

David M. Reher

Masculinity, mobility and religiosity in Cervantes's *The Great Sultana*.

Miguel de Saavedra Cervantes's comedy, *The Great Sultana*, published as part of a collection of eight comedies and interludes in 1615, is a unique work, perhaps most strikingly for its setting. In contrast to many of the author's other works that reference his time as a captive in Algiers, the work is set in Constantinople, where Cervantes had never been. This distant, un-real location seems to give the playwright an even broader canvas upon which to explore.

The main action of the play focuses on the titular Great Sultana, Catalina de Oviedo. The sultan Amurates falls for the captive Spanish woman in his harem, and proposes to marry her, breaking all convention. However, unknown to her, she is not the only Christian in the Harem. Lamberto, a young Transylvanian noble, has staged his own capture and sale into the harem to reunite with Clara. To disguise themselves, Lamberto dresses as the woman Zelinda, and Clara as Zaida. Their story unfolds as a secondary strand while Catalina deliberates the Sultan's proposal, torn between becoming martyrdom and marriage, suffering the misguided reproach of her long-lost father. However, in the end she agrees to marry, provided that she can maintain her name, dress and faith. This union is briefly challenged as the Sultan's religious counselor, the *cadí*, urges him to focus on conceiving an heir first. Reluctantly, the Sultan brings Lamberto to his chamber, and finally discovers Lamberto's true sex. Threatening to kill him, Lamberto explains that he miraculously changed sexes, and, as Doña Catalina de Oviedo pressures her husband the sultan with feigned jealousy, the Transylvanian couple gain their freedom.

As minor characters, Lamberto and Clara do not demand the attention they deserve. Criticism on the couple has tended to either view them separately, like Ottmar Heygi's *Cervantes and the Turks* and Agapita Jurado Santos's *Tolerancia y ambigüedad en "La gran Sultana,"* OR alternatively, to disregard them altogether, as do many articles. **I contend in this talk, however, that Clara and Lamberto are foils to other characters in the play, and thus central to Cervantes's maneuvers to invert common-place tropes that were used to villainize and exoticize the Orient.** The tropes are redirected back to Spain, where they highlighting Spain's social and moral failures and evoke anxieties about sexuality, religion and socio-economic mobility. The playwright thus deflects the normal criticisms of the Orient back to Spain. I will begin with exploring sexuality.

Sexuality

In his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains how unrestrained sexuality is **a common trope** used to explain the figure of the Oriental, who is, I quote, "that impossible creature whose libidinal energy drives him to paroxysms of over-stimulation" (312). We can see clear precursors of what Said says in many works of the Spanish Golden age, where Turks are pederasts or characters of boundless sexual desire. Within Cervantes's own cannon, for instance, the *Baños of Algiers*, a Cadí, that is, a religious leader, attempts to seduce two Christian boys. In Cervantes's Exemplary Novel, *The generous lover*, three Turks go to war to win the Christian Leonisa. Lope de Vega's play, the *Holy League*, opens with the Sultan decadently pursuing pleasure in his harem until the ghost of his father urges him to war. The author of *Viaje de Turquía* declares that Ottoman men no longer satisfy their wives

since they are so enthralled with their garzones, handsome young men who are often symbols of homoerotic desire.

As with these works, it is tempting to think our current play also follows this typical line of besmirching Ottoman culture by undermining its Masculinity, particularly through tropes of boundless libido and homosexuality. The Sultan Amurates falls for Catalina immediately, declaring “for my will is as subject to yours as darkness is to the light of day” (118). His advisor, the eunuch Rustán, declares in shock “This is a strange case! He loves her tenderly; his will is ruled by the Christian’s” (145). Moreover, the play’s fool, Madrigal, tricks the Cadí into admitting erotic interest in a garzon in the second act, confirming the audience’s expectation of pederasty in the Orient.

However, the Sultan’s love for Catalina defies the Western expectation of the harem as sexual slavery. He declares “this beauty is my wife, and henceforth the Great Sultana ” (118), and the ensuing wedding takes up half of the third act with dance, song and elaborate dress. Moreover, his desire for marriage takes on a pragmatism that no Spanish nationalist could contradict. He hopes that, in mixing, I quote, “Ottoman blood with your Christian blood to make it great,” “the world shall see a firstborn second to none. The sun will not shine in its entire orbit on one who can surpass or equal a Spanish Ottoman” (129).

