

Sexuality and misogyny in Fernando Pessoa:

The Duke of Parma's contribution to the topic

[Sexualidade e misoginia em Fernando Pessoa:
a contribuição de *The Duke of Parma* para o tema]

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, Sexuality, Misogyny, Multiplicity, *The Duke of Parma*.

Abstract

This essay examines the intersection of sexuality, misogyny, and male intellectual superiority in Fernando Pessoa's work, focusing on his unfinished tragedy *The Duke of Parma*. The Duke emerges as a psychologically troubled, ostensibly "chaste" figure who expresses revulsion toward the female body and sexuality. The study situates this play alongside other writings — *Marcos Alves*, Pessoa's mediumistic texts, *A Cadella*, and passages from *The Book of Disquiet* and *Epithalamium* — to consider whether such views reflect authorial belief or function as dramatic constructs. It argues that the Duke's rejection of women is grounded in a belief in male intellectual supremacy and in a "higher" homosocial bond beyond physical desire, while female sexuality is cast as impure and inferior. These ideas resonate with a recurrent motif in Pessoa's work: abstinence as a condition of intellectual or artistic superiority.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, Sexualidade, Misoginia, Multiplicidade, *The Duke of Parma*.

Resumo

Este ensaio examina a intersecção entre sexualidade, misoginia e superioridade intelectual masculina na obra de Fernando Pessoa, centrando-se na sua tragédia inacabada *The Duke of Parma*. O Duque surge como uma figura psicologicamente perturbada, ostensivamente "casta", que manifesta repulsa pelo corpo feminino e pela sexualidade. O estudo coloca esta peça em diálogo com outros escritos — *Marcos Alves*, os textos mediúnicos de Pessoa, *A Cadella* e passagens do *Livro do Desassossego* e de *Epithalamium* — para avaliar se tais posições refletem convicções autorais ou funcionam como construções dramáticas. Argumenta-se que a rejeição do feminino assenta numa crença na supremacia intelectual masculina e numa "ligação" homosocial superior ao desejo físico, enquanto a sexualidade feminina é representada como impura e inferior. Estas ideias articulam-se com um motivo recorrente na obra pessoana: a abstinência como condição de superioridade intelectual ou artística.

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The Duke of Parma is a fragmentary and unfinished tragedy centred on a sexual theme. Pessoa creates a protagonist who is at once passionate, psychologically disturbed, and philosophically restless. The Duke appears as a chaste figure: although he rejects sexual activity, he remains unable to escape its allure, a fact that disgusts him, as he is seemingly repelled by the female body and sexuality.

When considering the ideas expressed by the protagonist, it is important to bear in mind that he is a character devised by Fernando Pessoa to embody mental and emotional instability. Accordingly, the Duke's views should not be read as a direct reflection of the author's beliefs, even if they may have been shaped by intellectual currents Pessoa encountered and, at times, endorsed throughout his life.

Much has been written about Pessoa's sexuality and his singular relationships with women. The study most directly relevant to the themes explored in *The Duke of Parma*, and to which this article will frequently refer, is *Misoginia e anti-feminismo em Fernando Pessoa* (2011) by José BARRETO. Other important critics—including Eduardo LOURENÇO, Teresa Rita LOPES, and Richard ZENITH—have also addressed the subject. Among monographic studies, Yara Frateschi VIEIRA traces Pessoa's erotic imagery, particularly in the English poems *Epithalamium* and *Antinous*, to the possible influence of flagellation practices associated with the education of gentlemen in Victorian Britain. Pessoa was exposed to such practices as a student at Durban High School, and, according to Vieira, they informed the sadomasochistic, homosexual, misogynistic, and paedophilic tendencies attributed to certain milieus, as well as to aspects of nineteenth-century English poetry that Pessoa read.

Other critics, such as Aníbal FRIAS, have examined identity, the body, and sexuality within the poetic construction of a "cycle of amorous feeling" organised into five "empires", ranging from ancient Greece to a modern, pan-erotic era. Within this framework, the evolving figure of Eros unfolds, culminating in the "Fifth Empire", conceived as a realm of love projected beyond the divisions of sexuality and gender into an imagined future. Another significant contribution is the collective volume *Embodying Pessoa: Corporeality, Gender, Sexuality*, edited by Anna M. KLOBUCKA and Mark SABINE, which brings together a wide range of perspectives on these issues.

While these studies, along with others not discussed here, make fundamental contributions to the subject, they do not engage with the work at the centre of this analysis: *The Duke of Parma*. Despite its fragmentary and unfinished state, this tragedy displays a clear sexual theme: the protagonist, the Duke, proclaims his chastity, which arises not from a virtuous choice but from an avowed repulsion towards sex and all aspects of female sexuality.

The aim of this article is to establish a dialogue between this Shakespearean-inflected tragedy and Fernando Pessoa's other writings on sexuality, as examined in the relevant scholarship. To this end, I present and comment on selected fragments from the documentary corpus of *The Duke of Parma*. These excerpts are not intro-

duced according to their archival sequence or the presumed structure and development of the play; rather, they are arranged thematically so as to facilitate the analysis of this particular discourse.

Male supremacy and homoerotic tendencies

With regard to the Duke's assertion of male supremacy, the following dialogue between the protagonist and Alberto suggests an intellectual communion between them—a form of elevated union that, in his view, can exist only between men. This passage also recalls the homoerotic undertones identified in various interpretations of Fernando Pessoa's writings. Addressing Alberto, the Duke declares:

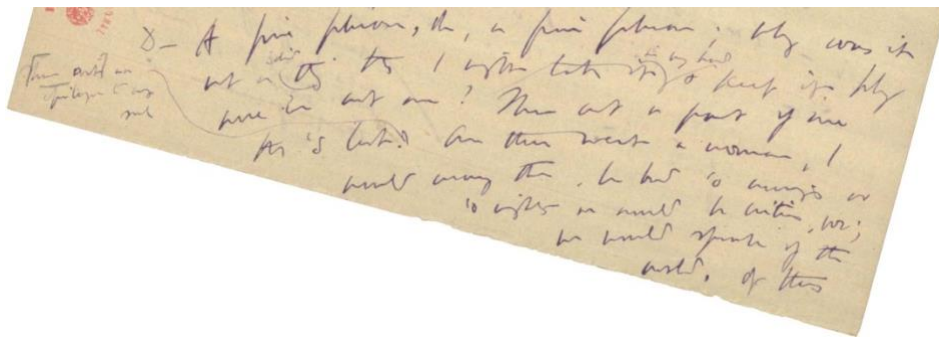


Fig. 1. (BNP/E3, 11^a D-9; detail).

[...] Thou art a part of me
that's lost. [*← /Thou art/ an epilogue to my soul*] As thou wert a woman, I
would marry thee. [...]

The Duke clearly regards this bond as superior to a union with a woman, which he construes as merely carnal, owing to what he perceives as the inherently material and sexual nature of women.

A subsequent exchange between Alberto and his sister, Hermione, further illuminates the complexity of his feelings towards the Duke:

I am glad he must
Be mad... An't loving in me to make him mad
And ~~wrecks~~ *wrecks my* plans thereon, I could not do it..
Ay, this thing fails me – tis but within me,
Sensing his madness does what I cannot...
This thing, that I cannot hate when I think
To treat as if I hated...

H - My lord... ~~why is~~ *Why*
Should you love him? What is the Duke to you?

A. Naught... But somehow he is not naught.
There are loves of the mind as of the body,

And in kinship doth lie between some minds...

That have no common

Where bodies have no common source + bodies ^{parentage}

+ + and bodies

H. Best think not of this...

Still as it matters little, it matters little...

Best think not of it, your action ^{lies}

Nearer to you than this...

A - Ay, this is nothing.

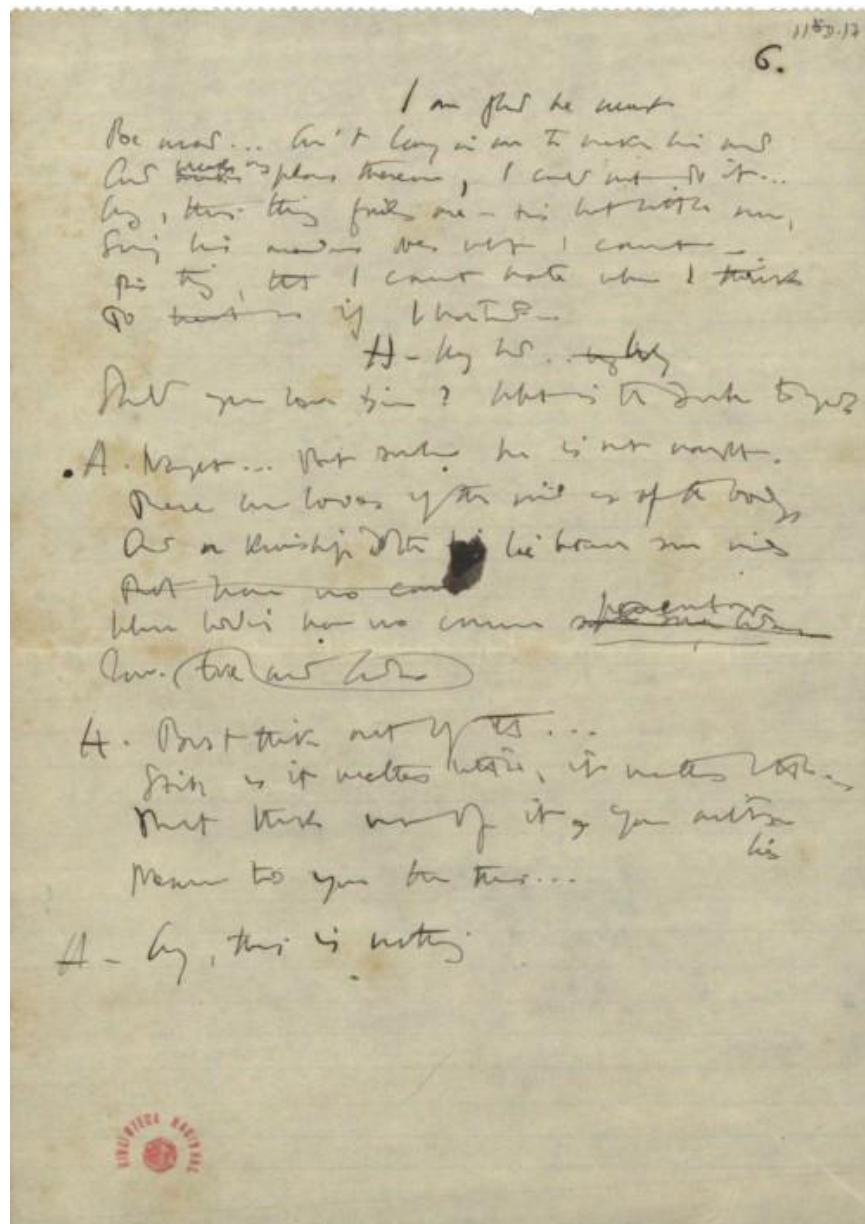


Fig. 2. (BNP/E3, 11º D-17º).

Alberto speaks of both his love for the Duke and the Duke's madness. His sister, Hermione, questions why he should love him. Alberto's response is deliberately ambiguous: for him, the Duke embodies a form of intellectual rather than physical love—a connection that transcends bodily desire. Once again, the text gestures towards a mode of attachment between men, or, more precisely, towards a bond that exceeds sexuality while remaining close to its threshold.

