

# TWISTED TURQUOISERIES: Emulation and Critique in Miguel de Cervantes' *La gran sultana Catalina de Oviedo*



By Sofie Kluge

*Cervantes' only surviving Turkish play, La gran sultana Catalina de Oviedo (1607/8), narrates the story of a Spanish captive in the Topkapı harem whose beauty conquers the heart of Murad III. Plot and setting allow the author not only to pursue his own fascination with the 'other' of Western Christianity, but also to critically examine the cultural forms of this fascination circulating in Spain at the time. Thus, the play's emulation of popular forms such as captivity tales and Byzantine martyr legends becomes an ambiguous inversion of the ideology that they harbour and even a tongue-in-cheek ideology critique.*

## Introduction

Spanish Renaissance authors and intellectuals were deeply interested in Ottoman culture. Writers of different sorts explored the exotic world of the “Gran Turco” in histories (Vicente Roca’s *Historia de la origen y guerra que han tenido los turcos*, 1556), Erasmian dialogue (the anonymous *Viaje de Turquía*, mid-16th century), and drama. Among those who recognized the dramatic potential of the Turks was the celebrated novelist and less acknowledged playwright Miguel de Cervantes. Like his detested rival Lope de Vega, the master of Spanish historical drama who allegedly penned 27 plays with a Turkish theme, Cervantes authored a cycle of Turkish plays of which only *La gran sultana*, written 1607/8 and published in *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos* (1615), survives. This play narrates the story of a Spanish captive whose extreme beauty conquers the heart of sultan Murad III. Almost the entire action is set in the harem in Constantinople, and plot and setting thus provide the author with ample opportunity not only to pursue his fascination with the eminent other of Christianity, but also to critically examine the cultural forms of this fascination.

Although he was nicknamed “el manco de Lepanto” (“the one-handed man from Lepanto”, Cervantes 2003, vv. 133–138) because of the injury he received in the famous battle against the Turks in 1571, Cervantes’ representation of the great adversary of Christian European culture is not exactly resentful. The *Sultana* depicts the Ottoman world in a way that can best be described as playful and form-conscious. Typical of the sophisticated

branch of Spanish Golden Age literature that he would come to epitomize for posterity, Cervantes' take on the Turk is emphatically 'literarizing' in the sense of consciously fantastical and demonstratively stereotypical. What spectators and readers encounter in this play is not a representation that lays claim to anthropological authenticity or historiographical correctness but rather a turcological mosaic which challenges its audience's habitual way of thinking by queerly emulating popular literary forms that revel in the proverbial cruelty of the Turk, including captivity tales and the martyr legends of Byzantine and Western hagiography.

This article examines how, in the *Sultana*, as in many other Cervantine texts, emulation of these forms becomes an ambiguous inversion of the ideology that they more or less explicitly harbour; how it, in other words, becomes a highly complex – tongue-in-cheek – ideology critique. The superordinate framework of this discussion will be Cervantes' subtle exploitation of literary forms to stimulate critical audience reflection on cultural stereotypes and historiographical common places. However, before reaching this level of abstraction at the end of my article, I will examine the play's mosaic poetic focusing on (1) the main character and (2) the plot's as it were 'magical' dénouement: the apparently harmonious falling into place of everything and allegedly happy disentangling of all the threads of the plot with the Sultana's pregnancy.

### The Play

Considering the little known nature of the play, a comprehensive annotated resume may be useful. Act 1 introduces the spectator to the dazzling world of Constantinople and the Topkapi palace, providing detailed anthropological information on clothing and props in unusually elaborate scene instructions.<sup>1</sup> Through a framing device – the opening dialogue between the two outsiders Salec and Roberto (a Muslim and a Christian renegade) – the audience is informed of local traditions and customs, religious rites and political ceremony while witnessing the pompous entry of the "Gran Turco" on his way through the city to the Hagia Sophia. Then, through a second framing device – the debate between another pair of outsiders, the palace eunuchs Mamí and Rustán – Cervantes introduces his protagonist, the Spanish captive harem slave Catalina who has been kept away from the sultan's eye for years by the secretly Christian Rustán yet who has now been discovered. The first act ends with the meeting of the two principal characters and Murad's unconditional surrender to the excessively beautiful Catalina whom he,

---

<sup>1</sup> García Lorenzo 1993, 64. Despite Cervantes' efforts, the play was first staged in 1992 (García Lorenzo 1994).

despite the young woman's fervent protestation of Christian faith, declares to be his sultana.

Act 2 opens with a sort of farcical inversion of the relationship between the Muslim sultan and the Christian girl, underscoring its transgressive nature, as the play's Spanish *gracioso* (clown), the surrogate playwright Madrigal, is carried off by Turkish authorities for fornicating with a Muslim woman.<sup>2</sup> After a brief and rather realistic diplomatic scene depicting the sultan's tough dealings with a Persian ambassador, the play returns to the principal action with various scenes focused on the preparations for the royal wedding. These are, however, interrupted by a scene introducing the characters of the subplot, the Transylvanian captive harem slave Clara and her lover Lamberto who has followed his love into the serail disguised as a woman. The second act ends with the appearance of Catalina's father, another Christian in Constantinople, who in his capacity as a tailor is incidentally appointed to sew the sultana a decent Christian dress. As father and daughter recognize each other in a dramatic moment of anagnorisis, the father severely reproaches Catalina for her choice in marriage upon which the sultana faints.

Act 3 opens with yet another framing device, a dialogue between the two eunuchs referring events happening since the ending of act 2. Then follows a reconciliation scene between father and daughter after which both onstage audience and the audience of Cervantes' play enjoy a kind of play-within-the-play as Madrigal performs a ballad narrating the life of Catalina accompanied by a group of musicians after which the sultana dances erotically. The play seems ready to end in total harmony, yet the knot of the subplot remains unresolved. In a moment of final suspense, the shady Cadi manages to persuade his master to return to his polygamous ways and spread his seed in order to secure an heir. Predictably (the play being a comedy and the Turks being proverbially homoerotic), Murad settles for the cross-dressed Lamberto who only just escapes the sultan's embrace and ensuing wrath by claiming to have been miraculously gender-transformed through conversion to Islam.<sup>3</sup> However, it certainly also helps his case that the sultana at this point intercedes and quite surprisingly announces her pregnancy. The play closes with Madrigal taking off to Spain, where he declares he will write the story

---

<sup>2</sup> Much has been said about Madrigal's status as surrogate playwright. I will not go very much into his character in this context, but submit to Jurado Santos 1997, 103–149.

<sup>3</sup> The Turks' alleged homoerotic propensity was a Renaissance commonplace and is, e.g., mentioned in the *Topography and General History of Algiers*, an eyewitness account of his years of captivity in Algiers 1577–1581 by Cervantes' fellow captive in Algiers, Antonio de Sosa. See the chapter on renegades or "Turks by profession" (*Topography* 124–127) and elsewhere.

of Catalina, in the midst of the city's celebration of the birth of the sultan's heir.

### Mosaic of Forms

On the surface, *La gran sultana Catalina de Oviedo* is a regular three-act Spanish *comedia*,<sup>4</sup> the general Golden Age term for a play, yet for my purposes it is worthwhile to linger a bit more on the question of genre. As the above resume suggests, the *Sultana* can be described in modern terms as a semi-historical romantic comedy, yet its generic status is extremely complex. Cervantes does go to some lengths to paint a convincing portrait of a historical character, the Ottoman sultan Murad III (1546–1595), in his historical habitat and according to Golden Age standards the play would probably qualify as a *comedia histórica* or what we could term a history play.<sup>5</sup> However, its historical veracity has been contested by modern critics and several passages have even been seen to suggest that the author is downright poking fun at the audience's readiness to accept his absurd historical construction.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, despite its undeniable romcom elements – prominence of the *gracioso* figure; marriage and childbirth – the happy ending of the play is quite ambiguous, raising doubts about the sincerity of Cervantes' adherence to the conventions of Lopean new comedy and about the ultimate comicality of the play.<sup>7</sup> Finally, with its tentative casting of the figure of Catalina in the role of a virtuous Christian martyr (or martyr wannabe), the *Sultana* bears resemblance to contemporaneous *comedias*

---

<sup>4</sup> Whereas the plays included in the *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos* thus conform to the formula of the new Lopean *comedia*, Cervantes' early drama, e.g. the famous *La Numancia* (1585), has five acts.

