Special Issue Reprint

# Curiosity and Modernity in Early Modern Spain

Edited by
Marina Brownlee

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Guest Editor

**Marina Brownlee**

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# About the Editor

**Marina Brownlee**

Marina Brownlee is the Robert Schirmer Professor of Spanish and Portuguese and of Comparative Literature at Princeton University. The Medieval and Early Modern periods are her primary focus, and she particularly focuses on issues of cultural translation, curiosity, and the encyclopedia, as well as representations of the senses.

Her books include the following: *The Status of Reading in the 'Libro de buen amor'*, *The Severed Word: Ovid's 'Heroides' and the 'Novela Sentimental*, *The Poetics of Literary Theory in Lope de Vega and Cervantes and The Cultural Labyrinth of María de Zayas*. She has co-edited a number of volumes on comparative Medieval and Early Modern topics, including *Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes, Boundary and Transgression in Medieval Culture, The New Medievalism, Cultural Authority in Golden Age Spain, Intricate Alliances: Early Modern Spain and England, Renaissance Encounters: Greek East and Latin West* and *Revealing New Perspectives: Studies in Honor of Stephen G. Nichols*.

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*Editorial*

# Introduction

**Marina S. Brownlee**

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Curiosity and Modernity offer an inevitable pairing. In defining curiosity, Vladimir Nabokov remarks that "curiosity is insubordination in its purest form" (Benedict 2001). By making this statement, he is recalling with his typically laconic irony the Premodern—indeed Biblical—injunction against curiosity as the sin of Eve. Her misappropriation of knowledge belonging to God rather than His human creations has been construed for centuries as an illegitimate, impious activity, while curiosity in the Modern period is seen as the currency of cultural progress. Blumenberg and Freud have famously theorized this association.

Curiosity denotes the human desire to know. The perennial lure of this impulse has been described since Antiquity in a variety of ways, and, not surprisingly, 21st-century researchers of philosophy, religion, science, and the arts continue to grapple with it. A mark of its complexity is clear in that curiosity is both a subjective and objective field of study, involving both mental attitudes and/or physical objects of contemplation.

In his influential study, Blumenberg equated the evolution of Modernity as the result of the progressive rethinking of curiosity from a vice to a constructive epistemic virtue (Blumenberg 1985). It is this change in attitude that made possible the Scientific Revolution, philosophical and artistic exploration, and advances that we identify as hallmarks of our Modern world. And, as a result, it is no wonder that the 17th century is frequently called "The Age of Curiosity".

What has emerged more recently from the study of curiosity by scholars such as Foucault, Greenblatt, Kenny, Daston, and Park, to name a few, is the diversity, ambiguity, and even contradictions at issue. In fact, as Evans and Marr affirm, a meaningful study of curiosity during the Early Modern period must necessarily take into account "How curiosity. . . changed or remained stable over time and in different contexts from place to place" (Evans 2006).

The essays included in this volume reflect the diverse vantage points at issue in defining curiosity in Early Modern Iberia and the New World.

> "Curiosity has always been a chameleonic quality", in the words of Susan Byrne. Her analysis begins with two ancient narratives: Plotinus's 3rd-century belief that overweening curiosity led to the creation of time and to chaos and his supposed contemporary Hermes Trismegistus, who viewed curiosity as a function of Narcissism. Byrne explores two Spanish rethinkings of these curiosity stories by two of Early Modern Spain's most illustrious writers—the mystical poet San Juan de la Cruz and the brilliant prose stylist Baltazar Gracián. After her review of speculative curiosity is these two authors, Byrne demonstrates how "curiosity begat Modernity".

Acknowledging the polysemy of the concept labeled as "curiosity", Javier Patiño Loira focuses on the two distinct meanings that it represented in Early Modern sources and Modern attempts to reconcile their differences. Basing himself on the writings of the

famed Jesuit Juan Eusebio Nirenberg, Patiño departs from our contemporary notions of curiosity, recontextualizing them in way that "what might strike us today as two different and largely unrelated concepts haphazardly clustered in 'curiosity' were in fact perceived as two sides of the same reality".

During the early Modern period, as definitions of curiosity were being rethought, so were literary genres. The miscellany is a case in point. Mercedes Alcalá explores this narrative form that offers its readers a wealth of information on unconventional topics—from the arcane to the folkloric. Julián Iñiguez de Medrano's unique *La silva curiosa* (1608) was written, among other reasons, to help the French Queen and author of the *Heptameron*, Marguerite de Navarre, perfect her Spanish language skills. Its context is surprising, sometimes Gothic in its gruesome subject matter, casting "the curious as synonymous with the bizarre, extraordinary, marvelous".

Curiosity in the context of the Inquisition is also central to Ana Gómez Laguna's investigation of Teresa de Cepeda y Fuente, also known as Teresa de Ahumada, the first Carmelite nun in the New World, the first female poet from Ecuador and St. Teresa of Avila's cousin. In her autobiographical *Vida*, Teresa first admits that she was "a very curious adolescent", thereafter deleting all references to her curiosity. Ironically, however, her impressive ability to reform the Carmelite Order could only have been accomplished, as Laguna explains, by "the conscious cultivation of a praxis-based curiosity of a reflective rebel able to defeat the inquisitorial injunction to female silence and restriction".

An unexpected codicological curiosity is at issue in Kathryn Phipps's study of what she terms "archival impertinence". Though it seems paradoxical, the manuscript confession known as the "Escrito curioso" by an unnamed archivist is aptly deemed "curious" for two striking reasons. Amid the sprawling script of Inquisitorial confessions, this manuscript is included by the archivist for its "valor caligráfico", including both poems and several pages of intricate illustrations. Submitted to the Mexican Inquisition in 1754, its departures from the confessional tradition reveal a fundamental tension between the Inquisition and the formal orthodoxy it demands.

Impertinent curiosity in different—gendered and racial—contexts is the focus of Catherine Infante's perspectives on North African borderlands and their representation by Miguel de Cervantes. Numerous Iberian writers were understandably obsessed by Muslim identity given the ongoing and problematic relationship with North Africa. Cervantes's interrogation of female Muslim stereotypes in Iberian texts is developed in his play titled *Los baños de Argel* (1615), particularly in the "curiosa impertinente" Zohara, who is based on a historical figure who is also a key figure in the intercalated narrative of "El curioso impertinente" in the *Quijote*. Her constructive female curiosity seriously challenges the prevailing attitude famously voiced by Juan Luis Vives regarding the perils of uncontrolled female curiosity.

Curiosity and its relationship to desire in text as well as film is the subject of Bruce Burningham's essay in both written and visual media contemplated from the perspectives of Girardian and Lacanian theories. Beginning with the intercalated "Tale of Impertinent Curiosity" in Part I of *Don Quijote*, he turns to a consideration of Pedro Almodóvar's film, *Carne trémula*, which is itself an adaptation of Ruth Rendell's novel, *Live Flesh* and Luis Buñuel's film titled *Ensayo de un crimen*. Burningham's analysis illustrates the fundamental role "not just of curiosity in early Modern Spain, but also in the representation of modern (and Postmodern) sexuality."

Curiosity in the domain of desire and sexuality is the focus of Frederick de Armas's investigation of María de Zayas's tragic novella, *Tarde llega el desengaño*. His original reading reveals a dense rendering of the plot by means of ekphrastic curiosity that Zayas elicits from both her characters and her readers, with attention paid to the powerful visual impact of her descriptions. Inspired by Apuleius's narrative of *Cupid and Psyche*, in which curiosity is the prime motivation of the plot, Zayas dramatizes the dangers of extreme amorous curiosity but also the perils threatening a lack of curiosity by means of a meticulous analysis of colors in eight ekphrases by which Zayas demonstrates that she is writing for the curious reader's "chromatic eye".

With a different perspective on curiosity, in this case its relationship to politics, Marta Albalá Pelegrín's essay charts the potentially disastrous social consequences of extreme weather catastrophes. A series of calamitous occurrences, specifically the devastating floods of Rome in October of 1530, an earthquake in Lisbon a few months later, and a tsunami as well led to prophesies of doom in the "end of times" recorded in the *Book of Revelation*. Albalá analyzes the intense curiosity fueled by these violent natural events in politicians and citizens alike who debated whether these were natural or divinely sent disasters "in order to advance political and religious calls to action".

A different type of curiosity, a Modern view of it that is not only epistemic but escapist, is provided by Steven Hutchinson's exploration, recalling the type of curiosity referenced by Michel Foucault in the 20th century, recalling this type of curiosity articulated by Montaigne in the 16th century, that is the author's "straying afield of himself". In this connection, Leo Africanus, author of the expansive *Cosmographia de l'Affrica* (1526), chronicles the plethora of unknown and exotic places and people he encounters. However, though his curiosity is paramount, not once does he use the word "curiosity". His unconventional travel writing, the "desire to see, engage with, experience, know and comprehend especially human life in its many aspects, contexts and variations", provides a stunning example of socio-anthropological curiosity.

As Julia Domínguez explains in her chapter, travel curiosity in connection with exotic humans, animals, and objects is also closely linked in the Early Modern period to "cabinets of curiosities" or *Wunderkammern*, proto-museums of sorts that wealthy Europeans constructed in their private houses. The collecting of objects from the natural world as well as man-made objects, including artworks and technology, was a means by which wealthy owners fashioned "a microcosm of the world", driven by their curiosity but also their desire to project their wealth to visitors. The missionary Diego Valadés (1533–1582) returned to Spain from Mexico, celebrating the material world of the indigenous people with whom he had lived. This mestizo with a curious mind offers his readers a surprising "textual cabinet of curiosities" in his *Rhetorica Christiana*.

The essays in this volume provide a panorama of curiosities, its new uses in Early Modern Spain, and some of the many motivations that its use implies.

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# A Restless Nature

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**Abstract:** During the Spanish Renaissance, curiosity was the catalyst for change and creativity. Earlier philosophical stories regarding the perils and pitfalls of curiosity, written by Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus, were adapted to a quite positive end: human creativity in letters.

**Keywords:** curiosity; Plotinus; Hermes Trismegistus; San Juan de la Cruz; Baltasar Gracián; philosophy in creative letters

## 1. Introduction

In the third century AD, Plotinus added a metaphysical twist to existing notions of curiosity. Positing hubristic inquisitiveness as the motivating force for the creation of time, the Greek philosopher describes "a restlessly active nature which wanted to control itself and be on its own" (Plotinus 1967, 3.7.11). This restless nature "moved, and time moved with it" such that soul "put itself into time. . . then handed over that which came into being as a slave to time" (Plotinus 1967, 3.7.11). Seeking autonomy, knowledge and creative clout, the curious nature generated difference, ergo time, in the cosmos. Curiosity begat the chaos of change.

A supposed contemporary of Plotinus, the apocryphal author Hermes Trismegistus, describes a similar process in terms of a Narcissus myth: the first son of *Mens*, he who brings the cosmos into being through intellectual ideation of it, sees himself reflected in Nature's waters. Unable to resist the beauty of his reflected self in the landscape fashioned by his father, he descends to become one with nature because he too wishes to create, that is, to do something more than he was meant to do.[1] Curiosity, here tinged with narcissism, begat creativity.

My focus in what follows will be on two Spanish adaptations of those curiosity stories, for what they tell us about early modern human empowerment in the arts. Mystic poet San Juan de la Cruz (1542–1591) attempts to invert the Hermetic descent so as to find, then join with, the divinity embedded in nature, while Baltasar Gracián (1601–1658) transforms Plotinus's chronological chaos into a new, aesthetic type of genesis story. Both authors use curiosity's descent into nature as the spark for their own creative muse.

## 2. Origins

Curiosity has always had a chameleonic quality, and the early Greeks used two different words to convey its divergent characteristics. The term *periergia* signified interested intellectual exploration, which itself had two different manifestations: if focused, it was positive but if a bit scattershot, negative. Overly intrusive nosiness or meddling, on the other hand, was roundly denigrated as *polupragmon*.[2] Those general differences in meaning are not always crystal clear in usage: Theophrastus condemned as well-meaning but intemperate the mistakes "of the *perierges*, the curious one", and Plutarch decried

"as a grievous vice" the negative *polypragmosyne* (Assmann 2005, p. 38). Writing midway between those two authors, Polybius contrarily used the putatively negative *polypragmosyne* to cast a positive light on intellectual endeavor (Leigh 2013, p. 1). Leigh adds to the mix yet a third related word, *philopragmon*, explaining this last as "an essential disposition, a positive relish for different forms of engagement" (Leigh 2013, p. 5).

Throughout the Middle Ages the Latin *curiositas,* which incorporated the full range of meanings for all three Greek terms, similarly vacillated in signaling traits from enviable to regrettable.[3] In the first century BCE, Cicero coined the Latin noun form to describe a happy state of intellectual stimulation: "I'm ravenous with curiosity" (Cicero 1999, 30 (2.12), p. 167).[4] Two centuries later, Apuleius criticized Psyche for falling prey to her curiosity.[5] From the third century CE we have the two creative curiosity stories referenced above by Hermes Trismegistus and Plotinus. For St. Augustine in the fourth century the quality was, simply, a pejorative, a vice, a sin.[6] The saint specifically relates both Plotinus' restlessly active fallen nature, and the Hermetic first man's descent, to *curiositas* as a moral transgression (Torchia 2013, p. 21), while similarly identifying man's wish to reverse that fall through the exercise of his own intellectual drive as yet another sin, that of wanting to know too much.

Moving forward, intellectual inquisitiveness was considered acceptable only if directed to an approved end, of which there were precious few. Excessive curiosity could be a simple lack of focus or a distracted restlessness, but when willful, it was criticized as intellect run amok without the control of reason. Writing mid-fifth c., Macrobius suggests "hidden causes (*arcanas causas*), which a few men, by careful inquiry (*curiositas*) are able to grasp" (Macrobius 2011, p. 133).[7] For most philosophers and theologians during this time frame, the post-descent yet still connected-to-its-origins, ergo restless, soul trapped in body should remain focused on divinely oriented intellectual matters (the good curiosity) so as to not get distracted by worldly interests or passions (the bad curiosity).

## 3. Early Modern Adaptations

Early modern humanists inherited that long-term moral baggage through Augustine and others, but they also gained access to the original Greek texts, some of which presented curiosity as an intellectual drive directed toward ultimate self-realization. Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) translated into Latin for the first time all the works of Plato and the Neoplatonists, as well as Hermetic author Hermes Trismegistus. Reading those authors in concert with Christian writings, Ficino identified a *pia philosophia* that he considered the primordial juncture between philosophy and religious belief. For the Italian philosopher, restoring that original confluence was key to resolving man's perennial questions on essence and existence, that is, it was the means with which to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. There are a number of texts in which Ficino speaks to the negative side of the trait, but he also insists that for a true philosopher, it is vital. In his *Three Books on Life (De vita*), the Italian philosopher attacks the detractors who accuse him of heresy as "intellectual busybodies (*curiosis ingeniis*)", while defending the inherent worth of his own intellectual curiosity (Ficino 2002, I.55). In Ficino's commentary to Plato's *Republic* we read that "just as the people are eager and curious to perceive these lower objects of the senses, so the mind of the philosopher is equally inclined and keen to discover the ideal principles of all these things and [he] is a shrewd hunter of truth itself" (Ficino 2009, p. 24).[8] In this place, Ficino is glossing *Republic* Book V, where Plato says that the philosopher "is a lover of truth" who diligently seeks it. This is the appropriate curiosity of Macrobius, seeking "*arcanas causas*", or in Ficino's words, "*ideales rationes*". There are caveats, and the Italian philosopher questions: "will curiosity [alone] make a philosopher?" only to answer that those who simply gorge themselves on every sight and sound are merely "an

imitation" (Ficino 2009, p. 24). In sum, we can appreciate in Ficino's own words, as well as in his readings of Plato and the Neoplatonists, the persistence of curiosity's dual aspects. Still risky or dispreciable in some instances, it is nonetheless an acceptable quality for the true philosopher. A lover of wisdom will direct his or her soul to hunt for its own "arcane causes" and "ideal reasonings" that is, its original, ideal principle. The message, as heard and amplified by later 16th c. thinkers, was that curiosity was fine if focused.

Early modern Spaniards welcomed with open arms the messages conveyed in these newly translated ancient and classical texts.[9] Specifically on the sources of the two curiosity stories referenced above, we know that the Hermetic writings underpin the 16th c.'s celebrated Spanish mysticism,[10] and Spain's writers also speak of Plotinus in glowing terms. Dominican theologian Fray Luis de Granada praises the "great philosopher named Plotinus" who achieved union with God by separating himself from all earthly concerns (Granada [1554] 1994, p. 137).[11] Poet and literary critic Fernando de Herrera makes use of the Greek philosopher's authority on the geometry of self-fashioning and control: "as Plotinus says, as soon as we concentrate our thought on one thing, it is expected that all the other senses will move into common sense, in which thought is formed, just as radii move from circumference to center" (Herrera 1966, p. 313).[12] Augustinian Pedro Malón de Chaide uses Plotinus to explicate Plato: "The ideas, says Plotinus, the infinite and ineffable forces of divine Wisdom, immense and fertile sources, first forms, concur in the divinity, that is, they are one thing with God" (Malón de Chaide 1959, 3.89). Lexicographer Sebastián de Covarrubias defines 'Manes' or men's souls that have left their bodies by, in part, noting what Augustine says in reference to what Plotinus had said: "that the souls of men are called daemones, and if they are good they are converted into Lares but if bad, into Lemurs or Larvae" (Covarrubias Orozco 1994, "Manes"). Certain echoes of Plotinian thought in Spanish letters have been highlighted: per Elias Rivers, Francisco de Aldana's "Otavas en toscano" mirror the silent, motionless communion between God and the angels that is a concept of fundamental importance in the Plotinian scale of hypostases (Rivers 1953, p. 168), and Hugues Didier studied the impact of the Greek philosopher's thought on the writings of Jesuit polymath Juan Nieremberg. Aurora Egido points to Plotinus as one important factor among many influential in the writings of Baltasar Gracián. Given that both Nieremberg and Gracián were members of the Jesuit Order, it is noteworthy that deluxe editions of Ficino's translation of Plotinus were housed in more than one Jesuit College or professed house, that is, places of retreat and learning.[13]

In short, the Plotinian and Hermetic texts were readily available to and popular with early modern Spanish thinkers, whose artistic environment encouraged creative experimentation with those concepts, forms and meanings. Spanish authors challenged and altered in surprising ways the earlier Neoplatonic aesthetic, pushing it in a direction that would lead to later 18th c. modern aesthetics.[14] This changed artistic impetus included new praise for intellectual curiosity, and dictionaries from 1490 (Palencia 1967) through 1611 (Sebastián de Covarrubias) defined the word in positive terms.[15] In Spanish writings throughout the sixteenth century, curiosity is frequently used in a positive light: Arce de Otálora praises Quintilian for his curiosity; Cabrera de Córdoba offers the adjective to denote something attractive to the eyes without any Augustinian condemnation; Antonio de Guevara praises curious historians who saved ancient histories; and Bartolomé de las Casas offers an interesting dichotomy between the "curious philosopher and the devout Christian", each of whom might travel to the Indies for a different reason: the philosopher to enjoy its beauty and marvels, and the Christian to attribute that beauty to God's design for the world (Casas 1992, I.323).

Within that modernizing trajectory, the metaphysical curiosity stories referenced above were reworked in creative verse by San Juan de la Cruz, and in prose by Baltasar Gracián. I'll begin with the former.

## 4. Restless Nature I: Hermes Trismegistus and San Juan de la Cruz

San Juan de la Cruz's *Cántico espiritual* consists of two hundred verses composed in the stanza form known as'lyre'. Following Garcilaso de la Vega's early 16th c. first use in the Spanish language of this Horatian-derived mix of hendecasyllable and septisyllable lines, the form became a favorite for Spanish poets. In the *Cántico*, it is used to describe a searching journey through nature, with the mix of shorter (seven-syllable) and longer (eleven-syllable) verses adding a dramatic, rhythmic unevenness to complement the passionate search that structures the poem. The poetic voice is stylized as a female, logically read to indicate that the speaker represents the poet's soul,[16] which narrates its own restless journey through nature seeking hidden signs of its lover's self and beauty. This is the acceptable curiosity, soul searching for its origin, a goal clearly invoked in the first verses: "Where have you hidden yourself,/Lover, and left me weeping?" (Juan de la Cruz 2000, ll.1–2). Seeking traces left in flowers, fields and waters, the poet races through the natural world demanding relief for his own restless curiosity, to be satisfied only when that Lover reveals himself for a euphoric if threatening end: "Reveal yourself/and let the sight and beauty of you kill me" (ll.51–52). Certain places in the natural world resonate with imagery of the Hermetic curiosity story as they offer hope of rediscovery: "Oh crystalline waters/if you would only, in your silvery semblances/suddenly form/the desired eyes/ drawn and borne inside myself" (ll.56–60). In inverse fashion, those verses echo the descent by the son of Mens in the Hermetic text: he saw himself reflected in earth's waters, and so descended to merge with her. The poet searches out that fallen son of God, who he quite obviously believes is literally inhabiting the surrounding nature: "My Lover the mountains,/the solitary, sylvan hills,/the strange regions,/the singing rivers,/the whistle of the loving winds" (ll.66–70). The poet's soul conjures with "sweet lyre/ and siren song" those elements of nature, then finally enters into the garden in which it will find refuge, to rest there in the "sweet arms" of its loved one (ll.101–2; 110).

San Juan de la Cruz tells us that Mother Nature was wounded by the descent of a Lover who can now be released by the poetic voice. Nature will provide solace by giving its breast to the wandering, desperate soul in order to teach it "a most scrumptious science" (Juan de la Cruz 2000, l.132). When it does so, and just as it had when descending to merge with nature's waters, the Lover leaves the poet's wandering soul covered in "grace and beauty" (l.165). San Juan's verses describe an attempt to invert the son of *Mens*' descent in the Hermetic text, and the overriding message of the poem is clear: the Lover is nature. This rather obvious deduction has presented a raft of difficulties for Christian readers, who may allow that their God graces nature with his beauty in an ephemeral sense, but cannot accept that he is nature. This suggestion is especially fraught in Spanish, a language in which this last supposition crosses the line into heretical pantheistic thought. God may be temporarily in, but he may not be, nature. An English reader does not differentiate lexically between being as essence and existence, using the same verb 'to be' for both. A Spanish speaker, however, chooses between two verbs, *ser* and *estar*, with the former indicating essence and the latter, existence, a temporary status. For Christians, God may be (*estar*) in nature, but he is not (*ser*) nature.

On that same theologically thorny basis, alongside the risky suggestion of pantheistic pitfall regarding divine essence, one very small detail in the poem has pestered scholars for centuries. In the last verse of the fifth stanza, we read "he left them dressed in his beauty" (Juan de la Cruz 2000, l.25). The Lover sought by the wandering poetic soul left the parts

of nature (woods, streams, mountains, etc.) dressed as himself. He descended to merge with nature, ergo his beauty now is the natural world. Struggling mightily to explain the possessive adjective 'his', editors, for the most part, avoid the issue by deleting it. Calling the adjective a probable scribal insertion, the issue is reduced to a simple syllable-counting concern: if one deletes the possessive and aspirates the 'h' of the word beauty (*hermosura*), all is resolved. Some unidentified silly scribe must have failed to notice that, and so resolved a putative metrical irregularity by inserting the possessive. That series of conjectures and deductions is unnecessary, however, as San Juan de la Cruz fairly obviously included the adjective because that is just how the Hermetic curiosity story reads: the Lover, son of the divinity, joined with nature, thusly clothing it in his beauty. A determination to erase the evidence of that story obscures one very obvious truth: early modern Christianity was different from that practiced in later centuries. An ideology riddled with Neoplatonic and Hermetic thought, the *pia philosophia* envisaged by Ficino was celebrated by Christian thinkers in the following 16th c., during which San Juan wrote his *Cántico*. Further, that story of curiosity leading to the descent of the son of *Mens* is very similar, albeit with one key difference to the one told by Christians for their own son of God, who likewise descended to become one with human nature. In the Biblical version, God sent his son to earth to save mankind. In the Hermetic text, that son's own curiosity and creativity were the driving forces behind his descent. San Juan de la Cruz chose that latter version, activating those same qualities in himself so as to reverse the process and reunite with the divinity embedded in nature. Curiosity served as a stimulus for his art.

## 5. Restless Nature II: Plotinus and Baltasar Gracián

A more radical take on the old curiosity stories is that proposed by the Spanish Jesuit Baltasar Gracián in his highly regarded philosophical novel titled *Criticón*, published in three parts in 1651, 1653 and 1657. By the time of that publication, the Spanish Jesuit was already a cause célèbre for his 1642 *Sharp Wit and the Art of Ingeniousness*, a book in which he codifies the underlying principles of metaphor and brilliant conceptual expression. Gracián's *Sharp Wit*. . . has been read as a theory of language, a neo-rhetorical treatise and a style manual, either praised as a "code book to poetic intellectualism" (Díaz Plaja 1949–1958, 3.710),[17] or insulted as a "code book to bad literary taste" (Pérez Lasheras 2001, p. 72).[18] For my purposes here, it is noteworthy that the Spanish author's basic proposals regarding the underlying structures of man's creative language in *Sharp Wit*. . . parallel what Stephen Gersh calls the analogical deep structures of Plotinus and Ficino on ratio, proportion, concord in discord and harmonics as the foundation of reality and its creation (Gersh 2017, pp. xxi–xxviii). A few quotations exemplify those same factors in Gracián's text: "If perception of wit is credited to the eagle, producing such wit is engaging with the angels: the job of cherubins and the elevation of men who take being to the original hierarchy" (Gracián 1993, p. 316).[19] That is, man can become like the angels and transcend this world; language is his weapon and wit, its most exalted expression. Like Plotinus, Gracián details consonant actions for sight, sound and intellect: "proportion among parts of the visible is beauty, among sounds, consonance and for intellect, it is concept/conceit" (p. 316), and he elaborates on how those factors come together: "The conceptual artifice consists of a skillful concordance, in a harmonic correlation between extreme knowables, expressed through an act of intellect" (p. 320). The perfection of such subtle concord is complex: "There is pure wit, which only offers one species of conceit, whether this be through fainting and parrying, or via proportion; and there is mixed wit, the monster of conceptual thought, because it combines two or three species of subtleties, with their perfections mixed and their essences speaking to one other" (p. 325).

Words, for Gracián, are alive and powerful as manifestations of human intellectual prowess in the creation of structural linguistic harmonics. The Spanish Jesuit uses the terminology of Ficino and Plotinus, but where they employed ratio, proportion and harmony to interpret how God creates reality, Gracián shifts attention to the mechanics of the human brain as it creates in language. That change in focus, purpose and power center underscores a new confidence in human agency. Through language, man can uncover "the secret relations hidden in the Universe of things" (Soto Rivera 2006, p. 71). The ancient image of the poet as an interpreter of the divine mind has been fortified but redirected in a secular fashion: the wordsmith's powers now proceed from human rather than divine source.[20] Further, this human writer creating in words not only understands but also directs the metaphysical universe he inhabits.

In the first part of his novel *Criticón,* published nine years after *Sharp Wit*, Gracián fashions just such a world in letters as an exploration of the four ages or seasons of man. He focuses specifically on knowledge: what it is, what it means to have it, and the rights and responsibilities associated with its possession. In his Prologue "To a Reader (*A quien leyere*)", the author tells us that human life can be divided into three component stages: nature, art and moral lesson. Given that the first few chapters (*crisis*) of the novel will be my focus in what follows, I am looking at the author's exploration of man's nature, prior to any art with which he might perfect or ruin that nature.[21] The focus of these sections is what man is in the first instance, his essence, his intellect and his entry into the world.[22] It is here, as well, that Gracián rewrites the Plotinian curiosity story.

*El Criticón* opens with an old man, shipwrecked and drowning as he tries to reach the shores of an island called Santa Elena. He is described by the narrative voice as "midway between life and death (*equívoco entre la muerte y la vida*)". That phrasing and imagery echo Plotinus, who describes the nature of the soul as "amphibious, compelled to live by turns the life there [above], and the life here [below]" (Plotinus 1967, 4.8.4, pp. 34–35). For Spaniards of the time, the named place (Santa Elena), in which Gracián's story is set, was also an amphibious, mid-way point between old and new worlds. Discovered in 1502 by Portuguese sailor João da Nova, the island served as a cargo port for over a century, remaining uninhabited until 1657, that is, six years after the publication of the first part of *Criticón*. In the novel, the drowning man Critilo is rescued by Andrenio, who is described as an angel in both looks and deeds. Andrenio has had no prior contact whatsoever with human beings; he is untainted by experience. Critilo tries to thank his savior, only to realize that Andrenio speaks no language. So, the rescued man takes it upon himself to teach his rescuer to speak, after which they share histories and a journey in search of immortality.[23] Throughout the novel, Critilo guides Andrenio through two phases of intellectual development: the discursive or dianoetic, and the interior or noetic. Critilo teaches Andrenio how to survive in the world of men, challenging him to see beyond worldly deceit and to find its hidden truths. Finally, the two characters arrive at the Island of Immortality with its, again with a Plotinian echo, Mansion of Eternity.

Andrenio learns Critilo's language quickly due to, as the narrator tells us, his "curiosity to know truths" (Gracián 2009, p. 69). Once equipped to narrate his origins, Andrenio tells Critilo that he was raised by wolves, in a cave, high up on a cliff.[24] His young brother wolves learned to navigate the cliffside, but he physically could not. He was intellect in human body, trapped in the environment of beasts. Andrenio employs multiple Platonic images in his first discourse, including a reference to the "accursed cave" (p. 71) in which he was raised with wolf pups and in which he had neither exterior nor interior light.[25] One day he felt an urge to know, a "thirst for knowledge" that he describes as "such a great blow of light and awareness that, thinking about myself I began to recognize myself and to pursue all sorts of reflection on my own being" (p. 71).[26] Here, Andrenio in the

Platonic cave begins to practice Plotinian self-reflection. First, his curiosity causes him to distinguish between himself and the wolves. Then, his "observation and curiosity" (p. 72) lead him to listen to the world and to "imagine" the parts he could not see from the cave.[27] His efforts include the very Plotinian act of splitting himself in two: "I argued with myself at times to see if, pushed, I could exceed myself; *I duplicated myself*. . . to see if, divorced from my ignorance I might attain the realization of my desires" (p. 70, my emphasis).[28] This self-reflection and self-duplication is just what Plotinus advises. In *Ennead* 5.3, we read that the man who knows himself is double, one knowing the nature of the reasoning, which belongs to the soul, and one up above this man, who knows himself according to Intellect because he has become that Intellect; and by that Intellect he thinks himself again, not any longer as man, but having become altogether other and snatching himself up into the higher world, drawing up only the better part of soul, which alone is able to be winged for intellection (Plotinus 1967, 5.3.4, p. 83).

For Plotinus, the initial illumination "turns the soul back on itself" so that intellect "will duplicate itself" (Plotinus 1967); Gracián describes the exact same process for Andrenio: a "great blow of light and awareness", then self-reflection and self-duplication (Gracián 2009, p. 71). Apart from Gracián, no other Spanish author references this act or even uses the word *duplicarse* in a related fashion. The Spanish author's most obvious source is plainly Plotinus, recognized as the first philosopher "to have clearly distinguished the concepts of soul. . . and ego" (E.R. Dodds, cited in O'Daly 1973, p. 4). In order to follow the Delphic commandment "know thyself", Plotinus split himself in two: "the knower must objectify the self, and in so doing, duplicate the self in the very act of knowing it" (Torchia 2013, p. 41). For the Greek philosopher, as for Andrenio in Gracián's novel, that self-knowledge was "the necessary prelude to philosophy" (O'Daly 1973, p. 19).

For Plotinus, soul in body is "in a state of alienation" from itself and there are two ways for it to investigate its power and nature, its divinity (Plotinus 1967, 5.1.1–2). The first is to duplicate itself so as to grasp itself "as the expressed thought of Intellect" (5.1.3), precisely as Andrenio did in the cave. The second route to knowledge is through rational thought in a historical process, i.e., philosophy in time (O'Daly 1973, p. 18). In Gracián's novel, Andrenio splits himself in two for his first realizations, prior to his rescue of Critilo. Post-rescue, amphibious soul Critilo leads Andrenio through an enactment of the second model for intellectual self-fulfillment. In short, Gracián personifies Plotinus' restless nature in Andrenio. The character self-duplicates so as to self-reflect: restless and miserable in the cave, he found refuge in dreams of what might lay outside that darkness. One night his world [the cave] was jolted by an earthquake. In that moment Andrenio felt himself being pulled apart, he was lost to himself, and the experience, he says, was "an eclipse of his soul" and a "deadly ecstasy or rapture (*deliquio*)" at the same time (Gracián 2009, p. 76). His "painful jail" was broken open and he was "born again" (p. 76). This restless nature descended and was thrust into human time. Andrenio relates that he was stunned, between "curiosity and happiness", at the sight of "this great theater of earth and sky" and specifically at the sun, a "monarch of light" that he instinctively adored (p. 78). As Plato says of Socrates, Andrenio stood still for a full day, admiring and watching the sun, innately aware that contemplation of this visible, corporeal sun might lead to knowledge of divine, incorporeal intellect. All of this preceded Andrenio's rescue of the drowning, amphibious Critilo.

*Criticón* is most commonly read for its moral lessons, with old man Critilo teaching youth Andrenio how to "become a person (*hacerse persona*)" by rejecting the risky pitfalls of human existence. In this view, wisdom and experience act as a guide for the innocent. For example, on realizing that Andrenio knows no language, Critilo highlights the need for it as a means to elevate thought. This argument, although inconsistent with Plotinian belief

regarding language as only necessary for our terrestrial life (Robertson 2008, p. 65),[29] is nonetheless clearly reflected in the specific details of Andrenio's story. The character did not need language to begin his self-reflection; pre-language, in the cave, he duplicated himself so as to know himself. In this sense, an alternative reading of Gracián's novel might see Critilo as evidence of the corrupt influence that life on earth, life in time, with language, has for a fallen angel, that restless nature descended into the chaos of chronological existence. He is, after all, himself, amphibious, drowning and in need of rescue. The younger man, Andrenio, is an angel who will only need speech because he is in the company of the older, earthly man. In the cave, he had already been born again, without language, through intellect. Taking Plotinus's recommendations, those earlier steps prepared the character Andrenio for philosophy as a way of life. With language, Critilo leads him through the next steps.

Thus, we can read Andrenio as an intuitive intellect, duplicating himself to know himself prior to the fall. Only after that does he meet Critilo, who will lead him through the Plotinian possibilities for dialectic and then noetic self-knowledge through ratiocination, through the philosophy of and by an embodied soul. For Plotinus, the Soul bears Intellect, an idea matched here in Gracián's novel with Critilo-Soul bearing Andrenio-Intellect through multiple life lessons until they arrive at the Mansion of Eternity. Taking the imagery one step further, rather than see the two characters as separate co-protagonists, Gracián may have been playing with a recreation of the Neoplatonic–Hermetic androgyne. If so, the Spanish Jesuit did so through curiosity that first creates and then serves as a means to reverse humankind's fall. In other words, precisely what St. Augustine condemned. Gracián personifies in Andrenio the fall of the soul from a mountaintop cave to earth, along with the cyclical result of that temporalization: man's need to learn everything, over and over and over again. In short, curiosity is humankind's curse but also its salvation. Whereas San Juan de la Cruz sought to release the Hermetic first son, the divinity in nature, Gracián seeks to reverse the Plotinian fall that created our chronological chaos. Without that rescue, man is doomed to discord:

(Critilo to Andrenio): "this universe is composed of contraries and makes concord out of discord… There is no thing that does not have its opposite, with which it fights, sometimes winning, sometimes giving up… But more than this, within the same man, within the doors of his own physical body, this discord is even more pitched [in battle]".

(Andrenio): "What are you saying, man against himself?"

(Critilo): "Yes, given that what he has as a world, even if it be a small one [the recognized trope of man as microcosm], he is fully composed of discord" (Gracián 2009, pp. 91–92).

The dual and dueling aspects of curiosity are, in *Criticón*, embodied in man. A creature of time, he both creates it and fights against it.

## 6. Literary Dramatization as Philosophy

Gracián's works have been studied for their reflection of philosophical trends popular in the Spanish 16th c.: Neostoicism (Aurora Egido), Scholasticism (Alban Forcione), and the resonance of Nicholas de Cusa (Alexander Parker). The connection to Plotinus, although recognized in general, has not yet been highlighted for its multiple specific details. One principal difficulty is that, in *Criticón,* Gracián, like other Spanish authors of his time, dramatizes his concerns rather than presenting analytical thought in essay or dialogue form. He explores the Plotinian ideas on curiosity and time in a new genre, the one we now call the novel, a form that was not so identified in his day. For Gracián and his contemporaries, long-form creative writings in prose mixed philosophy and invention. They were called "poetry in prose" or "poetic prose", phrasings that signify an as-yet unnamed and amorphous

mix of history and poetry, fact and fiction. These works are a place of experimentation in creative letters, avenues for Spaniards to dramatize their philosophy on life, letters and art. From the last third of the 16th c. and moving forward, Spanish writers would realize in literary works what earlier thinkers had posited in analytical terms. Dialogues were incorporated into expanded settings that make the conversations a part of everyday existence. Prose was exploratory, inevitably poetic and philosophical.

This poetic (in prose) attitude toward self, cosmos and nature was driven by a Ficinian, Plotinian, Neoplatonic type of intellectual curiosity, the positive *curiositas* earlier thinkers described as that of the true philosopher. Spanish authors use those same questions as a springboard for creative poetics. San Juan de la Cruz modernized the Hermetic curiosity story in a paradoxical fashion by Biblicizing it, offering an enigmatic echo of the *Song of Songs* as the means to recover the primordial lover of hermetic myth. Gracián, a Jesuit whose religious order warned against curiosity as a means to inquire into the doings of others, nonetheless explored in prose the metaphysical foundations of man's nature as curious, creative intellect. In *Criticón* we have a novelesque recreation of the underlying structural metaphysics of *Ennead* 3.7, *On Eternity and Time*. Speculative *curiositas* underlies many 16th c. Spanish literary creations, in verse as well as in prose. In this sense, curiosity begat modernity.

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## Notes

1. This tractate of the *Corpus Hermeticum* circulated widely in early modern Spain (Byrne 2007). Jan Assmann describes criticism of curiosity in other Hermetic fragments (Assmann 2005, pp. 39–40).
2. A Greek–English dictionary today casts PERIERGIA [περιεργία] in an obsessive light, calling it "futility, needless questioning, over-exactness" and lends a socially-intrusive aspect to POLUPRAGMON [πολυπράγμων], used for one who is "busy about many things, meddlesome, officious, a busybody" (*Liddell Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon* 1940).
3. The Latin root for the word incorporated the sense of care or solicitude, along with trouble or pains taken. See Lewis and Short (1879) under *cura, ae*.
4. Lewis and Short call this use by Cicero "very rare".
5. See Pei He; Assmann. Assmann posits the attitudes of the Egyptians toward the Greeks as one source of the negative slant on curiosity, using *The Goldan Ass*, in which curiosity is the protagonist's sin, to illustrate (He 2023).
6. See Joseph Torchia, who reviews the history and use of the term *curiositas* prior to, then as foundational for, Saint Augustine's depiction of curiosity as "one of the primal vices with his appropriation of the fall motif... from Neoplatonism, along with Plotinus' theory of the motives for the soul's gravitation toward temporality" (Torchia 2013, pp. 21, 27–35).
7. "sed esse arcanas causas ad quas paucorum potuit pervenire curiositas" (Macrobius 2011, p. 132).
8. "Principio quantam plebei circa percipienda sensibilia haec inferiora auidi curiosique sunt, tantum ingenium philosophicym ad inueniendas ideales horum omnium rationes, auidum & propensum est, & sagax ipsius veri venator" (Ficino 1557, p. 398).
9. Many scholars have spoken of individual authors and texts that reflect Neoplatonic concerns. For details on the resonance of Ficino's translations in Spain, see Byrne (2015).
10. For more information on Hermetic writings that underpin the 16th c.'s celebrated Spanish mysticism see Byrne (2007).
11. Senabre has noted the influence of Fray Luis de Granada in Gracián (Pérez Lasheras 2001, p. 76). Unless otherwise noted, here and in what follows, all translations from Spanish are my own.
12. The note (H-62) accompanies Herrera's commentary on Garcilaso's Sonnet VIII. The poetic works with commentary were published in 1580.

13 Two of those deluxe editions are held today in the Biblioteca Histórica Marqués de Valdecilla (BH INC I-256; BH INC FL-20). The latter was at one point held by the Library of the Society of Jesus at Alcalá de Henares, and the former, at the Madrid *Casa Profesa* of the Company of Jesus.

14 For more information on defining the word in positive terms see Byrne (2025).

15 From the same time frame in English letters, Oxford attributes the first use of the phrase, "curiosity killed the cat", with "care" used instead of "curiosity", to English playwright Ben Jonson in 1598.

16 Grammatical gender in Spanish labels soul (*alma*) as female.

17 Pérez Lasheras points out that *Sharp Wit*. . . has "no precedent" in prior Spanish tradition and is proposed by Gracián as a "new science" (Pérez Lasheras 2001, p. 77). The work has been studied for parallels to the thought of contemporaneous Italian authors Tesauro and Peregrini (Croce, Senabre, Mercedes Blanco). Avilés highlights Gracián's combination of image, word and mental construct (Avilés 1998, pp. 236–37).

18 Pérez Lasheras attributes the "bad taste" phrasing to Menéndez Pelayo. The Enlightenment would reject the Spanish Baroque's elaborate conceits. See Javier Patiño Loira (2024).

19 The adjective used by Gracián with hierarchy is *extravagante*, read in the early modern period as rare, disorderly or extraordinary. Moliner notes "original" as an old translation, which fits best in this circumstance.

20 This innovative distinction in creative worth and impact was first fully realized in the writings of Miguel de Cervantes, who wrote midway between San Juan de la Cruz and Gracián (Byrne 2025). Gracián's use of conceit is similar, it has been said, to the English metaphysical poets of his day.

21 In lieu of 'chapter' Gracián titles each new section of the novel a '*crisi*', using the Greek word for "critique or judgment".

