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Permalink

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Journal

Mester, 21(1)

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Publication Date

1992

DOI

10.5070/M3211014201

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The Representation of Woman in *El amante liberal*: Goddess, Chattel and Peer

Creó, pues, Dios al hombre a imagen suya, a imagen de Dios lo creó; varón y hembra los creó.

—*Génesis* 1:27

Anatomy is our destiny.

—Sigmund Freud

Looking back in history one can locate an abundance of treatises on the inferiority of women, as well as literature of courtly love, but rare are the references to woman as man's equal. Woman has been simultaneously exalted as the essence of purity and virtue, and degraded as the source of all evil. Miguel de Cervantes was in many ways a counter-culturist, albeit tempered by ecclesiastical and governmental expurgation. He took issue with the myths perpetuated by both religious and secular hierarchies. *El amante liberal*, one of his least studied works, challenges some of the culturally dictated feminine and masculine roles. Many of the social ills with which Cervantes took issue remain deeply rooted in twentieth-century society, hence the timeliness of his works is all the more remarkable.

El amante liberal presents a variety of male characters, but only two female characters: Halima and Leonisa.¹ Nonetheless, through them we come nearer to an understanding of the role of women in seventeenth-century Spain and the Ottoman Empire, and we come to distinguish the progressive elements in Cervantes' writing from typical seventeenth-century axioms.

El amante liberal is distinctive for it is one of only a few stories that takes place in foreign territory. The story begins *in medias res* with a sorrowful discourse by Ricardo, the male protagonist. Through his conversation with Mahamut we learn of the fateful event of his and Leonisa's

capture by the Turks from their home in Sicily. Ricardo tells Mahamut of his jealousy of Cornelio who, prior to their capture, had appeared to be easily wooing Leonisa's affection by his good looks and wealth. Ricardo had done what he could to compete with Cornelio, but his efforts were met with disdain and abhorrence on the part of Leonisa. While in captivity, both Leonisa and Ricardo undergo a series of tests and trials which enable them to unite in holy matrimony at the end of the novel.

I. Historical Context

It is by no means incidental that these protagonists are brought under Turkish domain. Though Leonisa and Ricardo are from Sicily, they are treated as if they were Spaniards (Casalduero 78-79). The religious issues about which Cervantes writes are obviously linked to the geographical area in which the story takes place. The battles between the followers of Islam and those of Christianity raged throughout the Mediterranean in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1571 the Ottoman fleet demonstrated its superiority by conquering Cyprus (this is where Leonisa and Ricardo were later taken upon being captured) and ravaging the coasts of Sicily and southern Italy, thereby establishing domination in both the eastern and the western Mediterranean (Goldschmidt 178).

Though religious differences exacerbated the antagonism between the Christians and the Turks, one thing they had in common was the marginalization of women in society. As we will see through our analysis of Halima and Leonisa, however, there were significant differences within the few freedoms afforded Christian and Muslim women of that era.

One might argue that since Halima was born of Christian parents and subsequently converted to Islam, she is not truly representative of Muslim women. This is where Christianity and Islam stand miles apart, for being a *converso* in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spain carried negative connotations and prohibited full integration into society, whereas Muslim society was much more accepting of converts. In theory, any male Ottoman subject could rise to the ruling class if he conformed to the requirements of the sultan and of Islam (Goldschmidt 126). One explanation of this openness is that "en el mundo musulmán la carencia de población cualificada permitía un rápido ascenso y un mejor nivel de vida al cristiano que, renegando de su fe, se pasaba a las estructuras del Imperio Turco" (Fernández Álvarez 492).

A literary example of the relatively easy access to upward mobility is found in *Don Quijote* when the captive informs us that Uchalí Fartax, originally of Southern Italy, renounced his faith in order to avenge his re-

sentiment toward his captivity, and came to be the king of Algiers and later a sea commander (I:40). Therefore we can assume that even though Halima converted to Islam from Christianity, she is as integrated into Turkish society as a woman can be, for the structure of that society had no restraints barring her assimilation other than her womanhood.

