

## Brazilian Voices in the Making: Paulo Pontes, Chico Buarque, and Euripides' Medea

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*Abstract. This article identifies three elements of Euripides' Medea which reappear in Paulo Pontes and Chico Buarque's play, Gota d'Água (1975). These elements, this article argues, enable Buarque and Pontes to reimagine Medea as a commentary on the reality of the Brazilian lower classes in the 1970s. The article proceeds in five parts. The first section is an overview of Brazilian history, contextualising key elements in Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985), under which Gota d'Água was written and first performed. The second section is a summary of Gota d'Água. The third, fourth and fifth sections address thematic similarities between the two plays—namely, the relationship between economic power and social climbing, between political power and silencing, and between otherness and marginality.*

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### 1. Historical background

Brazil was colonised by the Portuguese between 1500 and 1822. Brazilian independence can be traced back to 1808, when the Portuguese court sailed to Brazil in a desperate measure to escape from Napoleon and to establish a power base in the New World. At that time, Brazil was already an economic powerhouse, responsible for approximately 60% “of the exports that earned Portugal's trade surplus” (Skidmore, 1999, p. 31), leading the prince regent João to unify Brazil and Portugal into a “United Kingdom”. This bold move had two implications: Brazilian elites, on the one hand, saw the manoeuvre as an opportunity to claim independence; Portuguese elites, on the other hand, felt the need to reclaim Brazil's colonial status and urged the court to return to Portugal. This return, however, occurred only partially: João VI, now monarch, sailed back to Portugal, but his son Pedro remained in Brazil as prince regent.

In 1822, Pedro declared Brazil's independence and was crowned Emperor Pedro I. That Brazilian independence was declared by a member of the Portuguese Royal family reveals the continuities of the socio-political structures of the old regime (Caldeira 2017, p. 208): slavery was not yet abolished, and both economic and political power remained concentrated in the hands of elites. The lack of a sharp divide between Brazil, “the colony”, and Brazil, the newly founded “Empire”, has survived in Brazil for centuries. Even after becoming a republic in 1889 (tellingly, by means of a military coup d'état rather than a collective upheaval), presidential elections in Brazil remained little more than a formality for decades. Frauds were not uncommon, and candidates appointed by parties that were more influential in the government were often “chosen” by the people – with hardly any use of campaigning or debates (Caldeira, 2017, p. 340-341; p. 395-402).

The military remained a strong presence in Brazilian politics. The first two presidents of the republic were marshals (Marechal Deodoro da Fonseca and Floriano Peixoto), in what became known as the “República da Espada” (“Republic of the Sword”). It was another coup with military support that put Getúlio Vargas in power instead of Júlio Prestes, the official winner of the presidential elections of 1930. Ironically, it was also the military who, in 1945, would put a stop to Vargas’ authoritarian rule.<sup>1</sup>

In 1964, the military led yet another coup in an attempt to control the “communist threat” posed by João Goulart, the president at the time, who demonstrated a keen interest in promoting social change (Skidmore, 1999, p. 155). The military dictatorship argued that one of the main reasons for the rampant inflation Brazil was facing at the time was a recent but significant increase in the minimum wage. Attempts to favour the lower classes were also bound to be interpreted as communist-leaning and would therefore risk forfeiting foreign investment, mainly from the United States.

This mindset inevitably reinforced the social inequality Brazil had inherited from its colonial past. The resulting dissatisfaction among parts of the population had fewer and fewer chances to manifest itself as repression by the military government was progressively reinforced over time. The institutional act No. 5 of 1968 enforced censorship on the press, public demonstrations and artistic productions (Skidmore, 1999, p. 164). Torture and purges followed.

