



Sacrificial Lambs and Domestic Goddesses, or, Did Cervantes Write Chick Lit? (Being a Meditation on Women and Free Will)

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icture this: a lady, beautiful (of course), young (probably mid-twenties, although she clearly believes that time is running out on her chance to *carpe that diem*), wealthy, noble, and a widow. She has, of course, many suitors; but although a duke eventually tosses his hat into the ring, only two of the others stand out. The odds-on favorite of the moment is a studmuffin: abs and buns of steel, flashy dresser, flashy talker. The lady does not know that he also strings women along for the sense of power it gives him; she is also unaware that he is a compulsive prevaricator and that an ugly streak of brutality runs through his character. The lady, it goes without saying, is in love, so she finds it difficult to pay much attention to the other contender: our hero, the Regular Guy. *He* understands perfectly that his attractions pale beside those of the Hunk. Both he and the lady tell us that he is plain of face, that his body is unlikely to light *anyone's* fire, and

that he likewise lacks an impressive fortune. He is, however, intelligent, gallant, sincere, and generous of heart.

Whom will the lady choose? She believes it will be the Hunk; she is *determined* that it shall be. The name that she hears, however, just after midnight on the feast of St. John, that pagan fertility festival newly clad in Christian garb, is (gasp!) that of the Regular Guy! The lady, it seems, has a quarrel with destiny. First, she tries legalistic disputation: all right, it was our hero's *name*, but the *voice* that pronounced it belonged to the Hunk. Finally, the lady declares her freedom from all deterministic systems such as fate:

¿Qué importará que el destino
quiera, si no quiero yo?
Del cielo es la inclinación:
el sí o el no todo es mío;
que el hado en el albedrío
no tiene jurisdicción.¹

So, at the end, whom does she choose? The Regular Guy, of course, and she believes that she has done so freely, in spite of ancient fertility rites, in spite of literary convention, in spite of the ruthless way in which all of the Hunk's substantial shortcomings are exposed, in spite of the palpable desire of her creator to construct a system in which Regular Guys such as he can win the romantic prize. The Hunk, in fact, never had a chance, for the system is rigged to guarantee that, logically and inescapably, the lady will "freely" choose as she has been led to do.

This is, of course, the plot of Ruiz de Alarcón's *Las paredes oyen*, and it provides a useful opening for our topic here, for it deals explicitly with the problem of women's right to choose, and it also reveals the myriad ways in which that supposed freedom is conditioned, especially in literary works, so that the subversive or revolutionary possibilities it might imply simply never arise. Cervantes's heroines defend their free will no less vociferously than does Alarcón's lovely, logical doña Ana, but their choices rarely represent a challenge to the socioliterary system that they are meant to exemplify. This is nowhere clearer than in the master's Byzantine adventure novel, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, in which Cervantes presents us with as complete a gallery of the feminine character as we can find in any individual work, as well as with the possible choices a woman may make and their inevitable consequences.

¹ Alarcón, Act I, 936–41.

The *Persiles*

To begin with, we must admit that the *Persiles* is a *weird* story, in all of the meanings of the word: it involves fate and prophecy, enchantments and the supernatural, and things that are just plain strange. Compared to the *Persiles*, *Don Quijote* is pure realism and the *Novelas ejemplares*—talking dogs and all—are reportage. Teeming with incident, yet often tedious (which Cervantes, with annoying prescience, helpfully points out to us, hoping thereby to disarm us, and largely succeeding), the *Persiles* testifies to the ultimate incapacity of narrative to present the whole of anyone's experience. Looping back upon itself time and again as it tries to bring each new character's life up to date, and to apprise that person of the lives of the other pilgrims up to the moment of their chance encounter, it nevertheless sustains a mystery at its very core. Repeatedly, until the end, it eludes the question of identity and origin: just who are Periandro and Auristela, and where did they come from? When we finally find out, we are left with another, less respectful query: So what?

As allegories, of course, as pilgrims, where Periandro and Auristela are going and what they will become is more important than where they started, but they also make a curious pair for allegory. Unsettlingly androgynous, surpassingly skilled at lying and deception, supremely unconscious of the incestuous overtones that result from the combination of their love and their masquerade as brother and sister, they seem to generate from their own slippery nature an entire panoply of Cervantean lovers, liars, oddballs, and prodigies. When we reach the end of their story, which is also the beginning, for that is when their identities are finally revealed, we know little more than we knew before the long-withheld revelation, and the resolution seems less exemplary than breathless and forced. Because of this, and because the text is at least in part conceived as a Christian allegory, it becomes a test case for the existence and function (literary, as well as theological, social, and philosophical) of free will.

Theories of Free Will

It seems to me peculiarly appropriate that we consider the concept of free will as it is used in narrative, for its importance and prominence arise out of the explanatory force that it possesses in the narrative context. Christianity, as well as the other so-called "religions of the book," and significantly, *unlike* the pagan religions that preceded them, is both historical and narrative, in the sense that at a given moment in time, individuals had to *choose* to believe in its

version of the divine. In this way, the drama of choice becomes central to the faith, and inserts itself into a convert's personal, and later, cultural, history. Thus, free will first acquires its explanatory significance in the works of Saint Augustine, whose view of Christian doctrine at work in the individual believer grows out of his interpretation of his own spiritual autobiography.