Another work, *Viaje de Turquía*, by an anonymous Spanish author, provides an interesting source for comparison and contrast of the two cultures. The author actually commends the Turks for “el poco aprecio que hacían de sus mujeres” (qtd. in Fernández Álvarez 174). In fact the author complains about the excessive power of woman in Spanish society. As Manuel Fernández Álvarez explains:

Por ella se batían constantemente los galanteadores, por ella se torcía la vara de la Justicia, por ella se hacían mil dislates. ¡Qué diferencia con el mundo musulmán! Aquél sí que era reino del hombre. Para empezar, a las mujeres no se las tenía en cuenta, ni en ningún caso se solicitaba su consejo, cuanto menos su voto. . . . (495)

Though the author of *Viaje de Turquía* praises the Turks' low esteem for women, in general the documented sixteenth and seventeenth-century view of Moors and Turks on the part of the Spaniards was extremely negative. It is worth mentioning here that the Spaniards classified Muslims in two groups: Turks and Moors. “La primera [categoría] representaba la aristocracia respecto de la segunda” (Herrero García 535). It was common, however, to use the term *moro* generically (Herrero García 535) as did Cervantes, who calls Halima *la mora* and *la turca* interchangeably. The Moors were typically stereotyped as deceitful liars who were proud, arrogant, greedy, violent and traitorous. Though Cervantes does not glorify the Moors, he “gives us an infinitely subtler picture of the Muslim world than the caricature-like distortion to which we are more often exposed in the polemical writings of his contemporaries” (Canavaggio 81).² While Cervantes' seemingly temperate portrayal of the Turks appears to reflect respect for their tolerance and ability to coexist rather peacefully with the Christians inside their territory, he does treat harshly “those who renounce the Faith of Christ out of weakness or inertia; and he exalts, in contrast, the heroism of martyrs true to their convictions . . .” (Canavaggio 82).

In *Don Quijote*, for example, the captive tells of the unheard of cruelties his master inflicted upon the Christians on a daily basis. But he makes a point of saying that “los turcos conocían que lo hacía no más por hacerlo, y por ser natural condición suya ser homicida de todo el género humano” (I:40). He points to one perpetrator of the atrocities instead of accusing all Turks of villainous treachery. In *El amante liberal*,

Ricardo kills several Turks when they attempt to capture him. This could have easily resulted in his execution, but the promise of money for his ransom subdues their anger. It is true that Cervantes does judge the Turks more harshly than the Christians; they are the only characters who are killed in the novel as a result of their own actions. In addition, as we turn to an analysis of Halima and Leonisa, we will see that though the Turks do not physically harm them, the possibility is always imminent.

II. Halima

Halima is a renegade whose parents are Greek Christians living under Turkish rule. Though she only controls the discourse twice in the entire novel, her name itself tells her story, for, as we know from *Don Quijote*, the names given to renegades upon their conversion often reflect some defect or virtue they possess:

es costumbre entre los turcos ponerse nombres de alguna falta que tengan, o de alguna virtud que en ellos haya; y esto es porque no hay entre ellos sino cuatro apellidos de linajes, que decien de la Casa Otomana, y los demás, como tengo dicho, toman nombre y apellido ya de las tachas del cuerpo, y ya de las virtudes del ánimo. (I:40)

This is most interesting because one meaning of the masculine adjective *halim*, according to *A Turkish and English Lexicon*, is one “who has a lascivious dream.” Halima is the feminine form of this adjective and there could not be a better name for her!

