

**TRANSGRESSIVE TEXTUALITIES,
TRANSGRESSIVE SEXUALITIES:
NELIDA PIÑON'S *A FORÇA DO DESTINO***

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Na análise de *A força do destino*, romance que incorpora não só a ópera de Verdi, mas a própria autora na sua tessitura, em que as anacronias convivem com naturalidade no plano da história e das personagens, destacam-se, num primeiro momento, os aspectos transgressivos das opções compositivas de Nélida Piñon, tais como sua re-visão do conceito de ficcionalidade, do papel do narrador, da relação intratexto-intertexto e dos processos de metaficção. Num segundo momento, examinam-se as transgressões da sexualidade celebradas pelo texto, associadas principalmente às formas da literatura lésbica, com sua ilimitação de fronteiras e identidades e sua voz sáfica. Também a representação do homossexualismo masculino é discutida e as sugestões de incesto que ultrapassam o universo temático para impregnar a própria textualidade. Essas duas dimensões transgressivas são constantemente projetadas sobre a estrutura e efeitos da ópera como gênero.

In a published talk on women's writing in Brazil, author Marina Colasanti reminds us that "[l]iteratura... implica linguagem individual. E linguagem individual é transgressão, ruptura das normas, questionamento do já estabelecido" (41). Nélida Piñon, one of the foremost voices in contemporary Brazilian narrative, creates her own identity and claims her own authority in part through transgression. With the use of metafiction, parody, and other re-workings of traditional genres and canonical works, she transgresses myriad literary conventions. Piñon challenges the limitations of socially-accepted sexuality not only by including in her texts transgressive sexual expressions like incest and male and female homosexuality, but also by celebrating disruptive, excessive female sexuality and by exalting the erotic relationship between the writer and the text.

By building her 1978 novel, *A força do destino*, on the plot of the Verdi opera of the same name, Piñon is able to focus on some of her key topics: societal restrictions on a woman's ability to realize her full self; the dialectic micro-relationships of power between men and women, between parents and children, between employers and servants; and the grand emotions of opera – love, passion, greed and jealousy.¹ Piñon admits in interviews her lifelong fascination with theater and the opera, where human emotions are revealed in brute form. Everything assumes mythic proportions and it is perhaps this mythic aspect that appeals to Piñon. In stressing her Celtic roots, Piñon asserts, "Creo mucho en los mitos, en los arcanos. Tal vez sí, tal vez mi interés por la literatura tenga que ver con la genética cultural. Los celtas eran grandes contadores de historias, historias sin tiempo que otros proseguían..." (Riera 46). In *A força do destino*, Piñon re-writes a story out of time for, as Leonora herself says, "não somos os primeiros a contrariar as determinações paternas e, enquanto não venha a emancipação feminina, não seremos os últimos a fugir" (10). The

intended elopement of Álvaro and Leonora recalls stories of Romeo and Juliet, Calisto and Melibea and others across time and national borders.²

Building a contemporary Brazilian novel on a Italian opera which premiered in 1862 but was itself based on an 1835 Spanish drama, having characters from the opera converse with the Brazilian author within the text, allowing characters and author to address the readers directly, Piñon concurrently crosses national boundaries, moves back and forth between centuries and transgresses accepted literary conventions. Piñon, in discussing the book, says: "Pensei realizar, através de um libreto de ópera, uma reflexão sobre a escritura, uma espécie de meta-narrativa que seja ao mesmo tempo uma exaltação da realidade, uma exaltação do melodrama original."³ *A força do destino*, then, is a reflection on the concept of fictionality, a problematization of the role of the narrator, a fictional unveiling of the process of constructing a fictional text.⁴

Piñon opens *A força do destino* with a definition of the word *artist*, from an 1813 Portuguese dictionary. By choosing a dictionary that reflects eighteenth-century definitions and is thus more appropriate for a story set in eighteenth-century Spain and Italy than a twentieth-century Brazilian dictionary would be, Piñon helps transpose herself into the time and space of her characters. Yet, in *A força do destino*, Piñon deviates from any traditional definition of the artist, or author, by entering into the text as a character, one who not only narrates, but also interacts with the other characters. In doing so, the "Nélida" within the text must continually choose from various possible roles – disinterested observer, *cronista*, author who wields power over both the actions of the characters and the way those actions will be interrupted by future readers of the text she is creating. She also must negotiate with the expectations the characters have of her. Seeing "Nélida" as his path to fame, Álvaro "aspira a que o glorifique, para furtar-se aos encargos de eleger a própria história" (16). Leonora demands "Nélida"'s constant presence (98) and "protesta pelas vezes que a deixe só" (99). This incorporation of the demands made on the author by the characters evokes Miguel de Unamuno's *Niebla*, Luigi Pirandello's *Six characters in search of an author*, Jorge Luis

Borges "Borges y yo", as well as Brazilian literary examples such as Helena Parente Cunha's 1985 *Mulher no espelho*.

