

# A Portuguese Don Juan. The Deconstruction of Myths in the Novel by Almeida Faria *O Conquistador (The Conqueror)*

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## Abstract

The novels by Almeida Faria are not best sellers, although the author is very much appreciated in academic circles throughout Portuguese-speaking countries, like Brazil. His writing is iconoclastic and shows both the break with literary tradition, as well as a critical view of Portuguese society and history. This article analyses his last novel *O conquistador* (The Conqueror/The Seducer), where he merges two great myths, that of Don Juan, called the myth of deconstruction of myths, and that of the Hidden One (*O Encoberto*), important in Portuguese and English contexts. This myth relates to the Portuguese King Sebastião (1554-1578) known for his military fervour. Reversing the interest in military conquests, the modern hero of this novel is more interested in sexual ones. Assuming the narrative modus of a *Bildungsroman*, where the search for the individual's identity and knowledge through erotic experience are important, this novel is constructed as an anti-epic and becomes a profound meditation on collective way of living. The frequently scandalous effect of the Don Juan myth is related to the deconstruction of a great national myth that is a satirical depiction of the Portuguese society. This paper shows how this novel critically deconstructs the cultural heritage of Sebastianism providing not only a critical view towards Portuguese society but also a subversion of cultural canons through myth.

## Keywords

Mythocriticism, Anti-Epic, Portuguese Contemporary Literature, Don Juan, Sebastianism

## 1. Introduction

Political and propagandistic purposes are related to myths as a form of legiti-

zation and collective memory building. In fiction, the figure of Don Juan has great importance in European culture (Brunel, 1990), having given rise to contaminations with historical figures. Hence, it is pertinent to ask why. Almeida Faria's novel, *O Conquistador* (first published in 1990 and reedited in Faria, 2017) fuses the myth of Don Juan with that of the Hidden One (*O Encoberto*), important in the Portuguese and English contexts, creating a third space for cultural criticism. This later myth refers to the Portuguese king Sebastião (1554-1578) known for his military fervor. Contrary to the current trend in today's literature of conceiving a trivialized Don Juan who participates in the games of love in the struggle between the sexes for domination, some works by relevant authors of 20<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese literature (e.g., and in addition to Almeida Faria, we can cite Barros and Saramago—the latter known worldwide for his Nobel Prize in 1998) renew motifs that are mainly absent from contemporary literature. In an age of religious disbelief, the motive of divine punishment and confrontation with the supernatural tends to disappear. The presence of these elements in these works, however, ensures the mythical configuration, hence it is important to analyze their function. On the other hand, the mythocriticism that appeared in context of structuralism during the 1960s and 1970s, became one of the most fascinating trends of comparative literature. Would this methodology still be pertinent today? As the essays by Barthes and Althusser have shown, the myth has an interpellative character in the transmission of values, behaviors and cultural habits. Given that myths are narratives animated by an explanatory, etiological and interventional intention in relation to the real, mythcriticism—as conceived at the time by Rougemond and Durant—deserving to be taken up again in literary studies because it reconciles psychological and sociological meanings. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how Almeida Faria's novel critically deconstructs Portuguese cultural heritage providing a critical view towards Portuguese society.

## 2. A Portuguese Don Juan

In his novel, *O conquistador*, originally published in 1990 and republished in 2017, Almeida Faria delightfully combines the great Portuguese myth of the *Encoberto* (The Hidden One), referring to King Sebastião, who was born in 1554, with the Don Juan myth, the great myth of the demystification of myths. The hero of the story, Sebastião, looks just like the missing king, shackled to a mysterious fate and searching for who he is, in a tension between freedom and determinism.

Having left no descendants, King Sebastião's disappearance at the Battle of Alcácer-Quibir in 1578 heralded a dynastic crisis. A period of Castilian occupation followed in 1580, during which Portugal lost its independence, alongside a period of economic crisis and popular discontent, which explains the proliferation of both the prophesy and myth: expectation of the kings' return (who came to be known as *O Encoberto* [The Hidden One], as his death was considered

doubtful, and “*O Desejado*” [The Desired One], as his return would end Spanish domination and restore *lusitana antiga liberdade* [old Lusitanian freedom] becomes the belief in his return on a foggy morning. This fantastic return would ensure both political independence and initiate a new era of prosperity in which King Sebastião would be the universal leader of a new empire, projecting the myth into the future and lending it a broader dimension.

