

Comic Readings

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Abstract. The only comic character of *Os Lusíadas*, Fernão Veloso, is the spokesman in two important moments of the poem. I shall argue that there is only a difference in degree between these two episodes (the meeting with the African natives at the bay of St. Helena and the encounter with the nymphs at the Island of Love), since in both cases the task of reading is thematized by Camões.

The episode of Fernão Veloso that immediately precedes the momentous encounter of the Portuguese fleet with the giant Adamastor is traditionally seen as the only moment of comic relief in *Os Lusíadas*. Let me briefly recall it. When narrating to the King of Malindi the events of his voyage along the African coast, Vasco da Gama tells of the encounter the sailors had in the bay of St. Helena with a local tribe. This was their first contact with the African shore since leaving Lisbon. Vasco and his men are measuring the skies to determine their geographical position when a native is brought in by a group of sailors that had taken him by force as he was quietly collecting honey on the hill nearby. The two most striking features of this poor prisoner are the terror on his face and his total inability both to understand what is told to him and to make himself understood. This inability comes, according to Vasco, from his being “Selvagem mais que o bruto Polifemo” (V.28).¹ To the captain’s great amazement, the native prefers to accept transparent beads and a red cap instead of gold and silver. Once set free, he runs back to the village. The following day the native comes back to the beach with his companions

in search of more gifts. Vasco thus assumes that they are tame and friendly. This is why Fernão Veloso dares to follow them into the bush, though he soon returns more swiftly than he had gone, as the natives chase him. A fight follows, Vasco is wounded by an arrow, and revengeful bloodshed takes place. In a comic register, the epilogue shows Veloso, teased in mocking conversation by one of his companions, explaining his haste in returning to the beach by his fear that his fellows would have to face the enemy without him:

Disse então a Veloso um companheiro
 (Começando-se todos a sorrir):
 “Oula, Veloso amigo, aquele outeiro
 É melhor de decer que de subir.”
 “Si, é (responde o ousado aventureiro);
 Mas, quando eu pera cá vi tantos vir
 Daqueles Cães, depressa um pouco vim,
 Por me lembrar que estáveis cá sem mim.”
 (V.35)²

Then, in reported speech, in a sort of second, now strictly narrative, aftermath, Vasco tells how Veloso was threatened by the natives as soon as he disappeared beyond the hill. Of course, Veloso's comic re-description of his failure as both an explorer and soldier makes us read the expression “ousado aventureiro” (“th’ *Advent’rer* bold”) ironically, as a mock-epitheton. Also, we are led to revise our first assumptions—as the sailors are led to revise theirs—about the natives’ tameness and friendliness. In the end, they are “gente bestial, bruta e malvada.” The whole episode is a series of mutual incomprehension and misunderstandings. Even the teasing anecdote of the other sailor and Veloso's reply, in their ironical indirection, seem to be a fit closing for the episode, as the brief dialogue is meant to be equivocal and ambiguous. The consequence of misunderstanding is the actual telling of jokes, misunderstanding being a joke itself, in this case. In the end, the attempt to extract from the natives any information on how to reach India failed. As in the beginning of the episode, Vasco and Veloso could still say “Nem ele entende a nós nem nós a ele” (“*Hee* understood not *Us*, neither *Him Wee*”). Trade and communication failed altogether. Only bloodshed was memorable. Something interesting enough to deserve attention is the fact that the vindication of Vasco's military pride and wounded leg is construed by Camões as

a “re[s]posta tão tecida” (so woven an answer), that is, it is presented to the reader under the description of a text:

Mas nós, como pessoas magoadas,
 A reposta lhe demos tão tecida,
 Que em mais que nos barretes se suspeita
 Que a cor vermelha levam desta feita.
 (V.33)³

