

Discovery as Mediation: Luís de Camões's Account of the Portuguese Arrival in India

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After a long and arduous journey via southern Africa, Vasco da Gama's fleet finally reaches Calicut in Canto VII of Luís Vaz de Camões's ten-canto epic, *Os Lusíadas*. Canto VII begins: "Já se viam chegadas junto à terra, / Que desejada já de tantos fora" (VII.1) ["At long last, they were nearing the land / So many others before had longed for" (White 139)]. First published in 1572, Portugal's most celebrated late Renaissance epic poem immortalizes the 1497–99 pioneering voyage that initiated the maritime trade route to India. Curiously, the much anticipated first encounter the Portuguese have with the subcontinent is not with the Indian people, but with a foreigner far from his homeland, a Muslim from Morocco named Monçaide, or Monsayeed in Landeg White's English translation. This is rather anti-climactic since the Portuguese have been encountering Muslims throughout the voyage, and for centuries had been in contact, mostly in confrontation, with the primarily North African Arab world. Upon arriving at the destination they have for so long desired, and that always has been filled with mystery, what they first find is something familiar. Why, after having traveled so far, should they meet a well-known neighbor? Contrary to most, but not all, of the other Muslims in the epic, Monsayeed is presented positively, as a friend, and will act as an indispensable ally to the Portuguese in Calicut. By taking a closer look at this very significant figure and peculiar set of circumstances, I hope to reveal how Camões's narration of discovery is greatly invested in the role mediation plays in the emergence of knowledge.

Canto VII opens with a brief interlude, something the reader often finds at the beginning of the cantos, where the narrator criticizes the lack of determination on the part of most European Christian states to fight the rise of Islam. He condemns Europe's greedy attitudes and internal feuds, and singles out the Portuguese for persevering in their religious crusade against the Infidel: "Não faltaram Cristãos atrevimentos / Nesta pequena casa Lusitana" (VII.14) ["There will be no lack of Christian daring / In this little house of Portugal" (White 141)]. Hence the fight against Islam, which is an important component of the ideological background of the poem, serves as a prelude to the arrival of the Portuguese in India. This seems out of place since Gama's fleet has by this point traveled beyond Arab-dominated territory. At first glance, then, the crusading rhetoric would appear improper for describing a meeting between Christians and Indians. But as we shall see, this opening perfectly frames the complex encounter that for Camões involves a lot more than just two parties. After this short interruption the narrator returns to the moment when India's coastline is spotted by the Portuguese fleet and gives us a brief overview of the area's geography. What stands out the most in these descriptive stanzas is the divisiveness that characterizes the topography of this "terreno mui grande e assaz famoso" (VII.17) ["enormous, celebrated land" (White 142)]. The narrator explains that it is ruled by different kings of various faiths, and that a great range "toda Ásia discorre, / Que nomes tão diversos vai tomando / Segundo as regiões por onde corre" (VII.18) ["divides Asia, / Bearing different names in the different / Nations which lie beneath its slopes" (White 142)]. Feuding peoples of different cultures, races, and religions are also no novelty in the epic's narrative. The Portuguese are coming upon a completely new and strange place and yet it seems there is no surprise awaiting them: they have long known and found difference and religious rivalry throughout their trip. Because the narrator maintains a similar tone as before and prepares the arrival in this way, the longed-for conquest does not then, contrary to expectations, represent a disruption in the poem—nor does it present itself as a climax.

