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Alcohol as the Comedic Catalyst in Jorge Amado's *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*

A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua is without any doubt one of Jorge Amado's most humorous works. This is certainly saying something given the series of novels that the Brazilian writer has produced, particularly since 1958, in which humor plays a significant role.[1] *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*, first published in 1959, is a comic tour de force with respect to both the events described and the language employed to describe them.[2] One of the chief elements in the presentation of humor in this novella is alcohol, usually in the form of *cachaça*. In fact, alcohol is in many ways the catalyst for the work's humor, as it both allows for and even precipitates the occurrence of several humorous events that would otherwise seem implausible, if not impossible, were alcohol not present in the story from beginning to end.

A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua focuses, just as the title would seem to indicate, on the two deaths and, to a considerable extent, the two lives of Quincas Berro Dágua, known formerly to his family as Joaquim Soares da Cunha. After reading of the discovery of the protagonist's body in his room in a lower-class section of Bahia, the reader learns, in part through flashbacks played out in the mind of the deceased's daughter, that years before Quincas had abandoned both his job as a petty bureaucrat and his middle-class family to become the "[r]ei dos vagabundos da Bahia" (46), "o senador das gafieiras" (46), or

as one of Quincas's friends calls him on learning of his death, "o pai da gente" (64). Though Quincas's embarrassed family arranges for a funeral and initiates a wake, it is his lower-class comrades, four of the most colorful characters to be found anywhere in Amado's works, who actually spend the night with the corpse. Once the family leaves and Quincas is alone at last with his cohorts, he appears to come to life, cursing his family, guzzling cachaça in a style all his own, and heading with his companions out into the streets of Bahia for a night of debauchery that ends with the protagonist perishing for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, this time not passing on unceremoniously in the solitude of his room, but rather diving almost heroically into the sea from Mestre Manuel's boat.

The role which alcohol plays in the presentation of humor in *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua* is evident even before the story begins, in the title itself, within the protagonist's name, Quincas Berro Dágua. Though the full story behind Quincas's odd name is not explained to the reader until just over half-way into the story, the reader cannot help but notice the unusual nature of the protagonist's name. Describing how Quincas's name was instantly transformed from Joaquim (or Quincas, as his family also called him) Soares da Cunha to Quincas Berro Dágua, the narrator states:

> Entrara ele na venda de Lopez, simpático espanhol, na parte externa do Mercado. Freguês habitual, conquistara o direito de servir-se sem auxílio do empregado. Sobre o balcão viu uma garrafa, transbordando de límpida cachaça, transparente, perfeita. Encheu um copo, cuspiu para limpar a boca, virou-o de uma vez. E um berro inumano cortou a placidez da manhã no Mercado, abalando o próprio Elevador Lacerda em seus

> profundos alicerces. O grito de um animal ferido de morte, de um homem traído e desgraçado:
>
> —Águuuuua! (58-59)

A few lines later, the narrator adds that "[o] 'berro dágua' de Quincas logo se espalhou como anedota" (59). Thus, Joaquim (or Quincas) Soares da Cunha, in a single moment, became known as Quincas Berro Dágua, a name well earned and one which on its own bears considerable comic weight.

Moving beyond the title and the protagonist's name, it is worth noting that alcohol is not something artificially injected into the story by the author purely for the purpose of initiating humorous scenes. Alcohol, the reader quickly discovers, is indeed a completely natural part of Quincas's world, to the point that it is readily available to the author as a catalyst for the humor in the work. Cachaça, for example, and the various characters who populate the work are virtually inseparable. This beverage accompanies the telling of stories, is invited to and even appears to be the guest of honor at several parties, and a bottle of it is often found tucked beneath a jacket where some might keep a wallet or a pocket watch. Once the story begins, then, and the characters begin to show themselves, Amado has no trouble locating the substance he will use to grease the wheels of his comic machine.

