HE THAT WAITS FOR A DEAD MAN’S SHOES:

From history to literature and cinema

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Abstract: This essay examines the proverb *He that waits for a dead man’s shoes may long go barefoot*, starting with the Machado de Assis short story *O enfermeiro*. It considers other occurrences of both the proverb and the theme in different authors, periods and artistic forms, namely in a short story by Rubem Fonseca and in a film by João César Monteiro.

Keywords: Proverb; Machado de Assis; Rubem Fonseca; João César Monteiro; shoes.

A few years ago, during a widely commented court case, a High Court judge used the following proverb to support his reasoning: *Quem cabritos vende e cabras não tem, de algum lado lhe vem.*¹ The event merited general attention for certainly more than one reason: first of all, because it is uncommon – at least today – to use proverbs as a way of reinforcing an argument; secondly, because the proverb was not one of the most known and might not have been immediately understood; lastly – and this was the major cause for the ensuing discussion – because there could be an overlap between (so-called) common sense and legal science.

This simple example shows how important it is to think about the essential part of our culture which proverbs comprise. And although it seems that there is no immediate risk of texts like this one being erased from our memory, the truth is that many Portuguese have never heard it. A significant number of our fellow citizens no

¹ He who sells kids and doesn’t have goats, gets them from somewhere. [All translations are mine]. On the subject, see LOPES, 2017.
longer have a repertoire which allows them to quickly decode the evocative image on which the proverb relies; and, worse than that, many Portuguese (especially younger ones) not only do not understand what it tells us, but also do not want to know, contemptuous of what seems to be too distant in time. And yet, such a text has a lot to tell us: by calling our attention to small-scale agricultural trade, it invites us to see beyond the immediate, imposing on us a logic which, despite its irrefutability, leads in the end to a sarcastic smile of a mere insinuation that does not want to seriously question the state of affairs. Therefore the proverb is, at the same time, an exercise of intelligence and of cleverness, which teaches us how to see and how to live. Here, as in most proverbs, the past – which is an important part of what we are as a people – is only scenery, it mattering little that kids and goats have disappeared from our daily lives (at least literally).

The above can serve as an introduction to the proverb on which I will focus my attention: *Quem espera por sapatos de defunto morre descalço* [He that waits for a dead man’s shoes may long go barefoot].\(^2\) I have noticed in the last few years that most of my students do not know it or even understand the abbreviated form *sapatos de defunto* [dead man’s shoes]. The phenomenon is not new and seems easy to confirm: why has the remake of the television show *Wheel of Fortune* been unsuccessful, not having been able to repeat in 2008 the success it had achieved in 1990-1994? Probably for a broad set of reasons, generically related to changes occurring in the television scene. But it is likely that one of these factors might have been a decrease in the knowledge of and interest in proverbs, which used to be one of the main elements of the challenges presented to the participants in the show. And what is the cause of this decline? In the absence of precise sociological studies, it is not possible to give a clear answer, but it is plausible that part of the explanation resides, on the one hand, in the stifling of (and even in a certain contempt for) popular or rural culture and, on the other, in the growing hegemony of urban mass culture and the difficulty of establishing contact and dialogue between the older and the younger generations.

Despite having become less frequent, the phrase *sapatos de defunto* is still in use and not only at the oral level: José Viale Moutinho, for instance, used it in 2000 as a title for a collection of articles (MOUTINHO, 2000). In the past, its use seems to have been more frequent and with a sense that is closer to the established meaning, which

\(^2\) Literally, “He that waits for a dead man’s shoes dies barefoot”.
points to a delayed or uncertain promise or hope. Take the example of Francisco Leite Bastos (1841-1886), prolific journalist, fiction writer and playwright, who in 1882 published the novel Sapatos de defunto, a comedy of errors in which the grocer António Dourado and his wife seek to fall into the good graces of their neighbour D. Mónica, in order to become her heirs. It happens, however, that the deceased, who in life was much given to litigation, leaves only debts. Something similar happens in the homonymous farce by the Brazilian author Coelho Neto (1864-1934), a very popular writer in his time but today almost completely fallen into oblivion. This is a bourgeois comedy in which, as in most of Coelho Neto’s plays, money and women as objects of exchange are the main ingredients: Martim and Eugénia covet without success the inheritance of Militão, who is affected by a bizarre disease characterized by the sensation of hearing a dog barking inside his own head, which is a systematic ingredient for comicity.

