

Into the Dark Triangle of Desire: Rivalry, Resistance, and Repression in “El curioso impertinente”

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AMONG THE RECENT ATTEMPTS to liberate Cervantes’s “El curioso impertinente” from misunderstanding as an impertinent “intruder” into *Don Quijote*, several hinge on celebratory readings of Camila’s role in the triangle of desire formed by Anselmo’s rivalry with Lotario. Diana de Armas Wilson announces a “sudden accession to subjectivity” in the dagger scene (27), and Yvonne Jehenson concludes with similar conviction that “Camila’s performance succeeds in altering the very rules that have previously governed her signification” (43). According to Howard Mancing, Camila “transforms herself from passive object to active agent; she takes control of her life and her story and in the process relegates to secondary status the men who quibble over abstract concepts” (16).

These readings are based on admirable attempts to break out of discourses that objectify the female, but they also have significant shortcomings. For one, the insistence on Camila’s self-transformation “from silent object of desire” to “narrating and controlling agent” assumes that she was not already a whole person and that she was somehow previously incapable of action (Mancing 18). But to “[transform] herself from passive object to active agent” would have required the already-present ability to *act*, namely, agency. Further, these conclusions depend on a certain insensitivity to the eventual aftermath of the dagger scene and to the implications of this denouement for the purported “agency”

of Camila. Jehenson elides the damaging force of the ending by analyzing the presence of melodramatic topoi within it (45-46). Wilson suggests that Camila's rebellion overshadows the finality of her destruction: "Like the men who love *through* her, Camila will eventually die, but not before she produces a plausible counter-text to that insidious Golden Age sociolect of female 'value'" (28). Wilson's intertextual emphasis sweeps from Herodotus to the Golden Age to Borges with the convenient benefit that—seen from such a remove—Camila's abandonment and death can be read in relation to a larger "cause" (the critique of the traditional scapegoating of woman and her body). Mancing similarly shifts the stakes of the text by reframing it as a kind of battle between narrative (represented by Camila) and argumentation (represented by Lotario, and to a lesser degree, Anselmo). Mancing concludes that by the end of "El curioso impertinente," Camila's narrative of fidelity "has proven to be superior to the men's argument" (11). But this is ultimately a dubious triumph that has legitimacy only outside the tale itself; whatever her self-assertion, eloquence, and genius in acting, Camila is still brutally subjected to the punishments that so often await wayward women of early modern Spanish literature: the convent and the coffin.

I do not mean to suggest that female subjectivity is somehow impossible in early seventeenth-century Spanish literature or even in Cervantes; we need look no farther than Marcela, Dorotea, and other astute, assertive women characters of *Don Quijote*.¹ Rather, it is the possibility of the *expression* of subjectivity within a given narrative that interests me, and I will argue that the nature of the world constituted by "El curioso impertinente" renders Camila's subjectivity generally unthinkable within its bounds. The narrative offers us a radically closed society with only two full citizens—Anselmo and Lotario. Marriage brings Camila into an affective economy wholly based on the rivalrous dynamic between the two men, and her every move within this world deepens the degree to which its perverse metonymic logic affects her. Misunderstood and mistreated as an object and instrument

1 Edwin Williamson's "Romance and Realism in the Interpolated Stories of the *Quijote*" examines the complex—if not fully revealed—personal character of a number of female figures in *Don Quijote*.

of desire by both her husband and her lover, Camila is drawn into an ever-darkening triangle of dependence, deception, and desire that ultimately leads to her destruction.

I. "LOS DOS AMIGOS" AND THE INSTRUMENTAL BRIDE

Camila's role in this triangle can be understood best after establishing some sense of the ties between Anselmo and Lotario. Tellingly, the tale begins when both Anselmo and Lotario are single, well before Camila's introduction into the plot (399). As Robert Richmond Ellis notes, although the period before Anselmo's marriage is compressed into just a paragraph and a half, the details we learn there "form the background from which the characters emerge" and "contain certain parameters which must be kept in mind in the analysis of the subsequent action" (173). By the second paragraph, Anselmo has married Camila, and by the third, enough time has elapsed for Lotario's absence from the newlyweds' home to be noticed by Anselmo.

Even in this brief trajectory, it is abundantly clear which relationship is the focal point of the narrative. Camila's name is mentioned only once in the long second paragraph, and her marriage to Anselmo is narrated almost in passing, sandwiched between Lotario's assistance in procuring her hand and his attempt at a discreet exit from the stage of Anselmo's affections. From the very beginning, then, the relationship at stake is not Anselmo's marriage but rather his friendship with Lotario, and the use of language in "El curioso impertinente" reflects this emphasis. "Los dos" is used to refer to two of the three characters eighteen times in the text. Thirteen of these references are to Anselmo and Lotario, and the other five are to Lotario and Camila after they begin their affair. Never does "los dos" refer to Anselmo and Camila as a pair, an omission that clearly belies the significance given to their marriage.

The first paragraph of "El curioso impertinente" seems almost strained in its emphasis on the closeness and—above all—the equality of the two men: these wealthy and distinguished gentlemen are "tan amigos que, por excelencia y antonomasia, de todos los que los

conocían *los dos amigos* eran llamados” (I.33:399).² The narrator goes on: “mozos de una misma edad y de unas mismas costumbres; todo lo cual era bastante causa a que los dos con recíproca amistad se correspondiesen...” (I.33:399). And yet this explanation of their emphatically reciprocal relationship is really no explanation at all, for in this “ciudad rica y famosa,” there would certainly be many men of similar standing (I.33:399). What, then, so binds Anselmo and Lotario together? The narrator does not seem close enough to them to tell us, and this opening description offers a perspective very much like what we will encounter at the end of the narrative from the *ciudadano* who reports to Anselmo—without recognizing him—on the latest gossip regarding “los dos amigos.” It is significant that the *ciudadano* from Florence does not even realize he is speaking to the infamous Anselmo himself; he knows *of* “los dos amigos” without actually knowing them. In the same way, our narrator only gives us a view of Lotario and Anselmo’s relationship from the outside, glossing the overly credulous view of the Florentine community. Indeed, there is a tangible divide between the city at large and the closed social world of the two men. Aside from their servants and the nameless friend whom Anselmo visits as a pretext for leaving Lotario and Camila alone, it is as though their relationship exists in the absence of all other relationships. At least for Anselmo, Lotario stands for friendship and for family.

