

The Invisible Power of Death. *Let the Lady in,* by Jacyntho Lins Brandão

Jorge Deserto

1 The Play

Death, the mortal condition of the human being, is undoubtedly one of the most important themes to prompt reflection, over time. To live knowing that this is an ephemeral act, to live trying to give some kind of meaning to the ephemerality that is life, is a challenge that has been going on through the centuries. The ancient Greeks defined man by his mortality, putting him in confrontation with the immortality of the gods, those who live forever. Even aware of the brevity of life, the Greeks were able to counteract this weakness with other forms of immortality, made up of narratives that were perpetuated in the collective memory of the generations. Over the centuries, other forms of thought have solidified, in various ways, the conviction that death is not an end, it is only the passage to another, possibly more joyful, existence. Or, in the opposite sense, that it is the ultimate end and that life, however short it may be, is all that matters. Dealing with death, in historical terms, essentially gives it some kind of meaning. One of guidelines of this position is based on the comforting notion that death accompanies us in a way that – almost – totally escapes our control. We can call it Destiny or give it another name but life's duration is not our choice by rule – and if this leaves us often helpless, it also prompts a great deal of anxiety. What would humanity be like if death could be negotiated, exchanged? The work that provides the subject of this chapter deals with this question and does so in a particularly striking way.

In 1981, *Let the Lady in* by Jacyntho Lins Brandão¹ was presented to the Theatrical Texts Contest promoted by the Clóvis Salgado Foundation, in Belo

1 Jacyntho Lins Brandão is a professor in the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte. Specialist in Classical Studies, mainly in Greek Literature, studied in detail Lucian of Samosata's work, on which he published several studies. He also dwelled on the Greek epic and theater, having also developed study projects on Greek poetry, Greek theorizing about the forms of the narrative of the epic poem Gilgamesh and the use of 'common places' in the Roman period of Greek literature. He also published two novels (*Reliquary*, *Babel's Moat*) and the play which is the basis of this essay.

Horizonte, state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. The first prize, awarded in April of that year to this particular play, was a staging of the award-winning text, which took place in August/September of the same year, in a production mounted at the Teatro da Imprensa Oficial, in Belo Horizonte. The text did not get any subsequent exposure until 2007 when it was published, according to the author, “with some alterations”.² Although it is not possible to assess the extent of the changes made, everything seems to indicate that it was not a deep rewriting exercise. The version we now have is a work of around 120 pages, divided into 29 small sections, numbered and untitled, that mark both the entry and exit of characters, and the passage of time.

The plot can be briefly summarized as follows: Jorge, a young man, married to Cibele, sees, or thinks he sees, an entity, a woman dressed in black (Death?), who tells him that his son, a baby of a few months, will die within twelve hours (the action takes place between noon and midnight on the same day), unless he chooses a child’s relative to die in his place. Not knowing whether or not to believe in the threat, afraid of having lost his mind, but not willing to risk his son’s life, Jorge discusses the matter with Cibele, his wife, and from there the differences between the two clearly stand out, as well as the way they relate to several family members. At the end of the day, which coincides with Jorge’s birthday, they invite their closest relatives to dinner, gathering the play’s eight characters: the couple, Jorge’s mother and brother (D. Inocência; Luisinho); Cibele’s parents (Salvador; D. Isabel), an elderly aunt of the latter (D. Inacinha), accompanied by a young woman who has cognitive developmental disabilities (Teteca), Cibele’s cousin. As the night unfolds and midnight approaches, it is impossible to preserve the secrecy of the ultimatum that torments Jorge, and everyone is confronted with the question, that exposes and stirs hatreds and affinities, in a game that is progressively degrading, that makes all lucidity disappear until the situation becomes unsustainable. I will return to one or another particular aspect of this plot shortly.