## 2. Plot summary

Such is the context in which *Gota d’Água*, following several censorship cuts given its “strong note of social protest” (Woodyard, 1978, p. 152), was published and performed in 1975. The two authors, Paulo Pontes and Chico Buarque, also wrote a “manifesto” claiming that their work reacted to a political and cultural crisis in Brazil. They state:

“(…) First and foremost, the play explores a facet of Brazilian society that has gained prominence in recent years: the experience under capitalism (...). There’s nothing new in fostering the concentration of wealth in the upper classes through the draining of the income of the lower classes”.<sup>2</sup>

While this is a clear reference to the economic measures taken by the military, the authors also attribute the oppression of the Brazilian lower classes to residual colonialism surviving among the upper classes:

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed account of such events, see Skidmore (1999), esp. pp. 65-126.

<sup>2</sup> “A primeira e mais importante de todas [preocupações fundamentais que a nossa peça procura refletir] se refere a uma face da sociedade brasileira que ganhou relevo nos últimos anos: a experiência capitalista (...). Forçar a acumulação de capital através da drenagem de renda das classes subalternas não é novidade nenhuma” (Buarque & Pontes, 1975, p. xi). All translations from the Portuguese (with a few adaptations so that they are more accessible in English) are mine.

“Brazilian history has (...) two cultures: on the one hand, an elitist, **colonising** one, brought here from Portugal; on the other hand, a popular, silenced culture, born of the social experience of the lower classes. (...) *Gota d’Água* (...) is a tragedy of Brazilian life”.<sup>3</sup>

One of numerous takes on *Medea* onstage across countries and centuries (see Hall, E., Macintosh, F., and Taplin, O., 2000), Pontes and Buarque’s play is set in Rio de Janeiro, on a fictional suburban apartment block (“conjunto habitacional”) called Vila do Meio-Dia – a residential area not sufficiently deprived to qualify as a slum (“favela”), but one in which its working-class experience severe financial struggles. The main character, corresponding to Euripides’ Medea, is called Joana. Though Joana, a lower class Brazilian woman, does not share Medea’s status as a foreigner, she does share her magical powers, namely *macumba* – an umbrella-term referring to various African rituals and religious practices often stigmatised as dark magic. She is married to Jasão, who is younger than she is, just as Jason is younger than Medea. Jasão, however, is a less heroic figure in *Gota d’Água*: he is an amateur songwriter uncommitted to music or, for that matter, anything else. Creonte—Euripides’ Creon—is the real estate developer who owns Vila do Meio Dia’s housing and is portrayed as a nasty and manipulating slumlord. Egeu, an analogue to Aegaeus, is a small business owner in the neighborhood and the only character with his own property and, therefore, without any debt to Creonte.

Joana and Jasão live with their children at Vila do Meio-Dia, where most inhabitants pay for their homes in the form of monthly instalments debt to Creonte. Before the events of the play, Creonte had paid a radio station to play Jasão’s latest samba song, “Gota d’Água”, and turned it into a massive hit. Jasão is also leaving Joana to marry Creonte’s daughter. In the play’s first act, Joana’s female friends and Jasão’s male friends form a split chorus: the female characters lament that Joana, stronger and smarter, is about to be abandoned by a boyish, younger man who, until recently, was unable to fend for himself. The male characters, in turn, acknowledge Jasão’s talent as a songwriter and celebrate the fact that he is on the verge of gaining financial and social capital.<sup>4</sup> Egeu, meanwhile, has been helping Joana financially during her crisis while plotting an uprising against the abusive Creonte.

In the second act, Creonte promises his residents that he will renovate their houses as long as they stop their riot. Creonte gives Joana one day to leave the house. As revenge, Joana sends her children to Jasão’s wedding ceremony with a poisoned cake, but Creonte sends them home. Realising that her plan has backfired, Joana conjures the African deity Xangô and asks him why he will not let her take revenge

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<sup>3</sup> “Ao longo dessa história correram (...) duas culturas: uma, elitista, **colonizadora**, transposta da matriz pra cá; a outra, popular, abafada, nascida da existência social concreta das classes subalternas. (...) *Gota D’Água* (...) é uma tragédia da vida brasileira” (Buarque & Pontes, 1975, p. xii-xvii).

<sup>4</sup> See Woodyard (1978, p. 153).

on her enemies. Seeing no way out, she decides that she and her children should eat the poisoned cake and die.

