The Economics of Virginity: Cervantes' Novella *El amante liberal*[1]

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1. Reading Romance

El amante liberal is one of those novellas by Cervantes that modern readers find notoriously difficult—one of the narratives to which the deliberately vague category "idealistic" is usually applied. Novellas like *La española inglesa*, *La señora Cornelia*, or *Las dos doncellas* have come under fire from critics since the nineteenth century, who have tended to be particularly scathing about the story of the generous lover.[2] Even more than its siblings, it has a reputation for being conventional, artificial, pompous, and full of mannerisms. "No es más que una novela bizantina," a recent editor notes dismissively (109)—and in doing so puts the finger on what in the view of present-day readers is the crux of this novella: in terms of genre it draws heavily on the Hellenistic love and adventure tale and thus on a narrative tradition that over the centuries has all but disappeared from the literary canon, in a process of displacement in which, ironically, the prestige of *Don Quixote* played a significant role.

The English language provides a convenient set of terms by which to differentiate between two forms of extended prose narrative, "novel" and "romance,"[3] and *El amante liberal* clearly belongs in the second category. Part of a tradition that has proved extremely resilient, this narrative form dominated European prose fiction from the romantic adventure tales of the Hellenistic era to the Early Modern Age.[4] These are tales that (to name only a few core characteristics) privilege plot over characterization, complexity over probability, distance over proximity, magniloquent monologue over dialogue, elevated over mixed style and, most importantly, wish-fulfillment over probability. In Freudian terms, hence, there is a close resemblance between romance and daydream (Freud 1959a, 145). In terms of plot these tales center on pairs of heterosexual lovers—the girl is always sublimely beautiful—separated and finally reunited by a complicated chain of events which is supposed to end with marriage. Romance, in short, is about the premarital circulation of beauty in geographical space. It will hardly be necessary to point out that in popular culture this pattern dominates to this day.

At first glance *El amante liberal* seems a perfect incarnation of the typical romance plot: Leonisa and her rejected suitor Ricardo are abducted by North-African corsairs from their native Trapani on the westernmost tip of Sicily. They are separated and brought by many and devious paths to Turkish-occupied Cyprus, where they are reunited. Numerous twists of plot later they manage to escape, bringing home a rich booty. In a two-stage final monologue Ricardo renounces his passion for Leonisa, which naturally conquers her heart. The narrative is liberally strewn with references to ancient models (as is the later *Persiles*, for which *El amante liberal* can be seen as a literary trial run). The dramatic *medias-in-res*-beginning, for instance, alludes to

[1] An earlier version of this essay was published in Ehrlicher & Poppenberg 320-336. I would like to thank Walter Marx (Berlin) for his valuable comments on the text.

[2] For more on critical response to the novella, see the notes in the edition by Jorge García López (Cervantes 2001 775). Further citations to this edition are given in the text.

[3] The fact that the German language does not make this distinction has had far-reaching consequences for literary theory in Germany: the definition of the novel put forward by Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, for example, is based on this non-distinction, which therefore had a strong influence on Romantic interpretations of *Don Quixote*. German scholars of Romance languages and literatures, however, are aware of the terminological gap. See Nolting-Hauff 133 and Küpper 191.

[4] The authority here is El Saffar 1974, xiii. El Saffar draws on Northrop Frye's theory of literary modes, which however reserves the term "romance" for fairy tales and legends, while *El amante liberal* would probably fall under the mimetic mode. See Frye 33 et ss..

Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, the only surviving Hellenistic novel to have this type of opening, while the theme of initially unrequited love alludes to another ancient model, Achilles Tatius's *Leucippe and Cleitophon*.[5] If in his preface to the *Novelas ejemplares* Cervantes includes an advance notice of *Persiles*—"libro que se atreve a competir con Heliodoro" (19)—that is not just advertising but a clear hint on how to read some of the exemplary stories, too.

At a crucial point, however, the story of the generous lover falls away from the daydream fictionality of the Hellenistic novel. Right at the beginning Ricardo laments the Turkish conquest of Cyprus in 1570-71 in a speech that, though formally "antique," was politically rather topical at the time of publication in 1613: "¡Oh lamentables ruinas de la desdichada Nicosia, apenas enjutas de la sangre de vuestros valerosos y mal afortunados defensores!" (109). His opening speech ties the novella's plot into historical events that in Cervantes's and hence Ricardo's time were a living memory, namely, the traumatic escalations of the more or less permanent military conflict resulting from Ottoman expansion into the eastern Mediterranean. Since the formal opening of the story is rounded off by an "ethnographic" comparison of the administrative systems of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires (112 et ss.), the effect is a curious overlap of narrative patterns, one inspired by the Hellenistic novel, the other akin to historical chronicle. The Levantine setting of *El amante liberal* offers sufficient scope for both possibilities. It is as if current political events in the Greek Levant had called to the author's mind the protagonists of the ancient adventure novels and their wanderings in those locations.

