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Marriage in Contemporary Northeast Brazilian Popular Poetry and Comedy

A dissertation presented

by

Aaron Litvin

to

The Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Portuguese and Luso-Brazilian Literatures

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Marriage in Contemporary Northeast Brazilian Popular Poetry and Comedy

Abstract

This dissertation analyzes five works of northeast Brazilian *cordel* poetry (popular verse poetry in chapbooks) and three northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy performances through the lens of their respective treatment of the theme of marriage. It poses and answers three questions: how does each work characterize marriage, how do these characterizations tend to differ between the two genres, and what do those tendencies reveal about the nature, status, and direction of each genre? It also newly identifies commonalities between northeast Brazilian cordel poetry and stand-up comedy. Finally, it proposes new questions for future consideration, based on this study's conclusions.

This dissertation is innovative in several respects: it is the first academic study of northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy; it is the first in-depth analysis of the theme of marriage in northeast Brazilian cordel; it is the first work to compare the two genres; and all eight of the works that it analyzes have never been written about before. These eight works were selected because they are representative of the genres and because they focus on the theme of marriage. The five selected poems are also representative of the diversity of cordel poets, as they include works by authors of different ages, genders, sexual orientations, and geographic areas of northeast Brazil. The five cordel poems analyzed are: *O romance de João Besta e a Jia da lagoa* by Francisco Sales Arêda (circa 1950); *O sacrifício do amor ou o noivo ressussitado* by Manoel

d'Almeida Filho (1977); *O casamento do boiola* by José Francisco Borges (1985); *Romance de Amanda e Mara* by Graciele Castro (2020); and *As ninfas da cachoeira ou o castigo da ambição* (2001) by José Mapurunga. The three stand-up comedy performances analyzed are: "Um show de comédia standup" by Paulo Araújo's (2018); "Adulto" by Whindersson Nunes (2019); and "Comédia da vida casado" by Kedny Silva (2022). Other active northeast Brazilian comedians, including Arianna Nutt and Max Petterson Monteiro, are referenced but not analyzed, as they have not yet published extensive recordings of their stand-up comedy performances.

The analysis of the five cordel poems through the lens of marriage reveals diverse approaches, styles, identities, and perspectives. Each poem depicts marriage from a different angle and in a different light; moreover, each one does so with nuances and layers of meaning that only a close reading can reveal. Arêda presents happy marriage as a reward for the protagonist's supposed humility, whereas d'Almeida Filho frames marriage as a social obligation in which the protagonist repays female devotion by offering marriage in return. Borges, in his whimsically vulgar poem, leverages gay marriage to satirize the clergy, while mocking homosexuality as a "modern" aberration. Castro, on the other hand, in sharing her personal story about meeting and marrying her wife, celebrates marriage, including gay marriage, as a sincere expression of love. Mapurunga, meanwhile, frames marriage as an imperative: he grants prosperous marriage as a reward for his protagonist's honesty and obedience, while also directly exhorting his (ostensibly male) reader to embrace monogamy and settle down. Furthermore, analysis of the poems' wording and rhymes reveals subtleties that complicate and transcend the above interpretations.

The three stand-up comedians, on the other hand, all jokingly characterize marriage in mostly the same manner, dwelling on a negative, pessimistic depiction of marriage centered on

conflict and tension. They present personal anecdotes from their marriages in that light, and they extrapolate those alleged experiences to general affirmations. In doing so, they focus on a single trope: the henpecked, emasculated husband in a passionless relationship who lives in fear of his wife's anger and eventually capitulates to her manipulation and demands. Only Nunes ventures beyond that characterization, employing the theme of marriage as a basis for affirming and joking about his low-income upbringing, regional and socioeconomic class contrasts in Brazil, and the opulence of Brazilian elites along with the greed of those who profit from them. The creativity, originality, and ingenuity of the comedians' stand-up comedy performances are to be found not in the plot, framework, or underlying messages of the material, but rather in the unique details of the comedians' respective anecdotes, in the cleverness of their wordplay, and in the flourishes of their delivery that successfully evoke the audience's laughter.

This study has generated new questions that only further study and the passage of time will answer. Could northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, like cordel, become more diverse and innovative? Specifically with regard to the comedians' treatment of the theme of marriage, why is there such uniformity and negativity? Nutt, in her few published video clips of her stand-up comedy performances, makes jokes about marriage and divorce that align with the three male comedians' characterizations. Is there something about the imperative of generating laughter that requires the comedians to base their marriage jokes, at least to some extent, on depictions of interpersonal conflict? Are those characterizations currently necessary or most effective for generating humor for Brazilian audiences, or are they prevalent for other reasons? To what extent is the trope of marital strife, and its usage in northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, a localized phenomenon, and to what extent is it characteristic of stand-up comedy more broadly? Will northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy on the topic someday consist of more material beyond

that trope? And when, and in what ways, will gay marriage form a substantive part of the material of northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians? If there is to be a transformation in how marriage is portrayed, what, or who, will drive it? More generally, how and why will northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy evolve? Will it diversify mainly due to an increase in the diversity of its comedians, or might diversification occur for other reasons – such as increased maturity of the genre over time, along with more experienced audiences that are fatigued by well-worn tropes and that seek out new approaches? Finally – whether with or without such an evolution of the genre's content and approaches – will Brazilian stand-up comedy, including that of northeast Brazilian comedians, attract the scholarly and critical attention that today it still lacks? Might Brazilian stand-up comedy's foreign origin, as well as the "discovery" and appreciation of it by foreign scholars, inspire Brazilian intellectuals to recognize Brazilian stand-up comedy (including northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy) as an art form worthy of study – in the same way that Brazilian scholars, motivated by the constructed myth of Brazilian cordel's foreign origin and by the interest of foreign researchers, embraced cordel poetry and enthusiastically began researching it in the 1960s after having mostly ignored it for over half a century?

As for northeast Brazilian cordel poetry, how will the genre evolve? And how might it be influenced, if at all, by the rise of stand-up comedy in the region? Will the two genres continue to flourish and evolve in parallel? This dissertation argues that stand-up comedy is in some ways an heir to cordel, given that the genres share a number of key attributes, and considering that northeast Brazilian stand-up today has some characteristics that northeast Brazilian cordel used to possess but no longer does (or at least not to the same extent). Both stand-up comedy and Brazilian cordel poetry are characterized by the commercialization of published products (videos and chapbooks), by the use of themes and techniques that generate or

suggest intimacy so as to compensate for the distance between the performer and the audience, and by the inclusion or simulation of direct dialogue or interaction, however limited in scope, between the artist and the viewer or reader. Meanwhile, northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians perform to live audiences and publish recordings that reach millions of viewers, whereas cordel poetry nowadays is rarely recited publicly as it once was, and it no longer has the readership that it once did. This is not at all to say, however, that cordel poetry has been superseded by stand-up comedy. Although stand-up comedy may have overtaken cordel in terms of live performances, distribution, and audience size, it has by no means challenged cordel poetry with regard to the literary genre's cultural significance and identification with the region. Moreover, the immensity and diversity of the cordel poet community, including the presence of many young poets, attests to the continued relevance and dynamism of the genre – even though the genre has evolved away from live performance, and even if fewer chapbooks are sold today than decades ago. How might northeast Brazilian cordel poetry and stand-up comedy converge, or diverge, or coexist, in the coming decades? Might there be a resurgence of live performances of cordel, in the form of poetry readings and theatrical presentations? Or will the cordel universe continue on the path toward becoming an entirely written genre, leaving the element of performance to other genres? Meanwhile, will the pursuit and presence of humor increase in cordel as a consequence of competition or influence from stand-up? Or will cordel authors instead focus mainly on conveying new opinions and perspectives, ceding the realm of humor and laughter to stand-up? Finally, might it be the northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians who change course, maintaining humor and laughter while more purposefully selecting and diversifying the premises of their jokes? These are some of the questions for future consideration that emerge from this study's analysis of eight works in two genres of northeast Brazilian popular cultural production.

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Introduction

This dissertation analyzes and compares works in two genres of northeast Brazilian popular cultural production by considering how each work presents the theme of marriage. The first genre, known colloquially as *cordel*, is a type of verse poetry that originated in the late nineteenth century in northeast Brazil, and which is traditionally published by the poets themselves in chapbooks, whose covers are usually illustrated with black-and-white woodcut prints. The second genre is stand-up comedy – a genre of entertainment and performance art that originated (or was popularized, in a form that would be recognizable to today's audiences) in the United States in the early to mid-twentieth century, and which emerged in its Brazilian incarnation in the last decades of the twentieth century. In Brazil, the two genres, though disparate in certain respects, actually share a number of key attributes: both are rooted in oral live performance, both have served as forms of popular entertainment as well as social commentary, and both have in the past been (and stand-up still is) largely ignored by intellectuals and academics. With this in mind, my dissertation considers and answers three main questions by way of close readings and detailed analysis of several works from each of the two genres. First, how does each individual selected work characterize marriage? Second, how do these characterizations, considered broadly, tend to differ between the two genres? Finally, what do these characterizations and tendencies reveal about the nature, status, and direction of each of the two genres?

My initial hypothesis was that the works of *cordel* poetry would present marriage in a consistent and limited manner, reflecting and espousing a traditional socially conservative notion of morality in accordance with longstanding sociopolitical norms of rural northeast Brazil, ideology associated with the Catholic worldview, and the historical demographics of the majority

of the genre's poets (mostly elderly men from rural areas of the Brazilian states of Pernambuco, Paraíba, and Ceará). Brazilian stand-up comedy, on the other hand, surely would exhibit a more varied, multi-faceted, progressive, and irreverent take on the institution and experience of marriage – given that stand-up comedy is a relatively recent phenomenon in northeast Brazil (emerging approximately a century later than Brazilian *cordel* poetry), its performers skew younger and more urban than cordel poets, neither the genre nor its performers are associated with social or religious conservatism, and the genre of stand-up comedy (at least that of the United States) is generally purported and supposed to prize irreverence, shock audiences, and challenge social conventions. The conclusions of my analysis, however, turn this hypothesis on its head.

Cordel has matured and diversified as a literary genre over the course of the past century. Its poets, and its poetry, are neither stagnant nor unified; instead, contrary to common (yet outdated) perceptions, *cordel* has come to incorporate and reflect a diverse array of approaches, styles, identities, and perspectives – a variety that is especially evident when works of the genre are considered through the lens of the theme of marriage. Some cordel poems present happy marriage as a reward for a protagonist's good character and humility. Others frame marriage as a social obligation, whereby one person repays another's devotion by offering marriage in return. Still others employ the theme of marriage to satirize the church and political elites, while mocking gay marriage (and homosexuality more broadly) as a "modern" aberration. Others instead celebrate marriage – whether gay or straight – as an expression of love and sincerity. The diversity of marriage's appearances in cordel poems reflects the maturity of cordel poetry as a literary genre, while also demonstrating the diversity of perspectives, opinions, and identities of cordel poets over the past century, including contemporary poets.

Meanwhile, the performances of northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians are characterized not by the diversity, individuality, or creativity that are commonly attributed to stand-up comedy more broadly, but rather by an undeniable uniformity: several of the most well-known northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians address the topic of marriage in the same manner, using the same joke structure and content. While the details vary, the comedians' jokes about marriage are built upon a single trope: the henpecked husband, who, having been emasculated by a domineering wife ever since the fateful day of his wedding, now lives in constant fear of provoking her wrath. Some comedians acknowledge that this characterization is humorous hyperbole, while others do not include such disclaimers; the approach to the theme of marriage, however, is remarkably consistent. Rather than breaking new ground, these comedians adhere to a centuries-old tradition: as Shakespeare scholar Lisa Hopkins affirms in her book *The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands*, "Feminist critics of Renaissance drama have been quick to point to telling examples of a widespread climate of distrust and denigration of women, even after they had been safely married."[1] As literary scholar Catherine Belsey puts it, "The existing historical evidence gives no reason to believe that there was a major outbreak of women murdering their husbands in the sixteenth century. What it does suggest, however, is a widespread belief that they were likely to do so."[2] Whether this widespread belief still reigns in the twenty-first century in northeast Brazil is a separate question, open for debate; after all, the tendentious messages of a comedian's jokes are not to be read at face value as though they were expressions of that comedian's outlook or beliefs. However, it is notable that in the most viewed and well-known northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, most of the material

[1] Hopkins, Lisa. The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998, 5.

[2] Belsey, Catherine. *The Subject of Tragedy*. London: Methuen, 1985, 135.

about marriage is premised on a single caricature of marriage – one in which fearsome wives "wear the pants" and terrorize their cowering, no-longer-manly husbands.

In certain ways, stand-up comedy in Brazil's northeast is both what *cordel* poetry used to be and what it purports to be. First, stand-up comedy is performed live in front of audiences – just as cordel once was, in its heyday, through the mid-twentieth century. Second, the art of stand-up has a foreign origin, having been developed and popularized in the United States many decades before the form emerged in Brazil; cordel, meanwhile, is purported to have Old World connections (to the troubadours of Eastern Europe, and to the chapbooks of the Iberian Peninsula), though that is a recently constructed myth of origin rather than historical fact – the truth is that Brazilian cordel is a uniquely Brazilian form.[3] Third, Brazilian stand-up comedy has an audience of millions, combining live performances and views on video streaming services; *cordel* was once hailed as a source of information and education (and a forum for social commentary) throughout rural areas of Brazil's northeast, and it remains active and dynamic to this day, but it has been superseded by videos and social media in terms of popular attention.

Yet it is also notable that, in several other ways, the universe of cordel poetry is, today, what one might expect Brazilian stand-up comedy to be: creative and diverse – representing a variety of perspectives and identities, and on the cutting edge in terms of audacity and inventiveness. This conclusion runs counter to what I had expected, because it runs counter to commonly-expressed notions about the conservative and rooted ideology of cordel – as written

[3] The majority of books and articles about *literatura de cordel*, scholarly or otherwise, claim – and some even emphasize – that northeast Brazilian cordel surely originated in Europe, and attest to its purported origins in the *cordel* of the Iberian Peninsula. This theory presents Brazilian cordel as a continuation, or adaptation, of a Spanish and Portuguese literary tradition. However, the Brazilian literary scholar Márcia Abreu, through a decade of meticulous and exhaustive literary and historical research specifically on the question of the origins of Brazilian cordel, has proven that Brazilian cordel is, in fact, not an extension of European cordel, but rather a uniquely Brazilian cultural and literary form. (Abreu, Márcia. *Historias de cordéis e folhetos*. Campinas, SP: Mercado de Letras, Associação de Leitura do Brasil, 1999.)

in books and articles about cordel, some of which I will cite – while also running counter to conventional wisdom about stand-up comedy as an ostensibly progressive, transgressive, and experimental art form.[4]

My dissertation research is new in three respects. The first is its analysis of the theme of marriage as it appears in northeast Brazilian *cordel* poetry and in stand-up comedy. While many scholars have studied cordel from a variety of angles – including thematic ones, such as religion, violence, etc. – no studies, to my knowledge, have focused on the theme of marriage. Likewise, there has been no study of the theme of marriage in northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy; moreover, there has been almost no academic research about Brazilian stand-up comedy at all, with respect to any angle or theme.[5] Second, the eight works that I analyze in my dissertation – five cordel poems, and three stand-up comedy performances, by eight different artists – have never, to my knowledge, been analyzed or discussed in writing. As such, I have devoted time and space to introducing and describing each of the works, in addition to discussing how the theme of marriage appears in each one. Most of the works not only include the theme of marriage but rather revolve around it; for this reason, discussion and analysis of the theme of marriage in the work is necessary for interpreting the work overall. Third, my dissertation is the first to compare and contrast Brazilian cordel poetry with Brazilian stand-up comedy, in any manner. It does so with the objective of discovering and presenting some of the two genres' commonalities and divergences – which, in certain ways, are surprising and counterintuitive.

[4] There are not yet academic articles about Brazilian stand-up, but I will cite some of the few existing works on stand-up comedy – most of which are written by American scholars and about American stand-up comedy.

[5] The lack of scholarly attention to Brazilian stand-up comedy is in sharp contrast to the considerable scholarly and critical attention that is lavished on Brazilian cinema, for example.

There are several intriguing questions that one could ask, and potentially venture to answer, with regard to marriage in northeast Brazilian *cordel* and stand-up. I have chosen to focus on the question of how the theme appears in works of these genres, and what that reveals about the works themselves and about the two genres. One could also approach the topic from sociological or anthropological angles; for example, it would be interesting to study what the works reveal about the society and culture of northeast Brazil, as well as what they tell us, more specifically, about the conventions and meanings of marriage in the region. Or, one could compare and contrast northeast Brazilian cultural production (*cordel* poetry and stand-up comedy) with popular verse poetry and stand-up from other regions of Brazil, or from other countries – either in general terms or through the specific lens of marriage. However, as fascinating as these social science and comparative literature questions may be – and in spite of my initial intention, and ongoing temptation, to pursue several of them – I nonetheless found that answering even just my first question was a large and challenging enough task for this dissertation, requiring description and analysis of eight never-before-studied primary sources. Therefore, having delimited my research question and my approach, I have left the other questions to other scholars, and I hope that these questions will be pursued – especially with regard to Brazilian stand-up comedy, a genre that merits greater attention as an object of academic study, research, and debate.

Now I will briefly explain why I have chosen the lens of marriage to analyze the works of *cordel* and stand-up. "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."[6] This sentence – the first sentence of Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice* – is one of the most well-known and oft-quoted opening lines in

[6] Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Printed for T. Egerton, Military Library, Whitehall, 1813.

literary history. It is no accident that this first sentence of Austen's work presents the motif of marriage; the novel tells a story featuring a wealthy landowner who, not having any sons to receive his inheritance, pins his family's hopes on the objective of having one of his five daughters marry a suitable suitor.

Just as it is no accident that Austen made her novel's opening line address the theme of marriage – in accordance with her novel's fixation on that theme, from beginning to end – it is also unsurprising that Austen's famous novel, as a whole, focuses on it. Marriage is, and long has been, one of most recurrent and salient topics in works of literature and performance art. From the Western literary canon to contemporary literary and cultural production – in Europe as well as in the Americas, and in genres as varied as theater, film, the novel, poetry, and stand-up comedy – marriage is not merely one motif of many; rather, marriage is the primary theme in an astonishingly large number and proportion of works.

To give an incontestable example: even a cursory overview of the works of the most revered writer in the English language, William Shakespeare, reveals the extent to which marriage rears its head as a persistent and crucial element in each one. Whether in *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, or any other one of Shakespeare's 37 or so plays – or in his poetry, including all of the first 17 of his 154 sonnets, as well as most of the rest[7] – nuptials are central to the plot or message. Shakespeare scholar Lisa Hopkins elucidates the centrality of marriage in Shakespeare's works; in her book, Hopkins writes:

> It is true that marriage is the crucial feature in the lives of almost all of Shakespeare's heroines – even where it is absent, as in the case of Cleopatra and of Cressida, its absence is a powerfully felt one – and

[7] The first 17 of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, which are known as "the procreation sonnets," focus on various aspects of marriage; for example, Sonnet VIII (1609) chides a young man for remaining single and not pursuing marriage: "If the true concord of well-tuned sounds, / By unions married, do offend thine ear, / They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds / In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear."

> indeed it forms a central thematic and structural motif in his dramaturgy in general. His comedies end with marriages; his history cycles are articulated by marriages; his tragedies begin with marriages, his tragi-comedies are involved in complex negotiations with marriages, and both tragi-comedies and problem plays are habitually judged and generically classified in terms of their portrayal of marriages. The importance of marriage in the plays cannot, in short, be overstated; but its role as a generator of 'happiness,' I think, can.[8]

Having identified that marriage is the fulcrum of the works of Shakespeare – just as it is in the works of countless other writers and artists across numerous countries and genres – Hopkins goes on to analyze how marriage appears in each work, its significance, and what that reveals about the work, its author, and its social and literary context. By studying the theme of marriage in particular, and in depth, Hopkins succeeds in developing and presenting insightful interpretations of Shakespeare's works. By focusing on marriage, Hopkins also succeeds in comparing and contrasting the works, by way of demonstrating consistencies as well as variations in how the motif appears in the various works. Other scholars, in line with this approach, have studied the theme of marriage in works by other authors and in other genres.

Given that marriage is a salient and ever-present element in works of literature and performance, and considering that analyzing the portrayal of marriage in these works is valuable for interpreting the works and their contexts – in other words, one can learn a lot about works and genres by paying particular attention to how they incorporate, reflect, and discuss marriage – my aim in this dissertation is to analyze two genres of northeast Brazilian literary and cultural production through that same lens, and with that same objective. The two genres are popular verse poetry (known as *cordel*, as I will further explain below) and stand-up comedy.

The first of these two genres is a type of popular verse poetry that originated in northeast Brazil in the late nineteenth century, and which, since the late twentieth century, has come to be known and referred to as *literatura de cordel* ("cordel literature"). Originally known as *poesia*

[8] Hopkins, 6

popular em folhetos ("popular poetry in chapbooks") – before the current term, *literatura de cordel*, entered into favor around the 1970s – this genre of poetry began to be published by poets themselves, on printing presses with hand-set type.

Even though it has long been published and distributed in the form of chapbooks,[9] cordel poetry is nevertheless strongly associated with oral poetry. There are two likely reasons for that association. The first reason is that cordel poets used to declaim (perform, or recite) their poetry in public squares and at markets. This tradition, which continued in earnest until about the 1960s, was reminiscent of (but, again, not descended from) the troubadour tradition of the Middle Ages in Europe (including Occitania and the Iberian Peninsula, among other parts of the continent). This oral performance of the rhyming verses created a perception that cordel is oral poetry – even though the poets often read their poems from chapbooks, and even though the purpose of the performances was, in most cases, to sell chapbooks to the listeners.[10] The second reason why scholars and enthusiasts of cordel tend to associate it with oral poetry is that cordel is, whether rightfully or not, associated with illiteracy. Most of the many books and articles that have been written about the history and traditions of cordel make a point of commenting on the importance of cordel as a form of journalism and inclusion. By those accounts, cordel poetry – aside from (or alongside) its literary and creative value – once served the purpose of transmitting information and perspectives to the largely illiterate population of northeast Brazil, especially in the interior of the region, distant from the coastal cities.

[9] Indeed, the name *cordel* describes the cord, or string, on which the chapbooks are said to have been displayed for sale by the poets (though, in truth, the chapbooks were rarely displayed in that fashion in Brazil).

[10] The poet J. Borges – one of the poets whose work I analyze in this dissertation – recounted, during my September 2022 interview with him at his workshop in Bezerros, Pernambuco, that he used to declaim his poems and sell chapbooks of them in public squares and markets back in the 1960s. Now, such performances are rare and take place in comparatively contrived settings – such as at cultural fairs that exist specifically for the purpose of gathering and celebrating cordel poets and other traditional artists and artisans.

The abovementioned perception of cordel as being associated, to some extent, with oral poetry, is not entirely incorrect. To be sure, cordel traditionally was declaimed by poets in public spaces, and the meter and rhyme of its verses are particularly conducive to memorization and recitation. Cordel poetry can thus legitimately be linked to orality, and to performance. Although it would be a stretch to call cordel "oral poetry" – a term that is best reserved for the types of poetry and oral traditions studied by Milman Parry,[11] Walter Ong,[12] and Paul Zumthor,[13] among other scholars – it is nonetheless true that cordel, particularly through the mid twentieth century, was not only a type of published, written poetry, but also a genre that was, at least at some time in the not-so-distant past, associated with and truly animated by live recitations by the poets themselves.

All the same, cordel is a decidedly written form. Not only is it published and read, but it is even commonly used in northeast Brazilian primary school classrooms specifically for the purpose of promoting reading and literacy. That usage of the genre was espoused most enthusiastically by the cordel poet Arievaldo Viana Lima, who published a book about how best to employ cordel poetry in teaching children to read and write as well as to appreciate northeast Brazilian history and culture.[14] Incidentally, Lima's book – though intended for teachers of primary school students – is useful here as a primer, for those unfamiliar with the structure of cordel poetry. Joining his skill as a poet with his zeal as an educator, Lima explains the form of cordel verse in the form of cordel verse itself, as follows:

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[11] Parry, Milman. Parry, Adam. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

[12] Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: 30th Anniversary Edition*. London: Routledge, 2013.

[13] Zumthor, Paul. *Oral Poetry: An Introduction.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

[14] Lima, Arievaldo Viana. *Acorda Cordel na Sala de Aula: A literatura popular como ferramenta auxiliar na educação*. Fortaleza: Tupynanquim Editora, Queima-Bucha, 2006.

A Sextilha é uma estrofe
Que mostra, no seu contexto,
Seis versos de sete sílabas
E apresenta o seu texto
Rimando o segundo verso
Com o quarto e com o sexto.[15]

The sexain is a stanza
That shows, in its context,
Six lines of seven syllables
And presents its text
Rhyming the second line
With the fourth and with the sixth.[16]

Most of the poems are eight or sixteen pages in length; some are 32 pages. Traditionally, the covers of the chapbooks are illustrated with black woodcut prints, in a rustic style that is intentionally rough, devoid of thin lines or fine detail. The chapbooks are printed on off-white or gray paper. During the past 30 years or so, colored paper (in bright colors – usually pink, yellow, or light blue) has become the norm for the chapbook covers. All of this contributes to a sense of intentional materiality: holding a chapbook, turning its (sometimes brittle) pages, reading its imperfectly set type, and admiring its illustrated cover is an essential part of the cordel reader's experience. Anthologies of cordel poetry exist, but they tend to contain prefaces that apologize for robbing the reader of the "true" cordel reading experience.

Although some cordel poets are more well-known than others, there is no canon; that is to say, there is no generally agreed-upon set of poems that scholars and enthusiasts consider to be essential or foundational reading. Rather, fans of cordel tend to amass large collections of hundreds or thousands of chapbooks, discovering gems and personal favorites in the process. As a result, in scholarly writing about cordel, there is little debate or scholarly exchange regarding particular poems, because each scholar writes about their own set of personally selected works.

[15] Lima, 33

[16] This translation is my own.

Cordel poetry and its chapbooks are deeply identified with northeast Brazil – particularly the states of Pernambuco and Paraíba, which are considered the genre's cradle, as well as Ceará, to a somewhat lesser extent. Almost all cordel poets are from Brazil's northeast. Although cordel does exist in Rio de Janeiro and other regions of Brazil, that geographic diversity is mostly a consequence of the migration of northeast Brazilian poets to the country's southeast – which mirrors the historical path of southward labor migration. Most cordel poets live in the countryside, or interior – in the *sertão* and *agreste* regions – and the genre is traditionally considered a rural one; increasingly, however, cordel poets live in the coastal capital cities of Recife and João Pessoa, not only in the backlands. In the twentieth century, the great majority of cordel poets were middle-aged or elderly men; increasingly, however, cordel poets are not only urban-dwellers but also young, and in the past twenty years the proportion of female poets, which was once miniscule, is has increased considerably – to the point that there now exist associations of female and feminist cordel poets.

There has been a massive shift in perceptions about (and the reception of) cordel poetry over the past century. This transformation has perhaps been even more marked than the shift in the profile of the genre's poets. From its origins in the late nineteenth century until the 1960s, cordel was generally viewed as a popular cultural phenomenon unworthy of scholarly interest, study, or nuanced appreciation. Starting in the 1970s, scholars of literature and culture, as well as some cordel poets themselves – energized and emboldened in particular by a newfound interest that European and American literature scholars showed in Brazilian chapbook poetry – began to clamor for attention and respect for cordel. It was during that time that the genre's rebranding occurred, and a myth of origin was invented and propagated: what was once (rightfully) considered a Brazilian phenomenon and referred to as "popular poetry in chapbooks"

("poesia popular em folhetos") came to be renamed *cordel*, largely for the purpose of creating and propagating the myth that the genre is a Brazilian adaptation and continuation of a long European tradition. The invention of a European origin for the genre sought, perhaps, to recreate the same type of foundation for legitimacy that Brazilian sonnets and their authors had enjoyed throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Rather than being celebrated for its uniqueness and its local Brazilian origin, the genre of popular verse poetry in chapbooks in Brazil was bolstered by means of a contrived European-origin story and emphasis on attention paid to the genre by European and American scholars. The name *cordel* was bestowed on northeast Brazilian chapbook poetry by a European scholar named Raymond Cantel in the 1950s,[17] and this late designation was embraced and amplified by Brazilians, who saw in this new attention and attribution certain opportunities for a new visibility and respectability of this type of poetry.

That movement has continued, in several stages, until the present day. After many decades of scholarly relegation, disdain, and neglect, cordel was "discovered" by the academic community as a genre worth celebrating and studying. Initial approaches to its study were mainly taxonomic in nature: faced with the overwhelming task of analyzing a genre that lacked a canon and that included many thousands of works by thousands of authors, scholars sorted poems thematically, painstakingly creating numerous categories and then sorting and classifying the poems by topic or theme. Later, cordel proponents formed organizations, such as the Academia Brasileira de Literatura de Cordel (Brazilian Academy of Cordel Literature) – which was created especially for the purpose of advocating for recognition of and respect for the genre – and published anthologies, as well as manifestos and petitions extolling cordel. Other scholars, including American researchers Candace Slater and Mark Curran, approached the genre from

[17] I will discuss further the influence of Raymond Cantel and the "re-branding" of *cordel* later in this introduction.

other angles: Slater pursued a structuralist analysis, explaining the structural and plot elements that all cordel poems purportedly share,[18] while Curran dedicated his academic career to historical and descriptive approaches to cordel studies, showing in great detail how cordel richly reflects the history and culture of northeast Brazil.[19] Meanwhile, Brazilian scholars began to go beyond taxonomy, analyzing selected groups of cordel poems by choosing a particular thematic lens – such as mysticism,[20] religion,[21] crime and punishment,[22] or political satire.[23] My study of the theme of marriage as it appears in cordel poetry follows this mode of analysis – though I also argue that marriage, in cordel, is not merely one theme out of many, but rather a particularly apt lens for perceiving and comprehending both the traditions and the diversity of cordel poetry.

Prior to moving on to discussing northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, I will briefly provide some evidence for the above statements about the history of scholarly attention to (and appreciation of) cordel poetry – a history that, as I have said, began with the conspicuous absence of attention and appreciation by Brazilian intellectuals.

In 1963, the renowned Brazilian poet Manuel Bandeira edited an anthology entitled *Poesia do Brasil: Seleção e estudos da melhor poesia brasileira de todos os tempos* (Poetry of

[18] Slater, Candace. *Stories on a String: The Brazilian Literatura de Cordel*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989.

[19] Curran, Mark J. *História do Brasil em cordel*. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1998.

[20] Meira de Souza, Magna Celi. *Misticismo e fanatismo na literatura de cordel*. João Pessoa: Editora Universitária UFPB, 1998.

[21] Koshiyama, Alice Mitika. *Análise de Conteúdo da Literatura de Cordel: presença dos valores religiosos*. São Paulo: ECA-USP, 1972.

[22] Brandão, Adelino. *Crime e castigo no cordel: Crime e pena no folheto de cordel e no romanceiro folclórico no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Presença, 1991.

[23] Maya, Ivone da Silva Ramos. *O povo de papel: a sátira política na literatura de cordel*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Garamond Ltda., 2011.

Brazil: Selection and studies of the best Brazilian poetry of all time).[24] This anthology, with such a grandiose and promising title, includes no excerpts of cordel poetry whatsoever, nor any mention of its existence. In fairness, Bandeira's foreword includes a disclaimer: "A verdade é que nenhuma antologia pode por si só representar a poesia de um país: para isso são necessárias algumas antologias. A nossa pretende apenas ser uma dessas algumas."[25] ("The truth is that no anthology can, on its own, represent the poetry of a country; for that, several anthologies are needed. Ours intends to be only one of these several.") Moreover, due to the length of cordel poems, it would admittedly be somewhat impractical to include one within a non-cordel-specific poetry anthology. Still, the utter absence of cordel, and even of discussion of cordel, from the anthology evidently indicates that Bandeira (and his co-editor, José Guilherme Merquior) did not consider cordel worthy of being included among the "best" Brazilian poetry. Instead, the anthology is full of Modernist poetry and Eurocentric lyric poetry – with no shortage of sonnets, for example.

Similarly, the American poet Elizabeth Bishop, in the foreword of her anthology of Brazilian poetry (co-edited by Emanuel Brasil), wrote, "This anthology, consisting of selections from the work of fourteen poets of the modern generation and of the post-war generation of 1945, is a modest attempt to present to the American reader examples of the poetry written in Brazil during this century."[26] The anthology contains no cordel poetry, however. Bishop herself sheds light on a possible reason for the omission:

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[24] Bandeira, Manuel, Ed. *Poesia do Brasil: Seleção e estudos da melhor poesia brasileira de todos os tempos, com a colaboração de José Guilherme Merquior na fase moderna*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora do Autor, 1963.

[25] Bandeira, 5

[26] Bishop, Elizabeth and Brasil, Emanuel, Eds. *An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Poetry*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972, xv.

> It may seem to the American visitor that the educated people whom he meets in Brazil read more poetry and know more poetry (often by heart) than people in the same walks of life at home. But it should be remembered that the educated elite is still a very small class, living almost entirely in five or six of the larger coastal cities, and that in a country of widespread illiteracy (forty per cent the figure usually given), the potential book-reading, book-buying public is limited.[27]

Bishop takes for granted that the appreciation and knowledge of poetry – including memorization of poetry – is limited to an "educated elite" that lives almost exclusively in "larger coastal cities" – and that the consumption and transmission of poetry is limited to books (as opposed to chapbooks and orality) as a medium. Although she affirms that "poets and poetry are highly thought of in Brazil"[28] and that "there is respect for the poet, his work, and his opinions,"[29] this respect and high regard seemingly does not apply – from Bishop's perspective – to the cordel poet, or to cordel poetry. This observation serves not to critique Bishop's judgment, but rather to point out that from the birth of Brazilian popular verse poetry in chapbooks (now known as *cordel*) in the late nineteenth century until the 1970s, it was simply not on the radar of Brazilian and foreign intellectuals.

The Dutch scholar Joseph Luyten, who lived in Brazil and dedicated his career to the study of Brazilian folklore and cordel, described the trajectory of cordel's status and reception, which began with disregard and evolved into advocacy, followed by celebration. In his foreword to a collection of cordel poems by J. Borges, which was published in 2007, Luyten wrote:

> A literatura de cordel em verso passou por diversas fases de incompreensão e vicissitudes no passado. Ao contrário de outros países, como o México e a Argentina, onde esse tipo de produção literária é normalmente aceito e incluído nos estudos oficiais de literatura . . . as vertentes brasileiras passaram por um longo período de desconhecimento e desprezo, devido a problemas históricos locais, como a introdução tardia da imprensa no Brasil . . . e a excessiva imitação de modelos estrangeiros pela intelectualidade. Apesar da maciça bibliografia crítica e da vasta produção de folhetos (mais de trinta mil folhetos de dois mil autores classificados), a literatura de cordel – cujo início remonta ao fim do século XIX – continua

[27] Bishop, xiv.

[28] Bishop, xiii.

[29] Bishop, xiv.

> ainda em boa parte desconhecida do grande publico, principalmente por causa de distribuição efêmera dos folhetos.[30]
>
> Cordel literature in verse went through various phases of incomprehension and vicissitudes in the past. Contrary to other countries, such as Mexico and Argentina, where this type of literary production is normally accepted and included in the official studies of literature . . . the Brazilian version passed through a long period of unawareness and disdain, due to local historical problems, such as the late introduction of the press in Brazil . . . and the excessive imitation of foreign models by [Brazilian] intellectuals. Despite the massive critical bibliography and the vast production of chapbooks (more than thirty thousand chapbooks by two thousand classified authors), cordel literature – whose origin dates back to the end of the nineteenth century – still continues to be in large part unknown to the public at large, mainly due to the ephemeral distribution of the chapbooks.[31]

Attention to and respect for northeast Brazilian verse poetry in chapbooks eventually came about not in spite of the phenomenon that Luyten describes, but rather in keeping with it. As European and American scholars of literature and culture began to research and write about the genre, Brazilian cordel poets and their allies proudly acknowledged the attention, and Brazilian intellectuals took notice. The popularization of the term *cordel* itself as a new name for the genre was directly related to this process of "discovery" and recognition: what was once seen as a local and original form of verse poetry came to be marketed as a Brazilian perpetuation of a longstanding, "respectable" European tradition.

In the 1950s, the French scholar Raymond Cantel, who researched northeast Brazilian literature and culture – amassing, in the process, a large collection of Brazilian chapbooks for an archive at his institution, the University of Poitiers – began using the term *cordel* as a name for his object of study. The word *cordel* means "string," and suggests that poets hung their chapbooks on strings to display and sell them; however, in Brazil, that was never the primary way in which the chapbooks were displayed, nor was *cordel* a common term for the chapbooks or the genre. In 2010, the Academia Brasileira de Literatura de Cordel – an association formed

[30] Franklin, Jeová, ed. *J. Borges*. São Paulo: Hedra, 2007, 5.

[31] This translation is my own.

in Rio de Janeiro in 1988 with the mission of advocating for the recognition, valorization, and distribution of northeast Brazilian chapbook poetry – submitted a petition to IPHAN (the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, or National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute, which is the official heritage register of the Brazilian federal government) requesting the genre's formal recognition by the institute. Institute officer Ulpiano Bezerra de Meneses, writing in support of the petition, detailed the history and cultural importance of cordel poetry; in doing so, he addressed the question of the genre's name, explaining when and how the term *cordel* appeared, and acknowledging that *cordel* was not the universally accepted name for the genre until more than halfway through the twentieth century. Bezerra de Meneses wrote:

> Todavia, que [os folhetos] fossem, como padrão, suspensos em cordinhas (daí a denominação) não é atestado como norma corrente, nem como denominação exclusiva, senão a partir de 1950s, por influência de Raymond Cantel, um especialista na *littérature de colportage*. Aliás, as denominações variam segundo várias categorias, conforme o suporte (folheto, "foieto", livro, folhinha, romance), tradição (folheto antigo), lugar (arrecifes, poesia da rua), editores (livro de Athayde), conteúdo (histórias de João Grilo), origem social (poesia de matuto) e assim por diante.[32]

> Nevertheless, that [the chapbooks] were, as a rule, suspended on strings (hence the name) is not attested as a general rule, nor as an exclusive name, but rather starting in the 1950s, due to the influence of Raymond Cantel, a specialist of *littérature de colportage*. In fact, the names vary in accordance with various categories, based on the physical characteristics (chapbook, *foieto* [a colloquial pronunciation of *folheto*, which is the word for *chapbook*], book, pamphlet, novel), tradition (old chapbook), place (*arrecifes*) [a reference to the city of Recife], publishers (Athayde books), content (stories of Jack-the-Cricket), social origin (*matuto* [a term for a resident of the countryside] poetry), and so on.[33]

Until the 1950s, then, northeast Brazilian verse poetry in chapbooks was known by many different names, and cords (strings) did not even figure prominently in displaying those chapbooks – yet the name bestowed upon the genre by the French scholar stuck.

While the IPHAN report by Bezerra de Meneses explains when and how the new name *cordel* came to be, the work of literature scholar Márcia Abreu sheds light on the likely reasons

[32] Bezerra de Meneses, Ulpiano. "Solicitação de registro da "Literatura de Cordel" como patrimônio cultural brasileiro." Brasília: Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, 2010.

[33] This translation is my own.

why Brazilians embraced and perpetuated it. Having discovered, through painstaking archival research and analysis, that Portuguese cordel and Brazilian "cordel" are unrelated, Abreu goes on to consider why the myth of a connection between the two may have appealed to Brazilian poets and scholars.[34] According to Abreu, Brazilians maintain a Eurocentric vision, whereby intellectual production in Brazil is assumed to be linked to, or descended from, the great European centers; it is assumed that poor men in the backlands of Brazil could not have created a poetic form, and that their poetry must therefore be a copy or an adaptation of an old-world model. Claiming this connection then serves to grant a veneer of respectability to a type of poetry that otherwise would need to be relegated to the status of mere folklore. Abreu further affirms, "É como se os estudiosos dissessem: vejam, essas produções são tidas como algo menor, destituído de valor, mas há na Europa produtos semelhantes; há um parentesco, ainda que distante, com a tão apreciada cultura européia" ("It is as though the scholars said: look, these productions are held as something lesser, devoid of value, but in Europe there are similar products; there is a relation, even if distant, to the so highly appreciated European culture").[35] In this sense, Raymond Cantel and his work appealed to northeast Brazilian chapbook poets and proponents for two reasons: first, a French scholar was showing serious interest in the genre; second, that scholar, in addition to being a foreigner himself, was offering up a branding of the genre that implied a true and proud connection to an olden European tradition. These two elements, taken together, allayed the sort of Brazilian inferiority complex that Abreu describes,

[34] Abreu affirms, "Ao final deste estudo, ficará clara a impossibilidade de vinculação dessas duas formas literárias e, então, poderemos discutir as motivações da teoria da vinculação da literatura de folhetos nordestina à literatura de cordel lusitana" ("At the end of this study, the impossibility of a connection between these two literary forms will become clear, and then we can discuss the motives for the theory of a connection between northeastern chapbook literature and Portuguese cordel"). Abreu, 17

[35] Abreu, 127

whereby evidence of both foreign appreciation and foreign origin are seen as necessary for validating national and regional literary creations.

Indeed, the Academia Brasileira de Literatura de Cordel – the organization that had petitioned IPHAN for cordel's official recognition – has continued to exemplify the tendency that Abreu described. ABLC president Gonçalo Ferreira da Silva, in his introduction to the organization's 18th annual anthology of cordel poetry in 2011, proudly wrote, "Outro fato relevante foi a ida da ABLC aos Estados Unidos e mais precisamente à Biblioteca do Congresso daquele país, onde tivemos a felicidade de fazer a nossa instituição brilhar intensamente. Fomos agradavelmente surpreendidos com a ABLC nos centros de interesses da maior biblioteca do mundo..." ("Another relevant fact was ABLC's trip to the United States, and more precisely to the Library of Congress of that country, where we had the pleasure of making our institution shine intensely. We were pleasantly surprised by the ABLC's being in the centers of interest of the world's largest library…").[36] Respect and alleged roots overseas have legitimized northeast Brazilian chapbook poetry in the eyes of Brazilian poets and intellectuals, starting with Cantel and continuing to this day. The Brazilian embrace of the term *cordel* is a product of this mindset and of subsequent advocacy for the genre.

The "baptism" and legitimation of Brazilian *cordel* in the 1970s led to a surge in Brazilian research and writing about cordel. As Mark Curran explains in *Retrato do Brasil em Cordel* (Portrait of Brazil in Cordel), "Os estudiosos desse tipo de literatura pediam que o cordel fosse preservado nos arquivos nacionais, ensinado nos colégios e faculdades como variante popular da literatura brasileira e se tornasse tema de dissertação de especialistas na pos-

[36] Gonçalo Ferreira da Silva, ed. *Antologia Brasileira de Literatura de Cordel, Vol. XVIII*. Rio de Janeiro: Academia Brasileira de Literatura de Cordel, 2011, 10.

graduação" ("Scholars of this type of literature asked that cordel be preserved in the national archives, studied in high schools and colleges as a popular variant of Brazilian literature, and for it to become a dissertation topic of specialists in graduate schools").[37] Those requests were heeded.

Faced with thousands of cordel poems and no canon, many cordel researchers embraced a taxonomical approach, classifying cordel poems into categories by primary theme; what varied from study to study was the number of categories – which was frequently quite large, sometimes exceeding twenty – and the names of those categories. This pseudo-scientific approach gave scant attention to the form and creativity of individual poems, but it did succeed in bringing a semblance of order and organization to the new field of study. In describing the history of academic approaches to the study of cordel, Marco Haurélio, in *Literatura de cordel: do sertão à sala de aula* (Cordel Literature: From the Backlands to the Classroom), explains, "Prevaleceu a imagem do cordelista rústico, semianalfabeto, vendedor de brochuras impressas em condições precárias" ("The image that predominated was that of a cordel poet who was rustic, semi-illiterate, a seller of brochures printed under precarious conditions").[38] Haurélio goes on to affirm that this inflexible conception of cordel led to "an attempt at fossilization" of the genre and a campaign against "the destruction of its nature"; he points out that, still today, there is "talk of rescuing cordel literature, as though someone had kidnapped it."[39] The conservative, inflexible, top-down characterization of cordel that Haurélio describes is consistent with an approach to studying it that devalues it as an art form and that seeks to classify and generalize

[37] Curran, Mark J. *Retrato do Brasil em Cordel*. Cotia, SP: Ateliê Editorial, 2011, x.

[38] Haurélio, Marco. *Literatura de cordel: do sertão à sala de aula*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2013, 26.

[39] Haurélio, 26. This English translation is my own.

rather than to appreciate the qualities and nuances of each work. As Haurélio later explains, most scholars have engaged mainly in classification of cordel poems by theme – an approach that "confused cordel with oral literature" and that failed to appreciate its creative and intellectual value. He concludes, in reference to those studies, "A maioria, num esforço bem intencionado, mas mal dirigido, acabou ratificando o preconceito dos que sempre enxergaram no cordel uma expressão literária menor, à margem da literatura 'oficial'"[40] ("The majority, in a well-intentioned yet poorly-directed effect, ended up ratifying the prejudice of those who always saw in cordel a lesser literary expression, at the margins of 'official' literature"). His long list of such cordel scholars includes many literary scholars, and even cordel poets-turned-scholars, who focus on the taxonomy approach.

Later scholars, however, focused either on the structure of cordel poems, or on the light the poems shed on Brazilian history and culture, or on how certain themes appear within the genre. My dissertation follows the latter approach, but it focuses on a theme that has not yet been studied in this context. It also includes northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy – a body of work that has not been the object of systematic academic study at all. Through this study, I aim to present descriptions and an original analysis of each of the eight selected works through the lens of their treatment of marriage, and to use this analysis to discuss the two genres of northeast Brazilian cultural production.

Whereas, as Marcia Abreu has demonstrated, northeast Brazilian popular verse poetry is a Brazilian phenomenon without an authentic overseas origin – in spite of its belated baptism as "cordel" and the creation of a myth of its European origin – the genre of stand-up comedy in Brazil truly has overseas origins; it really is an imported genre. The genre's name, *stand-up*, is

[40] Haurélio, 57

used as is, in English, though it is pronounced in a Brazilian manner ("stand-up-ee"). Rafinha Bastos, one of the pioneers of Brazilian stand-up in the 1990s, has spoken extensively about the American comedians who inspired him, and his desire to popularize the genre in Brazil. Today, having decided to return to the source of his inspiration, Bastos, who is from southern Brazil, lives in the United States and performs stand-up comedy in English. Most of the relatively little existing academic writing and theory about stand-up comedy is by American scholars and researchers – including Ian Brodie and John Limon[41] – and it focuses on American comedians since the mid twentieth century (such as Lenny Bruce, Joan Rivers, etc.). Cordel poetry is a local Brazilian genre whose proponents have reframed it as a descendant of European literary traditions. Stand-up comedy, on the other hand, is a genre of North American origin, which has always been labeled in Brazil with the English-language name *stand-up*. It is an overtly foreign phenomenon, and one that only in recent decades has gained a foothold, and a widespread following, in Brazil.