The narrator presents the apparent similarity of the friendship’s two members as evidence of its harmony, but the original point of connection between the two is never revealed. And given the narrator’s distance from the inner workings of the relationship, these hyperbolic declarations seem to lack authority, as when the narrator declares that “andaban tan a una sus voluntades, que no había concertado reloj que así lo anduviese” (I.33:399). Much of this relationship, then, remains beyond the ken of the narrator and the reader. Perhaps this apparently harmonious equality results from a different sort of movement: a radical rivalry between the two men. In his brief analysis of “El curioso

2 A form of metonymy, *antonomasia* replaces a proper name with an epithet, and in Anselmo and Lotario’s case that epithet defines them precisely by their contiguity, elevating their friendship over their distinct identities.

impertinente,” René Girard asserts that “their ardent friendship is accompanied by a sharp feeling of rivalry,” a rivalry that nevertheless “remains in the shadows” (*Deceit* 50). Rather than a given fact of their relationship, the apparent balance between the two can be read as a product of the ceaseless striving of each man to surpass and control the other. But even in rivalries, the two parties are not necessarily equally motivated. We learn, for example, that Anselmo depends on the opinion and approval of Lotario “sin el cual ninguna cosa hacía,” but there is no mention of Lotario having a similar dependence on Anselmo (1.33:400). Might this suggest that Anselmo is in constant need of reassurance from Lotario that what he (Anselmo) is doing advances his status in Lotario’s eyes? Whereas Anselmo’s actions reveal a willful rivalry with Lotario, Lotario participates in the rivalry almost reflexively; repeatedly baited by Anselmo, he cannot help but assert his own worth.

The ongoing production of this rivalry is no doubt exhausting, and the text offers ample, if subtle, suggestions that Lotario harbors a desire to escape the tight embrace of Anselmo’s friendship. The circumstances surrounding the marriage of Camila and Anselmo, which Lotario himself orchestrates, can be read as evidence of precisely this desire. The narrator explains that Camila is “tan contenta de haber alcanzado a Anselmo por esposo, que no cesaba de dar gracias al cielo, y a Lotario, por cuyo medio tanto bien había venido” (1.33:400). Given that Lotario is the one who asks for Camila’s hand on Anselmo’s behalf, it stands to reason that her extreme gratitude is based not on Anselmo as he is—indeed, he soon proves to be a callous and indifferent husband—but rather on what Lotario has *told her* about Anselmo in the process of arranging the marriage. As soon as the wedding festivities are over, Lotario takes up a deliberate distance: “comenzó Lotario a descuidarse con cuidado de las idas en casa de Anselmo” (1.33:400). Although the timing of this change makes it appear that Camila is the cause of Lotario’s distance, the marriage may simply provide Lotario with the occasion to do what he wishes, namely, to acquire a measure of freedom from Anselmo’s cloying attachment.

The narrator offers a neat explanation for the “descuidarse con cuidado” paradox: Lotario is intentionally “neglecting” his friend out

of concern for the delicate honor of a husband. Indeed, in the next phrase, “como es razón que parezca a todos los que fueren discretos,” the narrator gives the impression that the whole community views Lotario’s actions as prudent and well intended (1.33:400). In addition to a sign of the narrator’s distant approval, we can also see this as an indication of the degree to which Lotario has positioned himself so that doing what he wants—getting away from Anselmo—is perfectly in keeping with societal norms, even for “los dos amigos.” By marrying Anselmo off, effectively sacrificing Camila for the sake of his own independence, Lotario seems to have secured an ironclad excuse for keeping his distance from Anselmo. After all, shouldn’t the marriage bond take precedence over even the closest ties between friends?

Anselmo does not accept this logic. Despite Lotario’s repeated efforts to get him to turn his attention to his new union with Camila, Anselmo remains fixated on the friendship that he feels slipping away from him. In fact, he insists to Lotario that, had he known that marriage would interfere with their continued connection, he never would have agreed to it (1.33:400). Anselmo even calls upon Camila to certify the degree to which “los dos”—here Anselmo and Lotario—“se amaban” (1.33:400). There is something of the querulous child in Anselmo, but there is also a hint that, amidst Lotario’s approval and assistance in arranging the marriage, he strategically neglected to mention to Anselmo that it would necessarily occasion a decrease in intimacy between them.

II. “LO QUE DEBES A NUESTRA AMISTAD”: A WEB OF RIVALRY AND OBLIGATION

If Lotario first used Camila to create a set of circumstances that would justify his distance, Anselmo, not to be outdone, now uses her as a means of closing that very distance. Having exhausted his appeal to their reputation as “los dos amigos” as well as numerous other entreaties for Lotario to behave as he did before the wedding, Anselmo turns to a new tactic, as the narrator signals with the phrase, “sucedió, pues,”

that opens the scene: “Sucedió, pues, que uno que los dos se andaban paseando por un prado fuera de la ciudad, Anselmo dijo a Lotario las semejantes razones” (1.33:401). Anselmo launches into his infamous request for Lotario to play at cuckoldry, a request he ostensibly makes to prove Camila’s virtue. Certainly *pues* can be read as “well,” “then,” “but,” or even as a kind of oral punctuation to establish rhythm in a told tale, but here it also underscores the stress on cause and effect already suggested by *suced*. At this point in the text, our narrator still maintains his distance from the characters, and in keeping with this distance, he only intimates the causal relationship between what precedes—Lotario’s continued refusal to restore their intimacy—and what follows—Anselmo’s latest and most singular demand. Nevertheless, the subsequent debate on the nature and demands of honor clearly belies the apparent triviality of the word *pues*.