The first element to bear in mind is that the play was written by a professor and researcher in classical studies, that is by someone with a deep knowledge of Greek literature and the Greek world. The blurbs on the back cover and the book flap make two references to ancient models, Lucian of Samosata and Aristophanes. The first is most clearly visible, as a complex philosophical problem is filtered through a layer of derision. In addition, we know that Lucian was studied deeply by the play’s author, which makes the connection inevitable and informed. The connection to Aristophanes is less clear, but it may make sense if we think of the Aristophanic tendency to look at the world by

2 Brandão (2007) 11.

reversing some of its polarities through the absurd.³ On the other hand, New Comedy comes to mind by the way the play works and develops its intrigues within the family. Nonetheless it may be argued that comedy, however extreme the conflicts it presents, tends to effect a recomposition of the world, a replacement of order. In the world of Brandão, on the contrary, there is no stone left unturned – and that is a fundamental difference. However, in this chapter I will read *Let the Lady in* in the light of a set of influences that come from tragedy, which are also capable of providing us with some particularly illuminating lines of enquiry.

2 The *Alcestis* Case

Euripides' *Alcestis* presents itself as an obvious inspiration for this work. But as closer analysis shows, as with many contemporary texts inspired by classical plots, it is as productive to point out affinities as to make the differences clearly delineated. The main theme, common to both works, is a substitute death, that is, someone is given the opportunity to escape at the otherwise inflexible hour of death as long as he finds another who is willing to die in his place. This is how Admetus, king of Pherae in Thessaly, has the right to remain alive when his wife, Alcestis, dies in his place. But even at this point there are, from the outset, obvious differences. In Euripides, Admetus does not die because he is rewarded for the way he hosted Apollo, receiving in return this god's protection (cf. E. *Alc.* 6–14). Moreover, when we enter in the play's plot, Alcestis has agreed to die, we are on the day due to her death – the question of the choice of Admetus replacement has already been resolved. There is no guarantee that it was an easy or anguish-free moment (cf. E. *Alc.* 15–8 and, later, the *agon* between Admetus and his father, Pheres), but it is clear that this is not a theme on which the playwright wants us to focus our attention.

In Brandão's play, the central element of the plot is the decision to find someone who will agree to die, not in the place of a husband, but of a child of few months of age. It is this threat on his child's life that, in the initial scene, Jorge hears – or thinks he does – in a dialogue where we only have access to his words and never to those of his supposed interlocutor. The choice that is left in Jorge's hands seems, therefore, clearly more a punishment than a reward. The hypothesis given to him to save his son puts an unbearable burden upon his shoulders – which is not even for his own benefit.

3 On this theme, see Cartledge (1990).

This initial scene⁴ creates another interesting contrast with Euripides' play. While the text suggests that "luminosity should give a fantastic tone to the scene", the Lady does not let herself be seen or heard – we can only imagine her words from what her interlocutor⁵ says. The author works the evocative and suggestive power of an absence, something that, only accessed through the imagination, represents an uncertain threat, not immediately revealed in an image or a form and, therefore, more powerful as an instigator of fear or uncertainty. Euripides, as we know, chooses to picture *Thanatos* and make him the character of an odd dialogue with Apollo in the Prologue (*E. Alc.* 28–76), which ends up weakening the power of this figure as a threat: *Thanatos* appears as an unexpected and compliant character, who comes to check if everything is going according to plan.⁶ By the effect of diminishing the threat, his later defeat at Heracles' hands seems almost justified.

Another contrasting element is the way the presence and influence of time is managed. In Euripides this is a minor element, it is not even possible to know how much time has elapsed between the *Moirai* decree and the moment, which initiates the action, in which Alcestis is about to die in place of her husband. The pressure of time seems never to be felt, either in the period briefly mentioned, in which it was necessary to find someone who would die in the place of the house's owner, or on the very day of the death, in which Alcestis has time to bid farewell to the house, the slaves, the children, so as to emphasize the importance of her disappearance. Death is not the quick solution to an urgent problem; it is a fault destined to endure and to leave marks. Brandão, by contrast, makes time a crucial element. Right at the beginning in the text there is reference to a "clock" that "chimes noon".⁷ All the action is marked by the urgency to find a solution in the strict period of twelve hours and this urgency is underlined by the inexorable advance of the hours in the clock that is on the scene. This new picture – the need to find someone, *before midnight*, who is willing to die instead of the child – intensifies the action and changes its tone completely.