Brodie, in *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-up Comedy*,[42] makes three points that are pertinent to my study of northeast Brazilian stand-up in relation to Brazilian cordel, and in relation to the theme of marriage. The first of these points is that although a stand-up performance is in some ways folkloric – considering that it consists of vernacular speech and is performed to a live audience, seemingly without the "fourth wall" that exists in theater – it is, notwithstanding its folkloric characteristics, a commodity and a form of art made by an individual with a distance from the audience. As Brodie explains, "Stand-up comedy is inherently folkloric, as it is performed in front of an immediate audience. The economics of

[41] Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.

[42] Brodie, Ian. *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-up Comedy*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014.

stand-up comedy, however, are directed toward turning live performances into an object – something that is not subject to further variation and can be sold as a commodity and broadly disseminated through distributive or redistributive networks."[43] In other words, although stand-up comedy is performed in front of a live audience, and although that audience's laughter and reactions are an essential part of that performance, the end product is not the live event itself or the audience's memory of it, but rather the recording of the performance – a video that is distributed, usually on the internet, either by the artist (self-published) or by a production company. The title of Brodie's book derives from a statement by the late American comedian George Carlin: "Stand-up comedy is a vulgar art. It can be vulgar in the usual way we use that word. But vulgar really means 'of the people.' It's the people's art."[44] However, although stand-up is "vulgar" both in the sense of being "of the people" and in the sense of containing risqué language and ideas, and although it might appear to consist of merely a person speaking to a group of people, it is nonetheless a work of art that is created by an individual, performed, transformed into a media product, and commercialized; its authorship is universally recognized, and the majority of its consumers are distanced both spatially and temporally from the artist. As Brodie goes on to explain,

> Intrinsic to the role of both 'storyteller' and stand-up is the notion of performance. Both are vernacular art forms, requiring fluency with locally situated knowledges that are particular to the culture in which they operate. However, the commodification and professionalization of stand-up comedy makes it different from traditional narrative performance: these differences include the breakdown of the intimacy of face-to-face communication that comes from larger venues and media dissemination and from the ownership of material and the emphasis on novelty that contrast against perceived notions of a shared or traditional repertoire.[45]

[43] Brodie, 37

[44] Brodie, 3

[45] Brodie, 8

These characteristics of stand-up comedy that Brodie describes – in particular, the creation and commodification of material – are equally present in the genre of Brazilian cordel poetry: although cordel poets sometimes recite their poetry aloud in public spaces (or used to do so, until the mid-twentieth century), the primary means of distribution of the poetry is the self-publishing and sale of chapbooks. The poets print and then sell their chapbooks, often via third parties such as bookstores and newsstands. In this way, a form that is generally considered to be popular (in the sense of being "arte do povo" – "art of the people"), which has an element or a history of live performance, and which contains vernacular wording and occasionally vulgar words and topics, nevertheless consists of a given author's commercial product being consumed by a viewer or reader in a different time and space.

Brodie's second point that is relevant to my study pertains to the artist's efforts to neutralize and overcome the commercialization and the distance generated by the aforementioned means of distribution. The cordel chapbook and the stand-up comedy video are commercialized and thus cause a distancing between the author and the consumer – the products are purchased by the consumer (or made available on commercial platforms such as Netflix and YouTube, in the case of stand-up), and there is no direct contact between the artist and the great majority of the artist's audience. To compensate for that distancing, and to regain a sense (or an illusion) of the face-to-face performance buried in the work, or in the genre's history, the artist – whether stand-up comedian or cordel poet – employs mechanisms to generate, or at least simulate, intimacy. Brodie frames the act of stand-up comedy as "working toward the successful reconciliation of intimacy and distance" and describes the genre as "turning that (public) forum into an intimate venue."[46] Stand-up comedians therefore aim to express thoughts and ideas that

[46] Brodie, 6

are not usually expressed in public or in social situations. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the inner workings of romantic relationships in general, and marriage in particular, constitute a salient – possibly the most salient – theme in stand-up comedy. By exposing and discussing an intimate relationship that is publicly recognized but whose inner workings and dynamics are ordinarily closed off from public view, the comedian reconciles the intimate and the distant. A crowded theater becomes a confessional of sorts; an audience of strangers is made to feel like a trusted friend. By speaking about marital relations – including squabbles between spouses, power dynamics, sexual frustrations, and the like – comedians imbue with intimacy a monologue that is performed before a large crowd in a theater, and subsequently to an exponentially larger crowd online that is removed not only spatially but also temporally from the original performance. Comedians also establish intimacy by engaging in conversations with members of the live audience – or, more often, comedians feign such intimacy by commenting on alleged reactions and facial expressions of audience members. By creating or claiming such interactions, comedians generate a sense of an intimate performance, complete with dialogue or a semblance of two-way communication. And just as comedians employ these techniques for generating or simulating intimacy, so, too, do Brazilian cordel poets. Many poems, including most of the ones that I analyze in this dissertation, include asides to the reader – usually near the beginning or the end of the poem. Such asides simulate face-to-face storytelling, allowing for multiple modes of communication simultaneously: sometimes the narrator is telling a story for general reception, but sometimes the author winks, comments, and advises in direct asides to the reader. My analysis of the poems included in this dissertation will consider a number of such "direct" poet-to-reader moments within cordel poems.

This concept of dialogue or simulated interaction between artists and audiences is the third of Brodie's points that pertains to my study of both stand-up and cordel poetry. Brodie asserts, "Stand-up comedy is a dialogic form," and he goes on to explain that the interaction between the performer and the audience – or at least the appearance of it – is an essential aspect of the genre: "No matter how one-sided the conversation between the performer and the audience might be, there is a required reciprocity between performer and audience."[47] Even more vividly, Brodie adds, "The stand-up comedian needs an audience, not like an author needs a reader or an artist needs a muse, but like a skier needs snow."[48] Both stand-up comedy and Brazilian cordel poetry are characterized by the commercialization of published products (videos and chapbooks), by the use of themes and techniques that generate or suggest intimacy, and, finally, by the inclusion or simulation of direct dialogue or interaction, however limited in scope, between the artist and the viewer or reader.

Although my focus in this dissertation is not on characteristics or characterizations of the Brazilian northeast, but rather on the genres of popular poetry and comedy within the region, it is nonetheless impossible to analyze the two genres without considering their relation to the concept of the Northeast, not just as a geographic region but rather as a cultural, political, and social construct. In his book *A invenção do nordeste e outras artes* (The Invention of the [Brazilian] Northeast and Other Arts), Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. discusses the ways in which the notion (and myth) of a unified and unique Northeast region was developed as a consequence of social and political factors, and the ways in which these characterizations have endured and been perpetuated by Brazilian intellectuals as well as by Brazilian literature and

[47] Brodie, 34

[48] Brodie, 34

popular culture.[49] Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. singles out cordel, in particular, as a form of cultural production that both constructs and diffuses imagery, themes, customs, and perspectives of a notional "Northeast" bonded by these supposed characteristics and commonalities. He writes:

> Cordel had been itself an important diffuser of images, texts, and themes about the Northeast, its production based on the repetition, variation, and reactualization of collective forms. It represents a sort of grassroots text in which popular narrative and enunciative models interweave and imbricate. . . . Of course, its traditionalist vision allowed it to dialogue with many other realms of cultural production about the region. The "primitive" character of its oral structure appeared to be the natural outgrowth of a region whose general content was taken as primitive (if not barbaric), the opposite of modern.[50]

Certain notions of proper structures and hierarchies in social relations constituted an important part of the value system perpetuated by the stories and imagery in cordel, according to Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. These concepts and attitudes include those pertaining to romantic and sexual relations, both within and outside of marriage. In this regard, Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. first explains that Brazilian novelists of the 1930s – including José Lins do Rego (1901-1957) – took inspiration as well as a sociocultural outlook from the storytelling of cordel and other popular poetry and song: "The fiction of José Lins do Rego clearly drew on the circular popular narrative

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[49] Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., Durval. *A invenção do nordeste e outras artes*. Recife: FJN, Ed. Massangana; São Paulo: Cortez, 1999. An English-language edition of this book has been published by Duke University Press. I will include quotations from the English-language version in the body of this dissertation, but I will also include the Portuguese-language "original" versions of the quoted excerpts in the footnotes. The English-language version is: Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., Durval, with a foreword by James N. Green, translated by Jerry D. Metz. *The Invention of the Brazilian Northeast*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

[50] Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., 79 (English edition). Original, Portuguese-language version: "Como a produção do cordel se exerce pela prática da variação e reatualização dos mesmos enunciados, imagens e temas, formas coletivas enraizadas numa prática produtiva e material coletiva, este se assemelha a um grande texto ou vasto intertexto, em que os modelos narrativos se reiteram e se imbricam e séries enunciativas remetem umas às outras. É, pois, este discurso do cordel um difusor e cristalizador de dadas imagens, enunciados e temas que compõem a idéia de Nordeste, residindo talvez nesta produção discursiva uma das causas da resistência e perenidade de dadas formulações acerca deste espaço. . . . O cordel fornece inclusive a visão tradicionalista que impregnará parte da produção sobre esta região. O "primitivismo" ou o "barbarismo" da fabulação oral parece, pois, ser a forma mais adequada para expressar uma região cujo conteúdo também se vê como "primitivo" ou "bárbaro", uma forma não moderna de expressão para mostrar uma região também não moderna." (Portuguese-language edition, 112)

processes of storytellers and story singers."[51] In particular – and in line with his insistent and persistent focus on the decline of an idealized past[52] – Lins do Rego identified and critiqued what he, and other traditionalists, considered to be abominations and deformities leading to the downfall of what had previously been a stable and honorable patriarchal society. Homosexuality was, in this traditionalist and conservative view, a chief culprit and manifestation of that so-called social deformity. This outlook, as Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. describes it, interpreted homosexuality as follows:

> Homosexual practice also symbolized the withering of a society founded on the patriarchal family. Relations that were "not productive" took away the essence of a world based on identity roles defined from the grandfather on down. Male homosexuality effaced the central figure of the virile man, indicating a society feminized, a society allowing itself to be violated by new bosses. The younger generations were degenerate, impotent, dominated.[53]

This view of modernity in general, and of homosexuality as a specific symptom and manifestation of that modernity, was pervasive in cordel poetry until recently. For example, Arievaldo Viana Lima's cordel poem *Casamento do morcego com a catita* (2007)[54] contains scenes of explicit exclusion, in which social undesirables – including poor people and

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[51] Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., 80 (English edition). Original, Portuguese-language version: "O romance de José Lins do Rego, por exemplo, apóia-se nos processos narrativos populares dos cantadores e contadores de histórias." (Portuguese-language edition, 114)

[52] Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. writes of José Lins do Rego, "His utopian project was to rebuild the social and cultural world of his grandfather's era, to escape the chaos of the present. . . . Because of this, his prose was judgmental of the forces of change and often dwelled on the dissolutions – pain, disease, melancholy, deformity, madness – that change had unleashed." (Muniz de Albuquerque Jr, English-language edition, 96) Original, Portuguese-language version: "Sua utopia é construir o mundo de seu avô outra vez, é fugir do desterro no presente. . . . Por isso, sua prosa é nitidamente judicativa. É uma forma de vingança contra aqueles que levaram a dissolução das relações sociais tradicionais, por isso espalha por seus livros dor, doença, melancolia, aleijões, tristezas, loucuras." (Portuguese-language edition, 131)

[53] Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., 101 (English-language edition). Original, Portuguese-language version: "As práticas homossexuais também simbolizam a decadência de uma sociedade cujo núcleo era a família e nela o patriarca, o homem viril. Numa relação não reprodutiva entra "personas femininas" desaparecia a própria essência deste mundo de homens, pais e avôs. O homosexualismo fala da própria perda de virilidade de uma classe social e de uma sociedade, fala da sua feminização. Sociedade que se deixou estuprar por novos donos. Uma classe que se desmoralizava, abandonava os antigos códigos de moralidade, para fazer parte de novas práticas vistas como degradantes." (Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., Portuguese-language edition, 136).

[54] Lima, Arievaldo Viana. *Casamento do morcego com a catita*. Fortaleza: Tupynanquim, 2007.

homosexuals, each of whom is represented in the poem by a different animal – are turned away violently from the gates of a wedding celebration. The gay character is represented by a deer – *veado*, in Portuguese, a term that resembles a homophobic slur – and it is no coincidence that the deer is sodomized by the guards who are protecting the sanctity of the wedding celebration. Perhaps even more reflective of the above-quoted assessment by Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. is the cordel poem *O casamento do boiola* by J. Borges, which is one of the five cordel poems that I analyze in my dissertation. In that poem, as I will discuss later in more detail, the condemnation is arguably not of homosexuality itself, nor of gay marriage, but rather of the decline of traditional social values, the diminishment of the patriarchy, the encroachment of "modernity" (as a catch-all term for the erosion of traditional society), and the rise of hypocrisy and of weakness among even heretofore respectable families and citizens, including political and religious leaders. These poems, though couched in humor and laden with hyperbole, convey the conservative and reactionary message that Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. outlines.

The genre and tradition of cordel poetry, however, allows for a fluidity and adaptability that can result, and has indeed resulted, in ideological evolution and transformation over time. Far from being a static genre ensconced in traditional religious or conservative values, cordel, in its perspectives and repertoire, has expanded and developed in tandem with changes in Brazilian society overall. This is not to say that cordel has lost its character and convictions; instead, new elements and social customs have been co-opted by cordel, in such a way as to avoid direct contradiction or conflict with the elements of modernity (such as homosexuality and gay marriage) that some cordel authors once lamented or mocked. Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. has noted this malleability of cordel in the face of new social norms and tendencies:

> As noted, however, cordel did not reject novel or surprising contemporary interjections. But they were reset and defused. Modernity's power to perturb a daily life immersed in regularity and tradition was subjected to an interpretive matrix giving the novelties a traditional cast, diluting their capacity for

> difference and knitting them into the absorbent substrate of similarity and continuity.[55]

Accordingly, young *cordelistas* (cordel authors) have written cordel poems that challenge homophobia. These authors – including Graciele Castro, whose autobiographical cordel poem *Romance de Amanda e Mara* (Romance of Amanda and Mara) is one of the five that I analyze in my dissertation – celebrate gay romantic relationships and gay marriage, while castigating anti-gay attitudes of the past and, in direct asides to the reader that are interspersed with the narrative, exhorting readers to recognize and reject the rampant homophobia that had traditionally characterized the universe of Brazilian cordel. In line with the above-quoted observation by Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., the insertion of new ideology within the cordel sphere, and the transformation of social and cultural attitudes with regard to previously chastised forms of sexuality and marriage, have occurred without overt conflict, division, or revolution in the community of cordel poets and readers. Instead, cordel, as a community and as a genre, absorbs and reframes "modern" and contemporary influences, such that there is acknowledgement of a new set of present values without rejection of cordel's traditional past. In this regard, it is notable that Castro does not directly criticize specific cordel poets for their past homophobia, and that J. Borges now reframes his own poem as a comedic take on social realities with no anti-gay sentiment intended. The authors' statements in my interviews with them reflect the cohesion and camaraderie that exist within the cordel community, and the malleability of the cordel tradition with regard to the content and messages that are conveyed in the poetry. What remains rigid is the adherence to cordel's characteristic rhyme and meter, and not to any particular thematic or

[55] Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., English-language edition, 80. Original, Portuguese-language version: "A estrutura narrativa do cordel permite também que o fato novo, o extraordinário, as descontinuidades históricas que vêm perturbar o cotidiano e a regularidade da vida sejam submetidos a imagens e enunciados que lhes dá um lugar tradicional, que retiram a sua novidade, que domam a sua diferença e que os submetam ao reino da semelhança. Uma maquinaria discursiva que, assim como o Nordeste, procurará instaurar sempre a continuidade." (Portuguese-language edition, 113)

ideological bent. The "ética do bom cordel" ("ethos of good cordel") – to quote a phrase from a J. Borges poem about cordel[56] – pertains to respecting the rhyme and meter of cordel poetry,[57] not to perpetuating any prescribed customs or social norms.

Attitudes toward gay relationships and gay marriage in Brazilian cordel evolved in parallel with changes in Brazilian society, politics, and law. As historian Sueann Caulfield explains in her article "A dignidade humana, o direito de família e o casamento homoafetivo no Brasil, 1988-2016" ("Human dignity, family law, and gay marriage in Brazil, 1988-2016"), pro-LGBT activism and celebration of sexual diversity since the 1970s in Brazil – and particularly the government-supported "Brasil sem Homofobia" ("Brazil without Homophobia") awareness campaign that took place in 2003-2004 – led to a cultural shift, which eventually persuaded federal judges that same-sex unions were part of the Brazilian social fabric and should be recognized by law. Having been framed as a matter of human rights and of equality – and building on the precedent set by the 2011 legal recognition of gay unions in Brazil – gay marriage was legalized soon after, in 2013.[58] The changes in attitudes since 2000 regarding gay rights and gay marriage, which were encouraged and accelerated by the political leadership of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ("Lula"), were mirrored in cordel. This occurred not only because cordel, as Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. has explained, is generally influenced by surrounding social and political transformations, but also because of the particularly direct influence and importance that Lula has had in the cordel universe: unlike previous presidents,

[56] Borges, José Francisco. *Como se faz uma xilogravura e como se escreve um cordel*. Bezerros, Pernambuco: J. Borges, 1980, 15.

[57] Borges, José Francisco. *Como se faz uma xilogravura e como se escreve um cordel*, 14.

[58] Caulfield, Sueann. "A dignidade humana, o direito de família e o casamento homoafetivo no Brasil, 1988-2016" in Acervo, Rio de Janeiro, v. 30, n. 1, 179-194, Jan./Jun. 2017.

Lula, a northeasterner himself, and of humble origins to boot, captured the hearts and the imagination of cordel poets and audiences, as Crispiniano Neto explains in his book *Lula na literatura de cordel* (Lula in Cordel Literature).[59] Lula's political views thereby influenced the worldview and perspectives of cordel poets, both young and old.

The Brazilian sociologist Luiz Mello, in his 2005 book on gay couples and gay marriage in contemporary Brazil, discusses the ways in which views on marriage in general – heterosexual marriage as well as homosexual marriage – have evolved in Brazilian society and culture since the 1990s, as well as why and how this social transformation has influenced customs and laws pertaining to gay marriage in particular. Mello writes:

> Minha expectativa pessoal é que aqui esteja explicitada a relevância de pensar as relações amorosas estáveis entre homossexuais como uma das modalidades de família que passam a ganhar visibilidade social a partir de meados da década de 1990, quando o casal conjugal é considerado menos como grupo organizado e hierarquizado, destinado à reprodução biológica, e mais como espaço de exercício de amor e de cooperação mútua, consagrado à reprodução social. . . . O casamento, quem diria, é o grande tesouro embaixo do arco-íris?[60]
>
> My personal expectation is that the present work will make clear the relevance of considering stable loving relationships between homosexuals as one of the modalities of family that began to gain social visibility starting in the mid 1990s, when the conjugal couple is considered less as an organized and hierarchical group, destined for biological reproduction, and more as a space for the exercise of love and of mutual cooperation, devoted to social reproduction. . . . Marriage – who would have guessed it – is the great treasure under the rainbow?").[61]

In this framing, the legalization and social acceptance of gay marriage in Brazil was an outgrowth not only of pro-LGBT activism, but also of a shift in how marriage itself was perceived. According to Mello, marriage increasingly came to be viewed in Brazilian society as an expression of love and partnership – as opposed to a fulfillment of a social obligation with the

[59] Neto, Crispiniano. *Lula na literatura de cordel*. Mossoró: Queima-Bucha, 2008.

[60] Mello, Luiz. *Novas famílias: conjugalidade homosexual no Brasil contemporâneo*. Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2005, 22.

[61] This English translation is my own.

objective of perpetuating a traditional institution and structuring procreation in a codified submission to patriarchy and societal expectations.

But even if the institution of marriage in Brazil (to the extent that it is possible to generalize) ostensibly has evolved in the direction of a love-based union, it nevertheless continues to entail, particularly in northeast Brazil, a daunting set of social and economic responsibilities and obligations, according to social anthropologist Maya Mayblin, who conducted an in-depth study based on extensive fieldwork on heterosexual courtship and marriage customs in Santa Lucia, Pernambuco. In her ethnographic study of marriage in a small town in the interior of Pernambuco, Mayblin uncovers the challenging, even dispiriting aspects of contemporary conjugal life as experienced by ordinary people in northeast Brazil. Mayblin writes:

> Marriage tends to be experienced by persons as an overwhelming transition to a state of increased social responsibility, bringing hardship and a sense of radical rupture from the life that went before. The Janus-faced nature of the power, prestige, and fulfillment that conjugal life promises is made evident at various turns. Marriage requires couples to make morally difficult decisions, to carry out spiritually polluting activities and to negotiate multiple new temptations toward envy, greed, selfishness, and pride.[62]

Contemporary northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy has seized on this phenomenon, exploring its implications and describing its quotidian manifestations, identifying conflict and tension that can be expressed and addressed through, and for, humor. The most popular and successful northeast Brazilian comedians (in terms of their viewership) who discuss marriage – Whindersson Nunes, Paulo Araújo, and Kedny Silva, all of whose performances I analyze in detail in this dissertation – have constructed their material on marriage based on the alleged ruptures and disappointments that the transition to married life entails. They do so in accordance with Mayblin's assessment, and in a hyperbolic magnification and dramatization of them.

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[62] Mayblin, Maya. *Gender, Catholicism, and morality in Brazil: virtuous husbands, powerful wives*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, 64.

Northeast Brazilian cordel poetry has presented diverse aspects of marriage: its role as a reward for proper behavior, particularly for the prized quality of humility; its function as a fulfillment of interpersonal obligation as well as of social norms; its relation, in its homosexual form, to the ostensibly negative effects of modernity and the downfall of traditional patriarchy; its existence as an expression of love, whether gay or straight, to be celebrated free of negative judgment; and its promise of happiness, provided it is pursued with sincerity and monogamy. Those are the respective angles pursued in the five cordel poems that I analyze in this dissertation: *O romance de João Besta e a Jia da lagoa* (circa 1950) by Francisco Sales Arêda; *O sacrifício do amor ou o noivo ressussitado* (1977) by Manoel de Almeida Filho; *O casamento do boiola* (1985) by J. Borges; *Romance de Amanda e Mara* (2020) by Graciele Castro; and *As ninfas da cachoeira ou o castigo da ambição* (2001) by José Mapurunga. On the other hand, the three stand-up comedy performances by northeast Brazilians that I analyze in this dissertation – Paulo Araújo's "Um show de comédia standup" (2018), Whindersson Nunes' comedy special "Adulto" (2019), and Kedny Silva's "Comédia da vida casado" (2022)[63] – all explore the angst-filled experience of marriage (only heterosexual marriage), as summarized by Mayblin, and leverage the pessimistic side of it, so as to generate tension and humor to which the majority of viewers can relate. Whether and how northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy stands to diversify and evolve remains to be seen.

[63] Each of the eight works is cited in full in the section in which it is analyzed. English translations of each title are also provided.

PART I:

Marriage in Northeast Brazilian Popular Poetry

CHAPTER 1

O romance de João Besta e a Jia da lagoa (c. 1950) by Francisco Sales Arêda

Francisco Sales Arêda was one of the most famous Brazilian cordel poets. He was born in Paraíba in 1916 and then at a young age (in 1927) moved to Pernambuco, where he lived the rest of his life. According to biographies, Arêda had only three months of formal schooling, yet he was an avid reader and became one of the most celebrated poets of the cordel genre.[1] Circa 1950, Arêda wrote the cordel poem *O romance de João Besta e a Jia da lagoa* ("The story of Dumb João and the Frog of the pond"), which tells a tale about three brothers who set out into the world on three separate journeys.[2] Each of the three journeys culminates in a wedding. Indeed, in this story, the fortunes of each of the three brothers are framed entirely in terms of the marital outcomes.

The poem conveys three concepts pertaining to marriage. The primary one is the inevitability of a man's interest in wealth, status, and beauty in his search for a spouse. A corollary of this is the inevitability of aspiration and greed being the motivating factors in the selection of a spouse. Whether explicitly or not, each brother's marital conquest is ultimately valued by the measure of the wife's riches, social status, and physical appearance – and in that order of priority. Another message, though a less salient one, is the importance of proper, official marriage: it is to be sought out as an end, its traditions must be followed, and its ceremonies – civil as well as religious – must be conducted. Yet another is the subtle yet crucial power and omniscience of a woman (and the necessity of obeying her wishes and orders). I will

[1] https://memoriasdapoesiapopular.com.br/2014/11/25/poeta-francisco-sales-areda-sintese-biografica

[2] Arêda, Francisco Sales. *O romance de João Besta e a Jia da lagoa*. Written and self-published circa 1950; the edition that I cite here was published (and illustrated) by J. Borges in Bezerros, Pernambuco, in 2005. (It is customary to italicize cordel poem titles, instead of putting them in quotation marks.)

first briefly discuss the significance of the poem's introduction, setting, and plot, after which I will discuss the poem's messages about marriage and how those are conveyed.

As is customary in cordel, the opening of the poem – consisting, in this case, of the first two stanzas – is a first-person pronouncement by the poet, whereby he presents his role as a faithful storyteller and conveys the importance of the story that he will go on to tell. This introduction reminds the reader that the poem, though written and published and read, is rooted in the tradition of oral poetry. The introduction functions as a convocation, compelling the reader to imagine the poet beckoning people to gather round and to listen to him declaim the story for them. The poet writes, "O poeta é um repórter / Das ocultas tradições . . . Por isso, chamo a atenção / A toda e qualquer pessoa, / Para assistir a este drama, / De uma história rica e boa"[3] ("The poet is a reporter / Of the mysterious traditions . . . Therefore, I ask for the attention / Of any and every person, / To watch this drama, / Of a rich and good story"). The drama is to be "watched" (the verb *assistir*) rather than read. This introduction lends the poem gravity and compels the reader to pay attention to its story and moral. Meanwhile, the phrase "rica e boa" ("rich and good") foreshadows two of the key themes of the story: wealth and goodness.

The poem is set not in Brazil but rather in ancient Greece: "Lá num subúrbio da Grécia, / Em tempos que longe vão"[4] ("There in a suburb in Greece, / In times far in the past"). However, the names of the characters, as well as the cultural references within the story, are evidently Brazilian. The use of ancient Greece as the setting serves to reinforce the gravity of the poem and to give the story an air of timeless relevance. The reader can nevertheless infer the implicit Brazilian setting: the three brothers are named José, Manuel, and João, and the story includes

[3] Arêda, 1

[4] Arêda, 1

references to unmistakably Brazilian styles[5] of music and dance, including *frevo*[6] and *pagode*.[7]

The plot is simple enough, and it is necessary to summarize it prior to discussing the ideas and attitudes that the poem reveals with regard to marriage and its characteristics. Three brothers agree to set off and see the world, each one taking his own path. Prior to their departure, their father, who is wealthy, offers each of them a choice between his blessing or a pile of cash. The first two brothers, who are greedy and self-interested, scoff at the offered blessing and take the father's money. But the third brother, João, leaves the money on the table and accepts his father's blessing instead. The three brothers agree to meet back at the family home one year later.

The two greedy brothers go off to different faraway lands, make fortunes, marry women who are fabulously wealthy and beautiful, and enter high society. Meanwhile, João walks down the road, sits by a pond, and enjoys delicious meals that an eager-to-please female frog magically prepares for him. Comfortable and satisfied with this simple life, João decides to spend his life there and marry the frog – despite her ugliness and her seeming lack of illustrious status.

After a year has passed, when the brothers reunite at the family home to share their adventures, the father commends the two greedy brothers while ridiculing João for his choice of wife. The three brothers then agree to return to the family home a couple of weeks later, together with their respective wives, to celebrate their respective unions. João returns to the pond to marry his frog-bride, and then they set off, by frog-drawn carriage, toward João's family home,

[5] A similar technique occurs in José Mapurunga's cordel poem *As ninfas da cachoeira ou o castigo da ambição* (Fortaleza: Editora Tupynanquim, 2001), which is nominally set in China but whose cultural and geographic references actually signal a Brazilian context; that poem will be discussed in detail later in this dissertation.

[6] Arêda, 15

[7] Arêda, 13

with a delegation of thousands of frogs behind them. Shortly before they arrive to the house, however, the frog-bride turns into a human princess, and all of the frogs in the delegation turn into human kings and queens and noblemen. The two "greedy" brothers go from being celebrated to being ignored, as all the wedding guests are instead enthralled by João's success. The fate of João and that of his two brothers are opposites: the brothers, dejected and ashamed, promptly commit suicide. João, on the other hand, receives a crown and a throne as the new king of his wife's land – where there are now only nobles, with no more frogs to be seen.

Notably, the narrator mentions only wealth, status, and beauty in his brief description of João's two brothers and their wives – as those are the only qualities that seem to matter to the two men. Regarding José and his bride, we are told only that he has opened a jewelry store and become a beloved member of high society – "Sendo querido por todos / Da rica sociedade" ("Being loved by all / Of the wealthy society") – and that his bride is the daughter of a baron: "A filha de um barão / Foi a noiva de José"[8] ("The daughter of a baron / Was José's bride"). Regarding the wife of Manuel, the reader is told only that she is the daughter of a banker – Manuel is embraced by the society for his status and riches, and therefore succeeds in obtaining a well-off bride: "Todo o mundo lhe abraçou, / Por ser lorde e ter dinheiro – / Até que findou noivando / Com a filha de um banqueiro"[9] ("Everyone embraced him, / For being a lord and having money – / And he ended up getting engaged / To the daughter of a banker"). Nothing is said about her appearance or personality – evidently, those qualities are far less significant. Thus the wives are initially described only by the professions and social status of their respective fathers. This focus is reiterated later in the poem, in the words of the brothers themselves, when

[8] Arêda, 5

[9] Arêda, 5

they proudly recount their respective outcomes to their waiting father. What began as a narrator's depiction becomes a confirmation from the horse's mouth – from each brother. José boasts, "E sou noivo com a moça / Mais rica do mundo inteiro"[10] ("And I'm engaged to the wealthiest young woman / in the entire world").[11] His similarly avaricious brother Manuel crows, "Fiz muitos negócios bons / e tive a felicidade / de arranjar uma noiva / rica e linda de verdade"[12] ("I did lots of good business / and I had the pleasure / of obtaining a bride / who is truly rich and beautiful"). Here, Manuel introduces the element of physical beauty as a characteristic that, though secondary to wealth, is worthy of mention and appreciation. There is still no mention whatsoever of love or kindness; only the material and physical attributes are recognized as relevant.

On the other hand, the narrator describes João's thought process as follows: "Porém João ficou pensando / Como era que casava / Com aquela Jia feia, / Mas que tanto lhe agradava / Assim, o tempo corria / E o amor multiplicava"[13] ("However, João wondered / How he could marry / That Frog who was ugly, / Yet who pleased him so much / Thus time went on / And the love multiplied"). What is notable here is the narrator's (and poet's) use of the words *agradava* ("pleased") and *amor* ("love") – two words that denote feelings. Unlike the other brothers, João allows his choice of wife to be influenced by emotions. Not only that, but those feelings are the primary forces that spur his decision: the two verses immediately following that stanza read, "Afinal, chegou o dia / Que [João] fez o contrato" ("Finally, the day arrived / On which [João]

[10] Arêda, 11

[11] In the translation I moved the word "wealthiest" to a different line, due to English sentence structure.

[12] Arêda, 11

[13] Arêda, 10

made the contract").[14] Being with his wife pleases João, and he loves her, which leads to the official union. Proof of those two words' weight is in their repetition. On the previous page – leading up to João's decision to marry the frog – the narrator recounts, "Quanto mais dias passavam / mais a Jia lhe **agradava** / e João tomou tanto **amor**"[15] ("The more days passed / the more he was **pleased** with the Frog / and João developed so much **love**"). Accordingly, the moral of the story might initially seem to be that modesty beats greed, and that marriage for love beats marriage for money and beauty. But Arêda ensures that this is not so.

To be sure, the greedy brothers are thoroughly caricatured as such, starting at the moment of their introduction on the poem's first page – "Manuel era um tacanho, / José, muito interesseiro"[16] ("Manuel was a miser, / José, very selfish"). This characterization continues in the description of their choice of their father's money over blessings – "José disse: – Eu quero é ouro, / Que encha saco e surrão"[17] ("José said: – What I want is gold, / That fills bag and sack") – as well as their goal of finding riches – "Então, atrás da riqueza / Caminharam logo os dois"[18] ("So, in search of wealth / The two promptly set off") – and their desire and quest for wealthy brides: "Que ganhei muito dinheiro / E sou noivo com a moça / Mais rica do mundo inteiro"[19] ("That I made lots of money / And I'm engaged to the wealthiest young woman / in the entire world").[20] But Arêda finds ways to show that even "modest" João, despite having been

[14] This edition of the chapbook has "José" instead of "João" in this line, but that is a typographical error. Arêda, 10

[15] Arêda, 9

[16] Arêda, 1

[17] Arêda, 3

[18] Arêda, 12

[19] Arêda, 11

[20] In the translation I moved the word "wealthiest" to a different line, due to English sentence structure.

introduced as humble and entirely devoid of greed – "Muito humilde, hospitaleiro, / Que não conhecia ganância, / Nem gostava de dinheiro"[21] ("Very humble, hospitable, / Who knew no greed, / Nor liked money") – nevertheless becomes seduced by the wealth and status that marriage can bring him.

Arêda uses not only the plot but also rhyme and juxtaposition to reveal that the institution of marriage encourages and promotes greed and self-interest. He does this on two levels. The "greedy" characters are, unsurprisingly, caricatures of greed, as is to be expected from a plot based on ancient folk tales. But if they were the only greedy ones, then the story could be understood simply as a fable condemning greed. Far more notable is that the "humble" character is shown – through more subtle elements of language and form – to be self-interested and greedy, too. He is corrupted by the opportunity that marriage offers.

When João arrives to the pond, the dinner table that captivates him – which was magically set by his frog-bride-to-be – is mesmerizing in the opulence of its tablecloth and its china: "A louça, de pérola e ouro, / Era um tesouro importante"[22] ("The dishes, made of pearls and gold, / Were an important treasure"). Shortly thereafter, when he decides to marry the frog, his admiration of her kindness becomes inextricably linked to – and perhaps even superseded by – a newfound opportunity for property and status: "Porém me acho feliz / com esta Jia tão boa / vou falar-lhe em casamento / pra ser dono da lagoa"[23] ("Yet I find myself happy / with this Frog who is so kind / I'll speak to her about marriage / to become the owner of the pond"). Here, "Jia tão boa" ("Frog who is so kind") is made to rhyme with "dono da lagoa" ("owner, or boss, of the

[21] Arêda, 1

[22] Arêda, 8

[23] Arêda, 9

pond"), and the marriage, occurring in between, constitutes the key turning point in João's focus. Later, when the frog-bride turns into a princess, João's first words are, "Mas que **beleza** / Agora, sim, vou fazer / A meu povo uma **surpresa**"[24] ("Oh, beautiful! / Now, yes, I will give / a surprise to my people"). The rhyme scheme ties *beleza* ("beauty") to *surpresa* ("surprise"), suggesting that João's immediate interest is not the beauty of his wife, but rather the beauty of the situation – and of the impression that he will make on his father and society. Ultimately, the allure of the benefits and riches of marriage cause João to become every bit as greedy as his brothers, and he is duly rewarded for this transformation in attitude. Accordingly, the pointed rhyme scheme strikes again in the penultimate stanza, when the *lagoa* ("pond") disappears and, instead, a *coroa* ("crown") appears on João's head,[25] thus handsomely rewarding him – not for being modest, but rather for eschewing simple modesty in favor of a newfound interest in the shiny china and local status that marriage guarantees.

Two more elements serve to confirm that João is negatively judged for his initial lack of social and financial ambition: the poet's (narrator's) word choices in describing João, and the father's reaction to João's decisions. The title itself contains a pejorative nickname, "João Besta," that is also used throughout the poem, thus signaling disdain or disapproval for João's initial outlook, as *besta* is a slang term that means moronic, obtuse, or idiotic. Moreover, in the introduction of the three brothers in the fourth stanza of the poem, João is presented as a "tolo pateta" – a redundant phrase that characterizes João as "clueless" and "dumb." His humility is celebrated when it comes to choosing his father's blessing over his father's money; however, in every other moment of the story, João's nature and preferences are ridiculed by the narrator, as

[24] Arêda, 15

[25] Arêda, 16

well as by the father. When João returns from the year away and declares that he will marry a frog from a nearby pond, the father retorts, "Mas você, com sua Jia, / Em minha casa não vem – / Que aqui não é lagoa / Para sapos de ninguém!"[26] ("But you, with your Frog, / Won't come to my house – / Here is not a pond / For anyone's frogs!"). Rather than celebrating João's humility and joy, the father literally and figuratively excludes him and his bride-to-be from the household.[27] It is only at the end, when the frog-bride turns into a beautiful human princess, that the father accepts and celebrates his "dumb" son's choice of spouse. At that moment, the father exclaims, "Lá vem João Besta / Com um cortejo imponente – / E vem trazendo a princesa / Mais linda do Oriente!"[28] ("There's Dumb João arriving / With an imposing procession – / And he's bringing the most beautiful princess / of the Orient!").[29] The father is impressed only by the royal delegation and the bride's beauty.

The concern for beauty is a recurring, persistent concern of the father throughout the poem. As presented in the poem, physical beauty is intertwined with and inseparable from money and status. For example, when João describes his frog bride, the father responds, "Como se[30] é besta assim? / Casar com uma Jia – / Bonita nora para mim!"[31] (How can you be so dumb?

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[26] Arêda, 12

[27] Moreover, the family's negativity appears to influence João self-concept: although he was happy to marry his frog-bride, and although he greatly enjoyed the informal wedding party held at the pond, he dreads traveling home to face his family and to complete the official ceremony, due to his embarrassment and his fear of further disparagement and rejection by his family. He makes the trip out of obligation to his family and the rituals of marriage, and in deference to his bride's wishes. (This supports my next two points about the poem's messages about marriage.) The evidence for this is João's disposition on the wagon heading toward home: "João sentou-se com a Jia / muito triste e pesaroso" ("João sat with the frog / very sad and sorrowful") – either he regrets his decision to marry a simple frog, or he fears his family's reaction to that decision (Arêda, 14).

[28] Arêda, 15

[29] In the translation, I have moved "most beautiful" to a different line, due to English sentence structure.

[30] The word *se* here is likely a typographical error in this edition of the poem. It should be *cê*, short for *você* ("you")

[31] Arêda, 11

/ Marrying a Frog – / What a lovely daughter-in-law for me!"). Here, with his ironic usage of the word *bonita* (best translated here as "lovely"), the father is simultaneously criticizing the bride's physical ugliness and her overall unsuitability. Whereas Manuel had boasted about his own wife's riches and beauty, João's wife is deemed lacking on those fronts.

The importance of respecting and following the traditions and rituals of marriage – civil as well as religious – is another message that the poem repeatedly conveys. When João proposes to his frog-fiancée, she gleefully accepts. Notably, what especially pleases her is the "official" status that she will soon hold as a wife: "Lhe respondeu que queria / Como noiva **oficial** / Cresceu mais a alegria"[32] ("She responded to him that she wanted to / As an **official** bride / The joy grew more"). The primacy of the "official" – in the sense of formal and legal – aspect of the union is emphasized throughout the poem. Marriage is principally presented not as a loving partnership, but rather as a contract that both fulfills social expectations and secures material gain. The previously mentioned verses "Afinal, chegou o dia / Que [João] fez o **contrato**"[33] ("Finally, the day arrived / On which [João] made the **contract**") – in which João drafts the document that will make the union official – are significant in that they suggest that the "contract" of marriage is what matters. The consummation is not the sexual or the emotional; rather, it is the ritualistic and the bureaucratic, in the form of the ceremony and the document. The narrator later describes, "Até que chegou o dia / Do casamento do João. / Juntaram-se todos os sapos / E o Cururu capelão / Veio, com as testemunhas / Cumprir a lei da nação"[34] ("Until the day arrived / Of João's wedding. / All of the frogs got together / And the cururu toad chaplain /

[32] Arêda, 10

[33] Arêda, 10

[34] Arêda, 13

Arrived, with the witnesses / To fulfill the law of the nation"). In this stanza, religious as well as civil authority is recognized and underscored. There is the religious element: a toad-chaplain ("Cururu capelão") performing rites before a congregation ("Juntaram-se todos" – "They all got together"). Crucially, there is also the element of the civil, national authority, which acts legally, and in the presence of witnesses, as prescribed: "Cumprir a lei da nação" ("To fulfill the law of the nation") – and "com as testemunhas" ("with the witnesses"). Carrying out the law of the nation, in the presence of the required witnesses, is a key element, and objective, of the event.

The reason these verses are crucial is that they recognize and affirm that the institution of marriage is controlled by the federal authority – in other words, the Brazilian national government – whose dominance had been resisted by monarchists and religious movements half a century earlier. Most famously, in the War of Canudos, which took place in the Brazilian northeast at the end of the nineteenth century, the messianic figure Antônio Conselheiro and his followers resisted the control of the recently installed federal government.

Conselheiro and his followers believed that the federal republic was the anti-Christ, and they decried civil marriage with particular zeal, considering it one of the primary abominations against God and the Church. Alongside taxation and the separation of Church and State, civil marriage was viewed by the group as evidence for the impending end of the world. Accordingly, in the poems and documents that are quoted in the classic text *Os sertões* (1902)[35] – in which Euclides da Cunha recounts the Republic's suppression of the Canudos community in the backlands of Bahia from 1893 to 1897 – civil marriage features repeatedly as a hated sacrilegious aspect of the heathen, diabolical federal republic. The narrative of *Os sertões* has a

[35] Euclides da Cunha. *Os sertões*. Originally published by the São Paulo branch of the Rio de Janeiro publisher Editores Laemmert & C., 1902. I cite page numbers from a more recent edition: São Paulo, Três / Biblioteca do Estudante, 1984.

curious break in the middle, consisting of a poem written by defiant Canudos residents. The poem focuses precisely on civil marriage, denouncing it as a tyrannical institution that epitomizes the tyranny of the Republic. That poem also expresses defiance, both of civil marriage specifically and of the Republic more generally:

> Casamento vão fazendo
> Só para o povo iludir
> Vão casar o povo todo
> No casamento civil!
> D. Sebastião já chegou
> E traz muito regimento
> Acabando com o civil
> E fazendo o casamento!
> O Anti-Cristo nasceu
> Para o Brasil governar
> Mas ahi está o Conselheiro
> Para delle nos livrar![36]
>
> They are doing marriages
> Only to deceive the people
> They will marry off everyone
> In civil marriage!
> King Sebastian has already arrived[37]
> And brings many regiments
> Getting rid of the civil
> And doing marriage!
> The Anti-Christ was born
> To govern Brazil
> But there is Conselheiro
> To liberate us from it![38]

In that poem the denouncement is not of marriage per se, but rather of the imposition of civil marriage over religious marriage. Still, it constitutes a rebellion against the prevailing marriage norms imposed by the Republic. Of course, D. Sebastião and Conselheiro did not "free" the people of Canudos from the tyranny of civil marriage; instead, all of the residents

[36] da Cunha, 92

[37] The poem references King Sebastian ("D. Sebastião") of Portugal, imagining him as a savior who would restore the power of the monarchy and the church in Brazil while eliminating the power of the hated federal government.

[38] This translation is my own.

would eventually be killed during the siege and the brutal armed suppression. Neither an individual nor a community would be able to survive either a resistance against the institution of marriage or a failure to partake in it. Francisco Sales Arêda's cordel poem *O romance de João Besta e a Jia da Lagoa* leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that the "lei da nação" ("law of the nation") will be obeyed, and that weddings are characterized by adherence to religious, civil, and traditional practices.

Within the framework of religious and civil weddings, traditional and symbolic practices are emphasized in several moments of Arêda's cordel poem by way of word choice and rhyme. For instance, in describing the frog-bride's entrance to the ceremony, the narrator recounts, "Na hora, chegou a Jia, / Todo trajada de **branco**, / De palma, véu e capela,[39] / Pisando com **passo franco**"[40] ("On time, the Frog arrived / All dressed in **white**, / With bouquet, veil, and chaplet, / Stepping with **loyal and sincere** gait"). The frog-bride's "passo **franco**" ("**loyal and sincere** gait") rhymes with – and corresponds with – her all-white dress, which she wears along with her chaplet and veil. These complementary (and complimentary) attributes of stride and garb signal the bride's suitability for the ceremony, the ceremony's validity in constituting a proper wedding, and the couple's obeyance of established customs. The frog-chaplain's manner of officiating the ceremony, as subsequently recounted by the narrator, serves to confirm and reiterate the universal reverence for ritual and convention as it pertains to marriage: "chegou o Cururu velho / juntou a Jia com João / celebrou o casamento / com toda a veneração"[41] ("The old cururu toad arrived / joined the Frog with João / celebrated the wedding / with full veneration").

[39] The expression "de palma, véu e capela" is used to describe a bride dressed in complete, traditional wedding garb.

[40] Arêda, 13

[41] Arêda, 14

The poet's placement of *veneração* ("veneration") at the very end of the stanza stresses the chaplain's respect for the wedding ritual as well as his understanding of its significance and magnitude. Moreover, the phrase "a Jia com João" ("the Frog with João") is paired, via the rhyme structure, with the word *veneração*, which further suggests the notion that João and his bride share the same extent of reverence for marriage that the chaplain exhibits.

In Arêda's poem, the female character is all-knowing, and the male protagonist must obey her commands in order to achieve success.[42] It is ultimately the woman's power and omniscience that guides the man through the essential choices that culminate in their union (which, in turn, leads to his prosperity). The morning after João proposes to his frog-bride and drafts the marriage contract, she admonishes him, "Meu João, não sejas ingrato: / Vai atrás dos teus irmãos, / Para cumprir com o trato"[43] ("My João, don't be ungrateful: / Go in search of your brothers, / To fulfill the agreement"). Her command particularly surprises and impresses João because he had not mentioned anything to her about his agreement with his brothers. How did his fiancée know the backstory without having been told? This detail is a magical element of the story, and it serves to position the woman (the frog-bride) in a dominant role – given that, as it turns out, she holds the knowledge and control – while positioning the man (João) as submissive to her. In this framework, João's success – his social status, wealth, and happiness at the end of the story – is predicated on his willingness and ability to follow her command. And he obeys her and passes the test: as the narrator goes on to describe, in the next stanza, "João ficou admirado / Com essa frase da Jia / Sem ele ter dito nada / Ela de tudo sabia! / Seguiu logo e encontrou / Os

[42] In this regard, the story resembles the classic Leandro Gomes de Barros cordel poem *A história da princesa da pedra fina* (self-published, circa 1906) – which also tells a fantastical tale that features a quest ending in marriage.

