

# The power of example: female adultery in two 19th century Portuguese female authors

*O poder do exemplo: o adultério feminino em duas escritoras portuguesas  
oitocentistas*

Mónica Sofia Gomes GANHÃO\*

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa (FLUL)

**ABSTRACT:** Female adultery is one of the most common topics of 19th century novels. In Portugal, this was to be one of the most discussed problems of that time, addressed in novels but also in critical or philosophical observations by famous intellectuals. Female authors were no exception to this rule and, contrary to popular belief, were not always the most tolerant judges. Maria Peregrina de Sousa (1809-1894) and Ana Plácido (1831-1895) both wrote about adulterous women and the consequences of their life choices. While both authors advise women against adultery, their points of view are markedly different. In this article, I aim to understand the message they chose to convey to their 19th century female readers.

**KEYWORDS:** Novel about adultery. 19<sup>th</sup> century representation of the adulteress. Portuguese female authorship.

**RESUMO:** O adultério feminino foi um dos tópicos mais desenvolvidos no romance oitocentista. Em Portugal, este foi um dos problemas mais discutidos ao longo do século XIX, abordado por muitos intelectuais renomados quer em romances, quer em textos críticos ou filosóficos. As autoras do sexo feminino não foram exceção a esta regra e, contrariamente à opinião comum, nem sempre foram as críticas mais tolerantes. Maria Peregrina de Sousa (1809-1894) e Ana Plácido (1831-1895) escreveram ambas sobre mulheres adúlteras e as consequências das escolhas de vida dessas personagens. Porém, se ambas aconselham a mulher a abster-se de ceder ao adultério, os seus pontos de vista relativamente a essa transgressão feminina são marcadamente

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\* PhD student in Portuguese and Romance Studies through Centro de Estudos Clássicos in Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa. E-mail address: [mon.ganhao@gmail.com](mailto:mon.ganhao@gmail.com)  
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diferentes. Neste artigo, procurarei apreender a mensagem que cada uma destas autoras desejou transmitir sobre este tópico às suas leitoras oitocentistas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Romance de adultério. Representação oitocentista da mulher adúltera. Autoria feminina portuguesa.

## **Introduction**

In the nineteenth-century, women and their social and moral behaviour was one of the main issues discussed by intellectuals. Adultery was both a privileged topic and a prolific subject for exploration in literature, especially for novelists (Overton 1996). Female-authored nineteenth-century novels were no exception. Adultery was one of their main concerns, although it was framed within a wider variety of topics related to female livelihood, something which seemed to elude many male authors.

Maria Peregrina de Sousa, one of the writers I focus on in this article, makes adultery the central theme of one of her novels. Ana Plácido, the other author I study, also writes about it in the only novel she completed and published. With about 20 years of difference in age between them, these two writers paint different perceptions of adultery. It is impossible to tell with certainty whether those differences stem from their distance in age or from different life experiences, but I propose that each of the authors' experiences must have greatly shaped the course of their fictional stories.

I will leave the introduction of these authors out of this article, since it has already been done (Campos 2008; Comandulli 2014; Ganhão 2019; Ganhão 2020). I must mention, however, that even though Maria Peregrina, who was single all her life, saw writing as a prolific pastime instead of a career, she published texts of different genres in numerous Portuguese and Brazilian journals of the time, and many novels in book form. Ana Plácido, on the other hand, did not have as much free time to write as Peregrina, despite openly seeing writing in a more serious way, and only publishing two books and some sparse texts in journals. Plácido had a much more troubled life (mainly due to her public adulterous relationship with Camilo Castelo Branco, which eventually led her to being imprisoned) and having a partner and children to care for. Still, Plácido's only novel - *Herança de Lágrimas* (1871) - gives us much to research.

In this article I analyse the representation of the adulteress in *Herança de Lágrimas* by Ana Plácido and *Henriqueta* (1876) by Maria Peregrina de Sousa with the goal of comparing both writers and understanding the ways in which two Portuguese female authors, both from the 19th century, perceive female adultery differently. I must add that even though the novels were published only a few years apart, *Henriqueta* was in fact written in the 1850's and first published in a journal as a feuilleton. Although I also intend to mention some points of contact between the two works, my main focus will be on their differences.

## 1. The precedents

I want to start by exploring the precedents of adultery in both novels, beginning with the exploration of marriage. If in Maria Peregrina de Sousa's work the dissatisfaction of Henriqueta, the main character, with marriage is painted as an issue related to her personality and her "wrong" expectations for married life, in Ana Plácido the arranged marriage is deemed responsible for the wife's unhappiness.