Contemporary readings of the novella basically fall into three categories. Two of these are strictly complementary:[6] The first highlights what is perceived to be the development of the hero, Ricardo, who after many deprivations finally renounces his passion, demonstrating that he has learned to respect his beloved's free will. This could be called a humanist reading. It is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the genre, however, since romance is simply not interested in character development. On the contrary, the exclusion of any such development, the static invariability of characters in at least one important point is not only a defining feature of the genre, it is also the source of an inherent narrative pleasure that derives not from development but, rather, from the elegant functioning of a system. (To draw an analogy, the "realistic" *Novelas ejemplares* resemble experiments while the "idealistic" ones are more like mental machines. The former are open processes that enable us to observe, for example, what happens when different linguistic spheres meet, while the latter contain formulaic plots whose elegance lies in the smooth performance of a predefined operation, independently of the material that is introduced.) As we shall see, *El amante liberal* in no way challenges the conventions of its genre in this respect.

The second reading—let us call it a materialist reading—approaches the novella via its underlying system of human trafficking.[7] It turns on the fact that throughout the narrative the protagonists' exchange value is continually being assessed. (While for Ricardo it is a fairly stable 2,000 to 4,000 *escudos*, the rate for Leonisa is remarkably unstable, varying from 10,000 to 1,000 escudos). The variation in these figures is partly due to the fact that they relate to two different economic systems: human trafficking within the area under Ottoman control commands

[5] On the links between Cervantes's novella and the Tatius romance see Zimic 47-83. Zimic tends to overrate Tatius's influence, however, to which he attributes a number of general characteristics of the genre to be found in Cervantes, while at the same time underrating the influence of Heliodorus. It is all the more surprising that he misses one crucial similarity, citing the motif of unrequited love as a departure from the Greek model (63) even though it occurs in embryonic form at the beginning of *Leucippe and Cleitophon*. This opening is in turn interpreted as a deliberate break with the conventions by Holzberg 92.

[6] The pair of opposites set up by Georges Güntert is rather different and distinguishes between an "exemplary" (Catholic/nationalist, i.e. ideologically conformist) reading and an "ironic" one, a distinction which, he says, ties in with Cervantes's use of two different narrative voices. See Güntert 131.

[7] A magisterial analysis is provided in Johnson 142-152.

lower rates than ransoming (*rescate*), which is transacted between Ottoman and Christian spheres of influence. When the protagonists pass the geostrategic boundary between the western Mediterranean and the Levant, the currency in which their value is given changes, too; the narrator gives the exchange rate from *escudos* to *doblas* at 1:2 (130). In this second reading, the novella describes a world of unleashed trade and exchange in which people are insubstantial commodities. This lack of substance is the mark of the fallen world which the Ottoman domains—a distorted mirror-image of Catholic Europe—are revealed to be: "Todo se vende y todo se compra" (113). In this reading, the protagonists' escape (without *rescate*) is a prefiguration of their final redemption and release from this world.

The third reading—also argued from a materialist perspective—is basically an elaboration of the second one. It demonstrates an intense fascination with the destabilization of identity (male/female, Christian/Muslim) in the transitional space of the novella. Its favorite motif are the scenes in which the protagonists dress up or disguise themselves, e.g. when the Christian Leonisa is presented in magnificent Moorish dress in the tent of the Pasha of Nicosia (128–132), or when, in a curious travesty, the ship carrying the escaped Christians back to their native land is disguised as a Turkish ship, flying Turkish flags, its crew and passengers dressed in Turkish costume as they sail into port (155).[8] The emblematic character in this reading is the renegade, the apostate who is forever crossing boundaries and inhabits an ideological grey zone situated between stable religious identities (see Vázquez, and Koppenfels).

These readings, too, leave a number of questions open. In their pleasure in exploring cultural ambivalence, they often lose sight of the fact that for all its destabilizing elements, *El amante liberal* is still a "novela bizantina." The essential challenge therefore is to understand how the novella dovetails cultural transgression and Hellenistic form. For although identity is a central theme of most readings to date, they rarely address the actual mechanisms of identification. They describe the circulation of values and marks of identity but ignore the forces that drive it.[9] It is in these forces that psychoanalysis is interested. If we read the order of signs in *El amante liberal* from a psychoanalytical perspective, it emerges that the system of human trafficking in the novella is merely a vehicle for the circulation of certain desires; and that there is indeed a gold standard to which the varying exchange rates relate. Neither the laws of the market nor personal development nor the right to self-determination are fundamental to the order represented in this narrative, or to the half-forgotten tradition to which it belongs.

2. Psychoanalysis of the Unconcealed

If Early Modern romance poses a challenge to psychoanalysis it is because of its emphasis on the power of wishing. For romance, like fairy tales, hails from "olden times when wishes still came true," though in fairy tales it is the protagonists' wishes that come true, while in romance it is those of the readers. Fairy tales—and popular fiction—are frequent objects of psychoanalytical interpretation. This seems paradoxical, since both genres are characterized by the fact that the wishes that are at stake are very much at the surface of the narrative. They deal in daydreams, not in nightmares. And where wishes lie unconcealed, what is there for psychoanalysis to uncover? The same question arises with regard to *El amante liberal*, which seems to be as impervious to analysis as the ancient romances and fairy tales to which it is structurally related. Unsurprisingly, the work in Cervantes's oeuvre most frequently subjected to psychoanalytical scrutiny is *Don Quixote*,[10] whose jests, wordgames, verbal slips, obvious breaks

[8] A well-argued example for this type of reading may be found in Fuchs. Also see Clamurro.