[43] Arêda, 10

irmãos no mesmo dia"[44] ("João was impressed / By this sentence spoken by the Frog / Without his having said anything / She knew of everything! / He went out and found / His brothers the same day"). This stanza clearly affirms what the previous one had implied: João is amazed by his bride's knowledge, her knowledge is of a fantastical nature, and he is compelled to promptly follow her orders.

Lest there be any doubt about the importance of female power in this story, it is the bride who possesses the magical object that causes the crucial transformation – that from frog kingdom into human royalty. As João, his frog-bride, and the delegation approach João's family's house, the bride gives João a magical box that, when opened, turns an unimpressive group of amphibians into the pinnacle of prestige and beauty. The narrator recounts, "A Jia entregou a João / uma caixinha fechada / e disse a ele faltando / meia légua pra chegada / tu abres esta caixinha / que para ti foi guardada"[45] ("The Frog gave to João / a closed box / and said to him, when there remains / half a league before our arrival / you shall open this box / which was saved for you"). Sure enough, João does not fail to heed his bride's directive: "E então, com meia légua, / Como a Jia tinha dito, / João foi abrindo a caixinha"[46] ("And so, with half a league, / As the Frog had said, / João opened the box"). The phrasing of these verses emphasizes the element of obedience, as the instruction is followed at the exact distance of a half league, and João is said to carry out the order precisely "as the frog had said" ("como a Jia tinha dito"). Immediately thereafter, the frog turns into a princess, and João turns into a king and the envy of his family and village – which is the reward for João's acquiescence to his bride's wishes. Had João

[44] Arêda, 10

[45] Arêda, 14

[46] Arêda, 15

disregarded her authority, none of these prizes would have come to be. By opting for his father's blessing, obeying female authority, and observing the proper rites of the institution of marriage, João obtains that which everyone is presumed to desire: the joy and respect that can come only from limitless wealth, status, and power.

CHAPTER 2

O sacrifício do amor ou o noivo ressussitado (1977) by Manoel d'Almeida Filho

In Manoel d'Almeida Filho's cordel poem *O sacrifício do amor ou o noivo ressussitado* ("The sacrifice of love, or the resuscitated groom") – which was written in the 1970s and published[1] in 1977 – marriage is characterized as a product of obligation and love, which are presented as inseparable imperatives. Marriage functions as the rare bridge across a chasm between social classes. The wife's idealized role is that of an eternally devoted, patient, accepting, and understanding woman: she cultivates the man's moral debt by selflessly supporting and protecting him, and he then repays that debt by dutifully proposing marriage, which the woman then cherishes unconditionally. In this story, the drama revolves around a central dilemma: what is a man to do when he owes marriage to two different women, each of whom has "earned" him as her husband? The resolution of this question, and the story that results from this drama, reveals the poem's message with regard to marriage and gender roles – a message that is introduced by the poem's preamble-like first page, and made explicit in the poem's final stanzas. First I will describe the plot of the story; then I will analyze the poem's messages and the ways in which its specific wording shapes and reinforces those messages.

Poems are often used as epigraphs in a story or novel. In this case, however, there is a short note in prose between the title and the start of the poem's verses; the note reads, "Fato real passado entre Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul e Alagoas"[2] ("True story that took place between Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul, and Alagoas"). This claim regarding the poem's

[1] d'Almeida Filho, Manoel. *O sacrifício do amor ou o noivo ressussitado*. Bezerros, Pernambuco: J. Borges, circa 2000 [previously published: São Paulo: Editora Luzeiro Limitada, 1977].

[2] d'Almeida Filho, 1

veracity, which is later reinforced by two parenthetical phrases in the poem's penultimate stanza – "Me disseram alagoanos" ("People from Alagoas told me") and "Fazem até poucos anos"[3] ("It was actually just a few years ago") – establishes in the story the weight of both legend and truth, giving weight to its moral.

The first four stanzas of the poem precede the tale and serve to describe the power of love, identify a poetic voice, and establish the storyteller's personal familiarity with the experience of love. Love is a magical bond that no person can resist – "Amor é a corrente mágica . . . No mundo ninguém tem força / P'ra cortar essa corrente" ("Love is a magic chain . . . No one in the world has the strength / To cut this chain"). And that includes the storyteller: "É nos laços amorosos / Que vivo preso também" ("It is in the bonds of love / That I live captive, too"). That is why the narrator feels compelled to share a story about love's mystery and glory: "Por isto conto um passado / Mostrando de onde vem / As corôas de misterios / Das glorias que o amor tem"[4] ("That is why I tell of a past / Showing the origin of / The crowns of mysteries / Of the glories that love has"). Although there is no mention of marriage in that introduction, the poem goes on to assert the centrality of marriage in relation to both love and indebtedness.

The plot of the tale is as follows. Rafael, a six-year-old orphan living alone in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, is taken in by a generous and very wealthy couple. The couple has a daughter, Margarida, who is Rafael's age. Over the years, Margarida falls in love with Rafael, as her family provides him with schooling and material support; however, she does not confess her love to him. While still a young boy, Rafael gets a job as a paperboy and moves out of the house, in view of making a living on his own. He then becomes an apprentice to a typesetter for a

[3] d'Almeida Filho, 32

[4] d'Almeida Filho, 1

newspaper and begins to attend night school. One day, Margarida sees Rafael in the street, and at this opportunity she can longer hold back: she confesses her pure, generous, extreme love for him, going so far as to exclaim that she would rather die than live without his love. He acknowledges her feelings but affirms that the social class difference makes it impossible for them to be together. She pushes back, asking him to express his feelings, and promising that nothing can stand in the way of their love. In response, Rafael confesses that the feeling of love is mutual. To that, Margarida's immediate reaction is to ask Rafael what books he needs for school; from then on, she secretly brings books to him in support of his studies, as well as clothes and shoes and all else that he needs. With this assistance, combined with his own efforts and intelligence, Rafael becomes an exceptional high school student and then becomes a medical student at the university, graduating at the top of his class.

The night of his graduation ceremony, Rafael proposes marriage to Margarida; specifically, he promises that he will ask for her hand in marriage as soon as he finds employment. In order to get a job as a veterinarian or doctor, Rafael needs a strong reference, so Margarida asks her father – the same man who had generously taken Rafael in from the streets over a decade earlier – to help, and he gladly obliges. With this, Rafael receives a job offer: he goes to the south of Brazil – Porto Alegre, in Rio Grande do Sul – to serve as a veterinarian.

Upon arriving in Porte Alegre, where he is to work on a wealthy landowner's farm, Rafael discovers the reason why a veterinarian was so urgently needed: yellow fever has been decimating the livestock. The landowner has ten children: nine sons, and one daughter – Catarina – whose angelic beauty the poet describes as matching that of the Star of the Orient. Catarina's mouth is a "rose," her lips are a robust carnation, and thus only a man of iron could possibly resist falling in love with her: "Só mesmo um homem de ferro / Não ficava

apaixonado"[5] ("Only a man of iron / Wouldn't fall in love"). Catarina quickly falls deeply in love with Rafael, yet he affirms and maintains his commitment to Margarida, from whom he receives passionate letters. But a dire circumstance changes the situation and, eventually, Rafael's sense of obligation as well.

Rafael contracts the dreaded yellow fever from the livestock and falls deathly ill. He survives, but only because the landowner calls in a team of expensive doctors to give Rafael the best medical care, and – crucially – because Catarina takes it upon herself to keep him alive, often saving him from the brink of death during her four-month vigil at his bedside. Having been unable to work, and having incurred an enormous medical bill (which the landowner covered), Rafael finds himself indebted to Catarina and her family. The doctors advise Rafael that he should thank God, Catarina, and money for having saved his life.

At this point, Rafael feels conflicted: should he remain faithful to his fiancée, to whom he was already indebted, or should he now marry Catarina, whose devotion saved his life? He debates the situation in his mind "a thousand times" ("fazia mil pensamentos") – "Pensava ir para o Rio / Se casar com Margarida / Mas lembrava Catarina / Uma alma tão querida / Que com esforços e lágrimas / Tinha salvo a sua vida"[6] ("He thought of going to Rio / To marry Margarida / But he remembered Catarina / A such loved soul / Who with efforts and tears / Had saved his life"). Fortunately, one of Catarina's brothers offers him some advice to sway the marriage decision in favor of the southern belle, using an effective combination of emotional blackmail, financial pressure, and flattery. The dilemma spans four pages of the poem, and month in the story, during which time Catarina herself falls ill and reaches the brink of death,

[5] d'Almeida Filho, 14

[6] d'Almeida Filho, 17

from which she thankfully recovers. Meanwhile, Rafael receives a job offer to work as a doctor in northeast Brazil, in the state of Alagoas. Catarina's father and nine brothers mount a pressure campaign, imploring Rafael not to leave them. However, Rafael declares that he will propose marriage to Catarina, and he promises to return to Porto Alegre in one year's time for the wedding; upon hearing that, the family consents to this arrangement. Catarina makes sure that Rafael understands the importance of his promise, as she threatens to kill herself if he does not return: "Se no praso [sic] não voltar / Pode julgar-se assassino / Pois vou me suicidar"[7] ("If you don't return on time / You can judge yourself an assassin / Because I'll commit suicide"). Rafael now has two fiancées – each of whom has declared that she will die if he does not return to marry her. With one woman left behind in Rio de Janeiro and another left behind in Porto Alegre, Rafael sets off, alone, to Alagoas.

Up north, Rafael's dilemma reignites and intensifies, as he receives frequent love letters from both of his devoted fiancées. As the narrator puts it, "Seu crâneo não resolvia / Com qual das duas casasse"[8] ("His brain wasn't resolving / Which of the two he would marry"). After begging Jesus for guidance, Rafael makes up his mind, deciding to marry Catarina. He sends his proposal by mail, and it is well received: Catarina's father promptly sends Rafael a sum of money to purchase clothing for the wedding, and jubilant wedding preparations begin in Porto Alegre. Ten days later, Rafael makes his gallant return to the south and to his "goddess who shone on her throne" ("deusa que no seu trono brilhava").[9] They party into the night, and they are married at ten in the morning, after which they set off for Alagoas together.

[7] d'Almeida Filho, 20

[8] d'Almeida Filho, 21

[9] d'Almeida Filho, 23

Back up north, shock and confusion soon supplant Rafael's joy, as he remembers Margarida and asks himself what he has done. At this point, the poet explains that Rafael, during his time living alone in the northeast, had made a male friend with whom he had become quite close. Rafael asks this friend – who remains nameless throughout the poem – to write a letter to Margarida stating that Rafael had tragically died of a sudden "congestão cerebral"[10] (an antiquated term for a stroke or aneurysm). Margarida, devastated, replies with a cordial letter, thanking the friend for having notified her, and enclosing a check to pay for a tombstone with golden lettering. In this letter, Margarida declares that she will never marry, and that she will remain in mourning for the rest of her life; indeed, she proceeds to write to the friend each year on the anniversary of Rafael's supposed death. Rafael, not knowing what to do, gives away to charity the money that Margarida had given for his funeral.

A tragically real funeral upends the entire story soon after. Catarina becomes pregnant, and Rafael accompanies her to Porto Alegre so that she can give birth on her family's farm. However, although she gives birth to a beautiful baby girl, Catarina dies during childbirth. The family insists on keeping the baby, so that she can take Catarina's place on the farm: "Na fazenda preenchia / O lugar de Catarina" ("On the farm she filled / The place of Catarina"); Rafael, however, is permitted to leave, on that condition.[11] Now with no wife and no custody of his child, Rafael travels back to Rio de Janeiro – for the first time since the beginning of his adventure – and upon arriving he enters a church. Coincidentally, Margarida is in the church praying at the altar, imploring Jesus to forgive Rafael's sins. Afraid to spook Margarida, Rafael exits the church and awaits her at the entrance. As she is leaving, he approaches her, claims that

[10] d'Almeida Filho, 24

[11] d'Almeida Filho, 27

he is Rafael's brother, and asks to marry her. However, Margarida declines, reaffirming her faithfulness to her "late" fiancée and her commitment to remain alone until death. In response, Rafael tests the waters to see if he would be forgiven if he were to come clean: while still pretending to be his own brother, Rafael tells Margarida that her fiancé had betrayed her prior to his death, and he asks if she would forgive the greatest imaginable betrayal. After Margarida declares that she would, Rafael identifies himself and tells her the entire story of his convoluted journey and deception. Margarida reacts without anger, stating that Jesus had wanted things to play out that way, and even defending Rafael's past actions as dignified. Thrilled, she brings Rafael to see her parents – who are overjoyed, and who agree that Rafael's decisions (including marrying Catarina and faking his own death) were the proper and "decent" course of action.[12] They promptly schedule a date for the wedding, declaring that Rafael will be the "genro herdeiro" ("inheriting son-in-law") – not only Margarida's husband, but also, as the wealthy parents' son-in-law, the heir to the family fortune.[13]

The last page of the poem contains a couple of perplexing final plot twists, followed by the poet's commentary about the veracity of the story and the importance of its moral. Prior to the wedding, Rafael goes on yet another journey, retracing the path of the preceding years. He first goes to Porto Alegre to visit his daughter; then he goes to Maceió, where he picks up his close male friend – the one who had lied to Margarida at Rafael's instruction – and brings him to Rio for the celebration. The sole fantastic element of the story occurs during the wedding: Cupid descends and crowns the two lovers.[14] The final stanza – which contains an acrostic with part of

[12] d'Almeida Filho, 31

[13] d'Almeida Filho, 31

[14] But which two lovers? It will be worthwhile to revisit the role and significance of Rafael's friend in this story.

the poet's surname ("ALMEIDA") – affirms the happy ending and, crucially, praises Margarida for her modesty.[15]

Manoel de Almeida Filho conveys three primary messages about marriage through the plot and the phrasing of his verse poem. The first is that marriage is rooted in obligation and love, which themselves are inseparable. The second is that marriage is a means for upward mobility, functioning as an elevator and as a bridge between social classes. The third is that an ideal woman – and any woman who wishes to be happy – must accept with patience and dignity, as a matter of course, all manner of deception, betrayal, confusion, and indignities to which her suitor subjects her.

Perhaps the most salient of these three messages about marriage is the first one: the concept of marriage as a fulfillment of both obligation and love – which are presented not as separate elements but rather as intertwined forces. The poet makes this apparent as early as page 8, during a dialogue between Margarida and Rafael in which Margarida confesses her love and begs Rafael to tell her if her love is requited. Rafael evades and protests the question, pointing out that the extreme gap in social class between them would render a romantic connection impossible. In response, Margarida affirms that she would gladly fund Rafael's education and resolve all of his material needs, if only he were to state that he loves her back. It is only after this guarantee of material support – after Margarida pledges to do everything in her power to assist him financially – that Rafael responds to her that the feeling of love is mutual.[16] Rafael is unable to separate love from the gratitude and financial relief that result from Margarida's contribution to his academic progress, material well-being, and advancement in society.

[15] d'Almeida Filho, 32

[16] d'Almeida Filho, 8

Just as Rafael's love is predicated upon Margarida's logistical and financial support, his subsequent willingness – and seeming obligation – to marry her is, explicitly and unequivocally, an outgrowth and expression of his gratitude for her past support. In no uncertain terms, marriage is characterized here as a man's requisite method of repayment of the contributions and devotion that he has received from a woman. On page 11, Rafael makes the following declaration to his devoted lover and benefactor: "Hoje é chegado o momento / De **agradecer-te as finezas** / Prestando meu juramento / Que só falta empregar-me / P'ra pedir-te em casamento"[17] ("Today the moment has arrived / To **thank you for your graciousness** / By swearing my oath / That as soon as I become employed / I will ask for your hand in marriage"). He thereby promises to marry her out of *gratitude* for her graciousness and kindness.[18]

The poet's choice of the word *finezas* is crucial for several reasons. In its senses of "obséquio" or "favor" or "gentileza" (which are all words in Portuguese that denote a kind, disinterested favor), the word *finezas* denotes those things that the man is repaying by way of his promised marriage proposal. Marriage, in this regard, has everything to do with past actions, and little to do with imaginings and hopes for the future. The word *finezas* also has a connotation of purity; it could be extrapolated that the woman is being thanked not only for her kind contributions but also for her preservation of her virginity and innocence. This relates to the third aspect of marriage as presented in the poem – namely, the ideal of a woman's attitude and behavior – which will be considered in more detail later in this discussion. In marrying her, Rafael is showing gratitude for her *devotion* – a concept that includes both her support for him and her demonstration, and preservation, of her own idealized feminine qualities.

[17] d'Almeida Filho, 11

[18] Notably absent here are any expressions that are common in contemporary wedding proposals and vows, such as "to express my love and passion for you" or "to demonstrate my desire to spend my future with you."

The phrase "só falta empregar-me" ("as soon as I become employed") is also notable, insofar as it suggests that employment and a certain social status is a prerequisite for marriage. Although marriage serves as a method for advancement (which is the second key message of the poem, to be discussed later), the man nonetheless must attain a certain status to enter into it: at a minimum, Rafael must first become employed in order to then pursue a marriage that will further cement his status and propel his advancement in polite society. One he reaches that threshold, he is to fulfill his obligations by marrying Margarida.

The central conflict of the story is precisely one of obligation: Rafael, having already promised to repay Margarida's kindness through future marriage, subsequently becomes indebted to another woman, Catarina. He owes marriage to two different women. Once again, this imperative is expressed in no uncertain terms, this time by the doctors, who inform Rafael that he is alive only thanks to Catarina's extraordinary efforts: "Primeiro agradeça a Deus / Segundo agradeça a ela / E terceiro ao dinheiro / Que lhe fez uma ação bela / Mas você era difunto / Não fosse a força dela"[19] ("First thank God / Second thank her / And third, money / That did a beautiful deed for you / You would have died / Had it not been for her efforts"). The implication is that marriage is the way for Rafael to properly thank the three forces responsible for his salvation – which are God, Catarina, and the money that was provided by Catarina's father. Rafael is now torn between two equally impressive imperatives, each represented by a different woman.

Lest there be any doubt, the doctor's commentary is followed by a more pressing assertion by one of Catarina brothers, who tells him, "A nossa família é grande / Rica e muito ilustrada / Você se casando nela / Sua pessoa é honrada / A conta do tratamento / Com isto fica

[19] d'Almeida Filho, 16

sanada"[20] ("Our family is large / Wealthy and very illustrious / You, by marrying into it / Your person will be esteemed / The bill for the treatment / With that will be resolved"). In addition to promising upward mobility in reminding Rafael of the family's wealth and status, the brother affirms Rafael's indebtedness quite literally by using the term *conta* ("bill") – there is an implied monetary debt as well as a moral one, and the two combine into a single obligation that can be resolved only through marriage. The word *sanada* – which can mean either "resolved" or "cured" – here refers to the resolution of the debt (moral and financial), but it also contains a second meaning that reminds Rafael of the gravity of the illness from which he has recovered (or been *restituted*) while incurring that debt. For Rafael, what would be the consequence of failing to fulfill the obligation? According to Catarina's brother, that consequence would be death – and this is not a death threat, but rather a guilt trip, as not Rafael but rather Catarina would be the one to die: "Pois Catarina confia / Em seu honrado critério / Se não se casar consigo / Vai findar no cemitério"[21] ("Catarina trusts / Your virtuous judgment / If she doesn't marry you / She'll end up in the cemetery"). Just as Margarida in Rio had brought up the prospect of suicide should Rafael not marry her – "Porque sem o teu amor / Prefiro suicidar-me"[22] ("Because without your love / I prefer to commit suicide"), Catarina's family also employs guilting for the same purpose. In response to this pressure, Rafael capitulates,[23] which results in layered and conflicting promises: despite having already promised to wed Margarida, he pledges to marry Catarina as well.

The author uses the symbolism of the number ten throughout the poem in order to root

[20] d'Almeida Filho, 17

[21] d'Almeida Filho, 17

[22] d'Almeida Filho, 7

[23] d'Almeida Filho, 20

marriage in a sense of obligation. At the beginning of the story, Rafael is rescued from the street by Margarida's parents on the *tenth* day of February. When he decides to marry Catarina, the wedding is promptly scheduled for a date *ten* days later: "E com dez dia seguisse / P'ra fazer o casamento"[24] ("And ten days later he would follow / To have the wedding"). The wedding itself takes place at *ten* o'clock in the morning: "No outro dia às dez horas / O moço então se casou"[25] ("The next day at ten o'clock / The young man got married"). The number ten brings to mind the Ten Commandments, which, for the devout Christian, govern human behavior. The recurrence of the number ten in the poem evokes the same concept that the plot conveys: Rafael's marriages stem from obligations rooted in the care and support that he has received since the very day he was rescued from the street as destitute orphan.

Manoel d'Almeida Filho also uses the full force of rhyme and rhythm to drive home the inextricable connections among obligation, love, and marriage. In describing Rafael's predicament, the poet's narrator explains: "Diante das duas dívidas / Não sabia a quem **pagasse** / Para cumprir seu dever / Não sabia a quem **amasse** / Seu crâneo não resolvia / Com qual das duas **casasse**"[26] ("Faced with the two debts / He didn't know whom to **pay** / To fulfill his obligation / He didn't know whom to **love** / His brain wasn't resolving / Which of the two he would **marry**"). The three rhyming words (marked here in bold) are verbs that correspond precisely to those three key elements: to pay, to love, and to marry. The three verbs (in the original Portuguese-language text) are all in the imperfect subjunctive, and all end in "-asse"; this implies a triangle, whereby repayment, love, and marriage are linked. This triangle is

[24] d'Almeida Filho, 22. The word *dia* is likely a typographical error in this edition; it should be *dias*.

[25] d'Almeida Filho, 23

[26] d'Almeida Filho, 21

superimposed on the inviable love triangle represented by Rafael and his two brides-to-be.

While some of the abovementioned passages reference the class difference between Rafael (who began as a destitute orphan) and the women (both of whom come from wealthy families), other parts of the poem focus more intently on this aspect. Marriage functions in the story as the magical step for overcoming gaps in status. At the beginning, Margarida keeps her love for Rafael a secret, fearing the reaction of her family: "Ela só não revelava / P'ra não ser repreendida"[27] ("She only didn't reveal it / So as not to be reprimanded"). Rafael is equally conscious of the problem of this gap: "Reconheço que és rica / Eu sou um pobre operário . . . Porquanto veja a **corrente** / Que nos separa, querida"[28] ("I recognize that you're rich / I'm a poor worker . . . Therefore, look at the **chain** / That separates us, my dear"). The author's choice of the word *corrente* ("chain") is significant, because "the chain" is presented here as a metaphor for a barrier, whereas in the poem's second stanza the "corrente" had been a metaphor for a tie that binds: "Amor é corrente mágica"[29] ("Love is a magic chain"). The "chain" separates, but it also unifies. While the use of *corrente* as two different metaphors in the same poem might appear odd, it serves a conceptual purpose: it implies that only the chain of enduring love can break through the chain that separates the haves from the have-nots.

Successful upward mobility is also represented in the poem by way of images of advancement and stair-climbing, with a mixture of a figurative and a literal "stepping upward." The narrator, in relating Rafael's rise through the academic ranks with Margarida's aid, remarks, "Rafael com o esforço / Que fazia sua amada / Subia de grau em grau / E de escada em escada /

[27] d'Almeida Filho, 5

[28] d'Almeida Filho, 8

[29] d'Almeida Filho, 1

Também de escola em escola"[30] ("Rafael, with the effort / That his loved one made / Rose from level to level / And from step to step / Also from school to school"). While *grau* ("level" or "grade") and *escola* ("school") refer to scholastic ranks, *escada* ("step" or "staircase") brings to mind a physical staircase, which causes the rank-rising to be more vivid and dynamic in the reader's mind. The phrasal structure "de X em X" ("from X to X" – or "from one X to the next") and its repetition in three consecutive lines of verse similarly creates a sensation of upward motion, reminiscent of the sound of a person in boots steadily climbing six stairs. This rise in the ranks by Rafael does depend on his own intelligence and his dedication – "Rafael sem ser boêmio"[31] ("Rafael, without being a slacker") – but even more so it depends on the effort ("esforço")[32] and devotion of Margarida and her generous parents. Similarly, Catarina and her father guarantee Rafael – and, later, Rafael's daughter – health, protection, and social status leading up to and continuing after the marriage.

Another message about marriage, which is emphasized especially at the end of the poem, is the connection between happiness and a certain conception of virtue. The poet celebrates Margarida as a model of purity, patience, and devotion, suggesting that it is these qualities that grant her a husband and an implied happiness ever after at the end of the story. The narrator introduces Margarida as a pure and loyal woman; she herself is "the emblem of virginity" ("o emblema da virgindade"),[33] and her love is described in holy terms: "Em Margarida crescia / Um santo amor tão fiel"[34] ("In Margarida there grew / A saintly love so faithful"). Years later, after

[30] d'Almeida Filho, 9

[31] d'Almeida Filho, 11

[32] d'Almeida Filho, 9

[33] d'Almeida Filho, 4

[34] d'Almeida Filho, 5

Rafael tricks Margarida into thinking he is dead, Margarida's reaction further demonstrates her qualities of loyalty and purity: "Que no mundo não havia / P'ra ela mais casamento / Era coberta de luto / Até seu último momento"[35] ("That in the world there was not / Any more marriage for her / She was covered with mourning / Until her last moment"). Once she has declared her love, she will not allow any other man to have her. This is proven when Margarida meets Rafael's "brother" (who is actually Rafael in disguise) in front of the church near the end of the story, as she retorts, "Para se casar comigo / Homem algum tem mister / Nem mesmo um homem de ouro / Não me terá por mulher"[36] ("To marry me / No man has what it takes / Not even a man of gold / Will get to have me as his wife"). Unlike the male protagonist, Margarida cannot be won by a new partner. The closing two lines of the poem are its *chave de ouro* (closing flourish) and drive home the primary message of the story: "Deus gratifique na glória / A moça que tem pudor"[37] ("May God give his graces in glory to / The young woman who has purity"). This "pudor" ("purity") is Margarida's innocence, decency, modesty, piety, chastity, and virtue – as idealized by the poet.

The woman remains passive and hopeful, all while remaining devoid of information, power, or control. Her success depends on her willingness to accept and condone her suitor's actions, even his extreme infidelity and deceit. Margarida goes so far as to affirm that Rafael's actions were in accordance with God's will: "Foi Jesús que quis assim / Que pagasses a Catarina / E viesses pagar a mim"[38] ("It was Jesus who wanted it to happen that way / That you would

[35] d'Almeida Filho, 25

[36] d'Almeida Filho, 30

[37] d'Almeida Filho, 32

[38] d'Almeida Filho, 31

repay Catarina / And come to repay me"). Her statement is crucial, in that it combines two of the primary messages of the poem: first, that marriage is a man's obligation for repaying devotion, and second, that a good woman is willing to dutifully accept this and other aspects of male behavior. The use of the verb *pagar* ("to pay" or "to repay") in consecutive verses underscores the understanding – by the protagonists, and also of the poet – that marriage is, first and foremost, a duty that springs from, and settles, a man's indebtedness. Moreover, by having Margarida proclaim this precept, the poet demonstrates that Margarida is, indeed, an ideal woman of virtue. Margarida's parents go even further: upon learning that Rafael had married another woman and faked his own death to deceive their daughter, they do not become angry; to the contrary, they praise Rafael for what they view as decent and proper behavior. As the narrator recounts, "O rapaz contou o drama / Bem feito e decente acharam / Para o feliz himineu / Mês e data contrataram"[39] ("The young man recounted the drama / They found it proper and decent / And, for the happy wedding / They scheduled the month and day"). It is telling that the phrases "decente acharam" ("they found it decent") and "feliz himineu" ("happy wedding") are in consecutive verses; the implication is that the wedding, and thus the woman's happiness, is made possible by the woman's (and her family's) unquestioning acceptance of the man's decisions.

The extremely accommodating nature of Margarida and her family is also what allows Rafael to engage in an intriguing whirlwind trip at the end of the story in the days before the wedding. Despite having already suffered through many years of waiting, uncertainty, and mourning, Margarida does not intervene when Rafael decides to retrace geographically the settings of the past love triangle. She allows him to set off on a journey that ends with a curious,

[39] d'Almeida Filho, 31

significant detail. On the last page of the *folheto* (chapbook), Rafael travels south to Rio Grande do Sul to visit his daughter; after that, he travels north to Maceió, for the sole purpose of rejoining the good friend he had met there and bringing that friend with him to Rio: "Até Maceió chegou / Para o Rio de Janeiro / O seu amigo levou"[40] ("He arrived in Maceió / And to Rio de Janeiro / He brought his friend"). That friend, who remains nameless, was not just Rafael's means for delivering false information to Margarida; rather, there is evidence of a far deeper connection and relationship between that friend and the male protagonist.

Earlier in the poem, the narrator affirms, "Então nunca tinha achado / Um amigo como aquele"[41] ("Until then he had never found / A friend like that one") – meaning that Rafael had never before found such a close friend. Indeed, it later becomes evident that they are not only good friends but rather best friends forever. Rafael returns to Maceió to meet his friend and then brings him to Rio de Janeiro for the wedding – but whose wedding is it, really? When Rafael and his male friend arrive to Rio de Janeiro together, they immediately are surrounded with celebration – "Já havia grande festa / Quando os amigos saltaram"[42] ("There was already a big party / When the friends arrived"). On paper, and before God, the newlyweds are Rafael and Margarida – "Rafael e Margarida / Perante a Deus se casaram"[43] ("Rafael and Margarida / Married before God"). Yet, then – in a turn of events that is presented to the reader, in the subsequent stanza, as a "mistério" ("mystery") – Cupid descends, and it is unclear (and perhaps deliberately made ambiguous) whether Cupid's intention truly aligns with that of the ceremony

[40] d'Almeida Filho, 32

[41] d'Almeida Filho, 24

[42] d'Almeida Filho, 32

[43] d'Almeida Filho, 32

performed by the church before the Christian God – or whether, instead, Cupid has something entirely different in mind. The narrator recounts, "No ato do casamento / Um mistério se passou / Porque Cupido orgulhoso / Naquela hora baixou / Com os louros da vitória / Os dois jovens coroou"[44] ("During the wedding ceremony / A mystery took place / Because proud Cupid / Descended at that moment / With the laurels of victory / And crowned the two young people"). But who are the "dois jovens" ("two young people") to whom the narrator refers, whom Cupid crowns with the laurels of victory? Ostensibly, the couple in question is Rafael and Margarida – but that assumption is challenged by the presence of Rafael's close male friend, and even more so by the ambiguity of the narrator's wording about Cupid's action.

It could be surmised that the "mystery" actually entails Cupid's coronation of Rafael and Rafael's male friend as the true victors – and the true lovers – of the story. Margarida, like Catarina earlier in the story, is celebrated for her purity and extreme devotion, and she, too, achieves the "victory" of marriage thanks to her virtuous patience and tolerance – "Inda[45] alcançou a vitoria"[46] ("And even attained victory"). However, it nevertheless appears that the two men are the ones who have cemented a true and honest bond, while also achieving social advancement. Rafael's male friend is the only person whom Rafael does not deceive over the course of the story. Moreover, their bond – unlike the two heterosexual marriages in the poem – is rooted in neither obligation nor repayment, but rather in affinity, sincerity, and intimacy. Thus what had apparently begun as one type of love triangle – that of Margarida, Rafael, and Catarina – ends up as a quite different one, consisting of Margarida, Rafael, and Rafael's mysterious

[44] d'Almeida Filho, 32

[45] Here the poet writes "Inda" instead of "Ainda" because the letter "I" forms part of the acrostic "ALMEIDA" in the closing stanza.

[46] d'Almeida Filho, 32

nameless male friend.[47] Rafael has completed his journeys around Brazil and to the top of the social ladder. He has fulfilled his obligations to the two women, and Margarida has received her due – marriage – in exchange for her boundless, silent virtue. However, although the marriage is set in stone, Cupid's ways nevertheless remain a mystery. It would seem that Rafael's friend might well be more than just a friend.

[47] The importance and centrality of the friend in the story is supported by the alleged source of the tale. Notably, the veracity of the story – according to the narrator – has been confirmed by residents of Alagoas, which is the home state of Rafael's dear friend: the poet writes, "Que êles ainda vivem / (Me disseram alagoanos) / Que esse caso passou-se / (Fazem até poucos anos)" ("That they are still living / (people from Alagoas told me) / That this story took place / (It was actually just a few years ago)"). (d'Almeida Filho, 32)

CHAPTER 3

O casamento do boiola (1985) by José Francisco Borges

José Francisco Borges is one of Brazil's most famous and celebrated living artists and poets. He was born in 1935 in the town of Bezerros, which is located within a region of northeast Brazil known as the *agreste* – a relatively narrow north-south strip of territory, spanning several states, that is sandwiched between the Atlantic coastal forests (*zona da mata*) to its east and the expansive, semi-arid, legendary *sertão* region of the Brazilian backlands to its west that is renowned for the history of economic and political suffering and resilience of its population (as described and memorialized by the journalist-author Euclides da Cunha in his classic *Os sertões*). More specifically, Bezerros is located in the interior of the northeastern state of Pernambuco, approximately 100 kilometers from the coastal capital city of Recife.

To this day, the poet and artist J. Borges – which is what everyone calls him, and also how he signs his ubiquitous and famous woodcut prints – lives and works in Bezerros, in a spacious and colorful studio and woodshop. On most days Borges sits at a table in his woodshop, chiseling what will become new woodcut print templates (known as *matrizes*). These rectangular blocks are often adorned with images of men and women dancing, riding horses, looking at one another expectantly, or contending with an imposing supernatural beast. Others contain exclusively plants and animals, the most iconic being cacti and birds. The lower-left corner of the print usually contains the image's title, such as "Moça roubada" ("Stolen young woman"), or "A dança no sítio" ("The dance on the small farm"), or "Pastor de ovelhas" ("Shepherd"), or "O plantío de girassol" ("The sunflower planting") – to name all but one of the prints displayed on the walls of my apartment. The lower-right corner contains his signature, "J. Borges," which is also carved into the woodcut, as an integral part of the final image. The

xilogravuras (woodcut prints) themselves are usually finished by Borges' several assistants, who apply either black or colored paint (depending on the image ordered) to the *matriz* (woodcut print template), place and rub blank white paper onto it, and slowly peel the paper off and hang it up to dry. Most of the templates, and thus most of the prints, are fairly large – most of the templates are approximately 55 by 40 centimeters, and the prints are made on even larger paper, so as to create a generous blank border and to fill out the 70-by-55 centimeter black wooden frame, which is also made by hand in the workshop.[1] This describes the process by which Borges makes the large, iconic, colorful (or strikingly black and white) prints that decorate not only the walls of his workshop and countless walls all over Brazil but also living rooms and galleries in numerous other countries.

Large prints of that sort constitute only one of the four things for which Borges is best known; there are three other salient elements that drive and characterize Borges' artistic production, cultural relevance, fame, and literary influence. All three of those elements are rooted in the universe of northeast Brazilian cordel literature. First and foremost, J. Borges is known for being the artist whose woodcut images illustrate many of the covers of cordel poetry chapbooks – not only his own poems, but also (and most notably) the works of other poets, including both his contemporaries and poets from previous generations. Second, J. Borges is a prolific publisher. He owns a printing press – the key to a social, economic, and even cultural status that, historically, cordel poets have coveted for generations. He has acquired the editorial rights to publish poems by several other authors from Pernambuco. Moreover, he reprints "old classics" of cordel – poems that were composed in the early and mid-twentieth century – whose text is presumably in the public domain and not protected by copyright. Thus he publishes, in

[1] I visited the workshop of J. Borges, and interviewed him there, in July 2015, and again in September 2022.

traditional *folheto* (chapbook) format, works by some of the venerated authors of Brazilian cordel, including Francisco Sales Arêda (1916-2005), Manoel d'Almeida Filho (1914-1995), Leandro Gomes de Barros (1865-1918), and João Ferreira de Lima (1902-1973). J. Borges creates original woodcut illustrations for the covers of these works, which further cements his status as both "The illustrator of cordel" and "The keeper of the cordel tradition" in the mind of readers both within and outside the region.

The third element of J. Borges' production in relation to cordel is his own poetry, which arguably is the least known and least celebrated aspect of his work. This is not to say that his poetry is not good; rather, it has been overshadowed, both by his woodcuts (which have essentially come to represent the "folk" art of Pernambuco, if not of the entire region north of Bahía) and by his illustrated *folheto* editions of classic cordel poems. When I asked Borges to read aloud, or "sing the verses of," his poem *A chegada da prostituta no Céu* (The Prostitute's Arrival in Heaven), he generously did so, and allowed me to record it on video; once our interview ended, he returned to the woodshop to continue cutting wood into block-size pieces (a task that he still does himself) and preparing his next *xilogravura* (woodcut).

J. Borges, in *Como se faz uma xilogravura e como se escreve um cordel*[2] (How to Make a Woodcut and How to Write a Cordel Poem) – his hybrid discussion, in prose and verse, about woodcuts and cordel poetry – writes, "Assim tem que ser escrito o cordel tradicional obedecendo a ética que o cordel manteve viva, que é a rima, métrica e a oração"[3] ("The traditional cordel poem must be written in that way, obeying the ethos that cordel has kept alive, which is rhyme, meter, and phrase"). That "ética" ("ethos") is first and foremost a matter of form, as Borges'

[2] Borges, José Francisco. *Como se faz uma xilogravura e como se escreve um cordel*. Bezerros, Pernambuco: J. Borges, 1980.

[3] Borges, *Como se faz uma xilogravura e como se escreve um cordel*, 14

subsequent verses also make clear; Borges continues, now in cordel verse:

> Procura-se escrever certo
> Usando a consciência
> Respeitando a rima certa
> Pra escrever com decência
> O poeta tem que pensar
> E escrever com paciência[4]
>
> One seeks to write properly
> Using one's conscience
> Respecting proper rhyme
> To write with decency
> The poet must think
> And write with patience.[5]

However, even if the ethos of good cordel is, as Borges claims, to compose balanced, thoughtful, meaningful verses that can be sung in accordance with the rules of rhyme and meter, perhaps it is also to express and convey the author's notions of ethics and morality[6] – which derive from individual beliefs and reflections, social norms, the Catholic tradition, realities and legends that have arisen from struggles for survival amid poverty, and combinations thereof. In other words, the "ética" might entail thinking patiently and using one's conscience, with a sense of decency, not only for the purpose of adhering to formal rules but also to express a thoughtful and morally defensible point. For the reader, the two elements are arguably even more intertwined, in the sense that the ethos of reading and analyzing cordel poems well – that is, closely, delicately, and one at a time – might well allow for the perception of various layers of expression within a given poem, including morality and ideology as well as elements of form and verbal artistry.

J. Borges' 1985 cordel poem *O casamento do boiola* (The Fag's Wedding) tells a story

[4] Borges, *Como se faz uma xilogravura e como se escreve um cordel*, 15

[5] This translation is my own.

[6] In my September 2022 interview with J. Borges in Bezerros, he claimed that his poems (including this one) contain neither moral messages nor argumentation of any sort, and that his only objectives have been to sell chapbooks, entertain readers, and maintain the form and tradition of cordel poetry. However, authors' claims about their own work should not be taken at face value and do not constitute the definitive interpretation of the work.

surrounding a gay wedding.[7] The poem deploys stereotypes, slurs, and vulgar plot twists to address morality and human behavior on two levels: first, it derides homosexuality itself and the so-called "modern" social and sexual behavior that accompanies it; second, it wields the theme of homosexuality as a bludgeon for the purpose of portraying and satirizing corruption, particularly that of the church. The poem's plot and language strains the limits of what is appropriate to discuss in academic writing – but that obscenity is largely the point, given that the story's vulgar, antagonistic jocosity serves to ridicule gay people and contemporary society while aiming to entertain the reader through a farcical litany of taboo configurations of human bodies and behavior. Marriage, which is in the poem's title, functions as the axis of the satire, as it brings together various social actors – men, women (including gay males who are facetiously called women), family, and the clergy – for the purpose of ridiculing and critiquing all of them. Here I will summarize the plot of this outlandish story concocted by J. Borges, and then point out some notable details of the poem that are pertinent to marriage in general and to homosexuality and gay marriage in particular.

In the poem *O casamento do boiola*, an effeminate, gay young man – who is the son of a respected and influential politician – announces his homosexuality to his parents. The illustrious father, deeply embarrassed and perturbed, asks his son to hide his gayness and to become straight; however, the young man reaffirms that he is gay and that he is unable to control or change it. The father laments to the mother that their son has, regrettably, taken after her – "O pai ficou arrasado / e em casa disse à mulher / ele puxou a você"[8] ("The father was devastated / and at home said to his wife / he took after you") – and thereby implies that the son's

[7] Borges, José Francisco. *O casamento do boiola*. Bezerros, Pernambuco: J. Borges, 1985 (to be cited as "Borges").

[8] Borges, 2

homosexuality is equivalent to femininity, and that it is cause for shame and lament.

This statement begins a conflation of sexual orientation with gender identity that persists and intensifies throughout the poem: the protagonist and the other characters, as well as the narrator, refer to the young man as a woman, through the use of names, slang references, and a mid-poem shift to feminine pronouns. In other words, the implication is that the young man's homosexuality makes him a woman for all intents and purposes. Although his given name is Heleno, he affirms that he – or "she" – will instead call himself (herself) Sofia: "e o filho no outro dia / disse mãe eu sou Heleno / esse nome me atrofia / achem bom ou achem ruim / vou me chamar de Sofia"[9] ("And the son, the next day / said, 'Mother, I am Heleno / that name atrophies me / whether you like it or not / I will call myself Sofia'"). The protagonist is not exactly transgender, however; instead, the poem flips back and forth between identifying Heleno/Sofia as a man or woman, and his feminine identity seems to be more a matter of imposition of stereotypes and poetic license than the true feeling of the protagonist.[10]

Only Heleno's mother, unlike the incensed father, supports her son and his declaration of homosexuality. Heleno then lives what is presented, stereotypically, as the gay "lifestyle" – which the narrator characterizes as flamboyant, loose, and promiscuous. Heleno then has sex with – and, soon after, falls in love with – a "super-endowed" man ("um cara superdotado").[11] Then, Heleno asks his lover if he is married, to which the man replies that he is not. Moreover, the man expresses a strong interest in getting married. His interest has nothing to do with feelings for Heleno, however. The man shows no true affinity for Heleno, and is not even

[9] Borges, 2

[10] For this reason, in this discussion I will refer to the protagonist as male, even though the poem aims to caricature (and deride) him as effeminate and conflates that with being transgender.

[11] Borges, 3

described as being gay or particularly interested in men. Rather, the well-endowed lover's interest is entirely impersonal and financial: he simply wants to live a carefree life without having to work for a living. Marriage, for him, is solely – expressly and explicitly – a vehicle for guaranteeing this financial cushion and stability. The man states, "mas preciso me casar / se encontrar uma pessoa / que possa me ajudar / pra eu ter a vida boa / sem precisar trabalhar"[12] ("but I need to get married / if I find a person / who can help me / for me to have the good life / without needing to work"). Accordingly, Heleno dangles his family's wealth – "meu pai tem muito . . . sou o único herdeiro"[13] ("my father has a lot . . . I'm the sole heir") – and thus offers the material benefits of marriage in order to retain the man he wants. And the man cashes in, accepting Heleno's proposal.

The outlandish developments in the story begin when Heleno brings his fiancé home to meet the parents. The father is not home, but the mother is, and she is carrying a tray full of drinking glasses. As soon as Heleno proudly announces his fiancé – "é meu namorado / e eu vou me casar com ele / Ele é superdotado"[14] ("he is my boyfriend / and I will marry him / He is super-endowed") – the mother promptly drops her tray, shattering the glasses all over the room. The mother begins to sweep the broken glass, and while doing so, she glances at the well-endowed man. What might initially be presumed to be shock or disappointment on the part of the mother is soon revealed to be a taboo mutual excitement: upon exchanging glances, the fiancé (who remains nameless throughout the poem) and the mother exhibit excitement of a sexual nature – the mother is "disposta" ("ready" or "excited") and the man "ficou um pouco

[12] Borges, 3

[13] Borges, 3

[14] Borges, 4

animado”[15] (“became a bit excited”). Boldly and shamelessly referencing her full thighs – “pernas que homem gosta”[16] (“legs of the sort that a man likes”) – he propositions her; meanwhile, at that moment, Heleno “stupidly” (“deu bobeira”) steps out for a walk in the garden. Taking immediate advantage of the opportunity, Heleno’s well-endowed fiancé proceeds to have his way with Heleno’s mother – the wife of the esteemed politician. He grabs her and they fornicate, without protest and with mutual satisfaction: “o cara pegou a mãe dele / que aceitou sem pantim” (“the guy took [Heleno’s] mother / who accepted with no resistance”). The sex scene is narrated in graphic, vulgar terms, as the sexual act is presented as being animalesque and unbridled, including multiple positions and sodomy, and with the complete submission of Heleno’s mother: “Embolaram pelo chão / a mulher e o rapaz / numa hora era na frente / e na outra era por traz[17] / e ela dizia aproveite / você sabe como faz”[18] (“They grappled and rolled around on the floor / the woman and the young man / at one moment it was in the front / and the next it was from behind / and she said, ‘make the most of it / you know how to do it’”). As soon as the unlikely couple finishes the deed, the clueless Heleno walks in, gleefully proclaiming his plans to go to the church that same day to arrange his gay wedding – “o boiola chegou dizendo / cheio de contentamento / hoje eu vou para a igreja / cuidar do meu casamento”[19] (“the fag arrived saying / full of contentment / ‘today I’ll go to the church / to take care of my wedding’”).

At the church, the sacristan/sexton offers to prepare the paperwork for the wedding,

[15] Borges, 4

[16] Borges, 4

[17] The correct spelling would have been “trás”; Borges may have intentionally written “traz” for humorous effect, so as to emphasize the rhyme with “rapaz” and “faz”

[18] Borges, 5

[19] Borges, 5

despite Heleno's apparent homosexuality: "Estou pronto para servir / mesmo assi desmunhecando"[20] ("I'm ready to serve / even with your wrists being loose like that"). Considering the sexton's reference to Heleno's "loose wrists," he apparently recognizes that Heleno is a gay man. However, given that homosexuality is, in the portrayed society, generally conflated with femininity or female identity, the sexton assumes that Heleno will somehow produce the documents of a woman. The sexton then notes – upon seeing Heleno's documents – that, although "she" is a "woman," the documents are those of a man, which is "unacceptable" because it means the wedding would be a gay wedding – "e a igreja não aceita / casar homem com viado"[21] ("and the church does not accept / marrying a man and a fag").