We should begin by noting that the extended exchange between Anselmo and Lotario develops familiar tropes of an established discourse on honor. Indeed, connections radiate outward from this scene to other narrative threads in *Don Quijote*, to the tales of chivalry consumed by Don Quijote, and to Cervantes’s *Novelas ejemplares*, not to mention Lope de Vega’s honor plays.³ Yet the thematic conventions of the honor tradition do not account fully for the dynamics at work in the scene; rather, a preoccupation with honor serves as a formal pretext for a more subtle exchange. Specifically, we can read Anselmo’s appeal for Lotario to test his wife’s virtue as a sequel to his earlier, unsuccessful, tactical attempts to reconnect with his friend. From the beginning, the test of virtue is directly motivated by Anselmo’s feelings for Lotario and has nothing to do with any real interest in Camila’s virtue. If this were really about Camila, “Anselmo’s plan to test Camila [...] should have emerged during his courtship of her,” when, as Ruth El Saffar notes, “the test would also have brought out something of the real Camila” (*Beyond Fiction* 72). Instead, Anselmo insists that Camila has no pleasure or will other than that which he wishes her to have, reveal-

3 See the fourth chapter of Joseph Ricapito’s *Cervantes’s Novelas ejemplares: Between History and Creativity* for a reading of four Cervantine texts as “honor novellas” that respond to and compete with Lope de Vega’s honor plays.

ing his utter lack of interest in knowing Camila as anything more than a simple mirror of his will (1.33:400).

Once again, the crucial relationship in “El curioso impertinente” is between Anselmo and Lotario; Camila is only incidentally related to them. Barry Ife shares the conviction that “the wife-testing is not the objective; it is the means to a quite different end,” and he adds that Anselmo’s determination to test Camila’s virtue “flows naturally out of his clinging behaviour towards Lotario” (678). However, we need not conclude that “what Anselmo really wants to see through the keyhole is his friend making love to his wife” (Ife 678). It is quite the opposite, in fact: given the rivalrous nature of their relationship, what Anselmo wants to see is Lotario’s *failure* to make love to his wife, a defeat that will simultaneously affirm Anselmo’s superiority and prove the absurdity of Lotario’s claims that he should stay away from their home out of propriety.

Anselmo also insists that when Camila “passes” the test, “tendré yo por *sin igual* mi ventura” (1.33:403; my emphasis): in other words, “when you prove my wife’s virtue, you will see how peerless *I* am—and how lucky you are to be my friend.” Even if Camila yields to Lotario, Anselmo still expects to come out ahead. For, in that case, he will have secured Lotario’s intimacy; surely Lotario will console him after the shame of such a trying experience, and they will be further united by the shared secret of Anselmo’s injury concealed in “la virtud” of Lotario’s silence (1.33:403). Such is the perverse logic underlying Anselmo’s rivalry, a rivalry so intense that he instigates these elaborate machinations with the express purpose of swapping Camila for Lotario and restoring the legendary intimacy of “los dos amigos.”

Lotario’s elaborate response is often vexing in its essentializing stance toward women, and Wilson justly denounces it as “a copious, aphoristic, even vicious tractate for the male regulation of the woman’s body” (27). We will return to the radically limited horizon of possibilities for being female according to Anselmo and Lotario’s worldview, but for now we should look at one way in which Lotario pursues his own desire for distance even as he appears to concern himself with his friend’s reputation. Lotario begins by insisting that Anselmo’s request

reflects a violation of the basis for their friendship: “las cosas que me has dicho, ni son de aquel Anselmo mi amigo, ni las que me pides se han de pedir a aquel Lotario que tú conoces,” and he goes on to cite a proverb to show that “no se habían de valer de su amistad en cosas que fuesen contra Dios” (1.33:404). The explicit message is that Anselmo should simply retract his request, but there is also the implication that, by persisting, Anselmo is entering territory in which Lotario may be morally obligated to withdraw his friendship. Of course, this is hardly a theological discourse, and the invocation of God is purely rhetorical: Lotario is capitalizing on whatever figures he can manage to make his resistance persuasive. God is the lever of this catapult, but the ammunition is Lotario’s threat of a complete end to their contact. This line of reasoning reemerges even more forcefully toward the end of Lotario’s lecture when he insists that Anselmo find another “instrumento de tu deshonra y desventura; que yo no pienso serlo, *aunque por ello pierda tu amistad*” (1.33:411; my emphasis).

This thinly veiled threat proves ineffective against the maneuvers of Anselmo, who recasts his desire as akin to “la enfermedad que suelen tener algunas mujeres que se les antoja comer tierra, yeso, carbón y otras cosas peores” (1.33:411-12). In a discussion of this allusion to pica, Harry Sieber notes how Huarte de San Juan extends the reach of the disorder to the emotions and the intellect (3-4), and Wilson takes it as a mark of “male hysteria” through which Cervantes discredits Anselmo’s project as pathological (19). In terms of Anselmo’s attempt to control Lotario, this allusion to illness deepens the guilt to which Lotario will be subject if he refuses to engage in the testing of Camila. Indeed, Anselmo’s speech is peppered with phrases such as “lo que debes a nuestra amistad” and “estás obligado a hacer esto” (1.33:412).