[9] The exception here is Caroll B. Johnson, who identifies the system of human trafficking in the novella as an economy of desire. See Johnson 145.

[10] See for example El Saffar & Armas Wilson – most of the studies included here focus on *Don Quixote*.

and gaps and indomitable dialogic surplus amply illustrate that its world is already subject to the split that generates unconscious meaning.

Compared to the polyphonic world of *Don Quixote*, romance appears as a singularly unrepressed form of narrative. Whatever there is to say is said, with theatrical gestures, and whatever there is to do is done, with adventurous verve. But that is not to say that these narratives lack the "insistence of the letter" and therefore, an unconscious dimension. They have a different kind of insistence, however, and this must be the subject of an analytical reading of romance—a reading that does not seek to uncover hidden signs but, rather, to understand the dynamic of the visible ones. And since these are to be found at the level of the plot, a psychoanalytical reading of romance will start by what Peter Brooks has called "reading for the plot."

Romance narrative is predicated on a premodern concept of selfhood. It can fulfill simple wishes for its readers and relaxes the common cultural taboo on all forms of hallucinatory satisfaction: the evil are punished, the good are rewarded, the lovers are united. Readers of Freud know that it is this daydreamlike quality which is emphasized whenever the founder of psychoanalysis uses the German word *Roman*, as he does for example in essay on the *Familienroman* ("family romance").[11] But it is precisely its similarity to daydream that spoils Early Modern romance for modern readers—despite the fact that the paths to wish-fulfillment that these offer are not invariably simple and can be highly tortuous. Yet there is no contesting that wishes do come true, though not in the traditional fairy-tale style.[12] Wish-fulfillment in Early Modern romance occurs not on the plot level but on the narrative level, not because miracles are worked but because the characters' wishes submit to the wish for narratability, because they are themselves fundamentally narratable. In modern novels, in contrast, there is a gap between wish and narrative, such that the protagonists' wishes cannot drive the plot unless by warped paths (Don Quixote's madness, Emma Bovary's phantasies). Reading modern novels, hence, means identifying wishes: "What does Emma Bovary really want?" This kind of detective work is not necessary with romance, where the wish that is represented plays straight into the hands of narrative desire.

Psychoanalytical critiques frequently open with a kind of disclaimer, a solemn promise not to analyze the author or the characters, nor to present a suggestive list of sexual symbols, but to discuss how desire works *in the text*.[13] There are two good reasons for doubting this type of statement. For one thing, it serves to veil rather than reject what has always been offensive about psychoanalytical readings, namely, their emphasis on sexuality. A structural analysis of wishes and desires in a text will always produce a sexed reading. Nor is it necessarily a comforting notion that psychoanalytical criticism is no longer content—if it ever was—to screen a piece of literature for sexual symbols but, instead, seeks to examine the relationship between language and sexuality, illuminating the underside of not just the individual sign but the entire structure.

For another, disclaimers of this type are far too complacent about the fallacy of identification—the risk of seeing unconscious subjectivity where there is nothing but systems of

[11] Freud 1959b. In contrast to *La gitanilla*, *La española inglesa*, and most ancient romances, *El amante liberal* does not replicate the patterns of the neurotic family romance because the motif of the lost child or changeling is missing. This precludes the possibility of suddenly providing the protagonists with a noble lineage: Leonisa's parents are always, if rather palely, in the background; while the anecdote of the beautiful Moorish woman mentions Ricardo's father as being a knight in the train of Charles V (136), at the time of action he appears to have no parents, though his "parientes" are vaguely mentioned on 159.

[12] Ilse Nolting-Hauff sees the link between fairy tale and romance as being extremely close: Nolting-Hauff 451.

[13] See for example Brooks 112: "There can be a psychoanalytic criticism of the text itself that does not become—as has usually been the case—a study of the psychogenesis of the text (the author's unconscious), the dynamics of literary response (the reader's unconscious), or the occult motivations of the characters (postulating an 'unconscious' for them)." In a similar vein, El Saffar & Armas Wilson 2 et ss.

artfully arranged signs. Psychoanalytical criticism tends to be somewhat overconfident about its ability to get around systems by uncovering their inherent mechanisms, i.e. the circulation of signs, the purely symbolic that keeps narrative moving. In practice, seeking the symbolic is no safeguard against the fallacy of identification in all its forms. We are deceiving ourselves if we believe that by concentrating on the interplay of signifiers we will neutralize our reader's instinct of identification. The real challenge is to read *with* this instinct, to use like a magnifying lens the bends and breaks that it generates.