Henriqueta is described from the beginning of the novel as a dangerously vain young woman:

Henriqueta had in her soul the poisonous seed that, if it was not destroyed before sprouting, could come to bear a terrible fruit. // This seed was vanity, which came from her knowing her great worth. (...) It was a seed that would naturally create many wrongs. (Sousa 1876, 2)<sup>1</sup>

The author tells us that the origin of that vanity was in the conscientious education that her parents had provided her, which let her see (comparatively, one assumes) that she had "great worth". Therefore, if educating the girl is seen in the novel as a positive thing, this particular education, being too elaborate, is deemed inconvenient as it would bring with it the vanity of knowing one's worth and enjoying being praised for it and, as a consequence, being the catalyst for one's disgrace. This puts in question, of course, the advantages of a woman knowing her own value and pictures education as a double-edged

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<sup>1</sup> In the original: "Henriqueta tinha na alma semente venenosa, que, se a não destruísse antes de germinar, podia vir a dar péssimo fruto. // Era esta semente a vaidade, que lhe vinha de conhecer, que muito valia. (...) Era o gérmen que havia naturalmente de originar muitos males." (Sousa 1876, 2).

sword that should be handled carefully so as not to result, in a female, in disproportionate self-esteem.

On the other hand, even though Henriqueta's marriage was planned by her father, she is not unwilling to follow his decision. She is given two suitors to choose from, both of whom she had not met before, and she "blindly" picks the one whose looks appeal to her the most - Júlio. Henriqueta is quickly disappointed upon witnessing her husband's initial passion rapidly wane. As a consequence, she soon becomes bored of married life, since it did not correspond to the intense passion and emotion she had expected:

If Henriqueta hadn't had such a high opinion of her charms and merits, she would have been content and happy with her husband's quiet and gentle affection: but having seen him raptured by her beauty, she now deemed it wrong for him to be solely occupied with her virtues. (Sousa 1876, 5-6)<sup>2</sup>

Henriqueta's husband, on his part, is only deemed at fault in the fact that he treats her authoritatively, a method not prone to producing good results:

He wanted to bring her to reason, but took the wrong path. Instead of convincing her with affection and sweetness to leave him to pursue his business freely and sometimes to engage in distractions that she did not take part in, he tried to accustom her to going where he pleased or must with rude frankness. (Sousa 1876, 5-6)<sup>3</sup>

This praise of tenderness as the ideal means of convincing a wife to let the husband do whatever he wishes is evidence of the type of marital relationship Peregrina envisions - one where the husband has the freedom he desires, but at least respects his wife, avoids imposing his freedom on her, and shows her that she is powerless when it comes to his decisions. This, from her point of view, would minimise the wife's dissatisfaction. As for the wife, Peregrina disapproves of her desire to go out more and be seen among society, proposing instead a restraint in the amount of distractions and amusements a wife should indulge in even when accompanied by her husband.

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<sup>2</sup> In the original: "Se Henriqueta não tivera opinião tão elevada de seus encantos e merecimento, contentar-se-ia, e seria feliz com a afeição sossegada e meiga de seu marido: mas tendo-o visto arrebatado de sua beleza, parecia-lhe mal vê-lo só ocupado de suas virtudes." (Sousa 1876, 5-6).

<sup>3</sup> In the original: "Ele quis trazê-la à razão, mas enganou-se no caminho. Em vez de conduzi-la com mimo e doçura a deixá-lo vagar a seus negócios em liberdade e algumas vezes a distrações, que ela não partilhava, tentou acostamá-la com rude franqueza a ir onde lhe parecia, ou era mister." (Sousa 1876, 5-6).

Given these circumstances, Henriqueta, encouraged by a (bad) friend and counsellor who used to stimulate her vanity and encourage her to engage in futile amusements, begins contact with the other former suitor she had rejected to marry - Carlos -, who now pays visits to her friend's house. Moreover, the fact that her husband is absent due to work makes Henriqueta feel forsaken, which, in turn, regarding her "natural female weakness" aggravated by her education, leads her into the arms of Carlos, the lover, with whom she ends up eloping, abandoning her children and husband.

As readers, we are led to assume from these circumstances that, for Henriqueta, the appeal of adultery comes from a faulty education that, instead of encouraging modesty and reservation as prescribed for women by social morals of the time, exacerbates her vanity and the desire to be admired. Although the fault is not directly her own, the responsibility for the consequences that will eventually befall her and her family is hers, as the narrator so often stresses.

The case of Branca d'Alvarães, the main character of *Herança de Lágrimas*, however, is painted almost as the reverse of Henriqueta's. Branca was a young woman with no inclination towards marriage, occupied mostly with her studies: "Branca thought she had been born for a life of studying, and was not able to understand how there could be a man that would make her forget her books and her chamber, the sanctuary few desecrated." (Plácido 2019, 98-99)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, she was gifted with above average intellectual capacities:

Her spirit understood everything that was great and superior. She was versed in history, poetry and in the French and Italian languages; she immersed herself in deliberations about ancient and modern literature, admirable for the fairness and good taste of the assessment. (Plácido 2019, 92)<sup>5</sup>

However, Branca's marriage with Jorge de Melo, arranged by her father against her will, had already been planned. For Branca, unlike Henriqueta, this marriage represents a kind of violence she will never be able to overcome, as she will never be able to love a man she does not like, and will instead find herself "the voluntary slave of the

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<sup>4</sup> In the original: "Branca pensava que nascera para a vida do estudo, sem compreender que houvesse homem que lhe fizesse esquecer os seus livros e o seu gabinete, o santuário que poucos profanavam." (Plácido 2019, 98-99).