Further confirmation of this attitude may be found in the following passage:

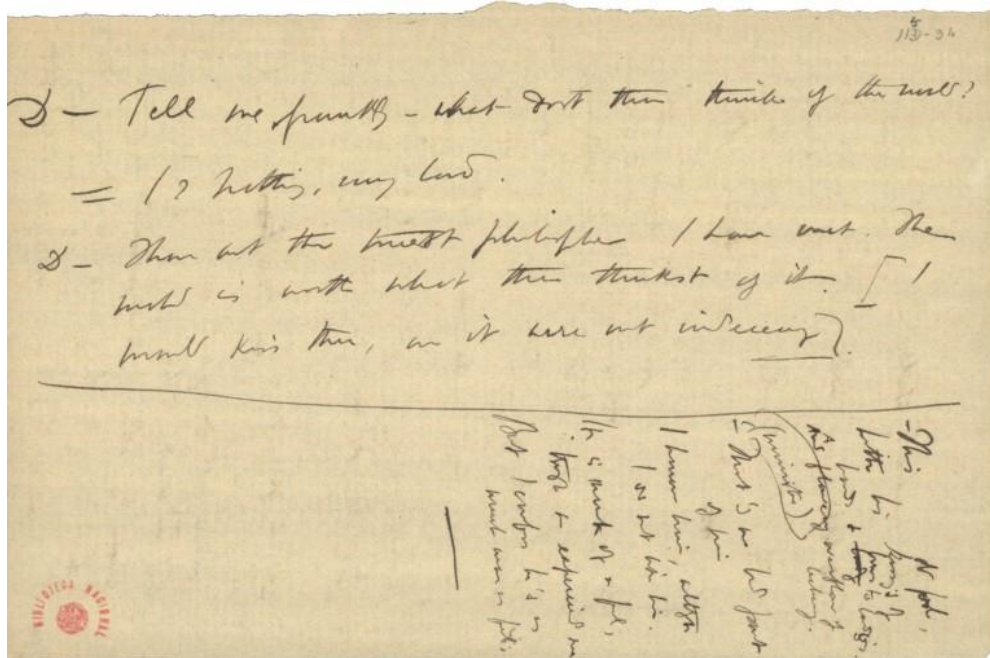


Fig. 3. (BNP/E3, 11^o D-34^o).

D – Tell me, frankly – what dost thou think of the world?
= I? Nothing, my lord.

D – Thou art the truest philosopher I have met. The world is worth what thou thinkest of it. [I would kiss thee, as it were not indecency].

– This □ old fool,
With his kissings of
hands & ~~body~~^{bows} to ladies.
And ^A flowery overflow of
lechery.

(minister)

– That's no bad part
of him
I honour him, although
I do not like him.
He is much of a fool,
though an experienced one
But I confess he's as
much man as fool.

It remains unclear whether the Duke is still addressing Alberto; however, he is clearly speaking to someone he recognises as “the truest philosopher I have met”. Once again, this intellectual communion prompts the Duke to articulate an incipient erotic

impulse towards his male interlocutor: "I would kiss thee, were it not indecency." This impulse is immediately followed by a sharply censorious remark, presumably voiced by a third party or by the addressee himself, in which reference is made to a "flowery overflow of lechery".

Female inferiority, their purpose and the Duke's repulsion towards female sexuality

In the verse of the first passage quoted here, we find a clear example of misogyny. In the middle section, the Duke says:

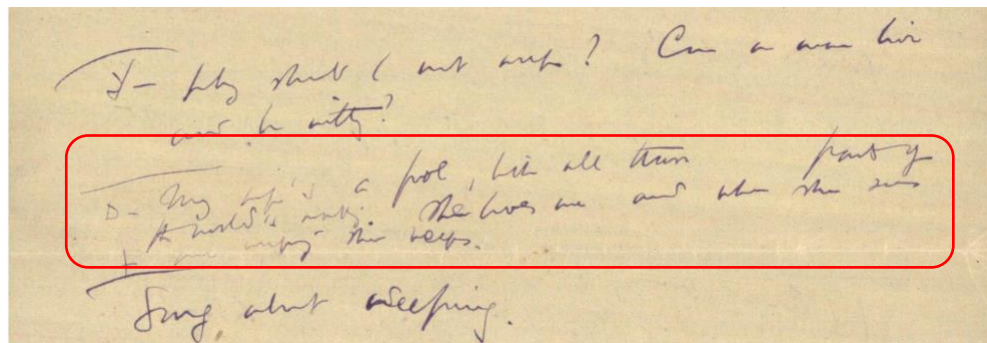


Fig. 4. (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-9^v; detail).

D — My wife's a fool, like all those □ part of the world's making. [...]

More specifically, he advances the view that his wife lacks intelligence—a trait he attributes not only to all women but to all beings he considers to exist solely for the purpose of procreation.

In the Duke's perspective, women are devoid of intellectual capacity. As this passage indicates, he not only asserts their supposed inferiority but also condemns what he construes as their inherent duplicity and deceitfulness.

- She reasoned well–
- Too well, too well. Had you a woman argue With intellectual □ who was right No, ~~she~~ the woman who argues, lies.

Women's arguments

Are Serve not for the understanding of the argument
But for the understanding of the woman.
When they are thus, we know that thus she thinks
And that way & ≠ ≠. With women never
The superficiality of phrase & word
Matches the soul & sense. They are born liars
= Gross, gross, gross–

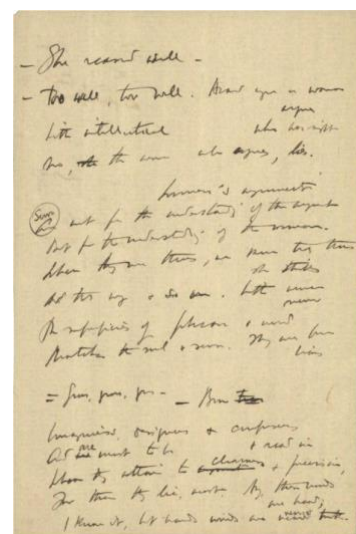


Fig. 5. (BNP/E3, 11⁵D-34^v).

– Born ~~liar~~

Imaginers, designers & confusers

And ~~we~~ ^{are} most to be $\square$ & read in

When they attain to ~~argument~~ cleanness & precision,

For then they lie most. Hey, those words are hard;

I know it, but hards words are ~~nearest~~ ^{newest} truth.

He maintains that women talk nonsense in order to achieve specific ends—ends that, in his view, never align with reason. The Duke acknowledges the harshness of these claims, yet insists that they come closest to the truth.

Procreation, for him, constitutes the primary function of women. While this role might be regarded as inherently noble, he perceives its physical realisation as profoundly degrading and repellent, insofar as it involves aspects of the female body he finds abhorrent.

At a solemn and formal occasion, the Duke appears dressed as a jester and poses a provocative question to one of his counsellors, a doctor: which is to be considered more unclean—the birth of a child or its conception?

Enter Duke, attired in
motley, with cap & bells.

General astonishment.

(this is a solemn occasion & one
demanding full uniform)

D — I, $\square$, Duke of Parma, fool
in general of this portion of the
land of fools gives ye greetings.

D — Thou art a doctor?

— Ay, my good lord.

D — Optime. Tell me which is dirtier:
the conception of a man or
his birth.

— I have never thought on it, my lord,
his birth, perchance.

D — Why not his conception, perchance.

— ~~n~~T true, my lord.

D — Or false. If a place is dirty

Is not going & coming dirtier

Than mere coming? I hear thee. [...]]

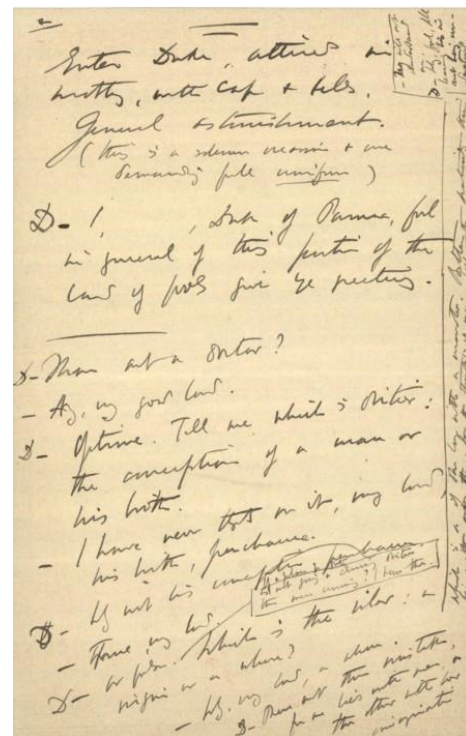


Fig. 6. (BNP/E3, 114 D-80v).

The Duke's question makes one point abundantly clear: he regards "that" place—that is, the site of procreation—as "dirty". This provides further evidence of his revulsion towards all things sexual, and particularly towards female sexuality. Accordingly, he construes both the locus of human conception through sexual intercourse and the moment of birth—emergence from the maternal body—as inherently filthy. In another

passage (11⁵D-46^r), he refers to “the dirt of our beginning”, and, in a dialogue with Alberto, characterises the act of conception as boisterous and animalistic, thereby casting life itself as intrinsically impure:

D — Hast thou observed — tell me, Alberto, for
I am a man of no eyes □, if a
Witch ~~sh~~ screams □ under cover?
A — Under cover? Oh, my. I myself
take it so. /Like ^{As} a woman ^{doth} believe./
D — True, true. It must be so. What a
thought! That one another ~~scream~~ ^{shrieked} this
bustly & wiggled thus when we were con-
ceived. We came of that, Alberto. (We
that unite party saying “thou art pure”,
my, we came of that)
I think dirtily upon life.
[...]

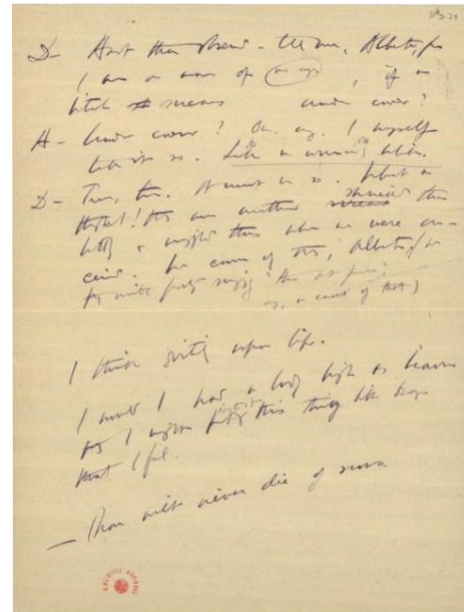


Fig. 7. (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-79^r).

Even in a dialogue with Alberto in the final part of the tragedy, the Duke's near-obsessive fixation on the bestiality of conception resurfaces. In his view, such awareness renders any poetic, respectful, or philosophical understanding of life impossible. This is exemplified by the image of the “two-arsed beast at active work”, in which two naked bodies engaged in copulation are perceived as a single creature:

Duke:

The □ things of life are in the power
To forget life
If we could see the ^{show} ^{sight} within us
The ^{present} ^{presentiment} ^{As of a present} and material being
Of our ~~birth, of our death~~ life as our mother, of our birth
The carnal & the local view of this;
If we in the words & □ of love
Could presence in a vision
The exact fleshly act that all that tends to.
Where were these poetry, respect, submission
To □
The complete vision of the /two-arsed/ beast
At ^{active} work of being it..
Is this not truth, Alberto?
A — The naked truth my lord, as the phrase goes
With too much vaunt of nakedness. [...]

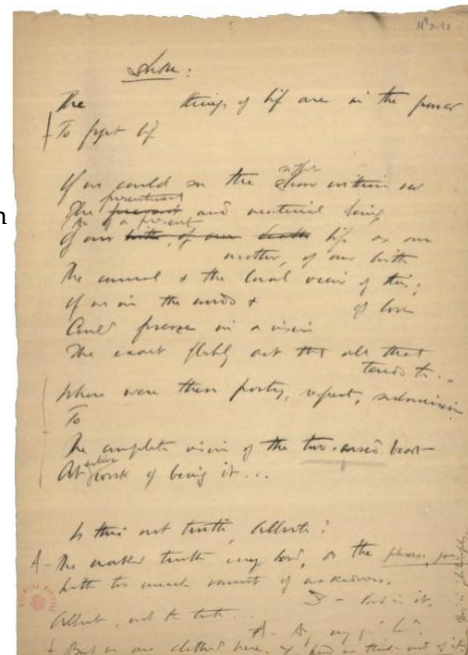


Fig. 8. (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-97^r).