Which laws, then, govern the interplay of symbols in *El amante liberal*? The lodestone for all the novella's systems of signs and the force that animates them is a sign that is in itself meaningless. It marks a necessary absence. Though it is in constant circulation, all we are allowed to see of it are a number of placeholders that are alternately veiled and unveiled. This mysterious sign is virginity. (In this respect Cervantes's novella closely follows the tradition established by the *Aethiopica*, whose high moral tone owes much to its cult of virginity—as does its survival in the Christian era, first in Byzantium and later in Catholic Europe. Among all of the Hellenistic romances, this was the one that best reflected the reorganization of sexuality in late antiquity on which Christian sexual morality was based). Leonisa's fabulous beauty, around which *El amante liberal* revolves, is simply a function of her virginal integrity (*entereza*).

Virginity is also referenced in a whole series of motifs involving precious objects, money and, most importantly, pearls. The chaste pearls with which the heroine is decked out for her presentation in the Pasha's tent form a contrast to her dark-red veil (129), but also to the ruby ("piedra balaja") that features in the anecdote about the beautiful Moorish woman by which Cervantes mirrors the scene in the Pasha's tent (137). In this respect Leonisa is reminiscent of Preciosa, the "precious one" from *La gitanilla* with her jiggling ear ornaments, and of Charicleia, the heroine of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, whose integrity and identity is also reflected in the jewelry she wears. In accordance with the conventions of the genre, in *El amante liberal*, too, precious things stand in for the object of desire. This pattern established by Heliodorus is startlingly amplified, however, when the worth of the object is assessed in much more concrete terms: Leonisa's fluctuating market value, of which the novella keeps close account, is determined by it. This becomes clear in the little fiction Mahamut uses to ascertain Leonisa's state of preservation when she is recovered. He mentions a discount price of three to four hundred *escudos* which, he says, Cornelio was willing to pay in order to recover Leonisa, bearing in mind that her value might have diminished due to sexual depredation by third parties:

> A la cual holgaría de hallar para rescatarla, si es que su amo se había ya desengañado de que no era tan rica como él pensaba, aunque podía ser que por haberla gozado la tuviese en menos. (135)[14]

In *El amante liberal*, virginity holds the position of the central phantasm. In psychoanalytical terms that position is reserved for the phallus, which here takes a premodern, romance form. An essentially unattainable object of desire (it vanishes when possession is taken), virginity has the status of Jacques Lacan's object *a*. In *El amante liberal* it also fulfills the function that Alfred Hitchcock, another master of plot, ironically termed "the MacGuffin": an object of desire that, while in itself meaningless, keeps the action moving. [15] If in psychoanalytical terms virginity is a phallus, it is because it represents a culturally powerful fantasy about the lack—the necessary lack—of a male genital. It is the place where it is not, never has been, and never will be; a symbolic void. In this wholly non-physical, structural sense we can say that virginity designates the place of castration.

[14] Cf. Johnson 147.

[15] The parallel between Hitchcock's "MacGuffin" und Lacan's "object a" was drawn by Slavoj Žižek in Žižek 54.

And this is what drives the novella's action, since the desire of (nearly) all male characters is directed toward making the sign of signs vanish. The desire that drives the narrative as such, in contrast, i.e. the narrative desire, is directed toward keeping it in circulation for as long as possible. At regular intervals the story therefore has to reassure itself of the continuing existence of this unlikely *entereza*:

> Yo, señor […] soy la poco querida de Cornelio y la bien llorada de Ricardo, que por muy muchos y varios casos he venido a este miserable estado en que me veo; y aunque es tan peligroso, siempre por favor del cielo he conservado en él la entereza de mi honor… (135)

> Y aunque las desventuras y tristes acontecimientos suelen mudar las condiciones y aniquilar los ánimos valerosos, no ha sido así con el verdugo de mis buenas esperanzas; porque con más valor y entereza que buenamente decirse puede, ha pasado el naufragio de sus desdichas y los encuentros de mis ardientes cuanto honestas importunaciones… (157)

Continuing the story means continuing to ferry the virginal MacGuffin all over the Mediterranean, with the help of such convenient vehicles as corsairs and storms. As in the Hellenistic tales of love and adventure, it is not the protagonists' death (which is faked in a number of scenes) that ends the narrative, but the loss of the greatest treasure of all. This loss can either be brought about by legitimate means, which with Cervantes means the blessing of the Church, or by illegitimate ones, such as seduction or rape. Once this has happened there is nothing left to narrate for this type of story. Since marriage must end it, the preservation of virginity is a narrative requirement, for it animates not only the interplay of desires *within* the narrative, but also the narrative desire itself. The underlying principle therefore is the principle of delay, which affects the novella's plot on three levels: sexually, in a delay of gratification; economically, in consumer abstinence; and in terms of religion, in the constancy of faith. (The third theme is remarkably pale in *El amante liberal*).