<sup>5</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of the specific epistemological and historiographical profile of early modern historical drama, see the recent *Staging History: Renaissance Dramatic Historiography* issue of this journal, eds.: Kluge, Kallenbach & Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt. For a more specific discussion of Cervantes and historical drama, see Kluge 2019. According to the standards of early modern historiography the play is quite accurate, even if it – also in accordance with contemporaneous historiography – contains elements which we would today consider blatantly incompatible with a serious historiographical approach, for example the comical scenes. For a survey of Cervantes' potential sources, see Hegyi 1992, 22–42, who highlights the importance of Italian material: "There can be little doubt that Spanish printed sources played little role, if any, as source material for Cervantes. In contrast, the number of comparable Italian publications, coming from over a hundred publishing houses, is overwhelming. Since Cervantes spent considerable time in Italy (1569–75), and Italian publications on Turkish events would have been linguistically accessible to him, they should be considered as probable sources of information" (27). Hegyi mentions Sansovino's compilation *Historia universale dell'Origine e Imperio de Tvrchi*, printed in Venice in 1560.

<sup>6</sup> See Mas 1967, 341–343; Lewis-Smith 1981; Hegyi 1992, 1–43. And see Lewis-Smith 1981 on the *Sultana* as a "practical joke".

<sup>7</sup> See Henry 2013, 91–103.

*hagiográficas* or *comedias de santos*,<sup>8</sup> yet the play simultaneously seems to challenge the conventions of both these dramatic subgenres suggesting that the protagonist did not resist but actually succumbed to the temptations of the flesh proverbially represented by the Ottoman world.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the play can even be seen to borrow generic elements – notably the focus on psychomachy – from the *autos sacramentales*, the quintessential form of Spanish Golden Age liturgical drama (bearing some resemblance to the English moralities). All in all, in what regards the question of genre, the impression is of a play whose author juggles consciously and demonstratively with different dramatic conventions, challenging the audience expectations encoded in these conventions in order to create a playful, form-conscious atmosphere.

However, Cervantes not only experiments with dramatic genre. His emulation of history plays, romantic comedy and saints' plays is but the foundation of the *Sultana's* mosaic of forms. As mentioned in the introduction, the play can be construed as a mosaic of cultural forms relating to the theme of Turks. Thus, in this play, Cervantes once again exploits the model of the captivity tale, a genre congenial to his own life story and one he repeatedly and successfully used in his fiction as well as in his drama.<sup>10</sup> In a Mediterranean marred by corsairs and pirates, seafarers travelled at great risk and historians estimate that there may have been as many as 600.000 Christian captives sold as slaves in Algiers between 1520 and 1660, some of which (such as Cervantes) escaped or were rescued to narrate their stories.<sup>11</sup> In such a situation, captivity tales naturally became highly popular as a kind of Renaissance docusoap. This semi-historiographical and auto-biographical genre, which flourished especially in England and Spain, usually centred on the topic of conversion – from Christianity to Islam; from Protestantism to Catholicism;<sup>12</sup> and from Islam to Christianity (there are also examples of Muslim captivity tales) – and conventionally exploited motives such as the fear of apostasy and escape/rescue as divine intervention on the backdrop of

---

<sup>8</sup> See Varas' already mentioned article on *El rufián dichoso* as "una comedia de santos diferente" (1991).

<sup>9</sup> See Antonio de Sosa's remarks concerning the "pleasure, [...] the good life of fleshly vice in which the Turks live" (125). I will go more into detail below.

<sup>10</sup> See Garcés 2002. Most famously, of course, Cervantes used the captivity tale in "The Captive's Tale" (*Quijote* I, 37 ff.) and the plays *Los baños de Argel* and *El trato de Argel* (the former issued in the same volume of plays as the *Sultana*), but also in various episodes of *Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*.

<sup>11</sup> Grieve 2016, 98 (citing Wolf, *The Barbary Coast: Algiers under the Turks, 1500–1830*).

<sup>12</sup> See Grieve 2016 who discusses various forms of Early Modern captivity accounts, including Antonio de Sosa's *Topography* and Cervantes' own captivity texts – excluding, however, the *Sultana* presumably on the grounds of its non-Algiers setting.

epic schemata of loss, exile and return and superordinate eschatological narratives about the battle between good and evil.<sup>13</sup> Yet, while obviously building on this popular narrative form, the *Sultana* deviates from the black-white cultural logic of the captivity tale, presenting an array of renegade Turks, renegade Christians, and even renegade atheists with all kinds of different motives and all kinds of accommodation strategies.<sup>14</sup> Again, as with his use of dramatic genre, Cervantes can be seen to pick up a discursive form and turn it in the palm of his hand reflectingly, as it were, observing it attentively from all angles in order to transform it through ironic emulation into an ambiguous, hyper-conscious version of itself.<sup>15</sup>

The same can be said of his exploitation of hagiography generally speaking and martyrology more specifically, a genre with strong ties to Byzantium (given the Arab-Byzantine wars).<sup>16</sup> Like their Western counterparts, the more or less legendary accounts of martyrs' lives and deaths in the oriental Middle Ages (330–1453) were generally structured around the opposition between Arab or Ottoman despots, as agents of Evil, and Christian martyrs, as representatives of Good, even if they could also simultaneously cater to other ideological agendas (fighting iconoclasm, for example). In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, legends such as those surrounding the 42 martyrs of Amorium, executed in 845 after refusing to convert to Islam;<sup>17</sup> Saint Laura of Constantinople scalded to death together with 52 sisters of her convent when the Ottomans took the city in 1453;<sup>18</sup> or that of Saint Agnes of Rome who refused to marry a heathen and was condemned by civil authorities to be dragged naked through the streets to a brothel and subsequently burned alive, were considered a good read. As I will subsequently argue, Cervantes'

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 102–103.

<sup>14</sup> See Grieve 2016, 109: "As a writer who invokes the Mediterranean world, Cervantes magisterially paints a nuanced world where virtue and goodness, or cruelty and evil, can be found anywhere, regardless of religion, race, gender or ethnicity".

<sup>15</sup> The quintessential example of this *modus operandi* is, of course, the emulation of chivalric romance in the *Quijote*.

<sup>16</sup> Like so many other literary forms, Cervantes also emulated the popular contemporaneous genres of hagiographical legends and saints' lives, once again held up as quintessential to the Catholic Church with the publication of the *Roman Martyrology* in 1583 in connection with Pope Gregory XIII's revision of the calendar. Grieve (2016, 107) briefly mentions Antonio de Sosa's later work, the *Diálogo de los mártires de Algiers* (1612), which – combining martyrology and captivity tales – is perhaps also pertinent in this respect. I have not been able to find any comprehensive study of Cervantes' use of hagiography, though references to hagiographic traditions abound in his work. There are, however, a few studies of Cervantine hagiography in single works, see e.g. Varas (1991) on *El rufián dichoso* as "una comedia de santos diferente" and Sherman (2015) on Cervantes' use of the legend of Saint Leocadia in "La fuerza de la sangre".

<sup>17</sup> Kazhdan 800–801.

<sup>18</sup> De Renzis 1925.

consciously modelled the character of Catalina on this type of legends yet simultaneously seems to challenge their innate dualistic worldview and, more indirectly, to question their veracity.<sup>19</sup> Before turning to the text itself to analyse Cervantes' playful and form-conscious poetics more in depth, I would like to briefly discuss the larger framework of this poetics.

