Narratives of Power and Resistance in Jorge de Sena's *O Físico Prodigioso*

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Abstract*:* This article examines Jorge de Sena's interrogation of power and resistance in *O Físico Prodigioso* (1966). While the second half of the novella functions as a clear allegory for the Portuguese and Brazilian dictatorships of the mid-twentieth century, political oppression and repression are in fact deeply ingrained in Sena's vision of society. The apparent freedom that is witnessed before and after dictatorship is not (and cannot be) universal, because for Sena even the power of discourse holds the potential for oppression. Drawing on Foucault's work, the article posits that *O Físico Prodigioso*'s shifting narrative functions as a call for continual resistance against oppression in all of its forms.

Keywords*:* Destabilization, freedom, Michel Foucault, dictatorship, Portugal

Almost fifty years after it was first published in a short story collection (1966), Jorge de Sena's *O Físico Prodigioso* remains one of the most textually challenging, experimental pieces of prose fiction in the Portuguese language.[1] The novella, which was published as a stand-alone text in 1977, involves substantial play at the level of both form and content. Francisco Cota Fagundes suggests that for its formal experimentation alone the novella deserves its canonical status ("O artista" 133). Its conventional prose narratives are interspersed variously with experimental language, verbal registers and punctuation; poetic intertexts interrupt the story; and parallel columns of text are used to question the linearity of narrative and the one-dimensionality of narrative perspective (Vessels 67). The plot is simultaneously simple and complex: superficially, it

tells the story of a boy-meets-girl romance and the hardships that the two lovers face; at a deeper level, multiple references to literary and cultural traditions are woven through the chivalric tale, and the conventions of genre are subverted, parodied and reworked.

A significant proportion of published scholarly responses to *O Físico Prodigioso* has focused on Sena's appropriation of European myths, legends and literary and cultural traditions (Azevedo; Fazenda Lourenço; Costa; Harland; Sharrer; Soares), and the author's engagement with narratives of Christianity (the most influential of these being Fagundes, "O artista"). In addition to these investigations of the novella's significant intertextuality, critical work has sought to analyze Sena's exploration of the specific themes of love and freedom (Seixo; Rothwell; Fagundes, "From Love's Revenge"), as well as the significance of the title character, the *físico*, the construction of his identity, and the spaces that he inhabits (Azevedo; Sousa; Lopes). A number of authors have focused also on the textual construction of the novella, and on Sena's persistent muddying of the boundaries between concepts such as good/evil, god/devil, male/female, which are conventionally understood in opposition to one another (Williams; Marinho; Vessels). Prior criticism repeatedly refers to Sena's humanism (a fine example of such an approach is Fagundes, "O artista") and to the focus on love and freedom as essential aspects of the author's broad-ranging *oeuvre* in general (Ferreira 264), and of this novella in particular. While the established criticism serves to illuminate this complex and confounding text to some extent, a significant lacuna may be identified in critical responses to *O Físico Prodigoso* so far, for there remains to be explored in detail the continually fluctuating power relations that mark all interactions between characters within the text. This article seeks to address that gap in part. The detailed examination of power dynamics and discourses within the novella is key to our understanding of this text's political function, both in terms of the era when it was written and, more broadly, as an exemplary tale for our times of the multifarious forms of power, oppression, and resistance.

Sena's literary experimentation is highly political. Modes of political oppression operate through a thinly veiled allegory that presents a biting critique of the hegemonic discourses of the conservative dictatorships of Brazil

and Portugal in the middle of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the novella also challenges our conception of narrative and the process of story-making in both its textual construction and in its narrative ambiguity. As I argue in the present essay, narrative and politics are intertwined in Sena's writing: to construct narrative, in and of itself, is a political act. Sena takes that act further, questioning the ideas and assumptions on which both narrative and our understanding of society and politics are constructed and consumed; and he develops a shifting and ambiguous tale (Fazenda Lourenço 180; Harland 170; Costa 109) that seeks to undermine and destabilize power in a number of forms.