The textualized "Nélida" maintains that the destinies of the young lovers are outside her control, that she is not responsible "pelo que há de acontecer neste pátio andaluz... Não posso prevenir Leonora dos perigos" (23). Just as she will not interfere with the intended elopement, she will not impede Carlo's desire for vengeance. In fact, she realizes that his vengeance could be what would free her of Leonora and Álvaro: "Pois não quero segui-los por toda a vida. Ou traí-los mais do que suporto. Um artista não é solidário senão com o que ele inventa" (102). As an artist, she separates herself from her creations. Like the inscribed author in Parente Cunha's *Mulher no espelho* who wishes the protagonist would decide what she wants to do with her life so that the author could be finished with the novel, this "Nélida" wishes her characters would finish off their story so that she might move on with her life. When she speaks of her life, it begs the question as to whether she means her life as a character or as a writer. If this textualized "Nélida" wants to be free of these characters in order to write the fictions of other, more interesting, characters, then her character moves closer to the site of the author Nélida Piñon. The positions of character and author seem never to remain distinct.

As a metafictional text that exposes the difficulties of constructing the text, *A força do destino* tells the story of the telling of a story. "Nélida", twentieth-century Brazilian author, appears as a character in the novel alongside Álvaro, Leonora, the Marquês de Calatrava, Don Carlo, and the other eighteenth-century characters. In placing the textualized "Nélida" alongside the characters, Piñon follows the lead of the two operas inspired by the works of St. Teresa de Ávila, *Ordo Virtutum* (1158) and *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927). Hildegard Von Bingen, the twelfth-century German mystic nun who created the earlier work, appears in her own person at the beginning of her work, while in the latter work the composer Virgil Thomson and librettist Gertrude Stein appear as the *commère* and *compère*.⁵ In *A força do destino*, the fictionalized "Nélida" is there to witness their words and actions so that she might write their stories. Piñon sets up her textual counterpart as a *cronista*, yet she has that counterpart continually emphasizing the gaps and

ruptures, the social, discursive and narrative asymmetries of the events she is attempting to chronicle. History thus becomes but one of the genres and languages engulfed, ingested and rearticulated by the novel.

But the fictionalized "Nélida" is not the only narrator. The parodic novel is created out of many voices; the single, authoritarian, unifying voice of the traditional omniscient narrator has been replaced by the dialogic discourse, the multi-voiced heteroglossia describe by Bahktin. The operatic characters speak to each other, to the textual "Nélida" and to the implied readers, while "Nélida" speaks both to her characters and to her readers directly. At times several characters speak at once, until Leonora complains, "já não sei que palavra é de minha lavra, que verbo brotou do seu coração" (29). The words of the different characters intermingle, just as the boundary lines between bodies and words are effaced.

Multiplicity is already inherent in the opera: not only do multiple characters speak in their own voices (as in a play), but the music, in combination with the dialogue, allows more than one emotion to be expressed simultaneously. Traditionally, in the staging of opera, the characters do not face each other as they sing, but turn out towards the audience. Their singing out is a practical, technical requirement; they must project their voices out over the orchestra to the audience. But the technical requirement has sexual reverberations. As the singers' emotional energy goes out to the audience, those in the audience look at the singers and feel that the singers are looking back at them, seducing them. Operagoers may be seduced by the tenor or by the soprano, by one or by all of the opera performers, according to each person's own sexual desires and fantasies.⁶

Often in the opera, characters proclaim their emotions to the audience but not to their fellow characters. Piñon replicates this effect in her novelistic text by including soliloquies and asides in parentheses by the various characters.⁷ Some things are said between characters, others are only confessed to "Nélida" or to the reader. The parenthetical remarks accentuate both the comic aspect of the opera and the parodic aspect of the novel, as in the scene where Álvaro and Leonora prepare to elope. Álvaro asks:

Que ruído é este? Quem ousa interromper o nosso idílio? Quem será, Leonora?

(Claro que é o pai, seu bobo. Até parece que não sabe decifrar uma carta militar, com seus sobresaltos e enigmas conhecidos. Bom pretendente tenho eu.) Não sei, amado. (24-25)

In the parenthetical aside, Leonora shows her intelligence, impatience and independence, her metafictional awareness of the artificiality of the scene she is playing. The words spoken to Álvaro (those given her by the male playwright) completely contradict her inner thoughts (as imagined by the female novelist).

The title, as well as the seventeen references to destiny that appear in the course of the novel, underscore destiny as a central theme of Piñon's novel.⁸ Like Parente Cunha's *Mulher no espelho, A força do destino* highlights the difficult question of who is in control of the text, who has the authority to determine the characters' destinies – the characters themselves or "Nélida". That Piñon's text is based on an earlier text complicates the issue further in that Giuseppe Verdi has also made decisions about the characters' destinies in writing his opera. That Verdi based his opera on an earlier piece further muddles both the *origin*-ality of the piece and the question of who determines the actions of the characters, who is it who controls their destinies.