22 Egido has studied the parallels between these sections and the various "misery of man" and/or "dignity of man" works of earlier historical periods (Egido 2009). She notes that the first crisis represents the "descent from celestial to terrestrial" environs (CCV). Maravall reads Andrenio and Critilo in the contemporary Baroque tradition of representations of a new Adam figure.

23 For the importance of immortality in Gracián's writings, see Vivalda, who notes that in his approach to the concept of fame through writing and demonstration of public virtues, Gracián is more like Miguel de Cervantes than his fellow Jesuits with their proverbial insistence on humility and denial of personal exaltation, while also a throwback to earlier writers like Juan Luis Vives, who stressed the continued existence of soul in the afterlife as the only consideration on immortality (Vivalda 2011, p. 208). See also Aurora Egido (2001, 2014).

24 Egido has noted the resonance of the Platonic cave as the starting place for Andrenio in the first crisi, and the image of the world as a great theater in the second, resonant of Hebreo, Pythagoras and Hermes Trismegistus (Egido 1986, pp. 47–48). I want to add Plotinus to this mix.

25 "infausta caverna" (Gracián 2009, p. 71). In 1959, Maravall wrote about the Platonic imagery of the cave used in these scenes by Gracián in relation to the Spanish author's presentation of Andrenio as a new Adam (Maravall [1958] 2001, p. 340). Egido has also highlighted the same imagery in these chapters, as well as its resonance in Calderón's *La vida es sueño* (Gracián 2009, p. CLXXIV). Both scholars focus on Andrenio's liberation from the cave; his interior transcendence within it, before the jolt of the earthquake, is the first phase of a two-part process, as I see it.

26 "ímpetu de conocimiento"; "un tan grande golpe de luz y de advertencia, que revolviendo sobre mí comencé a reconocerme haziendo una y otra reflexión sobre mi proprio ser" (Gracián 2009, p. 71). For Maravall, with this self-reflection by character Andrenio, Gracián anticipates rationalism with knowledge of the external world coming through knowledge of self (Maravall [1958] 2001, pp. 318–19). I would also note the tie-in to the Socratic know thyself and to Plotinus, who described and enacted the process. For the resonance of the Delphic commandment in treatises earlier than, and subsequent to Plotinus, see O'Daly (1973, pp. 11–19).

27 "observación y curiosidad" (Gracián 2009, p. 72). The strong link between curiosity and imagination for Italian humanists has been studied, with "imaginative curiosity. . . [in Petrarch and Politian]. . . having an intrinsic connection to narrative" (Capodivacca 2007, p. 1).

28 "Argüíame tal vez para ver si empeñado me excedería a mí mismo; *duplicábame...* por ver si apartado de mi ignorancia podría dar alcance a mis deseos" (Gracián 2009, p. 70).

29 "donde no media el artificio, toda se pervierte la naturaleza"; "es el hablar efecto grande de la racionalidad" (Gracián 2009, p. 68). For Plotinus, Soul bears Intellect, and language is "a case of the general intelligibility of everything governed by Soul" (Robertson 2008, p. 64). In his conception of language, says Robertson, Plotinus is different than those before: "language is not relevant to our 'higher' life. Language is an achievement of human nature in a rather low sense. . . terrestrial life. By comparison, contemplation is the proper function of the soul" (Robertson 2008, p. 65).

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# Curiosity and Artifice in Juan Eusebio Nieremberg's Natural Philosophy

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**Abstract:** I examine the strategies through which Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, a professor at Madrid's Jesuit Reales Estudios, promoted the role of curiosity in natural philosophy. I argue that Nieremberg responded to anti-curiosity criticism by restating how the two primary meanings of "curiosity" in early modern sources, "intellectual desire" and "diligence"/"care", should relate to one another. By analyzing a set of works published in both Spanish and Latin between 1629 and 1635, I demonstrate that Nieremberg advocated a form of "curiosity" (in the sense of longing for knowledge) focused on what he called "nature's artifice", which constituted a specific facet of God's "curiosity" (in the sense of attention or care in creation). In 1633, Nieremberg claimed that nature is nowhere more deserving of wonder than when it imitates art, actively challenging the way we understand the art–nature divide. I show that, by contrasting a superficial or external approach to nature with one that penetrates it in search of what is "artificial" about it, Nieremberg's efforts at defining a virtuous and legitimate form of natural-philosophical curiosity involved re-negotiating the boundaries between natural philosophy and more ambivalent competing realms, such as aesthetics, rhetoric, and the occult sciences.

**Keywords:** curiosity; artifice; nature; natural philosophy; early modern science; Jesuits; Juan Eusebio Nieremberg; nature and artifice

## 1. Introduction

The news traveled fast from Madrid's gossip hubs, or *mentideros*, to the pulpit and the lectern. The twins Lazzaro and Giovanni Battista Colloredo, born in Genoa in 1617, were then on tour in the city. The body of Giovanni Battista protruded from the stomach of Lazzaro, who alone was able to move and perform normal bodily functions.[1] Soon the pressure mounted for Juan Eusebio Nieremberg (1595–1658). Fascinated by zoophytes, which were simultaneously animal and plant, and, more generally, by any creature that challenged the boundaries between species and even genera, Nieremberg was expected to cast a verdict on the controversy that had emerged surrounding the Colloredo twins: was this one individual, or rather two? How could one determine where the one began and the other ended? Had religious authorities been merely thorough in choosing to baptize them twice, or were they victims of overzealous ignorance? In other words, was Giovanni Battista Colloredo truly distinct from Lazzaro (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 74r)?

Nieremberg had little doubt that he, a professor of natural history in the Reales Estudios newly instituted by King Philip IV in Madrid and entrusted to the Society of Jesus, was qualified to weigh in on the matter.[2] That was the case for reasons that exceeded any scholarly or academic credentials: wondrous and seemingly inexplicable phenomena ran through his family's blood. "It touches me to the core", he avowed in connection

with nature's ability to produce new and strange phenomena. One day, while pregnant, Nieremberg's grandmother was unable to satisfy her craving for strawberries and scratched her head in frustration. As a consequence, Nieremberg's mother was born with five bumps on her head "in the place where [Nieremberg's grandmother] had laid her hand, of the size, shape, and color of the fruit". Although they were removed every year, they soon grew back (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 79r–v).[3]

Nieremberg knew that knowledge was tied to materiality and place. He recognized that he enjoyed privileged access to the wondrous and rare because he lived at court. Lecturing in 1629, he described Madrid as "so to speak a summary of the kingdom" in which people and commodities arrived from both close and faraway places (Nieremberg 1629, fol. 6v).[4] He found Madrid to be a confusing but stimulating shop, "a theater" that presented the student of nature with a steady stream of new objects and stories communicated through personal contact with scholars, courtiers, and merchants that would be hard to imagine should he conduct research elsewhere.[5] The city was also home to individuals like Juan de Espina, who collected various rarities, artworks, and instruments (Reula Baquero 2019). For Nieremberg, research depended on forms of exchange that were ultimately tied to Madrid's global and imperial reach. After all, one of Nieremberg's aims was to disseminate knowledge about the flora and fauna of New Spain gathered by the physician Francisco Hernández (d. 1587) between 1570 and 1576 on the orders of King Philip II.[6]

Nieremberg's fondness for the wondrous and rare was obvious in the works he published between 1629 and 1635, and which he claimed to be representative of what he taught at the Reales Estudios. They include a public lecture printed as *Prolusión* (Introduction, 1629), the volumes *Curiosa filosofía y tesoro de naturaleza* (Curious Philosophy and Nature's Treasure, 1630) and *Oculta filosofía de la sympatía y antipatía de las cosas. Artificio de naturaleza* (Occult Philosophy of the Sympathy and Antipathy of Things. Nature's Artifice, 1633), and a treatise in Latin, *Historia Naturae, maxime Peregrinae* (A History of Nature, Especially of the Rare or Exotic, 1635).[7]

The question of the Colloredo twins was fairly representative of the problems that natural philosophy claimed to have the tools to solve. Nieremberg explained: "I was asked to satisfy the scruples of some and everyone's curiosity, which I shall now try to accomplish" (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 74r).[8] Nieremberg's first task was to appease specific theological qualms regarding the allocation of the sacrament of baptism. Conversely, satisfying "everyone's curiosity" pointed to a potentially more capacious course of study. Considering the title *Curiosa filosofía* and the prevalence of the terms "curious" and "curiosity" chapter after chapter, it is reasonable to conclude that the task of "satisfying curiosity" was central to Nieremberg's scholarly identity. This is hardly surprising given the Society of Jesus' continual interest in and oversight of the cultivation of curiosity (Castelnau-L'Estoile 1999).

However, as both recent and not-so-recent scholarship have pointed out, in the early modern cultural and scientific landscape, curiosity was marked by a multifaceted and elusive character (Benedict 2002; Blumenberg 1983; Daston 1995; Ginzburg 1976; Kenny 1998; Marr 2006). Curiosity could be a virtue or a vice depending on the situation and could refer to a variety of feelings and characteristics. The title *Curiosa filosofía* itself might seem perplexing: is it a book of philosophy for those who are "curious" or is it about philosophy on topics that are "curious"? As Neil Kenny and others have demonstrated, there was circularity in how Nieremberg's contemporaries used the terms "curiosity" and "curious" (Benedict 2002, pp. 2–4; Kenny 1998, p. 36–37).[9] Curiosity was a feature of the subject as much as of the object; thus, one is "curious" to learn about the kind of objects and phenomena that are also "curious".

In what follows, I delve into a specific but central aspect of Nieremberg's approach to curiosity's intricate web of meanings. I argue that the title *Curious Philosophy* and the subtitle *Artifice of Nature* used in Nieremberg's 1630 and 1633 publications point to a direct but complex link between the notions of "curiosity" and "artifice", one that also involved other keywords found in the titles of Nieremberg's books, such as the references to what is "occult" or "hidden".

## 2. "Curious" and "Curiosity" in Nieremberg's Works on Nature

When vowing to satisfy everyone's curiosity, Nieremberg was referring to a particular form of intellectual desire and eagerness to know. In 1618, Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (first published in 1593), portrayed "curiosity" as a woman wearing a dress ornamented with ears and frogs. The former signified "the desire to hear and learn things told by others"; the latter was a reference to Ancient Egypt, where frogs' eyes, wide open as though always in search for objects to grasp and learn about, symbolized a longing for knowledge (Ripa 1618, pp. 117–18; Benedict 2002, p. 25).[10]

Inspired by Pierio Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* (1556), Ripa's connection between curiosity and frogs was destined to remain obscure. Conversely, the qualities he ascribed to curiosity were commonplace and remained so for at least most of the seventeenth century. For Ripa, curiosity transforms humans into victims of a strong, unruly force that takes hold of them, making them constantly eager to catch a glimpse of anything that hints at novelty (Ripa 1618, pp. 117–18). The connection with "novelty" tainted curiosity with ambivalence by placing it in the neighborhood of dubious and even subversive everyday social and political practices, such as reading and writing newsletters (*gazzette* or *avvisi*), or going to tell and listen to news in the places that in Nieremberg's Madrid received the name of *mentideros* (Dooley 1999; Castro Ibaseta 2010). Ripa himself cast a negative and ominous light on the desire of those who long to know "more than they should" (Ripa 1618, p. 117; see also Ginzburg 1976). For him, curiosity was on the opposite edge of wisdom and was plainly wrong.

However extreme, Ripa's hostility is illustrative of the arguments against curiosity that might have plagued Nieremberg. Even more than as a professor of natural philosophy, Nieremberg became known as the author of best-selling works of religious piety. When writing about nature, he was conscious that the practice of natural philosophy had to confront a traditional, centuries-long mistrust of curiosity that far predated the term's associations with early modern news markets. Nieremberg's awareness that he needed to justify intellectual desire is obvious from the opening of *Historia Naturae*, which summarizes the arguments against curiosity advanced by the theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430). In the intellect's habit of hunting for new objects of learning, Augustine glimpsed the danger of forsaking the love of God in exchange for earthly and, therefore less worthy, matters. Yet, even worse than its obvious and dangerous power to distract humans, was curiosity's indifference to the good and the beautiful. Curiosity was the counterpart to sensory desire, but at least the eye and the ear rejoice only in objects that are inherently pleasant. What can one say of curiosity, which finds delight even in learning about that which is unpleasant, ugly, and bad (Saint Augustine of Hippo 1981, pp. 182–86, §10.34–35; see also Walsh 1988)?

In what follows, I will describe Nieremberg's strategies to advocate a pious and useful approach to natural-philosophical inquiry by drawing on ideas of which Augustine himself might have approved.[11] Nieremberg rehabilitated curiosity by dissociating it from superficiality and novelty for its own sake, and by dissecting curiosity in search of a version of it that might lead to harmony between theology with natural philosophy.

To vindicate curiosity, Nieremberg enlisted the notion of artifice. In order to understand how curiosity and artifice relate to one another in Nieremberg's works, one must first become familiar with the spectrum of meanings associated in those with the noun "curiosity" (*curiosidad*) and the adjective "curious" (*curioso/a*). When applied to natural philosophy, for Nieremberg, curiosity entails longing for the causes of seemingly obscure natural phenomena and processes (Nieremberg 1630, fols. 1v–2v, 54v). Understandably, Nieremberg often introduces himself as being intent on satisfying his reader's "curiosity", as he provides reasoning for phenomena that, in the eyes of lay people, seem to lack explanation (Nieremberg 1630, fols. 73v–74r). In doing so, he is able to appease (*sossegar*) what otherwise feels like an itch or endless wandering of the mind (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 137). In 1599, José Rocamora y Torrano (d. 1612), a member of the Royal Academy of Mathematics (Academia Real Matemática, which was later absorbed by the Reales Estudios where Nieremberg taught), described the certainty afforded by mathematics as a process through which the mind eventually rests and finds peace (Rocamora y Torrano 1599, fol. 4r; also Esteban Piñeiro 2002, p. 14). The language of movement was common in early modern accounts of intellectual activity. As the physician Juan Huarte de San Juan (1529–1588) noted in 1575, Hippocrates described thought as "the soul's promenading" (Huarte de San Juan 1989, p. 345). Curiosity was movement, and the opposite of calm: it launched the mind into a quest for answers.

Managing curiosity was a matter of the utmost importance when defining the relationship between author and reader, as well as that between reader and research topic: it was up to the practitioners of natural philosophy to either quench or elicit the reader's thirst or curiosity about any object or phenomenon. As a collective, interpersonal venture, scholarship impacted the community and the state of learning in noticeable ways. Indeed, while the author's curiosity seeks answers that might satisfy the reader's curiosity, both might occasionally cooperate to further beget curiosity. For example, Nieremberg argued that the publication of the treatise on magnetism included in *Curiosa filosofía* (1630), by coinciding with that of works on the same topic by fellow Jesuits Niccolò Cabeo (*Philosophia magnetica*, 1629) and Cristoforo Borri (preserved only in manuscript, but communicated with Nieremberg while Borri was in Madrid) would "double" curiosity among the public (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 215v).[12] In fact, reading Gilbert's influential *De magnete* (1600) had rendered Nieremberg suddenly "curious [to have] more light and more particular reasons" to explain the lodestone's behavior, insisting "on several experiments" that would lead him to understand it better (Nieremberg 1630, fols. 150v–151r).

In Nieremberg's writing, the meaning of "curious" ranged from a transitory state of mind to a way of approaching knowledge and life in general. Nieremberg called "curious" those who devoted themselves to the study of nature, including the Portuguese naturalist García da Horta and the unnamed "contemplator of nature" who showed Nieremberg a new species of cinnamon when they met in Madrid (Nieremberg 1630, fols. 21v, 29r). The attribution of "curiosity" to these individuals implied a commitment to a serious and thorough investigation of the truth, thus connecting "curiosity" as intellectual desire to curiosity's supposed etymon, the Latin word *cura* or "care" (Kenny 1998, pp. 35–37). For instance, Nieremberg called those who traveled to places in order to ascertain the truth of rumored wonders "curious". These were dedicated scholars, "careful" to know the truth (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 161v). Nieremberg also praised the thoroughness of Giambattista della Porta's and William Gilbert's experiments on the lodestone as "curious", and he applied the same adjective to Cabeo's work (Nieremberg 1630, fols. 117v, 168v, 213v). With the same idea in mind, he remarked that the astronomer Tycho Brahe did not spare "any cost or curiosity" in the research of truth (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 178r).

However, curiosity also sounded some alarms. Consider the eruption of Mount Vesuvius that, as Nieremberg wrote, "killed" Pliny the Elder's curiosity—and Pliny himself, one might add—in 79 CE (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 117r). Although curiosity might be dangerous at times, its absence denoted disrespect for, or at least lack of interest in, nature and God its creator, as Nieremberg claimed about the scholars of earlier periods who gave little attention to magnetism and thus failed to invent the compass (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 124r). Nieremberg subscribed to the idea that curiosity, understood as a thoroughness in research shared by a class of individuals devoted to learning, could be considered a characteristic of the period in which he lived, during which the passion for knowing the truth about nature had reached new and unprecedented levels.[13]

Nieremberg acknowledged that "curiosity" could also refer to a desire to know tangential or superfluous aspects of a problem, with the mind taking (perhaps) too much pleasure as it wanders out of focus (Nieremberg 1630, fols. 64r, 88r, 101v). In fact, if curiosity is linked to attention or care (Latin *cura*), it could become a form of at least partially misdirected or unnecessary care for that which does not deserve it. This might be understood by analogy to what early modern rhetoricians, based on ancient Greco-Roman models, called *κακόζηλον*, a vice that led to ridiculous results because of excessive and fruitless care in curating style.[14] Especially in the plural, Nieremberg often paired "curiosities" with "accidents" and other terms denoting unimportant or unessential components, which were nonetheless useful to bear in mind in case further research on a topic suddenly rendered them pertinent.[15]

In summary, Nieremberg portrayed curiosity as a passion that, at times, could fall short of the virtuous, but was indispensable for its role as a goad to advance knowledge of nature and God, its creator. Aware of conventional, critical views of curiosity inspired by Augustine, Nieremberg articulated a defense of at least certain forms of it—specifically, those that focused on the study of "nature's artifice".

## 3. Curiosity and Artifice

According to the author of best-selling *romanzi* Giovanni Battista Manzini (1599–1664), the artificial "is more sympathetic and agreeable to humans, who are curious by nature, than the natural" (Manzini 1652, pp. 102–3; see also Patiño Loira 2024, pp. 56–73).[16] The statement, contained in a volume of poetic criticism entitled *Delle meteore rettoriche* (1652), is interesting for two reasons. First, Manzini argued that "curiosity" was the characteristic that inclines humans to prefer the artificial over the natural. Second, he claimed, paradoxically, that it is nature that creates humans with a taste for that which is less than natural. Suspecting that the statement would shock a few readers, Manzini rushed to support it with evidence. He cited Plutarch (ca. 45–ca. 120 CE), writing of a boy who, when presented with a piece of bread shaped like a loaf and another in the shape of a dove, immediately picked the latter (Manzini 1652, pp. 102–3). In Plutarch's example, forming dough into a loaf is what occurs by default, "naturally" or automatically, in contrast to carefully fashioning it into a specific, "artificial", or non-obvious shape. Artifice was the result of care (*cura*), which justifies in some way, even if certainly a twisted one, the link between "artifice" and "curiosity": humans are "curious" because they love objects that are also "curious", the products of care.[17]

The link between "artifice" and "curiosity" was not unique to Manzini, nor did it require understanding artifice in terms of shape. Mateo Alemán's (1547–1614) picaresque narrative *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599) described a procession marching through the streets of a city. Near the end, Untruth sat comfortably on top of a triumphal chariot built with "admirable artifice and great curiosity" ("admirable artificio y extrema curiosidad") (Alemán 1987, vol. 1, p. 432). The link between artifice and deceit— after all, Alemán's

description revolved around Untruth's triumphal chariot—became central when Baltasar Gracián rewrote Alemán's allegory in his treatise *Arte de ingenio* (Art of Ingenuity, 1642) and, even more clearly, in its revised and expanded version, *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* (Acuity and Art of Ingenuity, 1648). Gracián's two publications sought to provide a method for the invention of rhetorical conceits, intricate arguments that resorted to a trope in order to arouse wonder in the reader by connecting otherwise unrelated facets of reality. Gracián described rhetorical conceits as instances of "artifice", and he resorted to Alemán's anecdote to justify why humans were no longer satisfied with truth-oriented uses of language. As Matteo Peregrini explained in *Delle acutezze* (1639), truth-oriented statements are "natural", unlike rhetorical conceits, which are "artificial" (Peregrini 1639, pp. 42–43). Spelling out one of the possible meanings of "artifice", Gracián stated that, in order to compete with Untruth, Truth "opted for the use of artifice. Since then, she [. . .] uses roundabout ways, wins through stratagems, paints what is near as if it were far away, [. . .] aims here in order to hit there [. . .] and, through ingenious circumlocution, she always reaches the target" (Gracián 2010, p. 396).[18]

Firmly grounded within the realm of rhetoric, Gracián's interpretation of "artifice" takes us from shape to indirectness. If we use Gracián's lens to read Alemán's juxtaposition of "admirable artifice and great curiosity", curiosity becomes a reference to a kind of "care" that, by going beyond usefulness and functionality, pursues a form of ornamentation that is attractive to the beholder because of the beholder's nature. Alemán's passage allows Gracián to justify using tropes that cater to the intellect of postlapsarian humans, who, unlike the perfect beings placed by God in the garden of Eden, are no longer attracted by truth and need indirect, circuitous forms of speaking. Gracián argues that, in order to compete against Untruth, Truth adopts artifice and, in doing so, takes "Taste" or "Flavor" as the "go-between" or mediator with humans, who no longer appreciate her in a naked, unmediated, or direct manner (Gracián 2010, p. 395).[19]

Nieremberg also employed metaphors of taste and flavor to link artifice and curiosity. What he understood by "artifice" and "curiosity", however, was largely at odds with Plutarch's dove-shaped bread, and was not exactly the same as Gracián's indirect, circuitous ways. Interestingly, Nieremberg's interest in artifice fell almost exclusively on "nature's artifice", a seemingly strange and paradoxical notion that was nonetheless central to his understanding of both nature and the study of nature.

In Nieremberg's view, the Colloredo twins prompted the intellect to consider that there was more in nature than meets the eye. By breaking with the norm, the twins aroused wonder, described as "the flavor of thought and the salt of the intellect, which is greater where ignorance is greater" (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 2r).[20] Nieremberg's psychology, outlined in *Curiosa filosofía,* implied that humans rarely experience any interest in "a vulgar truth". They have a taste for far-fetched explanations and news, which they usually seek in lies and fiction. If natural philosophy wants to arouse "curiosity" in humans and keep them away from reading romances and novels, it needs to present them with a view of nature that also focuses on what is rare and far-fetched. Just as Gracián's poets and orators use rhetorical conceits because they know that humans only pay attention to artifice, God has created nature "artificially", in a way that caters to the desire that humans feel for novelty in order to stir in them a process of thought and wonder.

Despite God's intentions, however, humans often settle for lesser forms of enjoyment and miss the point about God's art. With Augustine's criticism in mind, Nieremberg established a distinction between more and less legitimate objects of curiosity in nature. He advocated for training one's taste or *gusto* in order to direct the intellect toward knowledge of "the excellence of things" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 113r). In the study of nature, only its artifice is a worthy and appropriate object of "curiosity". The twins Lazzaro and Giovanni

Battista Colloredo deserved to become a topic of investigation not because they were evidence of nature's ability to produce variety, but rather because, under the appearance of a mistake, they provided the intellect with a path to investigate God's underlying plan, which natural philosophy discovers by peering into the correspondences that comprise "nature's artifice" (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 73v).

What exactly is "nature's artifice", however, and how is it both similar to and different from what Manzini, Alemán, and Gracián implied by "artifice"? Nieremberg's comparison between human and divine art—that is, between artworks and nature—is extensive. He argues that, when presented with excellent and skillful artworks, some people only pay attention to color, size, variety, or precious materials. Only a few "appreciate, and even recognize art's excellence and fantasy" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 113r–v).[21] Art's excellence is elusive and escapes all but those who know where to look for it. When the painter Apelles of Kos shared works with the populace, some praised the colors, others the portrayal of dress, shoes, and "whatever appeared most conspicuous". Those with knowledge of the art, however, looked at less obvious marks of talent, such as "some vivid gesture" or "the expression of feelings" (Nieremberg 1635, pp. 14–15).[22] Only education and training enable people to appreciate both human and divine art. Natural philosophy has the task and the tools to teach humans how to apply their senses and their intellect to nature. Nieremberg, like Manzini decades later, believed that humans are naturally "curious", and consider objects "curious" whenever they see them as "artful" or "artificial". However, only the learned know what constitutes evidence of art in the case of nature. Only curiosity directed to divine art rightly understood becomes a legitimate pursuit.

Nature's artifice was the object of Nieremberg's *Curiosa filosofía* and, more explicitly, of *Oculta filosofía*, a work in which the author clarified what he meant by "nature's artifice" through a distinction between a superficial, exterior appreciation of nature and one that looks "inside" it:

> Although the contemplation of nature is peaceful and pleasant even at first sight, when one considers only the bark of it—for it is painted with certain hues that force us to admire the trace of its author, which we see there—it is far more delightful and agreeable when one penetrates its secrets and enters the depth of its mysteries. [...] We will violate its innermost retreat.[23] (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 1r)

Nieremberg advocated a practice of natural philosophy that looked "inside" for a more pleasant and accurate experience of nature.[24] ecocritical and ecofeminist scholarship have discussed early modern sexualized and sexist approaches to nature, which imagined the student of nature violating its object of study, invariably conceived as female (Merchant 1990, pp. 1–41; also Hadot 2006, pp. 95–96). Looking inside was the path to understanding how the parts that compose the whole of nature are tied to one another. Nieremberg used "artifice" in the sense of composition or structure, defined as the articulation of a whole's interconnected constituent parts, arranged in a way that denotes a plan. He explained that, taken just in themselves, the parts of a whole offer a "crude" and "rough" object for contemplation, especially in comparison with considering "the fitting and artifice" of them linked with one another and "the harmony" that they make together (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 123r).[25]

Intent on fully addressing the objections raised by anti-curiosity literature, Nieremberg characterized the harmony of a whole—its artifice—by drawing on views deeply associated with curiosity's fiercest detractor, Augustine. Nieremberg's argument repeated Augustine's anti-Manichean interpretation of the book of Genesis, in which the theologian claimed that whatever good and beauty there may be in each of the parts compares unfavorably to the harmony that they form in a whole (Gronewoller 2021, pp. 63–67). Nieremberg likened nature to a clock, which strikes wonder in everyone even if the contemplation of its gears

in isolation leads only to indifference (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 123r–v). Like a clock, nature is a whole made up of jointed and coordinated parts that reveal the artificer's art to anyone who knows how to see and understand it.

Nieremberg's portrayal of art in general and "nature's art" in particular materialized in a story about the statue of the goddess Athena sculpted by Phidias in the fifth century BCE. Nieremberg was so fond of the anecdote, first recorded in pseudo-Aristotle's *De mundo,* that he repeated it, with little variation, in three different publications (Harrison 1966, p. 108). The version contained in *Oculta filosofía* reads as follows:

> Anyone who saw separately the pieces of which Phidias' statue of Athena was made would give them little consideration. However, once put together and attached to one another, they struck wonder in everyone, especially so if one paid attention to the art with which they came together in the shield of the goddess, in which the face of the artificer was portrayed.[26] (Nieremberg 1633, fols. 123v–124r)

As Nieremberg clarified when he retold the story in *Historia naturae,* a tradition held that Phidias had sculpted his face at the center of the shield, along with a mechanism that caused every piece of the statue to come apart should the sculptor's face be removed (Nieremberg 1635, p. 14).[27] Nature was like a statue sculpted by God that allows humans to admire how each part is linked to the whole, and to each of the rest, "responding to one another in a thousand ways" (Nieremberg 1633, fols. 123v–124r; Marcaida 2011, pp. 41–42).[28] Just like in Athena's shield, nature's creations relate to one another so that, at its union, one could see "a face of God as if enameled, the likeness of its artificer". It was like reading "God made me' (*Deus me fecit*)", as one would read a painting's signature (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 124r).[29] Noticing a whole's fitted composition or union leads the intellect to realize that it is the work of some artificer or author. In the case of nature, it is the intellect's path to God.

Anticipating the views of Gracián and Manzini, Nieremberg's comparison between nature and art underscores the centrality of humans as perceiving agents:

> In art, excellency and admiration depend on its imitation [of nature], for art becomes admirable in proportion to its ability to imitate nature. Yet I do not know how, suddenly the tables are turned, and that which is most admirable about nature seems to be that which imitates art: I mean nature's artifice and plan [. . .] for if art is counterfeit nature, then nature is natural, or divine art. What is most likely to arouse wonder about the world is not the immensity of the skies nor the number of its lights or the appearance of its forms, but its ingenuity, its plan, its structure, its order, its correspondences. To put it briefly, its art is its most beautiful aspect [. . .] in the knowledge of its artifice, I think, lies the most conspicuous knowledge and science of nature.[30]

"God's curiosity was meant to elicit curiosity", Joanna Picciotto has argued in connection with William Derham's 1713 *Physico-Theology* (Picciotto 2010, p. 197). Similarly, Nieremberg believed that God's care in the creation of nature could be appreciated superficially in its colors and shapes, its abundance and variety; yet well-directed curiosity should focus instead on nature's artifice, the correspondence that its parts make with one another.

In a chapter of *Oculta filosofía* entitled "El mundo con qué arte está fabricado" ("What is the art with which the world has been created?"), Nieremberg declares that "the world's artifice and nature's art" demonstrates that God created the universe "with a plan and ingenuity, and so [nature] is God's artificial whole, a divine machine and artifice" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 122r).[31] Nieremberg's approach to the parallel between the natural and the artificial underscored God's motivation: he created nature with ostentation in mind, seeking to be known. As humans' creator, God knows how to appeal to them (Nieremberg

1633, fol. 113r). “Nature’s artifice” is God’s attempt at exciting curiosity. When humans look at nature from inside, they find “its architecture”, which is “what is subtle and delicate about its work” (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 113r–v).[32]

However, the description of God’s or nature’s artifice became less clear in the passage from *Oculta filosofía* (1633) to *Historia naturae* (1635). Among the additions that Nieremberg included in the later work, there was the claim that “what is more ornamented and artificial suggests divinity” (Nieremberg 1635, p. 14).[33] In contrast with the emphasis on the composition of the parts—so-to-speak visible only from the inside—that we find in *Oculta filosofía*, Nieremberg’s mention of ornament complicated the distinction between the appreciation of nature’s “external” and “internal” assets, seemingly contradicting his insistence that one should direct attention to nature’s inner correspondences.

Nieremberg seems to have struggled to let go of the charms of ornament, a hypothesis partially confirmed by the use in *Historia naturae* of analogies that, to contemporary readers, might have conveyed specific aesthetic and rhetorical implications. Consider yet another parallel between human and divine art: “expert painters”, Nieremberg claimed, “paint edges in a way that suggests the remaining part of a form” (Nieremberg 1635, p. 14). Nature’s works, he argued, also hint to that which is not there, offering a spectacle that expects beholders to actively conjecture about the artificer who is responsible for the work.[34] Interestingly, the analogy returned, now in allusion to rhetorical conceits, in the pseudonymous *Censura de la elocuencia* (1648) by the Jesuit José de Ormaza (1617–1676), a work published more than a decade later. Painters, Ormaza explained, paint shoulders in a way that “suggests” the back of the figure, which remains out of sight. He compared that to the preacher’s ability to insinuate, through a trope that speaks indirectly, that which remains unsaid. Ormaza argued that the preacher thus offers the audience the opportunity to feel vanity’s guilty pleasures as they reconstruct meaning “by themselves” (Ormaza 1648, p. 63; see also Patiño Loira 2024, p. 112). Nieremberg’s reference to “ornament”, coupled with his use of analogies that seventeenth-century contemporaries associated with aesthetic pleasure and active reception in rhetorical contexts, suggest that despite his insistence that only composition was appropriate as the object of natural-philosophical curiosity, reality was more complicated. As Brian Gronewoller has demonstrated in a book about none other than Augustine (Gronewoller 2021), notions such as composition and economy, which entailed a relationship among parts, had imminently rhetorical origins. As Nieremberg’s case clearly shows, attempts at portraying natural-philosophical curiosity as serious and “deep” ultimately rested on aesthetic foundations and processes that rhetoric explained better than demonstrative logic and dialectic. As Gracián—and also Nieremberg—knew well, it was all about flavor or taste—Truth’s “go-between” with humans.

In addition to its vicinity with rhetoric, by defending natural-philosophical curiosity’s focus on nature’s artifice and correspondences, Nieremberg also had to negotiate its relationship to analogous but less than orthodox intellectual alternatives. Neil Kenny argues that Jerome’s fourth-century Vulgate translation of Scripture used the notion of “curiosities” (*curiositates*) in connection with the occult sciences (Kenny 1998, p. 37). Similarly, starting with the reference to the “occult” and “hidden” in the title of *Oculta filosofía*, Nieremberg played a card that was not without risk. Nieremberg’s curiosity, conceptualized as eagerness to grasp nature’s artifice, presented itself as a sanitized and religiously orthodox alternative to three disciplines that he viewed as fostering curiosity about nature’s artifice from the fringes: Kabbalah (which interprets nature in terms of numbers), Metoposcopy (which seeks meanings in lines), and Magic (which aims to exploit nature’s underlying consonances or correspondences). Nieremberg sought to replace Kabbalah, Metoposcopy, and Magic with “a general, pure, and truthful science that considers cleanly” what the others

addressed “superstitiously”, constituted by three counterparts: Arithmetic, Geometry, and Music (Nieremberg 1633, fols. 122v–123r).[35]

## 4. Conclusions

Nieremberg’s works sought to rehabilitate natural-philosophical “curiosity” by defining it as intellectual desire for God’s “curiosity” or care in the creation of nature. However, a problem with God’s “curiosity” is that he has painted the world with such colors, shapes, abundance, and variety that the intellect becomes easily distracted from “nature’s artifice”. The articulation of nature’s parts into a functional and meaningful whole, made up of occult or hidden correspondences, is, for Nieremberg, the true manifestation of God’s care and the object of natural philosophy. The task of the latter was to redirect curiosity from meaningless to meaningful novelty, from artifice wrongly understood as ornament to artifice rightly understood as composition. Only curiosity for the articulation of nature’s parts with each other is justifiable, because it alone provides the intellect with *sensus* (“meaning”). The beauty of composition was, compared to that of each part taken in isolation, just as “understanding” (*intelligere*) a book was compared to merely “reading” (*legere*) it. Nieremberg boasted a well-trained and educated taste by avowing that he, personally, only found pleasure in the contemplation of how the parts came together; the rest struck him as *insulsum*, “insipid” or “lacking salt” (Nieremberg 1635, p. 15). Still, occasional word choices and analogies give readers a hint that Nieremberg’s attempts at narrowing the scope of natural-philosophical “curiosity” occurred against the background of rhetorical and aesthetic foundations that contemplated a broader range of meanings for “artifice”, and amidst a competition between university disciplines and the world of the occult, which he condemned as “superstitious” but was hardly able or even willing to entirely silence.

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## Notes

1. The Colloredo twins were the subject of both learned and popular literature throughout the continent and even became the topic of English broadside ballads (Baratta 2018).
2. Nieremberg’s life and works have been the subject of recent scholarship (Hendrickson 2015; Marcaida 2011, 2014; Pimentel 2008). The Reales Estudios originated from the Jesuit college in Madrid, which was established in the latter half of the sixteenth century. In 1603, it was renamed Colegio Imperial under the patronage of Empress Maria of Austria. It quickly rose to prominence as the flagship institution of the Society of Jesus in Spain (Simón Díaz 1992). The Jesuit Order, established in 1540 by Ignatius Loyola, had initiated its educational mission toward the end of its first decade of existence, eventually developing a nearly global network of schools, structured around a well-established curriculum and specific teaching methods (Grendler 2018). In recent decades, scholars have begun to cast a more positive light on the contributions of Jesuit scholars—often depicted as staunchly anti-progress Aristotelians by traditional historiography of science—to the so-called seventeenth-century “Scientific Revolution” (Feingold 2003; Waddell 2015).
3. “En la parte que assentò su madre los dedos; del tamaño, forma, y color de aquella fruta” (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 79r–v).
4. “Un tanto y como el compendio del reyno” (Nieremberg 1629, fol. 6v). Ambivalent celebrations of Madrid’s cosmopolitan and capitalistic culture abound in early modern theater (Tirso de Molina 2005, p. 123; Fuchs 2018).
5. Nieremberg’s references to “esta Corte” (“this court”) as a place particularly suited to becoming acquainted with nature’s variety are too numerous to be coincidental (Nieremberg 1630, fols. 21v, 73v, 83r, 95r, 105v, 109r, 111v).
6. In addition to sponsoring Francisco Hernández’s expedition to document the flora and fauna of New Spain, King Philip II also engaged in a range of scientific endeavors, including the creation of the Royal Academy of Mathematics and the promotion of alchemy (Herrera 1995; Rey Bueno and Alegre Pérez 2001).
7. *Curiosa filosofía* and *Oculta filosofía* appeared together in 1643 as *Curiosa y oculta filosofía*, and then again in 1649. The timeframe of Nieremberg’s natural-philosophical works coincides with significant developments in the study of life and its forms occurring throughout Catholic Europe, including the publications and research activities undertaken by members of the Rome-based Accademia dei Lincei (Freedberg 2002; Brevaglieri 2019).

[8] "Pidiéronme satisfaciesse al escrúpulo de los vnos, y a la curiosidad de todos, que al presente procuraré hazer" (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 74r).
[9] "Subtle" and "subtlety" are also examples of a notion that applied to the knowing subject as much as to the object of knowledge (Mori 2017, pp. 13–14).
[10] "Hà solo il desiderio d'intendere, & di sapere cose riferite da altri" (Ripa 1618, pp. 117–18).
[11] José Ramón Marcaida has also studied Nieremberg's approach to curiosity (Marcaida 2011).
[12] Nieremberg does not address Athanasius Kircher's studies on magnetism, which were conducted concurrently with his own. Recently, Christoph Sander has reconstructed the landscape of early modern magnetism scholarship (Sander 2020).
[13] Medieval scholasticism, for instance, appeared to Nieremberg as a tradition lacking "today's erudition and curiosity" ("la erudición, y curiosidad de ahora") (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 172v).
[14] On *κακόζηλον* or *κακοζηλία*, see Quintilian's first-century CE *Institutio oratoria* (Quintilian 2001, 5:372–73, §8.3.56–58). In 1624, Juan de Jáuregui attacked the vice of *κακοζηλία*, "un mal celo y vituperable por demasiado; una afectación y vehemencia por adelantar nuestras fuerzas" ("bad zeal, which one should condemn for its excess; affectation and persistence in going beyond our forces") (Jáuregui 2019, p. 15 or fol. 3v).
[15] Nieremberg claimed that he and Cabeo differed "in many curiosities and accidents" ("en muchas curiosidades, y accidentes") in the way they understood magnetism (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 214r; also fols. 120v–121r, 182r; and Nieremberg 1633, fol. 5r). "Curious" could mean far-fetched, as when Nieremberg announced that he would address "a curiosity", namely the species of animal from which the hides covering Adam and Eve were made (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 23v).
[16] "L'artificiale è più simpatico, & amabile all'huomo, di natura curioso, dell'istesso naturale" (Manzini 1652, pp. 102–3).
[17] The eighteenth-century *Diccionario de Autoridades* defined curiosity as "the care and diligence that one puts to make something with perfection and beauty" ("el cuidado y diligencia que se pone para hacer alguna cosa con perfección y hermosura") (1726–1739, s.v. curiosidad).
[18] "[La Verdad] dio en andar con artificio, [. . .] introdúzese por rodeos, vence con estratagemas, pinta lexos lo que está muy cerca, [. . .] apunta a uno para dar en otro [. . .] y por ingenioso circunloquio viene siempre a parar en el punto de su intención" (Gracián 2010, p. 396).
[19] "Echó por tercero al gusto" (Gracián 2010, p. 395).
[20] "Por ser el sabor del pensamiento, y la sal del entendimiento, la admiración, que allí es mayor donde se ignora más" (Nieremberg 1630, fol. 2r).
[21] "Quien guste, y menos quien conozca dónde está el primor, y fantasía del arte" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 113r–v).
[22] "Quidquid primus aspectus dabat [. . .] significationes affectus" (Nieremberg 1635, pp. 14–15).
[23] "Si toda la contemplación de la naturaleza es apacible, y gustosa aun con su primera vista, y considerada, solo por la corteça (porque no sé qué matizes la iluminan, que nos admira con solo un borrón de su autor, que en ella diuisamos) mucho más amena y agradable será quando se penetran sus secretos, y se entra en lo hondo de sus misterios. [. . .] Violaremos su más guardado retiro" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 1r).
[24] According to Francesco Stelluti, Federico Cesi's aforementioned Accademia dei Lincei, founded in Rome in 1603, also understood the study of nature as the act of penetrating nature's inner workings, truer than what one observes at surface level (Stelluti 1630, p. 37; see also Galluzzi 2017, pp. 32–37). Building on Carolyn Merchant's influential *The Death of Nature* (1980),
[25] "El encaje y artificio" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 123r).
[26] "Quien viesse las pieças de que constava la estatua de Minerva, que labró Phidias cada una de por sí, no haría caso dellas, pero encajadas, y trabadas todas assombró al mundo; y mucho más si se reparava el arte con que todas ellas venían a engaçarse [sic], y trabarse en el escudo de la diosa en que estava el rostro del artífice" (Nieremberg 1633, fols. 123v–124r; see also Nieremberg 1629, 2r–v and Nieremberg 1635, p. 14; also Gómez Miedes 2003, 1:47–48).
[27] Other versions claimed that only every piece in the shield, not in the statue, would come apart (Harrison 1966, pp. 107–8).
[28] "Respondiéndose de mil modos" (Nieremberg 1633, fols. 123v–124r).
[29] "Está esmaltado un bulto de Dios, un rostro de su artífice [. . .] que por todas partes se ve, y lee, Deus me fecit" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 124r).
[30] "Toda la excelencia, y admiración del arte, es por ser remedo suyo, que tanto es más admirable, quanto mejor la contrahace. Pero no sé cómo se truecan las manos, que lo más admirable de la naturaleza, parece que es lo que imita al arte; esto es su artificio, y traça, y es lo que menos nos ocupa: porque si el arte es naturaleza contrahecha, la naturaleza es arte natural, o divina; y assí no es lo más maravilloso del mundo la inmensidad de essos cielos, ni el número de sus luzes, ni el bulto de sus essencias, sino su ingenio, su traça, su armazon, su orden, sus correspondencias; al fin, su arte es lo más vistoso que tiene, y a que menos se respecta: por lo qual he querido ocuparme una vez en la contemplación de su artificio, en cuyo conocimiento pienso está su mayor noticia, y ciencia" (Nieremberg 1630, fols. 113v–114r).
[31] "Este artificio del mundo, y el arte de naturaleza [. . .] con traça e ingenio: y assí es un todo artificial de Dios, un ingenio y artificio divino" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 122r).