At its simplest level, *O Físico Prodigioso* follows the journey of the title character from the point where he meets Dona Urraca, through an apparently blissful period during which they live together in her castle until he is arrested and subsequently tortured by the Inquisition. At the end of the novella, and only after a descent into total social disorder, there is an apparent move towards a new era signaled by the emergence of a new *físico*. The novella is divided into twelve short chapters and has been seen by Fagundes to depict the rise and fall of the male protagonist, the unnamed *físico*. For this critic, the first six chapters depict an idyllic period of light and love, while the second half of the novella is marked by darkness as the *físico* is tortured by the Inquisition, eventually leading to his death ("O artista" 135). The parallels with the story of Christ that are evident in the development of the story are made explicit in the novella at the end of the fifth chapter, when the *físico* stands with his arms extended, performing the miracle of bringing corpses back to life, while Dona Urraca, in the Magdalene role, embraces the *físico*'s legs as she declares him to be a god (Sena 67-68). It is easy to understand, therefore, why critical attention has tended to focus on the *físico* as the principal victim of political maneuvering and an oppressive regime, and the principal agent of resistance to that abuse of power. The Inquisition led by Frei Antão de Salzburgo is a clear allegory for António de Salazar's *Estado Novo* regime in Portugal; and the practices of arrest, imprisonment without charge, and torture, reflect practices current in both Portugal and Brazil at that time (see also Harland 171). By contrast with many earlier readings, I argue that by focusing on the character of Dona Urraca we are able to understand the novella as a critique not only of the abuse of power under

dictatorial systems, but also of how power is always open to being abused at some level. Sena interrogates in his novella the potentially oppressive or restrictive nature of discourse, perspective, and the fragile and illusory nature of freedom. I agree with Harland that contemporary readings of the novella must account for the socio-political allegory of Portuguese society under the *Estado Novo* that is undoubtedly present throughout the second half of the text (175). I also propose that Sena's brief experience of living in exile in the intellectually liberal environment of Brazil in the early 1960s—where he became a naturalized Brazilian—and the rapid transition to another dictatorial regime, potentially caused the writer to question not only the nature of repression, but also of apparent freedom. Sena's deliberate reference to the location and date of completion of the text (Araquara in Brazil, 1964) is an additional reminder of how quickly political situations can change, for Brazil experienced a transition to military dictatorship in 1964, and General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco's attacks on "communism" (which the military regime understood to mean any ideological position to the left of its own) meant that political liberties were sharply, and swiftly, limited. Sena's questioning of what is meant by freedom is sharpest at the end of the novella as anarchy descends on the region; but it is in the first half of the novella that, by turning our focus to Dona Urraca, the repressive power of discourse, even within an apparently free society, is revealed.

Dona Urraca

The first half of *O Físico Prodigioso* pivots on the question of relationships. Urraca is revealed to be the *raison d'être* of the *físico*'s journey and without the relationship between the two, the story would have no driving force, for the survival of their mutual love under duress is the redeeming feature of the second half of the novella. As such, it makes sense to discuss Urraca in greater detail than has been accorded to this character to date. A type of love triangle is established in the first half of the novella between the *físico* of the title, the devil from whom the *físico* receives certain powers in return for allowing the devil to use his body for sex, and Dona Urraca, who becomes the *físico*'s female lover.

Sena's Urraca, whose name both connotes evil and recalls a number of historical and fictional Iberian figures (Sharrer 92), is an ambiguous figure,

and is powerful and wealthy. She is cast by the Portuguese author as passionate and overtly sexualized, yet the long parallel narrative in which Urraca relates the story of her marriage to Gundisalvo suggests a traumatic sexual development that has had a formative influence on her personality (Sena 58-60). That passage presents, in two columns of text, two markedly different perspectives on Urraca's experience relating essentially the same story. This, and an earlier narrative describing the approach towards the *físico* of the *donzelas* who assist Urraca, are emblematic of the way in which apparent binaries come to be seen as complementary rather than oppositional (Marinho 142). The parallel columns also function as a bold challenge to the divisive way in which women have often been categorized within a binary and simplistic 'angel/whore' framework, and as Vessels observes, they additionally serve as a reminder that there are always various ways of seeing and interpreting the world (67). Indeed, these narrative columns, which stand out visually in the book, draw a reader's attention to Sena's disruption of the idea of woman as sexual object and passive sexual being—such a reconfiguration of the conventional literary representations of female sexual passivity occurs perhaps most forcefully in the episode where the *físico* and Urraca first encounter one another, and he performs his cure on her wasting body.