But this is not just a continuation of the strategy we saw Anselmo employ in the first part of the exchange; rather, through his oblique reference to “cosas peores,” Anselmo counters Lotario’s threat with one of his own. The phrase “cosas peores” hints at the degree to which Anselmo is willing to debase himself in pursuit of what he wants, which is Lotario’s attention, not the proof of Camila’s fidelity. Anselmo strategically positions himself outside obligations to honor by invoking

madness, illness, and feminine weakness, and his avowed recklessness threatens the very honor that Lotario prizes so highly and equates with life itself. If Lotario refuses to help him out of this state by performing the test, Anselmo just might reveal damaging information—whether actual or fabricated—about Lotario. Anselmo knows the rules of honor and banks on Lotario’s concern with his own reputation. For Lotario, in keeping with the tradition, honor is about appearances, not actual virtue: his own innocence would be no consolation to him if Anselmo were to disgrace him. Further, since Lotario and Anselmo are identified metonymically as “los dos amigos,” the loss of Anselmo’s good name would mean the loss of Lotario’s as well.

Trapped by a code of honor turned instrument of private perversity, Lotario gives in. The narrator offers a series of explanations for this abrupt acquiescence:

Viendo Lotario la resoluta voluntad de Anselmo [1], y no sabiendo qué más ejemplos traerle ni qué más razones mostrarle para que no la siguiese [2], y viendo que le amenazaba que daría a otro cuenta de su mal deseo [3], por evitar mayor mal [4], determinó de contentarle y hacer lo que le pedía. (1.33:412)

Tellingly, these justifications bear the mark of Freud’s kettle logic, whereby multiple contradictory claims are deployed toward the same purpose. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud recounts the story of a man accused by his neighbor of returning a kettle in a damaged condition: “In the first place, he said, he had returned the kettle undamaged; in the second, it already had holes in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, he had never borrowed the kettle from his neighbour at all” (101). These arguments are obviously contradictory, but Freud goes on to note the benefit of this fact since “if even one of these three methods of defence is recognized as valid, the man must be acquitted” (101). But competing claims erode the credibility of the speaker, and the strenuous nature of such a mode of justification betrays the urgency of the desire underlying it. In the kettle case, the desire is to evade responsibility for the damaged kettle; in Lotario’s case, the desire seems to be to

escape any suggestion that he agrees to Anselmo's terms out of his own interest. But of course, in both cases, what the multiple justifications seek to conceal is precisely what they reveal. Lotario accepts Anselmo's request in order to pursue the same goal he has had all along: breaking away from his oppressively intense friend.⁴

Lotario's reasoning develops along these lines: If I can't get Anselmo to agree to a less intimate friendship, what better way to induce a decisive split than to make him see that I have seduced his wife? Indeed, it is only after Lotario's assent to the test that highly ambiguous descriptions of his motives and actions begin to appear in the narration. For example, as Lotario agrees to all that Anselmo asks of him with regard to the test of virtue, the narrator notes that he does so "con diferente intención que Anselmo pensaba" (1.33:413). The obvious implication, of course, is that he does not intend to seduce Camila at all. In light of what comes, however, this cryptic remark could also be read as meaning that, while Anselmo only expects Lotario to *test* Camila's virtue, Lotario is setting out to conquer her virtue completely. Similarly, Lotario later likens his (as yet nonexistent) efforts to flatter and deceive Camila to how the devil achieves his objective by transforming himself into an "ángel de luz, siéndolo él de tinieblas" (1.33:414). Ostensibly, Anselmo understands Lotario to be pretending to be a devil (seducer) pretending to be an angel of light (admirer of Camila's beauty and virtue) and believes him to be an angel of a friend for accommodating his whim and playing at this devilry. But Anselmo, so pleased by what he assumes, fails to consider the possibility of yet another layer of deception whereby Lotario might deploy the very same duplicitous technique on him. An even more telling instance of double entendre occurs

4 Ife suggests that Lotario has been strategically "over-protesting," and he reads Lotario's resistance as one of many "cynical pieces of manipulation" enclosing a seduction of Camila that "has been going on from the outset" (678-79). This is certainly a provocative reading, and it would also uphold the degree to which the men are motivated by rivalry. In Ife's reading, Lotario would have systematically arranged the marriage with the express purpose of undermining it and proving his superiority to Anselmo by cuckolding him. What this reading does not account for, though, are the numerous implications that Lotario wishes to make a getaway from the too-tight embrace of Anselmo's friendship. Such a plot would have him mirroring himself in a rivalry that he seems to maintain only reluctantly and reflexively.

in Lotario's ambiguous assurance: "Lotario respondió que ya que había comenzado, que él llevaría hasta el fin aquella empresa, puesto que entendía salir della cansado y vencido" (1.33:415). "Aquella empresa," might just as well refer to the actual seduction of Camila as to the trial of virtue, and "salir della cansado" offers itself to a sexually loaded reading by which Lotario would be "vencido," not by the moral fortitude of Anselmo's wife, but rather by the arduous business of making love to her.⁵ Lotario's insistence that "la que él pensaba poner en satisfacelle le quitaría de toda sospecha" can also be read beyond its obvious implications (1.33:415). On one level, Lotario suggests to Anselmo that he will dismiss Anselmo's suspicions by proving Camila's virtue. But the phrasing of this apparent reassurance leaves open the possibility that Lotario will instead go "all the way" to confirm Camila's fallibility and make this fallibility known to Anselmo. Again, the goal of such a move on Lotario's part is to bring about the desired rupture in their friendship. If such elaborate scheming seems far-fetched, we would do well to remember the similarly convoluted narratives in the Italianate *novella* as well as the many other Cervantine tales that hinge on doubly or triply deceptive performances.⁶

In response to readings that insist that Lotario only begins to seduce Camila in earnest *after* Anselmo catches him in his deceptive non-seduction, we might invoke the long-standing nature of their relationship and suggest that Lotario knows his friend well enough to anticipate precisely what he will do, down to his suspicious gaze through the keyhole. We should resist the impulse to conclude, as Mancing does, that Lotario pretends to be interested in Camila merely to extricate himself from an awkward position (12). Instead, perhaps Lotario is faking the fact that he is faking. That is to say, he is *already* performing for Anselmo, and his real intention to seduce Camila is masked by the pretense of wooing her halfheartedly and only at Anselmo's

5 Lotario subtly identifies himself with the long tradition of the hero conquered or exhausted by love. Most salient is the much-repeated image of Mars sleeping after having sex with Venus, only to be caught up in a net by the cuckolded husband, Vulcan.

