# Liquid Gold: The Representations of Money and Slavery in Alencar's *Senhora*

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**Abstract**: The plot of José de Alencar's *Senhora* has often been accused by critics of being artificial and little relevant to the actual conditions of nineteenth-century Brazilian society. A close analysis of this novel, however, reveals that it does address issues that were pertinent to Brazilian social life in that period, such as slavery and the circulation of money. The representation of these issues is far from stable in this novel, as its imitation of the realist plot from Balzac might suggest, and the examination of sentimental elements in *Senhora* may point to alternative readings of the appropriation of this model and the way money and slavery are presented in this narrative.

**Keywords**: José de Alencar; realism; sentimental novels; sensibility; transparency; sympathy; money; slavery; market relations; nineteenth-century Brazilian society; nineteenth-century Brazilian novel.

In his seminal *Ao vencedor as batatas*, Roberto Schwarz demonstrates the applicability of his theory of misplaced ideas to the early Brazilian novel by taking Alencar's *Senhora* as an example of the contradictions and discontinuities they engender.

For Schwarz, the central plot of this novel, in which Aurélia effectively buys a husband, treating him as a piece of merchandise, is glaringly artificial and unconvincing, paradigmatically embodying the kind of unwarranted dislocations inherent in misplaced ideas. According to Schwarz, it derives directly from Balzac. It is a copy of the typical realist plot, which depicts the destruction

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of ideological values that are dear to European mentality, like the importance of personal merit, the force of romantic love, equality, or the idea of the republic, by the ruthless mechanism of economy and class society. These, however, had little connection to Brazilian society, which was far from constituting itself into a fully developed capitalist economy, and where social relations followed a different logic than those dictated by bourgeois society (39-40).

How long, however, can an idea remain foreign and attain the kind of resonance that *Senhora* achieved with its readers? As Flora Süssekind points out, ideas are only imported when and if they answer the needs of those who import them (49). Schwarz argues that misplaced ideas are necessarily distorted, sometimes perverted or even turned upside down, their falsity more blatant than in the context of their original creation (13-25). It may be more useful, however, to include them in Mary Louise Pratt's notion of transculturation, a dynamic relationship between marginal and dominant cultural groups where, although power relations are often radically asymmetrical, nevertheless an element of choice is still present, since culturally subordinate groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant culture (4-7). If, as part of the contact zone of two different cultures, transculturation shares some of the improvisational nature of this kind of encounter, this may be because some of the material transmitted by a foreign culture can find unexpected correspondences in the culture to which it is transplanted and adapted. This may occur quite by chance, or by an exercise of re-interpretation—or even by misinterpretation. Could we not say, then, that something similar occurs to the Balzacian plotline when it is transplanted and rearticulated in *Senhora*, something that, if it does not destroy its artificiality, at least adds to it some authentic elements? Or, taking my argument a step further, could we not argue that this process of appropriation blurs the line between what is authentic and what is artificial, so that these may not be the most useful categories to be used in an attempt to describe the kind of dynamics that helped shape the Brazilian novel in its formative stages?

In order to do this, we must not take the realist plot about money regulating all social relations at face value. *Senhora* does attack the way money corrupts human relations, and some of its invectives against money as the moving

force and, at the same time, the greatest evil of the nineteenth century seem to have been extracted straight out of the pages of Balzac. Nevertheless, in quite loudly decrying the corrupting power of money that seems to turn everything into merchandise and turn people into objects—sometimes literally ascribing them a price, as Aurélia does with her suitors—the plot of *Senhora*, despite its dissonances and contradictions, and its obvious incongruence with Brazilian reality at the time, also touches (however indirectly) upon another corrupting influence much closer to nineteenth-century Brazilian society, one that would find a much deeper resonance with Alencar's reading public: the issue of slavery.

In being bought by Aurélia, Seixas himself declares his condition as a slave, to which he submits, bowing to the binding character of the contract he had signed with her and to the logic of market transactions:

> I sold myself; I belong to you. You had the bad taste to purchase a debased husband; here he is just as you wanted him. You could have molded his character, perhaps warped by his upbringing, into that of a man of integrity, ennobled by your affection; instead you chose a white slave. You were within your rights; you paid for him with your own money, and generously. That slave is here before you; he is your husband, but nothing more than your husband! (97-98; pt. 2, ch. 9).[1]

In explaining his attitude, Seixas inscribes slavery in a modern mercantile system—a system to which it is actually opposed, since it undermines bourgeois work relations. At the same time, he invokes the ideological force of the contract, and in the process attenuates the violence which is an inextricable element of slavery, lending it the nature of a justifiable pact.[2] Slavery is ideologically justified and naturalized. Its intrinsic backwardness and barbarity, which was a motive of so much international embarrassment for the young Brazilian empire, is defused by inserting it—or translating it—into the kind of market logic that already dominated European societies at the time. Slavery appears as an essentially negative feature in Seixas' situation, but this very negativity is lessened by his discourse, which goes a long way to attenuate the actual horrors involved in slavery. This ideological sleight of hand—an example of a

misplaced idea in its own right—would not be possible without recourse to the realist bourgeois plot.

