“Passing the Love of Women”: The Intertextuality of *El curioso impertinente*  

DIANA DE ARMAS WILSON

AM PLEASED AND HONORED to be able to share with this distinguished audience some curious though I hope not excessively impertinent ideas about *El curioso impertinente*. You have all, I know, pondered that disturbing tale of a triangle created by a husband anxious to test his wife's fidelity through the instrument (lit., “el instrumento”) of his best friend. Interpolated into Part I of *Don Quijote*, the tale is read aloud by the priest to the characters who have converged at Juan Palomeque's inn. Although committed to speak today on the intertextuality of *El curioso*, I shall begin where the tale itself ends, with the priest's indictment of its intersexuality: “Si este caso se pusiera entre un galán y una dama, pudierase llevar; pero entre marido y mujer, algo tiene del imposible.”¹ A plausible case between lovers, but “impossible” between man and wife, concludes the priest, the first of a long line of critics—in and out of the *Quijote*—who have discredited *El curioso* by denying it.

¹ The following is a transcription of a paper invited for presentation at the 1985 annual meeting of the Cervantes Society of America at the MLA conference in Chicago.

In the light of this long and problematic canonization, it would seem at best quixotic to enter the ancient critical lists battling the issue of the interpolated tales. If I bring up these polemics of pertinence, then, it is only because we owe to them some of the most concealing and revealing judgments in Cervantine criticism. For those of us who must read or teach the *Quijote*, the intertextuality of its modern translators bears noting: “not worth the telling”; “doesn't bear examining”; “the substance” will do.² Scarcely confined to credibleness, readability, or pertinence.² By Américo Castro's 1925 poll of a dozen scholars (himself included), the issue of pertinence had come to a tie, an opposition that has been dismantled across our century, as increasingly flexible readers began to allow for what Bruce Wardropper justly termed “The Pertinence of *El curioso impertinente.*”³

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² See Sansón Carrasco's comments on *El curioso* as a misfit in II.3, and Cide Hamete's excuses for it in IV.44. To recall one strident example of the “outdoing topos”—by Cervantes’ “flesh and blood” over his fictional critics—see Unamuno’s judgment of *El curioso* as a “novela por entero impertinente a la acción de la historia” (*Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* [Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S. A., 1966], p. 95). Not the least of Cervantes’ distinctions is his challenge to the confining logic of verosimilitude—he showing us that what we take to be plausible or pertinent (“lo que se puede llevar”) is itself an artifice, a convention. The Cervantine character who strategically preempts forthcoming criticism of *El curioso* is further ironized by his role in the novel: as a celibate priest, his flawless ignorance of sexual otherness may itself “discredit” those constraints of likeliness that, as a reader, he proffers us. He appears to regard as “impossible” any violation against his readerly expectations that fiction will reinscribe for him only the received cultural ideas of marital dynamics.

³ Wardropper's seminal essay appeared in *PMLA* 72 (1957), 587-600. Castro's remarks are from *El pensamiento de Cervantes* (Madrid: Editorial Hernando, S. A., 1925), pp. 121-28. I disagree entirely with the conclusion “imposed” on Castro by his reading: “se impone la conclusión de que Cervantes tenía no muy buena la opinión de la mujer” (p. 127n.).


its English-language translators, this trivializing of Cervantes' tale is replicated by Vladimir Nabokov's scornful dismissal of its plot as “incredible nonsense, deceit and eavesdropping being the usual bedsprings of the thing.”⁵ For the summit of exasperation, however, we

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must turn to Madariaga's authoritarian criticism. His curt in hosted by "El curioso" is to me most suggestive, for it functions as a code that allows us to read the tale's intertext of hidden allusions: "The Curious Impertinent," intones Madariaga, "is a frank intruder, smuggled into the work by a simple contrivance —the finding of a manuscript in a bag left by a visitor in the Inn." Although Cervantes' "contrivance" here generates more critical vehemence than one might expect (including an unkind cut at Cervantes' "tactlessness"), Madariaga's judgment of "El curioso" as "a frank intruder" serves an extraordinary interpretive function. It establishes some powerful lines of continuity with Borges' tale of "The Intruder," a story that strikingly emulates the structures of "El curioso" and whose epigraph furnished me the title for this talk: "passing the love of women." The phrase is from the Old Testament, from David's dirge for Jonathan: "Jonathan lies slain upon the high places. / I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; / very pleasant have you been to me; / your love to me was wonderful, / passing the love of women." (2 Samuel I:25-26).