In the attempt to explain why he continued to live a sinful life in spite of the fact that he knew it was wrong, Augustine found that the classical faculties of reason and desire did not suffice. If desire is subject to reason, yet is able to rule his choices in the face of reason's knowledge, some other force must exist that can nullify reason and fortify desire with agency. For Augustine, this force was free will.²

In Augustine's formulation of free will, however, we also find the problematic aspects that bedevil attempts to justify the existence of such a force. In the first place, free will comes into being as a means of explaining *bad*, in the sense of *morally culpable*, decisions. This suggests that good and bad choices have—a priori—been defined and assigned relative values. It also means that whatever constitutes "good" choices is privileged as the natural norm, for a new category of effective force was not required to explain such a decision. Taking yet another step back, we can see that such defining, assigning, and privileging must have an author: *someone* had to establish the relative value of various choices, and that someone has to have the power to impose the evaluation on those who see themselves operating within the system. This means that free will always implies a hierarchical relationship between the entity that evaluates choices, and the entities that choose.

This remains the case some centuries later, when Erasmus picks up the topic. In his *De libero arbitrio*, Erasmus states flatly that humans do not *possess* free will as a natural attribute, but rather it is "God who created and restored free will" (49).³ The advantage to God is clear: "Why, you will say, grant anything to free choice? In order to have something to impute justly to the wicked who have voluntarily come short of the grace of God" (96). Abandoning the more

² "To explain sin he must introduce another faculty besides desire or reason to initiate this act, something which has the power to say no to the best advice of reason and thus to confound the proper order between reason and desire. He must introduce the will" (Stone 262–63).

³ Modern theologians can be even blunter and more explicit. "Freedom is not something won by our own will. It is not an expression of our own being nor a constitutive element in human nature," and therefore "We are free because we have been freed. Freedom has been acquired. It has been given" (Ellul 103 and 104).

classical terminology of reason and desire that survives in Augustine's work, Erasmus describes free will in action as follows:

There are certain seeds of virtue implanted in the minds of men [note the gender; it becomes important later] by which they in some way see and seek after virtue, but mingled with grosser affections which incite them to other things. It is this flexible will which is called free choice and although on account of the propensity to sin which remains in us, our will is perhaps more prone to evil than to good, yet no one is actually forced to do evil except with his own consent (76–77).

This reading emphasizes the retributive strain that has always run through explanations of free will, and it gains particular significance, as we will see, in the case of women's choices. To put it in the baldest of terms, free will allows the individual to be punished for the choices made. If he or she were not free to choose, but were compelled, any punishment would have to be seen as unjust.

Another common way of justifying the paradoxes of free will is to create an artificial disjunction between freedom of choice and freedom of action. Explanations along this line are frequently tautological, as in Stone's interpretation of Augustine: "Freedom of the will thus refers to freedom inherent in the nature of the will itself" (261), which assumes "that the person as willing must be conceptually distinct from the person understood as a desiring and reasoning being" (264). Thus, a person may not be free to *act* in a particular way, but the same person is always free to *will*.⁴ Logically, however, we must ask what value such a "freedom" ultimately has. Being free to will myself to fly, or to be six inches taller, or to publish a work of literary criticism that is, at one and the same time, an example of unparalleled scholarly rigor *and* a runaway popular bestseller is, I suppose, conceptually possible, but of absolutely no practical use whatsoever. Unless I can actually *cause* such things to happen, being free to will them provides me with very little comfort.

Because of such limitations inherent in formulations of a concept of free will, we are justified in asking the question "What intellectual or psychological work does a concept of free will perform?" I would

⁴ "The distinction between freedom of agency and freedom of will applies to this problem. For the bondage of the will to sin is an inability of the will to do what it wills, not an inability of the will to will. The will may be unfree to do what it wills, but it is still free to will" (Stone 264). Frankfurt, also, writes: "When we ask whether a person's will is free we are not asking whether he is in a position to translate his first-order desires into actions" (90).

argue that "free will" operates as an intermediate term, one that arises out of the pressure exerted by two contending forces, that is, absolute freedom and naked compulsion. That is to say, where freedom (of a weaker power) and compulsion (of a stronger) collide, they may reconcile by creating a third term that appeases both psychologically. Although that intermediate term has gone by the title of "free will," a more appropriate name, given the mutual contingencies required, would be something like "accepted/acceptable constraint." Cervantes himself provides an unambiguous explanation of how such a system should operate in the *cabrero's* story of the wayward Leandra, near the end of *Don Quijote*, Part I, when Anselmo declares: "No digo yo que los dejen escoger en cosas ruines y malas, sino que se las propongan buenas, y de las buenas que escojan a su gusto" (406). Among other advantages, such terminology helps us to account for the problem of prior evaluation, what Anselmo calls "proposing the good possibilities." An *a priori* decision concerning the value of a given act or decision, as we have said, can only be enforced in a hierarchical situation; it is not the same as a natural consequence. Natural consequences, such as eating something poisonous and dying, have logical, indeed *biological* effects that do not depend on an evaluation accorded them by someone who possesses the power to punish and reward. In contrast, prior evaluation assigns relative moral value to certain acts and/or decisions that may not necessarily have natural consequences: for example, choosing neither to marry nor enter a convent. Accepted constraint means that the person who functions within that system recognizes his or her place in the hierarchy and concedes that, as the contemporary theologian Ellul writes, freedom "is a power to act and to obey" (103). We can choose to disobey, but because such an act has already been established as culpable, we do so knowing that we will be punished for violating the conditions of accepted constraint. It becomes increasingly clear, therefore, that the need for a concept of free will only arises in a hierarchical situation in which common sense indicates that one does not, in fact, have the right to choose freely.

