

Unhappily Ever After:
Deceptive Idealism
in Cervantes's Marriage Tales

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Introduction

THIS BOOK BEGAN AS a study of the metafictional aspects Miguel de Cervantes's lesser-studied "idealistic" *Exemplary Novels* several years ago. Over time I have become increasingly interested in María de Zayas, a near contemporary of Cervantes, who seems either to inherit, or to challenge, depending on one's point of view, the underlying ideological and structural thrust of Cervantes's novelistic endeavors. In a study of Cervantine influences on María de Zayas,¹ Edward H. Friedman uses the apt phrase "deceptive idealism" to describe the textual undermining of romantic conventions. It is my contention that this undermining demonstrates self-consciousness, and, reciprocally, that the textual self-awareness prompts readings that expose the illusion of the idealistic frame. This book serves as an attempt to identify and explain the metafictional elements present in the marriage tales, especially of the *Exemplary Novels*. Cervantes's use of self-conscious elements lays a foundation for the equally provocative narratives of María de Zayas. I will focus my interpretive efforts principally on several of Cervantes's narrative romances. Although the focus of my study may appear narrow in that I examine only a few texts of a single writer, the implications of my investigation are broad, especially when perceived as a preview of Zayas's work, since both Cervantes and Zayas capture the psychological and literary essence of a particular society and moment only to transform those attitudes and events into stories that transcend time and space, resonating as clearly and as strongly with readers today as they did with audiences nearly four hundred years ago.

The stories that I discuss deal with marriage, a cultural phenomenon that has both vexed and revitalized societies surely from the moment that a union between a man and a woman was first undertaken. With the formation of societies and the concurrent emergence of concepts such as ownership, race, religion, rights, responsibility, and honor, among others, legal definitions of marriage were

¹ Edward H. Friedman, "Constructing Romance: The Deceptive Idealism of María de Zayas's *El jardín engañoso*."

created, as were conventions for the proper establishment and perpetuation of the union. This book does not attempt to trace or to define the political, philosophical, theological, biological, or other roots of the concept of marriage in the human race or in seventeenth-century Spanish society. I am not a sociologist or a philosopher or a human scientist. I am a student of literature, and, as such, explore the ideas both that affect and that emerge from the pen of an individual who had keen observational abilities at a particular moment in time and a gift for narrating his observations in such a way as to entertain and instruct readers both in his own lifetime and in succeeding generations.

With the rise of new methods of criticism, scholars have renewed their interest in Cervantes's fascinating and complex *Novelas ejemplares*. Certain *Novelas*, such as *El coloquio de los perros* and *El licenciado Vidriera*, have received the bulk of the critical commentary, due principally to their relation to the development of nineteenth-century literary realism. Others have attracted less attention, either because they have been deemed less interesting, qualitatively inferior, or too far removed from positivistic definitions of literary reality. Although seven of the *Novelas* are romances—stories that end idealistically in a recovery of identity and in marriage—of these only *La gitanilla* has consistently received critics' approval, due, not surprisingly, to its "realistic" portrayal of Gypsy society. Other romances, such as *Las dos doncellas*, *La ilustre fregona*, *La señora Cornelia*, have been relatively neglected by modern critics. Alban K. Forcione suggests that the novellas that receive the greatest attention are those that demonstrate aspects "assimilable to the *Quijote*" and compatible with modern novelistic values and concerns (Afterword 335). Forcione also hints, in contrast to the majority opinion, that perhaps less would be said of *Don Quijote* and the novellas of the "realistic" vein if Cervantes had not written works such as *Las dos doncellas*, *La ilustre fregona*, *La señora Cornelia*, and *La fuerza de la sangre*.

In recent years especially, Cervantes's realistic fiction has attracted scholars on account of its artistic self-awareness. In Forcione's opinion, for example, *El casamiento engañoso y el coloquio de los perros*, widely recognized as a realistic tale, is "the most literarily self-conscious of the *Exemplary Novels*" (*Mystery* 4). Numerous metafictional devices appear throughout the novella. Conventions are exposed. The concept of narratorial authority is placed in question, as is also the truthfulness or verisimilitude of the events that transpire. Highlighting the constructed nature of fiction, Cervantes creates a story within a story.

