MACHADO DE ASSIS

BRAZILIAN LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

THE CANE
MACHADO DE ASSIS
Damião ran away from the seminary at eleven in the morning one Friday in August. I don’t know what year it was; before 1850, anyhow. A few minutes later he stopped in confusion; he hadn’t bargained on the effect on passers-by of a scared, frightened, runaway seminarian. He wasn’t familiar with the streets, and kept losing his way and retracing his steps; finally he stopped. Where was he to go? Not home; his father was there, and he’d send him back to the seminary, after a good hiding. He’d not fixed on where he’d go, because he’d planned the escape for later; a chance event had brought it forward. Where could he go? He remembered his godfather, João Carneiro, but his godfather was a gutless lazybones, who’d do nothing off his own bat. It was he who’d taken him to the seminary and introduced him to the rector:

‘Here he is; here’s the great man of the future,’ he said to the rector.

‘Come in,’ he replied, ‘let the great man come in, so long as he’s humble and good. True greatness is modest. My lad…’

That was when he got there. A little time later the lad ran away from the seminary. Here he is now, in the street, scared, uncertain, unsure where to go for a safe haven or for advice; he went through the houses of relatives and friends, without settling on any. Suddenly, he exclaimed:

‘I’ll take refuge with Sinhá Rita! She’ll call my godfather, and tell him she wants me out of the seminary… Maybe that way…’

Sinhá Rita was a widow, João Carneiro’s mistress; Damião had some inkling of this situation and thought of using it for his own ends. Where did she live? he was so stunned, that it was only a few minutes later that it came to mind; it was in the Largo do Capim.

‘Holy name of Jesus! What’s this?’ shouted Sinhá Rita, sitting up on the settee where she was reclining.

Damião had just come in in terror; at the very moment he got to the house, he’d seen a priest go by, and shoved the door open - luckily, it wasn’t locked or bolted. Once inside, he peeped through the shutters, watching the priest, who hadn’t noticed him and went on his way.

‘What’s this, young Senhor Damião?’ shouted the lady of the house, again, for she’d only just recognised him. ‘What are you doing here?’

Damião, trembling, almost unable to speak, told her not to be afraid, it was nothing; he’d explain everything.
'Calm down, and explain yourself.'

'I'll tell you now; I've not committed a crime, I swear; but wait a moment.'

Sinhá Rita looked at him in shock, and all the girls, those belonging to the house and those from outside, who were sitting around the room in front of their lace-making cushions, stopped their hands and their bobbins. Sinhá Rita lived mostly from teaching lace-making, appliqué and embroidery. While the lad was catching his breath, she ordered the girls to go on working, and waited. In the end, Damião told her everything, his loathing of the seminary; he was certain he wouldn't make a good priest; he spoke with passion, and asked her to save him.

'What do you mean? There's nothing I can do.'

'You can, if you want.'

'No', she replied shaking her head; 'I'm not getting involved in your family's business; I hardly know them; and then there's your father – they say he's got a temper on him!'

Damião thought he was lost. He kneeled at her feet and kissed her hands, in despair.

'There's a lot you can do, Sinhá Rita; for the love of God, by whatever's most sacred to you, by your husband's soul, save me from death, because I'll kill myself, if I have to go back to that place.'

Sinhá Rita, flattered by the lad's pleas, tried to persuade him to change his attitude. A priest's life was holy and beautiful, she told him; time would show him that it was better to get over his repugnance, and one day... No, never, never, Damião answered, shaking his head and kissing her hands; and again he said it would kill him. Sinhá Rita hesitated for a long while; finally she asked him why he didn't go and see his godfather.

'My godfather? He's worse than papa; he won't listen to me, I don't think he'd listen to anyone...'

'Oh no?' Sinhá Rita interrupted, hit where it hurts. 'I'll show you if he'd listen or not...'