Crucially, however, the hurdle of documented biological sex does not put an end to Heleno's quest to formalize his desired gay wedding. Instead, as Heleno/Sofia presses to achieve his objective, various forms of corruption enter the picture, in what is characterized as a particularly "Brazilian" approach to problem-solving. He (or "she," as the narrator continues to call him) proceeds to bribe the sexton by promising not only large sums of money but also sex: "Disse ela tem que aceitar / que papai tem muito dinheiro / e se o senhor quiser / a gente vai no banheiro / a acerta todos papeis / no jeitinho brasileiro"[22] ("She said, 'You have to accept it / because Daddy has lots of money / and if you'd like / we can go into the bathroom / and resolve all the papers / the Brazilian way"). The full extent of the church's corruption is then revealed, as the sexton embraces both the financial and sexual aspects of the bribe. J. Borges conveys these elements of corruption through the use of a playful double entendre: "O sacristão com a

[20] Borges, 5

[21] Borges, 6

[22] Borges, 6

caneta / dura de admirar / assinou todos papeis"[23] ("The sacristan with his **pen** / impressively hard / signed all the papers"). In these verses there is a double meaning of the word *caneta* as both "pen" and "penis," and the sexual meaning is reinforced by the tongue-in-cheek use of the adjective *dura* ("hard") that modifies *caneta*. The sexton is both eager to enrich himself and excited sexually by Heleno.

The church's corruption is confirmed when the sexton discloses the bribe to the priest, who then emphatically agrees to officiate the gay wedding: "Disse o padre assim tem jeito / não vou deixar de fazer / Deus proibe mas não manda / dinheiro para nós comer / se um quer e outro quer / desde já vou resolver"[24] ("Said the priest, 'In that case, it can be done / I won't abstain from doing it / God prohibits things but doesn't send / money so that we can eat / if one wants and the other wants / I'll resolve it right away'"). The financial aspect of the arrangement is laid bare: God does not provide money, but the bribe does. Meanwhile, a mutually beneficial and desired arrangement – which includes both financial and sexual elements – is alluded to in the priest's comment "se um quer e outro quer" ("if one wants and the other wants"). Notably, in these verses the two referenced actors – "um" ("one") and "outro" ("the other") – are Heleno and the priest, as opposed to Heleno and Heleno's fiancé. In other words, what makes the gay marriage acceptable and permissible, in the priest's mind, is not the genuine love and desire of the gay couple, but rather the reciprocal interests – economic as well as erotic – of the gay man and the church.

The bribe itself is delivered the next day, at confession. In this way, the place intended for confessing sins instead becomes a place for committing sins, both financial and carnal; and it

[23] Borges, 6

[24] Borges, 7

is the church itself that commits these sins. After receiving the money – ten thousand Reals, which is quite a large pay-off – the priest proceeds to have sex with the gay "bride" (Heleno) behind the sacristy. The narrator describes the scene as follows: "E lá por trás da sacristia / era um lugar reservado / o padre pegou a noiva / bem cheia de rebolado / fez um trabalho com ela / o noivo viu o resultado"[25] ("And there behind the sacristy / was a reserved spot / the priest took the bride / who was full of shimmy / [and] made work of her / the groom saw the result"). The term "cheia de rebolado" ("full of shimmy") again mocks Heleno for being effeminate and overtly sexual, whereas the priest's action – "fez um trabalho com ela" ("made work of her") – implies sex of an aggressive sort, whereby the priest physically overpowers and dominates a submissive Heleno. The phrase "o noivo viu o resultado" ("the groom saw the result") indicates a second cuckholding – and a sort of karmic retaliation – whereby Heleno's lover is forced to witness the act and consequences of the priest's sexual subjugation of Heleno. Meanwhile, the phrase "era um lugar reservado" ("was a reserved spot") is particularly damning, as it implies that such transgressions are commonplace; the priest's corruption and sexual deviance is not an exception but rather routine, to the point where the spot behind the sacristy is "reserved" for profane acts.

The raunchy episode does not end with the priest in control, however. Heleno's manly, well-endowed "groom" enters and commands the priest to remove his robe and to receive that which the priest had imposed upon Heleno. This tit-for-tat is explicitly expressed in the groom's words: "quando entrou disse ao padre / pode tirar a batina / que vou fazer com você / o que fez com minha menina"[26] ("upon entering he said to the priest / 'you can remove your robe / for I will do to you / that which you did to my girl'"). He goes on to tell the priest, "Já recebeu a

[25] Borges, 8

[26] Borges, 8

propina / você é todo moderno"[27] ("You've already received the bribe / you are all modern"). The phrase "todo moderno" ("all modern") conveys a critique of the "modern" flouting of traditional conservative social norms. The priest's contraventions are then punished by the well-endowed groom, by way of sodomy.

While being sodomized by Heleno's lover, the priest laments his own impiety and exclaims to God – "acunhado o padre disse / valei-me meu pai eterno / dessa vez eu rasguei todas / as páginas[28] do meu caderno"[29] ("penetrated with force, the priest said / 'help me, my eternal Father / this time I tore all / the pages of my notebook'"). Here the verb *acunhar* – through its past participle *acunhado* – is employed in its slang meaning, which is "meter com força o membro masculino na mulher"[30] ("to insert, with force, the male sexual organ into the woman"). In this graphic scene – by way of the weaponization of homosexual intercourse – the debased priest's corruption is exposed, and his financial and sexual transgressions are punished. Nevertheless, the corruption persists through the end of the story. Moreover, it is that corruption that allows for the gay marriage to proceed, according to the narrator: "Com oito dias casaram / o superdotado e Sofia / o sacristão disse ao padre / já recebemos a quantia / desse jeito se casa até / Vicente com Malaquia"[31] ("Eight days later / the super-endowed and Sofia were married[32] / the sacristan said to the priest / 'we've already received the sum / as long as it's like that, there can

[27] Borges, 8

[28] The diacritic in "páginas" is missing in this edition; I have restored the diacritic in my quotation of the text.

[29] Borges, 8

[30] As defined in the *Dicionário Informal*, an online dictionary of Brazilian Portuguese slang terms: https://www.dicionarioinformal.com.br/acunhar

[31] Borges, 8. The poet uses "Malachia" instead of "Malachias" in order to maintain the rhyme (with "quantia").

[32] In my translation I moved "were married" to a different line, due to the different sentence structure in English.

be a marriage even of / Vincent and Malachi'").[33] The implication is that societal corruption – especially, but not limited to, corruption of the church – is unbridled, and that this corruption manifests itself most saliently in boundless perversion of the institution of marriage.

In the relationship between Heleno and his lover, the passion is one-sided. Heleno falls in love – "tornou-se apaixonado"[34] ("fell in love") – and initiates the discussion of marriage with his lover. The lover, on the other hand, is receptive to marriage not due to any passion or particular interest in Heleno, but rather (and only) because he is swayed by practical, selfish considerations. The lover patently pursues marriage out of self-interest, for the sake of financial stability and material comfort. Moreover, the lover demonstrates no particular interest in Heleno, nor even any sexual preference for men over women.[35] When the lover states, "mas preciso me casar / se encontrar uma pessoa / que possa me ajudar / pra eu ter a vida boa / sem precisar trabalhar" ("but I need to get married / if I find a person / who can help me / for me to have the good life / without needing to work"), the emphasis is on his pursuit of marriage for money and the ability to live a comfortable life without having to work. The institution of marriage, as presented in this first instance in the poem, is a vehicle for one-sided personal gain. Heleno's reaction validates and empowers that approach, as Heleno/Sofia responds with the promise that the marriage is a lucrative proposition for the lover: "Sofia disse sou eu / meu pai tem muito / vamos casar no civil / na igreja e no banheiro / o meu pai paga as despesas / que sou

[33] The sacristan, by mentioning a hypothetical marriage of Vincent and Malachi, evokes extreme sacrilege: Vincent and Malachi are both men; furthermore, one is a saint and the other a prophet in the Bible. The implication is that money takes precedence over any religious consideration. Corruption reigns supreme.

[34] Borges, 3

[35] Nor is the lover portrayed as bisexual; rather, he is seemingly indiscriminate in his sexual desire, demonstrating equal willingness to have intercourse with Heleno, Heleno's mother, and the priest.

o único herdeiro"[36] ("Sofia said, 'I'm the one / my father has a lot / let's get married legally[37] / in the church and in the bathroom / my father will pay the expenses / I'm the sole heir'"). In Heleno's framing, the legal, religious, and sexual aspects of the marital relation are all surrounded by money. The sentence structure mirrors the conceptual framing, as the two verb phrases on either side of "vamos casar no civil / na igreja e no banheiro" ("let's get married legally / in the church and in the bathroom") are "tem muito" ("has a lot") and "paga as despesas" ("pay the expenses") – both of which refer to finances and wealth.

Later in the poem, the institution of marriage is further mocked as not only corrupt but also ridiculous and contrived, as the vulgar copulation of the lover with Heleno's mother is juxtaposed with Heleno's oblivious giddiness about the upcoming wedding. Heleno believes that he has found a committed partner; however, the dramatic irony instead reveals to the reader that the lover is not only self-interested but also animalesque and indiscriminate in his pursuit of sexual intercourse. The sex is animalesque in that occurs on the floor ("pelo chão") and from the back ("por traz"), and in its raw spontaneity. Accordingly, when the lover gets excited by the mother, the narrator uses the word "animado" (which means both "excited" and "animated") rather than the word "excitado" ("excited") to describe him – "e o cara quando viu / ficou um pouco animado" ("and the guy, when he saw [her] / became a bit animated/excited") – which further suggests not merely sexual excitement but also animalesque copulation. The poet makes a point of juxtaposing this scene with a description of Heleno's plans for the wedding, even using the phrase "naquele mesmo momento" ("at that same moment") to highlight the juxtaposition of the scandalous sexual affair with the tradition of marriage: "Na hora que

[36] Borges, 3

[37] "No civil" refers to civil marriage, as opposed to religious marriage; here I have translated "no civil" as "legally."

terminaram / naquele mesmo momento / o boiola chegou dizendo / cheio de contentamento / hoje eu vou para a igreja / cuidar do meu casamento"[38] ("Right when they finished / at that same moment / the fag arrived saying / full of contentment / 'today I'll go to the church / to take care of my wedding'"). The wedding – and the tradition of marriage – is as removed as can be from the type of legitimate, monogamous relationship that it is supposed to represent. In this sense, Heleno's marriage has significance only on paper – a point that the poet reinforces through the repetition of forms of the word "paper" in the final three pages of the *folheto*. Heleno arrives to the church to "acertar os papeis do meu casamento" ("settle the papers of my marriage"); the sexton requests the "papeis" ("papers") of the groom; and the sexton "assinou todos papeis" ("signed all papers") after being promised the bribe.[39] The ultimate triviality of these papers – and, more generally, of all papers and formalities – is affirmed in the penultimate stanza of the poem, when the sodomized priest exclaims to God, "dessa vez eu rasguei todas / as paginas do meu caderno"[40] ("this time I tore all of / the pages of my notebook").[41] The printed pages of religious teachings are, figuratively, torn to shreds and rendered meaningless; more broadly, the same happens to the church's pretenses to morality and moral authority.

Along with the church and its conventions and officials, the institution of marriage itself is shown to be corrupted beyond salvation. When the gay wedding does take place – in the poem's final stanza – it serves to demonstrate not the validity and beauty of a gay partnership, but rather the hopelessly irreparable perversion of the institution of marriage. The closing phrase

[38] Borges, 5

[39] Borges, 6

[40] Borges, 8

[41] The torn "pages" of the priest's "notebook" could also be interpreted as being the priest's metaphor for the pain and physical damage that he is sustaining from the aggressive sodomy imposed by Heleno's super-endowed fiancé.

"já recebemos a quantia / desse jeito se casa até / Vicente e Malaquia"[42] ("we've already received the sum / as long as it's like that, there can be a marriage even of / Vincent and Malachi") implies that marriage, in the "modern" world, has become a free-for-all; the institution has been debased and debauched, and it can now be anything for anyone. It also suggests that marriage is now governed not by love or tradition but by money. From the poet's perspective, traditional values have been supplanted by monetary values[43] – a worship of money, alongside limitless perversion, in the corrupt "modern" world.

While J. Borges' cordel poem "O casamento do boiola" uses sexuality, sex, and marriage to critique what has become of the institutions of modern society, it also uses those things to mock homosexuality in particular. The omniscient narrator, as well as the characters surrounding Heleno, deride Heleno's behavior through the use of homophobic slurs, hyperbole, and crude physical descriptions. At the opening of the poem, in the very first stanza, the narrator makes that approach evident in the introduction of Heleno in relation to Heleno's illustrious father: "Houve um político famoso / muito forte e respeitado / do povo de sua terra / era muito acreditado / eleito em todas campanhas / **mas** tinha um filho viado"[44] ("There was a famous politician / very strong and respected / by the people of his land / he was very trusted / elected in all campaigns / **but** he had a son who was a fag"). Like *boiola* ("fag"), the term *viado* ("faggot") is a derogatory slur that refers to a gay man; moreover, the use of the conjunction *mas* ("but") indicates that the son's homosexuality is a negative attribute that runs afoul of the otherwise stellar reputation of the honorable father.

[42] Borges, 8

[43] In my September 2022 interview with J. Borges, he confirmed that he holds this view about money.

[44] Borges, 1

Homosexuality is then further depicted as negative in no uncertain terms, as the father complains to his son, "Meu filho que história é essa / meu único filho é você / lhe considero boa peça / só não me diga que é GAY / não faça uma coisa dessa"[45] ("My son, what kind of story is that! / you're my only son / I consider you a good specimen / just don't tell me that you're GAY / don't do a thing like that"). The word "GAY" is printed in the *folheto* with all three letters capitalized, in what is a unique rupture from the standard formatting. The phrase "não faça uma coisa dessa" ("don't do a thing like that") implores the son to reconsider his sexual identity and behavior; it presumes that gayness is a shameful, unfortunate choice, as opposed to a genuine, valid expression of self.

Heleno's response to his father's exhortation reinforces the preceding negative attitudes about homosexuality, while adding a layer of ridicule. Although the words are attributed to Heleno, they unmistakably constitute a continuation of the narrator's and father's derision, not a counterpoint to them. The narrator's phrasing of Heleno's response also mockingly exaggerates and mischaracterizes the mannerisms and desires of gay people – seemingly for the benefit of a playfully jeering heterosexual reader. Heleno states, "Quando vejo um rapazinho / novo nascendo bigode / no carnaval ou na rua / numa festa de pagode / meus peitos ficam piscando / minha bunda se sacode"[46] ("When I see a young boy / with a newly-appearing mustache / at carnival or on the street / at a *pagode* music party / my chest twitches / my ass shakes").[47] The verb phrases at the end of this statement – *ficam piscando* ("twitch") and *se sacode* ("shakes") – render a sense of uncontrollable physical movement fueled by uncontained sexual desire:

[45] Borges, 1

[46] Borges, 2

[47] In my translation, I have moved "young" to a different line, due to the different word order in English.

Heleno's chest twitches and his ass (*bunda*) shakes, or trembles, with lustful craving.

This sneering tone and relentless focus on Heleno's body language continues in the poem's subsequent pages, as the narrator chronicles Heleno's lifestyle, clothing, and motions. In what amounts to a laundry list of stereotypes, homosexuality is equated with showiness, libertine impulses, and a lack of self-control – the narrator recounts, "E assim continuou / com sua vida moderna / usando chotinho curto / mostrando grosso da perna / desses que desmunheca / e a trazeira desgoverna"[48] ("And he continued in this way / with his modern life / wearing short shorts / showing his thighs / one of those who has limp wrists / and doesn't govern his rear"). Heleno's short shorts, bare thighs, and limp wrists – as well as, crucially, his ungoverned rear, which represents Heleno's sexual promiscuity by characterizing him as an indiscriminate receiver of sodomy – establish him as a morally and physically lax character. This imagery is illustrated in J. Borges' woodcut print on the chapbook's cover, which depicts a notably limp-wristed Heleno pining after his male lover.[49] Heleno's behavior is not an individual aberration, as it is not specific to him; rather, it is emblematic of a purported new manner of living – a so-called "vida moderna" ("modern life") – which the narrator references and implicitly censures throughout the poem.

Moreover, the phrase about the typical object of Heleno's sexual desire – a young boy with a newly-appearing mustache ("um rapazinho novo nascendo bigode") – goes so far as to imply a conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia, as it conjures an image of a pubescent adolescent rather than one of a fully-grown adult man. This imagery serves to solidify and perpetuate a negative judgment regarding homosexual behavior; in this characterization,

[48] Borges, 3

[49] Borges, chapbook cover

same-sex attraction is unquestionably depraved, debauched, and even vile. The tone, however, aims to be jovial rather than sinister, as the verbs seek to depict an amusing jiggling of flesh, not a premeditated wickedness. In that way, the poem – and the poet – purports to lampoon homosexuality rather than seriously or directly condemn it.[50]

Even the sole instance of heterosexual intercourse in the story serves to critique and punish homosexuality, as the audacious, animalesque copulation between Heleno's lover and Heleno's mother represents a double cuckholding and a triple condemnation. First, the cuckholding of Heleno's father functions as a poetic condemnation of the gayness of his son and of the homosexual presence that has overtaken his otherwise pristine household. Second, the cuckholding of Heleno serves to deny the authenticity of his romantic relationship and to ridicule and indirectly condemn his pursuit of a gay marriage. Third, the aggressive sexual domination to which Heleno's mother is subjected – and to which she willingly submits herself as well – serves to condemn her approval of Heleno's homosexuality. The implication is that Heleno's mother, in approving of and defending Heleno's gayness, has allowed into her household a destructive monster (Heleno's fiancé) that proceeds to ravage her and her family. The phallus of the "super-endowed" lover represents an aggressive, violent intrusion by homosexuality, and by the "modernity" of which this homosexuality is a manifestation. In this sense, the mother's gracious acceptance of Heleno's homosexuality is punished rather than celebrated.

The narrator does not pontificate about the supposed evils of gayness, yet the poem's implicit message, as conveyed by its plot and its phrasing, is nonetheless clear in linking homosexuality to corruption and social decay. Borges' story about "the fag's wedding"

[50] Accordingly, in my September 2022 interview with Borges, he asserted that he has no opposition whatsoever to homosexuality or to gay marriage, and that his only objectives were to sell chapbooks and make readers laugh.

("o casamento do boiola"), even while masquerading as a jovial farce, zealously decries social and cultural transformations. It does so by dramatizing the consequences of homosexuality and by portraying gay marriage as a perversion of the institution of marriage – a core element of what was once, ostensibly, a traditional, respectable society – while also brandishing homosexuality and gay marriage for the purpose of satirizing the clergy and the church.

CHAPTER 4

Romance de Amanda e Mara (2020) by Graciele Castro

The 2020 cordel poem *Romance de Amanda e Mara*[1] (Romance of Amanda and Mara) by Graciele Castro is, in a number of ways, the antithesis of J. Borges' *O casamento do boiola*. Moreover – and accordingly – Castro differs from Borges as well, with regard to several aspects of her identity. Both poets were born in Pernambuco. However, whereas Borges was born in 1935, Castro was born in 1993. Borges is white; Castro is black (or mixed-race; she describes herself as being "of black ancestry"). Borges is a straight man; Castro is a lesbian woman.[2] While these differences alone do not necessarily account for all the differences between the two poems, there is an evident connection, in this case, between the life experience of each poet and the perspectives and attitudes conveyed in each poet's work.

In Borges' cordel poem, homosexuality is portrayed as a corrupt, perverse element of modern society that is to be mocked and criticized; gay characters and behaviors are made to appear distant from, and at odds with, the values of the poet. Castro's poem, on the other hand, affirms that homosexual love is genuine, true, and beautiful; moreover, Castro's personal connection to the topic is affirmed in the poem itself: the narration begins in the third person but shifts to the first person by the end, and the names of the characters in the poem correspond to the nicknames of the author and her wife. In addition, Castro's *Romance de Amanda e Mara* not only recounts an autobiographical story but also proactively and directly defends the gay love story against homophobic attacks. In other words, the poem not only shares the poet's own story of gay love and marriage, but also affirms the validity of gay love stories in general. Castro does

[1] Castro, Graciele. *Romance de Amanda e Mara*. Self-published in Petrolina, Pernambuco, 2020.

[2] I interviewed Castro in October 2021; she shared these biographical details.

so by focusing on love – the emotion that is notably absent from Borges' whimsical tale – and on the warmth and authenticity of the bond that develops over the course of the poem between her and her lover, who becomes her wife.

The opening page of Castro's poem emphasizes the theme of love – specifically, the presence of love in her relationship, which will become the foundation of her marriage. The narration underscores love through the use of repetition of words and names containing the root (and sound) "ama" – the third-person singular form of the verb *amar*, meaning "to love." The first page alone contains the infinitive *amor*, the conjugated form *ama*, the noun *namoro* (meaning "romantic relationship"), and the noun *amantes* ("lovers").[3] In addition, the names of the two protagonists – Amanda and Mara – bring the idea of love to mind: the name *Amanda* begins with "ama," while *Mara* is an anagram of *amar*. Both of these names are among the real-life nicknames of the author and her wife. The use of these particular nicknames, as opposed to other real-life nicknames, was intentional, and was due to those names' associations with the word *amar*.[4] Although Castro's first name is Graciele, she adopted the nickname "Amanda" for herself during her adolescence; in that sense, it was a "real-life" name of hers (though not an official one) prior to the writing of the poem. Her wife's name, meanwhile, is Queomara – with its ending, "Mara," as a nickname. The emphasis on love-related wording continues throughout the poem, as there are 35 occurrences of forms of *amor* throughout; while this count includes the two proper names, the majority of the occurrences are not names but rather the words *amor* and *amar* and their derivations in the form of nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

The poem not only begins with an emphasis on love, but also affirms, in no uncertain

[3] Castro, 1

[4] Castro confirmed this during my October 2021 interview with her.

terms, that love is unconstrained by gender identity or sexual orientation: "O amor não tem sexo / Disso pode ter a certeza . . . E mulher com mulher / Namoro tem delicadeza"[5] ("Love is genderless / One can be certain of that . . . And woman with woman / The romantic relationship is beautifully delicate").[6] These two concepts – first, that love is the origin and foundation of the relationship, and second, that love exists in homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships – set the stage for the development of the relationship described in the poem. That development includes the wedding of Amanda and Mara, the mutual loving support and comfort that their marriage represents, and the aim of building a family by adopting a child.

All of these elements stand in stark contrast to the gay marriage described in Borges' poem – which is a marriage devoid of love, lacking stability or comfort, and without any caring relation or aspirations of family-building. The marriage in Borges' poem is, instead, characterized by financial, moral, and societal corruption; it is based on a toxic combination of unbridled lust and selfish financial interest.

Although sexual excitement, and even sexual acts, do occur in Castro's poem, they are preceded by – and represent an outgrowth of – a mutual loving relation. Sexual excitement is first described in the fourth stanza of *Romance de Amanda e Mara*, only after the aforementioned discussion of (and allusions to) love. Moreover, when it does occur, the excitement is inspired by a voice: "Com você tava sonhando / Ouvindo sua voz rouca / Fico me excitando"[7] ("I was dreaming of you / Hearing your hoarse voice / I get excited"). It is the loved one's voice – not a

[5] Castro, 1

[6] Here, Castro uses the word *delicadeza* in the sense of "beleza que se apresenta de maneira sutil e delicada" ("beauty that presents itself in a subtle and delicate manner") (https://www.dicio.com.br/delicadeza); accordingly, I have translated *delicadeza* as "beautifully delicate" (and not as "fragile" or "weak").

[7] Castro, 1

body – that excites Amanda. This detail serves to characterize the excitement as personal in nature, as opposed to generic and/or merely carnal.

Additional details further support this interpretation of the nature of Amanda and Mara's relationship. When Amanda's "legs tremble" with warmth and passion, it is not a mere moment of lust, but rather the consequence of her partner's written confirmation of the romantic relationship. Amanda asks Mara to be her girlfriend – "Pediu Mara em namoro" ("She asked Mara to start a romantic relationship together") – to which Mara responds in the affirmative. That favorable reply from Mara is what stirs Amanda emotionally, romantically, and physically: "Por SMS Mara respondeu / Aceito, ela diz pro seu amor / Amanda tremeu as pernas / Sentiu tamanho calor"[8] ("Mara responded via text message / 'I accept,' she says to her love / Amanda's legs trembled / She felt such warmth"). The trembling of the legs in Castro's poem contrasts with the vulgar "shaking of the ass" in Borges' poem; while both involve movement of the lower part of the body, the former is an expression of warm, loving anticipation, whereas the latter is presented as a shallow, vulgar, and impersonal expression of lust. Accordingly, in Castro's poem, sex takes place in a bed, whereas in Borges' poem, the sex always happens on a floor or in a hidden corner, never in a bed; this contrast reinforces the humanity of the sex in Castro's poem, as opposed to the animalistic nature of the sex in Borges' poem.

Romance de Amanda e Mara depicts a multi-faceted romantic relationship that is based on a variety of shared activities and interests. The narrator writes, "De livros as duas falam / Música, comida e planos"[9] ("The two talk about books / Music, food, and plans") – the lovers discuss books and films, talk about food and cooking, and share their ideas and their plans for the

[8] Castro, 3

[9] Castro, 4

future. This contrasts with the unidimensional relationship that is depicted and mocked in Borges' poem, in which the protagonist's lover is not even named: the lover of the "boiola" ("fag") is never named and is referred to only as the "superdotado" ("super-endowed"). The only relevant factors in that relationship are the lover's large penis and sexual prowess, and the financial support and stability that are promised by the protagonist in exchange.

Whereas in Borges' poem the sex is impulsive, immediate, and indiscriminate, in Castro's poem the sex is imagined, individualized, and in earnest. Castro's poem details the dreamy anticipation that builds up to the in-person, physical consummation of the relationship. There is no instant gratification or cheap, quick lust; instead, Amanda and Mara meet online and form a long-distance romance through the use of contemporary communication tools, including messaging applications and social media. Desire builds, as the two young women develop an emotional connection and the desire to be together physically: "Mara fica arrepiada / E sua amada quer beijar . . . São quatro da manhã / O fogo ainda tem chama / Em mente elas imaginam / As duas nuas em cima da cama / Os corpos suados e molhados / Belas! São essas damas"[10] ("Mara gets goosebumps / And wants to kiss her loved one . . . It's four in the morning / The fire still has a flame / In their minds they imagine / The two naked on the bed / The bodies sweaty and wet / Beautiful! These ladies are"). Throughout *Romance de Amanda e Mara* there is evidence of, and emphasis on, the interrelation of love and sex; for example, the narrator affirms, "O amor tá em chama / Todo dia vão renovar / Ao se deitar na cama"[11] ("The love is flaming / Each day they will renew it / When they lie down in bed"). Here, sex serves to express love, and to renew it.

[10] Castro, 2

[11] Castro, 6

The loving relationship between Amanda and Mara eventually becomes a marriage, once their love has been nurtured over the course of a caring, multi-faceted relationship. The narrator describes, "Por **nove meses** foi assim / O amor foi **semeado** / Com respeito e amizade"[12] ("For **nine months** it was like that / The love was **seeded** / With respect and friendship").[13] Thus, the relationship develops over time, with a foundation of respect and friendship – both of which are lacking in the story of J. Borges, in which the relationship is brief, impulsive, and one-sided, and in which marriage is a means for financial gain. The "nine months" to which Castro's narrator refers is the period of time during which the lovers are apart – it is a long-distance relationship, as Amanda is in Pernambuco while Mara is in Brasília. However, the period of nine months also suggests a pregnant woman's gestation period, and the use of the past participle *semeado* – meaning "seeded" – is consistent with the implication of that analogy. Just as a baby is conceived and then nurtured in the womb for nine months, the two women nurture their relationship over the course of an equivalent time period. This analogy also portends the protagonists' eventual desire to raise a child – Cecília, a daughter who is in the two women's shared dream,[14] and who has already been named, though not yet adopted.

Although Castro's poem does not cite any specific opponents of gay marriage, it nevertheless functions as a response and rebuke to homophobic attitudes in general. Castro defends and affirms the validity of gay relationships, as well as the equality of heterosexual and homosexual marriages. She does this by conjuring and then preempting homophobic criticisms in various passages throughout the poem. She then conveys her personal experience by shifting

[12] Castro, 3

[13] I have put "nove meses" ("nine months") and "semeado" ("seeded") in boldface, for emphasis.

[14] Castro, 7

from the third person to the first person on the last page of the poem,[15] thereby revealing that the poem is autobiographical: Amanda and Mara are the poet and her wife.

Castro's assertive defense of gay marriage corresponds to her real-life attitude and experiences: in my interview with Castro, she explained that whenever someone makes an ignorant, bigoted, homophobic remark toward her and her wife, she responds directly and forcefully in defense of her identity and her marriage. Meanwhile, as an artist who is prominent in her community in Petrolina, Pernambuco, she aims to be a role model for LGBT youth. The real-life "Amanda and Mara" have transformed their house into a *cordelaria* – a "house of cordel" – with workshops and visiting artists, as well as art education programs for local low-income youth. Castro's aim is to promote poetry and the creative arts. Meanwhile, she is proud of her identity as a black lesbian woman, and she aims to express this in her daily life as well as in her verses.[16] Marriage, in particular, is critical to this mission, according to Castro. She explains that the official recognition of her relationship – which marriage affords – gives her more standing to defend gay relationships against the ignorance and bigotry that she frequently encounters. When read through the lens of Castro's life experience and her mission, her outspoken defense of gay marriage throughout the poem registers as both personal and political.

In the ninth stanza of her poem, Castro employs a chess metaphor to subvert both the patriarchy and heteronormativity. In doing so, the poet normalizes lesbian unions and avers their authenticity and legitimacy. The narrator states: "Romance é tabuleiro / O rei aqui não tem vez / É rainha com rainha / Na jogada do xadrez / Abraço, ternura e desejo / Sempre vai ter sua vez"[17]

[15] Castro, 8

[16] Castro stated this during the interview.

[17] Castro, 3

("Romance is a chessboard / The king, here, has no turn / It's queen with queen / In the playing of chess / Embrace, tenderness, and desire / Will always have their turn").[18] In this conception, the chessboard – a traditional, regimented space – is transformed into a field of equality, acceptance, and love. Male dominance is absent – "O rei aqui não tem vez" ("The king, here, has no turn"), and all-female relationships are normalized: "É rainha com rainha" ("It's queen with queen"). This transformation is not about militancy, but rather about protecting and promoting the expression of human emotion, in the form of "abraço, ternura e desejo" ("embrace, tenderness, and desire").

Having established the validity and equality of gay love, Castro extends this affirmation to the realm of marriage, which enters the narrative in the twenty-fifth stanza: "Romance tem todas etapas / Ninguém venha criticar / Namorou, noivou e casou / Casamento de admirar / As duas vestidas de branco / E uma filha quer adotar"[19] ("Romance has all phases / May no one seek to criticize / Dated, got engaged, and got married / A wedding to behold and admire / The two dressed in white / And they want to adopt a child"). This stanza is the crux of the poem, in three senses. First, it encompasses all the stages of the romance – from dating to engagement, marriage, and having children. Second, it protects gay marriage against presumed criticism. Third – in arguably traditional fashion – it upholds the institution of marriage, in general, as a maker and a marker of legitimacy, acceptance, and family.

The phrase "Ninguém venha criticar" ("May no one seek to criticize") admonishes potential critics of gay relationships and gay marriage. It asserts that gay couples, like heterosexual couples, should be free to partake of the "phases" ("etapas") of romance. The

[18] I have translated "vez" as "turn" (as opposed to "time" or "chance") to maintain Castro's chess game metaphor.

[19] Castro, 7

culmination of the romance is a wedding followed by children, as confirmed by the symbolism of the white wedding dress, the traditional attire of a bride. The phrase "as duas vestidas de branco" ("the two dressed in white") indicates that rather than rejecting wedding rituals, the poet instead supports the adaptation of those customs such that they become inclusive of all-female couples.

The legality of gay marriage in Brazil is critical, according to Castro. She stated during our interview that being married "on paper" (officially) affords her standing and a defense against the detractors whom she has encountered. Those detractors include residents of her city, Petrolina, who have made comments to her personally, as well as cordel poets who perpetuate homophobic stereotypes and messaging in their poems. When asked whether she has read Borges' *O casamento do boiola* and other cordel poems critical of homosexual relationships, Castro confirmed that she is familiar with those attitudes and works, and that she aims to confront them, albeit indirectly – without calling out particular authors or poems – in her poetry. Castro characterizes those homophobic attitudes as being rooted in ignorance; she does not believe that they are necessarily malicious in their intent, even though their effect is harmful.

With regard to cordel poems that reproduce and perpetuate stereotypes, Castro says of their authors, "Por não conhecer, acha que tem que ser aquilo" ("Since they don't know better, they think it has to be that way") – just as some of the people in Castro's neighborhood make jokes demeaning gay people. For those reasons, Castro feels a moral obligation to respond. In person, she never lets homophobic comments go by the wayside; she says that she always responds with confidence and states, "Yes, that is my wife; we are married, just like anyone else." She recounts hurtful comments and jokes that are directed at her on a near-daily basis; for example, men often call her "sapatão" (a derogatory slur directed at lesbians) or slyly ask, "De

vocês duas, quem é o homem?" ("Of the two of you, who is the man?"). One of her ready responses, Castro relates, is, "Da minha vida, pode deixar que vou cuidar" ("I'll take care of my own life, so you can leave me be"). With regard to those uncomfortable interactions, Castro explains, "Se eu me calar, é pior; eu preciso ter uma resposta pronta"[20] ("If I remain silent, it's worse; I need to have a response at the ready"). This response and affirmation is evident on page seven of the poem, as well, as the narrator goes on to state, "Família é feita por pessoas / Na alma possui amor / Lésbica, gays, travesti / Não tem bagunça, e sim valor / Querémos é respeito / Somos gente, sentimos dor"[21] ("Family is made up of people / Who have love in their soul / Lesbian, gays, transvestite / There's no disorder, but rather value / What we want is respect / We are people, we feel pain"). With these verses, Castro returns to the theme of love, thereby reminding the reader that love is what creates a family, and that LGBT people have the same rights, worth, and feelings that heterosexual people do. More pointedly, in response to generalized criticism, the narrator admonishes detractors directly, using the second-person pronoun *você*: "Você que enche a boca / Pra criticar a forma de amor / Aprenda, um lar tem harmonia / O seu princípio é valor / O bem mora em nosso peito / Temos fé em nosso Senhor"[22] ("You who fill your mouth / To criticize the type of love / Learn that a home has harmony / It's principle is value / Goodness lives in our chest / We have faith in our Lord"). These verses not only defend gay relationships but also declare an equality before God. Whereas in J. Borges' poem the homosexual acts represent sacrilege and moral corruption, Castro's poem preaches that gay people are as pious and God-loving as straight people – gay people, just like heterosexuals,

[20] The quotations and descriptions of Castro's comments are from my interview with her.

[21] Castro, 7

[22] Castro, 7

"have faith in our Lord" ("temos fé em nosso Senhor"). With these words, Castro reclaims God, love, and goodness for the LGBT community.

The legality of marriage, and Castro's own participation in the institution, are crucial to LGBT rights and to Castro's own identity and life. She explains, "O casamento pelo civil é um direito" ("Civil marriage is a right") – marriage grants her the same legal rights to shared property, and it allows her to respond to prejudice with the words "She's my legitimate wife." In Castro's view, the legal status afforded by her marriage reaffirms the legitimacy of the union. It will also allow her and her wife to adopt a daughter together – though they have been facing bureaucratic hurdles in that regard and have yet to complete the adoption.[23]

In addition to attaining equality and challenging heteronormativity, Castro advocates for the elimination of gender roles. In the interview, she recounts that when she was a child, her grandmother instructed her, "Você tem que aprender a cozinhar, para você cozinhar para seu marido" ("You need to learn to cook, in order for you to cook for your [future] husband"). That statement contained two tenets that Castro would later aim to overcome: first, the idea that she would necessarily marry a man; second, that it was her responsibility, as a woman, to cook. She recalls wanting to puncture her own finger with a needle, so as to escape from having to sew: "uma agulha no dedo, para não ter que costurar mais" ("a needle in the finger, to not have to sew anymore"). With regard to her grandmother's attitudes and assumptions, Castro explains, "Ela acha que o certo é aquilo que ela vê, enquanto eu achei errado aquilo que eu vi e decidi que eu não iria fazer" ("She thinks that what is right is that which she sees, whereas I thought that what I saw was wrong and decided that I would not do it"). This defiant spirit is present throughout Castro's cordel poem as well.

[23] These quotations and descriptions of Castro's comments are also from the interview.

Castro rejects certain traditional values by embracing a traditional custom. In her view, her own wedding – complete with the requisite white dress – and her marriage grant her the standing to defend her rights as a gay person and her equal status before both society and God. She embraces the tradition of marriage to overcome traditional heterocentric values. That is also the meaning and importance of marriage in *Romance de Amanda e Mara*. Castro confirms this interpretation in the interview, and she goes on to explain that the poem's first-person, autobiographical ending serves that purpose. The final page[24] of the poem shifts from third-person narration to a first-person account, thereby pulling back the curtain, revealing the life of the author, and providing the reader with a behind-the-scenes view of the author's relationship and marriage. In 2014, Castro and her wife registered their civil union; they married in 2017. Accordingly, the newly first-person narration states, "Esse romance que descrevi / De fato ele aconteceu / Comigo e minha esposa / Nosso jardim floresceu"[25] ("This romance that I described / In fact it happened / To me and my wife / Our garden bloomed"). The phrase "de fato ele aconteceu" ("in fact it happened") brings the poem's story into the realm of reality; furthermore, the phrase "comigo e minha esposa" ("to me and my wife") transforms a poem that had begun as a seemingly fictional story into a heartfelt personal account. The romance is no longer between a notional couple named Amanda and Mara, but rather occurs between the author and her wife. Finally, the phrase "nosso jardim floresceu" ("our garden bloomed") refers to the blossoming of the love of Graciele ("Amanda") and Queomara ("Mara") into a loving marriage and partnership.

To Castro, her identity as a woman – in addition to, and combined with, her identity as an LGBT person – is of critical importance to her work and to her mission. She strives to be a

[24] The final page of the poem contains the poem's last four stanzas.

[25] Castro, 8

"bandeira para a visibilidade de mulheres no cordel"[26] ("a flag for the visibility of women in cordel poetry"). The *cordelaria* (house of cordel) into which she and Queomara have transformed their abode focuses specifically on the nurturing of female artists and poets, and the development of a women's creative community. Castro explains that when she was growing up and learned about cordel poetry in the early years of school, she asked her teacher, "Are there any female cordel poets?" The teacher was unable to name any. Subsequently, from the age of eight, Castro wrote poems, but not yet cordel. It was not until she moved to Recife – where she met female cordel poets for the first time – that Castro learned the meter and structure of cordel poetry and began to write cordel poems herself. The *cordelaria*, according to Castro, aims to be a living, vibrant, affirmative answer to her childhood question, "Are there any female cordel poets?" Meanwhile, Castro says that her identity as a person of mixed race – she explains that she is "a descendant of black people" – is also relevant in the context of bringing visibility to underrepresented groups in cordel. Also related to this sense of marginalization is Castro's limited financial means during her childhood: she worked as an *ambulante de rua* (street vendor) selling *espetinhos* (grilled meat and cheese on sticks). As a mixed-race, gay, female poet from a low-income background, she hopes to help normalize the participation of all underrepresented groups in cordel.[27] This is why, she says, she chose to include the phrase "cor negra, cabelo crespo"[28] ("black color, curly hair") in the poem. Castro hopes to encourage black, female, and LGBT youth in particular to pursue careers in the arts. She affirms, "A nossa orientação sexual não interfere em nada para escrever cordel ou ter uma família" ("Our sexual orientation does not

[26] These quotations and descriptions of Castro's comments are also from the interview.

[27] These quotations and comments attributed to Castro are also from the interview.

[28] Castro, 7

interfere at all with writing cordel or having a family") – and that is the message that she hopes to convey and promote through her *cordelaria*.[29] This mission is stated on the final page of the poem, in the thirtieth stanza: "Nosso lar pertence à arte / Que não vai ficar calada / A expressão tem liberdade / Em nosso rosto estampada"[30] ("Our home belongs to art / Which will not remain silent / Expression has freedom / Which is manifest on our face").[31] Castro's creativity, as well as that of the other members of her community, will not be silenced, and it will be freely expressed.

What is the connection between this mission of an artistic community and the concept of marriage? And in what sense is the mission rooted in cordel poetry, as opposed to creative art in general? An unexpected answer to these questions is revealed in the stanza that follows – the poem's penultimate stanza. Castro's narrator writes, "Amanda é do cordel / Profissão cordelista / Mara é do artesanato / É xilogravurista"[32] ("Amanda does cordel / Profession: cordel poet / Mara does craftwork / She's a woodcut artist"). In other words, Graciele ("Amanda") writes cordel poetry, while her wife Queomara is an artisan who specializes in woodcut prints.[33] Traditionally, cordel poems published in the northeast of Brazil are illustrated with woodcut prints – a large illustration that constitutes the entire cover of the *folheto* (chapbook), and then sometimes some smaller illustrations inside, nestled between stanzas (as is the case in the *folheto* of *Romance de Amanda e Mara*). A Brazilian cordel chapbook in its traditional form, then, is a

[29] Interview with Castro.

[30] Castro, 8

[31] Given that the word *estampada* is used in the sense of "que está à vista" ("which is visible, evident, or manifest") – https://dicionario.priberam.org/estampado – I have accordingly translated the line "Em nosso rosto estampada" as "Which is manifest on our face."

[32] Castro, 8

[33] From the interview with Castro.

marriage of poetry and woodcut prints. The marriage of Amanda and Mara parallels, and reinforces, that artistic union. It thereby reaffirms that women, and lesbian women in particular, are creators of cordel. Both of the marriages involved here – that of poetry and woodcut prints, and that of poet and woodcut artist – are revealed to be essential to this work of cordel, *Romance de Amanda e Mara*.

Castro, then, is following traditions in two ways: she chooses to write cordel poetry, and she values the institution of marriage. By entering those two realms, however, she aims to promote inclusion, acceptance, and social progress, doing her part to expand people's views of who gets married and who writes cordel. Contrary to my assumption, it turns out that the woodcut prints that illustrate *Romance de Amanda e Mara* were not done by Queomara; rather, they were done by the artist Leonardo Faria, who presented the prints to Graciele and Queomara as a gift on the occasion of their 2017 wedding. Coincidentally, during that same year, Graciele discovered that her great-grandfather, who had lived in Ceará, had been a *contador* – a "teller of tales" who improvised rhymed verses at public gatherings.[34] Following in the footsteps of her ancestors – by partaking of both the traditional poetic form of *cordel* and the institution of marriage – Castro represents cultural continuity; at the same time, she represents, and espouses, progressive change. This marriage of tradition and social progress is precisely what Castro intends – and it is what her cordel poem *Romance de Amanda e Mara* wholeheartedly expresses.

[34] Castro shared these personal details during the interview.

CHAPTER 5

As ninfas da cachoeira ou o castigo da ambição (2001) by José Mapurunga

José Mapurunga, who was born in 1951 in the northeast Brazilian state of Ceará, in the town of Viçosa, is known for his work as a playwright, novelist, and cordel poet. In 2001, the Ceará publisher Tupynanquim Editora – which specializes in cordel poetry, among other northeast Brazilian cultural production – published Mapurunga's cordel poem *As ninfas da cachoeira ou o castigo da ambição* ("The Nymphs of the Waterfall, or The Punishment for Ambition").[1]

The "ambition" referenced in the poem's title is that of a greedy womanizer – a man who, not content with choosing just one woman to marry, seeks to be with many women at once. Accordingly, the title's "punishment" refers to that man's sorry fate, as he suffers an untimely death while receiving what he thought he wanted: a lustful, hedonistic orgy with all of the lovely nymphs that he had collected from a magical waterfall. This man – who is not the poem's protagonist – is an unscrupulous landowner, or lord, who envies the good fortune of one of his miserly serfs. That serf – named Chi-Chang – is the poem's protagonist, and its model of virtuous behavior. Chi-Chang embodies the qualities that the poet aims to promote both implicitly and explicitly throughout the poem. Ultimately, the message is rooted in the ideal of marriage and monogamy: he who seeks and takes his chosen woman will live happily and prosperously. Meanwhile, the flipside of that message is that he who aims to gather a harem, acting out of sexual perversion and avarice, will suffer at the hands – hands both figurative and physical – of his own misguided and immoral conquest. The poem extols traditional marriage

[1] Mapurunga, José. *As ninfas da cachoeira ou o castigo da ambição*. Fortaleza: Tupynanquim Editora, 2001.

while also associating its pursuit with humility and merit. The respective social roles of the two men (lord and serf) and the qualities that the poet attributes to each of them – namely, perverted avarice and earnest decency, respectively – infuse the poem with a Marxist bent, in praising the exploited worker, which in this case serves to emphasize and lend additional weight to the poem's celebration of monogamy and marriage.

Prior to describing and analyzing the poem's mystical plot and details of its wording and form – and how these serve to build a case for a particular idealized view of marriage – I will briefly discuss the complexities, and seeming contradictions, of the gender dynamics that the poem depicts. I will also briefly discuss the poem's setting – a setting that, at first, might seem bizarre for a cordel poem, but that, upon further consideration, is consistent with the northeast Brazilian popular poetry tradition.

As mentioned above, the poem seemingly places the man in a dominant role and the woman in a submissive and passive one: each man freely chooses his woman (or women, in the case of the greedy lord), while the women have no say whatsoever in the matter. Each man – as we will soon see in the description of the poem's plot – goes to the magical waterfall and is free to select the nymph(s) that he desires. Each man then turns his back and begins to walk away, and the chosen woman (or women) faithfully follow(s). It may appear, then, that the model of marriage promoted by the poem is one of male dominance and female subservience. However, details of the poem's plot and wording ensure that the gender dynamics – and the reader's takeaway – are not so one-sided. Rather, the women in the story hold great power, which is presented – and which manifests itself – in several ways.

The women are the mystical, magical beings in the story, whereas the men are mere mortals. The women are the ones who impose mortal punishment on the greedy lord. Finally,

the serf's chosen wife becomes the source not only of his happiness, but also of the couple's income and eventual prosperity, as she skillfully makes the jewelry that he faithfully and humbly sells at the market. While the men seem to make the decisions, choosing and taking women at will and whim, it is the women who determine each man's fate – whether that fate be his livelihood or his demise. Women grant happiness and financial success to men who seek marriage in accordance with societal conventions and the moral code; they are also the ones who bring about a tragic end to those men who eschew marriage in brazen pursuit of libidinal excess. In Mapurunga's poem, marriage exemplifies, encapsulates, and codifies the elements of noble behavior: monogamy, modesty, honesty, dedication, and devotion. Men enjoy – or suffer – the consequences of their varying approaches to that ideal of marriage. Women, meanwhile, ensure that those consequences correspond to each man's desert. Even if objectified and chosen, the nymphs – who become the wives – are anything but passive and subjected; to the contrary, they exert power and impose justice. In doing so, the women protect and enshrine the institution of marriage and its adherents.