The “resposta tão tecida” (“so woven an answer”) is translated by Fanshawe as “a ready answeare, so in print,” which evinces the configuration of the reply as a verbal one.⁴ But the Portuguese word “tecida” (“woven”) and the reference to the color of the answer that would tinge the natives’ bodies as to resemble the redness of the cap, necessarily reminds us of the fabric of the cap offered to the prisoner as a pledge of amiable intention. The idea that one has to capture another person to declare one’s friendship for him is a very intriguing one. But what is mainly at stake here is that the retrospective reference to the red fabric ironically stresses the verbal character that was wanting in this stillborn dialogue. In consequence, we have a group of persons answering again and again questions that they were not asked, and another group of persons who began collecting honey in the woods and ended up washed in blood. Questions and answers do not match at all in this awkward encounter and even the disproportion in military resources stands as an instance of this. The result is that the Portuguese in the end can do nothing but tell jokes about themselves to each other. That is the only dialogue possible. Issues of cultural relativism could well come out of the fact that the first African encounter in Vasco’s voyage was doomed to fail. But my main concern is to investigate how this succession of failures impinges upon the reader’s mind, taking into consideration that both in the beginning and in the end Camões presents such misencounters as acts of misreading.

In fact, Fernão Veloso will be the spokesman in the final case of hermeneutic disaster. The intricacies are far more complex this time. When the fleet lays anchor at the island of Venus, in Canto IX, it does not take too long for the sailors to notice the voluptuous nymphs running wildly (or so they think) among the trees. Veloso signals the discovery to his mates with an exclamation:

Dá Veloso, espantado, um grande grito:
 “Senhores, caça estranha (disse) é esta!
 Se inda dura o Gentio antigo rito,
 A Deusas é sagrada esta floresta.
 Mais descobrimos do que humano espirito
 Desejou nunca, e bem se manifesta
 Que são grandes as cousas e excelentes
 Que o mundo encobre aos homens imprudentes.

Sigamos estas Deusas, e vejamos
 Se fantásticas são, se verdadeiras.”
 (IX.69-70)⁵

Veloso is thus assigned another exploratory role in *Os Lusíadas*. As in the stop at St. Helena bay before the turning of the Cape, he is the one Camões picks to undertake the exploration. Here, it is up to him to announce the cognitive project that is about to take place. After the mishap with the African natives, Veloso seems to proceed now as though he were a true, competent anthropologist. He firstly states his amazement at the presence of such a “strange game” in the forests of the island and draws a historical-theological conclusion about the presence of naked women running amid the bushes: that the island is consecrated to some kind of pagan female divinities. Then, Veloso engages in a self-conscious meditation about the nature and variety of things in the world still awaiting discovery, and about how fortunate he and his fellow sea-travelers are for taking part in such a process. Lastly, and herein lies the cognitive project itself, Veloso exhorts the sailors to pursue the Goddesses so as to discover whether they are real or fantastical. In the course of these remarks, Veloso dares implicitly to suggest the superiority of those who make such discoveries when he claims that all these superior and excellent things are hidden away from imprudent men. The initial couplet of the following stanza (“Sigamos estas Deusas e vejamos / Se fantásticas são, se verdadeiras”) thus appears as the natural next step in the inquiry. The disposition to investigate the nature of the Goddesses would show that Veloso and his fellows are, in turn, prudent men. One editor of *Os Lusíadas*, commenting on the episode of Canto V, remarks that a more serious endeavor is reserved for Veloso in Canto IX.⁶ For Faria e Sousa, the most influential commentator Camões has ever had, there is no doubt about this, for he reads the passage as a plea against all the ignorant people who are incapable of reading

beyond the letter of the poem and thus capturing the hidden meaning of the text. He is, of course, thinking of the “wonders... and great blessings.../ the world and Nature hide from vulgar men.” I quote him:

I finalmente llama ignorantes a los que leyendo este canto piensan, que estas Ninfas son materiales, i no divinas, supuestas a celebrar gloriosamente esta accion. I descifrada toda esta Poesia, todo es grande, todo excelente, i todo divino: i esto es lo que se encubre aqui a los imprudentes, ignorantes que no la saben descifrar.⁷

Briefly, Faria ends up by saying that Veloso’s words are an apology for the need to read Camões, and in particular the episode of the island of Love, allegorically. According to him, the lines “Que são grandes as cousas e excelentes / que o mundo encobre aos homens imprudentes” refer to the poem itself and an exegesis of them would of necessity bear an effect on the rest of the episode. But how can Faria e Sousa or anyone else take Veloso’s endeavor that seriously? If we read carefully the stanza that precedes Veloso’s outburst at the sight of the naked women, we have no difficulty at all in figuring out what Camões meant by “coisas grandes e excelentes” (“big and excellent things”) that are hidden from imprudent men:

Começam de enxergar subitamente,
 Por entre verdes ramos, várias cores,
 Cores de quem a vista julga e sente
 Que não eram das rosas ou das flores,
 Mas da lã fina e seda diferente,
 Que mais incita a força dos amores,
 De que se vestem as humanas rosas,
 Fazendo-se por arte mais fermosas.
 (IX.68)⁸

The ontological concern shown by Veloso is just a way of saying that he wants to know whether the nymphs (or whatever they are) could satisfy him sexually. It is their bodies that are hidden from sight by the fine wool and silk garments they wear with the deliberate purpose of enticing sexual desire. These are the “wonders and great blessings” imprudent men cannot devise.

Prudentia, we know, is the Latin equivalent of *phronesis*, the virtue that Aristotle defined as being a kind of practical wisdom, an ability to know what

is good or bad for oneself in cases when deliberation is necessary, since there is no general knowledge available.⁹ In Faria's serious interpretation of Veloso's sayings, lack of prudence is the equivalent of ignorance, which has hermeneutic consequences. A bad interpreter, according to this view, would be one who was unable to decide when to read allegorically and when to read literally. But maybe there is no need for such a virtue as construed by Faria e Sousa. Much as when they stopped at the South African bay, the Portuguese, once more, do not have a clue as to what is happening to them. The African natives were not as friendly as Vasco and Veloso thought. And now the nymphs prove themselves to be not that wild or indeed chaseable in any sport-like way, either. In fact, it is the nymphs who are in control of the situation, though the sailors may think otherwise. Here, the men behave exactly as the women want them to, and it would be tiresome to catalogue further instances of what I am saying. Veloso's ignorance, however, needs to be qualified. In fact, he takes for true and real what is merely fictive. Camões does not spare any efforts to make us understand that the island is the supreme fiction of an accomplished maker, Venus herself. References to the act of painting are legion and culminate in stanza 60, where the whole landscape is described in terms of an exquisite tapestry:

Pois a tapeçaria bela e fina
 Com que se cobre o rústico terreno,
 Faz ser a de Aqueménia menos dina,
 Mas o sombrio vale mais ameno.¹⁰

And in stanza 61, where Zephyrus and Flora come to the help of the goddess of Love:

Pintando estava ali Zéfiro e Flora
 As violas da cor dos amadores,
 O lírio roxo, a fresca rosa bela,
 Qual reluze nas faces da donzela.¹¹

Everything is artificial on the Island of Love. The sailors gape at the tapestry as though it were not art but nature itself. Against Faria e Sousa, we could argue that to lift the tapestry in order to uncover the hidden meaning beneath the fiction would lead to nothing, as nothing it is that lies beneath the tapes-

try. Or, to be more precise, only fiction lies beneath fiction, since we may infer that the art that covers the valley and makes it pleasant is exactly the same that covers the nymphs' bodies. Are not the wool and silk of their garments the materials *par excellence* of the very rugs that surpass in quality those from Persia? Beneath the text there is more text, as behind the fabric there is more fabric. This brings us back to the episode in Canto V, where the cap was a pretext for Camões to talk about texts, since he played upon the etymological root of "text" so as to make of the red cap a kind of text upon which two kinds of readers were not in agreement. Actually, the red cap was a sort of text the Portuguese flaunted to lure the natives into trading and to give information on how to reach India—but in the end found no fit interpreter. Having the same bold adventurer as the main character and spokesman, the Island of Love must be seen as a development of the red cap episode.

What are we to make then of Fernão Veloso's attitude in Canto IX and his cognitive project? We know his project is both a joke—for he really does not care about ontology or anthropology—and a proof of ignorance—for he does not have the faintest idea that he is being outmaneuvered by the nymphs in a fictional world. But the question of prudence in a hermeneutic sense does not make sense here, contrary to what Faria e Sousa claimed. For then Faria would have to know already that the poem was meant to be read allegorically so that he could declare that the real allegorical meaning of Veloso's lines is that the poem is to be read allegorically. Prior to the reading of Canto IX, there had to be a general description of allegory that allowed the interpreter to recognize an allegorical textual indication to read the poem allegorically at that time. This is hardly to be prudent in a technical way—the way in which Faria e Sousa thinks he is using the term—for any particular choice that might exist is overruled by the general law being instantiated. There is no place for deliberation here. The same prudence Faria praises in Veloso's moral conduct should warn us against the excessive need to call on philosophy, theology or history to help us in the reading of Canto IX, not to say the entire poem. For what Faria argues is that prudence, in the reading of *Os Lusíadas*, should be the ability to recognize and appeal to a general law, the law of allegory, and not the power to solve particular problems locally. We could say, after all, that Faria e Sousa reads "prudence" with a capital *P*—the allegory of a virtue that decides things for us and spares us the predicaments of decision-making. Perhaps instead of accusing of ignorance all of those who read the poem literally because they read Veloso's meditation on the secrets of the uni-