Much like Don Juanism, this theme inspired important works, especially in England, as mentioned by Leonor Machado de Sousa (1985), and is related to the Arthurian legend of the Knights of the Round Table, through common Celtic origins: “[...] the myth of the missing king, rather miraculously preserved, who one day will save his people, exists in many cultural traditions. However, the most complete, paradigmatic and literary example in Europe is undoubtedly that of King Arthur” (Sousa, 1985: p. 10).

The myth of the hidden and desired king is common to British and Portuguese cultural traditions. The misty atmosphere such traditions evoke, and which in the Portuguese case demonstrates a certain tendency for mysticism and fatalism, is tied up with hope for better times, days of national happiness, justice and greatness. From a positive perspective, it is the Hegelian basis of man’s possibilities, an attitude towards unresolved situations, an extrapolation of messianism as contemporary Jewish intellectuals see it. From a less favourable point of view, it betrays an inability to solve problems, transposing hope for a solution to something far-flung and out of one’s control, to a hidden saviour, to a mythical level, where every problem can be solved, as explained by Jung (1971: p. 94).

Sebastianism combines belief in the young king’s return and another, much older belief in a great and ultimate world empire of a single king, single shepherd and single faith. Messianism, or the Jewish myth of the Fifth Empire, or the universal empire founded by the Messiah, also means something that brings Man salvation.

In the first volume of his book, *A cultura em Portugal* (1981), António José Saraiva presents Sebastianism as something derived from the myth of the Crusades, as depicted in *The Lusíads* by Camões which also inspired the counter myth of Decadence, which represented the void caused by the disappearance of the myth of the Crusades (Saraiva, 1981: p. 123). According to this author, the myth of the Crusades is the first major Portuguese collective myth and intrinsically linked to King Sebastião:

The myth of the Crusades not only functioned on a mental level, but strongly encouraged action. We sense this with the conquest of Ceuta and the African campaigns (designed to be a continuation of the Holy War), as well as Infante Henrique’s endeavours, whatever their real causes. And it evidently inspired King Sebastião, whose madness, like that of Quixote, consisted of believing purely mental aspects to be reality (Saraiva, 1981: p. 120).

Sebastião, the main character of a modern-day story, recognises himself in

this tradition of “conquest” (although this time of a romantic nature, with a semantic ambiguity explored by the title). He shares the same name as the young king who disappeared at Alcácer-Quibir, the same birthday and a number of other characteristics, such as a remarkable physical resemblance, the same age, the name of his parents and grandparents and the burden of fate, *fatum*, “*fado*” in Portuguese. Sebastião is a predestined being:

From the sea came flurries of mist moving towards the highlands, like a chaotic army beating a hasty retreat. For the people present, for my father I know not, such a vision made them believe that it was no coincidence that King Sebastian and I were born on the same day as the saint of the same name. Supported by such facts, the knight Alcides de Carvalho disseminated the legend of my birth. When I grew up and realised something was expected of me, I instinctively chose to pretend it was not my concern. Only much later did I begin to wonder, as now, when I look from up here, from Peninha, this January sea, covered in strips of fog (p. 36).

Thus, the beginning of the novel recounts the mystery, which, like the fog, shrouds the hero’s birth and creates a ritual of mystical rebirth:

For a long time, I believed that I came into the world in a different way from everyone else. It was my grandmother Catarina—and grandmothers never lie—who put this idea in my head. She used to tell me that one winter’s day, in the early morning, despite the fog, the lighthouse keeper João de Castro had gone to Adraga beach to catch octopuses when he found me inside a huge egg with my head, legs and arms sticking out.

My grandmother said that witnesses included a one-handed knight, an accomplished horseman, who often went riding there with his three squires, recruited from among the most idiotic of the villages. Shaken, they and the lighthouse keeper watched the most bizarre event. And the five argued among themselves who would keep me. Mid-discussion, they were attacked by a sea snake that was guarding me. However, Joao de Castro, with the spear that he used to skewer octopus among the rocks, cut off its diabolical head, thus earning the right to keep me (pp. 29-30).

The supernatural birth fits the narrator’s very personal perspective (“For a long time, I believed”), although reinforced by family and societal superstitious imagery, not without a certain doubtful and distant tone that involves us in the fantastic. As Pedro Eiras mentions in the preface to the 2017 edition, “there are no individual hauntings: ghosts are passed on, inherited”. Therefore, it is necessary “to play the game of messianism” (Eiras, 2017: pp. 7-9). The ironic tone and subversive humour found throughout the novel are immediately felt with the character’s explanation of the fate that awaits him and through which he conceals serious ideas with apparent frivolity: “...being the centuries-awaited Reincarnation, I should dedicate myself exclusively to that in which the Other failed so remarkably when showing an extraordinary aversion for the fairer sex” (p.