<sup>5</sup> In the original: "Seu espírito compreendia tudo o que era grande e superior. Versada na história, na poesia e nas línguas francesa e italiana, entranhava-se em considerações na literatura antiga e moderna, admiráveis pela justeza e bom gosto da apreciação." (Plácido 2019, 92).

man she fathomed belonging to the least.” (Plácido 2019, 99)<sup>6</sup>. In her case, it is her sense of filial duty and her love for her dying father that speaks louder and prevents her from finding the courage to stand against his will.

In *Herança de Lágrimas*, forced marriage is painted mainly as sexual and emotional violence, but it is also psychologically destructive. It strips women away from their already limited freedom of choice over their own lives, and even from the possibility of developing themselves intellectually and from being useful in the field of knowledge, instead forcing them to a life of irrevocable suffering and enslavement. Marriage is, therefore, seen here as a form of submission and imprisonment, stifling female potential and skill, at least when contracted against the woman’s will.

We should note Peregrina mentions Henriqueta’s husband engaging in “distractions that she did not take part in” without criticism, potentially insinuating that those distractions were intended only for men and comprised of brothels and prostitutes. Plácido, however, criticises Jorge’s behaviour when Branca finds out that he had an adulterous relationship with her uncle’s young wife, using this as a decisive factor in her decision to commit adultery herself, thinking it justified and acceptable given the circumstances:

When she was unwed, Jorge had wrenched her from her happiness; as a married woman, he had spat infamy on her face, forcing her to think about the hidden turpitude of society and, who knows, in this way maybe preparing her ardent spirit for the run towards the dark ravine of crime. Therefore, if his words were sincere, if there truly was pain in the soul of that man, he deserved it; the punishment was just; he should pay for the wrong he had done to her. (Plácido 2019, 140)<sup>7</sup>

D. Jorge de Melo's profile is that of a man with no principles who uses women for his pleasure. Plácido introduces him thus: “Soon, he had completely overthrown his rivals

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<sup>6</sup> In the original: “escrava voluntária do homem a quem menos pensava pertencer.” (Plácido 2019, 99).

<sup>7</sup> In the original: “Solteira, Jorge arrancara-a à felicidade; casada, cuspira-lhe a infâmia, obrigando-a a pensar nas torpezas ocultas da sociedade e, talvez, quem sabe, preparando-lhe deste modo o espírito escandecido a correr ao tenebroso desfiladeiro do crime. Portanto, se eram sinceras estas palavras, se havia dores na alma daquele homem, merecera-as; era justo o castigo; devia pagar o mal que lhe fizera. (Plácido 2019, 140).

through his graceful and dexterous seduction. And more than one white-winged moth burnt itself in that vicious and treacherous flame.” (Plácido 2019, 95)<sup>8</sup>.

Branca's first “mistake”, therefore, is being forced to live a life she had not wished for, and accept a status that did not please her. The frustration of marriage, on the other hand, makes her emotionally vulnerable and more susceptible to the idea of love and to the illusion that it would free her from that marital prison. Thus, responsibility for her adultery is deemed to belong, first and foremost, to the father who forced her to get married and, more significantly, to the social norms that encourage parents to marry their daughters comfortably, even against their will. Branca is thus victim to a flawed society that limits her freedom and robs her of her willpower.

Whereas Peregrina's main character is criticised by the author, who makes her suffer for the futility of her desires, Branca is, instead, victimised and acquitted by Plácido, who sees her as a nearly innocent being, whose sorrow is an unfair punishment. Furthermore, in Peregrina's novel the wife and husband's different status within marriage is seen as acceptable, in Plácido's it is the injustice of those differences that, in a way, lead the wife to adultery.

## **2. The adulterous relationship**

The adulterous relationship itself is depicted in a similar way by both authors, but the nuance that each gives should be noted. For example, although Henriqueta and Branca both regret having committed adultery, Branca does not wish, like Henriqueta, that she had been less “silly” or had known how to respect her husband as she “should”. Ana Plácido’s character does not torment herself with guilt, nor does she feel remorse for the pain she might have caused her husband; instead, she merely realises that adultery is not worthwhile because lovers’ promises are broken with the first sign of trouble in the relationship.

Henriqueta, on the other hand, thought she was unhappy in her marriage, but comes to understand, after the adultery, how “silly” she had been. From the moment she

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<sup>8</sup> In the original: “Dentro em pouco foram completamente suplantados todos os seus rivais em garbo e dexteridade conquistadora, e mais de uma mariposa de asas brancas se foi queimar naquele foco de luz viciosa e pérfida.” (Plácido 2019, 95).

abandons her family to elope with her lover abroad, her life becomes a succession of punishments and suffering aggravated by destitution after leaving her lover, which ages her to the point of becoming unrecognisable. Narration focuses exclusively on Henriqueta's mistakes, and the narrator blames her above anyone else for her own sorrows. Here is an example of the pejorative adjectives used frequently to characterise her: "She no longer found it hard to go out without her husband, rather, she looked for excuses to do it. The fool deceived herself. She thought herself on safe ground, but she was taking gigantic steps along the path of ruin." (Sousa 1876, 15)<sup>9</sup>.