The first mention of Halima occurs after the *kadi* has temporarily secured possession of Leonisa. He instructs Mahamut to take Leonisa to his wife, Halima, telling her to treat Leonisa as a slave of the *Gran Señor* until she is sent to Constantinople. Mahamut then arranges for the *kadi* to become Ricardo’s master as well, but Ricardo changes his name to Mario so that Leonisa will not hear that he is alive before they see each other in person. The action heats up when the narrator tells us that Halima, perhaps tired of her old husband, is instantly attracted to the young and handsome Mario the first time she sets her eyes on him:

Avino, pues, que un día la señora Halima vio a su esclavo Mario, y tan visto y tan mirado fue, que se le quedó grabado en el corazón y fijo en la memoria; y quizá poco contenta de los abrazos flojos de su anciano marido, con facilidad dio lugar a un mal deseo. . . . (166)³

Halima, who has grown to love and respect Leonisa, confides in her

that she has never seen a more handsome man in all her life and that “no sabía cómo darle a entender su voluntad sin que el cristiano la tuviese en poco por habérsela declarado” (166). She asks Leonisa to be the go-between and she strategically plans how Leonisa can inform him of her intentions. Meanwhile, Halima’s husband negotiates plans for Ricardo to be his mediator by making his plans known to Leonisa. Neither Halima nor the *kadi* show signs of being the least bit bothered by their flagrant disregard for their marriage. In fact, it is normal for the *kadi* to pursue other women since his position brings him enough wealth to afford the four wives the Koran allows him. However, Halima’s disregard for her marriage, her decision to divorce her husband, and her blatant lust for Ricardo would certainly have been deemed inappropriate behavior for a woman.

Nevertheless, Leonisa encourages the “torpe deseo” in Halima by giving her hope that Mario will comply with all she asks (174). As we know from the *Diccionario de autoridades*, *torpe* in seventeenth-century Spain meant lascivious. Just how plausible was it in seventeenth-century Turkish society for a woman to have an illicit affair with a man? The author of *Viaje de Turquía* tells us it was indeed plausible. The very clothing worn by Muslim women, which was intended to insure modesty, instead provided them the opportunity to engage in illicit affairs: “Aprovechaban para ello que los jueves, vísperas de su fiesta, habían de ir a los baños . . . Como iban solas y tapadas, tenían ocasión para su aventura” (qtd. in Fernández Álvarez 496).

Ironically it was the *poco aprecio* towards women on the part of Turkish men that drove them to establish relationships with Christians and also with Blacks (Fernández Álvarez 496). Though it is likely that the Christians’ intentions in these affairs were exploitative, they probably gave the women the attention that their own husbands denied them. Since Halima’s husband actively chases another woman and even plots his own wife’s death, from a rational point of view we can easily justify Halima’s active pursuit of another man, for her marriage was obviously unfulfilling. Though Islamic law would expiate only the *kadi*’s actions, both would stand guilty under Christian law. The Spanish moralists of the time, however, sanctioned a double standard for judgment of male and female adultery (Vigil 140). A woman had no recourse if she caught her husband in adultery. A man, in contrast, lost his honor if his wife or daughter was discovered in an adulterous relationship. In fact, the *Fuero Juzgo*, the *Fuero Real*, and the *Nueva Recopilación de las Leyes de España*, permitted the spouse or father to kill the wife or daughter who had committed the offense, as well as her lover. The moralists condemned the application of these laws (not the laws themselves), but they

supported the double standard which claimed “que es mayor el pecado de la mujer adúltera que el del varón” (Vigil 142).

Not only did women’s clothing facilitate affairs, and husbands’ disdain for their wives provoke them, according to the captive in *Don Quijote*, while it would be considered scandalous for a Muslim woman to be seen by a Turkish or Moorish man, there was much greater liberty with regard to Christian men. The narrator in *El amante liberal* tells us that “en mostrarse ellas a los cristianos no se les hace de mal; quizá debe de ser que por ser cautivos no los tienen por hombres cabales” (166). The *Diccionario de autoridades* defines *hombre cabal* as one “que no tiene defecto conocido, huye del vicio, y ama la verdad, y especialmente la justicia.” If the Christians were not *hombres cabales* one would think the Turks would take extra precautions to guard Turkish women from them.