The appropriation of the traditional realist plot, then, can be seen as something more than an acritical imitation of Balzac; in *Senhora*, it resonates with deeper anxieties concerning the kind of social relations established, or distorted, by the slave system. The objectified relations among people, which in Balzac—to stay with the literary comparison Schwarz pursues in his analysis of *Senhora*—is a direct consequence of the monetary transactions and of the consumerism typical of bourgeois society, in *Senhora* is a reflection of the actual conversion of people into merchandise intrinsic to slavery—but which, in Alencar's novel, is nevertheless presented under the guise (and, sometimes, with the same kind of rhetoric) of Balzac's bourgeois plots.

Objectification is very much an issue in *Senhora*; it is indeed the central theme of its plot. But objectification strikes other characters as well as Seixas, most remarkably Aurélia herself. "What a woman, Seixas!," a friend remarks to Fernando Seixas about Aurélia towards the beginning of the novel. "You cannot imagine. You look from afar and see an angel of beauty who fascinates you and has you trailing at her feet, drunk with love. When you touch her, you find nothing but hard metal beneath the splendor. She does not talk; she jingles like gold" (34; pt. 1, ch. 7). In this passage, Aurélia becomes a mere exchange object, denied even a coherent, expressive speech—she simply jingles like gold. Before she inherits her fortune, however, she is compared to objects of a lesser substance: a mere "display of wares" (71; pt. 2, ch. 2), "it was not the girl herself at the window, but a statue or, more appropriately, a wax figure from the showcase of a fashionable hairdresser" (71; pt. 2, ch. 3). Extremely poor, Aurélia is forced by her mother to display herself at her window in the hopes of catching a husband, literally becoming a piece of merchandise in the marriage market. The implication is clear enough: a woman in Aurélia's situation is one step away from becoming an object to be traded, a thing to be bought and sold whose beauty is its only market value.

Borderline cases in which the boundaries between slave and non-slave become blurred seemed to exert a special fascination over nineteenth-century Brazilian writers. This is the case of Alencar himself, who in his stage drama

*Mãe* explores the story of Joana, a mulatto slave who is revealed to be the actual mother of her master, Jorge. Jorge had been adopted by Joana's former master, who had died soon afterwards; the boy was raised by Joana herself, who never told him his true origins and who persists in addressing him as nothing more than his household slave. The son of a slave woman, Jorge, in spite of being apparently white, could nevertheless be technically considered a slave himself.[3] The possibility of impoverished white people crossing the line and being presented as slaves had its place in the Brazilian literary imagination of the time, bringing with it fears of social instability and of the upheaval of social hierarchies.

Slavery established a specific private order in Brazil, argues Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, and echoes of the historical process that gave shape to this order marked Brazilian forms of socialization as well as its daily life. Furthermore, given the large proportion of negroes and mulattoes in the Brazilian population, not all of them slaves, the matter of establishing one's identity was extremely important (17, 83). It was essential, especially for those in the lower tiers of the social order, to distinguish themselves from slaves. This was an especially pressing matter if we consider that slaves were not legally citizens and were considered no more than objects or animals (Mattos and Gonçalves 14). Haunted by poverty, members of a precarious middle-class and menaced by bankruptcy or the need to do menial work for a living, Seixas and Aurélia find themselves in a delicate social and economic position early in their careers, where lack of opportunity is combined with a lack of prestige. They are too close to the slave mass, and although their race in principle precludes their inclusion in its ranks, they run the risk of entering work and social relations which, warped by the experience of slavery, would tend to objectify them and put them in a social no-man's land of exploitation and lack of rights that, at least on an imaginary level, would cast them as little better than slaves. In a slave society like nineteenth-century Brazil, one step away from slavery is one step too close.[4]

In this context, the image of the statue or of the stone woman, employed with enormous insistence in *Senhora*, acquires new meanings. It recurs more frequently in those passages in which the issue of money—or of Aurélia's power over those around her, which is a direct consequence of her wealth—becomes

more prominent. We have already seen how Seixas is compared to a statue when he is bought by Aurélia and how Aurélia herself becomes a statue when she displays herself at her window to hunt for a prospective husband. These people turned into statues become merchandise and, as such, are often objects of desire—or, rather, in becoming an object of desire, they are turned into a coveted piece of merchandise. Hence, Adelaide, one of Aurélia's friends but also her rival, also becomes a statue when subjected to Seixas' desiring gaze—or so it seems to Aurélia, as she observes her husband and her friend during a theatrical performance:

> Adelaide, completely luxuriating in the satisfaction of eminence, did not even notice her friend's impatience, nor did she realize that the excessive outpour of her bodice, with the languishing sway of her body, exposed her bosom almost entirely to the eyes of the man behind her. Does the statue feel the glance that insinuates itself among the transparent veils? The fashionable woman has the skin of a statue when she dresses for the ball. (158; pt. 4, ch. 2)

The woman-statue here, as in *Lucíola*, is the temptress, the seducer imbued with sexual desire. This aspect of the woman-statue is more often employed in *Senhora* in connection to Aurélia, sometimes in association with the image of the threatening demonic woman ("In the immobility of her position and in her figure there was a frightful rigidity" – 136; pt. 3, ch. 7). In the passage above, however, it is the sensuousness of the woman-statue that takes center stage, but with a peculiarity: although Adelaide is obviously open to pleasure and feels desire, her skin, like that of any fashionable woman who dresses to flirt at the theater, is insensitive and unresponsive to her admirers' gaze. The passage employs imagery and rhetoric associated with transparency, but "the glance that insinuates itself among the transparent veils" only finds the beautiful but impenetrable marble skin of the statue. Instead of transparency, we find opaqueness and insensitivity.

These two elements—opaqueness and insensitivity—however, are intimately connected in Alencar's text. In order to make sense of this connection, we must turn our attention to the sentimental aspects of Alencar's work, which

play an important part in *Senhora*, vying with realist elements for dominance in the novel. In the sentimental tradition, which goes back to the eighteenth-century European novel, transparency depends on an affinity of the souls that is based on the profound mutual responsiveness brought by sympathy and sensibility. The stone-woman, despite her sensuous desire, is essentially insensitive. The moments in which Aurélia becomes a marble statue are also the moments of crisis in which her sensibility resolves itself into nervous irritation and finally collapses. In Adelaide's case, this occurs because her desire for display is intrinsically narcissistic. In both cases, the outward flow of sensibility, or the exchange of feeling through sympathetic resonance, is blocked, resulting in the subject closing up into itself and turning into an opaque and apparently inanimate object.

This is interesting in this context because insensibility is precisely one of the distinguishing traits of the slave in the early Brazilian novel. This was already the case in *A Moreninha*, where the exquisite sensibility of Carolina's hands is contrasted to the coarse skin of a slave woman who is far less capable of feeling. Curiously—and also more shocking—this is also true of those early Brazilian novels that offer themselves as a denunciation against slavery. While, as Markman Ellis argues in *The Politics of Sensibility*, European sentimental works (however reactionary and cautious in their demands for reform and better treatment of the slaves, however contradictory on those occasions in which they failed to actually attack slavery as an institution) tended to evoke pity for the slave, in Brazilian novels the slave is seldom an object of sympathy.[5] Joaquim Manuel de Macedo's *As vítimas-algozes*, for instance, consistently employs a sentimental rhetoric—to describe the slave-owners. They are often diligent, frugal, detached from the world, concerned with the integrity of their domestic life, and their daughters are "angels of innocence" imbued with a "delicacy of sentiment" that is an inborn instinct. If Macedo attacks slavery, he does so because it morally corrupts the slave, who in turn corrupts his or her master and the rest of society; more importantly, he condemns slavery because of the actual risk it represents for the slave-master, who is often at the mercy of vengeful slaves.[6] The latter are the perfect counterpoints to their masters: forcefully reduced to being objects, they are denied the "rights of sensibility," and do

not have resource to the "poetry of sentiments" (42). Sensibility and innocence belong to the white masters; actually, these are the traits that distinguish them from the slaves. Being white also means being sensitive.

The most famous Brazilian novel on slavery, Bernardo Guimarães' *A escrava Isaura*, makes the same point. As in *As vítimas-algozes*, the aim here is presumably to denounce slavery, and the novel does garner sympathy for the slave—a very special slave, however: Isaura, the daughter of a free Portuguese man and a mulatto slave woman, who, although being a slave, has the appearance of a free woman, endowed with exquisite beauty, modesty and sensibility. When her old mistress dies, Isaura is inherited by her son, a dissolute young man corrupted by a long sojourn in Paris. This new master, Leôncio, lustfully longs for Isaura and persecutes her with his sexual advances. She resists, willing to obey her master in everything except in relinquishing her virtue, until she is forced to run away.