The Sleeping Beauty

The *físico* is led to Urraca's castle by her *donzelas*, whom he has met in the forest, in order that he may cure their mistress of an unspecified illness. As the *físico* observes Urraca, she is described as being in a deathly state:

> Dona Urraca de Biscaia, filha de Dom Tortozendo Ermiges, o Batalhador, e viúva de Dom Gundisalvo Matamoros, o do Pendão, jazia no seu leito. Na desordem de cobertas e de peles, que o leito era, tão largo que nele dormiriam três casais à vontade, o seu corpo não se distinguia. Só o rosto, de olhos fechados, com os negros cabelos espalhados nos brancos almofadões, sobressaía, como de uma cabeça degolada, emaciada e enxangue, que tivesse sido esquecida ao cimo daquele leito imenso. O cavaleiro debruçou-se para a cabeça, e observou-lhe os longos cílios, os arcos das sobrancelhas,

> o nariz pequeno e agudo, a boca de lábios pálidos e grossos, o queixo muito redondo, as faces sem cor e sumidas nas olheiras fundas. E, com um gesto largo, seguido de outros, atirou para o chão todas as coberturas. Nua sobre o lençol branco, Dona Urraca não se moveu nem abriu os olhos. A sua pele tinha uma cor marfinada, que se destacava na brancura e ao mesmo tempo parecia alastrar-se nela. (Sena 30-31)

At the beginning of this passage, Urraca's body is indistinguishable from the mass of bed linen; only her head can be seen. Sena presents an almost stereotypical image of beauty: her black hair is spread out on the white pillow, and the color contrast is sharp. Yet the signal that she is no cliché of the damsel in distress quickly becomes evident. Bloodless and bodiless, Urraca's pale skull becomes an artifact whose size is dwarfed by the enormous bed. The sleeping beauty image becomes grim rather than romantic or disneyfied.[2] Sena's description recalls Perrault's original gory story in which the mother-in-law of the newly awoken beauty desires to eat the heroine and her children. Urraca's head figures, perhaps, as the discarded leftovers of the mother-in-law's ghastly meal. As the passage moves on, the narrative moves into scopophilic mode, and Urraca lies unmoving under the male observer's close scrutiny. As the *físico* pulls away the sheet covering her, Urraca's apparently mortified head rejoins her stark-naked body and she becomes the object of the gaze. However, contrary to the pre-sexual princess of both the Perrault and Disney versions of the legend, who inspires admiration rather than sexual desire in the prince who comes to rescue her, Sena's recreation produces an image of the sleeping woman which is at once terrifying and sexualized. On the one hand, Urraca's nakedness, her unmoving body and her ivory skin present an image of passive beauty; on the other, her off-white complexion seems to infect or stain the purity of the bed sheets and her deathly immobility (*jazia*, as though she were entombed) creates an uneasiness about the quasi-necrophilia of the físico's observation of her. As the passage continues, his gaze pans down over her body, which is compared to a landscape whose scenic highlights are the breasts and the *mons veneris*.

This scene presents several interpretative possibilities. Perhaps the físico's gaze restores to Urraca the body that she appeared to have lost through her

illness, repositioning the weakened female body as desirable. Despite her illness, this narrative (told from the perspective of the *físico*'s gaze) imbues Urraca's body with a dormant sexuality. Her breasts "avançavam fortes," and her curves draw the male gaze down towards her genitals (Sena 31). The metaphor of the body as landscape might also be read as a vision of land to be conquered and dominated by the male observer-adventurer. A number of critics have noted the similarities between this passage and the opening scene of the novella in which the *físico* surveys the valley opening out before him (Eiras 39; Lopes 45; Azevedo 26; Sousa 26).[3] In that scene, the height and verticality of the *físico* set him in a position of physical power over the horizontal landscape. Equally, when he is observing Urraca as she lies prostrate under his gaze, the *físico* is in a position of power and the woman is entirely dependent on his will to cure her. A third possibility for interpreting this passage and its continuation is that the *físico* creates from the vision of Urraca's body a romantic fantasy image that may stimulate his own sexual desire, but which ignores Urraca's role as agent within the sexual relationship—and of course, Sena is playing with the paradox of the chivalric tradition in which the knight errant ultimately longs to bed the damsel, despite the clichéd innocence of modern visions of courtly love.