The wish of nearly all of the male characters to make Leonisa's precious asset disappear could be described as a narrative death drive—"a consummation devoutly to be wished." At another level the narrative death drive is reflected in Ricardo's insistent death wish, which he feels compelled to utter every time he opens his mouth. To him, each unlikely postponement of his death is an insupportable delay: "Cada punto que la galeota tardaba en anegarse o en embestir en las peñas, era para mí un siglo de más penosa muerte" (123). Yet this direct reflection of the narrative desire for the end is only a secondary motif. Ricardo is tired of life because Leonisa rejected him, so the narrative desire that prevents his quick end actually works as a life drive. Peter Brooks has read the two central concepts of Freud's essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in narratological terms, arguing that in the world of narrative, Thanatos is an accelerating force while Eros generates delay (Brooks 112). And as Freud suggested in his speculations about the laws of life, Eros occasionally succeeds in harnessing Thanatos for purposes of his own.

This holds true for narration, too. In striving to achieve their end—which would also be the end of the story—Leonisa's various admirers cross each other and, for a while, prevent the end being reached. This period of grace *is* the narrative. But in the end—and this, too, corresponds to Freud's speculations—life must serve death, and just as in Freud's theory "the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion" (Freud 1955, 39), so the narrative seeks to end in its own way, that is, with the legitimate annihilation of virginity, one that takes place with the blessing of the father and the padre. (A hidden illegitimacy is inscribed even into his very orthodox ending, of which more later). Any illegitimate ending—an extramarital or even transcultural relationship, the sexual union of Sicilian Christian with North African corsair, Jewish merchant, Turkish kadi or pasha—would be wrong in narrative terms, too, a shortcut or short-circuit (on short-circuiting see Brooks 109). The need for delay is linked to sexual and

cultural prohibitions. This approximation between the laws governing narrative and the laws governing society is one of the basic rules of the genre. The romance element as a retarding force is predicated on the institution of marriage.

3. The Plot

Four different strands make up the plot of *El amante liberal*:

(1) The primary plot leads *from virginity to marriage*. Its progress has a clear direction, is irreversible, and reflects primal ritual patterns.

(2) Woven into the primary plot is a secondary, cyclic movement *from liberty via captivity back to liberty*. It reflects the fairy-tale pattern in which the protagonists must pass one or several tests: the path to marriage leads through adventures that enable the hero to prove his worth and to overcome the heroine's resistance. As a whole the quintessential romance plot is a manifestation of the Freudian "virginity taboo" (see Freud 1957). The lovers' odyssey emerges as an involuntary rite of passage necessary for the lifting of the taboo.

(3) The secondary plot loops with another cyclic pattern based on the renegade theme of *apostasy and reconciliation*. A subplot to the main story, it is essential to its denouement, since resolving the opposition of liberty and captivity at the heart of the romance plot requires an ambivalent *tertium*. In the novella, the renegade Mahamut fills the position that in fairy tales is identified as the Helper.[16]

(4) After the resolution of the liberation plot a second subplot briefly takes over: *Ricardo renounces his passion for Leonisa*. The action here is purely linguistic, its setting being Ricardo's final monologue, which delays the main plot one last time. Though the link between this subplot and the three other plots is not immediately obvious, in structural terms the entire narrative hinges upon it, for Ricardo's renunciation not only violates the conventions of the genre (a lover cannot simply renounce the object of his desires), he also becomes aware that his claim to his beloved is too small even to admit of his renouncing her. Hence his monologue falls into two parts: his renunciation, which leaves Leonisa to his effete rival Cornelio, is followed by *the renunciation of renunciation*. This multiple renunciation has its reward, however, since it moves the beloved object to surrender herself into his hands. The structure of the revocation that links the two parts of the monologue resembles that of the religious *renegatio*, for we have here the cancellation of a binding speech act through renewed speech—"de lo dicho, me desdigo…" (158)—a *renegatio* of love. What links the renunciation subplot to the whole, then, is a parallelism which enables Ricardo's lovelorn casuistry to exploit the novella's religiously motivated renegade plot.

The symbolic order on which all four plot strands are based is best illustrated by the dramatic false close that precedes Ricardo's final monologue. This bizarre scene once more demonstrates the logic of delay and danger governing all four of the novella's codes (narrative, sexual, economic, religious) when the protagonists' homecoming is staged as a masquerade. Having traversed the entire Levant like an arrow flying, the ship now sails very slowly ("bogando a cuarteles," 154) into the harbor of Trapani, with both ship and crew in Turkish guise.[17] Once again it is around Leonisa that this pointless and in fact extremely risky travesty revolves: Ricardo presents her wearing the magnificent Moorish dress she also had to don for the Jewish slave trader's auction on Cyprus. The homecoming of Ricardo's beloved thus turns into a blow-by-blow reenactment of her deepest humiliation when she was displayed publicly as a commercial good. Both scenes culminate in a ritual unveiling, with the veil's red color underlining the defloration symbolism. When a little later Leonisa describes herself as

[16] On the Magical Helper see Propp 207–238.

[17] Its previous Turkish owners had masked the galley as a Christian ship (151).