The respectable serf, who lives happily ever after with his magical bride, is named Chi-Chang. The brutal and brutish landowner is named Chen-Dang. Evidently, these are not common names in northeast Brazil. In fact, the entire poem is set "na velha nação chinesa / bem pertinho da muralha"[2] ("in the ancient Chinese nation / very near the Great Wall"). Why is this work of northeast Brazilian popular poetry set in China? And what relevance and message, if any, does the story have in relation to the poet's own homeland and region? While the majority of Brazilian popular verse poems are set in northeast Brazil – and many of them feature regional folk heroes and legends, including the infamous bandit-hero Lampião and his wife Maria Bonita

[2] Mapurunga, 1

– other poems are set in faraway lands, often in past eras. This does not mean, however, that this latter group of "foreign" poems does not have bearing on northeast Brazilian society. Rather, Mapurunga, like other Brazilian cordel poets, employs this sort of geographic and cultural displacement to lend gravity, universality, and flourish to his story – which, just like other cordel poems, is rooted in conceptions of morality, and imbued with messages conveying a sense of right and wrong. For example, as I have discussed previously, Francisco Sales Arêda uses the same approach in his cordel poem *O romance de João Besta e a Jia da lagoa*, which is set in ancient Greece.

If anything, the physical and temporal distance heightens the reader's awareness of a metaphorical commentary about the northeast Brazilian condition. Chi-Chang, a serf in faraway and long-ago China, represents a figure with whom northeast Brazilians are all too familiar: he is a peasant, in the countryside, who struggles to get by and to make a dignified life for himself, in the face of constant oppression by ruthless landowners, other local powers, and the societal structure more broadly. His only hope for survival and dignity is to keep his head down, maintain his modesty, obey social conventions, and marry faithfully, without an eye for gain. In doing so, he improves, somewhat, his economic condition and prospers – though it is understood that he will never become a landowner himself. Thus, for Chi-Chang – and, crucially, for the impoverished and oppressed northeast Brazilian masses that he represents – relative prosperity depends on a combination of decency and capitulation. He must know his place and keep it, while following the conventions and codes imposed on him – the ideology of the powerful. Even as Mapurunga's poem could be read as a celebration of a David's triumph over the Goliath, and of the worker's triumph over the capitalist, it also celebrates and reinforces the status quo: the poet, aligned with the dominant ideology and system of morality, celebrates the peasant's

unquestioning obedience. Marriage – the proper pursuit of it, and the proper living of it – is a cornerstone of that system of morality, as represented in (and espoused by) this cordel poem.

Before looking more closely at the wording and other details of Mapurunga's poem, I will summarize its plot. The story is one of magical realism: Chi-Chang and Chen-Dang are human, and the setting and plot appear realistic – until the appearance of talking animals and a nymph with magical powers. The tale begins in a forest, as Chi-Chang – the poor serf who works tirelessly on Chen-Dang's land – is toiling away, collecting firewood. Unexpectedly, Chi-Chang comes across a shiny silver brooch. He proceeds to place the brooch in his pocket – not with the intention of keeping it for himself, but rather with the intention of eventually locating its rightful owner and selflessly returning it. The narrator ensures that the reader clearly understands Chi-Chang's motivation for pocketing the brooch; this clarification is essential to the story's plot and its moral, as Chi-Chang's decision serves as an initial test of character that will help to bring about his favorable outcome.[3]

The following night, a beautiful woman suddenly appears in front of Chi-Chang, surrounded by a fantastic green glowing light.[4] The lovely woman tells Chi-Chang that she had lost her brooch, and she asks if he has, by chance, seen it. Sure enough, the honest Chi-Chang pulls the brooch out of his pocket and returns it to its beautiful owner.[5] She thanks him for having returned the precious brooch, and then she disappears, fading away into the night like a ghost. This episode constitutes the second portion of Chi-Chang's initial test: not only has he

[3] I will discuss this test, and this portion of the poem, in more detail after the overview of the poem's plot.

[4] This green light is the first indication that Mapurunga's story, which begins in the realm of reality, will include and depend on magical elements.

[5] Beauty is emphasized in this part of the poem, just as it will be throughout the rest of the poem; I will discuss the theme of beauty later in my analysis.

safeguarded the brooch with the intention of returning it to its owner, but also he follows through on that intended action, turning over the brooch upon locating its owner. This display of integrity – the successful completion of the initial moral test – will soon enough provide Chi-Chang with the opportunity to find and marry his ideal bride. In other words, a chance at marriage will be the reward for Chi-Chang's demonstrated honesty. All of this, however, is still unbeknownst to Chi-Chang on the night that he hands over the lost and found brooch.

Lonely and full of longing, Chi-Chang pines for that beautiful woman whom he had seen in the forest. His routine has been disrupted: now he dreams of the woman, and his love builds due to her absence – "Foi pra casa e toda noite / Sonhava com a donzela / Quando ia buscar lenha / Nunca encontrava ela / Na ausência é que o amor / Quase sempre se revela"[6] ("He went home and every night / He dreamed of the damsel / When he went to gather firewood / He never found her / It is in absence that love / Almost always reveals itself"). Rather than merely continue a tedious, arduous existence, Chi-Chang begins to dream about love and companionship – a dream that will be realized, provided he continues to make correct, virtuous decisions.

While dreaming and daydreaming of the beautiful brooch owner, Chi-Chang faces a new predicament: the bread that he packs for himself each day – which is his entire lunch – disappears each day. Hungry and bewildered Chi-Chang has no idea who the thief is. In an effort to find out, he climbs up a palm tree and sits atop it, surreptitiously watching over his lunch from that perch. This approach is effective, as Chi-Chang soon enough sees a deer eating the bread. Immediately, Chi-Chang confronts the deer about the theft-in-progress. The deer, caught red-hoofed, sincerely apologizes for having brazenly and repeatedly stolen Chi-Chang's

[6] Mapurunga, 5

sustenance.[7] As compensation for the misdeed, the deer offers Chi-Chang what will turn out to be a roadmap to his desired woman and a happy future. The animal tells the peasant about a very special secret: the existence, deep in the forest, of a waterfall in which, at any given moment, seven nymphs bathe. The nymphs bathe in the nude, and they leave their veils – each veil is of a different color – on a rock near the waterfall. Chi-Chang is instructed to go to the waterfall, take the veil that belongs to his desired nymph, and turn around and run home without looking back. The nymph – according to the deer's explanation – will then follow Chi-Chang in his footsteps, all the way to his home. Upon arrival, the nymph will ask Chi-Chang to marry her, and he is to respond, "Yes."

Wasting no time, Chi-Chang makes his way to the promising waterfall whose existence the deer had revealed. When he arrives, just as was promised to him, he witnesses nymphs entering the waterfall one by one. Each nymph removes her veil, places it on the rock, and frolics temptingly under the cascade. Chi-Chang observes the scene, as six nymphs enter in sequence – each one more beautiful than the previous.[8] However, despite the phenomenal attractiveness of each of the first six nymphs, Chi-Chang cannot stop thinking about the gorgeous woman he had seen in the forest many days prior. The owner of the silver brooch remains Chi-Chang's sole desire.

Fortunately, or sure enough, the seventh nymph turns out to be that very same woman – the magical woman who had been in Chi-Chang's dreams for so long. Without hesitation, Chi-Chang takes her veil, turns around, and runs home – with the sound and scent of his chosen

[7] The talking animal is the second magical element in the story, and, for the reader, it most saliently situates the story in the realm of fantasy.

[8] Once again, in his description of the nymphs, Mapurunga places great emphasis on female physical beauty; later in my analysis I will discuss this fixation on beauty and its significance.

nymph close behind him. She declares that she wants to marry him, he happily assents, and they marry. In addition to being marvelously pretty, Chi-Chang's wife also becomes his financial salvation: she skillfully handcrafts jewelry, which he sells at the market, and the couple lives happily (and plentifully) ever after.

Chen-Dang – the heartless landowner who is Chi-Chang's lord – becomes extremely jealous and suspicious upon observing Chi-Chang's marital and financial success. At a loss to understand the source of the serf's sudden prosperity, Chen-Dang accuses Chi-Chang of stealing from him. Chi-Chang, in defending himself against that baseless accusation, tells Chen-Dang about the talking deer. That same night, Chen-Dang goes to the forest, baits the deer with bread, and catches the deer. The deer tells the lord about the waterfall and its marvelous nymphs, and Chen-Dang proceeds to go there. However, unlike Chi-Chang, who had properly selected one nymph and taken her veil, Chen-Dang takes a different approach, true to his unsavory character. He grabs all of the veils in his arms and runs away with all of them. All of the women sprint after Chen-Dang in pursuit, and they soon catch up with him. Upon reaching him, they perform a vigorous, intensifying dance, which culminates in sexual favors and a full-fledged orgy. Chen-Dang receives too much of what he had sought; what he thought would be his reward turns out to be his punishment. In the poem's "castigo da ambição" ("punishment for ambition"), the extreme physical exertion results in Chen-Dang suffering a heart attack, and he drops dead, surrounded by his ill-gotten feminine gains. Chen-Dang tried to obtain more than he needed, and more than he could handle. Chi-Chang, on the other hand, did as he was meant to do, and enjoyed the result.

Mapurunga, having implicitly conveyed a clear moral judgment and message, closes the poem by conveying that same message explicitly, in verses that speak directly to the reader. The

poem's narration gives way to preaching, as Mapurunga directs the reader to maintain humility, eschew greed and hedonism, avoid excess, and choose one woman for faithful marriage. Be happy with one woman, make her your wife, and live happily with her – that is the instruction and moral that Mapurunga affirms at the poem's conclusion.

The poem is written by a man, in the voice (or "poetic I") of a man, and for consumption and consideration by men. Mapurunga makes all of these facts explicit through verses in the first and second person – verses in which he refers to himself and his readers as male. In this sense, the poem seemingly approaches the theme of marriage entirely from the perspective of the male gaze and of male agency: men admire, select, and take women at will. The poem's strong and recurrent emphasis on female physical beauty reinforces this perspective, as the women exist, in this poem, primarily as decorative objects of desire. This observation does not preclude an alternative, potentially feminist, reading of Mapurunga's story; however, prior to considering such possibilities, it is necessary to document the evidently male-dominated character of the work.

On the first page of the poem, at the start of its second stanza, Mapurunga writes, "Eu, poeta brasileiro / Amigado com a beleza / Contarei para o leitor"[9] ("I, a Brazilian [male] poet / Friend of beauty / Will recount to the reader"). These three opening lines serve four distinct purposes. First, the first-person commentary – marked by the pronoun "I" – introduces the narrator as a direct and identifiable speaker in the poem. In other words, the narration is not anonymous but rather a male voice, which can be assumed to be that of the poet himself, considering that in cordel poetry the written verses are traditionally imagined to be recited by the poet. The verses, though written, are representations of an implied and imagined oral

[9] Mapurunga, 1

presentation by the author. Second, the masculine adjective "brasileiro" marks the "poetic I" as male. This is consistent with the gender of the author, and it emphasizes that the poem's gaze and perspective is a male one. Third, the line "friend of beauty" introduces the theme of physical attractiveness as a fundamental element that, later in the poem, will be inextricably linked to desirability, particularly in the context of a man's search for a wife – and any given woman's perceived value during that search. Given that all of the poem's references to "beauty" refer to female beauty – in other words, beauty is presented as a female characteristic, not a male one – we can extrapolate that the author is, in essence, declaring that he is heterosexual and thus a trustworthy authority with respect to the male pursuit of personified, feminine beauty. Fourth, and finally, the reference to the "reader" establishes that the "poetic I" is not merely narrating a tale, but rather, or furthermore, speaking directly to the reader, for the reader's benefit.

This reader (the reader of the poem) is also presumed to be a man – and a heterosexual one, at that. Although these things are not made explicit at the opening of the poem – the noun *leitor* ("reader"), though masculine, could be construed as a general term that includes female as well as male readers – the closing stanza of the poem, on page 16, leaves no doubt that the intended reader, and thus the intended recipient of the poem's advice about marriage, is male. Mapurunga writes, "E você, caro leitor, / Que leva vida festeira / Caso encontre sete ninfas / Peladas na cachoeira / Pegue a roupa só de uma / E meta o pé na carreira"[10] ("And you, dear reader, / Who lives a life of partying / In the event that you come across seven nymphs / Naked in the waterfall / Take the clothes of just one / And put your foot on the road"). The second-person admonition to the reader – marked by the pronoun *você*, which is the informal form of the word *you* – presumes that the reader, like the poem's protagonist, Chi-Chang (as well as its

[10] Mapurunga, 16

antagonist, Chen-Dang), is a heterosexual man who desires female companionship. Moreover, the stanza suggests that greedy hedonism, which is expressed as a desire for multiple women, is a common and expected condition among men, and therefore something that needs to be addressed and corrected through moralistic guidance. The average reader is presumed to be not only male and heterosexual, but also (or therefore!) an aspiring Don Juan who is living a "partying" and promiscuous lifestyle – as denoted by the phrase "vida festeira," or "life of partying." The poem, then, is framed, and bookended, with what is unmistakably marked as man-to-man talk. This talk is centered on why, how, and with which considerations the heterosexual male reader should pursue traditional marriage. The man is to seek and appreciate female beauty whilst suppressing excessive sexual desire, taking what the poem posits as the sole viable and felicitous path: choosing, and taking, one woman for the purpose of a fulfilling lifetime partnership.

As I have mentioned earlier, Mapurunga lends gravity and universality to his message by setting it in a distant geographic and temporal space – long-ago China – as well as by infusing the poem with references to the struggle of the exploited laborer, with language reminiscent of a Marxist perspective on social and economic relations. After the first page of the poem sets the scene and identifies the narrator and the audience, the second page dives into a struggle-focused and labor-focused framing of the poem's plot. The words *luta* ("struggle") and *trabalho* ("work") each appear three times on the page, thereby emphasizing the protagonist's predicament and social position. The narrator also makes clear that Chi-Chang is one of many, many people in that position. Therefore, the story, and its moral, are presented as being universally applicable. Most any man, then, is to follow the narrator's advice: remain humble and honest, take but one woman – though a pretty one, to the extent possible – and marry traditionally, in order to become happy and successful. Page 2 begins, "Mas para milhões de

pobres / Tudo ali era um inferno / Era **luta** sem progresso"[11] ("But for millions of poor people / Everything there was hell / It was **struggle** without progress"). The northeast Brazilian audience is expected to recognize this struggle: though set in China, the poem is telling the story of the struggling *sertanejo* – the disadvantaged worker of the Brazilian backlands.

The subsequent stanza reinforces the universality of the struggling worker, with a second mention of the word *luta* ("struggle"), while also introducing the term *trabalhador* ("worker") – "Nesse tempo ali morava / Um rapaz **trabalhador** / Que vivia da lavoura / Comia do seu labor / Era igual a todo pobre / Que no mundo já **lutou**"[12] ("At that time there lived / A **working** young man / Who lived off of the land / Ate by his labor / He was the same as every poor person / Who has **struggled** in the world"). Here, Mapurunga doubles down on the point about the universality of the working man's struggle, going so far as to affirm that Chi-Chang was "the same as every poor person who has struggled in the world" – thereby ensuring that the reader recognizes that this poem, ostensibly about China, is equally, or even more so, a commentary about the reality facing the population of northeast Brazil. Moreover, identifying Chi-Chang as a "working" man lends him a dignity that both endears him to the reader and aligns with his upstanding character and actions – his honesty in passing the initial moral tests, as well as his morality in taking the proper course of action at the waterfall. The fourth stanza on the page contains the third mention of "struggle" and the second mention of "labor," and it serves to depict the arduous and unending nature of the proletariat's existence: "Num **trabalho** que para ele / Nunca era terminado / Ano a ano a mesma **luta** / Sem domingo ou feriado"[13] ("In **work** that

[11] Mapurunga, 2

[12] Mapurunga, 2 – It is notable that the word *lutou* ("struggled") here violates the stanza's rhyme scheme; it is possible that Mapurunga did this intentionally, in order to draw additional attention to the word and its importance.

[13] Mapurunga, 2

for him / Was never finished / Year after year the same **struggle** / With no Sunday or holiday"). The next stanza takes this description further, adding that Chi-Chang works not only year-round but also around the clock: "Sendo ainda obrigado / A ter **trabalho** noturno"[14] ("Also being obligated / to do nighttime **work**"). Mapurunga's depiction of the exploitation and subjugation of a poor laborer by a lord[15] presents the laborer's situation as one of unending struggle.

However, in this story, the struggle of the working poor is not associated with class struggle, and it does not result in a Marxist workers' uprising or revolution. Rather, in Mapurunga's framing, Chi-Chang's best prospect is not to challenge societal structures, but rather to adhere to them, demonstrating dignified behavior as well as reverence for social mores. In this sense, the poem does not encourage subversion, independence, or revolution; instead, it promises rewards to those who follow social conventions. Chen-Dang, the malevolent landowner, experiences his downfall not because he has it coming to him as a capitalist; instead, his demise is a direct consequence of his unwillingness to behave in the noble manner expected of him. Mapurunga's message, then, is not that the working masses will overthrow the wealthy capitalists, but rather that anyone's best hope for maintaining or improving their social rank is to modestly comply with societal expectations – which include (but are not limited to) working diligently without complaint. Respecting and pursuing traditional marriage is presented as a core element of this adherence. That is what Mapurunga accomplishes with his three references to labor and three references to struggle on the second page of his poem.

It is halfway through the poem that Mapurunga reveals marriage as the crux of the compensation for upstanding behavior. The talking deer in the forest, in telling Chi-Chang about

[14] Mapurunga, 2

[15] Also on page 2, in a stanza that I have not quoted, Mapurunga points out that Chi-Chang is a serf who toils on the land of – and under the control of – lord Chen-Dang.

the magical waterfall, explains to him what will occur: Chi-Chang's desired and chosen nymph, after chasing him home, will ask him if he wishes to marry her, and he should accept – "Depois de uma boa milha / Ela lhe perguntará: / Meu senhor, quero saber, / Queres comigo casar? / Diga sim, lhe dê a roupa, / Seja feliz no seu lar"[16] ("After a good mile / She will ask you: / 'My lord, I want to know, / Do you wish to marry me?' / Say yes, give her her clothes, / Be happy in your home"). In this first mention of marriage in the poem, the primary message about it is encapsulated. Marriage is an imperative. Accordingly, the verbs pertaining to it are in the imperative: "**diga** sim" ("**say** yes"), "lhe **dê** a roupa" ("**give** her her clothes"), and "**seja** feliz" ("**be** happy"). By immediately following the first mention of marriage with three imperatives, and by making those three imperatives constitute an explicit roadmap to happiness, Mapurunga prepares and reinforces the poem's primary deliverable: marriage is something to be pursued, accepted, and celebrated. Happiness comes from doing as one is told – and that includes doing what one is told to do with regard to marriage.

The hero Chi-Chang's status as a poor peasant is crucial, in that Mapurunga's message about marriage – and, by extension, about adherence to social norms in general – is evidently directed in particular toward the poor. After being informed by the deer about the opportunity to marry a lovely nymph, Chi-Chang initially protests, claiming that he is too poor to be eligible for marriage. The narrator describes, "Chi-Chang disse: não pode / Sou pobre que nem um Jó / O que ganho não sustenta / Nem a mim, um homem só, / Como sustentar esposa / Se vivo de fazer dó?"[17] ("Chi-Chang said: 'it cannot be / I am poor as a pauper / What I earn doesn't support / Even me, a lone man, / How could I support a wife / If my life is pathetic?'"). However, the deer

[16] Mapurunga, 8

[17] Mapurunga, 8

rebuts that concern, and, using two more imperatives, encourages Chi-Chang to get married without regard to finances: "**Faça** o que estou dizendo / **Tenha** muita confiança"[18] ("**Do** what I am telling you / **Have** much confidence"). Sure enough, by indeed following the deer's advice to the letter, the protagonist becomes not only happy but also financially comfortable. The message is that there is no valid reason for a man to avoid marriage. All men, including the poor, are to hew to the traditional, expected path of marriage.

From there, the notion of marriage as a form of compensation becomes increasingly evident and explicit as the poem progresses. Mapurunga first suggests it, albeit indirectly, by using a form of the verb *compensar* ("to compensate") – its past participle, *compensado* – on page 10 of the poem. The narrator recounts Chi-Chang's feelings during the moment after he has seen the first six nymphs – none of whom are the lovely woman he had seen in the forest and dreamt about for so long: "Porém o nosso Chi-Chang / Embora tão admirado / Não se sentia feliz / Nem estava **compensado** / Pensava apenas na moça / A do broche prateado"[19] ("However, our Chi-Chang / Though impressed / Did not feel happy / Nor was he **satisfied** / He thought only of the girl / The one with the silver brooch"). Here, Mapurunga's use of the word *compensado* is unexpected; in this context, the reader would logically expect a word such as *satisfeito* ("satisfied") – Chi-Chang, despite recognizing the beauty and charm of the first six nymphs, was not satisfied with any of them, because he had a particular woman on his mind. Furthermore, the need for a rhyme does not sufficiently explain Mapurunga's choice of word; he could have used, for example, the word *animado* ("excited" or "eager"), which would have rhymed with *admirado*. However, Mapurunga deliberately uses the word *compensado* so as to advance the

[18] Mapurunga, 8

[19] Mapurunga, 10

notion that Chi-Chang was deserving of compensation for his dignified actions – he had passed the moral tests with flying colors, and he was to be rewarded accordingly.[20]

Mapurunga drives home the point about compensation yet again – and, this time, more explicitly – on page 13 of the poem. The talking deer, in revealing to the landowner Chen-Dang the secret about the waterfall, promises that Chen-Dang will receive compensation, or a reward, in the form of marriage-ready nymphs.[21] The voice of the talking deer is that of Mapurunga; the author, cloaked in deerskin, is the one who is affirming that marriage is a form of compensation. Here is the stanza: "Disse o Cervo: tudo bem / Eu vou lhe **recompensar** / Bem ali na cachoeira / O senhor vai encontrar / Várias ninfas a banhar-se / Todas prontas pra **casar**"[22] ("Said the deer: alright / I will **recompense** you / Right there in the waterfall / You will find / A number of nymphs bathing / All ready to **marry**"). The stanza's final word – the verb *casar* ("to marry") – carries the most weight: marriage, in the form of nymphs willing to marry, is the restitution that the deer promises to Chen-Dang. The link between marriage and recompense is strengthened by the rhyme scheme: *recompensar* and *casar* rhyme, tying together the stanza's first rhyming word with its last, and thus binding the two concepts. Ultimately, Chen-Dang does not receive the offered reward, due to his later missteps. However, the connection between marriage and compensation has been established – and Chi-Chang's happy fate bears it out. A joyful and prosperous marriage is the reward for complying with the ideals of modesty, honesty, monogamy, and commitment.

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[20] Mapurunga employs the verb *compensar* in its fourth meaning, which is "suprir a falta de" ("to fulfill a lack of"), according to the Priberam dictionary definition – https://dicionario.priberam.org/compensado

[21] Here, the compensation is not for a legitimate loss; rather, it is a product of Chen-Dang's trickery: the greedy lord had baited the deer with food, knowing that the deer would eat it and then offer compensation. Nevertheless, the key point here is that the deer, in his speech, directly connects the idea of recompense with the idea of marriage.

[22] Mapurunga, 13

While marriage, overall, is the reward, the specific prize is a beautiful bride. Indeed, physical beauty is arguably the most recurrent, persistent theme in the poem. It lends importance and value to the compensation that marriage represents. It also reinforces the notions of the male gaze and of male agency: men observe, appreciate, long for, and select women, and the successful man enjoys the woman of his choice – a woman whose primary attribute is her set of attractive physical features. The author, having established himself as a connoisseur of beauty,[23] goes on to underscore beauty on the occasion of every female apparition and appearance throughout the story. When Chi-Chang's dream girl magically appears out of the forest, surrounded by a green glow, she is described as "Uma moça de beleza / Só encontrada no céu / Bonita dessas capaz / De adoçar qualquer fel"[24] ("A girl of a beauty / Found only in Heaven / A beauty of the sort that is capable / Of sweetening any sort of bitterness"). The description of the girl's visual appeal continues in the two subsequent stanzas: she has "pele formosa" ("lovely skin") and "Os lábios mais tentadores / Que alguém podia admirar"[25] ("The most tempting lips / That one could possibly admire"). Indeed, the reader learns nothing about this girl except that her body and face are extremely beautiful; the implication is that her beauty is her only relevant attribute, and that if we know the extent of her beauty, then we know the extent of her value. Specifically, we know the extent of her value to Chi-Chang, the male protagonist. The narrator's description of her lips, for example, is imbued with an unmistakable sense of the male gaze and of male desire. The lips are not merely pretty; rather, they are worthy of "admiration," and they are "tempting" – the girl exists for male appreciation and for male consumption.

[23] Mapurunga, 1

[24] Mapurunga, 4

[25] Mapurunga, 4

The poem, in its depictions of women, continues to present an exclusive focus on beauty, as we see when the deer counsels Chi-Chang regarding his upcoming trip to the waterfall. Immediately upon the serf's arrival to the magical spot, he can expect to witness the following scene: "Sete ninfas lá se banham / Cada uma é a mais bela"[26] ("Seven nymphs bathe there / Each more beautiful than the rest"). Once again, beauty is the only quality that the nymphs are said to possess. Moreover, this beauty is unparalleled in its extent, such that, paradoxically, each of the nymphs is more beautiful than the other six. The scene that the deer had conjured indeed takes shape, as promised, when Chi-Chang arrives to the waterfall – and, once again, physical beauty is the only noted quality that the nymphs possess. With this repetition, Mapurunga makes the focus ever-present. The first nymph has a "corpo tão bonito" ("such a beautiful body"), while the third one is "bela como uma deusa" ("beautiful as a goddess") and the fourth one is "bela e sensual" ("beautiful and sensual").[27] Mapurunga then employs the fifth nymph to make explicit that the depicted feminine beauty exists for male appreciation and consumption. In an aside to the reader, the narrator affirms that he would have taken the fifth nymph for himself: "Digo aqui, para o leitor, / Se eu estivesse lá enfim / Ficava sem vacilar / Com essa ninfa para mim"[28] ("I say here, to the reader, / That had I been present / I would have taken, without hesitation / That nymph for myself"). In this instance of man-to-man talk – as in the other one that I mentioned earlier – the poet uses the first and second person to depict the nymph as an object that exists for the purpose of being chosen and taken by a man. The sixth nymph, for the sake of consistency,

[26] Mapurunga, 8

[27] Mapurunga, 9

[28] Mapurunga, 10

is as visually appealing as the rest: "Nada que fosse mais belo / Que ela em cena de nudismo"[29] ("Nothing could be more beautiful / Than her in a scene of nudism"). The superlative serves to convey the nymph's impeccable beauty, and the mention of nudism confers a carnal, sexualized lens to the male gaze. The latter indicates that not only the author but also the reader tends to view women in this manner.

Chi-Chang, however, resists the "temptation" represented by the first six nymphs. By waiting patiently, and by not succumbing – unlike the narrator – to any of the first six paragons of beauty, Chi-Chang proves his worth as a dedicated, proper man. In other words, although Mapurunga characterizes the male gaze as one that incessantly seeks out beauty, he nevertheless characterizes proper behavior as being somewhat resistant to such bodily temptations. It is by patiently admiring the first six nymphs – and, crucially, not taking any of them for himself – that Chi-Chang gains the opportunity to obtain the ultimate prize: the nymph from the forest, about whom he had fantasized. He is "compensated" ("compensado") for his patience: the seventh nymph, his long-standing and long-lost object of infatuation, becomes his for the taking.

Mapurunga's emphasis on physical beauty might seem to position the women in the story as passive, desirable objects of the male gaze. In this framing, the men observe, assess, and select women, and not vice versa; men appear to monopolize agency and decision-making. The deer's instructions to Chen-Dang make the concept apparent: "Escolha a que lhe convir / Pegue a roupa que for sua / Ela há de lhe seguir / Mesmo ela estando nua"[30] ("Choose the one that suits you / Take her clothing / She will have to follow you / Even being nude"). It is the men who "choose," and the men who "take." The woman does not have agency; to the contrary, she "will

[29] Mapurunga, 10

[30] Mapurunga, 14

have to" follow the man. Moreover, the woman must do so despite being nude; she has no choice but to reveal herself fully and to submit to the desire of the man.

All of this may make the poem seem simplistic and male chauvinist – and perhaps it is. Nevertheless, there are three notable details in the poem that might allow for an alternative reading, and even a somewhat feminist one. The first is that it is always the nymphs – never the men – who propose marriage; this runs contrary to Western social conventions, and suggests that, at least symbolically if not practically, the women hold some measure of agency in the marriage process. Second, it is the nymphs who – whether knowingly or not – implement Chen-Dang's punishment, which causes him to die of a heart attack during the turbulent orgy scene. Third, all of the women in the story have mystical qualities, whereas the two men are simply men, with no magical characteristics.

The poem makes three references to the women proposing marriage. The first is on page 8, when the deer describes to Chi-Chang what he can expect to hear from his chosen nymph: "Ela lhe perguntará: / Meu senhor, quero saber, / Queres comigo casar?"[31] ("She will ask you: / 'My lord, I want to know, / Do you wish to marry me?'"). The second is on page 11, when the deer's prediction proves to be spot on, in a description of what occurs when Chi-Chang's chosen woman chases him down: "A ninfa disse: meu bem / Quero [ser][32] sua mulher!"[33] ("The nymph said: 'my dear / I want to be your wife!'").[34] The third is on page 14, when the deer tells

[31] Mapurunga, 8

[32] In the chapbook, this line reads "Quero sua mulher"; however, that is clearly a typographical error. "Quero sua mulher" means "I want your woman," which makes no sense in this context. Moreover, that line does not have the requisite seven syllables that are required by the poem's meter. It is therefore evident that Mapurunga intended for the line to be "Quero **ser** sua mulher"; accordingly, I have quoted it as such.

[33] Mapurunga, 11

[34] The word *mulher* can mean either "woman" or "wife," depending on the context; here, it means "wife," though arguably the two possible meanings overlap – especially if/when marriage is viewed as a man possessing a woman.

Chen-Dang what to expect: "Ela há de lhe fazer / Proposta de casamento"[35] ("She will have to make you / A proposal of marriage"). In all three cases – two hypothetical, and one a description of an actual occurrence – the woman is said to propose to the man. This differs from the Western tradition of men proposing to women. One could argue that this twist bestows additional agency upon the story's women. However, that is a difficult argument to sustain, considering two more facts of the story: first, the nymphs have no choice but to ask the men for marriage – as is evident from the phrase "ela há de lhe fazer proposta" ("she will have [no choice but] to make you a proposal") – and second, the men then have the opportunity to decide how to respond (though the deer recommends an affirmative response). Considering these nuances of the negotiation, one could counterargue that the version of courtship presented in the poem provides the women with even less agency than the northeast Brazilian reader might have experienced in real life. In Mapurunga's poem, the man not only chooses the woman but also has the luxury of the last word, choosing whether to say "yes" or "no" to the woman's obligatory proposal.

Given that the nymphs bring about Chen-Dang's demise, one could argue that they are powerful figures in the story. The narrator describes in the following manner the scene in which the nymphs initiate the orgy with Chen-Dang: "Todas nuas, radiantes, / De repente o cercaram / Como demônios da noite / Com ele juntas dançaram"[36] ("All nude, radiant, / Suddenly they surrounded him / Like demons of the night / They danced together with him"). Later on the same page, the nymphs "galloped" and "accelerated," while Chen-Dang "weakened" and

[35] Mapurunga, 14

[36] Mapurunga, 15

reached "exhaustion."[37] The nymphs' delirious, persistent action and movement is what causes the malevolent landowner's heart attack. Moreover, the women are described as "demons of the night" – they are akin to magical, fearsome creatures who hold the power to bring about a man's death. Notably, the nymphs seem to go off script. Rather than all proposing to Chen-Dang – as could be expected, in accordance with the rules of the game, given that Chen-Dang had taken all their clothes and thereby "chosen" all of them – the nymphs instead gang up on him in a bacchanalian orgy that ends up killing him.[38] The nymphs' action was not prescribed; therefore, one could argue that they demonstrated agency, as well as force, through their deadly action.

The mystical nature of the female characters is another element that could be said to undermine, or at least complicate, the seemingly male-dominated nature of the story. Starting with one nymph's magical green glow in the forest and ending with the nymphs' collective "demonic" dance, the female figures are neither mere ordinary people nor passive objects. When Chi-Chang's preferred nymph appears at the waterfall – following the previous six beauties – the narrator describes her appearance using a Biblical allusion: "Parecia a encarnação / De Salomé em delírio"[39] ("She looked like the embodiment / Of Salome in delirium"). In the Bible, Salome – the daughter of princess Herodius and Herod II – famously demanded the beheading of John the Baptist. Salome won the opportunity to make her deadly request by way of dancing delightfully at the birthday party of her stepfather Herod Antipas,[40] who was so pleased and

[37] "Elas nele galopando" ("They, galloping on him"); "Elas mais aceleravam" ("They accelerated more"); "Chen-Dang ia fraquejando" ("Chen-Dang weakened"); "Ele indo à exaustão" ("He, heading toward exhaustion"); Mapurunga, 15

[38] "Na orgia mais bacante" ("In the most bacchanalian orgy"); Mapurunga, 15

[39] Mapurunga, 11

[40] In addition to being Salome's stepfather, Herod Antipas was also the half-brother of Herod II, Salome's mother Herodius' first husband.

charmed that he granted her any wish.[41] Chi-Chang's chosen nymph, though benevolent, is likened to Salome, and therefore is suggested to have powers of seduction and control. She does not harness these against her husband, because she does not have a reason to do so; however, the other beautiful nymphs in Mapurunga's story mortally punish Chen-Dang, and they do so by means of a seductive dance. That is also a parallel to Salome. Furthermore, Salome's dance – which won her a license to murder – is known as the "Dance of the Seven Veils." In Mapurunga's poem, in the scene at the waterfall, there are seven nymphs, and each of them has a veil. That scene is yet another allusion to Salome. Whether they use it or not, the nymphs have power that men would be wise to fear. That includes the power to propose marriage, and, in extreme cases – such as that of Chen-Dang – to prevent it with seductive and lethal force.

Mapurunga's reader – who is presumed to be a heterosexual man – thus is meant to be left dumbstruck and awestruck, fearful of the consequences of doing anything other than what Mapurunga, women, and northeast Brazilian society all expect of him: remain humble, find a woman, marry her, and live happily ever after.

[41] The playwright and poet Oscar Wilde popularized the story of Salome, with his play *Salomé*. It is likely that Mapurunga, who is a playwright as well as a cordel poet, read Oscar Wilde's play and was alluding to it, in addition to alluding to the Biblical story. (Wilde, Oscar. *Salomé*. Paris: Librairie de l'Art Indépendant, 1893.)

PART II:

Marriage in Northeast Brazilian Stand-up Comedy

CHAPTER 6

"Um show de comédia standup" (2018) by Paulo Araújo

Paulo Araújo is a comedian, born in 1985, who is originally from Recife, Pernambuco, and who has lived in the state of Minas Gerais for the past fifteen years. In addition to stand-up comedy, Araújo has produced, written, and performed in theater productions as well as comedic sketches and television programs. Araújo began performing stand-up comedy in 2008, and he has amassed a considerable following since then, both through his live comedy – which has included performances in over 30 cities in Minas Gerais, as well as in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Recife – and through the video sketches of his comedy troupe Tumate Cru, which have over 100 million views on YouTube and Facebook.[1] He also wrote and starred in the play *Ser corno ou não ser* ("To Be a Cuckhold or Not to Be"),[2] which is an adaptation of Molière's 1664 play *Le Mariage Forcé* (*The Forced Marriage*)[3] about a middle-aged man who pursues a younger woman whom he is then forced to marry despite her insistence on keeping a lover.

Araújo himself has been married for eleven years,[4] with three children,[5] and he moved from his home state of Pernambuco to Minas Gerais, his wife's home state.[6] These elements of his life experience are the basis for much of his material. Much of Araújo's comedy, including his stand-up comedy, revolves around two central themes related to his biography: married life –

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[1] This information is from Araújo's autobiography, on his troupe's webpage: http://tumatecru.com.br/paulo-araujo

[2] This information is also from Araújo's autobiography. The English translation of the play's title is my own.

[3] Molière. *Le Mariage Forcé*. 1664. (The translation of the title is the one used in English-language editions.)

[4] Araújo, Paulo. "Um show de comédia standup." Produced by Cia. Tumate Cru de Comédia, October 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqwF7tuK_o4 – 31:30 (Note: I will cite this performance as "Araújo")

[5] This fact is also in Araújo's autobiography on his troupe's webpage, as cited above.

[6] Araújo, 33:31

specifically, the life of a man in a heterosexual marriage – and cultural differences between Pernambuco and Minas Gerais.

Here I will discuss a stand-up comedy show that was performed by Paulo Araújo, and recorded, on October 16, 2018 before a live audience in the Usina Gravatá Theater in Divinópolis, Minas Gerais. The performance is 47 minutes long,[7] and it is a traditional stand-up set, in the sense that it is a solo performance devoid of scenery or props; on the stage there is only the comedian, a microphone, and a microphone stand.[8] In stand-up jargon, the term *set* refers to an entire stand-up comedy performance by a single comedian, whereas the term *bit* refers to either an uninterrupted cluster of interrelated jokes or a single humorous story or anecdote. A *bit* contains a series of jokes and/or moments that are intended to prompt and elicit laughter. While not all the bits in Araújo's set are about marriage, most of them are, including both the second bit and the final bit. Moreover, one could argue that the second bit functions, structurally, as the actual opening bit – considering that the first bit, though humorous, contains instructions to the audience about turning off their cell phones and remaining in their seats, and transitions smoothly into the second bit.[9] Araújo's set, then, focuses essentially from start to finish on the theme of marriage, by way of a series of personal stories, audience interactions, invented anecdotes, and reflections.

While the primary aim of the performance – like that of all stand-up comedy – is to elicit laughter from the audience, it also conveys and reveals a number of perspectives and attitudes about the topic of marriage – a combination of the comedian's own opinions and his impressions

[7] This duration excludes the additional edited footage that precedes and follows the stand-up set in the video.

[8] There is not even the traditional wooden stool that adorns the stage in most stand-up performances.

[9] Araújo, 2:25

of the sociocultural reality of Minas Gerais (and of human behavior and relations more generally). This is not to say that Araújo's statements reflect his opinions on the subject matter. As the Australian comedian Jim Jefferies has stated in one of his own performances, "There is a big [expletive] difference between what I think and what I think is funny to say."[10] Accordingly, many of the things that Araújo – or any comedian – says during his set do not reflect his opinion. That sort of distinction is also true of novelists and playwrights and other creative artists, including cordel poets – yet it is nonetheless sometimes less evidently true of stand-up comedians, due to the apparently (though not truly) conversational nature of an effective stand-up comedy performance. However, even without taking Araújo's performance and statements at face value or out of context, it is possible, in this case – due to particular aspects of the structure and style of Araújo's set that I will discuss later – to interpret his performance and to determine his thoughts and messages pertaining to the experience of marriage. Moreover, and more interestingly, it is also possible to distill the ideas that are not his own, and which form the basis and backdrop for his jokes.

A valid analysis of a comedian's statements considers not only the words and their meaning, but also the manner in which those words are spoken. Intonation, pauses, accents, impersonations, and other verbal elements shape or alter the meaning of the words. Moreover, just as one should not take the comedian's statements at face value, an analysis of the performance should not reduce that performance to its transcript, or even to its audio. In the same way that a valid analysis of a film must consider not only the film's script but also the visual elements and the nuances of the actors' performances, it is necessary to consider various aspects of the comedian's performance beyond the words spoken and beyond the manner in

[10] Jefferies, Jim. "Freedumb." Recorded in Nashville, Tennessee. Netflix, 2016, 7:15.

which they are spoken; these non-verbal elements include posture, physical movement, and facial expressions.

Prior to entering into a discussion and analysis of the details of Araújo's performance, I will give a brief overview of the set's recurrent subthemes and concepts. Araújo playfully characterizes marriage as a mistake, a devastating existential and financial loss, an exhausting existence, and an inevitable decline from eager excitement to banality and boredom. For the man – or, at least, a man in a typical heterosexual marriage in Minas Gerais – marriage is an emasculating, terrifying experience, wherein the man suffers intimidation as well as physical and verbal abuse from his wife, regardless of whether he attempts to assert himself. However, ultimately it becomes evident that all this is neither Araújo's opinion nor his conclusion; rather, it is a hyperbolic, tongue-in-cheek presentation that is exploited for its potential to capture the audience's attention and engagement, elicit reactions, and generate humor. Araújo's persistent focus on marital conflict serves to generate comedic intrigue and tension, which he ultimately resolves at the end of his set. He closes by earnestly pulling back the curtain on the playful, joking, exaggerated nature of his characterization of conflict in typical heterosexual marriages in Minas Gerais. The objective of stand-up comedy – generating laughter – is an imperative that is served, in Araújo's performance, by a sustained dive into the minutiae of conflict between husband and wife. Non-verbal cues, particularly Araújo's facial expressions, identify his discussion of conflict as amplified fodder for jokes, whereas that supposed conflict's resolution – because it is presented more earnestly (without jokes, in a more serious tone) and in the set's final minutes – is marked as the more pertinent, sincere, and enduring message with regard to Araújo's assessment of married life. Nevertheless, the set's conclusion, which emphasizes marital bliss, neither overtly nor implicitly negates the preceding focus on conflict. Rather, the

closing statement acknowledges the reality of that conflict – even while de-emphasizing it – and presents a paradox to the audience: if married life is so evidently and demonstrably terrible, then why do the married men and women in attendance enjoy their partners' company enough to attend the comedy show together, as part of a couple? After playfully pitting men and women against each other for 40 minutes, Araújo pivots and brings them together, while marveling at the unexplainable forces that make couples happy and that allow marriages to endure in spite of evidently stark odds.

Araújo briefly introduces the theme of marriage 80 seconds into his set,[11] as a 15-second joke that makes up a portion of a scatological bit; he then returns to the topic of marriage 29 minutes in, then stays with it in an unbroken series of bits through the end of the set. In total, the performance contains approximately 18 minutes of material about marriage. Araújo's early joke about marriage hints at several concepts that he goes on to develop later in the set. He remarks,

> Antes de casar, eu conheci minha esposa; eu passei uma semana na casa dela aqui em Minas. E eu pensei, assim, porque no começo do namoro você faz tudo, né, para agradar. Aí eu pensei, vou passar uma semana aqui sem cagar, para ela pensar que eu nem cago. Porque quando o cara tá no começo do namoro, ele faz todo tipo de sacrifício. Agora, depois que casa, não – ele caga e chama para ver. . . . Depois que casa, as coisas mudam.
>
> Before getting married, I got to know my wife; I spent a week at her house here in Minas. And I thought, you know, because at the beginning of a relationship you do everything, you know, to please. So I thought, I'm going to spend a week here without pooping, so that she thinks I don't even poop. Because when a guy is at the beginning of a relationship, he makes every sort of sacrifice. Now, after he marries, no – he poops and calls her to see it. . . . After one marries, things change.[12]

This joke characterizes marriage as an inevitable decline: spouses' behavior transforms from thoughtfully delicate to vulgar. There are two implications here. The first is that once people get married, they stop making efforts to impress their partners. The second is that while marriage increases intimacy, it does so in a way that sacrifices romance rather than furthering it. The last

[11] This is at 2:25 of the video, given that Araújo's set begins at 0:58 of the video (at approximately minute 1).

[12] All of the English translations of Araújo's material presented here are my own.

sentence – “Depois que casa, as coisas mudam” (“After one marries, things change”) is the underlying message that Araújo returns to and develops later in the set: things change, and appear to worsen in many respects, after marriage, yet the marriage somehow persists and even grows stronger in spite of the inevitable superficial flaws.

This introductory joke also presents another topic that Araújo will develop later in the set: a husband’s efforts to please his wife and to avoid her disdain – an effort that eventually grows into a full-fledged fear of his wife’s judgments and reactions. Araújo leans into the trope of the henpecked husband: a man who wishes to assert his masculinity but cannot do so, as he is increasingly petrified, and ultimately emasculated, by his wife’s bullying and excessive demands. The implication of the opening joke – and the premise of the majority of Araújo’s subsequent bits about marriage – is that Araújo himself and the married men in his audience largely share the humiliating, bewildering experience of the archetypal henpecked husband who fears his wife and attempts to alter his behavior to avoid the full brunt of her wrath.

However, Araújo pointedly hedges this characterization in two ways, and for two purposes. First, by way of transparent exaggeration, as well as playful facial expressions and intonation, he makes it evident that his characterization is hyperbolic: just as he could not possibly hold out for an entire week, likewise he is not genuinely terrified of his wife, and she is not nearly as abusive as his words might otherwise suggest. Second, Araújo allows, at several points later in his set, that men cause or prompt their wives’ behavior through dubious or moronic behavior of their own. These two qualifications serve two purposes. First, they make it possible to maintain a semblance of balance, so that the women in the audience are acknowledged and disarmed – rather than criticized and alienated – throughout the joking portion of the set. In other words, Araújo manages to keep the women in the audience on his

side, or at least not against him, throughout the set – and this is evidently effective, as is confirmed when the video cuts to audience reactions.[13] Second, the qualifications facilitate the pivot that occurs at the end of the set. They do so by marking the depictions of marital conflict – and, more specifically, female aggression – as being either magnified or warranted, in preparation for the comedian's closing discussion of marital harmony as the more truthful and pertinent takeaway. Araújo's early acknowledgments that he is merely joking in his depictions of conflict – and that wives are justified in their thoughts and behaviors – condition the viewer to accept and to privilege Araújo's closing point, which is delivered in earnest. The primary purpose of stand-up comedy is to elicit laughter from the audience by joking; accordingly, earnest, non-humorous statements are exceedingly rare. An earnest statement delivered during a stand-up performance stands out as a marker of a true opinion, a priority, and a deliberate message of the comedian. Here I will present and analyze several bits from the joking portion of Araújo's set, and then conclude with a quotation and discussion of his closing statement.

Araújo returns to the theme of marriage 29 minutes into his set and remains focused on it through the end of his set. In re-engaging with marriage, he turns to the audience to obtain their participation and supposed validation, which allows him to make the exaggerated, joking claim that marriage is a mistake and a tribulation that destroys a man's mental and financial health. The audience's validation is *supposed*, rather than confirmed or real, because the comedian uses his position on stage to attribute and describe audience reactions that may not have truly taken place. In this way, the comedian is able to falsely claim the audience's confirmation or validation of what he says; this includes claiming, at various moments, that audience members are acting or appear hesitant, scared, tired, and angry. Araújo employs this technique throughout

[13] The best example of this, consisting of two edited cuts to a woman in the audience, is from 34:55 to 35:06.

his set to build his joking claims.

Araújo re-enters the topic by asking, "Quem é casado aqui? Levantem a mão. Levantem a mão. Não, gente, não precisam ter vergonha, não, podem levantar a mão, sério. Vai – errar é humano."[14] ("Who here is married? Raise your hand. Raise your hand. No, people, you don't need to be ashamed, no, you can raise your hand, seriously. Go on – to err is human.") By creating the impression – by way of repetition of phrases, and mock encouragement – that the audience members seem embarrassed to admit they are married, Araújo generates a false sense of confirmation of his joking claim that getting married is a shameful mistake that people are scared to admit. The remainder of his set – up to but excluding the ending statement – builds on the idea that heterosexual marriage is a downhill path on which the man, in particular, inevitably experiences financial loss, fear of his wife, and a loss of ambition and accomplishments.