This biblical epigraph foretells the structures of desire in Borges' "La intrusa," a tale of a triangle created and destroyed by brotherly love. In this story —exalted by Borges as "perhaps the best . . . I have ever written"— the Nilsen brothers, a pair of illiterate Argentine compadritos, share a woman picked up by the elder brother Cristián. They attempt to rid themselves of her (and of their increasing love for her) by selling her to a brothel, but they are driven to buy her back. Finally —unable to save their relationship with the woman between them— the elder brother kills her. In "Los teólogos" Borges has written that "there are some men who seek the love of a woman only to forget her, to put her out of mind." Borges puts his intrusive woman out of mind and text by snuffing her out entirely —allowing his men to survive and even to be bonded by her murder. The closing lines of "La intrusa" represent this new intimacy as follows: "They threw their arms around each other, on the verge of tears. One more link bound them now —the woman they had cruelly sacrificed and their common need to forget her" ("la obligación de olvidarla."). The filiation with "El curioso" should be obvious: two men sharing a woman who somehow intrudes on their original bond. The Borges scholar Gene H. Bell-Villada vividly describes the nature of the bond in "La intrusa":

The tie stressed here, of course, is of a rather archaic sort, the macho bonds between men in the wilderness, a relationship of the kind one might encounter at all male clubs, on athletic teams, or in men's-magazine stories about deer hunting.

Although it might be pertinent to know that Borges' mother articulated the lady-killer ending for "La intrusa," I do not wish to expose an audience of cervantistas to further speculations on Borges' "family romance." Rather I have invoked Borges in order to use him as he himself used "Pierre Menard": in order to "rewrite" "El curioso" —those three chapters of the "Quijote" that Menard, in his splendid fastidiousness, may himself have found nauseous and expendable. My initial strategy in what follows, then, is to rethink "El curioso" in the light of Borges' violent intimacies. After all, long before the Yale School of critics assured us that we learned to read older texts from newer texts, that there were benefits to be gained by ignoring chronology, Borges himself had already recommended what he called "the new technique . . . of the deliberate anachronism." Keeping the graphic schema of "La intrusa" in mind, then —two male subjects "passing the love" of a female object ("era una cosa" is how Borges puts it)— we shall explore the remote literary precursors of this triangle, as well as the repose of its millennial repetition. Following this, we shall move forwards again, if only by about a decade, to examine a text that shatters that repose: the Barbaric Isle narrative of Cervantes' own Persiles.

I am of course well aware that any talk of triangles will evoke René Girard's tranhistorical account of the erotic triangle, an account...
illuminate a specific set of interactions and transactions by which Cervantes himself—Girard's avowed model—eventually fractures the Girardian construct that so violently passes over the love of women.

To that end I must take up the intertextuality of El curioso, a term I am using in Thomas Greene’s sense of “the structural presence within a text of elements from earlier works.” Greene, who laments his neglect of “most notably Hispanic” literature in The Light in Troy, his study of Renaissance imitation, could very well have included Cervantes in his roster of those celebrated Renaissance writers who had the courage to confront the model “without neurotic paralysis and [to use] the anxiety to discover selfhood.” Certainly the creator of El curioso neutralizes all anxieties of influence by deliberately writing into his work his relationship to his models—just as he did in the Prologue to Part I of the Quijote. Into El curioso, then, as visible or acknowledged constructs, Cervantes inscribes his imitative strategies: mostly agonistic, occasionally heuristic, never reproductive or sacramental. Out of this rich and abundant intertextuality—this criss-crossing of influences—I want to take up three subtexts, one at a time, in order to explore their literary transvaluation in El curioso.