Free Will and Women: Special Problems

This is nowhere more evident than in the case of women, for where men are understood as *susceptible* to evil, women are conceived as *always already* evil. Thus, in Erasmus's view, "In the case of Eve . . . not only does the will seem to *have been corrupt*, but the reason also or intellect, the source of all good and evil." In contrast, "In

Adam, the will seems rather to *have been corrupted* by immoderate love toward his spouse, whose desire he preferred to satisfy rather than the commandment of God" (48, emphasis added). The very verb forms themselves testify to the disorder in Eve's will as an inherent, on-going condition, compared to the passive process of which Adam is apparently the victim. It thus becomes especially important to demonstrate that, after the sacrifices of the Virgin and her Son, women can choose both freely and wisely. The usual arena for enacting this elevating lesson for women is marriage. In choosing to marry and so reinforce social order, a woman rejects the negative freedom that led to humankind's downfall, turns away from a purely immediate and individual desire that brings disaster in its train, and allows her future and relations to her husband to be mediated by the representatives of God, as can be seen in visual representations of marriage, where the priest stands precisely between the spouses.

We still might ask what the system gains if a woman is shown to acquiesce explicitly to marriage with a certain spouse that it would not gain if she were compelled? If, in the first place, we can claim that a woman, whose soul "*es libre, y nació libre, y ha de ser libre en tanto que yo quisiere*" (26, emphasis added), as Cervantes has his *gitanilla* declare, has chosen whom to marry, then we are justified in requiring her to remain married, regardless of what happens. If, furthermore, she should freely choose to limit her own freedom, as the gypsy girl's "as much as I should desire" suggests that she will, the fiction of "free" choice obscures the level of constraint involved in the decision, so that constraint accepted is absolved of its ability to compel in the moral sense. Thus, to use another example from the *Novelas ejemplares*, the belief in free will allows Leonisa in "El amante liberal" to choose to marry Cornelio or Ricardo in order to conceal that it compels her to marry *someone*. In other words, the notion of free will functions as a rhetorical illusion that shifts responsibility without an attendant authority from the powerful, who have previously evaluated the relative value of the various choices, to the powerless who remain culpable for their decisions within that evaluation.

Free Will and the Representation of Women in the *Persiles*

In *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*,⁵ Cervantes displays the fundamental function of the concept of free will to doubly bind his

⁵ I refer to the edition by Avallé-Arce (Madrid: Castalia, 1969). Further references will occur in the text.

feminine characters, by accepted constraint and by the evaluation of their behavior within that constraint. Cervantes, in other words, makes his characters what they are, and then judges them, sometimes quite harshly, for failing to correspond to an ideal from which he has deliberately excluded them. The tendency in recent criticism is to present a protofeminist Cervantes, an anti-Girardian who creates strong, free women and tender, sensitive men, both of whom are liberated from traditional roles, structures, and conflicts,⁶ into what De Armas Wilson has called "*learned* relations of complementarity and adjacency" (xv), so that the response to the question in my title becomes "Yes, Cervantes wrote literature for strong, free chicks like me." I have come to see this as a willfully unnuanced reading of the Cervantes corpus. A close look at the feminine characters and their decisions, as well as their fates, in the *Persiles* will help us to see why we must revise, yet again, our view of this most complex and often infuriating writer.

The first thing that we notice when we look at the vast array of feminine characters that pass through the *Persiles* is that, although there are a great many of them, they do not correspond to a similarly wide range of types. In fact, the range is quite narrow, and little is done to differentiate the individuals within the type; knowing the type will also predict with great accuracy what the narrator's opinion of any given individual will be. In every case, the type is defined, at least in part, by its use of the right to choose, and that choice occurs almost exclusively within the context of sexuality. The most common category, and in some ways the least interesting, is the Sweet Blonde Babe. Cervantes's heroines are almost always of this type. They are normally sixteen or seventeen years old, always beautiful, always fair, and always destined for an appropriate marriage if nothing goes wrong; failing that, they may head to a convent or die. The type occurs with such frequency that it comes to suggest a personal preference on Cervantes's own part. Occasionally, as in "La fuerza de la sangre" and "El celoso extremeño," the Sweet Blonde Babe may be even younger—thirteen or fourteen—but in such cases, the extra *frisson* of their youth is compensated for by the fact that desire for them arises in a context seen as vaguely or explicitly crimi-

⁶ I have previously dealt with this problematic development in *Marriage of Convenience* (1993), but it can be seen in comments such as Grieve's "he is generally considered to be a male author sympathetic to the plight of women" (88); Combet's "l'héroïne cervantine est toujours disponible pour l'action ou la volonté" (55), and much of the work of El Saffar and her followers.

nal. Sweet Blonde Babes are the universal objects of desire, but their attraction for Cervantes seems predicated on the fact that their sexuality remains potential instead of actual. In the *Persiles*, Auristela/Sigismunda, Constanza, Transila, and any of the crowd of young women who are always described as “the most beautiful girl in the room if it were not for Auristela” fall into this category, and their escapades often function as escapes, creating a space and time in which sexuality is further held at bay.

The other category of which Cervantes approves is the Saintly Mother, a figure that in general is relatively rare in Cervantes’s works, at least in her active, actual form, since all of the Sweet Blonde Babes are destined to become, after the close of their stories, Saintly Mothers. These are women whose sexuality is no longer potential, but it has nevertheless been sublimated in the form of motherhood. That is to say, because they are mothers and wives, their sexuality is contained, no longer dangerous. Ricla, the barbarian convert, is a Saintly Mother. In another way, so are the various female hermits, such as Eusebia; in her case too, the category serves to drain away the socially challenging sexuality that characterizes the other two groups, and which Cervantes obviously finds immensely unsettling. In fact, Cervantes seems rather fond of the Eusebia solution to the problem of feminine sexuality: it becomes a step permanently deferred, replaced by a sickly, pseudo-fraternal relationship.