In contrast, Clara and Lamberto, are expecting a child out of wedlock. They are thus *antithetical* to the Sultan’s commitment to marriage. Moises Castillo notes, I translate, “what is unacceptable here is that these two peninsular characters are those who criticize the Sultan’s lust, when they themselves lack moral fiber and lie constantly” (236). Moreover, when the Sultan finally frees them, Clara responds to Catalina’s demand that she marry

Lamberto by declaring “I do not want to marry” (166). In comparison to the Christian relationships, then, the Sultan’s is one of restraint and moderation.

Regarding pederasty, a further break from the Orientalist trope occurs when the Sultan reacts with rage when discovering Lamberto’s true gender, despite desiring him as a woman moments previously. For the Sultan, Lamberto is not a fitting object of desire as a male. However, Cervantes implies that Lamberto and his tutor and teacher, Roberto, were formerly lovers. After the opening procession where especial attention is drawn to a *garçon*, Roberto imparts to his friend Salec, “I’ve come to seek that young man of whom I spoke: for I love him more than the soul that sustains me, more than my very eyes.” (103)

Crucially, these lines were likely written during or shortly after Fray Pedro de Leon’s extensive sermons and inquisitions against sodomy in Seville, which coincided with several decades of extensive inquisitorial prosecution against sodomy in Aragon (Berco 356). For Renaissance Spain, as Berco points out, “the most common male-to- male sexual relationship was intergenerational.” Crucially, Lamberto is dressed as a woman in order to hide in the harem. As José R. Cartagena-Calderón underscores, effeminate dress was seen as a marker of homosexuality in contemporary sermons¹. This European same-sex pairing, then, would naturally destabilize the purported Spanish moral high ground. The male couple **collapses** the distinction between the East and the West by undermining purported Western masculinity’s superiority.

Socio-economic

¹ “a connection between sodomy, effeminacy, and clothing, a widely disseminated association which the present article aims to explore vis-a-vias the figure of the *lindo* or pretty fop as it was constructed, imagined, and performed in early modern Spanish culture”(318)

In the Spanish Golden Age, the Orient often presents **unparalleled socio-economic opportunities**, but only if you renege the Catholic faith. Barbara Fuchs explains that “Many renegades were motivated by the greater social mobility, prosperity, and sophistication of north Africa of the Ottoman world ... [where] a poor European sailor or apprentice could rise through the ranks much faster in these relatively meritocratic societies than he could at home, becoming a powerful janissary. . . or a roving corsair captain” (86). In Chapter 40 of *Don Quijote*, for instance, a captive tells of Tinoso, the calabresan renegade who ascended from galley slave to king of Algiers. It is a trope to neutralize the Renegade, whether through death or reconversion, as happens with Tinoso and in Cervantes’s other works. In the *Baños of Algiers*, the renegade Yzuf is killed by the reconverted Hazan. In *the generous lover*, the renegade Mahamut returns to the Christian fold after helping the Christian couple Ricardo and Leonisa escape captivity. Similarly, in Lope de Vega’s *The Holy League*, Uchali, the king of Algiers, reneges Islam, bitterly promising to eat Mohammad’s bones.

This pattern, however, is broken in *the Great Sultanness*. Before looking at Lamberto as our primary example of the un-punished Renegade, we must note how he is tied to Salec the renegade who is an old friend of Roberto, Lamberto’s tutor. Despite being, as he clarifies, an atheist², Salec helps his friend by translating, explaining rituals, and giving him a tour of the city. Rather than dying or reconverting, he instead acts alongside Roberto as a vital bookend for the introduction and conclusion of the play.

More central to the action of the play, however, is Lamberto’s seeming conversion. To corroborate his story of transformation from man into woman, he explains, “As a girl I

² “truth be told, I don’t believe in anything.” (105)

heard a wise man describe the excellence and advantages that man has over woman; from that point on I wanted to be male, so I asked heaven for its help with this mercy. As a Christian woman it was denied to me, but not as a Moorish woman.” (164) I will dwell **later** on the religious aspect here. Right now, it is important to note, as Barbara Fuchs underscores, that “Lamberto’s narrative proclaims not one but **two** crucial transformations, a gender transvestism collapses into a hasty religious conversion. Before he can explain his masculinity, he must convert himself into a *mora*” (Fuchs 84).