Joaquín Casaldueiro states that Leonisa, serving as an intermediary for Halima, tells Ricardo “cómo la mujer arde en deseos de ser poseída. A solas con él, tiene que pintarle cómo la carne de Halima sufre” (91). However, it is clear that Halima does not desire to be possessed, but to possess. Most readers will agree that Halima offers an abrupt contrast to the traditional portrayal of man as the sexual aggressor and woman as the passive receiver. Various critics explain this away either as an attempt to portray all Turks in a negative light regardless of their sex, or, like Casaldueiro, as pure comicality (82). On the surface the portrayal of a group of men so set on possessing Leonisa that they will go to such extremes as killing a spouse, sacrificing their own lives, or paying vast amounts of money is a bit comical. The fact that a woman would carry on in a similar fashion may seem to emphasize just how grotesque the entire lot of lecherous men are. However, it is clear from these explanations that:

Phallic criticism has steadily denigrated and ridiculed those women who moved outside the established parameters. For if, in anti-feminist discourse, women are often inferior to men, nothing in this same discourse is more ridiculous than a woman who imitates a male activity and is therefore no longer a woman. (Marks and Courtivron 5)

Halima’s attempt to lure Ricardo with a handsome dowry seems quite normal in the Christian tradition. However, in Muslim society the man provided the dowry for the woman. When Halima boards the ship for Constantinople, she takes with her all of her riches, leaving nothing behind, “pues era de creer que llevando tantas riquezas consigo, y volviéndose cristiana, no dejaría de tomarla por mujer [Ricardo]” (176). Taking into account her cultural context Halima’s actions are all but status quo.

Because we know of Halima’s husband’s desire to throw her over-

board and be rid of her, we as twentieth-century readers at least are rooting for her. But, we wonder, how is it that Halima has the audacity to pack up and take all of her riches right under her husband's own nose? One historian tells us that recent research on the Ottoman Empire reveals that in that society

women in fact were able to hold property, including that brought as part of their dowry, and to manipulate its use without interference by their husbands, fathers, or other male relatives. . . . Though women's right to initiate divorce proceedings was limited to rare circumstances, they could leave their husbands and take their property along, maintaining themselves outside their husbands' control as long as they were able and willing to do so. (Goldschmidt 159)

What then is the moral of Halima's story? It is clear that Cervantes embraces the Erasmian conviction that marriages based solely on instinctual attraction are weak (Forcione 104). Therefore Halima's lascivious desires only result in frustration. Her attempt to marry Ricardo is doomed to failure. In spite of Halima's carnal desires and the fruitlessness of her efforts, her strength lies in her refusal to become a victim. The *kadi* almost loses his mind when he realizes the woman he was so anxious to throw overboard has decided to leave him. He is left with nothing. In contrast, Halima takes her money, sets sail for Christian land, remarries, and reconciles herself with the Church. By asserting her independence she ends up victorious.

III. Leonisa

Let us now turn to Leonisa. She is first presented to us by Ricardo who, exalting her above all other women, tells us that she is "una doncella a quien la fama daba nombre de la más hermosa mujer que había en toda Sicilia . . . la de más perfecta hermosura que tuvo la edad pasada, tiene la presente y espera tener la que está por venir" (141-42). We then find out through Ricardo's conversation with Mahamut that he loved her, adored her, and served her "como si no tuviera en la tierra ni en el cielo otra deidad a quien sirviese ni adorase" (142). This inversion of male and female roles is familiar to us from our readings of medieval courtly love literature in which a gentleman adopts an attitude of humility and servitude toward the woman he loves. Louis Combet describes the male in Cervantes' works as "moins *raisonnable* et moins *énergique* que sa partenaire, en face de laquelle il apparaît *dévirilisé*, dans une attitude de soumission et d'infériorité volontaires" (101).