In all of these suggestions, the woman is understood as the passive object of desire, subject to the gaze/will of the man and at the same time, an imposed fiction corresponding to man's perception of her (Rothwell 57). The woman's autonomy and identity as an individual in her own right effectively are called into question in the very opening lines of this scene, which are separated in the narrative by a series of ellipses indicating a scene change. Urraca is named for the first time here, and it is her paternal line and her marriage that identify her to the reader. In other words, the narrator presents her relative importance as a character as being inextricably linked to the importance of her father and husband. This passage follows on from a conversation between a friar and one of Urraca's maidens, in which the friar insists that Urraca's wasting illness stems from the physical absence of her husband, while the *donzela*'s view is that her poor health is simply inexplicable (Sena 28). That earlier conversation, and the parallel narratives, work together to highlight the variations in perspectives on women and to bring to the fore the ways in which women were and are

subjected to patriarchal authority through language. Let us read the first half of the novella as reflecting a non-dictatorial society in which personal freedoms are not limited. When we shift the critical focus from the *físico* to Urraca, it becomes evident that personal freedom and autonomy are relative, for Urraca is subject here to the understanding of others, and the potential power that such understanding may wield. Neither the friar in the earlier conversation, nor the narrator in the passage cited above, can conceive of Urraca without the presence of men forming part of her identity.

As Harland (171) and Pereira (119) note, the second half of *O Físico Prodigioso* can be seen as an allegory for the Portuguese dictatorship, or for political repression in general; yet, while the position of women was certainly weakened and restricted under that regime, the present interrogation of the first part of *O Físico Prodigioso* highlights the gendered basis of power more generally and the ways in which women have been subject to men's perspectives on them and discourses about them even in what might be viewed as a relatively liberal society.

Sena uses gender to question the line dividing freedom and oppression more broadly. Until 1959, Jorge de Sena's entire adulthood had been lived under the Portuguese dictatorship; but in 1959, Sena left Portugal for Brazil at the invitation of his friends, Adolfo Casais Monteiro and Eduardo Lourenço, following his activity in a failed *coup d'état* (the "Conspiração da Sé") (Santos; see also Raby 201-04). The period from 1959-64 was one of relative freedom and intellectual liberty for Sena, and one of swift economic growth for Brazil as Juscelino Kubitschek sought to implement fifty years' worth of industrial progress in just five years (Burns 401-08). By the mid-1960s, the new, urban labor force working in the industrial centers had become increasingly politically aware, spurred on since Vargas's government in the early fifties, and the rich/poor divide became more acutely visible with the growth of *favelas* in the urban centers. In this environment, and unable to return to Portugal, Sena took Brazilian nationality in 1962, but three years later he would leave the country for the USA, once again in self-imposed political exile.

During his period living in Brazil, Sena witnessed significant political change as the country moved from Juscelino Kubitschek's dynamic government, through the rise and fall of Jânio Quadros, who sought to bring Brazil

closer to the communist centers of China and the USSR. Following Quadros's sudden resignation in 1961, João Goulart's presidency saw a decline in Brazil's economic growth, an approximation to left-wing ideologies, and the increased mobilization of the labor unions (Burns 431-44). Backed by the USA and in response to a perceived threat from communism during the Cold War period, the military took power in 1964 in a coup that installed a conservative dictatorship. In many ways, then, the apparent liberty/oppression binary that is established between the two halves of *O Físico Prodigioso* can be seen to chart the political shifts in Brazil during Sena's period there. Yet the liberty in which Sena lived in Brazil from 1959-64 was not entirely free because he was living in exile. Equally, our behavior in situations of apparent social freedom is nonetheless governed by social codes and rules. In the same way, the freedom of some characters in the first half of *O Físico Prodigioso* reveals itself, under closer scrutiny, to be a freedom that is nonetheless subject to repressive power, albeit in a subtler form than the power of an identifiable political regime as depicted in the second part. It would be, therefore, a mistake to accept a reductionist either/or vision of this or any of the other binaries present in the novella, as Sena's subversion of the angel/whore vision of women demonstrates.