107).

If one believes the chroniclers, the cult of chastity, which was adopted by King Sebastião, who refused to marry or have any contact with women that would provide him with descendants, thus ending the dynasty, was extended to the “illustrious generation”, i.e., Prince Duarte, Prince Henrique and their brothers, sons of King D. João I. This ascetic Christian value of renouncing the carnal and earthly combines the ideal of the knight with that of the clergyman, and is expressed in the spirit of the crusade, which drives conquests on the African coast. King Sebastião was educated by Jesuits based on this monastic-chivalrous ideal that, in *O conquistador*, is replaced by the dedication *a contrario* in amorous conquests, adhering to the destiny proposed for him and in accordance with the “drives [which] would not allow [him] to focus on just one woman, and never exclusively” (p. 38), thus becoming Don Juan.

Sebastião and Don Juan represent the universal and eternal character of desire. They are, in the words of Bataille (1957), *volonté de chance* (the will of destiny) and both have the shadow of a double.

The double plays such an important role in Don Juanism, in terms of complementarity and symmetry, as well as the struggle between opposing forces, as demonstrated by Otto Rank in his two essays about Don Juan and the Double, published together in the French edition, *Don Juan et le Double* (Rank, 1973). He is part of the same traditional projective framework in which Don Juan opposes an anti-Don Juan (one embodying what the other is or was unable to be) and, at the same time, refers to the vertigo of postmodern *mise en abyme* in which Don Juan has a past he cannot free himself from. In the end, Sebastião/Don Juan becomes lost in self-repetition, unable to avoid his mythical past. Today, although authors no longer punish the seducer, they do deny him celestial peace.

The ominous presence of the deceased king’s double creates a climate that, if not fantastic, at the very least offers a certain oddness. The physical resemblance between them extends as far as both having six toes on their right foot and the parallelism of incidents that indicate something supernatural, create the ambiguity that nourishes myths. Because of these similarities and parallels, the threat of death remains present: Sebastião fears not reaching his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, just like the king. The likeness with the missing king and other coincidences are a threat hanging over the new Sebastião, which oscillates between compliance and alienation, or proximity and escape, which make him, albeit against his will, reflect upon his true fate, shrouded in tenebrous mystery: “But the idea pursued me against my will, catching me unawares at the most unexpected times” (p. 110). The dreams, reproduced in Mário Botas’s fantastic illustrations, which accompany the novel’s chapters, are part of the dialogue with the afterlife, as “no one knows how dreams can take over (...) if images belong to us or if they are just on loan” (pp. 184-185).

Through the seemingly playful game of combining the two myths, Sebastianism and Don Juanism, there is a reassessment of the mythologic basis of the

Portuguese common imagery, breaking away from the prevailing sentimentality and moralism, which chimes with Don Juanism. As such, certain aspects of historical-cultural tradition and collective memory are part of an iconoclastic process typical of Almeida Faria's fiction and emerge with a new anti-conservative view, which, much like this author's other novels focussed on national self-gnosis, allegorically portraying the country as a collective immersed in a provincial and destructive backwardness.

In this novel, the Don Juan myth's obvious social focus, which the author explores well, at the very least because he burdens the character with the "social responsibility" of his erotic endeavours, is associated with a kind of implicit feminism. Sebastião, for whom being accused of male chauvinism is a "lazy insult", dedicates his time to his destiny with a vocation that he considers to be "quixotic" and without the psychological violence Don Juan submits his victims to. The stable aspect of the myth and its literary archetype clearly change in this novel, developing the character of ill-repute and removing his dramatic impact, thus transforming the malicious swindler and seducer into a generous and ironic Casanova who is uninterested in dominating women. During his exile in Paris to escape war, Sebastião soon starts working for the female society SUCH: "*Société pour l'Usage Convenable des Hommes*". The process of debauchery he initiates transforms him into a type of man-machine for women's pleasure, without the hindrance of time-consuming seduction or the moral and religious taboos that women would normally face in a patriarchal and Mediterranean society.

*O conquistador* contains the expression of something that, in a certain non-Don Juan-like sense, I would dare to call libertine poetics, as it expresses the condition of the existential libertine whose relationships become an almost stoic means of revealing existence. The Other is the non-I through which the I is revealed: "Even if something is learned through practice, for this, like for any other art, one is born predestined. However, neither fate nor fairies are enough. Somebody needs to wake us from the sleep of the senses" (pp. 76-77).