Equally different is the fact that the threat falls on a child who, unlike Admetus, is unable to take an active part in the set of decisions that pertain to his survival. Besides, as he opts for a path in which ridicule and absurdity are the fundamental elements, Brandão completely ignores all the moments

4 Brandão (2007) 13–4.

5 Later, when he tells the episode to Cibebe, Jorge outlines a brief characterization of the figure he saw: "A woman in black. Long. With a harsh look in her eyes" (Brandão (2007) 20).

6 Parker, in his comment, also goes in this sense: "Death is a punctilious official" (Parker (2007) ad 26–7).

7 Brandão (2007) 13.

of *pathos* which in Euripides stem from the children's presence on stage. In Brandão, the most important question doesn't seem to be to save the child – it would be the central theme, but it remains in the background; instead, it is the dispute that arises and the way each character relates to the strangeness of the situation and the hypothetical imminence of death that provide the focus here. In a shrewd way, Brandão withdraws the child and his destiny from the equation, progressively, as the intrigue advances.

It is also different that the Lady explicitly demands that the choice be given to a relative, to someone who has the same blood as the baby. In Euripides, the demand is only for one corpse in exchange for another. But it is equally true that, although we do not know what *philoï* were consulted (cf. E. *Alc.* 14–5), the question quickly seems to be reduced to family members, not going beyond the parents or the wife. In both cases, although with differences, it is the family sphere that is at the centre. If the influence of Euripides' *Alcestis* is evident in this contemporary work, it is above all in the transposition of a fundamental motive, that of a substitute death. However, this motif is subject to a considerable rewriting both in terms of the tone and plot development.

3 The Family

Brandão's play confines the possibility of replacing, in death, the child whose life is under threat to the family sphere. Here, some interesting avenues are opened from the perspective of Greek theater. First, it could be said that it is the Greek model that has made possible new realities in literary creativity. The limited, private or semi-private area of the *oikos*, the reserved sphere of family life, is an especially powerful in device in theatre. The power results, on the one hand, from the theater exploring, in its intrigues, the dynamics and the conflicts of the family universe, while, on the other hand, it is intensified by the drama's presentation, which puts real characters before the viewer, clearly raising the audience's emotional involvement with what happens on stage. It is true that this access to the family's intimacy may seem very limited in recent years when the concept of intimacy seems to have completely vanished. In the context of drama, family conflicts have migrated to the public space of the *polis* or, perhaps better, have given the *polis* the illusion of entry into the reserved space of the private sphere. In many ways, this intrusion found in theater became an exception (as their plots were equally exceptional in emotional terms), allowed and at the same time mitigated by its illusory nature and its connection to the distant world, not immediately threatening, of myth.

To look at the family, to take it to the center of a theatrical plot, implies, at once, to weave a web of relations. Who fits inside an *oikos*? In the Greek world, according to Monika Trümper, the borders already had some elasticity:⁸

It has been recently emphasized that the (Athenian) *oikos* was not a static unit, but often a complex entity, which included various types of kinsmen (grandparents, aunts, etc.) and also non-kinsmen (slaves, friends, concubines, etc.) and owned more than one house.

Brandão's option, as we have already seen from the cast list, is not limited to a closed nucleus of parents and children (it also extends to an aunt and Cibele's cousin), but establishes an important boundary based on blood ties, which sets aside the friends and the servants. The exclusion of anyone outside the close family sets apart from the Greek model in terms of character choice: Greek theater richly explores characters like confident Nurses and other compassionate servants and this would certainly not be unreasonable in Brazilian society of the 1960s, which is also marked by strong social inequalities – but Brandão otherwise chooses to underline blood ties. The Lady asks, in order to save the child, that it is someone of the same blood who should die. It is this condition that dictates the choice of characters: the boy is the only person who unites, through blood kinship, all those present on the scene. But that does not rule out other forms of kinship being taken into account.