The most humorous section of *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*, and the section in which alcohol is of the greatest influence, is that which deals with Quincas's "regeneration" in the company of his friends. Alcohol, again in the form of *cachaça*, is the agent of the protagonist's comical resurrection. Once Quincas's family leaves the wake, the protagonist's corpse is left alone with his four closest friends, Curió, Cabo Martim, Negro Pastinha and Pé-de-Vento. After criticiz-

ing the family's penny-pinching with respect to the wake and a valiant yet comically unsuccessful attempt at reciting the Lord's Prayer in unison, the four friends turn their attention to the one among them who will inherit the girlfriend Quincas has left behind. Anxious to gain his dead comrade's approval in this area, Cabo Martim decides it would be a good idea to offer Quincas a drink of the *cachaça* being passed around among the four mourners: "Vamos dar um gole a ele também... —propôs o Cabo, desejoso das boas graças do morto" (85). Then and there Quincas begins to drink with his friends and his regeneration officially begins. The reader is told that the four friends "[a]briram-lhe a boca, derramaram a cachaça" (85). But the narrator points out that Quincas has his own way of drinking, stating that "[e]spalhou-se um pouco pela gola do paletó e o peito da camisa" (85). Noticing their friend's difficulty in drinking lying down, Curió and the others make the necessary adjustments: "Sentaram Quincas no caixão, a cabeça movia-se para um e outro lado. Com o gole de cachaça ampliara-se seu sorriso" (85). Once upright in the casket and his thirst quenched, Quincas, now revived from the dead through the miracle-producing beverage, begins to curse the family he abandoned years before. At one point, his friends hear him openly state: "Os homens, uns bestalhões. As mulheres, umas jararacas" (87). Elsewhere, he can be heard calling one female member of his family "[u]m saco de peidos" (87). All of this occurs in the presence of his four closest friends, and this "regeneration" both pleases them and surprises the reader. What follows, as stated earlier, is a night on the town with his cronies, surrounded by his girlfriend and others who know him well, with all of it leading to his demise on board Mestre Manuel's boat.

A legitimate question here is how is it that Quincas's friends, both

those at the wake and those he meets in his travels that fateful night, accept the apparent fact that Quincas, once thought dead, lives again? There is a relatively simple two-part answer to this question, and both parts are related to alcohol: 1) Quincas's friends are already quite drunk when they come in contact with him that night, and their judgment, therefore, is not as good as it could be; and 2) there appears to be little difference between a drunk Quincas and a dead Quincas.3 Evidence supporting both parts of this claim, particularly the first, is quite easy to find in the text.

That Curió, Negro Pastinha, Cabo Martim and Pé-de-Vento have been drinking and are already considerably inebriated before they even arrive at the wake, there can be no doubt, even when the narrator makes an intentionally weak attempt to hide the fact, as he does at the beginning of Chapter VIII, when he states:

> Deve-se dizer, a bem da verdade, que não estavam eles ainda bêbedos. Haviam tomado seus tragos, sem dúvida, na comoção da notícia, mas o vermelho dos olhos era devido às lágrimas derramadas, à dor sem medidas, e o mesmo pode-se afirmar da voz embargada e do passo vacilante. Como conservar-se completamente lúcido quando morre um amigo de tantos anos, o melhor dos companheiros, o mais completo vagabundo da Bahia? Quanto à garrafa que o Cabo Martim teria escondida sob a camisa, nada ficou jamais provado. (61)

The reader soon discovers that the narrator's obviously false claim that "não estavam eles ainda bêbedos" is just that. In an apparently intentional contradiction, three pages after informing the reader that

Quincas's closest friends had only "tomado seus tragos," the narrator describes in considerable detail just how each friend took the news of Quincas's death, and in all cases "*cachaça*" is synonymous with "consolation." For example, Curió, the reader is told, "tomou da nova garrafa, buscou nela a consolação" (65), while the reaction of Negro Pastinha is as follows:

> Lá estava ele, sentado na calçada do pequeno mercado, debulhado em lágrimas, segurando uma garrafa quase vazia. Ao seu lado, solidários na dor e na cachaça, vagabundos diversos faziam coro às suas lamentações e suspiros. Já tivera conhecimento da notícia, compreendeu Curió ao ver a cena. Negro Pastinha virava um trago, enxugava uma lágrima, urrava em desespero:
> —Morreu o pai da gente... (64)

After this, the reader learns that "[c]irculava a garrafa consoladora" (64). As evidenced by the behavior of the "vagabundos diversos" present in the scene with Negro Pastinha, the four friends who would later attend the wake were not the only ones drowning their grief in a considerable amount of *cachaça*. For example, Quitéria, Quincas's girlfriend, "[s]ó encontrou consolo na bebida, exaltando, entre goles e soluços, a memória daquele inesquecível amante, o mais terno e louco, o mais alegre e sábio" (59-60). In fact, the entire city, or at least Quincas's section of it, had been drinking away its sorrow at the loss of a dear friend for several hours: "Naquele dia começou-se a beber na cidade da Bahia muito antes da hora habitual. Não era para menos, não é todos os dias que morre um Quincas Berro Dágua" (70).