The British Hispanist Malveena McKendrick has remarked that, even if Cervantes was not as accomplished a dramatist as he was a prosaist, his entire universe is permeated by what she terms a "theatrical imagination".<sup>20</sup> In the *Quijote*, for example, all the characters, from the barber and the priest who dress up as ladies to the university student Sansón Carrasco who performs the part of the Knight of the Mirrors and the entire court of the Duke and the Duchess, go around playing roles all the time, as do the 'shepherds' in the *Galatea*, the 'picaros' in "La ilustre fregona", and 'Periandro' and 'Auristela' in the *Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the famous novelist can indeed be considered the epitome of the Golden Age worldview examined by Oxford scholar Jonathan Thacker in *Role-Play and the World as Stage in the Comedia* (2002), even if revisionist work clearly remains to be done in order to vindicate Cervantes' oftentimes misunderstood and undervalued dramatic poetics itself.<sup>22</sup>

Although this is not the place to discuss the quality and critical reception of Cervantine theatre,<sup>23</sup> there is one aspect of Cervantes' theatrical

---

<sup>19</sup> In this, he could have been inspired by the sixteenth-century critical scrutiny of Jacobus de Varagine's medieval bestseller, the *Legenda aurea* or *Legenda sanctorum* (c. 1260) by disciples of Erasmus. The text saw various Spanish editions during Cervantes' lifetime, e.g. in Seville 1580. On the influence of Erasmian thought on Cervantes, see Bataillon 1950, 777–800.

<sup>20</sup> See McKendrick 2002: "[...] both the full-length plays and the interludes not only illustrate his experiments with the theatrical representation of modalities, preoccupations, and ways of seeing present elsewhere in his work, but throw light on the indebtedness of his major prose works to the genre of drama itself. Indeed his interest in the theatre goes a long way to explaining some of the outstanding characteristics of his fiction, for as the commercial outlet of his dramatic aspirations was cut off, his theatrical imagination and instincts found ample expression instead in his prose, above all in the *Quixote* itself" (132).

<sup>21</sup> The *Novelas ejemplares* also abound in examples, among which "La ilustre fregona" arguably stands out.

<sup>22</sup> While I find McKendrick's description of Cervantes' "theatrical imagination" as an effort "to experiment with and render performable the configurations of an existing dramatic habit" (2002, 132) very accurate, I do not agree with her contention that this effort represented a visionless adherence to outdated dramatic forms "rather than a wholehearted engagement with the conditions and demands of a new theatrical world" (ibid.), ultimately responsible for the author's failure as a dramatist. Can it really be true that one of Western literature's greatest spinners of plots and coiners of character, a master of human psychology, should be unable to write a decent play? Or could it be the critics who fail to grasp his idiosyncratic – neither classicist nor Lopean – conception of drama?

<sup>23</sup> I submit to Canavaggio's slightly older but still authoritative study (1977).

imagination (as found both in his drama and in his prose) that I would like to elaborate a bit on here because it has some bearing on *La gran sultana Doña Catalina de Oviedo*: its literarizing quality. In this play, as in Cervantine texts generally, the roles more or less demonstratively performed by the characters do not come out of nowhere; they are not intuitive or arbitrary. They are expressly literary, consciously emulated forms, topoi, clichés, stereotypes, even, or classic examples of what the Russian Formalists would call “literaturnost”, literariness.<sup>24</sup> What Cervantes’ characters perform are, in other words, fictive roles: pastoral novel shepherds, chivalric novel knights, Byzantine romance pilgrims or captives tales’ harem slaves – not real shepherds, knights, pilgrims or harem slaves.<sup>25</sup> In the *Sultana*, this tendency is underscored in scene directions detailing “bizarre” costumes<sup>26</sup> and overflowing with *ante terminem* orientalist props such as taffeta curtains and velvet cushions and carpets.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Bringing up Shklovsky in this context may seem capricious, but *O teorii prozy* (1925) in fact includes a most interesting and original reading of the *Quijote* along these lines.

<sup>25</sup> Thus, in contradistinction to other prominent Golden Age proponents of “el gran teatro del mundo” (such as notably Calderón), Cervantes take on the pervading reality/illusion theme is – in my view – not ontological but literary. He sees form everywhere. See, however, McKendrick 2002, 156–157: “It was his abiding concern, consequently, that literary illusion and deception should be underwritten by the identification of a recognizable truth, that the realities of human nature and experience should shape and inform the constructions of the imagination. Equally significant, however, for the identity of his drama, as well as his prose, was his counter-intuition that within the workings of the imagination less visible, profounder human realities are already embedded, and it is in his ironic openness to the play of these two perceptions that the distinctive character of his writings for the stage lies.”

<sup>26</sup> See especially scene instructions for the sultana’s entrances in act 3: “(Éntranse, y la SULTANA se ha de vestir a lo cristiano, lo más bizarramente que pudiere.)”, Cervantes 2005, 73; “(Entra la SULTANA, vestida a lo cristiano, como ya he dicho, lo más ricamente que pudiere; trae al cuello una cruz pequeña de ébano [...])”, *ibid.*, 77. (“[They exit, and the SULTANA must dress in the Christian fashion, as elegantly as possible]”, Cervantes 2010, 148; “[Enter the SULTANA, dressed in the Christian fashion, as I’ve already said, as richly as possible]”, *ibid.*, 153). For not particularly clear reasons, the English translation renders “lo más bizarramente que pudiere” as “as elegantly as possible” – a choice which suppresses the ‘literarizing’ qualities that I am highlighting here as an essential element of Cervantes’ poetics.

<sup>27</sup> See especially the scene instructions in the first act: “(Parece el GRAN TURCO detrás de unas cortinas de tafetán verde; salen cuatro bajaes ancianos; siéntanse sobre alfombras y almohadas; [...])”, *ibid.*, 38 (“[The TURK appears behind green taffeta curtains; four old PASHAS enter, who sit on carpets and pillows;]” Cervantes 2010, 124). For a discussion of the play’s ‘orientalism’ (and gender trouble), see McCoy (2013) 245–248, using the *Sultana* to critique Saidian theory (e.g., 248: “... Saidian Orientalism, as I have mentioned, relies too heavily on the existence of strict binarization or atomization of identity to solely explain the cultural contact staged in *La gran sultana*”) and Butler’s concept of gender performativity.

### Saint or Sinner?

The various formal schemata exploited by Cervantes in *La gran sultana Catalina de Oviedo* not surprisingly converge in the main character Catalina, devout Catholic captive harem slave in the sultan's palace. Thus, among a bewildering multitude of other possibilities,<sup>28</sup> the *Sultana* can be construed as a character study upon which are imposed all the above-mentioned frames creating the highly complex, mosaic, or indeed contradictory portrait of a woman<sup>29</sup> suggested in the play's oxymoronic title.<sup>30</sup> One common feature of this portrait, however, is its insistent counterposition and juxtaposition of the Spanish Christian sultana and the Turkish Muslim sultan and I will therefore keep a more or less explicit turcological focus in my subsequent examination of four key scenes concerning Catalina's 'triumph' in Constantinople.

The first of these scenes is the initial meeting between the sultan and Catalina (here "vestida a la turquesca" ["dressed in the Turkish fashion"])<sup>31</sup> near the end of act 1, a courtship scene modelled on the Stoic-Christian castle-under-siege *topos* familiar not only from the courtly tradition but especially from hagiographical literature and morality plays, yet also containing elements of both flirtatious coquetry and hard-nose negotiation of marriage terms:

TURCO	Sabe igualar el amor el vos y la majestad. De los reinos que poseo, que casi infinitos son, toda su jurisdicción rendida a la tuya veo; [...] Que seas turca o seas cristiana,
-------	--

---

<sup>28</sup> On earlier criticism, see Hegyi 1992, 1–21. For a stimulating examination of the play's reception, see Díez Fernández 2006, 301–322; Further Henry 2013, 91–94, resuming Pedraza Jiménez' (1999) and Díez Fernández' critique of the modern interpretation of the *Sultana* as "un canto a la tolerancia", as exemplified by Castillo 2004 et al.

<sup>29</sup> Cervantes lived large parts of his life surrounded by women and many of his works confirm him to be an acute and sympathetic observer of their lives (See e.g. *Novelas ejemplares* such as "El celoso extremeño", "La ilustre fregona", and "La fuerza de la sangre"; but also the Marcela episode in the *Quijote* I,14). Thus, even if he – as mentioned above – always depicts wives, daughters, princesses, and shepherds through the lens of literature, as literary characters rather than as empirical beings or sociological types, he certainly appears to be the most "feminist" masculine Golden Age writer. For an entertaining and detailed account of Cervantes' life, see McCrory 2005.