This brief outline of the premise of Bernardo Guimarães' novel must sound familiar to anyone who has read *Pamela*. Indeed, the first half of *A escrava Isaura* owes a lot to Richardson's novel, and also to his *Clarissa*, on whose protagonist Isaura's character is largely based, and which likely inspired some episodes in Guimarães' novel, as when Isaura is locked away by Leôncio in an attempt to bend her to his will. Of all nineteenth-century Brazilian novels, *A escrava Isaura*, published as late as 1875, is probably the most faithful to the sentimental tradition in terms of plot and rhetoric: it does read like a typical eighteenth-century European sentimental novel, translating a problem that was typically Brazilian into an European form. It is as if the novel were trying to present the matter of slavery to foreign eyes.

The effect is not to create a sense of unfamiliarity, stressing the absurdity of slavery as an institution in Brazil, but on the contrary to naturalize it. The argument against slavery, developed in sentimental terms, leaves aside the exploitation of labor and the social tensions it entails, to focus on a broader—and more abstract—enlightened vision of men as essentially equal. In sympathizing and identifying with the protagonist of the novel, the reader is invited to share this sentimental vision of slavery, becoming one of the "people of good sense and sound heart" who Álvaro, Isaura's love interest and rescuer, believes would understand and approve his marrying a deserving slave (96).

Like Macedo's slave owners in *As vítimas-algozes*, whose exquisite sensibility strangely fails to compel them to free their slaves, the readers of *A escrava Isaura* could sympathize with Isaura's sufferings without having to attack slavery as a whole. By associating the theme of slavery to a familiar (because already old) European literary code, *A escrava Isaura* ensures the conflicts intrinsic to slavery can be explained and solved according to an established European pattern. Brazilian reality, which at first sight might seem aberrant to more "civilized" eyes, is thus shown to be subsumed under, and hence equivalent to, the European situation. As a consequence, Brazilian society is also shown to fundamentally subscribe to the same liberal ideas dominant in Europe, since its reading public is as capable of being moved by Isaura's quandaries as the British public was capable of being moved by Pamela's sufferings. Enjoying the same reading experience and sharing the same sensibility, both reading publics, the novel suggests, are essentially the same. Through its sentimental rhetoric, *A escrava Isaura* does a wonderful job of turning opposites into the same, and of neutralizing backwardness.

Slavery is further naturalized in *A escrava Isaura* by it being tacitly shown that those slaves who do not possess Isaura's sensibility deserve their subordinate position. This is particularly clear in those brief moments in which Isaura interacts with other slaves in the slave quarters. There, not only her whiteness, but most of all her sensibility and her "natural" superiority are set in contrast with the relative coarseness of her fellow slaves. In spite of her humility, Isaura reveals "a certain dignity and native pride, originating perhaps from the knowledge of her own superiority, so that she unwillingly stood out among the others […]. She looked like a heron raising its graceful and towering neck among a throng of vulgar birds" (42; ch. 7).

In European sentimental discourse, sensibility was a potential social equalizer, since it was not the exclusive domain of any specific social group. Transcending class barriers, it was nevertheless part of the bourgeoisie's effort towards self-affirmation during the eighteenth century, an element of personal merit that did not depend on family lineage (Barker-Benfield 289). On the other hand, precisely because it was perceived as a natural individual trait, it was assumed that some people were born with more sensibility than others, so that it

often assumed the airs of an aristocratic birth privilege. In *A escrava Isaura*, sensibility becomes the element that allows Isaura to be recognized by her savior as a kindred soul and to surmount the apparently fixed social inequality imposed by slavery. At the same time, it is the feature that marks her as a non-slave to begin with and that confers her a certain nobility that separates her from the rest of the slaves, while the actual conditions of her birth might condemn her to their ranks. While in Europe sensibility is a social marker that makes social ascension possible or less shocking on an imaginary level, in Brazil it exerts the more clear-cut task of distinguishing the human from the non-human.

Isaura is ultimately saved from slavery by being bought by Álvaro and becoming his wife. The same situation that brings the plot of *A escrava Isaura* to a happy conclusion introduces an element of conflict in *Senhora* that lends momentum to its plot. And, while Isaura's sensibility is never cast into doubt, Aurélia often finds herself caught in the difficult position of having to assert her own humanity against the tendency of being seen as an object—or of actually becoming one, as when she assumes the rigidity of a statue. "In her heart, she felt deeply humiliated thinking that to all these people who surrounded her, she, herself, merited none of the flattery that they dedicated to each of her thousands in capital" (5; pt. 1, ch. 1). This is partly due to Aurélia's ambiguous social status. Although she became a member of the propertied class after receiving her inheritance, she was originally a member of the lower middle-class, whose values—as a later representative of the typical sentimental heroine—she is supposed to embody. These values, however, seem out of place in nineteenth-century Brazilian society, and ran the risk of being submerged by the objectifying social relations dictated by the experience of slavery, just as members of the lower freed classes ran the risk of having their sensibility denied and being symbolically confused with slaves. In inverting the basic situation presented in *A escrava Isaura*, *Senhora* carries out a much broader discussion of the objectification of people carried out in a slave society, and sensibility becomes even more complex and ambiguous in this discussion.

