
ALLEGORIES OF CONQUEST: MISOGYNY AND ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN COLONIAL BRAZILIAN CHRONICLES

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines through the perspective of cultural criticism the representation of female image in European patriarchal discourse from tradition down to colonial Brazilian chronicles. It shows that denigration of woman is ideological and rhetorical: it corresponds to a cultural complex aiming androcentric hegemony.

Simone de Beauvoir observed that “in all civilizations and still in our day woman inspires man with horror” (*The Second Sex*, 1989, p. 138). This past summer, the movie *Species* portrayed this horror: alien DNA-material is transformed from innocent child to seductive female, ultimately becoming an agile, reptile-like creature with the sole purpose of perpetuating its kind. Ironically, a female embryo is deliberately “engineered” to be more “docile”; “easier to handle”. Like Scylla or the Lamiae of patriarchal mythologies this contemporary siren continues to fascinate the unsuspecting navigator, a victim of her shadowy world: “For the sailor [says Beauvoir], the sea is a woman, dangerous, treacherous, hard to conquer” (*The Second Sex*, 1989, p. 145).

In the same misogynous tradition, the Portuguese chronicler Pero de Magalhães Gândavo, author of the first history of Brazil – *História da Província de Santa Cruz* (ca. 1570) – adds to his report an illustration

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of the “Igpupiara,” a dreaded sea-creature found in the Captaincy of São Vicente in 1564. Gândavo’s narrative does not gender the monster as feminine but the illustration, depicting large breasts and, especially, the mermaid tail influenced other chroniclers.

Fernão Cardim in his *Tratado do Clima e Terra do Brasil* (early seventeenth century) observed that in Brazil there were marine monsters whose “femeas parecem mulheres, têm cabellos compridos, e são formosas ...” and they “kiss” the life out of their victim

beijando-a, e apertando-a consigo que a deixão feita toda em pedaços, ficando inteira, e como a sentem morta dão alguns gemidos como de sentimento, e largando-a fogem; e se levão alguns comemlhes sómente os olhos, narizes e pontas dos dedos dos pés e mão, e as genitálias, e assi os achão de ordinario pelas praias com estes [sic] cousas menos (*Tratado do Clima e Terra do Brasil*, 1980, p. 50).

Here, text and icon merge to represent the sub-human desire that leads to destruction, for the unnatural bodies of these creatures cannot possibly satisfy the passions that are aroused by their seduction (Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 1962, p. 283). Images of the *Vagina Dentata* are remembered when Cardim observes that the creatures are especially fond of the victim’s “genitálias.”

This same fear is reflected in representations of the medieval “Hell Mouth”: “Medieval Christianity [explains Barbara Walker] made the vagina a metaphor for the gate of hell and revived the ancient fear-inducing image of the *toothed vagina* that could bite off a man’s penis” (*The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, 1983, p. 328). This fear of the feminine, in the vocabulary of the sub-human “other,” is central to the colonial enterprise. Then as now, these denigrating representations of the “other” fuel hegemonic rhetoric.

In the promotional literature and iconography of the New World, representations of the feminine, in the gendered language of exploration and conquest, point to the same dialectic of desire and denigration that characterizes the misogynous tradition. These archetypal visions of the feminine are reflected in the gestures of dominance and submission that underly the language of appropriation; an idiom founded on the “violent hierarchies” (Derrida) of male privilege and control.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, while characterizing the divided world of colonial rule, Frantz Fanon also exposed gendered oppositions:

The native represents [he wrote] not only the absence of values. [S]He is ... the enemy of values, and in this sense [s]he is the absolute evil. [S]He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him [her]; [s]he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty and morality; [s]he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces At times this [he continues] Manicheism goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him [her] into an animal. In fact the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's [woman's] reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations. When the settler seeks to describe the native [fully in exact terms] he constantly refers to the bestiary (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963, p. 41-2).

These dangerous dichotomies of the male symbolic order are deployed within the larger context of racial and class distinctions, of ageism, and also of that fear we call homophobia. In other words, to treat gendered discourse as mere sexual difference without regard to hierarchy “obscures and legitimizes the way gender is imposed by force” (MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 1987, p. 32; qtd. in Showalter, “Introduction: The Rise of Gender,” 1989, p. 4). Still the divisive machinery of alterity is always, already sparked by privileging the masculine *over* the feminine, as strong superior *over* weak inferior.