More significantly, Lamberto is seemingly rewarded for what the Sultan calls a “fortunate miracle and a sign of his goodness” (165). He becomes Pasha of Rhodes almost immediately and the play closes with his departure for Rhodes. This contrasts with the punishment we see for other Renegades. Yet Lamberto doesn’t re-affirm his Christianity when the Turks leave, as happened in the first act. As shown in the next section, there is reason to doubt whether or not his conversion is sincere or just a trick—Cervantes seems to prefer to leave it unresolved.³

Lamberto, however, is not the only European to vastly improve his position on account of his experience in Constantinople. Doña Catalina rises from petty noble to Sultanness of the vast Ottoman Empire, and the fool, Madrigal, reveals his talent as a raconteur, prompting him to become a playwright when he returns. At the same time, Lamberto’s rise to eminence contrasts profoundly with the others. While he has done little

³ Rather than condemning this, Roberto, upon hearing the news calls Lamberto’s scheme “wise” and declares, “May God grant it!” (169), openly affirming his wards means to success.

beyond fretting in drag, Doña Catalina's rise comes after a profound religious struggle⁴.

Madrigal, similarly, has cheated death twice, frantically improvising lie after lie to survive.

Lamberto's rise highlights the seemingly arbitrary nature of royal favor, something Cervantes understood well. The rapid, effortless rise of Lamberto by the Sultan's favor is the final act of the play, thus contrasting it to the beginning, where Salec the Renegade notes that, despite the garzon gathering numerous petitions from the destitute, "these wretches business never comes to a good end: interest holds sway, and they are denied" (101). This denial of royal favor is a reflection from Cervantes's life. Being denied multiple petitions, Cervantes would have been well-aware of the arbitrary nature of royal favor. Crucially, of the three captives, only Madrigal, the playwright, returns to Spain, where, without favor from the Sultan, he plans to earn his own way.

Religion

Religion is the most fundamental line of separation in Western notions of the Orient, where, according to Said, the West "clearly posits the **Islamic** category as the **dominant** one" (305). Although they are prior to what Said describes, Spanish Renaissance portrayals of Muslims often include jabs at Islam. The conclusion of *Baños of Algiers*, for instance, features a comparison of Muslim and Christian prayers, and the crucifixion of a Christian youth causes an apocalyptic storm.⁵

In contrast, the only miracle in our current play is Lamberto's feigned conversion into a man. This miracle reaffirms the faith of the Cadí and Sultan. Amurates appropriates the

⁴ the cost of what she terms "bitter affliction" (120) and resolving to die "a thousand times" (147) as she engages in a profound struggle to discern what her faith demands

⁵, where "the clouds have rained blood and mail, and pieces of scimitars and shields." In *the Holy League*, the renegade Uchali interprets his fleets destruction as a sign of Christianity's veracity.

miracle to waylay Catalina's jealousy, saying "the heavens, in order to provide no further opportunity for the jealousy you've felt, have changed Zelinda into a man." (165) Lamberto describes his miraculous transformation as he stands next to his pregnant lover, Clara. Surely this would prompt the audience to wonder, What story might Clara have invented to explain her untimely pregnancy? This casts doubt on the Virgin birth, a central doctrine of Christianity. This Christian anxiety emerges again when, surprisingly, Doña Catalina reveals that she is three months pregnant, even though it has only been three days and an afternoon since she first met the Sultan.

We now return to the uncertainty in Lamberto's reneging. His multiple names best exemplify this ambiguity. In a seeming error, Cervantes at times calls Lamberto Alberto; Lamberto, moreover, is first introduced as the name of Clara's father, and then later again as the youth's name. Lamberto calls himself Zelinda in the harem, which the Sultan corrects to Zelindo after his conversion into a man. Martin van Koppenfels underscores the importance of names for Renegades, saying, I translate "The question of the name that a renegade was given in baptism occupied a central place in inquisition protocol... The stories of renegades are... the stories of those whom change their names." (53⁶) This **multiplicity** of names, combined with Roberto's final lines that call him Lamberto even as he prepares to depart as Pasha of Rhodes, obfuscates the question of his religious devotions.