6 Williamson notes that the interpolated tales in *Don Quijote* have their roots in the Renaissance *novella*, which Cervantes claimed to have introduced to Spanish readers (43).

bidding. By pretending indifference in the short-run, Lotario secures greater freedom for the full seduction he has in mind. As Ife observes, “the strength of Lotario’s resistance only serves to increase the value of Anselmo’s authorisation” (679). But while Lotario may imagine this plan as a means by which to definitively break with Anselmo, the seducer himself will be seduced back into Anselmo’s embrace.

III. “CUÁN DIGNA ERA DE SER AMADA”: TRIANGULAR DESIRE

Now that we have explored the subtle indications of rivalry and unequal attachment between Lotario and Anselmo, we must begin to consider what these dynamics between the men mean for Camila. Girard’s model of triangular desire has been a source of heated critical debate, especially insofar as it positions women between desiring men and seems to exclude modes of female desire.⁷ There are indeed misogynistic tendencies and major lacunae in the model Girard offers, and Wilson—following Ruth El Saffar and Toril Moi—points out that Girard’s theory “passes over the love *of* women as [in] the experience of women in love” (13). Laura Gorfkle and Amy R. Williamsen describe how “Girard’s ‘specular’ representation of woman (a process in which the male self can only perceive of [sic] the female other as a projection of his own identity)” is bound up in “his fear of sexual difference, of a different desire” (12). Gorfkle and Williamsen object to how Girard’s model seems to reduce female desire to an imitation of male desire, and this may well be a central problem with many applications of the theory.

But in the case of “El curioso impertinente”—with the single exception of Camila’s dagger thrust—what we see is precisely the rigorous exclusion of female desire from the closed relationship between Anselmo and Lotario, making Girard’s model keenly relevant. Indeed, even the narrator, whose voice is emphatically male, participates in

⁷ See, for example, the exchange between Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo and Cesario Bandera, which begins with Morón-Arroyo’s review of Bandera’s *Mimesis conflictiva: Ficción literaria y violencia en Cervantes y Calderón* in *Diacritics* 8.1 (1978). A reply from Bandera follows in *Diacritics* 9.3 (1979), as does a further response from Morón-Arroyo in the same issue.

the restrictive structuring of the concepts through which Camila becomes intelligible to them only as an object and instrument. The men's relationship to Camila is both parasitic and perverse in its insistent objectification: she is gold to be tested (1.33:403), a fine diamond (1.33:408), an imperfect animal (1.33:408), a relic to be adored but not touched (1.33:409), a snow-white ermine (1.33:409), a beautiful garden (1.33:409). Camila can be all of these things because she is to them a kind of magic mirror (a crystal mirror, Lotario says), onto which shifting images may be projected (1.33:409).

Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo makes a different objection to the application of Girard's model to Cervantes: "This approach casts women merely as objects of the conflicting desires. [...] But is it not legitimate to look at the story from the side of the women, as subjects who are the tragic victims?" (83). In the case of "El curioso impertinente," the answer is no; female subjectivity cannot find full expression in an affective economy regulated by the men's desire. Within the triangle of desire—not to be confused, as Morón-Arroyo does, with the approach that describes it—Camila really *is* an "object of conflicting desires." Virtually every aspect of the relational dynamics in the text denies her subjectivity. This does not mean that Camila is not a subject, insofar as any fictional character is a subject. Rather, the critical point is that her subjectivity is unintelligible to the men and—given that their discourse defines the narrative—to the reader as well.⁸ In his analysis of the text, Ellis points out that Anselmo "forces Camila to submit to a pre-conceived notion of reality," one in accordance with the world as he would like it to be (172). Luce Irigaray explains that "the rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a

8 It may seem contradictory to debate the subjectivity of a fictional character. What I mean when I speak of the subjectivity of characters is the degree to which we can imagine them as complex, feeling, thinking agents in control of their own lives. There is no denying Camila's cleverness, her quick-wittedness, or her complexity; nevertheless, everything that we know about her is filtered through the men. We can speculate about what Camila might be like as a subject, but the text gives us no ground for constructing this being. She exists beyond the bounds of the text.

mirror invested by the (masculine) 'subject' to reflect himself, to copy himself" (30). To repeat this crucial point: we only encounter Camila as she is for the men, for any subjectivity on her part is relegated to the margins of the world defined by the "dominant ideology," here, the rivalry between Anselmo and Lotario.

I have already insisted that the focal relationship of the text is between the two men and that Camila is involved only incidentally, as the purported object of desire. Girard explains this aspect of the rivalry as often entailing a scenario in which the hero "pushes the loved woman into the mediator's arms in order to arouse his desire and then triumph over the rival desire" (*Deceit* 50). But this is only the external movement of the rivalry inherent in triangulated desire; it should be clear by now that what Anselmo wants is not Camila but Lotario, the very man he positions as rival/mediator. His strategy for regaining the intimacy he desires with Lotario—an intimacy so extreme that he wishes to *be* Lotario—is to instigate Lotario's interest in Camila. She is the immediate object, but "the object is only a means of reaching the mediator" (53). As Girard notes, "the desire is aimed at the mediator's *being*" (53). Even more tellingly, Girard adds elsewhere, "the goal is less to wrench the loved one from the mediator than to receive her from him and to share her with him" (*Double Business* 67). "To receive her from him" really means "to see him desire her"; in the case of Anselmo, seeing or imagining Lotario's interest in Camila is what endows her with value. Similarly, Lotario begins to intensify his pursuit of Camila when he recognizes "cuán digna era de ser amada"; which is to say, when he notices the *worth* of what Anselmo has (1.33:417). She serves as a visible sign of the Other's desire, but, as Toril Moi explains, "the competition between subject and rival soon overshadows the subject's mediated desire for the object," and "before long the subject is caught up in an intense and ambivalent relationship with the rival/model. The object recedes more and more into the background and is presently declared superfluous" (22). Camila, purely incidental from the beginning of the marriage, serves merely as a conduit for the desire that flows from Anselmo to Lotario and back again; for, however ambivalent his feelings toward Anselmo, however strong his urge to slip from

Anselmo's stranglehold, Lotario is by no means indifferent to Anselmo. Even his relationship with Camila is bound up in his ties to Anselmo, and his feelings for her cannot survive his separation from Anselmo, as becomes evident by the narrative's end.