After soliciting the audience's participation and identifying the two longest-married men in the audience – who have been married for 22 and 26 years – Araújo playful places them in a competition, in which he attributes a man's apparent fatigue to the length of his marriage. He says of the two men, "É uma disputa difícil, porque dá para ver na **cara de cansado** de vocês. Eu não sei qual dos dois está mais **estafado**. É uma cara de quem já **desistiu**. Já está só levando aí no banho maria; já **não tem mais sonhos**."[15] (It's a hard competition, because it's visible in your **tired faces**. I don't know which of you is more **exhausted**. It's a face of someone who has already **given up**. You're already just on auto-pilot; **you don't have any dreams anymore**.") Again, Araújo employs the technique of attributing characteristics to the audience – this time, claiming physical traits rather than reactions – and he then generates humor by using a series of

[14] Araújo, 30:12

[15] Araújo, 31:14

expressions to transparently escalate his hyperbole. In Araújo's depiction, the men go from "tired" to "exhausted" to "giving up" to "not having dreams" – with each iteration, the comedian employs a more extreme phrasing for the same concept, thereby building an imaginary "marriage staircase" of sorts that descends into abject depletion and hopelessness. Araújo thus establishes a framework that he follows throughout the remainder of his set: as a marriage and a married man's spirit decline, the humor escalates.

Prior to presenting a series of vignettes that illustrate various types of conflict in marriage, Araújo makes one last general joke that serves a number of purposes: first, it establishes his credibility as an "insider" by revealing that he himself is married; second, it acknowledges and engages the women in the audience, so as to keep them on his side in spite of the male-centric critiques that will follow; and finally, it completes the framing of his humorous consideration of marriage, so as to condition and prepare the audience for the primary themes that he will exploit. The following is a transcript of this joke:

> Eu tenho oito anos de casado. Eu aprendi uma coisa importantíssima no casamento para ele durar. Importantíssima. O mais importante para um casamento durar é o homem aprender a abrir mão das coisas. Porque o homem casa, geralmente, achando que vai ser tudo do jeito dele. E não é assim. É ou não é, mulherada? [audible affirmative response from women in the audience] Não é assim. Quando o homem casa, ele precisa aprender a abrir mão das coisas... como, por exemplo, da felicidade... da paz... do dinheiro.[16]
>
> I've been married for eight years. I learned something that is extremely important in a marriage for it to last. Extremely important. The most important thing for a marriage to last is for the man to learn to give things up. Because a man marries, generally, thinking that everything will be his way. And it's not like that. Am I right, ladies? [audible affirmative response from women in the audience] It's not like that. When a man marries, he needs to learn to give things up… like, for example, happiness… peace… money.

In this joke, Araújo employs a joking technique that Freud, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, refers to as *displacement*: the comedian generates humor by first creating an expectation of a certain type of ending to a story, then subverts that expectation by replacing the

[16] Araújo, 31:30

expected resolution with an entirely unexpected one.[17] Here, Araújo lays the groundwork for the *displacement* in two ways: by sharing aspects of his own identity, and by using repetition and the language of marketing. First, by beginning the joke with the revelation that he, too, is a long-married man, Araújo leverages his insider status to intensify the displacement effect: the listener is conditioned to expect specific, practical advice based on Araújo's personal lived experience. Second, by repeating both the word *importantíssima* ("extremely important") and the phrase "aprender a abrir mão das coisas" ("learn to give things up"), Araújo creates and ratchets up the expectation that he is about to share supremely useful practical advice about some specific, implicitly minor items that married men need to forego. Then, Araújo subverts that expectation with his punchline, which is delivered after a crucial pause. "Happiness, peace, and money" – not minor items, but rather the broadest and most crucial elements of life – are the things that a man must give up in order to make his marriage function. Initially, Araújo gives validation to the women in the audience by affirming that men are clueless and that women know better. However, the punchline undermines that affirmation by revealing that there is no concession that a man could make to make a marriage work, short of giving up everything that he could possibly want and need in life. This implies – contrary to the message that Araújo had confirmed with the women in the audience – that the problem is not the expectations or behavior of men, but rather the behavior of women, or the institution of marriage itself. While this framing is a joke in its own right, it also serves to pave the way for the anecdotes and vignettes that follow it.

Araújo's first vignette in the subsequent series employs wordplay. Its *tendentious element* posits three things about women in heterosexual marriages: that the wives use money

[17] Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1991 (original work published 1905).

selfishly, that they are a drain on the finances of their husbands, and that they use intimidation – effectively and successfully – for the purpose of controlling their husbands and maintaining the status quo. Here, the word *tendentious* is Freud's jargon, as used in the context of joke analysis, to denote a joke's underlying message; the *tendentious element* is distinct from the *joking envelope*, which is the humor-generating technique that delivers the message.[18] This is not to say that the message corresponds to the comedian's actual opinion. Still, according to Freud, it is possible to identify a message – whether or not that message corresponds to true opinion – that is separate from the joking mechanism. Although Araújo's joke (which is transcribed below) appears to be a misogynist condemnation of women, its punchline also insinuates that perhaps it is the husbands who are somewhat at fault. The question of blame remains open to interpretation. In any case, the joke playfully dramatizes the petty nature of marital conflict.

The following is a transcription of the bit, followed by my translation of it:

> O dinheiro do homem paga as contas da casa, mas o dinheiro da mulher paga as contas dela. Lá em casa, a minha esposa recebeu o salário dela e falou assim: "Ah, amor, recebi o meu salário essa semana. Acho que vou fazer luzes. Eu falei, "Ué, por falar em luzes... [pause, laughter]... porque você não paga uma conta de luzes aí?" Aí ela falou, "Por falar em conta... porque você não conta quem é essa Vanessa que está curtindo as suas fotos no Facebook..." Aí eu falei... [pause] "Pode deixar, que eu pago [delivered quickly and quietly, after a pause]. Não vamos discutir por mixaria também, né."[19]
>
> The man's money pays the bills of the home, but the woman's money pays her own bills. At home, my wife received her salary and said this: "Oh, love, I received my salary this week. I think I'll get highlights done in my hair. I said, "Hey, speaking of lights… why don't you pay one of those light bills?" Then she said, "Speaking of accounting… why don't you account for that Vanessa woman who has been liking your photos on Facebook…" Then I said… [pause] "Never mind, I'll pay [delivered quickly and quietly, after a pause]. Let's not argue over trifles."

This bit's wordplay – which cannot be rendered fully in an English translation – revolves around the words *luzes* and *conta*. The word *luzes* means "highlights" (in the sense of hair styling) as well as "lights" (in the sense of electric lights), whereas the word *conta* is both the noun "bill"

[18] Freud, as cited previously.

[19] Araújo, 31:59

(in the sense of an electric bill) and the verb "to count" in the third-person singular of the present tense. In the exchange, the husband critiques his wife's selfishness, only to have the tables turned by his wife, who retools the man's own wording and phrasing to accuse him of dubious connections with other women.

Initially, the wife is portrayed as caring only about her own desires. Rather than concerning herself with – and contributing to – critical household expenses such as the electric bill, she opts to spend her money in a frivolous, self-serving manner. The husband points this out, employing what seems – at least to him – to be a clever spin on the wife's wording, thereby using her own word against her. He begins, "Por falar em luzes…" ("Speaking of lights…"), suggesting to his wife – and to the audience – that the wife is self-absorbed and has improper priorities: she is concerned with the wrong type of "lights." That line gets a big laugh from the audience, due to the humor in the husband's wordplay. However, while that line is a successful joke in its own right, its greater function in the bit – and, in particular, the function of the laugh that it generates – is to set up the audience to feel the same rise and fall of power that the husband himself experiences in the story. In other words, the point of the bit is that it is the wife who gets "the last laugh": the audience vicariously experiences the husband's gleeful verbal triumph, only to realize, in short order, that his victory was short-lived, and that the wife comes out on top. The reversal, and the power shift, occurs when the wife retorts, "Por falar em conta…" ("Speaking of accounting…"), because with this line, it is now the wife who uses the husband's own phrasing – "Por falar em…" ("Speaking of…") – and his wording ("conta") against him. Moreover, her retort raises the stakes of the discussion: whereas the husband had implicitly accused his wife of frivolity and selfishness, her response insinuates that he has potentially betrayed her. Terrified by this sudden, unexpected escalation, the man freezes for a

moment, then retreats from the interaction, thereby giving up his powerful victory and opting, instead, for a pathetic escape.

Accordingly, the crux of this bit – which is marked by a long (two-second) pause in Araújo's delivery – is the short period during which the husband is seemingly considering his options for responding in the face of the wife's damning accusation. Ultimately, instead of defending himself against the wife's pointed observation, the husband opts to attempt an escape from the conversation: after a nervous pause, he utters the phrase "Pode deixar, que eu pago" ("Never mind, I'll pay") quickly and quietly, while looking down at the floor. The delivery and the body language, taken together, imply that the husband recognizes his potential guilt and tries to avoid facing it. Either he knows that he is in the wrong, or he fears the wrath of his wife that could result from an extended discussion of the topic. What is not evident in this exchange is the extent to which the man truly accepts fault as opposed to merely fearing the specter of his wife's reactions – that question remains open to interpretation. What is clear, however, is that the man fears his wife, and that the wife gets her way in the end. Meanwhile, a relationship that was romantic at its outset has, after marriage, become antagonistic: the husband and wife jockey for power and independence, and the wife obtains the upper hand.

While Araújo packages this scene in a *joking envelope*, and although he aims to mollify it, or defang it, later in his set, the primary *tendentious element* of the bit – the wife's clever, overpowering nature and the husband's fear of her – remains pertinent. One could argue that, in spite of the apparent resolution and marital peace attained at the conclusion of Araújo's performance, a misogynistic and pessimistic message from this earlier bit, and others, might nonetheless persist. Perhaps, in accordance with the old saying, every joke – or at least this one – contains a kernel of truth. In this case, the revealed truth is not so much that the wife is

domineering, but rather that the man sees her as such. Araújo tells the story in the first person: it is not just any husband and wife, but rather Araújo himself and his own wife. In this way, Araújo suggests that the story is based on his own experience, as opposed to an abstract theory about human behavior. However, the first-person perspective of the bit does not indicate that Araújo's characterization is truthful, or that it reflects his actual opinions or lived experience.

In his set, Araújo begins with first-person stories about his own experiences – or alleged experiences, as he may well have invented them for their comedic value. Then, he shifts to the audience's experiences, claiming that the way in which the men and women in the audience react to his jokes confirm his characterizations of married life. Finally, Araújo makes broader jokes about married life in general. By starting with the first person, then shifting to the second person (singular and plural), and then closing with the third-person plural, Araújo develops a case that progresses from personal experience to supposed confirmation to broad assertion.

However, Araújo also toggles – within each bit – among these three types of statements. While telling some of his personal stories, Araújo at times purports to see or hear an audience member confirming his sentiments. Moreover, Araújo begins several of his personal stories with opening statements that convey a general claim. For example, Araújo's bit about "luzes" and "conta" opens with a claim of a general nature: "O dinheiro do homem paga as contas da casa, mas o dinheiro da mulher paga as contas dela" ("The man's money pays the bills of the home, but the woman's money pays her own bills"). This opening serves to frame the remainder of the bit as a detailed example of a general claim. The next bit that I will analyze – part of which is quoted below – does the same. By structuring his overall set as specific-to-general but his bits as general-to-specific, Araújo conveys a sense of empirical analysis (evidence that leads to conclusions) as well as a sense of didactic presentation (facts illustrated by examples).

I will discuss two more stories that Araújo tells in the first person, then one in which he pivots from his own experience to that of the audience, and then two that are abstract and general. It is by Araújo's design that the bits occur, for the most part, in that progression.

In his subsequent bit, which consists of an opening statement followed by two jokes, Araújo opens by affirming that women are jealous. He then goes on to tell a story about his wife's angry reactions to the frequent phone calls that he receives from a certain other woman. Here is a transcription of the first half of the bit:

> As mulheres têm um ciúme louco, né. De repente, assim, do nada, a minha esposa – de vez em quando acontece isso – ela chegou com meu celular na mão e falou assim: "Paulo, essa mulher está ligando para você de novo. Eu já falei que eu não suporto essa mulher. Atende e fala para essa mulher não te ligar mais. Aí eu peguei o telefone, atendi, e falei, "Mãe... para de me ligar, mãe, por favor."[20]
>
> Woman are insanely jealous, right? Suddenly, you know, out of nowhere, my wife – occasionally this happens – she came over with my cell phone in her hand and said: "Paulo, this woman is calling you again. I already told you that I can't stand this woman. Answer and tell this woman not to call you anymore. So I took the phone, answered, and said, "Mom… stop calling me, Mom, please."

This is, once again, a joke that utilizes *displacement* as its primary joking technique. The combination of the introductory phrase "as mulheres têm um ciúme louco" ("women are insanely jealous") and the wife's repeated use of the phrase "essa mulher" ("this woman") cause the listener to imagine that the wife is angry about a woman who is romantically pursuing her husband. Araújo, in his telling of the joke, reinforces this impression – and misdirection – by having the wife angrily say "essa mulher" three times, always with pointed emphasis on the phrase. The joke's reveal, or twist, occurs when Araújo begins his phone call to "this woman" with the word *Mãe* ("Mom") – the woman in question, it turns out, is not a potential lover, but rather Araújo's mother. Although the full sentence is "Mãe... para de me ligar, mãe, por favor" ("Mom… stop calling me, Mom, please"), Araújo, in his delivery, pauses after the word "Mom"; he does so because he anticipates – and indeed receives – a big laugh from the audience

[20] Araújo, 32:41

immediately upon the reveal.

While the humor is generated by the displacement, the bit serves not only to be funny but also to advance Araújo's through-line – a joking claim that thematically and logically links the various marriage-related bits in the set. Like the preceding bit, this one characterizes the wife as angry and jealous, and it presents the husband as being afraid of her. Faced with the wife's wrath, and fearing her reactions, the husband immediately capitulates.

The joke is somewhat more complex thematically than the preceding one, in that it introduces the relationship between a wife and her mother-in-law while also implying a curious type of connection between them. There is both opposition and convergence in the tale of the wife and her mother-in-law. The wife competes with her mother-in-law for the husband's attention; meanwhile, the manner in which she does so is reminiscent of a parental figure. As presented in this story, the wife's fearsome authority brings to mind that of a mother scolding and commanding her child. Araújo's fear of his wife, then, is an extension of his childhood fear of his parents; the wife fills the role that the mother once played.

While this conclusion is implicit in the first half of the bit (the portion quoted above), Araújo chooses to make it explicit in the bit's second half (not quoted above), when he states, "Com o passar dos anos, a sua mulher vai ficando igualzinha à sua mãe"[21] ("As the years pass, your wife gradually becomes just like your mother"). In Araújo's account, both of the female figures – the mother, and then the wife – harshly tell a man the same thing: "Engole o choro"[22] ("Swallow your tears"). The wife, like the mother, is not to be messed with, and the man's only safe response to her dominion is prompt capitulation.

[21] Araújo, 33:05

[22] Araújo, 33:20

In a later bit, Araújo maintains this through-line and goes even further, in that he explicitly mentions his own tears, and in that he classifies his recurrent capitulation as a form of emasculation. Here I will relate the bit, rather than transcribe it, due to its length. Araújo opens by saying that he did something wrong and that his hot-tempered wife, "for the thousandth time,"[23] got angry and yelled at him. Deciding to finally stand up for himself, he mustered the courage to speak up, saying, "I'm the boss of this house!" ("Quem manda nessa casa aqui sou eu!").[24] However, in the joke's reveal, Araújo admits that his wife had already left the house ten minutes prior, and that he had made his "brave" statement while "looking at the mirror, crying" ("olhando para o espelho, chorando").[25] The "tears" that had been alluded to in the preceding bit appear in this one, as the character of Araújo, in the shadow of his wife, is reduced to a crybaby. Later in the bit, Araújo recounts his second attempt, in which he makes his brave statement – "I'm in the boss of this house" – to his wife via a WhatsApp text message.[26] His wife, shocked and indignant, replies, "What did you say to me?!" ("O que foi que você disse?!"). At this point in the bit, Araújo recounts his reaction as follows: "Aí, nessa hora, você precisa sustentar a sua masculinidade, então eu peguei o meu celular e respondi, 'Desculpa, foi o corretor; eu quis dizer que te amo'"[27] ("Then, at that moment, you have to sustain your masculinity, so I grabbed my phone and responded, 'I'm sorry, that was autocorrect; I meant to say that I love you'"). This joke employs a combination of displacement and irony to generate humor. Araújo's build-up – the mock explanatory phrase "Aí, nessa hora, você precisa sustentar a sua masculinidade"

[23] "a milésima vez que ela brigava comigo" (Araújo, 35:15)

[24] Araújo, 35:21

[25] Araújo, 35:41

[26] Araújo, 36:15

[27] Araújo, 37:49

("Then, at that moment, you have to sustain your masculinity") that precedes his quotation of his own text message – causes the listener to expect a text message that confidently asserts the husband's authority. Instead, the content of the text message is quite the opposite: it is merely yet another meek escape, by which Araújo retreats to a safe position of passive acquiescence to his wife. Through the *displacement* technique, the phrase "sustentar a sua masculinidade" ("sustain your masculinity") is revealed to have been ironic. Both the surprise and the irony provoke laughter. Meanwhile, by invoking masculinity and his lack thereof, Araújo makes his most direct statement yet of the through-line for his jokes: in his marriage – and due to his marriage – he feels emasculated.

Although one might initially assume that the bit focuses primarily on the wife's menacing anger and aggression, a closer examination of Araújo's delivery and facial expressions indicates that the bit's primary focus is actually the husband's cowardice. This is an instance of a joke whose nuances would be lost if the performance were reduced to its transcript. Ultimately, what is being mocked most harshly throughout this bit is not the wife's behavior, but rather the husband's behavior – or, perhaps, the institution of marriage that has placed the husband in this predicament to begin with.

In the first part of the bit – immediately after quoting his own declaration ("I'm the boss of this house!") – Araújo abruptly looks at someone in the front row of the audience, smirks sheepishly, and playfully remarks, in an aside, "Só porque não pareço ter muita credibilidade…"[28] ("Just because I don't appear to have much credibility…"). In this way, he implies that the audience member had laughed at him in disbelief. Here, Araújo employs a

[28] Araújo, 35:29

technique that I refer to as an *attributed reaction*,[29] whereby he pretends to react to an unexpected intervention from an audience member. Other audience members, having no way of ascertaining whether there was indeed a reaction from a spectator, are conditioned by their habits of social interaction to accept the supposed impromptu exchange at face value and to believe that it was spontaneous. The function of this particular *attributed reaction* is to project the notion, in the minds of the spectators, that Araújo has been reduced to a pathetic and weak man, such that it would be difficult to believe that he is capable of standing up to his wife.

However, Araújo's smirk and smile are crucial in shaping the impression caused by this *attributed reaction*. Rather than believing that Araújo is truly weak, the audience is led, by the smirk, to recognize that Araújo's commentary is a self-deprecating joke. If the delivery had instead been in a tone of sadness, anger, or frustration, then the audience might have believed that Araújo was truly lamenting his lack of power. However, here the viewer understands that the comedian is poking fun at himself, satirizing his own behavior as a husband who fails to defend himself from the pressures of married life.

This interpretation is reinforced by the framing of the bit, as Araújo opens by saying that he had done something wrong[30] that had provoked his wife's anger. The implication is that the wife's reaction was understandable and perhaps justified. In this bit, Araújo places the critical spotlight on himself – or on the institution of marriage, for having reduced him to an emasculated version of himself – and does not blame his wife per se.

Araújo does not abstain, at other moments in his set, from characterizing his wife's behavior as violent and extreme. To the contrary, he even ratchets up his commentary in other

[29] This is a term that I have created for the purpose of this analysis.

[30] "Eu fiz uma merda lá" (Araújo, 35:11)

bits, moving on from the preceding depictions of verbal abuse to mentions of physical abuse committed by his wife. However, when he does so, he qualifies those observations about his wife in three ways. The first two are qualifications that I have previously described: first, he acknowledges that the wife's anger is provoked by the husband's errant behavior, and second, he uses a playful tone of voice and facial expression to convey that his characterization of violence is hyperbolic. Third, and more interestingly, he ascribes his wife's behavior not only to the condition of marriage, but also to the local culture; in other words, she acts like that not simply because she is a woman, and not just because she is married, but specifically because she is a married woman who was born and raised in the state of Minas Gerais. Crucially, Araújo attributes his wife's behavior not to her individual personality, but rather to social and cultural factors – the conditions of being married and of being from Minas Gerais. This allows Araújo to make purportedly generalizable observations – extrapolations that he subsequently "confirms" by way of the audience's alleged participation.[31] Araújo's intention, then, is not to comment on his own life, but rather to move, over the course of his set, from the first person (himself) to the second person (the audience) to the third person (married couples in general) – a rhetorical staircase that leads to red-herring conclusions. He then challenges those conclusions, by means of his earnest closing consideration of marriage and human behavior.

Accordingly, Araújo's claim about the women of Minas Gerais is not intended to be taken at face value as a legitimate differentiation of Minas Gerais women from other Brazilian women. Rather, Araújo is employing an *insider/outsider* technique to connect with the audience and to establish credibility: he presents himself not only as an insider (a married man who, like

[31] Here I have placed the word *confirms* in quotation marks, and included the qualifier *alleged*, so as to suggest that Araújo once again employs the stand-up comedy technique of *attributed reaction*: although he will further claim that the audience has reacted in certain ways, he is in fact either exaggerating or falsely ascribing those reactions.

the audience, lives in Minas Gerais), but also as an outsider (someone who hails from Pernambuco, a different state in a different region of Brazil) who benefits from a more distant, comparative perspective. The spectator then retains a sense of Araújo's insider/outsider authority on the topic – even after discounting or forgetting, by the end of the set, the aspects of Araújo's claims that were specific to Minas Gerais. The evidence for this interpretation is that there are no further mentions of Minas Gerais after this bit (which is transcribed below). The bit employs several techniques, and functions on a number of levels. It establishes *insider/outsider* status, then heavily incorporates *attributed reactions*, then closes with *displacement*. Meanwhile, it evolves from the personal to the general, pausing at every step along the way: the first person, then the second person singular, then the second person plural, and finally the third person plural. The following is a transcription of the bit:

> Eu casei com uma mulher mineira. Não sou de Minas. Eu casei com uma mulher mineira, e eu não sabia que a mulher mineira era tão brava. Eu não sabia. Eu não sabia que era normal aqui em Minas a mulher bater no marido. Não sabia disso. Deixa ver aqui se estou falando a mesma língua que vocês. . . . Levantem a mão de novo quem é casado aqui. Você aqui, moço. Se a sua mulher for muito brava – calma, calma, calma, calma, que estou vendo, estou vendo você – se a sua mulher for muito brava, não precisa falar não, só pisca. Não, peraí, para não te queimar, vou fazer coletivo agora; pode valer namorado, noivo, pode valer tudo. Se a mulher de vocês for muito brava, quando eu contar até três, vocês vão dar uma psiudinha. . . . Um, dois, três [whistles and laughter on "três"]. Pronto, pronto, pronto. Então, tá tudo mundo falando a mesma língua. Beleza, vocês vão me entender. . . . Tem gente engasgando até agora! É engraçado que todas as mulheres aqui hoje são loucas, não é? Mas, é estranho, como pode? Eu vi recentemente uma notícia que explica isso. Deixa pegar aqui, eu até vou ver no celular. Tá aqui: "Cientistas comprovam: mulheres só são loucas porque homens só fazem merda" [women in the audience cheer]. Obrigado.[32]
>
> I married a woman from Minas Gerais. I'm not from Minas. I married a woman from Minas, and I didn't know that women from Minas are so angry. I didn't know it. I didn't know that it was normal here in Minas for a woman to hit her husband. I didn't know that. Let's see here whether I'm speaking the same language as you all. . . . Raise your hands again, those of you here who are married. You here, young man. If your wife is very angry – calm down, calm down, calm down, calm down, I see, I see you – if your wife is very angry, you don't need to say it, just wink. No, wait, so as not to ruin you, I'll do a general one now; it counts if you're a boyfriend, a fiancé, everything counts. If your wife is very angry, when I count to three, you're going to give a little whistle. . . . One, two, three [whistles and laughter on "three"]. There it is, there it is, there it is. So, everyone's speaking the same language. Great, you'll understand me. . . . There are people choking even now [from holding their breath]! It's funny that all the women here today are crazy, isn't it? But it's strange, how can that be? Recently I saw a news article that explains it. Let me get it now, I'm even going to look it up on my phone. Here it is: "Scientists prove: women are crazy only because men always screw up" [women in the audience cheer]. Thank you.

[32] Araújo, 33:31

Rhetorically, the bit serves to establish that the audience members' experiences and feelings are analogous to those depicted in the personal anecdotes that Araújo had recounted previously. Araújo suggests that the men and women in attendance are each behaving – even in the current moment, during the show – in precise accordance with his prior representations. He does so through the use of both female and male *attributed reactions*. He then claims those behaviors as evidence for a general characterization: wives are angry, and their husbands are scared of them. Meanwhile, however, Araújo also mitigates his characterization of women's anger, and then puts forth a justification for it. He does so – while also generating humor in the process – using intonation, non-verbal cues, and then *displacement*.

Here I will briefly explain how Araújo applies each of these techniques. By requesting a signal from a man in the audience and then saying "calma, calma, calma, calma" ("calm down, calm down, calm down, calm down") to that man's wife, Araújo creates the impression, for the rest of the audience, that the woman is so furious at her husband that she needs to be told four times to calm down. This is the female *attributed reaction* that Araújo employs to imply confirmation of his point that wives are angry. However, by smiling during the delivery of that line – and by using intonation that is evidently not alarmist (contrary to the words) – Araújo makes it clear to the audience that the woman is not truly livid, and that there is no genuine anger in the audience, nor any disruption to the performance's playful tone. In other words, in this case the comedian ensures the transparency of his use of the *attributed reaction* technique. The woman is not disrupting the atmosphere of the show, nor is the insinuated anger genuinely ascribed to her. Likewise, when Araújo later conjures the male *attributed reaction* – that the married men in the audience are still choking from holding their breath – the line "Tem gente engasgando até agora!" ("There are people choking even now") is delivered with a laugh, which

prevents it from being taken seriously. The women in the audience are not truly upset, and the men are not truly scared. The viewers understand that – just as Araújo intends.

The purpose of the transparency of the *attributed reactions* is not merely to maintain a lighthearted atmosphere conducive to laughter.[33] Rather, Araújo uses the mitigation and transparency to begin to prepare the viewer for the closing point of his set, which is his true message: namely, that a married couple's love and desire to be together is stronger and more genuine than the superficial squabbles that might appear to pit the husband and wife against each other or push them apart.

The *displacement* at the end of the bit serves the same primary purpose; beyond generating humor, it levels the playing field for wives and husbands by restoring a semblance of balance to the criticisms. When Araújo states that he saw a news article that explains why women are crazy, and when he reaches for his phone ostensibly to read that article's conclusions, this creates in the spectator the expectation of legitimate, newsworthy information – such as the conclusions of a scientific study – and the assumption that the information in question will pertain to the physiology or psychology of women. Instead, the diagnosis is neither scientific nor related to women at all. The displacement counters those expectations with an unexpected statement, in the form of a crass blanket assertion that places the blame squarely on men: "mulheres só são loucas porque homens só fazem merda" ("women are crazy only because men always screw up"). While this surprise generates laughter, it also serves to regain the agreement of the women in the audience, thereby restoring a sense of balance and neutrality to the set.[34]

[33] After all, it might have been possible, in an alternate stand-up set, to generate humor and laughter without softening or reversing the critiques or characterizations made within the set.

[34] The crowd-reaction shots (edited images of audience members listening and responding to Araújo's jokes) to which I referred earlier in my discussion take place during this moment. These are, of course, true reactions, not *attributed reactions*. Their inclusion in the video supports the set's content. I discuss them in the next paragraph.

The implication is that if women are angry and crazy, it is only because men are dumb people who do stupid things; women, ultimately, are not at fault for their behavior.

Araújo's editing of the video of the performance confirms this interpretation of the bit's emphasis and aim. Immediately prior to Araújo's punchline, the image cuts to a woman in the audience who is listening intently with a consternated expression on her face. Immediately after the punchline, the same woman smiles while enthusiastically clapping and nodding in agreement.[35] The bit's resolution – that "women are crazy only because men always screw up" – restores an equilibrium to the joking by validating a pro-female perspective as well as a pro-male one. This impression of equality and balance is reinforced, for the viewer of the video, by the images of the approving woman in the audience.[36] Accordingly, by extending an olive branch to women, the bit paves the way for Araújo's concluding message about the uncanny, mystifying force that maintains harmony and that holds spouses – and their marriages – together.

Prior to his closing statement, Araújo performs two additional bits and one stand-alone joke that reinforce and summarize the *tendentious elements* (to use Freud's term for the points and messages underlying the jokes) that are in the joking portion of his performance. I will not transcribe or describe the two bits here, except to briefly summarize their *tendentious elements*. The first one returns to the idea of marriage as an inevitable decline: romance diminishes over

[35] Araújo, 34:55

[36] This woman in the audience can be considered a *shill* in the sense described by Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Araújo mentions (at 52:40) that many of the people in the live audience are friends of his who have already seen his set many times. Moreover, the camera was already trained on the woman in anticipation of her responses, and the two clips of her were pointedly included in the video. Therefore, the woman fits Goffman's description of a *shill*: "A shill is someone who acts as though he were an ordinary member of the audience but is in fact in league with the performers. Typically, the shill either provides a visible model for the audience of the kind of response the performers are seeking or provides the kind of audience response that is necessary at the moment for the development of the performance." (Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Science Research Centre, 1956, 91)

the years.[37] The second returns to the idea of money as a contentious part of a marriage: women spend money, while men attempt to economize.[38] Unlike the earlier bits, these two remain mostly in the third person plural, and thus are presented as universal truths about marriage. The protagonists of the bits are not Araújo and his wife, nor members of the audience. Instead, the bits are now, in their entirety, generalizations about wives and husbands – and, therefore, declarations (albeit joking ones) about married life.

Those two bits, taken together, function as a thematic summary of the material that precedes them; at the same time, they prime the audience for the final joke that punctuates the set, in preparation for the sober closing statement. The following is a transcription of the final joke:

> O casamento funciona muito parecido com fogos de artifício. . . . Os dois começam pegando fogo. Depois eles decolam. Depois eles brilham. Depois eles explodem. Depois eles caem. E depois você fica olhando e pensando, "Por qué que eu fui gastar o meu dinheiro com essa merda?" A mesma coisa. São as mesmas etapas.[39]
>
> Marriage works very much like fireworks. . . . Both start by catching fire. Then they take off. Then they shine. Then they explode. Then they fall. And then you sit there looking and thinking, "Why did I go spend my money on that crap?" The same thing. They're the same phases.

The joking mechanisms here are *juxtaposition* and *extended metaphor*. The joke generates humor by comparing two very different things: a physical object (fireworks) and a non-physical abstraction (marriage). The metaphor initially registers, to the spectator, as an unlikely and dubious one. However, contrary to expectations, the comedian is able to follow the comparison through a series of six steps. Moreover, the last three of the six stages of the extended metaphor – explosion, decline, and frustration – mirror the performance's earlier portrait of the quiddities

[37] Araújo, 38:12 – I will discuss this bit later, in order to draw parallels to another comedian, Whindersson Nunes.

[38] Araújo, 39:29

[39] Araújo, 43:27

of conjugal existence. The joke is a closing salvo that condenses and punctuates the humorous piece of the set. It also brings the assessment of marriage to its starkest, most pessimistic point. This, too, is by design, in that it underscores and maximizes the conundrum that Araújo will discuss in closing: if marriage is harrowing, and if conflict and decline are inevitable, then why do wives and husbands continue to want to spend time together?

The following is a transcription of Araújo's subsequent, closing musings about these questions:

> Para não ficar com essa imagem horrível do casamento... que embora eu esteja falando isso... a gente sabe que algumas coisas são verdade, o casamento é difícil, é lógico, mas vejam como é legal: tem hoje aqui muitos casais que vieram essa noite se divertir – casal com mais de vinte anos de casado, casal com menos de cinco anos de casado; casais que têm realidades diferentes vieram aqui hoje. E quiseram estar aqui nesse momento juntos, mesmo sabendo que muitas das coisas que estou falando aqui é verdade: mulher é brava, o cara só faz merda, tudo isso é verdade, mas vocês querem estar juntos aqui hoje. Então esse é o verdadeiro significado do que é o amor – quando nada faz sentido, e vocês querem estar juntos. Porque não tem nenhuma razão para vocês quererem estar juntos. Não tem, não tem. Sério, não tem, não tem.[40]
>
> So as not to come away with that horrible image of marriage… even though I'm saying these things… we know that some things are true, marriage is hard, of course, but look at how neat it is: here today are many couples that came tonight to have fun – a couple that has been married for over 20 years, a couple married less than five years; couples that have different realities came here tonight. And they wanted to be here together in this moment, despite knowing that many of the things that I'm saying here are true: women are angry, men always screw up, all of that is true, but you want to be here together today. So that's the true meaning of what love is – when nothing makes sense, and you want to be together. Because there's no reason for you to want to be together. There isn't, there isn't. Seriously, there isn't, there isn't.

Araújo does not offer a clear answer to the questions that he has raised. Instead, his closing message is about the mystery of love itself. Love – and the endurance of marriages – seems paradoxical and is impossible to comprehend.

Comedians rarely end their sets with earnest statements devoid of jokes. When they do – as Araújo does in this performance – it is to signal that even if there was some truth in their joking, that truth was not complete or predominant. Araújo, having said what he thinks is funny to say, ends by stating what he thinks: marriage has its squabbles, but those are no match for

[40] Araújo, 43:55

love. Accordingly, the couples in the audience can go home happy. The wives will not be angry – and none of the husbands will need to spend the night in the theater.[41]

[41] This sentence – specifically, the part about husbands spending the night in the theater – alludes to a joking *attributed reaction* in Araújo's set from a bit (at 39:14) that I did not quote earlier in my discussion. Araújo, after impersonating a wife snapping at her husband, asks a man in the audience to confirm the veracity of the characterization. Araújo then looks at that man's wife and exclaims, "Olha a cara dela! Putz! Jesus! Quer dormir aqui no teatro hoje? É mais seguro, tal, dá um tempo, dá um tempo. É mais seguro." ("Look at her face! Damn! Jesus! Do you want to sleep here in the theater tonight? It's safer.") The *attributed reaction* implies that the wife is furious and that the man should be terrified of her. In reality, however, the wife is not upset, and the husband is not scared; they are enjoying the show together – much as Araújo describes at the end of his performance.

CHAPTER 7

"Adulto" (2019) by Whindersson Nunes

Whindersson Nunes is far and away the most popular Brazilian comedian. He is also one of the most successful comedians in the world: he has over 100 million followers on social media, his YouTube channel has over 44 million subscribers, and his videos have over 3 billion views. As fellow Brazilian comedian Rafinha Bastos said of Whindersson Nunes in a March 2021 interview, "O cara é simplesmente um dos maiores pop-stars brasileiros da atualidade"[1] ("The guy is simply one of the greatest Brazilian pop stars of our day").[2] Nunes rose to fame by creating comedic videos – including parodies, songs, and commentary – which he began self-producing and posting at the age of 15. In addition, he has starred in popular comedic movies such as "Os Parças" (2017) and "Os Parças 2" (2019). However, starting in 2013, he gradually shifted his focus to stand-up comedy performances. Although his popularity and fame did not originate from his stand-up comedy, and while he is not exclusively a stand-up comedian, it can nonetheless be said with certainty that of all the Brazilians who perform stand-up comedy, Nunes is the most famous and financially successful.

Nunes has done several stand-up comedy tours, not only throughout Brazil but also around the world. He has travelled to over 40 countries and performed – always in Portuguese – to Brazilian-diaspora audiences in North America, Europe, and Asia. His "home" shows, in Brazil, take place in large stadiums and attract tens of thousands of fans. Nunes has released three stand-up comedy specials – performances that were recorded in front of live audiences.

[1] Interview of Nunes by Rafinha Bastos, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZRLm_Jv3bM – 0:01

[2] The translations of all quotations from this interview are my own.

His comedy special "Proparoxítona,"[3] which was recorded in Rio de Janeiro in 2017, has over 150 million views on YouTube – more than any other stand-up comedy special on the platform. His more recent special "Adulto" was released on Netflix worldwide in August 2019.[4] That performance – which is the one that I will discuss in this dissertation – was recorded in Fortaleza, Ceará on December 15, 2018, in front of a live audience of over 20,000 people. In that show, the stage is a platform at the center of the arena, surrounded by spectators, as in a championship boxing match.

The comparison to a professional "fight night" is apt, in that the staging of the event reflects and amplifies Nunes' mega-star status by including elements – sights and sounds – that are traditionally absent from stand-up comedy performances. For sound, he has a keyboardist who accompanies the performance with music and sound effects. He also varies the lighting throughout the show to convey and reinforce the mood of each story and bit, mostly alternating between full-stage lighting and a single spotlight in the darkness. Meanwhile, at the start of the show, the audience is a sea of lights, as each audience member holds a white glowstick. The camera rotates laterally around Nunes, showing the adoring fans who surround him, as Nunes alternately points at the crowd and points at his chest.[5] In these ways, the comedian incorporates cinematic techniques and exuberant body language in order to accentuate his performance while also exuding his status as an illustrious performer. In his interview with Rafinha Bastos, Nunes reveals that his decisions about the staging of this special were made in a calculated and

[3] Nunes, Whindersson. "Proparoxítona." 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRirqw082XI

[4] Nunes, Whindersson. "Adulto." Recorded in Fortaleza, Ceará. Netflix, 2019. (I will cite this as "Nunes")

[5] Nunes, 0:30

deliberate manner. Describing himself as a "megalomaniac,"[6] he explains that he intended for the show's scale and production to be impressive, and for viewers of the special – especially people in the United States and in other countries who might not yet know him – to marvel at his popularity in Brazil.[7] Accordingly, the added sounds and dramatic stage lighting – which are atypical of stand-up comedy – add hype, intensity, and theatricality to the performance.

In the same interview with Bastos, Nunes demonstrates awareness of the traditional boundaries of the genre of stand-up comedy – and of the ways in which he has deliberately stretched, or crossed, those boundaries. After initially describing his show "Adulto" as "stand-up," he immediately corrects himself, pointing out that perhaps his performance cannot rightfully be called *stand-up* and instead should be called a *show*, due to its supplementary visual and auditory elements.[8] This commentary reveals that Nunes is well aware of the history and traditions of the genre, and that his breaches of the codes of stand-up were done with intention and forethought, with a particular objective in mind. That objective – namely, presenting himself as a preeminent performer and as a Brazilian icon – is of fundamental importance to his comedy because it is inextricably linked to the verbal content of his set. It shapes the persona that he aims to establish, as well as the insights that he seeks to convey about life and about Brazilian society.

That is why my preface to my discussion and analysis of the work of Whindersson Nunes focuses on the superlatives, the statistics, and the self-curated star power of the comedian. The essence of his work – and of his widespread appeal – is his persistent emphasis on his unique,

[6] Interview of Nunes by Bastos, 8:32

[7] Interview of Nunes by Bastos, 10:18

[8] Interview of Nunes by Bastos, 8:50

almost paradoxical combination of unapologetic stardom, on the one hand, and preserved modesty, on the other. He embraces and amplifies his success and influence, yet he does so for the purpose of demonstrating that his essence remains unadulterated in spite of his becoming an adult and his amassing notoriety, money, and influence. The implicit message of Nunes' stand-up is that he, the new millionaire – even while traveling in his own airplane and bumping elbows with the royalty of the Brazilian entertainment world – is still, at heart, the same poverty-stricken 15-year-old who lives in the interior of an overlooked northeastern state and posts choppy videos of himself speaking shirtless to a webcam.

Seemingly without false humility, and without denying his newfound access to high society, Nunes emphasizes his roots, conveying, in various ways, a single message: that no matter how rich and powerful he becomes, he will always retain, and share with his fans, the perspective of a modest "everyman" from the countryside of Piauí. He is not just a once-poor man who has become rich, because he has not denied or abandoned his former identity. Rather, Nunes incessantly signals that he is a loyal, enduring representative of the Brazilian lower classes who now happens to have the means to mingle with the Brazilian moneyed elite – and that he uses this access not to reinvent himself, but rather to mock and to critique the lavishness that now surrounds him. His quintessence is that he is the *João-ninguém*'s (average Joe's) man on the inside of the palace; Nunes may be *among them*, but he will never be *one of them*. His material comes across as a report *from the inside*, duly transmitted by a benevolent spy who chronicles his observations: "This is what it was like in there," Nunes implies throughout his performance. When he actually says that sentence, it is specifically in reference to his visit to the absurdly enormous and extravagant mansion of Luciano Huck, Brazil's most influential

television personality.[9] However, Nunes might as well be talking about his perspective on Brazilian high society more generally: *this is what it's like in there*. The implicit point is that Nunes is sharing his view from the inside, and the viewer perceives this, consciously or not. And, socioeconomically, most Brazilians are in a position to identify with the early experiences, outlook, and perspective that Nunes has (or purports to have) and constantly projects.

In order to sustain this perception – or *illusion*, to those who hold a less credulous, more cynical view of Nunes' self-characterization – Nunes perpetually reaffirms two things: first, that he indeed is extremely popular and successful, and second, that he indeed grew up very poor. The staging of his special "Adulto" – with its spectacular stage lighting and sound, and with its shimmering audience of 20,000 – is megalomaniacal not merely out of vanity, but also out of necessity: it lends credence to what amounts to half the premise of Nunes' material. If he had appeared to be simply a standard stand-up comedian with a normal stage, no frills, and an average-size audience sitting invisibly in the dark, then that would not have conveyed the pop-star status that is necessary for Nunes' jokes and observations to logically function. Nunes communicates the other half of the premise – namely, his low-income and low-class upbringing – by way of his storytelling, beginning within the first few minutes of his set and continuing throughout.

Nunes was born in the northeast Brazilian state of Piauí in the town of Palmeira do Piaúi, and he grew up 50 kilometers from there, in Bom Jesus (population: 26,000), a municipality located deep in the interior of the state, 635 kilometers from Piauí's capital city of Teresina. A young comedian, he was born in 1995, which means that – chronologically at least – he is not far

[9] Nunes, 21:36

removed from his childhood.[10] Accordingly, Nunes' very first joke in "Adulto" evokes his impoverished childhood, so as to cement his rags-to-riches story, which serves as the foundation of his set. Here is a transcription of the joke:

> Eu não esqueço de nada que passei quando era muito pobre. Eu guardo isso muito no meu coração, até mesmo para não perder o pé no chão, né, a minha humildade... a minha essência, que é a coisa que vocês gostam em mim, que foi o que fez vocês estarem aqui hoje, para falar a verdade. E, graças a Deus... eu até me emociono... Eu lembro que andava muito de... [scratches head, winces in disappointment at forgetting the word, turns around, talks toward the front row] Como é o nome daquele negócio que o pessoal anda? *Ônibus*, isso. Eu andava muito de ônibus. [deadpan, serious expression, hand over mouth] Faz tempo, faz tempo. A gente tem que crescer, cara. Aprender a dividir, entendeu?[11]
>
> I don't forget anything that I went through when I was very poor. I keep this very much in my heart, so as not to lose my groundedness, you know, my humility... my essence, which is the thing you like about me, which is what made you be here today, to tell you the truth. And, thank God... this even makes me emotional... I remember that I often used to take... [scratches head, winces in disappointment at forgetting the word, turns around, talks toward the front row] What's the name of that thing that people take? *Bus*, right. I often took the bus. [deadpan, serious expression, hand over mouth] It's been a long time, it's been a long time. We have to grow up, man. Learn to share, you know?[12]

In this joke, Nunes uses comic irony, misdirection, deadpan delivery, and self-deprecation. It works particularly well because it is the first joke, preceded only by earnest, non-humorous introductory statements; the audience is not yet expecting any humor. He further sets up the surprise by speaking in an intentionally earnest tone when he delivers the joke's set-up (the first several sentences in the excerpt quoted above). When he pretends to have forgotten the word *bus* – a misdirection that he sells through physical acting, by scratching his head, wincing in disappointment, and turning toward someone in the front row for supposed assistance – the audience initially believes that he has truly forgotten the word. The punchline – "*Ônibus*, isso. Eu andava muito de ônibus" ("*Bus*, right. I often took the bus") – works because of twin shocks. First, the audience suddenly realizes that the comedian's forgetting of the word *bus* contradicts

[10] From biographies of Nunes, including https://natelinha.uol.com.br/famosos/tudo-sobre/whindersson-nunes

[11] Nunes, 1:26

[12] The translations of Nunes' bits are my own, though I have adapted them from Netflix's English subtitles.

and undermines the claim about humble recollection that he had been verbally putting forth. Second, immediately afterwards, the audience realizes that it was all a charade, and that they have just experienced not an earnest statement but rather the comedian's first joke of the night.

By maintaining a serious (deadpan) expression before, during, and after the punchline, the comedian generates a temporary dramatic irony, which then ruptures and transforms into comic irony as soon as the spectator discovers the deception. It is dramatic irony in the sense that for just a moment, the viewers believe that they have caught the comedian misrepresenting his relation to his impoverished childhood – they think, "He pretends to remember it vividly, yet if he has forgotten what a bus is, then clearly he is out of touch" – and that they have noticed something damning that the comedian has not. However, the comedian's long pause after the punchline gives the audience members an additional moment for reflection, during which they discover the joke: the comedian did not really forget the word *bus*, but rather is poking fun at his own claims of humility. In that sense, it is a self-deprecating joke; the comedian is mocking himself for the possibility that he has become out of touch with the everyday life of his past and of the people in his audience.

That is the explanation of the joking mechanisms and basic interpretation of the opening joke. However, the joke also functions on yet another level, thereby ultimately delivering quite a different message – one that is crucial to the entire set. Self-deprecating jokes can convey some measure of humility, in that they require comedians to bring themselves down, even if temporarily or superficially. By bringing up the possibility of his becoming so lofty as to have forgotten the word *bus* and his old life, Nunes is actually reaffirming that he hasn't forgotten; meanwhile, he is also demonstrating a degree of self-awareness that would be absent in a person who is truly out of touch. Ultimately, the takeaway of the joke is that Nunes remains humble and

down-to-earth even though the opposite might well have been the case if his personality were different. That message is crucial; it is the thematic through-line of the entire set. The spectator is now primed to believe that the stories Nunes will tell are from the unusual perspective of someone who, against all odds, somehow retains the outlook and values of a poor boy from Piauí even while hobnobbing with the Brazilian elite and experiencing the trappings of the upper-class lifestyle. Nunes' set – and the crux of his persona – is, in essence, that of an embedded reporter who comments, always from the poor boy's perspective, on the ultra-lavish lifestyle that ordinary Brazilians rarely witness.