verse literally, we should rather focus on the idea that ignorance of what lies behind the woods or beneath the carpet is in fact a sort of precondition for wisdom, as it propels knowledge, which is unpredictable and not subject to a pre-existing plan. I do not say this in the sense that because we know nothing we are bound to learn something. I am arguing rather that error is a necessary condition for the reading to go on. And we like to think we would rather learn from the errors of others, not from our own. When he faces Veloso making his way into the woods, declaring himself prudent when in reality he is not, the reader is compelled to regard himself as a kind of Veloso adventuring into the exegesis of *Os Lusíadas*. Like the picaresque sailor, the interpreter “de arrogante, crê que vai seguro” (in Fanshawe’s translation, he “walks secure in his own Arrogance”), always risking being seen as a joke and subject both to failure and to glory, which generally happens in spite of himself. He could not do otherwise. In this sense, Camões is not nice to his readers, as he ostentatiously tells them they have to be deluded and miss out on the comprehension of the poem if they want to go on with the reading of it. On the other hand, they are offered the consolation of knowing they are not alone in making mistakes.

Perhaps the biggest consolation of all is to let the reader realize the poem is just a colorful woven fabric. I have already spoken of learning from other people’s mistakes. These two topics are interwoven, in their turn, in the case of a docile straw man who makes both sixteenth-century and present day, in any case actual, readers feel superior and successful. I am referring to the reader *par excellence* of *Os Lusíadas* and in *Os Lusíadas*: the boy King Sebastian himself. In the first stanza of the unusually long dedication to the King (thirteen *stanze* in all), Camões addresses D. Sebastião as “Maravilha fatal da nossa idade”—“The foretold *Wonder* of our *Centurie*,” in Fanshawe’s translation, which is in itself rather telling, since it dispels the ambiguity contained in the adjective “fatal.” In fact, we could interpret “fatal” as meaning either “decreed or prophesized by fate” or, on the other hand, “disastrous, destructive, ruinous, deadly.” Allegedly, History teaches us great lessons, including how to interpret literature. In this case, it is common practice to choose the first alternative, and read the adjective as a positive qualification of the wonder. King Sebastian indeed came to the world on account of divine providence since, historians tell us, an heir to the throne was dramatically wanting and a new surge in the war against the infidel was highly expected. But the truth is not exactly like this. The expression “maravilha fatal” was

actually picked up by Camões from an ode by Horace, Ode xxxvii from Book I, the ode that celebrates the death of Cleopatra. In this poem, Horace says it is time to drink and hit the floor with a free foot, for Cleopatra is dead. There are more reasons to celebrate her end, as the queen was preparing the ruin of the Roman Empire. Camões's "maravilha fatal" is the direct translation of "fatale monstrum," as applied to Cleopatra, the deadly monster Caesar wanted to put in jail.

What is most interesting is that in his Latin translation of parts of *Os Lusíadas*, entitled *Specimen Rerum a Lusitanis*, Fanshawe translated the line "Maravilha fatal da nossa idade" as "Monstrum Virtutis, praesentis Gloria saeculi."¹² The Camoensian "maravilha" is returned to its Horatian origin, "monstrum," here taken etymologically as meaning a display, a show. For better or worse, the adjective "fatal" is replaced by "Virtutis," probably because Fanshawe wanted to avoid the ambiguity inherent to "fatale," the whole expression resembling the common "mirror of virtues." We may wonder whether prudence was among the virtues the king might have possessed. The truth is that the boy king thus made into an inept reader at the outset of the poem, in such an eventful moment as the dedication and *captatio benevolentiae*, makes the reader of *Os Lusíadas* feel superior to the very dedicatee of the poem, the powerful King of Portugal. On this specific occasion, there is no place for historical, let alone allegorical, explanations. The poem, the fiction or the tapestry, as you wish to call it, is totally self-contained.