[32] "Su architectura, ni en lo que está lo sutil, y delicado de su obra" (Nieremberg 1633, fol. 113r–v).
[33] "Quod ornatius, quod artificiosius est indicatio numinis" (Nieremberg 1635, p. 14).
[34] "Periti pictores ita ducunt extremas lineas, vt vltrà aliam innuant formae partem" (Nieremberg 1635, p. 14).
[35] "Una ciencia general y pura, y verdadera, que limpiamente considere lo que ellas con culpa, y error, y que el mundo es un todo hecho con algún arte, o artes" (Nieremberg 1633, fols. 122v–123r).

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# The Dark Side of Things: Praxis of Curiosity in *La silva curiosa* (Julián de Medrano 1583)

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**Abstract:** Curiosity lies at the heart of the sixteenth-century miscellany books, which served as precursors to the essay genre. Among them, a truly exceptional piece stands out: *La silva curiosa* by Julián de Medrano, published in 1583. This work pushes the boundaries of curiosity to such an extent that it challenges its classification within the genre of miscellany owing to its unconventional and strange nature. Julián de Medrano, the author of this outlandish work, transforms himself into a character and protagonist, defining himself as an "extremely curious" individual. During his extensive travels, he curates a collection of "curious" epitaphs associated with often comical and peculiar deaths, spanning Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Galician, and Italian. In addition to this, *La silva curiosa* includes an autobiographical narrative, a precursor to the Gothic genre, in which Medrano recounts unsettling encounters with black magic. This work offers a multifaceted exploration of curiosity, taking it to the extreme by narrating the author's life experiences driven by a relentless pursuit of the curious, which is synonymous with the bizarre, extraordinary, marvelous, and unexpected. *La silva curiosa* emerges from a time marked by an almost nihilistic void, as the full force of the Baroque era has not yet arrived, and the ideals of humanism are fading away. It stands as a unique document that unveils an unexpected facet of the concept of curiosity within Spanish Renaissance culture.

**Keywords:** curiosity; misceláneas; Julián de Medrano; *La silva curiosa*; gothic novel; sixteenth century; Marguerite de Navarre; epitaphs; black magic; antiquities

Curiosity, long celebrated in Renaissance thought as a driving force behind human inquiry, also harbored a more ambivalent nature—one that could lead to excess, transgression, and the destabilization of knowledge itself. While humanist discourse often framed curiosity as an epistemological virtue, early modern literature reveals how it could just as easily become a disruptive force, undermining the very intellectual structures it sought to build. *La silva curiosa* (1583b) by Julián (or Julio) de Medrano exemplifies this tension.[1] Although its title aligns it with the tradition of Renaissance miscellanies, its content radically reconfigures curiosity as an erratic and destabilizing principle, pushing it beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge toward an intense engagement with the grotesque, the macabre, and the esoteric. Medrano's relentless pursuit of the extraordinary not only fragments the structure of his text but also transforms curiosity into a praxis—an experiential enactment that dissolves the boundary between the observer and the observed, between collector and object.

At the heart of *La silva curiosa* is the figure of Julio de Medrano as a traveler, a restless low-range aristocrat, who traverses the cultural and linguistic landscapes of sixteenth-century Europe, collecting epitaphs, encountering strange phenomena, and documenting his experiences with an insatiable curiosity. Medrano's wanderings take him from Spain

to France, Italy, Flanders, and Portugal, and even to the distant islands of Madeira and Menorca, creating a textual cartography of curiosity that apparently mirrors the intellectual ambitions and anxieties of his time. Yet, unlike the Renaissance traveler who seeks knowledge through engagement with antiquity, science, or geography, Medrano's curiosity leads him into territories of excess and disorder—spaces haunted by the past, filled with cryptic inscriptions, morbid relics, and uncanny encounters. His journeys do not follow a linear trajectory of discovery but instead form an erratic, disjointed path through a world that is increasingly illegible.

*La silva curiosa* embodies a radical enactment of Renaissance curiosity, not as a vehicle for systematic knowledge but as an excessive, erratic, and self-referential pursuit that ultimately subverts the epistemological ideals of the period. While Renaissance curiosity was often framed as a disciplined inquiry into the natural world, antiquity, and humanist scholarship, Medrano's work dismantles this paradigm by turning curiosity into an unrestrained fascination with the ghoulish and the bizarre. His amassing of epitaphs, necromantic encounters, and esoteric inscriptions does not seek to order or interpret knowledge but revels in its chaos, constructing a textual heterotopia where meaning is perpetually deferred. In this sense, *La silva curiosa* is not merely an example of Renaissance curiosity; it is its paradoxical inversion—a curiosity that devours itself, reducing the pursuit of knowledge to an exercise in accumulation without synthesis, an aestheticized fixation with death and the arcane that anticipates the spectral anxieties of the Baroque.

Although this scarcely known text has been considered a miscellany, it greatly differs from any work of this genre, even though the author, beginning with the book's title, plays with references to Pedro Mexía's (1989) *Silva de varia lección* (1540) and Antonio de Torquemada's *Jardín de flores curiosas* (Torquemada [1570] 1982). The Renaissance miscellanea, while fundamentally heterogeneous and devoid of rigid formal constraints, adhered to a general principle of curated variety that balanced erudition with accessibility. These texts, which flourished in sixteenth-century Spain, functioned as compendia of historical anecdotes, moral reflections, philosophical speculations, scientific curiosities, and literary excerpts, arranged with an implicit pedagogical intent. As precursors to the essay, miscellanies privileged associative logic, thematic fluidity, and digressive exploration, yet they often retained an underlying coherence, however subtle, that structured the reader's intellectual engagement. Even within their inherent dispersion, Renaissance miscellanies were not purely arbitrary collections but rather texts shaped by the desire to cultivate a refined and well-rounded knowledge.

In contrast, *La silva curiosa* defies even these loose parameters, embracing disorder not as an incidental feature but as an organizing principle that deliberately undermines the genre's conventional function. In reality, it is an unclassifiable book, as there are no works that resemble it. While it can be affirmed that it is a genuine *silva* in the Renaissance sense—a work in prose and/or verse whose elements are deliberately presented in disarray—Medrano's text pushes this disorder to an extreme that transforms the very notion of miscellaneity into a paradoxical exercise in excess and self-reflexivity. Rather than using curiosity as a means of structuring knowledge, Medrano surrenders entirely to its destabilizing force, crafting a text in which the act of accumulation supplants interpretation, and the pursuit of knowledge dissolves into a strong fascination with the arcane, the morbid, and the bizarre.

Whereas traditional miscellanies subtly guided their readers through an engaging interplay of instruction and diversion, *La silva curiosa* disrupts this balance by privileging the erratic over the instructive, the esoteric over the rational, and the grotesque over the edifying. The text revels in a compulsive cataloging of epitaphs, necromantic encounters, and inscriptions devoid of explanatory context, eschewing the epistemological aspirations

that typically underpinned the Renaissance miscellanea. This shift signals not merely a deviation from the genre's established tendencies but a profound subversion of its intellectual ethos, reconfiguring the miscellany's capacious form into a disorienting, labyrinthine exploration of curiosity itself. In doing so, the *Silva* emerges not as a repository of scattered wisdom, but as a literary artifact that embodies the very excesses of curiosity—unbound, insatiable, and ultimately self-consuming—prefiguring the unsettling sensibilities of the Gothic imagination.[2]

## 1. The Unsettling Pursuit of Curiosity: From Renaissance Wonder to Proto-Gothic Obsession

*La silva curiosa* can rightly be considered one of the earliest manifestations of the gothic or horror genre, antedating it by two centuries.[3] One of many striking manifestations of this paradoxical curiosity occurs when the protagonist and author, Julián de Medrano, descends into the secret cavern of a necromancer. The cave is a space filled with parchments written with blood, skulls, teeth of the dead, heads stolen from graves, human hair and other terrifying things to partake in the secrets and knowledge that this space holds. The necromancer withdraws to a corner and, after conversing with the devil, presents the nobleman with a concave mirror with which he can see in real-time his father going to bed, his brother playing cards with a lady, his cousin feeding his greyhounds, and his beloved, a certain Marfisa D.A., reading Jorge de Montemayor's *La Diana* in her bed.

Unlike the classical image of the scholar uncovering hidden truths in an archive or library, this is a journey into a space of horror and forbidden knowledge, where learning is supplanted by dread. The necromancer's cave, filled with remnants of death and occult artifacts, offers not enlightenment but a confrontation with the eerie and the unknown. Here, curiosity does not serve an intellectual function but rather compels the protagonist to witness an unsettling vision—an event that underscores how *La silva curiosa* anticipates the spectral anxieties of the Gothic imagination. Medrano describes this moment in vivid detail:[4]

> Pasando adelante, y escudriñando más adentro en su cueva, [el nigromante] saca de un rincón un gran puñado de cabellos atados en dos mil lazos. Saca una calabaza larga llena de dientes de muertos, saca huesos, saca cabezas que él había cortado en los sepulcros de los muertos. Yo, viendo cosas tan diabólicas, principié a sentir tal horror y espanto que volvía la cabeza atrás por no ver cosas tan terribles. [. . .] En esto, él se esconde como un gazapo en un rincón de la cueva y, después de haber allí hablado con el Diablo (como yo creo), sale al cabo de poco rato con su espejo en la mano, y me dice: «Hermano, tomad esta candela, y estad atento a lo que viéredes en este espejo, y principiad a llamar todos los que ver deseáis.» [. . .] vi a mi padre con su pierna cortada que dos mozos que yo conocía le estaban acostando. Vi a un primo mío, llamado Pedro Íñiguez, el cual, siendo aficionadísimo a la caza, él mismo estaba dando de comer a dos galgos que él quería mucho. Vi a mi hermano Pedro de Medrano, el cual estaba en muy buena conversación con una dama vecina suya, sentados los dos en sendas sillas. Vi a dos hermanas mías, que la una de ellas, la mayor, estaba haciendo red o resul sentada cerca del fuego y la otra menor estaba jugando a los naipes con un caballero de mi tierra. Me mostró a uno de mis amigos muerto, a otro acuchillado. Vi a Marfisa, D.A., que es una mujer valerosa de alta sangre y virtuosísima, la cual estaba acostada y sentada dentro de su cama, leyendo en un libro español que le llaman *La Diana* de Montemayor. Y yo afirmo que era aquel libro porque dentro del espejo vi y quise leer el nombre, y conocí claramente que era *La Diana*. (Medrano [1583] 1998, pp. 276–77)

> [Moving forward, and delving deeper into his cave, [the necromancer] takes from a corner a large handful of hair tied in two thousand knots. He takes out a long gourd full of teeth from the dead, he takes out bones, he takes out heads that he had cut from the graves of the dead. Seeing these diabolical things, I began to feel such horror and dread that I turned my head back to avoid seeing such terrible things. [. . .] At this point, he hides like a rabbit in a corner of the cave and, after having spoken with the Devil there (as I believe), he comes out after a while with his mirror in hand and says to me, "Brother, take this candle and pay attention to what you'll see in the mirror, and begin calling all those you wish to see." [. . .] I saw my father with his leg amputated, and two young men I knew were putting him to bed. I saw a cousin of mine, named Pedro Íñiguez, who, being a great hunting enthusiast, was feeding two greyhounds he dearly loved. I saw my brother Pedro de Medrano, who was in a pleasant conversation with a neighbor lady, both sitting in chairs. I saw two of my sisters, one of them, the older one, making lace or sitting near the fire, and the younger one playing cards with a gentleman from my village. It showed me one of my friends dead, another one stabbed. I saw Marfisa, D.A., who is a valiant woman of noble blood and virtuous, sitting in her bed reading a book in Spanish they call *La Diana* of Montemayor. And I say it was that book because in the mirror I saw and wanted to read the title, and I clearly recognized it was *La Diana*.]

The contrast between the realm of black magic in the cave and the peaceful, and yet uncanny, vision of domestic life in the mirror highlights how *La silva curiosa* engages with curiosity as both a literary device and an existential force. The mirror, a classic Gothic motif, acts as a portal between worlds, collapsing the boundaries between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane, the real and the illusory. Medrano does not merely depict curiosity as an intellectual pursuit; rather, he stages it as a precarious encounter with the unknown, where the pursuit of hidden knowledge becomes indistinguishable from transgression.

Although the Gothic novel would not emerge as a recognized genre until Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *La silva curiosa* contains many of the foundational elements that would later define Gothic fiction (Walpole [1764] 2014). The genre is characterized by a fascination with ruins, the supernatural, the grotesque, and the collapse of reason, all of which are present in Medrano's work. The necromancer's cave, the enchanted tomb of Orcavella, and the ritualistic inscriptions that populate the text all function within the Gothic aesthetic, where the past continually haunts the present and where the search for knowledge leads not to enlightenment, but to horror.

A particularly relevant point of comparison is Jan Potocki's the *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* (1804–1815), a work that shares *La silva curiosa*'s narrative structure of digressions and nested stories, as well as its preoccupation with necromancy, esoteric knowledge, and the blurred line between reality and illusion (Potocki 1989). Both works feature a protagonist whose journey is marked by supernatural encounters, where curiosity repeatedly draws them into a labyrinth of ominous, unsettling experiences. However, while Potocki's novel embraces a fully developed Gothic aesthetic, Medrano's work remains an unstable, transitional text, caught between Renaissance miscellaneity and the emerging sensibilities of Gothic horror. Ultimately, *La silva curiosa* anticipates the core anxieties of the Gothic genre, particularly its obsession with the past, its preoccupation with mortality, and its fascination with knowledge that threatens to undo its seeker. Medrano's world is one in which curiosity has no resolution, only endless accumulation, where the quest for understanding results not in clarity but in a confrontation with the void. This is the true

dark side of curiosity, a realm where inquiry does not illuminate but instead shrouds the seeker in darkness, leaving them forever lost in the labyrinth of the unknown.

In *La silva curiosa*, curiosity moves away from the pursuit of knowledge to become the dominant trait of the author, who refers to himself numerous times as curious and undoubtedly ends up being the main curiosity of his work, illustrating Barbara Benedict's assertion that a curious person ultimately becomes an object of curiosity (Benedict 2001, p. 2). Medrano writes a book that is, above all, an extravagant collection of curiosities that gradually lead to the themes that obsess him: death, magical arts and, above all, ancient and modern inscriptions such as epitaphs carved into stones, caves and tombs.

## 2. Julián de Medrano: Courtier, Amateur Writer and Collector of Curiosities

*La silva curiosa* was originally published in Paris in 1583 by Nicolas Chesneau and later re-edited in 1608 by César Oudin (Medrano 1608), who appended *El curioso impertinente* without acknowledging Cervantes' authorship, a decision that generated considerable scholarly debate. The work was subsequently re-edited by José María Sbarbi in 1878. The *Silva* was dedicated to queen Marguerite of Navarre—or of Valois—the sister of French king Henry III and the wife of Henry IV. On the frontispiece it reads: "en que se tratan diversas cosas sutilísimas, y curiosas, muy convenientes para damas y caballeros en toda conversación virtuosa y honesta" ["In which very subtle and curious matters are discussed, highly suitable for ladies and gentlemen in all virtuous and honest conversation."].[5]

The first part of the book is composed of an enormous variety of elements with the common denominator that they can be considered "curious": paremias (proverbs, aphorisms, sayings, riddles, mottos), humorous stories, Italianate poetry, ballads, courtly poems, and short pastoral narratives in which the author presents himself as the shepherd Julio. Additionally, there are digressions and personal anecdotes that connect all these elements.[6] The second part of the book is what unquestionably makes it exceptional and sets it apart from other miscellanies. As mentioned, it consists of a series of journeys during which Julio collects curious epitaphs from different parts of Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, and Flanders, including islands like Madeira and Menorca. Within these travels, Julio incorporates the story of his pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, which comprises several interwoven episodes with an undeniable character of gothic horror. In *La silva curiosa*, the author and narrator merge in an autobiographical text in which they continuously connect with the reader, providing insights into the writing process and involving the reader in the impromptu nature of the composition, making this a highly engaging work in which the author does not hide his enthusiasm as a novice writer. For instance, he refers to his book as the "primera y tierna flor de mis trabajos entre las espinas de mis penas y fatigas" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 73) ["first and tender flower of my labors amidst the thorns of my sorrows and hardships"], and, as an example of the many times he announces his changes of plans, he informs his readers that "Yo pensaba pasar adelante y había propuesto de ensalzar la gloria del buen Baco hasta el cuerno de la luna, pero principio ya a sentir que sus versos y presencia fumosa me dan mal de cabeza, y temiendo que el mismo accidente acontezca a los lectores [. . .], por ahora baste lo que hemos dicho de su licor devino" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 140) ["I had a mind to go on and had intended to extol the glory of good Bacchus right up to the horn of the moon, but I'm beginning to feel that his verses and smoky presence are giving me a headache, and fearing that the same might happen to the readers [. . .], for now, let what we've said about his divine liquor suffice"].

Apart from what he says about himself in the *Silva*, we know very little about the author.[7] Nevertheless, the information his work offers is sufficient to understand that Julio de Medrano (1583b) was a Navarrese nobleman in the court of Nerac with queen

Marguerite of Navarre (popularly known as queen Margot; she would later become queen of France). He was a soldier, courtier and tireless traveler, and his text repeatedly references his journeys through various parts of Europe and the Indies. As the laudatory poems validate this information, even comparing him to Ulysses, it seems that this is true.[8] His loyalty to France against Spanish interests is evident as there are two compositions in the paratext added to the end of the 1583b first edition that prophesy the decline of Spain under Philip II in favor of the victorious arm of Henry III (Medrano [1583] 1998, pp. 310–11). These compositions were removed in the 1608 edition by César Oudin.

There are other curious details about this author and his work. In 1583, he published—with the same publisher Nicolas Chesneau, a fervent Catholic and anti-Huguenot propagandist—his *Historia singular de seis animales, del can, del caballo, del oso, del lobo, del ciervo y del elefante* (Medrano 1583a) (A singular history of six animals: of the dog, the horse, the bear, the wolf, the deer and the elephant), dedicated to Henry III.[9] The astonishing fact is that Medrano did not write this book at all; rather, he appropriated a pre-existing work, *Del can y del caballo* (*Of the Dog and the Horse*), originally published in 1568 by the prothonotary Luis Pérez (1568). Medrano reissued the text under his own name, changing only the title, the preliminary materials, and the cover, while leaving the content untouched. What makes his audacity truly remarkable—bordering on temerity—is that he dedicated this "stolen" book to Henry III of France, not only passing it off as his own but also claiming that it contained new and rare knowledge about four additional animals—the bear, the wolf, the deer, and the elephant—that were never mentioned in the original, nor, for that matter, in the text he plagiarized. In the dedication, he boldly declares: "para que Vuestra Majestad [. . .] entienda, y sepa todo lo que del Can y del Caballo fue nunca escrito, y así mismo, vea aquí y descubra, los secretos más raros y curiosos, que se hallan en Natura, del Oso, del Lobo, del Ciervo y del Elefante" (2v) ["So that Your Majesty [. . .] may understand and know everything ever written about the Dog and the Horse, and likewise see here and discover the rarest and most curious secrets found in Nature of the Bear, the Wolf, the Deer, and the Elephant"].

This lack of integrity is repeated in the epistle dedicated to queen Marguerite of Navarre that opens *La silva curiosa*, in which he claims that it is divided into seven books that do not exist. Thus, he writes: "suplico a V. M. no deje de pasar adelante y emplear algunos ratos de espacio en los otros seis libros siguientes, compuestos en prosa" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 73) ["I beseech Your Majesty not to hesitate to proceed and spend some moments of leisure on the following six books composed in prose"]. Indeed, a "Tabla de los siete libros de la *Silva*" ["Table of the seven books of the *Silva*"] is added with "phantom" books dedicated, respectively, to the study of plants, precious stones, land animals, fish and birds, culminating in the seventh book which "Descubre los más raros y delicados secretos de naturaleza experimentados por el mismo Julio y otros hombres curiosos de nuestros tiempos; la mayor parte de ellos sacados del ermitaño de Salamanca, y de los más excelentes filósofos de Italia, Francia y España" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 78) ["Reveals the rarest and most delicate secrets of nature experimented with by Julio himself and other curious men of our times; most of them taken from the hermit of Salamanca and the most excellent philosophers of Italy, France, and Spain"].[10] Likewise, the *Silva* appropriates compositions from Joan de Timoneda (1576), Cristóbal de Castillejo (1556), Francisco de Aldana (1985), Francisco Suárez de Figueroa (1988), Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, Fernando de Acuña, Gregorio Silvestre and Gutierre de Cetina (1981), as well as anonymous compositions found in *cancioneros* dated before the publication of the *Silva*, in a game that goes beyond Renaissance imitation: at times he even explains the circumstances in which he composed the plagiarized poems, some of whose verses he would alter.[11]

All the above points to an "amateur" author, not a professional, who writes in Spanish as a courtier to delight queen Marguerite with the Spanish book she has commissioned.[12] The entire work exudes the joyful freedom of an *aficionado* who engages in writing with the abandonment and pleasure of improvising literary remnants united by their curiosity. Medrano writes about himself: "siendo yo soldado, desnudo y estéril de las letras y ciencias que son necesarias al que compone alguna obra" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 143) ["being a soldier, naked and barren of the letters and sciences necessary for someone composing any work"] to reaffirm throughout the work his enthusiasm as a writer committed to various literary projects. It is not a typical Spanish literary work but a text that we could define as pan-European, written and published in France for a courtly audience and composed in Spanish with snippets in French, Latin, Italian, Portuguese and Galician, possibly without expectations of being read in Spain and without any literary ambition. It seems that Medrano's initial plan was to write a conventional miscellany, a compilation of short literary units as varied as they are curious.[13] Indeed, the requirement of "curiosity" is insistently repeated throughout the text and is undoubtedly the guiding thread that unites all these heterogeneous materials. Fortunately, however, the intended plan is constantly compromised by the continuous improvisation of the author, who appears and disappears in the text, weaving in stories, expressing his opinion on various subjects, interrupting the planned course, changing direction and constantly addressing the reader as if speaking to someone he knew.

Thus, the *Silva* gradually becomes disorganized, while the author's *persona* becomes the main object of the writing. The digressions and the author's direct presence become increasingly interesting and significant until they reach the second half of the book, in which the apparent initial plan has been completely abandoned. Here, Julián de Medrano shows his readers the object of his curiosity, his obsessions, the secret of his evolution and vitality, for in the end the *Silva* is nothing more than the book of an extremely curious man who therefore becomes the focus of his writing, giving free rein to his undisguised attraction for very specific curiosities related to death and the magical arts.

Medrano repeatedly expresses his interest in antiquities, graffiti and inscriptions, among which, of course, epitaphs play a prominent role. His curiosity does not arise from the pursuit of knowledge but from the gathering in his notebook of words written on stones that he can turn into objects for his collection. For instance, in Orense he asks a friar about what remarkable things the city offers, and the friar responds:

> "La ciudad es muy deliciosa y regalada. Y, entre las cosas que en ella son tenidas singulares, hallaréis excelentes baños, muy buenas tripas, excelentes vinos y hermosas mujeres." Yo le dije: "Padre, no os pregunto yo de los vinos ni tripas; pero deseo que me digáis si hay cosas antiguas desde el tiempo de los Romanos y Moros, como son Pirámides, Ídolos, Letreros y Epitafios". (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 234)
>
> ["The city is very delightful and pleasurable. And among the things that are considered unique in it you will find excellent baths, very good sausages, outstanding wines and beautiful women." I said to him, "Father, I am not asking you about wines or sausages, but I desire you to tell me if there are ancient things from the time of the Romans and Moors such as pyramids, idols, inscriptions and epitaphs"].

Miguel Morán Turina (2010), in his study on the fervent interest in antiquities in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, explains that there was indeed a substantial group of scholars "who always had something of curious antiquarians and who, convinced that there was no memory more secure or certain than that of the stones,

traveled the peninsula with pen in hand, committed to the 'good practice of questioning antiquities' [. . .]. The answers were on the stones, and they dedicated themselves to the massive task of gathering in their notes enormous collections of inscriptions with which to form that indispensable corpus on which to base their historical work" (p. 11). Medrano's case is radically different because he is not a scholar with a research-driven ambition but a collector of curiosities. His quest for antiquities is nothing like that of Ambrosio de Morales, Juan Fernando Franco or Rodrigo Caro, who were engaged in a common cause of historical research.

## 3. The Endless Cemetery: Epitaphs, Necromancy, and the Heterotopia of Death

In the second part of the book, Medrano narrates his extensive travels in search of curious epitaphs. In the *Silva*, the world his protagonist traverses turns into an endless graveyard. The space becomes a heterotopia, a place within another place, a necrophilic utopia within the vast landscape of his journeys. Heterotopia, according to the term coined by Michel Foucault (1998), is a real place in which other places belonging to a culture are "at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places outside other places, although they are actually localizable" (p. 178). The cabinet of curiosities, the library, and, I dare to venture, the pages of a book like the *Silva*—by gathering inscriptions and epitaphs found during Medrano's travels—also become a kind of representational derivation of real space turned into an immense cemetery.

Before the second part of the book, we also find some amusing epitaphs such as that of Gil Vivanco in Menorca,[14] after which, despite being in the 'paremias' part of his *Silva*, he writes:

> La curiosidad de los Epitafios ha sido tan grande entre los antiguos, y así mismo entre los de nuestros tiempos que, pues hemos caído en el propósito de ellos, yo quiero ponerte a la fin de este mi primer libro una parte de los que yo he hallado en diversas tierras buscándolos con curiosidad. Y si conozco que este mi servicio te dé gusto, y que tú te recreares en la lectura de estos mis epitafios, yo te ofrezco de servirte con otros doscientos que te guardo para ponerlos en mi *Vergel curioso*, los cuales yo he sacado de muchas partes, siguiendo mi peregrinación larga y trabajosa. (Medrano [1583] 1998, pp. 154–55)
>
> [The curiosity about epitaphs has been so great among the ancients, as well as among those of our times, that since we have embraced their purpose, I want to place at the end of this my first book a selection of those I have found in various lands, searching for them with curiosity. And if I know that this service of mine pleases you, and that you take pleasure in reading these epitaphs of mine, I offer to serve you with another two hundred that I have kept to include in my *Curious Orchard*, which I have gathered from many places during my long and laborious pilgrimage.]

Indeed, throughout the second part of the *Silva,* the *Vergel curioso* [*Curious Orchard*], is referred to six times. According to Medrano, this chimerical book, probably never written, will be the repository of the true and orderly history of his travels, of all the epitaphs in his collection, and of the unspeakable secrets he has experienced in his adventures, which he quickly passes through in the *Silva*. It is then that the need arises to plan a second book in which his uncontainable curious passion will have ample and organized space for documentation. Each time something interesting appears on its pages, the *Vergel curioso* [*Curious Orchard*] emerges as a promise and to stimulate the reader's curiosity.

While epitaphs as a theme are not unfamiliar in the Renaissance, they usually belong to a radically different poetic or classical tradition than what we encounter in the *Silva*, where, as we will see, the obsession with death, the heterodox interest in necromancy and the compulsive collecting of curiosities related to these themes deviate from any tradition of its time.[15] Before he recounts these travels there is a brief pastoral narrative in which Medrano becomes the shepherd Julio and narrates the carnal love of other shepherds, thus betraying the neoplatonic character of the pastoral novel. This part ends with a surprising request from the shepherdess Marfisa, a lady who appears several times in the work and who may well be a counterpart of queen Marguerite herself:

> La generosa Marfisa, estando triste y muy afligida por la muerte del pastor Gélido de Riojo, envió una carta a Julio, y por ella entre otras cosas le ruega que no le escriba ya más cartas ni versos que traten de amores porque pasó solía. Y el mayor consuelo que ahora ella tomaba era en andar solitaria por un desierto, cantando versos tristes y lamentables, y escribiendo diversos epitafios por las fuentes y peñas, y sobre las cortezas de los árboles. Asimismo, escribe a Julio y le ruega mucho que en lugar de las sentidas empresas y hermosísimas divisas que otras veces solía ofrecerle por estrena, que ahora le envíe tristes y amargas lamentaciones, y los epitafios que en tierras extrañas hubiere descubierto, para que ella los ponga y escriba de su mano sobre las peñas y árboles de todas las florestas donde ella apacentare su ganado. (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 225)

> [The generous Marfisa, feeling sad and deeply afflicted by the death of the shepherd Gélido de Riojo, sent a letter to Julio. Among other things, she asks him not to write her any more letters or verses about love because that time has passed. Her greatest consolation now is to wander alone through a desert, singing sad and lamentable verses and writing various epitaphs by the springs and cliffs and on the bark of trees. She also writes to Julio and implores him to send her, instead of the heartfelt tokens and beautiful mottos he used to offer her as gifts, sad and bitter laments and the epitaphs he may have discovered in foreign lands so that she can inscribe them by her own hand on the rocks and trees of all the forests where she grazes her cattle.]

It is worth noting that among all these genres—mottos, emblems, lyrics, etc.—of courtly wit and gallantry intended for the entertainment of ladies, the genre of epitaphs is introduced as one more, which obviously has a formal resemblance but completely deviates in its purpose. It is at the very least gruesome that in the *Silva* epitaphs are discussed as potential gifts and are appreciated as incentives for courtship. In them, the function of honoring and remembering the deceased is completely omitted, and they are reduced to small morbid narratives offered to a noble lady. The epitaph is not unrelated to the interests of the time. For example, it is not unusual to find small collections of epitaphs scattered in works of a different nature. Such is the case with Luis Zapata's *Miscelánea* (Zapata de Chaves 1949), Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa's *El pasajero* (Suárez de Figueroa 1988), and a text dedicated to them a century later, Philippe Labbé's *Thesauros epitaphiorum veterum ac recentium* (Labbé 1666). Even in the prologue of the 1605 *Don Quixote* there are burlesque (literary) epitaphs, See (Rodríguez Cacho 1996). This proliferation of epitaphs outside of funerary contexts responds to broader cultural and rhetorical conventions. One must not forget that the quasi-catalogic display of extraordinary deaths was a long-standing literary tradition, traceable at least to Valerius Maximus (2004). In chapter XII of book IX of his *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, he devotes an entire section to such deaths among both Romans and foreigners—demonstrating that, far from being marginal curiosities, these narratives occupied a legitimate place in the didactic and commemorative practices of early

imperial literature. However, I do not believe there is a work in which they are the subject of a collection of curiosities corresponding to the selection criteria linked to the author's morbid infatuation with death.

I will briefly summarize this second part of the book, which fully fits within gothic literature. The text begins with various anecdotes and places where the author compiles curious epitaphs because they refer to curious deaths.[16] This characteristic "curiosity" about death can be summarized as comical deaths—"ridiculous" and "funny" ones—absurd, tragic, disastrous and in some way extraordinary deaths. The journey in search of epitaphs does not follow a specific geographical order, as the author mixes different travels and adventures. The cities mentioned are Barcelona, Calatayud, San Pedro de Cárdena, Alcántara, Zamora, Burgos, Salamanca, and Orense. The city of Orense reminds him of a previous journey he made to Galicia as a pilgrim from Roncesvalles to Santiago de Compostela. This will be the main narrative in the *Silva*, which I will refer to later. After arriving in Santiago, he goes to Padrón and then to the hermitage of Finnibus Terrae, where he announces an "Adventure and epitaph". This adventure consists of the story, also horrific, of the witch Orcavella, who, in a remote past, plagued the region with her dark magic, feeding on the flesh and blood of children and using her spells: "fue tan grande el estrago y matanza que esta loba encarnizada hizo que ella dejó la mitad de este reino despoblado y desierto" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 289). ["The devastation and slaughter that this ferocious she-wolf caused were so great that she left half of this kingdom depopulated and deserted"].

The narrative focuses not on the story of the sorceress herself but on the description of her enchanted tomb and the incantations that condemn the curious who approach it to die within a year, as well as the venomous snakes that guard her grave and attack those who dare to touch it. Julio is warned by a shepherd who prevents him in time from approaching her tomb. However, the same illiterate shepherd shows him a stone reproduction of a cave with the three inscriptions found on the original tomb, the last one being the epitaph carved by Orcavella herself: "Aquí yace sepultada/dentro de esta peña dura/la enemiga de natura/Orcavella la encantada" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 291) ["Here lies buried/within this hard rock/the enemy of nature/Orcavella the enchanted"]. Again and again, the strange environments, fantasy, magic, and the macabre—in the strictly etymological sense of the Arabic *maqabir*, meaning tombs—along with the inherent Gothic elements of this world of apparitions, spirits, necromancers, and wonders, make the final part of the book a precursor to fantastic stories that explore themes closely related to what we now recognize as the horror genre. A great example of this is Louis Adrien du Perron de Castera's *Relation de la découverte du tombeau de l'enchanteresse Orcavelle*, *avec l'histoire tragique de ses amours* (Castera 1729), written in 1726 and based on the mentioned Orcavella episode from the *Silva*. This Gothic novel employs the found manuscript device and attributes its authorship to Julio de Medrano, turning him into the protagonist of a work of fiction that portrays him as an extremely curious adventurer.

Later, Julio de Medrano continues his journey through Galician lands and arrives in Redondela, where he finds the epitaph of a fortune-teller named Marcolfo, whose death he extensively recounts. It seems that his pilgrimage and journey through Galicia end here because he abruptly transports us to the island of Porto Santo, near Madeira, where he collects another epitaph with its story. He then recalls an epitaph found in Coimbra, another in Brussels, and continues with some epitaphs found in Italy: Ravenna, Rome, and Cività-Vecchia, as well as Athens in Greece. After this, he travels to France and transcribes epitaphs found in Rouen, Chartres, Paris, Blois, Orléans, Dauphiné, Nivernois, Bourbonnais, Laon, several villages in Picardy, Amiens, and Poyssi, from where he selects

five epitaphs of nuns. This rather necrophilic journey concludes with a substantial group of epitaphs found in various churches in Paris.

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, which is inserted into the narrative of collecting epitaphs, is a digression that links several adventures related to necromancy and spans fifty pages in the 1998 edition. It begins with the numerous epitaphs found in a hermitage, including the one written on a wall above a dead man sitting and leaning against the wall.[17] In the hermitage there lives a hermit and his servant, whose name is Cristóbal Salvaje. This character is a deformed necromancer who, with his dark magic, exercises power over all the shepherds in the region, as well as controlling wolves and other beasts at his whim, being as influential as he is vital for the survival of the inhabitants of those lands. He is an ambivalent character, capable of great cruelties and terrible incantations, with his knowledge stemming from his dealings with the devil. Cristóbal chooses Julio de Medrano as a confidant and friend because he recognizes in him a "corazón insaciable de tales cosas" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 274) ["an insatiable heart for such things"] and because he notices "que yo era curiosísimo" ["that I was extremely curious"]. For his part, Medrano sees in this friendship a unique opportunity to satisfy his curiosity for secrets that would be forbidden to human knowledge if not through the terrifying channel of black magic. He naively tries to convince the reader of his integrity as a Catholic as he implores the magician, whom he calls his brother, to ensure that his teachings that do not cross the boundaries of orthodoxy:

> No quiero yo penetrar tan adelante que vos me mostréis ningún secreto ni experimento de los que tocan a esa ciencia negra y tenebrosa, porque yo aborrezco mortalmente las invocaciones y conjuros de demonios, pues son enemigos de Dios, nuestro creador. No, no, Vade retro Satanás, no quiero conversación con tan mala gente, Dios me guarde de tal deseo. *Y si en tal error yo cayere de desear cosa tan mala,* le suplico de todo mi corazón que antes que a tal paso llegue, escogiéndome en hora y estado de gracia él me toque con su santa mano, y me mate y conserve esta pobre almaa pues es suya". (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 273)
>
> [I do not wish to delve so deeply that you may show me any secret or experiment related to that black and gloomy science, for I abhor invocations and conjurations of demons as they are enemies of God our creator. No, no, get thee behind me, Satan! I do not desire conversation with such wicked people. May God keep me from such a desire. *And if I should fall into such an error of desiring something so evil*, I beseech Him with all my heart that, before I reach such a point, choosing me in a time and state of grace, He touch me with His holy hand and kill me and preserve this poor soul, for it is His" (emphasis mine)].

And this is said by a gentleman who has begged to enter the cave of a necromancer and who, despite the horrors he sees, decides to stay and receive the gift of a book of spells that, due to its content, must be kept secret. In fact, Medrano never stops expressing his gratitude to this magician for the knowledge he has imparted, even as he continually conveys the terror it inspires—subtly suggesting the transgressive nature of these lessons: "él principia a descubrirme su pecho y a decirme cosas que, viéndome solo con él los cabellos de la cabeza se me erizaban en oírlas" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 274) ["He begins to reveal his heart to me and to tell me things that, being alone with him, made the hair on my head stand on end when I heard them"].

## 4. A Collection of Words

Julio de Medrano is a collector of words—words written in epitaphs, on stones and walls that he encounters on his journey. David Castillo (2011) describes this book as a

textual cabinet of curiosities (p. 57), and although it is an evocative definition, the *Silva* takes the idea of collection and curiosity into unknown territory. Indeed, it is a cabinet of curiosities in which the text, beyond the book, is the terrain in which Medrano roams, extracting words from the stones without paying much attention to their meaning. What Medrano does with the words he finds in the inscriptions is to transform them into objects, into things. These things are words copied from inscriptions and epitaphs and taken to another domain—for example, to the pastoral/courtly fantasy in which a lady, Marfisa D. A., supposedly writes them on the bark of trees. The words are transformed into collectible objects that have been sought, treasured, given, reproduced, and exhibited. The sign—the letter—is separated from the medium—the stone—that gives it meaning. These words without context have an existence detached from their meaning. Although they can be deciphered, they have lost the logic of their existence, the reason why they were written by someone and placed in a specific space. What now defines them is that they are possessed by someone, and as Byung-Chul Han (2021) writes, "only an intense relationship with things makes them a possession" (p. 28).

The words transcribed in the *Silva* are part of a collection that exemplifies the praxis of a superfluous curiosity that corresponds to a time whose energy has faded away. The *Silva* emerges in a time marked by an almost nihilistic void. It is a frivolous and almost puerile work that displays the fatigue of an exhausted world. Thus, the frivolity of the *Silva* demonstrates a change of epoch, an empty time stripped of beliefs.

The Baroque era has not yet arrived with its extraordinary vigor, and the dream of humanism has been vanishing. The *Silva* is intensely original while it is also deeply enmeshed in its cultural context. David Castillo affirms that "the multiple faces of death and the unsettling shadows that emerge in the dark section entitled "Parte de los epitaphios curiosos hallados por Julio" represent the original expression of loss of values of an age that has not yet replaced the eroded beliefs of the ancients" (p. 60).

In its transcribed words, sometimes unintelligible, there is an excess of signifiers and an absence of signifieds: interpretation as such does not exist. Thus, curiosity is exhausted on the surface of signs in an exercise of accumulation that does not illuminate the search for meaning beyond banality. When, for instance, Medrano on his journey encounters indecipherable texts in a church in Alcántara, it seems not to matter to him: "donde hay muchas cosas antiguas y curiosas desde el tiempo de los Romanos, como lápidas escritas, estatuas, ídolos, columnas, trofeos con diversos letreros y epitafios, que debido a su gran antigüedad y al estar parte de ellos rotos y cubiertos de moho, no se podía sacar el sentido de lo que significaban" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 231) ["where there are many ancient and curious things from the time of the Romans such as inscribed stones, statues, idols, columns, trophies with various inscriptions and epitaphs, which, due to their great antiquity and being partially broken and covered in mold, their meaning could not be deciphered"].

Han reflects on Ernst Bloch's interpretation of the story of Sinbad the Sailor. Sinbad and his companions arrive on a paradisiacal island with tall trees and lush vegetation. They delight in the beautiful landscape, go out hunting, and when they light a fire to cook dinner, the ground shakes, the trees fall and the island sinks because it is nothing more than the back of an immense whale that has been asleep for a very long time, allowing plant and animal life to thrive on its back. Bloch interprets the story as an allegory of our ignorance of things that, beyond their utility, have a hidden and elusive aspect: "the back of things". Indeed, as Han surmises, things have an unsettling part that we never quite come to know; they are presences that belong to another world, their own, embedded in the human but essentially different. Things represent a kind of otherness that connects us to the world; they possess an essence that goes beyond their utility. They are presences that radiate warmth, the warmth of the hands that made them or the coldness of machines. He adds

that the ontological depth of things and their intrinsic otherness is eroded in the modern era: “Things lose their own life, their own weight and their independence” (p. 71). Thus, things and objects constitute a fundamental otherness for us to relate to the world (pp. 66–72). Medrano’s *Silva curiosa*, however, anticipates this process in a different yet strikingly analogous way. His obsessive collection of epitaphs and inscriptions, meticulously copied from tombstones and stones found across Europe, detaches these texts from their original material and commemorative contexts. What were once markers of memory—engraved upon stone to endure beyond the fleeting presence of the living—become, in Medrano’s hands, disembodied fragments, stripped of their spatial and historical significance. In this relentless cataloging, the very weight of the stone—a material charged with permanence and memory—dissolves into the lightness of textual accumulation, mirroring the modern world’s transformation of objects from bearers of presence into hollow tokens of excess and spectacle. Medrano’s work thus foreshadows a mode of engagement with materiality in which things are no longer valued for their intrinsic depth but for their capacity to be extracted, displaced, and collected into a system where accumulation overtakes meaning.