Where and how does marriage fit into this picture? Throughout, and thoroughly. Marriage is the primary lens through which Nunes examines Brazilian society and human behavior. By scrutinizing his personal experience of each stage of marriage – the wedding, the honeymoon, and living together as a married couple – Nunes makes social commentaries that reach beyond the topic of marriage itself, shedding light on regional differences, class differences, behavioral psychology, and gender relations. Meanwhile, in addition to these broader social commentaries, Nunes presents characterizations – or caricatures – of marriage itself, depicting, in a playful manner, the dynamics of married life and the transformations that occur in a relationship from the time of courtship to marriage.

Although the title of Nunes' Netflix special is "Adulto," his live performances on his international tour following it – during which he performed the same set – had a different title: "Eita, Casei!"[13] ("Wow, I got married!"). Moreover, at the beginning of his special, immediately after greeting the crowd – "Boa noite, Fortaleza!" ("Good evening, Fortaleza!") – and thanking his keyboardist, Nunes opens his set with the phrase, "Eu, esse ano, me casei" ("I got married

[13] Nunes, Whindersson. "Eita, Casei!" London, 2019 – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_a1QZkG-8jk

this year").[14] This early statement – which precedes his comments about his childhood and his joke about the *ônibus* – signals that his recent wedding and marriage will be a key topic of his set. Even when marriage itself is not a work's central theme, it tends to appear as a requisite lens through which other themes are explored. That is certainly the case in "Adulto," as Nunes opens with and repeatedly returns to the topic of marriage, mainly for the purpose of reflecting and commenting on other themes.

To Nunes, marriage – including the wedding, as an event, as well as the marriage in general – is remarkable in that it sometimes juxtaposes (by physically bringing together into the same space) people from entirely different places and different walks of life who otherwise would not have met or gotten to know each other. His own wedding and marriage, from which he draws his material, constitute, in his recounting, an extreme example of such juxtaposition. There is the geographic distance: his wife and her family are from the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul,[15] whereas he is from Piauí. There is also a class chasm – a line, separating the rich and the poor, that becomes starkly visible at the wedding. All Brazilians understand that these two contrasts are intertwined, given that in Brazil the South is more prosperous than the Northeast. The wedding took place in the northeastern city of Maceió, in the state of Alagoas.[16] Nunes' wife's family traveled to Alagoas by plane, whereas Nunes' family and friends took the bus – *ônibus*, the word that Nunes joked about having forgotten, yet clearly hasn't. Nunes remarks, "Quando chegaram as duas famílias, uma do lado da outra – meu irmão, o contraste é

[14] Nunes, 1:10

[15] Nunes, 33:40

[16] Nunes, 18:50

muito forte"[17] ("When the two families arrived, one next to the other – oh brother, the contrast is very strong"). He goes on to affirm, "Eu casei com uma gaúcha. É outra cultura. É outra coisa."[18] ("I married a woman from the south of Brazil. It's another culture. It's something else.") Although Nunes' wife is a fellow Brazilian, she and Nunes might as well hail from different countries.

The comedian uses a series of anecdotes to contrast the population of the Northeast with that of the South: his wife's family is whiter, wealthier, healthier, better-looking, more international, more genteel, more guarded, and more wasteful. For example, Nunes looks to the wedding feast to compare the manners, and the mannerisms, of the two families. The Southerners enjoy their cocktail shrimp and eat it with a flourish, yet they discard the shrimp tails uneaten, to the chagrin of the Northeasterners.[19] He also compares the families' respective reactions during their visit to the beach: whereas the Northeastern children ran into the sea with reckless abandon, using only empty Coke bottles as makeshift flotation devices, the over-protected Southern children were prohibited from entering the water.[20] In these portions of his set, Nunes uses a storytelling style, describing amusing scenes with almost no joking techniques. Rather than employing displacement or misdirection or irony, Nunes uses only hyperbole; he relies mostly on the inherent humor of the vignettes that he relates. This lends a sort of veracity to his commentary; it indicates that, particularly when he talks about topics pertaining to Brazilian society, he is recounting real-life situations – albeit funny ones, and with poetic license

[17] Nunes, 33:52

[18] Nunes, 34:00

[19] Nunes, 39:00

[20] Nunes, 36:56

– as opposed to misdirecting or shocking the audience through joke structures. In this portion of the performance – which, not coincidentally, is also the portion that deals with economic inequality and social and regional differences in Brazil – the humor comes not from crafty deception or surprise, but rather from transparency, directness, and the amplification of an existing, familiar truth. The spectators' laughter is rooted in their shared recognition of the Brazilian social reality that Nunes' anecdotes spotlight. The shrimp tails and the Coke bottles are Nunes' narrative embellishments of an underlying story – that of the Brazilian social reality – with which his viewers are intimately familiar.

After addressing the economic and social contrasts between the populations of the two regions, Nunes gives a similar treatment to the matter of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. In doing so, he again uses his wedding – a rare moment that brings together two entirely different walks of Brazilian life – to emphasize and dramatize the cultural distance between the people of the two regions of Brazil. In particular, he alludes to the greater sophistication, diversity, and globalism of the population of Rio Grande do Sul as compared to that of Piauí.

In one such bit, Nunes talks about his wife's heritage – and about his own family's ignorance in relation to family history. Unlike Nunes' family, which has no knowledge of its ethnic background or national origins, his wife's family knows the exact details of its European ancestry. Moreover, although they are Brazilian-born, the wife and her family sometimes speak German to each other. Nunes tells of a moment during his wedding reception when the wife and her mother were speaking to each other in German. Out of the corner of his eye, Nunes recounts, he saw his younger cousin approaching. Here is a transcription of the end of the bit:

> Quando veio o Francisquinho se aproximando, eu falei, "Não, não, não, não, não!" Do nada, o Francisquinho entrou no meio das duas e disse, "Vocês são de qual igreja, hein?" Meu Deus![21]
>
> As little Francisco approached, I said, "No, no, no, no, no!" Out of nowhere, little Francisco came up right between the two of them and said, "What church are you from, huh?" My God!

The premise of this bit is that Nunes' relatives, being from Piauí, are unfamiliar with linguistic and cultural diversity. The only people they had ever seen speaking a European language other than Portuguese were the missionaries from various international churches who frequently travel to Piauí to proselytize. Nunes' relatives – having never traveled to other parts of Brazil – lack knowledge of the large immigrant population in Brazil's southern states, particularly the German presence in Rio Grande do Sul. Therefore, upon hearing the wife's family speaking German, the little cousin incorrectly assumes that they are missionaries. The presentation of the cousin's flawed logic – and, more specifically, the revelation of the *false inference* in which that logic results – is the joking mechanism that makes the bit function, technically, as a joke.

That constitutes part of the bit's humor; however, it does not account for all of the laughter that the bit generates, nor does it explain the bit's broader function in the set. In his wording and in his delivery, including his gesticulations and facial expressions, Nunes accentuates his own dread and embarrassment as he watches the scene unfold. With the exclamation "Não, não, não, não, não!" ("No, no, no, no, no!") the comedian conveys his fear of being embarrassed by his impolite, ignorant cousin; then, after quoting the cousin's sentence, Nunes cringes and covers his face in mock shame. Nunes' slight smile makes it evident that his depiction of his fear is playful hyperbole. His delivery causes the viewer to visualize the scene as though it were a comedic movie – specifically, a parody of a horror flick – with frequent cuts to close-ups of Nunes' mortified face. By telling the anecdote playfully, and by focusing on his

[21] Nunes, 40:30

own embarrassment, Nunes makes the story humorous and self-deprecating. He is not mocking his wife's German heritage, culture, or bilingualism; rather, he is evidently poking fun at the ignorance and provincialism of the members of his own family – and, by extension, of the people in his family's milieu in Piauí. By focusing on his own humiliation, albeit in a lighthearted way, Nunes reminds the viewer of his origins while also implying an admiration for his wife's family and its social and cultural attributes – particularly its prosperity and its internationalism. It is a society to which he wants access – and his success, as well as his marriage, have granted him that familiarity and entry.

However, in subsequent bits, Nunes goes on to signal to his audience that he will not *become one of those people*. Instead, he intends to embrace the internationalism, the opportunities, and the comfort that the Brazilian upper class enjoys, only without allowing himself to acquiesce in, or be duped into, the excesses that also characterize the Brazilian elite. Nunes confirms this approach to fame and fortune during his interview with Rafinha Bastos. When asked, in light of his wealth and fame, how he intends to raise his children, Nunes explains, "Will [my children] study in a school in which only English is spoken? They will. But they will also make their own paper covers for their textbooks."[22] The children, like Nunes himself, are to enjoy the benefits of high society while remaining firmly down-to-earth. Just as with everything else in life, this is the delicate balance that Nunes aims to achieve, and demonstrate, in relation to his wedding and his marriage. Most of the subsequent bits – including several more about his wedding and about his honeymoon – recount his walking of that fine line, as Nunes aims to be among the stars without acting like them. He must retain his

[22] "Vai estudar numa escola em que só fala inglês? Vai. Mas vai encapar os livros também." (Interview of Nunes by Bastos, 40:10)

roots, his humility, and his essence, because that – to put it in Nunes' own words – is why his audience comes to see him.

Unlike Paulo Araújo, Nunes presents marriage not as a standard fact of life but rather as a step that is associated with wealth. To Nunes, marriage, as he has experienced it, is an endeavor that requires a higher standard of living than that of his youth. The wedding, the honeymoon, and the ability to contribute to a partnership and support a new family all require money; they constitute an upper-class, or at least middle-class, endeavor. With this perspective, Nunes begins his discussion of marriage by linking it to his new level of prosperity, social status, and purchasing power. Thanks to his newfound wealth, Nunes is able to experience all of the trappings of marriage, most of which would otherwise have been beyond his realm of possibility. He then faithfully reports this experience to his audience. In this way, Nunes' discussion of marriage follows the through-line of the set: a modest man's report from the palace on the hill.

First, Nunes implies that were it not for his income he likely would not have gotten married at all, due to the unfeasibility of paying for the extraneous expenses that weddings entail, and due to his inability to support a new family financially. For example, Nunes would not have been able to afford a "proper" wedding ceremony with the traditional invitations and flowers, nor a honeymoon to the beach. Nor would he have been able to attract and marry a woman he desires – especially not a beautiful young woman from a well-to-do family from the south of Brazil. Without money, perhaps his options would have been cohabitation or common-law marriage – likely with a woman of less interest to him – or simply remaining single. Nunes expresses the view that marriage represents social and personal progress, and that it is tied to upward mobility: getting married requires some wealth to begin with, and then it helps a man to achieve his full potential. Like a good education and top-notch health care, marriage is only

nominally available to the general population, in Nunes' portrayal. And – alongside education and health care – marriage contributes to a man's development, advancement, status, and happiness. This view underpins what would otherwise seem to be a confounding opening statement by Nunes in his performance of "Adulto":

> Eu, esse ano, me casei, né – com uma mulher! Olha que legal. Isso é muito bom. Isso é muito bom. Porque a gente tem que evoluir. As pessoas têm que crescer, né? Eu, graças a Deus, tenho um padrão de vida que nunca pensei que eu pudesse ter. Vou falar isso para vocês... nunca pensei. Mas me sinto abençoado por tudo que está acontecendo na minha vida.[23]
>
> I got married this year, you know – to a woman! How cool. That's very good. That's very good. Because we have to evolve. People have to grow, you know? I, thank God, have a standard of living that I never thought I could have. I gotta tell you, I never thought it. But I feel blessed with everything that's happening in my life.

This statement does not contain any joking mechanisms or humor. In it, Nunes posits that marriage represents or facilitates both personal growth – with the verb *crescer* ("to grow") – and transformation – with the verb *evoluir* ("to evolve"). When Nunes thanks God for his new "standard of living" ("padrão de vida"), and when he says that he feels blessed with "everything that's happening in my life" ("tudo que está acontecendo na minha vida"), he is referring both to his marriage and to his professional and financial success – and he makes no distinction between them. To Nunes, getting married, beyond marking his entrance into adulthood, forms part of his ascent out of poverty and into the social classes that previously had been out of reach.

As with everything else, Nunes navigates his wedding, honeymoon, and marriage – or, at least, his discussion of them – in such a way as to retain a veneer of humility and credibility as an outsider looking in. This is particularly evident in his jokes about the expenses involved in his wedding preparations and his honeymoon travel. In what amounts to a critique of consumerism and greed, he highlights the extravagant customs of the wealthy as well as the rapaciousness of vendors. This takes the form of wedding planners who attempt to sell him

[23] Nunes, 1:10

absurdly expensive wedding invitations and flowers,[24] and tour guides (on his honeymoon) who overcharge him for a private scuba-diving tour.[25] The stories share a common theme: although the vendors attempt to make him overpay, he attempts to avoid the expenses and to spend modestly. In the end, he fails to resist, and the vendors get his money; however, in maintaining his spirit of defiance throughout, he remains true to himself – and to his likeminded fans. These bits, unlike several of the preceding ones, are not self-deprecating. That is perhaps because Nunes – though pleased to mock the things for which he imagines the members of high society might mock him, such as his poor upbringing, his oafish manner, and his homely appearance – does not wish to undermine[26] the fundamental premise of his persona: namely, his enduring mass appeal as a permanent and uncorruptible common man.

The following is a transcription of Nunes' bit in which he recounts his negotiations with vendors regarding the invitations and the flowers for his wedding:

> O problema é que as pessoa,[27] por saber que era o nosso casamento, queria cobrar mais caro. Para cima de mim? Ei, jovem, eu tenho dinheiro de três anos para cá. Dali para trás, era "galfo" e "imbigo" mesmo na minha vida, meu jovem. As pessoas julgam a gente. . . . O cabra disse, "Olha, os convites estão prontos. Onze mil Reais. . . . Por onze mil Reais eu não preciso de convite. Eu compro um Celta e saio convidando as pessoa de casa em casa. Boto uma caixa de som e saio, "Ó, casamento! Casamento!" . . . E se você enche isso aqui de flor, eu vou falir. Vou morar debaixo da flor. O cara: "Não, mas a flor é a alma do casamento." Eu digo, "Não vai ter alma, então. Casa sem alma. Só eu e ela. Está bom."[28]
>
> The problem is that people, knowing it was our wedding, wanted to charge more. Putting one over on me? Hey, man, I've have had money for three years. Before that, my life was "galfo" and "imbigo" [these are incorrect pronunciations of the words *garfo* and *umbigo*, which mean "fork" and "belly button," respectively]. People judge us. . . . The scoundrel said, "Look, the invitations are ready. Eleven thousand Reals. . . . For eleven thousand Reals I don't need an invitation. I could buy a little Chevy and drive around from house to house inviting people. I'd put loudspeakers on the roof like a street vendor and go around, like, "Hey, wedding! Wedding!" . . . And if you fill this place with flowers, I'll go bankrupt. I'll live under

[24] Nunes, 32:00 (invitations) and 32:30 (flowers)

[25] Nunes, 49:22

[26] The *onibûs* joke is as far as Nunes allows himself to go in that regard; as I have discussed earlier, although that joke is apparently self-deprecating, it does not truly challenge his status as a self-aware everyman.

[27] Nunes says "as pessoa" – which is a colloquial form – instead of the grammatically correct form "as pessoas"

[28] Nunes, 19:50

> the flower. The guy says: "No, but the flower is the soul of the wedding." So I say, "There won't be a soul, then. We'll have a soulless wedding. Just me and her. It's all good."

In this bit, Nunes ridicules two tendencies that he has observed: wealthy people spend lavishly on decorations – which he considers to be pointless status symbols – and vendors exploit such customs in order to maximize profit. Nunes expresses his disgust toward both of these tendencies; he disassociates himself from the former, and he attempts to resist the latter. He expresses that sentiment directly, as when he refers to the salesperson as a scoundrel.

In addition, however, Nunes intentionally uses two linguistic elements for the purpose of marking himself as a man of humble origins who deftly straddles the divide between rich and poor without losing his essence. An examination of these two elements – both of which are impossible to render accurately in the English translation – reveals that Nunes pays close attention to nuances of spoken Brazilian Portuguese. More specifically, it shows that Nunes is cognizant of the ways in which those nuances relate to notions and inferences about culture, education, and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, Nunes leverages those nuances for the purpose of constructing his persona. In parallel with the overt meaning of his statements – e.g., that he refuses to overspend as a typical rich person would – he also uses subtle details of language to meticulously craft an identity and to reinforce a particular impression.

The first linguistic element is the more subtle of the two, in that it is not something that Nunes imitates or points out, but rather a grammatical feature that he uses in his own speech – not only in this bit, but throughout his performance (though not always). Nunes frequently omits the "s" at the end of plural nouns, using the singular form of the noun instead of the plural. While this is a common feature of spoken Brazilian Portuguese, it is also a marker of low socioeconomic class, given that most Brazilian media stars and members of high society avoid speaking in that way. Yet it seems that Nunes strategically embraces and employs that feature,

without attempting to eradicate it from his speech. In the first sentence of the bit quoted above, Nunes says, "O problema é que *as pessoa*, por saber que era o nosso casamento, queria cobrar mais caro" ("The problem is that people, knowing it was our wedding, wanted to charge more").[29] That is not a typographical error in the transcription, nor does Nunes err in his delivery. Nor is the noun *pessoa* meant to be singular in terms of meaning; semantically, it must be plural, given that the article *as* is plural. Rather, Nunes speaks in that way so as to implicitly affirm his roots and his connection to his target audience. It is as if to say, "I am one of you; I may have more money and fame than you, but I am still one of you." Later in the bit, Nunes repeats the verbal singularization of the plural noun: "Eu compro um Celta e saio convidando *as pessoa* de casa em casa" ("I could buy a little Chevy and drive around from house to house inviting people").[30] This demonstrates that the first sentence was no aberration. It is important to note that Nunes is not merely putting on an act; this is truly his natural way of speaking – as is evident from the way he speaks in normal conversations, such as during his extended interview with Rafinha Bastos.[31] However, there is also evidence that Nunes has, in some other respects, adjusted his way of speaking in order to adhere to prescriptive grammar and pronunciation. The second linguistic element, which I will discuss below, suggests the existence of modifications that Nunes' speech has undergone over time. Therefore, it is possible that Nunes singularizes plural nouns consciously, even if not artificially; in other words, although it is surely not an affectation, it is also not merely a function of the way he grew up speaking. Nunes does not attempt to achieve "proper" grammatical agreement, just as he (purportedly) does not desire all

[29] The detail that I am highlighting cannot be rendered in the English translation; it would simply be *people*.

[30] This detail – just like the one in the previous example – cannot be rendered in the English transation.

[31] Interview of Nunes by Bastos, 10:02

of the trappings of a "proper" wedding.

The second linguistic element is pronunciation, which Nunes actively discusses with the audience. He attests that as recently as three years prior – right up until his meteoric rise to stardom – he used to mispronounce the words *garfo* (fork) and *umbigo* (belly button). The Brazilian audience understands Nunes' intimation: the mispronunciation of those words is evidence of limited schooling, possible illiteracy, and low socioeconomic status. Accordingly, Nunes assigns those attributes to himself: he was once a poor boy in Piauí. The audience already knows this. However, when Nunes relates this aspect of his personal history, he does not say that he "mispronounced" the words, nor does he say that he used to speak incorrectly. Instead, he says, "Era 'galfo' e 'imbigo' mesmo na minha vida" ("My life was 'galfo' and 'imbigo'"). Here, "galfo" and "imbigo" are the respective mispronunciations of the words *garfo* and *umbigo*; however, by quoting those pronunciations without labeling them as erroneous, Nunes depicts the conditions of his upbringing without passing unequivocal or negative judgment. He does make it clear that he no longer pronounces those words in that manner; his way of speaking has evolved, due to the change in his socioeconomic status. However, while he does mimic – and perhaps even poke fun at – his old pronunciation, he does not deride it, nor is he ashamed of it, nor does he call it wrong. This accords with his overarching approach and message: although he acknowledges his past and teases himself about it, he does not disparage it. Instead, he derides the profligacy of Brazil's elite, as well as the avarice of those who profit from it. In doing so, Nunes positions himself as a dual outlier: he has found success and progressed in life, and he has transcended the socioeconomic conditions and confines of his childhood sphere, yet he has nonetheless retained the prudence and sensibilities that set him apart from the upper echelons of Brazilian society.

In a long bit earlier in the set, Nunes recounts Neymar's penchant for absurdly expensive restaurants.[32] Neymar – the superstar Brazilian soccer player – purportedly invited Nunes to dinner at a fancy London hotel, and Nunes was terrified by the obscene prices on the menu. In the context of Nunes' set, Neymar serves as an example par excellence of a once-poor person who, after becoming rich, lost all modesty and reasonableness. Whereas Luciano Huck was always a member of the upper class, Neymar is the archetypal nouveau-riche star. It does not matter whether Nunes' characterization of Neymar is true or accurate, especially considering that he was joking. What matters is that Nunes, in presenting a caricature of Neymar, differentiates himself from the behavior that he describes. Nunes no longer says "galfo" or "imbigo," but he is no Neymar. He has not become out of touch; he has kept his feet on the ground.

The humor in the bit about the invitations and flowers derives from Nunes' boldness and ingenuity in defying high society's expectations of conspicuous consumption: unlike other well-to-do grooms, Nunes makes a creative effort to eschew ostentatious wedding ornaments. His efforts ultimately fail, in that he nevertheless ends up paying for the invitations and encountering a huge display of flowers at the wedding; Nunes humorously recounts this scene later on in his set, in a joke that functions through misdirection and displacement:

> Agora, quando eu entrei na igreja, alí eu senti. Eu nunca tinha sentido aquilo na minha vida. Cara, na hora que eu boto o pé dentro da igreja... comecei a chorar. Na hora [piano music: emotional; dramatic spotlight]. Eu não sei o que foi. A lágrima desceu na hora. Na hora. Um nó na garganta imenso. Eu chorava que eu soluçava. Eu tenho 23 ano.[33] Tinha uns 20 ano que eu não chorava daquele jeito. Eu ficava soluçando. Eu tinha vontade de gritar, rasgar a roupa assim e gritar, "Ahh!" Porque eu olhava para cima e era flor que só a porra que o homem tinha botado [act-out of hands over face and trembling]. Olhei para as parede, e… flor. E eu, "Para que flor na parede?!" Olhava para o chão e... "Para que flor no chão?!" [while fake crying]. Olho para trás e a Luísa entra com um buquê, e eu disse, "Ah, não!"[34]
>
> But when I entered the church, there I felt it. I had never felt that in my life. Man, when I set foot in the church... I started crying. Right away [piano music: emotional; dramatic spotlight]. I don't know what it

[32] Nunes, 28:18

[33] "23 *ano*" is another example of Nunes' dropping the "s" from a plural noun, as with "as *pessoa*" previously.

[34] Nunes, 44:40

> was. The tears flowed immediately. Right away. A huge lump in my throat. I cried, I sobbed. I'm 23 years old. I hadn't cried like that in about 20 years. I was sobbing. I felt like yelling, tearing my clothes like this, and yelling, "Ahh!" Because I looked up and there were so many damn flowers that the guy had put there [act-out of hands over face and trembling]. I looked at the walls and… flowers. And I'm like, "Why flowers on the wall?!" I looked at the floor and… "Why flowers on the floor?!" [while fake crying]. I look behind me and Luisa walks in with a bouquet, and I'm like, "Oh, no!"

Perhaps that failure – and the concomitant appearance of large quantities of flowers – was a consequence of the vendor's dishonesty. Or, perhaps it was the product of a secret intervention by Nunes' wife, as Nunes implies when he mentions the large bouquet that she held during the ceremony. Either way, the overspending on excessive flowers was not Nunes' decision or fault; he absolves himself of blame. To the contrary, he has won a moral victory and remained true to himself, thanks to his principled derision and resistance.

That message is further highlighted by the joking mechanisms that Nunes employs in the joke: *misdirection*, culminating in *displacement* assisted by a distant *callback*. In stand-up comedy terminology, a *callback* is a joking mechanism in which a comedian unexpectedly alludes to a humorous moment from much earlier in the set. The logical setup and referent for this joke about the wedding day flowers occurs a full 25 minutes earlier in the set – during minute 20 of the performance – whereas the joke and punchline are in minute 45. Callbacks are inherently funny because they are unexpected and clever. Furthermore, this *callback* contributes purposefully and considerably to the joke's *displacement*. Nunes leads the audience to presume that the wedding-day feelings that he dramatizes were caused by the intense joy of getting married, not by anger about excess blossoms and bouquets. Because the prior joke about flowers is so distant, the spectator remembers it – enough to eventually understand the connection – yet is not actively thinking about it at this point in the set. This maximizes the surprise of the moment in which the comedian reveals, jokingly, that his emotional outbursts were caused not by the joy of getting married but rather by his adverse reaction to the floral decorations.

Nunes' histrionic delivery – which consists of melodramatic recollections of intense emotion ("I cried, I sobbed") and correspondingly hammy facial expressions and gestures – is supported by the unconventional light and sound elements that Nunes has chosen to add to his show. The stage goes dark except for a single spotlight on Nunes, and tear-jerking piano music plays,[35] just as it would in a sentimental scene of a movie. The saccharine mood engendered by the combination of these various audiovisual elements contributes to the *misdirection*; then, the shattering of that mood with the *callback* to the almost-forgotten flowers constitutes the *displacement*.

That is how the joke itself functions – the way in which it causes laughter – but there is also another level on which this joke operates, for the purpose of extending the set's through-line and fortifying the overall premise and message of the performance. The 25-minute gap between the two flower-related jokes suggests to the viewer that to Nunes, frugality and moderation are ever-present values that remain top of mind. The implication is that even if the audience has by now stopped worrying about the excessive flowers, Nunes never has – and never will. His steadfast modesty and prudence are the foremost elements of his self-concept.

An analogous scenario plays out in a later bit, in relation to Nunes' honeymoon. The newlyweds travel to Fernando de Noronha – a beautiful island off the coast of northeastern Brazil, belonging to the state of Pernambuco, that is a protected natural reserve. Once again, Nunes experiences sticker shock and exploitative businesspeople. He suggests that due to his unfamiliarity with Brazilian tourist destinations – a knowledge gap that, once again, underscores his humble origins by exposing his lack of travel experience and sophistication – he is unprepared for, and taken aback by, the expense of the trip. He recounts, "Fomos direto para a

[35] Nunes, 44:55

lua de mel. Não quis nem saber... Fernando de Noronha... pensando que ia ser mais barato que as flor."[36] ("We went straight to the honeymoon. I didn't even care... Fernando de Noronha… thinking it would be cheaper than the flowers.") Contrary to his clueless expectation, Nunes is confronted by high fees and by unscrupulous tour operators who charge him exorbitant prices. Just as with the invitations and flowers, Nunes attempts to evade the outrageous expenditures by means of his creativity, and although in the end he fails to protect his wallet, his defiant spirit and his sense of self remain unscathed. Through these jokes, Nunes once again does two things: he acknowledges that he now partakes in expensive activities and that he frequents fancy locales, yet in the process he insists upon his independence, his resolve, and his faithfulness to the tenets of simplicity and restraint, in accordance with the values and experience instilled in him by his upbringing in a lower socioeconomic class. The honeymoon, like the wedding, is an occasion that is particularly suitable for exposing the frivolity of Brazil's affluent classes and the brazen profiteering of those who serve them. To Nunes, the phenomenon of marriage – with its unique constellation of gatherings, purchases, and geographical and social dislocations – is the ideal avenue for commenting on Brazilian society and human nature, and for positioning himself in relation to them.

Unlike Paulo Araújo, Nunes does not focus solely on the dynamics of the marital relationship itself; instead, as I have delineated above, he uses marriage as a lens to explore other themes that are central to his persona and to his sense of integrity, and which allow him to comment on Brazilian society more broadly. Nevertheless, while it is not his focus, Nunes does venture into a discussion of the nature of the relationship between a husband and wife. In that regard, the comedian's set does at times resemble that of Araújo. Moreover, Nunes' approach to

[36] Nunes, 46:10 – "as *flor*" is yet another example of Nunes' use of the singular for plural nouns.

discussing marital relations – and, even more notably, the nature of his commentaries and conclusions about the dynamics between husband and wife – bear an uncanny similarity to those of Araújo.

Some of these similarities can be ascribed to the traditions and hallmarks of the stand-up comedy genre; these include the use of personal anecdotes, introductory questions directed at the audience, and a thematic focus on human conflict due to its potential for humor. Still, some of the more specific similarities between the performances either call into question the originality of the comedians or serve as evidence of a thematic convergence that might be fueled by the imperative of exploiting familiar stereotypes for the purpose of generating humor. In other words, either the comedians have influenced and copied each other, or the necessity of making audiences laugh leads the comedians to dwell on clichés and familiar formulas. Even if the former is true to some extent, the directionality of the emulation cannot be definitively determined, given that the comedians' live tours were mostly concurrent. However, it does seem somewhat more likely that Nunes was influenced by Araújo, given that Araújo recorded and released his special in October 2018, whereas Nunes recorded "Adulto" in December 2018 and released it several months later, in 2019. Moreover, as Nunes stated during his interview with Bastos, he often watches the work of lesser-known comedians to gain inspiration and ideas.[37] My main point here, however, is not that Nunes plagiarized or emulated Araújo's content, but rather that there is remarkable similarity, and overlap, in the specific *tendentious elements* of the two comedians' sets insofar as they explore the topic of marital relations.

As I have summarized earlier, *tendentiousness* is the English approximation of Freud's term pertaining to a joke's premise and message, which, in Freud's view, can be considered

[37] Interview of Nunes by Bastos, 10:06

separately from the joking mechanisms once a joke is analyzed and distilled.[38] As the social psychologist Michael Billig explains in his article "Freud and the Language of Humour,"[39] *tendentious* jokes, in Freud's postulation, are those that, beyond using wordplay or other technical mechanisms for generating laughter, express and perpetuate certain thoughts and ideas – which often are repressed, aggressive ones. Billig writes,

> For all the linguistic sophistication that Freud showed in analysing joke-work, his purpose was to explore the psychological dynamics behind it. He made an important distinction between innocent and tendentious jokes. Had he made analogous distinctions in relation to dreams and slips of the tongue, he would have avoided some of the criticisms that were to be levelled against his earlier two books. Innocent jokes were those that did not fulfil deep psychological functions. These may be jokes that purely and simply make a play on words. By contrast, a large number of jokes, according to Freud, are tendentious in that they permit repressed desires to be voiced. Under the guise of a joke, the thought is presented as if it is not serious: it is 'just a joke'. Freud argued that most tendentious jokes express sexual or aggressive impulses, or both.[40]

Araújo and Nunes perform different jokes on the topic of spousal relations in heterosexual marriage; however, they construct their respective jokes around exactly the same three tendentious elements. The first is that before marriage men and women make efforts to impress and please each other, yet after getting married they cease those efforts. The second is the notion that marriage is characterized by an inevitable long-term decline in romance and rapport. The third is the trope of the henpecked husband who obeys his wife because he fears her wrath. Both Araújo and Nunes tell a variety of jokes that present, either in isolation or in combination, each of these three alleged properties of marriage. Nunes considers the elements in isolation, whereas Araújo treats them in isolation in some jokes and then intertwines them in other jokes. Either way, the implication – or, the amalgamated *tendentious element* – is that the loss of deference and the inevitable decline in romance within a heterosexual marriage tends to

[38] Freud, as cited previously.

[39] Billig, Michael. "Freud and the Language of Humour." In: *The Psychologist*, Vol. 12, No. 9, Sept 2002.

[40] Billig, 453

manifest itself in the form of the wife's unchecked anger and the husband's emasculation and capitulation.

This is not to say that the comedians truly believe those characterizations; what they think is funny to say may well differ from their overriding opinions, as Araújo explicitly points out in the closing minutes of his set. As per Jim Jefferies' point, a joke's tendentiousness does not necessarily reflect the joke-teller's beliefs. Nevertheless, as Freud theorized, the jokes do in some way express – or, if not express, at least reflect – deep-seated attitudes, conventions, and stereotypes. In any case, it is notable that the three tendentious elements of each of the two comedians' jokes about husband-wife interpersonal relations are, in essence, identical.

Here I will provide only one example from Nunes' set for each of the three elements, so as to support my assertion (that all three of the elements appear in Nunes' special) concisely while still presenting sufficient evidence. I will also reference parallel examples from Araújo's set – including one "new" bit that I did not discuss in the preceding section about Araújo's special – in order to demonstrate the parallels between the two comedians' performances.

Near the end of his set, in minute 52, Nunes contrasts his wife's behavior on their wedding night with her premarital demeanor and priorities. He does so by focusing on a detail: the difference between the "before" and "after" with regard to her approach to removing – or not removing – her makeup at the end of the day. The gist of the bit is that prior to the wedding she used to religiously remove her makeup before going to bed – for the sake of maintaining good skin and a pleasing appearance – whereas immediately after getting married she lazily abandons those preoccupations and precautions. Nunes then remarks, in a brief commentary, that since marriage he has experienced a startling lack of privacy: his wife enters the bathroom without warning, even when he is using it. Both of these situations suggest the same point: after

marriage, the wife no longer makes a special effort to look pretty or to permit a measure of privacy that would be conducive to romance. Meanwhile, the bit also imagines his wife as a potentially monstruous, menacing figure. That depiction of a villain, though ostensibly an analogy for describing solely her physical appearance – as opposed to her personality or demeanor – nonetheless foreshadows a later bit in which Nunes does overtly depict his wife as a terrorizing, intimidating figure (which is the third *tendentious element*). The following is a transcription of the bit:

> Se maquiava toda... Chegava em casa: "Não, calma, que tenho que tirar a maquiagem para dormir, né. Cuidados com a pele." Pensei, "Essa é a mulher que quero casar. Cuidadosa." Hoje em dia não tem mais isso. Vamos para festa, volta – "Tô com sono." Dorme. No outro dia acorda... o Coringa do meu lado aqui dormindo. Ave Maria. Tenho medo de acordar para mijar e ela dizer, "Vai para onde, Batman?" [in a scary voice, imitating the Joker]. Na hora, macho. Morro de medo. Outra coisa que mudou: agora a outra pessoa tem autorização para entrar do nada. Do nada, ela entra. Do nada, dentro do banheiro.[41]
>
> She'd wear makeup… Then she'd come home and say, "No, wait, I have to take my makeup off to sleep, you know. Skin care." I thought, "That's the woman I want to marry. Careful." Nowadays, that doesn't happen anymore. We go to a party, return home – "I'm sleepy." She goes to sleep. The next day she wakes up... the Joker next to me, sleeping. Holy Mother of God. I'm afraid I'll wake up to pee and she'll say, "Where are you going, Batman?" [in a scary voice, imitating the Joker]. Right away. I'm scared to death. Another thing that has changed: now the other person is authorized to enter out of nowhere. Out of nowhere, she enters. Out of nowhere, into the bathroom.

Nunes' phrase "Hoje em dia não tem mais isso" ("Nowadays, that doesn't happen anymore") encapsulates the point: the wife's effort and consideration, which previously had impressed him, are now gone – and he blames marriage for causing that loss. This tendentious element is related to the second one – that of inevitable decline over time – but it differs in the sense that it implies that marriage results in an *immediate* change in behavior. In other words, here the point is not simply that romance erodes over time in a relationship, but rather that the act of getting married causes a precipitous drop in romantic efforts.

Paulo Araújo makes the same point early in his set, when he states, "Quando o cara tá no

[41] Nunes, 52:15

começo do namoro, ele faz todo tipo de sacrifício. Agora, depois que casa, não – ele caga e chama para ver. . . . Depois que casa, as coisas mudam."[42] ("When a guy is at the beginning of a relationship, he makes every sort of sacrifice. Now, after he marries, no – he poops and calls her to see it. . . . After marriage, things change.") Both comedians evoke the change in behavior; moreover, both comedians use scatological references to emphasize the extent of that change. The only discernible difference is that Nunes highlights the wife's lack of effort after marriage, whereas Araújo points out the husband's – and perhaps this difference merits further consideration. However, this variation does not represent a fundamental divergence between the two comedians; rather, it is merely the same overarching message expressed in different ways. This is evidenced by the more general statements that each comedian takes care to include, both in these bits and in others. For example, in the bits quoted above, Araújo makes the general statement "Depois que casa, *as coisas* mudam" ("After marriage, *things* change"), while Nunes incorporates the similarly non-gender-specific statement "Agora *a outra pessoa* tem autorização para entrar do nada" ("Now *the other person* is authorized to enter out of nowhere"). Araújo's and Nunes' use of the neutral noun phrases "as coisas" ("things") and "a outra pessoa" ("the other person") frames the comedians' respective assertions – and, accordingly, the first *tendentious element* – as gender-neutral: neither the wife nor the husband is to blame. Rather, the crux of each joke is that *marriage itself* is to blame for the abrupt change in behavior.

Furthermore, both Nunes and Araújo lean into the second *tendentious element* – the premise that the quality of spousal relations inevitably further declines over time. In both comedians' jokes, marriages are presumed to go downhill. In this conception, the long-term stability guaranteed by marriage, and the resulting familiarity, perversely engender growing

[42] Araújo, 1:20

ennui, irritation, and disrespect with the passage of time. Once the joking mechanisms and situational details are subtracted, the comedians' respective jokes mostly mirror each other in that regard. Moreover, unlike the previous *tendentious element*, this one is not presented as a gender-neutral phenomenon. Rather, in both comedians' jokes, the increase in interpersonal conflict – and the deterioration of marital happiness over the years – manifests itself in female behavior more than in male behavior. Simply put, the premise is that men are simple, dumb beings who are essentially unchanging, in the sense that they always do the same sort of wrong, stupid things: "o homem é besta" ("men are moronic" – Nunes' phrase), and "homens só fazem merda" ("men always screw up" – Araújo's phrase). Women then react – or overreact – to that habitual male behavior. The internal logic of this gender stereotyping is that married men are predictable in their buffoonery, whereas married women are complex, evolving, reactive creatures who are more difficult to comprehend, and that therefore it is the man who is left to reckon with the increasingly confounding and repressive attitudes of the woman.[43]

Transcribed below is an example of the second *tendentious element* – the presumed decline of marital relations over time – as it appears in Nunes' set. This same excerpt will also be useful for considering another matter: the ways in which each comedian addresses and/or does not address gay marriage. This portion begins with Nunes' *crowdwork* – the comedian's intentional interaction with his live audience – and ends with his non-humorous elaboration of the premise that will underpin his later bits. Here is the transcription:

> Tem alguém há muito tempo junto aqui? Muito tempo. Muito tempo? Quanto tempo vocês estão? [pointing to someone in the audience] Seis anos? Tem alguém mais de seis anos? Quanto?! [pointing at someone else] Vinte e cinco?! [mock serious shocked facial expression] Puta que pariu! Vocês se falam ainda, vocês dois? Fala e coisa todo dia? Que conversa é essa?! Como é seu nome? [repeating responses] Cristina e o Ricardo. Cristina e o Ricardo. Palmas para Cristina e Ricardo aí. Eita, porra, vinte e cinco ano é muito tempo. Você tem que ceder muito, entendeu? Isso é o que acontece. Sabe por que? Não importa

[43] This husband-wife dynamic will, in turn, beget the third *tendentious element* – that of female anger and male despondency – which I will discuss in more detail later in my analysis.

> qual é o sexo. Não importa. É homem com homem, mulher com mulher, é homem com mulher, não importa. A gente sempre procura na outra pessoa uma coisa que falta na gente. Que é o que torna a outra pessoa especial para a gente. Só que, às vezes, quando você busca essas coisa que você ama, às vezes vêm umas coisas que você não gosta, também. E aí acontecem as desavenças: um, às vezes, não gosta de conviver com o outro, o outro não gosta de conviver com um. Eu acho que para mulher é mais fácil conviver com o homem porque o homem é besta.[44]

> Has anyone here been together a long time? A long time. A long time? How long have you been together? [pointing to someone in the audience] Six years? Has anyone here been together longer than six years? How long?! [pointing at someone else] Twenty-five?! [mock serious shocked facial expression] Holy crap! Do you still talk to each other, you two? Talk and "do it" every day? What are you talking about?! What's your name? [repeating responses] Cristina and Ricardo. Cristina and Ricardo. Let's hear it for Cristina and Ricardo. Damn, twenty-five years is a long time. You have to cede a lot, right? That's what happens. Do you know why? It doesn't matter the gender. It doesn't matter. Man with man, woman with woman, man with woman, it doesn't matter. We always look for something in the other person that is missing in us. That's what makes the other person special to us. Only, sometimes, when you look for those things that you love, sometimes some things that you don't like show up, too. And then the discord happens: sometimes Person A doesn't like to live with Person B, and sometimes Person B doesn't like to live with Person A. I think that for a woman it's easier to live with a man because men are moronic.

Nunes' *crowdwork* serves a specific, calculated purpose. By identifying a long-married couple in the audience, expressing mock surprise at the longevity and apparent success of their marriage, and congratulating them, Nunes accomplishes two objectives that are crucial to his set. First, he uses the real-life couple as a blank screen upon which he can project and articulate his premise, namely that marriages tend to worsen as years pass. By asking Ricardo and Cristina the question "Vocês se falam ainda, vocês dois?" ("Do you still talk to each other, you two?"), Nunes conveys his facetious presupposition that a long-married couple likely no longer communicates regularly or amicably. The point is not that Nunes believes that to be the case; rather, the point is to signal to the audience that his jokes are built upon that premise. The second objective that Nunes accomplishes is to also signal to the audience that the premise is not really true: he shows that he is joking, that his characterizations are playful, and that he understands (and intends) that his premise does not correspond to observed reality. By saying "Palmas para Cristina e Ricardo aí" ("Let's hear it for Cristina and Ricardo"), Nunes recognizes,

[44] Nunes, 56:36

celebrates, and affirms the longevity of marital harmony, even while also jocularly denying it for comedic effect. Nunes' affirmation, which he accomplishes through planned *crowdwork*, serves precisely the same purpose as Araújo's non-humorous closing statement: it draws the line between what the comedian thinks is funny to say and what he actually thinks. It also delineates a "safe space" for jest that is insulated from reality: by acknowledging that his premise is mere fodder for gags, the comedian grants himself leeway to explore its humorous potential without offending the sensibilities of the audience. In other words, if Ricardo and Cristina are shown to be happily married, and if they are shown to be enjoying the show, then the jokes are all framed as being in good fun. Meanwhile, the *tendentious element* – which will underpin the subsequent bits – has nevertheless been established: "E aí acontecem as desavenças" ("And then the discord happens"). Accordingly, Nunes, like Araújo, pokes fun at that supposed discord.

For both comedians, the premise further holds that the experience of that discord is unequal between men and women. The logic is that because men are immutable morons, women can more easily understand them, whereas men are left perplexed – and at a loss – in the face of their wives' intensifying, harsh reactions. This is what Nunes means by the closing sentence of the quoted excerpt – "Eu acho que para mulher é mais fácil conviver com o homem porque o homem é besta" ("I think that for a woman it's easier to live with a man because men are moronic"). The comparative phrase "mais fácil" ("easier") here refers to a heterosexual marriage, and it compares the wife's experience with the husband's experience of the same marriage.[45] If wives have it easier than their husbands, then it logically follows – by the anti-symmetry property of inequality – that husbands have a harder time than their wives. In other

[45] The phrase "mais fácil" ("easier") is not comparing a heterosexual marriage to a homosexual one; I clarify this point because it is not evident from the quoted excerpt, whereas it is evident from the context and from the continuation of the bit, which I have not quoted.

words, the premise extends to include the notion that men struggle to live with women. Women have it easy because, although they get mad, they know what to expect from men and it is straightforward. By this logic, the men are the ones who suffer – or fear potential suffering – at the hands of their volatile wives. This is the third *tendentious element*, and it is the basis for Nunes' subsequent bit, as well as for several of Araújo's bits.

There is one appreciable difference between the two comedians' material about marriage, and it should be mentioned here; however, while acknowledging it, I will also show how other evidence indicates that not too much should be made of it. Paulo Araújo makes no mention whatsoever of homosexuality or gay marriage, nor do his framework and commentary in his discussion and jokes about marriage grant space to that possibility. All of his anecdotes feature heterosexual couples, and all of those stories and jokes are based on the logic of the male-female gender roles and stereotypes described previously. Nunes, on the other hand, does explicitly acknowledge the existence of gay couples and gay marriage; he does so in the above excerpt. However, although Nunes nominally includes gay marriage in his framework, he does so only near the end of his set,[46] he mentions it only in passing, and he then abandons that line of consideration in favor of a return to conventional musings about heterosexual marriage. After affirming that two people of any gender can marry, he immediately falls back on the idea that women have it easier because men are predictably idiotic – "para mulher, é mais fácil conviver com o homem porque o homem é besta" ("for a woman it's easier to live with a man because men are moronic") – a statement that, in addition to being stereotypical, makes sense only in the context of heterosexual marriage. I make this point not to suggest that Nunes insufficiently considers non-heterosexual marriage, but rather to clarify that, in spite of Nunes' brief

[46] Nunes' sole mention of gay marriage occurs in minute 57 of his performance.

acknowledgment of gay marriage, both Araújo and Nunes discuss only heterosexual marriage – and rely on its stereotypes and tropes – in their anecdotes and jokes. Neither set truly explores gay marriage. At the same time, neither is heteronormative.[47] Rather, both comedians choose to focus on heterosexual marriage throughout their performances.

Both Araújo and Nunes are heterosexual, and both were married at the time of their performances (though Nunes and his wife divorced in April 2020, about 16 months after his special was filmed).[48] Given that much material in stand-up comedy is rooted either in personal experience or in a fabricated semblance of personal experience, it is unsurprising that both Araújo and Nunes avowedly and unabashedly use their own current marriages – whether truthfully or hyperbolically – as their frame of reference and source of material. In doing so, they share the very same picture: inescapable relationship decline; demanding, menacing wives; and bewildered, acquiescent husbands.

This does not mean that the comedians are engaging in misogyny or self-pity. It does mean that the comedians are engaging *with* misogyny and self-pity, employing easily recognizable tropes as a basis upon which to construct their jokes. They leverage stereotypes in the same way that, for example, tellers of "blonde jokes" do: taking advantage of a preexisting, widespread premise to guarantee comprehension and to place the emphasis on the joke's joking mechanisms – on *the joke as a joke*. The comedians incorporate and repeat *tendentious elements* that are thoroughly familiar to their audiences and that are generally understood – particularly in

[47] However, it is possible to argue that both sets are, in a sense, heteronormative – either by claiming that a focus on heterosexual relations constitutes heteronormativity, or by claiming that the institution of marriage itself (including even gay marriage) is inherently heteronormative. The sociologist Michelle Wolkomir makes the latter point. (Wolkomir, Michelle. "Making Heteronormative Reconciliations: The Story of Romantic Love, Sexuality, and Gender in Mixed-Orientation Marriages." In: *Gender and Society*. Aug 2009. Vol. 23, No. 4, 494-519.)