<sup>30</sup> As noted by Lottman 1996, "The comedia's language is selfconsciously dense with puns, riddles, oxymorons, soliloquies, private prayers, and asides" (75). The title itself, I may add, with its juxtaposition of "Catalina" (intrinsically Christian name) and "sultana" is the most striking example, recalling other Cervantine titles such as, notably, *El rufián dichoso* and *La ilustre fregona* – or *La española inglesa*.

<sup>31</sup> Cervantes 2005, 14; Cervantes 2010, 106.

a mí no me importa cosa;  
esta belleza es mi esposa,  
y es de hoy más la Gran Sultana.

SULTANA Cristiana soy, y de suerte,  
que de la fe que profeso  
no me ha de mudar exceso  
de promesa ni aun de muerte. (Cervantes 2005, 29–30)

TURK Love makes you one with majesty. I see all of my  
kingdoms, which are nearly infinite, delivered to your  
jurisdiction; now my great dominions, which have made  
me a great lord, are yours more than mine by justice and  
by right. [...] I don't care if you're a Muslim or a  
Christian; this beauty is my wife, and henceforth the  
Great Sultana.

SULTANA I am a Christian, so much so that I will not change my  
faith for a million promises, nor the threat of death.  
(Cervantes 2010, 118)

Performing, all through act 1, the part of Constancy, Catalina will not yield  
neither to flattery nor is she afraid to die for her faith.<sup>32</sup> However, she is  
understandably vexed about the whole situation in which she – a base captive,  
much inferior to her mighty suitor<sup>33</sup> – finds herself most insistently pursued

---

<sup>32</sup> The implicit presentation of Catalina here as a figure of “constantia” has been carefully  
prepared by Cervantes in a prior scene showing the deliberation of the protagonist and her  
ally Rustán prior to the meeting with the sultan:

“SULTANA ¿Es crüel el Gran Señor?/ RUSTÁN Nombre de blando le dan;/ pero, en  
efecto, es tirano./ SULTANA Con todo, confio en Dios,/ que su poderosa mano/ ha de librar  
a los dos/ deste temor, que no es vano;/ y si estuvieren cerrados/ los cielos por mis pecados,/  
por no oír mi petición,/ dispondré mi corazón/ a casos más desastrados./ No triunfará el  
inhumano/ del alma; del cuerpo, sí,/ caduco, frágil y vano.” (Cervantes 2005, 15–16)  
(“SULTANA Is the Grand Signor cruel? RUSTÁN They call him gentle, but he’s really a  
tyrant. SULTANA With all this, I trust in God, whose powerful hand will free us both from  
this justifiable fear. And if the heavens be closed to me because of my sins, and do not hear  
my request, I shall ready my heart for a more terrible outcome. This inhumane one will not  
triumph over my soul, only over my body, which is weak, fragile, and vain.” [Cervantes  
2010, 106–107]).

This expectation communicates perfectly with the sultan’s desire which is expressly  
carnal:

“SULTANA He de ser cristiana./ TURCO Sélo;/ que a tu cuerpo, por agora,/ es el que  
mi alma adora [...]” (Cervantes 2005, 46) (“SULTANA I shall remain a Christian. TURK  
Be one. For now, my soul adores your body as if it were its very heaven.” [Cervantes 2010,  
130]). Indeed, following Friedman’s conception of Cervantine drama (1981), Constancy can  
be said to be the unifying concept of the Sultana.

<sup>33</sup> Throughout the play, Catalina’s humbleness compared to the Turk is emphasized. She  
is very young – barely sixteen (according to Madrigal’s ballad [2005, 81; 2010, 155], she

by the madly enamoured Great Turk who swears to obey her every command ("A cuanto quieras querer/ obedezco y no replico", 31 ["I obey and do not dispute whatever you might want", 119]). Thus, she asks for three days to reflect on "no sé qué dudas mías,/ que escrupulosa me han hecho", *ibid.* ("certain doubts of mine, which have made me hesitant", *ibid.*) and turns in prayer-monologue to Christ – the good "Gran Señor" as implicitly opposed to the sultan who is also "Gran Señor", but "tirano", 15 ("tyrant", 105) – for spiritual consolation in the dying lines of the first act:

SULTANA    ¡A ti me vuelvo, Gran Señor, que alzaste,  
                  a costa de tu sangre y de tu vida,  
                  la mísera de Adán primer caída,  
                  y, adonde él nos perdió, Tú nos cobraste. [...]  
                  a Ti me vuelvo en mi aflicción amarga,  
                  y a Ti toca, Señor, el darme ayuda:  
                  que soy cordera de tu aprisco ausente.  
                  y temo que, a carrera corta o larga,  
                  cuando a mi daño tu favor no acuda,  
                  me ha de alcanzar esta infernal serpiente!  
(Cervantes 2005, 32)

SULTANA    I turn to you, oh Lord, who raised Adam from his  
                  miserable first fall with your own life and blood. As he  
                  lost us, You redeem us. To You, blessed shepherd, who  
                  sought the one small lost sheep out of a hundred, and,  
                  finding it pursued by the wolf, threw it over your holy  
                  shoulders, to you I turn in my bitter affliction. You must  
                  aid me, Lord: for I am a lamb lost from your fold, and I  
                  fear that, sooner or later, if you do not come to my aid,  
                  this infernal serpent will catch me!  
(Cervantes 2010, 119–120)

Drawing on the conventions of the captivity tale, ever concerned with the threat of forced conversion and the fear of apostacy, this monologue exploits imagery from classical Christian tales of temptation and perdition – the lost sheep; the Fall of Adam – in order to thematize the heroine's religious anxiety. So far, the dramatist certainly casts his protagonist as a saintly figure straight out of hagiography, liturgical drama or devotional literature yet also indebted to the profane pseudo-historiographical/auto-biographical genre of

---

was ten when she came to Constantinople after which have passed six years, as we learn from Mamí in act 1 [2005, 13; 2010, 105]) – and her father is "hidalgo, pero no rico:/ maldición de nuestro siglo", 80 ("He was a gentleman, but not a rich one: that's the curse of our times, for it seems that being poor and being an hidalgo are one and the same thing", 154).

captivity tales, building on the same opposition between vice and virtue, Good and Evil, that structured these accounts.

The second scene that I will discuss confirms this picture. After a short lesson in moral theology, explaining that it is alright to commit a sin if you are forced to do it, the play now introduces the possibility that the sultana could become a martyr:

SULTANA    ¿No es grandísimo pecado  
                  el juntarme a un infiel?

RUSTÁN     Si pudieras huir dél,  
                  te lo hubiera aconsejado;  
                  mas cuando la fuerza va  
                  contra razón y derecho,  
                  no está e pecado en el hecho,  
                  sí en la voluntad no está:  
                  condénanos la intención  
                  o nos salva en cuanto hacemos. [...]

SULTANA    Mártir seré si consiento  
                  antes morir que pecar. (Cervantes 2005, 42)

SULTANA    Is it not a great sin for me to be joined to an infidel?

RUSTÁN     If you could flee from him, that's what I would have  
                  advised; but when force trumps reason and right, then  
                  there is no sin in the deed if there is none in the intent.  
                  Intention saves or damns us in all we do. [...]

SULTANA    I shall be a martyr if I consent to die rather than to sin.  
                  (Cervantes 2010, 127)

Convenient though it may seem to the youthful Catalina, consumed with religious fervour and understandably fearful of what awaits her in the sultan's bedroom, this proposition is categorically dismissed by Rustán who – acting here and elsewhere as the enforcer of Catholic orthodoxy (and as a shield against Inquisitorial censure) – ponders that it takes more than a forced marriage to make a martyr. Indeed, he says, there is no chance Catalina will be martyred because that would require the sultan to kill her, which he surely will not considering that “sin darle muerte al ganado/podrá gozar de la lana”, 43 (“he can shear the wool without killing the sheep”, 127):

RUSTÁN     Ser mártir se ha de causar  
                  por más alto fundamento,  
                  que es por el perder la vida  
                  por confesión de la fe.

SULTANA    Esa ocasión tomaré.