Master narratives of exploration and conquest, whether we speak of the literature of “discovery” or *Indiana Jones* in pop culture, inevitably unveil “the mysteries of inert spaces [while allegorizing] ... the Western's achievement of virile heroic stature” (Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, 1994, p. 146).

As in the chronicles of colonial Brazil, sexuality here becomes the vehicle for appropriation. This language of conquest, as we all know, often becomes confused with that of erotic exploration and exploitation. An obvious example in the Early Modern Period is found in *The Perfumed Garden* (14th century) by Shaykh Nefzawi (1394-1433), an

erotic classic, where the author registers 34 synonyms for the penis. One of these – “All Moktécheuf” or “He who discovers” – is so called because, the penis is “not afraid to lay bare the vulva which it does not yet know, and to lift up the clothes which cover them without shame. It is not accessible to any bashfulness, cares nothing and respects nothing” (*The Perfumed Garden*, 1978, p. 180).

Similar boldness appears in allegorical depictions of America as a nude female. Theodor Galle’s 1580 engraving – after a drawing by Jan van der Straet, 1575 – (Fig. 1), illustrates how intricately, “knowledge becomes involved with eroticized scrutiny, penetration and consummation” (Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, 1994, p. 146). The recumbent America, in what might be a gesture of welcome (if not utter surprise), seems to beckon the armored male, Amerigo Vespucci. His classic patriarchal positioning with respect to the female, allows for a show of the latest knowledge-gathering instruments of European control, while proudly raising the standard of male authority, topped with the symbol of the New Father’s religion. The sword, almost invisible, symbolically awaits the “excitement” of the next moment; the same “excitement” that is promised to the submissive America in the latin motto below the frame: “Americen Americus retexit, & Semel vocavit inde semper excitam” – “Americus rediscovers America; he called her once and thenceforth she was always awake.” (qtd. in Montrose, “The Work of Gender and Sexuality in the Elizabethan Discourse of Discovery,” 1992, p. 142).

By contrast, a male allegorical representation of America by Paolo Farinati (1595) – the only one I have uncovered – , not subject, of course, to the same erotic conventions of the European nude, holds the same cross, symbol of supreme authority; this male America could never be desired as the awaiting female is in the other engraving: “a naked body [John Berger reminds us] has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude” (*Ways of Seeing*, 1977, 54).

In Galle’s illustration, furthermore, the cannibal scene, at a distance, but clearly featured, as well as the exotic fauna and flora – wild and fanciful to the European as the naked America – hint at elements of barbarism and deception. Louis Montrose poignantly observes that “Of particular significance here is the blending of these basic ingredients of proto-colonialist ideology with a crude and anxious misogynistic [sic]

fantasy, a powerful conjunction of the savage and the female” (“The Work of Gender and Sexuality,” 1992, p. 144).



Fig. 1 - *América* (ca. 1580). Engraving by Theodor Galle after a drawing by Jan van der Straet (ca. 1575)

In the New World, European misogynous strategies – stemming from male fear of the feminine and patriarchal privilege – were not only used to dehumanize the indigenous woman, but also, and by extension of the sexual politics in colonial rule, to de-nature the “orientalized” Amerindian male. Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão, author of the 1618 *Dialogues of the Great Things of Brazil*, provides an interesting example in Dialogue V, where Brandônio (always praising the new found land) describes a flesh-eating fish:

the *piranha* [he explains] is a fish little bigger than your hand but with such great fighting spirit that it surpasses sharks in voracity. ... As soon as these fish sense a person in the water, they set upon *him*

[!] like wild beasts. They strike most often at the testicles, which they at once cut off and carry away along with the victim's manhood. For this reason [he adds] one finds many Indians who lack these members.

Alviano replies: "I give you my word that so long as I live nothing will induce me to go into the rivers of this land, for even if they had only a plam of water in them I would be thinking that the *piranhas* were after me to disarm me of what I prize the most" (*Dialogues of the Great Things of Brazil*, 1987, p. 256-57). Alviano's use of the verb "to disarm" is interesting, especially when in confrontation with the "many" castrated Brandônio registers.

The anecdote, however, more than just phallus-centered anxiety, points to one of the most misogynist etymologies of gendered discourse in the Portuguese language, for the word *piranha* in contemporary Brazilian slang means "prostitute". In another instance, discussing a species of "delicious" crabs with "beautiful big corals" – which happens to be the ovaries – Brandão observes that "the natives say [the] crabs 'andaõ ao atá' ('are on the loose') which is the same as saying they are lascivious" (*Dialogues of the Great Things of Brazil*, 1987, p. 230). Many words and phrases expressing aimless movement carry this meaning in Brazil, where it is still applied to females as in the expression "mulher à-toa" or prostitute.