Let us begin with the story of “Gyges and Candaules,” not the version given us by Glaucon in Plato’s Republic (about Gyges’ magic ring) (II.359-60), but the account in Herodotus (b. 484 B.C.), whose History of the Persian Wars situates Candaules’ story within a text of elements from earlier works. Greene, who laments his neglect of “most notably Hispanic” literature in The Light in Troy, his study of Renaissance imitation, could very well have included Cervantes in his roster of celebrated Renaissance writers who had the courage to confront the shadow of influence “without neurotic paralysis and [to use] the anxiety to discover selfhood.” Certainly the creator of El curioso neutralizes all anxieties of influence by deliberately writing into his work his relationship to his models—just as he did in the Prologue to Part I of the Quijote. Into El curioso, then, as visible or acknowledged constructs, Cervantes inscribes his imitative strategies: mostly agonistic, occasionally heuristic, never reproductive or sacramental. Out of this rich and abundant intertextuality—this criss-crossing of influences—I want to take up three subtexts, one at a time, in order to explore their literary transvaluation in El curioso.

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The episode that disrupts and glosses the reading of El curioso. But let us here briefly recall the Herodotus plot. King Candaules desires that Gyges—“his favourite among his bodyguard”—and the man to whom he entrusts “all his weightiest secrets”—watch his Queen undress: “contrive that you may see her naked.” Gyges protests (briefly, in some half-dozen lines, unlike Cervantes’ long-winded Lotario) but Candaules won’t take no for an answer. He installs Gyges “behind the open door” of the regal bedchamber, where he must play the voyeur. The Queen (still nameless in the Greek text) perceives what her husband has done and decides to punish him for what Herodotus calls her “great shame.” The next day she gives Gyges an either/or proposition: “You must either kill Candaules and take me for your own queen and the throne of Lydia, or yourself be killed now without more ado.” Gyges opts for life, of course, and slays Candaules in his sleep. The rest is Persian history.

The earliest allusion to this story in Spanish occurs in the medieval Coplas de Mingo Revulgo, in which it is written of “Candaulo”: “ándase tras los zagalos / por estos andurrias / todo el día embebecido.” These lines were glossed by Fernando del Pulgar as meaning that Candaules was a boy-chaser: “que su rey anda tras los mozos.” Whatever sexual acts Candaules’ medieval career may have taken, they are not as yet evident in Herodotus. The so-called “father of History” gives us a notably unadorned plot: a man’s desire to expose a woman (who violently objects to the exposure) to another man. In Herodotus the woman executes a contrapasso, as it were: she contrives to have the contriver of this plot destroyed—ironically by her own “body-guard,” and in the very bedroom he has profaned. Traffic in women is violently avenged at the dawn of
lay in which King Arthur nearly stabs Guinevere after he imprimently drinks from a magic ivory horn that reveals her infidelity by pouring the wine upon him, "down even to his feet." 22

But there is a subtext even to all these subtexts. The father of all these secular cup-tests, as it turns out, is Moses. As spokesman for the Lord in the Old Testament, Moses articulates the so-called "law of jealousies" in Numbers 5:11-31. This law decrees that a priest may force an accused wife (even one merely suspected of going astray) to drink from "an earthen vessel" a mixture of water and dirt from the tabernacle floor. Should the woman have lain with another, then this "bitter water that causeth the curse" (in one Spanish version, "el agua que saca la verdad") shall "enter into her . . . and her belly shall swell, and her thigh shall rot." When Lotario piously drinks from this magic cup, it will automatically spill its contents into his lap [OF, 42]. Rinaldo's prudent refusal is rooted in the predictable frailty of the feminine gender: "My wife a woman is, their sex is frail" (the "la donna e mobile" routine). 23 The Carolingian wife-test that subtends El curioso had its earliest Arthurian expression in Robert Bicket's Lay of the Horn, a 12th-century Anglo-Norman Breton

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lay —for the first and last time, it would seem— by an outraged woman. The declinations on this ur-text of two men trafficking in the body of a woman without her leave are most instructive. As we move down

16 On Candaules as a giant, see Kirby Flower Smith's "The Tale of Gyges and the King of Lydia," American Journal of Philology, 23 (1903), 36. Cervantes' disruptive wineskin episode is an imitation of the last chapter of Book II of Apuleius' Golden Ass (translated into Spanish by Diego de Cortagana for posthumous publication c. 1525), where Lucius compares himself to a giant-killer as he perforates three bewitched and animated wineskins.