To this, we may add a monologue in which the Duke reflects on the importance of clothing in preserving decency and honour. In this extract, the notion of the inherent indecency of the human body—and of the sexual act—re-emerges, particularly in relation to the female body:

Duke: — My clothes? What, motley?...
I pray you, inveigh not against clothes.
We're clothed things, body & soul.
There is no status in a naked body
Nor no condition in a nude soul. Note this:
That ^{as} no decency or no □ exists
Save clothes, no honour & no □
Save the soul dresses words. Why what is purity,
What is this best of love, this □
Could this be done by naked lover. No.
The maiden pure, the **true** wife, the **good** nature
Our **dressed** ^{costumed} animals. All clothes apart
There's but the female animal.
What would □ be if dress were not?
What would be purity & courtship & □
If the body's & soul's sex were not hidden. We are
~~We are~~ The willing drapes of our unconsciousness(es).
Others are the virgin's virginity, the wife's purity,

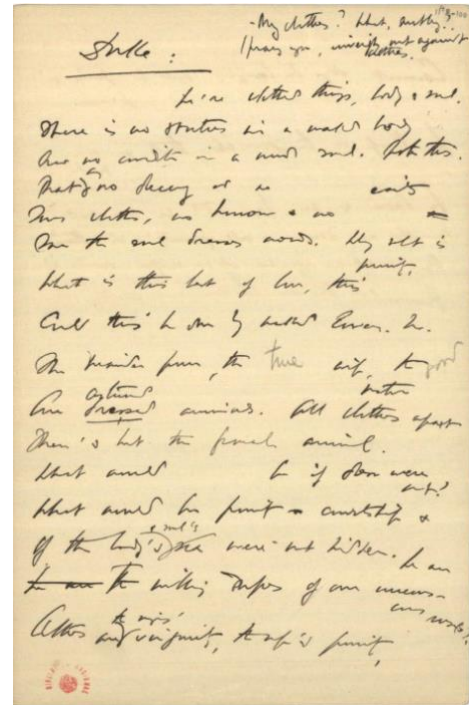


Fig. 9. (BNP/E3, 114 D-100).

Without clothes, the Duke asserts, a woman is reduced to “the female animal”. He ponders, “What would purity and courtship be like if the sex of the body and soul were not hidden?” And it is only the unawareness of human nudity, made possible by the concealment of the body, that makes ideas such as the virginity of the virgin and the purity of the wife possible. He elaborates this even better later in the same scene (in the verse on the same page):

Cannot dogs be taught not to piss in presence?
We keep it to ourselves that we are naked.
We hid it sometimes for our own selves, so well
That we do never know that we have hidden it.
We dress & we forget that we are naked
Beneath our dresses: all purity's in this.
How could we speak of in virgin-words if we
Remembered that our clothes are clothes.

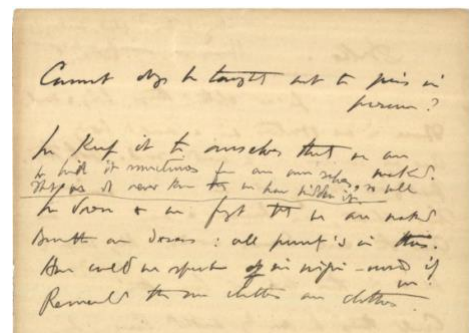


Fig. 10. (BNP/E3, 114 D-100; upper half).

Pessoa himself expressed a similar concept in other writings, as noted by José Barreto, such as the following passage from the *Book of Disquiet*:

O meu horror ás mulheres reaes que teem sexo é a estrada por onde eu fui ao teu encontro. As da terra, que para serem □ teem de supportar o peso agitado de um homem – quem as pode amar, que não se lhe desfolhe o amôr na antevisão de prazer que serve ao sexo *enfernizado de negro? Quem pode respeitar a Esposa sem ter de pensar que ella é uma mulher n’outra posição de copula? Quem não se enoja de ter mãe por ter sido tão vulvar na sua origem, tão nojentamente expellido para o mundo? Que nojo de nós não punge a idéa da origem carnal da nossa alma – daquelle irrequieto □ corporeo d’onde a nossa carne nasce, e, por bella que seja, se desfeia de origem e se nos enoja de nata?

Os idealistas falsos da vida-real fazem versos á Esposa, ajoelham á idéa de Mãe ... O seu idealismo é uma veste que tapa, não é um sonho que crie.

Pura só tu, Senhora dos Sonhos, que eu posso conceber amante sem conceber macula porque és irreal. A ti posso conceber-te mãe, adorando-o, porque nunca te manchaste nem do horror de seres fecundada, nem do horror de parires.

Como não te adorar, se só tu és adoravel? Como não te amar, se só tu és digna de amor?

Quem sabe se o meu sonhar-te não foi o encontrar-te simplesmente, se o meu amar-te não foi o ver-te, se o meu desprezo pela carne e o meu nojo pelo amôr não fôram a obscura ancia com que, ignorando-te, te esperava, e a vaga aspiração com que, desconhecendo-te, te queria?

(PESSOA, 2017a: 44-45)

BARRETO (2011: 40-41) notes that the revulsion towards the “vulvar origin” of human beings and female genitalia is reminiscent of the gynophobia evident in certain texts by Swift and Yeats.

The Duke’s disgust for sex and female sexuality is linked to his broader contempt for the physicality and materiality of human beings, as evidenced by the following passage:

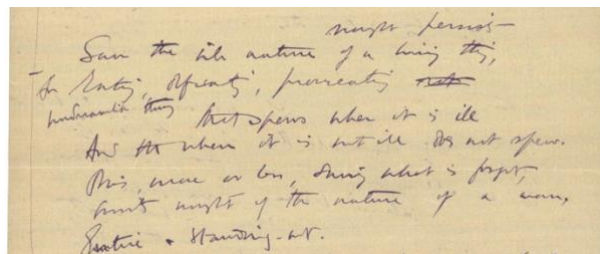


Fig. 11. (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-54r; detail).

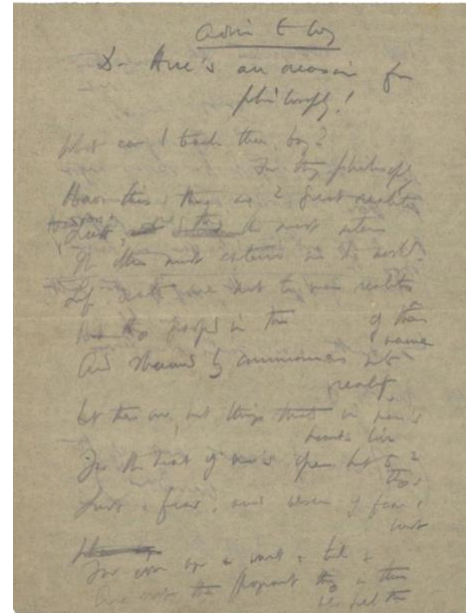
[...] nought persists
 Save the vile nature of a living thing,
 Are Eating, defecating, procreating ~~not~~
 Undreamlike thing that spews when it is ill
 And that when it is not ill does not spew. [...]

Sex—and, more specifically, lust—is presented as one of the forces governing ordinary men, alongside madness. It is among the impulses that drive them, together with fear—affects that, in the Duke’s view, acquire a greater immediacy than life and death themselves. This perspective emerges in a further excerpt, in which the Duke offers philosophical counsel to a boy, possibly Alberto’s son:

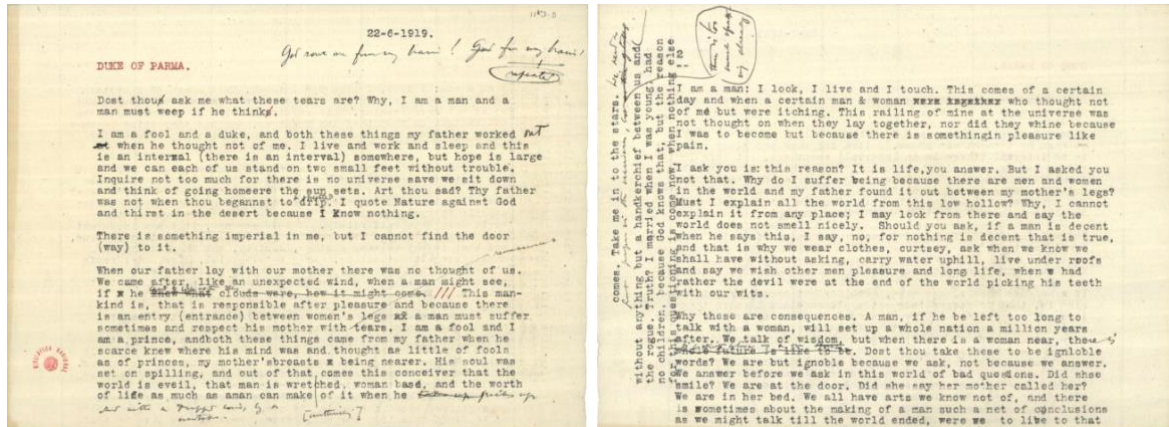
*Advice to boy

D — Here's an occasion for philosophy!
What can I teach thee, boy?

For thy philosophy
Have this: there are 2 great realities
Madness & Lust, and one delirium thing the most interior
The other most exterior in the world.
Life, death are not to men realities
But things grasped in the □ of their^a name
And showed by commonness not reality,
But these are, not things that in men's hearts live
For the heart of men's open but to 2 things:
Lust & fear, and absence of fear & lust
When age
For even age & want & tirl & □
Are not the flagrant thing in those who feel them

Fig. 12. (BNP/E3, 114 D-61^v).

A monologue delivered by the protagonist offers a decisive insight into the Duke's aversion to sex and female sexuality. In this passage, he denounces what he construes as the irresponsibility and selfishness inherent in sexual pleasure, which, in his view, may lead to a life of unhappiness. The following selected excerpts illustrate this:

Figs. 13a & 13b. (BNP/E3, 115 D-5^r & v).

[...]

I am a fool and a duke, and both these things my father worked out
at when he thought not of me. I live and work and sleep and this
is an inter~~val~~ (there is an interval) somewhere, but hope is large
and we can each of us stand on two small feet without trouble.
Inquire not too much for there is no universe save we sit down
and think of going home ere the sun sets. Art thou sad? Thy father
was not when thou beganst to drip^{be spurted}. I quote Nature against God
and thirst in the desert because ~~il~~ ~~K~~ know nothing.

[...]

When our father lay with our mother there was no thought of us.
 We came after, like an unexpected wind, when a man might see,
 if ~~we~~ he ~~knew what~~ ^{scared to look at the} ~~clouds were, how it might come.~~ ^{sky} /// This man-
 kind is, that is responsible after pleasure and because there
 is an entry (entrance) between women's legs ~~a~~ a man must suffer
 sometimes and respect his mother with **remembrance** & tears. I am a fool and I
 am a prince, and both these things came from my father when he
 scarce knew where his mind was and thought as little of fools
 as of princes, my mother's breasts ~~e~~ being nearer. His soul was
 set on spilling, and out of that **[methinks]** comes this conceiver that the
 world is evil, that man is wretched, woman base, and the worth
 of ~~life~~ as much as a man can make of it when he ~~takes up~~ **picks up**
sand with a dropped coin, by a
mistake.

2

I am a man: I look, I live and I touch. This comes of a certain
 day and when a certain man & woman ~~were together~~ who thought not
 of ~~me~~ but were itching. This railing of mine at the universe was
 not thought on when they lay together, nor did they whine because
 I was to become but because there is something in pleasure like
 pain.

I ask you is: this reason? Is it life, you answer. But I asked you
 not that. Why do I suffer ~~being~~ because there are men and women
 in the world and my father found it out between my mother's legs?
 Must I explain all the world from this low hollow? Why, I cannot
 explain it from any place; I may look from there and say the
 world does not smell nicely. Should you ask, if a man is decent
 when he says this, I say, no, for nothing is decent that is true,
 and that is why we wear clothes, curtsy, ask when we know we
 shall have without asking, carry water uphill, live under ~~roofs~~ **roofs**
 and say we wish other men pleasure and long life, when ~~we~~ had
 rather the devil were at the end of the world picking his teeth
 with our wits.

Why these are consequences. A man, if he be left too long to
 talk with a woman, will set up a whole nation a million years
 after. We talk of wisdom, but when there is a woman near, **there is**
~~whole future is like to be.~~ ^{is a skirt between us & our thoughts.} Dost thou take these to be ignoble
 words? We are but ignoble because we ask, not because we answer.
 We answer before we ask in this world of bad questions. Did she
 smile? We are at the door. Did she say her mother called her?
 We are in her bed. We all have arts we know not of, and there
 is ~~sometimes~~ about the making of a man such a net of conclusions
 as we might talk till the world ended, were ~~swe~~ **to live** to that.

The verbs employed serve to emphasise a mechanical and, in certain respects, degrading conception of the male sexual act. This is particularly evident at the end of the following sentence: “Are you sad? Thy father was not when thou beganst to drip [be spurted]”. The spermatozoon—the entity that will eventually become a human being—is thus figured as something that “drips” or is “spurted” forth.

The begetting male is portrayed as entirely consumed by desire and by the selfish pursuit of his own pleasure, showing no concern for the consequences of his actions. This idea is underscored when the Duke remarks: “When our father lay with our mother, there was no thought of us. We came afterwards, like an unexpected wind”.