IV. "MI TAN JUSTO DESEO": CAMILA'S UNREADABLE GESTURE

But what does Camila make of this rivalrous world, and what does it make of her? Anselmo's central preoccupation with Lotario becomes hers as well, and the rivalry between the men generates deception after deception. After Lotario agrees to Anselmo's plan, the three characters are, as El Saffar writes, "launched into a series of 'plays' in which each character in turn believes himself [sic] to be the 'author,' successfully manipulating the actions of the other two" (*Distance* 72). From the initial deceit by which Anselmo enlists Lotario to secretly test Camila's fidelity (1), the following quickly unfold: (2) Lotario deceives Anselmo by pretending he is trying to seduce Camila when he is not (yet); (3) Anselmo deceives Lotario by spying on him and Camila while pretending to be out of the house (undoing the second deceit); (4) Lotario deceives Anselmo by wooing Camila in earnest rather than merely as a test; (5) Lotario deceives Camila by not revealing Anselmo's plot and pretending his pursuit is motivated by his desire independent of Anselmo; (6) Camila deceives Anselmo by feigning faithfulness to him when in fact she has given herself to Lotario; (7) Lotario deceives Camila when, in a fit of jealousy, he tells Anselmo that she has been unfaithful and sets a trap to "catch" her; (8) Lotario then deceives Anselmo by revealing to Camila his ill-advised confession; and (9) Camila deceives Lotario by withholding her plans for the dagger scene to be staged for the concealed Anselmo. Virtually every deception reveals one character or another attempting to "take over" the job of directing the play that Anselmo and Lotario have brought about through their rivalry. With each additional layer of concealment, the need for further dissembling crops up, demanding ever-greater feats of deception. Desire and deception extend metonymically through the characters, always promising

gain when, in fact, they only accumulate increasingly imminent potential for betrayal.

This becomes especially evident in the dagger scene staged by Camila with Lotario and her maid, Leonela, as supporting actors. In this scene, as El Saffar notes, “the complexity of the artifice of the entire structure eludes the grasp of any one of the characters who helped to produce it” (*Distance* 76). The layout of misperception and each character’s false sense of control together shape what she or he perceives as the truth of this situation. Camila knows Anselmo is watching, and she thinks she knows Lotario’s part, but what she *does not* know is that her performance marks the culmination of a test initiated by Anselmo and pursued by Lotario. Anselmo does not know that Camila knows he is watching, and he thinks that Lotario, as lover, is performing the role he has “assigned.” As for Lotario, he knows of both Anselmo’s expectations regarding the fidelity test and of Camila’s determination to reverse her husband’s suspicions. Nevertheless, there is a blind spot in his knowledge: Camila has refused to tell him the details of her plan. The movement of the unsheathed dagger, then, is the one element he cannot anticipate.

Camila’s performance begins before Lotario enters the room, and Anselmo watches from his hiding place in horrified fascination as the same woman whom he has told “que no tenía más que hacer que bajar la cabeza y obedecelle” now appears not as a “mujer delicada, sino un rufián desesperado” (1.33:417; 1.34:432). Upon hearing what he thinks is her true intention to kill Lotario, Anselmo wants to reveal himself to prevent the murder, but fails to overcome the desire to see “en qué paraba tanta gallardía y honesta resolución,” a failure he repeats when Leonela brings Lotario into the room a few moments later (1.34:430). What Anselmo admires in Camila in this moment is her ability to do what he has failed to do: defend her honor (which is also her life). And yet his admiration of her apparent potency in this male role highlights his own lack and fills him with a second impotence: he now proves unable to protect Lotario’s life (which is also his honor).

Once Lotario enters the room, Camila embraces her role as righteous defender of virtue even more fully, declaring herself “el espejo

donde se mira aquel en quien tú te debieras mirar” (1.34:433). The echo of Lotario’s version of woman as a crystal mirror highlights the degree to which, even in her “independent” action, the tropes used by the men circulate through the speeches she performs. When Camila draws a line with the dagger and warns Lotario, “si a dicha te atrevieras a pasar desta raya que ves, ni aun llegar a ella,” she visually repeats his earlier invocation of the untouchability of woman as *reliquia* (1.34:432). “Lo primero, quiero, Lotario, que me digas si conoces a Anselmo mi marido, y [...] si me conoces a mí” (1.34:432), Camila demands, strongly recalling Lotario’s assertion to Anselmo that “no me conoces, o [...] yo no te conozco” (1.33:404).

This recirculation of the tropes employed by the men is not, as Jehenson would have it, evidence that “Camila has deftly usurped the cultural formations that had perpetuated the two friends’ discourse of male domination” (44). Rather, these verbal and visual echoes underscore the restricted economy of ideas in the society governed by Anselmo and Lotario and the degree to which these concepts extend metonymically through Camila. While it may be an attempt to exert the subjectivity that has gone unrecognized by the men and the reader, her ambitious performance takes place *inside* the men’s world, and thus is always already contained by it. This explains why Lotario “correspondió con su intencion tan discretamente y tan a tiempo, que hicieran los dos pasar aquella mentira por más que cierta verdad” (1.34:432). Lotario slips into Camila’s performance with such ease precisely because it is already in harmony with the order he and Anselmo have established.