She called a slave-boy and shouted him to go to Senhor João Carneiro's house and call him over, on the instant; and if he wasn't at home, he should ask where he could be found, and run to tell him she needed to talk to him straight away.

'Go on, boy.'

Damião sighed heavily, out loud. To cover up the imperious way she'd given those orders, she explained to the boy that Senhor João Carneiro had been her late husband's friend and had got her some orphan girls to teach. Later, as he still looked down in the mouth, leaning in a doorway, she pinched his nose, laughing:

'Come on, my young priest, relax, everything'll work out.'

Sinhá Rita was forty on her birth certificate, and twenty-seven in her eyes. She was a handsome woman, lively, jolly, fond of a good laugh; but when it suited her, as fearsome as the devil himself. She decided to cheer the boy up, and in spite of the situation, it was no great effort. In a short while, both of them were laughing; she told him stories, and asked him to tell her others, which he did with great
aplomb. One of these, a silly story accompanied by comic gestures, made one of Sinhá Rita’s girls laugh; she’d forgotten her work to look at the lad, and listen to him. Sinhá Rita picked up a cane at the side of the settee, and threatened her:

‘Lucretia, mind the cane!’

The little girl lowered her head to avoid the blow, but the blow didn’t come. It was a warning; if when night fell the task wasn’t done, Lucretia would get the usual punishment. Damião looked at the orphan; she was a black girl, skinny, a little waif with a scar on her forehead and a burn on her left hand. She was eleven years of age. Damião noticed she was coughing, but inwardly and muffled, so as not to interrupt the conversation. He felt sorry for the little girl, and decided to take her under his wing, if she didn’t finish her task. Sinhá Rita wouldn’t refuse her forgiveness… What was more, she’d laughed because she thought him comical; it was his fault, if you call being funny a fault.

At this point, João Carneiro arrived. He went pale when he saw his godson there, and looked at Sinhá Rita, who wasted no time on preambles. She said it necessary to take the boy out of the seminary, since he had no vocation for the ecclesiastical life, and one priest less was better than a bad priest. We can love and serve the Lord in the wider world. João Carneiro, dismayed, couldn’t find words to reply for the first few minutes; finally, he opened his mouth and admonished his godson for coming to bother ‘strangers’; then he asserted he would punish him.

‘Punish him – no fear!’ Sinhá Rita interrupted. ‘What for? Go on, go and talk to his father.’

‘I can’t guarantee a thing. I don’t think it can be done…’

‘It is possible, I’ll warrant for that. If you will it,’ she went on in an insinuating tone of voice, everything can be worked out. ‘Go and insist, he’ll give way. Go on, Senhor Carneiro, your godson’s not going back to the seminary; I’m telling you he’s not going…’

‘But, madam…’

‘Go on, go.’

João Carneiro couldn’t work up the courage to go, nor could he stay. He was being pulled in opposite directions. He couldn’t care if the boy ended up a priest, a lawyer or a doctor, or whatever – a layabout would do; the worst thing was that they were entrusting him with a tremendous struggle with the boy’s father’s deepest feelings, with no certainty as to the outcome; and, if the answer was no, to another struggle with Sinhá Rita, whose final word was a threat: ‘I’m telling you he’s not going back…’ One way or another there was going to be trouble. There was panic in João Carneiro’s pupils, his eyelids trembled, his chest heaved. He looked at Sinhá Rita in supplication, and the slightest tinge of reproach. Why couldn’t she ask something else of him? Why didn’t she ask him to walk, in the rain, all the way to Tijuca or Jacarepaguá? But to ask him to persuade his dear friend to change his son’s career… He knew the old man; he was quite capable of smashing a jug in his face. Oh! If only the lad could drop down dead, on the spot, in an apoplexy! That was one solution – cruel, it’s true, but definitive.
‘Well?’ Sinhá Rita insisted.

