Comparative Perspectives on the Rise of the Brazilian Novel

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Dom Casmurro is Machado de Assis’s most controversial novel. It was published in 1900 and in an English translation for the first time in 1953. In Dom Casmurro, Machado de Assis perfects the hybrid quality of his works, which benefit from a combination of his deep knowledge of European literature and his experience of the political, social and gender transformation sweeping through Brazil with the end of slavery (1888), the proclamation of the Republic (1889) and the belle époque.

Machado de Assis’s position between these two worlds is one facet of the originality and modernity of his works and above all of Dom Casmurro. In Dom Casmurro, he reveals his fascination with a theme that has a long history in European literature – jealousy – most notably represented in Shakespeare’s Othello, which Bento the narrator refers to directly in the chapters ‘A Touch of Iago’ (62), ‘A Reform in the Drama’ (72) and ‘Othello’ (135). According to Caldwell, Dom Casmurro can be considered one of the best modern reincarnations of Othello. The story is told through the eyes of Bento Santiago, the supposedly betrayed husband. Bento does not become a priest as his mother wanted, because he wants to marry, and he ends up marrying his enchanting childhood sweetheart and neighbour, Capitu. Capitu is therefore a sort of social-climbing Desdemona of suburban Rio de Janeiro, whereas Othello’s incarnation in nineteenth-century-Brazil is as a decadent superstitious Catholic paterfamilias. The aged narrator represents the decadent land- and slave-owning elite in the passage from the Monarchy to the Republic; he has lost most of his wealth and has to make his living as a lawyer and from the remaining family assets.

Bento is writing a memoir for the purpose of justifying his jealousy towards his deceased wife. The evidence of the betrayal that he gathers is very flimsy and could easily be interpreted as paranoia. In fact, we can summarize a substantial part of the history of Dom Casmurro’s criticism as
‘fiction of a court case’, which has essentially focused on the relationship between the narrator and his heroine, Capitu, and more recently, as we shall see later, on the triangular – or even quadrangular – story of friendship, love and homosocial affection between Capitu, Bento, Escobar and Sancha. This chapter will also explore this triangular relationship, by proposing a reading of Bento’s accounts of his life with his wife Capitu as an elegy, or perhaps a double elegy. The self-reflexive narrator interweaves the bitter and sad lament for the death of his heroine with that of his best friend Escobar. The relationship between the narrator and Capitu is the main subject and the one that occupies the most space in the narrative, but it is not the only one. Capitu, who is the most complex character of the novel – alongside the narrator himself – is in the foreground of the narrative, but in the middle distance he lets us glimpse the relationship between himself and a hero, Escobar, shedding light on the changes in the social, sexual and gender relations at the end of the nineteenth century in Brazil. As Chalhoub and Schwarz both state, Machado de Assis’s novel portrays this period of transition in Brazilian society, in which the relationship between the patriarch and his dependants – be they *agregados*, slaves, women or children – is being redefined, owing to the change of political regime, the end of slavery, industrialization and also, according to Miskolci, the new model of family and the transformation of gender relations and sexuality.

I will argue more precisely that *Dom Casmurro* can be considered an elegiac romance and that Machado de Assis has chosen a woman as the heroine of his novel because of the central role that women occupied in the patriarchal urban family at the end of the nineteenth century in Brazil and by extension because of woman’s role as mediator of male homosocial desire and partnership in the control of women. The elegiac romance appeared first in the early fiction of Joseph Conrad and was subsequently developed by a number of major writers influenced by Conrad, including Nabokov and Fitzgerald. This chapter will present the main characteristics of the elegiac romance and compare *Dom Casmurro* to *Lord Jim* in order to highlight what makes the relationship between narrator and hero(es) in *Dom Casmurro* unique.

**Lord Jim: The Double**

Bruffee states that novels such as *Lord Jim, Heart of Darkness, The Great Gatsby, The Good Soldier, Doctor Faustus* and *Pale Fire* share formal and thematic characteristics that must be taken into account when
defining them as works of art. He coined the term ‘elegiac romance’ to define them: a new narrative form that allowed the tradition of the heroic quest romance to survive in the fiction of the twentieth century.

Bruffee prefers to call these works ‘romance’ rather than ‘novel’ because the hero embarks on a kind of quest similar to that found in the chivalric romances. They are elegiac because the narrators tell us the story after the death of the hero, as in a pastoral elegy.

However, as different as they may seem, novels such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Lord Jim* share the same underlying driving force: they are the outcome of the need for the narrators to overcome the feeling of loss caused by the death of their heroes. For this reason, they are heroic and elegiac at the same time. They explore the interaction between the narrator and the hero in the recent and distant past. The loss of the hero is irredeemable. As a result, the narrator begins to construct the hero, who is a product of his or her fantasy; as readers we do not have access to the hero except through the narrator, who inevitably becomes his mediating force. Even when he is given a voice, what the hero says is meticulously selected and edited by the narrator. For example, Marlow guides his listeners as follows:

I am telling you so much about my own instinctive feelings and bemused reflections because there remains so little to be told of him. *He existed for me, and after all it is only through me that he exists for you.* I’ve led him out by the hand; I have paraded him before you. Were my commonplace fears unjust? I won’t say – not even now. You may be able to tell better, since the proverb has it that the onlookers see most of the game.