In fact, just as Anselmo is lulled into an amazed stupor, Lotario becomes entranced by Camila’s facility with reason and rhetoric. Camila buries the hints of “la venganza que espero” and her wish to “matar muriendo” into a long discourse; relative to her blunt suicide threat—“me pasaré el pecho con esta daga”—these words slip past without particular distinction (1.34:434;432). (It is only while Lotario is out of the room that she declares her murder plan openly for Anselmo’s benefit.) Lotario’s comfortable position as supporting actor is shattered when “con una increíble fuerza y ligereza arremetió a Lotario con la daga

desenvainada” (1.34:434)—that is, with Anselmo’s dagger. For the concealed Anselmo, the appearance of his own knife is both a thrilling promise of vicarious penetration and a pointed reminder of how his rivalrous love has literally gotten out of hand. Unimpeded by Anselmo, Camila only withdraws “viendo que no podía haber a Lotario, o fingiendo que no podía,” and even Lotario is unsure “si aquellas demostraciones eran falsas o verdaderas, porque le fue forzoso valerse de su industria y de su fuerza para estorbar que Camila no le diese” (1.34:434).

What do we make of Camila’s unexpected move and, even more so, of the uncertainty of Lotario, Anselmo, and the narrator when faced with the actor behind this pivotal action? Is it the full effort and force of Lotario that stops Camila, or is she only pretending that she wishes to strike him? Does she show the degree to which she can orchestrate verisimilitude in performance, or does she try to cloak naked aggression in drama? Unlike her recycled words, this gesture remains absolutely opaque to the men; it is a signifier without any signified that they can comprehend; for, whatever Camila means by this gesture can only exist outside the order of their world.

When Camila speaks again a moment after she draws back, it is to cite the failure of her “tan justo deseo” (1.34:434). Based on what she knows, to kill Lotario would erase in one stroke the evidence of her infidelity and the primary recipient of Anselmo’s desire and attention. Of course, this is not possible for Camila, for what is to Lotario a conquest founded on deceit is to her the sealing of a love founded on the kind of intimacy lacking from her marriage. But imagine how different her justice would be if she knew what she does not: that her lover sacrificed her to Anselmo in an attempt to secure his own freedom, that Anselmo sacrificed her to “tests of virtue” to draw Lotario back, that Lotario’s “love” was from the beginning based on deceit, that both men are only interested in getting at the other through her. Could Camila-as-herself, appearing in a fragmentary flash from outside the bounds of this two-man society, perhaps act for a vengeful justice that is larger than what Camila-as-actor knows? With the dagger, she could destroy the triangle. Lotario’s death by Anselmo’s dagger in Camila’s hand: it would be a kind of perfect comeuppance.

But we cannot know. As witnesses to this scene, we also remain in radical uncertainty as to whether Camila really intends the dagger for the breast of Lotario. This is the climax of both Camila's drama and the narrative as a whole—a moment of suspense for both men, a moment in which action occurs at the heart of the triangle of deceit and desire but also beyond its control. The absolute opacity of Camila's performance suggests that *all along* she has been more than they (or we) can know. And yet the content of the self that seems to exist beyond this triangle of desire cannot be expressed within it.

V. "LA MARGARITA PRECIOSA" ABANDONED

Whether Camila's failure is real or feigned, what she does next irrevocably alters her position in relation to Anselmo and Lotario and their relationship to each other, as the rest of "El curioso impertinente" bears out. The text makes clear that this "suicide attempt"—itself a topos we see again in the second volume of *Don Quijote* with Basilio's performance at Camacho's wedding—is premeditated and calculated by Camila to do minimal damage: "guiando su punta por parte que pudiese herir no profundamente, se la entró y escondió por más arriba de la isilla" (I.34:434). It nevertheless comes as a complete and convincing surprise to the others; apparently even Leonela was excluded from this part of the plot, for the narrator reports that "estaban Leonela y Lotario suspensos y atónitos de tal suceso" (I.34:434). Camila's choice of the faux-suicide topos also highlights the constructed nature of the situation. The self-inflicted wound serves as a double display of fidelity to the two men in her life: first, a feigned faithfulness to Anselmo underscored by a violent commitment to his honor, and second, her actual commitment to Lotario demonstrated in the lengths to which she will go to secure their mutual access under the cover of her "rejection" of him. She succeeds in persuading them both; Lotario marvels at "la sagacidad, prudencia, y mucha discreción de la hermosa Camila," while Anselmo admires "la margarita preciosa que había hallado en el desengaño de la bondad de su esposa" (I.34:434; 436). By thrusting Anselmo's

dagger into her own body, Camila seems to resume her mirroring role deliberately; through her self-sacrifice, she figures the mastery that each man believes he exercises, not only over her, but also over the other.

Before his actual encounter with Anselmo, Lotario fantasizes about how he and Anselmo will celebrate together “la mentira y la verdad más disimulada que jamás pudiera imaginarse” (1.34:435). The narrator’s playful irony points up the absurdity of Lotario’s improbable expectation that he and Anselmo both have a reason to celebrate: Lotario, “la verdad más disimulada,” which is Camila’s true faithfulness to him, and Anselmo, “la mentira” of her marital fidelity. In his eagerness to rejoice, Lotario has forgotten for the moment that his victory can only be a private one, since its revelation would also be its undoing. Because Anselmo does not know what Camila’s act means, how fully it shows her commitment to her lover rather than to her husband, he believes that he has “won”—that he has finally pulled ahead in their rivalry. Lotario’s apparently repentant sense of “cuán engañado estaba su amigo, y cuán injustamente él le agraviaba” actually evinces his frustration that he cannot set the record straight and thereby claim credit for his conquest (1.34:436). Indeed, when Anselmo thanks him for his services, Lotario chafes at being unable to reveal his own pleasure (1.34:436). Their rivalry hinges not on actual supremacy but on *perceived* supremacy—the supremacy performed in relationship to the supposed object of desire.