With a gesture of his hand, he told her to wait. He rubbed his chin, looking for a way out. God in heaven! A decree from the Pope dissolving the church, or at least abolishing seminaries, would bring everything to a satisfactory conclusion. João Carneiro would go back home and play gin rummy. Imagine Napoleon’s barber being put in command of the army at the battle of Austerlitz… But the church was still there, seminaries were still there, his godson was still there, back to the wall, his eyes downcast, waiting, and giving no sign of apoplexy.

‘Go on, go,’ said Sinhá Rita handing him his hat and stick.

There was nothing for it. The barber put his razor in its sheath, gripped his sword and went off to the wars. Damião breathed easier; on the outside, however, he remained the same, his eyes fixed on the ground, dejected. This time Sinhá Rita held his chin up.

‘Come on, get some supper, don’t be so miserable.’

‘Do you really think he’ll get anywhere?’

‘He’ll sort it all up,’ Sinhá Rita replied, with confidence. ‘Come on, the soup’s getting cold.’

In spite of Sinhá Rita jovial nature, and of his own easy-going ways, Damião wasn’t as happy at supper as in the earlier part of the day. He didn’t trust his godfather’s pliable nature. However, he ate well; and towards the end, returned to the funny stories they’d been telling in the morning. When he was eating his dessert, he heard the noise of people in the room, and asked if they were coming to take him away.

‘It must be the girls.’

They got up and went to the sitting-room. The ‘girls’ were five neighbours who came every afternoon to have coffee with Sinhá Rita, and stayed until it was dark.

The pupils, when their supper was over, went back to their work-cushions. Sinhá Rita presided over all these womenfolk, those who lived there and those from outside. The gentle clicking of the bobbins and the neighbours’ chatter were such homely noises, so far away from theology and Latin, that the lad let himself be drawn in by them and forgot everything else. For the first few minutes, the women were a little shy; but that was soon wore off. One of them sang a modinha, accompanied by Sinhá Rita on the guitar, and the afternoon passed quickly by. Before the end, Sinhá Rita asked Damião to tell a certain story she’d been amused by. It was the same one that had made Lucretia laugh.

‘Come on, Senhor Damião, don’t play hard to get, the girls want to be off. You’ll like this story.’

Damião had no option but to obey. In spite of the advertisement and the expectation, which reduced the surprise and the effect, the story ended in laughter from the girls. Damião, pleased with himself, didn’t forget Lucretia and looked at her, to see if she’d laughed too. He saw she had her face close to her cushion to finish her task. She wasn’t laughing; or maybe she’d laughed inwardly, just as she coughed.

The neighbours left, and twilight came. Damião’s soul got blacker and blacker, as night fell. What could be happening? Over and over, he went to look through the
shutters, and came back more and more disheartened. Not a sign of his godfather. It was plain that his father had told him to shut up, called two slaves and gone to the police to ask for the loan of a constable, and was on his way to take him back to the seminary by force. Damião asked Sinhá Rita if you could get out of the house by the back; he ran into the back yard and thought he could jump over the wall. He asked if there was some way of escaping to the Rua da Vala, or if it was better to ask some neighbour to do him the favour of taking him in. The worst thing was his cassock; if Sinhá Rita could get him a jacket, or an old frock-coat... Sinhá Rita had just the thing, a coat, a memento from João Carneiro – unless it was just an oversight.

‘I’ve one of my late husband’s coats,’ she said, laughing, ‘but what’s all this fuss for? It’ll all work out, don’t worry.’

Finally, just as night came, one of his godfather’s slaves appeared, with a letter for Sinhá Rita. The business wasn’t settled yet; the father was furious and on the point of smashing the furniture; he’d shouted that no, sir, the whippersnapper would go to the seminary, or he’d put him in jail, or the army. João Carneiro had a terrific struggle to persuade his friend not to take things in hand now, but sleep on it for the night, and think whether it was right to destine such a rebellious and vicious young man to the religious life. He explained in the letter that he spoke in those terms, the better to argue the case. He’d not won it yet, he said; but on the next day he’d go and see him and insist again. He concluded by saying the boy should go to his house.