- RUSTÁN     ¿Quién a ella te convida?  
Sultán te quiere cristiana,  
y a fuerza, si no de grado,  
sin darle muerte al ganado  
podrá gozar de la lana.  
Muchos santos desearon  
ser mártires, y pusieron  
los medios que convinieron  
para serlo, y no bastaron:  
que a ser mártir se requiere  
virtud sobresingular,  
y es merced particular  
que Dios hace a quien Él quiere.
- SULTANA    Al cielo le pediré,  
ya que no merezco tanto,  
que a mi propósito santo  
de su firmeza le dé; (Cervantes 2005, 42–43)
- RUSTÁN     Martyrdom is for a loftier reason: losing one's life for  
confessing one's faith.
- SULTANA    I shall take that opportunity.
- RUSTÁN     Who offers it to you? The Sultan loves you as a  
Christian, and by force, if not willingly, he can shear the  
wool without killing the sheep. Many saints desired  
martyrdom, and attempted to achieve it, but that was  
not enough, for being a martyr requires outstanding  
virtue. It is an exceptional favor that God grants to whom  
He wishes.
- SULTANA    Since I do not deserve so much, I shall beg heaven to  
grant strength to my holy purpose; I shall do what I can,  
and in silence, in my apprehension, I shall cry out to the  
heavens. (Cervantes 2010, 127–128)

In other words, regardless of Catalina's religious scruples, she is and remains the sultan's sex slave and why would he destroy his favourite toy?<sup>34</sup> Both celibacy and martyrdom being thus out of the question, my third key scene then considers a third and rather drastic way of escaping the Turk's embrace: suicide. Backdrop of this scene – showing the emotional reconciliation between father and daughter – is the not so happy first reunion of the sultana

---

<sup>34</sup> The sultan himself concedes as much, stating that, although he does intend to make a lady out of her, he can in principle do whatever he likes with her (“Como a mi esclava, en un punto/ pudiera gozarte agora;/ mas quiero hacerte señora [...]”), 47 [“As my slave, I could possess you in a minute; but I want to make you my lady, to increase my happiness”, 130]).

with her father at the end of act 2 during which he shames her, saying he would rather be sewing her shroud than her wedding dress (“¡Plugiera a Dios que estos lazos/ que tus aseos preparan/ fueran los que te llevaran/ a la fuesa entre mis brazos!”, 65; “Would to God that these laces that make up your dress were for carrying you to the grave in my arms!”, 143). When they meet again at the beginning of act 3, the tone is more reconciliatory although the father is still the typical severe, Catholic, Spanish “hidalgo” upholding low aristocracy morality without much regard for the welfare of his daughter. Thus, he reproaches her with wilfully rendering herself to a life of sin seduced by the pomp of the palace, accentuating the Counterreformation doctrine of free will.<sup>35</sup>

PADRE           Hija, por más que me arguyas,  
no puedo darme a entender  
sino que has venido a ser  
lo que eres por culpas tuyas;  
quiero decir, por tu gusto;  
que, a tenerle más cristiano,  
no gozara este tirano  
de gusto que es tan injusto.  
¿Qué señales de cordeles  
descubren tus pies y brazos?  
¿Qué ataduras o qué lazos  
fueron para ti crüeles?  
De tu propia voluntad  
te has rendido, convencida  
desta licenciosa vida,  
desta pompa y majestad. (Cervantes 2005, 70)

FATHER            Daughter, despite all your arguments, it still seems to me  
that you’ve come to be who you are by your own faults;  
I mean, by your pleasure; for if you had more Christian  
leanings, this tyrant would not enjoy something so  
unjust. What signs of whipping do your feet and arms  
show? What ties or binds have cruelly held you down?  
You’ve surrendered of your own volition, swayed by this  
licentious life, this pomp and majesty.  
(Cervantes 2010, 146–147)

The sultana replies that she has tried everything in her power to cool the sultan’s affections, but – in curious accordance with a Western erotological,

---

<sup>35</sup> Against Lutheran determinism, Counterreformation theologians such as Luis de Molina (*On the Harmony of Free Will with the Gifts of Grace*, 1588) pondered man’s free will under the influence of grace (leading man in the right direction, but not impeding his free choice).

Petrarchan, logic – he has only been all the more inflamed by her coldness and rejections (“Con mi celo le encendía,/ con mi desdén le llamaba,/ con mi altivez le acercaba/ a mí cuando más huía”, 70–71 [“My zeal excited him, my disdain attracted him, and my haughtiness brought him closer when I fled him the most”, 147]). When she finally gave up this strategy and gave in to her suitor it was to avoid forced conversion, not to climb the social ladder and become sultana, she defends herself (“Finalmente, por quedarme/ con el nombre de cristiana,/ antes que por ser sultana,/ medrosa vine a entregarme”, 71 [“Finally, to keep a Christian name, rather than that of Sultana, I fearfully gave in”, 147]); to which the father – softening up a bit but still in the condemning mood – comments that “que por lo menos estás,/ hija, en pecado mortal”, 71 (“You must realize, to your disadvantage, that you are in a state of mortal sin, my daughter”, 147).<sup>36</sup>

This is certainly a new perspective. Perhaps the sultana is not so exemplary a Christian after all? Perhaps she freely gave in to the vice and lasciviousness of the Topkapi while claiming to resist? Is her accommodation strategy, in the end, but a moral downfall in disguise? Could she be deceiving herself and everyone else (including the audience)? Faced with these troubling charges, Catalina brings up the solution of suicide: if the Turk will not kill her, then perhaps she should kill herself? Again, the answer to her plan is negative. In a rather preachy manner, the father reminds her that, for the good Christian, suicide is definitely no go:

SULTANA    Pues sabrás aconsejarme,  
                  dime, mas es disparate:  
                  ¿será justo que me mate  
                  ya que no quieren matarme?  
                  ¿Tengo de morir a fuerza  
                  de mí misma? Si no quiere  
                  Él que viva, ¿me requiere  
                  matarme por gusto o fuerza?

PADRE        Es la desesperación  
                  pecado tan malo y feo,

---

<sup>36</sup> Here as elsewhere in the play, Cervantes appears to be toying quite daringly with Catholic sexual morality and the famous Spanish honour code, leaving his audience in doubt about how bad is her fall is. Cf. that the reflexive verb “entregarse” can both mean *to give oneself up*, e.g. to the Sultan’s suit for marriage, and *to succumb*, e.g. to a vice, see the *Diccionario de Autoridades* of 1732 (online at the Spanish Academy: <http://web.frl.es/DA.html>): “ENTREGARSE. Vale tambien darse a alguna cosa, apetecerla y desearla, y en cierto modo entrañarse y emplearse en ella: como entregarse a la oración, al estudio, a los vicios y sensualidades, etc.” ([It also means to give oneself over to something, to fancy and desire it, and to absorb and devote oneself to it, e.g. to prayer, study, *vices and sensuality*, etc.] my italics).

que ninguno, según creo,  
le hace comparación. (Cervantes 2005, 71)

SULTANA Since you know how to advise me, tell me, though it's nonsense: is it right for me to kill myself, since they won't kill me? Must I die by my own hand? If He does not wish me to live, does He require me to kill myself by choice or by force?

FATHER Desperation is a sin so evil and ugly that no other compares to it, I think. Killing oneself is cowardly and holds back the generous hand of the Sovereign Good that sustains and nourishes us. (Cervantes 2010, 147)

Faced with the deadlock situation, father and daughter finally agree to opt for the classic Stoic-Christian solution: inner resistance and the patience of the righteous; turning the other cheek while awaiting the redemption of the meek; suffering, if not for religion (which she is allowed to keep), then at least for the chastity that she is forced to renounce. In this sense, Catalina can finally and with some right claim her martyrdom, as indeed she does pronouncing herself "mártir en el deseo" ("martyr of desire"),<sup>37</sup> whereas her father formulates himself in less bombastic terms:

SULTANA Mártir soy en el deseo,  
y, aunque por agora duerma  
la carne frágil y enferma  
en este maldito empleo,  
espero en la luz que guía  
al cielo al más pecador,  
que ha de dar su resplandor  
en mi tiniebla algún día;  
y desta cautividad,  
adonde reino ofendida,  
me llevará arrepentida  
a la eterna libertad.