The textualized "Nélida" highlights this issue of authorial control by explicitly referring to certain aspects of the story as outside her control, already determined by Verdi. The fictionality of her claim is underscored by the other aspects of her text that differ greatly from the Verdi opera. Following Adrienne Rich's definition of "re-vision" as the part of feminist literary criticism that includes "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction"(90), one could say that Piñon's greatest re-vision of the Verdi opera lies in the portrayal of the female characters, particularly Leonora. Leonora goes from hapless, helpless victim in Verdi's opera to a strong-minded woman in Piñon's novel.

Giuseppe Verdi, working with the librettist Francisco Maria Piave, used as a foundation for his opera the Duque de Rivas' *Don Alvaro o la fuerza del sino*, a "médico de su honra"

drama published in 1835. In the Duque de Rivas' drama, Leonor's defining characteristics are anguish and indecision. She loves both her father and Don Álvaro and, seemingly incapable of deciding what to do in this impasse, continually exclaims, "¡Ay, desdichada de mí!" or "¡Ay, triste!". Joaquín Casaldueiro's notes to Alberto Blecua's edition of the play refer to Leonor as "la mujer nacida para el dolor" (23). Such was the limited role available to females in the Spanish dramas of the day.

In Verdi's opera, the feminine roles are also small, portraying female characters – Leonora and her maid – who are fragile and vulnerable. In *A força do destino*, the textualized "Nélida" apologizes that the role of Preziosilla,⁹ whom she characterizes as an enchanting woman, is so modest, requiring less than five minutes of reading, but reminds the reader that "[a] culpa não é minha. Verdi exigiu-lhe a presença, sem me ceder explicações" (109).¹⁰ It was the earlier male author who gave Preziosilla such a small role. Nélida suspects that "na juventude chegou a tê-la no próprio leito, prometendo-lhe então a glória. E cumpriu a promessa. O que não se estranha, tratava-se de um cavalheiro italiano, cioso da palavra empenhada" (109). Piñon's characterization of Verdi as a gentleman is, of course, an ironic one: while she concedes that he fulfilled his promise to the young woman, her denunciation of his method of luring the woman into his bed is implicit. In Piñon's novel, the story of Preziosilla becomes a narrative both written into and written out of the text, another example of the discursive and narrative gaps and ruptures characteristic of the metafictional text.

In Verdi's opera, the masculine roles, and the strong male voices, predominate. In Piñon's version of the opera, however, Leonora is not the typical fragile, abandoned victim. She is a strong, independent woman seeking to live her life according to her own desires. She is a feminist stuck in the restricted role of an operatic heroine, surrounded by men who want to control her life and unable to change their way of viewing women and the world: "Nem Leonora sucederia em propor-lhe uma visão feminista" (84). By turning the operatic heroine into a feminist aware of the restrictions of her role, Piñon is writing beyond the ending, severing her narrative from conventional structures of fiction, opera and consciousness about women.¹¹

Statements about the condition of women – in opera, in eighteenth-century Spain – abound in Piñon's text. The characters are metafictionally aware of the literary and operatic traditions that underlie their roles and undermine their independence. Leonora elopes with Álvaro because "nestes tempos de dois séculos atrás, não pode a mulher fazer outra coisa senão contrariar a vontade paterna fugindo com o noivo" (8). Similarly, she obeys him "como as mulheres da minha nação nesta época submetem-se" (20). But she does not see why her brother should be the only heir to the family fortune, "só porque nasceu dotado de um pauzinho minúsculo entre as pernas" (93). Álvaro is described as "carnívoro, aprecia carne crua e sofrida", and as one who "usou as mulheres das Índias com tradicional desrespeito" (83). These statements do not fit in a "médico de su honra" Spanish drama, in which it is not the woman's place to comment on her role in society nor on the behavior of the men around her. Neither do the statements correspond to a Verdi opera, but they definitely fit within a Piñon text that transgresses the limits of those earlier traditions. With Leonora's self-conscious statements on the role of women in eighteenth-century Spain, Piñon is again writing beyond the ending, using her narrative to make critical statements about the psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women.

The language of Piñon's novel transgresses the linguistic and socio-linguistic limits of a Verdi opera. The spoken language of the young lovers shatters social hierarchies. In parodying a genre considered elitist, artificial and foreign, Piñon puts contemporary Brazilian slang into the mouths of these operatic European figures of an earlier century. Álvaro refers to "Nélida" as a "macaca velha", a term then explained in the parenthetical aside as "expressão que se vai usar em duzentos anos, é só esperar para ver, não sabe você que a língua é um fenômeno da moda" (10). Stressing the transitory fashions of speech undercuts language's authority to impose meaning and identity.

The operatic discourse is further disrupted by terms in English that refer to twentieth-century realities: "traveller's checks" (24), "crayon" (59), and the ubiquitous "OK" (8). These misplaced terms emphasize both the artificiality and foreignness of the operatic text and the wrinkles in time created by Piñon's text. The terms manage, paradoxically, both to erase and to

emphasize the boundaries between the twentieth and eighteenth centuries.