Lamberto's **destabilized name** makes him a **foil** to Catalina de Oviedo. She refuses to change her name as a condition of marrying the Sultan, rejecting the title 'the Ottoman', claiming that she "refuse[s] that last name, for mine is de Oviedo, a noble, renowned, and

⁶ De hecho, la cuestión del nombre que había recibido el renegado en el bautismo ocupa un lugar central también en los protocolos de la inquisición. En la Historia del cautivo de Cervantes, el renegado queda anónimo -- como si su nombre cristiano y musulmán se hubieran anulado mutuamente. Los relatos de renegados son, en tanto que historias de los que cambian de nombre, típicas historias cervantinas. (53)

Christian one.” The name is an Austurian, Old Christian name⁷, going back at least to the 11th century. However, despite being the pinnacle of Spanish nationalism, she is connected to the Sephardic Jewish community, many of whom, after being expelled in 1492, resettled in the more tolerant Constantinople. For instance, her father pretends to be a humble tailor, which was a traditionally Jewish occupation (consider, for instance, the Jewish union of Clothiers in Saragossa). Moreover, he is lodged (perhaps at his request?) in the Jewish ghetto, which is striking given that Constantinople had numerous Greek homes. Doña Catalina herself is **indebted** to the Jewish doctor, Zedequias, who cured her melancholy, as well as the Jewish merchant who provided her Christian wedding dress. Cervantes underscores the contribution of the Jewish community to Catalina’s well-being, casting doubt on the expulsion of 1492; moreover, Catalina’s move from Spain to Constantinople retraces the Sephardic Jews emigration.⁸

To conclude, while his play seems at first to follow many conventions that establish a polarizing Orientalist division between the Christians and the Muslims in the play, Cervantes in reality *collapses* this dichotomy by using these same connections to underscore Christian short-comings and anxieties in Spain. This closes the gap between East and West in the Spanish imagination. The setting for his play seems crucial for breaking norms that he maintained more readily in works set in Algiers or on the Mediterranean. Paradoxically, while Constantinople poses a threat to Europe as the capitol of the Ottoman empire, it at the same time offers means to purify and save it.

⁷ "Certificación De Armas Del Apellido Oviedo." (2005): *O.A.Ister*. Web. 1 Feb. 2016.

⁸ To this, we can add Madrigal, who, despite his hyperbolic nationality, is more indebted to muslims than he may want to admit. As Covarubias acknowledges, the Saraband that is among the dances he plays at the wedding was recognized as a Moorish dance at the time. Moreover, he owes the pork that he torments the jewish family with to Janissaries who hunted a wild boar in the mountains, and is certainly not above seducing a beautiful mora, even if he draws the line at marrying her. While it may not have been known to Cervantes, who likely took them from Spanish Oral tradition, the two stories that are the basis for how he deceives the Cadi have Arabic and Jewish versions as well.

Works cited

- Berco, Cristian. "Producing Patriarchy: Male Sodomy and Gender In Early Modern Spain." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17.3 (2008): 351-376. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.
- Cartagena-Calderon, Jose R. "Of Pretty Fops and Spectacular Sodomites: El Lindo Don Diego and the Performance of Effeminacy in Early Modern Spain." *The Poetics of Masculinity in Early Modern Italy and Spain*. Ed. Gerry Milligan and Jane Tylus. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010. 317-350. Print.
- Castillo, Moisés R. "¿Ortodoxia Cervantina? Un Análisis de *La gran sultana*, *El trato ae Argel* y *Los baños De Argel*." *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 56.2 (2004): 219-240. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.
- Fuchs, Barbara. *Passing for Spain: Cervantes and the Fictions of Identity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.
- Saavedra, Miguel De Cervantes. "*The Bagnios of Algiers*" and "*The Great Sultana*:" *Two Plays of Captivity*. Ed. and Trans. Barbara Fuchs and Aaron Ilika. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2010. Print.
- Von Koppenfels, Martin. "Cervantes Y Los Renegados." *Iberoromania* 66.1 (2009): 45-60. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 1 Feb. 2016.

notes:

dancing Catalina and Salome, john baptist's beheading

write around notion of becoming moor as sexual transgression, or renormalizing sex—
currently written to implice that one can switch genders but only first as a moor

highlight uniqueness of male dressed as female; add context, maybe uan Rana?