The text, then, offers ample evidence to support the claim that both Quincas's cronies and the people with whom he comes in contact that night are in all likelihood quite drunk indeed before encountering him, and as a result their judgment concerning the state of their friend is anything but clear; that is to say, they are in no condition to discern whether Quincas is dead or drunk.

As stated above, in addition to the fact that Quincas's friends are already drunk when they see him that night is the fact that Quincas the drunk and Quincas the corpse are remarkably similar in both appearance and behavior. In fact, quite direct and concise testimony to this fact can be found when the narrator states that a bar owner who knows Quincas finds himself on that night "estupefato ao ver Quincas Berro Dágua no melhor de sua forma" (98). In other words, Quincas not only looks alive, he even looks better than he did when he was alive, due in large part, presumably, to the skill of the undertaker. Also, most of Quincas's activities once leaving the coffin are of the kind that at least from a distance could be perceived as being those of a drunk. The description of these activities lies at the heart of both Amado's theme of the ambiguity of reality and his brilliant use of language.[4] Due almost entirely to Amado's carefully worded descriptions, Quincas's post-mortem travels are both ambiguous and comical. In each of the following passages, Quincas, at least viewed from the reader's perspective, can be taken to be either drunk or dead, depending on which one of the two the reader would care to believe.[5] Amado's descriptions intentionally provide absolutely no help whatsoever in making such a decision, since that ambiguity is the cornerstone of the author's theme.[6]

Just moments after going into the streets, Quincas, accompanied very closely, arm-in-arm, in fact, by his friends, "tentava passar rasteiras

no Cabo e no Negro, estendia a língua para os transeuntes, enfiou a cabeça por uma porta para espiar, malicioso, um casal de namorados, pretendia, a cada passo, estirar-se na rua" (93). Soon after, when someone suggests that it is, ironically, the protagonist's birthday, Quincas's reaction is again intentionally ambiguous, as it is suitable for either drunk or corpse. The narrator states that "[n]ão negou Quincas fosse seu aniversário" (94). A bit later the narrator reveals that so happy are the people of the neighborhood to see Quincas alive and well that they cheer him as he moves down the street with his friends, and the protagonist's reaction, again, is less than definitive: "Por onde passavam, ouviam-se gritos chamando Quincas, vivando-lhe o nome. Ele agradecia com a cabeça, como um rei de volta a seu reino" (96).

Probably the most comical of Quincas's activities after leaving the coffin concerns the fight he gets into (and helps start, in fact) in a neighborhood bar. Here the dead or drunk Quincas (reader's choice) is seated, as one might expect of either Quincas, with his legs fully extended in front of him. A passer-by takes exception to Quincas's position and orders him to move his legs. Quincas "fez que não ouviu" (98). When the offended party curses Quincas and then physically attacks him, the protagonist, much to both the reader's surprise and delight, is not passive. In fact, the narrator states that "[d]eu-lhe Quincas uma cabeçada, a inana começou" (98). A full-scale brawl ensues, with Quincas in the thick of it. When the fight is finally over, Quincas "encontrava-se estendido no chão, levara uns socos violentos, batera com a cabeça numa laje do passeio" (99). However, he is quickly nursed back to health, according to the narrator, with the aid of *cachaça*. As the narrator puts it: "Quincas reanimou-se mesmo foi com um bom trago. Continuava a beber daquela maneira esquisita: cuspindo parte

da cachaça, num esperdício" (99).