There is a positive notion of desire whereby the awareness of pleasure and the knowledge obtained via pleasure should be lucidly shared. In this sense, the character is opposed to the traditional Don Juan, to whom seduction only appeals because abandonment is never far behind.

In its metamorphoses of the Don Juan myth, *O conquistador*, maintaining the main thrusts of impregnator and double, represents its continuity, for it is possible to recognise the three invariables established by Jean Rousset (1981): the inconstant hero, the female group and the dead (in this case substituting the character of the Commander for King Sebastião).

The mythical aspect of *O conquistador* has interrelated historical, aesthetic and ethical ramifications. The past and present combine through religious and medieval imagery, which is recurrent and eroticised, and becomes as important as it is in previous novels by the same author, particularly *A paixão* [1965] (Faria, 2013) and *Cavaleiro andante* [1983] (Faria, 2015), although is especially

visible in this one.

Whenever my mother dragged me to Mass at Uregueira church every other Sunday, I remembered Justina when the priest chanted, ‘Take and eat; this is my body. Take and drink; this is my blood’. My religion was made of fluids and effluvia, heat and tremors of the teacher's body, whose qualities I never ceased to admire (p. 76).

The reflection on being and doing, i.e., an ethical dimension, is combined with the aesthetic, in which the inspiration of magical realism meshes with the traditional pool of Portuguese imagery. For example, in the revival of popular proverbs, superstitions and beliefs (“everybody knows that if a baby comes close to an animal’s snout, it risks acquiring a stutter” (p. 32) or in the use of “racy sayings”:

A meloa e a mulher, pelo perfume se conhecem [A cantaloupe and a woman are known by their scent]. À boa e à má, fofa almofada [Whether good or bad, women deserve pampering]. Mulher de raça não se exhibe em praça [A woman of class is discreet]. Mulher que entristece, de homem padece [A sad woman needs a man]. A mulher muito doce, não a comer logo toda [A very sweet woman should not be devoured whole] (p. 155).

Popular magic is also linked to bodily perception which, sometimes, assumes ghostly appearance:

At that moment I heard a hiss, and out of the tree came a hideous man's head with a moustache and snake's body. Very well, I thought, I'm in trouble. After all, my confessor was right. God sees everything, even my hand between the teacher's thighs (pp. 73-74).

These monsters, which occasionally appear throughout the novel and are reproduced in the seven drawings by Mário Botas that introduce the chapters, show the aggressiveness of the form while bringing all such representations to life. They are not subject to a reflective approach. All explanation and language cease. Representation is without meaning. The power of these images derives from the fact that they go against the nature and the illusion of the immediate.

The magic and symbolic power of the number seven, commonly found in oral literature, are also revived and repeated, from the seven fragments unified by the character Daniel João in author's first novel *Rumor branco* [1962] (Faria, 2012) to the declaration of the importance of the number seven in the epigraph of *O conquistador* (“*El número siete, hijo mío, es un número muy importante, ya lo verás*” - Camilo José Cela), and the novel's seven chapters, ending with the Seven-Sisters that, in the final lines, shroud Sebastião in a protective halo: “Seven stars revolve around me, as if I were a sun. They are the Pleiades, part of the Taurus constellation, and suddenly I am reassured by the evidence that those Seven-Sisters will guide me through life and defend me from an early death” (p. 185).

*O conquistador* is a novel of national remembrance, much like the author's

other novels, particularly *Lusitânia* [1980] (Faria, 2014) and *Cavaleiro andante* [1983] (Faria, 2015), which take place during the Portuguese revolutionary period of 1974/75. However, its main focus is not Portuguese identity or even the (im)possibility of its existence. The demystification of myths rather generates an active image that connects the past and present and surpasses the individual sphere. As such, if the choice of the first-person narrative expresses individual experience, contrastingly, the careful selection of certain situations offers something more common. From the symbolic exemplariness of the individual and his errant encounters with the world, from which he expects to find himself, we find a value of collective sharing via the ramblings of an individual who attempts to discover his origins through contact with different alterities (gender, space, ways of living). In the words of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “The Hidden One is the image of ignorance of ourselves reflected in a complacent mirror” (Santos, 1994: p. 50), which seem to be in such synchrony with this novel.