The narrative structure of the elegiac romance is a reconstruction in the narrative present of the relationship that was established between these two complementary characters in the past, blending factual reality with invention. The problem that the narrator faces is that although the hero is dead, his influence remains alive in the narrator’s mind. By dying, the hero takes the past of the narrator with him. The narrator embarks on an imaginary journey as a means of exorcizing his ghosts and recovering his past, and this will result in an autobiographical account. By telling his story, the narrator manages, or at least makes an attempt, to obtain a degree of control over his underlying concern, which is the driving force behind the narrative. When the elegiac romance is compared with other narratives about heroes, the narrator of this form can be said to be much more than a mere observer: he undergoes change insofar as he gives an account of the hero and is the victim of his relationship with him or her.
The elegiac romance is thus an autobiography of the narrator disguised as the biography of the hero.

_ Lord Jim _ is a novel about the art of narrating a story, but particularly about the difficulties that Marlow faced in attempting to understand and narrate the story of Jim. Jim is a young and promising sailor, who dreams about becoming a hero of the high seas. Marlow is much older than Jim and is a ship’s captain who is tired of his profession and discontented with life in general. Throughout the narrative, he has mixed feelings towards Jim, which fluctuate between admiration, curiosity and slight repulsion. Although the hero is the cause of conflicting emotions, Marlow remains loyal to his friend: he helps Jim to find a new position whenever he gives up his job in an attempt to flee from his past. He wants at all costs to understand Jim’s spiritual being and find an explanation for his actions by seeking to reconstruct his story.

Marlow is not the narrator at the beginning of the novel. In the first chapters, an omniscient narrator tells the story of Jim’s childhood and early years, as well as his romantic dream of becoming a hero like the protagonists of the sea adventure stories that he has read. Marlow only takes over the narrative when he arrives on the scene at the judicial inquiry about the _Patna_. From then onwards, what we read is the account given by Marlow to a group of listeners after dinner. The end of the novel is presented in yet another way: it takes the shape of a letter written by Marlow to the most attentive of his listeners.

The gist of the narrative is conveyed to the reader through Marlow, who has complete control over the story, even when he reconstructs the section on the judicial testimony and eye-witness accounts of Jim given by third parties. When the narrative is handed over to Marlow, time sequences are constantly jumbled. Past, present and future are juxtaposed in a single paragraph, which allows Marlow to manipulate the narrative flow and thus highlight certain aspects of the story. At the same time, he delays revealing (or even conceals) information from the reader concerning facts about the fate of the _Patna_ and the death of Jim which are important to the plot.

**The Three Elements of the Elegiac Romance**

Before examining _Dom Casmurro_, account should be taken of what Brufee regards as the three key elements of elegiac romance to emerge from _Lord Jim_ (and _Heart of Darkness_), which are also present in _Dom Casmurro_, as we shall see.
The first is the ambiguity of the relationship between the narrator and the hero, which raises doubts about the credibility of Marlow. His interpretation of Jim can be tendentious because at times he arouses sympathy for Jim and at other times invites us to judge him. As Albert Guerard wrote, on the one hand, Jim ‘needs a judge, witness and advocate in the solitude of his battle with himself’. On the other, Marlow ‘speaks of the fellowship of the craft, of being his very young brother’s keeper, of loyalty to “one of us” of mere curiosity, of a moral need to explore and test a standard of conduct. But Marlow … acknowledges a more intimate or more selfish alliance.’

The second key feature is the continuous introspection of the narrator who reflects on the past and reinterprets it while telling the story. This means that emphasis on action is kept to a minimum and thus the rhythm of the narrative slows. What is most important for Marlow is to discover both the effects of the past on the life of his hero and how the past affects him, too, in the fictional present. It is all these various moments of introspection combined that lead us to conclude that the narrator is not simply seeking to explain Jim’s offence, but also attempting to satisfy a personal need, as he makes clear in Chapter 5:

Was it for my own sake that I wished to find some shadow of an excuse for that young fellow whom I had never seen before, but whose appearance alone added a touch of personal concern to the thoughts suggested by the knowledge of his weakness – made it a thing of mystery and terror – like a hint of a destructive fate ready for us all whose youth – in its day – had resembled his youth? I fear that such was the secret motive of my prying.

The investigation that the narrator undertakes to discover the influence of the past on the present compels him to occupy a situation that is constantly shifting. In Bruffee’s view, what he really wishes to do in the story is to exhume the past that lies buried within himself and look at it without blinking so that he can proceed with his own life.