Considerable adaptations and deviations from the original Greek text were made in order for the play to be rooted in its Brazilian context – the most striking one probably being the fact that Joana, unlike Euripides' Medea, commits suicide (which is addressed in the fifth section of the present article). Nonetheless, there are a few significant elements from *Medea* that the Brazilian text seems to be nodding to, which are discussed in the following sections.

### 3. Economic power and social climbing

Mastronarde (2002, p. 31) points out that Jason “frequently employs commercial and financial terms and metaphors”. Though such language is unexpected in the aristocratic environment of Greek tragedy, they reoccur in Jason’s justification of his new marriage:

“(…) but my purpose was that **we should live well** – which is the main thing – and **not be in want**, knowing that everyone gets out of his way to avoid a **penniless friend**”.<sup>5</sup>

Medea also implies that social climbing contributes to Jason’s betrayal, claiming that “his passion was to marry a king’s daughter”.<sup>6</sup> This theme becomes prominent in *Gota d’Água*. Several characters comment on Jasão’s change of social status throughout the play:

“Let’s drink to Jasão, that lucky bastard  
who is about to marry the king’s daughter”.<sup>7</sup>

This is hardly the sole instance in which Creonte is referred to as king, and the imagery is reinforced in a scene where Creonte seduces Jasão “into a position of power, symbolized by his chair, a kind of throne” (Woodyard, 1978, p. 153). Allusions to Creonte’s royalty are more than mere attempts to reference source material, however, and in fact reveal the relations of power in Brazil from colonialism to capitalism – a time span included in the authors’ “manifesto”.

McLeod (2000) defines colonialism as the seizing of a foreign land for the economic profit of the homeland while developing unequal relations of power between coloniser and indigenous people. This is not radically different from

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<sup>5</sup> ἄλλ’ ὥς, τὸ μὲν μέγιστον, οἰκοῖμεν καλῶς  
καὶ μὴ σπανιζοίμεσθα, γινώσκων ὅτι  
πένητα φεύγει πᾶς τις ἐκποδῶν φίλον. (*Med.*, 559-561). The Greek edition and the English translation are Kovacs (2001).

<sup>6</sup> ἀνδρῶν τυράννων κῆδος ἠράσθη λαβεῖν. (*Med.*, 700)

<sup>7</sup> “Vamos beber à Jasão  
Aquele sim, nasceu co’o cu pra lua. Está  
Pra se casar co’a filha do rei” (Buarque & Pontes, 1975, p. 17).

Creonte's vision of capitalism: he builds houses on a piece of land for his own economic profit and takes advantage of his position to exploit members of lower classes by means of abusive charges. The difference in scale in each case is obvious,<sup>8</sup> but the parallels remain striking. References to Creonte as king, in this sense, broaden his reach, rendering him a generic agent of social injustice that has always been present in Brazil – previously in the form of colonialism, and then in a form of capitalism.

#### 4. Power and silencing

Injustice, in Euripides' play, is connected to the tense relationship between power and speaking. In the *agōn*-scene, Jason ascribes Medea's hopeless situation not to the injustice she has suffered—that is, the fact that her husband has abandoned her—but to her decision to voice such injustice and therefore challenge the ruling power:

“Although you could have kept this land and this house by patiently bearing with your **superior's arrangements**, you will be exiled because of your foolish talk. Not that it bothers me: go on, if you like, **calling** Jason the basest man alive. But as for your **words against the ruling family**, count yourself lucky that your punishment is exile”.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Medea's act of speaking is placed at the center of the threat she poses. Silencing her through exile, then, allows Creon to reinforce his authority. This is but one of many instances in ancient literature in which women are belittled for being vocal<sup>10</sup> – and that includes tragedy. Roisman shows the different textures with which “outspoken women, who speak and act against the ruling powers” (2004, p. 92) are portrayed in Greek tragedies other than *Medea* (namely: Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and *Agamemnon*; Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Electra*; Euripides' *Electra*).