The American anthropologist David Schneider, who wrote some influential works on kinship relations in the 1980s, defended that in the present Western world (in this case, the focus was essentially on the North American example), the symbolic examples used to define and shape the notions of kinship are based on two distinct orders: on the one hand, kinship “by nature”, blood kinship, permanent and unalterable; on the other, kinship “by law”, which results from a set of culturally established and changeable behavioral norms, creating family relationships also marked by mutability.⁹ This dichotomy, which clearly does not express all the complexity of Schneider's thought, becomes particularly visible in the way Brandão draws the two parts of the family, that coexist throughout the play: early on, when only the two discuss the problem, Jorge and Cibele establish a kind of non-aggression pact – each can only appoint, as a death candidate, someone from his family “by nature”. Later, when they are all together, one of the conflicts that immediately becomes apparent is what opposes the two families, two particularly different and unequal nuclei, which

⁸ Trümper (2011) 33.

⁹ Wilgaux (2011) 217–8.

circumstances compel to share a family environment where the discomfort is evident.¹⁰ However, although Brandão underlines the existence of this boundary, he seems to do so tentatively so that he can easily dilute it later, as it gets swallowed by another wave of conflicts, more serious and deeper, that put several of those who are relatives 'by nature' into opposition.

Aristotle, in *Politics*, when he speaks of *oikia*, divides it into three relational binomials: lord/slave; husband/woman; father/children (Arist. *Pol.* 1. 1253b 2–8). As we have seen, the first of these dualities is not considered by Brandão, no doubt on the grounds that it is an understandable anachronism. But the other two clearly represent fundamental axes of the family articulation presented here: on the one hand, by questioning the bond between the couple, Jorge and Cibeles, with an extension, occupying the other axis, to the relationship with the child. On the other hand, although in a different way, since Jorge and Cibeles no longer depend on the *paidotrophía* relation, since they already constitute an independent family, the connection between parents and children is also questioned – what legitimizes the affirmation that these two axes (husband/wife, parents/children) delimit the basic structure on which the action centers.

Of course an intrigue that happens in the twentieth century must have some trace of the time in which it takes place – but at the same time, it does not fail to make eloquent the fact that certain conflicts, however much they change, are of all times and of all places. Jorge has a difficult relationship with his mother, who doesn't approve of the fact that he hasn't been born blonde with blue eyes and who only has eyes for his brother; so Jorge hates his brother, and Luisinho treats him with disdain, tormenting Jorge with jokes about his alcoholic past, and claiming that he, Luisinho, might have slept with Cibeles. Jorge wants his brother to die – and Cibeles, at a particular moment, does not fail to refer ironically to the story of Cain and Abel.¹¹ On the other hand, Cibeles has a deep love for her father – which she protects at all cost – while at the same time she treats her mother disrespectfully, which seems to be caused by a certain jealousy. This, of course, suggests an Electra complex.

10 There is, in some moments, a drawing that is inspired by the joke, as in the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, about the way the latter cooks. D. Inocência says to the daughter-in-law: "The pasta is not that good, but it's fine anyway. (...) But Cibeles cooks really well, doesn't she? You just need to improve the seasoning" (Brandão (2007) 73). Later, when she is eating alone, her outburst is different: "I can't speak, or she'll get too proud, but my son's wife actually knows how to season ..." (Brandão (2007) 107). On the opposite side, with different characteristics, the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law is also an example of extreme tension.

11 Brandão (2007) 42.

Although he defines his characters with obvious care – a theme to which I will return – Brandão is more concerned with the effect on them of this sudden need to deal with Death or, at least, with the perspective of Death. So if family relations are the central theme of this work, this is because the process of family dissolution is being staged, in a progressive and methodical fashion, both of what is united by the bonds created by the law and of what is united by the bonds created by blood, both equally precarious.

Finally, Brandão briefly brings us back to Greek tragedy with the question: who is more important, the father or the mother?¹² It is an issue explored in the trial scene in the *Eumenides* (cf. *A. Eu.* 657–66) and, in the brief reference here when Jorge and Cibele contemplate the possibility of one of them acting as surrogate for the baby, it is largely reconfigured. Now any rational argumentation is removed and the question is reduced to stereotypes, fuelled by feelings of irrational and macabre hatred.

