a standard binary opposition of European/non-European (although this is present as well). A Moor is the symbolic or figural representation of a process of negotiating strange and alien landscapes (geographic, perceptual, discursive), of adjusting epistemological systems to accommodate such landscapes, and of historicizing this process narratively. The Portuguese expansionist Moor emerges at the investiture of historical awareness into the space of Africa—an awareness, of course, that is European rather than indigenous, and of an imperialist bent.

It was Zurara, the chronicler appointed *cronista-mor* as successor to Fernão Lopes, who first fashioned Africa and the Moor as part of a teleology of expansionism in historiographic discourse. Above all, Zurara's chronicles present Africa as the space and place of expansion, a historically familiar geo-

graphical reality that becomes less familiar as the Portuguese campaigns of the Infante D. Henrique work their way down the west coast past Cape Bojador, for centuries one of the end-points of European cartographic knowledge. In the *Crónica da Tomada de Ceuta*, Zurara observes that Ceuta was the first post-diluvian settlement in Africa, founded by Noah's grandson who christened it with a name that means "começo da fermosura" in Chaldaic (10). This foundational myth, for Biblical wanderers the beginning of genealogical descent, is, for Zurara, also a beginning, but now one of an evolving providential mandate which locates in Africa the dawn of the imperial *nação*. The "beauty" of Ceuta in Zuraran expansionist discourse is the city's metonymic relation to the campaign of imperialist ethics that is imbricated in the workings of cosmological destiny and harmony. Ceuta thus initiates an ethical movement of the state which will find symbolic fruition in Camões's "ledo Monçaide" (VII, 28, ii) whose *ledice* is rooted in an Aristotelian notion of happiness as a good attained by action—in Monçaide's case, the decision to return to Portugal with Vasco da Gama's fleet.

In another chronicle, the *Crónica de D. Pedro de Meneses*, Zurara writes:

Porque a prinçipall parte do meu emcarreguo he daar comta e rrazão das cousas que passã nos tempos de minha hydade ou daquellas que passarão tam açerca de que eu posso aver verdadeiro conhecimento—ca, segumdo os amigos escreverão este nome...cronica, prinçipallmemte ouve o seu orig_e fundamemto de Saturno, que quer dezer "tempo", esto porque em grego se chama este planeta Cronô ou Cronos, que synyfica "tempo", assy como no latym este nome quer dezer "tempus", e dhy se deriva cronica, que quer dezer "estoria em que se escrev_os feitos temporais." (173)

Here, the etymological comments explicating the nature of the historiographer's vocation link the writing of history to Saturn, the planet of time. Yet Saturn is also the planet of melancholics. Zurara implicitly aligns the nature of historiography to the planet of melancholy—history-writing is a saturnine activity—in an African context. For Zurara, Africa gives birth to chronistic discourse as it now will be practiced in the age of expansion, and does so under the sign of Saturn. Melancholy and writing merge (at least notionally) and construe expansionist, historiographic productivity (which will include *Os Lusíadas*, profoundly historiographic in nature) as a narrativity allowing for a consciousness of states of alterity and strangeness.

Africa and the Moor, then, in the epic imagination of Camões, reference not solely an externally constituted space of otherness together with its inhabitant but also a process of redefining national and cultural identity as cartographies of knowledge and perception shift under the weight of imperial and empirical newness. In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe states that “narrative about Africa is always pretext for a comment about something else, some other place, some other people” (3). While Mbembe works in the contemporary sphere, his comment nonetheless characterizes the discursive culture of early modern Portuguese imperialism. Africa emerges in Camões as an interiorized space in which the writing subject (metaphorically) constitutes and expresses itself.

Notes

¹ All citations of *Os Lusíadas* are from the edition by Emanuel Paulo Ramos.

² I credit Manuel de Faria e Sousa (1590-1649) for first reading Adamastor as reminiscent of a punitive and Dantesque universe. In his commentary, Faria e Sousa notes, “el Gigante al respôder reboliò los ojos, i torció la boca, que es rechinar cõ los dientes: i todo esto son señales de cõdenado al infierno [...] como lo vimos [...] singularmente en los lugares de Dâte” (col. 543).

³ See Quint 99-130, Lipking, Blackmore 20-27, and Banks, respectively.

⁴ Greene further states: “Love is a discursive commonplace in this period not because people were generally in love [...] but because it was a widely acknowledged staging area for a variety of problems of the time, such as the drives of the subject to find expression in action, the contradictions and incommensurabilities of desire in its many forms, and the distribution of power in unequal situations” (11).

⁵ Silva observes in the course of an essay on the melancholic aspects of Camões’s lyric poetry that Adamastor is “uma das grandes expressões da melancolia camoniana” (224). Silva’s description of Adamastor as an expression of melancholy refers generally to the sad or tragic aspects of the giant’s condition insofar as his is a story of lost love. For other comments on melancholy in Camões’s lyric, see Earle.

⁶ The classic study of humoral melancholy is Klibansky, et. al.

⁷ Adamastor’s “dentes amarelos” point to a choleric temperament (which derives from too much yellow bile or choler), a temperament closely associated with melancholy.

⁸ In this sense Adamastor is understandably “o carcereiro da sua própria prisão” (Macedo 65). Of note also is Susan Stewart’s remark on giants: “the giant is linked to the earth in its most primitive, or natural, state [...] the gigantic represents a physical world of disorder and disproportion” (74).

⁹ This brand of melancholy was formulated by Aristotle in *Problemata XXX* and propagated throughout Europe by the writings of Italian humanist Marsilio Ficino. For a wide-ranging study of genial melancholy, see Schleiner.

¹⁰ João R. Figueiredo also argues for Adamastor as a stasis, a “virilidade paralisada e tornada grotescamente inútil pela inexistência súbita da mulher que permitiria a consumação do acto” (24).

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