Her pain does not seem to be enough atonement for the guilt of her actions, as Henriqueta constantly shames herself for her past behaviour. Even her husband's indifference towards her before her elopement with the lover is attributed to herself and to her jealousy, which tire him and create distance between them.

In Henriqueta's case regret does not stem from the risk of public humiliation at home, since only the husband and her parents knew of her elopement, which they chose to keep secret by telling everyone else that she had died. This, however, severs her connection to the family and any possibility of returning home as wife and mother. On the other hand, social marginalisation does not become an issue in her adulterous relationship, because her lover's friends take her for his legitimate wife (named Emília for them) and consider her a model of virtue. But it is precisely this fake image of herself that tortures her the most. Henriqueta's conflict is, mainly, an intimate tension between being aware of the truth but having to live a lie, which materialises into the unbearable weight of guilt.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, not even a whole life of virtuous behaviour, which is the one she leads after eloping with the lover abroad (to whom she remains faithful until she returns to Portugal where her only option is to live alone with her illegitimate son) seems to be enough atonement for the weight of her initial adulterous fault – that mistake is bound to be an indelible mark on her life forever.

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<sup>9</sup> In the original: "Já não tinha dificuldade em sair sem seu marido, antes procurava pretextos para isso. A louca enganava-se a si mesma. Julgava-se no mesmo terreno, e adiantava-se a passos de gigante no caminho da perdição." (Sousa 1876, 15).

<sup>10</sup> At a certain point, during exile in Brazil, Henriqueta is forced to listen to a story similar to hers, in which the woman that was introduced as someone's wife was, in fact, his lover. This is a moment that intensifies her agony when faced with the need to keep the secret of the relationship she entertains with Carlos and pretending to be a virtuous wife: "João Felizardo had brought from England a lovely young lady that he tried to sell us as his wife. // (...) What a shame for an adventurer such as her to try to jibe with honorable ladies!..." (Sousa 1876, 43). In the original: "João Felizardo tinha trazido de Inglaterra uma linda moça, que nos impingiu por sua mulher. // (...) Querer-se igualar com senhoras honradas uma aventureira!..."



When Henriqueta comes back to Rivais, her village, after the love affair has ended, she comes across more hard truths: she learns from the servants at her former home, who do not recognise her, that she was the cause of her mother's death and her father's illness, as well as the cause of her husband's everlasting heartbreak, as she acknowledges before her husband:

Did you know I was a matricide and almost a parricide? My mother died of pain. But I did not die of woe learning the effects of my crime!... I withstood everything!... So many wounds and I did not die of them... I live still so I can suffer the sting of remorse... and all the wrath of despair! (Sousa 1876, 110)<sup>11</sup>

In this excerpt, as well as in many others, the persistence of picturing adultery as a crime is obvious: a crime that affects not just the husband but the whole family of the adulterous woman, who is considered guilty of all the misfortunes that derive from being unfaithful. As if her overwhelming feeling of guilt was not enough, the author puts the added moral weight of matricide and parricide on her character's shoulders.

I should clarify that, in this novel, adultery's only purpose is criticism and disapproval. There is no room for any sensualised descriptions nor for any reference to the excitement inherent to a passionate and sexual relationship. This probably due to the didactic purpose of the story, intended to deter women from committing adultery.

In *Herança de Lágrimas*, on the other hand, the focus is not on the moral and cultural offence that adultery represents, but rather on the real consequences that it would have for a woman's life if it became public knowledge, such as abandonment by the husband and the family, which would lead to destitution and loneliness. What seems to concern Ana Plácido are the personal physical and psychological problems that an adulterous woman would have to face.

Unlike Henriqueta, Branca does not elope with her lover. Rather, she is expelled from the family home by her husband. Furthermore, in this case, the author raises the problem of the unfairness of divorce for women at the time, since Branca's husband refuses to divorce her unless she requests it in court, which would mean she would become publicly known as an adulteress. Without a divorce, Branca is prevented from

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<sup>11</sup> In the original: "Sabes, que fui matricida e quase parricida? Minha mãe morreu de dor. E eu não morri d'angústia ao saber os efeitos do meu crime!... Resisti a tudo!... Não morri com tantos golpes... Vivo ainda para sofrer o aguilhão do remorso... e toda a força da desesperação!" (Sousa 1876, 110).

reclaiming her dowry, which was hers by law<sup>12</sup>, leaving her with the only option of joining her lover and hoping he kept the promises he had made her.