The third key feature of the elegiac romance that Bruffee detects in Lord Jim is the rhetorical manipulation of the reader by the narrator. Marlow portrays a fascinating character similar to the heroes of the sea yarns in the books read by Jim (and by the readers of Lord Jim), which are imbued with Western cultural traditions. Bruffee thinks that the reader reacts in a conventional way to these traditions and sees Jim as in fact a hero. This is not the only ‘trick’ employed by the narrator to distract the attention of the reader. Bruffee states that Marlow also persuades the
reader that his own interests and he himself are of no less importance for the narrative. In this way, Marlow draws the attention of the reader from himself to the figure of the hero when what he is doing the whole time, in reality, is to ‘saturate his description of his hero with his own personality, his own values, and above all his own deepest emotional problems’.12

The presence in Lord Jim of the three features discussed above, or, in other words, the ambiguity of fellowship, the introspection of the narrator and the rhetorical manipulation of the reader, means that the reader of the novel remains in a state of conflict. At first, this takes place between the reader and the narrator, but it also occurs between the reader and the omniscient narrator (at the beginning of the novel) and within the reader himself or herself, in relation to his or her own values and literary imagination. All this makes for a very different experience from that of the linear reading of heroic novels and the Bildungsroman of the nineteenth century. As Guerard states, the novel subjects its readers to a profound experience and requires their full involvement while also encouraging them to read the book a second time. The readers go through the labyrinth of evidence without the usual guide of an omniscient narrator and find themselves alone with a manipulative narrator. The novel places us within a psycho-moral drama where there is no final solution. We read the end of the book without knowing whether Marlow has explained Jim’s offence or if he has become reconciled to the past and freed himself from Jim’s influence. It was probably not one of Conrad’s main concerns to solve either of these mysteries. By making the pendulum swing between the narrator and the hero, the author is more concerned with establishing an interaction between the two and their respective mental outlooks. This is achieved with a degree of profundity that a modernist novel would attribute to mental processes, introspection and inner experience.

**The Title: Dom Casmurro and not Capitu**

‘Don’t look it up in dictionaries,’ Dom Casmurro warns us in the first chapter of the book that he intends to write and for which he chooses as a provisional title the nickname that his neighbours have given him. The meaning of ‘casmurro’, he continues, ‘doesn’t have the meaning they give, but the one the common people give it, of a quiet person who keeps himself to himself’.13 In the dictionaries that readers are discouraged from using, ‘casmurro’ means stubborn, headstrong and pig-headed. In this chapter we should, perhaps, once more question the Machadian narrator, as several critics of the novel have done, and consider it to be the
first instance of what Marta de Senna calls a ‘strategy of deceit’ which is predominant throughout the novel: ‘the device is what I call the strategy of deceit, by which I mean the narrator’s ability to build, on every other page, a kind of trompe l’oeil that conditions the reader’s eyes to see what is not there, and not to see what really is there to be seen’.14

Yet, if we try to see Dom Casmurro through the eyes of his neighbours, we find that he is a man who in the recent past and in the narrative present has lived ‘alone, with a servant’, in a house where the architecture and decor seek in an artificial way to recreate the old times of the child and teenager. Moreover, since he used to spend days and nights on end writing, he cannot be regarded by his living neighbours as anything but a man of ‘quiet, reclusive habits’.15

This does not mean that the two definitions are mutually exclusive. They apply to the same person but at three different stages of his life. He is the narrator Dom Casmurro, Bentinho and Bento Santiago, all at once. The dictionary meaning does not bring together the features of the narrator, at least for those who see him from the outside and are still alive when the narrative begins. Moreover, it fails to define the teenager Bentinho, who we know was much more naive than his childhood playmate Capitolina and his best friend and also former seminarian Escobar. The cunning of Capitu and Escobar and the naivety of Bentinho are heightened not only by gender but also by the fact that they belong to different social classes: Capitu is a social climber and Escobar a self-made man.16

Out of the three facets of the same man (Bentinho, Bento and Dom Casmurro), it is Bento who is the stubborn and pig-headed one. The obsession that grips him during his adult life distances Dom Casmurro from Bentinho, and is therefore fateful for his destiny and those of Capitu and their son Ezequiel. However, it is not Bento who sits down to write the narrative. He is as much a character as Capitu and Escobar. In reality, the memoirs of Dom Casmurro are concerned with reconstructing the interaction between Bento, Capitu and Escobar at different stages of the narrator’s life – according to the pattern of the elegiac romance.