19 On women as scapegoats, see Dorothy Dinnerstein: "What women want is to stop serving as scapegoats (their own and children's scapegoats) for human resentment of the human condition. They want this so painfully and so pervasively, and until quite recently it was such a hopeless thing to want, that they have not yet been able to say out loud that they want it" (The Mermaid and the Minotaur [New York: Harper & Row, 1976], p. 234).

20 On Anselmo as voyeur: "Anselmo se encerró en un asposento y por los agujeros de la cerradura estuvo mirando y escuchando lo que los dos trataban" (I.33); and "Todo lo miraba Anselmo, cubierto detrás de unos tapices donde se había escondido" (I. 34).

21 Orlando Furioso, 43.6. An imprudent character in Orlando Furioso called Anselmo —a victim of Ariosto's dreaded cup-test [OF, 43.6]— may have provided Cervantes both the name of his anti-hero in El curioso and that of his Second Shepherd in the "Goatherd's Tale." In this last, Cervantes represents as a locus of misogynistic lamentation a pseudo-Arcadia where men such as Anselmo and Eugenio take up full-time careers of "railing at the frivolity of women" (I.51).

22 Robert Bicket's Lai du Cor [Lay of the Horn], MS: Bodleian Library, Oxford, Digby 86. See English prose translation in Medieval English Literature, ed. Thomas Garbaty (Lexington, Mass.: Diana Heath, 1984). In this lay, [p. 18] Guinevere protests that the horn is "too veracious," as it tests unfaithful thoughts as well as acts. In
"dos amigos" tradition trooped by antonomasía, however, my main concern here, has been very capably unfolded by Avalle-Arce, who traces it down seven centuries, beginning with the 12th-century Disciplina clericalis. Although Avalle-Arce gives the tale mythic status ("situación mitica"), he never inquires into the sexual mores or economic practices that have assigned that "situation" to literary mythology (as I hope to show Cervantes does). Actually, Avalle-Arce could have begun his Latin tradition some 8 centuries earlier, in the non-fictional realm, with St. Augustine's claim (in De genesi ad litteram; his commentary on Genesis), that "if it was company and good conversation that Adam needed, it would have been much better arranged to have two men together, as friends, [and] not a man and a woman" (IX.v.9). But Avalle-Arce could not have closed his dos amigos tradition where we can today, since at the time of his writing he did not have access to Freud's recently published Complete Letters (1985), in which is documented another dos amigos situation "passing the love of women": namely, Freud's own "long thralldom" to Wilhelm Fliess. One of Freud's letters to Fliess makes his priorities explicit: "I do not share your contempt for friendship between men, probably because I am to a high degree party to it. In my life, as you know, woman has never replaced the comrade, the friend.

How, then, might we unravel this "mythic" plot of male intimacy — of males bonded together through the conduit of a woman's body that they must shame (as in Herodotus), or test (as in the Bible and subsequent "secular scriptures"), or erase (as in the dos amigos tradition recently revived by Borges)? How does Cervantes criticize and correct his models, rewrite these prior visions as his own? And will we "need a commentary" to make sense of his transvaluation? Francisco Ayala has observed that El curioso remains "una de las creaciones más ambiguas e insondables de su ambiguo e insondable autor." Cervantes' creation may be more amenable to the "soundings" of contemporary readers — readers who are made not "nauseous" but curious by its protagonist's strange metaphor for his wife-testing. For it is Anselmo's self-diagnosis of his disease — his verbalization of its kinship to an eating disorder common among women — that forces us to recognize the great distance that Cervantes has traversed from his models. For in none of these subtexts — from Moses to Ariosto — is the husband's desire so explicitly structured like the language of male hysteria.