Like the Duque de Rivas' plays and Verdi's operas in Spain and Italy, Piñon's novels are major works that condense national identity and ethos in Brazil. As genres, drama, opera and novel are all cultural artifacts that help to define their respective periods. In working to define the twentieth century in Brazil, Nélida Piñon uses her novels to push at the limits on narrative, on language and on the space allotted to women in both literature and society. In the metafictional *A força do destino*, Piñon makes visible the traditionally invisible, that is, the parodying language, the process of constructing the text, the thoughts of the writer, the presence of strong women. By ingesting, absorbing and mimicking the varied discourses that share a presumption of authority – such as the chronicle, diary, travel journal, or anthropologist's monograph – Piñon shows that neither their language nor their "truths" are absolute. Rather they are conventional, arbitrary constructs specific to their time periods and intended to enforce a patriarchal re-articulation of authority over women. In *A força do destino*, Piñon strives to *undo* the effects of patriarchal discourse by *overdoing* them.

Celebrating Transgressive Sexualities

In addition to the literary transgressions accrued by mingling genres, mixing languages and traversing national borders, Piñon challenges what society deems acceptable sexuality by including forms of transgressive sexuality in her texts. The relationship between the writer and the text is eroticized; female sexuality in all its forms is celebrated; incest and homosexuality make frequent appearances in her narratives. Indeed, with the celebration of sexuality, the constant engagement of desire in its myriad manifestations, and the resistance to fixed identities and boundaries, Piñon's fiction falls into one categorization of lesbian literature. In an article on how to define the nature of lesbian writing, Bertha Harris asserts that lesbian literature engages a desire and a profusion that defies the fixity of identity, the boundaries drawn around individual subjects, or any form of categorization and normalization.

Diana Hamer similarly asserts that "lesbianism... suggests a much more fluid and flexible relationship to the positions around which desire is organized" (147). Piñon's narratives present an organization of desire that is fluid and flexible, continually refuse any fixity of identity, blur the boundaries around individual subjects and revel in a disruptive, excessive female sexuality that often threatens the confines of her texts.

Various passages from *A força do destino* eroticize the relationship between "Nélida" and her text, between "Nélida" and the Brazilian language. "Nélida" secures the role of *cronista* by selling herself to Álvaro as the only one capable of memorializing the two lovers in Portuguese. She characterizes Portuguese as "um feudo forte e lírico ao mesmo tempo" (13), as a ship that travels the Atlantic, now consoling Portugal, now perturbing Brazil, a maritime language that "entende bem os impropérios do vento, mais que qualquer outra se deixa levar pelos sentimentos" (14). Portuguese is presented as a passionate language which has gained force and ardency from the African laments that have entered into the Brazilian tongue. Brazilian Portuguese is given an eroticized physical body with the characterization "de rosto e sexo ardentes" (14). In this way, "Nélida" herself becomes a lover, with the personified Brazilian Portuguese as her beloved.

In considering, in *The pleasure of the text*, the erotic relationships between the writer and the text as well as between the reader and the text, Roland Barthes affirms that writers of pleasure accept the letter as their pleasure and are obsessed with language (21). Piñon's obsession with Brazilian Portuguese can be noted throughout her fictions and confirmed in her interviews. Barthes further suggests that the mother tongue is an object of constant pleasure for the writer, defining the writer as "someone who plays with his mother's body" (37). Barthes's proposition that the text is an anagram of an erotic human body (17) corresponds to the eroticized relationship between "Nélida" and her text suggested in *A força do destino*.

"Nélida" writes "[n]a volúpia de dedicar-me aos personagens com a paixão unicamente consentida pelo verbo" (99). In these passages, she enters the text not as disinterested observer, but as eroticized female body. She warns Álvaro, when they enter into their agreement, "serei uma pele de temperatu-

ra igual à de vocês. Qualquer febre da tua amada há de incendiar-me também" (12-13). That it is Leonora's ardor which will arouse "Nélida" lends a sexual meaning to Álvaro's complaint that "Nélida" always preferred Leonora. Reminded that "Nélida" too is capable of arousal leads Álvaro to realize that they are playing "um jogo perigoso" (13), as "Nélida", excited by Leonora's sensuality, could become a rival of Álvaro's. The reader is also reminded of the narrator's sensuality by sections that describe "Nélida" as feeling "indolente. O suor na pele, usufruía desta doce sensualidade" (36) or in which "Nélida" proclaims herself "voraz" (97). Sexuality and textuality come together like the two lips in continuous contact in Luce Irigaray's *This sex which is not one* (24).