Still, the first encounter the Portuguese have on Indian soil does come as a surprise for other reasons. As is customary upon reaching new territory, the captain, Vasco da Gama, never orders his ships to harbor; instead, one of his multilingual messengers is first sent on land to both impart and obtain information from the natives. This messenger, himself a go-between, encounters yet another intermediary figure, Monsayeed. Having lived in Malabar for a long time, the Moroccan nonetheless recognizes the Portuguese envoy as a neighbor:

Em vendo o mensageiro, com jucundo
 Rosto, como quem sabe a língua Hispana,
 Lhe disse: “Quem te trouxe a estoutro mundo,
 Tão longe da tua pátria Lusitana?” (VII.25)

Catching sight of the envoy, he exclaimed
 In delight, and in fluent Castilian
 “Who brought you to this other world
 So far from your native Portugal?” (White 144)

Monsayeed, genuinely glad of this encounter, is astounded to hear of the immense voyage and great sufferings undergone at sea that the envoy recounts to him, and he welcomes the Portuguese messenger to rest in his home:

E que, entanto que a nova lhe chegasse
 De sua estranha vinda, se quera,
 Na sua pobre casa repousasse
 E do manjar da terra comeria;
 E, *depois* que se um pouco recreasse,
 Co ele *pera* a armada tornaria,
 Que alegria não pode ser tamanha
 Que achar gente *vezinha* em terra estranha. (VII.27)

Meanwhile, as news of this unique arrival
 Was conveyed to the king, he was welcome
 To relax in his home, poor though it was,
 And sample the food of the country;
 Then, after the envoy had rested,
 He would return with him to the ships,
 For there were few delights so salutary
 As meeting neighbours in a foreign country. (White 144)

The enthusiasm between the Moroccan and the Portuguese is quite unexpected, but as Monsayeed and/or the narrator explain above, there is nothing like being in a foreign place, on neutral ground, in order to look upon neighbors as friends, even if these were formerly enemies. The narrator's voice is superimposed here with the character's voice, which is typical of Camões's

strategy of creating multiple voices in his epic and generating ambiguity by mixing direct and indirect speech. The narrator suggests, therefore, that there is a greater tolerance for neighbors and our familiarity with them increases when one encounters them in a distant land. We know of course that this bonding between neighbors didn't always take place during the Age of Discovery. One would only have to recall Hans Staden and his experience in Brazil. When captured by the Tupinambá in 1553, the German Staden begged a Frenchman to explain to the indigenous Indians that he was indeed not Portuguese, and hence not an enemy, but his neighbor chose not to defend him. Camões's representation of Monsayeed as the friendly neighbor must also be understood on an ironic level, which contributes, as we shall see, to the author's complex construction or reading of the Portuguese's alleged discovery of India. Without hesitation the Portuguese envoy accepts the Moor's invitation and an unproblematic and emotional bond based on mutual trust quickly forms between the neighbors:

O Português aceita de vontade
 O que o ledo Monçaide lhe oferece;
 Como se longa fora já a amizade,
 Co' ele come e bebe e lhe obedece.
 Ambos se tornam logo da cidade
 Pera a frota, que o Mouro bem conhece.
 Sobem à capitaina, e toda a gente
 Monçaide recebeu benignamente. (VII.27–28)

The Portuguese complied readily
 With all the smiling Monsayeed proposed;
 He ate and drunk and followed his lead
 As if their friendship was long-standing.
 Afterwards, both of them left the city
 For the fleet Monsayeed recognized,
 Visiting the flagship, where all on board
 Welcomed the Muslim with a friendly word. (White 144)

This pronounced friendliness astonishes the reader who throughout the epic has witnessed numerous events strained by betrayals and conflicts between the Portuguese and Muslim traders and pilots. The geniality between

the Moroccan and Portuguese envoys carries over to the rest of the mariners as well. While the cheerful Monsayeed gives the Portuguese middleman generous hospitality, he in turn receives a warm reception aboard the ships:

O Capitão o abraça, em cabo ledo,
Ouvindo clara a língua de Castela;
Junto de si o assenta e, pronto e quedo,
Pela terra pergunta e cousas dela. (VII.29)

The captain embraced him, overjoyed
To hear clearly the accents of Castile;
He sat, and calmly plied him with questions
About India and all its ways. (White 144)