Machado de Assis has been criticized for writing only histories of white men and women and this is also true of Dom Casmurro, the first novel he published after the change of the regime from Monarchy (1821–89) to Republic.17 The plot explores the social destiny of free women – represented by the heroine, Capitu and Escobar’s wife, Sancha – but also of free men – represented by Bento himself, Escobar and the agregado José Dias. It runs from the 1840s to the 1890s and provides the reader with a panorama of the period as the narrator tells us his personal story. The Second Reign particularly stands out, especially the rule of Dom Pedro II, which lasted
49 years (1840–89). With the social and economic crisis, the abolitionist movements, the Paraguayan War and the many internal conflicts, such as the Farroupilha Revolution, the ideals of the Empire began to crumble. In 1857, a key year for the plot, since it is when young Bento finds out that he is in love with Capitu, the Second Reign experienced its apogee. The image of the Emperor as a symbol of power is constantly reflected in the novel, firstly in specific scenes, such as when Bento and José Dias witness an imperial procession as they are wandering through the streets of Rio de Janeiro in 1857 (Chapter 29), and the scene in which Bento recollects Capitu’s interest in historical facts, more precisely in finding out what the ‘Emperor’s Majority’ means: that the coronation of Dom Pedro II took place in December 1840 on his fourteenth birthday. Secondly, Bento embodies the symbolism of a declining but yet powerful regime and emperor through Dom Pedro’s violent and failed attempt to maintain his position of control. The novel captures the figure of the patriarch in full exercise of his power, which is, nevertheless, at stake.

Only intended to be provisional, as the narrator states in the first chapter, the title *Dom Casmurro* is not referred to again in the narrative. We accept *Dom Casmurro* as the definitive title when we have finished reading Chapter 148, without asking if it was the most suitable for the book. Machado de Assis could have chosen to call the novel *Dona Capitu* or *The Gypsy Capitu* or simply *Capitu*, as in Luiz Fernando Carvalho’s televised adaptation, broadcast by TV Globo in 2008. The author would thereby have given prominence to the novel’s heroine, in the same way that Cervantes and Conrad highlighted the significance of their heroes by making the respective titles eponymous with them. On the one hand, *Don Quijote* and *Lord Jim* are echoed in the title chosen by Machado, owing to the neighbours’ accusations that he had ‘aristocratic pretensions’. As Bruffee argues, the title of an elegiac romance very often draws attention to

the ostensible hero of the narrator’s tale, but at the same time qualifies that attention so as to cast doubt even before the tale begins on the ostensible hero’s legitimacy both as a hero and as the hero, that is, both on his genuineness and integrity and on his role as the true central figure in the work.

On the other hand, *Dom Casmurro* is set apart from *Don Quijote* and *Lord Jim* because its title already denounces what the elegiac romance initially seeks to conceal: that the interests of the narrator are of central concern. As Bosi points out, in *Dom Casmurro* ‘Machado succeeded in reinstating the internal story of the narrative voice, giving it depth and tone’.
We can understand the significance that fellowship acquires in *Dom Casmurro* if we concentrate on the three features of the elegiac romance discussed in greater detail in the section above on *Lord Jim*. These are (1) the ambiguity of fellowship, (2) the rhetorical manipulation of the reader and (3) the introspection of the narrator.

The ambiguity of fellowship must be discussed in more detail because, in the first place, the fellowship in *Dom Casmurro* is not of the same type as that in *Lord Jim*. Like *Lord Jim*, *Dom Casmurro* tells the story of the narrator’s obsession with the – heroic – figure of a friend who has already died: ‘the first love of my heart’, as he calls Capitu in the last chapter. His search is also conducted at an inner level; or, to put it another way, in attempting to recreate an interaction between the heroine and himself, he indulges in an epistemological and psychological kind of self-assertion. The narrator reveals in Chapter 2, much earlier than Marlow (who is not the narrator at the beginning of *Lord Jim*), that ‘clearly my aim’ in writing the book ‘was to tie the two ends of life together, and bring back youth in old age’, something he failed to achieve with the house that he built in Engenho Novo.

As the narrative progresses, the presence of Capitu and the enigma surrounding her personality become more and more imposing. However, Dom Casmurro does not cease to tell his story while at the same time conducting an appraisal of the heroine. His and Capitu’s lives are as closely bound up in the narrative as the two sides of the wall that divides the houses of the two families.

In one respect Marlow and Dom Casmurro are the same: both of them reach the end of their stories without deciphering the mystery of their heroes. In the case of Jim, this is even after several accounts about him have been given by third parties whom he met on various occasions. Marlow does not manage to penetrate the mind of his hero (being only able to speculate about it) and fails to find a justification for Jim’s offence. However, in Machado’s novel the question is even more complex. At the beginning, Dom Casmurro is in a more advantageous situation than Marlow with regard to Jim. The reason for this is that he is married to Capitu and is thus on intimate terms with her, sharing the same house and presumably the same bedroom. Despite this, the narrator reaches the end of his account without succeeding in deciphering the mystery of Capitu’s ‘undertow eyes’.

At the turn of the nineteenth century in both Brazil and Europe, women (and homosexuals as well) were depicted as figures of disorder who occupied a border zone between patriarchal order and sexual
anarchy. Femmes fatales such as Zola’s Nana and Oscar Wilde’s Salome were characterized as mysterious, enigmatic and a stimulant of desire in men that would cause illness or even death. An important element of seduction was their eyes, something Machado de Assis explored not only in Dom Casmurro but also in his short fiction, in ‘A cartomante’, ‘Miss Dollar’, ‘Sem olhos’ and ‘Uns braços’. In Dom Casmurro, the narrator confesses to being unable to convey an image ‘that doesn’t offend against the rules of good style’ to convey her eyes:

Undertow eyes? Why not? Undertow. That’s the notion that the new expression put in my head. They held some kind of mysterious, active fluid, a force that dragged one in, like the undertow of a wave retreating from the shore on stormy days.