"desenvuelta" (158), it is hard not to understand this literally in the sense of unwrapping a piece of merchandise.

The purpose of all this drama is obvious: Ricardo wishes to display his beloved as one that has been captured twice, a "captive captured." Moorish dress augments the value of the sexual and religious integrity that her disguise highlights. In this context the narrative uses the ambiguous and untranslatable word "valor," a word describing both worth of character and market value. When Ricardo accounts for his actions, he points out that he never touched the capital whose value has, in fact, increased ("con más valor y entereza que buenamente decirse puede," 157). His logic is that of venture capitalism—and of the pleasure of denial: for capital to increase it must not only be preserved (its consumption postponed), it must be put at risk. "Como el oro tengo de ser," Leonisa says, "que mientras más se acrisola queda con más pureza y más limpio" (145). The many financial transactions in the novella symbolize this increase through risk: the more often an object has been sold, the higher its value and the greater the desire to own it.

In view of this poetics of libidinal delay it is all the more striking that at its ending the narrative does not make use of a form of delay provided for by Catholic canon law, which since the Council of Trent required the calling of banns on three consecutive holy days prior to the marriage. The Trapanian priest grants the couple a special dispensation and marries them on the spot: "Hallóse presente el obispo o arzobispo de la ciudad, y con su bendición y licencia los llevó al templo, y dispensando en el tiempo, los desposó en el mismo punto" (159). Exemption from banns is an unacknowledged leitmotif in Cervantes's novellas.[18] In *La fuerza de la sangre* it is noted that events take place before the Council of Trent, when canon law was not as strict with regard to marriage (322)[19]—an option the narrator of *El amante liberal* has himself excluded by mentioning the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, which dates the novella to the post-1570 period. The new marriage law posed a serious problem for romance narrative. The instant wedding of heroine and hero after surviving adventures and ordeals is an absolute requirement of the genre. This is not unreasonable, either, as becomes clear in *El amante liberal*: the action of the romance is test enough, obviating the need for a canonical preclusion of impediments. In romance, adventure takes the place of the public announcements that the ritual of banns involves in the unadventurous everyday.

4. The Virgin

Romance can be defined as a genre that reinforces the virginity taboo: before it is lifted all manner of tests need to be passed. Freud in a rudimental essay accordingly interpreted it as a manifestation of male anxiety vis-à-vis the aggressive female resistance that in his view derives from the female child's fixation on the father. To illustrate his argument he cites the literary motif of the castrating virgin.[20] Classical representatives of this motif are the fatal maidens in the

[18] The banns are cut short in *La gitanilla* ("Concedió licencia el Arzobispo para que con sola una amonestación se hiciese" 107). In *La española inglesa* the period of waiting is also curtailed by the bishop's dispensation to only eight days (263). Instant weddings occur in *La fuerza de la sangre* (322), *La dos doncellas* (480) and *La señora Cornelia* (519), the latter being a clandestine or common-law wedding. The picaresque nuptial deceit in *El casamiento engañoso* owes its success to a clever manipulation of Tridentine law: the three holy days on which banns must be read are not Sundays but consecutive feast days, so that the period of waiting shrinks from three weeks to three days (527).

[19] Joachim Küpper has drawn attention to the absence of banns in *La fuerza de la sangre* (Küpper 201). He also points to the construct of the *matrimoium in facie Dei* by which the Church was able retroactively to acknowledge free cohabitation as legal marriage.

[20] Freud 1957, 207. Also see Sissa 20. Since the virginity taboo also serves the interests of patriarchal family hierarchy, feminist appropriations of the motif of the "phallic virgin" such as provided by El Saffar 1993, 172 & 174, are at least open to question.

Greek pantheon, foremost among them Artemis,[21] to whom Heliodorus's heroine Charicleia bears a marked resemblance: she goes into maenad rages and occasionally slays men with arrows (Héliodore VI, 8 & V, 32). At one point she is referred to as "Artemis herself" (Héliodore V, 31). Traces of the threatening virgin goddesses of antiquity may also be found in Charicleia's Catholic cousin Leonisa. She is a lioness ("leona," 114). Whoever desires her—and to see her is to desire her—is in deadly danger: the renegade Yzuf perishes in a storm, Alí Bajá is slain, and the Kadi of Nicosia is cruelly humiliated. In an anecdote told in mid-novella, the beautiful Moorish woman introduced as Leonisa's narrative counterpart is called by the telling byname "Dura lanza de Mahoma" (137).