As Monsayeed tells the sailors all he knows about the history, religion, and social and political systems of India, the narrator compares his charms to those of the golden flute of Orpheus. Hence, through an artistic voice, he is the one that introduces the Portuguese to the subcontinent's cultural specificity, historical background, and material wealth. Portuguese knowledge of India is thus Monsayeed's knowledge. Despite this unexpected amiability, this is not, however, the first affable encounter that the Portuguese sailors experience on their trip. In Canto II, in Malindi, after some hostile meetings in previous stops on the eastern coast of Africa, the sultan of this kingdom greets the men with genuine tributes and sincere promises: "Lhe manda rogar muito que saíssem, / *Pera* que de seus Reinos se servissem" (II.75) ["He welcomed them to the comforts of the shore; / Everything in his realm was theirs, and more" (White 40)]. This welcoming gesture creates a brief cease-fire in the poem that very aptly serves to introduce a long flashback, also via a different narrative voice. Just as Aeneas relates to Dido the account of the Trojan War, Vasco da Gama narrates to the Sultan of Malindi the history of Portugal beginning with the country's foundation and the Reconquest all the way to the present voyage. Therefore, the sultan's knowledge of Portugal is Gama's knowledge. These moments of reciprocal friendliness seem then to lead to the emergence of knowledge of something newly discovered. But in order for this to happen a peaceful exchange with another is always necessary and these narrative voices, or this knowledge, overlap with the epic's story. This first encounter upon the Portuguese arrival in India is revealing and surprising on many different levels. A former enemy is

immediately perceived as a friend. After traveling so far the Portuguese ironically discover a world they have known all along, or should have known at any rate, and instead of the native Indians they encounter a mirror image of themselves: a foreigner in a strange land. This meeting prepares the Portuguese to interact with India and its people. In other words, no new encounter or discovery would be possible without this mediating experience. Mediation obliges a moment of identification between the Moor and the Portuguese so that the discovery of India can be read as an excuse for other findings: the discovery of the other and the discovery of ourselves in the other.

After Monsayeed's history lesson, the Portuguese have some awareness of the people they are about to engage, but the Indians have little information as of yet about the new arrivals. Following the exchange with the Muslim, Gama and some Portuguese knights disembark to go and meet the Hindu leader, the Samorin. The privileged Gama and the Catual, one of the Samorin's officials who has come to meet the Portuguese captain, travel in richly cushioned palanquins and converse as they cross the city, "Monçaide, entre eles vai interpretando / As palavras que de ambos entendia" (VII.46) ["Monsayeed, between them, interpreting / Those of their words which he understood" (White 148)]. The Malabari and the Lusitanian make a stop on their way at a richly furnished temple full of images of Hindu gods, which the narrator, somewhat repulsed, describes in detail. After making his sovereign's wishes of establishing trade and military bonds with the kingdom of Malabar known to the Hindu leader, Gama and his men rest for the night in the emperor's palace. At daybreak the Catual goes straight to Monsayeed. He has orders from the Samorin, "Saber da gente estranha, donde vinha, / Que costumes, que Lei, que terra tinha" (VII.66) ["To discover more about this strange breed, / Their origins, their customs, and their creed" (White 152)]:

Manda chamar Monçaide, desejo
 De poder-se informar da gente nova.
 Já lhe pergunta, pronto e curioso,
 Se tem notícia inteira e certa prova
 Dos estranhos, quem são; que ouvido tinha
 Que é gente de sua pátria mui vizinha. (VII.67)

He summoned Monsayeed, to discover
 What he could tell of these novel people.