PADRE Esperar y no temer  
es lo que he de aconsejar,  
pues no se puede abreviar  
de Dios el sumo poder.  
En su confianza atino,

---

<sup>37</sup> The current English translation of this sentence (quoted below) is extremely odd, not only strangely omitting "of desire" ("en el deseo"), but changing the presence indicative "I am" ("soy") to the optative "I would wish to be". This translation not only impedes appreciation of Cervantes' theatrical poetics and corresponding casting of Catalina as a young woman performing the role of the martyr; it also obfuscates the play's essential sinner/saint dialectic (both under examination here).

y no en mal discurso pinto  
deste ciego laberinto  
a la salida el camino;  
pero si fuera por muerte,  
no la huyas, está firme. (Cervantes 2005, 71–72)

SULTANA I would wish to be a martyr. Though my fragile and sick flesh may slumber at this cursed task for now, I trust that the light that guides the greatest sinner to heaven shall shine brightly on my darkness one day, and take me, repentant, from this captivity where I reign aggrieved to eternal liberty.

FATHER Hope, not fear, is what I advise, for the highest power of God cannot be reduced. Confidence in Him, I find, is the way out of this maze; but should it be by death instead, don't run from it, be steadfast.  
(Cervantes 2010, 147–148)

The third key scene thus essentially resumes the lines of the first two, as the relationship between the sultana and sultan is cast within the black-white religious framework of the captivity tale – expressly referenced in the last quotation (“esta cautividad” [“this captivity”]) – saints’ legends and martyrology. According to the underlying eschatological schemata of these literary forms, the pious captive Catalina in the Turkish harem is at one and the same time a semi-historical flesh and blood figure and an allegory of the human soul caught in the bodily prison, awaiting redemption and salvation through divine intervention. However, as we have seen, a nagging doubt is introduced with the father’s reproach. Seen from the perspective of the concerned father, the daughter’s relations to the Turk is a dangerous dallying with desire. In the end, the hagiographic interpretation of Catalina’s character thus seems to hang entirely on her own assertion that she gave in to “el gran Señor” for strictly pious reasons and not because of any kind of lust or social ambition. Yet her motive is essentially blowing in the wind.

On the surface, the fourth and final scene that I will discuss here seems to confirm the image of Catalina painted by the dramatist thus far. From her exchange in act 3 with Zaida/Clara, the Transylvanian harem slave whose cross-dressed lover Zelinda/Lamberto has just been selected for the sultan’s pleasure, it appears the sultana could not care less about her husband’s presumed infidelity (which would mean an easement of her martyrdom: if he chooses to make love to someone else Catalina is momentarily off the hook while another “martyr of desire” is being ‘tortured’):

ZAIDA Mi señora,  
no alcanzo cómo te diga

el dolor que en mi alma mora:  
Zelinda, aquella mi amiga  
que estaba conmigo ahora,  
al Gran Señor le han llevado.

SULTANA ¿Pues eso te da cuidado?  
¿No va a mejorar ventura? (Cervantes 2005, 92)

ZAIDA My lady, I don't know how to tell you of the pain in my  
soul: Zelinda, my friend, who was with me just now, has  
been taken to the Great Signor.

SULTANA That worries you? Isn't she improving her fortune?  
(Cervantes 2010, 162)

Catalina here coolly presents sexual intercourse with the sultan as a way of improving one's fortune, voicing the very opportunism that she was charged with by her father and fervently denied at that earlier point. Appalling to her then, it is apparently part of her business-like dealings in the harem now. The main plot seems to have come to a shallow end in which the pious Christian martyr of desire has sacrificed her chastity in exchange for keeping her religion and is now facing a humiliating if materially satisfying exercise in futility, waiting for God to rescue and redeem her from her trials while playing her cards as best she can.

Yet, when she learns of the Transylvanian lovers' predicament, the sultana awakes to heroism conceiving a plan that secures both the happy dénouement of the subplot and the 'happy' ending of the hagiographic legend of which she imagines herself to be the main character. She approaches her husband in what appears to be a jealous rage and reveals that she is pregnant, urging him not to go around spreading his seed anymore. Thus, she not only saves the two captive lovers but also, finally, consummates her longed-for martyrdom with a definitive, official goodbye to chastity – motherhood:

SULTANA ¡Cuán fácilmente y cuán presto  
has hecho con esta prueba  
tu tibio amor manifiesto!  
¡Cuán presto el gusto te lleva  
tras el que es más descompuesto! [...]

TURCO Más precio verte celosa,  
que mandar a todo el mundo,  
si es que son los celos hijos  
del Amor, según es fama,  
y, cuando no son prolijos,  
aumentan de amor la llama,  
la gloria y los regocijos.

- SULTANA Si por dejar herederos  
este y otros desafueros  
haces, bien podré afirmar  
que yo te los he de dar,  
y que han de ser los primeros,  
pues tres faltas tengo ya  
de la ordinario dolencia  
que a las mujeres les da. (Cervantes 2005, 96–97)
- SULTANA How quickly and easily you've shown your lukewarm  
love through this trial! How soon your fancy leads you  
after the most immoderate desire! [...].
- TURK I'd rather see you jealous than command the entire  
world, if it's true that jealousy is the offspring of Love,  
as they say. When it is not excessive, it feeds the flame  
of love, its glory and gladness.
- SULTANA If you commit this and other outrages in order to produce  
heirs, I can assure you that I shall give them to you, and  
that they will be the first, for I have already missed three  
times the usual trouble that women get.  
(Cervantes 2010, 164)

From her initial cold reaction to Zaida's story, the audience could suppose that Catalina is merely playing the role of the jealous wife here, and perhaps she is.<sup>38</sup> Yet who can know the secrets of the heart? Though the audience is given various leads to interpret the sultana's actions and motivations, among which her youthful idea of being a martyr (if only a "martyr of desire") surely stands out as the most prominent, her character essentially remains an enigma. In the end, the dramatist leaves it to the spectator to decide whether Catalina is in fact a saintly martyr-like figure enduring – and masochistically enjoying – her suffering; or a sinful woman "attracted by pleasure, by the good life of fleshly vice in which the Turks live" (Sosa 125); or an intelligent woman pragmatically accommodating herself to adverse circumstances (in the manner of the famous Roxolana or Hürrem and Safiye, the historical sultana of Murad III, both foreigners in the Topkapi);<sup>39</sup> or indeed a romantic figure

---

<sup>38</sup> See Henry 2013, 98–99: "The Sultana's jealousy, however, has no substance".

<sup>39</sup> See Pinto-Muñoz 2011 for an examination of the Roxolana figure in Spanish Golden Age literature (Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, Juan Boscán, Garcilaso, Francisco de Borja, Bartolomé Leonardo Argensola and Lope de Vega). In a footnote on page 102, editor of the English translation of Cervantes' play *Barbara Fuchs* (2002) notes that "The "Great Turk" of the play, Sultan Murad III (1546–1595), also called Amurath or Amurates, ruled from 1574 to 1595. He was the son of Selim II, who was vanquished at Lepanto by the Sacred Alliance in 1571, and Nur Banu, the illegitimate daughter of the Venetian Nicol. Venier. The historical Murad fell in love with the Corfiote Christian captive Safidje". Murad III's colourful life,

who actually ends up enamoured of the enemy and happily having his child, incarnating ideals of tolerance and intercultural harmony.<sup>40</sup>

Depending on which of these interpretations of the main character is preferred, the play's ending changes colour dramatically: in the first case, in which the play would essentially be a *comedia hagiográfica*, the ending is happy because it is bad (as indeed it would have to be if Catalina is to be beatified); in the second case, in which we would be dealing with a type of morality play or *auto sacramental*, the ending could on one hand be considered good because it shows how a wicked woman gets what she – a bad *exemplum* – deserves (more of the Turkish vice that destroyed her) yet, on the other hand, it could also be considered bad because it would imply a kind of heretic hedonist inversion of the morality genre in which Evil triumphs over Good; in the third case, in which the *Sultana* would be a semi-historical drama, the ending would have to be considered deeply troubling, seeing that, albeit she manages to adapt, the protagonist is caught in a situation she cannot control: an enforced marriage, with all that it entails, and life as a captive in an environment hostile to her culture and her religion;<sup>41</sup> finally, in the fourth case – which the playwright, superficially at least, would seem to endorse with the ostentatively celebratory ending in which all of

---

dominated by cupidity, was chronicled by the Ottoman historian Mustafa Âlî (1541–1600) in the last part of his monumental *Essence of History*, 1592–1599. See Fleischer 1986, 293–307.