However, the dream of a marital life with the lover falls apart as soon as they run away together. Once the obstacles to the relationship are overcome, the illusion they both lived in is broken: the lover loses his regard for her as soon as her social prestige is tainted by infidelity and she becomes a burden and a prison, while Branca quickly realises that the passionate lover she knew was not real and that his promises were not honest:

What was, however, clearly proven was that she had been mistaken, that her calculations were undone and that the future with that man was uncertain. [...] What struggles did the unfortunate lady's heart suffer, confounded for not having come to her senses in time of saving herself. (Plácido 2019, 162)<sup>13</sup>

Another of the problems related to adultery, also experienced by Henriqueta, is the collapse of one's own identity. Before being adulteresses, both characters pictured themselves within an ideal of virtue that brought them peace of mind, which they took pride in. After adultery, that ideal disintegrates and turns into feelings of shame that are hard to bear, and into a conflict between the past and present selves that makes them miserable. As expected, if this loss of self-perception troubles Branca, it is felt way more intensely by Henriqueta, who is obsessed and oppressed by the remorse of her actions.

The difference between the two protagonists becomes even more evident with the straightforwardness of Branca regarding her "crime" of adultery. Branca's lack of hypocrisy is, maybe controversially, another of the traits that contributes to her exoneration within the story. As I noted earlier, after learning of her husband's infidelity, the young wife mistakenly sees herself as his equal, and thinks she may confess to adultery since he had first committed adultery himself. Branca misjudges her situation: thinking that her beliefs are correct and just, and that her appreciation of justice and truth would be acknowledged on the part of the husband; she wrongly assumes that he would

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<sup>12</sup> As Isabel Sá and Maria Fernandes tell us: "(...) the dowry corresponds to the number of belongings that are endowed on the bride, and is characterised, mainly, by being inalienable and incommunicable with the belongings of the husband and by being regulated by the dowry laws." (Sá and Fernandes 1986, 92); "It was the sort of legal protection only a woman would need." (100). On the topic of female adultery and law see also Pozzo 2019.

<sup>13</sup> In the original: "O que no entanto estava bem provado é que se tinha enganado, que os seus cálculos estavam desfeitos e o futuro com aquele homem era incerto. [...] Que confrontos não fazia o coração da infeliz senhora, consternada de não cair na realidade, a tempo de salvar-se!" (Plácido 2019, 162).

deem it unfair to blame her for something he had also done. Branca's misjudgement lies in the fact that she forgets the world does not treat men and women the same.

It is also interesting to note that the consequences of adultery explored in *Henriqueta* that befall the family, and which the main character feels guilty for, are only present in *Herança de Lágrimas* through the voice of Jorge, the betrayed and offended husband, but never cross Branca's mind: "He was a man, he could be unfaithful to her as many times as his whims, his caprices and occasion led him to, without having to account for it in society and without tainting his name; but her! Branca d'Alvarães dishonour[ed] herself and her own (...)" (Plácido 2019, 185)<sup>14</sup>. Never does Branca blame herself for dishonouring her husband, since, in her mind, he had become devoid of all honour from the moment he had been unfaithful to her, and had exposed himself to being treated the same way by his wife. In this episode, Plácido explores the social limitations placed on women at the time, as well as the social double standards when compared to male behaviour, especially with regard to sexual conduct.

Regarding the adulterous relationship, Branca, like *Henriqueta*, chooses to eventually abandon her lover, even if that meant embracing loneliness and destitution. Both women resort to work as a solution for their own and their children's survival. Nevertheless, while Branca finds an acceptable position as tutor of two little girls, *Henriqueta* is forced to accept a job well below her previous social status. Even when fighting for her own life, *Henriqueta* is put through pain and humiliation, while Branca is taken in by a caring family that helps her through her pregnancy. Furthermore, it is thanks to her education that Branca's job is less degrading than *Henriqueta's*, whose education seems now to be completely disregarded. Thus, in *Herança de Lágrimas*, female education is indirectly valued: "«Little did my father know», she continued her monologue with herself, «little did he think that her Branca would get to the extreme of blessing and plucking the fruits of a good education!»" (Plácido 2019, 162-163)<sup>15</sup>.

As for the lovers, it is easy to find many points of contact between the two authors. Embodying the mythical Don Juan's *persona*, both lovers are prone to passionate fleeting

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<sup>14</sup> In the original: "Ele por si era homem, podia traí-la quantas vezes a isso o levassem, as veleidades, os caprichos, e as ocasiões sem ter de dar contas à sociedade, nem macular o seu nome; mas ela! Branca d'Alvarães desonrar-se a si e aos seus (...)" (Plácido 2019, 185).