4 Speech and Characters

If there is an aspect in which this work departs particularly from the Greek tragic model, it relates to its organization of dialogue. Greek tragedy relies on the word, on the construction of long and solid speeches, particularly present in the extensive *rheseis* through which the characters confront, in intense rhetorical *agones*, their visions of the world. In Greek tragedy the power also rests in the other equally intense narrative moments, the narratives carried by the messengers, which are capable of conjuring for the spectator events from the past and far from the stage and which are clearly more effective when expressed in words, since it would be impossible to represent them in the theater with the same energy. There are also moments marked by strong emotional content, in which *stichomythia* predominates and which often include *antilabe*. But it is the way these various speech modes combine, and how this combination gives them complexity, that produces the strong appeal and much of the timelessness of the tragedy.

Brandão opts for a very different path: his speeches are made up of predominantly brief, occasionally extended, often truncated, interrupted and resumed speeches, in a style characterised by quotidian features and common words. If we seek parallels they would be found in the tone of comedy, but there is no easy laughter or immediate humor here: the words often come veiled in almost palpable anguish. The constant time pressure repeatedly intensifies the

12 Brandão (2007) 37–9.

disorientation of the characters and often militates against the light-hearted tone. Yet because the audience feels discomfort as this group of people embarks on such madness, there is always an uncomfortable line between them and the onstage world progressively marked by irrationality – in this situation, laughter is wry and disconcerting.

The selection and differentiation of the eight characters is remarkable. The play starts with scenes in which only Jorge and Cibele are present (II–IV):¹³ they describe the crucial situation to be developed, as well as some of their marital problems: the social gap between them, making it clear that Cibele comes from a more affluent background (she complains about material goods – ah, the T.V. ... – that they cannot buy); Jorge's drinking problem, seemingly solved since their son's birth, but having left very deep marks. At the same time, in these initial scenes, we are being introduced, indirectly but with some depth, to the characters who are about to arrive.

When they finally arrive – and they do so almost simultaneously¹⁴ – Brandão wisely administers entrances and exits (for the kitchen or to the room where the child is), in order to solidify the development of the action by small steps, gradually opening the span of revelations. But the truth is that he is not constrained by any rule that limits the number of actors or the characters who can share the stage at any one time. Therefore, when he places the eight characters simultaneously onstage, he does so with undeniable wisdom, constructing a way of articulating the voices that could almost be identified as choric. This is a chorus in which sets of distinct voices challenge and conflict in such a way as to create an unusual harmony – which feeds precisely on the disharmony that, in continuous acceleration, pushes the characters incessantly into the abyss.

A character who specifically deserves attention is Teteca, a young woman of indefinite age, who is taken care of by Aunt Inacinha and is Cibele's cousin, and who suffers from a clear cognitive development problem. Brandão uses her as a free voice, unable to understand the rules of convenience and restrictions of a social nature, which allows her to say things that wouldn't usually be said. She is therefore both a source of humor, treated with sensitivity and without exaggeration, and at the same time a means of circumventing the masks that the other characters, at least initially, adopt out of respect for social convention. As the plot progresses, and as the play drifts increasingly towards the irrational, it is chilling to witness how the remaining characters are dragged into the plan to solve the surrogacy question by lot: a lucky dip for one of the folded pieces of paper, each containing a name, that is organized, with supreme irony,

13 Section 1 is, of course, the one in which Jorge is confronted by the invisible Lady.

14 Jorge's family arrives in section 5, Cibele's on VII.

by a young woman who never herself learned to write. Brandão uses this young woman wisely to underline how this group of people has descended into a thoroughly irrational world.