Although Brazil, in Brandônio's own words "was a very kind mother" – the standard promotional image of abundance – , he recognizes that the Europeans "stepfathers" exploit more than the fruits of her labor. The narrative shows that they also desired, feared and sometimes hated the daughter's of the land. This becomes evident when Brandônio observes that although "very lascivious by nature, there are many damsels ... who have a great love of chastity" (*Dialogues of the Great Things of Brazil*, 1987, p. 322). Alviano – always skeptical – answers:

Such girls as these must have heard tell of Diana and her nymphs, and to imitate them, take up hunting as an occupation. Yet I cannot bring myself to believe that they will be continent, for this is a gift of the soul and cannot be prized except by one who knows its value. Now since these girls lack such knowledge, I don't see what would

make one think that they could keep this continence (*Dialogues of the Great Things of Brazil*, 987, p. 322).

Even with respect to these “chaste damsels,” phallogocentric interest frustrates any possibility of the subject’s *integrity*, serving instead as a springboard for further colonial misogynies. These examples remind us that “the origin of woman’s evil nature [observes Elisabeth Badinter] is unbridled sensuality, impossible for any man to satisfy” (*The Unopposite Sex: The End of the Gender Battle*, 1989, 90).

Animal symbolism is inseparable from this notion. In the Middle Ages, not only is woman subordinate to man, but she is also assimilated to Satan, often depicted as a female serpent with sagging breasts. In the logic of opposites, woman – as St. Augustine noted – is “an animal that is neither firm nor stable, full of hatred, spreading evil ...” (qtd. in Badinter, *The Unopposite Sex: The End of the Gender Battle*, 1989, p. 66).

Furthermore, in her quest for the same satiation that enfeebles the man, this woman-as-witch exerts complete control over the animal world: “the only males equipped to face up to this ‘woman-crevice-leech’ are not humans, but animals [whose penises correspond better to female desires]” (Badinter, *The Unopposite Sex: The End of the Gender Battle*, 1989, p. 91). In this respect, *The Hammer of Witches (Malleus Maleficarum*, 1486) reminds us that “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in woman insatiable. ... Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they [witches] consort even with devils” (qtd. in Tuana, *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman’s Nature*, 1993, p. 81).

This same old hag image informs Vespucci’s ethnography when (in the 1503 letter to Lorenzo Piero Francesco de Medici) he writes that Amerindian “women being very libidinous, make the penis of their husbands swell to such a size as to appear deformed; and this is accomplished by a certain artifice, being the bite of some poisonous animal, and by reason of this many lose their virile organ and remain eunuchs” (qtd. in Montrose, “The Work of Gender and Sexuality in the Elizabethan Discourse of Discovery,” 1992, p. 144).

Louis Montrose adds that “The oral fantasy of female insatiability and male dismemberment – [appearing elsewhere] as cannibalistic

confrontation of alien cultures – is here translated into a precise genital and domestic form. Because the husband’s sexual organ is under control of his wife and is wholly subject to her ambiguous desires, the very enhancement of this virility becomes the means of his emasculation” (“The Work of Gender and Sexuality in the Elizabethan Discourse of Discovery,” 1992, p. 144-5).

Similarly in Brazil, Gabriel Soares de Sousa records that

São os tupinambás tão luxuriosos que não há pecado de luxúria que não cometam ... os quais [tupinambás] são tão amigos da carne que se não contentam, para seguirem seus apetites, com o membro genital como a natureza formou; mas há muitos que lhe costumam pôr o pêlo de um bicho tão peçonhento, que lho faz logo inchar, com o que têm grandes dores, mais de seis meses, que se lhe vão gastando espaço de tempo; *com o que se lhes faz o seu cano [i. e., penis] tão disforme de grosso, que os não podem as mulheres esperar, nem sofrer ... (Tratado Descritivo do Brasil em 1587, 1987, p. 308; emphasis mine).*

More than unbridled female lust, Soares de Sousa is justifying, through the technique of emasculation, the indigenous woman’s preference for the colonizer. This is made more evident when he suggests that the native custom of wrapping up the penis, “was less for protection than display,” an observation corroborated by Margraf, a Dutchman, in 1648 (qtd. in Trevisan, *Perverts in Paradise*, 1986, p. 20).