<sup>15</sup> In the original: "«Mal pensaria meu pai», continuava ela o monólogo consigo mesma, «mal cuidaria ele que a sua Branca chegaria ao extremo de abençoar e colher os frutos de uma boa educação!»" (Plácido 2019, 162-163).

relationships that invariably make them unhappy and unsatisfied. This is what Rodrigo (Branca's lover) says near the end of the novel: "A bleak destiny never let me savour without disgust the pleasure of an hour! My mischiefs are explained thus. I could never be faithful to any woman, while always yearning to find one that would truly bind me... that would enslave me..." (Plácido 2019, 181)<sup>16</sup>; and he later says:

I love today what tomorrow will bore me and that I will loathe the day after! I don't even know what longing is (...). After great fires, not even traces of ash are to be found in my soul; there is only boredom, as an eternal and disagreeable reminder of such misspent sensations. (Plácido 2019, 127-128)<sup>17</sup>

These seductive men are marked by their cruelty and selfishness, despising the women they mislead after they have conquered them. Carlos, Henriqueta's lover, also gets bored of her and tolerates her presence out of compassion only:

The wretch could not even now have the criminal satisfaction of believing she had sacrificed her honour, her homeland, her family, her duties and all her joys to a faithful lover: she knew well that only commiseration and shame forced Carlos to still treat her as his wife. (Sousa 1876, 48)<sup>18</sup>

Just like Rodrigo, Carlos only regrets having seduced Henriqueta when it is too late:

On this occasion, Carlos felt tremendous compassion for the woman he had disgraced, and, if he could, he would have restored the peace and bliss he had robbed her of, at the price of all his belongings. Late did these generous ideas come to him!... The wretch [Henriqueta] was condemned to a life of shame and remorse. (Sousa 1876, 44)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In the original: "Negro destino, que me não deixou nunca saborear sem enojo o prazer de uma hora! As minhas maldades explicam-se assim. Nunca pude guardar fidelidade a mulher alguma, com a ânsia de encontrar uma que me prendesse deveras... que me escravizasse..." (Plácido 2019, 181).

<sup>17</sup> In the original: "Amo hoje o que aborreço amanhã e detesto no dia seguinte! Nem mesmo sei o que é a saudade (...). Depois de grandes incêndios, nem resquícios de cinza me ficam na alma; apenas lá fica o tédio, como lembrança eterna e desagradável de tão malbaratadas sensações. (Plácido 2019, 127-128).

<sup>18</sup> In the original: "A mísera nem agora tinha a criminosa satisfação de crer que havia sacrificado a honra, a pátria, a família, os seus deveres e todas as suas alegrias a um amante fiel: ela conhecia bem que só a comisseração e a vergonha obrigava Carlos a tratá-la ainda como sua mulher." (Sousa 1876, 48).

<sup>19</sup> In the original: "Nesta ocasião sentiu Carlos imensa compaixão pela mulher, que desgraçara, e, se pudesse, lhe restituiria a paz e ventura, que lhe roubara, à custa de todos os seus haveres. Tarde lhe chegavam ideias generosas!... A infeliz estava votada a uma vida de ignomínia e remorsos." (Sousa 1876, 44).

With this remark Peregrina places some of the blame of adultery on men, while stressing that most of its consequences would befall women exclusively.

Nevertheless, in Ana Plácido's novel, the blame for the misfortunes of women is much more strongly put on men than in Peregrina's, who has the punishment befall almost exclusively on the adulteress. In Plácido's *Herança de Lágrimas*, recklessness and immaturity are two of the main traits that characterise male figures. Both husbands and lovers claim to be unaccountable for the wrongs they provoked by seducing and deceiving married women, and some (mainly Jorge and Rodrigo) even express misogynistic views when claiming that adultery and letting themselves be seduced is only downgrading for women, and is otherwise acceptable and even "normal" for men. This view is one Maria Peregrina seems to endorse in *Henriqueta*.

### 3. Offspring and redemption

Solitude is depicted in both novels as one of the main characteristics of an adulteress' life, whether that is seen as a rightful punishment or as a dreadful consequence of adultery. After ending the adulterous relationships, all that is left for the adulterous women characters in both novels are their illegitimate children and the few people that show compassion for them. It is the suffering that stems from that solitude and from the struggles of making a living on their own and supporting their children that leads both *Henriqueta* and *Branca* to a degrading death.

Yet, even in death, major differences can be found between them. On her part, *Branca* dies shortly after giving birth to *Diana*, to whom she leaves an autobiographical letter encouraging her not to make the same mistakes regarding adultery. *Henriqueta*, on the other hand, dies an old lady after having returned to the home she had left, but without being able to tell her legitimate children who she was. For *Peregrina*, for whom family and filial love were paramount, this is potentially the most bittersweet compensation she could give her protagonist: enabling her to see her two legitimate children once again, but taking away from her the possibility of introducing herself to them as their mother. The moment of their reunion is, therefore, a mixture of anguish and bliss:

– Oh, my God! give me strength to resist the temptation of crying out to them... of running into their arms!... How happy I could have been and how wretched

I am!... Of all the ordeals of my guilty life, oh, my God!... this is the one I offer to you as atonement for my sins!... (Sousa 1876, 95-96)<sup>20</sup>

Her three children are, in fact, the people who unwittingly humiliate and hurt her the most because, on the one hand, they are nothing like her (all of them are immaculately virtuous), and on the other hand, they are the ones she is repeatedly prevented from being with: in the case of the illegitimate son, because of his untimely death and, in the case of the other two, because she abandoned them for her lover.