Opera is, as noted in *En travesti: women, gender, subversion, opera*, about sex and the pleasures of artifice (1). Margaret Reynolds notes the velvet plush, gilded mirrors, naked cherubs and powdered footmen that connect the opera house to the brothel at the same time that she remarks on the opera lovers' capacity to savor, to spin out refined pleasure, to surrender with apparent abandon, to contrive, calculate and regulate their pleasure (132). Other contributors to the volume discuss opera as an art form "disposed to trespassing across sexual boundaries¹²," and delineate the queer history of opera, with reference to the characters and performers who seem poised between the masculine and the feminine – castratos, mezzo-sopranos who sing male parts, tenors who cry, the various cross-dressed and star-crossed lovers, etc. Essays in this volume discuss how the art form "permits an unparalleled range of opportunities for women to subvert and, often, overturn traditional gender roles", as the voice in opera transcends both sex and gender, as the tradition of women singing trouser roles allows for women "to make love to each other in a public place and *get away* with it" (4-5). When a female singer, dressed as a man, sings of "his" love for another woman, spectators are treated to a passionate display of erotically-charged identification and difference. *En travesti* looks not just at the transcendence of gender enacted by the transvestite characters in opera, but also by all the women in opera – characters, performers, librettists, composers – who challenge and transgress the limits of female identity, who to break the rules,

who to transform the operatic stage into a playground for their own pleasure.

Terry Castle's essay on Brigitte Fassbaender explores the long tradition of "sapphic" diva-worship in opera. Brigid Brophy has argued that a great diva's appeal is intrinsically erotic; her feats of breath control and muscular exertion can be easily reinterpreted as "metaphors of virtuoso performance in bed" (qtd. in Castle 21). As Castle puts it, "[f]or female fans, the implication is obvious: to enthuse the voice is, if only subliminally, to fancy plumping down in bed with its owner" (21). The ardor female fans feel for their favorite divas is, implicitly or explicitly, charged with homoeroticism.

Sam Abel argues that to enter into the world of opera – as Piñon does in creating her novel and as textualized "Nélida" does within that novel – is to "engage in abnormal, excessive sexuality" in a world that is distinct from mainstream desire. He refers to operatic desire as "bigger, more passionate, shameless, brazen" and less controlled than what is considered "normal" sexuality. He goes on to assert,

Even more queerly opera aims its desire ambiguously and indiscriminately, refusing to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable, male and female, single or multiple objects of desire, merrily blurring the lines between the possibilities. (66)

That ambiguous and indiscriminate aiming of desire is characteristic of *A força do destino*.

In "Sapphonics", the third chapter of *Queering the pitch*, Elizabeth Wood employs her title term to refer to "a way of describing a space of lesbian possibility, for a range of erotic and emotional relationships among women who sing and women who listen" (27). This Sapphonic voice resonates in a sonic space as lesbian difference and desire. Wood's description of the Sapphonic voice – its flexible negotiation and integration of an exceptional range of registers crosses boundaries... to challenge polarities of both gender and sexuality... Its refusal of categories and the transgressive risks it takes act seductively on a lesbian listener (28) – also resonates with the descriptions

of lesbian literature cited above. Piñon's use of opera in *A força do destino* (and *A doce canção de Caetana*) opens a space to act seductively on lesbian (and non-lesbian) readers.

The textualization of "Nélida"'s body reveals not only "Nélida"'s possible lesbian interest in Leonora but also a (possibly narcissistic) mirroring relationship between the two females. In the text of *A força do destino*, "Nélida" recalls seeing Renata Tebaldi sing the part of Leonora in the Teatro Municipal do Rio. Seeing life reproduced so beautifully on the stage, "enxergávamo-nos como diante de um espelho" (46). Terry Castle notes that for lesbian opera fans in particular, "the diva's passion is a mirror: a fluid, silvery form in which desire itself can at times be recognized. By the liberating way that she desires – by the bold ardor of her own 'homovocal' exaltation," the diva becomes a thrilling emblem of homoerotic possibility (49). In *A força do destino*, "Nélida"'s identification was such that she erased the boundaries between her body and that of the opera singer: "E ao emprestar meu corpo a Tebaldi, para me fazer crer que cantava através da minha garganta adolescente..." (46).¹³ "Nélida"'s words echo those of Wayne Koestenbaum, in *The queen's throat: opera, homosexuality and the mystery of desire*, when he writes:

A singer's voice sets up vibrations and resonances in the listener's body... The listener's body is illuminated, opened up: a singer doesn't expose her own throat, she exposes the listener's interior. Her voice enters me, makes me a "me", an interior, by virtue of the fact that I have been entered. (42-43)

In *A força do destino*, as in the citation from Koestenbaum, the boundaries between bodies and words, as well as those between the bodies of supposedly different female subjects, are blurred.

