

António Manuel Bernardo Lopes<sup>1</sup>  
*University of Algarve and CETPAS*  
*Portugal*

## PORTUGUESE FOLKTALES AND THE POLITICS OF SUBVERSION

### Summary

Folktales are not only a rich repository of the collective imaginary and of the social myths of a community, but they also harbor the political and social tensions that have marked the history of nations. Such tensions usually veiled under the guise of symbols and other forms of literary representation end up weaved into narratives that voice the common man's yearning for justice and empowerment. This paper attempts to draw a parallel between some of the Portuguese folktales and one of the most important 15<sup>th</sup>-century historiographic accounts, *Crónica de D. João I* – written by royal chronicler Fernão Lopes, dubbed Portugal's first historian – where, in his quest for the truth, the “people” acquire narrative density and challenge the powers that be. The conceptual framework for this comparative study draws on Fredric Jameson's notion of *political unconscious*, according to which texts are to be regarded as political fantasies, resulting mainly from repression and contradicted impulses. Two examples of folktales where these tensions are resolved to the benefit of the common man are provided.

**Key words:** folktales, historical chronicles, Portuguese medieval history, political unconscious, social empowerment.

## CONTOS POPULARES PORTUGUESES E A POLÍTICA DE SUBVERSÃO

### Resumo

Os contos populares não são apenas um rico repositório do imaginário colectivo e dos mitos sociais de uma comunidade, mas também abrangem as tensões políticas e sociais que têm marcado a história das nações. Tais tensões, geralmente escondidas sob o disfarce de símbolos ou de outras formas de representação literária acabam por ser tecidas nas narrativas que dão a voz os anseios do homem comum pela justiça e empoderamento. Este artigo visa lançar um paralelo entre alguns contos populares portugueses e um dos mais importantes relatos historiográficos do século XV *Crónica de D. João I* – escrito pelo cronista real Fernão Lopes, chamado de primeiro historiador de Portugal – em que, na sua busca pela verdade, “o povo” adquire a densidade narrativa e desafia os poderes estabelecidos. O quadro conceptual para este estudo comparado baseia-se na noção do inconsciente político de Frederic Jameson, de acordo com o qual, os textos devem ser considerados como fantasias políticas que resultam principalmente da

---

<sup>1</sup> [alopes@ualg.pt](mailto:alopes@ualg.pt)



repressão e dos impulsos contrariados. Dois exemplos de contos populares onde essas tensões estão resolvidas a favor do homem comum são fornecidos.

**Palavras-chave:** coentos populares, crônicas históricas, historia medieval portuguesa, o inconsciente político, empoderamento social.

## Introduction

Portugal's most important chronicler of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Fernão Lopes, maintained that the accession of King João I to the Portuguese throne after the 1383–1385 crisis was, to a large extent, a victory of the popular classes and of the nationalist cause against the nobility's stateless interests. The chronicler's concern was not just to explain, but also to sanction for posterity the origins of the second dynasty. However, by doing so, he ended up awarding "the people" an until-then unsuspected political role in the making of the country's history. The faith he expressed in the people's sound political judgment could simply be regarded as another manifestation of a more general, deep-seated belief in popular wisdom. However, the way in which he depicted the Revolution somehow changed the perception that the powerful had of those from the lower social strata. Such convictions, which not even the dreadful years of the Inquisition succeeded in effacing, have been preserved and even magnified through the creative lenses of the folktale. The ability to trick and outwit the mighty, to undermine the principles of authority, to question hierarchy are just some of the narrative strategies to displace power and subvert social order. This paper aims to examine the ways in which these strategies are deployed in some of the folktales collected by José Gomes Ferreira in one of the important anthologies published to this date (Gomes Ferreira 1977).

## From History to story: the political unconscious of the folktale

Let us not be deceived by the apparent naivety of the folktale. It may help us understand the world around us through symbols and archetypes, but it may also provide us with the keys to wrestle and rebel against the existing order of things. It may voice the precepts of an old and long forsaken social order, but at the same time it can hint at the possibility of its dislocation and ultimate renewal. In fact, there is something provocative and disturbing about the folktale, especially when it deconstructs the world, disassembles its constituent parts, reshuffles and rearticulates them in a new arrangement which may end up questioning our outlook and disrupting the neat certainties we have about the reality framing our existence.