Damião finished reading the letter and looked at Sinhá Rita. ‘She’s my last refuge,’ he thought. Sinhá Rita had a horn inkwell brought over, and at the bottom of the letter itself, on the same sheet, wrote this reply: ‘Joãozinho, either you save the boy, or I’ll never see you again.’ She sealed the letter with a wafer, and gave it to the slave, telling him to take it quickly. Again she encouraged the seminarian, who had once more donned the habit of humility and dismay. She told him to calm down, for this was now her affair.

‘They’ll see what I’m worth! I’m no pushover, wait and see!’

It was time to gather in the work. Sinhá Rita examined it; all the pupils had finished. Only Lucretia was still at her cushion, weaving her bobbins in and out, unable to see; Sinhá Rita went over to her, saw that her task wasn’t finished, flew into a rage, and grabbed her by an ear.

‘Ah, you little good-for-nothing!’

‘Missy, missy! For the love of God! For Our Lady in heaven!’

‘Good-for-nothing! Our Lady doesn’t protect idle girls!’

Lucretia struggled, pulled herself away from her mistress’s grip, and ran inside; Sinhá Rita went after her and grabbed her.

‘Get here!’

‘Please, mistress, forgive me!’ the little girl coughed.

‘Not a bit of it. Where’s the cane?’

And they both came back into the room, one held by her ear, struggling, weeping and begging; the other saying over and over that no, she was going to punish her.

‘Where’s the cane?’
The cane was at the head of the settee, on the other side of the room. Sinhá Rita, unwilling to let go of the girl, shouted to the seminarian:

‘Senhor Damião, pass me that cane, if you please.’

Damião went cold... Cruel moment! A cloud passed before his eyes. Yes, he had sworn to give the girl his protection - she had got behind in her work because of him...

‘Give me the cane, Senhor Damião!’

Damião got as far as going towards the settee. Then the girl begged him for the sake of everything he held most sacred, his mother, his father, Our Lord himself...

‘Help me, young master!’

Sinhá Rita with her face on fire and her eyes starting out of her head, demanded the cane, without letting go of the girl, who was now paralysed by a fit of coughing. Damião felt a pang of guilt; but he needed to get out of the seminary so badly! He reached the settee, took the cane and handed it to Sinhá Rita.
THE BOOK

The Cane
Machado de Assis
• Original title: O Caso da Vara, in Páginas Recolhidas
• Year of publication: 1899
• Original publisher: H. Garnier Livreiro-Editor

The English version – A Chapter of Hats – a short stories collection (2008), organized by John Gledson, published by Bloomsbury Publishing (http://migre.me/aAppq). Special permission to print in this publication granted by the publisher and the translator.

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  Esaú e Jacó
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  Falenas
  Americanas
  Ocidentais
- Teatro:
  Desencantos
  Quase Ministro
  Deuses de Casaca
  Tu, só tu, puro amor
  Teatro

The complete bibliography of Machado de Assis can be found at http://macha-do.mec.gov.br/
THE TRANSLATOR

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John Gledson is a retired professor of Brazilian studies from the University of Liverpool, England. He published two books about Machado de Assis in Brazil: Machado de Assis: Impostura e Realismo e Machado de Assis: Ficção e História. He edited three volumes of chronics from this author and an anthology of short stories: Contos: Uma antologia (1999). He also published two books about Carlos Drummond de Andrade: Poesia e Poética de Carlos Drummond de Andrade e Influências e Impasses: Drummond e alguns contemporâneos, and many articles about Machado de Assis and other Brazilian authors. He translated several articles from Portuguese to English, among them, from Machado de Assis, Dom Casmurro (1997), and an anthology of short stories, A Chapter of Hats (2009), that includes the short story here reproduced.

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