5 From the Absurd to the Emptiness

Jacyntho Lins Bradão's play is charged with both the absurd and madness. At the very beginning, Jorge, the only voice we hear, utters a cry of despair that could characterize the whole play: "No! Wait a second! Don't go away! Don't leave this absurdity in my hands! I am not God! Wait!"¹⁵

Nobody listens to him. We don't even know if someone, at any moment, listens or talks to him. But the absurd of this situation is present, gains strength, takes over the events and the people. It is not unreasonable to establish a connection with the so-called Theater of the Absurd, an expression designated by Martin Esslin in 1961.¹⁶ But it is equally noticeable that this connection is not complete. Brandão approaches the theater of the absurd when he shows us a non-rational world, a world that clearly moves away from logic and reason. A devaluation of the power of the word, of the power of language, is also characteristic of the theater of the absurd, which delineates a world in which words are muffled by the unreason of events. We have already seen that Brandão clearly devalues the use of the word as a tool of rationality. There are, however, two further defining lines of the theater of the absurd, from which Brandão moves away with some clarity. First, the theater of the absurd is characterized by a sparse investment in the creation and drawing of the characters, whereas in Brandão's play, despite the quick brushstrokes of a rarefied language, the characters are drawn with remarkable clarity and considerable complexity. Secondly, the theater of the absurd isn't concerned with the coherent organization and development of a plot, while Brandão constructs a meticulously organized intrigue, which pushes its characters into the abyss; and he does so by scrupulously interlinking the various actions with the mastery of a watchmaker. Thus, if we can speak of absurd as one of the fundamental hallmarks of this work, the connections are marked by a certain ambiguity, as if the author's classical experience and training had put a kind of brake on some of the most notorious features of the Absurd entering his play.

¹⁵ Brandão (2007) 14.

¹⁶ Regarding the characteristics briefly pointed out in the next lines, see Esslin (1968) 389–419.

The second thematic axis is madness. What is particularly striking is how at certain moments madness and lucidity seem to look each other firmly in the eye. Jorge, the character who starts the action, has no sense of what is happening. Maybe he is crazy. But what if he's not? What if the order he heard (thought he heard?) is true? The world turns out to be incomprehensible, and the only support, naturally uncertain, is a vague literary reminiscence, which Jorge tries to grasp, without being able at first to remember the author's name. It is as if this voice of authority helped to accommodate which is neither easy nor comfortable:

Jorge – So! We have to think. If it's a hallucination, I'll be hospitalized tomorrow. Just let midnight pass. If it's a lie, it's a lie. If it's true, we save our son.

Cibele – That's crazy!

Jorge – I know. But have you forgotten that poor devil who said ... what did he say? ... I think it was: there are more things between heaven and earth that are dreamt of in our philosophy. Who really said that?¹⁷

It is too fragile a support for someone who, after the birth of his son, had decided to choose lucidity. Jorge has been sober for two months since his son was born. But now that, supposedly, he looks lucid to the world, it seems to crumble. There is a great irony here, as if he were being punished for this renunciation of the wine god. But, in actual fact, the order of the world here is to have no order.

What we see during the course of the play is how a family falls apart, how tensions, hatreds, recriminations and repressions develop until a point of no return is reached. Death invades life, absorbs it, takes away its meaning.

Immediately after the recourse to a failed raffle, the play culminates in a moment of complete disorder, when the first strokes of midnight are heard. Written in the text: "The clock rings the first midnight bell. All are motionless. The light reaches the total darkness".¹⁸ Only the characters voices are heard in the dark – as they wake up incredulous from the numbness, like people in shock, after a terrible accident, who look around them in a confused state. In Greek tragedy too, especially in Euripides, there are parallels (*Orestes* case is possibly the most eloquent). But as the next step is about to lead to the abyss,

17 Brandão (2007) 23. The poor devil Jorge talks about is Hamlet (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene v): "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, that are dreamt of in your philosophy".

18 Brandão (2007) 115.

a *deus ex machina* comes out of nowhere and restores order to the world. Even if this feels deeply artificial, the truth is that everything is neat, nothing appears left out of place. Here, on the contrary, we find ourselves among ruins. “Are we all dead? ... everyone?”¹⁹ asks Isabel, Cibele’s mother, one of the most reasonable characters throughout the play. In a way, the answer can only be affirmative.

In *Alceste*, a man manages to postpone death, only to find out that to remain alive is, after all, another form of death. Brandão’s characters, albeit following very different paths, experience something similar: they too discover that it is possible to find, in life, a kind of death, in form of poignant degradation of the characteristics and qualities that make them human. And no matter how light the tone, any laughter in this world doesn’t last long.

19 Brandão (2007) 118.