Anselmo famously diagnoses his own "locura" by metaphorizing it as a female eating disorder desire to eat dirt, plaster, coal, and even other unnamed, if more explicitly vile, "things": "enfermedad que suelen tener algunas mujeres, que se les antoja comer tierra, yeso, carbón y otras cosas peores, aun asquerosas para mirarse, cuanto más para comerse" (411-12). By way of a presenting symptom, then, Anselmo offers us a menu of non-nutritive ingestants. Whatever we are to make of this utterance, it begs, I think, for the kind of psychoanalytic criticism that is being applied today to those so-called "fasting girls" — from Catherine of Siena and her anorexia mirabilis down to our modern epidemic of eating disorders. Although social and cultural historians are using psychoanalytic approaches, there are still many scholars who would refuse any "crítica psicológica" to literary figures. Harry Sieber usefully gave Anselmo's disease a Renaissance psycho-physiological reading in 1970, when he diagnosed it, on the authority of Huarte de San Juan as pica — a craving for unnatural food — glossing it as "possibly a version of hysteria." While I do not regard Huarte's humoral theories as quaint or useless (I agree with Sieber that Huarte "taps the unknown often mysterious emotional structure of man"), I believe...
that we may move beyond the venerable Renaissance medical theories in the area of eating disorders, widely regarded today as “a silent language,” as a kind of “discourse without words” (e.g., an issue currently being illuminated, and sometimes banalized, by such books as *Holy Anorexia*, *Starving for Attention*, *Hungry for Identity*, et al.). We are in a better position now to scrutinize that gender-inflected label of *hysteria*, eliminated as far back as 1952 from the *Diagnostic Manual*, if not from the mind, of the American Psychiatric Association. If, as the Lacanian Serge Leclaire puts it, the hysterics’ question boils down to “Am I a man or a woman,” we may at least be prepared to abandon the rigid either/or category that bespeaks such pathology.27 But we should under no circumstances abandon either Anselmo or the question of his conspicuous consumption. Just as psychoanalysis was taught to Freud by his “hysterical” patients, our contemporary debate about sexual difference —indeed, about the future of difference— may have much to learn from the torments of Anselmo.

It is reductive to speculate on whether Anselmo is homo-, bi-, or asexual—all gross clinical labels that shed little light on his own enigmatic identification with women. By confronting psychoanalysis (as a theory of sexuality in human societies) with new inquiries into ideologies of gender, we may open Anselmo’s *locura* to the complex sexual dynamics operating both in his case and in his culture. Cervantes, indeed, may help us to move from the discourse of hysteria—also known as “sexual allegory”—towards a new discourse, towards a workable psychology of sex differences. The special pertinence of this tale for our time is that Anselmo’s disease—the need to *know* his woman’s real nature—is a perverse form of “communion.” Anselmo explicitly metaphors his disorder as a longing for female longings (“como suelen tener las mujeres”). Even as twisted signs or signifiers, Anselmo’s cravings for what he believes to be female fare are a part of the curious dynamic of his sex / gender relationships: Anselmo’s desires to test, and even swallow the *other* (Camila) can be fulfilled only through “the instrument” of the *same* (Lotario). Seen from this coign, Anselmo recalls Foucault’s Don Quixote: “a hero of the Same” in an endless quest for similitude—a quest which leaves Anselmo, on the eve of his death, “amarillo, consumido, y seco” (I.35).28

There have been countless post-mortems done on Anselmo, ascribing his death to error, to *curiositas*, to mono- or megalomania, to an ethical abnormality, to sexual perversion. The earliest of these “anatomies,” to my thinking, was performed by Cervantes himself in the *Persiles*—in the work Edward Dudley justly ranks as “one of the most ambitious intellectual feats ever attempted by a novelist.”29 Cervantes’ rewriting in the *Persiles* of his predecessor self in the *Quijote* is a revisionary as well as a visionary experiment. The vexed issue of male bonding via women’s bodies is deepened, extended, and allegorized in Cervantes’ last romance. The enigmatic overture to the *Persiles* (set on a fictional “Barbaric Isle” in the real North Sea in the semi-fictional 1560s) may be read as an extended metaphor for David’s dirge, Borges’ epigram, and my title: “passing the love of women.” I would further suggest that the Barbaric Isle narrative of the *Persiles* shows us Anselmo’s psyche, writ large, in the mode of sexual allegory. The “Isla Bárbara” narrative, in short, teaches us how to read *El curioso*.

Let’s begin with those cravings for (among other things) carbón. The male inhabitants of Cervantes’ Barbaric Isle eat something like that regularly, or at least ritually. The insistent food motif in this narrative is a powdered drink of charred hearts: “la bebida de los polvos”—specifically “polvos de . . . abrazado corazón.”30 The only way to identify

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30 *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, ed. Juan Bautista Avalle-Arce (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1969), p. 58. All subsequent references to this text will be parenthetically documented.