More than a manifestation of the exciting possibilities of money that, according to Schwarz, underlies the explicit theme of *Senhora* (54), Aurélia's demonic sensuousness, like Lúcia's, offers the opportunity of evoking its

opposite, sometimes mixed in the statue-woman image: "the satanic fire of that woman's beauty was her greatest seduction. […] If the sinister glimmer were to vanish suddenly, leaving that beautiful statue in the soft penumbra of sweetness and innocence, the pure and chaste angel borne within her as in all young women, might pass unnoticed amidst the whirlwind" (4; pt. 1, ch. 1). Similarly, Aurélia's complaints against the objectification of her being echoes Werther's protestations that his heart is his only pride, not his social position or even his intelligence, which can be developed by learning and by acquired knowledge (86). At a certain level, *Senhora* seems to work within the parameters of the fascination with urban vitality that Peter Brooks mentions as one of the salient traits of realism, a fascination that includes erotic arousal or lust, which in turn is associated with money (145). The way this typical realist preoccupation is articulated in *Senhora*, however, leads to a rejection of realism itself. Something like the nostalgia for the prelapsarian existence in the country that Brooks perceives in the city-dweller of the first-generation realist novels (131) is very much present in *Senhora*, and it could be argued that it is the driving force behind the way its plot is structured—although not with the same meaning it assumes in nineteenth-century European bourgeois societies. The kind of semiotic crisis occasioned by the first encounter with the city, the discovery of a new sign-system that must be deciphered and mastered—a shock and an endeavor that for Brooks is the business of the realist novel to represent, and which gives rise to the realist code itself (131-32)—appears in *Senhora* vestigially inscribed in the body and the nervous instability of its protagonist. The city is dominated by money, which in *Senhora* is associated with unregulated female sexuality, the latter turned more dangerous because it is connected with Aurélia's social power. Turned into a pathology, it must be cured and neutralized. Rendered theatrical and exaggerated, the realist code is opposed to an older sentimental code that is presented as more natural and vital.

In order to understand how this opposition works, it is necessary, among other things, to examine how money can assume different meanings in *Senhora*. At first, it appears as part and parcel of the realist code, as its emblem, so to speak, and participates in the construction of the central plot of the novel in the guise of what Schwarz would point out as the copy of a typical Balzacian plot. Hence, in

one of the first chapters of *Senhora*, a detailed description of the several objects in Seixas' room is followed by a careful account of his financial situation, which includes the actual figures he and his family earn in a year: "The interest from the savings account and from the rented slaves came to something like $1,500 annually or $125 a month. However, since the family expenses came to $150, the three ladies [Seixas' mother and his sisters] provided the rest with their sewing and ironing" (28; pt. 1, ch. 6). The inventory goes on and on. Here we seem to be witnessing an instance of the realist tendency to represent people by the things they use, and to define their place in society, as well as their social relations, by the money they possess and put in circulation (Brooks 14-16). Alencar seems to be doing his best to work according to the precepts of the realist code.

Soon, however, it becomes apparent that this is not the dominant code in the novel, for this realist notation is ascribed a very specific place in the kind of "moral map" established in *Senhora*. I borrow the expression "moral map" from Deidre Shauna Lynch, who uses it to refer to the way eighteenth-century fiction groups characters according to the social norms and human nature they represent—in other words, to the moral stances indicated by their choices and moral deportment (33). In sentimental novels, these maps are structured around strict—and often soul-rending—moral choices, choices which the reader is invited to subscribe to or reject through his sympathy with the characters. In *Senhora*, the realist code is presented in connection with the pair Seixas and Aurélia, and its deployment is related to the way both characters are developed. In the case of Seixas, it is dominant in the first part of the novel. As we have already seen, Seixas is described in marked realist terms, but these realist traits are almost immediately associated with Seixas' indolence, his passion for social life and display, his social climbing and his desire for an elegant life—associated, in short, with the pernicious moral influence society, the "bustle of the world" (28; pt. 1, ch. 6), exerted over him—an influence insistently denounced by sentimental novels. In the beginning of the narrative, then, Seixas occupies the negative pole in the moral map drawn by *Senhora* and which reproduces the moral tensions typical of sentimental novels. Seixas belongs to the class of misguided sentimental heroes who, through a lack of character strength or a deficient education, are seduced by society's pleasures