The virginity taboo and the anxious male fantasies on which it is based are also reflected in the novella's topography. The action starts in Trapani, a place whose name is related to the Greek word for sickle (*drepané*) and thus evokes the castration of Uranus, which was carried out with that instrument. In Pérez de Moyas compendium of ancient mythology we read:

> Cayó la hoz, y como viniese de alto y hubiese de dar en alguna parte, los poetas quisieron que diese en la tierra de Sicilia, cerca del monte Libeo, para declarar por ello una ciudad que está en el puerto de mar, cerca de dicho monte, llamado en latín Drepanis y en lengua vulgar Trapana, y los griegos le dicen hoz […]. Dice más: que los miembros cortados cayeron en la mar, de cuya sangre y espuma del mesmo mar se engendró Venus.[22]

The center of the novella's topography, in turn, is Cyprus, island home of the goddess Aphrodite who sprang from this castration. This is the place where the love carousel revolving around Leonisa, also risen from the sea, begins to accelerate. The outermost limit of the protagonists' odyssey is reached at the entrance to the Dardanelles. The strait is described as a point of no return beyond which the "gran Turco" lurks and the "torres del mar Negro" (111) wait, the Ottoman state prison also known as *Yedikule Hisarı*, the Fortress of the Seven Towers, situated at the walled-up Golden Gate of Constantinople (see García Salinero 497). This dreaded place marks the point in the narrative from which no one ever comes back. The metaphor of dangerous straits ("estrecheza," "encogido estrecho," "laberinto") incidentally is a leitmotif of Ricardo's laments, too. But the protagonists do not pass the strait of the Dardanelles. Their luck turns, the wind changes, and a fine levanter blowing from the threatening east carries the ship home.[23]

It is striking that the novella makes no attempt to stylize the heroine's virginity in a Christian, Marian sense—a clear contrast to the *Historia del capitán cautivo*, for example, where Zoraida emerges as a sort of Black Madonna of Captives. Leonisa is not surrounded by the aureole of sanctity but, instead, by the aura of a precious object. She dispenses no grace and works no miracles. And when she is called a "goddess" (114) the overtones are pagan rather than Christian. It is the renegade Mahamut of all people who compares the reverence Leonisa is shown to pagan cult (137). A solitary hint of virginal sanctity occurs when she leaves behind the wounded kadi who asks her to place her hand upon him (153). But this request comes from a Muslim, and the narrative gives no indication that it is to be taken seriously.

With Cervantes the virginity taboo can be used to distinguish between what is "idealistic" narration and what is not. What is idealistic about texts like *El amante liberal*, *La española inglesa*, the *Historia del cautivo*, or *Persiles y Sigismunda* is above all the unlikely respect this taboo is accorded in all the persecution the heroines suffer. In all of these narratives beauty is, as it was with Heliodorus, first and foremost the perceptible sign of virginity. Heliodorus's Charicleia, too, was a sublimely beautiful girl who "owed her beauty more to her purity than to

[21] On the cultural history of virginity see McLachlan & Fletcher, in particular the essay by Eleanor Irwin, "The Invention of Virginity on Olympus" 13–23.

[22] Pérez de Moya 56 et ss. Walter Marx (Berlin) kindly pointed me to this source.

[23] Harald Wentzlaff-Eggebert reads the novella's topography as a political allegory in Wentzlaff-Eggebert 179.

her youth."[24] And this type of beauty is an emasculating force rather than a possible object of seduction or rape. A central phantasm of romance narratives, virginity is also much on Don Quixote's mind; his knight-errantry is motivated by a virginal ideal and he has a tendency to see "doncellas" where in fact there are none.[25] In *El amante liberal* the taboo object of virginity emerges as a more fundamental good than money or liberty: Ricardo's final renunciation of Leonisa is effective only because physical possession has not taken place. If she is "una" and "entera" in a moral sense and therefore the subject of a possible free will, that is only because she is so in the physical sense, too.

5. The Renegade

At the structural level of this Catholic romance, virginity as the object of all desire emerges as a rival to the *summum bonum* offered by the salvation of the soul. Cervantes stages this rivalry by giving the renegade (who has rejected the promise of salvation) the role of the Helper to whom the virgin owes her safe return and the purity from which the Christian bridegroom is then allowed to benefit.[26] There is a good reason for the narrative to plunge *medias in res* at a point where Ricardo and the renegade Mahamut enter into a conversation, for this encounter marks the turn for the good. The loop between the virgin's fate and the renegade story is unusual for a romance narrative; in *El amante liberal*, virgin and renegade form a pair of balancing opposites. The renegade embodies the transgressive border-crossing between Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Islam, and Judaism that takes place in the Levant; he stands for a world of ideological and linguistic ambiguity and bastardized signifying systems that enable everyone more or less to understand each other—and the narrative hints that this is a disturbing state of affairs, that the Mediterranean *lingua franca* is the language of a world beyond the reach of salvation (145).[27]

Representatives of this ambivalence, the renegades are nevertheless indispensable because they are interpreters—a skill which links them to the narrator. Their presence also provides a foil for Leonisa's inconvertible purity, the sole stable signifier, such that their function resembles that of the elaborate disguises assumed at various points in the story. Pure Beauty must pass through a promiscuous, polluted world, but to do so she needs the ambivalent middlemen who manage her journey. Yet her purity is the cause of the heterogeneity around her, too, for she calls the boundaries between different symbolic orders into question as hunger for her makes every man a potential renegade to his religion (152).