In *Gota d'Água*, too, Joana verbally challenges Creonte's authority:

<sup>8</sup> Some actions attached to colonialism clearly do not apply to Creonte's case – e.g. there is no invasion of land (see Hiddleston, 2009), as he is Brazilian and not explicitly associated with a Portuguese ancestry. In a way, Creonte's presence in the play could be also linked with imperialism, which can “be understood as a larger structure of economic or political hegemony that does not have to include the direct rule and conquest of another country” (*ibid.*, p. 2). Due to its broader reach, “Imperialism could, then, continue after the end of colonial rule” (*ibid.*), and in the context of the play may express, by means of Creonte's character, a residue of colonial economic and power abuse in more recent structures.

<sup>9</sup> σοὶ γὰρ παρὸν γῆν τήνδε καὶ δόμους ἔχειν  
κούφως φερούση **κρείσσόνων βουλευμάτα**,  
**λόγων** ματαιῶν οὐνεκ' ἐκπεσσῆ χθονός.  
κάμοι μὲν οὐδὲν πρᾶγμα. μὴ παύση ποτὲ  
**λέγουσ'** Ἰάσον' ὡς κάκιστός ἐστ' ἀνήρ.  
ἂ δ' ἔς **τυράννου**ς ἐστὶ σοὶ **λελεγμένα**,  
πᾶν κέρδος ἡγοῦ ζῆμιουμένη φυγῆ. (*Med.* 448-454)

<sup>10</sup> See Mary Beard's recent *Women and Power: a Manifesto* (2017, p. 3-45).

“Joana held rallies  
at the *terreiro*, at the bar, in front of the building,  
She cut Creonte to pieces”.<sup>11</sup>

The Portuguese word “*comício*”, translated here as “rally”, often refers to a public meeting or protest in which a leading figure makes a political speech. The word, therefore, alludes to the power dynamic integral to speaking—one recognised by Euripides. That this term is used to refer to Joana’s allegations against Creonte further reveals how marital and social conflicts are deeply intertwined in *Gota d’Água*. Indeed, Creonte uses his social status to silence Joana’s voice: escorted by policemen, he forces his way into Joana’s house and commands her to leave “calmly, without **complaining**” (“*Saia sem **chiar**, calma*”, Buarque & Pontes, 1975, p. 148). This scene becomes even more powerful when rooted in the context of dictatorship in the 1970s, during which the police repressed rebellion through violence, torture and purges. Joana, in this sense, represents Brazilian voices continuously silenced by the ruling power.

## 5. Marginality/Otherness

Motifs of marginality and otherness inevitably evoke Euripides’ famous passage in which Medea declares herself representative of a marginal, oppressed group—women:

“Of all creatures that have breath and sensation, **we women** are the most unfortunate. First at an exorbitant price we must buy a husband and **take a master for our bodies**. The outcome of our life’s striving hangs on this, whether we take a bad or a good husband. For divorce is discreditable for a woman and it is not possible to refuse wedlock.”<sup>12</sup>

The use of *master/δεσπότης* here reinforces the idea of the oppression of otherness: in this case, male oppression of what is not male. Indeed, much has been said about Medea representing otherness: females, foreigners, witches.<sup>13</sup> Medea actually appeals to such otherness, claiming that her condition is even worse than the one of the women in the chorus, as she is away from home and without

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<sup>11</sup> “Ela fez comício  
No *terreiro*, outro no bar, no edifício,  
Deixou Creonte mais raso que o chão” (Buarque & Pontes, 1975, p. 98).