In keeping with this view, the woman appears as a mere object of desire, evoked only through the part of her body that enables male pleasure: “because there is an entry (entrance) between women’s legs”.

Such irresponsible male selfishness is presented as the source of human suffering, as well as of the Duke’s own anguish. As he states: “I am a fool and I am a prince, and both these things came from my father when he scarce knew where his mind was, and thought as little of fools as of princes; my mother’s breasts being nearer”. Here again, only an erogenous zone of the maternal body is invoked—a locus of attraction that blinds men and renders them irresponsible. The child born of this act is condemned to suffer and to honour his mother (“a man must suffer sometimes and respect his mother with [→ remembrance &] tears”). From this detail, it becomes clear that the maternal figure is neither denied nor rejected, unlike the lover or companion: the Duke repudiates the idea of motherhood itself, yet does not call into question the figure of the mother or her familial role.

This tension is further evident in another passage of the tragedy, in which the Duke observes that, at the moment of conception, mothers behaved as boisterously and animalistically as any other woman—or, in his own terms, that they “cried like any other bitch”—and that such reflections would undermine the respect owed to them.

King Laertes.

How does a bitch cry when

*bowed *low?

— I know not my lord —

(Bitch)

Whatever cry it does.

D —Faugh! Our mothers cried thus
when we were conceived. But
what would respect be if these
things were thought on?

— This is naked language, my lord.

— Ay so are we by nature. And
have many known it?

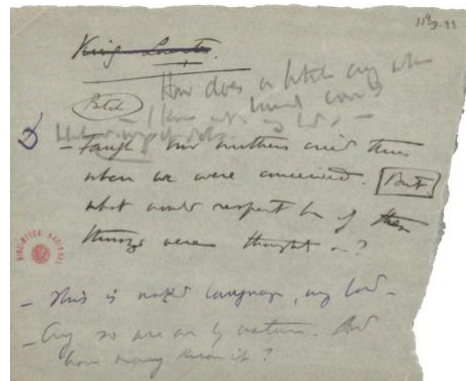


Fig. 14. (BNP/E3, 11^a D-88^r).

The implicit conclusion seems to be that it is preferable not to think of one's mother as merely another woman.

In the preceding monologue, the Duke states that "His soul was set on spilling", suggesting that the man's sole intention in the sexual act is the attainment of pleasure. This idea is once again conveyed through a degrading imagery and a verb denoting the release of seminal fluid—the physiological consequence of desire. For this tormented ruler, men are wretched and women trivial, yet mothers are to be respected. He assigns little value to life, emphasising its contingency when he declares: "I am a man: I look, I live and I touch. This comes of a certain day and when a certain man & woman who thought not of me but were itching". The use of the colloquial term "itching" underscores the reduction of sexual desire to a base impulse.

This amounts to what he himself terms a "railing [...] at the universe". The Duke associates unhappiness with contempt for, and revulsion towards, female sexuality—the very source of life, whose allure, in his view, leads men into unconsciousness and the selfish pursuit of libidinal satisfaction. He refuses to account for the world (that is, the human world) from what he perceives as such a degraded standpoint: "Must I explain all the world from this low, hollow place? Why, I cannot explain it from any place; I may look from there and say the world does not smell nicely". Even in *Epithalamium*, one of Fernando Pessoa's English poems published during his lifetime, the vagina is described as a "lipped lair". As Yara Frateschi VIEIRA observes, this constitutes a relatively transparent metaphor for the female sex as "'sepulcro', 'cova', 'cama de animais selvagens'", that is, as a site of death and decay (1981: 76-77). In other words, the female sex is dehumanised, and eroticism and sensuality are effectively annulled—a move that serves the cathartic function Pessoa assigns to his two published English poems, as will be discussed below.

The "indecent" of the Duke's invective is directly linked, in his view, to its truthfulness. As he provocatively asks: "Should you ask, if a man is decent when he says this, I say, no, for nothing is decent that is true"; and immediately adds: "Dost thou take these to be ignoble words? We are but ignoble because we ask, not because we answer".

Women are thus figured as a potential—if not inevitable—threat to male wisdom: "A man, if he be left too long to talk with a woman, will set up a whole nation a million years after. We talk of wisdom, but when there is a woman near, there is a [skirt between us & our <thoughts>]."

A further monologue by the Duke reiterates this deeply degrading view of the sexual act and of female sexuality:

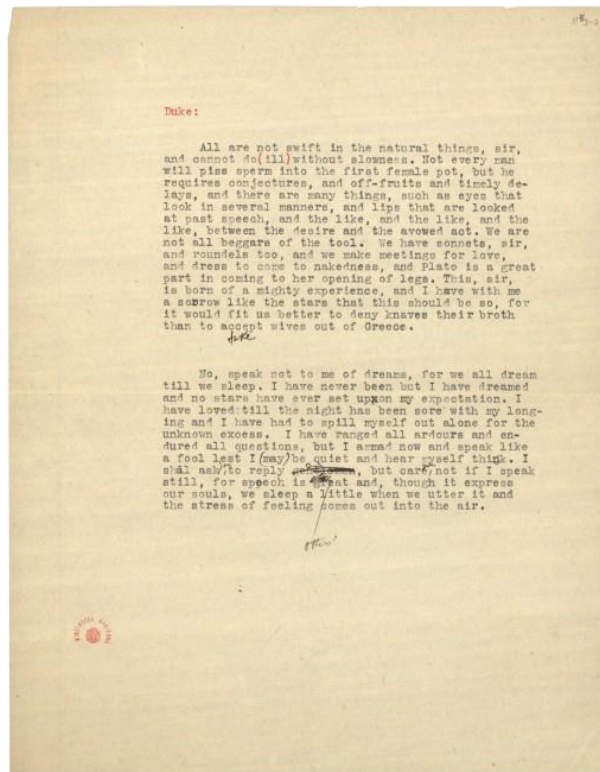


Fig. 15. (BNP/E3, 115 D-29).

Duke:

All are not swift in the natural things, sir,
and cannot do (ill) without slowness. Not every man
will piss sperm into the first female pot, but he
requires conjectures, and off-fruits and timely de-
lays, and there are many things, such as eyes that
look in several manners, and lips that are looked
at past speech, and the like, and the like, and the
like, between the desire and the avowed act. We are
not all beggars of the tool. We have sonnets, sir,
and roundels too, and we make meetings for love,
and dress to come to nakedness, and Plato is a great
part in coming to her opening of legs. This, sir,
is born of a mighty experience, and I have with me
a soerrow like the stars that this should be so, for
it would fit us better to deny knaves their broth
than to **accept** take wives out of Greece.

No, speak not to me of dreams, for we all dream
till we sleep. I have never been but I have dreamed
and no stars have ever set **uppon** my expectation. I
have loved; till the night has been sore with my long-
ing and I have had to spill myself out alone for the
unknown excess. [...]

Note the phrase: “Not every man will piss sperm into the first female pot”. In the Duke’s representation of the sexual act, women are evoked through synecdoche: the female sex is reduced to a receptacle that merely receives, thereby signalling passivity. A comparable image appears in poem VIII of *O Guardador de Rebanhos* (*The Keeper of Sheep*) by the heteronym Alberto Caeiro, where the Virgin, mother of the infant Jesus, is described as a kind of container carrying her son without having known love. Her exceptional status as a mere vessel is thus contrasted with the ordinary condition of womanhood and motherhood: “E a sua mãe não tinha amado antes de o ter || Não era mulher; era uma mala | Em que ele tinha vindo do céu”.¹

Conversely, the secondary role assigned to women as instruments for the satisfaction of male desire emerges in a text in which Fernando Pessoa comments on the female characters of Charles Dickens:

Dickens' women are dolls, but all women are dolls. As some thinkers upheld it at Nicea (?), women have no souls. Their existence is bidimensional to the tri-dimensional psychism of men. Women are merely ornaments of man's life – of his life as an animal, as enabling him to satisfy an instinct, of his life as a social being, as enabling him to continue the society he lives in and, working for, creates anew, of his life as an intellectual being as a decorative part of the outer world, with landscapes, china, pictures, old furniture, no more living and actual than these.

The reality of Dickens is purely masculine [...]

(*apud* BARRETO, 2011: 80)

Even in *Epithalamium*, as Yara Frateschi VIEIRA observes, “a noiva é meramente um suporte para a sexualidade masculina, uma ‘montaria’ (maiden mount), o que não só retoma a metáfora zoomórfica no pólo negativo da bestialidade, mas também remete a sexualidade feminina à pura passividade” (1989: 80). The poem does not depict an encounter or a mutual exchange of pleasure; rather, it stages the imposition of the male upon the female and her subsequent annihilation.

This perspective helps to explain why, in the Duke’s invectives against the irresponsible satisfaction of male lust—seen as a source of unhappiness—women are consistently evoked through synecdoche. They are verbally fragmented, reduced to the bodily part that incites the animalistic instinct to which man abandons himself, thereby betraying his highest intellectual vocation.

In the cited passage from *The Duke of Parma*, the verb “piss” is particularly forceful, reducing ejaculation to the expulsion of waste or surplus matter—a purely physiological necessity. When the Duke adds that “Plato is a great part in coming to her opening of legs”, he reiterates this misogynistic logic by refusing to name the woman and referring instead to a part of her body.

¹ *The Keeper of Sheep* by Fernando Pessoa, bilingual edition, translated by Edwin Honig and Susan M. Brown, Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1985, pp. 24-25, available at <https://archive.org/details/keeperofsheepogu0000pess/mode/2up>.

The expression “till the night has been sore with my longing and I have had to spill myself out alone for the unknown excess” appears to allude to masturbation. In this regard, Richard ZENITH, in an essay included in the volume *Embodying Pessoa: Corporeality, Gender, Sexuality*, notes that “masturbation, in fact, is a leitmotif in Pessoa’s writings”, citing the author’s own observation: “[o] desdobramento do eu é um fenómeno em grande número de casos de masturbação” (“the multiplication of the I is a frequent phenomenon in cases of masturbation”) (2007: 264).

In the final part of the tragedy, the Duke’s contempt for women, combined with his madness, escalates into violence in the grim “Scene of the Murder”. The Duchess implores him to spare her in the name of the love she has always borne him; he responds first by deliberately insulting her with the epithet “whore” —though he himself acknowledges its falsity, using it purely as an insult—and then casts her from a parapet:

Scene of the murder

D. & Ds enter †, D. ~~in motley~~ *still enters from an inner room, dressed in motley.

D — Have all the masked fools gone? the fools in foreign dress? (seeing his eyes)

Ds — (trembling) Ah... / Oh, torture me not to-night
Do me no harm, spare me, my gracious lord,
Think how I love you, & have loved you ever
How I... no... how (he seizes her wrists suddenly)
No, no, no, no. I am your wife, my lord...

D — Dost thou know what thou art?

Ds — Your wife, my lord.

D — No, a whore.

Ds — Oh, my lord, my lord! I am none.

D — Why I know thou art not. I say’t to offend thee.
(digs his nails into her arms)
she weeps writhing in silent anguish)

(Threats to tear ^{put} her eyes out. She almost screams with horror –  he takes her by the throat & lays her head against the bottom of the bed.

Covers her eyes with her hands & bows her head

D — What? Wilt thou shriek?

Ds — No, no. But oh my lord. By your mother’s soul, spare me, spare me.

(Heels her over the parapet. An awful scene is heard. He watches her fall with a completely insane delight. [...])

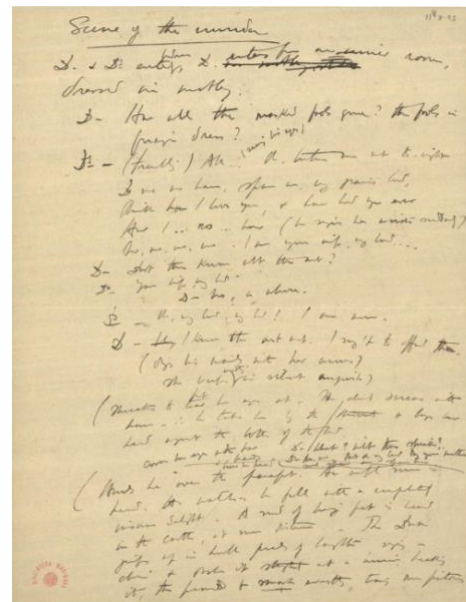


Fig. 16. (BNP/E3, 114 D-95).