and are caught up in the world of appearances, relinquishing the world of true being—a process described in *Senhora* by the typically sentimental image of the friction with society: "Seixas was an honorable man, but under the friction of his office and the heat of the rooms, his honesty had acquired the flexible nature of wax, which can be molded to the fancies of vanity and the claims of ambition" (40; pt. 1, ch. 9). In employing the realist code to place Seixas on the wrong side of the sentimental moral map, Alencar is doing something similar to what Bernardo Guimarães does in *A escrava Isaura* when he employs a physiognomic study typical of naturalism to describe an intensely negative character, a bounty hunter who finds Isaura when she runs away and brings her back to her master.[7] Doing that in an intensely sentimental novel throws a dissonant note that condemns the literary genre of naturalism by its association with the villain. However, while a similar indictment by association is present in *Senhora*, Seixas, as a fundamentally positive nature, only spoiled by an excessive contact with the world, is nevertheless capable of redemption. The story of this redemption is also part of the central plot of *Senhora*, and the fact that it is achieved through money, through the payment of a ransom, is indicative of the different meanings and valences money acquires in this novel.

As Schwarz points out, the plot structure of *Senhora*, which involves the identification of Aurélia with money, sounds artificial and forced, too grandiose and theatrical. This, however, is not merely the result of a failed attempt to copy the kind of plot that is typical of Balzac and to adapt it to a social reality incompatible with it. It is rather, once again, an attempt to establish a moral map along the lines of the sentimental opposition between the deleterious influence of society, of "the world," and the primordial purity of a retiring nature. This tension is inscribed within the development of Aurélia's character. The theatricality involved in this plot structure and in Aurélia's invectives against money are indeed symbols of the theatricality involved in social life according to sentimental thought, and are equivalent to Lúcia's theatrical displays in assuming her social role as a prostitute. The outside demands of luxury—the "decency of wealth," in Aurélia's words, the need to display one's riches in order not to be accused of being a miser by society—are like costumes Aurélia is forced to wear in order to assume the role the world imposes upon her, and, as such,

are sources of torment and humiliation: "isn't this luxury that surrounds me a form of torture? Is there any hair shirt that can compare to these fine lace and silk hair shirts that I wear over my flesh, which debase me at every moment because they remind me that in the eyes of the world, I, my being, my very soul, is worth less than these rags?" (119; pt. 3, ch. 4). This passage encapsulates the sentimental opposition between appearance and being, and associates it with a desire for the affirmation of the self.

The "lace and silk hair shirts," the beautiful and rich dresses Aurélia wears and which the narrator describes in loving detail, are part of her erotic appeal, but, since they are also part of her forced display to society, they are the equivalent of her transformation into a wax figurine when she displays herself at the window in search of a prospective husband. In both cases, her erotic attractiveness calls attention to the materiality of her body, caught in a game of worldly conventions where, as Aurélia recognizes, her true self, her "very soul," is denied. Although her dresses have a meaning, they are not a transparent symbol: they call too much attention to themselves and signify ostentation and luxury, things that remain outside Aurélia herself. The image of the stone woman that is so frequent in *Senhora* is threatening because it is an expression of female desire, as its use in connection with sexual ardor makes abundantly clear. It may represent an attempt to neutralize this desire, in freezing its active aspect in the passivity of an immobile object. It may also present, in inverted form, the threat of male impotence when faced with strong female desire, like a Medusa who has her gaze diverted to herself. But it also represents the threat of a lack of transparency, of the marble skin that blocks the other's gaze, of a lack of responsiveness to either gaze or touch that impedes that kind of resonance of the souls involved in transparency: "her face and her entire demeanor displayed the imperturbable serenity that she assumed when she wished to contain and subdue the impulses of her passion" (177; pt. 4, ch. 5).

Money acts, then, as an element that blocks transparency and the natural flow of sensibility in *Senhora*. However, Aurélia's identification with money throughout the novel opens up the possibility of its acquiring new meanings and having the opposite effect. As Regina Lúcia Pontieri argues, this identification with gold contaminates Aurélia with the opacity that characterizes money

in market transactions, since it does not allow us to recognize in itself the kind of merchandise that it is supposed to buy or that is converted into money when it is sold (54). However, if Aurélia *is* gold, then it may be possible to move money to the positive pole of the moral map established in *Senhora*, for Aurélia does not remain a stable character throughout the novel, oscillating between the positive and negative poles of the moral tension developed in the narrative.