The third and fourth categories of feminine characters meet with considerably less authorial approval. Sexually active, sexually *experienced* women, what we may call Lustful Ladies, who are not contained in any of the sanctioned roles—young, innocent virgin, mother—always seem to cause a violent distaste in our author. We need only think of the *dueñas* in *Don Quijote* and “El celoso extremeño”; in the case of the latter, the narrator ends up blaming the whole sorry mess on the evil influence of Marialonso and others like her. In the *Persiles*, such women chase aggressively after their desire, willing to use whatever tactics it takes to fulfill it. This is the case with Rosamunda, a semi-historical, semi-legendary figure who says of herself: “siempre fui mala. Con los años verdes y con la hermosura mucha, con la libertad demasiada y con la riqueza abundante, se fueron apoderando de mí los vicios” (146). Once the mistress of kings—in all senses, as she declares “he tenido el pie sobre las cervices de los reyes”—she now sees herself the victim of “el tiempo, saltador y robador de la humana belleza de las mujeres.” In spite of her “edad larga [y] marchita belleza” (147), the narrator exposes her unflagging sexual desire, and subjects her to the disgusted rejection

of the object of it, the young barbarian Antonio. Similar to Rosamunda, in both her fate and her desire, is Policarpo's witch Cenotia, who also desires Antonio, and the Roman courtesan Hipólita, who tries to seduce Persiles and, failing that, solicits a spell to rob Sigismunda of her health and beauty. Such mature seductresses always lose abjectly, and are punished either by the scorn of those around them or even death. It is clear that, reversing the Byronesque formula, the sexually mature and sexually active, unmarried woman in Cervantes is always mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

The last type of woman that we find in the *Persiles* we might call the Wild Child, or the Youthful Outlaw. Some of Cervantes's heroines, his Sweet Blonde Babes, appear to start out this way; we think of "Las dos doncellas," or Dorotea in the *Quijote*, or Feliciana de la Voz here (although, as we shall see, Feliciana's character is less clear-cut than it may appear). But the real Wild Child cannot be simply assimilated to the standard pattern of innocent virgin who becomes a happy and lawful wife, and so she tends to have a more individual, and less resolved, fate. The most well-known of the type is, of course, the *Quijote's* Marcela, to whom Cervantes seems willing to grant the freedom that she tries to claim. That freedom nevertheless depends on her exclusion from the normal realm of her fictional society, consigned to an even more artificial world, that of the literary pastoral, and even then, may change at any moment, without Marcela's own control, since she says "El cielo aún hasta ahora no ha querido que yo ame por destino" (I, 103). Cervantes predicates his relatively benevolent view of Marcela's bid for both freedom of will and freedom of agency on Marcela's embrace of a *chaste* mode of life, for when his Wild Child chooses unbridled sexual activity, as does Luisa la Talaverana in the *Persiles*, the author creates a very different narrative trajectory for the character, and she becomes the source of violence, crime, and despair.

Women Making Choices in the *Persiles*

A close look at the process by which some of the more prominent feminine characters in the *Persiles* go about making their choices can tell us much about accepted constraint as the true nature of free will. If we begin with Luisa, we see one of the less ambiguous cases. Prior to her entrance in the narrative, Periandro declares the standard Cervantine concept of free will: "nosotros mismos nos fabricamos nuestra ventura, y no hay alma que no sea capaz de levantarse a su asiento"

(224, emphasis added), but Luisa is given an essential nature that militates against the possibility of willed moral improvement. She first appears in the Polish *indiano's* story as the deceptive object of his desire. He is much older than she, but, as is usual in Cervantes, her attractiveness is based on her apparent youth: she enters the common room of the inn where she works, "una doncella de hasta diez y seis años, a lo menos a mí no me pareció de más, puesto que después supe que tenía veinte y dos" (321). She is thus painted as duplicitous even with regard to qualities over which she has no control. She also suffers immediate punishment, as her young suitor "corrió tras ella, y no la pudo alcanzar, sino fue con una cox que le dio en las espaldas, que la hizo entrar cayendo de ojos en su casa" (321).

This becomes the pattern of Luisa's life: she surrenders with corrupt ease to any embrace, yet remains always out of reach in some fundamental way. The casual brutality with which the young Alonso treats the woman he intends to marry is justified by Luisa's failure to conform to the sociosexual norms: his blows, the innkeeper tells us, "muy pocas son sin que ella las merezca; porque, si va a decir la verdad . . . la tal Luisa es algo atrevidilla y algún tanto libre y descompuesta" (321), to the extent that, like Rosamunda, "no dejará de seguir su gusto si la sacan los ojos" (322). By claiming both free will and free agency in the sexual realm, Luisa becomes the source of the violence that befalls her. She disregards, both willfully and helplessly, the rule that "una de las mejores dotes que puede llevar una doncella es la honestidad" (322). In contrast to the modest innkeeper, whose mother "no [le] dejó ver la calle ni aun por un agujero, cuanto más salir al umbral de la puerta," Luisa proves the wisdom of the maxim that both chickens and women are lost if allowed to roam.

