

Classical Mythology and Portuguese Renaissance Poetry

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An enthusiasm for classical mythology is one of the most obvious markers of Renaissance poetry. However, in an intensely Catholic country like Portugal, the myths could seem extremely problematic, especially after the Council of Trent. In this brief paper I will discuss, not the myths themselves, but the various strategies by which they could be introduced into a poem. Different degrees of engagement with myth thus become visible. One possible strategy, much employed in the Middle Ages, was allegory, whereby a classical story could illustrate some Christian moral or religious truth. But, during the Renaissance, other possibilities became available. A story could be presented as a beautiful image, to be contemplated from afar or, at the other extreme, as a series of events in which the poet himself had a role to play. When that happens, in the first-person mythological narratives to be discussed shortly, the imaginative range of poetry seems to be greatly expanded. Yet that in itself does not constitute an ideological challenge to the dominant Catholicism of the age.

The pioneer of the Portuguese literary Renaissance, Sá de Miranda, was, amongst many other things also the author of the first long mythological narratives of Portuguese literature, the interpolated tales included in the eclogues, *Fábula do Mondego* and *Encantamento*. The *Fábula do Mondego* was probably written first, around 1538.¹ The centrepiece of the eclogue is the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, told in a way which recalls the versions of Virgil, Ovid, and Poliziano. It is quite literally a centrepiece, because it occupies ll. 252-378 of a poem of just over 600 lines.² When I first wrote about the narrative in my doctoral thesis, many years ago, I was struck by the negative meanings that Sá de Miranda seems to give it. Orpheus offends the moral code, by allowing himself to become 'prey to destructive sexual passion'. Orpheus's backward glance at Eurydice, by which he lost her, seems also to

¹ According to Vasconcelos, 1885 – 1989: 816, the poem was composed in 1528. However, the account of a battle with the Turks (see the dedication, ll. 15-23) could refer to the first siege of Diu, of 1538, an event which Sá de Miranda also mentions in the prologue to the *Comédia dos Vilhalpandos*.

² The line numbering is that of the Vasconcelos edition.

have a metaphysical dimension. It is a moment when ‘a proud and sinful individual attempts to know those things about God which should be hidden’ and accordingly he is punished (Earle, 1980: 70).

What is very noticeable about the poem when reread today is the way that the poet distances himself from his mythological narrative. It occupies the centre of the eclogue, but he is confined to the beginning - the dedication to King João III, and the setting of the scene, near Coimbra. The poet only reappears in the final stanzas, again addressed to the king, which explain, in a fanciful etymology typical of the period, how the story of Diego is the origin of the arms of the city. It is only in these passages that Sá de Miranda speaks in his own voice. In the middle of the poem comes the tale of how Diego loved and lost his ‘ninfa hermosísima’, told by an unnamed third-person narrator, and in the middle of that the legend of Orpheus, narrated by Diego, who is thus as far removed from his creator as he could possibly be.

The next generation of poets, the generation of Camões and Ferreira, born in the 1520s, allowed themselves closer contact with the pagan deities, how close, we shall see in a moment. Everyone knows the mythological episodes of *Os Lusíadas*, whose exuberance is without parallel in sixteenth-century Portugal. Yet Camões himself plays no part in them, and at every turn provides rational explanations which tend to diminish the reality of his mythological characters. So the Isle of Venus becomes an allegory of the well spent life, and the gods themselves, as Tethys explains, ‘fabulosos, fingidos de mortal e cego engano’ (X. 82). Adamastor begins his autobiography by telling the voyagers that he is the Cape of Good Hope, thus making it possible to reduce his tale of unhappy love to nothing more than an imaginative explanation of the origin of the Table Mountain. Both episodes can be and have been given much more complex symbolic readings. But it remains true that both can be reduced to the simple, and safe level of allegory or myth of origin.

It might, nevertheless, be possible to relate these episodes in the epic poem to the first-person mythological narratives of the lyrics, to be discussed later. That is because although Camões does not engage with Adamastor and the nymphs of the Isle of Venus, the historical and human characters of the poem – the voyagers – do. But that is too wide a topic for the present paper.

In lyric poetry the most common way of introducing the classical myths is in the form of a comparison, as Barry Taylor has explained in an interesting paper presented at a conference held last year in the Universidade de Lisboa, as part of the Mythos project. Barry's first example is the sonnet 'O filho de Latona', perhaps by Camões, in which the poet-lover compares his sufferings to those of a classical deity, in this case Apollo. A mythological story is told, or rather alluded to, but its function is largely rhetorical, as a way of proving the greatness, and the impossibility of the poet's love. The poet's own situation is only alluded to in the last line, and yet it is the peg on which the whole poem is hung (Taylor, 2007: 31-2).

Comparisons of this kind are a way of introducing classical myths into poetry safely. The myth is there, not for its own intrinsic beauty or truth, but to enhance the situation of the poet. It becomes, then, a form of adornment, 'encarecimento', to use the language employed by the first censor of *Os Lusíadas*, Frei Bartolomeu Ferreira, when discussing precisely this feature of Camões's poem.