The sections of *A força do destino* in which the textualized "Nélida" identifies with Renata Tebaldi are seemingly autobiographical, as Piñon has spoken in interviews about a childhood and adolescence spent at the Teatro Municipal de Rio, fascinated by opera and ballet, opera singers and ballerinas,

a youth in which she “vivía para admirarlos” (Riera 47). Piñón’s youthful capacity to lose herself in admiration of the performers is echoed by Sam Abel, in his *Opera in the flesh: sexuality in operatic performance*, when he marvels at how opera makes him lose himself, how it consumes him in a way matched only by sexual desire. He dedicates a chapter to “Operatic orgasms”, claiming that every “climactic note, in an aria, in an assemblage, even in an overture”, takes on the character of a sexual climax in the “sensually heightened” space of the opera house (88). Abel ponders the paradoxical tensions in opera, especially those in the realm of sexuality:

Why, for example, do the most masculine roles in nineteenth-century opera belong to tenors, men with voices closest to the female range; and before that, to castrated men, sometimes with voices higher than the heroines? Why do women in opera play men’s roles so often... And how can opera get away with staging sexual transgressions such as adultery and incest with so little protest from the audience, even during... the Victorian era? How does opera manage to be entirely sexual underneath a face of complete chastity, thoroughly subversive in its eroticism behind a mask of sexual normalcy? (11-12)

For Abel, opera can be termed “queer” under Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s use of that term in *Tendencies*: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (8). Opera is a lure towards “the illicit and the atypical” (Abel 26), one that tempts with every kind of physical and emotional excess, one that asks us so much to identify with, but rather to lose ourselves in desire for all these gorgeously dressed, exotically placed, heroic and romantic characters with strong and beautiful voices.¹⁴ It is this open mesh of possibilities, the sexual subversiveness and the erotic transgressions of opera that entice the textualized “Nélida” into the text of *A força do destino*.

"Nélida"'s ability to occupy the dual positions of desiring subject and object of desire again demonstrates the fluid and flexible organization of desire as well as the continual refusal to fix identity cited as characteristics of lesbian literature. The autoerotic nature of simultaneously inhabiting the positions of subject and object of desire also evokes Laplanche and Pontalis' ideal image of autoeroticism in "'lips that kiss themselves'. Here, in this apparently self-centered enjoyment, as in the deepest fantasy,... all distinction between subject and object has been lost" (26). Laplanche and Pontalis posit fantasy as a *narrative* scenario, a structuring scene of desire that perform an important role in the constitution of the sexual subject. The illustrative value of their theory in exploring *A força do destino* justifies a longer quotation:

By locating the origin of the fantasy in the autoeroticism, we have shown the connection between fantasy and desire. Fantasy, however, is not the object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject... appears caught up in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene although... he cannot be assigned any fixed place in it... As a result, the subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question. (26)

If *A força do destino* is seen as the fantasy, it certainly holds that, as the subject, "Nélida" is caught up in the sequence of images that comprise this metafictional text, is represented as participating in the scene without being in any fixed place in it, and is always present in the fantasy, perhaps in its very syntax.

The references to "Nélida"'s sexuality, her participation in the fantasy of the metafictional text, disrupt her guise as *cronista*. She admits in a parenthetical and ironic section that certain words in her text "estão se excedendo em suas funções. Não as endossarei de modo algum. Refiro-me particularmente às que destacam calor e corpo de Leonóra" (59). Female sexuality is in excess, refuses narrative control, breaks out of bounds.

Female sexuality is what has been traditionally silenced in masculine texts. In *This sex which is not one*, Irigaray asserts that what remains the most completely prohibited to woman is any expression of her own sexual pleasure. "For in fact feminine pleasure signifies the greatest threat of all to masculine discourse, represents its most irreducible 'exteriority,' or 'exterritoriality'" (157). In *A força do destino*, female sexuality shatters traditional narrative restrictions, repeatedly disturbing any boundaries drawn between characters, between bodies and words. As Leonora exclaims, "já não sei que palavra é de minha lavra, que verbo brotou do seu coração" (29). The demarcating lines between physical bodies and spoken words are no longer clear.

"Nélida"'s preference for Leonora also puts into question her position as *cronista*. As Álvaro complains to "Nélida": "Você sempre preferiu Leonora a mim, que é uma Julieta espanhola, corresponde ao teu ideal de independência... Nunca me amaste com a mesma intensidade" (80). Indeed, as Naomi Hoki Moniz notes, Leonora fits into a line of independent females in Piñon's works – Mariela from *Guia-mapa de Gabriel Arcanjo*, Ana from *Madeira feita cruz*, Monja from *Fundador*, Marta from *A casa da paixão*, Esperança from *A república dos sonhos* and Caetana from *A doce canção de Caetana* (Moniz 128).