According to Bosi, Machado de Assis makes use of tautology and of the metaphor of olhos de ressaca [undertow eyes] to convey the narrator’s inability to grasp the heroine. With regard to the use of tautology, he writes,

It is significant that in the shaping of Capitu the narrator turns to tautology, ceasing to define his girlfriend in a narrow, rectilinear way: ‘Capitu was Capitu, that is, a very particular person, more of a woman than I was a man. If I’ve not said it already, there you have it. And if I have, there you have it anyway. There are things which must be impressed on the reader’s mind by dint of repetition.’ The singular in its pure state – Capitu was Capitu – marries the universal feminine (woman) and from there arises that intensifier ‘very particular’, which takes the refusal of classification as far as possible.

As in Lord Jim, one of the narrative devices of the rhetorical manipulation of the reader is the characterization of the heroes of the novels through the use of male or female tropes from the literature of the time. The narrator’s inability to decipher Capitu’s nature goes hand in hand with her depiction as a femme fatale, playing thereby with the reader’s literary imagination. This is not an innovation of Dom Casmurro, since Machado often employs the same prominent female tropes in his short stories and novels. Reading Capitu as a femme fatale was the predominant critical reception of the novel until the mid twentieth century. Critics such as Veríssimo, Pujol and Miguel-Pereira accuse Capitu of adultery, based on Bento’s assumption of Capitu’s manipulative nature.
The restrictions that society placed upon women meant that seduction was their only way of gaining independence.\textsuperscript{35} The femme fragile highlights women’s dependency and capacity to be manipulative, whereas the femme fatale represents strong, rational women who subvert traditional gender roles. These early critics fall prey to Machado de Assis’s rhetorical manipulation and endorse the status quo: the submis-
sion of women and children to the patriarchal family structure in a soci-
ety that is less and less dependent on slave labour. Indeed, these early critics are led by Bento into seeing Capitu as a threat to marriage and the hierarchical structure of the family.

However, by comparing Capitu with other female characters – Virgília of Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas and Sofia of Quincas Borba – Bosi comes to the conclusion that the heroine of Dom Casmurro is far more complex and dense, remaining even today a mystery to readers: ‘It is plausible that Pádua’s daughter is fighting to improve her position within the paternalistic society of the time, which was focused on mar-
riage and family wealth, but her innate character ruptures established interests, just as life will, if it can, rupture the dam of social convention.’\textsuperscript{36}

As we read the novel we follow the progressive complication of the relationship between the heroine and the narrator, for whom being mar-
rried to his heroine does not provide better insight into her character.\textsuperscript{37} To put it more clearly, the nature of the initial ties of friendship between the narrator and the heroine changes throughout the novel to suit the particular aspects of the historical and social background depicted and the specific turns of the plot. In the beginning the heroine is the child-
hood friend and neighbour of the narrator. During puberty, the friend-
ship and innocent playfulness of the two children turn into love. The ties of friendship are transfigured by the swearing of vows of love, which are sealed by the inscription on the wall shared by the two houses and are later renewed when the couple are married at a church altar.

We do not doubt that Bentinho was passionately in love with Capitu. It is her feelings that are ambiguous; at least that is how the nar-
rator wishes us to see them. His curiosity to understand something that is indecipherable in her dates back to their childhood. Like Jim, she is the product of the imagination and discourse of the narrator, who mean-
while seeks to make up for his failings in fantasies and preparing his own absolution. At the time when they both lived in Matacavalos, Bentinho used to admire how cunning Capitolina was. Much as he may be trying to gather arguments that could be used to condemn the heroine and remove the slightest possibility that the reader will forgive her, he cannot leave unnoticed in his words the tender feelings that the memory of the
heroine in her childhood and youth arouses in him. It is for this reason that, as has been noted by Roberto Schwarz, a lyrical tone prevails in the part of the narrative about the house at Matacavalos.\(^{38}\)

The ties of friendship between the two families are sealed by the marriage arranged for the happiness of the two youngsters. If we employ Bruffee’s terminology, which brings us back to the origins of the heroic quest romance, there is in *Dom Casmurro* a shift in the nature of the bond between the narrator and the heroine.

The historical and social background should not be overlooked, since it places the heroine in an adverse situation that is twofold: she does not have a voice in the narrative, and when she was still alive her wishes and freedom were constantly thwarted. This is because her responsibilities were confined to playing a role that was defined within a patriarchal society: looking after the household and bringing up her only child. Even a small protective gesture of Bento’s towards his wife is not something genuine; I refer here to the covering of Capitu’s arms by a fine veil in the dances later in the novel. It is a conservative and overprotective attitude that is prompted by jealousy of the natural endowments of the woman and the physical inferiority that Bento feels, for example, in comparison with Escobar. The exile of Capitu and Ezequiel to Switzerland, where Bento sends them after their separation, represents the final break of the fellowship between the heroine and the narrator, which I interpret here as a betrayal of Capitu by Bentinho. This reverses the line of interpretation that is usually followed and which is the most controversial area in critical essays about the novel. If the betrayal of Bentinho by Capitu can never be confirmed, we can nonetheless be sure that, in the world of the elegiac romance, no narrator has ever gone so far in his ambiguous feelings towards his heroine.

