

“Oh morte, que vida é esta!” Relations between women and male authority figures in the comedies of António Ferreira

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“Oh morte, que vida é esta!” It is Lívia, the heroine of Ferreira’s *Comédia do Cioso*, who has this striking line as her husband Júlio comes home after a prowling round the streets of Venice (Ferreira, fol. 122). Exactly what the phrase means is not clear—does it express a longing for death, or is she comparing her present life to death? Either way, Lívia is clearly unhappy, and with good reason, because the insanely jealous Júlio keeps her locked up, her only company—as he thinks—her nurse Brómia whose name, one of the traditional epithets of Bacchus, means ‘the noisy one’. It is also a servant’s name typical of Roman comedy, which occurs in Plautus’s *Amphitruo* and in Camões’ adaptation of it, *Os Enfatriões* (Roig 1983, 53).

The main plot of this sixteenth-century prose comedy, set in Venice and with a mix of Portuguese and Italian characters, concerns the deception (and also self-deception) of Júlio. He is lured out of his house by the chance of a night with a courtesan, so that his wife can receive the Portuguese boy-friend she had had before marriage, Bernardo. This is possible because Bernardo has returned to Venice on business, and also because just about every character in Ferreira’s play is on Lívia’s side, who they see as the victim of injustice. And so, at the climax of the play, at the end of Act IV, Lívia and Bernardo meet, at night, in the marital home.

The moment is not climactic in every sense. For one thing, the meeting happens off stage, and is reported by Bernardo. Then the lovers have a chaperone, the nurse Brómia. And what Lívia wants from Bernardo is the opportunity to tell him about her feelings, not a sexual relationship. She bitterly regrets having obeyed her father, and married Júlio, because he was rich, rather than the penniless foreigner. According to Bernardo the scene passes in tears, on both sides.

Nevertheless, something quite significant has happened. Two powerful males—husband and father—are successfully defied by a woman, not a common event in sixteenth-century Portuguese literature. And Ferreira chose to do this in a genre, the comedy in prose, normally neglected and despised by the critics, who have a tendency to dismiss his and Sá de Miranda’s experiments in this kind of drama as pale imitations of Roman comedy.¹ In the *Comédia do Cioso* there is quite a lot to remind the reader of classical comedy, but no scene like the one just described occurs anywhere in Plautus or Terence. Their plays normally end with a marriage, not with the dysfunctional workings of a relationship which had begun five years previously. It is true that Plautus’s *Amphitruo*, the play with a servant called Bromia, concerns an

¹ For a bibliography, see Earle 2008, 34-36.

event in the marriage of Amphitruo and Alcmena, but theirs is a conventionally happy relationship, unlike that of Júlio and Lívia.

Cioso was probably written in the 1550s, while Ferreira was a student at Coimbra. It is the second, and more interesting of his two comedies, but has suffered from the lack of a modern edition. Its first appearance in print known to us was in the *Comédias Famosas Portuguesas* of 1622, but there may have been an earlier edition, as there is of Ferreira's first play, the *Comédia de Bristo ou do fanchono*. There are two copies of that play, printed in Coimbra in 1562, in the Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, and it is available in a useful modern edition, by Adrien Roig (1973, 20). The female lead, Camília, is less well developed than Lívia, and only appears on stage once. Yet she too, in partnership with her lover, and later husband, Lionardo, defies male authority.

Camília is a poor but respectable girl who lives with her mother, her father believed dead in India. With the assistance of the ambiguous Bristo she and Lionardo marry, but off stage, in defiance of Lionardo's father who disowns his son (Act IV, sc 5).

Ferreira's prose comedies are largely forgotten, but his verse tragedy, *Castro*, was until recently one of the best-known plays in Portuguese. It is never studied in conjunction with the comedies but, if that is done, common patterns emerge, and one of them is the presence of a young, but strong female lead, Inês de Castro herself, more than capable of holding her own against the males who surround her.

In Act III Inês hears that her execution has been ordered by the king, Afonso IV, because that is the only way open to him of ending the undesirable relationship between her and his son, Pedro. Inês does not flee to her lover's arms, as the Chorus advises, or even wait for him to come to her rescue, but, convinced of her innocence, resolves to defend herself before the monarch. This she does with success, and in the course of Act IV she comes to dominate the stage, until the weak king lets her go free:

Ó molher forte!
Venceste-me, abrandaste-me. Eu te deixo.
Vive, enquanto Deus quer. (ed. Earle, ll. 14212-13)

Here is a statement like no other of the capacity of Ferreira's heroines to dominate those around them, whatever their status.