This transformation of our mindset, however, does not always generate the same perceptions, nor does it proceed from the same causes. On the one hand, the listener may either fail to grasp some of the subtextual intricacies that lie beneath the surface of the narrative or he may simply interpret them in an unexpected light. On the other hand,



popular wisdom itself, as it is mirrored in the folktale, is far from being a static and coherent body of knowledge. Essentially, it is full of contradictions, inconsistencies and paradoxes, many of which result from the sedimentation and compression of diverging collective historical experiences, which in turn keep on changing in accordance with economic, social and political contingencies and constraints. In order to understand the full complexity of the folktale, we cannot regard it as an immutable tradition, but as a heritage that keeps evolving and transmuting itself into new, unforeseeable forms. That is the reason why probing deep into the shadows of time past to understand the true motivations that led to the invention and preservation of a given folktale, though rather tempting, remains an elusive exercise. We can but try to unearth links between *story* and *history*, buried deep in the collective memory, to trace the intersections of fact and fiction, to restore a lost unity with fragments of composite materials which, for whatever reason, simply do not match up. There are, however, critical moments in the peoples' history that represent ideological and cultural turning points and that, by impressing themselves upon that which Fredric Jameson once called the "political unconscious", end up resurfacing in the narrative in a symbolic register that can hardly be disguised. As he stated, "all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of a community" (Jameson 1981: 70).

Since it is impossible to recreate the origins of the semantic and ideological investments woven into the fabric of the text, we have to resort to a symptomatic reading which will enable us to interpret the text in terms of its possible repressions, mystifications and latent meanings, a phenomenon that is concomitant with the very history of Europe, riddled as it is with moments of extreme violence and ideological coercion. Whenever a social conflict threatens long-established hegemonic relations and the struggle intensifies, new myths and social imaginaries emerge, taking over older discourses and social practices. Signifiers end up rearticulated, collective identities created, and new universals negotiated.

### The legitimizing function of history-writing

One of the most significant periods in which such tensions and antagonisms reached their paroxysm was in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the Old Continent was beset by a series of sudden dislocations. In fact, as a result of a succession of crises which ground the European economy to a standstill and depopulated the whole continent, the late Middle Ages witnessed constant confrontations between popular classes and the nobility. Neither town nor country was spared. Peasants, artisans and tradesmen rebelled against famine, war, increasing taxation, loss of income, religious persecution and the growing gap between the privileged and the underprivileged. As Rodney Hilton remarks in his reflections about the Peasants' Revolt in England in 1381, the mass movements of the later



Middle Ages proclaimed aims which clearly ‘subvert[ed] existing social and political relationships’ (Hilton 1988: 96).

Portuguese history constitutes no exception – with a noticeable difference, though: the political crisis of dynastic succession in 1383–1385 provided the popular classes with the opportunity to come to the fore as legitimate agents of political change. As a matter of fact, at this critical juncture of Portuguese history, a strategic alliance was formed between the common people and the nobles who sided with D. João, Grand Master of the Order of Aviz, a natural son of Pedro I. The movement opposed the faction of D. Beatriz, daughter of the deceased King, Fernando I, and wife of the King of Castile, Juan I. Were her cause to win and Portugal would lose its independence, as envisaged by the Treaty of Salvaterra de Magos (April 1383), a document which dictated the terms of the matrimony between the Portuguese Princess and the Castilian King. Her supporters, mostly feudal lords who had no other interest than the preservation of their long-standing privileges, saw in their allegiance to the Castilian Crown the best tactic to strengthen their status quo. Having espoused the nationalist cause, the partisans of D. João, on the other hand, succeeded in mobilizing widespread support against the threat posed by Castilian expansionism. The adherence of the lower classes to the cause, however, soon got out of hand and gained its own momentum. Some burghers harbored grave doubts about the resolve of D. João and feared his weakness might jeopardize the entire nationalistic project. Rallies across the country quickly spread the word. Peasants, artisans and merchants abandoned their work and took up arms against the old oppressors. Popular uprisings in the capital and in the provinces resulted in the seizure of important castles and the abduction or assassination of pro-Castilian barons. The old feudal order was finally starting to disintegrate.