Following this line of thought, the separation of the couple, which is caused by the morbid jealousy of the husband, constitutes a break of the (conjugal) ties. We can no longer speak of ‘the fellowship of the craft’ or the protection ‘of his very young brother’, as in the case of Marlow and Jim. The nature of the bond is less changeable in *Lord Jim*. In Conrad’s novel there is no break in the pact of the fellowship. The narrator remains loyal to the hero from beginning to end. He attempts to help Jim by arranging a number of consecutive jobs for him. Furthermore, he is not responsible for the conflict that finally leads to Jim’s death. Marlow is hundreds of miles away and has already said his last farewell to Jim. In this respect, Marlow acts as a passive observer. This is not the case in *Dom Casmurro*: Bento sends Capitu to exile and is indirectly responsible for her lonely death, as well as that of their son. Thus, Bento betrays Capitu (and not the other way around) if we reread the novel through the lens of a heroic quest romance.
A Double Elegy?

Dom Casmurro makes plain at the beginning and end of the book that his purpose is to link the two extremes of his life and that all that is lacking is he, himself.\textsuperscript{39} In view of this, why has criticism put so much effort into (re)reading the novel in search of clues that will confirm the infidelity of Capitu or clear her of the charge of adultery? As mentioned above, Abel Barros Baptista describes this trend in the critical history of \textit{Dom Casmurro}, focused on the relationship between narrator and heroine, as ‘fiction of a court case’. Why are we led not to see what is there before us – Bento Santiago’s authoritarianism, envy, personal weakness, selfishness, scorn for religion, and indifference towards his son – and to see what is not there, that is, the adultery of Capitu?

The first study to cast doubts on the veracity of the narrator was published as early as 1900. José Veríssimo suspected that Bento’s views about Capitu might be biased: ‘Dom Casmurro describes her with love and hate, which may make him suspect. He tries to hide these feelings very carefully, perhaps without all-round success. At the end of his memoirs one feels a thrill that he attempts to reject.’\textsuperscript{40}

Key critical studies throughout the twentieth century, such as those referred to on p. 286, were unanimous in their condemnation of Capitu. It was only in Helen Caldwell that the heroine finally found an advocate who defended her from the accusation of adultery. For Caldwell, Bento acts simultaneously as Othello and Iago in order to plot the condemnation of his wife. She compares the narrative to a court of law, in which Capitu is put in the dock and the narrator is Bento’s own lawyer. The implied author would have left clues throughout the book, causing the reader to be wary of Bento’s account. As Gledson and Schwarz argue, the reader glimpses the malfunctioning of contemporary Brazilian society through the troubled figure of Bento Santiago.

Gledson draws attention to the unreliability of the narrator of \textit{Dom Casmurro}. In Gledson’s view, Bento’s whole narrative is an attempt to persuade the reader of Capitu’s infidelity by reconstructing impressions of the past that are unsubstantiated and lack concrete evidence. The narrator’s aim is to make his version of the facts override everything else. This means that, as the narrative progresses, the novel is revealed to be a study of Bento’s pathological obsession and not of Capitu’s adultery.\textsuperscript{41}

Schwarz, on the other hand, puts the blame on the reader for having accepted Capitu’s conviction for more than 60 years: the reader is sympathetic to Bento’s attitude because he shares with the narrator Bento’s
point of view and the concerns of his social group. Capitu’s conviction and the ruin of Bento’s family life were undesirable but inevitable.\(^{42}\)

As mentioned above, some studies have expanded the focus to examine the triangular relationship between Capitu, Bento and Escobar. Italo Mariconi, who pioneered the reading of the novel as a queer narrative, explores the sexual connotations of episodes of clear affection between Bento and Escobar. For Mariconi, some lines of the novel make explicit ‘certain ambiguities and sufferings that characterize masculine homosexual desire in the paradigm of Victorian heteronormativity’.\(^{43}\) For Richard Miskolci, it is a homosocial relationship to which, as Boucinhas points out, the problem of class inequality is added. Machado depicts through the ambiguity of Bento’s feelings for Escobar – desire, rivalry, homosexuality and camaraderie between two seminary friends – the problematic and complex relations between men prevailing in the late nineteenth century. Based on the studies of Foucault and Ortega, for Miskolci the friendship between Bento and Escobar is socially controlled and peripheral to the relationship with woman within the nuclear monogamist family. Capitu – as well as Sancha, about whom Bentinho cherishes a small erotic fantasy in Chapter 118 – is the mediator of the relations between men who attempt to affirm their masculinity ‘against the feminine ideal, embodied in women and projected by them, in sum, socially represented in that which mediates their relationship founded on a masculine homosocial desire’.\(^{44}\)