But, as we all know, these moments of empowerment do not last long. The last words that Inês hears in the tragedy are the king's endorsement of her strength of character, but as soon as she is off stage the king's counsellors have no difficulty in getting him to consent to her death, which occurs immediately afterwards, again off stage. Yet the reinstatement of male power is itself temporary, for in the final speech of the play Prince Pedro, the king's son, threatens his father with a civil war. Inês's murder weakens the king's authority more than it strengthens it.²

² For further discussion of this point, see Earle 2012, 294-97.

In the comedies, too, women's domination is only fleeting. Male power is soon restored though, since these are comedies, that restoration is a reason for rejoicing. The conflicts of Plautus and Terence's plays are normally resolved in the final act in a recognition scene, in which a traveller from abroad brings information which explains the characters' true identities and, very often, allows them to marry with parental approval. This is exactly what happens in the more conventional *Bristo*. Camília's father, supposedly lost in India, returns, together with his son, not just safe and sound, but also rich. Her marriage, the cause of so much rage, now receives both fathers' blessing, and two other marriages also immediately take place. All the young people are reabsorbed into a society in which fathers rule.

Cioso is more complex, and more ambiguous. The last scene of Act IV is the one already mentioned, in which the unhappy wife Lívia receives her former Portuguese lover, Bernardo. It is the moment in the play in which female self-determination is most dramatically portrayed. Act V changes all that. The first person to come on stage is Lívia's father, followed by two other old men, whose appearance constitutes the recognition scene. One of them is an emissary from Bernardo's father, sent to bring him back to Portugal after five years of wandering round the Mediterranean. He has to leave, though there is no way that he can take Lívia with him, and no marriage awaits him at home. His consolation is the discovery that his closest friend and accomplice in Venice is a long-lost brother, so the two young men depart together.

Lívia is left behind, to face, not the consequences of her actions but a suddenly and miraculously transformed Júlio, who has resolved to abandon jealousy and become the model of a kind and considerate husband. The change is startling, but there is no need to condemn it, as Roig does, as "um desenlace *Deus ex machina* que a evolução interna da acção não fazia prever" (Roig 1983, 50-51). It is true that nothing happens on stage which forces Júlio to behave differently, but this is a comedy of character, as Roig and other commentators have noted, probably the first to have been written by a Portuguese (Roig 1983, 55-56). In it the men tend to be weak and changeable, the women—even the prostitute Faustina, as will appear—upright and steadfast.

Throughout Júlio is impetuous and erratic, uncertain of his identity. It is clear almost from the start that the role of the jealous husband that he is playing is intensely painful to him. He is a sadistic tyrant at one moment, and then suddenly overcome by doubt, as in these excerpts from Act I, Scene 2, in which Brómia complains that she and Lívia are forced to spend their time locked up at home:

BRÓMIA. Havemos de viver sempre em trevas?

JÚLIO. Si.

BRÓMIA. Porque?

JÚLIO. Porque eu quero.

BRÓMIA. Basta.

JÚLIO. Não sou eu o rei nesta casa, não guardarão as leis que eu ponho?

BRÓMIA. E as outras assi vivem?

JÚLIO. As boas vivem assi.
 BRÓMIA. Como te enganas.
 JúLIO. Os sesudos assi o fazem.
 BRÓMIA. E pera que fez Deus o dia?
 JúLIO. Pera os homens.

And yet, only a few minutes later in the same scene he seems to repent of all of this:

JúLIO. Quero andar com meu rosto muito seguro e muito confiado, e não me deixam.
 BRÓMIA. Quem te não deixa?
 JúLIO. Meus pecados que me foram cativar tão miseramente. (*Comédias famosas portuguesas*, fols. 118v-19r)