In the *Silva* there is a certain intuition of the presence of “the back of things”, which leads this work to attempt to uncover magical secrets and sense transcendent messages hidden in antiques and in the memory of stones. Yet, this intuition remains unfulfilled: Medrano’s relentless accumulation of epitaphs and inscriptions does not lead to revelation but to an excess of signs transformed into objects stripped of their original depth. On another occasion, Cristóbal Salvaje takes Medrano and his Bretón companion to a cave:

> El Bretón y yo, curiosos, andábamos mirando por todas las partes de la cueva y gustábamos mucho en ver cosas tan antiguas como eran aquellos letreros y divisas que estaban allí escritas, la mayor parte desde el tiempo de los Moros y Romanos. Y, como eran en lenguas diferentes y en letra muy antigua, no pudiendo entender algunas de ellas, el fámulo leyéndolas bien nos las interpretaba y hacía entender muy claramente. Viendo allí cosas tan sentidas y curiosas, escribiéndolas las guardamos por memoria. (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 282)
>
> [Curious, the Bretón and I were walking around all parts of the cave and greatly enjoyed seeing things as ancient as those inscriptions and symbols that were written there, most of them dating from the time of the Moors and Romans. And, since they were in different languages and in very old script, we were not able to understand some of them, but the servant, by reading them carefully, interpreted them for us very clearly. Seeing such meaningful and curious things there, we wrote them down and kept them in our memory.”]

Medrano turns the world he inhabits and frantically traverses into a stone canvas, pursuing the fantasy of deciphering mysteries and secrets inaccessible to everyone but him. The orography of the deserts he describes, the caves, the mountains, the village cemeteries, the abandoned ruins. . . all these spaces conspire to show him written words that, beyond what they say, supposedly contain a mystery. The surface of the world he travels in his journeys is marked by writing in various languages, from different eras, sometimes illegible. It is a world that is literally encrypted and needs to be deciphered, even though those letters do not mean anything because their secrets are nonexistent. Medrano wanders the world out of a sterile and exhausting curiosity. This is exemplified and taken to the extreme when the necromancer Cristóbal gives him a (secret) book of secrets that implicitly promises to illuminate that hidden side of things that is intuited in this work obsessed with mysteries.

> Julio mío, aunque yo creo que sois caballero y hombre verdadero, todavía por mayor firmeza quiero que juréis en esta cruz de nunca dar a hombre ni mujer un libro que yo quiero daros, que lo tengo más caro que mi corazón; y que, estando

> en el paso de la muerte, si tenéis tiempo ni fuerza, vos mismo lo quemaréis para que ninguno después de vos goce de tesoro tan precioso. También quiero que prometáis sobre este santo madero que nunca descubriréis a criatura nacida los secretos que yo quiero mostraros.” (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 274)
>
> [My dear Julio, although I believe you are a nobleman and man of truth, I still want you to swear on this cross to never give to a man or a woman a book that I want to give you, a book that I hold dearer than my own heart. And that, when you are at the threshold of death, if you have the time and strength, you will burn it yourself so that no one after you can enjoy such a precious treasure. I also want you to promise on this sacred cross that you will never reveal the secrets I want to show you to any living creature.]

As can be seen, this book gifted by a magician is a key to unlock the secrets of the world: the chimera of a curious person. The knowledge that Medrano claims to possess is as imaginary as it is exclusive: the necromancer orders him to destroy it so that no one after him can enjoy these precious secrets.

## 5. Conclusions: The Dark Side of Things and the Exhaustion of Curiosity

Nothing in the *Silva* is what it promises. There is never more than a trivial curiosity that barely scratches the surface of things without the will to delve deeper. The world presented in the *Silva*—and let us not forget that it claims to be a non-fictional and autobiographical account—is, in Jean Baudrillard’s terms (Baudrillard 1994), a simulacrum or the depiction of something that either had no original or that no longer has an original (p. 6). Within the universe drawn by Medrano, the distinction between reality and its representation is futile; the equivalence between the real and its representation has been irretrievably lost.

*La silva curiosa* exposes the dark side of curiosity, revealing its potential to unravel meaning rather than construct it. In Medrano’s work, curiosity is presented as an erratic, obsessive force that ultimately consumes itself. The book’s structure is a fragmented labyrinth of anecdotes, epitaphs, and necromantic encounters, in which information is gathered but never synthesized. Unlike traditional miscellanies, which sought to curate and organize diverse material, the *Silva* offers no stable framework or resolution—only the relentless collection of strange and unsettling phenomena. Medrano does not seek knowledge; he seeks possession, accumulating inscriptions and arcane references as if they were mere artifacts, detached from their original contexts and devoid of interpretative depth.

The necromancer’s cave, where past and present collapse into a spectral vision, epitomizes this destabilization of meaning. Here, curiosity does not lead to wisdom but instead confronts the traveler with a disturbing spectacle of disorientation, where reality dissolves into illusion. Medrano’s relentless quest—whether literary, antiquarian, or supernatural—reveals a world in which the profusion of signs does not generate insight but rather exhausts it. This excess of curiosity, which leads him to amass epitaphs and macabre inscriptions without interpretation, anticipates the thematic concerns of Gothic fiction.

Yet *La silva curiosa* is not merely a precursor to the Gothic; it also encapsulates the ideological exhaustion of its own time. Unlike the Gothic novel, which often restores some semblance of resolution, Medrano’s work offers no closure, no revelation, no deeper truth—only the compulsive accumulation of signs that remain detached from meaning. He himself becomes the ultimate object of curiosity, trapped in an endless cycle of inquiry without resolution. His relentless pursuit of the strange, the morbid, and the arcane ultimately reflects a world in crisis, where curiosity has reached its breaking point and where interpretation, rather than illuminating, only deepens the mystery of things. Thus, the *Silva* fully embodies a world where curiosity does not enlighten but obscures, where coherence is replaced by fragmentation, and where the pursuit of meaning ultimately

leads to a confrontation with the void. In Medrano's textual maze, curiosity ceases to be an instrument of discovery and instead becomes a force that dissolves knowledge into spectacle and excess.

In the praxis of curiosity found in the *Silva*, the world is a hieroglyph of signs, of hermetic signifiers, compulsively collected, paradoxically never sought for meaning beyond the suggestion of a mystery. By the late sixteenth century, *La silva curiosa* embodies a unique, outlandish, and unproductive curiosity that, nonetheless, dreams of the fantasy of the dark side of things.

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## Notes

1 I cite from my own critical edition of *La silva curiosa*, (Medrano [1583] 1998), which remains the only existing critical edition of the text and includes a comprehensive introduction contextualizing its historical, literary, and editorial significance. Several scholars—Jules Carsalade du Pont (1882), Gilles Banderier (2009), Antonio Prieto (1986), André Gallego Barnés (1996a, 1996b), Lina Rodríguez Cacho (1993, 1996), Fernando Bravo López (2016), Eva Lara Alberola (2017), Carlos Mata Induráin, Lilith Lee (2011), and especially David Castillo (2011)—have explored various aspects of *La silva curiosa*.

2 See (Molho 1988, p. 46): "Soledades".

3 Regarding the theme of curiosity in *La silva curiosa*, see my discussion in *La silva curiosa* (Alcalá Galán 1998, pp. 29–33), where I examine how Medrano's treatment of curiosity diverges from the humanist ideal, transforming it into an erratic and often unsettling force that drives the text's structure and thematic concerns.

4 Unless otherwise indicated in the list of works cited, all English translations are mine.

5 In my critical edition of *La silva curiosa*, (Alcalá Galán 1998), I extensively detail the editorial history of the work. In addition to the first edition published by Nicolas Chesneau in 1583 and the later reissue by César Oudin in 1608, there exists a pirated edition from 1580 (Joan Escartilla, Zaragoza), which, although presenting a new cover, lacks key elements such as the prologue, table of contents, laudatory poems, tax stamps, licenses, and approvals. Rather than being a fraudulent reissue, it constitutes a remainder of the first edition, repackaged with false data to circumvent the heavy taxation imposed on book printing (3–4).

6 As (Mata 2000) demonstrated, the *Silva*, although not a book of emblems, presents an abundance of emblematic elements throughout the work, thus reflecting the courtly context in which it was conceived.

7 See my critical edition *La silva curiosa* (Alcalá Galán 1998, pp. 5–7) for a detailed discussion of Medrano's biographical uncertainties. Bravo López (2016) speculates that Medrano may have died before 1588, citing as potential evidence his absence from his son Pierre's wedding that year. However, given Medrano's peripatetic lifestyle, determining the precise cause of his absence remains difficult.

8 [. . .] Julius ecce Medrana novus velut alter Ulysses, A variis populis, a varioque mari, Gemmarum omne genus, genus omne reportat et auri, Thesaurus nunquam quantus Ulissis erat. Jo. Auratus Poeta Regius (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 80).

9 I have personally consulted the only known copy of this work, held at The Hispanic Society. It is a fraudulent edition lacking tax stamps or royal privilege. Menéndez y Pelayo and other scholars erroneously asserted that it was dedicated to the Duke of Épernon, likely due to their lack of direct access to the book. My examination confirms that it is unequivocally dedicated to Henry III.

10 On the genre of Renaissance miscellanies, see (Prieto 1986; Rallo Gruss 1984; Rodríguez Cacho 1993, 1996; Alcalá Galán 1996) and the "Estudio" of my edition in *La silva curiosa* (1998).

11 This is amply documented in my critical edition of *La silva curiosa*.

12 "Y si no fuera lo que Vuestra Majestad me dijo estando en Fontainebleau cuando me mandó que compusiese un libro de empresas y divisas españolas, y alguna otra obra en lengua española de sujetos varios y curiosos, no me atreviera yo de ofrecer a Vuestra Majestad esta mi *Silva* siendo ella indigna de tanto valor y merecimiento. Pero al fin, deseando en todas cosas conformarme a su deseo, no hallando cosa que para su servicio me sea difícil ni trabajosa (y conociendo que Vuestra Majestad se recrea naturalmente en cosas diversas y curiosas, y se huelga mucho con la lectura de la lengua Castellana)" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 74) ["And if it were not for what Your Majesty told me while in Fontainebleau when you commanded me to compose a book of Spanish

emblems and mottos, and some other work in the Spanish language on various and curious subjects, I would not dare to present to Your Majesty this *Silva* of mine, which is unworthy of such value and merit. But ultimately, desiring to conform in all things to your desire, not finding anything that would be difficult or laborious for your service (and knowing that Your Majesty naturally takes pleasure in diverse and curious matters, and greatly enjoys reading in the Castilian language)"].

13 Menéndez Pelayo (1943) refers to *La silva curiosa* as a work intended for teaching Spanish to Queen Marguerite of Valois (p. 122). In my critical edition *La silva curiosa* (Alcalá Galán 1998), I consider this hypothesis; however, there is no conclusive evidence to support it. The epistle that opens *La silva curiosa* states that the queen enjoys reading in Spanish, but it does not indicate that she needed to learn the language. For further discussion, see (Bravo López 2016, pp. 12–13).

14 The following would be an example, among others, of what Medrano calls a funny epitaph. It tells the story of a lame tailor, Gil Vivanco, whom he calls Vulcano, who has an affair with a fisherman's wife, whom he calls Venus. Vivanco is murdered by the husband after spending the night with the beautiful fisherwoman.

¿Quién duerme aquí? Gil Vivanco.
Yo fui sastre, cojo y manco,
Que por ser enamorado
Me veis aquí sepultado.
Mi cornudo de Mallorca
Me mató con una horca,
Y me arrojó en un barranco.
¡Dios te perdone, Vivanco! (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 154)

[Who sleeps here? Gil Vivanco.
I was a tailor, lame and maimed,
Because I was in love,
You see me buried here.
My cuckold from Mallorca
Killed me with a pitchfork
And threw me into a ravine.
May God forgive you, Vivanco!]

15 Gilles Banderier traces an enigmatic epitaph first recorded in *La silva curiosa* (Medrano 1583b), where the author claimed to have found it in Bourbonnais. The epitaph later appeared in various works, including the *Hortus epitaphiorum selectorum* (1648), and was linked to multiple locations, particularly Écouis in Normandy. Scholars like Abraham Golnitz (1631) searched for it without success, while others, such as Thomas Platter (1599), claimed to have seen it. This shifting attribution raises questions about whether the epitaph was a real inscription or a literary motif that evolved over time through oral and written transmission.

16 This section begins as follows: "Parte de los epitafios curiosos hallados por Julio en diversas tierras, enviados a la sabia y valerosa Marfisa, en las mismas lenguas naturales en las cuales fueron compuestos. Y, por ser Marfisa experimentada y peritísima en diversas ciencias y en las lenguas extranjeras, el dicho Julio no se los explica ni declara" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 229) ["Part of the curious epitaphs discovered by Julio in various lands, sent to the wise and valiant Marfisa, in the same native languages in which they were composed. And because Marfisa is experienced and highly skilled in various sciences and foreign languages, Julio does not explain or interpret them."].

17 "y, viendo que este que aquí está era tan hermoso y estaba tan sincero y entero como si el mismo día muerto fuera, le hizo este altar que aquí veis, y le dejó por ejemplo, así como esta con su Epitafio" (Medrano [1583] 1998, p. 246). ["And, seeing that this one here was so handsome, sincere and whole as if he had died that very day, he made this altar that you see here, and left him as an example just as he is with his epitaph"].

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# Rebeldes con Pausa: Teresa de Jesús, Cervantes, Fray Luis, and the Curious Path to Holiness

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**Abstract:** Early modern theologians often cast female curiosity as both a moral flaw and an epistemic transgression. Aware of this suspicion, Teresa of Ávila professed to have renounced such dangerous impulses in her youth. Yet the persistent presence of curiosity in her writings suggests a strategic redeployment—one that fosters attentiveness and subtly renegotiates ecclesiastical authority as she actively advances reform within the Carmelite order. Through life-writing and scriptural exegesis, Teresa cultivates a disciplined appetite for knowledge: an appetite that outwardly conforms to, yet quietly subverts, doctrinal anxieties surrounding women's intellectual desires. Her use of *curiosidad* moves fluidly between sacred and secular registers—sometimes connoting superficial fascination, at other times signaling a deeper, interior restlessness. Resisting reductive interpretation, Teresa reveals a sophisticated and self-aware engagement with a disposition both morally ambiguous and intellectually generative. The same culture that once feared her intellect would ultimately aestheticize it. After her death, Teresa's relics were fragmented and displayed in Philip II's *Wunderkammer*, transforming her once-condemned *curiosidad* into *curiositas*, an imperial collectible. Reading Teresa alongside her posthumous interpreters—Fray Luis de León and Miguel de Cervantes—this essay explores how her radical epistemological ambition reverberated through Spanish intellectual culture. Spanning this cultural arc—from sin to spectacle, from forbidden desire to sanctified display—Teresa emerges as a masterful theorist and activist reformer of spiritual authority. In these expansive roles, she reveals the immense and often contradictory power that curiosity wielded in the early modern world.

**Keywords:** curiosity; *curiositas*; epistemology; mystic activism; Teresa de Jesús; Fray Luis de León; Miguel de Cervantes

## 1. Introduction

In 1701, the Franciscan moralist Antonio Arbiol y Díaz (1651–1726) launched a pointed critique against what he regarded as a growing moral peril: curiosity. Condemning this "impulse to knowledge" as a "most ugly and pernicious vice," he found it especially dangerous when embodied by women (Arbiol y Díaz 1789, pp. 112, 137)[1]. To Arbiol, female curiosity was not a benign inclination but a spiritual liability, one that left women particularly vulnerable to deception and error. He was especially troubled by women who sought to frame their spiritual experiences through theological study—an ambition he dismissed as both presumptuous and doomed to failure. Such efforts, he argued, produced nothing but "arrogant theories" (bachillerías), born of texts that women inevitably "mispronounced" and "misunderstood." (Arbiol y Díaz 1789, p. 138).

As caustic as this invective was, it was hardly novel. Centuries earlier, Augustine had famously classified curiosity as *concupiscentia oculorum*—a seductive "lust of the eyes"

that drew believers away from divine truth (Augustine 2025).[2] This appetite for knowledge continued to be regarded as especially pernicious in women, who continued to be cast as both morally suspect and epistemologically unstable. By the sixteenth century, theologians—drawing on Tertullian, John Chrysostom, and Thomas Aquinas—had escalated these warnings into a form of moral censure, aimed specifically at women's engagement with textual interpretation and spiritual writing (Tertullian 1994, vol. 4; Chrysostom 1994, Series 1, vol. 13; Aquinas 1947, II–II, q. 167, a. 1–2). Beneath these strident condemnations lay an implicit acknowledgment: that the curious woman, merely by questioning and articulating spiritual knowledge, posed a potent threat, capable not only of challenging but also of destabilizing entrenched hierarchies of gendered authority and doctrinal orthodoxy.

Whether Arbiol y Díaz had Saint Teresa specifically in mind is impossible to determine, yet his censure of female curiosity sheds light on the fraught intellectual and spiritual terrain she had to navigate. Teresa's autobiography, *The Book of My Life* (*Vida*), offers a striking rejoinder: a woman who not only demonstrates curiosity but deliberately negotiates its place within the moral framework of her time. Through the act of narrating her life and interpreting the Scripture said to guide it, Teresa articulates a sustained appetite for knowledge—one that both conforms to and quietly subverts the doctrinal suspicion surrounding women's epistemological desires.

Aware of the dubious reputation attached to curiosity, Teresa nonetheless speaks of—or confesses—her inclination with notable caution. Early in the *Vida*, she admits that even as a child, she was "curious about everything" (*era curiosa en todo cuanto hacía*), recalling how she once believed this impulse to be "a virtue" (*me parecía virtud*) (Teresa of Avila 2001, p. 23).[3] Acknowledging her "mistake," she claims to have largely overcome the tendency—"I have greatly improved the curiosity that used to afflict me" (*me hallo mejorada de curiosidad que solía tener*)—only to concede, in the very next breath, "not completely, which is the reason why I am always doing penance" (*aunque no del todo, que no me veo estar en esto siempre mortificada*) (Teresa of Avila [1588] 2001, Obras completas de Santa Teresa de Jesús, p. 734). This dance of asserting, erasing, and reasserting her intellectual drive underscores Teresa's gift for simultaneously affirming and denying a trait that could be deemed spiritually hazardous.

The tension intensifies when we consider the polyvalent semantics of *curiosidad* in the early modern world. Moving fluidly between sacred and secular registers, Teresa deploys the term in multiple contexts: sometimes referencing appearances—her own or others'—and at other times evoking a deeper interior restlessness, a yearning to understand. Her usage resists neat categorization, signaling a sophisticated, self-aware engagement with a term whose moral and theological contours remained unsettled.

While the transparency of Teresa's rhetorical posture may be open to debate—whether in terms of motive, strategy, or spiritual sincerity—the primacy of curiosity as both an intellectual and emotional force in her writing is undeniable. Even when her inquisitiveness appears formulaic, it fuels a sustained epistemological quest. At a moment when feminine virtue was defined by silence and enclosure, Teresa's desire to know—and the understanding it yields—emerges as a potent force. Although she sometimes disavows the impulse ("I've never, glory to God, felt the desire to know things, since I gain nothing by knowing [anything]," *jamás, gloria a Dios, fui curiosa en desear saber cosas, ni se me da nada de saber más*), she offers many other instances affirming it: "the great desire I have to know—how is your Excellency's health and the rest" (*Tengo mucho deseo de saber; cómo le va a vuestra excelencia de salud, y lo demás*) (Teresa of Avila [1588] 2001, Obras completas de Santa Teresa de Jesú, pp. 759, 38). Or again: "I received your letter—it always gives me great joy to know from you, to see how our Lord keeps you aligned with His great design, which is no small favor, living in this Babylon" (*me da mucho contento saber de vuestras mercedes y ver*

*cómo las tiene nuestro Señor en sus buenos propósitos, que no es pequeña merced, estando en esa Babilonia*) (Teresa of Avila [1588] 2001, Obras completas de Santa Teresa de Jesús, p. 166). Even when claiming to focus solely on divine intent, Teresa repeatedly reveals an insistent wish to know "the rest"—how worldly matters, especially those involving her allies and the court in Madrid (her "Babylon"), unfold around her.

Taken together, these expressions of curiosity—whether aimed at Scripture, correspondence, or worldly affairs—suggest a mode of knowing that exceeds mere introspection.

In Teresa's writing, curiosity frequently prompts action, emerging not as passive reflection but as a performative gesture with tangible spiritual and material consequences. Her "impulse for knowledge," in other words, exceeds the traditional framing of a "passive" mystic condition. Scholars often argue that the danger of Teresa's mysticism lies in its interiority—its proximity to Reformation-era individualism and heterodox movements such as illuminism. Yet perhaps the perceived threat resided elsewhere: not solely in her introspection, but in her capacity to merge cognition, volition, and action within her mystic practice. Teresa's "rebelliousness" may stem less from contemplative withdrawal and more from an active spirituality that seamlessly intertwines thought, desire, and movement.

Within the charged moral and theological climate of the late sixteenth century, Teresa de Jesús dared to infuse her autobiographical and mystical texts with her own, unnamed *curiosidad*—an impulse whose early modern meanings ranged from vanity to intellectual transgression. This essay traces how such curiosity shaped not only the composition of Teresa's works but also their complex afterlife. Transformed into relics and objects of public devotion, Teresa's body of work—and, quite literally, her physical body—was fragmented and dispersed across the Spanish empire, sometimes consigned to royal collections like a *curiositas* in a Habsburg *Wunderkammer*. While these guarded spaces remained accessible to only a privileged few, her texts and testimonies—both direct and mediated—circulated widely, becoming regular touchstones for readers within and beyond the cloister. Writers as diverse as Cervantes and Fray Luis de León eulogized her intellect and public example, reframing her paradoxical figure for an imperial stage of contested Catholic piety.

Teresa's quiet yet rebellious journey is examined here, particularly through the lenses of these two writers. While Fray Luis's evolving admiration for her expansive devotion remains insufficiently explored, Cervantes's lesser-known poem—composed for her beatification in 1614—centers not on her saintly aspirations but on her secular epistemological gifts. Each writer, in his own way, pays homage to the path forged by the resilient and curious Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada. Most crucially, the dynamic concept of *curiositas* illuminates Teresa as a study in contrasts: at once "possessed and saint," viewed through Augustine's "lustful eyes," yet ultimately venerated by Philip II's envious royal gaze in his *Wunderkammer*. Spanning this cultural arc—from sin to spectacle, from forbidden desire to sanctified display—Teresa emerges as a masterful theorist-practitioner and one of curiosity's most emblematic relics. In so doing, she reveals the immense and often contradictory power that curiosity wielded in the early modern world.

## 2. Curiosity in Word and Deed

Perhaps it was this real-life side of mysticism that made Max Aub wonder, fifty years ago, "who is more active than our most prominent female mystic [Teresa]?" (Aub 1966, p. 233) For Aub, Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross were no otherworldly dreamers but rather "activists" (*"nuestros místicos son 'activistas'" emphasis is the author's*) (Aub 1966, Manual, p. 233). In his view, mysticism and asceticism differ not in their yearning to know God but in what they do with that knowledge: mysticism translates insight into reform and transformation, while asceticism turns inward, privileging renunciation. While both religious practices aim to "know God," he concedes, only mystics use this knowledge

to bring about some form of action (i.e., reform) in the real world. Aub reminds us that after the death or castigation of Erasmists in Spain in the 1500s, mystics were the only reformists left on the Spanish ground determined to fight for a more genuine view *and practice* of Christianity. Aub describes these mystic figures, Saint John and Saint Teresa, as "battered errant knights that lost many battles but ultimately were able to leave behind an undeletable footprint [in Spanish cultural history]." (Aub 1966, Manual, p. 234).

Aub's metaphor of mysticism as embodied resistance resonates with the ethical vision of other thinkers of his time. Especially relevant for the purposes of this essay is Simone Weil, a twentieth-century philosopher and activist who likewise challenged the binary between contemplation and action. Weil, who also fought on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War (as Aub), saw mystical insight as inseparable from ethical engagement, see (Weil 2002, p. 117; Weil 1973, p. 63).[4] For her, mysticism demanded a radical commitment to suffering and justice. Like Teresa, she saw divine knowledge not as a retreat but as a summons—a call to intervene in the world, even at great personal cost.

Though separated by centuries, both women pursued transcendence not as escape but as ethical intensification—a means of reshaping both self and society. In this light, Teresa's *curiosidad*—and her mystical praxis more broadly—can be read not only as interior piety but also as a form of "spiritual activism," grounded in an epistemology of attention and a politics of reform. Whether in sixteenth-century Ávila or twentieth-century France and Spain, mysticism—far from evading the world—emerges, for these figures, as a deliberate way of moving within it.

Yet in sixteenth-century Spain, such ideas placed women, especially religious women, on precarious footing. Few environments were more suspicious of female intellectual agency than the convent, where inquiry was usually tolerated only within narrow devotional confines. The Holy Office regarded practices like mental prayer and contemplation with suspicion, worried they might be linked to "illuminated" heresies. At a time when the Inquisition was prosecuting alleged *alumbrados* and punishing so-called "false visionaries," Teresa stood on volatile ground.

As Roland H. Bainton observed, "the Inquisition never ceased to distrust mysticism"—a distrust that loomed especially large over female contemplatives (Bainton 1977, p. 33). Alison Weber has further illustrated the stakes of Teresa's position, showing how she lived "under the shadow of Magdalena de la Cruz," the infamous false mystic whose legacy of disrepute lingered over other "alumbradas" like María de Cazalla and Francisca Hernández.[5]

Teresa's identity as a mystic thus complicated her relationship to curiosity. On one hand, mystical vocation allowed her to disclaim personal agency in acquiring new insights, since mystics were supposed to receive "truths beyond the understanding." (Hoad 2023)[6]. On the other hand, any woman's active, analytic pursuit of theological truth could be cast as heretical. As the Bishop of Puebla reminded Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz almost a century later, there is a difference between scholastic and mystical theology: the former is learned through acts of understanding, the latter through the loving affections of the will."[7] Tolerating Teresa's "affective" knowledge, then, did not necessarily make room for her active, searching intellect.

Teresa deftly navigated this predicament by emphasizing the ineffability of her mystical encounters. "One cannot understand [the mystic trance], much less describe it," she wrote, "since [the soul or reason] cannot comprehend what it is understanding; it understands by not understanding it."[8] Revelation, in her telling, is an event beyond the bounds of ordinary cognition (Ramírez 2015, p. 302). Her claim might be slightly modified by modern theological perspectives, which hold that revelation requires the recipient's acceptance—an implicit acknowledgment of some volitional dimension. Teresa admits being halfway there when she famously underscored her understanding that God's words

"are deeds" (*Sus palabras son obras*), perhaps suggesting that although divine knowledge may be a gift, it also demands a human response (Teresa of Avila [1588] 2001, Obras completas de Santa Teresa, p. 144). Max Aub and Simone Weil would call that response "action," though Teresa had little freedom to make such a claim openly, lest she appear willful and risk accusations of heterodoxy. Consequently, the reformist rarely admits that her understanding may have been sharpened by these divine encounters and translated into real action.

Revealing how easily a woman's claim to knowledge—even if divinely bestowed—could be construed as overreach, she admits in *El libro de las fundaciones* that "I later understood what it was, but did not dare to say it, since we live in a world where one must think what others think of oneself." (Teresa of Avila [1588] 2001, Obras completas de Santa Teresa, p. 591). Like the notion of curiosity itself, this private form of understanding could only be acknowledged covertly. In this sense, Teresa's carefully veiled "activation" of knowledge resonates with Weil's insistence that spiritual insight demands both contemplation and action. In an era that required Teresa to mask the volitional side of her mysticism, she nonetheless chose action beyond this private understanding—lest she be seen as crossing from "affective" devotion into the realm of scholastic "acts of understanding," which male authorities guarded so vigilantly.

## 3. Fray Luis' "Forgotten Apology" and Teresa's Veiled Activism—Across Centuries

By the 1590s, Teresa of Ávila was increasingly recognized not only as a mystic but also as a figure of spiritual reform. Her frequent expressions of humility and self-effacement may have offered some protection from direct condemnation during her lifetime. Yet, the deeply involved nature of her spiritual practice, along with the meticulous attention given to her writings after her death, only heightened the uncertainty surrounding her status as an intellectual and theological authority. Contemporary critics—including Alonso de la Fuente, Francisco de Pisa, Juan de Lorenzana, and Juan de Orellana—viewed her repeated claims of "ignorance" and "inadequacy" with suspicion, interpreting them as rhetorical strategies that concealed a deeper engagement with knowledge traditionally denied to women. To these men, even her constant appeals to "obedience" seemed less like genuine submission and more like a calculated front for doctrinal ambition.

No accusation haunted Teresa more persistently than the charge that she had overstepped her place as a woman by assuming the role of a teacher and reformer.[9] Despite her insistence on obedience and humility, her visibility as a founder, writer, and spiritual director stood in uneasy tension with Saint Paul's long-invoked injunctions against women teaching (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12). Alonso de la Fuente invoked Pauline doctrine in his denunciation to the Inquisition: "*Esta mujer se mete a enseñar, contraviniendo la palabra de San Pablo.*"[10] Indeed, in and beyond the canonization process, multiple witnesses testified to Teresa's desire for her nuns to *"learn and understand Christian doctrine and the mysteries of faith,"* hiring teachers and encouraging critical engagement—quietly forming a community of seekers, even as she disavowed formal authority.[11]

In this fraught context, an unlikely defender emerged in Fray Luis de León—a poet, theologian, and towering scholar. He was commissioned in 1588 to edit Teresa's writings for publication, an apparently routine task that took an unexpected turn, becoming one of Teresa's most consequential advocates. Although he had written La perfecta casada (1583), a text championing patriarchal ideals of female modesty and silence, his encounter with Teresa's works revealed a profound shift in perspective. The woman who might once have appeared irreconcilable with his idealized vision of Christian femininity came to embody, in his later view, a vessel of divine wisdom and ecclesial renewal. Editing her

works thus became, for him, a theologically significant act—culminating in a compelling preface (the so-called Apología) that not only defended Teresa's right to write and teach, but also functioned as a deliberate gesture of theological rehabilitation.

In the *Apología*, Fray Luis argued that Teresa had not transgressed by offering instruction. He compared her revelatory experiences to those of canonized male saints, finding her teachings orthodox and transformative. "Look at the nuns and monks of the Discalced Carmelites," he urged. "Formed under her doctrine. Are they deluded? Mad? Or are they, in fact, the clearest example of pure religion?" In this flourish, Fray Luis positioned Teresa's mysticism not as a questionable innovation but as a force for authentic renewal (León 1944, p. 919). Rather than confining her to personal piety, he emphasized and praised the tangible fruits of her ministry: the communities shaped by her guidance. By defending Teresa's spiritual authority, he effectively legitimized the activist dimension of her mysticism.

Over four centuries later, the Church formally affirmed what Fray Luis had intuited. In 1970, Pope Paul VI declared Teresa a Doctor of the Church—the first woman to receive the title. Reflecting on this elevation, Paul VI highlighted her unique blend of spiritual and intellectual depth. Yet he also repeated the enduring tension by attributing much of her insight to divine "initiative," an echo of the standard framing of women's knowledge as a gift rather than a product of active study:

> ¿De dónde le venía a Teresa el tesoro de su doctrina? Sin duda alguna, le venía de su inteligencia . . . de su correspondencia a la gracia acogida en su alma . . . Pero ¿era ésta la única fuente de su 'eminente doctrina'? . . . Nos encontramos . . . ante un alma en la que se manifiesta la iniciativa divina extraordinaria, sentida y posteriormente descrita llana, fiel y estupendamente por Teresa con un lenguaje literario peculiarísimo. (Paul VI 1970)

While the title of Doctor seemingly resolved questions about Teresa's orthodoxy, it renewed debate about whether women's theological authority is best accepted when framed as passively received rather than actively pursued. Male theologians like Aquinas are rarely portrayed as mere vessels; in Teresa's case, her *curiosidad* is often sanctified only through a language of humility and submission. Teresa's rhetorical balancing act—between deference and discernment—remains not merely a historical posture but a model for the compromises still often demanded of women who speak with spiritual or intellectual authority.

## 4. From Curious Woman to Canonized Curiosity

If Fray Luis de León's 1588 edition of Teresa's works—and his robust defense of her orthodoxy—did not entirely dispel theological reservations, it nonetheless set a precedent in which her mystical knowledge could be publicly acknowledged, if not fully embraced.[12] Among those who bore witness to this reframing was Miguel de Cervantes, who dedicated a poem to Teresa in 1614, the year of her beatification.[13] By then, she was officially numbered among the blessed, even as tensions remained between the humility she invoked and the autonomy she exercised.

While Fray Luis made Teresa's works theologically palatable, Cervantes rendered her spiritual journey intellectually resonant. In the poem *"A los éxtasis de la Beata Madre Santa Teresa de Jesús,"* he focuses not only on her mystical raptures but on how her pursuit of understanding shaped her path to holiness. A superficial reading of Cervantes's poem might see only the elevation of Teresa's mystical experiences. On deeper inspection, however, it highlights the intellectual rigor behind her mysticism and critiques a culture that often reduced holy women to mere symbols. In an era prone to aestheticizing, politicizing, and domesticating sanctity, Cervantes refuses to cast her ascent to glory in conventional terms. For Cervantes, sainthood becomes a mystery grounded in knowledge—a sacred pedagogy where divine ecstasy instructs as much as it inspires:

Fue su espíritu alzado a las estrellas,
y en su pecho dejó Dios estampadas
de su sabiduría las señales.
(Her spirit was lifted to the stars,
and on her breast God stamped
the signs of His wisdom)[14]

Divine union here serves as an epistemological gateway—God is Teresa's teacher, and she is a strikingly "greedy" (*codiciosa*) student—an explicit allusion to a kind of epistemological fervor typically regarded as dangerous in women.[15] By framing her intellectual pursuit not as transgression but as sanctification, Cervantes echoes Teresa's own sentiment in *Vida* 40.1: "No hay saber más alto que el de Dios, y a él se encamina mi alma" ("There is no knowledge higher than that of God, and to it my soul strives").

Cervantes's poem to Teresa, in sum, celebrates a female saint who, through these instructive ecstasies, became "humbler," but also "wiser" [more knowledgeable], and more "obedient" [though it remains unclear to what or to whom] (emphasis added, *más humilde, más sabia y obediente*). This is as close as one could come, in the early 1600s, to celebrating the knowledge or understanding of a woman, holy or not. Strikingly, in a religious poem, Cervantes dedicates great space to describing the process by which Teresa's soul and intellect are elevated, while saying relatively little about the more traditional virtues that supposedly earned her mystical enlightenment in the first place.

The novelist's sensitivity to Teresa's journey may have stemmed from personal rather than devotional proximity. Cervantes' sister Luisa joined the Discalced Carmelites in Alcalá de Henares in 1567 (just before Teresa's residency at that convent for a few months), and Cervantes himself was present when his sister professed vows.[16] Books that Teresa "constantly read" still remain in the same convent, attesting—through witnesses like Luisa—not only to her devotion to prayer, but also to study and writing. Perhaps for Cervantes, Teresa was no remote or abstract saint, but a quiet—yet dissonant—presence, felt both in life and in text, close at hand. Aware that her image was celebrated, contested, and even reified across both religious and secular spheres, he subtly emphasizes that her quest for knowledge could not be confined to the spectacle of relics and royal pageantry.

Yet while Teresa's influence may have lingered quietly in Cervantes's imagination, her legacy beyond the cloister would take on a far more visible and politicized form. As her sanctity gained institutional momentum, the mystic who once dwelled among books and sisters became a symbol mobilized through relics, ritual, and imperial display. As saints were canonized, their relics became prized emblems in both courtly rituals and ecclesiastical pageantry. Teresa's body of work—and literally, her body—would be dispersed throughout the empire, some parts finding their way into Philip II's showcase at El Escorial, alongside bones, robes, and other saintly relics.[17] The reformer who once declared, "¿Qué se me da a mí de los reyes y señores, si no quiero sus rentas. . .?" ("What do I care about kings and lords, if I do not want their riches?") was not blind to the uses of wealth—she sought it when necessary to found and sustain her convents (Teresa of Avila [1588] 2001, Obras completas de Santa Teresa, p. 283). Yet she consistently cast such efforts within a larger spiritual resistance to the trappings of worldly power. It is thus a profound irony that the woman who navigated courtly networks out of necessity should, in death, be absorbed into the very spectacle of empire she once held at a distance. Her sanctity—rooted in reform, prayer, and mystical authorship—was ultimately reframed through the gold-leaf optics of imperial veneration.

While Cervantes began to explore the concept of sanctity in 1614, readers would have to wait until the 1615 publication of the second part of *Don Quixote* for a fuller insight into his vision. There, in Chapter 9, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza debate the relative

merits of knights and saints in a memorable exchange that may offer the clearest Cervantine meditation on holiness. Sancho praises humble, healing saints—those whose miracles and relics inspire tangible devotion—above emperors and knights, claiming their "fame," both worldly and eternal, surpasses that of any earthly conqueror.

What appears at first to be a contrast between secular and sacred renown in fact operates as a coded reflection on grace and spiritual authority. Within the doctrinal constraints imposed by the Inquisition, Cervantes deftly recasts "fame" as a metaphor for sanctity and divine favor. Through Sancho's voice, he affirms a form of embodied holiness linked to healing, suffering, and relics without directly challenging ecclesiastical power.

> *The fame of those who raise the dead, give sight to the blind, heal the lame, and cure the sick... is better, for both this world and the next, than the fame left behind by all the gentile emperors and knights-errant who ever lived.* (Cervantes Saavedra 2005, chap. 2.9, pp. 507–8)

> (*Cogido le tengo... luego la fama del que resucita muertos... mejor fama será, para este y para el otro siglo.*) (Cervantes Saavedra 2011)

This reframing of fame elevates the miraculous over the martial, and the spiritually efficacious over the politically grand. The saint's "fame," reinforced through chapels, relics, and royal reverence, gestures toward a deeper form of power—one rooted not in domination, but in devotion.

Cervantes also underscores the irony of relic culture: that saints' remains—some adorned with wigs, prosthetic eyes, and carved limbs—are carried in solemn processions by monarchs themselves. Sancho continues:

> *The bodies and relics of the saints... have lamps, candles, shrouds, crutches, paintings, wigs, eyes, and legs, increasing devotion and enhancing their Christian fame. Kings carry their relics on their shoulders, kiss the fragments of their bones, and decorate their private chapels and favorite altars with them.* (Cervantes Saavedra 2011)

> (*Los cuerpos y las reliquias de los santos... tienen lámparas, velas, mortajas, muletas, pinturas, cabelleras, ojos, piernas... los cuerpos de los santos o sus reliquias llevan los reyes sobre sus hombros, besan los pedazos de sus huesos, adornan y enriquecen con ellos sus oratorios.*) (Cervantes Saavedra 2011)

This layered irony was not lost on Erasmus of Rotterdam either. In *De cultu sanctorum*, he lamented the Church's obsession with "drivel-stained napkins" while ignoring "the books [the saints] wrote."[18] For Erasmus, it was the *animorum reliquiae*—"relics of the mind"—that carried enduring value, not the spectacle of bodily fragments.

Cervantes echoes this sentiment in his poem dedicated to Teresa, where he celebrates a sanctity rooted in her intellectual and spiritual legacy rather than in relics or outward displays of devotion. In that 1614 poem, he offers both homage and critique—revealing a Teresa whose thirst for knowledge is as defining as her mystical raptures, a saint not merely to be venerated, but also to be read. His reflections anticipate the Church's eventual recognition of her as a Doctor of the Church, even as they expose the enduring tension between revering her memory and containing her radical potential.

By bringing Teresa into his creative orbit, Cervantes exemplifies the contradictions that continued to haunt her legacy. On one hand, her beatification (and later canonization) seemed to resolve ecclesiastical anxieties about her mystical practices; on the other, her advocacy for an educated faith—especially among her nuns—remained suspect in a Church still inclined toward docile, devotional models of female spirituality. Cervantes's verses, together with the ironies voiced in *Don Quixote* II.9, thus illuminate a Teresa whose holiness is inseparable from her hunger for knowledge—an insight often obscured by the grand

pageants that, in parading relics such as her famous arm, simultaneously celebrated and commodified her sainthood.

## 5. Conclusions

While Teresa's legacy has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, the explicitly social and political dimensions of her mysticism—as a form of lived activism—remain underexplored. We are only beginning to assess the elusive yet far-reaching influence of "activist mystics" like Saint Teresa—Teresa de Jesús, de Ahumada, de Cepeda—on her ostensibly secular contemporaries, including Cervantes. For some, her words and actions offered a new model of religious experience, one that operated at the margins of both orthodoxy and social convention. Others have seen in her singular mastery of subversive rhetoric a blueprint for writers of various spiritual persuasions—showing how to cloak epistemological ambition, such as intellectual curiosity, beneath modest, carefully fashioned narrative personae rendered with an air of pious credibility. Yet most would agree that Teresa's life beyond the page, her tireless travels and community foundations, was no less transformative. It constituted a radical gesture of defiance against the injunctions of silence and enclosure that shaped early modern expectations of women.

"She did not write everything," Fray Luis de León observed, "nor was she able to say many things, or talk about what happened after she published that [*Life*], as I found out in her papers and from the trustworthy people who knew her well" (*no la escribió toda [su vida], ni dijo muchas cosas*. . . *ni pudo decir las que le sucedieron después de aquella escritura que yo he buscado y recogido, informándome de sus papeles y de personas de mucho crédito que la trataron y conocieron*) (León 1944, p. 921). In other words, Teresa's legacy was always larger, and, at times, riskier, than her written record. Her teachings could never be fully contained in text, even when they were widely and emphatically recognized by contemporaries, both supporters and detractors.

Teresa's relentless drive for knowledge and expression expanded the personal and collective horizons of female spirituality and agency in an era largely hostile to such growth. Did this perilous yet astonishingly effective journey begin with her often-confessed, half-repentant desire "to know"? If, as Vladimir Nabokov once claimed, curiosity represents "insubordination in its purest form," then Teresa's own curiosity may have fueled, from the very beginning, her life story and the inexorable momentum of the Discalced reform (Nabokov 1947, p. 47).