<sup>40</sup> Thus, there is a considerable tradition for considering *La gran sultana* a play that in a liberal manner celebrates hybridity (Fuchs 2002, 63–86; Mariscal 1994; Weimer 2000; Zimic 1992; Castillo 2004), see Henry's above-mentioned critique of this tradition (2013, 91–94). Instead, Henry proposes a somber, political reading of the play as a “metaphor for disrupted Spanish selfhood” (94), arguing that there “is, as we shall see, sound evidence in the play for reading *La gran sultana* as a play which does not propagate values of tolerance. Notions of harmony and leniency function as an elaborate illusion disguising tensions, conflicts and sinister motives which inform the conduct of the drama's characters. It is, therefore, a much more unsettling and problematic drama than has traditionally been realised; and certainly not the ‘comic’ play that most critics have mistaken it for” (93).

<sup>41</sup> This interpretation would approximate the play to the anxiety-provoking “La fuerza de la sangre” in which a girl who has been raped is forced by social convention to marry her violator. Like the *Sultana*, this short story ends with childbirth and marriage yet Cervantes exploits diegetic form to shrewdly question whether, for the female protagonist, this ending is in fact happy. Thus, recounting the nuptials that are, in effect, the sanctioning of a rape, the narrator of the text ostensibly steps back (or, rather, says he must step back) for having reservations about the whole thing. See Boruchoff: “The otherwise reserved narrator is conspicuously obtrusive and ironic, for example in stating that it would take a more refined (or perhaps wanton) mind to recount the joy of those present at the wedding of Leocadia and Rodolfo [...] specially as he immediately goes on to describe this allegedly ineffable joy in great and at times surprising detail” (2016, 470).

Constantinople goes wild with joy over the birth of the sultan's child<sup>42</sup> – it is of course the proverbial happy ending of the Lopean type of *comedia*.

As the preceding discussion of the play's characterization of the main character will have suggested, my point is that Cervantes does not definitively prioritize any of these interpretations, but instead piles forms upon forms as so many interpretive frames neither of which are fully able to capture the elusive silhouette of the Christian girl from Oviedo who became the sultana in Constantinople.<sup>43</sup> Taken together these different frames form an ambiguous turcological and characterological mosaic of more or less contradictory elements that forces the audience to think and reflect: should Ottoman-Spanish relations – as embodied in the relationship between sultan and sultana – be conceived in the allegorical terms of hagiography, martyrology and captivity plays as a battle between Good and Evil? in the problem-oriented terms of serious drama as a subtle game of power in which the Ottoman Empire's famous religious tolerance and liberality is but the cloak for more concrete types of political and physical repression? or, finally, in the utopian 'comic' terms of reconciliation and hybridization pertinent to the comic *comedia*?

### Cervantes' Idea of a History Play?

Recalling the famous harangue against contemporaneous *comedias históricas* in the *Quijote* I:48, it seems strange that Cervantes should seriously choose to write a semi-historical drama like the *Sultana* which suffers from many, if not all, of the vicissitudes censured by Don Quijote's interlocutor.<sup>44</sup> However,

---

<sup>42</sup> See Cervantes 2005: "(*Suenan las chimerías; comienzan a poner luminarias, salen los garzones del TURCO por el tablado, corriendo con hachas y hachos encendidos, diciendo a voces: "¡Viva la gran sultana doña Catalina de Oviedo! ¡Felice parto tenga, tenga parto felice!"*)"; Cervantes 2010: "*Shawms sound; they begin to place luminaries; enter the GARZONS of the TURK on the stage, running with lighted torches, crying out: "Long live the Great Sultana Doña Catalina de Oviedo! May she deliver happily!"*" (169).

<sup>43</sup> Hernández Araico makes a similar point, noting that the play thus repetitively "diverts the spectators' perspective" (1994, 157).

<sup>44</sup> See Cervantes 1998: "Y si es que la imitación es lo principal que ha de tener la comedia, ¿cómo es posible que satisfaga a ningún mediano entendimiento que, fingiendo una acción que pasa en tiempo del rey Pepino y Carlomagno, el mismo que en ella hace la persona principal le atribuyan que fue el emperador Heraclio, que entró con la Cruz en Jerusalén, y el que ganó la Casa Santa, como Godofre de Bullón, habiendo infinitos años de lo uno a lo otro; y fundándose la comedia sobre cosa fingida, atribuirle verdades de historia y mezclarle pedazos de otras sucedidas a diferentes personas y tiempos, y esto no con trazas verisímiles, sino con patentes errores, de todo punto inexcusables?" (554). ("And if truth to life is the main thing the drama should keep in view, how is it possible for any average understanding to be satisfied when the action is supposed to pass in the time of King Pepin or Charlemagne, and the principal personage in it they represent to be the Emperor Heraclius who entered Jerusalem with the cross and won the Holy Sepulchre, like Godfrey of Bouillon, there being

to conclude my examination of this interesting play I would like to briefly introduce the hypothesis that, notwithstanding its historiographical inaccuracy and demonstratively literarizing nature, *La gran sultana Catalina de Oviedo* could be seen to epitomize Cervantes' idea of the history play – a dramatic genre whose popularity and prestige grew exponentially with dramatists, theatre audiences and theorists from the last decades of the 16th century. Though Spanish Golden Age historical drama is traditionally seen to culminate with the work of Lope de Vega, who even went so far in his engagement with history as to aspire for the position of royal historiographer,<sup>45</sup> Cervantes was among the first to experiment with the genre in the early 1580s and, judging by his later production, an interest in the problem of historical representation never left him.

Two elements of the *Sultana* are especially pertinent in this respect. For one thing, the striking meta-historiographical aspect of the play – largely (but not exclusively) embodied in Madrigal's performance of the ballad of Catalina's life<sup>46</sup> and his plan to write "la historia de esta niña/ sin discrepar de la verdad un punto", (Cervantes 2005, 100 ["the history of this girl without straying one jot from the truth", Cervantes 2010, 168]) – obviously toys with the idea of the play as a historical play if perhaps primarily in the sense of hagiographic life-writing. Secondly, although the playwright makes sure to emphasize the literarizing or conventional – turcological, rather than Turkish – nature of his Constantinople and Murad III, he does actually introduce quite comprehensive factual knowledge about Turkish rites and customs which would have required some research.<sup>47</sup> Yet, notwithstanding the (form-conscious, reflective) historiographical intention disclosed in both these elements, it is for a different reason that I would highlight the *Sultana* as a model of Cervantine historical imitation: its 'didactic', performative or audience-involving aspect.

In this play, the dramatist clearly and variously aims to stimulate spectators' reflection on cultural stereotypes and historiographical common places creating his very own – very Cervantine – version of the *historia*

---

years innumerable between the one and the other? or, if the play is based on fiction and historical facts are introduced, or bits of what occurred to different people and at different times mixed up with it, all, not only without any semblance of probability, but with obvious errors that from every point of view are inexcusable?") Cervantes 2004; unpaginated internet text].

<sup>45</sup> Lope de Vega himself said so much in one of his letters (Lope de Vega 1939–1945, vol. III, 45).

<sup>46</sup> Cervantes 2005, 79–82; Cervantes 2010, 154–155.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g. the quite detailed information conveyed in act 1 about the "salah", the Muslim prayer performed five times daily, about Turkish protocol and office, as well as about the infrastructure of Constantinople.

*magistra vitae* tradition. In Cervantes' school of history, the magister does not give monological lectures but encourages active student participation, as it were, and he has quite a few cards up his sleeve to awaken the slumbering masses.<sup>48</sup> Besides the massive, thought-provoking literarization identified above in the *Sultana*'s hagiography and captivity tale inspired turcology, his repertoire of what can be termed consciousness enhancing devices includes meta-dramatic takes (such as the performance-within-the-performance in act 3); mixture of empirical persons and places with entirely fictive ones; and the ambiguous recurrence of words and concepts relating to history, historicity and historiography, among other things.<sup>49</sup>

Like the literarizing take examined more in depth in this article, these different devices – which I cannot go further into in the present context but propose for further study – essentially facilitate the transformation of what may at first sight appear to be an absurd fantasy about Spanish political hegemony over the Turks<sup>50</sup> into a subtle critique of this very fantasy; of propagandistic notions about the Ottoman sultan as the great adversary of Western Christianity into tongue-in-cheek ideology critique; and of apparently fantastical and stereotypical turquoiseries into a twisted, critical, turcology. In this sense, the *Sultana* could indeed be seen to provide us with a sophisticated model of historical imitation that is very much in line with the emulative poetics epitomized, of course, by the *Quijote*; and a welcome alternative to unreflective interpretations of historical agents and events of all kinds (as reductionist as they are recurrent).