The feeling of guilt derives partly from the fact that Júlio is angling to spend a night with the courtesan Faustina, but his problems go far deeper. The other characters notice that after his marriage he even changes physically: “Quem viu aquele de antes, mancebo galante, gentil homem, polido, penteado, mais enfeitado que ãa dama, como o conhecerão agora, sujo, magro, a capa caída...?” (fol. 124v). The sense that his is a very insecure personality increases when Júlio pretends to the servant Ardélio not to be Júlio at all, in an attempt to dissuade Ardélio’s master, Lívia former lover, Bernardo, from approaching his house. The servant sees through this desperate scheme at once, and takes advantage of the situation to insult Júlio, who has to listen while his own shortcomings are mercilessly exposed: “Um cioso malaventurado, desconfiado, que martiriza a mulher de dia e de noite” (fol. 130). Clearly Júlio derives some perverse satisfaction from this humiliation, for in his Act V soliloquy, in which he resolves to treat his wife better, he is again abject in his self-abasement: “...Aborreço a mi mesmo, como a um imigo, agora conheço que todos aqueles meus fundamentos e boas razões eram cegueiras e doudices...” (fol. 150). What is more, just as he changes once, so he may change again, and on the last page of the comedy Lívia’s own father thinks that his daughter should enjoy her new life with Júlio while she can, “que segundo o que enxergo nele, vai já caindo em outro extremo demasiado” (fol. 154v).

As the principal male characters come on stage in the opening scenes of Act V the patriarchy is restored, and the freedoms hinted at in the end of Act IV, Lívia’s nighttime encounter with Bernardo, are forgotten. But it is already clear that male authority in *Cioso*, as in *Castro*, rests on shaky grounds. The men, too, and not just Júlio, are weak and changeable characters, in contrast with the constancy of the women, and not just Lívia. One of the funniest scenes in the play is between Lívia’s parents, César and Pórcia. Pórcia blames César for his greed in accepting Júlio as his son-in-law, and claims that she had seen through him from the start. César wriggles in embarrassment, and finally decides that ill fortune was responsible for the unhappy marriage. Pórcia unhesitatingly replies: “Não te aqueixes da fortuna, senão de ti só. Que culpa tem ela a

quem se entrega ao mal?” (fol. 136). Finally, left alone on stage, César grudgingly admits that his wife was right. Even Brómia, the old servant, whose role as a garrulous old woman is a traditionally comic one, proves herself to be a strong character, quite capable of standing up to her master Júlio, as the exchanges quoted above show. And she has the lead role in another very funny scene, Act IV, scene 6, in which she obeys to the letter the instructions which she had received from Júlio not to let anyone into the house, including Júlio himself. She accordingly bars the door to her master when he unexpectedly returns. This scene ultimately derives from an incident in *Amphitruo*, in which Amphitruo is denied entry to his own house by Mercury, who is disguised as the slave Sosia. However, Ferreira integrates the scene most effectively into his own play, and the dialogue raises once again those doubts about Júlio’s identity which are an important feature of his character.

There is a more unexpected example of female constancy in the behaviour of Faustina, the courtesan, who is devoted to her lover, Octávio. The faithful prostitute is a character type who appears in Roman comedy, but Faustina takes it to a new level. Act III opens with Faustina’s first appearance on stage, and an intertextual relationship is immediately set up with Philematium in Plautus’s *Mostellaria*. Faustina has a servant, Clareta, more cynical and more worldly wise than she is, just as Philematium has in Scapha, and Ferreira translates a number of lines from the Roman comedy.³ However, Philematium is just a silly girl, who thinks of little more than her appearance, and in any case is only on stage relatively briefly. Faustina is a much more fully developed character, who ends up gaining the audience’s sympathy. Despite her lover Octávio’s insulting behaviour and jealous fits she remains devoted and, although she loses him in the end, it is for reasons outside her control and for which she cannot be held responsible.

Octávio, is another character rather more common in Portuguese than in Roman comedy. His cynicism and materialist attitude to love-making are a foil to the romantic Bernardo who, though a stranger to Venice, soon becomes his friend. In that respect he forms a parallel to Duriano, in Camões’s *Auto de Filodemo*, who has a close relationship with the play’s male lead, Filodemo, despite his loves being “ativos” rather than “pola passiva” (ed. Anastácio, 106-07). Octávio’s frankly sexual attitude to women incurred the wrath of the inquisitorial censor, who struck out this remark to his friend: ‘Eu te dou de boamente todas as almas de quantas molheres há no mundo, e dá-me tu os seus corpos’ (Ferreira 1622, fol. 132).

Yet, in the *Comédia do Cioso*, as in Camões’s play, it is the courtly, spiritual lover who makes the running. Filodemo marries his Dionísia, while Bernardo, though denied a sexual relationship with Lívia, does enjoy a profoundly satisfying emotional

³ *Ibid.*, fol. 134 where there are quite close translations of ll. 157-58, 171-72, 190 and 230-31 of *Mostellaria*. In these exchanges the two women debate the pros and contras of staying faithful to a single paying lover. Later in the same scene there is an imitation of ll. 272-77, which are about make-up and perfume.

experience with her. Octávio, on the other hand, ends up quarrelling irremediably with Faustina. The story of that quarrel reveals his typically male weakness and indecisiveness, as opposed to the lady's strength of character.