The conventions of the sleeping beauty narrative within European tradition establish a number of binary oppositions, not least that of the good and innocent beauty who is placed in opposition to the evil stepmother. Sena's appropriation of the tale reveals that this is no simple fairy tale fantasy. Initially presented as a passive body, objectified by the *físico*'s gaze, Urraca turns out to be far from submissive or innocent. She responds passionately to the físico's highly sexualized kiss, grasping his hair as he performs oral sex to waken her. Here, not only is Dona Urraca awakened, but so is her sexual desire, which had been lying dormant—a desire that emanates from her genitals in a "cheiro acre" (Sena 32). Sena subverts the sleeping beauty narrative of fantasy, introducing realistic traits such as the smells of the body and sexualizing a narrative that in its traditional form relies on the sleeping woman as a model of passivity. In doing so, he forces the reader to recognize Urraca as a sexual agent, and Sena's challenge to the dominant modes of perception of women in social terms becomes a political act. The combined force of aspects of the text such

as the occasional poetic *mise en abyme*, the attempted simultaneity of the parallel narratives, and the continual shifting of identifiable conceptual pairs and apparent dichotomies enable the emergence of a plurivocality that stands in lasting textual opposition to monologic discourses, not only of the dictatorial era in which the novella was written (Marinho 146), but which, despite their modulations, persist over time.

The Power of Discourse

The "pan-eroticism" of *O Físico Prodigioso* was highlighted by its author and has been alluded to by a number of critics (Sena 8). Nonetheless, few critics beyond Phillip Rothwell have explored in detail the nature of the sexual relationship for parties other than the *físico*. Some, such as Francisco F. Sousa, see the sex in the novel as little more than a means of the *físico* expanding his erotic power, while Urraca's sexuality is simply overlooked (29-31, 38-39). Others, such as Jorge Fazenda Lourenço, note the curative power of sex (200; see also Sena 32, 117). Sex as and for pleasure is additionally presented in the novella as an end in itself, however, and this goes for the *físico*, the devil, Urraca, and the *donzelas* alike (Sena 17, 21, 44, 73); intercourse need have no purpose other than pleasure (Fagundes, "From Love's" 19). In this respect, the narrative's explicit descriptions of sexual joy reject the conservative mores of dictatorial regimes of the 1960s. In this, Sena's work creates parallels with other examples of the literature of resistance, such as the Brazilian playwright Alfredo Dias Gomes's *O Santo Inquérito* (1966), in which the Inquisition's regulation of sexual pleasure is used to satirize and contest the repressive nature of the military regime. Sena's text has been read by Fagundes as a tale of love conquering everything, where sex and love are seen as effectively the same thing ("From Love's" 19; "O artista" 134). Rothwell, however, explains how repression and desire are engaged in a paradoxical relationship whereby repression seeks to smother desire but in doing so perpetuates it, and desire seeks to overcome the obstacle to its fulfillment that repression provides but at the same time requires that very obstacle in order to sustain itself (56). Repression of sexual pleasure appears explicitly in *O Físico Prodigioso* in the form of the Inquisition which, in addition to physical torture, attempts to torture the *físico* psychologically through the denial of

sexual intercourse with Urraca by imprisoning her genitals in a chastity belt—an obstacle that is, nonetheless, overcome (Sena 84). The repression of sexuality is revealed more subtly in the early part of the novella, through the ways in which love and sexuality are discussed verbally. The narratives around Urraca's sexuality are a good example of how the power of discourse may be exerted as a form of control or repression. In this sense, Urraca functions as a complement to the *físico*. While the *físico* lives in apparently blissful freedom, Urraca, by contrast, is subject to the repressive power of discourse and is slandered by a society that seeks to undermine her independence.

As Michel Foucault has observed, the exertion of power over others is not simple or single, but is variable in different situations and contexts ("The Eye" 156). It is precisely a move away from the hegemonic critical focus on the *físico* as the principal victim of repressive power that enables one to see how Sena uses the very experimental form of the text to depict and critique the ways in which other groups (for example, women) might be, or have been, repressed through the deployment of language. Notably, out of the three parallel narratives which are frequently cited as epitomizing Sena's experimentation with narrative form, the two that occur in the first half of the novella both deal with the understanding of women by men, exposing as fantasy the image of the innocent, asexual *donzelas* in the first (Sena 19-20), or the girl who comes into womanhood through heterosex in the second (Sena 58-60). The second and third parallel narratives (the latter continues a parallel narrative in alternate sentences rather than separate columns) take the rape of a woman as their subject matter (Sena 60 and 116). Taken together, as linked frame narratives, these columns remind us that repression and power can be exerted both verbally and physically. Dona Urraca is especially subject to the repressive power of discourse—both within the plot of the story and in the way that critics have responded to this character. Of particular interest for the present essay is the suggestion in chapters four and five that Urraca is literally a man-eater. Her sexual appetite is associated with cannibalistic desires, reversing the earlier image of her as a woman devoured, and dispelling any residual ideas of Urraca as a pre-sexual sleeping beauty.