Like the virgin, the renegade figure is predicated on a taboo, namely, the religious taboo he has transgressed. And as he has been circumcised, he too is associated with castration fear. At the same time he represents the principle of perversion, which reaches its goals by unorthodox paths. In the literature of the *Siglo de Oro*—including Cervantes—the renegade and indeed the entire Muslim world are always under suspicion of sexual deviance.[28] Most importantly, however, the renegade has access to forbidden forms of linguistic performativity. He takes the liberty of doing with words something that can but absolutely must not be done: he renounces his faith, he apostates. And similar to the loss of virginity, apostasy is a repetition of the original sin,

[24] Héliodore X, 9. A rather drastic parody of the virginity cult in romance tales is given in Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (Novel 2, 7: The story of the Sultan of Babylon's daughter); Niklas Holzberger has identified violations of the rigid sexual economy of the idealistic romance as early as Tatius's *Leucippe and Cleitophon*. See Holzberg 92.

[25] For example in Chapter I, 2 (Cervantes 1998a, 50).

[26] For a more detailed discussion see Koppenfels 2007.

[27] The term "bastarda lengua" for the lingua franca is used in the *Historia del capitán cautivo* (Cervantes 1998a, 476).

[28] In *El amante liberal* it is the corsair captain Fetala who, when the booty is divided, shows a decided preference for male slaves, including "dos muchachos hermosísimos, de nación corsos" (121).

which the narrative brings into play right at the beginning when using the image of the "mal derribados torreones" to describe the fallen Nicosia (109).

In a fictional world in which all desire is directed toward consistency (*entereza*), the renegade's inconsistency is nonetheless essential for the story's structure: if the evil renegade Yzuf first throws Ricardo and Leonisa off course, the good renegade Mahamut helps them find the course that will take them back home. The apostate, then, is a traitor in the sense defined by Louis Marin, one who animates the plot (Marin 98-101). This explains the role he plays in Cervantes's romance narratives.[29] And once he has fulfilled this role, he no longer needs to remain in the ambivalent space to which his apostasy transported him: the renegade plot in *El amante liberal* ends with a *reconciliatio* or reintegration into the Church, just as the main plot ends with the protagonists' marriage. As is suitable for a romance, the reconciliation is effected on the spot, too.[30]

The renegade is a deeply ambiguous character, not only with regard to politics, territory, and religion, but also in sexual terms. Mahamut's role in *El amante liberal* demonstrates this: he has certain "eunuchic" privileges, including free access to the harem; most importantly he does not participate in the dance of desire circling around virginity. Apart from Cornelio—whose lack of interest however is taken to indicate a lack of virility—,[31] Mahamut is the only male character who does not lust after Leonisa and who clearly has difficulties perceiving her beauty. Having renounced his chance of salvation, it seems, the renegade is no longer receptive to the virtue of virginity. This lack of receptiveness is depicted as a sexual deficit which not even his return to the fold of the Holy Church can heal entirely. Though Mahamut, too, is allowed to marry in the end, his is no virginal bride but a woman who is already married, another penitent renegade. The link between the two qualities is clear, for in the narrative's symbolic system, virginity and apostasy are mutually exclusive. Mahamut marries Halima, wife of the Kadi of Nicosia. Not that she is a widow, but her first husband is treated as though he were already dead. Complete humiliation (he falls from power, he is robbed, his wife deserts him) takes the place of actual death. Together with Halima's renewed change of religion this is enough to render her first marriage null and void.

The renegade motif is one of Cervantes's most original contributions to romance narration. It appears in the *Novelas ejemplares*, in his dramatic writing (*Los baños de Argel*), and in both parts of *Don Quixote* (the story of the *cautivo* and the story of Ana Félix Ricote). In *El amante liberal* this motif provides a balance to the traditional romance element represented by the narrative and sexual economics of virginity. The virginity taboo remained relevant in later centuries, too, exerting a powerful influence on bourgeois sexuality—Freud wrote about it as a significant psychic factor as late as 1918—, but its heroic staging is limited to romance narration and hence to a premodern literary form. Narratives like *El amante liberal* give insight into a system of desire that has become strange to us. Despite its survival in popular genres, the reasons for its former power—first and foremost its promise of painless sublimation without residue, conflict, or repression, which projects into a sunlit world of Mediterranean splendor—are only just within our grasp today. It is the pastness of such texts that—as a historical form of repression—transforms them into a cultural unconscious that wants to be read. For each present desire is also determined by the wish to repeat past wishes, as is demonstrated most drastically

[29] On the significance of the renegade in the works of Cervantes see Smith 231. Smith's description of "renegade logic" in the *Historia del cautivo* ist predominantly political, however, and almost completely ignores its narrative dimension.

[30] In reality the possibilities for achieving *reconciliatio* were limited; the process involved an inquisition tribunal and in most cases seems to have been rather painful. See the evaluation of inquisition files provided by Bennassar & Bennassar 27-124.

[31] The mythological figures Cornelio is linked to are Ganymed and the young Achilles, famously disguised as a girl (116 et ss).

by Don Quixote, the hero whose *entereza* is based on his stubborn adherence to an obsolete system of wishing.

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