



MACHADO DE ASSIS AND THE TRADITION OF MENIPEAN SATIRE



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ABSTRACT

This work aims to elaborate a small excerpt about the work of Machado de Assis, mainly about three of his novels from his so-called mature phase: *Posthumous Memories of Brás Cubas*, *Dom Casmurro*, and *Quincas Borba*, to present them as representatives of a genre recognized as "Menipeian satire", having as its main exponent the Roman writer Lucian of Samosata (120-180 AD) for comparison between the respective techniques and the intentions of both, and through this, highlight some other classic allegories ("carnivalization") listed by the realist author as the narrative strategy that made him supplant his contemporaries and subsequent authors until the present day.

Keywords: Machado de Assis. Bakhtin. Lucian of Samosata. Classical Tradition. Menipeian satire.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature of Machado de Assis is recognized as of a singular relevance to the subject, as seen in his extensive and plurilingual critical fortune, especially about his most consecrated works, considered as those of his mature phase, to which the three novels belong: *Posthumous Memories of Brás Cubas* (1881), *Dom Casmurro* (1900) and *Quincas Borba* (1891). They are studied from different perspectives, as they evoke multiple theories that can encompass them, one of them being the one that classifies them as representatives of "Menipean satire". It is believed that to understand this approximation, it is necessary here to give a small exposition on the respective genre.

The "Menipeian satire" owes its name and origin to Menippus of Gadara (300-260 B.C.), and its little-known biography is attributed to Diogenes Laertius (180-240 A.D.) who makes references (coming from third parties) to him as someone who would have lived approximately five centuries ago from him. It is said that Menippus was born in Gadara, a Syrian city of possible Greek origin and located in the southeast of the Sea of Galilee. He was first a slave in the service of a citizen of Pontus, a region on the southern coast of the Black Sea, and later a freeman in the then-opulent Thebes. Most of his writings are said to have been lost, with only a few titles being known, such as a *Necromancy* (*Nekuia*) in which he theoretically imitated the Homeric theme of the descent into hell. He is credited with an incipient type of satire with great power of subversion in the face of the literary traditions of the period, but his story would probably have fallen into oblivion had it not been rescued by other writers such as the Roman Terence Varro and the Hellenized Syrian Lucian of Samosata.

Marcus Terentius Varro (Varro in Portuguese) was born in 116 BC in Reate (Rieti, present-day), an Italian Sabine city dominated by Rome since 290 BC. Varro was a politician, grammarian, and literati and was considered, in addition to being an adaptor of Menippus' work to the Roman public, a great writer by many. This, including by the Roman orator and professor of rhetoric Marcus Fabius Quintilian (35-95 AD). Thanks to such recognition, their work gained relevance to be studied and differentiated into two distinct traditions, namely "Roman satire" and "Menipean satire".²

² There is a main differentiation made by Quintilian who states: "There is also a genre prior to this ["Roman satire"], which consisted not only of a difference of meters, but of a miscellany of various elements, cultivated by Terence Varro, the most erudite among the Romans" (See in: REGO, Enylton José de Sá. *The Calundu and the panacea: Machado de Assis, the Menippean satire and the Lucianic tradition*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 1989. p. 33).

The other writer cited who revered the "Menipeian satire" was the writer and philosopher Lucian of Samosata³. Little is known about this beyond what is in his writings, as his date of birth is imprecise, being placed by biographers in the first half of the second century of our era, between 120 and 140 AD. It is claimed that his birthplace is in Syria, in the city of Samosata, a small fortified village on the banks of the Euphrates River and former capital of the small kingdom of Commagene, of Hellenistic tradition, but then annexed as a Roman province. He is said to have died approximately in 180 AD.

Although there are no longer so many characteristics of the originals for a greater study of satire, the reference most accepted by classicists persists, which is that of the aforementioned Quintilian, presenting this as the "pros symmetrical" criterion of production, using both prose and verse. However, this would still not be enough in the face of the analogy with Machado's novels, if Quintilian himself in his work *Institutio Oratoria*, after discussing the satire in hexameter verses of Lucilius, Horace and Persius, had not come to affirm the existence of a previous genre not necessarily based on the difference in meters, but proposed in a miscellany of various elements that had even been cultivated by the aforementioned Terence Varro. And it is based on this statement, also allied to the studies of Mikhail Bakhtin on Rabelais and Dostoyevsky⁴ and those of Northop Frye in his *Theory of Genders*, see Enylton José de Sá Rego (1989), that many critics rely on to associate Machado's work with "Menipean satire".