The perversion of the female imagination and the natural role of woman as seductress

Returning to the dialogue between the Duke and the doctor discussed earlier (see Fig. 6), we may now consider the second question and, above all, the answer the Duke deems correct:

D — Which is the viler: a virgin or a whore?

— Why, my lord, a whore.

D — There art thou mistaken, for one lies with men, & the other with her imagination

The sentence is then completed in the right-hand margin:

[→ Which is as if she lay with a monster. Better
lie with asses than with the thought of men.

What emerges here is the notion that the female mind and imagination are even more reprehensible than the female body, insofar as women are construed as inherently bound to, and dependent upon, sexuality.

On this point, Fernando Pessoa writes, in a text from the mid-1910s:

Women have only self-control by force or social pressure; individually they follow their sexual nature which is to belong to, to be the possession of someone, and not to possess.

(*apud* BARRETO, 2011: 70)

This passage reinforces the conception of women as objects of possession—a passive position also reflected in several of the Duke's lines.

In a 1913 essay, Pessoa reiterates the idea that women are naturally predisposed to seduce men:

O unico interesse da mulher — á parte excepções doentias — é o homem. Por isso a unica faculdade fundamental em acção na mulher é a que capta e enreda o homem. D'ahi um extraordinario desenvolvimento d'essa faculdade, fazendo-a dominar toda a alma feminina.

(*apud* BARRETO, 2011: 123)

[The only interest of woman—apart from pathological exceptions—is man. For this reason, the only fundamental faculty at work in woman is that which attracts and ensnares man. Hence the extraordinary development of this faculty, leading it to dominate the entire female soul.]

Women are thus portrayed as beings whose primary function is to attract and ensnare men—the ultimate aim of their existence. As José Barreto observes, “O estereótipo da mulher lasciva, tentadora, naturalmente devassa, que não controla a sua sexualidade, é recorrente na literatura misógina mundial [...] A cedência à volúpia carnal é apanágio da mulher e corolário da sua inferioridade” (2011: 45) [The stereotype of the lascivious, seductive, and inherently wanton woman, who does not

control her sexuality, recurs throughout misogynistic literature worldwide (...) The surrender to carnal pleasure is regarded as a defining trait of woman and a corollary of her inferiority.]. He further cites the following passages from *The Book of Disquiet*:

Concedo que a inferioridade feminina precisa de macho. [...]

E o homem superior não tem necessidade de nenhuma mulher. Não precisa de posse sexual para a sua volúpia. Ora a mulher, mesmo superior, não aceita isto: a mulher é essencialmente sexual.

(PESSOA, 2017a, 142 e 136; BARRETO, 2011: 45)

In a passage written around 1917 and intended as a preface to an edition of five of his English poems, Pessoa reaffirms his supremacist and misogynistic views. He attributes intellectual faculties exclusively to men, relegating women to a reproductive role. Consequently, love (and sexuality) is secondary for men but fundamental for women. In articulating these ideas, Pessoa praises classical literature and criticises Christian literature.

Cult of woman: Mankind means man: it is man that creates civilization, which woman does but biologically render possible, which at most she does but preserve. (Woman creates man). Woman is complementary, but sexually and there emotionally complementary, not intellectually. Men are each others' intellectual complementaries. The ancients know no such slavish thing as the "importance" of love in a man's life, though they know it was sovereignly important in a woman's. Their sanity made them aware of the secondary importance of woman. All Christian literature is a litany to the Virgin Mary, in the person of several ladies who generally have borne more resemblance to Mary Magdalene of the first phase. All Christian literature is woman-ridden, worse it is female. [...] For the Christian poet love sums up the world. [...] In Milton there is no such woman-worship.

(*apud* BARRETO, 2011: 77)

This final idea—that sex is unworthy of a man but fundamental for a woman—may underlie the Duke's choice of chastity, alongside his horror of the female sex. Such horror may stem both from psychological trauma and from the internalisation of misogynistic and supremacist ideals.

In an unpublished note (BNP/E3, 55C-69^r), dated by José Barreto to 1910, Pessoa develops the notion of women's fervent sexual imagination, though he reverses the conclusion of the Duke's second question discussed above. The note begins:

Mulher

É depravada logo que deixa de ser virgem.

Quanto mais sensível um ser, dada uma decadência social, maior a perversidade; d'ahi, dado o conhecimento das cousas sexuaes, a maior depravação da mulher, pelo menos nas ideias.

(BARRETO, 2011: 37)

[Woman
Is depraved as soon as she ceases to be a virgin.
The more sensitive a being, given a condition of social decadence, the greater the
perversity; hence, once there is knowledge of sexual matters, the greater depravity of
woman, at least in her ideas.]

In other words, the woman is considered depraved from the moment she learns about sex. However, in the Duke's formulation, it seems that perversion is even more innate in women because, even before they have experienced sex, their imagination is already perverse.

In *The Book of Disquiet*, the author even offers advice to “unhappily married” women on how to fulfil their sexual fantasies without betraying their husbands by using their imagination.

Proponho-me ensinar-lhes como trahir o seu marido em imaginação.
Accreditem-me: só as creaturas ordinarias trahem o marido realmente. [...]
Retenham todo o gesto de sensualidade excessiva. Beijem o marido que lhes estiver em cima
do corpo e mudem com a imaginação o homem para olhar o bello que lhes estiver em cima
da alma.

(PESSOA, 2017a, 142; BARRETO, 2011: 47)

[I propose to teach them how to betray their husband in imagination.
Believe me: only vulgar creatures betray their husband in reality. (...)
Restrain every gesture of excessive sensuality. Kiss the husband who lies upon your body,
and with your imagination replace the man with the beautiful one who lies upon your soul.]

In this regard, Barreto observes: “A esposa não precisa de entregar-se a outros homens – o no que desceria ao baixo nível de moralidade de uma criada de servir –, bastando traí-lo em imaginação com uma série de ‘machos imaginados’” (BARRETO, 2011: 46) [The wife need not give herself to other men—in which she would descend to the low moral level of a servant—since it suffices to betray him in imagination with a series of ‘imagined males’].

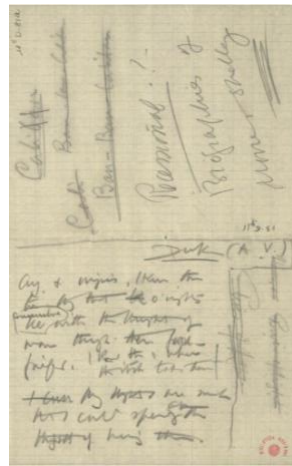
Pessoa/Soares’s advice to substitute imagination for reality in amorous encounters reproduces the mechanism identified by Isabel Allegro Magalhães, which, in her view, characterises a significant portion of Pessoa’s work: the woman / lover is evoked only to be denied as an erotic, physical presence, and replaced by a reality more conducive to the lyrical self—that of dreams, the intangible, and the imagination (see MAGALHÃES, 1996).

It is imagination itself that condemns women to “impurity”. The capacity to “sin” in imagination underpins the Duke’s notion that a virgin may be more “repugnant” (or “vile”, in the text’s terms) than a whore.

In another passage, the Duke returns to and develops his moral contempt for virgins (on the left-hand side of this page):

Duke (A V.)

Ay, & virgins, I know them
 too, they that lie o' nights
 lie commune with the thoughts of
 man through their fore-
 finger. I know them & where
 the itch takes them
 I know My thoughts are such
 that I could spew at the
 thought of having them.

Fig. 17. (BNP/E3, 11⁵D-81a^r).

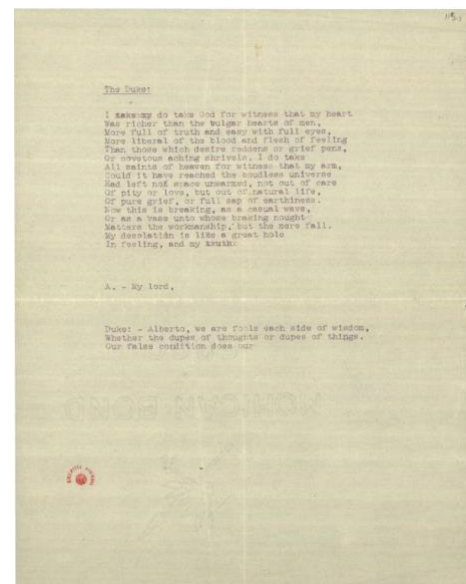
He claims that the very idea of possessing them would provoke a physical reaction of disgust: “I could spew at the thought of having them”. There is also an explicit reference to female masturbation: “virgins, I know them too, they that o’ nights lie [or commune] with the thoughts of man through their finger. I know them & where the itch takes them”. The notion that what has not yet been enacted in practice is nevertheless vividly imagined and desired is thus reiterated, and it is precisely this that underpins the Duke’s condemnation.

The choice of chastity and the sublimation / exorcisation of sexual instincts

Desire is considered by the Duke to be a form of slavery. In a statement made by the protagonist to Alberto, we read:

The Duke:

I ~~take my~~ do take God for witness that my heart
 Was richer than the vulgar hearts of men,
 More full of truth and easy with full eyes,
 More liberal of the blood and flesh of feeling
 Than those which desire reddens or grief pens,
 Or covetous aching shrivels. [...]

Fig. 18. (BNP/E3, 11⁵D-3^r).

Elevating himself above “the vulgar hearts of men”, the Duke emphasises his freedom from the slavery of desire.

In another passage at the top of this other page, the Duke states:

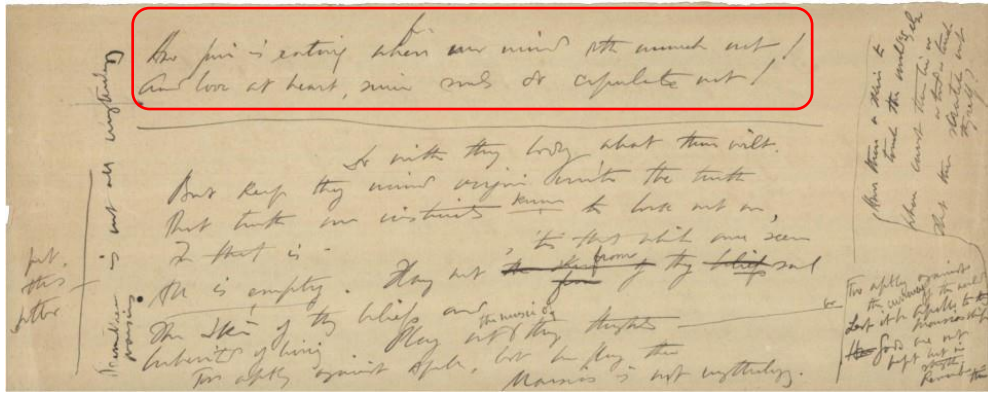


Fig. 19. (BNP/E3, 11^o D-30^o).

How *fine is eating **when** ^{for} ~~for~~ our mind doth munch not!
And love at heart, since souls do copulate not!

Love directed to the heart is thus presented as legitimate because spiritual love is pure: “souls do copulate not”. The soul, in this view, does not descend to base and impure acts such as fornication.

This idea corresponds to an ideal of the “superior man” who, in aristocratic fashion, renounces love as physical contact with women and as carnal, plebeian pleasure. Instead, he embraces abstinence and chastity in pursuit of higher ends. Fernando Pessoa articulates this notion in several writings from the 1910s, and it also appears in a passage from the unfinished fiction *Marcos Alves*. There, the narrator reflects on the protagonist, a virgin devoid of sexuality:

Como é, perguntava elle, que homens de génio – que sentiriam sem duvida como elle – tinham podido amar physicamente.

(PESSOA, 2006: II, 547)

[How is it, he asked, that men of genius – who would undoubtedly have felt as he did – could have loved physically?]

According to this perspective, genius is incompatible with the concrete, physical experience of sexuality.

In a passage from *The Book of Disquiet*, written in the early 1910s and cited by José Barreto, Pessoa expresses a similar renunciatory stance towards sexual contact:

Ser puro, não para ser nobre, ou para ser forte, mas para ser si-proprio. Quem dá amôr, perde amôr.

Abdicar da vida para não abdicar de si-proprio.

A mulher – uma bôa fonte de sonhos. Nunca lhe toques.

Aprende a desligar as idéas de voluptuosidade e de prazer. Aprende a gosar em tudo, não o que elle é, mas as idéas e os sonhos que provoca. Porque nada é o que é, e os sonhos sempre são sonhos. Para isso precisas não tocar em nada. Se tocares o teu sonho morrerá, o objecto tocado occupará a tua sensação.