With humble—and almost barefoot—steps, Teresa de Cepeda's determined epistemological ambition left an unmistakable imprint on Spanish cultural history. Much like the unruly idea of curiosity in the early modern age, her "fame," as Sancho dictated, soon acquired a life of its own in ways that no single narrative, institution, or orthodoxy could fully reify or contain.

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## Notes

1. Curiosity had remained a “vice” during the Middle Ages. For enlightening introductions to the subject, see (Brooke 2017; Kivistö 2014, especially pp. 17–27; Marra and Evans 2006; Whitcomb 2010; Kenny 2004; Benedict 2001; Harrison 2001; Walsh 1988).
2. He writes: *“concupiscentia carnis est, et concupiscentia oculorum, et ambitio saeculi. . . Concupiscentia carnis, voluptatis infimae amatores significat; concupiscentia oculorum, curiosos; ambitio saeculi, superbos.”* (“the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. . . the lust of the flesh refers to lovers of base pleasure; the lust of the eyes to the curious; and the pride of life to the proud”). Augustine later repeatedly revisits these three categories of temptation in (Augustine 1991, p. 41).
3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from this work and from this edition, and all translations, are my own.
4. Her political theology—often summarized by the apocryphal phrase “Not to act is to let the world rot”—insists on the inseparability of contemplation and responsibility. See, in this regard (Gabellieri 2020).
5. While rare exceptions such as the *beata* Catalina de Carmona managed to avoid censure, they remained outliers in a climate of deep institutional suspicion. See (Weber 1990, pp. 23, 28, 44). Weber’s groundbreaking studies on Teresa are a mandatory reference for understanding the reformist’s work. See also (Weber 2003, 1991). Other enlightening explorations include (Eire 2019; Bernárdez Rodal 2017; Tyler and Howells 2017; Wilson 2013; Sanz de Miguel 2010; Simerka 2008; Carrera 2005; Cammarata 1994). For a contextual study, see (Bilinkoff 1989).
6. For a general introduction on the subject, see (McGinn 2017), and Mónica Balltondre analyzes Teresa’s mysticism in (Balltondre 2012).
7. “Carta de Puebla”. (Soriano Vallés 2019, p. 223).
8. Notably, variations of the verb *entender* (“to understand”)—*entendí*, *llegué a entender*, and so forth—appear more than two thousand times in Teresa’s collected works, underscoring a continuum in which divine gift and human cognition overlap. “Both our understanding and our soul are amazed at some of the things they can understand,” she writes, acknowledging an augmented cognitive capacity. “I never thought there was another way of listening and understanding until I saw [experienced] it myself,” she adds shortly after—both statements appear in *OC* 146—signaling that mystical revelation can indeed expand intellectual horizons. The full quotation referenced in the main text reads: “[O]ne cannot understand [the mystic trance], much less describe it, since it [the soul or reason] cannot comprehend what it is understanding; it understands by not understanding. Whoever has experienced it will understand this, because it just cannot be put in clearer terms” (emphasis added). In the original: “no se puede entender, cuanto más decir. . . como no puede comprender lo que entiende, es no entender entendiendo. Quien lo hubiere probado entenderá algo desto; porque no se puede decir más claro” (emphasis added). (Teresa of Avila [1588] 2001, Obras completas de Santa Teresa, p. 327).
9. Fray Luis de León, known for his constrictive views of women, clearly makes an exception for Teresa when he says:Teaching, not being proper of women, as Saint Paul reminds us, has been wondrously exercised by this weak and courageous woman, willing to take on such an enormous task [the reform of the Carmelite order], a task that she has mastered however wisely and efficiently, stealing our hearts in the process, and bringing them closer to God. In doing so, she has brought people to do things that defy any common sense.Porque no siendo de las mujeres el enseñar, sino el ser enseñadas, como lo escribe S. Pablo, luego se ve que es maravilla nueva una flaca mujer tan animosa que emprendiese una cosa tan grande, y tan sabia y eficaz que saliese con ella, y robase los corazones que trataba para hacerlos de Dios, y llevase las gentes en pos de sí a todo lo que aborrece al sentido.Fray Luis, “A las Madres priora Ana de Jesús y religiosas Carmelitas Descalazas del monasterio de Madrid, el Maestro Fray Luis de León, salud en Jesucristo.” (Teresa of Avila [1588] 2001, p. 193).
10. Alonso de la Fuente, denunciation to the Inquisition (c. 1579), Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid), Inquisición, leg. 2036, exp. 2, fol. 232.
11. Fray Luis de León comments on these testimonies, arguing that:[Saint Teresa] wanted her nuns to learn and understand the Christian doctrine and mysteries of faith, and everything else that the Holy Church demands very well; to that effect, she covered this material with them [nuns] daily, and even bought [to them] very knowledgeable and virtuous persons that would teach them. And being present in those teaching sessions, she [*Teresa] asked them [nuns] to ask any question that they had, although she did not allow her nuns to engage in any form of curiosity that does not apply to women.* This is what this female witness declares, having been there, in situations like this, as it is publicly known.(Asimismo procuraba que sus monjas aprendiesen bien y entendie sen la doctrina cristiana y los misterios de la fe, y todo lo que la santa Madre Iglesia manda saber a un cristiano; trataba muy de ordinario de esto con ellas cuando se juntaban, trayéndoles algunas personas pías y doctas que se lo declarasen, estando ella presente, *mandando a las sobredichas religiosas preguntasen las dudas que se les ofrecían*, aunque *no consentía de ninguna suerte se metiesen en escudriñar curiosamente lo qué no pertenece a mujeres;* todo la cual sabe esta declarante por haberlo visto y halládose en estas ocasiones, y porque es público y notorio.)(León 1944, p. 499).
12. For the lingering problems of Teresa with the Inquisition, see (Corazón 1962). For the relationship of this form of mysticism with Cervantes, see (López Baralt 2021).
13. “A los éxtasis de la Beata Madre Santa Teresa de Jesús.” (Cervantes Saavedra 2001). For Cervantes and Saint Teresa, see (Callejas Berdonés 2015).

[14] "A los éxtasis de la Beata Madre Santa Teresa de Jesús."

[15] In the poem, Cervantes writes: "que a tu edad tu deseo aventajaba;/y si se descuidaba/de lo que hacer debía,/tal vez luego volvía/mejorado, mostrando codicioso/que el haber parecido perezoso" (*your desire outpaced your age; and if it ever strayed from what it ought to do, it would often return improved, revealing itself as greedy). The lines suggest that Teresa's seeming "laziness" had only been a way to gather force for the leap.* Cervantes ascribes morally risky qualities—*codicioso* (greedy) and *perezoso* (lazy)—to Teresa's desire, personifying it in a way that complicates traditional hagiographic tropes.

[16] Jean Canavaggio claims that it was 11 February 1567 (Canavaggio 1997, p. 37).

[17] Nowhere was this tendency more theatrically realized than in the building of El Escorial. There, Philip II positioned the tombs of the Spanish Habsburgs alongside relics of saints in a deliberate attempt to sacralize his dynasty. As his secretary, Antonio Gracián proudly wrote, "Saints and kings rest in this church... both saints and kings. Because the saint reigns with God and the king... is himself a saint." The physical proximity of royal and holy remains was meant to suggest divine approval of imperial rule (Lazure 2007, p. 63).

[18] The translation is (Kearne 2009, p. 58). The Colloquy, on Pilgrimage was included in Erasmus' 1526 edition and translated into Spanish by Alonso Ruiz de Virues c 1529 (Bataillon 1939, Erasme et Espagne, xxix, 321). See Kearne's ample discussion on the subject, these relics, in Chapter 1.

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# (Il)legible Orthodoxy: Diligence and Impertinence Before Inquisitorial Curiosity

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**Abstract:** This article proposes the Spanish Inquisition as a site of productive conflict between the polyvalent significations of curiosity in early modern Spain. On one hand, the Spanish Inquisition promoted curiosity through diligent inquiry, while on the other it prosecuted those whose curiosity led them to impertinence. This article examines the significance of an archival curiosity whose dubious relevance within the archive highlights its fundamental illegibility before Inquisitorial curiosity. This article argues that despite an ethos of apparent orthodoxy and cryptic invitations to curious readers, the manuscript ultimately fails to prompt Inquisitorial inquiry and itself becomes designated as "Escrito curioso por su valor caligráfico" by an unidentified archivist. Impertinent as an archival misfit and insolent in its failure to adhere to standards of confession, the "Escrito curioso's" playful provocations invite a diligent reader to peruse its depths, only to find obstinate opacities nestled within the umbrage of orthodoxy. Ultimately, the article contends that the "Escrito curioso" ironically elucidates the Inquisition's paradoxical dependence upon the heretical curiosity it condemned. As a diligent expression of undying faithfulness to the Church and her Inquisition, it is relegated to the forgotten margins of the Holy Office's operations.

**Keywords:** inquisition; curiosity; diligence; confession

## 1. Introduction

For the uninitiated, Inquisitorial curiosity may at first seem like a paradox. The Spanish Inquisition was notorious for its censorship, its secrecy, and its violence against those who were too curious for their own good, and yet early modern lexicographer Sebastián de Covarrubias emphasized curiosity as a key characteristic of Inquisitors who had to be professionally inquisitive (de Covarrubias 1611b, "cvrioso").[1] Prominent twentieth-century scholars like Henry Charles Lea—whose collection of manuscripts this article examines—often portrayed Inquisitors as unrestrained, echoing the insolence attributed to heretics and claiming, "the power of the inquisitor had practically scarce any bounds but his own discretion" (Lea 1922, p. 527). However, historiography has since nuanced such stereotypes of Inquisitors as by recognizing Inquisitors more as "faceless bureaucrats rather than spectacular tyrants" (Edwards 1999, p. 65). More recently, Kimberly Lynn elucidated that though individual Inquisitors approached their positions differently, the virtue of diligence—a concept both linked to curiosity and pastoral love—united the profession (Lynn 2013, p. 53). Curiosity, then, describes the diligent inquisitiveness of Inquisitors who regulated the curiosity that could lead the Spanish population towards heresy.

The tension between Inquisition and curiosity aligns with an established understanding that curiosity had contradictory connotations in early modernity (Kenny 2004, pp. 150–57).[2] On one hand, curiosity fostered empirical study and scientific discovery, but

on the other hand, undue curiosity could carry one down perilous paths towards heresy. Covarrubias records a similar polysemy in the Spanish context, explaining that curiosity has "buena y mala partes". He associates "diligencia" with the "buena parte" and the "mala parte" with those "soplones delatores"—snitching rats—people who "se desuela en escudriñar las cosas que son muy occultas y reseruadas . . ." (de Covarrubias 1611a, "cvrioso"). But what is the limit between the diligent questioning of an Inquisitor and the indecent spying of the "soplones delatores"? Were Inquisitorial agents who reported on the secret lives of their potentially heretical neighbors *curiosos diligentes* or *soplones delatores*? Doubtlessly, the difference depends on one's perspective. Both *curiosos diligentes* and *soplones delatores* discover hidden and reserved things. They ask, investigate, and spy to uncover what is hidden.

Studies that examine the intersection of Inquisition and curiosity continue to affiliate the Spanish Inquisition with the "mala parte" of curiosity through readings of Cervantes's intercalated tale, *El curioso impertinente* (de Cervantes Saavedra 1978, I:XXXIII–XXXV, pp. 399–446).[3] For instance, Michael Gerli points to *inquisitiveness* as the fatal flaw of the story's intrepid protagonist (Gerli 2000, p. 115). Anselmo, impertinently curious, instructs his best friend, Lotario, to attempt to seduce his wife, Camila, in order to test her fidelity. His incipient curiosity precipitates the demise of all involved. Just like heretics whose curiosity carries them too far, Anselmo is too inquisitive for his own good, hastening his own demise through experimentation with his wife's fidelity, to the ultimate chagrin of his all-important *honra*.

The titular adjective, *impertinente*, operates on two levels, as Anselmo's impertinent curiosity parallels the disputed pertinence of the story within the broader narrative of *Don Quixote*. Covarrubias registers this polysemy in distinguishing between an impertinent man "el que es sin sustancia y sin modo," and *impertinencía* "la cosa fuera de proposito" (de Covarrubias 1611b, "impertinente"). Impertinence conveys insolence, irrelevance, and being out of place, and both Anselmo and the text itself can be seen as all three. Anslemo hides in order to spy insolently on places he should not be, and characters find the manuscript stranded in an inn, bizarrely out of place both spatially within the narrative and textually through its inclusion in the broader novel. These transgressions metacritically fold upon themselves in typical Cervantine fashion. Anselmo spies upon a performance that was staged specifically for his forbidden sight, and in Part 2, characters criticize the tale's inclusion in Part 1 on the grounds they were not germane to Don Quixote's adventures (de Cervantes Saavedra 1978, II:3, 63; II:44, 366). On both levels, the notion of impertinence raises a key question when examining curiosity's polysemy. What is the boundary between relevant and irrelevant curiosity if both require some form of transgression in order to uncover what was previously hidden? How does the Inquisition regulate this boundary?

In a provocative response to such questions, Kevin Larsen suggests that Inquisitors, like Anselmo, impertinently experimented with the Spanish population—creating and subsequently discovering the very deviancies it feared (Larsen 2013, p. 414). On one level, the Inquisition's internal logic employed the "buena parte" of diligent curiosity against the "mala parte" of heretical curiosity. The Inquisition prosecuted those it deemed deleteriously curious, as curiosity has long been linked to heresy and original sin. Heretics are impertinently curious; like Eve, they pursue forbidden knowledge. What could be more hidden and reserved than the nature of the divine? Heretics questioned the unquestionable and exceeded the boundaries of licit knowledge. The Inquisition regulated those boundaries by discovering heretics and returning them to orthodoxy through public penance.

On another level, the tension between good and bad forms of curiosity haunts the memory of the Holy Tribunal. Twentieth-century scholarship viewed Inquisitorial curiosity schismatically—either as a boon to the prospering of Spanish culture or an impediment

to its cultural progress. On one hand, the Inquisition's critics fomented the Black Legend, which claimed the Inquisition promoted a culture of surveillance that restricted certain harbingers of "modernity"—the Reformation and the Enlightenment.[4] For instance, for John Stoughton, the Inquisition's "merciless bigotry," in part explains why Spain, "lag[s] behind in the march of improvement. Their civilization is incomplete, and strangely contrasts with that of England, Germany, Italy and France (Stoughton 1883, pp. 13, 16). On the other hand, Catholic historian Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo contended, "Nunca se escribió más y mejor en España que en esos dos siglos de oro de la Inquisicion" (Menéndez y Pelayo 1992, p. 445). Leaving aside his superlative assessments, he is right to highlight the productivity of the Inquisitorial years. The sixteenth and seventeenth century are hardly characterized by a paucity of literary production. Without sharing Menéndez y Pelayo's investment in sustaining that the Inquisition promoted "good" literature that bolstered Spain's national identity, if we are to understand the impact of Inquisition on early modern cultural production, we must take the prolificness of Inquisitorial methods seriously.

Whether diligent or impertinent, benevolent or pernicious, Inquisitorial curiosity was certainly creative. While public indexes are a reminder that the Inquisition placed limits on what could be published, its internal mechanisms were immensely productive. During its 350-year tenure in Spain, the Americas, and the Spanish Pacific, the Spanish Inquisition produced prolific volumes of documentation as it investigated myriad forms of heresy. It merged the sacramental office of confession to the meticulous notetaking of bureaucratic juridical systems—producing copious records of its proceedings. If the Inquisition restricted what could be said publicly, it recorded privately the very ideas it censured. Scrupulous note-takers, the Inquisition's notaries produced copious documentation, recording every detail of investigations as Inquisitors solicited myriad confessional texts of its witnesses and defendants. If the Inquisition is an institution of textual repression, it is equally an institution of textual production.

In this article, I contribute to a growing recognition of the Spanish Inquisition's creative power by demonstrating that Inquisitors, as *curiosos diligentes*, fomented textual production as they sought to restrict the deleterious impact of *curiosos impertinentes*. Fundamentally, this article elucidates the Holy Office's paradoxical dependence upon the curiosity it condemned through an Inquisitorial curiosity. It examines a small miscellany of texts that are now gathered as Ms. Coll. 728—the Henry Charles Lea Collection of Inquisition Manuscripts, 1533–1866—in the Kislak Center Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania.

Our centerpiece is an illustrated manuscript fittingly dubbed, "Escrito curioso por su valor caligráfico" by an unidentified archivist. Five folded folios of paper loosely stitched together and wrapped in an unassuming cover open to reveal a beautifully penned prologue whose immediate legibility starkly contrasts the infamously difficult paleographic script of traditional Inquisition documentation. Its brief confessional preface introduces a collection of elaborate poems that are punctuated by three pages of ornate illustrations—all of which laud the Inquisition and express a profound fidelity to Catholic orthodoxy.

While curious in form, it is profoundly uncurious in ethos. The document vehemently rejects heresy and emphatically expresses a desire to spill blood and ink in Christendom's service. While overall, "Escrito curioso" maintains some of the conceits of confession common in Inquisition documentation, and its legibility, brevity, and artistry single it out as a poor fit within Inquisition documentation. What was the Inquisition to do with a beautifully penned expression of resolute orthodoxy? How might an archival curiosity speak to our understanding of the Inquisition's impact on early modern curiosity? Inversely, how do expressions of resolute orthodoxy, characterized by a lack of theological curiosity, resonate within Inquisitorial processes?

Submitted to the Mexican Inquisition in 1754 and now housed in Philadelphia, we might describe it as curiously impertinent (*no pertenece*)—it does not quite belong. Despite an ethos of hyper-legibile orthodoxy, "Escrito curioso" is ultimately ineffective at provoking Inquisitors' curiosity. Departing from dominant representations of the Inquisition as a means to restrict early modern curiosity, this article demonstrates that curiosity was both vice and virtue before the Inquisition. If not a true virtue, then it was at least a procedural necessity, as Inquisitors required a salubrious form of curiosity in their efforts to control curiosity's deleterious impacts, relegating impertinently uncurious expressions of orthodoxy to the margins of its operations.

## 2. Inquisition Confessions

This article will largely side-step the rabbit hole of traditional Inquisition confessions, instead examining how archival misfits inform our understanding of the Inquisition's regulation and promotion of curiosity in its procedures. However, it is important to establish first the essential characteristics of Inquisition confession in order to perceive the subversion of the confessional conceit of "Escrito curioso". Confession is the Inquisition's preferred method for producing truth-telling narratives. As Foucault reminds us, confession develops within a relationship of power and involves the disclosure of the hidden inner realms of private thought and belief (Foucault 2020, pp. 58–59). In the confessional, a confessant discloses their thoughts to a priest who says little until administering an appropriate penance, but in the case of Inquisition confession, there is mutual disclosure developed through dialogue. Trials unfolded through a dance between revelation and obfuscation. Inquisitors strategically withheld information from confessants, and confessants—presumably—strategically withheld information from the Inquisition. Recorded for internal bureaucratic processes, these documents are notoriously difficult to read—full of abbreviations and in a loose cursive called *procesal*, which has initiated many migraines among early modernists.

A brief document housed alongside "Escrito curioso" exemplifies the typical structure of Inquisition trials. Mayor Garcia, a morisca from Daymiel, was tried in 1550 on suspicion of continuing Islamic practices, particularly the use of henna on the hands and stating that the "ley de los moros" was better than that of Christians. At only 21 folios, it was a relatively brief trial that certainly merits closer attention, and we will not, here, do it justice. For our purposes here, her first audience with the Inquisitors concisely illustrates the dialogical structure of Inquisition confessions as a procedural control of information which required confessants to navigate iterative confessions.

On 16 April 1550, after identifying the names, locations, and lineage of her grandparents, parents, and children, Inquisitor Valtdano asks Mayor if she knows the cause of her arrest and she responds succinctly: "preg[unta]da sy sabe la causa por q[ue] ha sido ma[n]dada a traher presa a este santo officio dixo q[ue] no lo sabe" (Figure 1. 5r).[5] This brief exchange is a standard opening question from the Inquisition in which they ask open-endedly for the confessant to identify the reason for their imprisonment. In this instance, Mayor responds with a guarded denial, opting to withhold any potentially self-incriminating evidence. Her denial launches the three *moniciones*, three opportunities to confess fully before the charges are revealed. Confessions given in this state of ignorance are ostensibly treated as more genuine and meriting greater mercy.

In general, Inquisitors expected confessions to be complete and truthful admissions of guilt. David Gitlitz examines the impact of these standards in rhetorical terms, arguing that confessants had to create confessions that appeared true and complete, while obscuring or minimizing any truly damning evidence (Gitlitz 2000, p. 55). Those who the Inquisition believed lied during their confessions were termed "false confessants" ("ficta confitentes").

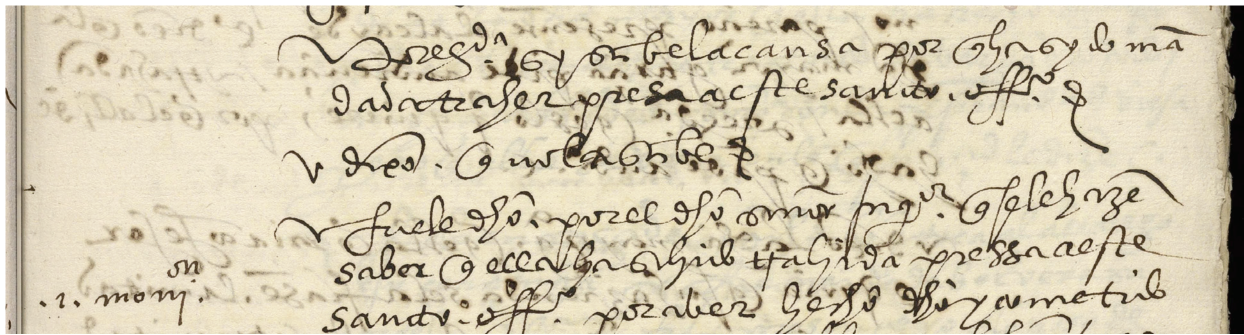


**Figure 1.** Proceso de fe contra Mayor Garcia 52. "Sy sabe la causa" and *segunda monición*.

Inquisitor Valtodano's second *monición* reveals that the Inquisition demanded discursive conformity alongside theological adherence to orthodoxy. The second monición here reads:

> fuele d[ic]ho por el d[ic]ho señor Inq[uisid]or q[ue] se le haze saber q[ue] ella ha sihido trahida pressa a este santo off[ici]o por aber hecho, d[ic]ho y cometido cosas contra n[uest]ra sancta ffee catholica por tanto se le amonesta y encarga q[ue] diga y co[n]fiesse todo aq[ue]llo q[ue] ella obiere hecho y d[ic]ho y visto dezir y hazer q[ue] sea contra n[uest]ra s[an]ta ffee catholica y lo q[ue] supiere de otras p[er]sonas aun sy bibas como defuntas/e absentes y q[ue] haziendo lo ansy se bsara con ella de la m[isericord]ia q[ue] lugar obiere de d[e]r[ech]o. que por *na* en buen estado su causa para ser con brebedad d[e]spachada y poderse absuelta de qualquier ex[empci]on en q[ue] aya yncurrido y lo contrario haziendo sera oydo el fiscal y ella y se hara justi[cia].
>
> la d[ic]ha mayor garcia dixo q[ue] ella diria la v[er]dad pues ha venido a esta s[an]ta casa/y q[ue] lo q[ue]re pensar.

In his *monición*, Valtodano highlights the presumption of guilt standard across Inquisitorial practices. She was arrested because she has carried out, said or committed crimes against the Catholic Church that are known to the Inquisition, but unnamed to her. Often prompted to "descargar la consciencia," there was no presumption of innocent until proven guilty. Quite the contrary; confessants were consistently informed that the Inquisition never arrested people without a chargethe confessant had to discover it (find it and reveal it), ideally with no additional information.

Valtodano's *monición* also illustrates the centrality of denunciation to Inquisitorial practices. He encourages Mayor to reveal the names of those living or dead who also fell into heresy. The practice of implicating others in the trials was essential to ascertain the veracity of confession. Inquisition methods relied on a large conglomeration of anonymous testimony to verify the particulars of any individual's confession. Any mention of another witness to an event would implicate that person and the Inquisition would call them to their chambers to submit a confession. The second person's confirmation of someone else's testimony from a state of ignorance—unaware of the particulars of the original testimony—would be convincing evidence of veracity. This exemplary *monición* further demonstrates a discursive mandate for comprehensiveness. Valtodano insists that Mayor "confiese todo aquello que ella obiere hecho, dicho, y visto dezir y hazer" with the demand including even hypotheticals captured in the imperfect subjunctive.

Throughout the *moniciones*, Mayor obfuscates, asks for more time, and denies any wrongdoing. However, on 6 May, Mayor's first confession exemplifies the rhetorical utility of repentance, veracity, and verifiability—discursive constraints encouraged in the dialogical questioning between defendant and Inquisitor. Her confession reads:

dixo la d[ic]ha mayor garcia q[ue] podra aber treze o quatorze años q[ue] estando en daymiel a la puerta de casa de marcos manglano q[ue] hera b[ecin]a desta t[estig]o, hablando co[n] su muger y se o estando anbas solas antes q[ue] la d[ich[a y sro fuese presente en esta ynq[uisici]on. la qual dixo a esta declar[ant]e pareseme q[ue] hera mejor ley la de los moros q[ue] la q[ue] tomamos y q[ue] no le dixo mas y esta declarant[e] creyo algo dello. preg[unta]da q[ue] es esto algo q[ue] dize q[ue] creyo dixo la d[ic]ha mayor señor q[ue] de me ansi q[ue] no lo crey del todo

y aun q[ue] le fue d[ic]ho q[ue] declare bien esto q[ue dize[ y co[n]fiesa y fue le encargado q[ue] diga la verdad

dixo q[ue] no sabe más d[e]z[i]r de lo que ha d[ic]ho.

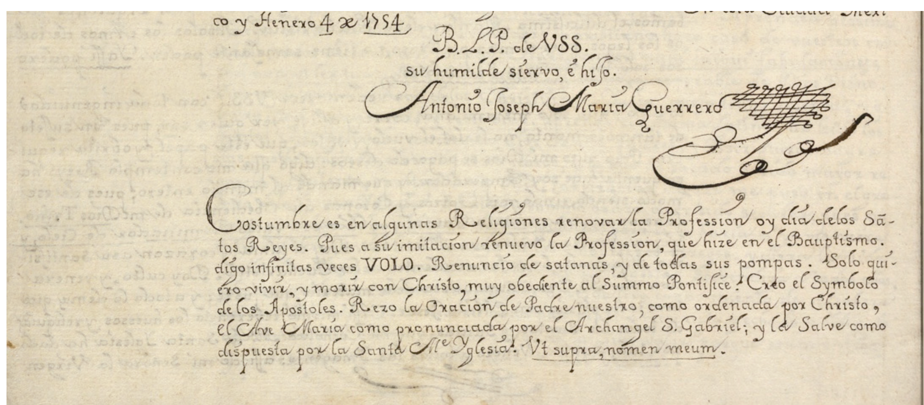
She names the time, place, and people present when a theologically suspicious statement was made. While mitigating her guilt by claiming she only believed the statement in part, the dialogical structure shows the Valtodano listened attentively for gaps in her narrative. He asks her to clarify the ambiguous "algo" (something), which she clarifies "que no lo crey del todo". This answer does not satisfy Valtodano, however, who encourages her, "declare bien," she attests she has stated this to the best of her ability and does not, here, clarify further. Eventually, however, the Inquisitors are satisfied with Mayor's confessional performance. By the end of the trial, the Inquisitors decide to admit her back into the church as a "reconciliada," on the basis that she was a "verdadera confitente y penitente" (19r–v). Truthful and repentant, Mayor eventually—though it seems it required some discursive coercion—produced a confession that achieved the standards enforced by Inquisitorial procedures.

## 3. The (I)llegibility of "Escrito Curioso"

The same cannot be said for "Escrito curioso". It is curiously impertinent (*no pertenece*) not only for its aesthetic qualities, but for its significant departures from Inquisitorial confession as a conceit. It is an exemplary confession, purporting complete adherence to Catholic orthodoxy and faithful submission to the Inquisition. However, its divergences from procedural confessions emphasize a foundational tension between the Inquisition and the orthodoxy it demands. Despite its *ethos* of transparency and submission, "Escrito curioso" is a fundamentally opaque confession that ultimately resists the Inquisition's operations. It presents itself as legible but obscures critical information that renders it useless to the Inquisition—an impertinent curiosity that seemingly fails to prompt the Inquisition's diligent curiosity. The Holy Office exists to promote orthodoxy, submission, and conformity to Catholic standards. Those values are functionally useless to its operations. Orthodoxy and heresy are, of course, determinative others. Curiosity—impertinent or otherwise—sustains both.

Turning now to the peculiarities of "Escrito curioso," we must first establish the basic contours of the document's three central components. First, a neatly penned prose confession signed legibly by Antonio Joseph María Guerrero (Figure 2) expounds his reasons for composing and submitting his work to the Inquisition: it is a means to relieve his conscience as he approaches death, to express submission to the Church and her Inquisition, and to preserve a Catholic legacy for future generations after a lifetime as an educator. Despite its resolutely uncurious posture towards doctrine, its divergences from Inquisitorial forms would pique the curiosity of readers who will perceive behind its obsessive numerology and resolute adherence to Catholic doctrine, significant obfuscations, and contradictions that resist Inquisitorial diligences. After the prologue, three elaborate illustrations laud the triune God and the three members of the Tribunal. It expresses

orthodoxy to an over-determined degree, and yet its details invite curious readers into puzzle-like games that play on the hiddenness of the archive. Finally, the work closes with an erudite but playful collection of hyper-orthodox poetry in Latin and Spanish. Again, the bizarre amalgamation of creative and overwrought stylistic forms invites a reader/viewer to seek out what is obscured. Each element of the manuscript demonstrates a profoundly uncurious ethos in regards to orthodoxy, and yet the twists and turns of each element invite a curious reader to peruse its depths with diligence.


co y Henero 4 de 1754

B.L.P. de VSS.
su humilde siervo, é hijo.
Antonio Joseph Maria Guerrero

Costumbre es en algunas Religiones renovar la Profession oy dia de los Sãtos Reyes. Pues a su imitacion renuevo la Profession, que hize en el Bauptismo. digo infinitas veces VOLO. Renuncio de satanas, y de todas sus pompas. Solo quiero vivir, y morir con Christo, muy obediente al Summo Pontifice. Creo el Symbolo de los Apostoles. Rezo la Oracion de Padre nuestro, como ordenada por Christo, el Ave Maria como pronunciada por el Archangel S. Gabriel; y la Salve como dispuesta por la Santa Mc Yglesia. Vt supra, nomen meum.

**Figure 2.** *Signature.*

Departing from the dialogical structure of typical Inquisition confessions, Guerrero emphasizes the totality of his admittedly brief confession through obsessive numerology. He requests pardon only for “lo corto de mi dezir,” and obsessively employs structures of twos, threes, and sevens throughout the entire work (1r). Twos allow for totalizing logic, dividing the world into comprehensive dualities. Threes and sevens communicate completeness in Christian numerology: seven days for creation and three members of the triune Godhead. On a structural level, Guerrero employs three modes of writing—prose, poetry, and illustration. After the two-part introduction, two full-page word-arts open to seven poems. The final illustration sets apart the last set of seven poems. There are fourteen poems total—nine of which are in Latin, three of which are in Spanish, and two of which are written half in each language.

Numerology is similarly used to structure the prologue. Addressed to the three Inquisitors on Three King’s Day, his first line establishes a duality that divides humanity into two parts: slaves and sons. This division organizes his confession; he writes the first half as son, the second as slave. At the moment of transition, he argues one identity does not negate the other: “ya me es preciso hablar como siervo sin apartarme del Ser de hijo”, and he ultimately signs the documents as “su humilde siervo, e hijo” (3r–v). Such dualities proliferate to establish an ethos of completeness throughout the confessoin. If the whole world can be reduced into sons and slaves, it can also be reduced into masters and fathers. Slaves/masters and sons/fathers can serve God through *armas* or *letras*, with blood or with ink, as clergy or laity. He divides humanity into two parts and proves he belongs to both, suggesting that nothing has been omitted.

Dualities also convey totality in his motivations for writing to suggest complete submission in his service to God and Inquisition. As Guerrero elaborates on his service to the Church first as a son and then as a slave, he aligns himself primarily with letters and laity. He bemoans his inability to take physical arms against heretics but offers his lettered ink as erudite compensation for un-spilled blood, and he laments his inability to preach. However, he also claims responsibility for the clerical and armed activity of his former students. As a lay teacher, he raised over three thousand clerical sons who preached and took arms in missions. He takes responsibility for the totality of possible Christian

service to God—promoting letters and arms through lay and clerical offices in the service of Christianity.

Moreover, the paper connects the materiality of Guerrero's literary and artistic service to an eternal submission, his physical submitting of document to the Inquisition's hidden archives an act of faithful submission to God and Inquisition He explains, "Por es siendo de cada Christiano Padres en el particular, digo con el Prodigo. Da mihi portionem meam. La Cruz, que es el caudal de mis Padres, la Cruz, que es mi herencia, esa toca a mis hijos, y descendientes, como blazon, y Armas de mi eterno descanzo y nobleza" (2v).[6] He aligns himself with the prodigal son to say, "give me my portion". What portion does Guerrero inherit? The cross. He establishes a certain metonymy connecting the paper of "Escrito curioso" and the cross—both tree-based images that represent the spiritual wealth of orthodoxy. Guerrero writes, "Este papel, y obrita es mi Cavallería, mi caudal, y todos mis honores". Both the cross and this paper represent his *caudal*, the wealth of spiritual inheritence he receives and leaves behind.

In affiliating with the prodigal son, Guerrero gestures to a moment of repentance for wastefulness, but how does the analogy of paper, cross, and the prodigal's portion address the question of extravagant squandering? In the parable, the father grants his younger son's somewhat impertinent request to pre-emptively receive his inheritance, which the son prodigiously wastes before returning sheepishly to his father—who welcomes him home with open arms. How might one squander the cross? Is there something wastefully extravagant in the paper? The squandering of such an indulgent manuscript—its elaborate illustrations and poetry cast into the oblivion of the Inquisition's secret archives—echoes a certain throwing of pearls before pigs. Much more diplomatically, Guerrero acknowledges that his submission to the Inquisition inevitably enters a private space. He laments, "Siento solo el que uno es mi escripto, pues quisiera dexar en todas la Casas del mundo un fanto, para que fuera publico, lo que para mis Padres, y amos los Señores inquisidores es privado" (3r). In submitting his manuscript—his great wealth and inheritance—he re-encloses it into the secrecy of the archives, in the hopes that it might someday be made public—presciently foreseeing its discovery in Philadelphia some 150 years later. And yet, the paper and Cross collude to confer a form of immortality to this wasted treasure. Finding permanency in the written word as a "monumento de mis cenizas," he claims, "quedando este papel, vivo yo confessando muerto lo que tanto he estimado estando en este destierro" (3r). Likely referencing terrestrial life as "destierro," from the celestial Eden, Guerrero argues that the relative permanency of paper confers a form of immortality—continually confessing from the grave.

Appended to the prologue are two illustrations that synthesize the dualities elaborated in the prologue to visualize Guerrero's dual submission to God and the Inquisition. In the first (Figure 3), a decorative frame encloses two forms: a heart and a circle. The inscriptions around each shape explicate their symbolism. The heart is formed from the words, "In toto corde meo exquisivite. In corde meo Abscondi eloquiatua. Inglina Cor meum in testimoniatua. Fia Cor meum immaculatum in iustificationibus tuis ut non confundar. Gloria Tibi Deus vnice". While the heavenly inner realm of the heart is Latin, the earthly realm below is circumscribed with a rhyming quatrain in the vernacular. It reads, "Sobre el mundo todo entero, yo antonio estimo a mi Dios no se reparte entre un dos el amor que es verdadero". Within these dualities, threes also flourish. Enclosed within Antonio's heart is a trinitarian flower shape constructed entirely of triads, which enshrines the Trinity with the phrase "Unus Deus Trinus" at the center of the shape. Each petal contains the thrice repeated, "sanctus, sanctus, sanctus" and a temporal triplet, "qui fuit, qui est, qui erit. While extremely orthodox in its content, its form reinforces an ethos of complete

submission—both the world and heart, in sacred language and the vernacular bound in unison under the banner of God's name.

**Figure 3.** Heart and World illustration.

This first illustration transitions the reader/viewer to the next illustration, which celebrates the two totalizing responses of the Inquisition—justice and mercy (Figure 4). Once again, the symbolism is not subtle. Adopting the Inquisition's iconography and centered around the Holy Office's motto: "Veni Domine Iudica Causa[m] Tua[m]," the image depicts a lion with sword and a lamb with an olive branch, each with one paw on a crucifix, standing atop a pedestal. Just in case the imagery is lost on the viewer, the decorative chord over the olive branch reads, "This peaceful lamb carries this shining olive branch" ("Hic agnus pacis portat lucentis olivam"). Over the lion, "This ready sword continuously stops the evil ones" ("Hic ensis promptus destuit usque malos").[7] Mercy rests within the Cross as Christ's feet sit atop the phrase "Miserere Nobis". Beyond introducing the Inquisitorial frame of justice and mercy, this illustration incorporates the triads and dualisms employed in the prologue and preceding image. Addressed to three Inquisitors, a halo of three *sanctus* surround the diminutive body of Christ on the crucifix: *Sanctus fortis* on his right, *santus immortali* on his left, and he is crowned, "sanctus deus". Guerrero again legibly pens his name—this time half in Latin and half in Spanish: Auctor Antonios Josephus Maria Guerrero Grammatices pre[c]tor. The vernacular quatrain that rests above the crucifix re-iterates the blood and ink motif of the prologue in the first couplet—"sangre tengo en estas venas// con ellas deseo firmar"—and the heaven and earth duality of the preceding image in the second: "que un dios trino ha de Reynar en el cielo, y las arenas".

These two images synthesize the totality foundational to Guerrero's project. It should not surprise us that Guerrero concludes his prologue with the affirmation that he has fully confessed. He claims, "He echo toda esta Confession de todo lo que debo creer y confessar" (3v). He affirms full, complete, extravagant submission to the God and his Inquisition in body and soul, ink and blood, heaven and earth, in Latin and the vernacular, in prose,

poetry, and illustration—fully and completely surrendering to the service of God and Inquisition.

**Figure 4.** Justice and Mercy illustration.

## 4. Confessing (Im)perfection

However, when compared to the traditional standards of Inquisition confession, myriad obfuscations emerge to highlight a critical dissonance between confessions of orthodoxy and Inquisitorial methods. While the Inquisition required completeness in its confessions, it also demanded verifiability (Gitlitz 2000, p. 56). Confessions had to be corroborated by other witnesses. Names, dates, and places were critical pieces of information that had to be disclosed. If we try to read this text like an Inquisitor, we immediately run into significant obfuscations.

If Guerrero pursues the standard of completeness with diligence, he eschews the standard of verifiability. Despite the legibility of his signature, his identity is profoundly ambiguous (See Figures 2 and 4). At first, he questions the value of his name—claiming it cannot add to the value of the work. He writes, “Pueden creer VSS. (con toda ingenuidad lo digo) que solo me amilana, corre, y aflige ver quien soy; pues un sujeto de tan poco monio, no le da el vuelo, el valor, que este papel y obrita requiere” (3r). However, this modest gesture contrasts with the beautifully penned name signed at the end of the document in incredibly legible print. His metaphorical usage of his name further casts doubt on the assertion that the name adds no value to the text. Consider this passage from a later *canción*

Vivid Señor vivid

Pelead, Pelead en tan dichosa LID

Yo os sere Compañero

*Que pasa eso de CHRISTO soy Guerrero*

Y tengo fortaleza

> Que el BAUTISMO me dio con su limpieza (Capitalization maintained from original; emphasis is mine).

While it may not add value to the paper the way a reputable, well-known name might, his name serves the logic that drives the whole collection. He fittingly sneaks his first name, Antonio, into the first poetic work in the collection and hides it in the first full-page illustration. Saint Anthony is the saint of lost things, and the hiddenness of the name emphasizes the public/private nature of the archive as he sends a document into obscurity, hoping it will be found. His prologue centers on his orthodox positioning as a child of God, taking Joseph and Mary into his lineage. The line, "que pasa eso de CHRISTO soy Guerrero," aptly describes his name. The surname Guerrero, which means warrior, comes after "eso de Cristo," the holy parents, Joseph and María (Joseph, curiously in the English spelling and not in the Spanish, José). He is a warrior—a guerrero—in the cause of the Christian empire, accomplishing with the pen what he was unable to do with a sword.

Given the ambiguity of his lineage and the metaphorical employment of the name throughout the text, I find it plausible that this is a pseudonym, a fiction constructed to more perfectly conform to the vision of empire that his text presents. However, even if his name truly is Antonio Joseph Maria Guerrero, the information he provides falls short of the information typically submitted in Inquisitorial confessions. He signs it from Mexico City, though at no point does he mention his city of birth. He does not identify his natural lineage and obfuscates the circumstances of his baptism. He provides one piece of biographical information with intense precision: he is 64 years, 9 months, and 13 days old.

Furthermore, in Guerrero's hyper-pious display of filial conformity to the Church and her Inquisition, adopting Inquisitors as his "padres," he obfuscates his natural lineage. In the same vein, he gives contradictory insight into the circumstances of his baptism. He implies that he made a verbal profession of faith in his baptism, saying, "Costumbre es en algunas Religiones renovar la Profession oy dia de los Santos Reyes. Pues a su imitacion renuevo la Profession, que hize en el Bautismo." Is he here implying he was not baptized as an infant? Was he not born to Christian parents? Is that why their names are curiously absent from his prologue? Elsewhere, however, he claims he was baptized at three days old, "En tal manera, que si como consegui la Fortuna, a los tres dias de nacido, no la hubiera obtenido, por aver nacido entre infieles: a gritos pidiera las aguas sangradas; confessaria a DIOSTRINO, y UNO" (2v). The counterfactuals introduced by the imperfect subjunctive imply that he was born to Christian parents (at least not "entre infieles") and was baptized at three days old; emphatically asserting that his conformity to the Church would exist even in alternate realities. However, he fails to affirm his natural lineage in the indicative, obscuring whether he was born into the faith or if he was an *hijo por adopción*.