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the potential father of their forthcoming messiah is by the manly ingestion of the pulverized hearts of sacrificial victims: only one lucky patriarch will be able to swallow these powders without wincing. This drinking test has been revealed to the barbarians by a “vana e impertinente profecía” (shades of Anselmo’s “vana e impertinente curiosidad”?). Eduardo González sees this ritual drink as metaphorizing “el autócrito ajetreo sodomita del Grupo” [the aboriginal sodomite agitation of the Group], a notion given some authority by Alban Forcione, who writes of a particular barbarian’s “sodomitic passion,” and by Joaquín Casalduero, who also allows of “una impresión de sodomía” in this episode. These consensual notions would link Cervantes’ barbarians at least to the Anselmo of Francisco Ayala’s interpretation: the closet homosexual who kept his “turbios deseos . . . sublimados en las formas nobles de la camaradería.”31

But my own reading does not depend upon sodomy as an interpretive structure. I am more interested in the Barbaric Isle as Cervantes’ emblematic “homosocial” landscape, in Eve Sedgwick’s sense of
The same landscape that we pre-viewed in the tradition of los dos amigos, in other words, is magnified grotesquely, to almost comic proportions, in the Barbaric Isle narrative.

What do we find on Cervantes' Isla Bárbara? The island sustains a community of isolated males bound together under a “Barbaric Law.” This so-called “Ley Bárbara” or ritual idolatry dictates a continual circulation of women's bodies, required only for biological procreation —as containers to incubate that long-awaited messiah. To this end, imported women are purchased “a subidísimos precios” [at inflated prices] with gold ore and prize pearls: “que los pagan en pedazos de oro sin cuño y en preciosísimas perlas.” The text is careful to note that the women are never brutalized by the barbarians: on the contrary, they are well treated by them “que sólo en esto muestran no ser bárbaros” (p. 57). The only interdiction for women on the island would appear to be language. They are forbidden to “dilate” their speech, or as the interpreter explains: “que estos mis amos no gustan que en otras pláticas me dilate, sino en aquellas que hacen al caso para su negocio” [These my masters do not wish me to dilate my speech in anything other than what is pertinent to their business] (p. 62). “Their business” is violence and the sacred, and women have but one assigned role in this economy: they are commodities who guarantee the continuity of the insular culture; they are things to be exchanged, just like spoken words. The women on the Barbaric Isle are in fact treated precisely like signs: they are “communicated.”

When one of the island's warriors expresses his spontaneous desire for the sign of a woman (“la hermosa imagen, que pensaba ser mujer” actually is the hero in female disguise), the barbarian’s “out-law” behavior is checked with a deadly arrow through his tongue. One arrow leads to another and then to a full-scale patri-/fratricide: “arremetieron los unos a los otros, sin respetar el hijo al padre, ni el hermano al hermano” (p. 68). A violent faction sets the island on fire, and in the ensuing holocaust all its inhabitants are turned to ashes [“hechos ceniza”] (p. 70). The protagonists Persiles and Sigismunda (travelling under pseudonyms) manage to escape from the smoldering island in order to begin, as self-exiles, their quest for a different sexual economy. Thus begins Cervantes' last romance, with the amazing micro-narrative about an all-male community trying —before the holocaust— to detour the love of women. Cervantes may have taken for the germ of his narrative Pliny’s description of the Essenes, a community of all-male refugees living “sine ulla femina” (close to the Dead Sea, aptly). This classic fantasy has its modern literary avatars, to name only two flagrant examples, in D. H. Lawrence, who dreams of men relating to each other in “womenless regions,” and in Borges, who makes that dream fictionally come true.33 The traditional “doctrinal” readings of this Barbic Isle prologue to the Persiles focus on Cervantes' barbary as a kind of Arctic hell to Rome's “heaven on earth.”34 Much attention has also been given to


33 Pliny, Natural History, Volume II, Book V. xv. 73, trans. H. Rackham, M. A., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press), pp. 276-77. We know that Pliny was on Cervantes' mind during this period of writing, since Book VIII of the Natural History is cited within the Persiles itself (p. 134). D. H. Lawrence's “womenless regions of fight and pure thought” may be found in his “Education of the People,” in Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence London: Heinemann, 1936), pp. 664-65.