The possibility that a classical myth might contain some intrinsic truth, not explicable as a Christian allegory, is what made them exciting, and potentially dangerous. For this reason, the group of sonnets which, in Dr Taylor's words, 'use only the grammatical third person' are perhaps more interesting than the others. These are poems in which a mythological story is told, in the third person, without comment or comparison. It is therefore not surprising that such sonnets are rare, in the Iberian Peninsula and elsewhere (Taylor, 2007: 31).

In what remains of this paper I would like to investigate another group of poems which seem to reveal a greater imaginative engagement of the poet with his mythological subject-matter. To use grammatical terminology again, these might be called 'first-person mythological poems', poems in which the poet himself enters the classical world. Such poems are few in number, but nonetheless very telling.

It is surprising that the author of one of them was António Ferreira, for he was a writer who often expressed a prim distaste for the ‘fábulas vãs’ of ancient writers.³ But in the last of his odes, Book II no. 5, dedicated to António de Sá de Meneses, he joins forces with the pagan gods in the celebration of spring. He probably took this unusually bold stance because he felt secure in the protection of a powerful patron, a member of a prominent Oporto family.⁴ It is worth spending some time on the ode, because it establishes a pattern which can be found elsewhere. The poem, which perhaps dates to 1565 or 66, nearly thirty years after the *Fábula do Mondego*, is often read merely as an imitation of several odes of Horace. But read for itself it becomes a rare imaginative experience.

‘Eis nos torna a nascer o ano formoso’, the poem begins, and in the first stanza spring is celebrated by the Graces and the Amores, mythological figures perhaps, but still fairly tame. But in the next stanza they are joined by Venus herself, and her son Cupid, and then the magic seems to begin, because this spring is not any spring, but the first spring, the spring-time of the world: ‘Renasce o mundo, e torna à forma nova / do seu dia primeiro’. Venus is joined by Tityrus, the shepherd of Virgil’s first eclogue, and then the scene widens further to include the dedicatee of the poem and Ferreira himself, crowned with flowers, and ready to sing ‘mil odes..à branda Vénus, mil a Apolo louro’.

This is a highly imaginative moment, in which the Christian poet celebrates the renewal of nature in the company of the pagan gods. The emotional range of the poem is also very wide, since it begins with the evocation of Spring and ends with thoughts of death and the need for a Stoic resignation. The transition from joy to grief is made very skilfully through the dual role of Apollo, at once sun god, associated with the renewal of nature, and god of medicine. Ferreira appeals to him in that capacity to restore his patron’s health. Sá de Meneses died in 1566, probably shortly after the composition of the poem (Ferreira, 2000: 531). In this ode, which is clearly the product of a Renaissance sensibility, the poet feels himself to explore the mysteries of life and death and to talk freely with the pagan Venus and Apollo. The paganism of

³ There is an example in the ‘História de Santa Comba’, ll. 289-93, where the narrator speaks with contempt of the myth of Acteon.

⁴ The poems dedicated to Sá de Meneses all have a strongly pagan feel, which suggest that the recipient appreciated ancient literature. See Ferreira, 2000: pp. 601-2.

the poem is striking, especially so if it was composed around 1566, some years after the final session of the Council of Trent, from which so much Catholic orthodoxy came to Portugal.

However, the ode's highly literary nature will have protected the poet, and a similar argument can probably also be used in the case of Camões. Professor Américo da Costa Ramalho has shown that the ode to António de Sá de Meneses reveals the influence of at least three of Horace's odes, and the literary atmosphere is continued by the reference to Virgil's Tityrus (Ramalho, 1969: 324-6). Ferreira attributes very lofty ambitions to poetry, but it is clear also that the new poetry of the Renaissance exists in its own space, a space reserved for poets, and that its contacts with the real world are few.

When Camões entered the same area of thought and feeling he did so at greater length. Agrário's long speech in the eclogue 'Ao longo do sereno' (Eclogue 2 in the numeration of the 1595 edition of the *Rimas*) is a remarkable first-person mythological poem. However, the speech makes direct reference to other works of literature and, because it is included in an eclogue, where it cannot be associated directly with the poet, Camões provides that element of caution which seems to be essential.

Agrário's speech, like Ferreira's ode, begins with an invocation of the morning: 'Fermosa manhã clara e deleitosa', and again we feel that this is not just any morning. As he contemplates the beautiful nature around him Agrário thinks back to earlier mornings: 'Quamanha saudade tenho agora / do tempo que a pastora minha amava'. So he brings to mind the morning of his own life and also the morning of the world, when the lovers of mythology still roamed the woods. 'Então tinha o amor maior poder', for Agrário himself and for Zephyrus and Flora, Echo and Narcissus, Venus and Adonis, and others. Camões, like Ferreira, stresses the literary nature of his vision by including in it several of the shepherds named in Garcilaso's eclogues, Salicio, Galatea, Nemoroso and Elisa. Ferreira, you will recall, included Virgil's Tityrus. But then, just as in the ode, thoughts of death come to haunt the poet: 'Ó imatura morte', says Agrário, 'que a ninguém, / de quantos vida têm, nunca perdoas!', and the bright scene disappears (Camões, 1981, III: 272-4).