Leonora is the object of everyone's desire. In addition to being the character preferred by the narrator in the text, she is the beautiful woman desired not only by Álvaro, but also by her brother Carlos and quite possibly by her father. In describing her voluptuous body to their father, referring to breasts that were not just beautiful but seemed to "esguichar mel refinado", Carlos asks, "Não vais me dizer, pai, que nunca notaste o dorso de tua própria filha?" (39). The brother's desire is so great that he cannot imagine that the father would not feel the same lust. Carlos remembers how happy he was living in the same house as Leonora and seeing her daily: "Que melhor despertar podia eu pretender. A sonhar com a irmã pelas noites, e já pelas manhãs buscava-lhe a sombra" (42) and suggests that "[d]evíamos isto sim ter agido naquela época, quem sabe, posto naquela parte – que parte? ora, pai, o senhor sabe bem – um cinto de castidade, a chave ficaria ora com o senhor, ora comigo. Seríamos os únicos guardiões de tal tesouro" (42). The intercalated

question and answer, "que parte? ora, pai, o senhor sabe bem", intimates complicity. Carlos' suggestion that they could have taken turns guarding the key to her chastity belt insinuates that they could also have taken turns taking their sexual pleasure with her.

Carlos' incestuous desire for his sister is a recurrent motif in the novel, as he continually pine for the days of their childhood games and declarations of love and fidelity he exacted: "fidelidade só se oferta a um irmão. Sobretudo porque brincávamos de marido e mulher, protegidos pelos arbustos" (43). The brother-sister relationship elides into a husband-wife relationship. As they grew up, he gave up the incestuous play, because, "sofrendo por perdê-la, proibido de restituir-lhe os folguedos infantis, estava respeitando o pai, a tradição, e a propriedade" (44). Only the power and authority of the father and the patriarchal tradition compel him to make the sacrifice.

The incestuous desire Carlos feels, and believes his father to feel, and the fact that he eventually comes to resist that desire because of his father all hint at embedded and conflicted desire in the father-son relationship. Such desire would be an incestuous form of "homosocial" eroticism Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in *Between men*. She argues that in many nineteenth-century texts, a homosocial bonding between men underlies the more obvious heterosexual narrative. The homosocial attachment is one of deep affection that, while erotic, is never actually consummated. Often the homosocial bond is maintained through the body of a woman, a woman who serves as a commodity of interchange between the men. Leonora would function in that role of establishing the bond between father and son.

In Verdi's opera, it can also be argued that Leonora fills that same role in the relationship between Don Carlo and Don Álvaro. In Act III of the opera, they declare their undying love for one another, in a scene of "ecstatic male bonding" (Abel 70). Their love turns to hate when men discover each other's true identities (as the son and the murderer, respectively, of Leonora's father). Much of the romantic weight of the opera is carried by the males once Leonora becomes a hermit.

In Piñon's novel, Leonora is also the object of desire of another fraternal/paternal figure, the Abbot of the monastery

where she eventually seeks refuge. The passages in which he speaks of his obsessive desire mirror those of Carlos, including reference to a key which would grant him free access to her voluptuous body (103). Guardian of the faith, he is another man who is supposed to guard her virtue, but instead can ill conceal his own sexual desire for her. Coveting her fortune as well, the Abbot exemplifies greed, hypocrisy and forbidden desire.

Like "Nélida", the Abbot finds that Leonora's sexuality cannot be contained in, or by, words. In her published speech "O gesto da criação: sombras e luzes", Piñon discusses the transgressive nature of the word: "a palavra instaura a desordem, a inquietude, a sensação do iminente fracasso. E instaura ainda o desejo de se exceder, de abarcar mundos possíveis e impossíveis" (81). For the Abbot, words that might express Leonora's sexuality incite disorder, uneasiness, dangerous excess. "Três palavras convertem-se facilmente em trinta. Cada uma correspondendo à parte do corpo que se quer tocar para conhecer de perto a sonoridade de um vocábulo sussurrado" (*Força* 106). Sexual pleasure and verbal expression are closely linked, as touching the female body releases a whispered word. For the Abbot, abstinence – not just from the sexual act itself, but also from speaking the sexual act, from putting carnal desire into words – is imperative.¹⁵ Piñon's text bears out the Abbot's fear that once he starts voicing Leonora's sensuality he will not be able to stop. His proclamation that begins, "Que louco sou eu, eu sou louco por Leonora", continues on without a period or other mark of punctuation to signal the end. His words and desires cannot be contained. They end only when Nélida's words interrupt.

Piñon's rejection of the final period here is a nod to Clarice Lispector's *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres*, a novel which itself ends without a final period. Lispector's text ends with a colon, avoiding any semblance of final closure.¹⁶ Just as the lack of a final period recalls Lispector's novel, the Abbot's words echo those of Calisto in the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, when Calisto proclaims, "Melibeo soy, y a Melibea adoro, y en Melibea creo y a Melibea amo" (94). Calisto's words were considered heretical; the Abbot's echoing of those words puts his own piety in question.

Male homosexuality is another form of transgressive sexuality introduced in *A força do destino*. When Leonora proclaims to her father that she and Álvaro are a woman and a man in love, the Marquês, opposing their union, asserts that their being a man and a woman is not enough. When Álvaro queries, “se Dona Leonora fosse varão, o senhor melhor aprovaria nosso amor homossexual?”, the Marquês replies, “pelo menos não estaria à minha vista, eu teria assegurado à sociedade de Sevilha que a honrada casa de Calatrava jamais se uniria a um telhado menos digno com o propósito de ter filhos” (29). In the Marquês’s socially-conscious eyes, the unforgivable transgression seems not to be homosexual relations but rather the creation of grandchildren bearing blood of a lower class. The passage reminds us that in the patriarchal tradition, Leonora’s body is the repository of family honor and, as such, must be defended by the father and brother.