Like Don Juan, Sebastião sees every woman in the abstraction of femininity. If we use the same distinction that Kierkegaard uses in *Either/Or* by Kierkegaard (1970) to describe the main character’s love for his Paris clients, his “sensual love”, being undifferentiated, would oppose “chivalrous love” towards a person. Although the term may be unfortunate in Guy Vogelweith’s opinion (Vogelweith, 1981: p. 82), it expresses the impersonal or superficial nature of dedication, unlike the character of Clara, the foreigner, who stands out from other women due to the special complexity of her life which echoes the new, the “enlightened rationality”, contrary to the world in which Sebastião was raised.

Whilst being a type of knowledge that involves a form of self-analysis which brings out the unconscious, the myth also enables the identification with common objects. In the novel, the journey exemplifies this aspect well, representing learning, erotic experience and, at the same time, a common reality in Portugal, the clandestine journey, “leap-like”, abroad, to escape war and military service during dictatorship.

The more metafictional myth of Paris, commonly found in Portuguese literature, is revived in relation to Sebastião’s exile (the theme of separation, whether romantic or not, is a dominant feature in Almeida Faria’s work). A city shrouded in myth since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Paris shares the ambiguity of being identified in Portuguese imagery with freedom, vice and, at the same time, refuge. Foreshadowing both exile and paradise, the city offers the chance of renewal and metamorphosis, with the relatively symbolic repercussions of paradise lost that allows a renaissance.

This myth is also inverted or demystified. If the characters in *Lusitânia* and *Cavaleiro andante* exchange letters between different continents while the universe to be enlightened is always Portugal, in *O conquistador*, Paris is unable to solve the crucial issue of the search for identity, symbolically represented by travel. After a while, happiness becomes a poisoned chalice, as it does not seem suited to the hero.



This is perhaps why all the erotic errancy, which is described using humour and satire, is of no use, except for the protagonist to return to square one. With no irony whatsoever, the inconclusive end of *O conquistador* demonstrates the search for the individual's identity. The novel, as the narrative modus of a *Bildungsroman*, is constructed as an anti-epic: "As much as I have enjoyed the journey of past years, I must admit that they have only brought me back to the point from whence I departed. And I am not just referring to geography; the inner journey has progressed even less. I still don't know who I am" (p. 179).

The place of punishment now shifts to the character in the form of their double. The intimate drama combines with an ontological deficit of the protagonist that extends to Portuguese society.

Almeida Faria uses the myths' symbolic impact and appearance of an epic or logical achievement to undertake an ironic deconstruction, not only of national myths in the search for self-knowledge—less mystifying and glorious, but more emancipatory and self-critical—but also of literary myths, revealing lands bathed in magic, lands of legend and prodigies. For Almeida Faria "mythology is an endless source of fascination because it was created by man" (Faria, 1983: pp. 16-17). According to Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, in the words he wrote for the prologue of his book, *Don Juan* (Torrente Ballester, 1963) was inspired by a reaction against realism. With its dreamlike, imaginative and symbolic character, *O conquistador* demonstrates that it never escapes from the domain of realism, instead it is a transcription of the real and another revelation of being. The novel thus lends strangeness to the familiar and imbues the marvellous with the commonplace, offering no opposition between *mythos* and *logos*, imagination and reason, poetry and logic, embodying the delicate balance between the fantastic and real.

### 3. Conclusion

The reference to prevailing myths exemplifies to what extent they live on in contemporary literature. In the work of Almeida Faria myths become important devices to address effectively challenging subjects and become a powerful metaphor to tackle specific issues in Portuguese contemporary society. Revisiting the tragic dimension means a new twist of the myth in a contemporary setting. Almeida Faria, just like Mozart and also against his century, restored the supernatural aura of the afterlife, creating a narrative formula that differed from that usually found in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature. Like Mozart, Sebastião's/Don Juan's sensuality and eager womanising are intensified, with a hero in love with every woman in the world, and free of the tedium and erotic fatigue we see in contemporary works. In fact, there are many types of women in Almeida Faria's novel. It is a yearning for knowledge through erotic experience that this Portuguese Don Juan represents so well. The similarity to the works of the mid and late-20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen in the parody by which the hero is seduced, another example of how the hunted catches the hunter. However, reducing the myth to a

type, making Sebastião a seducer, or, in other words, focussing only on the aspect of his relationship with women, is to forget the mythical function, which has to do with a certain philosophy of life or society. It would be interesting to analyze further new reinterpretations of the myth that mix classic Western tradition with local cultural aspects outside of European culture as in the example of Caribbean culture specifically with the musical by Walcott and MacDermot (1974).

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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