Urraca's reputation as a devourer of men is made explicit in the episode where the *físico* returns with Urraca to the clearing in the forest. He witnesses

as a fantasy Dona Urraca and her *donzelas* in an orgy of flesh in the forest, satisfying their appetites for meat with his horse, the culmination of which sees Urraca greedily licking what can only be the horse's penis (Sena 52)—a seemingly clear reference to the Freudian assumption of masculine fear of castration and feminine desire for the phallus. Shocked, the *físico* accepts without question the devil's subsequent suggestion that the women of the castle ate the men who came to try to cure Urraca (53). The whirlwind narrative (a passage that rolls on with no punctuation) that introduces this reversion of the scorched clearing to a green idyll makes clear for the reader the unreal nature of what the *físico* witnesses (50). For Azevedo, this passage marks the *físico*'s transition to a post-virginal state, and is part of his sexual awakening (77) (or the awakening of a more active sexuality tied up with love, and which contrasts with his passive acceptance of the devil's advances). What does that sexual identity or awakening tell us about power? In Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud's work, the phallus is a symbol of power (masculine-coded, but not necessarily male in fact). Bearing that in mind, I propose that we might also read this passage—a fantasy, an unreal scene—as a metaphor for the power relationship, where the *físico* is perturbed by his vulnerability and the potential imbalance of the power relationship. The *físico*, however, fails to note the dream-like nature of the horse-eating scene, or the distinctly devilish laugh that he hears (Sena 51), and he does not interrogate the extent to which this may be a reflection of what he wishes or fears to see or believe. In my reading, Sena uses the *físico* here to underline the potential for every one of us to be taken in by the narratives that mold society and become systems of power in themselves—a question that the author explored in more detail in "O realismo estrito" (61).

Like Urraca, and like many of the characters in the novella, the *físico* is not the all-good, unselfish, and open-minded hero that we might like him to be (and that is the defining feature of the broader cultural narrative of the hero). He is characterized by his ambiguity (Costa 113). Despite many good qualities, the *físico* is also shown to be selfish and narcissistic. For example, he wonders at his ignorance of the potential for omnipotence that he has from his cap (Sena 51). In this particular case, the *físico*'s reaction is self-obsessed, as he moves from assuming witchcraft on the part of the women ("Aquelas mulheres eram

bruxas" (52)) to assuming that they love him because he, in turn, is a "bruxo," to assuming that his own survival has to do with his virility: "E eu, também eu vou durar uma noite? Só o silêncio lhe respondeu, e ele mesmo disse: —Não, eu durei duas noites e um dia… Sou um homem como não há" (53). I read this reaction both as the *físico*'s unquestioning acceptance of the devil's story about Urraca, and as displaying a certain pride in his own prowess. Sena goes further with this line of thought, and uses Urraca to challenge the físico's uncritical, and even prejudiced, perspective in this particular instance.

At the *físico*'s insistence, Urraca shows him a pile of rotting corpses. The devil's story is denied, and yet the stack of dead men apparently confirms her evil streak. However, through Urraca's version of events, Sena creates a multi-layered challenge to dominant discourses about women and prejudice along gendered lines. Following the parallel narrative in which she tells the story of her marriage, Urraca recounts how she reclaimed her personal power through the murder of the *escudeiro* (footman), while his preceding attempt to blackmail her highlights the ways in which some men use sex to exert power over women (Sena 61). The question is implicitly raised as to whether murder in the case of self-defense may be considered evil. Urraca's need to seek sanctuary in the castle and allow only women as permanent residents confirms the idea that society is unsympathetic to the abuse that she has suffered. Finally, Urraca denies the stories that have been spread about the women in the castle devouring the men who visit it, and she insists that they died of sexual exhaustion (61). (Perhaps the idea that the women "ate" the men is a sly reference to, and upturning of, the colloquial use of the verb *comer* to refer to men's penetration of women in sexual intercourse?) The very existence of these stories (of which Urraca is aware), however, suggests that men, or society as a whole, are perturbed by the idea of female homosociality and the lack of a need for men, because—as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick tells us—women are constructed in so many cultural and social narratives within a necessarily oppositional relationship with men (72-73). Indeed, this assumption is reflected in critical work on *O Físico Prodigioso* as critics including Rothwell (55) and Harland (177) have accepted unproblematically the suggestion of Urraca's cannibalism. A return to the text exposes these rumors as invention, and at the same time posits the