As already stated, the plot of the comedy hinges on bringing Bernardo and Lívia together. Lívia, who is the driving force, persuades Octávio that he should lure Júlio away from home by offering him a night with Faustina. This places Octávio in a dilemma, because he knows Faustina will be deeply offended by the proposal, but he yields to Lívia's pressure: "Mas que hei já de fazer? Rogou-me, abraçou-me, chorou-me, venceu-me" (*ibid.*, fol. 135v). The situation, and even some of the language, recalls the king's surrender to Inês in *Castro*.

Octávio does what he promised Lívia he would do, and Faustina is duly furious, so much so that she does not even allow Octávio to explain why he wants to offer her to Júlio. In the last scene of Act III she laments the faithlessness of men, and sees no future other than a return to purely mercenary relationships. In his analysis of the play Adrien Roig says that Faustina admits Júlio because she is greedy for the ring that he had promised to give her, but this rather misrepresents her motives, which are much more of resignation and despair (Roig 1983, 49). As it turns out, in the scene in Act III, which is the last time we see her on stage, the ring is not mentioned.

So far, so bad, but matters get worse, for when Faustina does admit Júlio to her house, her servant carelessly leaves the door open, and Octávio passes by and notices. Júlio's jealousy, it will be recalled, takes the form of keeping his wife locked up, and Octávio is just the same. "Porta aberta a tais horas?" (*ibid.*, fol. 144v), he asks, and he becomes furiously jealous, even though Faustina had done what he asked. He calls her a "puta" (*ibid.*, fol. 146v), and refuses to have anything more to do with her, despite her entreaties.

So Octávio, like Júlio, is jealous and given to sudden changes of mood. Even Bernardo, the romantic hero, is weak and vacillating by comparison with Lívia, who thinks of the scheme whereby they will spend the night together, and carries it through. She and Faustina, though one is a respectable woman, and the other a prostitute, have constancy and fortitude in common. As Octávio says, earlier in the play, "Não cuidei que nestas molheres se achasse amor tão inteiro" (*ibid.*, fol. 139), and it is a remark which could apply to either of them.

As a comic dramatist, and as a tragic one also, Ferreira was very much aware of the contingency of human existence, of the way that people's lives are influenced by factors that they cannot control. Octávio's unattractive behaviour, his apparent readiness to discard Faustina, is not simply driven by callousness, and he faces a genuine dilemma, as he explains: "Perda é todavia agravar ãa vontade tanto minha, vergonha me há-de ser, mas a amizade então se vê quando se em mor pressa prova" (*ibid.*, fol. 135v). Here the competing claims of his mistress's affection for him and his own friendship with Bernardo are brought into conflict. It is a one-sided conflict, because Octávio and Bernardo are brothers, though at this point in the play neither of them knows that. So a hidden genetic influence pushes him more strongly than his

sense that he is acting shamefully. There are additional reasons why Octávio should tend to side with Bernardo, not all of them to his credit, including the way he is easily seduced by Lívia, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, it is clear that he is not a wholly bad character.

The same could be said even of Júlio, whose strange actions are attributed, by his servant Brómia and his mother-in-law Pórcia, to the lack of the steadying influence of a father (*ibid.*, fols. 117v and 136r-v). Júlio's father is not one of those absent relatives, so common in comic drama, who suddenly reappear in the last act, as the hero's father does in Ferreira's own *Comédia de Bristo*. He had been a friend of César, Júlio's father-on-law, but by the time of the action of the play has perhaps died, though no mention is made of his death. Possibly the first edition of the play, if there was one, would cast some light on the problem. However, from the text as we have it it is clear, as Pórcia says, that Júlio's willfulness derives from a family situation which is not his responsibility: "...este mancebo, criado sem pai, vive à sua vontade, sem deixar conversações doutros tais como ele" (*ibid.*, fol. 136).