It is a scene in which it is possible to find great imaginative richness, more I think than the simple opposition between ‘o bem e o mal’ which Maria de Céu Fraga sees in it (Fraga, 1989: 92-3). The way in which the I of the poem, the lovers of mythology and the shepherds of Garcilaso can all be present in the same place, and at the same time, is a celebration of literary creativity. And though the vision cannot last, its disappearance gives the poet the chance to show how his art can embrace the widest possible range of emotions of joy and sadness. All the same, in his eclogue Camões, just like Ferreira, creates an exclusively poetic world, formed from the work of other poets, Virgil, Ovid e Garcilaso.

My final example is one of Camões’s most famous sonnets, ‘Aquela triste e leda madrugada’. This is, in my view, a first-person mythological poem, but as in the other cases where the human and the supernatural mingle, Camões exercises a certain amount of caution, and the sonnet is, to some degree, a coded utterance.

The poem opens with a celebration of the morning, like the other examples discussed here. It is not necessarily the first morning of the world, but a special morning, which Camões wishes to be remembered for ever. It is, therefore, another poem in which poetry itself is celebrated. In the second stanza comes a hint of the mythological, through the personification of the dawn. This dawn is not just ‘marchetada’, spangled, a word commonly used of the goddess Aurora.⁵ She is also the only witness of the sad scene of the lovers’ parting. Camões stresses that no one else was present through the repetition ‘ela só viu’. This poem, like the others, covers a very wide range of feeling, from the joy and beauty of the morning to the grief of the lovers. Their eloquent words, which could give rest to the condemned souls, suggest a second mythological reference, to Orpheus, the divine poet whose words and music brought a temporary halt to the sufferings of the damned.

One of the striking features of the sonnet is the shift of perspective. The first person of the first stanza is replaced by the dawn, from whose third-person point of view the rest of the poem is described. The poet – Camões – introduces the poem, but then seems to disappear from it. Is this, then, a framed mythological narrative, like the one

⁵ See, for example, the sonnet, ‘O raio cristalino se estendia’ and *Os Lusíadas*, I.59, II.10.

in Sá de Miranda's eclogue? But in that case, who are the lovers, and who is the Orphic figure of the last line? Orpheus's famous song was delivered in Hades, and these lovers are on the surface, their sighs witnessed by the dawn alone. Since no one else is mentioned, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the poet and his lady are the lovers. In that case, Camões will have introduced himself into the mythological scene, with an implied identification of himself with the son of Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry. It is, therefore, a first-person narrative, though a disguised one.

It is normal to read the sonnet as simply the sad story of the parting of two lovers (Moreira, 1998: 101-3). But a mythological reading helps to explain the imagery of joy which pervades the first two stanzas: 'leda', 'celebrada', 'marchetada', 'claridade'. Even the last line is as much of exultation as of despair. After all, for a mere human to have the eloquence of Orpheus is a rare gift.

In this paper some of the ways have been discussed by which classical mythology could enter Portuguese poetry. The myths greatly extended its imaginative range, especially the first-person narratives in which the human and divine meet and mingle, and in which the words of the poets seem to span heaven and hell, the joy of life and its extinction in death. Yet there is a negative side to this. The poets have created a new world for themselves, but it is a purely literary construct, disassociated from the problems of real life, which will lead in the end to an empty aestheticism.

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Renaissance and its implications The Revival of Learning denotes, in its broadest sense, the gradual enlightenment of the human mind after the darkness of the Middle Ages. The names Renaissance and Humanism are often applied to the same movement. The term renaissance, which was first used in England, only as late as the nineteenth century. Petrarch's love poetry is of the country kind, in which the pining lover is shown as a "servant" of his mistress with his heart tempest-tossed by her neglect and his mood varying according to her absence or presence. The revival of ancient classical learning scored its first clear impact on England drama in the middle of the sixteenth century. Previous to this impact there had been a pretty vigorous native tradition of drama, particularly comedy. The second late Renaissance poetic tendency was in reaction to the sometimes-flamboyant lushness of the Spenserians and to the sometimes-tortuous verbal gymnastics of the metaphysical poets. Best represented by the accomplished poetry of Ben Jonson and his school, it reveals a classically pure and restrained style that had strong influence on late figures such as Robert Herrick and the other Cavalier poets and gave the direction for the poetic development of the succeeding neoclassical period. The last great poet of the English Renaissance was the Puritan writer John Milton, who, having at his Mythology and the Renaissance tradition in English poetry. Item Preview. > remove-circle.