



***Miss Dollar: Stories by Machado de Assis (Bilingual Edition)*. Trans. Greicy Pinto Bellin and Ana Lessa-Schmidt. Ed. Glenn Alan Cheney. Hanover, CT: New London Librarium, 2016. 528 pp.**

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Ask anyone in Brazil who the greatest Brazilian writer is, and it would not be unexpected that the name of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839-1908) would come up more often than any other. A self-taught dramatist, essayist, journalist, novelist, and short story writer, Machado de Assis began his literary career under the sign of Romanticism, turning later to a realism tinged with irony and pessimism. As with many writers of the day, he was a frequent contributor to periodicals, writing countless serialized narratives. Not republished in book form, many of these stories remained inaccessible to contemporary readers, and critics long read them only as forerunners of his longer masterpieces, *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881, also translated as *Epitaph of a Small Winner*) and *Dom Casmurro* (1899). Acknowledging instead the various phases of Machado de Assis's output, *Miss Dollar: Stories by Machado de Assis* joins a recent trend to make his early and middle works accessible through modern editions and place this important Brazilian writer more firmly in the terrain of World Literature through translation.

The volume gathers ten narratives from Machado de Assis's early career, many originally published in the Rio periodical, *Jornal das Famílias*, which, founded by a French émigré, was largely responsible for the dissemination of modern French culture to audiences in Brazil during the Second Empire (Pinto Bellin 27). The readership was primarily upper-class women, so it is no surprise the stories would feature matters of concern to them. Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva's Foreword points out that "Coach 13," "Augusta's Secret," "Miss Dollar," and "Confessions of a Young Widow" all deal with themes of marital infidelity and marriages of convenience. Admittedly, many too contain the conventional elements of romantic love and a moralizing intent, but Machado de Assis was able to exploit the building of suspense and interruption of reading mandated by the

serial narrative to allow “readers the possibility of temporary and unusual interpretations which would not necessarily mirror the standards of behavior upheld by the magazine, therefore leaving the moral judgment for the end” (Suriani da Silva 13).

The portrayal of strong, prominent female figures was a feature of the modernity that writers such as Baudelaire aimed for, and Machado de Assis followed in his footsteps. Modernity is also present in other aspects of the stories, many of which allude to dramatic changes in the city of Rio. The introduction of mass transit such as trams and the bustling downtown of the city, with the commercial Rua do Ouvidor and various elegant theatres, shops, and restaurants in its vicinity, are vividly depicted in the stories. All these are elements that characterized the world of mid- to late-nineteenth century Rio, particularly the lives of the bourgeoisie Machado de Assis witnessed and masterfully rendered.

It could be argued, then, that Machado de Assis’s early work in this volume mirrors the transformation of Brazil from a traditional to a modern society, including all the contradictions inherent to that change, an aspect of his work keenly analyzed by the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz in *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*. Deeply aware of the paradoxes of modernization, Machado de Assis presents an ironic, critical view of this society in transition, of the contrast between the traditional countryside and the modern metropolis, of economic shifts, and of changing fortunes and mores. In this world, and often for financial reasons, parents deceitfully meddle in marriage arrangements against the will of their children (“Friar Simão,” “Augusta’s Secret”); women (but also men) tread the dangerous line of social acceptability and personal happiness (“Confessions of a Young Widow,” “The Woman in Black,” “Coach 13,” “Three Consequences,”); and characters explore moral and psychological dilemmas (“The Gold Watch,” “The Blue Parasite,” “Alone!”).

Therefore, besides the concerns with modernity and the themes of passion, jealousy, and solitude, the narratives also deal with reflections on ambition, appearances, status and social climbing. This is particularly present in the countless ironic references to the term “*corte*,” (“court”), which originally referred to the Portuguese royal family’s relocation to Rio as a result of the Napoleonic invasions of Portugal. Interestingly, by the time Machado was writing these narratives in the 1860s to the 1880s, Brazil had been declared a republic, so the term came to signal instead a circle of sycophants in search of political and economic favour. As Pinto Bellin points out, Machado’s reference to the court thus alludes to “his critical position with regard to the social mechanisms that perpetuated the domination of classes in the Brazilian empire” (29).

From an aesthetic point of view, drawing from sources as diverse as Laurence Sterne, Giacomo Leopardi, and Edgar Allan Poe, Machado developed a unique style that combined meta-literary references with psychological analysis and a tragicomic view of human nature. The stories experiment with the form of the epistolary novel, particularly adequate to the form of the feuilleton or serial magazine. They also make extensive use of intertextuality and meta-literary devices.

“Alone!” directly alludes to Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd.” Other stories include characters who are readers, aspiring writers, or as well-versed in literature as in their regular professions. The omniscient narrator will often explicitly play with and indeed frustrate readers’ expectations (“Miss Dollar”). So, in sum, while the devices of nineteenth-century narrative, particularly from the serialized form, might seem at times contrived to contemporary audiences, the innovative moves and the freshness and wit of Machado’s style make the reader move apace through these stories. The conventional trappings of a moralizing intent in some tales—features of the genre and the venue of their original publication—are overcome by Machado de Assis’s distinct gift in making the characters and tales memorable and poignant.

The original’s verve and fine irony come across in English in the solid work done by Greicy Pinto Bellin and Ana Lessa-Schmidt, who were jointly responsible for the edition and translation of these stories presented in *en face* format. While a future edition might benefit from some fine-tuning and copyediting, in all this volume constitutes an excellent introduction to Machado de Assis’s early work, both for general readers as well as scholars, and students. The Foreword, Introduction, and Notes provide excellent contextualization and critical perspectives. The narratives are short enough to be used as pedagogical material, and having the English and Portuguese on facing sides will be of use to students of Portuguese, Brazilian literature, and Comparative Literature.

REFERENCES

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