Towards the end of the first part of *Senhora*, the reader is shown Seixas' and Aurélia's nuptial chamber. It has been carefully decorated by Aurélia and, in true sentimental fashion, the whole is described in order to elicit a specific emotional response in the reader: the dominant colors in the room are white and celestial blue, there are statues representing love and chastity, the bed is "modestly enveloped in its nuptial veilings," and is seen behind a "diaphanous clarity" of lace lambrequins (58; pt. 1, ch. 13). The nuptial chamber represents love, chastity, purity, innocence and transparency, all positive values in the sentimental code. The chamber itself is a transparent symbol that refers to Aurélia's true essence, the one she could manifest before she got rich, when she and her mother lived "isolated and withdrawn," in a perfect "indifference and detachment from the world" (67; pt. 2, ch. 2) —and which remains hidden within Aurélia, as "the pure and chaste angel" remains hidden within the statue she often becomes. At this time of quiet and retiring domesticity, Aurélia could be described simply as a "woman of imagination and feeling" (70; pt. 2, ch. 2), and her sensibility had not yet been hampered by her forced contact with society, or converted into irritation by attrition with the world, which "wastes" what it "does not absorb" (149; pt. 3, ch. 10). Aurélia's nuptial chamber brings all that back again to the forefront with the creation of a new intimate space in which her soul finds its expression.

The same is true of the rooms Aurélia prepares for Seixas, in which, as she dreamed it, he would find "as if it permeated the elegance of these chambers, her throbbing soul, which would embrace him and enclose him within it." The rooms destined for Seixas' personal use are also the result of Aurélia's desire for transparency, and the same keys which open them open her own, for "two souls that come together, she thought in sweet abnegation, have no secrets and should possess each other completely" (121, 122; pt. 3, ch. 5). The nuptial chamber, as well as Aurélia's and Seixas' personal rooms, which comprise the

most intimate part of the house, are, then, permeated by Aurélia's soul, which nevertheless expresses itself through the luxury objects that decorate them and that are the most visible manifestations of wealth. In fact, Aurélia's soul seems to impregnate most of her personal possessions, even those that are obvious consumer goods, such as the "perfumed satin sheet with gilded borders and the monogram A.C. embossed in scarlet" where Aurélia writes her testament, a document that "albeit a will, did not gainsay the beautiful hand that had penned the text, or the gracious soul that might have enclosed therein, alongside her final wish, the perfume of unknown tears;" or such as the pieces of furniture and personal effects that Aurélia picked out for Seixas and which are "stylish," "costly," and not lacking in anything "that a man accustomed to all the comforts of fashion might wish," but which nevertheless lead Seixas to declare that he senses "in every object the perfume that comes from her beauty" (57-58; pt. 1, ch. 12). The "perfume" these exquisite consumer goods exude is an emanation of Aurélia's presence in them, which converts them into sentimental possessions, personalized commodities that are detached from the marketplace and that, in exchanging hands, function as means for the circulation of feeling (Lynch 117-18).

That money itself can function as one of these sentimental possessions becomes obvious in the end of the novel, when Seixas buys himself back from Aurélia in an act of redress that reinstates the sentimental bonds between the two protagonists and finally establishes between them the full transparency Aurélia desired so much. As in Freud's theory, in which the means of repression becomes the instrument to bring back to the surface the material that had been repressed in the first place (1301), money acts as the means to bring back the sensibility it had blocked in Aurélia and the instincts it had warped in Seixas.

Seixas himself is the first to acknowledge this: "you, madam, have regenerated me and the instrument was this money. I am grateful to you" (196; pt. 4, ch. 9). This comment reveals the way the whole question of money is developed. It is clear now that money, in true sentimental tradition, acted as a means to test the protagonists' virtue and as a tool for Seixas' moral reform.[8] He had to work hard to earn the money he used to buy himself back from Aurélia, adopting in the process new habits of diligence and sobriety, valuing domesticity and intimacy, and relinquishing the world of social display and ostentation:

"The society in which I was raised molded me into a man after its kind; luxuries gilded my vices, and I could not see behind their fascination the materialism toward which they dragged me. […] At that time I was nothing but a salon actor" (196; pt. 4, ch. 9). This is an avowal of the sentimental logic that structures the narrative of *Senhora*; indeed, if this sentimental logic is not taken into account as the chief organizing principle in this novel, its ending remains incomprehensible and even more implausible than it actually is; as the ending of a sentimental novel concerned with moral reform, however, it makes perfect sense.