Eager and curious, he demanded
 A full account, and sure proof
 Of who they were, having come to understand
 Their home was very near his native land. (White 152)

Monsayeed gives another brief lesson, this time on Portuguese history and customs to the Catual, and he invites him to find out more for himself by visiting the ships. Canto VIII thus begins with a question-and-answer session on board the Portuguese vessels between the Catual and Paulo da Gama, the captain's brother, who is left in charge in Vasco's absence. Paulo da Gama describes to the Hindu official the series of images on the silk flags adorning the ships. The shields of Achilles and Aeneas serve as precedents here, but everything the wise Paulo says that illuminates Portuguese history "O Mauritano sábio lhe interpreta" (VIII.1) ["the wise Mauretanian translated" (White 157)]. The Catual's knowledge of Portugal continues to depend highly on Monsayeed's knowledge, because even if Paulo da Gama communicates the information this knowledge is translated by Monsayeed and only as best as possible. For although we have seen that Monsayeed is quite knowledgeable, his language skills are not without limitations. He is only able to translate what he can during the palanquin conversation between Gama and the Catual. And as we know he speaks Castilian, not Portuguese. This was of course not a problem, as fifteenth- and sixteenth-century learned Iberians were all but bilingual (Camões himself writes beautiful sonnets in Castilian), but it does create one more level of mediation or distancing between these communicating figures. Curiously, Camões uses the word "interpreta," which further reinforces Monsayeed's significant role, whose function is not only to translate but also to interpret. Also meaningful during this meeting is the fact that Vasco da Gama, the leader of the Portuguese fleet, is absent. This void on the ship is filled by the presence of the Moroccan who is metaphorically navigating the situation between these two second-rank men as he earlier attempted to monitor communication between the two top ranks, Vasco da Gama and the Samorin. Monsayeed's voice is once again superimposed—this time on Paulo da Gama's direct speech since we know that Monsayeed is translating all of Paulo's words. Camões constantly creates multiple levels of ambiguity on the question of narrative authority. Who is speaking here? Who has knowledge of Portuguese history and how is that knowledge communicated?

All this learning from one another and seemingly mutual understanding comes abruptly to an end as disagreement between Gama and his men on the one hand and the Samorin and his counselors on the other leads to rivalries, hostage taking, bribes, the instigation of revolts, and more. The geographic divisions described toward the beginning of Canto VII start to mirror the conflicting events that ensue. The Muslim traders in Calicut attempt to delay the Portuguese ships on purpose in order that a fleet that was due from Mecca could arrive and attack them. By the middle and the end of their stay in India, the Portuguese are far from the peaceful and welcoming first encounter in which reciprocal, albeit mediated, knowledge is gained. As with many other events in the epic, and as often happens when calm waters are suddenly overrun by sea storms, the illusion of peace is quickly shattered and chaos erupts. But, luckily, the narrator explains, something provokes certain impulses in the mind of Monsayeed and he alerts Gama of the planned assault on its way from Mecca. The Portuguese manage to escape the city thanks to Monsayeed, who travels back to Portugal with them after deciding that he will convert to Christianity. The narrator concludes that Monsayeed is a happy African who “tão longe da pátria achou maneira / *Pera* subir à Pátria verdadeira!” (IX.15) [“so far from his homeland, was blessed / With the means of gaining eternal rest” (White 180)]. Once again, this successful conversion must also be understood as an ironic and even self-ironic commentary. The evangelizing speech that the narrator makes at the opening of Canto VII takes on a new relevance now. It seems that the resolute crusading efforts of the Portuguese have paid off with one individual but not on a collective level. The only understanding gained appears to have come from a single mediating figure. The discovery of new territory presented at least initially a moment of successful mediation.

The figure of this mediator can also be read as self-reflective because Monsayeed has a lot in common with Camões himself, who sails for India in 1553 and spends sixteen years in the East far from his home. Their life experiences and roles as interpreters and translators of knowledge make them both important mediators, although the author is never as lucky as the North African; we know from his writings and especially his lyric poetry that Camões gains only eternal unrest from his experience abroad. By elaborating on these scenes of mediation the author shows that he is far more interested in questioning how something previously unknown becomes known. It is not what is encountered that is at stake in the narrative, but how knowledge and otherness are transmitted and undermined. Beyond the facticity of the discovered subcontinent, this