Miskolci employs the geometric figure of the triangle in examining the novel’s social, gender and sexual hierarchies, which are crystallized in the love triangle: ‘we find not only the centrality of the Bento–Escobar relationship, but above all, the fact that the apex of the triangle, which is farthest from the base, is also the most revealing’.\(^{45}\)

This line of interpretation corroborates the hypothesis that the nature of the fellowship in *Dom Casmurro* is more complex because it is twofold. The narrator gives centrality to Capitu, owing to the role of women in social relationships among men, and also because Machado de Assis may have been conditioned by the literary models and female tropes in force in his time, as discussed earlier. However, the ‘male knight’ does not disappear from the narrative: he instead loses his role as hero to a more complex female character. His death is felt much sooner than Capitu’s and is, according to Miskolci, what turns Bento Santiago’s life inside out: it fills him with suspicions that are directed against Capitu and makes him question his own masculinity.\(^{46}\)

One of the textual proofs that the knight loses centrality in the narrative is the way in which Machado de Assis depicts Escobar. He is not as complex as Capitu. In a few chapters, particularly Chapters 56...
and 71, the narrator is able to present with precision the character's key attributes – physical and psychological features, mannerisms and habits. Escobar is seen through not only Bento’s eyes but also the eyes of other characters, in a way very similar to the characterization of Dona Glória, José Dias, Prima Justina and Tio Cosme. Even his nervous twitches and flaws are described in detail in Chapter 56.

Machado de Assis does not construct ambiguity through the description of the character, as he does for Capitu. Escobar is a self-made man, as described by Boucinhas. However, Machado implies the possibility of eroticizing (or even queering) male homosocial relationships in a few specific scenes, such as the one in which Bento touches the arms of Escobar – which has been extensively examined by Mariconi and Miskolci – and an earlier one during their time in the seminary. Bento is enthusiastic about Escobar’s mathematical abilities and gives him a hug in public. The gesture is reprimanded as excessive and deviant from the modest normative behaviour expected of seminarists:

I was so taken with my friend’s mental agility, that I could not refrain from embracing him. It was in the courtyard; other seminarists noticed our exuberance; a priest who was with them did not approve.

‘Modesty,’ he said to us, ‘does not permit such effusive gestures; your esteem can be expressed with moderation.’

Escobar remarked that the priest and the others were speaking out of envy, and said that we should perhaps keep apart from one another. I interrupted him to say no; if it was envy, so much the worse for them.

‘Let’s cock a snoot at them!’

‘But …’

‘Let’s be even firmer friends than we have been up to now.’

Escobar grasped my hand in secret, so hard that my fingers still hurt from it. An illusion, no doubt, perhaps the effect of the long hours I’ve been writing without a break. I’ll put down the pen for a while.

It would be perhaps less anachronistic and more accurate to interpret the effusive hug and the strong handshake on the sly as signals of ‘friendship or male love’, a pre-homosexual category of male sex and gender deviance which, according to Halperin, is revealed as much in hierarchical relations (heroic warrior–subordinate pal or sidekick; patron–client) as in relations ‘between two men who occupy the same social rank, usually an elite one,
and who can claim the same status in terms of age, masculinity, and social empowerment. Escobar and Bento are at first equals, since they are about the same age and are at this point both at the seminary and therefore being prepared for the same career. I would not go as far as to say that there is some hierarchy between them. It would be more precise to say that there is a small social, physical and intellectual asymmetry between the two men, much to Machado’s liking, who, as Bosi describes, prioritizes in his fiction the treatment of the smallest social difference. Both types of relationship are ‘indissociably bound up with at least the potential for erotic signification’. However, as Halperin writes further on,

It is difficult for us moderns – with our heavily psychologistic model of the human personality, our notion of unconscious drives, our tendency to associate desire with sexuality, and our heightened sensitivity to anything that might seem to contravene the strict protocols of heterosexual masculinity – it is difficult for us to avoid reading into such passionate expressions of male love a suggestion of ‘homoeroticism’ at very least, if not of ‘latent homosexuality,’ those being the formulations that often act as a cover for own perplexity about how to interpret same-sex emotions that do not quite square with canonical conceptions of sexual subjectivity.

Along these lines, I think it is more accurate to define the relationship between Bento and Escobar as male friendship that is built on their common desire to leave the seminary and reject a future life as priests, as clearly stated in Chapter 78. It is a friendship that starts in the seminary, between two men who will later each become a paterfamilias, one representing the rising new bourgeois class, and the other the decaying elite of former land- and slave-owners. Escobar emulates the habits of the patriarch: he marries, has a daughter, buys a house for the family in the upwardly mobile neighbourhood of Flamengo and maintains extra-marital affairs, as Bento does.