Moreover, the illegitimate child is weak and ill from birth, thus reflecting the sin within which he was born, and ends up being rejected by the father. The fact that this “virtuous” and “honourable” child, who holds high moral standards, lives all his life believing a lie results in aggravating the mother’s pain and shame even more than the adultery itself, for he believed, until she reveals the truth to him, that his father had abandoned them and that his mother was an exemplary virtuous wife. The shock the truth provokes in him weakens him to the point of illness and death:

When he learned that his mother, who was his idol, who was all that he loved on earth; when he learned, I say, that that worshiped and dear being was a demeaned and criminal woman, and that his birth was shameful to him and a remorse to his mother, he felt haunted by it and wished ardently for death. (Sousa 1876, 75-76)<sup>21</sup>

The continuous obstacles to the fruition of motherhood are, indeed, the worst punishments Maria Peregrina could attribute to a deviating woman like Henriqueta. Henriqueta herself confesses it when about to die in the arms of her husband, begging him for forgiveness:

How beautiful and kind our children are!... Such bliss that I deprived myself of because of a momentary hallucination!... How happy I would have been if we had always lived together, and I now died in your arms and theirs, without crime or remorse!... Wretched me!...I will never see them again!... and no longer hear their voices!... I saw them but couldn’t run into their arms... (...)

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<sup>20</sup> In the original: “- Oh, meu Deus! dai-me forças para resistir à tentação de chamá-los em altos brados... de correr a seus braços!... Quanto poderia ser feliz e quão desgraçada sou!... De todos os tormentos da minha culpada vida, oh, meu Deus!... é este que te ofereço em expiação de meus pecados!...” (Sousa 1876, 95-96).

<sup>21</sup> In the original: Quando pois soube, que sua mãe, que era o seu ídolo, que era tudo quanto amava sobre a terra; quando soube, digo, que esse ser venerado e querido era uma mulher aviltada e criminoso, e que o seu nascimento era uma vergonha para ele e um remorso para sua mãe, sentiu-se acabrunhado e desejou ardentemente a morte. (Sousa 1876, 75-76)

Oh Júlio! I was so guilty, but I was even more unfortunate! The tortures that above all I just now suffered... I cannot even voice them. (...) The blame is on me... only me, if I lost the right to embrace my children... And even so I embraced them both!!! (Peregrina 1876, 115)<sup>22</sup>

Branca, contrary to Henriqueta, extends the tie that binds her to her child even in death through the aforementioned letter. The story of her dead mother deters Diana from also committing adultery; she learns from the adulterous mother she never met and creates with her a tie based on empathy, rather than reinforcing feelings of shame and guilt like Henriqueta's children are bound to do. Thus, Branca's redemption comes to her after death in the form of the influence her example has on Diana.

For Henriqueta, redemption is being able to see her husband and children before dying. It is clear these are two significantly different stances towards adultery: Peregrina, on her part, vehemently condemns her character's life choice; Henriqueta is built as a moralising and nearly horrifying example of the consequences of giving in to one's vain whims. Plácido, on the other hand, endows her protagonist with a timeless dimension, turning her into a voice of wisdom to be heard by both her daughter and the female readers of the novel. Branca's voice is, therefore, the sensible magnified voice of the victim, nearly acquitted from all guilt and warning her readers, first and foremost, about the evils of an arranged marriage.

## **Final considerations**

In Branca's case, since adultery is painted as a an understandable mistake, mitigated by so many factors, her regret and suffering are, unlike Henriqueta's, valid forms of moral recovery in the view of the narrator/ author, even though they might not be enough for the adulteress to recover her previous social status. In this way, the prejudice surrounding female adultery and the belief that it stemmed from lust, debauchery and perversion is deconstructed:

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<sup>22</sup> In the original: "Como são belos e amáveis nossos filhos!... De que ventura me privei pela alucinação de um momento!... Que felicidade seria a minha, se tivéssemos vivido sempre juntos, e agora morresse nos teus braços e nos deles, sem crimes nem remorsos!... Mísera de mim!.. Não os tornarei a ver!... nem ouvirei mais suas vozes!... Vi-os e não corri a seus braços... (...) Oh, Júlio! fui muito culpada, mas ainda fui mais desgraçada! Os tormentos que sobre tudo sofri há pouco... não os posso exprimir. (...) A culpa foi minha... só minha, se perdi o direito de abraçar meus filhos... E contudo os abracei a ambos!!! (Peregrina 1876, 115)

Men wish that every woman that sins, blinded by passion or by an involuntary mistake, be perverted. There is no appeal to this sentence. She is not even granted the virtue of regret, the sublime agony of contrition, for which Christ himself promised the reward of heaven! (Plácido 2019, 113)<sup>23</sup>

Despite all these differences between Maria Peregrina's and Ana Plácido's works, there are still some conclusions that apply equally to both authors, namely that romantic love is fleeting and that adulterous relationships are doomed from the start and will necessarily end with disappointment and sorrow. Equally, both authors signal that an adulteress' most likely destiny is abandonment and destitution. But these are conclusions that are practical in character rather than moral or philosophical.