As a tool for his moral reform, Seixas is grateful for the money Aurélia used to buy him and which he returns in the end. This further re-inscribes money in a sentimental order by turning it into a means of awakening the kind of gratitude that is such an important part of the transaction involved in sentimental charity, leaving it forever present as the basis for a new relationship between Seixas and Aurélia. Money guarantees the exchange of mutual obligations, of which gratitude is one manifestation; this, according to Gillian Skinner, is one of the bases of the sentimental community and in the eighteenth century functioned as an ideological justification for the financial market (60). But in playing this role in *Senhora*, money itself becomes a sentimental token, ceasing to participate in financial circulation in order to promote the circulation of feelings. The continuation of this sentimental circulation of feeling, gratitude, and charity is assured by the fact that Aurélia will use the money Seixas has just returned her to help one of her former suitors who had assisted her before, but who, driven by despair after being ruined, was on the verge of committing suicide: "This money is blessed. You say, sir, that it has regenerated you, and you have just repaid it so that in turn it will assist in the fulfillment of a charitable deed and serve another regeneration" (196; pt. 4, ch. 9).

In becoming an instrument employed by Aurélia in Seixas' education and moral reform, money is turned into a shaping instrument that recasts Seixas' character. In being bought by Aurélia, Seixas becomes not only her slave, but also one of her sentimental possessions, and, as such, acquires some of her characteristics, becoming an expression of her soul, an extension of her being and a testimony of her presence. In their forced intimacy, as if through a sort of contagion, Seixas increasingly becomes an image of Aurélia, adopting her tastes, her moral stance,

her beliefs, and her views on society: "She imagined, or rather saw, that thoughts of her filled and completely dominated her husband's life. At every moment, in the most inconsequential circumstance, this absolute possession that had taken hold of his soul became manifest. There was in Fernando something like a resonance of her. […] It was not only the possession of her by love that had been wrought in Seixas; it was also the assimilation of character" (180, 181; pt. 4, ch. 6).

The money plot, then, serves a rather specific purpose in *Senhora* and acquires specific ideological functions in this novel. It inserts slavery in the contractual logic of market relations, at the same time that it asserts the prevalence of personal interactions as the ideal form of social relations. *Senhora*, then, presents an ambivalent stance towards bourgeois market relations and the realist code that is supposed to represent them. On the one hand, they serve the purpose of imposing the rational logic of the market on the issue of slavery, only to subject it at the end to the emotional and moral logic that guides social relationships in the sentimental code. Money and slavery become the symbols of the personal relationships outlined by the sentimental code and which, in *Senhora*, seem preferable to the bourgeois social relations that the appropriation of the realist money plot at first seems to uphold.

## Notes

[1] All quotations from *Senhora* in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are from the Catarina Feldmann Edinger translation.

[2] Hebe Mattos Castro points to the vision of slavery as based on a contract as an ever-present means of ideologically legitimizing slavery in Brazil (358).

[3] Robert Slenes reports the case of three children from the province of São Paulo who inherited their own mothers as their slaves once their father died (258). The premise of *Mãe*, absurd as it may sound today, did have its equivalent in real life in nineteenth-century Brazil.

[4] I do not mean to imply in this discussion that in *Senhora* Alencar was criticizing slavery or showing any kind of sympathy for the slave. As José Murilo de Carvalho points out, Alencar was a fervent defender of slavery (53-55) and if any element of sympathy is present, it is reserved for those free men who were not land owners or merchants, and who were part of the incipient Brazilian middle class. As we will soon see, the slave was seldom an object of sympathy in the nineteenth-century Brazilian novel.

[5] The shortcomings of the European sentimental discourse on slavery are marvelously illustrated by a passage in *Paul et Virginie* (a novel widely read in nineteenth-century Brazil) where Virginie goes to the aid of a runaway slave who was severely mistreated by her

master. All the pathos of Virginie's pity for the slave is brought to life to the reader, who is invited to take part in her sympathy. Virginie's attempts to solve the situation, however, are strictly conciliatory, and the final result is that the slave is finally convinced to return to her master, presumably to endure further punishment, despite the slave-owner's claims he has pardoned her in consideration of Virginie—who he had found extremely attractive (92-93). More than calling attention to the slave's plight, the passage displays and reinforces Virginie's sensibility.

[6] Alencar's comic play, *O demônio familiar* adopts the same stance, although in a much lighter tone. All the misunderstandings that besiege the lovers in Alencar's comedy are intentionally caused by Pedro, a household slave, who carelessly and insensitively plays one character against the other to further his views of becoming a fashionable coachman. The final lecture delivered by Pedro's master at the end of the play anticipates Macedo's arguments on the corrupting influence of the slave inside Brazilian homes.

[7] "He has a large head, a wide face and rough features. His forehead is inordinately broad and covered with enormous protuberances, which, in Lavater's opinion, is a sign of a slow and narrow spirit, bordering on stupidity. The whole of his coarse and almost grotesque physiognomy reveals ignoble instincts, a great selfishness and a low character" (Guimarães 79; my translation).

[8] For a fuller account of the sentimental program for male reform, see Barker-Benfield 215-86. Barker-Benfield posits the desire for a reformation of manners as one of the central issues in Britain's culture of sensibility.

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