<sup>12</sup> πάντων δ’ ὅσ’ ἔστ’ ἔμψυχα καὶ γνώμην ἔχει  
γυναικῆς ἔσμεν ἀθλιώτατον φυτόν·  
ἄς πρῶτα μὲν δεῖ χρημάτων ὑπερβολῆ  
πόσιν πρίασθαι, **δεσπότην** τε σώματος  
λαβεῖν. (...) κἀν τῷδ’ ἀγῶν μέγιστος, ἢ κακὸν λαβεῖν  
ἢ χρηστόν· οὐ γὰρ εὐκλεεῖς ἀπαλλαγῆ  
γυναιξίν οὐδ’ οἷόν τ’ ἀνήνασθαι πόσιν. (*Med.* 230-237)

<sup>13</sup> “The single character Medea is marked in all ways as the other, the different, in the tragedy which bears her name. (...) Medea is not a whole other culture, but the other within the city” (duBois, 1982, p. 118-119). See also Mastrorarde (2002, p. 15) and Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin (2000). For a more nuanced interpretation of Euripides’ character, see Rabinowitz (1993).

supporting family. By the end of the play, however, she is no victim. In the final scene, she “rises to complete triumph over her enemies and appears physically raised above Jason (...) like the gods for whom the upper level and locomotion by the theatre-crane are normally served” (Mastronarde, 2002, p. 12).

In *Gota d’Água*, Joana echoes Medea’s monologue (adding an extra layer of social struggle) in stating that, if God were good, he would not have created poor people or women (“não criava duas coisas: primeiro pobre, segundo mulher”, Buarque & Pontes, 1975, p. 65; see Woodyard, 1978, p. 154). Joana’s otherness manifests itself in what escapes the Portuguese colonising culture mentioned earlier in the manifesto: Joana is not male, not elite, not catholic and, as a *macumba* practitioner, linked to the colonial oppression of Africans. The big difference, however, is that Joana, unsuccessful and driven to suicide, concludes her story rather differently. Her last lines are:

“To Creonte, the daughter, Jasão and others  
I’ll leave this wedding gift  
I’ll give you **our** agony  
because, oh Father, I learned that the pain  
from living in tragedy every single day  
is worse than dying from poisoning”.<sup>14</sup>

In using the first-person plural here, Joana speaks not merely for herself and her children, but for the otherness she impersonates. Further, the choice to use an ending that differs from Euripides’<sup>15</sup> – where Medea survives and revenges herself on her enemies – elicits more sympathy than the Greek character and intensifies the tragedy of Brazilian life highlighted in the manifesto.<sup>16</sup> These Brazilian voices of which Joana is a spokeswoman are bound to be silenced again and again throughout history. Such silence, Joana maintains, though experienced while living, proves even less bearable than the silence of death itself.

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<sup>14</sup> “A Creonte, à filha, a Jasão e companhia  
vou deixar esse presente de casamento  
Eu transfiro pra vocês a **nossa** agonia  
porque, meu Pai, eu compreendi que o sofrimento  
de conviver com a tragédia todo dia  
é pior que a morte por envenenamento” (Buarque & Pontes, 1975, p. 167).

<sup>15</sup> This ending was inspired by a Brazilian television adaption of *Medea* that, as they claimed, “showed that the elements of the tragedy we wanted to disclose already lied in Euripides’s dense plot” (“nos forneceu a indicação de que na densa trama de Eurípides estavam contidos os elementos da tragédia que queríamos revelar”, Buarque & Pontes, 1975, p. xx)

<sup>16</sup> In an interview about a more recent production of *Gota d’Água* (2005 to 2013), director Heron Coelho argues that this kind of passionate suicide is a Brazilian cultural reference: “Chico and Paulo Pontes are dealing with a Brazilian context and Brazilian cultural references. There is a samba of the 1940s which deals with a very similar situation. It talks about a Joana who commits suicide on account of someone called João. It is called *Notícia de Jornal* (“News Piece”). Chico recorded this song later” (in Gemelli, 2015, p. 716).

These three elements – social climbing, the tension between power and speaking, and marginality – reveal that the authors of *Gota d'Água* engaged with *Medea* in a way that enhances the socio-political tensions present in the Greek text. Although they may not be central aspects in Euripides' play, they serve as springboards for the authors to comment more effectively on the constraints facing Brazilian lower classes at that time and, more broadly, on a scheme of social inequality that can be traced to Brazil's colonial days.

*Faculty of Classics*

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