---

<sup>48</sup> Thus, although I disagree with Henry's rather grim, political interpretation of the *Sultana*, I find her closing remarks concerning the play's performativity very accurate: "As has already been established in this study, Cervantes makes plain that his theatre refuses to be an instrument of propaganda. As such, this play naturally resists those arguments which insist that the drama promotes a harmonious inclusiveness. Moreover, Cervantes does not make it easy for his spectator to read and interpret the signifying systems at play. The difficulty in peeling back the drama's layers of farce and rigorously determining the motivations which drive the play encourages both discrimination and active participation" (102–103).

<sup>49</sup> See, notably, Rustán's closing remark:

"RUSTÁN Alzad la voz, muchachos; viva a voces/ la gran sultana doña Catalina,/ gran sultana y cristiana [...]/ a quien Dios de tal modo sus deseos/ encamine, por justos y por santos,/ que de su libertad y su memoria/ se haga nueva y verdadera historia." (Cervantes 2005, 102) ("RUSTÁN Raise your voices, lads; may the Great Sultana Doña Catalina be praised – the Great Sultana and a Christian [...]. May God make her desires so just and holy that a new and true history may be written of her liberty and memory." [Cervantes 2010, 169]).

<sup>50</sup> See Williamson 1994.

### Bibliography

- Bataillon, Marcel 1950, *Erasmus y España. Estudios sobre la historia espiritual del siglo xvi*, México.
- Boruchoff, David. A. 2016, "Unhappy Endings: La fuerza de la sangre and the Novelas ejemplares of Miguel de Cervantes", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 93, 5, 461–477.
- Canavaggio, Jean 1977, *Cervantès Dramaturge. Un théâtre a naître*, Paris.
- Castillo, Moisés R. 2004, "¿Ortodoxia Cervantina? Un análisis de La gran Sultana, El trato de Argel y Los baños de Argel", *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 56, 2, 219–240.
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de 1998, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed.: Francisco Rico, Barcelona.
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de 2003, "Epístola a Mateo Vázquez", *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 23.1 (unpaginated internet text).  
URL: [http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/cervantes-bulletin-of-the-cervantes-society-of-america--45/html/0279583e-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064\\_32.html#I\\_52](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/cervantes-bulletin-of-the-cervantes-society-of-america--45/html/0279583e-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_32.html#I_52)
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de 2004, *The History of Don Quixote*, I., trans.: John Ormsby. Produced for [gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org) by David Widger. URL: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5921/5921-h/5921-h.htm>.
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de 2005, *Comedias*, IV, Zaragoza.
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de 2010, "*The Bagnios of Algiers*" and "*The Great Sultana*". *Two Plays of Captivity*, eds. and trans.: Barbara Fuchs & Aaron J. Ilika, Philadelphia.
- De Renzis, N. 1925, *Storia di Santa Laura da Costantinopoli nel quattrocentosettantacinquesimo anno della Sua morte*, ed.: R. Riccio, Cosenza.
- Diccionario de Autoridades* III (1732). URL.: <http://web.frl.es/DA.html>
- Díez Fernández, José Ignacio 2006, "'Sin discrepar de la verdad un punto'. La gran sultana: ¿Un canto a la tolerancia?", *Lectura y signo* 1, 301–322.
- Fleischer, Cornell 1986, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Âli, 1541–1600*, Princeton.
- Friedman, Edward H. 1981, *The Unifying Concept, Approaches to the Structure of Cervantes' "Comedias"*, York (Spanish Literature Publications).
- Fuchs, Barbara 2002, *Passing for Spain. Cervantes and the Fictions of Identity*, Indiana.
- Garcés, María Antonia 2002, *Cervantes in Algiers, a Captive's Tale*, Nashville.

- García Lorenzo, Luciano 1993, "Cervantes, Constantinopla y La gran sultana", *Jornadas de teatro clásico de Almagro XVI*, 57–71.
- García Lorenzo, Luciano 1994, "La gran sultana de Miguel de Cervantes. Adaptación del texto y puesta en escena" *Anales Cervantinos* 32, 117–136.
- Grieve, Patricia E. 2016, "Conversion in Early Modern Western Mediterranean Accounts of Captivity: Identity, Audience, and Narrative Convention", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 47.1–2, 91–110.
- Hegyí, Ottmar 1992, *Cervantes and the Turks, Historical Reality versus Literary Fiction in La Gran Sultana and El Amante Liberal*, Newark.
- Henry, Melanie 2013, *The Signifying Self: Cervantine Drama as Counter-Perspective Aesthetic*, London.
- Hernández Araico, Susana 1994, "Estreno de La gran sultana: teatro de lo otro, amor y humor", *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 14.2, 155–165.
- Jurado Santos, Agapita 1997, *Tolerancia y ambigüedad en "La Gran Sultana"* De Cervantes, Kassel.
- Kazhdan, "Alexander", *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Oxford.
- Kluge, Sofie 2019, "Waking the Dead. Miguel de Cervantes Numancia and the Problem of Golden Age Historical Drama", *MLN* 134.2, 227–251.
- Kluge, Sofie, Ulla Kallenbach & David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt (eds.) 2018, *Staging History: Renaissance Dramatic Historiography (Renæssanceforum 13)*.
- Lewis-Smith, Paul 1981, "La gran sultana Catalina de Oviedo: A Practical Joke?", *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 17, 68–82.
- Lope de Vega Carpio, Félix 1939–1945, *Epistolario de Lope de Vega*, 4 vols, ed.: A. González de Amezúa, Madrid.
- Lottman, Maryca Ortiz 1996, "La gran sultana: Transformations in Secret Speech", *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 16.1, 74–90.
- Mariscal, George 1994, "La gran sultana and the Issue of Cervantes' Modernity", *Revista de estudios hispánicos* 28, 185–211.
- Mas, Albert 1967, *Les Turcs dans la littérature espagnole du Siècle D'Or*, I–II, Paris.
- McCoy, Christina Inés 2013, "Engendering the Orient: Cervantes' La gran sultana", *eHumanista* 2, 245–259.
- McCrorry, Donald P. 2005, *Miguel De Cervantes: No Ordinary Man*, London.
- McKendrick, Malveena 2002, "Writings for the Stage", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Cervantes*, ed.: Anthony J. Cascardi, Cambridge, 131–159.
- Pedraza Jiménez, Felipe B. 1999, "El teatro mayor de Cervantes: Comentarios a contrapelo", in: *Actas del VII Coloquio Internacional de la*

- Asociación de Cervantistas*, ed.: José Ramón Fernández de Cano y Martín, Toboso, 19–38.
- Pinto-Muñoz, Ana 2011, “Roxolana in the Spanish Golden Age”, *eHumanista* 19, 375–389.
- Sosa, Antonio de 2011, *An Early Modern Dialogue with Islam, Antonio De Sosa's Topography of Algiers (1612)*, ed.: María Antonia Garcés, Notre Dame, Indiana.
- Zimic, Stanislav 1992, *El teatro de Cervantes*, Madrid.
- Varas, Patricia 1991, “El rufián dichoso: Una comedia de santos diferente”, *Anales Cervantinos* 29, 9–19.
- Weimer, Christopher B 2000, “Going to Extremes: Barthes, Lacan and Cervantes' La gran sultana”, in: *Gender, Identity and Representation in Spain's Golden Age*, ed.: Anita K. Stoll & Dawn L. Smith, Lewisburg, 47–60.
- Williamson, Edwin 1994, “La gran sultana. Una fantasía política de Cervantes”, *Donaire* 3, 52–54.