Vêr e ouvir são as unicas cousas nobres que a vida contem. Os outros sentidos são plebeus e carnaes. A unica aristocracia é nunca tocar. Não se approximar – eis o que é fidalgo.

(PESSOA, 2017a: 50; BARRETO, 2011: 43)

[To be pure, not in order to be noble or strong, but in order to be oneself. Whoever gives love, loses love.

To renounce life so as not to renounce oneself.

Woman—a good source of dreams. Never touch her.

Learn to dissociate ideas of voluptuousness and pleasure. Learn to enjoy, in everything, not what it is, but the ideas and dreams it provokes. For nothing is what it is, and dreams are always dreams. For this, you must not touch anything. If you touch, your dream will die; the object touched will take over your sensation.

To see and to hear are the only noble things that life contains. The other senses are plebeian and carnal. The only aristocracy is never to touch. Not to approach—this is what it is to be noble.]

The Duke therefore appears to be a character modelled on the ideological complex of that epoch, which viewed sexual abstinence as a means of achieving higher goals.

The Duke thus appears as a character shaped by the ideological framework of his time, which construed sexual abstinence as a means of attaining higher goals. Renouncing sexuality entails the sublimation of instinct. As noted above, in a letter to João Gaspar Simões dated 18 November 1930, Pessoa justifies the “obscenity” of his English poems *Antinous* and *Epithalamium*, explaining that he sought to eliminate it cathartically through intense poetic expression—written in English and published in Portugal, hence relatively discreetly²—because it constituted an obstacle to certain higher mental processes:

² Anna M. Klobucka and Mark Sabine, in their introduction to the volume *Embodying Pessoa*, which they edited, write about the circumstances in which Pessoa chose to speak publicly about homosexuality: ‘Particularly when approaching the subject in print or in public, Pessoa either attributed his more candid and uncensorious discussions of homosexuality to Álvaro de Campos or made recourse to the English language, a tactic which afforded him particular freedom of expression in two ways. First, it permitted him the inconspicuous circulation of material that censorship laws made unpublishable in Great Britain in a medium that was safely unintelligible in Portugal. Second, it facilitated textual engagement with the genealogy of covertly homoerotic anglophone writing that had emerged in the previous half-century’, (KLOBUCKA & SABINE, 2007b: 14). Regarding why Pessoa wrote his two admittedly ‘obscene’ poems in English, Yara Frateschi VIEIRA adds: ‘Um dos motivos, ainda que não necessariamente o único, porém, terá sido porque nessa língua conheceu os modelos de comportamento e atitudes que fundamentaram a sua posterior fantasia erótica. Ainda, publicá-los eventualmente em Inglaterra ofereceria a vantagem de ser lido por um público com formação comparável à sua [... uma vez que] foi a Inglaterra que pôs em circulação esse tipo de relação pedagógico-erótica, tanto que veio a ser conhecido como ‘o vício inglês’” (1989: 75).

Ha em cada um de nós, por pouco que especialize instintivamente na obscenidade, um certo elemento d'esta ordem, cuja quantidade, evidentemente, varia de homem para homem. Como esses elementos, por pequeno que seja o grau em que existem, são um certo estorvo para alguns processos mentaes superiores, decidi, por duas vezes, eliminal-os pelo processo simples de os exprimir intensamente.

(PESSOA, 1998: 137)

[There exists in each of us, however little we may instinctively specialise in obscenity, a certain element of this order, whose quantity, evidently, varies from man to man. As these elements, however slight their degree, constitute a certain hindrance to some higher mental processes, I decided, on two occasions, to eliminate them by the simple process of expressing them intensely.]

Later, on 11 December 1931, Pessoa writes again to the same editor of *Presença* to clarify:

[O] pouco que sempre me interessou a sexualidade, propria ou alheia – a primeira pela pouca importancia que sempre dei a mim-mesmo, como ente physico e social [...]

(PESSOA, 1998: 175)

[The little that sexuality, my own or that of others, has ever interested me—the former owing to the small importance I have always attached to myself as a physical and social being (...)]

In the introduction to their volume, Anna M. Klobucka and Mark Sabine explain how Pessoa effectively guided later criticism in this direction. They refer to:

[...] the exegetic seed planted by Pessoa in his epistolary self-interpretations, evidently written for public consumption, that was to take root in such influential critical constructs as Jorge de Sena's claim that Pessoa had exorcised sexuality once and for all from his heteronymous universe.

(KLOBOUCKA & SABINE, 2007: 12)

They also cite Eduardo Lourenço's notion of "sexualidade branca" ("white" or "blank" sexuality; see LOURENÇO, 1973), which, in his view, should not be taken as evidence of Pessoa's sexual indifference, but rather as the expression of a repressed homoerotic drive manifest in his writings. In other words, Pessoa's horror of sex would entail an intrinsic dimension of self-censorship. In *Pessoa Revisitado*, Lourenço writes:

Não é o de imaginária indiferença ao sexo, nem pura impotência, mas desesperado e duplo combate para sufocar a expressão de um Eros anómalo e de o transformar em Eros "normalizado", culpabilizando-se por sentir os impulsos do primeiro e desprezando-se por não poder nem aceitar-se neles nem traduzi-los com os reflexos do segundo. Toda a sua poesia é o doloroso labirinto desta ambiguidade

(LOURENÇO, 1973: 309)

[It is not a matter of an imaginary indifference to sex, nor of mere impotence, but of a desperate and double struggle to suppress the expression of an anomalous Eros and to transform it into a 'normalised' Eros, accompanied by guilt for feeling the impulses of the former and self-contempt for being unable either to accept them or to translate them according to the patterns of the latter. All his poetry is the painful labyrinth of this ambiguity.]

Lourenço further maintains that every poem by Fernando Pessoa “traduz, segundo o seu ponto de vista, uma única e estranha visão do amor como ausência suprema, como insuperável não-amor” (LOURENÇO, 1984: 59) [translates, from his perspective, a single and strange vision of love as supreme absence, as an insurmountable non-love]. He associates this incapacity for love with the figure of woman, rather than with homosexual love, which, in his reading, finds a fuller and freer poetic expression in Pessoa and should not be mistaken for coldness or indifference, as it bears traces of suffering (see PENTEADO, 2024).

Other leading Pessoa scholars, including Richard Zenith and Teresa Rita Lopes, have questioned the idea that Pessoa was indifferent to sex and sexual practices—including heterosexual ones—drawing on both his personal writings and his poetry. This issue will be revisited in the concluding remarks.

What can be stated with certainty is that the Duke of Parma’s embrace of chastity and hostility towards women is not presented as serene or unconflicted. This is suggested by a comment Pessoa leaves on sheet 11⁵D-53^r:

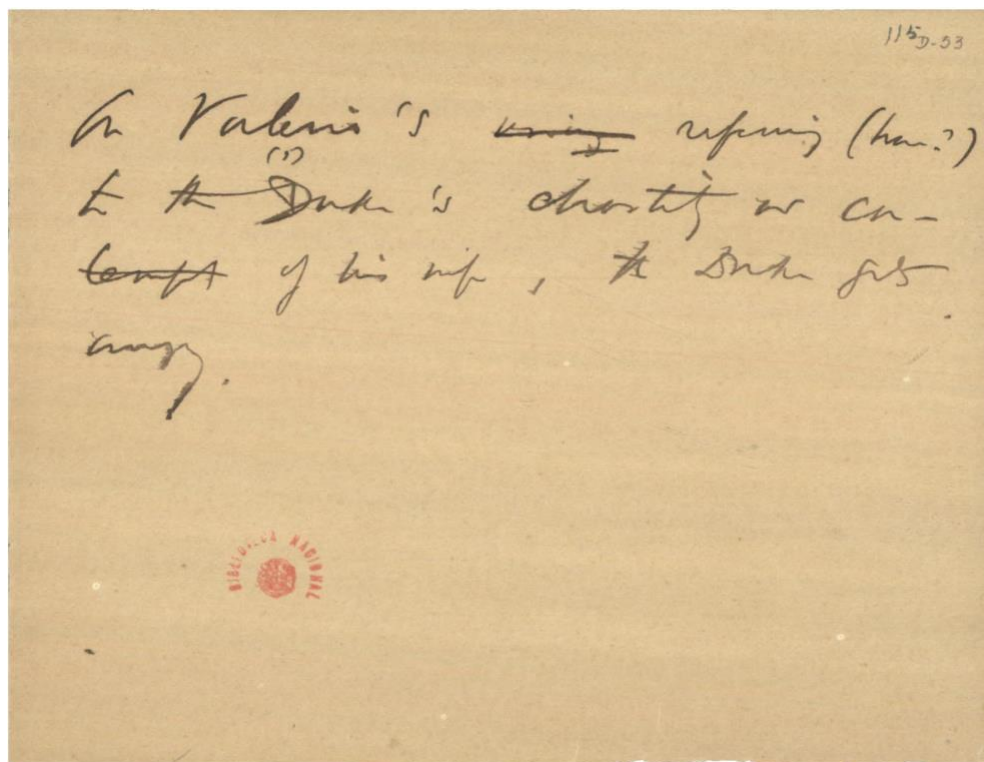


Fig. 20. (BNP/E3, 11⁵D-53^r).

On Valerio's ~~using~~ referring (how?)
to the Duke's chastity and con-
tempt of his wife, the Duke gets
angry.

Discussion and conclusion

It is evident that the theme of unexpressed, unrealised, and frustrated sexuality pervades Fernando Pessoa's work, surfacing in texts that are themselves, not coincidentally, fragmentary or unfinished. This is the case with *The Duke of Parma*, whose protagonist displays a deeply conflicted attitude towards sex and a marked aversion to female sexuality, and with the novel draft *Marcos Alves*, whose protagonist is labelled "No sexual" in a note and described in the epilogue as follows: "A sua vida sexual foi nulla, era indiferente" (PESSOA, 2006: II, 544) [His sexual life was null; he was indifferent].

Marcos Alves is a frustrated figure who has never lost his virginity, feels profoundly uncomfortable in the presence of women, and is consequently ridiculed. As a result, he becomes a social misfit; the source of his alienation—and of the anger it generates—lies in his awkwardness in relation to women. As we read in *Marcos Alves*:

Sentia uma indignação tremenda quando mulheres riam de qualquer cousa obscena ouvida ou vista. A principio elle queria crêr que era puramente indignação moral. Mas tão ardente era o seu odio contra ellas ao vel-as rir que, maugrado seu, foi analysando-se, e descobriu que era porque ellas sabiam o que aquillo significava, que era porque antes, mesmo, tinham praticado actos d'aquelles. O mero facto de uma rapariga virgem perceber aquellas coisas – enchia-o de odio. O mero acreditar que os outros tinham mais experiencia d'aquilo que elle, enegrecia-lhe a alma de odio horroroso. Uma raiva imensa derramava-se-lhe pela alma fóra. (PESSOA, 2006: II, 538)

[He felt tremendous indignation when women laughed at something obscene they had heard or seen. At first he wanted to believe it was purely moral indignation. But so intense was his hatred when he saw them laugh that, despite himself, he began to analyse himself and realised that it was because they knew what it meant, because they had, even before, engaged in such acts. The mere fact that a virgin girl could understand such things filled him with hatred. The mere belief that others had more experience of it than he did darkened his soul with a terrible hatred. An immense rage poured through his entire being.]

Toda a idea sexual como que morrera n'elle, mas não perdera tanto a analyse que não se irritasse de perceber sempre no fundo de si uma constante corrente, esbatida em / fraca/, de sexualidade / nas sub-idéas/.

(535)

[All sexual feeling seemed to have died within him, yet not so completely that he failed to perceive, deep within himself, a constant, faint current of sexuality in the sub-ideas.]

E depois – visto serem quasi sempre de ordem sexual ou de ordem orgulhosa os seus sonhos – o horror de não se poder sonhar sexual, pela terrível consciencia da sua fealdade (e ainda assim beneficia o não ter olhos, como tantas creaturas do seu genero intellectual que conhecia).

(537)

[And then—since his dreams were almost always of a sexual or proud nature—the horror of being unable to dream sexually, owing to the terrible awareness of his ugliness (though it benefited him not to wear glasses, like so many creatures of his intellectual kind whom he knew).]