[48] "Whindersson Nunes e Luisa Sonza anunciam separação: 'Acabando um casamento, mas jamais o amor.'" *G1* (*Globo News* online), Apr 29, 2020 – https://g1.globo.com/pop-arte/noticia/2020/04/29/whindersson-nunes-e-luisa-sonza-anunciam-separacao-acabando-um-casamento-mas-jamais-o-amor.ghtml

the context of a stand-up comedy show – to be lighthearted tongue-in-cheek clichés that do not truly deride any group of people. They do so to guarantee that the premises of their jokes are comprehensible, consistent, and mundane, and thus that the creative, humorous aspect of each joke is underscored and understood within that context – just as a shiny costume in a theatrical performance is usually most visible and best appreciated when placed in front of a solid, dull, dark background.

The following Paulo Araújo bit – which I did not include in my earlier discussion of Araújo's set, and which I present here to illustrate the parallels between Araújo and Nunes – is built on a combination of the second and third tendentious elements: romance declines over time, while men remain static and women become irate. Here is the transcription:

> Uma coisa que diminui muito com o passar dos anos no casamento é o romantismo. Vocês já notaram isso, vocês que têm quinhentos anos de casados. É muito fácil perceber isso, porque durante o namoro, o casal tá sentado num sofá e o cara está comendo um sanduíche, e a mulher está do lado. E aí ela fala assim: "Amor, me dá um pedacinho do seu sanduíche?" Aí o cara fala, "Só se vier pegar!" [in a cute, playful voice]. Aí ela fala, "Ah, então eu vou pegar!" [also in a cute, playful voice]. E fica, e funciona aí, funciona isso. Depois que casa, o mesmo casal, dez anos de casado: o cara está comendo sanduíche, a menina está sentada do lado dele... o cara tá comendo sanduíche, e aí a menina fala assim: "Amor, me dá um pedacinho do seu sanduíche?" Aí o cara fala assim: "Só se vier pegar!" [in the same cute, playful voice as before]. Aí ela fala... "Enfia no seu cú, então."[49]
>
> One thing that decreases a lot in marriage as the years pass is romance. You've already noted that, those of you who've been married for five hundred years. It's very easy to notice that, because when a couple is dating, they're sitting on a couch and the guy is eating a sandwich, and the woman is next to him. And then she says: "Love, would you give me a little piece of your sandwich?" Then the guy says, "Only if you come and get it!" [in a cute, playful voice]. Then she says, "Ah, then I'll go and get it! [also in a cute, playful voice]. And they kiss, and it works, that works. After getting married, the same couple, after ten years of marriage: the guy is eating a sandwich, the girl is sitting next to him… the guy is eating a sandwich, and then the girl says: "Love, would you give me a little piece of your sandwich?" Then the guy says: "Only if you come and get it!" [in the same cute, playful voice as before]. Then she says… "Stick it up your ass, then."

The structure of this vignette is remarkable in that each of its three primary *joking mechanisms* dramatizes the joke's *tendentious elements* and is ideally suited to them. Those three

[49] Araújo, 38:12

mechanisms are *hyperbole*, *juxtaposition* (or *compare/contrast*), and *the rule of three*.

The first two of these are mostly self-explanatory. The phrase "têm quinhentos anos de casados" ("have been married for five hundred years") is clear *hyperbole* that emphasizes the idea of many years passing; this reinforces the second *tendentious element*, which involves the passage of time. Next, the *juxtaposition* of two nearly identical dialogues serves to implicitly highlight the one portion that differs, which is the wife's last line in each dialogue. Her last line in the second dialogue (which is preceded, in Araújo's delivery, by a strategic pause) causes the audience to laugh because its coldness and aggression contrasts so starkly with its counterpart – her last line in the first dialogue – which was happy and playful. Meanwhile, that same contrast illustrates the second and third *tendentious elements*, in that it demonstrates both the deterioration of marital relations over time and the wife's unchecked anger. Notably, in both of this vignette's dialogues, the husband's words, and intonation, are absolutely identical throughout; it is only the woman's words and tone that change at the end. This is consistent with the point that I discussed previously: both comedians employ the trope that men are unchanging fools while women are volatile.

The humor in the punchline – the wife's last sentence in the second dialogue – is strengthened by Araújo's application of a joking mechanism that is known, in stand-up parlance, as *the rule of three*. This technique creates *displacement* in a particular way: two items establish a pattern and generate an expectation, and then the third item generates a shock to the listener by departing from that expectation.[50] The punchline is the unexpected third element in the latter dialogue; it also corresponds to – and sharply contrasts with – the third element of the former

[50] Shatz, Mark. "Comedy Writing Secrets: Triple the Funny." *Writer's Digest* online, Feb 11, 2016 – https://www.writersdigest.com/there-are-no-rules/comedy-writing-secrets-triples

dialogue. Thus Araújo employs both *juxtaposition* and *the rule of three* to spotlight the punchline (the wife's final statement) and to cause it to be impactful and humorous. Meanwhile, the punchline's congruity with the through-line of the set – through its depiction of a marriage's decline and a wife's noxious transformation – further intensifies the humor, as the audience recognizes the ways in which the conclusion of the vignette aligns with Araújo's prior jokes and commentary.

Meanwhile, Nunes, having already incorporated the first and second *tendentious elements*, goes on to utilize the third one in isolation. The following bit, at minute 58 of "Adulto," is premised entirely on the third element: a husband's fear of his wife's inscrutable anger, and his resulting capitulation. Here is a transcription of the bit:

> As palavras para mulher são outras, entendeu? Às vezes, uma palavra que tem um sentido para nós, para a mulher tem vários. Quando fala "Vai," para mim é para eu ir. Para minha mulher, às vezes não é! Eu digo, "Amor, vou jogar bola com os menino, tomar uma cerveja... uma meia-noite eu estou em casa. E ela diz, "Vai! Vai!" [said with lips pressed together and a harsh stare, as if to convey, "Don't you dare!"]. Aí, eu não vou, né. Vai mandar me matar? Que diabo é isso? Não, fiquei ali tranquilo. Ela: "Mas que foi, que tu tá sério." Eu disse, "Não, é que eu queria ter ido jogar bola." "Eu disse para tu ir, amor! Eu disse, 'Vai'" [said in a high-pitched, sweet voice]. Eu disse, "Você não disse esse 'vai' de agora, não." Entendeu? São coisas que acontecem![51]
>
> Words, to women, are different, you understand? Sometimes, a word that has one meaning to us, to a woman has several. When someone says "Go," to me it means I should go. To my wife, sometimes it means I shouldn't! I say, "Honey, I'm going to play soccer with the boys, have a beer… I'll be home at midnight. And she says, "Go! Go!" [said with lips pressed together and a harsh stare, as if to convey, "Don't you dare!"]. So then I don't go. Will she get someone to kill me? What the hell is that? No, I just stayed there and took it easy. She said: "What's wrong? You look gloomy." I said, "No, it's just that I wanted to go play soccer." "I told you to go, honey! I said, 'Go'" [said in a high-pitched, sweet voice]. I said, "No, you didn't say that 'go' from now." Understand? These are things that happen!

The bit's two introductory sentences frame part of the premise in general terms: women are more complicated, and harder to comprehend, than men are. In addition to establishing this dichotomy, the second sentence establishes a class, and Nunes' membership in it: by using the first-person plural object pronoun *nós* ("us") in reference to men, Nunes positions himself on the

[51] Nunes, 58:00

male side of the polarity. He also links the personal to the general: a dichotomy exists, he is firmly located on one side of it, and, by that logic, he has a kinship and shared experience with all other (heterosexual) men. In this way, Nunes suggests that his experience is representative of that of all men in heterosexual marriages, and that he can speak for them. Moreover, his use of the first-person plural signals his high status and his authority to speak on behalf of men.[52]

Nunes' third sentence – "Quando fala 'Vai,' para mim é para eu ir" ("When someone says 'Go,' to me it means I should go") – uses a grammatical sleight to buttress the connection between the general and the personal. The implicit subject of the clause "quando fala 'Vai'" ("When [someone] says 'Go'") is impersonal; if it had been included, it would have been "alguém" ("someone," or "a person"). However, the second clause, "para mim é para eu ir" ("to me it means I should go") brings in two first-person pronouns (*mim* and *eu* – which are, respectively, the object pronoun "me" and the subject pronoun "I"). From Nunes' intonation and pauses, it is clear to the listener that the *para mim* ("to me") is not a prepositional object phrase of the verb *falar* ("to say"), and that *mim* is not an indirect object of *fala*; rather, here the *mim* is the indirect object of the implied (unstated) verb *significar* ("to mean") – a verb that, in Portuguese, is usually omitted in this context. In other words, here the phrase *para mim* means "to me it means." The sentence comprises two distinct clauses, and the prepositional phrase *para mim* begins the second one.[53] By concatenating, in a single sentence, those two distinct clauses – one general and one personal – Nunes implicitly claims the subsequent first-person anecdote as evidence for the general fact that he had put forth in his two introductory sentences.

Having laid the groundwork for projecting his own experience as emblematic of a

[52] Kacewicz, Ewa, et al. "Pronoun Use Reflects Standings in Social Hierarchies." In: *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. Mar 1, 2014. Vol. 33, issue 2, 125-143.

[53] That is why my transcription contains a comma before the *para mim* and no comma after it.

universal phenomenon, Nunes goes on to present the bit's vignette in the first person. As in Araújo's bit about the sandwich – and as is common in stand-up comedy – Nunes presents the anecdote in the form of a dialogue. That dialogue is a reenactment of an alleged conversation between Nunes and his wife. Nunes' intonation and facial expressions are crucial to conveying meaning in this joke; the joke cannot be coherently rendered in writing. For this reason, I have included in the transcription bracketed annotations indicating the pitch, tone, and delivery of each critical line of dialogue – particularly regarding the various occurrences of the pivotal word *vai* ("go"), whose inconstant meaning and connotations are the crux of the bit's humor.

The subtext of the bit is that while the man is straightforward, the wife deviously uses subtle cues to effectively repress and control her husband – all while nonetheless preserving deniability and the pretense of sweet innocence. In other words, she cleverly utters the word *vai* in a manner that conveys the opposite of the word's literal meaning; in doing so, she immobilizes her husband. Only after she has gotten her way – after her husband has been paralyzed by his fear of her potential reaction – does she feign sympathy. Moreover, in doing so, she shrewdly (and deceitfully) claims, after the fact, to have affectionately encouraged him to go out with his friends. The husband is left to suffer the consequences, with no concrete proof of his wife's machinations. The humor is in the ingenuity of the wife's manipulation, and in the starkness of the semantic contrast between her two utterances of a seemingly simple word whose meaning is normally considered immutable.

To the spectator, there is no doubt as to the bit's implication: marriages decline, women are tricky and terrifying, and men suffer. But it is also evident that this subtext is an exaggerated stereotype employed for comedic effect. Nunes, like Araújo, jokes about having a mortal fear of his wife: "Vai mandar me matar?" ("Will she get someone to kill me?"). This concern is so

preposterous that it can easily be deemed facetious – just as Nunes intends for it to be. Moreover, in less jocular moments, the comedian expresses his gratitude and happiness as a newlywed.

CHAPTER 8

"Comédia da vida casado" (2022) by Kedny Silva

A third northeast Brazilian stand-up comedian whose performances address marriage is Kedny Silva. Silva was born in Curitiba, Paraná (which is located in southern Brazil), and he currently lives in the city of São Paulo (southeast Brazil), yet he was raised in Pernambuco and lived there for most of his life; he describes himself as possessing a "Pernambucan heart."[1] He was born in 1979 and began performing stand-up comedy in 2011, at the age of 32, in Recife, his adopted hometown. Though lacking the name recognition and the enormous fanbase of Whindersson Nunes, Silva is nevertheless one of the most high-profile northeast Brazilian comedians, with nearly a million followers on Facebook and almost half a million followers on YouTube.[2]

Unlike Nunes and Araújo, Silva is Black, and his experiences as a Black man, as well as the topic of race more generally, figure prominently in some of his performances. He also has performed material about religion and the military. However, the topic of marriage – or, more specifically, life as a married man – is one of the most frequent and salient in his work, even more so than that of race.[3] Moreover, Silva coincides with Nunes and Araújo in his comedic approach to marriage; the content and structure of his sets mirror those of the other two comedians. Silva focuses on the same aspects, and purported repercussions, of marriage. And he does so using the same formula as the other performers: he presents vignettes that are (or

[1] "coração pernambucano" – www.kednysilva.com.br

[2] www.facebook.com/kednysilvas and www.youtube.com/@KednySilva/about

[3] Silva devotes more time overall in his performances to discussing married life than he does to race, and several of his most popular videos are those that focus on his experience as a husband.

claim to be) from his personal experience, he employs wordplay and double meanings to accentuate his stories, and he purports interaction with (and reactions from) the audience that support the underlying tendentious elements of his jokes.

Silva's playful presentation of marriage is most evident in "Comédia da vida casado" ("Comedy of Married Life"), which is a 13-minute segment of a set that he performed to a live audience at Hillarius Comedy Bar in São Paulo in January 2022. Although the segment is only a portion of a performance, Silva published the segment as a stand-alone video, under the aforementioned title.[4]

Consisting of a string of anecdotes about his life as a husband, Silva's "Comédia da vida casado" contains the same five fundamental thematic elements that Nunes and Araújo employ. The first is a lamentation of post-marriage life as being devoid of passion, compliments, or quality sexual relations. The second is the "henpecked husband" trope, which is a lamentation of the wife's dominance and control of sex and life; in this framing, the woman "wears the pants" in the relationship and emasculates her husband, thereby causing a purported inversion of gender roles. This trope is expressed through physical and even sexual metaphors: woman are imagined to possess male sexual organs, and the wife's newfound dominance (and, accordingly, the husband's submission) in the abstract is interpreted and imagined vividly in the form of body configurations and sexual manifestations. The third thematic element is the wife's purported use of pressure and manipulation; the figure of the wife is presented as being not only forceful and dominant but furthermore as stubborn, conniving, and clever. Silva, like Araújo, employs the technique of wordplay to emphasize this element, creating evocative and risqué double

[4] Kedny Silva, "Comédia da vida casado," January 2022, https://youtu.be/HpyDaPZQwbI (I will cite this as "Silva")

meanings[5] and attributing these to the wife in the anecdotes' quoted dialogues. The fourth element is the wife's wrath, which is characterized as a feared menace to be avoided at any cost. To underscore this element, Silva, like Araújo and Nunes, employs the technique of interaction with the audience – or feigned interaction, whereby the comedian alleges that audience members reacted with laughter and/or certain facial expressions – so as to dramatize, and ostensibly demonstrate, the extent and pervasiveness of female anger and male fear in marital relationships. Finally, the fifth element is submission: the "comedic I" gives up on resisting the wife's impositions, instead fully relenting and abdicating independence and power in the marriage. I have selected four bits from Silva's set, each of which exemplifies one or more of the five elements.

In the very first bit of "Comédia da vida casado," Silva efficiently establishes the first through fourth elements delineated above, leaving only the final element, that of submission, to be addressed later in the performance. Here are the transcription and translation of the bit:

> Faz muito tempo que ninguém me chama de gostoso. Nem a minha mulher me chama. Tú vai transar e ela fala "Vai logo!" Porra, "vai logo" é foda! "O arroz vai queimar. Vai logo." Aí o cara igual um coelhão. Pô, o arroz. O arroz. O arroz. O foco já é o arroz. [Silva speaks toward a man in the audience] Você está rindo muito. Você é casado? Você é casado? Você está rindo muito. E a mulher tá assim ó: "Ri, filha da puta... ri. Também não dou mais. Punheta. Foda-se."[6]
>
> It's been a long time since anyone has called me hot. Not even my wife calls me hot. You go to have sex and she says, "Hurry up!" Damn, "hurry up" is messed up! "The rice will burn. Hurry up." Then, the guy is like a big rabbit. Damn, the rice. The rice. The rice. The focus is already on the rice. [Silva speaks toward a man in the audience] You're laughing a lot. Are you married? Are you married? You're laughing a lot. And the wife is like this: "Laugh, you son of a bitch... laugh. I won't have sex with you anymore. Jerk off. Screw it."[7]

[5] These are not double entendres. Instead, the same word is used in a quoted dialogue twice in succession, the first time (by the husband) with its standard meaning, and the second time (by the wife, purportedly) with a sexual and/or aggressive alternate meaning. I will give examples later in the discussion.

[6] Silva, 0:44 to 1:27

[7] The translations of Silva's material are my own.

Silva opens by lamenting his wife's lack of excitement and attraction toward him, as well as the poor quality of their sexual relations; the wife is more concerned about the rice on the stove than about spending quality time with her husband. That is element #1. This dynamic leads to both dominance (element #2) and pressure (element #3) by the wife, with the use of aggressive commands – "Vai logo!" ("Hurry up!") – as well as pressure tactics – "O arroz vai queimar" ("The rice will burn") – for exerting control. For the fourth element, Silva shifts from his own purported experience to that of an audience member in real time, so as to transfer his claims from the personal to the universal; it is as if to say, "Not only is my marriage like this, but all marriages are like this." Silva does this by claiming reactions on the part of a man in the audience and that man's wife. Speaking in the direction of the man, Silva points out that the man is laughing; in this way, Silva implies that the male audience member identifies with the story being told. Subsequently, Silva claims that the man's wife is upset by the man's laughter, and he imagines that woman's thoughts aloud, using vulgar and demeaning speech. By attributing anger and aggression to the anonymous wife – whom he claims is thinking "Ri, filha da puta" ("Laugh, you son of a bitch") toward her husband – Silva universalizes the fourth element, springing from a personal anecdote to a characterization of a purported social phenomenon. In other words, all wives are menacing, and all men fear their wives – the same comedic framing that fellow comedian Araújo employs. The husband's capitulation, which is element #5, takes place in later bits.

One minute later in the set, Silva presents another brief anecdote that likewise touches on all of the first four thematic elements. This bit, however, represents an advance in the overall narrative arc of the comedian's set with regard to marital relationships, in that here the husband begins to challenge the wife's dominant control. It is an intermediate step – though ultimately a

futile one – that follows an initial period of unexamined compliance, and which precedes a helpless acquiescence. The husband first experiences the wife's control, then attempts to rebel against it, and then realizes that his resistance is counterproductive and therefore hopeless. This is the overall story of Silva's "Comédia da vida casado," and its bits are carefully crafted and sequenced in such a way as to create this broader narrative arc that spans numerous detailed anecdotes. In other words, each bit is not merely more of the same, nor a mere variation on a theme; rather, when received or considered in relation to one another, the bits, taken together, constitute a larger meta-story of marriage. Here are my transcription and translation of the bit, followed by a brief analysis of the techniques that it uses to express the aforementioned themes:

> Eu comecei a malhar. Aí minha mulher falou assim: "Ah, tá ficando mais fortinho." Eu falei, "Então, eu também tô mais gostoso." Ela falou "Baixa a tua bolinha. Vem devagar." Aí eu falei... já sei como eu vou resolver isso. Peguei uma foto sem camisa, botei no Instagram. As mulheres: "E aí? Que delícia! Que gostoso!" Eu falei, "Eita porra. Agora vai bater um ciúme e vai pingar um negocinho." Ela pegou a foto e falou só uma palavra: "Apaga! Shhh! Se não apagar, eu apago você. O quê que você quer? Você que decide da sua vida."[8]
>
> I started working out. Then my wife said: "Oh, you're getting stronger." Then, I said, "So I'm also getting hotter." She said, "Take yourself down a notch. Go easy." Then I thought… I already know how I'm going to solve this. I took a shirtless photo and posted it on Instagram. The women were like: "Hey! Yummy! So hot!" I said, "Wow, there we go. Now she's going to feel jealous and things will start to happen." She saw the picture and said two words: "Delete it! Shhh! If you don't delete it, I'll delete you. What is it that you want? You decide what to do with your life."

All of the first four elements are present: first, the wife fails or refuses to recognize her husband's physical attractiveness; second, she conveys dominance through her harsh command ("Apaga!" – "Delete it!"); third, she uses cleverness, which is expressed through wordplay, to press her husband into obedience ("se não apagar, eu apago você" – "if you don't delete it, I'll delete you"); fourth, she evokes fear by threatening murder, even if figuratively ("você que decide da sua vida" – "you decide what to do with your life"). What this bit contains that the

[8] Silva, 2:26 to 3:08

previous bit did not is greater audacity – initially, at least – on the part of the husband: the husband dares to post an image on social media, despite the likelihood and predictability of his wife's disapproval. The endgame, however, is not yet displayed: how will this power struggle play out? The subsequent bits – including the one that immediately follows in the set – address that implicit question.

The next bit contains all five elements: the husband laments his wife's coldness, authority, pressure, and wrath, and then he finally concludes, and affirms, that attempting to defy his wife's rule is inadvisable. In this sense, the bit goes beyond the previous two, because it ends with recognition of the futility of a husband's attempts at resistance and independence. The bit, like the previous one, includes wordplay attributed to the woman, thereby underscoring her cleverness. Unlike the previous bit, this one also features corporal allegory and sexualization of the woman's dominance; the wife speaks of herself as possessing a male sexual organ, and she expresses her rage by depicting herself sodomizing her husband. The wordplay and the sexual imagery occur in the same statement: the wife is quoted as using the verb *emperrar* (meaning "to get stuck")[9] in reference to sodomy immediately after the husband used the same verb to describe his key stuck in a lock. This generates humor while also furthering the perception of the woman as a clever dominatrix. Meanwhile, the bit's vulgar language – which is attributed to the wife, through quoted dialogue – further marks the woman as the aggressor. She is revealed to have become the opposite of what the husband had hoped for, and expected, in a wife. The notion of a clash between expected behavior and (ostensibly) observed behavior is delineated in the opening words of the bit: "A gente casa e muda tudo" ("We get married and everything changes"). The following are the transcription and translation of the bit, which has a duration of

[9] *Emperrar* is used in the sense of "não poder mover-se" ("not be able to move") – www.dicio.com.br/emperrar

just over two minutes:

> A gente casa e muda tudo. A gente não manda mais na vida da gente. Eu quero tomar uma, por exemplo. Antigamente: "Vamos tomar uma? Vamos!" Marcou... foi. Agora? Não. Tú tem que pedir autorização pra sua mulher com três meses de antecedência. E outra... tem que chegar devagar. Tem que ser assim: "Ó, amor, tudo bem? Tô bem pra caramba. Né? Pagamos todas as contas. Tudo jóia. Pôxa, tem um amigo meu, lá de Recife. Pôrra, amo esse cara. Faz anos que eu não vejo ele. Daqui a três meses ele vai estar aqui. Tú acha que eu tô afim de tomar uma com ele?" Aí a mulher fala: "Eu acho que não." Pega o seu cuzinho e vai pra casa. Você não vai dizer, "Eu vou e foda-se." Teve uma vez que eu falei assim: "Pôrra, eu pago as minhas contas, a gente é casado, não vou fazer nada de errado. Eu vou nessa pôrra". Ela falou, "Se for, tá fudido." Eu falei, "Eu vou! Eu sou o homem da porra da casa. Eu vou." Fui. Fiquei bebaço. Me diverti pra caralho. Um maluco solteiro arranjou uma menina. Foi transar. Aí eu me lembrei. Eu falei, "Eu vou ter que ir pra casa." Cheguei em casa, abri com a chave, né? Fui abrir a porta... "Ué?!" Aí liguei pra ela: "Amor, acho que a porta emperrou." Ela falou, "Emperrou o teu cú no meu pau. Eu tranquei. Agora vai comer o teu amigo. Não vai entrar aqui, não. Só volte amanhã. E com um pão quente, viu?" Ó, meu irmão, não vale a pena. Não vale a pena. É melhor você ficar em casa puto do que dormir na rua.[10]

> We get married and everything changes. We don't run our own lives anymore. I want to go out for a drink, for example. In the old days: "How about we get a drink? Let's go! You schedule it... you go. Now? No. You have to ask your wife for permission three months in advance. And another thing... you have to bring it up slowly. It has to be like this: "Hey, honey, how are you? I'm doing great. Right? We paid all the bills. Everything is fine. Oh yeah, so there's a friend of mine, from Recife. Man, I love this guy. I haven't seen him in years. Three months from now he'll be here. Do you think I'd like to have a drink with him?" Then the woman says: "I think not." You take your little asshole and go home. You're not gonna say, "I'll go, screw it." There was one time when I said, "Damn it, I pay my bills, we're married, I'm not going to do anything wrong. I'm going out to this thing." She said, "If you go, you're screwed." I said, "I'm going! I'm the man of the damn house. I'm going." I went. I got drunk. I had a great time. A crazy single guy got a girl. He went off to have sex. Then I remembered. I said, "I have to go home." I got home, I turned the key, right? I went to open the door... "What?!" So then I called her: "Honey, I think the door got stuck." She said, "Your asshole got stuck on my dick. I locked it. Now go screw your friend. You're not coming in here, no way. Don't come back until tomorrow. And with a hot loaf of bread, got it?" Oh, brother, it's not worth it. It's not worth it. It's better for you to stay home pissed off than to sleep on the street.

What this anecdote still lacks, however, is the man's obedience. Although the man has capitulated, he has not yet acted upon this capitulation. In other words, he has given up resisting, but he has not yet reached the final phase, which is that of acquiescence; he has accepted defeat, but he has not yet fulfilled his wife's demands. The fifth element can thus be subdivided into two parts: the man's realization of the futility of disobeying his wife, and his subsequent

[10] Silva, 3:08 to 5:22

reluctant obeyance of her commands. This bit contains the former but not the latter. The next bit, however, contains both. In this way, Silva has carefully constructed a narrative arc that spans all of his material about marriage: not only does each anecdote show a trajectory, but also the anecdotes – when considered collectively, in sequence and in relation to one another – suggest a broader trajectory at the macro level.

The following is a transcription and translation of the next bit of Silva's set, which immediately follows the previous one in the performance:

> Cara, não brigue com a sua mulher. É a briga que você vai perder. Quando não é isso, a minha mulher fala assim, ó: "Vamos alí rapidinho... na 25 de Março?" Vai tomar no teu cú! Não tem rápido! Rápido e 25 não pode estar na mesma frase. Aí tú fala, "Não vou. Não, não vou, não. Não vai ser rápido. Vou ficar carregando sacola lá." Que é pra isso que eu presto. Carregar sacola. Porque dinheiro ela tem. Ela não quer carregar sacola. Eu vou pra dirigir e carregar sacola. "Eu não vou, não. Vai você." Ela fala, "Ah, não vai, não?" ... "Não, não vou" [act-out of the wife seated and upset]. Um mês, ela aqui na sala. Pézinho balança. É raiva. Aí eu falei, "Pô, eu tô morrendo de fome." E ela, "Ah, você está com fome? Pede um iFood." ... "Oh, meu amor, faz aquele ovinho que você gosta." ... "Não, não vou fazer não." Até você dizer, "Olha só, eu quero ir na 25 de Março." Aí ela fala, "Eu vou, mas não é porque eu quero, não. É porque *você* quer." A mulher filha da puta. Ela joga uma pressão em você, pra você consertar a merda que ela criou pra você. E a gente cai.[11]
>
> Man, don't fight with your wife. It's the fight you're gonna lose. When it's not that, my wife says, "Let's go real quick... to March 25th Street?" Go to hell! There's no quick. Quick and 25th can't be in the same sentence. Then you say, "I'm not going. No, I'm not going, no. It won't be quick. I'll be carrying bags there." That's what I'm good for. Carrying bags. Because she has money. She doesn't want to carry bags. I'm going in order to drive and carry bags. "I'm not going, no. You go." She says, "Oh, you're not going?" ... "No, I'm not going" [act-out of the wife seated and upset]. For a month, she's here in the living room. Her little foot bounces. It's anger. Then I said, "Man, I'm starving." And she's like, "Oh, you're hungry? Order some food for delivery." … "Oh, my love, make those eggs that you like." … "No, I won't." Until you say, "Look, I want to go to March 25th Street." Then she says, "I'll go, but it's not because I want to, no. It's because *you* want to." That woman, what a bitch! She pressures you to fix the crap that she created for you. And we fall for it.

This bit marks the end of the trajectory of the set, of the husband, and of the marriage. Resistance is futile; there is no way out and no hope for asserting control, in the face of the woman's wrath and cleverness. Accordingly, the husband eventually submits to his wife's demands. Silva's playful characterization and artful dramatization of tension and malcontent in

[11] Silva, 5:41 to 7:14

marriage – which he has meticulously constructed over the course of the set, through both the structure and the order of his anecdotes – has reached its extreme conclusion, and the audience laughs.

In stand-up comedy, the premises of the jokes serve as the foundation and background, not as the message or takeaway. For the most part, the spectators know the stereotypes, recognize the hyperbole, and take the *tendentious elements* for what they are: a consistent, familiar backdrop on which jokes are projected. The objective and takeaway of a stand-up comedy performance is the laughter generated by its amusing details, carefully crafted surprises, and whimsical twists of phrase. Some questions remain, however. Silva, Nunes, and Araújo deploy the same stereotypes and similar scenarios and anecdotes when it comes to joking about marriage. Why do those particular *tendentious elements* dominate the joking characterizations of marital relations in northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy? And why are those habitual characterizations so different from those present in *cordel* poetry? I will raise these and several other follow-up questions in my conclusion, with the hope that future research will suggest some answers to them.

Conclusion

My dissertation has analyzed eight works of northeast Brazilian popular cultural production – five *cordel* poems and three stand-up comedy performances, none of which have been written about before – through the lens of their respective treatment of the theme of marriage. I chose these eight works in particular because they are representative of contemporary northeast Brazilian cordel and stand-up comedy.[1] Through close readings of each of these eight works, I sought answers to three questions. First, how does each of the individual selected works characterize marriage? Second, how do these characterizations, considered broadly, tend to differ between the two genres? Finally, what do these characterizations and tendencies reveal about the nature, status, and direction of each of the two genres? In this conclusion I will briefly summarize the answers to these three questions, and I will offer some new questions, which I consider worthy of future study, that have emerged as a product of my research.

Prior to doing so, however, I will explain how the five cordel poems and three stand-up comedy performances are representative of their respective genres, and I will briefly introduce some other northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians whose work I did not discuss in the dissertation. This will serve not only to contextualize and justify my selection of works, but also, in the case of stand-up, to expand the horizon, so as to reinforce my answers to the second and third questions and to help open the door to the follow-up research questions that I will propose.

The genre of northeast Brazilian cordel poetry, which originated in the late nineteenth century, has thousands of works by thousands of authors, and it has no canon; each scholar of

[1] The paragraphs that follow will explain how the selected works are representative of their respective genres.

cordel chooses different poems to analyze, and there has been no scholarly dialogue pertaining to close readings and interpretations of specific works. Accordingly, given the vastness and variety of literary production in cordel poetry, as well as the lack of a recognized set of preeminent or iconic works, it is difficult to contend that any set of five selected poems is representative of the cordel genre. However, the five works that I have selected are representative of the genre's diversity and of the different ways in which cordel poets incorporate, consider, and characterize the theme of marriage. Some cordel poets frame happy marriage as a reward for a protagonist's morality, bravery, humility, or obedience. Others present marriage as a social obligation, whereby a man repays a family's support, or a woman's devotion, by offering marriage in return. Some poets leverage the theme of marriage to reactionary ends, deriding and satirizing homosexuality, gay marriage, and other things that they consider to be "modern" aberrations. On the other hand, other poets celebrate marriage – whether gay or straight – as an expression of genuine love and passion. The diversity of marriage's appearances in cordel poems reflects the maturity of cordel poetry as a literary genre, while also demonstrating the diversity of perspectives, opinions, and identities of cordel poets. In selecting five cordel poems for analysis, I sought to include works containing the elements and approaches that I had found to be most salient and recurrent during my preliminary survey of cordel chapbooks. The five selected poems are also representative of the diversity of cordel authors, as I have included works by authors of different ages, genders, sexual orientations, and geographic areas of northeast Brazil.

As for northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, I faced the opposite extreme: stand-up comedy is relatively new to Brazil (having emerged in the 1990s), and northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians appeared on the scene mostly in the past decade (in the 2010s). Only a few northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians – including the three whose performances I have

analyzed in this dissertation – have released recordings of their sets. In that sense, those three comedians are representative of northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, because they are the ones who have published extensive material. That is not to say that they are the only active stand-up comedians in or from the region. It is also certainly not the case that all comedians from northeast Brazil are men, or that all are heterosexual. The female comedian Arianna Nutt – who is from the northeastern coastal city of Maceió (the capital of the state of Alagoas), and who has lived in São Paulo for the past decade – is perhaps the most well-known female stand-up comedian from northeast Brazil. However, Nutt has not yet released a stand-up comedy special, and the few video clips of her stand-up that have been published are short and contain the same few bits, repeated in different venues. Notably, Nutt's few jokes about marriage use some of the same framing and *tendentious elements* as those of the three male comedians whose work I have analyzed; in that regard, her material, rather than offering a different perspective, is fully consistent with the other comedians' characterization of marriage.[2] There are other stand-up comedians in northeast Brazil, including other women, who aspire to pursue stand-up comedy fulltime and to publish and distribute their material – Josi Dionísio from Paraíba, as well as Michele Félix, Anayra Bandeira, Andy Rodrigues, Babi Maybell, Érica Ferrer, and Ninha Rodrigues from Pernambuco.[3] Max Petterson Monteiro, a gay comedian from Ceará who lives in Paris, opened for Whindersson Nunes' "Eita, Casei!" shows in France and has headlined

[2] Like the other comedians, Nutt jokes about the lack of passion and quality sexual relations in marriage: "Pau de marido é que nem OB: a gente até bota para dentro, mas incomoda" ("A husband's cock is like a tampon: we put it in, but it's uncomfortable"); "Se eu quisesse transar com sono, não teria acabado meu casamento" ("If I had wanted to have sex while tired, I wouldn't have ended my marriage"). She also frames marriage overall in negative terms and using vulgar wording, while emphasizing her marriage's decline and the relief of having escaped it through divorce: "Ah, me separei dessa porra" ("Ah, I separated from that crap"). (Arianna Nutt, "Sexo depois do divórcio," Comedians Comedy Club, 2019) (Arianna Nutt, "Stand Up no Comedy Central, 2019)

[3] Brasileiro, Paula. "No Nordeste, stand up comedy é 'coisa de mulher'" in *Leia Já*, September 24, 2021 – https://m.leiaja.com/cultura/2021/09/24/no-nordeste-stand-comedy-e-coisa-de-mulher/

shows of his own in northeast Brazil. However, Petterson has not made a stand-up special or released clips of his performances; this is likely because he has focused mainly on creating comedy in other forms, such as humorous videos and comedic movies. Most Brazilian stand-up comedians – even more so than their counterparts in the United States – create and participate in various forms of comedy, including television shows, videos, and films; this has limited their focus on stand-up and, perhaps, somewhat stunted or stalled the development of stand-up comedy in Brazil. Nevertheless, it is likely that several of the abovementioned names represent part of the future of northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy. If someday these comedians do produce and publish stand-up specials of their own, then it is possible – though by no means guaranteed – that they could bring new approaches, both to the theme of marriage in particular and to stand-up comedy in general.

That being said, how does each of the eight selected individual works of cordel poetry and stand-up comedy characterize marriage, and what do those characterizations show about each work?

My analysis of the five cordel poems reveals not only that each one depicts marriage in a strikingly different manner, but also that each one does so with nuances and layers of meaning that only a close reading can reveal. In the poem *O romance de João Besta e a Jia da lagoa* (circa 1950) by Francisco Sales Arêda, marriage is seemingly presented as a reward for the protagonist's humility; however, a closer examination of the poem's wording and rhyme exposes the avarice that lurks even in purported humility. In *O sacrifício do amor ou o noivo ressussitado* (1977) by Manoel d'Almeida Filho, marriage is a means for the male protagonist to fulfill interpersonal obligations, as well as a way for the poet to extol the virtues of extreme female devotion. A careful reading of that poem, however, reveals a likely homoaffective

relationship between the protagonist and his unnamed male friend from Alagoas. That interpretation deepens the poem's implicit distinction between obligation and affinity, while also suggesting the possibility of a homosexual liaison in an era when that topic was far less socially accepted than it is today. *O casamento do boiola* (1985) by J. Borges is undoubtedly a homophobic poem, in that it crudely mocks and caricatures homosexuality while linking it to the ostensibly negative effects of modernity and to the downfall of the traditional patriarchy. Analysis of the poem, however, shows that its vulgar homophobic content serves not merely (or even primarily) to deride homosexuality or gay marriage, but rather as a tool for ridiculing the financial and moral corruption of ecclesiastical authorities. Moreover, the absurdity of the poem's plot, along with the jocular whimsy of its wording and double entendres, suggests that the poem – though patently homophobic, as well as critical of the clergy – was likely written with the primary aim of entertaining the reader, as opposed to promoting reactionary or incendiary views.[4] The poem *Romance de Amanda e Mara* (2020) by Graciele Castro celebrates marriage as an extension and expression of love, while defending gay marriage (and lesbian marriage in particular) against potential prejudice and negative judgment. While the poem is direct and straightforward with regard to its plot and message, a close reading allows for appreciation of the poem's metaphors, imagery, and wording – such as the kingless chessboard, the symbolic recurrence of the number nine, the abundance of various forms of the word *amor* ("love"), and the closing leap from the third person to the first person. *As ninfas da cachoeira ou o castigo da ambição* (2001) by José Mapurunga, at first glance, appears to side with the peasant

[4] J. Borges, in my September 2022 interview with him, affirmed that the poem has no message or ideological positions, and that his sole intent was to make the reader laugh and to sell chapbooks. Although Borges' claim should not be taken at face value, nonetheless it is worthwhile to note the author's stated goal, considering that his professed aim of generating laughter suggests a further parallel between cordel poetry and stand-up comedy.

against the lord, and it seems to depict women as passive objects to be prized and chosen by men – all while exhorting the (male) reader to be monogamous and to humbly pursue and accept marriage. However, a more careful analysis reveals two alternative points, one of which represents a politically conservative bent, and the other a potentially feminist angle. First, rather than advocating for class struggle in the Marxist sense, the poem extols the tireless work ethic, diligence, and obedience of the submissive peasant, granting him a prosperous marriage as a reward for those qualities. Second, by way of mystical elements, Biblical allusions, details of dialogue, and a key plot twist, the poet establishes women as having power and some measure of agency, including in marriage. Each of the five cordel poems frames and characterizes marriage in its own way and to a different end. The nuances and implications of these characterizations come into focus only through close readings and detailed analysis of the works with regard to their treatment of the recurrent theme. Moreover, the consideration of each work through the lens of marriage opens a pathway for interpreting and understanding more broadly the meanings and creative elements of each work.

Whereas each of the five selected cordel poems considers marriage from a different angle and presents it in a different light, the three stand-up comedy performances that I have analyzed in this dissertation – Paulo Araújo's "Um show de comédia standup" (2018), Whindersson Nunes' "Adulto" (2019), and Kedny Silva's "Comédia da vida casado" (2022) – all jokingly characterize marriage in mostly the same manner. All three of the northeast Brazilian comedians dwell on a negative, pessimistic depiction of marriage centered on conflict and tension. They present personal anecdotes about their experiences of marriage in that light, and they extrapolate those alleged experiences to general affirmations, moving fluidly between first-person observations and third-person commentaries. Specifically, all three comedians base their jokes

on the same five *tendentious elements*, which, in tandem, constitute the "henpecked husband" trope: the lack of passion, kindness, and quality sexual relations in marriage; the wife's control of sex and life, which results in the emasculation of the husband; the wife's clever and persistent use of pressure and manipulation; the wife's menacing anger and the husband's fear of provoking it; and the husband's inevitable submission and capitulation to the wife's demands.[5] Moreover, all three comedians use wordplay and audience interaction as mechanisms for constructing their jokes on the topic. Only Nunes ventures beyond that characterization, employing the theme of marriage – including his own wedding and honeymoon – as a basis for affirming and joking about his low-income upbringing, regional and socioeconomic class contrasts in Brazil, and the opulence of Brazilian elites along with the greed of those who profit from them.

Northeast Brazilian cordel poetry includes a diverse array of approaches and perspectives – a variety that becomes especially evident when works of the genre are analyzed in close readings through the lens of the theme of marriage. Cordel poems depict marriage in widely varying ways, presenting a multiplicity of aspects, characterizations, and messages. Moreover, cordel poets use formal and stylistic elements to add nuance and layers of meaning to their characterizations. Northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, on the other hand, is mostly homogenous in its characterization of marriage, focusing on a single trope: the henpecked,

[5] Some of these elements, particularly those pertaining to marital conflict and diminished passion, had already been employed by other comedians – both American and Brazilian, both male and female, and both straight and gay. American comedians Louis CK and Sam Jay, and Brazilian comedians Rafinha Bastos and Criss Paiva, among others, have performed bits about marriage and divorce that are built on some of the same *tendentious elements* and characterizations that Araújo, Nunes, and Silva employ. However, my broader research shows that the sets of the three northeast Brazilian comedians resemble each other more than they resemble the sets of comedians from other parts of Brazil and from the United States. (Louis CK, "Oh My God." HBO, 2013) (Sam Jay, "I Didn't Even Know How Gay I Was," Comedy Central, 2017) (Rafinha Bastos in "Casamento," 4 Amigos, Fila de piadas #56 participação Rafinha Bastos, 2017) (Criss Paiva, "Criss Paiva se separou do marido!" Comedy Central, 2019)

emasculated husband who endures a passionless relationship and a constrained existence while living in constant fear of provoking his wife's anger.

The creativity, originality, and ingenuity of the comedians' stand-up comedy performances are to be found not in the plot, framework, or underlying messages of the material, but rather in the unique details of the comedians' respective anecdotes, in the cleverness of their wordplay, and in the flourishes of their delivery. Each comedian successfully achieves the objective of generating laughter from the audience by skillfully playing upon and embellishing a tried-and-true marriage trope with which the audience is familiar. My analysis of the comedians' characterizations of marriage reveals a uniformity of underlying meaning and structure. At the same time, it suggests that perhaps what matters most to the comedians is the originality of the details of their anecdotes, and the effectiveness and efficiency of the humor in provoking laughter, as opposed to the originality of the material's premises. The comedians may have borrowed *tendentious elements* from one another, or they may have each independently sought out and adopted a trope that guarantees both audience recognition and fodder for comedic tension. In any case, the comedians take advantage of a proven foundation on which to artfully generate laughs from and for their audiences.

The history and structure of northeast Brazilian cordel poetry, on the other hand, place great emphasis on plot and meaning – including moralistic messages, expressed as implicit and explicit advice and exhortations to the reader, as well as extended, complex stories and tales. The "ethos" of cordel poetry is adherence to the poetic form, not adherence to a particular ideology; accordingly, cordel poets over the years have presented a variety of perspectives and ideologies in their stories, all while staying within the genre's traditional meter and rhyme scheme. In this way, the poets establish their belonging in the cordel poetry tradition,

irrespective of the messages that they convey. The diversity of perspectives and approaches in cordel poetry, though expanded by the increasing diversity of its poets and bolstered by the incorporation of new social norms and progressive values, is fundamentally rooted in the genre's malleability, as Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. has pointed out.

My study of the theme of marriage in northeast Brazilian cordel poetry and stand-up comedy has generated several new questions, which only further study and the passage of time will answer.

First, with regard to northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy: might the genre in the region evolve over the coming decades in some of the ways that cordel poetry already has? In other words, could northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, like cordel, become an irreverent, diverse, boundary-pushing, innovative art form? Specifically with regard to the comedians' treatment of the theme of marriage, why is there such uniformity and negativity about marriage? Is there something about the imperative of generating laughter that requires the comedians to base their marriage jokes, at least to some extent, on depictions of interpersonal conflict? Are those characterizations currently necessary or most effective for generating humor for Brazilian audiences, or are they prevalent for other reasons? To what extent is the trope of marital strife, and its usage in northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy, a localized phenomenon, and to what extent is it characteristic of stand-up comedy more broadly? Will northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy on the topic someday consist of more material beyond that trope? And when, and in what ways, will gay marriage form a substantive part of the material of northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians? If there is to be a transformation in how marriage is portrayed, what, or who, will drive it? More generally, how and why will northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy evolve? Will it diversify mainly due to an increase in the diversity of its comedians, or might diversification

occur for other reasons – such as increased maturity of the genre over time, along with more experienced audiences that are fatigued by well-worn tropes and that seek out new approaches? Finally – whether with or without such an evolution of the genre's content and approaches – will Brazilian stand-up comedy, including that of northeast Brazilian comedians, attract the scholarly and critical attention that today it still lacks? Might Brazilian stand-up comedy's foreign origin, as well as the "discovery" and appreciation of it by foreign scholars, inspire Brazilian intellectuals to recognize and analyze Brazilian stand-up comedy (including northeast Brazilian stand-up comedy) as an art form worthy of study – in the same way that Brazilian scholars, motivated by the constructed myth of Brazilian cordel's foreign origin and by the interest of foreign researchers such as Raymond Cantel, embraced cordel poetry and enthusiastically began researching it in the 1960s after having mostly ignored it for over half a century?

As for northeast Brazilian cordel poetry, how will the genre evolve? And how might it be influenced, if at all, by the rise of stand-up comedy in the region? Will the two genres continue to flourish and evolve in parallel? I have argued that stand-up comedy is in some ways an heir to cordel, given that the genres share a number of key attributes, and considering that northeast Brazilian stand-up today has some characteristics that northeast Brazilian cordel used to possess but no longer does (or at least not to the same extent). Both stand-up comedy and Brazilian cordel poetry are characterized by the commercialization of published products (videos and chapbooks), by the use of themes and techniques that generate or suggest intimacy so as to compensate for the distance between the performer and the audience, and by the inclusion or simulation of direct dialogue or interaction, however limited in scope, between the artist and the viewer or reader. Meanwhile, northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians perform to live audiences and publish recordings that reach millions of viewers, whereas cordel poetry nowadays is rarely

recited publicly as it once was, and it no longer has the readership that it once did. This is not at all to say, however, that cordel poetry has been superseded by stand-up comedy. Although stand-up comedy may have overtaken cordel in terms of live performances, distribution, and audience size, it has by no means challenged cordel poetry with regard to the literary genre's cultural significance and identification with the region. Moreover, the immensity and diversity of the cordel poet community, including the presence of many young poets, attests to the continued relevance and dynamism of the genre – even though the genre has evolved away from live performance, and even if fewer chapbooks are sold today than decades ago. How might northeast Brazilian cordel poetry and stand-up comedy converge, or diverge, or coexist, in the coming decades? Might there be a resurgence of live performances of cordel, in the form of poetry readings and theatrical presentations? Or will the cordel universe continue on the path toward becoming an entirely written genre, leaving the element of performance to other genres? Meanwhile, will the pursuit and presence of humor increase in cordel as a consequence of competition or influence from stand-up? Might some cordel poets even begin to moonlight as stand-up comedians? Or will cordel authors instead focus mainly on conveying new opinions and perspectives, ceding the realm of humor and laughter to stand-up? Finally, might it be the northeast Brazilian stand-up comedians who change course, maintaining humor and laughter while more purposefully selecting and diversifying the premises and *tendentious elements* of their jokes? These are some of the many questions for future consideration that have emerged from my analysis of eight works in two genres of northeast Brazilian popular cultural production.

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