As I have said, however, the phrase sapatos de defunto is part of the proverb Quem espera por sapatos de defunto morre descalço, the didactic sense of which is quite evident: he is a fool who places too much hope in an uncertain event and makes his life depend on it. But there is yet another morality: he will be punished who lets himself be dominated by personal interests to the point of hoping for someone’s death. Referring, as we shall see, to a medieval practice, the proverb is certainly ancient, although the date of its first occurrence in Portuguese remains unknown. Its English equivalent appeared for the first time in printed form in 1546, in the compilation of proverbs by the poet and playwright John Heywood (1497-1580): Who waite for dead men shoen shall goe long barefoote (Part i., Chap. xi).

The explanation for this saying, at least as regards the Portuguese version, resides in the figure of the andador [walker] of medieval brotherhoods, “que, tangendo o anafil, calcorreava os caminhos para chamar os irmãos a cabido, às vigílias e à sepultura dos mortos.” (BEIRANTE, 1990: 15) This andador was the only person who “recebia uma soldada da confraria e, sempre que morria algum irmão, tinha o direito a receber os sapatos do defunto.” (Ibid.: 16) In view of this, it becomes clear that access

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4 See COSTA, 1975.
5 who, playing a Moorish trumpet, travelled the paths to call the brethren to chapter, to vigils, and to the burial of the deceased.
6 received a stipend from the brotherhood and, whenever a brother died, was entitled to receive the shoes of the deceased.
to the dead man’s shoes depends on (or is associated with) the announcement of his death – an announcement which, being made on foot, brings with it the consumption (or wearing-out) of the legacy, thus revealing the illusory character of the reward.

Such an origin may seem strange today, given the society of abundance in which we live, at least in the Western part of the world. But if footwear is no longer a concern for the majority of the population, the image of a great many people having to face barefooted daily life and the rigors of winter and snow still persists in the memory of the elderly.7 However, persecution by the police of pedestrians walking without footwear in Portuguese cities has been erased from collective memory, while the same happened to the signs in children’s folklore which indicated wearing shoes until the very end: “Quem rompe no bico/ Tem amor bonito,/ No calcanhar,/ Tem amor leal,/ No meio,/ Tem amor feio.”8 Of those times of scarcity, however, there have remained some marks in language, in phrases such as pé descalço9 [barefoot] or pé rapado [literally, scraped foot], which identified, with undisguised class superiority, individuals from the most impoverished social groups.

Let us now look at three cases – two literary and one cinematographic – in which the proverb or the theme of the shoes is present and constitutes an important element.

The first concerns a short story by Machado de Assis, O enfermeiro [The nurse], included in the book Várias histórias [Assorted Stories], published in 189610, in which a first-person narrator recounts for the second time a dramatic episode of his life which had occurred some years earlier: “Parece-lhe então que o que se deu comigo em 1860, pode entrar numa página de livro?”11 (ASSIS, 1998: 208) As can be seen from this quotation, the narrator speaks explicitly to a narratee, of whom we know only that he had had a previous conversation with the narrator and that he now acts as a publisher,

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7 See, for example, a recent book by Miguel Sousa Tavares (2018), namely a passage in which the author recalls the time spent in his childhood, in the late 1950s, in a village near Amarante.
8 He who wears out [his shoe] at the beak/ Has a pretty love,/ At the heel,/ Has a loyal love,/ In the middle,/ Has an ugly love.
This was a sort of guessing game, through which children sought answers to their doubts about love. The text was collected by the ethnographer from Elvas, António Tomás Pires, and published by Francisco Adolfo Coelho (1885: 586).
9 The phrase appears already in Feira dos anexins, by D. Francisco Manuel de Melo (1608-1666): “– Olhem para elle! Ha dous dias de pé descalço! Ninguem, antes destes dialogos fazia caso delle: já presume de cavalleiro de sapato novo, e que calça bem por seu dinheiro.” [– Look at him! Two days ago he was barefoot! Before these dialogues, no one paid attention to him: now he pretends to be a nobleman, with new shoes, and good ones, in view of his money.] (1875: 111).
10 The story, however, had already been published twelve years earlier, in July 1884, in the Gazeta de Notícias, under the title “Cousas Intimas” [Intimate Things].
11 Do you think, then, that what happened to me in 1860 can appear in the page of a book?
under one condition: “Vá que seja, com a condição única de que não há de divulgar nada antes da minha morte.”12 (ibid.) At first glance, this demand is rather strange, in so far as it suggests a fear that is not in line with a certain haughtiness and cynicism that the character displays in the present tense of the narration. A possible explanation could lie in death as a requirement for eternity – only after death can the character aspire to perpetuate himself, which he will achieve through the written word: in paper, on the pages of the book containing the account of the episode that changed his life; in stone, in the shape of an epitaph on the marble tomb, which the protagonist suggests to the narratee as a form of payment.