epic poem explores the infrastructure of mediation through which knowledge emerges. Knowledge also doesn't guarantee understanding. For both the Portuguese and the Indians need to negotiate with Monsayeed in order to understand one other. Yet a peaceful agreement between them is ultimately impossible. In fact, one can argue that mediation itself is what makes possible the reciprocal gaining of knowledge, or the discovery of the other, and it is also mediating forces (the involvement of the Arab traders) that foment the violence between the parties, and yet again Monsayeed, the individual mediator, who comes to the rescue of the Portuguese. What is discovered, in other words, is that discovery is but a process of mediation, and that it would not have been possible without the mediating role of the Moroccan. Mediation is involved in the real misunderstanding and in the creation of the illusion of a mutual understanding.

Camões's depiction of Monsayeed's role in the epic becomes all the more interesting if we remember that mediation was a widespread *topos* in the historical context of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European exploration. Russell-Wood, in *The Portuguese Empire*, for example, reminds us how important land advances by intelligence-gathering missions were for the success of Portuguese expansion. The men on these expeditions often encountered other mediators and, through much hearsay, maps were drawn and knowledge of gold, spices, and faraway Christian communities was communicated down through many different messengers. This very important work of gathering and sharing information consisted of and depended on negotiating with primarily non-Europeans. Camões integrates this historical context into the figure of Monsayeed, underlining the fact that mediation was the way Europeans learned at this time and that the emergence of knowledge wouldn't have been possible otherwise. Also important in this context is the fact that Monsayeed's character is based on a historical figure, a real go-between from Tunis who helped the Portuguese as a translator, revealed a plot to detain the Portuguese fleet in Calicut, and arranged for the purchase of spices that would serve as proof back home that Gama had reached India.

We know of Monsayeed's existence from the well-known journal kept on board during Gama's first voyage to India, the *Relação da viagem de Vasco da Gama* attributed to Álvaro Velho. This text tells of the encounter with the real go-between and narrates other significant events that took place between the Portuguese and the Indians, all of which inform Camões's fictional rendering of this first encounter. The journal provides important evidence of a crucial fact. Upon arriving in India, the Portuguese apparently mistook the Indians

to be Christians. They had earlier reports that attested to the presence of Nestorian Christians in the region, and there is clear evidence in the *roteiro* that Vasco da Gama and his men prayed at the Hindu temple that the Catal showed them on their way to see the Samorin. What is less known, but equally important, is that the Indians thought the Portuguese were Hindus. In his essay "First Encounter: The Christian-Hindu Confusion When the Portuguese Reached India," Michael Murrin tries to explain why this mutual misunderstanding occurred. He proposes that the restricted contact between parties and the structural similarities between Hinduism and Christianity contributed to the confusion. But he claims that what kept the misunderstanding alive over the more than two months during which the Portuguese stayed in Calicut were Muslim traders who acted as go-betweens. These men encouraged the mutual confusion and never dispelled the illusion, possibly because this benefited them and perhaps, Murrin argues, because as iconoclasts they lumped Christians and Hindus together since both religions worship images. Regardless of the reason, what is most interesting is the fact that Muslims played an incredibly influential role in the Portuguese encounter with the Indian people. Even before reaching India, Gama's fleet depended highly on Muslim go-betweens and pilots throughout their nautical adventure. Muslims helped the Portuguese against enemies, guided Gama's ships through the Indian Ocean, and served as translators. They were, in other words, involved on all the different levels of the "discovery" of India, including preparing and negotiating the first encounter. Their involvement is not completely unselfish, and they betray the Portuguese on various occasions, so that they were both indispensable and looked upon with great distrust. It shouldn't come as a surprise, therefore, that the Portuguese were suspicious of what they relied on the most.