Sex thus continues to gnaw at Marcos Alves's existence, remaining constantly present in his thoughts. It also shapes the way he observes others:

O seu destrambelhamento sexual dava-lhe não só uma acuidade estranha para analysar até chegar ás bases sexuaes dos actos, aparentemente d'elles remotas, dos indivíduos – o que era horrorosamente desidealizante –, mas dava-lhe também a tendencia para orientar sempre para um ponto sexual a sua analyse dos indivíduos. A sua sexualidade enchia todo o cérebro coloria tudo com a sua intenção.

(537)

[His sexual disarray gave him not only a strange acuity for analysing individuals down to the sexual bases of their actions—apparently remote from them—which was horrifically de-idealising, but also a tendency to direct his analysis of individuals towards a sexual point. His sexuality filled his entire mind, colouring everything with its intent.]

He also projects his own lack of a sexual experience onto others:

Reparou, no decurso dos seus pensamentos, que a epoca em que vivia parecia de onanistas
 □ de impotentes em potencia, de sexuaes sem vida sexual.
 E foi feroz de tristeza a alegria do pensador com que elle se comprehender-se assim obscenamente symbolico.

(538)

[He noticed, in the course of his reflections, that the age in which he lived seemed one of onanists, of potential impotents, of sexual beings without sexual lives. And there was a fierce sadness in the joy with which he understood himself as thus obscenely symbolic.]

He thus comes to see himself as “obscenely symbolic” of his time—a perception that encapsulates a profoundly complex and conflicted self-awareness.

In *The Duke of Parma*, the theme of sexual abstinence is closely intertwined with that of madness—whether genuine or strategically feigned by the Duke in order to expose his enemies and draw them into the open. This is achieved through his use of forceful, provocative language and through his position as ruling Duke, which grants him the latitude to speak and act with unusual directness.

Just as he addresses his subordinates in this manner to provoke them and encourage suspicions of his madness, he also articulates a sustained invective against sex, the pursuit of sexual pleasure, and female sexuality, which he regards as the “unclean” source of human life. Like Marcos Alves, the Duke is a character who does not engage in sexual activity yet remains, in a sense, obsessively preoccupied with it.

At first glance, the image of Fernando Pessoa as a misogynistic and supremacist figure, uneasy in relation to women and repelled by female sexuality, might seem confirmed by the themes articulated in this unfinished tragedy.

In reality, however, the picture is more complex, as José Barreto has argued. The most overtly misogynistic and supremacist positions are concentrated in writings from the 1910s. Moreover, as Barreto observes: “Os escritos mais íntimos de Pessoa – como as páginas de vários diários ou as ‘comunicações mediúnicas’ – fornecem-nos, porém, uma perspectiva com mais cambiantes, na medida em que provam que esse sentimento de repulsa pelas mulheres é simultâneo de um evidente desejo de sexo e amor heterossexuais” (2011: 82) [Pessoa’s most intimate writings—such as the pages of various diaries or the ‘mediumistic communications’—nevertheless provide a more nuanced perspective, insofar as they demonstrate that this feeling of repulsion towards women coexists with an evident desire for heterosexual sex and love].

In short, the notion that Pessoa entirely renounced sexual desire must be qualified, if not challenged altogether—a point emphasised by several critics. Teresa Rita LOPES, for instance, described Pessoa a “O falso virgem” [The False Virgin] in a 2008 article, contesting his supposed incapacity for love and identifying clear expressions of concrete—and at times passionate—heterosexual desire in his poetry and, above all, in intimate writings such as his private diary, séance transcripts, and letters to Ofélia Queiroz (2008: 60-64). Even earlier, in 2007, Zenith addressed the issue by through an analysis of Pessoa’s mediumistic writings. In his essay “Automatic Romance: Pessoa’s Mediumistic Writings as Sexual Theatre” (2007), Zenith also draws on his earlier article, “Fernando Pessoa’s Gay Heteronym?” (2002), further complicating any reductive reading of Pessoa’s sexuality.

[...] to show that his claim to have eliminated sexual desire from his life once and for all was false; it continually asserted itself and was continually repressed, being sublimated in his writing. In the present essay I will argue that it was not always Pessoa’s clear intention to relegate sex to the literary domain. I will assemble evidence to show that Pessoa also tried to “get a life,” as the expression goes – a real, physical, sexual love life.

(ZENITH, 2007: 261)

Zenith cites pages from the poet’s personal diary and observes that “Pessoa obviously wanted to be a ‘normal’, practising heterosexual, but could not rise to the occasions that presented themselves, either because he was too timid and uncertain of himself or because he was not a heterosexual” (2007: 262).

A marked sense of sexual and emotional frustration emerges in these mediumistic writings, in which Fernando Pessoa communicates with English-speaking spirits, particularly between 1916 and 1917, alongside an evident desire to transform this aspect of his life. Indeed, most of the questions he addresses to these spirits concern the sexual sphere. Presumably produced in a semi-hypnotic state and without literary ambition, these texts were later dismissed by Pessoa as the product of

mental imbalance (much like the Duke's utterances). Nevertheless, they likely provide a unique insight into his most intimate, concealed thoughts and inner dialogue—or, as ZENITH suggests:

The several hundred sheets of mediumistic writings left by Pessoa, which have only recently begun to be published, are a gold mine for sexual psychoanalyses [...]
 Pessoa's mediumistic writings, I maintain, are more self-theatralization, dealing with a problem – the sexual problem – that the heteronyms were unable to resolve. [...]
 For Fernando Pessoa, permeated with a horrified disdain, or disdainful horror, of love in the real world, automatic writing was, like the heteronyms, an avoidance strategy, a way to live without living.

(2007: 258, 259, 269)

As José BARRETO observes, the English-speaking spirits with whom Fernando Pessoa communicates—most notably Henry More—appear to embody a kind of “censorial and normative superego” (2011: 84), which advises him against the practices of chastity, masturbation, and homosexuality—that is, anything that precludes sexual engagement with the opposite sex—and urges him to reverse the path he had previously followed in the pursuit of artistic and intellectual fulfilment. This dynamic is evident in the following extracts:

A man who makes up his mind to keep chaste is a man who makes up his mind to sunder himself from mankind.

(Excerpt 27; PESSOA 2003: 260)

You must not maintain chastity [any] more. You are so misogynous that you will find yourself morally impotent, and in that way you will not produce any complete work in literature. You must abandon your monastic life and now. You are not a man to make much in the world if you keep chaste.

No temperament like yours can manage to keep chastity and sane emotionally. Keeping chastity is for stronger men and men who have to [keep chaste] on account of physical defects. This does not apply to you. A man who masturbates himself is not a strong man, and no man is man who is not a lover. Many men make many mates. You are a moral child many times over. You are a man who masturbates himself and who dreams of women in a masturbator's manner. Man is man. No man can move among men if he is not a man like them.

Make up your mind to do your duty by Nature, not in a manner so insane as now. Make up your mind to go to bed with the girl who is coming into your life. Make up your mind to make her happy in a sexual way.

(Excerpt 9, “28-6-1916 – pelas 6 (5) da tarde”; PESSOA 2003: 224-226)

As Barreto suggests, we can notice:

[U]ma inversão da anterior argumentação sobre a relação entre a obra literária e a sexualidade ou o amor: de obstáculos à nobre missão artística, amor e sexo passam agora a sua condição prévia. O futuro da grande obra literária depende da inserção de Pessoa no

mundo humano através dos elos do amor e da sexualidade, encarados estes como um “dever de acordo com a Natureza”.

(2011: 86)

[A reversal of the earlier argument concerning the relationship between literary production and sexuality or love: from being obstacles to the noble artistic mission, love and sex now become its precondition. The future of a great literary work depends on Pessoa's integration into the human world through the bonds of love and sexuality, conceived as a 'duty in accordance with Nature'.]

Another literary figure in Fernando Pessoa's work, Barão de Teive, embodies the frustration arising from the inability to produce a finished, non-fragmentary work of art. He composes *A Educação do Estóico* in an attempt to account for this failure, only to leave the work incomplete and ultimately take his own life. It is perhaps not coincidental, as ZENITH suggests, that the Barão is sexually impotent (2007: 265).

As with his hesitation between remaining unpublished and seeking recognition, fame, and glory through the public acknowledgement of his literary genius, Pessoa's shifts in position are neither unambiguous nor definitive. Rather, they point to a deeply unresolved conflict. These mediumistic writings constitute an inner dialogue that reflects the tension between the desire for a “normal” and fulfilling sexual life and the inability to realise it; between the aspiration not to squander his genius through the indulgence of base instincts and the difficulty of sustaining a commitment to chastity in someone who appears far less chaste than he wished to present himself. As ZENITH writes, “To judge by the baron's twin tragedy, as well as by Henry More's ominous warning, Pessoa feared that his failure to be a complete person socially, amorously and sexually could be detrimental to his creative work” (2007: 265).

This line of argument may be both compared and contrasted with the Duke's embrace of chastity. As a fictional construct, the Duke need not be read as a direct projection of Pessoa himself. One may hypothesise that the character is grounded in the misogynistic and supremacist views articulated in the 1910s; however, these positions do not fully account for the complexity of Pessoa's thought and sensibility across the entire period during which he worked on the tragedy.

Fernando Pessoa was also capable of creating assertive and fully realised female characters who challenge established gender hierarchies and power relations. A notable—if relatively rare—example is *A Cadella*, a short narrative text probably written around 1915 and included in the collection of his “Static Theatre” (PESSOA, 2017b: 137-143).

A Cadella stages a dialogue between two figures of opposite sex, identified only through personal pronouns: a “He” (ele) and a “She” (ela). When asked a direct question by the male figure — “Que espécie de mulher é a senhora?” [What kind of woman are you?]- She defines her identity in universal terms, presenting herself as a symbol of the female condition: “Eu sou todas as mulheres” [I am all women]. This

response reinterprets Pessoa's central notion of plurality through a feminine and gendered lens, reorienting the typically Pessoaan idea of multiple identity towards a more explicitly gendered and political register.

She drives the progression of the dialogue, responding incisively to her interlocutor's provocations and posing striking questions—such as “Tu [...] nunca mataste um homem?” [Have you ever killed a man?]—which evoke an undercurrent of violence permeating the text. This violence is associated with men, who are symbolically represented as dogs: figures characterised as aggressive, dominant, and fear-inducing for women.

At the same time, She expresses a desire to overturn her position and assume that very role of dominance. The feminine form of the term *cadela* [bitch] carries a strongly derogatory connotation in common usage, often employed as an insult to describe women as promiscuous, aggressive, or malicious. Fernando Pessoa's decision to associate this term with the protagonist lends it a double resonance, encompassing both contempt and violence. In this sense, the figure of the dog reflects not only the protagonists' inner dispositions but also the dynamics of their relationship, marked by a form of violence perceived as familiar and quotidian. She is not merely a victim; rather, her interiority and her association with the animal metaphor suggest an attempt to assert agency and to act upon reality itself.

In *A Cadella*, a distinctly female voice emerges within the dialogue between “He” and “She”. This voice is neither passive nor subordinate; on the contrary, it displays a lucid awareness of its disadvantaged position. At the same time, it expresses a forceful desire to overturn existing hierarchies and to assume a dominant, active role. Her verbal aggression may thus be read as an attempt to appropriate the physical and, above all, linguistic “code” of power.³

In this light, it is worth considering a pair of paratextual notes left by Pessoa in the manuscripts of *The Duke of Parma*. In a comment written in Portuguese at the bottom of folio 11⁵ D-28^r—on a sheet that also contains similar remarks on other characters in English—regarding the characterisation of the Duchess, we read:

A Duquesa é um caracter
intensamente feminino – limpido,
puro e amante.

³ I owe this analysis of *A Cadela* to the thesis project – which I supervised – “Voci negate: rappresentazioni femminili e tensioni sociali in ‘A Cadela’ di Fernando Pessoa” [Voices Denied: Female Representations and Social Tensions in Fernando Pessoa's “A Cadela”], written by Claudia Bonetti and recently defended (26th March, 2026) with top marks, leading to the award of a degree in Modern Foreign Languages and Cultures from the University of Parma.