This proposal of the tomb as a means of payment – which, incidentally, is marked by the adverb também [also] – underlines one of the central ideas of this short story: the reversibility of positions and the circularity of destiny. In fact, he who used to be a nurse is now an invalid; he who in the past has inherited and become rich now has an inheritance to hand down, which in its turn may enrich – and ruin? – the legatee. At the beginning of the story, the narrator refers to this legacy by using an expression whose scope is not immediately comprehensible: sapatos de defunto (ibid.). Promising this reward to anyone who published his documento humano [human document], the narrator of Machado’s short story suggests to the publisher a role somewhat different from that of the traditional andador: rather than announcing death, he is to give voice to a dead person who will thus have triumphed over death, as he had triumphed in his life, by twisting moral rules in his favour and allowing “o prazer íntimo, calado, insidioso cresc[r] dentro de mim, espécie de tênia moral, que por mais que a arrancasse aos pedaços, recompunha-se logo e ia ficando.”13 (ASSIS, 2008: 216) What do these dead man’s shoes mean? A Faustian purchase of his sole? Or a kind of bell that lets one kill the mandarin, as in the novel by Eça de Queirós? The answer, as always with great authors, depends on the reader.

The second case to be analyzed here is also Brazilian, but contemporary: it is the short story Sapatos [Shoes], by Rubem Fonseca, which is part of the volume Axilas e outras histórias indecorosas [Armpits and other indecorous stories] (2011). Here the theme of shoes is more literal, however apparent the invitation to a wider symbolic reading might be. In this story a first-person narrator explains, in a tone almost brutal

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12 All right then, with the sole condition that you will not make anything public before my death.
13 the intimate, quiet, insidious pleasure [to grow] inside me, a kind of moral tapeworm which, however much I might tear it to pieces, would soon recover and persist.
due to its restraint, the importance of shoes in order to obtain employment. The tone is an oral one, marked by short sentences, parataxis, slang, and even swearing. The story is valuable as a parable of inequality in Brazilian society, and because of the symbolism of the shoes, but mainly due to the silence which surrounds it and which is one of the marks of Fonseca’s style.

The narrator lives with his mother (which allows us to assume he is still relatively young), who is a domestic servant. Her brother had been “assassinado pela polícia quando fugia depois de assaltar um turista na praia” (FONSECA, 2012: 10) and he is unemployed, something which he ascribes to two particularities (or faults) of his appearance: his teeth and his shoes. The first is more easily understood, and it would not require the explanation provided by the character: “sei que tenho problemas, como esse dente faltando na frente, um buraco feio que eu sei que causa uma impressão ruim.” (2012: 9) It is, in fact, a matter of class: “As pessoas que conheço perderam dentes lá de trás da boca, eu fui perder logo na frente.” (ibid.) The issue is more serious than it may seem at first glance, as one can see from a news item published on 19 September 2007 in the newspaper O Globo, under the title “Guarda Municipal: candidato deve ter no mínimo 20 dentes”. The first paragraph reads:

Batizado pela irreverência do rock dos anos 80 de país dos banguelas, o Brasil pode ter parte dessa realidade mudada, ao menos na Guarda Municipal do Rio, onde um concurso para 1,500 vagas prevê, no quesito que trata do exame odontológico dos candidatos, que não serão aceitos aqueles que tiverem menos de 20 dentes, sendo dez na arcada superior e dez na inferior. (Supplement «Rio», p. 18)

The second particularity of the narrator’s appearance, which constitutes the central motif of the short story, is identified by his mother: “Minha mãe acha que eu não arranjo emprego porque não tenho sapatos. Diz que as sandálias que uso são muito feias

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14 murdered by the police while he fled, after having assaulted a tourist on the beach.
15 I know I have problems, like that missing tooth in front, an ugly hole that I know makes a bad impression.
16 The people I know lost teeth at the back of the mouth, I lost them right up front.
17 Municipal Guard: candidate must have at least 20 teeth.
18 Baptized as the country of the toothless people by the irreverence of the rock of the 80s, Brazil may have part of this reality changed, at least as far as concerns the Municipal Guard of Rio, where a competition for 1,500 places states, as regards the dental examination of the candidates, that those who have less than 20 teeth, namely ten in the upper arch and ten in the lower one, will not be accepted.
It is the mother who solves the problem, bringing him a pair of shoes from her employer’s house. Although we are far from the typical atmosphere of a fairy tale and these are not the cat’s boots from the well-known tale by Charles Perrault, the truth is that the shoes seem to have something special, at least in the eyes of the narrator, who considers them “Uma coisa linda. Olhando para o bico deles, que brilhava que nem um espelho, quase dava para ver a minha cara.” In addition, they produce an almost magical effect: “As pessoas já me atendiam melhor, pediam para eu voltar dentro de alguns dias, isso já era coisa do sapato novo.”