One of these critics to use such studies to classify the work of Machado de Assis as representative of a certain style is José Guilherme Melchior in his article "Gênero e estilo das *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*". For the scholar, the Machadian novel is "[...] A modern representative of the comic-fantastic genre, [...] also known as *Menippean literature*" (emphasis added), based on the reduction of 14 characteristics, presented by the aforementioned work by Mikhail Bakhtin, five of which are seen as the "main attributes" of Menippean satire present, for example, in *Posthumous Memoirs...*, to be checked:

- 1) the absence of ennobling distance from the characters and their actions; 2) the mixture of the serious and the comic; 3) the absolute freedom of the text about the dictates of verisimilitude; 4) the frequency of literary representation of aberrant psychic states; and finally 5) the constant use of interspersed genres.⁵

³ ALMEIDA, Cleber R. R. A História como ontologia do mundo: Luciano de Samósata entre a derisão e a austeridade. *Revista Estudos Hum(e)anos*, n. 0, 2010. [online].

⁴ MERQUIOR, José Guilherme. Genre and style of the *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. *Colóquio/Letras*, Lisbon, n. 8, p. 13, jun. 1972.

⁵ MERQUIOR, 1972, p. 13.

In addition to him, Dirce Cortês Riedel also presents some analogies between Machado's work and Bakhtin's analyses, based, above all, on the concepts of "parody" and "metaphor". Bakhtin's idea associated with Machado's work is that of "carnivalization", now highlighted by Jean Franco when he argues that

Carnivalization is the process through which the intrinsically ambiguous and irreverent popular discourse – singularly expressed in the carnival rites and festivals of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, up to the seventeenth century – would erupt into the realm of discourses formalized and transformed into "genres" by the official literature of a given society, subverting and revolutionizing them.⁶

This process, for Bakhtin himself, would also be closely linked to the tradition of "Menipean satire" and Franco presents it as pertinent to the understanding of the "turnaround" of the hierarchies of values established in European literature, with which Machado's text would have ample dialogism.

Another theorist who discusses the work of Machado de Assis as a "Menipean satire" is the American Alfred J. MacAdam⁷, using Northrop Frye's *Theory of Genders*. MacAdam associates himself with the idealist historicism of Georg Lukács, in *Theory of the Novel*, to conclude that all of Machado de Assis's work belongs to the genre of "satire" defined by Frye; more specifically to that of "Menipean satire".

Based on the points of view presented and associating them with the idea that Machado de Assis was a vast connoisseur of the classics, plus his creative capacity as seen in the innovations proposed by him for the literature of the time, one can see the ideal conditions to have the link between his production and the "Menipean satire", including because our author empirically has some important books of this tradition, for it is known that in his private library, there were the two volumes of *the Oeuvres completes de Lucien de Samosata*, in a French translation of 1874 with introduction and notes by Eugène Talbot.⁸

All this can still be expanded by taking into account that, in the characteristics applicable to "Menipean satire" since Quintilian, there are some criteria that help to understand this production: the formal and the moral. Given the formal criterion, the aforementioned choice of the mixture of prose and verse is privileged, that is, the "pros symmetrical" form (see Machado in his short and incisive sentences permeated by syllogisms); while the moral is based on the conceptions of the social function of laughter posed by satire. For the defenders of the tradition of Roman satire, it should have a

⁶ FRANCO, 1975, p. 75 apud REGO, 1989, p. 22.

⁷ MACADAM, 1972-1973, p. 180-187 apud REGO, 1989, p. 23.

⁸ FRANCO, 1975, p. 75 apud REGO, 1989, p. 43.

moralizing function, serving laughter only as a means to denounce the vices of humanity: a quality also present among Machado's narrators (protagonists or not), but not only that.

As for the moralizing character of the classic "Menipean satire", there are different expositions made by C.A. Van Rooy⁹ and Hendrickson¹⁰. The former has an essentially moral and civic function and says that it should be used for the improvement of society; while the second highlights the function of laughter in Greek satire, where the satirist is seen as the *spoudogeloion*, that is, a character who, through his laughter (*gallon*), expresses himself seriously (*sporulation*), something closer to Machadian subtlety.