Up to this point alcohol has been seen as a clearly evident element in the presentation of humor in *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*, as it has been responsible for the protagonist's comical surname, his miraculous regeneration, his post-mortem activities and the humorous participation of his friends in these activities. However, alcohol also serves as a more indirect link to humor in this short work. A substantial part of the humor in *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*, in addition to its thematic intent, is based upon the fact that the accuracy of the events described is in question from start to finish. And, interestingly, it is not simply the reader who has
doubts, but the narrator as well. The narrator claims that he is merely passing along what he has heard from witnesses and that even now there are considerable gaps and inconsistencies in the story. On the first page he states:

> Até hoje permanece certa confusão em torno da morte de Quincas Berro Dágua. Dúvidas por explicar, detalhes absurdos, contradições no depoimento das testemunhas, lacunas diversas. Não há clareza sobre hora, local e frase derradeira. (15)

Just two pages later, he admits that "[n]ão sei se esse mistério da morte (ou das sucessivas mortes) de Quincas Berro Dágua pode ser completamente decifrado" (17). The reason for almost all of the confusion surrounding Quincas's multiple deaths, a confusion that lies at the heart of the work's humor, is that the majority of what the narrator ironically calls his "testemunhas idôneas" (15) were totally drunk during the entire episode. In this way, Amado works alcohol, or a least

its collective effect on a group of characters, into the presentation of the novella's theme as well as its humor.

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider what Amado's work would be like without the presence of alcohol. To a large extent, the lack of alcohol and the resulting lack of much of the humor, would make the story quite a morbid one, even grisly, as a man dies and then four of his friends proceed to prop him up in his coffin and take him out for a final tour of the neighborhood, for it must be remembered that without alcohol, everyone with whom Quincas comes in contact, including his four closest friends, would know that he is actually a corpse. But the story would not even get that far without alcohol, for if Quincas's friends were indeed sober, they would never initiate his regeneration at the wake in the first place. The story would end almost before it could begin. In fact, it might even be called A *morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*, which would make not only for a much shorter work, but one of very little interest, and one devoid of all humor whatsoever.

Alcohol, then, is indeed the fuel that feeds the comic fires of Amado's *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*. Its influence can be seen in the novella's title, in the name of its protagonist, and in its story as it both allows for and even precipitates almost all of the work's comical scenes. In fact, the role of alcohol in the presentation of humor in *A morte e morte de Quincas Berro Dágua* is such that the story could not even exist, let alone be humorous, were alcohol not present from beginning to end.

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Notes

[1] For a discussion of the post-1958 Jorge Amado, as well as how *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua* fits into Amado's works of this new phase in his writing, see Elizabeth Schlomann Lowe's "The 'New' Jorge Amado" (*Luso-Brazilian Review* 6.2 [1969]: 73-82).

[2] Initially published in the magazine *Senhor*, *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua* was subsequently and more widely published, along with another novella, *A completa verdade sobre as discutidas aventuras do Comandante Vasco Moscoso de Aragão, capitão de longo curso*, in *Os velhos marinheiros: Duas histórias do cais da Bahia* (São Paulo: Martins, 1961). The novella also has appeared separately in various editions since its publication in *Os velhos marinheiros*. The edition used for the present study (*A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1985) represents the fifty-sixth edition published by Editora Record.

[3] Bobby J. Chamberlain, in his *Jorge Amado* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), concurs with the first part of this two-part answer in particular, stating that "[t]he several utterances ascribed to Berro D'água toward the end of the wake, though if true plainly indicate that he is still alive, may also be interpreted as hallucinations induced by the convenient drunkenness of the four remaining mourners" (51).

[4] See Earl E. Fitz's "Structural Ambiguity in Jorge Amado's *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*" (*Hispania* 67 [1984]: 221-228) for a detailed study of Amado's use of language and his strategic "balancing of the plausible with the implausible" (221) in order to create a wholly ambiguous text, and Chapter Four of Chamberlain's Jorge Amado for a discussion of the Brazilian author's use of ambiguous language and its relationship to the writer's theme of the "relativity of truth" (50). Other studies which address, among other topics, the themes and meanings of this novella include Lowe's above-mentioned article, Chamberlain's "Double Perspective in Two Works of Jorge Amado" (*Estudos Ibero-Americanos* 4.1 [1978]: 81-88) and Malcolm Silverman's "Duality in Jorge Amado's 'The Two Deaths of Quincas Wateryell'" (*Studies in Short Fiction* 15 [1978]: 196-199).

[5] And as Chamberlain has pointed out, "it is never completely clear which of these interpretations the reader is supposed to accept" (*Jorge Amado* 51).

[6] Not only do Amado's descriptions not clarify matters, they make things worse, even more ambiguous. As Chamberlain states, "An additional quantum of ambiguity is generated by the narrator's use of double entendres and his description of Quincas's movements with verbs that connote voluntary action" (*Jorge Amado* 51). Examples of this type of description follow.

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