Released from the shackles of its past, the country was about to enter a new era. The key episodes of the Revolution were later fashioned into a historiographic narrative by Portugal’s most important chronicler of the period, Fernão Lopes, who had been appointed by King Duarte in 1434 to write the history of the monarchs that had preceded him. The purpose was to legitimize the birth of the second dynasty by proving that the coronation of João I was the result of a collective will which had brought all social classes together against a common foe. The literary quality of the texts themselves has remained undisputed. In fact, his *Chronicles* have long been integrated in the Portuguese literary canon and are amongst the titles that make up the national curriculum. Robert Southey, one of the Lake poets and a well-informed scholar of Portuguese history and culture, was a fervent admirer of the medieval author and called him “the best chronicler of any age or nation” (*apud* Barnes 2006: 65). Alexandre Herculano, one of Portugal’s most distinguished 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelists and historians, argued that in Fernão Lopes’s chronicles “there is not just history: there is also poetry and drama; there is the middle age with its faith, its enthusiasm, its love of glory” (Herculano 1886). But no less important is the fact that the chronicles have also been acclaimed as one of the first serious historiographic enterprises ever: revealing a keen sense of duty towards historical truth, the writer drew



mostly upon testimonies and documentary evidence, critically analyzing every source and crediting only those reports that seemed more reliable. And it was this commitment to the ‘clear certitude of truth’ – as he called it – that compelled him to put the people at the center stage of the historical narrative. A contemporary Portuguese scholar, Maria Ema Tarracha Ferreira, claims that Fernão Lopes is none other than ‘the creator of the “popular conception of history”, insofar as the underprivileged participate directly in the defense of the Portuguese monarchy and step to the fore in one of the nation’s gravest moments’ (Ferreira 1988).

Lopes’s *Crónica de D. João I* is a compelling and eloquent example of such conception of commitment to the ‘clear certitude of truth’, for it is here, in the skillful way in which he unfolds the history of a country in search of its king, that the people acquire palpable political density. Instead of a unidimensional perspective of the events, reduced to mere extensions of the will of the powerful or of the divinity, Lopes offers us a kaleidoscope of memories and voices, regardless of their social class, each helping to create the epic backdrop against which the political struggle is set. Instead of a history from above, where, thanks to the daring intervention of the hero, everything miraculously falls into place, we are ushered into a world bordering on lawlessness and anarchy, where courage is sometimes overcome by fear and determination by fatigue, where authority is questioned, if not defiled. The gruesome aspects of the popular rebellion were neither feigned nor euphemized. Neither were the consequences of the siege of Lisbon, a city haunted by the specters of pestilence and famine. In his chronicles he recorded the genuine voice of the people, hailing and shouting, singing and cursing, rejoicing and crying for blood. What drives history in Fernão Lopes is not just the hotbed of palace intrigue or the political alliances forged and shattered by the shifting circumstances of the moment, but also the anonymous, collective forces that are driven by discontent and determine the course of events. After being held in thrall for centuries, the Revolution represented to the common man a period of enfranchisement and, at the same time, of empowerment, and Fernão Lopes was intelligent enough to perceive and acknowledge it in his work.

### **From the *Chronicles* to the folktales: another way of approaching a collective struggle**

Now, the reason why I mention Fernão Lopes is because I want to formulate a hypothesis, a hypothesis that is most likely to remain untested because of the impossibility to ascertain the exact origin of each folktale and the socio-political conditions that led to its appearance. Be it as it may, I will propose that Fernão Lopes’s chronicles are themselves the historiographic rendering of the political transformation of the common man in late Middle Ages, a subtle and yet definitive ideological shift that was also to find its expression in some Portuguese folktales. Now, such shift did not occur in Portugal





alone. In Europe, it corresponded to significant changes in the mode of production and therefore in the nature of the social and economic relations (the transition from feudalism to capitalism), phenomena which were accompanied by the emergence of the State (Brenner 1996: 247–276; Comninel 1992; Jack 2007: 27; Teschke 1998: 325–358).

It remains undisputed that the chronicle and the folktale are worlds apart. They are opposed in many respects: the latter pertains to an oral tradition, whereas the former finds its place within the inner circle of the Portuguese literary canon; the latter has thriven in a predominantly rural culture and therefore tends to emphasize a circular conception of time, while the former, being a scholarly enterprise, is grounded on the attempt to give rise to a historical consciousness; the latter feeds off fantasy and fiction, while, on the contrary, the former is committed to factual truth; the latter fiddles with unconscious drives, whereas the strength of the former lies in its critical awareness and method of research; the hallmark of genuineness of the latter lies in its anonymity, the authenticity of the former in its authority. The gap between these two narrative subgenres seems too wide to be bridged.