The moral and social conduct implications that stem from each of the authors' works are vastly different. The character of Henriqueta, on one hand, is at the core of Peregrina's critique, which she expresses either through the narrator's side comments, or by building a main character that is shattered, and I would argue almost haunted, by adultery and its consequences. The author is almost exclusively interested in the exemplarity of a story of calamity and remorse caused by female adultery. She appeals to morality by warning the reader about the consequences of a wrong decision, which, given their dimension, should be enough to discourage any young bride from following a similar path. Even the initial vanity and beauty that were Henriqueta's most noticeable traits are destroyed; her former beauty and pride turn into deprivation and humiliation. Therefore, the possibility of female self-determination away from social expectations is demolished by the protagonist's example.

Branca, on the other hand, learns with adultery a rather less profound lesson:

If they [female readers] drew from this, at least, the wise conclusion that there is no man that feels for us more than a passing whim, that the wind of a storm will blow away; that all of them are traitors when they swear; that there isn't a single one that deserves being missed or sincerely mourned! (Plácido 2019, 179-180)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In the original: Querem os homens que toda a mulher que peca, cega pela paixão ou por um lapso involuntário, esteja pervertida. Não há apelação nem agravo desta sentença. Não lhe consentem depois sequer a virtude do arrependimento, a sublime agonia da contrição, para a qual o mesmo Cristo prometeu a recompensa do céu! (Plácido 2019, 113).

<sup>24</sup> In the original: "Se elas [as leitoras] daqui tirassem ao menos a sábia conclusão de que não há homem que sinta por nós mais do que um capricho passageiro, que o vento da tempestade leva longe, que todos são traidores quando juram, que não há um só que mereça uma saudade, uma lágrima sincera!" (Plácido 2019, 179-180).



It is not the humiliation of adultery *per se* that the young woman concentrates on, but rather male fickleness that leads women astray in the name of fleeting emotions, in the name of an illusion that disappears as quickly as it was formed. It is against this that Branca stands, and it is with the intention of revealing the truth about adulterous love that she warns other women with the following remark:

Going astray for a blind and imperious love seemed, until then, forgivable to her, and maybe even hallowed by divine law; but going astray to satisfy the brutish whims of a perverted heart; replacing the joys and safety of virtue with the painful and concerned uncertainties of a crime, whose end would be an atrocious disappointment, without the fictitious colourfulness of pretence and dissimulation... that was the extreme to which one could experience despair! (Plácido 2019, 181)<sup>25</sup>

In a way, blame is reverted to the male characters - husband and lover - and diverted from the main nucleus of the story - the adulteress. Even though she regrets the loss of innocence and virtue, Branca stands proud through all the ordeals she has to face. She also believes she made the wrong choice not because it deprived her of a life of marital and familial delights, but because it did not bring her the happiness that she was looking for all along.

In the end, the final depiction of Branca is that of a martyr redeemed through pain and death, thus atoning for the mistake she indulged in, regardless of how little she could have done to avoid it: “You rest, at last, saint of woes! Soul regenerated through tears, spirit purified through pain and contrition!” (Plácido 2019, 195)<sup>26</sup>. One of the central points of the novel is the injustice of the social treatment given to an adulteress, who is from then on marked by her sin forever, and devoid of the redemption religion offers all sinners. Atoning and being crowned a martyr is, therefore, a way of glorifying the pain a woman who made one mistake in her life is put through and a way of raising her above

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<sup>25</sup> In the original: “Perder-se por um amor cego e imperioso, parecera-lhe desculpável até então, senão já santificado pelas leis divinas; mas perder-se para satisfazer os caprichos brutais de um coração pervertido, trocar as alegrias e seguranças da virtude pelas inquietas e dolorosas incertezas do crime, cujo remate era receber o atroz desengano, sem o colorido fictício do fingimento e da dissimulação... isto é que era o extremo a que podia levar-se o desespero!” (Plácido 2019, 181).

<sup>26</sup> In the original: “Repousaste, enfim, santa das amarguras! Alma regenerada pelas lágrimas, espírito purificado pela dor, e pela contrição!” (Plácido 2019, 195).

the man that sins multiple times without regrets. Being a martyr is, indeed, what turns Branca into a heroine.

This is what adultery is truly used for in Ana Plácido: for making women heroines through abnegation and putting into perspective the experiences of the female gender in a misogynous and patriarchal society. If in 1871 Plácido fought with words against nineteenth-century's unfair social morality, Maria Peregrina de Sousa, in 1876, although 20 years older and re-editing a book she had initially written in 1850, sided with the rules of the century and demanded compliance of her fellow females, terrorising them with what might happen if they did not.

Regardless of the many differences between Plácido's and Maria Peregrina's works, these two women have something in common that no one, not in their century nor in ours, could take away from them: the power and the use of the written word to express views and perceptions of the world that surrounded them and that would rather have seen them silenced.

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