It happens, however, that these shoes were not shaped for the foot of the character: “o sapato tinha um número pequeno, o patrão de minha mãe tinha pé pequeno, como todo sujeito rico.” The solution lies in following the advice of his late brother: “Eu ia ter que amansá-los” (2012: 9). The term amansá-los [tame them] expresses the violence of the appropriation process, whose marks will be felt only by the subject: “quando fui deitar os meus pés doíam como se um ônibus tivesse passado por cima deles. (...) Meus pés já estavam cheios de bolhas. (...) Continuei andando e depois de algum tempo as bolhas dos pés viraram calos, e andar com os sapatos foi deixando de doer.”

It is precisely when the process of taming the shoes comes to an end that the protagonist finds himself confronted with a kind of Cinderella test, but inverted: a policeman, “um cara ainda mais escuro do que eu” (2012: 11), knocks on his door, seizes his shoes saying that they had been stolen by his mother, and take him to the police station. The recognition is somewhat different from that which takes place in Perrault’s tale – more than confirming possession, the mother’s employer puts on his

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19 My mother thinks I cannot find a job because I do not have shoes. She says the sandals I wear are very ugly and scare people.
20 A beautiful thing. Looking at their beak, which shone like a mirror, I could almost see my face.
21 I was already being better received, people asked me to come back in a few days, that was already an effect of the new shoes.
22 Best of all, I got a job as a doorman in a building in the south zone.
23 The size of the shoes was too small, my mother’s employer had small feet, like every rich guy.
24 I had to tame them.
25 When I went to bed my feet ached as if a bus had passed over them. (...) My feet were already full of blisters. (...) I kept walking and after some time the blisters of the feet turned to calluses, and walking with the shoes gradually ceased to hurt.
26 a guy even blacker than me.
shoes to stamp on the narrator: “Deixa eu experimentar. Colocou os sapatos e deu uma volta pela sala./ Engraçado, disse o puto, eles não apertam mais os meus pés. São ingleses, sabia?” 27 (2012: 12) Once the ritual of power has been enacted, the shoes are given away for a second time, now accompanied with a condescending recommendation: “Pode levar, ele disse, são seus. Mas continua cuidando bem deles.” 28 (2012: 13)

What points of contact are there between the dead man’s shoes of Machado’s short story and these live shoes that need to be tamed? In both cases there is a somehow forced transmission of property: in the first, because of the imminence of death; in Rubem Fonseca’s short story, as a form of exercising power. The effect, however, is perhaps distinct: in Machado de Assis, the shoes feed a narrative which serves to unmask; in the second text, they give rise to a change of status (from unemployed to doorman in a condominium in the south zone), which is no more than a different way of signifying social oppression, masked within a silence which cannot but be provisional. In both cases the shoes are a sign of death – individual (of Colonel Felisberto) and collective (of the class represented by the son of Mrs. Eremilda) – and they demand the punishment that the cobrador [collector], title of an emblematic short story by Fonseca, will not fail to exact.

To conclude, let us examine a case taken from the cinema: the medium-length film Quem espera por sapatos de defunto morre descalço, by João César Monteiro. This film, with the subtitle Um provérbio cinematográfico [A cinematographic proverb], had a troubled history which, to a large extent, explains the fact of its being little known. Plagued by financial difficulties, it was completed in 1971, but was never commercially distributed, since the director considered that the cuts imposed by the censorship had disfigured the work. Except for the foreign film festivals in which it was presented, the film would debut in Portugal only in 1979 on RTP, the main public television channel.