And roam Luisa does, although in a very basic way she is also locked up: physically, she frequently lands in prison, and narratively, because unlike many of the other women characters, even the dangerous *dueñas*, Luisa never tells her own story at length. We always see her from the outside, from the point of view of one of the men in her life, from the perspective of those men "victimized" by her wild decisions. When she does speak briefly, it is to express a conventional repentance for her disorderly life:

Mi amigo, el primero, murió en la cárcel. Éste, que no sé en qué número ponga, me socorrió en ella, de donde me sacó, y como he dicho, me lleva por esos mundos con gusto suyo y con pesar mío; que no soy tan tonta que no conozca el peligro en que traigo el alma en este vagamundo estado (383).

Luisa's contrition turns out to be tactical more than real, for she wishes to make another change, to escape as she always does from the men who try to hold on to her.

As the novel progresses, the distance between reader and character increases: once she entices the servant Bartolomé to take up with her, we begin to receive news of their misadventures in letter form, at two narrative removes from us. Although Bartolomé appears to have no illusions about the nature of the woman to whom he is in thrall, telling his masters, the pilgrims, that she is a *ramera*, it is clear that neither the other characters nor their creator understand a woman who indulges her will in the way that Luisa does. Nor do they remember one significant element of her story: she does not choose to marry the wealthy, older foreigner, but instead is forced to do so by her dazzled father. After fleeing that marriage, Luisa is dismissed as "una mujer loca," one whom society attempts to control by imprisoning her, for the more usual kinds of containment have no effect on her, yet Luisa la Talaverana haunts the novel to its very end. She is feminine sexual free will incarnate, snaky and infinitely deceptive, but her very unwillingness to submit to accepted constraint, as criminal and chaotic as it is shown to be, endows her with a kind of quirky energy that the Sweet Blonde Babes never possess, and which they may secretly envy.

Felician de la Voz follows a very different trajectory, one whose ambiguity and resultant greater complexity announce Auristela's fate as well. Felician has become, in recent years, a kind of poster child for the "chick lit" crowd, based in large part, it would seem, on her wonderfully suggestive name (here is a female character who rejoices in her voice!), and on a selective reading of the events of her peculiar life. In her story we find: the rejection of an arranged marriage; a love affair with a preferred suitor that results in the birth of a child; an escape from forced marriage and then, from punishment for fleeing, by taking refuge in a hollow tree; the recovery of her voice, first in sorrow and then in joy; and finally, marriage with the preferred suitor with her family's consent. Regarded in this way, it certainly appears that Felician "se sale con lo suyo." But does she?

If we examine more carefully several of the key moments in Felician's story, we begin to note certain anomalies that subvert our feminist conclusion. The first scene is that of her escape. We must note how Cervantes has arrayed the various characters. Felician has retreated to her room when confronted by her father and brothers, who have brought the man to whom they have betrothed her, along with his friends, to the house so that they might effect an immediate

marriage. Outside, we find her lover Rosanio. In her room, Feliciana is cornered, trapped by the men in the house, the man outside of the house, and the baby (a son, it goes without saying) who has chosen this inopportune moment to be born, or as Feliciana describes it, "arrojé una criatura en el suelo" (294). Her father enters, hears the baby cry, looks at Feliciana, noting her pallor and weakness, once again hears the baby, and takes out his sword. Now, what does she do? She does not throw herself on her father's mercy. She does not leap forward to protect the baby from the implicit threat. She does not flee to the garden, with or without the child, to her lover's presumed protection. Instead, she takes the one direction that allows her to escape from all of them: "bajé por un caracol a unos aposentos bajos de mi casa, y de ellos con facilidad me puse en la calle, y de la calle en el campo, y del campo en no sé qué camino" (295).

The key here, it seems to me, is the baby. Feliciana demonstrates a distressing (at least given Cervantes's social theories) lack of maternal feeling, which could cause us to question whether she will pass easily from being something of a Wild Child, to reestablishment as a Sweet Blonde Babe, and finally to Saintly Mother and domestic goddess. First, we have that off-handed birth: she just drops him out on the floor. Then, she abandons him, and when the pilgrims describe their earlier encounter with a man fleeing with a baby, Feliciana indicates that she might not even be able to recognize him, if he is not wearing something that she had had in her room, for "nunca le he visto" (295). She hopes that, failing the recognition of the child's swaddling, "quizá la sangre hará su oficio, y por ocultos sentimientos le dará a entender lo que me toca" (295). When the child's caretakers bring him before his mother, however, "en ninguna cosa pudo conocer la que había parido, ni aun, lo que más es de considerar, el natural cariño no le movía los pensamientos a reconocer el niño" (297). Feliciana therefore concludes "De otra debe ser esta prenda, que no mía," and she allows him to be taken off by the shepherds, who will carry him to Trujillo in accordance with the wishes of the mysterious stranger who had left the baby with these countryfolk.

The baby's departure has the effect of leaving Feliciana free of her past, and of the various men whose pressing attentions launched her on her journey. Now, she decides to continue it, motivated by her comfort with the pilgrim company, a feeling that seems to be based on the lack of duty owed to them. She can, then, "volver las espaldas a la tierra donde quedaba enterrada su honra [y pedir] que consigo la llevasen como peregrina a Roma" (298). It is in the context of

this apparently liberating decision that it occurs to Auristela to inquire about Feliciana's rather strange name. It comes, she says, from the universal agreement that "tengo la mejor voz del mundo" (299), but only if "los tiempos se mejoran . . . yo cantaré, si no canciones alegres, a lo menos endechas tristes." This suggests that the loss of her singing voice is tied in some essential way to the complications introduced by love and marriage arrangements, by the fruit of sexual desire, into her life, and that once she has escaped from those tensions, she will be able to sing again. The sense of liberty that Feliciana's decision awakens is emphasized by the change of apparel: first she divests herself of "un collar de perlas y dos sortijas" (300), jewels that indicate her value to the men who would so adorn her. As soon as she has dressed herself in a pilgrim's habit, Feliciana's attitude, which has tended, since her appearance on the scene, toward melancholy and desperation, changes completely: "le nacieron alientos nuevos y deseos de ponerse en camino."