Moreover, nowhere in the prologue does Guerrero confess to any sin, heresy, or moral failing. This curious omission contrasts Guerrero's resolutely uncurious attitude throughout the work. He diligently represents his orthodoxy without expressions of guilt, sin, heresy, curiosity, wonder, doubt, or ambiguity. At one point he asks for forgiveness, only to offer a series of philippic interrogatives berating hypothetical heretics. Asking the Inquisitors forgiveness for the words he uses to unburden his heart—echoing the language of the confession— he instead lambasts heretics:

> Como mis Padres me perdonen algunos terminos, que aqui pongo; desahogar mi corazon. Decidme hereges puercos, canalla del demonio gente sin razon. A quien debeis la vida? Quien es causa de que respireis? Quein os da en abundancia de todo lo necessario? Quien sufre con tanta paciencia vuestras envinciones y chismes? Dios, por que es bueno, por que es santo; porque es inclinado a hacer bien (2v).

These are not inquisitive questions; they are rhetorical. They do not discover information; they emphasize established beliefs. In many ways, these questions fit better within a catechism than a confession—an unsurprising stylistic marker given Guerrero's past profession as a teacher. In fact, profession may be a better term for Guerrero's project than confession. He does not reveal past error; he professes his conformity to the Church. This profession would be exemplary to anyone convicted of heresy, but confessions of faith without confession of sin have no home in court proceedings. While better understood as a profession of faith as a part of a death-rite practice, rather than a confession of sin, the Inquisition did not hear death-rite confessions. Simply put, as a confession, this document could not have launched a case and consequently serves little purpose.

## 5. Formal Playfulness

Nowhere is the curious futility of this manuscript more apparent than in the remaining collection of illustrations and poems. In a critical divergence from Inquisition testimony, Guerrero underscores enjoyment, pleasure, and playfulness as central motives for writing in the prologue, but gestures to the "elogios eruditisimos" appended to the opening statement as the synthesis for his efforts. He explains, "este hijo ha estado entretenido, y con summa gusto ocubado en hacer esa obrita, que directamente va a complacer a mis terrenos Padres, porque me persuado sera regozido de nuestro celestial P[adr]e Bien quisiera aver tenido una singular capacidad, para hacer elogios eruditisimos en honra de mi SS.a y Christiana Religion" (1r). Although we might accuse the corpus as overwrought thematically, Guerrero demonstrates this "singular capacidad," through a somewhat ostentatious display of erudition. A clear penchant for acrostics and puzzle-like forms characterizes the collection, which proceeds through a variety of metrical forms, including the vernacular classics of the Golden Age, décimas, octavas, and quintillas, and canciones and classical forms, sonnets, odes, and elegies. Penning each poem's genre with a large heading and underlining instances of Latin, Guerrero draws attention to his stylistic mastery of an array of poetic forms, as well as his ability to compose in a bizarre amalgamation of Latin and Spanish. Taken as a whole, the collection showcases a certain braggadocious playfulness, mixing erudition with pleasure under the auspices of rigorous orthodoxy.

While the whole collection certainly merits further study, I will here focus on two poems that directly engage a future reader. As we have seen so far, Guerrero diverges from traditional Inquisitorial curiosity by not invoking issues of sin or heresy. Even as he frequently displays the motif, to come and judge your cause (see Figures 2 and 3), he offers his future readers very little to judge. However, the poem of octavas offers a significant exception in its metacritical reflection on the *obrita's* relationship to Inquisition. It reveals a confounding awareness that Inquisitorial readers are looking for hidden places and obfuscated information

It is an intricate poem worth examining in detail, so I include a transcription and translations below. I will have to remit assessment of the quality of Guerrero's late eighteenth century Latin to Latinists and proffer labored and yet surely imperfect translations into Spanish and English to guide our analysis of the poem.

1. Obumbrame leyendo este papel
2. Signum evidens de mi Fe crecida
3. Attendas illam dandome el Laurel
4. Nempe dicam, sub alís admitida
5. Confiteor, que me he visto en un Vergel
6. Turbatus quam vis por hazer lucida
7. Una obra quod vobis certe placeret.

8. Mirabile siendo, apud vos valeret
9. Tantum affectum recevid, prudentes.
10. Repellentes defectus de ignorante
11. Indignus sum, mas sois tam eminentes.
12. Boni, et Sapientes que saldre triumphante
13. Uniti los Tres, ceteri excellentes
14. Numeri Ministri, omnes por amante
15. Al parco inclinen, igitur lo pido
16. Luctans opere, por lo no lucido.

1. Asombrame leyendo este papel
2. Señal evidente de mi fe crecida.
3. Presta atención a ella, dandome el Laurel
4. Diré verdad debajo ala admitida
5. Confieso, que me he visto en un vergel
6. Turbado sin embargo por hazer lucida
7. Una obra que ciertamente os placiera.
8. Maravilla siendo, ante os fuera fuerte
9. Solo afecto recibid, prudentes.
10. Repeliendo los defectos de ignorante
11. Indigno soy, mas sois tan prominentes
12. Buenos y sabios que saldre triumphante
13. Unidos los Tres los demás excelentes
14. Los números del ministro todo por amante
15. Al parco inclinen, por lo tanto lo pido
16. Luchando obra, por lo no lucido.

1. Cover me reading this paper
2. Apparent proof of my grown faith.
3. Pay close attention to it, giving me the Laurel
4. Truly I will say under the accepted wing
5. I confess, that I have seen myself in an orchard
6. Although anxious to bring to light
7. A work that would certainly please you.
8. Being marvelous, before it could strengthen you
9. Receive goodwill, prudent ones
10. Repelling the failures of ignorance
11. I am unworthy, but you are so pre-eminent,
12. Good and wise that I will emerge triumphant.
13. United the Three, the rest excellent
14. Minister's numbers, to all as lover
15. They incline to the frugal, therefore I ask

16. For you to wrestle and work for what remains unlit.

The poem reflects upon hiddenness and invites a diligent reader, suggesting that in the face of seemingly transparent orthodoxy, there is an invitation to peruse hidden meanings. The poem announces the confessional motif, "Confiteor," adopting the first person to proclaim an Edenic provenance, emerging from a turbulent effort to bring the work to light.Recalling the garden not as of site of pernicious curiosity, he rather centers on the laborious effort of a creation that takes place in the shadow of an orchard. Guerrero opens with a demand that the work be cast in shadow and ends with an invitation to enter its unlit realms, even as he claims he wants to bring the work into the light for his audience's pleasure, knowing his text would enter the shadowed secrecy of the archive.

The opening couplet weaves themes of revelation with notions of protection by relying on the polysemy of the words left in Latin. The opening word, *Obumbrame*, is itself an invitation, conjugated as a command; it appears to be a conflation of the Latin verb, *obumbro*, and the Spanish personal pronoun *me*. In Latin, *obumbro* can mean to overshadow or shade, but it can also convey a sense of protection, or defense—a cover or physical protection (*Database of Latin dictionaries* 2005, "obumbro"). It is from *obumbro* that Spanish received its word for shadow, sombra. Obumbrame, orthographically and semiotically, harkens to *alumbrame (illuminate me)* as both call forth notions of light and dark—of revelation. It also preserves the sense of protection, of taking umbrage under a shadow.

The second verse similarly binds visibility with defensibility, opening with another Latin phrase that asserts the paper of "Escrito curioso" is a *signum evidens* of Guerrero's faith. *Signum* can mean sign, signal, referencing a thing's visibility. It can also mean proof—a form of logical defense. Similarly, *evidens* can be translated as apparent/visible or evident/provable. This dualism raises the question: is this paper Guerrero's public defense of his orthodoxy? Or is it an opportunity to return into shadow? Is it an invitation into the light, to embrace apparent signs and obvious proofs? Or is it an invitation into the cover of a shadow?

Guerrero's invitation does not lead us towards a revelation of his identity or to a confession of infidelity. Instead, it leaves us clues that draw us to different parts of the work—only to lead us to more expressions of orthodoxy. In the enigmatic fourth line, he declares that he will say what he has admitted under a wing. On one level, this statement harkens to Biblical language, as sheltering under God's wings, another instance of *obumbrame's* relevance—he takes shelter in the umbrage of orthodoxy.

However, this allusion adopts a literal dimension, as the opposing page prominently displays a large bird with its wings lifted (Figure 5). Sure enough, on the underside of the wings we find a brief confessional text that reads, "Una cosa superior traigo en mi pecho metida, todo su ser es amor a solo amor reducida como prenda del señor". Guerrero surprises us (nos asombra) with a hidden confession (in the *sombra* of a literal wing), but this invitation to peruse secret depths only reinscribes us deeper into orthodoxy.

The collection's final work stands to synthesize the curious diligence of Guerrero's eerily playful hyper-orthodoxy (Figure 6). Another acrostic announces the end of the work and contrasts the divergent ends available to humanity. Titled "The different ends between the just and the sinner", it is a multi-tiered acrostic poem starting with the word FINIS, end. Each word in the line shares a last letter, so the last line reads: "Sanctificum nomen Iustus laudabit amicus" above and "stercoreum stramen dixus gaudebit ut hostis" below. It is meticulous, and once again, the totalizing power of dualities governs the structure of his writing—all of humanity is forced onto one of the two paths as friend or enemy to God. The end of the line is a new beginning. The poem reads acrostically, *semes* (seed). Fruitfulness is of course standard biblical imagery for spiritual and procreative (re)production, but it is not one we tend to associate with Inquisition. And yet, Guerrero directly links righteousness to

artistic labor and creativity. However, Guerrero's hidden or playful invitations to attentive reading largely escapes the attention of the Inquisitors. No marginal notes or underlines seem to indicate that an Inquisitorial scribe ever passed through the text, as was common in most confessional documentation. Its curious impertinence contrasts the ethos of uncurious diligence that governed its production.

**Figure 5.** *Confessing Bird*.

**Figure 6.** *Ends for the Just and the Sinner*.

## 6. Creative Curiosity

On the whole, my efforts to locate documents with a similar structure and purported purpose to "Escrito curioso," have, thus far, been in vain.[8] However, one of the neighbors of "Escrito curioso" in Ms. Coll. 728 offers a significant contrast between the two confessional styles, exemplifying the diligence so characteristic of Inquisition procedures. Folder 20 contains a document cataloged as "Correspondence-Marques, Josef Nicolas 1773" (*Henry Charles Lea Collection of Inquisition Manuscripts, 1533–1866*. 1773) Marques's letter relates a particularly egregious tale heard in the confessional to the Inquisition. He makes a somewhat audacious request to be granted the authority to absolve an unnamed penitent, someone who made a pact with the devil, but was now repentant.

His brief confession is worth considering as a whole because it exemplifies classic elements of a denunciation to the Inquisition.

Ill[ustrisi]mo señor

Cierto penitente se a confesado conmigo arrepentido ya de haver cometido el siguiente exeso, es á saber: q[ue] desesperado de su pobreza, viendo q[ue] dios nu[e]s[tro] señor no le socorria, como deceaba, dijo, q[ue] renegaba se su mag[esta]d de su sacro-sancto Nombre, de la soberana Reina, y de todos los santos, (en voz vaja, tal, qual usaba intra confessionem) no por q[ue] negaba en Dios el poder socorrerle, y en los s[an]tos el poder le int[e]pretar el alivio; sino exasperado de no conseguirlo, por lo qual invoco a el Demonio, cuia figura traxia en un papel, diciendole, q[ue] si le aliviaba sus necesidades, no llamaria mas a Dios, y le daria su alma, se lo q[ue] asegura q[ue] luego se arepentia: en quatro ocasiones se quito el horario, jusgando, era el inconveniente q[ue] tenia, y ana q[ue] el Demonio no se le apareciese si ocurriese a su llamado, en dos de ellas lo arrojo, y escupió, diciendo era horario de porqueria, y en una de estas lo oyo otra persona. Es cierto, q este infeliz no nego misterio alguno expresamente ni desconfio de la Divina misericordia; pero vilipendiandola incurrio en una virtual apostasia, q manifesto por esa execrables demonstraciones; de todo lo qual por no poder ocurrir immediatam[en]te a V. S. Ill[ustrísim]ma pide arrepentido perdon, y misericordia por medio mio, e' xo' para proceder con mayor seguridad, suplico ardidissimamte a V.S. me conceda facultad, para absolverlo in foro o conscientie, asi lo espero de su piedad, y santo zelo. Luechula y sep[tiembr]e 28, 1773 a[ños].

p[i]do m[erce]d de v[uestra]. s[eñoría]. ill[ustrisi]ma su humilde siervo, y cape[lla]n

Br. Josef Nicolas Marques (*Henry Charles Lea Collection of Inquisition Manuscripts, 1533–1866*. 1773.).

It is a meta-confession, a confession of a confession. Marques reveals a secret while maintaining (for now) the anonymity of the penitent who confided in him. The disclosed information pertains to the Inquisition's jurisdictions: questions of faith and apostasy. Marques's report is saturated with expressions of guilt-ridden repentance, as the penitent allegedly drew an image of the Devil on some paper in an effort to make a demonic pact after God disappointed him by not responding to his impoverishment and suffering.

Distinct from "Escrito curioso," the margins are full of annotations by Inquisitorial hands, indicating how specific Inquisitors responded to this confession. A marginal note records their response.

> Respondase a este confesor aconseje y persuada al penitente haga su denuncia expontanea en el S[an]to Offi[ci]o asegurandole del inviolable secreto q[u]e en el se guarda; q[ue] no se servira daño alguno p(or) ello, y q[u]e antes bien le servira p[ar]a no ser castigado si se le delatare por alguno de los delictos o heregia en q[ue] buen confitente aq[ue]llo contrario que da expuesto p[ar]a lo que puede ocurrir al mismo s[an]to of[ici]o o a su comisario (*Henry Charles Lea Collection of Inquisition Manuscripts, 1533–1866*. 1773.).

This invocation to diligence encourages both the confessor and the confessant to quick action lest they incur Inquisitorial inquiry. They encourage the confessor to persuade the penitent to spontaneously denounce himself to the Inquisition, promising safety in the umbrage of their secrecy. They suggest that the penitent can rest assured no harm will come to him so long as he confesses voluntarily. However, they leave the consequences of not choosing to proceed voluntarily ominously ambiguous—leaving the work of explication to the confessor. The poorly veiled threat distinctly mars an otherwise warm invitation, exemplifying the duality of mercy and justice that Guerrero celebrates.

While any subsequent files produced by this demonic pact have since been lost or separated from this initial confession, it is easy to see how denunciation perpetually produces novel Inquisitorial documentation. Marques wrote a letter confessing on behalf of the penitent; Inquisitors wrote back and recorded their response. If diligence was followed, the penitent would soon be de-masked either by a voluntary submission or by other means. The final marginal note indicates that the request to give the Marques the aforementioned instructions was carried out on the following day, affirming, "se dio com[unicaci]on a este Ec[clesiasti]co p[ar]a que le reciba declaracion al espontaneo" (*Henry Charles Lea Collection of Inquisition Manuscripts, 1533–1866*. 1773.). While our records end there, it is clear this single folio had the potential to generate hundreds of pages of Inquisitorial testimony. While the Inquisitors deny Marques the authority to independently absolve, his request solicits a response.

By contrast, "Escrito curioso" is indeed a curious writing for its dearth of curiosity in the face of a diligent display of orthodoxy. It is not inquisitive, and yet it invites careful parsing. In many ways, "Escrito curioso" represents the perfect Inquisitorial subject in Guerrero's adherence to orthodoxy, and it echoes the self-reflective language and diligent investigation of the heart expected within the confessional conceit. And yet, it is difficult to imagine how the Inquisition might respond to this elaborate display of fidelity. Flawed confessions, or confessions of flaws, legitimatize the Inquisition's authority and power to question, or to be *inquisitive*. But what can it do with confessions of orthodoxy whose cryptic invitations only lead to more expressions of conformity?

Thus, the rarity of "Escrito curioso" within the archive underscores the Inquisition's shadow desire: its desire for heresy. The impertinence of "Escrito curioso"—its lack of belonging—within the archive emphasizes that the Inquisition ultimately rejects such uncurious diligence. Illegible to an Inquisitorial reader who seeks to question the orthodoxy of individuals, Guerrero's legible but un-functional work of piety remains a curiosity, stranded in a forgotten nook of Inquisitorial documentation. Not only does it require its Inquisitors to be diligently curious, but it also depends on confessants who are diligently and impertinently uncurious at the same time. If this is a contradiction, it is a productive one. When we understand the Inquisition as a productive site of conflict between polyvalent forms of curiosity, we are better poised to understand the multivalent impacts of Inquisition on Spanish textual production.

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## Notes

1. Scholarship on the Spanish Inquisition has made important strides in revising over-stated claims of its repressive efficacy. A wave of scholarship challenged the classic tomes of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century historiography, including William Monter (1989), and Edwards (1999), among many others. Inquisition scholarship continues to elucidate the disjuncture between the Inquisition's operations and its representation as a beacon of intolerance. After Henry Kamen's influential *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (Kamen 2014), see more recent contributions by Doris Moreno Martínez (2004), Lu Ann Homza (2006, ix–xxxvii), Gabriel Torres Puga (2021), and Starr-LeBeau (2023). See also, for deconstructions of Inquisitorial mythology. Still, the impact of the Inquisition's censorship on knowledge and textual production remains fertile ground for analysis. After Carlo Ginzburg (1976) and late 20th century scholarship on the Inquisition, Alcalá (1987), see María José Vega (2014) and Peter Harrison (2001), along with the following collections: *Textos castigados* (2013) and *Diálogo y Censura* (2016).

[2] The past few decades have seen a burst in scholarship on curiosity's evolution from vice to virtue in the transition to modernity, especially in early modern France and England. See, especially, Line et al. (2016) as well as Abramovici (2021), Benedict (2001), and *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (2006).

[3] As an entry into the prolific research on the operations of the *novela*'s role within *Don Quixote*, see Bruce Wardropper's foundational article (Wardropper 1957) along with recent reflections by Donald Gilbert-Santamaría (2020, p. 77) and Federico Jiménez Ruiz (2023, p. 277).

[4] Julian Juderías (1914) coined the term the Black Legend in his seminal *La leyenda negra y la verdad histórica*. For an updated account of the evolution and deconstruction of the Black Legend, see Domínguez (Domínguez 2019).

[5] In this and subsequent transcriptions of Inquisition documents, I maintain orthography and punctuation, but have resolved all abbreviations in brackets.

[6] The Vulgate reads Luke 15: 12, "pater da mihi portionem". Guerrero adds an emphatic prossessive pronoun, "meam".

[7] Latin translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[8] There are some promising entries in the catalog of the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City, that, with future study, may allow us to better contextualize "Escrito Curioso" in the operations late Mexican Inquisition. See for example, "Copia de un papel curioso cuyo título es: 'Desengaño de Ignorantes'. Incluye otra reflexión: 'Respuesta a la respuesta de sepan todos, para que todos sepan la verdad que es la que únicamente se debe saber'."Another document appears to merge religious drawings and writings with description reading "Versos entre las fojas 479 a 482. Copia o Dibujo de un alma, y soneto a un alma". However, unlike "Escrito curioso," this document appears to be contained within a much larger work.

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Expediente 046 (Inquisición Caja 5235), with the description, "Copia de un papel curioso cuyo título es: 'Desengaño de Ignorantes'. Incluye otra reflexión: 'Respuesta a la respuesta de sepan todos, para que todos sepan la verdad que es la que únicamente se debe saber'."

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# "Curiosa Impertinente": Women and Curiosity on the Spanish–North African Borderlands

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**Abstract:** In European imaginings of the Islamic world, women incited intense curiosity and were often depicted by early modern writers as sexualized subjects and curious objects of male desire. However, this Orientalist fascination ignores the very curiosity of these women and their desire to glean knowledge about the world around them. While curiosity became increasingly valued in the early modern period as a means of progress, female curiosity was still often linked to the perils of excess (Neil Kenny). This essay examines this apparent contradiction by focusing on the Muslim protagonist in one of Miguel de Cervantes's plays that takes place on the Spanish–North African borderlands. In *Los baños de Argel* (1615), Zahara defends her desire to inquire about the world by portraying herself as a "curious impertinent" ("curiosa impertinente"), a name that clearly recalls the tale of "El curioso impertinente" intercalated in the first part of *Don Quixote* (1605). Moreover, Zahara harnesses her ability to ask questions to further her goals and ambitions. Ultimately, through a close reading of the female protagonist in this play, I argue that Cervantes considers the ways in which women asserted their own curiosity and represented themselves as agents of inquiry.

**Keywords:** Miguel de Cervantes; North Africa; Iberia; women; gender; curiosity; Islam; theater

## 1. Introduction

In European imaginings of the Islamic world, women incited intense curiosity and were often depicted by early modern writers as sexualized subjects and curious objects of male desire.[1] The captive Portuguese cleric Antonio de Sosa is one of these authors who displays his curiosity towards the physical features and customs of Muslim women, and he incorporates these commentaries into a work that principally depicts the city and multilingual population of Algiers at the end of the sixteenth century. In his *Topografía e historia general de Argel* (1612), Sosa dedicates various chapters to profiling women in Algiers, including descriptions of their clothing, beauty practices, and pastimes.[2] Among these portrayals, Sosa voyeuristically imagines women's activities in the gendered space of the bathhouse, scrubbing their bodies and softening their skin with special products: "They usually go in the afternoon because the men are there until then, and they all take at least one slave with a basket or bundle of linen or silk in which they carry their clean shirt and bloomers, their headdress, and some soap to scrub themselves [...] to whiten and soften their skin. And many also carry some scented water with which they spray their faces and breasts, and towels to wipe themselves off" (de Haedo [1612] 1927–1929, vol. 1, pp. 135–36).[3] Women's fashion also piques his fascination as he describes their plunging necklines and thin linen tunics while they walk barefoot in their homes (de Haedo [1612] 1927–1929, vol. 1, pp. 129–31). Sosa, like many of his contemporaries, offered

up a colorful display of women's bodies and spaces in the Islamic world for a curious European audience.

However, this Orientalist fascination with the female "other" ignores the very curiosity of these women and their desire to glean knowledge about the world around them. While curiosity became increasingly valued in the early modern period as a means of progress, female modes of inquiry were still often linked to the perils of excess.[4] As Neil Kenny argues, "the purpose of making women into curious subjects was not, on the whole, to empower them, but on the contrary to show what disasters ensue when women are given leeway to act on the curiosity that storytellers attribute to them" (Kenny 2004, p. 384). Narratives and exempla that circulated in medieval and early modern discourse only helped to emphasize the negative association between women and curiosity. Female names, such as the biblical figure of Eve or Pandora from Greek mythology, were harnessed by diverse authors to show the calamitous results of women's curiosity (Kenny 2004, pp. 395–400). As a consequence, men were able to display their curiosity towards women or other curious objects that oftentimes became feminized, but it was usually inappropriate for women to express their curiosity about the world around them (Kenny 2004, p. 423).

This essay examines this apparent contradiction between viewing women as curious objects and appreciating these women's own curiosity by focusing on the Muslim protagonist in one of Miguel de Cervantes's *comedias* that takes place on the Spanish–North African borderlands. In *Los baños de Argel* (1615), Zahara defends her desire to inquire about the world around her by characterizing herself as a "curious impertinent" ("curiosa impertinente"), a name that clearly recalls the tale of "El curioso impertinente" intercalated in the first part of *Don Quixote* (1605). Moreover, in collaboration with the other women in the play, Zahara harnesses her ability to ask questions to mobilize her own desires and aspirations. Ultimately, through a close reading of the female protagonist in this play, I argue that Cervantes considers the ways in which women asserted their own curiosity and represented themselves as agents of inquiry.

## 2. Curious Characters and Spectators in *Los baños de Argel*

In *Los baños de Argel*, Cervantes draws heavily on his own experience as a captive in Algiers (1575–1580) to represent the captivity of Don Lope and his subsequent rescue and return to Spain with Zahara, the wealthy Agi Morato's daughter. The play is a reworking of some parts of "The Captive's Tale," intercalated into part one of *Don Quixote*, and broadly speaking, it presents the dynamics of Christian–Muslim encounters and conflicts in the early modern Mediterranean world.[5] Aside from an exploration of Zahara's curiosity that will be central to my argument in this essay, it is important to first note how the play also alludes to the curiosity of many of its characters, especially their interest in the religious "other." Christian characters probe the actions and customs of their Muslim counterparts and vice versa. Right from the start of the play, the Christian captives are enthralled with trying to figure out who Zahara is and how to decode the messages with coins she sends out her window. The captives inquire about what and who they encounter in Algiers and try to make sense of these scenes.

The noble captive Osorio, for example, is also curious about Zahara's planned wedding with Muley Maluco, while likewise depicting the Muslim personage as "well versed and curious": "Muley Maluco is to be her husband, the one who aspires to be king of Fez, a very famous Moor, well versed and curious in his sect and evil law. He knows Turkish, Spanish, German, Italian, and French; he sleeps on a raised bed and eats at a table, sitting in Christian fashion. Most of all, he's a great soldier, generous, wise, composed, adorned with many graces" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 84).[6] This character is based on the historical dignitary 'Abd al-Malik of Morocco (1541–1579). Near the end of his life, he married the

daughter of the Ottoman official Hājjī Murād—the same woman who inspired Cervantes's characters of Zoraida in *Don Quixote* and Zahara in *Los baños de Argel*. [7] As Osorio suggests in the play, Maluco's Europeanized customs do not necessarily line up with the captive's expectations. The historical 'Abd al-Malik also aroused the attention of other visitors to North Africa, like Edmund Hogan, the English ambassador to Marrakesh, who commented on his interest in European music and sports. The early modern Arabic historian al-Ifrānī remarked on his distinctive use of Latin characters to sign his name and that he was a man inclined to new things (Oliver Asín 1947–1948, p. 259). Thus, the brief commentary about Muley Maluco's curiosities in the play reveals the interest he incited not only in the other spectators in the play but also in the real-life readers/audience of Cervantes's *comedia* in early modern Spain.

Just like the Christian captives were curious about the people and practices in the world around them, Cervantes also shows how the Muslim characters on stage take an interest in the peculiarities of Christian customs. This idea is best illustrated at the start of act three when the Christian captives are preparing to celebrate Easter with a Mass, including other accompanying musical and dramatic performances. Just as the religious celebration is about to start, the Muslim wardens guarding the entrance to the bagnio express their curiosity about the event, and one of them incites his fellow worker to look on with him: "Let's watch from the door how they say their Mass, for I imagine in concert they must have excellent music" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 68).[8] The other guardian enthusiastically agrees, suggesting that the captives' sacred performance must really be a sight to see.

The fact that the captives were celebrating an Easter Mass, or any Sunday Mass for that matter, would not have been so surprising to Muslim onlookers in Algiers since these captives were permitted to carry out these religious rites. As Ellen Friedman explains, conversion to Islam in Algiers was generally discouraged since this would diminish the value of their captives as merchandise that could be bought and sold. Thus, the captives' masters were open to allowing them to practice their Catholic traditions as they thought their captives would be more obedient and they could retain their economic value (Friedman 1975, p. 34).[9] Antonio de Sosa, for example, wrote about the celebration of religious rites in Algiers, which were especially lively on Easter: "And since by God's grace there is never a lack of devout Christians, there is usually a great gathering on Sundays and holidays, for those who can, to hear Mass there, and at Easter there are usually so many that there is no room, and it is sometimes necessary to say Mass on the patio outside" (de Haedo [1612] 1927–1929, vol. 1, p. 195).[10] Sosa goes on to explain that the motivation for allowing captives to participate in these religious observances, in part, also had to do with the collection of money they obtained from captives to access the celebration.

Given the commonplace of these religious ceremonies in Algiers, the curiosity on the part of the wardens seems to be based more on their own desire to catch sight of the captives' religious and cultural practices rather than on some perceived novelty of these taking place. In fact, Cauralí, the captain of Algiers who leads raids on Spain and is enamored by the Christian Costanza, also shows up to witness the spectacle. Although Cauralí is characterized as a bold captain in act one, rich and prosperous from the booty and captives he plundered off the Spanish coast, in act three, he shows up to the captives' Easter celebrations wanting to be nothing more than a curious spectator. When he enters the scene, he insists he is only there to "see your celebration" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 325).[11] He is not there to harm anyone but instead tells the other captives to sit and watch the show with him as it is about to start. In a way, he sets aside his role as captain and is just another spectator interested in the performance.

In his study of the captives' Easter celebration and public performances in *Los baños de Argel*, Javier Irigoyen-García observes how the prevalent "hybridity" in the play within a play "underscores the quandaries of creating a 'pure national culture' in early modern Spain, exposing the pastoral mode as a vehicle for articulating Iberian anxieties over cultural sameness and difference" (Irigoyen-García 2010, pp. 45–46). He sheds light on this performance, noting how the Muslims and Christians mirror each other; the prison guards assume they will hear what they consider to be "Spanish" music, and one of the captives considers the music "heretical" or Moorish (Irigoyen-García 2010, p. 251). Thus, Cervantes subtly points to the similarities and blurred lines of cultural practices, as well as the dangers of defining "national" cultures with tidy labels (Irigoyen-García 2010, p. 59). As we have seen in both of these cases, with Muslims' desire to observe captives' religious celebrations in Algiers, as well as previously with Osorio's curiosity towards Muley Maluco's Europeanized cultural practices, Muslims and Christians display an interest in each other's knowledge and cultural practices. In both cases, however, the play suggests that a curiosity in what the characters consider to be different or unique instead reflects the familiar.[12]

In this brief review of how the Cervantine characters display their curiosity, we must also consider how Cervantes creates curiosity for the spectators/readers outside the play's fiction. In Adrienne L. Martín and Esther Fernández's introduction to *Drawing the Curtain: Cervantes's Theatrical Revelations* (Martín and Fernández 2022), they show how Cervantes's theatricality is frequently predicated on the notion of revelation. As they demonstrate through various examples, this notion is ripe for moments of anagnorisis in which certain unexpected details that have been concealed from other characters and/or the audience are suddenly revealed. As they put forward, "The act of revelation suggests that something has been intentionally concealed, thus its disclosure and the recognition of hidden truths produce moments of high drama" (Martín and Fernández 2022, p. 4). In *Los baños de Argel*, these moments of revelation and high drama are what unveil how Cervantes also sparks the curiosity of the spectators off the page. To use but just one example, we could turn to the scene in act one where the captives Don Lope and Vivanco notice a reed stick coming out of one of the windows from the adjacent building, leaving them with a small package of gold coins. At first, the captives imagine it might be a young lad who dropped the present down from the window, and then they speculate that it is perhaps a renegade Christian woman locked in the house. The motive behind their speculation is the window lattice (*celosía*) that blocks their line of vision to the human behind the screen, inciting the captives to imagine the who and the why along with the readers/audience who follow their clues. The moment of revelation only comes later when Hazén tells the two captives that it is not a renegade Christian slave but rather the daughter of the prominent Agi Morato who lives there and that she has been promised to marry Muley Maluco. In a world in which Christian–Muslim encounters are so frequent, the play also satisfies the curiosity and whets the appetite of the readers/audience who are anxious to learn about these peoples and places that are at once close but out of reach.[13]

## 3. Zahara's "Impertinent" Curiosity

As we have seen, a thread of curiosity towards other religious and cultural practices runs throughout *Los baños de Argel*, all with different implications. If we pay close attention to these examples, however, we see that the majority of these cases are limited to the male characters of the plot. In part, this could be due to the fact that there are more men populating the pages of this *comedia*, and only three principal women (Zahara, Halima, and Costanza) are included in the main storyline. Therefore, we must also consider how the intersection of gender and curiosity was understood in the early modern period.

While curiosity had often been linked as a vice to original sin, in Cervantes's world, curiosity began to take on a more positive undertone, especially when it was associated with men. During this time, natural philosophers persistently worked to establish the moral acceptability of curiosity, thereby legitimizing their scientific pursuits and the emergence of new scientific principles. As a result, curiosity began to be actively promoted in a manner unprecedented in previous times (Cottegnies et al. 2016, pp. 2–3). Within the particular context of early modern Spain, in his *Tesoro de la lengua española*, Sebastián de Covarrubias reflects this volatile meaning of curiosity: "This word *curious* . . . is understood in good and bad ways. In good for the one who treats things with diligence, and in bad for the one who works hard to scrutinize those things that are very hidden and reserved, and that do not matter to us according to that place" (Covarrubias Horozco [1611] 2006, p. 656).[14]

Even though curiosity was on an upward trajectory in terms of its moral acceptance in the early modern world, feminine curiosity continued to be viewed as transgressive. As Barbara Benedict has argued, "Early modern cultural critics depict female inquiry [. . .] as an act of transgression that endangers society or the individual" (Benedict 2001, p. 155). On the contrary, male inquiry was frequently explained "as an act of impiety or insanity shaped by a corrupt culture" (Benedict 2001, p. 155). Benedict goes on to show how female curiosity leaned more towards superstition and uncontrolled wonder rather than to the perceived scientific pursuits of their male counterparts. Early modern authors, thus, depicted curious women as transgressive, capable of challenging established societal norms and conventions (Benedict 2001, p. 155).

The inclusion of Zahara and her desire to inquire about the world around her in *Los baños de Argel* offers an important perspective on the debates about the societal acceptability of women's curiosity. In the second act of the play, Zahara pays a visit to her friend, Halima, and tells her about the most recent local news: the Cadí has just sentenced Hazén to impalement because he killed Yzuf. Zahara admits that she waited around to watch the impalement, observing that Hazén died happily as he confessed his Christian beliefs. This dreadful scene moves Zahara, and when Cauralí interjects to ask why she stopped to watch such a dreadful scene, Zahara identifies herself as a "curious impertinent" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 283).[15] While not directly condemning Zahara, Cauralí's expression of incredulity ("You stopped to watch such a sight?") implies that her decision to pause and observe the impalement might not align with what is considered an acceptable form of curiosity, even though he too is curious about Hazén's fatal outcome (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 34).[16]

Zahara's reaction to Cauralí appears to be influenced, to a certain degree, by his expectations of her. Zahara's justification for her inquisitive nature directly follows the portrayal of her emotions in gendered terms. She admits that she was brought to tears by the spectacle of Hazén's death because her "heart is naturally merciful and humane; in short, a woman's heart" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 34).[17] Continuing with her gendered portrayal, Zahara labels her inquiry as "impertinent," thereby conforming to society's expected behavior associated with her gender. In the early modern world, many (principally men) viewed feminine curiosity as excessive and with suspicion. As Kenny explains, excessive or impertinent curiosity was widely attributed to women's natural inclination towards excessiveness in general (Kenny 2004, pp. 388–89). Juan Luis Vives, for example, cautions against the "uncontrolled curiosity of women, who are dying to know what is happening everywhere: who is out banqueting at whose invitation, how they are dressed, with what splendid apparel" (Vives [1524] 2007, p. 142). He proceeds to imply that the excessive curiosity of women might result in adverse outcomes, affecting not only these women but also those around them. Thus, for Zahara to qualify her curiosity about Hazén's demise and the surrounding world as "impertinent" is a defense that aligns with

the expectations that early modern society held for women. The way she refers to her curiosity as "impertinent" is particularly striking, especially when compared to Cauralí, who is able to express interest in Christians without any scrutiny or the need to explain his curiosity. In contrast, Zahara feels compelled to explain or qualify her inquisitiveness.

Aside from the gendered expectations that associated impertinent curiosity and excess to women in the early modern world, Zahara's reference evidently recalls the intercalated tale in *Don Quixote* (Part I, chapters 33–35). The narrative of "El curioso impertinente" follows the relationship of two close friends, Anselmo and Lotario, whose bond is tested when Anselmo's curiosity gets the best of him, and it motivates him to devise a plan to find out whether or not his wife Camila will remain faithful to him. He enlists Lotario's help, even "if only for the sake of curiosity and amusement" (Cervantes Saavedra 2003, p. 291).[18] Despite Lotario's initial reluctance, he becomes entangled in the scheme, leading to disastrous consequences when Anselmo discovers the truth and meets his tragic end. Cervantes's cautionary tale on the perils of curiosity rapidly gained popularity, piquing the interest of various authors beyond Spain's borders. As Marina S. Brownlee has shown, seventeenth-century English playwrights were among those captivated by this narrative. At least a half dozen of them crafted plays inspired by Cervantes's "El curioso impertinente," translating and adapting the plot to different contexts (Brownlee 2020). The popularity of Cervantes's storyline compelled early modern writers to use Anselmo's curiosity for various moral considerations. At the crux of their exploration of Anselmo's imagination was often an examination of women's virtuousness. Even when not directly referencing Cervantes, references to a "curious impertinent" in their plots oftentimes alluded to an Anselmo figure and a similar series of events. On the one hand, these narratives were employed to caution against male curiosity akin to Anselmo's, highlighting how such "impertinent" curiosity might mobilize a sequence of negative consequences that could have likely been avoided. Yet, other early modern authors adapted Cervantes's plot to suggest that as long as men refrain from questioning female chastity, they could limit any adverse consequences (Kenny 2004, pp. 346–52).

Taking into consideration the potential for moral lessons about "impertinent" curiosity in Cervantes's tale and later adaptations of it, the use of the same phrase in reference to Zahara is all the more perplexing. As Kenny has suggested, male authors were much less interested in delving into women's curiosity about their husband's fidelity than exploring female curiosity as wayward behavior that reflected poorly on their husbands (Kenny 2004, pp. 384–424). While the possibility of crossed love interests exists in the drama, the discussion of curiosity in the play does not revolve around women's chastity. Instead, Zahara's curiosity stems from her own motivations to learn about Don Lope and Christian customs and values, with the desire to leave behind her life in Algiers and travel to Spain. While the narrator of Cervantes's intercalated tale ultimately affirms that "Anselmo's reckless curiosity cost him his life," thus emphasizing the calamitous possibilities of being curious about something unnecessary or "impertinent," the use of Zahara's curiosity in *Los baños de Argel* has quite a different outcome (Cervantes Saavedra 2003, p. 305).[19] In effect, Zahara's curiosity does not lead to her end, but instead, it paves the way for new opportunities in her life, evident through her subsequent questioning and information seeking alongside the other women on stage.

It is worth noting that, at this point in the play, Zahara's curiosity is closely tied to her religious transformation. In act one, she claims that a captive Christian woman introduced her to Christianity and the Virgin Mary at a young age, but in act two, her curiosity about religious practice deepens. As Zahara witnesses the scene of the repentant renegade Hazén's impalement, which is visually charged as he holds up a wooden cross, proclaiming his return to Christianity, she exclaims: "I saw him die so happily that I think he did not die

at all. If his death were by any other means, I would have envied it" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 34).[20] In this moment, Zahara's curiosity evolves into a quest for knowledge, which seems to drive her toward a religious revelation, even bringing her to the point of almost wishing for her own death on African soil as a Christian convert.[21] As Márquez Villanueva reminds us, Cervantes's captivity plays are shaped not just by autobiographical or documentary elements of life in Algiers but also by religious and literary influences, crafted with moral and educational intent, akin to other captivity writings inspired by religious redemptionists seeking financial support for their cause (Márquez Villanueva 2010, pp. 39–40, 337n126).[22] Zahara's curiosity about Hazén's gruesome martyrdom stands in stark contrast to the superficial interest of characters like Cauralí, whose fascination with the captives' religious spectacle lacks any deeper understanding of their devotional practices. Considering this context, it is clear that, to a certain extent, religion shapes Zahara's desire to understand her world, though other factors in the dramatic work also play a role.

If we expand our focus beyond Zahara's curiosity about Hazén's impalement and the discussions justifying her inquiry, we see how gender and women's roles in the adjacent scenes play a particularly interesting part in the broader context. Just before Zahara expresses her curiosity about the latest news of Hazén's death, Cervantes sets the stage for act two with a revealing conversation between Halima and Constanza on the limits and possibilities of women's freedom. While Constanza, a Christian captive in Algiers, is deprived of certain freedoms, Halima laments her even more constrained position as a married woman, asserting, "Clearly she who belongs to herself is better off. There's no misfortune like not having freedom: I know it well, though I'm no slave" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 31).[23] This gendered discourse in the opening scene of act two highlights the experiences of women in a society shaped by rigid norms and power structures. As both women grapple with their powerlessness—whether as a slave or a wife—Zahara's later appearance contrasts sharply with these expectations, as she makes independent choices that defy the constraints of her world, partly driven by the curiosity she has about it.

## 4. A Defense of Women's Inquiry

In contrast to the explanation Zahara presents to Cauralí regarding her curiosity, her ensuing discussion with Halima provides an alternative viewpoint on how Cervantine women perceived their own inquisitiveness and their ability to acquire knowledge about the world. When Cauralí leaves, the two female friends are left alone with the new captives, Fernando and Costanza, and Zahara takes advantage of the situation to ask them about the customs and practices of Christians. In fact, the action of the whole scene is propelled because of Zahara's questions. She is curious to know if the captives are new to Algiers, who their love interests are, and the cultural practices around loyalty and truth telling. After posing a series of questions aimed at the new captives, Halima exclaims, "How fond you are of knowing everything!" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 37).[24] This time, however, Zahara has a different response in defense of her curiosity, answering her friend with another question: "Who does not like to know?" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 37).[25] She justifies her right to knowledge and desire to inquire about her interests, reframing it as more than just a mere "impertinent" curiosity and not defined with any gender expectations in mind.