Conclusion

The secret of the relationship between Escobar and Bento may still be an open question, although I believe that they were simply friends, in pre-homosexual terms. The relationship between two men remains an important element of the elegiac romance, but the female character gains centrality in the plot and therefore more complexity as a character,
which is lacking in Escobar. The triangular relationship is, nevertheless, central to the development and acclimatization of the genre in this novel, which takes gender on board to fit the specificities of the plot and of Brazilian society at the end of the nineteenth century – to be precise, the change in the gender of the hero and the presence of a male friend in the middle distance.

In this simplified summary of some of the ways in which Dom Casmurro has been read, we can see that the rhetorical manipulation of the reader – Bruffee’s second element of the elegiac romance – has already been fully discussed in critical studies of Machado. Going back to the comparison of Machado’s and Conrad’s novels, I believe that the rhetorical manipulation of the reader in Dom Casmurro is more prevalent than in Lord Jim. In the first place, Dom Casmurro has to shift the focus away from himself, since his aims are made clear earlier in the novel than is the case with Marlow. Secondly, there is a shift from hero to heroine as the central element of the elegy. And, third, he must persuade himself and the reader that it was necessary to break off the pact of fellowship with his heroine in order to defend his honour as a betrayed husband before he can be redeemed. He could never succeed in gaining redemption without first justifying why he has broken off the original vows. Thus his final hope lies with the readers: he wants to persuade them that Capitu has betrayed him and thus rid himself of the burden of having broken the heroic quest romance’s oath of loyalty.

Before concluding, there remains the final distinctive feature of the elegiac romance – the introspection of the narrator. This has already been studied with regard to Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas in the critical tradition that links it to the Shandean form. This feature of the elegiac romance roughly corresponds to the first two components of the Shandean form as outlined by Rouanet: the constant presence of the narrator and the digressive and fragmentary character of the plot.\textsuperscript{53} The effect on the narrative of the constant introspection of the narrator is that the action slows down. Digression and introspection are employed for different reasons, however. In the elegiac romance (and this applies to Dom Casmurro), Bruffee argues that, insofar as the narrator grows in stature, the narrative tends to take on the quality of action, as the narrator talks about what he is doing, or trying to do, in telling the tale. And the narrator also manifests a growing interest in what might be called the irrecoverable past and its effects on the present.\textsuperscript{54}
Another consequence of the frequent intrusions of the narrator is that, in Bruffee’s words, whenever he finds himself in conflict with himself and reveals ‘his deepest emotional problems’ he either contradicts or betrays himself. Hence, I believe that it is not the implicit author who adopts this role, as Caldwell argues. In Caldwell’s opinion, the authorial voice is superimposed on Dom Casmurro’s narrative. The implicit author signals to the reader at various points of the narrative that Dom Casmurro is only telling his own version of the story. Like the followers of Joseph Conrad, Machado tones down the effect of the frame narrator (if he does not exclude it altogether), that is, the narrative superstructure in which an omniscient narrator is superimposed on the dramatized narrator. Thus, in Dom Casmurro, both the heroic quest and the authorial voice are internalized. In psychoanalytical terms, the inner authorial voice is responsible for the lapses of the narrator, that is, the casual errors he commits without taking account of the repercussions of what he has written on the minds of more obtuse readers. Examples include the irony implied in the title of the book, the contradictions between the different definitions of the word ‘casmurro’, the effigy of Massinissa, and other allusions and quotations that can be found in the novel – all of which tell us to be wary of the narrator.

The comparison of Dom Casmurro with Lord Jim in this chapter may encourage a rereading of the Brazilian novel to distinguish its realistic aspects from its modernist aspects. Although its plot may seem to belong to the nineteenth century, the form of the elegiac romance that Machado employs, whether consciously or not, places him alongside or even ahead of Conrad.

Notes

1. This chapter is a shorter version of Silva (2018).
2. The novel was published by H. Garnier in Paris in 1899 and was on sale in Rio de Janeiro in 1900. The first translation into English was by Hellen Caldwell (Assis 1953). The translation used in this chapter is by John Gledson (Assis 1997). All other translations are mine.
5. An agregado is a free poor person who lives in the shadow of a patriarchal family in a dubious and uncomfortable position, being neither a relative nor a servant (Chalhoub 2003; Schwarz 1997; Miskolci 2008).
13. Assis 1997, 4
16. See, for example, Meyer 1986, 222; Boucinhas 2015.
22. Assis 1997, 244.
27. Assis 1870.
29. Assis 1885.
33. Stein 1984, 112.
34. Veríssimo 1977, 28; Pujol 1934, 247–8; Miguel-Pereira 1936, 272.
37. See, for example, Merivale’s article (1980) on A Book of Common Prayer by Joan Didion for an analysis of this work as elegiac novel in which both the narrator and the protagonist are women.
38. Schwarz 1997, 32.
39. See Chapters 2 and 144 of Dom Casmurro.
40. Veríssimo 1900.
42. Schwarz 1990.
44. Miskolci 2009, 552.
45. Miskolci 2009, 557.
46. Miskolci 2009, 556.
47. Boucinhas 2015.
52. Halperin 2002,120.

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