Casalduero tells us that Ricardo loves Leonisa “por lo que todo un hombre se enamora de una mujer, por bella. Por la misma razón Leonisa había preferido a Cornelio” (89). Ricardo does in fact ridicule Cornelio’s finery, but it is likely that Leonisa was motivated not only by his appearance, but also by the wealth it represented. With moralists like Luis Vives heralding such myths as “un matrimonio cimentado sobre bases afectivas sería más inestable que uno establecido sobre bases económicas,” it was common for marriages to be negotiated fundamentally as economic contracts (Vigil 82). Leonisa is encouraged by her parents in her relationship with Cornelio rather than with Ricardo because if she married the former they “granjearían yerno más rico” (143). If in fact Leonisa were motivated by monetary concerns rather than love, this would indeed be acceptable for the moralists of the time successfully propagated the belief that love would come after marriage.

Upon being captured Leonisa descends from the angelic throne on which Ricardo’s idealism had placed her into the degraded booty of the Turks. She is now the sought-after *premio* of a group of lascivious men who attempt to control her destiny. She becomes merchandise whose worth is determined by men who, if the price is right, will relinquish their prerogative to *gozarla*.

Yzuf, her first owner, agrees to ransom Leonisa for six thousand *escudos* provided that he receives four thousand for Ricardo at the same time. Knowing that Cervantes’ ransom while in Algiers was five hundred *escudos* puts into perspective the exorbitant amount of money these men were demanding. While waiting for Ricardo’s *mayordomo* to come up with the money, an attack by other Turks obliges Yzuf to surrender Ricardo and six other Christians in order to keep Leonisa.

Leonisa’s next owner is a rich Jewish merchant who buys her from the Turks for two thousand *doblas*, which, according to Leonisa, was “precio excesivo, si no le hiciera liberal el amor que el judío me descubrió” (172). The Jew, like Yzuf, is desirous of Leonisa but his insolent entreaties are met with strong resistance. Leonisa assures Ricardo in her account of her misfortune that “Yo le hice la cara que merecían sus torpes deseos” (172). The Jew, seeing that he is unable to assuage his desires, “determinó de deshacerse de mí [Leonisa] en la primera ocasión que se le ofreciese. . .” (172).

When the *kadi* announces from the entrance to his *tienda* that “todos los que quisiesen entrar a pedir justicia . . . podrían entrar libremente” (156), the Jew bedecks Leonisa in clothing and jewels which would outdazzle those of even the richest Moorish woman, and takes her to the *kadi* in hopes of selling her. At the request of the *kadi* he unveils Leonisa, and the *kadi*, Hazán, and Alí devour her with their eyes; all of them hope to “alcanzarla y . . . gozarla” (158). Hazán and Alí each pay two thou-

sand *doblas* for her, and the *kadi* pays an additional two thousand for her vestments.

Ricardo, who had thought Leonisa was dead, witnesses her being treated as merchandise at an auction and is overcome with emotion. He reacts as if the Turks were exercising eminent domain without compensation; as if she were his merchandise being sold against his will.

This portrayal of Leonisa as merchandise was certainly nothing new in seventeenth-century Spain, and unfortunately even today it is not a concept confined solely to antiquity. As Luce Irigaray states:

woman is traditionally use-value for man, exchange value among men. Merchandise, then. This makes her the guardian of matter whose price will be determined by 'subjects': workers, tradesmen, consumers, according to the standard of their work and their need-desire. Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers. This stamp(ing) determines their value in sexual commerce. (105)

This is most certainly true of Leonisa. Her market value is directly proportional to the status of her virginity. When Mahamut approaches her to get an idea of her feelings toward Ricardo and Cornelio, he tells her that the former has died, but that it would have given Ricardo great joy to have paid her ransom if her owner had realized she was not as rich as he thought, “aunque podía ser que por haberla gozado la tuviese en menos; que como no pasasen de trescientos o cuatrocientos escudos, el los daría de muy buena gana por ella. . .” (162-63). What a contrast! Had her owner defiled her, her market value would have dropped to three or four hundred *escudos* from six thousand *doblas*.