unreliability of narrative and invites us to question whether Urraca is telling the truth—and a reading of the point at which Urraca shows the *físico* the pile of rotting corpses does not provide a clear answer (Sena 57). This particular story has the effect of destabilizing the social narrative of heterosexual living and loving partnerships as the established and only valid order, as well as undermining the devil's explanation of the corpses.

The destabilization of accepted narratives, and the textual revelation of the extent to which dominant discourses, if repeated often enough, can mold how we think, challenges the reliability of established truths and ways of understanding the world; in particular, Sena's undermining of the reliability of narrative (in terms of its form and content) makes it deliberately difficult to pin this novella down to a single interpretation (Costa 109). One of the most perplexing aspects of the novella's constant game of identities is the suggestion that Urraca may in fact be the devil in another guise (Sena 75). The question raised by the *físico* is left deliberately unanswered as the Inquisition arrest the pair and the novella moves to its second half.

An Unholy Trinity

As Eduardo Lourenço has observed, Sena's exploitation of the demonic in *O Físico Prodigioso* is both illuminating and original (55). For the devil, the very absence of a stable bodily form links him with the *físico*, whose physical body, and indeed humanness, are equally questionable (Sena 94; Azevedo 70). The devil's formlessness also allows for the possibility that he appears in an alternative incarnation as Dona Urraca, a reflection of the *físico*'s desire (as he later appears to Frei Antão de Salzburgo as a reflection of himself). Furthermore, and as the devil's explanation to Salzburgo reveals, the *físico*'s continued survival under severe torture is sustained by both his relationship to the devil and to Urraca, separately and simultaneously (the love between the *físico* and Urraca is sustaining; the devil's desire that the *físico* survives sustains him), and as the *físico*'s life persists, it takes on meaning through its symbolic value.

For the Inquisition, the *físico* is the symbol of the moral ill that it seeks to extinguish; he is a symbol of devilish desire, of the diabolical. This is exactly the reason why the Inquisition seeks to exterminate the *físico* while at the same time

paradoxically desiring that he remain alive. As Rothwell explains, Frei Antão de Salzburgo, as representative of the organizing power (the law-of-the-father, in the terms of Rothwell's Lacanian analysis) needs the *físico* to exist as a symbol of opposition to the ideological system in force, because the opposition gives meaning to that very system, or regime. Salzburgo therefore has to keep alive the object of his desire (for the *físico* is both the symbol of opposition, and the symbol of the Inquisition's desire to exterminate that opposition) in order that Salzburgo himself (and the system or regime that he represents) may survive (Rothwell 62).

For the devil as well, the *físico* must be protected because he comes to function as a symbol and as the object of the devil's own desire. At the same time, though, the *físico* acts as a proxy or substitute for the devil, who stands for the marginal, an alternative to the established order, the oppositional, but who is the very absence of a figure (Lourenço 57). The *físico* is therefore both a symbol of love, freedom, and desire, and of opposition. In other words, the *físico* and the devil together function as symbols of resistance to a form of power that is not a single institution or thing that can be located anywhere in particular, but rather an omnipresent force that reproduces itself continually and in different contexts (Foucault, *The History* 93). In this reading, all relationships are relationships of power that must be negotiated variously dependent on the context in which they are experienced. Therefore, if Urraca is an incarnation of the devil, then the way in which we understand the relationships between the *físico*, Urraca, and the devil becomes destabilized. There is a strong argument to be made in favor of this interpretation, not least the repeated disappearance of the devil from the *físico*'s vision and hearing when Urraca, or indeed, her *donzelas*, are present (Sena 34; see also Fazenda Lourenço 182). In an extension of Rothwell's Lacanian-inflected argument that desire is essentially the projection of our fantasies onto the body of our sexual partners, it is possible to see Urraca as a quixotic imagining of the devil himself as a desired other rather than an ugly reality (57). Yet at what level is such a projection of fantasy a free choice? For example, the devil wishes the *físico* to give himself up freely to the enjoyment of the sexual relationship (Sena 18); and indeed, with Urraca he does (Sena 40). However, if the devil is in fact Urraca—if the devil has recreated himself as Urraca to garner the *físico*'s sexual desire, then the *físico* is being