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The Intertextuality of El curioso

Before I return to the transactions between men in El curioso, I would like to glance briefly at some fertile and interesting similarities between Cervantes' barbaric society and Lacan's Symbolic order —the order of Language—in which the so-called "Father's Law" replaces the "Desire of the Mother." It is well known that Lacan's notion of the Symbolic is derived from anthropology, most notably from Lévi-Strauss. But we might generate even richer implications between Lacan's psychoanalytic account of the unconscious —what he calls "the scene of the Word" and Cervantes' literary account of the Barbaric Isle. Cervantes represents the inhabitants of his literary island, for instance, as crazed producers of signs, communicating largely by noises ("espantoso estruendo") or by gestures ("señales," "muestras"). The women imported by Cervantes' barbarians uncannily anticipate Lacan's idea of woman, expressed in his Seminaire II, as "the symbol of a 'word' exchanged between men." The Barbaric Isle also recalls Lacan's "scene of the Word" in that it maintains its own resident interpreter; it is the scene of some covert male / female language lessons; and its shores offer refuge only to those outsiders who can play at being "mute." Cervantes' whole Barbaric Isle narrative, in other words, appears to be depicting a crisis of language, of categories of difference. In a kind of travesty of man's conscription into systems of kinship —into the culturalization of biological sexuality— the hero of the Persiles is represented in the act of being metaphorically "born" into a barbaric order whose paternal law must be upheld through ritual sacrifices. Most pertinent to our reading is the fact that Cervantes destroys his island—his mapa mentis, his spatial metaphor for "relations between men"— before his hero's heart can be cannibalized.

To return our focus to the "relations between men" inscribed in El curioso, however, it should be tendentiously clear by now that I regard the Barbaric Isle narrative as Cervantes' retrospective commentary on Anselmo's problem. As I see it, Anselmo suffers from a disease of communication in all senses of that term. It may be a "multidetermined disorder," but we cannot infer for Anselmo either biological factors or family dynamics. What we can know, however, is the language of Anselmo's culture, the approved maxims and prejudices that constitute its system of values. That system might suggest to us why he is making the female body a focus of his biological sexuality—the hero of the Christian Romance is represented in the act of being metaphorically "born" into a barbaric order whose patriarchal law must be upheld through ritual sacrifices. Most pertinent to our reading is the fact that Cervantes drops the island—his mapa mentis, his spatial metaphor for "relations between men"— before his hero's heart can be cannibalized.

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First, the economics of desire between Anselmo and Lotario; secondly, their long discourses on the nature of woman; finally, Camila's untraditional response to being "communicated" between men.

First, the economics. Just as women are fungible goods on the Barbaric isle, Camila is regarded barbarically—by both her husband and her lover—as currency, as an item of exchange. She is not merely reified across the tale, she is mineralized. Obsessed with the equation of women and precious stones, Lotario tells Anselmo that he is the "legítimo posesor de un finísimo diamante, de cuya bondad y quilates estuviesen satisfechos cuantos lapidarios le viesen," a point which he hammers home compulsively: "Haz cuenta, Anselmo, que Camila es finísimo diamante"; and "No hay joya en el mundo que tanto valga como la mujer casta y honrada" (I.33). Anselmo is similarly keen to have an 18-karat wife, having designed a test to reveal "los quilates de su bondad como el fuego muestra los del oro." But he also believes that he can sell his wife's loyalty with gold—"[cuatro] mil escudos de oro" (I.33). Even the narrator's problematic voice begins to echo what Nabokov is amused to call the "Prospector's Simile" in this work: "Pues si la mina de su honor . . . te da sin ningún trabajo toda la riqueza que tiene . . . ¿para qué quieres ahondar la tierra, y buscas nuevas vetas de nuevo y nunca visto tesoro . . . ?" (I.33) When Camila eventually

42 Lectures on "Don Quixote," p. 143.
falls, it is because Lotario “minó la roca de su entereza,” although she would have fallen “aunque . . . fuera toda de bronce” (I.34). “The mine of her honor” —what a telling trope! The rhetoric of commerce here insinuates obvious parallels with the vendible ladies of the Barbaric Isle narrative. But its meaning even wanders around that catalogue of paper ladies which crops up near the end of the Quijote, Part II, when Sansón Carrasco assures his pastoral fraternity that if necessary they can all “buy” their shepherdesses at the marketplace —“pues las venden en las plazas” (II.73).