A brief review of *El casamiento engañoso y el coloquio de los perros*, one of the "realistic" novellas, will expose the metafictionality of the realistic texts and help

to set the stage for my study of the “idealistic” stories. In the outer frame of the tale, a soldier contracts syphilis, ironically, from his wife, whom he has tricked into marrying him by pretending to be rich. Before they married, his future spouse, a rogue herself, fooled him by playing the role of a wealthy young lady of the upper class. This story of greed and deception comes to us through the first-person, oral narration of the now-wifeless soldier as he relates the events of his unfortunate past to a friend. The “biography” sets the frame for the *Coloquio de los perros*, the “truthful” events recounted by one dog to another as the soldier was recovering from his infection in the hospital. The dogs are keenly conscious of their unique ability to speak and comment on it at length, attributing their condition to magic. They decide to put their new skill to good use by sharing their life stories. While one dog narrates, much in a Sanchoesque style of storytelling—overburdened with details and tangential information (remember, for example, Sancho Panza’s story of the jealous shepherd who took his 300 goats across the river one by one [179-81])²—the other dog, like Don Quijote, instructs his companion on the “proper” way to tell a tale, and amicable arguments often ensue between the two canines.

The soldier, claiming to have overheard and to have remembered the entire lengthy conversation between the dogs, has written it down so that others may delight in its novelty. The soldier’s friend reads the dialogue and thoroughly enjoys it, praising the soldier for his inventiveness and writing ability yet insisting that the story cannot possibly be true, that it is a creation of the soldier’s ingenuity. The tale highlights the problems of reading and writing, of presentation and interpretation, of fiction and reality. The juxtaposition of the supposedly truthful, personal, orally narrated experience of the soldier, to the magical, second-hand, written account of the dogs’ colloquy may encourage modern readers especially to reconsider the truth value of the events of the outer frame, suggesting that in a parallel way life itself is full of illusions.

As exemplified by *El coloquio*, Cervantes’s works anticipate and influence two literary modes: the first, nineteenth-century literary realism, in which characters develop in a historically verisimilar milieu that seeks to hide the process of its creation; the second, the illusion-breaking fiction of the modern and especially postmodern eras in which storytelling becomes the subject of the story, conventions are laid bare, reality becomes an illusion, and the illusion, a reality. Facets of both these modes are present in all Cervantes’s fiction. Over the years, more

² All Spanish references to *Don Quijote* will be to the Francisco Rico edition of 204.

attention has been given to those stories that, for a variety of reasons, seem to display aspects of the historical reality of Cervantes's contemporary society.

Cervantes, in continuous dialogue with Aristotle and the principles of literary verisimilitude, devises imaginative worlds that confront and display the problems associated with the authentic portrayal of fictive realities. Like *El coloquio de los perros*, the other "realistic" stories also self-consciously display the problems associated with the production of a literary text. Whereas scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth century gave preference to the realistic tales on account of their realism, these same tales attract scholars today because of their self-reflective qualities. The allure of the realistic texts entices educators to utilize the stories in their classes, and, due to time restrictions and other factors, the realistic tales become the Cervantine canon. The tendency to neglect the idealistic narratives is passed on to a new generation of scholars, and year after year, these texts are neglected.

The literary self-consciousness of *El coloquio de los perros* is probably readily apparent to many, if not most, readers. Metafiction, however, is much more than explicit, unavoidably noticeable dialogue regarding the construction of a text. The terms metafiction, self-conscious fiction, self-reflective or reflexive fiction, narcissistic fiction—all closely related terms—describe, perhaps, a way of reading a text as much or more than they describe anything inherent in the text. Depending on the reader's previous experiences—literary and non-literary—metafiction can be discovered in the use, abuse, and defiance of conventions, in the doubling of characters and plots, in the invention and assignment of names, and in a character's desire and effort to define his or her own role. Intertextuality also plays a role in metafiction, as do dramatizations of the interplay between author and reader or between life and art.

If, as some critics have advocated, all texts are metafictional to some extent, it does not necessarily follow that all readers will equally detect the metafictional qualities of the text. A text can be many things for many people. So, while for some readers, for example, *Don Quijote* is a juxtaposition of idealism and realism, for others it is a story about storytelling, and for others, something completely different. This seems fitting, given that there are many valid ways of approaching and interpreting the words, ideas, and indeterminacies of a text.

In powerful rebuttal to the reigning opinions regarding the idealistic narratives, Carroll B. Johnson demonstrates, in a 1988 essay, that *La española inglesa* is as solidly grounded on historical facts and phenomena as any other *Novela*. He implies that research shows that the other romances may have similar