So, does Feliciana recover her voice? The answer is a qualified affirmative, and we can see just what qualifies our response. The pilgrims have arrived in Guadalupe, and have gone directly to the monastery, where instead of the expected luxuries of decoration, they find symbols of the miracles of healing that previous *peregrinos* have undergone, which have left them "ya vivos, ya sanos, ya libres y ya contentos" (305), a list that will come to apply selectively to each of the pilgrims, but not all of the conditions to all of them. Profoundly impressed by the holy evidence, the pilgrims kneel and appeal to the Virgin. At that moment, they witness a virtual miracle within their own party:

puesta de hinojos y las manos puestas y junto al pecho, la hermosa Feliciana de la Voz, lloviendo tiernas lágrimas, con sosegado semblante, sin mover los labios ni hacer otra demostración ni movimiento que diese señal de ser viva criatura, soltó la voz a los vientos . . . y cantó . . . (306).

"And she sang": just at this moment, in a situation that sees Feliciana free of the normal social burdens placed on women of her class, while regarding the Virgin, the woman known for her voice regains it.

And it condemns her to return to those very burdens, for (providentially, since providence and coincidence are the very mechanisms of accepted constraint in the literary realm) her male pursuers have entered the church behind the pilgrims. Feliciana is once again trapped by their expectations, as she was in her own bedroom. Her father and brothers, her rejected fiancé, her lover, and her son range

themselves against the freedom she had just allowed herself to feel and express, cutting her off in mid-song; the narrator, in fact, says that the argument and tumult that ensue “selló la boca de Feliciana” (307), and that condition, as far as the narrative goes, is permanent; Feliciana neither speaks nor sings again. Her brother attempts to silence her eternally; in the face of that mortal threat, she can only accept Rosanio’s defense and offer of marriage, to which we see her answer by clinging to her lover, “toda temblando, toda temerosa, y toda triste y toda hermosa” (308). We cannot help but notice that her attractiveness here seems to derive precisely from her reduced state: she is beautiful *because* she is trembling, sad, frightened . . . and *silenced*. After this, the men settle things among themselves, congratulating each other on their benevolence, and contentment spreads among them. In contrast, Feliciana kneels at her father’s feet, weeping, sighing, fainting. When the baby is brought forth, it is Feliciana’s father who recognizes the blood tie, who bathes the child’s face in his tears, who rains kisses down upon him, who dries the tiny face with his silver hair. The last signs we have of Feliciana are the text of the song she was never allowed to finish. Now mute, now a silent text on paper, its talk of “espíritus alados” (309) is almost cruelly inappropriate in Feliciana’s case, for she is returned, surrounded by the men who have determined her fate, “a su lugar” (312), carrying the son she has never been seen to recognize as her own. We are to remember her, the narrator suggests in the following chapter, for “al par de su voz, su discreción y el buen proceder de su hermano y de su padre.” Discretion, the very tool of accepted constraint, trumps voice, the expression of free will, every time, and in addition, we must be grateful that the menfolk were able to restrain their justifiable violent tendencies.

It is clear that we are meant to see the Feliciana de la Voz episode as a triumph, but it is more difficult to say that the victory belongs to Feliciana herself. Her instinct to escape, to sense that the expected role for a young woman of her class is a trap that, in fact, deprives her of her one distinction, nevertheless prefigures the arc of the *Persiles* as a whole as it concerns the fate of its heroine, Auristela/Sigismunda. Although some readers in search of a more ideologically comfortable message have exempted the protagonists from their analysis, arguing, as does De Armas Wilson, that “Cervantes’s rigid control over the behavior of his titular protagonists is generically motivated by his uses of allegorical romance” (145), this strategy strikes me as analytically inadequate. If Cervantes does intend a socially subversive representation, then the choice of genre and the

destiny of his protagonists should figure into that plan. If they do not, perhaps we should reconsider our evaluation of the intention. In contrast, I would argue, as I have already suggested, that the other characters actually *grow out* of the ambivalences and peculiarities of the portrait of Auristela and Periandro.

Although time does not allow me to trace Auristela in the detail I have employed with Luisa and Feliciano, some elements of her character and her story can be summarized before examining the crucial moment of her "decision" in Rome, at the end of her pilgrimage. One peculiar advantage of the Byzantine romance narrative is that it literalizes the perils of perfection in a woman. Cervantes, as is his wont, extols Auristela's absurdly hyperbolic beauty at every turn, with the result that he turns her into a tautology: she can only be compared to herself, so that this sort of extreme perfection becomes a closed system that excludes the rest of the world and turns the woman herself into an enigma. The only approach to such a self-sufficient construct is to look at it, admire it, and then, usually, to desire it. Auristela thus functions as the motor of the adventure plot, for she is a walking, talking incitement to crime. She is stolen, bought, sold to pirates, destined to be a barbarian goddess, nearly burned in a plot to make her marry the aged Policarpo, and always, always *stared at*. She expresses only pious goals, but arouses the most immodest thoughts in those around her. In the real world, other women *would* hate her because she is beautiful, but in the *Persiles*, only Hipólita resents her enough to act against her. Everyone else positively *loves* her, for she is everything that is good and sweet and fine.