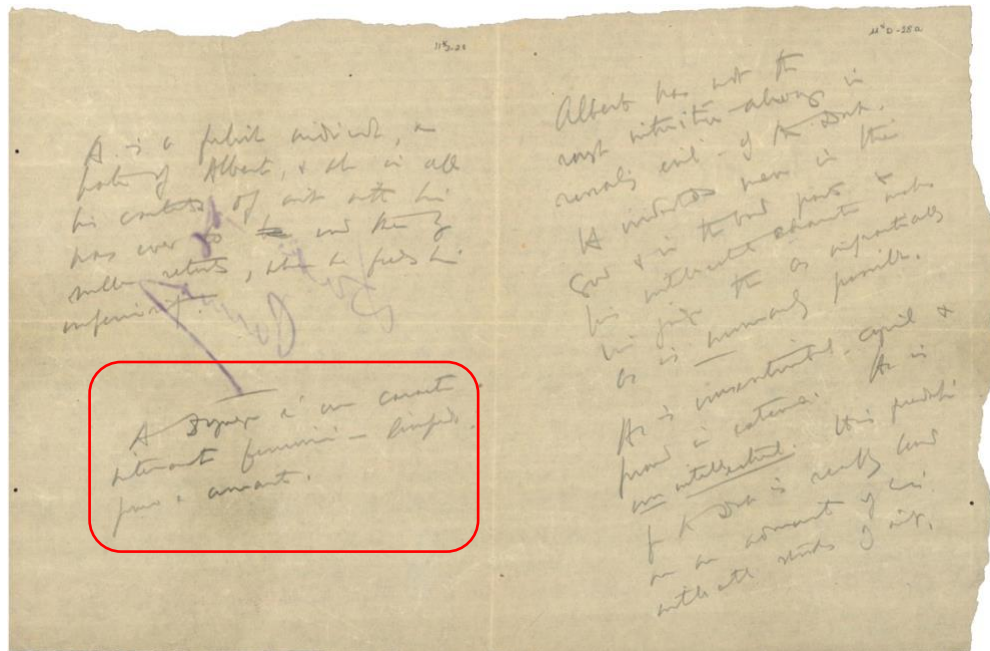


Fig. 21. (BNP/E3, 115 D-28r, detail).

Notably, the Duchess's character is defined by the adjective "feminino" [feminine], further intensified by the adverb "intensamente" [intensely]. This clearly foregrounds the strong association between her characterisation and her gender. Significantly, however, this association is not negative; on the contrary, the "intensely feminine" character is further qualified by three markedly positive adjectives: "limpido" [candid], "puro" [pure], and "amante" [loving]. In other words, Fernando Pessoa's note stands in clear contrast to the Duke's markedly negative representation of women throughout the tragedy.

Another paratextual annotation added by Pessoa to manuscript 115 D-83 makes the dissociation between the character and his creator, with regard to the theme of sexuality, explicit. This note appears at the end of a brief line spoken by the Duke, in which he states:

That ~~thought~~^{act} is like
man's nipples, righte set
Than to right purpose set.

The author then makes the following remark:

(Explanatory: The Duke's
constant sexual allusions
+ their purpose. They
are not the author's; they
belong to the author's
conception of the
character of the Duke.)

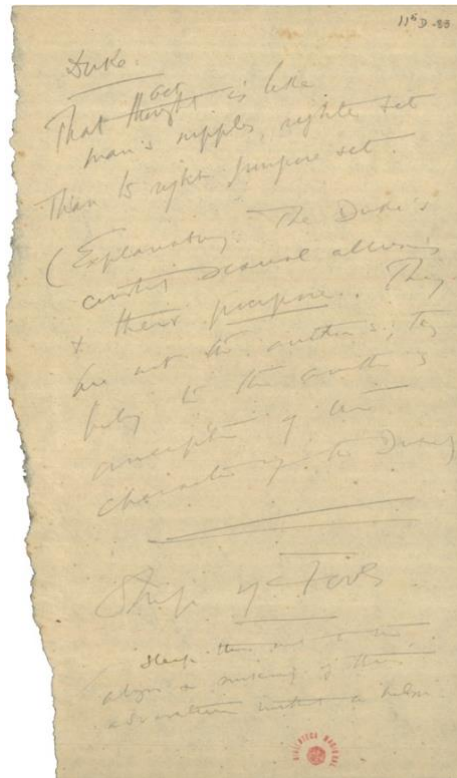


Fig. 22. (BNP/E3, 115 D-83).

Richard ZENITH, who quoted this remark in his biography of Pessoa (2022: 304), observes that the author rarely included disclaimers in his work. He proposes two possible interpretations:

Because Pessoa does not normally go to the trouble of reminding us that his fictions are fictions, this disclaimer smacks of a sly admission. On the other hand, it is true that he did not obsess about sexual matters and mores like the Duke of Parma.

Neither the Duke nor Marcos Alves was an autobiographical portrait. Like the heteronym Alexander Search, both served their creator as dummies, or guinea pigs. Worried about his sexual inhibition and the possibility of a latent mental illness inherited from his grandmother, Pessoa juxtaposed and exaggerated these points of fragility in two characters from different social classes and time periods. After endowing both of them with progressive insanity and severe sexual phobias, he wrote about their possible outcomes.

(ZENITH, 2022: 304)

In light of what José Barreto has demonstrated, and of the evidence contained in the Duke's manuscripts, I am inclined to take Pessoa's disclaimer at face value. His distancing from the character signals not only an evident inner conflict but, above all, an irrepressible need to resist any univocal representation and to assert himself as a plural, multifaceted entity.

Moreover, in a well-known letter to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues dated 19 January 1915, Pessoa reflects extensively on his nature as a "dramatic poet" and on the sincerity of his writing under heteronyms:

Isso é toda uma literatura que eu criei e vivi, que é sincera, porque é sentida, e que constitui uma corrente com influência possível, benéfica incontestavelmente, nas almas dos outros. O que eu chamo literatura insincera não é aquela análoga à do Alberto Caeiro, do Ricardo Reis ou do Álvaro de Campos (o seu homem, este último, o da poesia sobre a tarde e a noite). Isso é sentido na *pessoa de outro*; é escrito *dramaticamente*, mas é sincero (no meu grave sentido da palavra) como é sincero o que diz o Rei Lear, que não é Shakespeare, mas uma criação dele.

(PESSOA, 1944: 42)

[This is an entire literature that I have created and lived, which is sincere because it is felt, and which may constitute a current with a possible—indeed unquestionable—beneficial influence on the souls of others. What I call insincere literature is not that analogous to the work of Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, or Álvaro de Campos (the latter being the author of the poems about evening and night). That is felt in the *person of another*; it is written *dramatically*, but it is sincere (in my grave sense of the word), just as what King Lear says is sincere—though he is not Shakespeare, but his creation.]

Pessoa creates dramatic personae. Just as King Lear is not William Shakespeare, but an autonomous character whose thoughts and feelings are not those of his author, so too, according to Pessoa, Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis are autonomous entities whose thoughts, feelings, and emotions cannot be reduced to Pessoa's own. He is therefore entitled to give voice to these figures without being identified with any of them—just as Shakespeare could articulate the inner world of Lady Macbeth without thereby being conflated with her.

Finally, it is worth considering another note from a 1912 diary, preserved at the Casa Fernando Pessoa and transcribed in *Os Objectos* (PIZARRO, FERRARI, and CARDIELLO, 2013: 150):

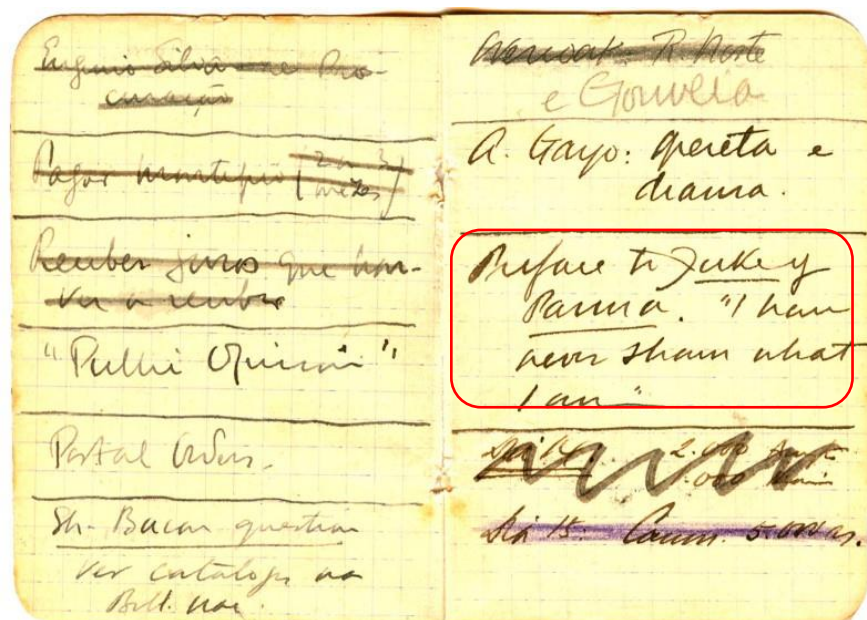


Fig. 23. "Preface to Duke of Parma. I have never shown what I am".

In reality, this preface was never written — another intriguing detail that contributes to the text's overall enigma. The formulation of this note suggests that it may have been intended either as the title of a projected preface or as a key to the interpretation of *The Duke of Parma*.

We must also consider the referent of the "I" in the note: does it designate the Duke, or Fernando Pessoa himself — a writer who never fully disclosed his "true" self? After all, we are dealing with a "dramatic poet" who consistently insisted on a rigorous distinction between himself and the heteronyms who speak through their works. It is difficult to imagine that he would not also distance himself from a character who is not even the author of his own discourse.

In this light, the concluding observation by Isabel Allegro Magalhães on the representation of the feminine in Pessoa's work is particularly compelling, as it posits a dialectic between absence and presence, negation and existence:

De facto, mostra-se a ausência do amor ou a sua inviabilidade, mas mostra-se simultaneamente a existência inegável da paixão amorosa: ambas tão reais como fictícias. Apesar de negados, o feminino e a sexualidade permanecem nos textos de Pessoa, mas só como figuras textualmente criadas ou configuradas, nessa função, que aqui se intensifica, da linguagem como ausência da coisa.

(MAGALHÃES, 1996: 37)

[In fact, the absence of love — or its impossibility — is shown, but at the same time the undeniable existence of amorous passion is also revealed: both are as real as they are fictitious. Although denied, the feminine and sexuality persist in Pessoa's texts, but only as textually created or configured figures, in this function — which is here intensified — of language as the absence of the thing.]

Magalhães demonstrates how, in Pessoa's poetry, the feminine often appears less as a fully realised presence than as a morphological or linguistic marker, with both woman and love remaining largely unmaterialised beyond their grammatical traces. Although the male lyrical subject initially evokes erotic imagery, these images are promptly negated through logical and grammatical operations, leaving the reader suspended between desire and its erasure. This dynamic produces a recurring tension in which erotic propositions are immediately annulled, creating a barrier constituted by their own linguistic denial.

Consequently, the feminine figure — whether mother, lover, or companion — emerges as a fictional construct invoked by the poetic voice, whose presence is essential precisely in its metaphorical and intangible form, often displaced into the realm of dream or abstraction. Even when desire momentarily persists, it is typically undermined by subsequent negation, transforming the feminine into an incorporeal vision and redirecting discourse towards an internal, self-contained reality. This process contributes to the construction of an increasingly asexual poetic persona, while the persistence of negation paradoxically affirms what it seeks to deny.

Thus, femininity and sexuality endure in Pessoa's work only as textual configurations, exemplifying language's function as the absence of the thing itself. The feminine becomes a purely verbal, metonymic construct, bearing only a tenuous relation to empirical reality and amounting to a stylised, almost artificial creation (see MAGALHÃES, 2001). Ultimately, for Pessoa, everything is constructed through language and exists solely within discourse.

*

Postscript. A suggestive parallel may be drawn, as Jerónimo Pizarro pointed out to me, with Thomas Carlyle's reflections on clothing in *Sartor Resartus*, where he develops his well-known "philosophy of clothes". In this work, clothing is not merely a material or social element, but a fundamental symbol: all that is human—institutions, beliefs, identities—is understood as the "vesture" of something deeper and invisible. Within this framework, nakedness corresponds to a kind of ultimate truth, yet one that is also unsustainable, even threatening. Clothing, therefore, does not simply conceal; it structures, gives form, and renders social and symbolic life possible. This perspective resonates with the dynamics at play in *The Duke of Parma*: the sense that the body—especially the sexualised body—is "indecent" or intolerable; the need for mediation (through clothing, language, or convention) in order to make the human acceptable; and the tension between truth (the "base", physiological dimension) and form (the symbolic, intellectual one). It is worth recalling, in this regard, that Pessoa read Carlyle during his years in Durban.

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