However, I am not concerned here with exploring the differences—though they might also yield some interesting results. What attracts me most is what Fernão Lopes's *Chronicles* and some of the folktales have in common. To start with, they are both representations of the medieval world and of how that world represented itself. Let us not forget that the social setting of most folktales unmistakably reproduces the sort of socio-economic structure that characterizes the later Middle Ages. In general, the stock characters populating the narratives are representative of social classes or professional types that make up the society of the period: the monarch and his or her courtiers, councilors, ministers and knights; the different classes of clergymen, including the bishop, the priest, the abbot and the monk; and the common man, represented by the peasant, the shepherd, the villain, the miller, the minstrel, the weaver, the tailor and the merchant. All of them occupy a specific place and fulfill a role determined by the rules governing the relations of subordination and exploitation of the period. They too are all to be found in the chronicles. Secondly, both the chronicles and these folktales lend a voice to the people, i.e., they give ordinary people the possibility to speak up, to verbalize their thoughts and emotions, thus endowing some of them with a rhetorical ability and an intellectual acumen. No longer a monopoly of the lord or of the bard singing his master's political and military exploits, the word now circulates as the common currency of exchange among social actors, regardless of their rank or class. Its aesthetics is that of the natural rhythms and vibrancy of the people's language. Its power and effectiveness lie in the dialogic momentum gathered by the confrontation of wills. It is the dispute over the (spoken) word which on many occasions constitutes the driving force behind the narrative. Thirdly, both Lopes's *Chronicles* and this set of Portuguese folktales under analysis broach, one way or the other, the people's continuous struggle for empowerment or the attempt to displace of power. Of course, the political subtext in each narrative is multifaceted and lends itself to different interpretations. Obviously, they



belong to separate traditions and orbit at quite different distances from the center of power. However, it is also a fact that in these stories, both erudite and popular, power gets challenged and subverted, but without aiming at the total destruction of the existing social order. The position of the ruler is still there – as are all the other positions of authority, true – but this time the roles of the intervening actors have to be negotiated, fought over, disputed, the result being a greater political promiscuousness between the ruling classes and the people, a promiscuousness that in the case of the folktales is symbolized by the marital bed (when, for example, the young man wins the hand of the princess). In turn, this conduces to a progressive liberalization of social conventions, which accelerates social mobility and eases the pressures from below. In a sense, the folktale could be said to have performed a major ideological role in the dissemination of such mythical projections of empowerment and social mobility.

## Two examples

Given the impossibility of conducting a thorough dissection of all the Portuguese folktales that share these features, I will mention only two cases which I think best illustrate my point. One of them, “The Peasant” (Gomes Ferreira 1977: 9–10), is about a poor man who, having once met the king, explained to him how he managed to survive with only twelve “vinténs” a day (coins worth twenty “réis”, the smallest unit) and how he apportioned that meagre amount to his old parents, wife and children. The king, impressed with the peasant’s thriftiness, instructed him not to tell that secret to anyone until he saw the king’s face one hundred times. Anxious to teach his courtiers a lesson, the king defied them to find out who earned a living with only twelve cents a day and how he made use of that money. The courtiers went out to look for the man, and having found him, were informed that they would learn the secret only if they were to give him one hundred golden coins. They did as they were told and then rushed back to the palace and to tell the king all about it. The king immediately called for the peasant and scolded him for not having abided by his commands. The man, however, said he had not disobeyed him, because the king’s face was all over the golden coins he had received from the courtiers. The king conceded that the man was quite intelligent and asked him what stipend he wanted, but the peasant replied that all he wished for was the right to charge five réis from every man who feared his own wife. The king found the whole idea ludicrous but gave his assent nonetheless. The man rapidly made a fortune and soon was able to afford his own equipage. One day, when the king saw him pass by, he ordered the carriage to halt, stepped in and revealed his admiration for the peasant’s wisdom. Now in friendly terms, the king confessed that on his way to the palace he had seen a stunning princess walking by and he did not refrain from extolling her beauty. At that very precise moment, however, the queen showed up and he hurriedly asked the peasant

to keep silent. The man saw there another opportunity to make money and in that very instant charged the king five réis.