Notes

¹"More savage than the brutish POLYPHEME." All quotations from *Os Lusíadas* are from the edition of Emanuel Paulo Ramos. Translation is by Sir Richard Fanshawe, *The Lusiad, or, Portugals Historical Poem* [1655].

²Then to VELOSO said a Jybing lad
 (The rest all laughing in their sleeves) "Ho! Frend
 "VELOSO: the Hill (it seems) was not so bad
 "And hard to be come down, as 'twas t'ascend.
 "True (quoth th' *Advent'rer* bold) Howe're, I had
 "Not made such haste, but that the DOGGS did bend
 "Against the *Fleet*: And I began to doubt me
 "It might go ill, that you were here without me.

³But *wee* (as prickt with *smart*, and with dysdaine)
 Made them a ready answeare, so in print,
 That (I believe in earnest) with our Rapps
 Wee made their *Heads* as *crimson* as their *capps*.

⁴In his commentaries to the poem, António José Saraiva reads the adjective “tecida” as a visual metaphor: “As balas disparadas contra os negros eram tantas que juntas formavam um tecido. Com esta palavra inicia-se um jogo de palavras: os barretes dados pelos portugueses aos negros eram de *tecido* vermelho, mas estes levaram também o vermelho do sangue resultante do *tecido* das balas.” (“The bullets fired against the natives were so many that together they formed a fabric. With this word, a pun is set to work: the caps offered by the Portuguese to the natives were made of red *fabric*, but in the end the natives also bore the red blood resulting from the *fabric* of the bullets.”) *Os Lusíadas*, ed. António José Saraiva, 236. If I agree with the last part of Saraiva’s statement, where the pun is made explicit, the visual metaphor, on the other hand, seems far-fetched. In my opinion, the adjective “tecida” is above all a metonymic development of “resposta” and offers coherence and sturdiness to the answer, thus literalized and conceived as a rhetorical, textual one.

⁵Amaz’d VELOSO with a lowd voice cry’d;
 “Strange *Game* (my masters) in this *Forest* rise:
 “The ancient *Poets Tales* are verify’d,
 “And this *Isle’s* sacred to the DEITIES.
 “Nay, what to *humane-fancy* is deni’d
 “To hope, or comprehend, see with your *Eyes!*
 “And see, what *wonders*, what great *blessings* then,
 “The *world* and *Nature* hide from *vulgar* men!
 “Chase we these *Goddesses*; it shall be seen
 “If they be *Real* or *Fantastical*.

⁶*Os Lusíadas*. Ed. Frank Pierce: “This sailor is later involved in rather more solemn episodes” (116).

⁷Sousa, t. 4, p. 201: “And finally calls ignorant those who read this canto and believe these Nymphs to be material, not divine and able gloriously to commemorate the action. And once deciphered all this Poetry, everything is great, everything excellent, and everything divine: and this is what is here hidden from ignorant, imprudent men, incapable of deciphering it.”

⁸When suddainly, thorow the Green-wood leaves,
 Variety of *Colours* they descry;
Colours, which soon the judging eye perceives
 Are not of *Roses*, or fresh *Flow’rs* the *dye*:
 But, of fine *wool*; or *That*, the rich *worm* weaves:
 Of which LOVE makes his *Lure*, and *Sauces* high;
 Of which their Garments *Humane Roses* make,
 To make the *Bird* sell for the *Feathers* sake.

⁹See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially book VI, chapters v-xiii.

¹⁰The fine and noble *Carpets* then (which *there*
 Lye to be trod on by the meanest Plant)
 Make those of PERSIA, *course*; and *pleasanter*
These of the gloomy Valley *All* will grant.]

¹¹*There*, ZEPHYRUS and FLORA painting stood
 The *Vilet*, with the *Pale* of *Paramours*;
 The *Flow’r-de-lis*, with *blew*; the lovely *Rose*,
 Just *such*, as in a *Virgin’s* cheek it blows.

¹²Fanshawe, *Specimen Rerum a Lusitanis*, in *The Poems and Translations of Sir Richard* 338.

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