Other examples of satire in a menial manner, which would have inspired Machado in his production, are in the first century of our eras such as *Satiricon* and *Apokolokyntosis*. *Satyricon* is a work of Latin literature by the Roman prose writer Petronius, probably written around the year 60 AD, describing the adventures and misadventures of the narrator, Encolpius, his lover, Asciltus, and the handsome servant, the young Gito, whose meddling between the two lovers provokes jealousy and argument. All of them, together with the poet Eumolpus, in the manner of Argonauts, end up shipwrecked at the hands of Circe, a priestess of the suggestive god Priapus. The other, *Apokolokyntosis*, written by the Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 BC-65 AD), is even quoted directly by Machado in chapter IV of the *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, which is entitled "The Fixed Idea":

My idea, after so many cumbers, had become a fixed idea. God deliver you, reader, from a fixed idea; rather a mote, rather a beam in the eye. Look at Cavour; It was the fixed idea of Italian unity that killed him. The truth is that Bismarck did not die, But it must be noted that nature is a great capricious and history an eternal laurel tree. For example, Suetonius gave us a Claudius, who was a simpleton, or "a pumpkin" as Seneca called him, and a Titus, who deserved to be the delights of Rome. A professor came along in modern times and found a way to demonstrate that of the two Caesars, the delicious, the truly delicious, was Seneca's "pumpkin"...¹¹

Lucius Annaeus Seneca wrote this work, which bears the title of *Apokolokyntosis* or *Ludus de Morte Claudii*, on the occasion of the deification of the emperor Claudius decreed by the Roman Senate, which followed the example of the apotheosis with which the emperor Augustus had been honored. The main title is strange and unfamiliar to both Greek and Latin lexicons, but it seems to be a play on the Greek terms *apotheosis* ("deification", "*transformation into a god*") and *colocynth* ("pumpkin").

⁹ ROOY, 1965, p. 91 apud REGO, 1989, p. 35.

¹⁰ HENDRICKSON, 1927, p. 49 apud REGO, 1989, p. 36.

¹¹ ASSIS, Machado de. All Novels and Established Short Stories: Volume 2. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2016. p. 28 - 29.

Apokolokyntosis is a narration of the events that took place in heaven and hell on October 13, 54 A.D., the day of Claudius' death. After a short introduction by the narrator, the aforementioned character, freed from his agony by the gods, is seen taking the path towards the heavens. When he arrives there, he is greeted by Hercules who does not recognize him. The stranger's identity is revealed by the goddess Fever to Hercules, who is furious. There follows a gap in the text, during which Claudius is said to have been brought before the assembly of the gods for trial. The text resumes amid a debate that ends with the decision to send it to Hades. In his descent into hell, Claudio passes through the earth and has the opportunity to observe his burial. Upon arriving in Hades, he is summarily tried and sentenced to serve as a slave.

Analogous to Seneca, Machado uses parody and a mixture of genres in his production, but now as a mockery of the epic hero, adapting him to the style of the incipient anti-hero. This, without losing sight of a certain specific characteristic of satires: the mixture of a "high" genre with a "low" genre. In the specific case of Machado, this must also be understood as a desacralization of the current romantic novel (even contradicting the subsequent style, the naturalist), with his narrative diction, due to spatiotemporal and didactic adequacy, being taxed as realistic, although there are already controversies.¹²

In turn, Gilbert Highet, in his book *The Anatomy of Satire*¹³, suggests a series of eight different criteria for identifying a text as satirical. Among these, there are cases in which the author himself refers to a lineage of satirists. Although this criterion is not defended here as definitive, it is presented in several texts of the Lucian tradition, as well as in *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. As has already been said here, in chapter IV of his memoirs, Brás Cubas directly quotes *Seneca's Apokolokyntosis*, when referring to the "fixed idea" that had caused the very death of the aforementioned Machadian protagonist, doing justice to Highet's statement for his relationship with "Menipeian satire".

In *Quincas Borba* (1981), a book published ten years after *Posthumous Memories...*, there is the same process of generic hybridization used in the previous novel and now cited in the novel itself, also in a reference to the mockery of Lucian texts, see the episode of the "fall of the postman":

After some time, he heard footsteps in the street, and raised his head, supposing that it was Carlos Maria who was returning; It was a postman who brought him a letter from the countryside. He handed it to him. As he left the garden, he tripped the postman at the foot of a bench and fell face down, scattering the letters on the floor. Sofia couldn't help but laugh.¹⁴

¹² BERNARDO, Gustavo. *The problem of Machado de Assis's realism*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2011.

¹³ HIGHET, 1962, p. 235-237 apud REGO, 1989, p. 60.

¹⁴ ASSIS, 2016, p. 272.