Also proleptic of the Barbaric Isle rhetoric, where the whole issue of female desire is elided, are the long discourses between Lotario and Anselmo on the nature of women. Anselmo assures Lotario “que su esposa Camila no tenía otro gusto ni otra voluntad que la que él quería que tuviese” (I.33). How parallel this seems to the arrogant logic of the barbarian in the Persiles who shrieks out, “Esa doncella es mía, porque yo la quiero” (p. 67). As for Lotario’s cautionary discourse (which Anselmo regards as oracular, and which critics have variously celebrated as wise, eloquent, striking, or —sad but true— as “assertions of normalcy”), I see it as little more than a copious, aphoristic, even vicious tractate for the male regulation of the woman’s body.43 Lotario’s seizures of honor (to borrow Honig’s phrase for Calderón), the urgency of his insistence on el qué dirán, and his blind adherence to Aristotelian systems of misogyny (“Mira, amigo, que la mujer es animal imperfecto”) are blindingly obvious in their unconscious barbarity to women.

Finally, as for the traffic in Camila, the scapegoating of her sexuality is foiled by her sudden accession to subjectivity, by her own unruly production of discourse. The curious pertinence of Camila strikes us most forcibly during her improvisation, under pressure, of the storeroom drama —variously labeled in the text as Anselmo’s tragedy (“la tragedia de la muerte de su honra”) or his anatomy (“notomía de las entrañas de su honra”). Unlike all of El curioso’s intertexts —and in an implied debate with them— Cervantes makes Camila into a “maker.” Using theatre as a means of resistance, Camila confronts her husband’s “hysteries” with her own histrionics. In record time, she produces, directs, and stars in her own agonistic imitation of the Roman myth of Lucrece —“aquella Lucrecia quien dice que se mató sin haber cometido

Camila’s little drama is a fiction-within-a-fiction-within-a-fiction, what John J. Allen calls “the last and smallest [of the Quijote’s] series of Chinese boxes.”45 Camila steps out of her box having convinced Anselmo that she is “the pattern of chastity” —or as Cervantes suggestively puts it, “un simulacro de la honestidad” (I.34). Through the agency of the alert Camila, Cervantes laughs the chastity-tested away. Like the men who love through her, Camila will eventually die, but not before she produces a plausible counter-text to that insidious Golden Age sociolect of female “value”—a lying text, in fact, but the only one that Anselmo (“el hombre mas sabrosamente engañado”) is evidently able “to stomach.”

If El curioso impertinente is “a frank intruder,” it may be said to intrude into all those quixotic male fantasies about the nature of women. Cervantes seems to have been testing wife-testing, exposing all those shared cultural fictions —the norma loquendi of the Renaissance man—that drive Anselmo, like the violent and sacrificial barbarians of the Persiles, to self-destruct. At the critical moment of writing his final confession, Anselmo drops dead, pen in hand, leaving the unfinished lines: “y pues yo fui el fabricador de mi deshonra, no hay para que . . .” (I.34). Language fails Anselmo but it does not fail Cervantes who, before his own death, will cross the frontiers of genre into romance —into that uncharted territory where both genre and gender distinctions blur. If the earlier “tragedy of the death of Anselmo’s honor” teaches us anything, in sum, it is that “passing the love of women” is an act of great violence, and that only a failure of language would also make it sacred. It is our turn now not to fail Cervantes.


44 Camila contests that image of female purity internalized and even enshrined by Renaissance writers: “quiero matar muriendo” [I want to kill while dying] is her laconic correction of Lucrece’s exemplary suicide. In contrast to Shakespeare’s representation of Lucrece pacing the floor after her rape —“And that deep torture may be called a hell,” ‘When more is felt than one has power to tell’” (II.1287-88)— Cervantes’ parody focuses especially on her “power to tell.” Unlike her own literary models, Camila’s affective experience does not lack a voice, a voice that will find a swelling chorus across the Persiles.