Indeed, much of the remainder of the act is dominated by her pursuit of knowledge, and her questioning allows her the chance to control her destiny to a certain extent. Zahara's inquiries enable her to interact with the Christian captives and ultimately take control of her own fate. Initially, Zahara capitalizes on her inquiries to ascertain that the Christians will keep their word. Later in the act and with the help of her friends, Zahara coordinates

the collection of certain details to acquire a better understanding of Don Lope. She instructs Costanza to observe Don Lope and extract any details about his social standing. As Ana M. Rodríguez-Rodríguez notes, Zahara's actions stand in stark contrast to the expected feminine norms of early modern Spain. Her behavior is marked by a certain dissimulation, which she carefully manipulates throughout the play (Rodríguez-Rodríguez 2013, p. 153).[26] Alongside her curiosity, Zahara uses her physical appeal to manipulate the Christian captives. She enlists the help of the other Christian and Muslim women to support her ruse of being stung by a wasp, allowing her to remove her veil in public. Her ultimate aim is to ensure that Don Lope witnesses her beauty, thus securing his commitment to her. Her strategy proves successful, as he expresses his desire to take her to Spain soon, precisely as she had planned.

Cervantes's dramatic rendering of women's defense of inquiry, in particular on the Spanish–North African borderlands, can be extended to some of his other writings on women within this sphere. *El gallardo español* (1615), the first play in Cervantes's collection of *comedias*, centers on another Muslim protagonist who, as Mercedes Alcalá Galán has argued, is the "true nucleus of the plot, a magnet that attracts to itself the dramatic action, and the live portrait of a magnificent, interesting, surprising, and powerful feminine character" (Alcalá Galán 2019, p. 90). Rather than existing within the play as a curious object of desire for the other characters in the plot, her own curiosity is a central feature of her persona. In a conversation with her captive, the female protagonist fiercely expresses her curiosity and interest in meeting Fernando de Saavedra, about whom she has heard so many intriguing things. Within this context, Arlaxa portrays herself as "more than discreet, curious," a characteristic responsible for mobilizing much of the plot (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015b, p. 46).[27] This does not necessarily imply that curiosity is universally viewed as a positive quality in Cervantes's play. In fact, the text juxtaposes curiosity with discretion, suggesting that feminine inquiry could still be seen as a flaw. However, in this particular passage, Arlaxa embraces her curiosity, validating a woman's pursuit of information to affect her own needs.

To some extent, one might expect that women's curiosity in both *Los baños de Argel* and *El gallardo español* could be excused because of society's different moral expectations for these characters. In the world of Cervantes's Spanish–North African borderlands, Muslim women were oftentimes portrayed as sexualized subjects and curious objects of male desire. Consequently, a certain male subsection of this domain held different expectations for the moral standards of these women. This dynamic created a point of pressure, as unrestrained curiosity was typically deemed inappropriate for women. Yet, societal expectations were distinctive for them, allowing such behavior to be excused in some contexts. As Kenny has argued, "[s]ome writers tried to resolve this new tension by attributing plot unravelling curiosity to protagonists of whom one did not expect high moral standards in any case: women in general and female servants in particular rather than say noblewomen" (Kenny 2004, p. 419).[28] Yet, Zahara's and Arlaxa's curiosity is more than just excused; rather, it is what allows them to mobilize their desire. More importantly, it is the women themselves who justify their modes of inquiry and pursuit of knowledge.

As I alluded to at the start of the essay, feminine curiosity was presented as a moral lesson, highlighting the dire consequences that could arise when women yield to their inquisitive nature. In the narratives of early modern authors, as Kenny has convincingly argued, the inclusion of curious female characters typically served as a cautionary tale, emphasizing the potential negative outcomes of uncontrolled curiosity. Figures such as Eve, Psyche, and Pandora were some of the most predominant examples. Despite the recurrence of these few female exemplars, they came to represent the perils of curiosity more than men in similar situations. The unchanging nature of their narratives contributed

to the perception that all female curiosity inevitably led to catastrophic results (Kenny 2004, pp. 395–400). In contrast to this conventional view of women in Cervantes's world, Zahara emerges as a striking deviation. The North African woman mobilizes her own desire, in part through her curiosity and ability to ask questions to further her goals and ambitions. Therefore, Zahara's probing prompts the audience to contemplate for whom curiosity is problematic or impertinent. While curiosity often carries a negative undertone, the text suggests that this is primarily from the perspective of men rather than necessarily being regarded as such by women. In the play, female characters such as Zahara exemplify how curiosity can serve as an instrument to garner knowledge and, to a certain extent, the power to enact one's own destiny.

## 5. Conclusions

In Barbara Benedict's *A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, she shows how literary works, especially canonical sources, are an important form of "cultural documents," highlighting their role in reflecting historical perspectives on curiosity. In particular, she posits that literary texts designed for a cultured audience provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the tensions surrounding the desire for knowledge in the early modern world (Benedict 2001, pp. 22–23). In line with Benedict's proposal, Cervantes's writings set in the Spanish–North African borderlands are especially fertile ground for considering how the author's contemporaries viewed the inner workings of curiosity. As we have seen, his exploration of curiosity encompasses not only the religious "other" living in this sphere but also the particular intersection of gender and the pursuit of knowledge within this context. His plays, and, in particular, *Los baños de Argel*, demonstrate a move away from portraying women on this Mediterranean frontier as more than curious objects to be exoticized. Cervantes's drama significantly suggests that women could indeed harness their own curiosity, characterizing themselves as active participants in their own desire to inquire about their worlds. Even though early modern society may still define this inquiry as impertinent, Cervantes creates a space where women like Zahara can justify their ability to be curious.

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## Notes

1. For a relevant analysis of European writings on women in the Islamic world, see Grosrichard (1998, pp. 123–84), Kahf (1999), and Schick (1999, pp. 176–226). For a focus specifically on the context of early modern Spain, see Alcalá Galán (2012). Mas offers a summary of literary works that emphasize the "exoticism" of the Islamic world (Mas 1967, vol. 2, pp. 415–68).
2. For the descriptions of women within the broader context of Antonio de Sosa's work, see Garcés (2011, pp. 4–5).
3. All translations into English are my own unless otherwise noted. "Suelen ir después de mediodía, porque hasta allí van los hombres, y llevan todas, alomenos, una esclava con cesta o envoltorio de lienzo o seda, en que llevan su camisa lavada y zaregueles para mudar su tocado y algún jabón con que se frieguen [. . .] para emblanquecer y ablandar las carnes; y también llevan muchas alguna agua olorosa con que rucian la cara y pechos, y tobajas para enjugarse."
4. On the reception of women's curiosity in the early modern world, see Kenny (2004, pp. 384–424) especially and the volume on this subject edited by Cottegnies et al. (2016).
5. Garcés (2002) provides an in-depth analysis of how Cervantes's experience as a captive influenced his writing on this topic in his fiction.
6. I have modified the English translation slightly to also note Muley Maluco's curiosity in the original Spanish: "Muley Maluco es su esposo, / el que pretende ser rey / de Fez, moro muy famoso, / y en su secta y mala ley / es versado y muy curioso; / sabe la lengua turquesca, / la española y la tudesca, / italïana y francesa; / duerme en alto, come en mesa, / sentado a la cristianesca; / sobre todo, es gran soldado, / liberal, sabio, compuesto, / de mil gracias adornado" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, pp. 343–44).

7 For more on the historical 'Abd al-Malik of Morocco and Hājjī Murād's daughter, see Garcés (2002, pp. 90–92) and Oliver Asín (1947–1948, pp. 256–65).

8 "Entremos a mirar desde la puerta / cómo dicen su misa, que imagino / que tienen grande música y concierto" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 322).

9 For more on Christian captives' practice of religion in North Africa, see Friedman (1983, pp. 77–90).

10 "y como nunca por la gracia suya faltan cristianos devotos, hay gran concurso dellos que los domingos y fiestas suelen, los que pueden, oír allí misa, y en las Pascuas suelen ser tantos que no caben, y es necesario algunas veces decir misa en el patio fuera."

11 "ver vuestra fiesta."

12 Christina E. Lee has discussed the uneasiness that arises when the distinguishing cultural practices of the dominant and marginalized segments of society are crossed, producing what she calls the "anxiety of sameness." As she argues, "while conspicuous religious and socio-cultural difference was certainly perturbing and unsettling, in some ways it was not as threatening to the dominant Spanish identity as the potential discovery of the arbitrariness that separated them from the undesirables of society—and therefore the recognition of fundamental sameness" (Lee 2015, p. 4).

13 To offer just one indication of the popularity of these themes, Thomas E. Case outlines dozens of plays that Lope de Vega wrote about Christian–Muslim relations around the Mediterranean for a public that was eager to consume this drama (Case 1993).

14 "Esta palabra *curioso* . . . se toma en buena y en mala parte. En buena por el que trata las cosas con diligencia, y en mala por el que se desvela en escudriñar las que son muy ocultas y reservadas, y que no nos importan según aquel lugar." See also Kenny's *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe: Word Histories* where he traces the multiple meanings of curiosity as a concept (Kenny 1998, pp. 123–43).

15 "curiosa impertinente."

16 "¿Que tal te paraste a ver?" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 283).

17 "pecho humano y clemente; / en fin, pecho de mujer" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 283).

18 "aunque no fuese más de por curiosidad y entretenimiento" (Cervantes Saavedra [1605] 1978, p. 421).

19 "a Anselmo le costó la vida su impertinente curiosidad" (Cervantes Saavedra [1605] 1978, p. 437).

20 "Vile morir tan contento / que creo que no murió; / si ella fuera de otra suerte, / tuviera envidia a su muerte" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 282).

21 On the ambiguities of this scene, see Castillo (2004, p. 231).

22 See also Stackhouse, who places Cervantes's Algerian captivity plays in a broader context beyond the confines of performance (Stackhouse 2000, p. 24).

23 "Que gana más la que es suya / nien se ve ser cosa llana. / Al no tener libertad / no hay mal que tenga igualdad; / selo yo, sin ser esclava" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 279).

24 "¡Qué amiga de saber eres! (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 285).

25 "¿A quién el saber no agrada?" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 285).

26 See also Ortiz Lottman who notes how Zahara's "desire for knowledge" contrasts with how Cervantes's contemporaries depicted women in Algiers (Ortiz Lottman 2004, pp. 160–61).

27 "más que discreta, curiosa."

28 See Kenny´s recent essay as well on "Curiosity, Women, and the Social Orders" where he expands on this idea (Kenny 2016).

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# Trembling Curiosity: Sex and Desire in *El curioso impertinente* and *Carne trémula*

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**Abstract:** There is a longstanding connection between "curiosity", "desire", and "sexuality". This connection can be found in texts as diverse as works of scripture like the Hebrew Bible and the Quran as well as in contemporary works of critical theory. Miguel de Cervantes explored such a connection more than four centuries ago in *El curioso impertinente*, an exemplary novella embedded in the 1605 part one of *Don Quixote*. Through a comparative reading of Cervantes's *El curioso impertinent*, Pedro Almodóvar's 1997 film *Carne trémula* (itself a free adaptation of Ruth Rendell's 1986 novel *Live Flesh*), and Luis Buñuel's 1955 film *Ensayo de un crimen*, this essay analyzes the intersection of curiosity and desire—inflected through the lenses of both Girardian and Lacanian theory—in order to explore the fundamental role not just of curiosity in early modern Spain, but also in the representation of modern (and postmodern) sexuality.

**Keywords:** curiosity; triangular desire; Miguel de Cervantes; *El curioso impertinente*; Pedro Almodóvar; *Carne trémula*; Ruth Rendell; *Live Flesh*; Luis Buñuel; *Ensayo de un crimen*; René Girard; Jacques Lacan

## 1. Introduction

"Explore your curiosity". So reads the exterior signage of a particular sex shop in a nondescript Midwestern town. Such a tagline, of course, is meant to draw in potential customers by reassuring nice, middle-class passersby that any temptation they may feel to venture inside this establishment is by no means an indication of some presumed prurience but merely a sign of their (perfectly understandable) inquisitiveness. Still, the wording of this inviting euphemism does not prevent readers from correctly understanding this coy turn of phrase to really mean "explore your desire". Thus, this artful tagline reveals the extent to which curiosity and libido are intimately connected, both psychologically and discursively. For instance, Peter Carruthers (2018) notes that "in the burgeoning recent literature on curiosity in cognitive science, curiosity is defined as a *desire* to know or experience things" (p. 132; my emphasis). He then goes on to characterize curiosity as a "desire-like state" that involves what he calls a "physiological *arousal*" (p. 136; original emphasis). But the recognition of the linkage between curiosity and sexual desire is certainly not limited to cognitive science, nor is it particularly new. As Ahmed al-Rahim (2022) notes in an essay on curiosity and the gaze in medieval Islam, "The gaze, or the act of seeing the other and the awareness of being seen, has a storied history in the Islamic tradition. In the Quran, the gaze or glance [...], along with the 'amorous eye' and its attendant curiosity, is associated with the 'lust of the eye' or 'ocular fornication or adultery'" (p. 465). Indeed, within the traditions of all three Abrahamic religions, the connection between curiosity and sexuality can be said to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden[1], where the "forbidden

fruit" symbolizes the temptation of both knowledge and sexuality, since after partaking of the fruit, Adam and Eve are suddenly aware of (and pointedly ashamed of) their nakedness. Moreover, let us not forget that the Hebrew Bible itself also links sexuality and knowledge in its usage of another coy euphemism (often called "carnal knowledge") to describe the sex act.

> "'Knowing' is a euphemism for the sexual act in many languages, deriving from the biblical Hebrew usage. [. . .] Sexual knowledge is the key to the biblical story of Eve. The awareness of sexual difference is the fruit of knowledge, and after the Fall, Genesis imagines sex in a new and striking way: 'And Adam knew Eve his wife'. The metaphor of sex as knowing cannot in this context be accepted as a euphemism—'modesty of language', as some commentators have called it. In the first chapters of Genesis, the same [Hebrew] verb, 'yada', means to know and distinguish between moral categories and to be aware of one's own and another's physical difference (nakedness)." (Donger 2001, n.p.)

And, of course, it is not coincidental that European variants of the 2014 US reality-TV show *Dating Naked* were often titled something like "Adam Seeking Eve" (or, in its Spanish version, just *Adán y Eva*)[2], nor that the name of one particular online adult superstore is precisely named Adam&Eve.com. In this way, we can trace a trajectory that leads directly from curiosity to knowledge to sex (or, conversely, from curiosity to sex to knowledge)[3]. In either case, "curiosity" serves as the prime catalyst in this process.

## 2. *El curioso impertinente*

As many readers already know, *El curioso impertinente* (sometimes translated into English as the "Tale of Foolish Curiosity") is one of the many intercalated narratives embedded in the 1605 first part of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Unlike the other intercalated stories of part one, however, which are narrated when Don Quixote and Sancho encounter some new character who launches into a digressive tale usually unconnected to the mad knight's mission to restore the Age of Chivalry, *El curioso impertinente* exists precisely as an intradiegetic written document[4]. Some thirty-two chapters into part one of *Don Quixote*, the title character and Sancho arrive once more at the inn of Juan Palomeque, this time in the company of Dorotea, the Priest, and the Barber, where they are presented with a trunk (left behind by a prior unnamed traveler) that contains—among other texts—a manuscript titled *El curioso impertinente*. After discussing which of these various texts should be burned, the Priest decides that this particular manuscript, with such an intriguing title, should be read aloud to help them pass the time. In this way, the next three chapters of *Don Quixote* are given over—almost in their entirety—to the text of yet another of the novel's "found" manuscripts (the most important of which, of course, is Cide Hamete Benegeli's original "Don Quixote" manuscript that is said to be found inside a box of rags in a bazaar in Toledo).

Set in Florence, Italy, *El curioso impertinente* tells the story of two friends named Anselmo and Lotario, who are so close, in fact, that everyone in the city simply knows them as "los dos amigos" (the two friends) (Cervantes 1978, 1: 399). At the beginning of the tale, Anselmo falls in love with a beautiful young woman named Camila, whose virtue is beyond reproach, and with whom he soon weds. In response to this marriage, Lotario finds himself in the position of being what we might today call a "third wheel" and thus starts to spend less and less time at Anselmo's house. At this point, however, the story takes an unexpected turn. Anselmo approaches Lotario to enlist him in a plot to test Camila's virtue by asking his friend to try to seduce Camila in his absence. Lotario attempts to dissuade Anselmo from engaging in this foolish and dangerous course of action, but Anselmo will have none of it. Under continued pressure from Anselmo, Lotario outwardly appears to consent to the plan, but then only pretends to seduce Camila by telling Anselmo that he has done so and that she has passed the test with flying colors. When Anselmo

eventually discovers that Lotario has made no bona fide attempts at the seduction of his wife, he reproves his friend, who finally—and genuinely—acquiesces. The rest of the tale plays out (in brief) as follows. Lotario eventually succeeds in seducing Camila. Attempting to create subterfuge that will keep Anselmo from discovering the truth, Camila and her maid Leonela stage a scene in which Lotario pretends to woo Camila and in which she pretends to stab herself (actually drawing blood) in order to convince Anselmo that she has remained faithful to him. Later, when Anselmo catches a glimpse of Leonela's lover exiting the house early one morning, Camila herself becomes worried that she is about to be found out, so she finally flees the residence, hoping to run off with Lotario. Lotario, however, decides instead to deposit Camila in a nunnery, where she eventually dies of sadness and melancholy. Meanwhile, Lotario himself ultimately dies in battle somewhere far off, while Anselmo remains alone in his empty house, where he too soon dies of a broken heart (in the very midst of writing his own confession), now cognizant of his own foolish curiosity.

The scholarship published on *El curioso impertinente* is appreciable, and it is not necessary to gloss it here[5]. That said, it is worth pausing to briefly discuss one of the primary critical threads that this exemplary novella has famously generated, particularly as it relates to the intersection of curiosity and desire. In his book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* René Girard (1965) invents the term "triangular desire"—which will become the cornerstone of what is now called "mimetic theory"—to describe Don Quixote's "surrender" to Amadís de Gaula when it comes to choosing the objects of his own desire. Says Girard of the novel's title character: "The disciple pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined for him, by the model of all chivalry. We shall call this model the *mediator* of desire" (pp. 1–2). Speaking more specifically of *El curioso impertinente*, Girard argues that, in much the same way, Anselmo needs Lotario as a "mediator" in order to confirm his own desire for Camila: the hero "pushes the loved woman into the moderator's arms in order to arouse his desire and then triumph over the rival desire. He does not desire *in* his mediator but rather *against* him" (pp. 50–51; original emphasis).

A number of critics have taken issue with Girard's theory as it relates to both *Don Quixote* and to *El curioso impertinente* (and, again, it is unnecessary to gloss the full range of this scholarship)[6], but Girard's approach to what Luis Avilés (2024) calls "impertinent desire" is indicative of critics' treatment of the relationship between Anselmo and Lotario. Indeed, glossing Girard, Steven Hutchinson (2006) argues that in order to really know Camila ("conocer a la *otra*"), Anselmo needs Lotario ("utilizará a su *doble*"), even though the test will ultimately result in the destruction of his marriage (p. 129; original emphasis). Alternatively, Hutchinson argues, we might even read Anselmo's wife-testing as a means to deliberately destroy the marriage and thus demonstrate that no woman is worth his friendship with Lotario (Hutchinson 2006, pp. 129–30). In this regard, a number of critics have even offered queer readings of *El curioso impertinente*, arguing that its true love story is really between Anselmo and Lotario themselves. For example, in his book-length study of "male jealousy", Louis Lo (2008) notes: "If Anselmo's obsession is associated with a repressed homosexual desire, his curiosity is driven more by the desire of sex with his friend Lothario, than to test his wife's virtue" (p. 73)[7]. Still, while Cesáreo Bandera (2006) acknowledges that "There is nothing in the text that would clearly prevent us from assuming some sort of latent homosexual desire in Anselmo", he also stresses that, either way, the centrality of the relationship between "los dos amigos" is the main point of the narrative (p. 188). Which brings us to Pedro Almodóvar's *Carne trémula*.

## 3. *Carne trémula*

Released in 1997, and loosely based on Ruth Rendell's English novel *Live Flesh* (1986, from which Almodóvar's film takes its English-language title)[8], *Carne trémula* is a

complex narrative that essentially tells the story of a love triangle consisting of David de la Paz (Javier Bardem), Elena Benedetti (Francesca Neri), and Víctor Plaza (Liberto Rabal). Early in the film, we are introduced to Víctor, who arrives unannounced at Elena's apartment bearing gifts in the form of a pizza. The two had apparently "hooked up" at a party the week before and had agreed to meet up again on the evening in question, although Elena has clearly forgotten about this prior commitment. When she tries to brush off Víctor, an altercation ensues in which she pulls a gun and orders him to leave. When the gun accidentally goes off, a neighbor calls the police, and David, along with his partner Sancho (José Sancho), arrives on the scene. Following a tense stand-off, during which Víctor briefly takes Elena hostage, Sancho rushes Víctor, who—we are initially led to believe—shoots David in the chaos. At this point, the film basically jumps forward some six years into the future, during which temporal leap Víctor has served time in prison for the shooting, and David (who is now paralyzed from the waist down) has formed a romantic partnership with Elena.

This early "hostage standoff" scene essentially tracks the opening of Rendell's novel, although Almodóvar has made a few significant changes, including changing the name of one of the main characters. In Rendell's original novel, Víctor is Victor Jenner, and David is David Fleetwood. But Elena's original name in Rendell's novel is actually Clare Conway, a name that Almodóvar has assigned to Sancho's wife Clara (Angela Molina), while the name of the woman taken hostage is Rosemary Stanley, who really plays no further role in Rendell's novel after the opening chapter. Moreover, in the opening scenes of *Live Flesh*, Victor is really a violent sex offender who, having just raped a woman, climbs through an unlocked upper window in Rosemary's apartment building, where he eventually takes her hostage. Meanwhile, David arrives on the scene with a full contingency of other police officers, who cordon off the building and demand that Victor give himself up. In an attempt to rescue Clare, David also sneaks into the building but is unintentionally shot by Víctor, who is taken completely by surprise at David's sudden arrival in the hallway behind him. As with *Carne trémula*, *Live Flesh* then jumps forward several years, and we again catch up with Victor upon his release from prison and with a paralyzed David who, again, has paired up with Clare.

But it is at this point that the two narratives diverge greatly. From Victor's release from prison onward, Rendell's novel exists as a kind of psychological study of his mental breakdown as he tries to cope with life in a rundown halfway house. As Paul Julian Smith (2014) comments, "Almodóvar rejects the rape motif offered him by Rendell [. . .] and with it Rendell's cod psychology" (p. 159). Or, as Carmen Pérez Ríu (2017) puts it, "in Rendell's text much of the narrative is configured as the musings, recollections and misperceptions of Victor's mind as he wanders through the streets of Greater London" (n.p.). In this regard, Rendell's discourse often gives itself over to Victor's stream-of-consciousness as he stalks David (who has now become a famous author and whom Victor blames for his present situation) and attempts to seduce Clare as a way of exacting a kind of vengeance by taking something away from his presumed rival. In this way, Rendell's novel can be read precisely as a narrative performance of Girard's triangular desire. Victor's interest in Clare is primarily driven by David's function as Girardian "mediator". Meanwhile, in Almodóvar's cinematic narrative, Víctor's post-incarceration life does indeed cross paths several times with those of both David and Elena, but the structure of Almodóvar's character interrelationships is much more complicated than that of the single, simple triangle presented by Rendell. Indeed, as I will argue, *Carne trémula* can be read as an exploration of Girard's triangular desire "cubed". For, while Almodóvar's film still contains the triad of David, Elena, and Víctor, it also includes two other triads, both of which revolve around Sancho's wife, Clara.

As the film progresses, we learn that prior to the shooting in Elena's apartment, David had actually been having an affair with Clara and that Sancho himself seems to have fired the shot that paralyzed David by pushing Víctor's finger against the trigger during the struggle at the apartment. Moreover, even while Víctor remains obsessed with Elena, he also manages to enter into an affair with Clara, who remains deeply unsatisfied with her marriage to Sancho, given that, as Gwynne Edwards (2001) rightly points out, Sancho functions as a pointed critique of "old Spain", symbolizing "a typical macho traditionalist who believes that a woman's place is in the home and who cannot face the possibility and, in his own eyes, the blow to his self-esteem of losing his wife to another man" (p. 167).

In this regard, the difference in meaning of the disparate titles of Rendell's original novel and Almodóvar's cinematic adaptation is telling. While Rendell's "*Live Flesh*" may subtly evoke notions of sexuality, her novel goes out of its way, as Thomas Deveny (2000) points out, to define this term medically as directly related to a neurological disorder: "the meaning of the novel's title has nothing to do with eroticism. Rather, it refers to the tick or muscular spasm of Victor's lip as he looks at himself in the mirror" (n.p.). Or, as the novel itself narrates: "A muscle worked at the corner of [Victor's] mouth. Chorea, it was called, 'live flesh'" (Rendell 1986, p. 112). Meanwhile, Almodóvar's title, one that suggests the "trembling flesh" of carnal anticipation, clearly drips with sexual desire, as the coy nudity of the film's original marketing poster makes abundantly clear[9]. Indeed, the importance of this sexualized reading of Almodóvar's Spanish title was emphasized even before production began when, in an interview with Maruja Torres (2004), he indicated that he was specifically setting up his new film "within the realm of desire" (p. 117).

## 4. *Ensayo de un crimen*

Before entering into a closer examination of *Carne trémula*'s treatment of curiosity and desire, a brief exploration of one of the film's other important intertexts is in order here. Readers familiar with Almodóvar's body of work will recognize his penchant for "quoting" the work of other filmmakers. For instance, not only does his 1988 film *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*) include visual shots that are reminiscent of James Whale's (1935) *Bride of Frankenstein* and Alfred Hitchcock's (1954) *Rear Window*, it also includes various clips from Nicholas Ray's (1954) *Johnny Guitar*, which we see projected on a screen in the production studio's editing room where Pepa (Carmen Maura) and Iván (Fernando Guillén) separately work to create the Spanish dubbing for this English-language film (Almodóvar 1988, 00:04:39+; 00:09:46+). For its part, *Carne trémula* includes a segment of Luis Buñuel's (1955) film *Ensayo de un crimen* (*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*), which can be seen playing on the television set in Elena's apartment in the moments leading up to the early hostage scene (Almodóvar 1997, 00:16:05+). This appearance within Almodóvar's narrative of Buñuel's film—which itself is based on Rodolfo Usigli's (1944) novel also titled *Ensayo de un crimen*—might be read as both an autobiographical nod to Buñuel and a meta-cinematic commentary on *Carne trémula* itself[10], since both films exist as loose adaptations of prior novels[11]. But I think there is something more going on here.

Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen*, which Steven Marsh (2004) characterizes as "a brilliantly droll parody of the Hollywood crime thriller" (p. 65), narrates the story of Archibaldo de la Cruz[12]. In one of the very early scenes of the film, which occurs at some unspecified moment during the Mexican Revolution, we meet the young Archibaldo ("Archi") in his upper-middle-class home. His mother gives him a music box that plays the tune of Emil Waldteufel's "El príncipe rojo" ("The Red Prince") and then instructs Archi's governess to tell him a story while she goes out for the evening. In response to this instruction, the governess tells Archi that this music box is special in that it can grant him his desires. Moments later, a stray bullet enters the house and kills the governess, suggesting to Archi

that the music box does indeed respond to his desires. Years later, Archi comes across this music box in an antiques store and manages to buy it. This purchase initiates a sequence of events whereby Archi's infatuation with several women who happen to cross his path eventually end up dead (much like his childhood governess), including a nun that we meet in the film's opening scene, who accidentally falls down an elevator shaft as Archi chases after her with a straightedge razor.

Caryn Connelly and Lynd (2002) argue that Archi's "sadistic longings to murder women" highlight Buñuel's avant-garde ideals, which "utilize unconscious desires to confront bourgeois sensibilities" (p. 234). Andrew McKenna (2019), for his part, argues that "In *Ensayo de un crimen* we witness the impassive portrayal of a 'love quest' in which the protagonist's desires are enacted as murderous" (p. 24). Indeed, in one particular scene from *Ensayo de un crimen*, which is clearly seen playing on Elena's television set in *Carne trémula*, Archi has lured a woman named Lavinia into his home with the express purpose of killing her (Almodóvar 1997, 00:21:49+). But when some of her friends suddenly arrive and whisk her away, Archi is left with no other recourse but to burn her in effigy in his kiln in the guise of a mannequin that looks just like Lavinia (given that Lavinia had served as the artist's model for the mannequin's fabricator).

Of course, while Archi certainly desires—and, indeed, plans—to kill all these various women, their deaths are not legally attributed to him by the judge to whom he ultimately confesses. But even though he does not succeed in enacting his murderous intent, his mental state necessarily demonstrates the psychological connection between desire and death. Camilo Hernández Castellanos (2017), for instance, notes the way in which Lavinia and the mannequin not only point to the cadaver as a "fetish" (p. 122) but also to the importance of the "doubles" that sit at the border of life and death (p. 114). Also, regarding the fetishism that recurs in several of Almodóvar's films, Shaila García Catalán and Rodríguez Serrano (2021) argue that "el fetichismo se origina en los misterios del cuerpo y en un intento de negar la falta" (p. 101). Or, as Sidney Donnell (2001) succinctly puts it: "Desire in Buñuel's films manifests itself as an insatiable appetite, a constant craving, or a Lacanian lack" (p. 54)[13].

Well-known philosopher and Lacanian film theorist Slavoj Žižek (2006) follows a similar train of thought when he discusses the way in which Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) effectuates a complete makeover of Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak) in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) through which Madeleine ultimately becomes the uncanny doppelganger of the "deceased" Judy Barton. Such an intense makeover, argues Žižek, underlines the "extreme violence"—the "mortification of woman's desire"—that lies at the heart of both Archi's and Scottie's obsessions (Žižek 2006, Part 2, 00:17:51+): "It is as if in order to have her, to desire her, to have sexual intercourse with her, with the woman, Scottie has to mortify her, to change her into a dead woman. It's as if, again, for the male libidinal economy, to paraphrase a well-known old saying, the only good woman is a dead woman" (Žižek 2006, Part 2, 00:18:12+)[14]. The same, as we shall see, could also be said of both *El curioso impertinente* and *Carne trémula*[15].

## 5. Girardian Triads

Edwards (2001) has argued that "the centrality of the theme of sexual obsession to *Live Flesh* and to Victor in particular is further underlined" by Almodóvar's reference to Buñuel's film (p. 168). Indeed, as Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz (2007) insists, "the parallel in Almodóvar's scene is especially telling, for the twenty-year-old Víctor will now also associate a criminal and a sexual memory, which leads to a severe trauma" (p. 172). Or, as Carolyn Wolfenzon (2006) puts it: "Para Usigli, la Revolución genera un trauma en el inconsciente de los mexicanos; para Buñuel, es un telón de fondo que sirve como pretexto para encubrir los deseos ocultos del hombre, un medio para desenmascarar uno de los

tabúes de la sociedad: la relación entre sexo y muerte" (p. 38). Yet, what interests me about *Carne trémula*'s deliberate intertextuality with *Ensayo de un crimen*—beyond just the nexus of what Sigmund Freud (2011) calls Eros and Thanatos (p. 242), which is also a major theme of *El curioso impertinente*—is the fact that Buñuel's film can also be read as an exploration of a set of three "curious" love triangles with Archi standing at the very center of each. Setting aside both Archi's governess and the nun, *Ensayo de un crimen* shows Archi inserting himself into the relationships of three women and their paramours, with deadly effect in nearly all cases. He inserts himself into Willy Cordurán's relationship with Patricia Terrazas, who commits suicide shortly after Archi fantasizes about killing her. He inserts himself into the relationship between the elderly Chucho and the younger Lavinia (whom we have already discussed and to whom we will return). And he inserts himself into Alejandro Rivas's relationship with Carlota Cervantes, who is shot by her married lover (i.e., Alejandro) on the very day of her planned wedding to Archi (who, not coincidentally, has also fantasized about shooting her at the wedding). And, in this, the (perhaps unintentional) intertextualities between *El curioso impertinente*, *Ensayo de un crimen*, and *Carne trémula* begin to emerge.

Like *Ensayo de un crimen*, *Carne trémula* contains a set of three love triangles. The first—the David/Elena/Víctor triad—is the one most closely related to Rendell's original novel. But even before the coming into being of what will become the central triad of the film following Víctor's release from prison, Almodóvar's film posits a prior love triangle that exists between Sancho, Clara, and David. Significantly, this earlier triad is the one most reminiscent of *El curioso impertinente* (particularly given that the name "Sancho", like the surname "Cervantes" in *Ensayo de un crimen*, inevitably evokes *Don Quixote* and thus serves to enlarge Almodóvar's semantic field to also include cognitive associations with Anselmo, Lotario, and Camila). Like "los dos amigos" from *El curioso impertinente* (or even Don Quixote and Sancho themselves), Almodóvar's two police detectives, David and Sancho, are a connected pair, given their intimate status as law enforcement "partners". Indeed, the close relationships that form between law enforcement partners are often treated as a kind of "marriage". For instance, in a *USA Today* news story about the retirement of two long-time Indianapolis homicide detectives, Diana Penner (2013) says: "More than one colleague describes them as like an 'old married couple'—they finish each other's sentences, sense each other's moods, bicker and goad each other—but never really argue" (n.p.). Likewise, in an article in *Police Chief Magazine*, tellingly titled "Thriving Intimacy in Law Enforcement Relationships: Obstacles and Resiliency", Cyndi Doyle (2019) offers relationship advice to police officers. Yet, if Doyle's counsel is meant to be directed toward the officers' private lives, her rhetoric often effaces—perhaps deliberately—the boundaries between the personal and the professional:

> "In law enforcement lingo, it's essential to believe that one's partner has your 'six'. This is built on the belief that each partner acts and thinks to maximize the benefit to each other and not in self-interest. [. . .] Commitment to one's partner means loving their attributes and growing an appreciation for those things that might otherwise be an irritation. This is also acting and believing that both partners are in the relationship for the long haul." (n.p.)

*Carne trémula*'s opening scenes of David and Sancho out on patrol do indeed treat the two as if they were an old married couple. We see the pair out on a nighttime patrol, driving around the streets of Madrid. Sancho is at the wheel. But he is also actively drinking, much to the consternation of David, who tries to cajole his partner into putting away the bottle. We later learn, of course, that Sancho already suspects David of having an affair with Clara, but his current act of drinking and driving while on duty is simply not presented as some kind of anomaly that might disturb anyone's concern for either public safety or professional

ethics. Later, during the standoff that occurs in Elena's apartment, both David and Sancho pull their guns on Víctor, who is holding Elena at gunpoint, and demand that Víctor drop the weapon. As the situation continues to escalate, however, David begins to sense that there is a real danger that an inebriated Sancho may very well shoot Víctor no matter what he does. So, David actually turns and points his gun at Sancho, demanding that he, too, drop his weapon. Shortly thereafter, when Sancho rushes Víctor and falls to the floor in an attempt to wrestle the gun away from him, Sancho uses the chaotic moment to shoot David by pressing Víctor's finger against the trigger.

Here, of course, we may wonder about Sancho's motivation for shooting David and whether this impulse might be connected to Anselmo's insistence that Lotario attempt to seduce Camila in *El curioso impertinente*. Does Sancho shoot David as an act of revenge for David's affair with Clara? Or is the catalyst for this shooting Sancho's sense of betrayal, which is brought on by David's turning his gun on Sancho? In other words, is the deeper betrayal here not the fact that David has been sleeping with Clara, but rather that (in the words of Doyle) David does not have his partner's "six" when push comes to shove? Again, as with *El curioso impertinente* (at least in Bandera's interpretation), what is perhaps of primary importance in Almodóvar's film is not the relationship between Sancho and his wife, but the relationship between Sancho and David (Bandera 2006, p. 188)[16].

But this brings us to the third of the film's three "curious" triads: Sancho, Clara, and Víctor. At the same time that Víctor—like Archi before him—is loosely inserting himself into David and Elena's relationship (most directly by getting himself hired as a teaching assistant at the orphanage where Elena works), Víctor also enters into a sexual relationship with Clara, who, during his years of incarceration, has attempted to separate herself from the hotheaded Sancho. As Víctor's relationship with Clara develops, she spends more and more time at Víctor's house and even becomes a kind of sexual tutor to her inexperienced paramour. In this regard, Almodóvar's Sancho/Clara/Víctor triad subtly reinscribes Rendell's original David/Clare/Victor triad back into his cinematic narrative. Indeed, within the discourse of *Carne trémula*, the David/Elena/Víctor triad and the Sancho/Clara/Víctor triad exist as phantom reflections of each other, "doubles" that Almodóvar has created precisely by splitting Rendell's original male character into David and Sancho and her original female character into Elena and Clara, with Rendell's un-bifurcated Victor pivoting between both these triangles.

By way of comparison, in Rendell's original novel, once Victor has been released from prison, and sometime after he has insinuated himself into the lives of David and Clare, Victor and Clare eventually engage in sexual intercourse. Rendell's novel suggests that the respective motivations for these two characters' tryst are as follows. Victor, who is a convicted sex offender and who has already started to fall back into his old ways, is attracted to Clare because she represents, perhaps, a path toward social rehabilitation whereby he might actually hope to have a stable and genuine relationship with a woman[17]. Clare's motivation, however, is decidedly more libidinous. In *Live Flesh*, David's paralysis has also left him emphatically impotent.

> "In the middle of the newspaper article, just when the reader might have started thinking that being paralysed and confined to an orthopaedic chair for the rest of one's life wasn't so terrible after all, Fleetwood said, 'I supposed the worst thing is what most people don't think of, that I'm impotent, without sex. I can't make love anymore and it's pretty unlikely I ever will. People forget that that gets paralysed too, they think it's solely a matter of not walking. It's the hardest thing to bear because I like women, I used to love women, their beauty, you know. That's all lost to me in a real sense, I have to face it. And I can't marry, I couldn't do a woman that sort of injury." (Rendell 1986, p. 57)

And while Clare has many times asked David to marry her (partly out of pity), she is no doubt as sexually frustrated by the current situation as he is. Thus, in Rendell's novel, Clare's sexual encounter with Victor, which she almost immediately regrets, has less to do with her attraction to Victor—although, she does tell him, "I like you Victor, you're attractive too, very physically attractive" (Rendell 1986, p. 218)—than with David's sexual incapacities. In this way, Almodóvar's channeling of Rendell's David/Clare/Victor triad into his own Sancho/Clara/Víctor triad maintains the sexual dynamics of Rendell's original while still preserving a separate narrative thread for his David/Elena/Víctor plot line[18].

In this regard, *Carne trémula*'s primary love triangle nevertheless diverges greatly from that of Rendell. In the first place, Almodóvar's Víctor is generally depicted as an innocent victim of circumstance. He initially arrives at Elena's apartment at her invitation (even if she no longer recalls extending it), and the gun in question actually belongs to Elena. Moreover, as we have said, we eventually learn that it is actually Sancho who engineers the shot that paralyzes David. In David's case, while he is indeed consigned to life in a wheelchair, he is in many ways the physical antithesis of Rendell's more cerebral David (whose fame derives from having published a book about the very case that brought about his paralysis). Almodóvar's very athletic David, in contrast, becomes a celebrated Paralympian who plays wheelchair basketball in connection with the 1992 Summer Olympic Games held in Barcelona, and who even obtains an advertising sponsorship contract with "Champion" apparel, which we see in a billboard image that recalls Michael Jordan at the height of his fame (Almodóvar 1997, 00:32:57). More to the point, whether or not Almodóvar's David is actually impotent, the film nonetheless depicts him—in contrast to Rendell's David—as sexually active, suggesting that he routinely brings Elena to orgasm through cunnilingus. As Edwards (2001) rightly notes, "for all his disability, he appears to make her happy" (p. 169). Indeed, in contrast to Almodóvar's chauvinist Sancho, and within the film's political allegory of Spain's transition to democracy, Víctor and David are specifically represented as "reconstructed, 'new men'" (Allinson 2001, p. 88). Thus, in contrast to Rendell's Clare, Elena's decision to have sex with Víctor in *Carne trémula* is motivated less by her own sexual frustrations than it is by the same kind of pity that motivates Clare to want to marry David in Rendell's original: Elena feels responsible for everything that has happened to Víctor ever since that fateful night when he first showed up at her apartment. This is not to say, of course, that Elena does not enjoy her sexual encounter with Víctor. But when David confronts her about her infidelity, expecting to hear that she is planning to abandon him in favor of Víctor, Elena replies that she intends to stay with David because he "needs her more" (Almodóvar 1997, 01:22:01+). This admission of pity wounds David, who then attempts to use Sancho's own jealousy toward Clara to take out his revenge on his new Girardian rival (essentially repeating Sancho's earlier gesture of using someone else as his "trigger man"). In the end, however, David cedes the field (and hence Elena) to Víctor and disappears to Florida, where the film suggests he will find a new life.

## 6. The Color of Desire

Again, Lo (2008) includes chapters on both *El curioso impertinente* and *Carne trémula*, but in neither chapter does Lo explicitly connect one to the other. This is unfortunate since the two texts have a great deal in common (certainly enough for Lo to have included both in his monographic study of male jealousy). A meaningful reading of the interplay between these two texts can thus be teased out if one pays particular attention to the color palette of *Carne trémula*'s production design, including its costuming, lighting, and scenery. Almodóvar's film is framed by two sequences that take place precisely at Christmastime. In the film's opening sequence, we see the circumstances of Víctor's birth (Almodóvar 1997, 00:00:21+). His mother (Penelope Cruz) is a prostitute who goes into labor during the wee

hours of a bleak 1970 January morning and ends up delivering Víctor on a Madrid bus. The film's final sequence shows a pregnant Elena, accompanied by Víctor, being driven to the hospital in a taxi (Almodóvar 1997, 01:34:30+). It is again Christmastime, but the streets of Madrid are no longer empty and bleak; instead, they are now teeming with both pedestrians and holiday cheer. In this way, the film deliberately contrasts the social circumstances of Víctor's own birth during the waning years of the Franco dictatorship with this imminent delivery of a new child that symbolizes the birth of a new, vibrant, and democratic Spain. And in between these two discursive "Christmastime bookends", the color palette of Almodóvar's entire film prominently features the colors red and green.