And yet, for such a moral and saintly person, Auristela is an astonishingly good liar. Unlike Periandro, she rarely lets slip her mask as his sister, even when it means she must lie to people like Sinforosa, who is pathetic in her love for Periandro, as well as in her admiration of Auristela. The masquerade itself is unsettling—as Transila at one point says, "no creo yo que las fuerzas de los celos lleguen a tanto que alcancen a tenerlos una hermana de un su hermano" (156)—and Cervantes's special pleading for it, in which only the bad characters who want Auristela or Periandro for themselves question the purported blood relationship, does not alleviate the queasiness it occasionally awakens. The jealous imaginings of characters such as Policarpo, of whom the narrator comments: "Ya le parecía ver a Auristela en brazos de Periandro, no como en los de su hermano, sino como en los de su amante" (220), all but force us to entertain the incestuous implications. Indeed, the suspicion that Cervantes *and*

Auristela would rather sustain the quasi-fraternal relations, with their suppressed element of erotic desire, only accentuates our uneasiness. When Auristela, in the midst of the Felician episode, tells Periandro "Todo esto me mueve a suplicarte, ¡oh hermano!, mires por mi honra, que desde el punto que salí del poder de mi padre y del de tu madre, la deposité en tus manos" (296), we suspect that she may prefer to leave things in their undefined state, not excluding the repressed sexual aspects. Once we find out, at the end, that Sigismunda originally fled an arranged marriage to Persiles's *brother*, we may conclude that although Cervantes was not a protofeminist, he may very well have been a protofreudian.

The erotic implications also surface in scenes such as the conversation between Sinforosa and the invalid Auristela, when the former's unfounded gratitude to the latter leads her to "ech[ar] los brazos al cuello, midiéndole la boca y los ojos con sus hermosos labios" (197), a description lifted virtually unchanged from any number of Baroque love poems. Just as surprising in this regard are the thoughts of an itinerant poet, whose intuitive grasp of Auristela's acting ability causes him to fantasize:

en un instante la vistió en su imaginación en hábito corto de varón; desnudóla luego y vistióla de ninfa, y casi al mismo punto la envistió de reina, sin dejar traje de risa o de gravedad, de que no la vistiese (284).

Although Cervantes, of course, insists that the poet *never* imagines her as anything but "sobremanera honesta," he nevertheless has created a situation in which he, the poet, and the reader can enjoy the titillation, contemplating Auristela's legs in the dress of a man or a nymph, along with those delicious moments of dressing and undressing.

Keeping all of this in mind, we can better understand what happens to Auristela, and to *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, when the pilgrims reach their supposed destination in Rome. We are reminded that Sigismunda's original explicit goal in traveling to Rome was to learn about the Christian faith and to make a formal conversion to it. Once she had accomplished that, she would be willing to abandon the fraternal masquerade as the siblings Auristela and Periandro, and would marry Persiles. Both parts of the plan, however, have grown more complicated in action than they were in potential. Auristela arrives in Rome trailing not one suitor, but six, although three are not actually present at the moment. Persiles accompanies her, of course, but the prince Arnaldo, who has courted

her from almost the very beginning and whom she has implied that she will marry once her pilgrimage is complete, has also come to Rome. He has been seriously wounded in a duel with the Duc de Nemurs, a French prince who has joined Auristela's admirers relatively late, over a portrait of Auristela that the latter had painted. The memories of three rejected suitors—Rutilio, Policarpo, and Persiles's brother—also remain. How to get rid of the excess, so that *Periandro* does not become part of a *polyandrous* situation?

Enter the jealous Hipólita, whose magic potion immediately deprives Auristela of one of the two present, unwanted suitors. The duke's love, the narrator tells us, was based on Auristela's beauty, so that "como la tal hermosura iba faltando en ella, iba en él faltando el amor," which according to the narrator is understandable, since "amar las cosas feas, parece cosa sobrenatural y digna de tenerse por milagro" (454). One down. Prince Arnaldo's case is a little more complicated, since he believes that he is *Periandro's* friend, as well as Auristela's suitor, and is reluctant to leave the friend when he is so concerned about his sister. Still, the duke's departure leads Arnaldo to think about leaving, too, since in the face of Auristela's apparently inevitable death, his hopes can only be seen as "menoscabadas." In the end, the *deus ex machina* action taken by Persiles's brother Magsimino outmaneuvers Arnaldo, and he receives the consolation prize: marriage to Sigismunda's sister Eusebia, described by Auristela as "tan hermosa como yo" (459).

Before that happens, however, another complication arises, one that echoes the dilemma in which we have already seen Feliciana. Between her studies and her recovery from the magically induced illness, Auristela comes to a new understanding about what she should do now that her pilgrimage is complete. In spite of the overwhelming role that *Periandro* has played in her life during their travels—she says: "tú has sido mi padre, tú mi hermano, tú mi sombra, tú mi amparo, y finalmente, tú mi ángel de guarda, y tú mi enseñador y mi maestro" (459)—or perhaps *because* she has been identified with him, and vice versa, so completely, that to add lover and husband to the mix would be somehow redundant, Auristela now proposes that she should take a different path than the one that has sustained *Periandro's* hopes:

Querría agora, si fuese posible, irme al cielo, sin rodeos, sin sobresaltos y sin cuidados, y esto no podrá ser, si tu no me dejas la parte que yo misma te he dado, que es la palabra y la voluntad de ser tu esposa. Déjame, señor, la palabra, que yo procuraré dejar la

voluntad, aunque sea por fuerza: que, para alcanzar tan gran bien como es el cielo, todo cuanto hay en la tierra se ha de dejar, hasta los padres y los esposos. (459)

Although the request stuns Periandro, leaving this prolix talker, for the first time, speechless, Auristela's decision follows the relentless logic of the Christian allegory. As in the case of Feliciano de la Voz, having taken up the pilgrim's staff and traveled in search of Christian enlightenment, the next step would naturally be to dedicate one's life entirely to God. It also appears to these characters as an escape, the only approved escape, from the norms and expectations that govern women of their class. In essence, the pressure of men's pursuit, their unfailing gaze, impels Auristela and Feliciano toward a celibate life in the Church. The fact that neither is allowed to follow the logic of their development indicates both a failure of the concept of free will and of Christian allegory. *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* surrenders to Cervantes's social ideology and in the process, becomes a cracked Christian allegory.