manipulated by the devil. If so, then to what extent is his apparently free choice really free? To what extent is Urraca's insistence that the *físico* return to a pre-Urracan time to regain happiness actually a liberation, and to what extent is it in fact another form of manipulation (the *físico* does indeed go back to that time, fully enjoys sex with the devil for the first time, and returns to Urraca to learn that she knows all about the devil)? Furthermore, if Urraca is the devil (or at least associated with the devil), then Sena's narrative sees the *físico* (who may represent the divine) come together in a type of unholy trinity with Urraca and the Devil, blurring the boundaries between characters and various concepts (such as the moralistic conception of good and evil) still further (68), and allowing for the possibility that each of them simultaneously is and is not the other (see Azevedo 79). None of these points and questions is answered in the text itself, and while further and deeper investigation might produce different insights, perhaps the whole point is that it is necessary not to find a neat, concrete answer. Rather, it is precisely the ambiguity of the narrative and its continual destabilization that functions as a weapon of resistance, just as the bodily ambiguity of the *físico* is also used to resist oppression.

In the second half of the novella, the transference of the *físico*'s image to other bodies is a means of resisting the regime, and the unsettling movement of that image points to the need for a form of resistance that continually adapts to the power at play. For example, we might understand the transference of the *físico*'s facial image to his lover, Urraca, at the point of her death (Sena 84) as an acknowledgement that they have resisted and overcome the Inquisition's attempts to regulate their bodies and desires. By contrast, the multiplication of the *físico*'s image onto the faces of the *frades*, just a couple of pages later, parodies the symbolic value that they have come to ascribe to the image through its repetition, and through their unwitting embodiment of it; such a parody is reinforced by the *físico*'s literal defecation on their attempts to dominate his powers (86-87). The multiple ways in which the single image of the *físico* is repeated and multiplied as an act of resistance that expands his physical presence is therefore a reminder that any form of resistance against dominant modes of power must be multiple, continual and shifting if that very contestation itself is not to become merely another form of oppressive power.

As William Morris observes in *A Dream of John Bull*, "men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat and then it turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under a different name" (27). Thus, and while it seems at the end of chapter XI that the fight against the ideological system of the Inquisition has been won, the final chapter reveals the great liberation to have evolved into an alternative, but equally repressive, regime—and once again, the oppression within a period of apparent freedom (or in this case, complete lawlessness) is gendered, involving the harrowing, repeated rape of a young girl who emerges as a new Urraca figure (Sena 115-16). While this final chapter may on the one hand be read as a vision of anarchy, or a preview of the type of uncertainty and instability that characterized Portugal in the immediate aftermath of the 1974 revolution, it is also a reminder of the responsibility that always comes with the potential to exert power, and for the need for a sustained and continual resistance as a means of balancing power.

The destabilization that is brought sharply into focus with the narrative ambiguity of the text and the bodily ambiguity of Urraca, the devil, and the *físico* pinpoints the crucial significance for our times of Sena's brief novella: the disavowal of concrete knowledge and/or fixed interpretations is the only form of resistance that *might* not end by imposing another form of power. If there is no power system that encompasses every individual fairly, then the only possibility for resisting an unequal exertion of power—as Foucault would later theorize—is an unceasing resistance and a constant shifting that does not allow any form of power to settle (Pickett 450). By continually pulling the rug from under his readers' feet, Sena refuses to allow any narrative order to establish itself—just as the ending of the novella, which apparently sees the emergence of a new *físico* and a new Urraca, both reifies (through a cyclical return) and destabilizes (through the rejection of an ending to the story) the conclusions that readers may have drawn to that point. To extend this interpretation to politics, it is only by challenging and destabilizing as a matter of course the narratives established by any political order that power in its shifting and myriad forms can be kept in check.

Notes

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[2] The Walt Disney feature-length cartoon version of the story was released in 1959 in Brazil and in the USA.

[3] For the earlier description of the landscape, see Sena 15.

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