Another reference to the classical era is the characterization of the character Rubião, the central character of the novel, who belongs to the category of "good provincial" who has recently arrived in the city and who is exploited by ambitious characters typical of comedy, as identified since Aristotle under the name of *agroikos*, that is, rustic, Romero or matuto. This adjective is used by Cristiano Palha to justify, in front of his outraged wife, Rubião's more than intrusive behavior in declaring his love to such a woman. According to Palha: "Besides, despite what you tell me, you know that he is still a fool..."; while according to Sofia: "Then the devil is also a fool, because he seemed to me nothing less than the devil. And ask me to look at the Cross at a certain time, so that our souls could meet?"¹⁵

By taking Rubião, a character who goes mad and dies in a pathetic situation, Machado de Assis attributes to him characteristics close to those of the classic tragic hero, but as a strategy. Hence, Helen Caldwell states that it was not the antagonism of society that drove Rubião to madness: "The 'fault', as in the case of Brutus, was in himself; the primordial confusion lay in his soul"¹⁶ One can also add this reading to the idea expressed in the first chapter of the same novel when Rubião is presented as the character Adimantos present in Luciano's dialogue "The ship or the votes". Just like Adimanthus, the "maniac of Piraeus", who believed that all the ships in the port were his property, and lived happily with it in his imagination; Rubião looks at the Botafogo cove, and enjoys in his spirit the "feeling of ownership".¹⁷

Another reference to classical culture, present in the book *Quincas Borba*, is in the trip to the moon witnessed by a barber named Lucien, the French version of Luciano's name, who was the author of the first account of a trip to the moon in Western literature. Such a reference is yet another proof of Machado de Assis' influence on classical culture and, at the same time, of the reinvention that imprints it.

In *Dom Casmurro* (1900), the doubt presented about Capitu's betrayal, established by the narrator Bento Santiago, presents a conception of the work of art as exempt from an authority centered on "truth": something also typical of the Lucian tradition. In addition, there are the correlations made by the former between his supposed tragedy and that of Othello and Desdemona. In chapter CXXXV, suggestively titled "Othello", the narrator of *Dom Casmurro* says:

I dined out. At night I went to the theater. It represented *Othello*, whom I had never seen or read; I knew only the subject, and I estimated the coincidence. I saw the great anger of the Moor, because of a handkerchief, — a simple handkerchief! —

¹⁵ ASSIS, 2016, p. 267.

¹⁶ REGO, 1989, p. 180.

¹⁷ ASSIS, 2016, p. 211.

and here I give material to the meditation of the psychologists of this and other continents, for I could not avoid the observation that a handkerchief was enough to kindle Othello's jealousy and compose the most sublime tragedy of this world. The handkerchiefs have been lost, today the sheets themselves are needed; Sometimes there are no sheets, and only the shirts are worthwhile. Such were the ideas that were running through my head, vague and blurred, as the Moor rolled convulsively, and Iago distilled his slander. In the intervals I did not get up from my chair; I didn't want to expose myself to meeting someone I knew. The ladies were almost all in the boxes, while the men went to smoke. Then I wondered if any of those had not loved someone who now lay in the cemetery, and other inconsistencies came until the curtain went up and the piece continued. The last act showed me that not me, but Capitu should die. I heard Desdemona's pleas, her loving and pure words, and the fury of the Moor, and the death he gave her amidst frenzied applause from the audience.

"And he was innocent, I was saying down the street; — what would the public do, if she were guilty, as guilty as Capitu? And what death would the Moor give him? A pillow would not suffice; blood and fire were needed, an intense and vast fire, which would consume her completely, and reduce her to dust, and the dust would be thrown to the wind, as an eternal extinction..."¹⁸

Here another characteristic common to the Lucian tradition is reinforced: the need to resort to the imagination and memory of other texts to fill in the gaps intentionally left by open texts, those that avoid affirming the truth and authority of the narrative voice¹⁹. In addition, the chapter "Guests of good memory" refers to the classical era, having its title and first paragraph inspired by *Erasmus' In Praise of Madness*, and, through this, in the work of Lucian of Samosata. Luciano, with his "island of dreams", is also mentioned in the chapter "An idea and a scruple".

In addition to the novels by Machado de Assis mentioned above, numerous passages in his other texts refer to important authors and classic works, such as the short story "Teoria do Medallion". This one appears because of its subtitle of "dialogue" and because Luciano's name appears at the end of it. Another reference placed there about the Hellenized Syrian is that the aforementioned tale is established in the form of a parody of Luciano's famous essay: "The Rhetoric Teacher", as well as a characterization assumed by Machado of a historical function of the Lucianic tradition within the "Menippean satire", in addition to the "irony" of his time about the medallions of Parnassianism, belletrist par excellence.

Given the above, it is believed that the work of Machado de Assis can be called a re-updated reading of literature and mockery presented by the pioneers of "Menippean satire". This, if not so much for the formal character, is much more comprehensive for the theme, see the miscellany of props glimpsed in its pages. Thus, such a reference to the classics and the typical elements of the Western literary tradition corroborate the desires presented for the motivation of the writing of this article.

¹⁸ ASSIS, 2016, p. 623-624.

¹⁹ REGO, 1989, p. 57.



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