The basic idea probably came from the French cinema, as João Bénard da Costa explains:

A geração de César, nas peugadas da Nouvelle Vague, pensou muito em filmes de sketches, género como se sabe largamente cultivado pela vaga francesa. A certa altura surgiu a ideia de um filme a várias vozes sobre provérbios. Quase

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27 Let me try them. He put on his shoes and walked around the room./ Funny, said the son of a bitch, they are no longer tight on my feet. They’re English, did you know that?
28 Take them, he said, they’re yours. But keep on taking good care of them.
tudo ficou no tinteiro. Escaparam Quem espera por sapatos de defunto, o segundo filme de César, e Perdido por cem... que António-Pedro Vasconcelos filmou como longa-metragem em 1972. 29 (COSTA, 2010: 27)

In fact, there is at least one representative of this current of French cinema who worked with proverbs in some of his films, but in the 1980s, after João César Monteiro’s experiment: Éric Rohmer, who, between 1972 and 1987, directed a series of six films to which he gave the generic title of Comédies et Proverbes. The first, from 1981, was La Femme de l’Aviateur, which bore the subtitle On ne saurait penser à rien; it was followed by Le Beau Mariage (with the subtitle Quel esprit ne bat la campagne, qui ne fait château en Espagne), in 1982; Pauline à la Plage (Qui trop parloit, il se mesfait), in the following year; Les Nuits de la Pleine Lune (Qui a deux femmes perd son âme, qui a deux maisons perd la raison), in 1984; Le Rayon Vert (Ah! Que le temps vienne où les cœurs s’éprennent), two years later; and finally, in 1987, L’Ami de mon Ami (Les amis de mes amis sont mes amis).

We should note, however, that of the six phrases used as a subtitle, only the last one corresponds to the most common definition of proverb. The others are either a creation of the director himself (as is the case of the fourth film) or quotes from other authors: the first is a variation of On ne saurait penser à tout, title of an 1849 play by Musset; the second is taken from a La Fontaine fable, La laitière et le pot au lait; the third comes from a chivalric romance by Chrétien de Troyes; and the fifth is the conclusion of a well-known poem by Rimbaud, “Chanson de la plus haute Tour”.

This experiment has, as far as I know, a distant antecedent in the theatre: the fact is that proverbe, besides describing a short aphoristic statement, can also signify a brief comedy illustrative of a proverb. This theatrical genre was practiced in France in the 18th and 19th centuries, and has in Alfred de Musset its best known representative.

Whether or not influenced by this ancient French theatrical genre, César Monteiro used the proverb we have been referring to as freely as Rohmer would in the following decade. The film, which Bénard da Costa considered “como a introdução a tempo inteiro ao universo de César ou à visão de César”30 (COSTA, 2010: 28), is the illustration of an impasse in the life of the protagonist, Lívio (played by Luís Miguel

29 César’s generation, following the Nouvelle Vague, thought much about sketch films, a genre widely cultivated, as is well known, by the French [New] Wave. At one point came the idea of a film by several hands about proverbs. Almost everything remained in the inkwell. The exceptions were Quem espera por sapatos de defunto, César’s second film, and Perdido por cem... which António-Pedro Vasconcelos directed as a feature film in 1972.
30 as a broad introduction to César’s universe or to César’s vision.
Cintra, making his debut) and in his relationship with Mónica (played by Paula Ferreira, now better known as Paula Bobone). This impasse, in a way overcome by Mónica in the mirror, is also the impasse of the filmmaker, the cinema and the country.

In spite of being a free adaptation, the film directly uses the motif of dead man’s shoes: those of Almirante [Admiral] Saladas, which the young protagonist and a friend collect as a kind of alms when they present, in a burlesque way, their respects to the family. As is easy to perceive, this is a slightly veiled allusion to the head of state at the time, Admiral Américo Tomás, whose photo, furthermore, appears on the cover of the newspaper which suggested to the young people the stratagem that would enable them to obtain some money. But the Admiral’s shoes are too big, leading the protagonist to exclaim: “O morto tinha os pés maiores que uma língua de sapo!”31 Thus rejected, those belongings of the deceased would be pawned, yielding some money to the youngsters.

A political interpretation is unavoidable, especially since at one point Salazar’s unmistakable voice is heard in a speech in which he asserted that Africa was burning and asked himself why that was happening32. But equally important is a more psychological kind of interpretation, pointing to the obligation of each one making his own way.

After this brief journey, I believe that it is possible to conclude with a word of confidence: even if proverbs seem to be losing strength, they are part of our heritage and remain inscribed in our art, being used in many ways and allowing various readings, as a proof of versatility and long-term vitality.

References


31 The dead man feet were larger than a frog’s tongue!
32 This was probably the speech he gave on May 23, 1959, at the headquarters of the União Nacional [National Union], on the “Posição Portuguesa em face da Europa, da América e da África” [Portuguese Position towards Europe, America and Africa].


HEYWOOD, John, 1546. A dialogue conteining the nomber in effect of all the prouerbes in the englishe tongue compacte in a matter concernyng two maner of mariages, made and set foorth by Iohyn Heywood. London: Thomas Berthelet.


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