Given Auristela's announcement, what prevents her from fulfilling her desire? In large part it is a lack of will, as well as a continuing confusion over her role. On the one hand, she reasons, "más me debo yo a mí que no a otro" (461); on the other, Periandro "es mi alma . . . por él vivo, por él respiro, por él me muevo y por él me sustento." On the one hand, she begins her address to Periandro with "hermano mío" (458), and calls him "brother" throughout; on the other, she tells Constanza afterwards, "ni sé si Periandro es mi hermano o si no" (461). The other characters do not comprehend such an apparently artificial difficulty with identity and definition; in fact, they find the undefined nature of the relationship between the two protagonists to be problematic. Constanza finally advises "dala [i. e. la mano] de esposo a Periandro: que igualándole contigo, pondrás silencio a cualquiera murmuración" (463). Although Auristela sets out with her companions in search of Periandro, she does so without declaring what she plans to say when they find him.

What Cervantes does with the plot at this point can serve as a final, perfect illustration of the operation of accepted constraint in action. First of all, he brings Periandro y Auristela full circle to confront their past and the reason for their flight by having Magsimino arrive in Rome. This immediately suggests to Auristela that there is a third, even less desirable, possibility for her future, one that she thought she had eluded: "desapareciéronse en un punto, así las esperanzas de guardar su integridad y buen propósito, como de alcanzar por

más llano camino la compañía de su querido Periandro" (471). But our kind author rescues his worried heroine from such a fate by afflicting Magsimino with (horrors! but how convenient!) a fatal illness that not even the wise doctors of Rome can cure. And Periandro's big brother, with what we are to regard as amazing and unlooked-for magnanimity (but the name is a clue), arranges the protagonists' fate without their intervention:

Con la mano derecha asíó la izquierda de su hermano y se la llegó a los ojos, y con su izquierda le asíó de la derecha y se la juntó con la de Sigismunda, y . . . dijo:— . . . con esotra mano aprieta la de Sigismundo, y séllala con el sí que quiero que le des de esposo. . . . El reino de tus padres te queda; el de Sigismunda heredas; procura tener salud, y gócelos años infinitos (474).

Notice what Cervantes has done here. By giving Persiles what he clearly wanted, and by sparing Sigismunda the one option that she absolutely did not want, he has crafted something that is supposed to satisfy as a happy ending. But in this scene, as in the monastery scene that seals Feliciana's fate, *the woman is not consulted*. Magsimino's commands are given to Persiles; it is Persiles who gives the "yes" to the matrimony, whose spirits are revived; the only part Sigismunda plays is to have her hand grabbed and forcibly joined with that of Persiles. After this, the funeral is arranged, we hear the justifiably sour thoughts that Arnaldo has concerning his wasted time, only to be passed over by "el nuevo y estraño casamiento de Sigismunda" (475), and then his matrimonial fortunes and those of the other secondary characters are quickly settled. What is left for Sigismunda? She gives Constanza her diamond cross,

Y habiendo besado los pies al Pontífice, sosegó su espíritu y cumplió su voto, y vivió en compañía de su esposo Persiles hasta que biznietos le alargaron los días, pues los vio en su larga y feliz posteridad (475).

Once again, the trap snaps shut, the woman can only accept the situation, and we the readers are supposed to rejoice for her. Ah, the tyranny of the happy ending!

Conclusion: Women, Free Will, and Cervantes

The verdict on women and free will in Cervantes's works in general, and in the *Persiles* in particular, cannot, it seems to me, be given categorically. The texts clearly present a context *within which*

everyone—characters, author, narrator—believe that the feminine characters have been allowed to choose freely, and that belief, in turn, strongly conditions readers' conclusions as well. At the same time, however, a high level of social anxiety attends the act of feminine choice, which expresses itself iconographically in scenes in which the very physical arrangement of bodies plays out the limitations on the characters' options and agencies. The fact that the heroine-style Sweet Blonde Babes must choose (or have chosen for them) between what they perceive as an unattractive, a less attractive, and a most attractive option, and inevitably must settle for the less attractive one, even when the most appealing one is generically and theologically organic, clues us to the level of ideological coercion in the system. The punishment visited upon those types—the sexually active, non-sanctified women—who choose outside of the options established by accepted constraint only reinforces this insight. After all, Luisa la Talaverana, although she escapes the ugly death that figures such as Rosamunda and Cenotia receive, is also excluded from the general round of rewards that ends the *Persiles*. Instead, she and her lover “se fueron a Nápoles, donde se dice acabaron mal, porque no vivieron bien” (475).

In the end, Doña Ana may insist that her decision to marry the Regular Guy, and to dump the Hunk, comes about because “el dueño fui de mi mano” (Ruiz de Alarcón, Act III, 2912), but of course the lady never was, and never is, the master of her own hand. She is only its guardian, until it can be joined—by fate, by accident, by genre, by big brother—to its rightful owner.

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