These images of emasculation and consumption uphold colonial rule while reinforcing the anxiety of Aristotelian logic: “The female is, as it were, a mutilated man ... For females are weaker and colder in nature, and we must look upon the female character as being a sort of natural deficiency” (Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, qtd. in Starr, *The “Natural Inferiority” of Woman: Outrageous Pronouncements by Misguided Males*, 1991, p. 35-6).

The old crone – blending ageism with sexism – is an integral part of this image of female wildness, and

Wildness [as Hayden White observes] is what a normal human being takes on as a result of losing his humanity ... This was especially true of the wild woman of medieval legend: she was supposed to be

surpassingly ugly, covered with hair except for her gross pendant breasts, which she threw over her shoulders when she ran. This wild woman was supposed to be obsessed by a desire for ordinary men ("The Forms of Wildness: An Archaeology of an Idea," 1992, p. 167).

As early as the fifth century (430 B.C.), Hanno claims to have chased some of these "women with long-haired bodies ... We captured three women [says he], but they bit and scratched their captors" (qtd. in Barker, *The Encyclopedia of Discovery and Exploration: The Glorious Age of Exploration*, 1973, p. 60-2). We may speculate today on whether these hairy captives were pygmies or chimpanzees, but more pertinent is the fact that the Carthaginian sailor thought them human or he would have hardly used the word "women" in his report. Furthermore, they must have been a rare prize, for as he reports later, "We killed them and skinned them, and took the hides to Carthage with us" (qtd. in Barker, *The Encyclopedia of Discovery and Exploration: The Glorious Age of Exploration*, 1973, p. 60-2.).

These "Tropes of Empire" (Hayden White) reappear in the monstrous idiom of medieval travel narratives. In the thirteenth-century (1245-1247) journey to the mongol court of Kuyut, Friar John of Pian Carpini arrived at "a certain country, wherein ... they found certain monsters resembling women" (*The Journey of John of Pian Carpini* [1245-1247], 1928, p. 16). Likewise, Friar Odoric in the fourteenth century (1318-1330) ventured into eastern regions where he meets "beautiful men, and deformed women," adding that "men and women have dog's faces" (*The Journal of Friar Odoric* [1318-1330], 1928, p. 216-26).

In the Iberian tradition, the most famous of these hairy ladies are described in the fourteenth-century *The Book of Good Love*. One of these "serranas" had the mouth of a hound-dog set in a fat, dumpy face, with great long teeth, irregular and horsy. And true to her prototype, the Archpriest of Hita notes that her breasts hung down over her dress to her waist, even though they were folded over; otherwise they would have reached her hips.

Similarly, Jean de Léry, however, during his sixteenth-century voyage to Brazil (1578) observes that "when [the female Amerindians]

wear pendants ... their ears swing on their shoulders, even over their breasts; if you see them from a little distance [says the chronicler], it looks like the ears of a bloodhound hanging down on each side" (*History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, 1990, p. 64). Léry, less given to hyperbole, writes: "I will wait until later to refute the error of those who would have had us believe that the savages were covered with hair" (*History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, 1990, p. 27).



Fig. 2 - *Isle of Love*. Drawing by Gerard (19th century)

Finally, I turn to the Portuguese epic, *The Lusiads* (1572) of Luís Vaz de Camões. If we lift the veil of erotic lyricism, we will uncover the

same gendered idiom. Here, Venus – in Canto IX – honors the weary Portuguese soldiers with the famed “Isle of Love.” The willing nymphs – seen here in Gerard’s nineteenth century engraving (fig. 2) – first evade their lustful hunters, only to surrender their bodies as trophies. Upon seeing these women, Veloso exclaims: “What strange game have we here . . . It is obvious that there are greater and more excellent things to be discovered in the world than we unthinking mortals dream of.” Here, too, as Shohat observes,

animalization forms part of [a] larger, more diffuse mechanism of naturalization: the reduction of the cultural to the biological, the tendency to associate woman with the vegetative and instinctual rather than with the learned and the cultural” (*Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, 1994, p. 138).

Colonized people, as women, have always been portrayed as body rather than mind.

RESUMO

O presente ensaio examina, através da perspectiva da crítica cultural, a representação da imagem feminina no discurso europeu patriarcal, desde a tradição até as crônicas coloniais brasileiras. O ensaio mostra que a denegação da mulher é ideológica e retórica, correspondendo a um complexo cultural que objetiva a hegemonia androcêntrica.

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