All the women, but especially the principals, Lívia and Faustina, are much more attractive than the men, and if they too go astray their problems are, to some degree, also outside their control. Lívia might be criticized for arranging a meeting with her lover and encouraging her husband to visit prostitutes but, as she and others repeatedly make clear, she was forced into marriage by her father's wish for her to make a wealthy match. Faustina is capable of disinterested love, and is not mercenary at heart: "Enfim, melhor é o roubo pois nos enriquece, e os roubados vão mais contentes, mas minha condição não era essa: sempre desejei um bom amor, agora que cuidava que o tinha [with Octávio] não o vejo" (*ibid.*, fol 141v [in 1622, erroneously, 143]). The fact of being a courtesan (no explanation is given as to how or why that happened) makes an honourable way of life impossible.

The personal circumstances of all these characters, therefore, influence their behaviour and make moral judgements difficult. However, there is no doubt that, in general terms, Ferreira favours his female characters.

The feminism which is such an attractive feature of Ferreira's plays may well be the result of personal preference. However, it also has an aesthetic and intellectual context. Portugal's brief moment of humanistic freedom allowed time for only two writers of classical comedy to emerge, Ferreira and Sá de Miranda. Ferreira was more than forty years younger than Sá de Miranda, who he regarded as a master. He refers to his comedies respectfully in the prologue to *Bristo*, but he clearly also regarded them as a challenge.

Sá de Miranda was notoriously misogynistic, and nowhere more so than in his plays. His heroines are so angelic that they never appear on stage at all, and such females as are visible are either prostitutes or comic old women. In several scenes in Ferreira's comedies one can see him rewriting the older man's work, in support of an agenda which is much more pro-women. There is space here for only one example.

In Sá de Miranda's second play, *Os Vilhalpandos*, several scenes involve a pair of courtesans, mother and daughter. They are both treacherous and venal. In *Cioso*, as just explained, there is a much more complex, and sympathetic attitude to such people. In Ferreira's first play, *Bristo*, there is a mother and her daughter, but they are respectable women. However, an intertextual relationship exists between them and the courtesans of *Os Vilhalpandos*. In that play the daughter provokes chaos by falling for one of the Spanish captains –the Vilhalpandos of the title– who she had seen brawling outside her house. In *Bristo* the daughter, Camília, is desired by the male lead –exactly as in *Os Vilhalpandos*– but when he is also involved in a struggle with a local mugger outside her house (with the respectable aim of recovering some stolen property) Camília refuses to go to the window to watch what is going on. No doubt there is some anxiety of influence here, but by rewriting scenes from Sá de Miranda's comedies Ferreira was constructing a national literary genre whose effect derived from its relationship to a Portuguese model, not to an exclusively Greek or Roman one. There is no doubt also that Ferreira wished to show that women existed who were concerned with modesty and preserving a good reputation.

Robert Archer's *The Problem of Woman in Late-Medieval Hispanic Literature* (Woodbridge, 2005) shows how relations between the sexes were a living intellectual question in the period, and though most of his examples are Spanish or Catalan it is true of Portugal too. In the 1540s two very different works appeared in Portugal in support of women. In 1540 the provincial lawyer João de Barros published his *Espelho de Casados* in Oporto, a city with which Ferreira was connected after his second marriage. In Part 3 of this work Barros clearly supports the role of women in marriage, though without challenging the dominance of the husband. Closer to home, in Coimbra, was the rather unusual edition of Erasmus's *Colloquia*, published in the city at some time between 1545 and 1552, unusual because at this period Erasmus was a suspect writer in many Catholic countries. Nevertheless, the *Colloquia*, though expurgated, were dedicated to the heir to the throne, and the printer, João Fernandes, included a prefatory letter to Cardinal Prince Henry, the inquisitor. Several of the *Colloquia* are about women. The 'Coniugium', in which two young married women discuss how to deal with an errant husband, has something in common with the *Comédia do Cioso*. That something is not similarity of plot or language, but rather a certain atmosphere by which women, though in the end subservient to men, seem nevertheless to be the more appealing and in some ways the stronger sex. In Erasmus's dialogue Eulalia tells Xantippe that managing a husband requires the skills of a tamer of elephants and lions 'aut similia animantia, quae vi cogi non possunt'.⁴ Lívia handles the men around her in rather the same way.

⁴ "or similar creatures, that cannot be controlled by force". For the Latin text I have used Erasmus 152.

Neither João de Barros, nor Erasmus, nor even Ferreira, ever really challenge the view that it is a man's world. However, they all regard women with sympathy and admiration. Ferreira's plays are not neo-classical fossils, but living works of art with a relevance to their own day, and to ours.

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