What Jehenson calls “a delusive harmony” follows (44), and Anselmo remains for the moment “sabrosamente engañado”—given his professed penchant for “tierra, yeso, carbón y otras cosas peores,” he has had quite a feast (1.34:437; 1.33:411). But when Leonela, caught in her own act of adultery, promises to reveal things of great importance to Anselmo in exchange for her life, Camila apparently panics (1.35:442). She gathers up her valuables and absconds to Lotario’s house, where she tells him the story and makes a request: “le pidió que la pudiese en cobro o que se ausentasen los dos donde de Anselmo pudiesen estar seguros” (1.35:443). On the surface, this seems a plausible enough reaction, yet is this any greater crisis than she faced with Lotario’s jealous revelation to Anselmo, a situation that she skillfully turned to her advantage? Perhaps the real motivation is tucked into those two telling

words, “los dos,” in the phrase “que se ausentasen *los dos*.” Camila has grown weary of sharing Lotario with Anselmo and wants to cement Lotario’s and her identity as the “real” *los dos*. No doubt she expects that the inevitable rupture with Anselmo will pave the way for a new union with Lotario—if not immediately, at least after only a brief separation.

But Lotario’s reaction belies his professions of love—or at least nullifies their currency beyond the triangle that also includes Anselmo: “la confusión en que Camila puso a Lotario fue tal, que no le sabía responder palabra, ni menos sabía resolverse en lo que haría” (1.35:443). Faced with the very outcome he once desired—to get away from Anselmo—Lotario is now paralyzed. It was one thing to imagine what it would be like to go “donde jamás Anselmo le viese a él” and quite another to effect that separation, even to gain the “prize” of Camila (1.33:417). In fact, that prize seems to have lost value without Anselmo’s rivalry; Lotario discards Camila, depositing her in a monastery and then withdrawing permanently from Florence. True, one might argue that it is Lotario’s sense of honor that impedes a romantic elopement, but in his dealings with Camila his actions send a clear message that she—once considered “cuán digna de ser amada”—is not, in fact, worth his honor (1.33:417). Further, Lotario’s abrupt departure causes plenty of scandal on its own, as demonstrated by the news the *ciudadano* reports to Anselmo.

Anselmo’s response to Camila’s disappearance similarly reveals her unimportance to him relative to his friendship with Lotario. Upon discovering the absence of his wife and her jewels, Anselmo is “triste y pensativo,” but not too distraught to make the trip to Lotario’s house immediately, expecting, of course, to be showered with consolation (1.35:443). Only when he learns of Lotario’s absence does he begin to lose his mind, a process that continues until his death (1.35:443). Lotario, not Camila, is the great love—and the great loss—of Anselmo’s life. Camila’s end is also one of disillusionment and suffering, and her death is hastened by the news she learns of her “ausente amigo” (1.35:444). The exact nature of the news remains enigmatic, but it seems that it is related to Lotario’s flight into battle which, however clichéd a response to shameful revelations, also signals his rejection of Camila. With

the subsequent news of Lotario's death comes also the description of Lotario as "el tarde arrepentido amigo," a phrase that leaves ambiguous which of his great misdeeds prompts his repentance—his betrayal of Anselmo or his abandonment of Camila. Lotario's conveniently swift death in war means that we have no access to his emotional state, as we do in the cases of Camila and Anselmo. Does Lotario pine for his lost friend, or does he long for his lover? Or, on the contrary, does he relish his brief freedom from the ties of rivalry and deception?

VI. "LAS RIGOROSAS MANOS DE TRISTEZAS": AGAINST FALSE TRIUMPHALISM

However deft her deceit and subtle her deployment of the concepts and tropes of Lotario and Anselmo's world, Camila cannot break out of the field of play bounded by their desires and decisions. She becomes a party to the dark triangle of desire, but she does not occupy a position of control. Even her boldest actions are circumscribed by the originary deceit agreed upon by Anselmo and Lotario and never revealed to her. Camila's dagger poised inches from her lover's chest ts a near rupture in the fabric of deception stretched taut between Anselmo and Lotario, a rupture that would perhaps have forced their recognition of her as a subject. Her enigmatic movement toward Lotario with the dagger is the one action that the narrator cannot contain, but it also points to the agonizing limitation Camila experiences in a world that will never admit or recognize her as more than a performer in a male-directed drama. If she dies in "las rigurosas manos de tristezas," she has lived in the even more terrifying and crushing grip of Anselmo and Lotario's rivalry (1.35:446).

What does it mean for us as readers to conclude that Camila does not triumph over the strictures of a male society? Certainly, as Wilson observes, "passing the love of women"—as Anselmo and Lotario do—"is an act of great violence" (28). But we can also recognize that, in the case of "El curioso impertinente," it is precisely the absolute stifling effect of the dominant order that makes the violence they do to Camila

so great. Wilson writes that “only a failure of language would *also* make [this violence] sacred,” reproaching (in a none-too-veiled reference to Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*) those readings that would take seriously the idea of triangular desire (28). And yet this is to confuse an analysis of the brutal and perverse acts driven by desire in fiction with the promotion—or even perpetration—of those acts. Mancing similarly urges us not to stop with a reading of “El curioso impertinente” as “a story about a man’s madness” and to see in it “one about a woman’s self-assertion” (19). But not every self-assertion succeeds. And sometimes what an author points to—or what a reading can contribute—is a stark exposure of a closed world in which a man’s madness makes a woman’s self-assertion impossible, a world in which the onward-driving desires of a closeted rivalry trump real human connections. Such a reading of “El curioso impertinente” may not be as inspirational as canonizing Camila as a subversive saint, but it just might be the most pertinent one.

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