Male homosexuality is discussed at greater length in reference to the members of the monastery. The textualized “Nélida” points out to the Abbot the various ways in which the monks reveal their sexual interest in each other. “Por favor, abade, não quis chamá-lo de *gay* ou aos seus companheiros. Mas a vida humana não é um simples arbusto, pede calor, lágrima, a emoção...” (108). In stressing the human need for love and encouraging the acceptance of all forms of passion, “Nélida”’s words advocate that more fluid and flexible relationship to the positions around which desire is organized. In this conversation, as in other points in the novel, the use of an English word in italics transports the readers from the eighteenth back to the twentieth century and factors in all that the contemporary term *gay* has come to incorporate.

Throughout *A força do destino*, English words disrupt the Portuguese text, twentieth-century terms displace the eighteenth-century story, the narrative subverts conventions of genre and gender, and sexuality breaks out of bounds. Piñon’s novel highlights the process of constructing the fictional text, parading and parodying inherited literary and operatic practices and discourses and exemplifying the truth of Piñon’s own claim, “Meu imaginário é transgressor, subverte o que precisa” (“Gesto” 88). In the end, *A força do destino* illustrates not just the

force of destiny, but also the force of desire, of language and of the creative versatility of Nélida Piñon.

NOTES

¹ See Naomi Hoki Moniz's book, p. 126.

² Melibea, like Piñon's version of Leonora, can be seen as a strong female character who celebrates pleasure and independence. For a feminist reading of *La Celestina*, see Diane Hartunian's *La Celestina: a feminist reading of the carpe diem*.

³ Pettorelli, p. 27.

⁴ Naomi Haoki Moniz refers to this metanarrative text as "uma reflexão irônica na forma de um jogo de espelhos" (114).

⁵ For more on these operas, see Blackmer and Smith, p. 6-7.

⁶ Emma Bovary, for example, is seduced by the tenor in the Act I finale of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, sure that the tenor is singing directly to her (264-265).

⁷ Moniz asserts that soliloquies add to "o sabor da oralidade e a musicalidade" of Piñon's work (123).

⁸ The italicized title is repeated on pages 45, 48 and 122. The word "destino" itself appears on pages 33, 36, 46, 47, 54, 70, 76, 78, 79, 92, 96, 97, 108, 118, 122, 123, and 125.

⁹ This character, already present in the Duque de Rivas' play, has a name traditionally used in Spanish literature to designate a gypsy girl or young woman. In Miguel de Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares*, for example, "La gitanilla" is named Preciosilla. The introduction of such a character adds a *costumbrista* touch.

¹⁰ "[S]em me ceder explicações" implies that Verdi should have provided Nélida with an explanation, that when writing his opera, he already knew of Nélida's existence. As historical figures, Verdi and Piñon are separated by many years; however, in her text, Piñon has the power to bring them together on the same plane.

¹¹ I borrow this term from Rachel Blau DuPlessis' text of the same name, *Writing beyond the ending: narrative strategies of twentieth-century women writers*. DuPlessis deals with authors writing in English, but many of her observations can be useful in studying texts by women writing in other languages and traditions.

¹² Paul Griffiths, "The song of the Sheik", qtd. in *En travesti* (90).

¹³ For more on the eroticism in the relationship between the diva and the female spectator, see Blackmer and Smith.

¹⁴ Abel insists that opera, "through its physical excesses, music, and staging devices, actively encourages me to respond erotically to the spectacle rather than to read the narrative in psychological terms. As an alternative to chasing after elusive and shifting identities, the pleasures of erotic abandonment are much more attractive" (39).

¹⁵ Leonora's brother Carlos also acknowledges the power of words to incite sexual desire and advocates abstinence from such verbal expression: "certas palavras correm o risco de incendiar o corpo. Não há que pronunciá-las" (40).

¹⁶ Lispector's novel is constructed, in large part, of dialogue between Loreley and Ulysses. It is an explanatory conversation that has no limits or boundaries: the novel begins with a comma followed by a first word that is not capitalized; it ends with a colon. Thus, the beginning and ending are shown to be arbitrary.

The novel could have started earlier in the conversation; so too could it have continued to follow the *aprendizagem* of Loreley and Ulysses. The readers are like passengers in a car who pick up a radio station, listen in for a while and then lose the station when the car passes out of the region reached by that station. By beginning with a comma and ending with a colon, Lispector avoids any semblance of full closure. The unusual punctuation cuts the moorings and allows the text to float freely between the said and the unsaid at the same time that it calls attention to the novel's existence as a text, a set of typed symbols on a page.

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