Considering the tradition mediation had in the period of European colonialist expansion and the role that Muslim Arab traders or go-betweens played historically in creating this mutual confusion upon Gama's arrival in India, it is particularly striking and significant to consider Camões's characterization of Monsayeed. Besides his own experience, Camões used a variety of historical sources to reconstruct the epic voyage, primarily the famous chronicles of João de Barros and Fernão Lopes de Castanheda. The work of these early historians, which was informed by Álvaro Velho's *roteiro*, tries to explain the mistake made by the Portuguese sailors in thinking that the Indians were Christians. Thus their writing marks the beginning of a discourse that attempts to explore and explain the encounter and confusion. By the time Camões writes

The Lusíads the mistake seems to be absent altogether. As noted earlier, the narrator describes in detail the Hindu temple and emphasizes the strangeness of the images of the different Hindu gods as if to draw attention to the difference of this foreign creed from Christianity. While it might seem that Camões simply erases the mistake, as Murrin argues, he in fact continues the historical discourse of his predecessors by interestingly figuring into the poem not the content but the form or the problem caused by this historic confusion. It is Monsayeed, a Muslim, who gives knowledge to the two encountering groups. Is Camões attempting then to correct the lack of understanding that the Christians and the Hindus experienced by having the very knowledgeable and assumedly objective Monsayeed inform each of the two parties? Or does the author suggest that even if the people involved had been knowledgeable, violence and confusion would still have been unavoidable? It is important to the author that a Muslim should be the central figure of the Portuguese's arrival in India. Camões is not merely interested in the historical accuracy of the event when he picks a Moroccan to greet the Portuguese fleet. He seems to suggest that this is a highly complex encounter that involves a lot more than a meeting between two different cultures. Without the contribution of the North African Moor, the Portuguese would never have reached or known India—or themselves, for that matter. The contact with the Arab world is, in other words, what makes possible Portugal's age of discovery.

Camões also seems to be making an ironic comment by echoing in Monsayeed the warnings of the Velho do Restelo, who preaches back at the end of Canto IV that the Portuguese should take care of their problems at home and focus their crusading efforts on their enemies close by, namely, their southern Muslim neighbors. Ultimately, against the Velho do Restelo's recommendations, the Portuguese sail far away only to discover what back home was so close by. Just as Monsayeed's conversion to Christianity critically comments on Portugal's truncated crusading efforts, the meeting of the Portuguese with Monsayeed can be interpreted as a fulfillment of the Velho do Restelo's predictions. The scene of arrival is an encounter with new knowledge as mediation, a process of self-discovery, and a meta-reflection on the epic's narrative. The figure of Monsayeed and the series of mediating scenes reveal that Camões is primarily interested in emphasizing the significant role the intermediaries played in the complexity and possibility of the encounter and in the discovery of India. This also ties to Josiah Blackmore's argument in his book *Moorings: Portuguese Expansion and the Writing of Africa*. As Blackmore

points out, despite the fact that “much criticism reads the *Lusiadas* as a poem ‘about’ India,” most of the epic takes place in Africa. We can add that even the part of the epic that is about India is in fact still about Africa.

Like all great epics, Camões’s narration of Gama’s journey begins *in media res* with the fleet in the channel between Mozambique and Madagascar, at exactly the furthest point that navigators before them had reached. He begins thus in the middle of things for the fleet is more or less halfway through its voyage. But, on the other hand, this middle is also the end of what others had accomplished, and at the same time indicates the onset of new discoveries and encounters for the Portuguese. Like the Portuguese voyage to India, the epic poem also wants to start off where others finished and hopes to achieve something novel; to uncover more ways of narrating discovery in a new age. Camões creates structures with which he asks: how is it that we celebrate historical truth and the emergence of new knowledge? *The Lusiads* is an epic of discovery—not primarily of land, peoples, spices, and silks, but of aesthetic forms and of the figure of knowledge itself. Clive Willis claims that only occasionally did it occur to Camões “that Portugal or Europe might have something to learn from the East, from Otherness” (80). But quite to the contrary, as we have seen, differences in culture, language, and religion play a fundamental role in the transmission of knowledge for Camões. In understanding discovery as mediation, Camões attempts to reconcile how familiarity and individual experience make an encounter of different cultures and religions both possible and impossible.

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