The other story, “The Three Hares” (Gomes Ferreira 1977: 30–32), is also about how a poor man who outwits the entire palace. There was this king who intended to betroth her daughter to a man capable of making up a riddle she would never solve. Princes and other young nobles tried their best she would not be outsmarted by their wit. Many miles away, a poor villein learnt of the king’s pledge. Although he knew not what to ask the princess, he decided to undertake the long journey to the court. On his way there, in the midst of the open country, he was tormented by hunger and thirst. Fortunately for him, his eyes fell on a dead rabbit, which he promptly skinned, gutted and broiled on a fire made from the prayer book he had brought with him. He still needed to quench his thirst and so he galloped his horse until the animal started sweating. Then, with his hat, he collected the liquid pouring from his mount and drank it. When he finally arrived at the court, he was brought before the princess and asked her if she knew how he managed to eat meat that had not been killed by human hand and had been broiled in the word of God, and how he survived by drinking water that had neither fallen from the sky nor sprung from the earth. She was taken aback and could not solve the riddle at once. He was asked to stay at the castle waiting for the princess’s answer. By the end of the day, one of her ladies in waiting asked him what the solution was, but he replied that he would satisfy her curiosity within three days only if he was allowed to spend the night in her bedroom. She consented, and that night, when she fell asleep, he stole the skirt she had been wearing and left the room. The following night he did the same to another lady in waiting. On the third day, it was the princess’s turn to beseech the villein to let her know the answer to his riddle. Once more, he demanded to spend the night in her chamber. This time he stole her nightgown while she slept. Early in the next morning, as promised, he gathered the princess and her ladies in waiting and disclosed his secret. Later that day, before the whole assembly, the princess announced, to the king’s relief, that she already knew the answer to the riddle and revealed it. Without delay, her father ordered the villein to take leave, but the latter insisted he still had one final riddle for the princess to guess. He then said that when he had entered the palace he had come across three hares, all of which he had skinned and whose pelts he would show. When he was about to exhibit the skirts and the nightgown, the princess stood up, stated she had never met anyone so shrewd and promptly agreed to marry him.

## Conclusion

The two folktales are themselves quite telling and illustrate the points made in the previous section. By exploiting the vulnerabilities and flaws of the ruling class, the narratives constitute symbolic constructs of social emancipation and material success of the common man. The implicit condemnation of the sexual drives of the aristocratic





women, the exposure of the king's own feebleness and fear of his wife, the unintelligence of the courtiers, their surrendering to the whims of the poor are just some instances of the message of symbolic desacralisation of power and of social status that the folktale have since long sought to convey. Many more folktales present the same blueprint. Some of them are more explicit in the way in which they exploit this logic of subversion of the social order and political power. In other narratives, however, such subversion is more subterranean, playing with, for example, gender or generational divides, social stereotypes and prejudices (the wife who outwits the husband; the young child who succeeds in fooling the elders; the apparent fool old woman who outmaneuvers her neighbors; the knave who foxes the local priest). In times of political repression and persecution (the Portuguese Inquisition's last *Auto da Fé*, where people were burnt at the stake in the Terreiro Paço in Lisbon on charges of heresy, took place as late as 1766), the folktales provided a much-needed space of freedom. Despite being merely fictional, these narratives voiced the yearning for justice embedded in the collective imaginary of the Portuguese people.

## REFERENCES

- Barnes, W. J. *Portugal Gateway to Greatness*. Vancouver: Read Books, 2006. Print.
- Brenner, Robert. «The Rises and Declines of Serfdom in Medieval and Early Modern Europe». Michael L. Bush (ed.), *Serfdom and Slavery: Studies in Legal Bondage*, London: Longman, 1996: 247–76. Print.
- Comninel, Gorge. *Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism*. Toronto: York University, Department of Political Science, 1992. Unpublished manuscript.
- Ferreira, Maria Ema Tarracha (ed.) *Crónicas de Fernão Lopes [The Chronicles of Fernão Lopes]*. Lisbon: Ulisseia, 1988. Impresso.
- Gomes Ferreira, José. *Contos Tradicionais Portugueses*, Lisbon: Iniciativas Editoriais, 1977. Impresso.
- Herculano, Alexandre. *Opúsculos*, Tomo 5. Lisbon: Bertrand, 1886. Impresso.
- Hilton, Rodney. *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*. London: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Jack, Malcolm. *Lisbon, city of the sea: a history*. London: Tauris, 2007. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1981. Print.
- Teschke, Benno. «Geopolitical Relations in the European Middle Ages: History and Theory». *International Organization*, 52.2 (Spring 1998): 325–358. Print.

---

Fecha de recepción: 16 de octubre de 2018

Fecha de aceptación: 15 de abril de 2019