Under these circumstances it is no wonder that Leonisa affirms her virginity every chance she gets. According to Casaldüero, “Produce un efecto más raro que nunca ver que una muchacha habla constantemente de su virginidad . . . y no sólo que habla, sino que se lo cuenta al primero con quien tropieza” (90). However, it is clear that Leonisa's repeated affirmation of her virginity is in fact a declaration of her empowerment over the dominance of the masculine will. Leonisa's only recourse while a captive in the phallocratic society which constantly threatens her chastity is to assert her control over the one thing she alone possesses: her virginity.

At the end of the novel Leonisa and Ricardo arrive safely in their Christian homeland, along with Mahamut and Halima who reconcile themselves with the Church. Leonisa and Ricardo get married, and Halima, who realizes the impossibility of marrying Ricardo, marries Mahamut. How convenient that they all manage to end up equally yoked and acquiescent to the One True Religion. Though the ending is fairly-

tale-like, the events leading to this idealistic finale are quite remarkable. What I am referring to here is the transformation in the characters that enables them to reach this point.

Ricardo, feeling quite valiant after the heroic feats which enable them to reach Sicily, attempts to turn his *prenda*, Leonisa, over to Cornelio, admonishing him to esteem her: “te entrego la prenda que tú debes estimar sobre todas las cosas que son dignas de estimarse . . .” (186). And to Leonisa he exclaims, “¡hermosa Leonisa!, te doy al que tú siempre has tenido en la memoria” (186). At this point Ricardo is still treating Leonisa as a possession. But suddenly he silences himself, and before anyone else speaks he expresses his new found revelation: he does not have the power to give Leonisa away for she was never his to begin with.

Leonisa responds to his acknowledgement with an affirmation that “siempre fui mía, sin estar sujeta a otro que a mis padres” (187). And then, out of respect to her parents, she asks for their blessings on her decision to marry Ricardo if he does not refuse “la mano que de mi esposo te pido” (187).

For years Ricardo had kept Leonisa on a pedestal; a pedestal that put her beyond his reach. When other men converted her from goddess to chattel, Ricardo competed with them in claims to proprietorship, and all of them failed miserably. But when Ricardo sees Leonisa as his equal, as a person he cannot possess, but rather a person who controls her own destiny, then their union is made possible.

Traditionally the selection of a spouse was a man’s decision. What Cervantes shows us through the inability of numerous men to possess Leonisa is that men imposing themselves on women breeds destruction. It is their respect for themselves and for one another that liberates Leonisa and Ricardo from the traditional gender expectations which inhibit true union.

IV. Conclusion

According to Christianity, both man and woman were created in God’s image. Century after century, gender distinctions have forced woman into submission hence making our anatomy our destiny. Cervantes’ recognition of the legitimacy of the Erasmian view that “partners in marriage should respect one another as equal” (Forcione 107) uproots the myths of woman as superior or inferior but never equal to man. Cervantes does not expiate the crimes of his sex, but his attempt to take issue with accepted stereotypical gender roles is noteworthy.

Both Leonisa and Halima are empowered through making their own decisions and determining their own fate. Halima, who had likely been

forced to marry the *kadi* as well as to practice Islam, breaks loose from the shackles of Muslim society and asserts her independence. Although she is ridiculed by many critics for transcending established gender norms, she is victorious not because she transfers her submission to Spanish society from Muslim society, but because she is empowered as she comes to control her destiny. In the same way, Leonisa is empowered when she affirms her control over herself. Though these two women make very different journeys in the affirmation of self, they challenge and defeat a common enemy: anatomy.

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NOTES

1. A third woman is unnamed and talked about only briefly.
2. Other critics disagree with these contentions maintaining that Cervantes never presents the Turks sympathetically (see for example, El Saffar 148).
3. This and all subsequent references to the text are taken from: Miguel de Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares*, Vol. 1 (Madrid: Cátedra, 1988).

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