For instance (and among many other examples), the walls of Elena's apartment are painted a deep red, while the walls we later see in Clara's kitchen are green. Likewise, in the early scene in Elena's apartment, Víctor is seen wearing a red sweater, while the sheets we later see on the bed of his prison cell are of a green checked pattern. At one point, we even see Sancho back in Clara's kitchen wearing a matching green plaid shirt and a green apron. The walls of the orphanage where Elena works are also very green, and we even see Elena wearing a green sweater that matches the décor. Later, she is seen wearing a green jacket. Moreover, when Elena first "meets" the new teaching assistant (Víctor), who has been hired by the orphanage staff without Elena's prior knowledge, Víctor is seen wearing a full wolf mask, which might not be red in and of itself, but which certainly suggests Little Red Riding Hood and thus evokes the color. Likewise, David's car is also red, as is his jacket, while the city bus that shuttles Víctor around Madrid is green. At one point, Clara visits Víctor also wearing a red jacket, and when David comes to visit Elena at the orphanage, she wears a red dress for the occasion. The first time Clara has sex with Víctor, she arrives wearing a red dress, while later, when Víctor tries to break up with Clara, he wears a green shirt. At one point, even the two wheelchair basketball teams wear green and red uniforms, respectively. Finally, this interplay of red and green comes full circle at the end of the film when we see the expectant Elena wearing a green coat and a red hat as she travels to the hospital to give birth.

Red and green, of course, were not always and universally considered the colors of Christmas in all parts of the Christian world, but they have largely become so through the ubiquitous spread of Anglo-American culture across the globe (for example, despite the autochthonous Spanish tradition of the *Reyes Magos*, the orphanage includes an image of a very American Santa Claus hanging on the back of one of the doors (Almodóvar 1997, 01:34:27) and *Carne trémula* takes full advantage of this now-predominant association. At the same time, the colors red and green are not exclusively associated with Christmas; they are, in fact, symbolically multivalent. And here is where a particularly "gendered" reading of these colors within the discourse of *Carne trémula* becomes significant and where such a reading folds back on *El curioso impertinente*. In their connection with the film's male characters, red and green are the colors of jealousy, anger, and violence. We routinely speak of being "green with envy" and of jealousy as the "green-eyed monster". We also speak of being "red with rage", and we generally associate the color red with both violence and blood. In this regard, *Carne trémula*'s overlapping love triangles—like the triad at the heart of *El curioso impertinente*—are centered on male jealousy and the violence that accompanies it. Angered and jealous that David has been sleeping with Clara, Sancho engineers the gunshot that leaves David paralyzed. Angered and jealous when he learns that David and Elena have become romantic partners, Víctor hatches a plan to steal Elena away from David and then deliberately leave her jilted. Angered and jealous that Víctor has slept with Elena, David shows Sancho the photos he has surreptitiously taken of Víctor and Clara's afternoon trysts in the hopes that Sancho will take out his violent jealousy on Víctor.

Of course, Sancho nearly does just that in a late scene that is somewhat reminiscent of the ending of Almodóvar's (1986) *Matador*, where that film's two serial killers snuff themselves out in a mutual act of sexual climax. In *Carne trémula*'s case, Sancho arrives at Víctor's apartment intending to kill Víctor, only to find Clara already there. Later, having already been shot by Clara back at their apartment, Sancho kills her and then appears to be ready to shoot Víctor as well. But, at this point, Sancho unexpectedly turns the gun on himself in an act of suicide that can perhaps be read as an echo of Anselmo's death at the end of *El curioso impertinente*, and which leaves Víctor very much alive to pursue his relationship with Elena. In this regard, David's final absence at the end of *Carne trémula*, which we learn about via a postcard sent from Florida, can perhaps be read as a nod to Lotario's disappearance and eventual death at the end of *El curioso impertinente*. Certainly, Clara's farewell message to Víctor—which she writes in his notebook and in which she predicts her own imminent death—can be read as a nod to Anselmo's own final confessional account of his foolish curiosity:

> "Cuando leas esto ya estaré muerta o huyendo. No te sientas tú responsable ni me compadezcas. Desde el día que llamé a tu puerta sabía que acabaría como este barrio—estropeada y destruida. Pero no me arrepiento ni te culpo, amor mío. Antes de conocerte yo ya estaba condenada a desaparecer." (01:29:10+)

Through its various intertwining intertextualities, *Carne trémula* highlights precisely what is at stake in *El curioso impertinente*, as William Peter Evans (1995) unintentionally observes in his discussion of *Ensayo de un crimen*'s music box (whose tune, I would hasten to point out, is associated with the color red) and its violent effects: "Here, in miniature, the history of male scapegoating of women is summarized" (p. 102). Indeed, the scapegoating of both Camila and Clara—fatal victims of domestic abuse, whether physical or psychological—at the end of their respective narratives represents the epitome of Evans's history in miniature.

But in this, the red and green color palette of *Carne trémula* can also be read through a gendered lens that evokes precisely the opposite of male jealousy, rage, and violence. In connection with the film's female characters, red and green are the colors of passion, desire, and sexuality. Again, we routinely speak of the "red light district" (and it is no coincidence that Víctor's mother is initially a sex worker). Likewise, red roses are generally viewed as a symbol of love and passion. But, while the color green may certainly evoke both jealousy and envy (along with the promise of hope) across many cultures, within the Spanish tradition, green is also the particular color of both fecundity and sexuality, as Vernon Chamberlin (1968) notes: "the color green has special and important connotative value—amorous desire—in Latin countries that does not exist in the English-speaking world, though at one time it was clearly present in English literature" (p. 29). For instance, the Spanish term for a "dirty old man" is, of course, a "viejo verde" (green old man). And let us not forget the opening lines of Federico García Lorca's "Romance sonámbulo", which evoke fecundity, sexuality, and the hope of Spring at one and the same time: "Verde que te quiero verde. / Verde viento. Verdes ramas. / El barco sobre la mar / y el caballo en la montaña" (García Lorca 1982, p. 147)[19]. Indeed, Magdalena Altamirano (2015) argues that this connection between green nature, human sexuality, and fecundity in the Spanish tradition can be traced at least as far back as the Iberian medieval period:

> "[L]a naturaleza tienda a cargarse de contenidos simbólicos asociados con la sexualidad humana y la fecundidad. De ahí también que la mujer, por su nexo ancestral con la madre tierra, sea la figura dominante en los cantarcillos; es una mujer sexualmente activa, que suele desplazarse por los terrenos al aire libre y transgredir los espacios de naturaleza controlada." (pp. 110–11)

## 7. Agency and the Female Gaze

Viewed through the lens of Almodóvar's use of color, the three love triangles of *Carne trémula* look very different from the one presented by Cervantes in *El curioso impertinente*. In contrast to Cervantes's narrative, Almodóvar's triads do not rehearse what Diana de Armas Wilson (1987) characterizes as "two men trafficking in the body of a woman without her leave" (p. 15), nor do they explore the proposition that "a woman is good only in proportion to her temptations" (Bandera 2006, p. 187). Instead, Almodóvar's Clara and Elena are both examples of female agency. Clara, for instance, is clearly unhappy in her marriage to the drunken and abusive Sancho. And while the film does not provide any direct information on how her affair with David may have started, everything we know about Clara's personality suggests that she was clearly a willing and enthusiastic partner. For, later, when she engages in yet a different affair with Víctor, she actively instructs her young and inexperienced lover in how to please a woman. Likewise, Elena is hardly a wilting flower, tossed about on the winds (and whims) of the men in her life. When we first meet Elena at the beginning of the film, she is clearly sexually active, engaging in casual sex with any number of men, including Víctor. Later in the film, she is also the one who seduces Víctor, rather than vice versa. And it is very likely that it was she who also initiated her relationship with David, probably while he still lay in a hospital bed recovering from the gunshot wound. Even prior to this fateful gunshot, Almodóvar gives us a glimpse of Elena gazing admiringly—perhaps even "curiously"—at David during the early hostage scene as he takes her hand and pulls her out of danger (Almodóvar 1997, 00:27:20+)[20]. And while this brief camera shot of Elena's female gaze might be attributed to some kind of sudden hero-worship as the big, strong, handsome policeman rescues her from danger, this moment is central to the various love triangles at play in *Carne trémula*. In fact, this scene provides a welcome and necessary corrective to Camila's representation in *El curioso impertinente*. For as Laura Mulvey (1999) argues in her foundational and Lacanian-inflected study of both the gaze and cinematic scopophilia:

> "The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. [. . .] Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world." (pp. 835–36)

In a similar fashion, roughly halfway through *Carne trémula*, in a scene where Clara asks Sancho why they do not just separate once and for all, and he responds by violently slapping her across the face, Almodóvar's camera pans across the room and shows us an image hanging on the wall of the apartment (Almodóvar 1997, 00:57:00+). It is an image of the kind of stereotypical Andalusian "Spanish beauty", featuring Ángela Molina herself in a pose that visually echoes her onscreen presence as a flamenco dancer in Buñuel's (1977) film *Cet Obscur Objet du Désir* (*That Obscure Object of Desire*). Such imagery has evoked romantic and sexualized notions of Spain ever since the creation of Washington Irving's 1832 *Tales of the Alhambra* (Irving 1993) and Georges Bizet's 1875 opera *Carmen* (Bizet 2010). There are several ways to interpret Almodóvar's inclusion of this image, both within the film in general and within this shot in particular. First, within the film, this stereotypical image of an idealized Andalusian beauty can be read as a political commentary on the sheer weight of "traditional" Spanish culture—promoted so incessantly by the Franco regime—that still hangs heavy over a country that is in the process of transitioning to a new democratic reality. This image thus contrasts starkly with the initial image presented by the film of Elena as a kind of international punk junkie who came to Spain to participate in what remained of the 1970s and 80s *movida madrileña* movement. Second, this traditional image

of the “Spanish beauty” can be read as a representation of Sancho’s chauvinist expectations for his wife, ones that she is ultimately unwilling to fulfill. Moreover, this image not only contrasts with Titian’s *Danae and the Golden Rain*, which can be seen hanging on the wall of Elena’s apartment earlier in the film, and which provides the backdrop to Elena’s own “curious” gaze during David’s rescue of her (Almodóvar 1997, 00:19:15+; 00:27:16+), but it also contrasts violently with Clara’s own haggard look over the course of the film, especially coming on the heels of Sancho’s brutal slap just moments before.

Still, whatever other significance this image may have for either a 1990s Spain in transition or for Clara’s unhappiness within her marriage, I am particularly interested in the female gaze that this image projects to the viewer—an outward gaze that is much more reminiscent of Francisco de Goya’s *Maja desnuda* or Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* than it is of either Titian’s *Danae and the Golden Rain* or Diego Velázquez’s so-called “Rokeby Venus”, where the female figures seem entirely uninterested in attracting anyone else’s attention. Indeed, Almodóvar cites both Goya and Titian in this regard by providing a brief shot of Clara reclining on her sofa (wearing a bright red dress that stands in for Goya and Titian’s nudity) with her hand across her belly (Almodóvar 1997, 00:56:25). For, this outward gaze of Almodóvar’s wall painting of Molina’s stereotypical Andalusian beauty—what al-Rahim (2022) might call her “ocular fornication” (p. 465)—serves as a visual echo of Elena’s own gaze toward David at the end of the hostage scene, and it bespeaks the female agency—and active curiosity—that both Elena and Clara exhibit over the course of the film. As Mark Allinson (2001) shrewdly argues, Almodóvar’s films “are self-consciously *about* voyeurism, *about* sadism, and *about* masochism” (73; original emphasis), which is precisely why David’s surreptitious and voyeuristic photos of Víctor and Clara’s ongoing trysts are so important to the work, and why the film can be read as a late-twentieth-century iteration of *El curioso impertinente*’s sadistic testing of Camila.

Cervantes’s intercalated novella famously objectifies Camila by comparing her, first, to a diamond that might be broken; second, to an ermine that might be sullied; and, finally, to a mirror that might be damaged (Cervantes 1978, 1: 290). Indeed, in much the same way that the women of Buñuel’s *Ensayo de un crimen* are depicted “as splendid, charming, doll-like figures with creamy porcelain-like complexions [who] become objects of a desire that titillates the heterosexual male libido” (Gutiérrez-Albilla 2008, p. 129), Cervantes’s Camila is depicted as a kaleidoscope of fragmented desires. More importantly, she can also be read, perhaps, as a seventeenth-century version of the unrealizable “perfect wife” that Almodóvar’s Sancho fantasizes about in the Andalusian beauty painting that he has installed on his apartment wall[21]. Such a fragmentation and objectification parallels what we see in several of Almodóvar’s other films, ranging from the specific example found in the opening credits of *Mujeres al borde*, whereby magazine “clippings” of various female body parts such as legs, lips, or eyes, are presented to the viewer as a collage (Almodóvar 1988, 00:00:12+) to what Eduardo Urios-Aparisi (2010) calls the “metonymy” of body parts—especially “legs, abdomen including genitals, and torso” (p. 181)—which are scattered across so many of Almodóvar’s films.

## 8. Camila and Subjectivity

Against such fragmentation, critics have often read *El curioso impertinente* looking closely for traces of Camila’s integrated subjectivity somewhere in the text, a subjectivity comparable to that of Marcela who, earlier in *Don Quixote*, forcefully argues for her right to love whomever she will love (and only *if* she chooses to love), rather than be compelled by social convention to love the first man that pursues her (Cervantes 1978, 1: 185–188). Howard Mancing (2005), for instance, argues that Camila is actually the primary protagonist of Cervantes’s intercalated novella in so far as “the first half of the tale is dominated by

the men, Anselmo and Lotario, whose discourse is characterized primarily by argument, while the second half of the story is dominated by the women, Camila and Leonela, whose discourse is characterized above all by narrative" (p. 11). In the same way, Mancing argues, Cervantes's Camila "transforms herself from passive object to active agent; she takes control of her life and her story and in the process relegates to secondary status the men who quibble over abstract concepts" (p. 16). Michael Gordon (2019) echoes these sentiments when he says, "Throughout the first half of *El curioso impertinente*, Camila is without voice, an object caught between her husband and his best friend, and ultimately an unwitting victim of Anselmo's wife-testing, yet she transforms herself in the second half into an agent who takes control of her own destiny" (n.p.). Yvonne Jehenson (1998), for her part, argues that Camila ultimately "takes the conservative agenda that the narrator had postulated as normal and stands it on its head" (p. 42), while Wilson (1987) argues that it is precisely through Camila's theatrical fiction (whereby, again, she convinces Anselmo that his honor remains intact by staging a scene in which she stabs herself with a dagger rather than "yield" to Lotario's advances) that "the scapegoating of her sexuality is foiled by her sudden accession to subjectivity, by her own unruly production of discourse". (p. 27). Wilson says: "Using theatre as a means of resistance, Camila confronts her husband's 'hysterics' with her own histrionics" (p. 27).

Now, while I do not necessarily disagree with any of these scholarly comments regarding Camila's emerging subjectivity, I do think that a bit more can still be teased out here. For obvious reasons related to the social mores of seventeenth-century Spain (including the threat of censorship), Cervantes could hardly provide the kind of intimate scenes of Camila's adulterous affair with Lotario that we might find in contemporary texts like Rendell's *Live Flesh* or Almodóvar's *Carne trémula*. In this regard, Cervantes describes the sex act between Camila and Lotario as minimally and as discreetly as possible: "Rindióse Camila, Camila se rindió" ["Camilla surrendered; she surrendered"] (Cervantes 1978, 1: 300). Indeed, and in contrast to the aforementioned arguments of various critics, it is precisely through its very minimalism that this description of *El curioso impertinente*'s climactic moment does rob Camila of nearly all her subjectivity, at least diegetically. This is to say, from a grammatical perspective she is obviously both the "subject" of the sentence and the "agent" of the verb's decidedly passive action. Still, Cervantes's discourse here—with its emphasis on passivity—effectively curtails Camila's subjectivity as much as grammatically possible. As Ashley Hope Pérez (2011) remarks, "the nature of the world constituted by 'El curioso impertinente' renders Camila's subjectivity generally unthinkable within its bounds" (p. 84):

> "Virtually every aspect of the relational dynamics in the text denies her subjectivity. This does not mean that Camila is not a subject, insofar as any fictional character is a subject. Rather, the critical point is that her subjectivity is unintelligible to the men and—given that their discourse defines the narrative—to the reader as well." (Pérez 2011, p. 96)

In his commentary on Stanley Kubrick's (1999) film *Eyes Wide Shut*, Žižek (2006) notes the centrality of the sexual fantasies that are related by Alice Harford (Nicole Kidman) to her husband Bill (Tom Cruise) within the cinematic narrative: "The film is the story of how the male fantasy cannot catch up with the feminine fantasy, of how there is too much of desire in feminine fantasy and how this is the threat to male identity" (Žižek 2006, Part 2, 00:37:58+). The same, perhaps, can be said of Camila. Anselmo's "test" of her virtue can be read as less a desire to prove her virtue than to prove (at least to himself) that her desire—again, her own curiosity—can somehow be contained. And yet, as Žižek also notes with regard to *Eyes Wide Shut*, the final word of the film belongs to Alice: "But I do love you", she says to Bill. "And you know there is something very important that we need to do as soon as

possible. [. . .] Fuck." (qtd. in Žižek 2006, Part 2, 00:39:08+). Žižek's take on this moment is that what underlies this final word is a defensive reaction to trauma that seeks a way out: "It's as if our inner psychic space is too wild, and sometimes we have to make love, not to get the real thing but to escape from the real, from the excessive real that we encounter in our fantasizing" (Žižek 2006, Part 2, 00:39:33+).

With this in mind, a number of questions arise regarding Camila's unnarrated tryst with Lotario. For instance, rather than simply "surrender", did she, in fact, enjoy this new sexual encounter (even if only for its novelty)? Did she immediately feel remorse for having betrayed Anselmo? Or did she instead experience some kind of thrill—perhaps a moment of "trembling flesh"—related to the partaking of a forbidden fruit? After all, Cervantes's own text raises the specter of Adam and Eve in Lotario's prior arguments to Anselmo about why he should not tempt fate (Cervantes 1978, 1: 292). Going further, did Camila and Lotario have sex twice that day ("Rindióse Camila, Camila se rindió"), or is this linguistic repetition merely a rhetorical flourish? Conversely, did she ultimately "surrender" to Lotario's amorous advances primarily due to what might be called the "aesthetics" of his wooing? After all, the conventions of both medieval courtly love poetry and the early modern pastoral novel present "wooing" less as an act of seduction and more like a poetry competition in which the "grand prize" is simply being preferred—though certainly nothing more—by the object of one's affection. Going even further still, did Camila ultimately look across the table one day—after having fended off so many of Lotario's sexual advances—and finally say to herself, "Why not"? In other words, did she make a conscious decision at this point to "explore her own curiosity", the consequences be damned?

If, as I have argued elsewhere (Burningham 2024), Almodóvar's *Mujeres al borde* ultimately provides in the characters of Pepa and Marisa a feminist response to the seventeenth-century "Don Juan" narrative that Ana Caro was simply unable—again, due to social conventions—to construct in her own day, thus requiring her Doña Leonor to ultimately marry the (effective) "date rapist" who had previously absconded with her honor (p. 87), *Carne trémula*, I think, can be read as Almodóvar's late-twentieth-century response to Cervantes's own seventeenth-century tale of "Foolish Curiosity". Having absorbed Rendell's original Clare and then bifurcated her into Elena and Clara, Almodóvar has placed both these women inside a "cubed" set of love triangles where they might explore the very curiosity—that is, the *active* desire—that Cervantes's exemplary novel ultimately denies to Camila, at least diegetically, even if *El curioso impertinente* does tepidly concede the existence of Camila's sexuality. Consider the ways in which both Rendell and Almodóvar depict the dual arousal of female desire in their texts.

Whatever Clare may have initially thought of Victor in *Live Flesh*, when he finally does come to accept his own culpability with regard to David's paralysis, Clare approaches Víctor and quietly embraces him in what seems to be little more than a gesture of kindness and empathy on her part: "Clare had come in and without a word taken him in her arms. She held him lightly at first, then with increasing tender pressure, her hands moving on his back, up to his neck and head, to bring his head into the curve of her shoulder. His lips felt the warmth of her skin. He heard her murmuring gentle comforting things" (Rendell 1986, pp. 168–69). Yet, before this gentle embrace is through, Rendell nevertheless gives us a clear hint of the way in which Clare's empathy will soon become her curiosity: "Holding her now, letting her hold him, indeed pressing his body into hers with a voluptuous abandonment as he had yielded it in the past to warm water or a soft bed, he felt the last thing he would have expected, a swift springing of sexual desire. He was erect and she must feel it" (Rendell 1986, p. 169). Clare immediately disengages, but her newly kindled curiosity will eventually overcome any reticence she may have initially felt, as the novel describes in a later chapter:

"The hungry anxious look she had that he couldn't define. He had never seen it in a woman before. He had never before taken a woman in his arms and cupped her head in his hand and brought her face to his and kissed her lips. [. . .] She responded to his kiss quite differently from that last time, for he felt she was as desirous as he. Her kiss explored his mouth and her body pressed its curves into his hard muscles and vulnerable nerves. [. . .] She left the room and when he followed she had disappeared. [. . .] He drew a deep breath and opened a door and saw her waiting for him, sitting naked on the side of her bed, lifting her eyes to meet his, extending her hands to him without a smile."

(Rendell 1986, p. 206)

While such a description—which comes at a chapter break and thus functions as a kind of cinematic fade-to-black—certainly approaches the types of more explicit narratives that we often encounter in modern romance novels, it is still a far cry from Cervantes's very discrete "Rindióse Camila, Camila se rindió". But, at the same time, Rendell's novelistic fade-to-black does highlight the important progression we analyzed earlier whereby curiosity leads to knowledge leads to sex.

*Carne trémula*, of course, stages its own scene of Elena's budding curiosity, and it also does so precisely at the very moment that Elena learns the truth about David's paralysis: that Sancho, in fact, pulled the trigger and that Víctor has been an innocent victim of circumstance all along. At this point in the film, Víctor finds Elena sitting on a bench in the orphanage's playground (Almodóvar 1997, 01:07:20+). She confesses to him that David has told her what really happened, and then she comments about how much Víctor must hate her. He responds by insisting that this is not true. But, at the same time, he does admit that while he was in prison he hatched a plan to get his revenge on both David and her: he would become the best lover in the world ("el mejor follador del mundo" [Almodóvar 1997, 01:08:17]); after which, he would proceed to seduce Elena, give her the best night of sex in her life (thus making her fall in love with him), and then leave her high and dry in the full knowledge of just what she was missing. In other words, Víctor's revenge would be to sexually frustrate Elena while cuckholding the impotent David in the process. Elena's response to Víctor's confession of this plan—which is to say, to his mention of potential sex with someone who is decidedly not impotent—piques a curiosity in her that was already on subtle display in an earlier scene when, while receiving oral sex from David, she unexpectedly blurts out that she saw Víctor earlier that day at the cemetery (Almodóvar 1997, 00:41:00+). Elena will eventually explore this newfound curiosity to its fullest when, a few days later, she shows up unannounced at the orphanage one night, wearing both red and green, and initiates a night of lovemaking with Víctor that will (ironically) bring his plan to partial fruition, since it is now she who requires Víctor to agree to never see her again after this night (Almodóvar 1997, 01:13:27+). Unlike *El curioso impertinente* and *Live Flesh*, however, *Carne trémula* will stage this sex scene as a kind of nude and highly choreographed sensuous "dance" set to the music of Chavela Vargas's "Somos" ("Somos un sueño imposible / que busca la noche. . ."; "Somos dos seres en uno / que amándose mueren") (Vargas 2007). Following this night of trembling curiosity, the film then shows us the dawn breaking across the Spanish sky, with Elena getting up to dutifully return to her husband, but not before enjoying the lingering scent of Víctor on her body as she showers away the experience back at her apartment.

Thus, in contrast to Camila in *El curioso impertinente*, both Rendell's Clare and Almodóvar's Elena actively seek out sex with their respective Lotarios; which is to say, neither of them can be said to passively "surrender". And both are represented not only as clearly enjoying themselves but are also far more sexually experienced than either of their respective Lotarios. In short, and despite the fact that Almodóvar's Clara does ultimately

perish as a scapegoat in the service of Girard's model of triangular desire, *Carne trémula* provides us with an antidote to all the death and sadness that occurs at the end of *El curioso impertinente* by allowing Almodóvar's Elena—finally—to actively pursue her Lotario and then head off with him into a brighter future filled with hope for a better life. And in this regard, *Carne trémula* ultimately reinscribes—though in a less ironic way—the "happy ending" imagined by Buñuel in *Ensayo de un crimen*, where Lavinia eventually meets up with Archi along the bank of a river and the two walk away hand in hand on the road to happily-ever-after. As Connelly and Lynd (2002) point out with regard to Buñuel's deconstruction of the conventions of melodrama, but which might be said to apply equally to Almodóvar's deconstruction of the conventions of the crime thriller (and, along with them, the underlying conventions of *El curioso impertiente*): "Lavinia—whatever the post-diegetic future may hold for her—is, within the film, not punished for her sexual precocity, and her character therefore bucks up against the conventions of melodrama: she is not supposed to end up in a happy relationship" (p. 243).

## 9. *Carne trémula* and Lacanian Desire

Yet, *Carne trémula*'s final scenes serve to "trouble" Girard's theory of triangular desire rather than reconfirm it. In other words, Almodóvar's film—precisely because of its overlapping love triangles—wants to have things both ways at one and the same time. But, as Ashraf Rushdy (1993) shrewdly observes, within Lacanian theories of libidinal economy, "what we desire, we shall never have" (p. 49). Thus, on the one hand, as an exploration of the dynamics of triangular desire that play themselves out in *El curioso impertinente*, *Carne trémula* (at least with regard to one of its three love triangles) opts for an ending remarkably similar to that of Cervantes. For, just as happens in Cervantes's story of Anselmo, Lotario, and Camila, Almodóvar's narrative of Sancho, Clara, and David also ends with all three characters effectively "dead" at the end: Sancho kills Clara before turning the gun on himself, and David disappears from the narrative almost entirely. Indeed, during *Carne trémula*'s final "happy ending" sequence involving Víctor and Elena, all that remains of David is a disembodied voiceover—what Ian Whitmarsh (2017) might call a "substitute by displacement" (p. 1245)—that accompanies the postcard from Florida. And it is precisely David's discursive absence from the film that makes possible Almodóvar's imagined "bright future" for a democratic Spain in the form of Víctor and Elena's new baby.

On the other hand, however, this particular denouement in and of itself highlights a clear problem. Because neither Víctor nor Elena formed part of *Carne trémula*'s original Cervantine love triangle, their "happy ending" does nothing to resolve the real triangular desire that lies at the heart of Almodóvar's text and that plays itself out in the increasing violence that spins out of the respective Sancho/Clara/David and Sancho/Clara/Víctor triads. Indeed, Víctor and Elena's ongoing relationship at the end of the film—like David's phantom postcard and voiceover—represents something of a Lacanian "object a" that, in the words of Cindy Zeiher (2017), "stands in for desire" and that exists as the residue of a curiosity that simply cannot be satisfied. In other words, as Maire Jaanus (2013) notes, "the structure of desire exposes desire as unrealizable or overwhelming or exposes realized desire as insufficient" (p. 44). Or, as Henry Sullivan (1996) argues, such a Lacanian remainder, which stems from a "loss of *jouissance*", is caused precisely by "the trauma of being split away from a primordial oneness" (p. 184). And in this way, *Carne trémula* itself functions as a kind of "object a" in relation to its precursor texts, splitting and doubling its "curious" subjects throughout a cinematic performance of what Graham Wolfe (2011) might call a Lacanian "infinite deferral" of death (p. 199) and what Renata Salecl (1997) characterizes as a desire that always "has to remain unsatisfied, endlessly going from one object to another, positing new limits and prohibitions" (p. 19). For

Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas (2002), Almodóvar's film "is predicated on the dynamics of loss and recuperation: loss of the object of desire and attempts to win it back" (p. 188–89). This is certainly true. But, in its nearly endless bifurcation and duplication of Cervantes's Anselmo, Lotario, and Camila (into Víctor and Elena, and Archi and Lavinia, and David and Sancho and Clara), *Carne trémula* demonstrates that even happy endings and bright futures are forever haunted by the trauma of their deadly doubles.

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## Notes

1. For more on the relationship between curiosity and Eve, see Brantlinger (1972, p. 358), Evans (1995, pp. 104–5), Kenny (1991, p. 272), Lo (2008, p. 79), and Parga Linares (2020, p. 33).
2. The original Dutch name of the program was *Adam zoekt Eva*. Other international titles include *Adam sucht Eva* (German), *Adam recherche Ève* (French), *Adam og Eva* (Danish), *Aatami etsii Eevaa* (Finnish), *L'isola di Adamo ed Eva* (Italian), *Ádám keresi Évát* (Hungarian), and *Adão e Eva* (Portuguese).
3. On the connection between discovery, knowledge, and sexuality, see also DeNicola (2017, pp. 48–50).
4. Scholars believe that this Boccaccio-inspired novella was one of the several, largely independent narratives that Cervantes had been working on at the time, and that he decided to lend this particular story to his *Don Quixote* project, while leaving the rest to be published together several years later in a 1613 collection titled *Novelas ejemplares* (Hahn 2001, pp. 213–14). See also Aylward (1982, p. 30), Brown (1981, p. 797), Casalduero (1967, pp. 102, 113), Cotarelo y Mori (1920, pp. 62–63), and Ford (1928, p. 36n).
5. See, for example, Alcalá Galán (2022), Arbesú Fernández (2005), Avalle-Arce (1961), Barbagallo (1994), Flores (2000), Gerli (2000), Gil-Oslé (2009), Ife (2005), Laguna (2007), McCallister (2014), Sánchez Sempere (2022), Santa Aguilar (2015), Sieber (1970), Wardropper (1957), and Zimic (1994).
6. On the limits of Girardian theory within religious and theological studies, see Andrade (n.d.). Regarding Girard and early modern Spanish literature, see the debate between Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo (1978) and Cesáreo Bandera (1979).
7. On homoeroticism in *El curioso impertinente*, see also Amat (1997) and Holcombe (2024).
8. For the sake of clarity, throughout this essay, I will refer to Rendell's novel using her original English title *Live Flesh*, while referring to Almodóvar's cinematic adaptation using the Spanish *Carne trémula*.
9. Almodóvar's choice of word in his title is likely influenced by the fact that Rendell employs the word "trembling" several times over the course of her novel in relation to sexual excitement (Rendell 1986, pp. 62, 169, 202, 209, 223).
10. In his own analysis of this film, Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz (2007) notes that Liberto Rabal is "the grandson of Buñuel regular Francisco Rabal" (p. 171), an actor who also appears in *Átame* (*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*) (Almodóvar 1989). Likewise, Acevedo-Muñoz points out that Ángela Molina is "another Luis Buñuel actor who appeared in his 1977 film *That Obscure Object of Desire*" (p. 173), the significance of which will become apparent.
11. On Buñuel's adaption of Usigli's novel, see also Martínez Herranz (2016).
12. The main character in Usigli's original novel is named "Roberto de la Cruz". Buñuel's decision to change this name to "Archibaldo" represents another way in which *Carne trémula* engages in dialogue with Buñuel's precursor text.
13. On Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen*, see also Donnell (1999) and Donnell (2000).
14. Gina Wisker (2019) notes a similar process in the foundational work of Edgar Allan Poe in the establishment of the detective genre itself: "Poe's own dark mixture of the romantic and the salacious offers a model for a deep-seated cultural fascination with sex and death in which women are desired, destroyed, and desired even more exquisitely when they are post mortem" (p. 184).
15. For other psychoanalytic approaches to *El curioso impertinente* and *Don Quixote*, see Cascardi (1993), González (1993), Lauer (2011), and Stroud (2015). On psychoanalytic theory and Almodóvar, see Cívico-Lyons (2014)
16. Mark Allinson (2001) rightly notes a tendency in Almodóvar's work that perhaps applies more so to Sancho and Clara than to any other Almodóvarian couple: "Where male characters assume voyeuristic or sadistic roles, this is critically questioned, and identification tends to lie with the female characters" (p. 81). Such is the case with regards to Gloria (Carmen Maura) and Antonio (Ángel de Andrés López) in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*) (Almodóvar 1984), but it is also true in *Carne trémula*, "where the relationship between Clara and Sancho (the most dysfunctional relationship in Almodóvar) is clearly the fault of Sancho's masculine insecurity" (Allinson 2001, p. 81).
17. Within his demented stream of consciousness, we do see Victor fully believing that Clare will somehow leave David and will run off with him so that the two can live happily ever after.

[18] And it is not coincidental that Almodóvar's Sancho/Clara/Víctor triangle, like Rendell's, also ends in death (although, again, with some modifications). In Rendell's novel, Victor eventually dies of tetanus following an untreated stab wound to the chest that he receives while trying to rape a different woman.

[19] Readers familiar with Lorca's work—particularly his best-known play, *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of Bernarda Alba*)—will recognize that the horse mentioned here functions as a symbol of galloping sexual desire.

[20] Acevedo-Muñoz (2007) groups *Carne tremúla*, along with *High Heels* (1991), *The Flower of My Secret* (1996), and *Volver* (2006), in a chapter titled "Figures of Desire: The Melodrama of Longing" (pp. 135–203).

[21] On theological, philosophical, and cultural theories of the "perfect wife" in early modern Spain, see Dopico Black (2001).

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# The Colors of Curiosity: Ekphrasis from Marguerite de Navarre to María de Zayas' *Tarde llega el desengaño*

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**Abstract:** María de Zayas' *Tarde llega el desengaño*, the fourth tale in her *Desengaños amorosos* (1641), is one of the most studied novellas in the collection. The reader's curiosity may stem in part from the main model for the tale, the Apuleian story of Cupid and Psyche, which has *curiositas* as its central motivation. Nevertheless, this essay argues that one of the reasons that the tale has attracted so much attention has to do with the vividness of its scenes, the chromatic design that Zayas uses to write for the eyes and the relationship of these topics to curiosity. The text induces characters and readers to marvel not only at a colorful scene but also to seek to understand the choice of colors in eight impacting ekphrasis in the novella. These colors color emotions and arouse our curiosity regarding scene, symbol, shade, and character. In addition, Zayas alludes to a painting included in one of Marguerite de Navarre's novellas to further arouse curiosity and visual memory.

**Keywords:** Maria de Zayas; Marguerite de Navarre; Jean Perréal; Mary Magdalen; curiosity; ekphrasis; colors; chromatic design; chiaroscuro

María de Zayas y Sotomayor (1590–1661) is one of the three most important women writers of the early modern Hispanic world. She shares this distinction with Ana Caro and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Still, little is known about her life. She was born in Madrid, the daughter of an infantry captain. We do not know if she was single or married, if she also lived in Valladolid, and if she traveled to Naples. She and Ana Caro were close friends, a fact that spills over into their writings. Both of them dealt with the marginalization of women, the importance of friendship among women, and the importance of valor. They promoted the notion that women should study to improve their social status (Maroto Camino 2007). Indeed, it is very likely that the two worked together in Madrid between 1636 and 1638 (De Armas 2021). We have an early play written by her, *La traición en la Amistad* (*Treachery in* Friendship) (1628/1632). In addition, we preserve two collections of novellas, *Novelas ejemplares y amorosas* (*Amorous and Exemplary Novels*), published in 1637, and *Desengaños amorosos* (*Disenchantments of Love*), published in 1647. Her two collections consist of a number of tales tied together by a frame story in the manner of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

María de Zayas' *Tarde llega el desengaño*, the fourth tale in her *Desengaños amorosos* (1641), is one of the most studied novellas in the collection. It is one of the more complex, since it presents a story within a story. Filis narrates the story to the guests gathered in Lisis' home. The story begins with the tale of Don Martín who is shipwrecked in the Canary Islands. There he witnesses the main story, that of the cruelty of Don Jaime, who mistreats his wife and has replaced her with the daughter of slaves. Conscious of Don Martin's shock, Don Jaime tells the story of how he was treated cruelly in his youth, thus adding another level to the narrative. When this black woman falls fatally ill, she reveals that she lied about Don Jaime's wife's infidelity so that she could take over. However, it is now too late since she also expires at this time. This essay seeks to highlight the uses of ekphrasis in

the tale, the chromatic design that Zayas uses to write for the eyes and the relationship of these topics to curiosity. While a few essays have pointed to specific instances of ekphrasis (De Armas 1998; Catelli 2011; Pérez Villanueva 2021), no study has read the novel as a whole in these terms. We will highlight eight instances of ekphrasis and their importance. Although Edwin B. Place noted in 1923 that Zayas' novella made use of one of Marguerite de Navarre's tales, this piece analyzes in detail, for the first time, how Zayas uses the painting mentioned by this author.

The reader's curiosity may stem in part from the main model for Zayas' tale, the Apuleian story of Cupid and Psyche, which has *curiositas* as its main motive. In the novel, both Lucius, the protagonist, and Psyche the main character in an interpolated tale are consumed by *curiositas*. Joseph G. De Filippo reminds us that "*Curiositas*. . . itself is found in a literary text only once in extant Latin prior to Apuleius, whereas it occurs twelve times in the *Golden Ass* alone, not to mention twelve occurrences of the adjective *curiosus*" (De Filippo 1990, p. 471). Curiosity is also key in Zayas where characters in both the main story (don Martín) and in the interpolation (Don Jaime) are negatively affected by their curiosity (or lack of it). Already, in Apuleius, the term curiosity has a meddlesome character. In his important seventeenth century Spanish dictionary, Sebastián de Covarrubias sees a curious person as often intrusive, asking why this and why that (Covarrubias y Orozco 1611, p. 260). Covarrubias thus leaves out the dangerous and often-punishable aspects of excessive curiosity as found in Apuleius (witchcraft) and Zayas. He also fails to include the dangers of a lack of curiosity. Although these are key aspects of Zayas' work, this essay argues, nevertheless, that one of the reasons that the tale has attracted so much attention has to do with the vividness of its scenes, the *enargeia* with which it presents a series of tableaux before our eyes.[1] Although the notion of vivid description seems to have originated with the rhetoricians, it was later to become firmly entrenched in poetic theory, too. One reason for the popularity of descriptive passages in poetry, no doubt, was the Latin notion of *ut pictura poesis*. Horace had said that poetry is like painting, and most Renaissance literary critics repeated the claim that poetry is like a picture" (Bormann 1977, p. 156). This created competition between art and literature, between the visual and the verbal.

This vivid description, creating, in many cases, ekphrasis that describe a special moment or picture, is accompanied by a chromatic impetus that further enhances it. The text induces characters and readers not only to marvel at a colorful scene but also to seek to understand the choice of colors. After all, color symbolism was essential to medieval and early modern literature, from priestly vestments at liturgical feasts to the hue of different planets and from the dyes used in clothing to the pigments used to fashion a painting. Indeed, color and design are the very basis for Renaissance artistic theory. In María de Zayas, these colors color emotions and arouse our curiosity regarding scene, symbol, shade and character. Indeed, Eavan O'Brien has pointed to the ornate clothing, their color and symbolic meaning in Zayas' first collection, the *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*. She explains how characters wear "their social statuses and relationships" (2012, p. 127). She also evinces how chromatic elements can provide "visual evidence of the innermost emotions" (2012, p. 127).[2] The colors assigned to each character symbolize their passions and emotions, utilizing a chromatic dictionary that Lope de Vega had clearly followed in his plays, and that derived from at least the previous century (Fichter 1927, pp. 220–31). At times, the color need not even be stated as when the narrative points to Lisis dressed in the "color de sus celos" that is, blue (Zayas y Sotomayor 2000, p. 170). While revealing desires and emotions, the tableaux also paint with many colors the moment of the beginning of the feast organized for Lisis to make her forget her illness. It thus allows readers to view the scene as a dramatic ekphrasis that regales the eyes and other senses.[3]

The tale that concerns us emphasizes men's cruelty to women.[4] Ekphrasis appears here in its original sense, as a vivid description that seems to present itself before our very eyes, what the Greeks called *enargeia* and the Romans, *evidentia*.[5] Its more specific sense, the description of a work of art, will also be encountered here. The diverse ekphrasis found in this collection can paint with words astounding landscapes or tableaux of human suffering; from scenes suffused by chiaroscuro to moments typical of a *vanitas* painting.[6] In our story there are eight main ekphrastic images: (1) storm and shipwreck; (2) the calm seas whose waves have returned to its blue abode (cerúleo albergue); (3) the description of the castle with its many tapestries and ruled by a man with wavy dark hair; (4) the dinner: a black lady, dressed in "cruel" red and lighted by candles; (5) the dinner: a white woman kept in the darkness of her cell and in the shadow of the floor under the dining table; (6) Elena as martyr, recalls the ecstasies of Mary Magdalen; (7) Marguerite de Navarre's tale; (8) a cruel man and his Lucretia (Borgia).

## 1. Storm and Shipwreck

Our story begins with nature's cruelty, the description of a storm at sea that imperils a ship. An ancient topic, dating back at least to Homeric descriptions, the tempest at sea became a most recurrent and meaningful image during the early modern period. After all, it was a period of discovery—when the Europeans encountered other lands—lands often separated by dangerous seas. At a time of conquest and discovery, the sea space became "the most profoundly alien and hostile element, with the result that shipwreck is the worst imaginable scenario, evocative of the most extreme fear, horror and abjection" (Thompson 2014, p. 6). Placed at the beginning of the novella, this terrible tempest that seems to dash Don Jaime's hopes to return home to receive great honors and to marry his beloved creates suspense and curiosity. It also shows the dexterity of the author in presenting such a narrative ekphrasis. It matters not if elements of the description come from ancient epic, contemporary tales of shipwreck or the many paintings of losses at sea.[7] It is too brief to discern the different strands. What matters is hyperbole, if such a term can be used to describe such a storm. It does serve to write for the eyes, to present to the curious reader a moment of great peril and a scene of terror: "habiendo cerrado la noche obscura, tenebrosa y revuelta de espantosos truenos y temerosos relámpagos con furiosa lluvia, trocándose el viento apacible en rigurosa tormenta, los marineros, temerosos de perderse…" (Zayas y Sotomayor 1983, p. 107).[8] From moments *in extremis*, we move to acceptance as sailors, after doing all they could, and seeing themselves at the mercy of the storm "puestos de rodilla, llamando a Dios que tuviese misericordia de las almas, ya que los cuerpos se perdiesen" (1983, p. 233). This pious reaction is typical of numerous religious texts in which the heavens save the ship and those who are about to drown.[9] But, in Zayas, the storm continues, allowing for the narrative to give us a glimpse of its protagonist. His bravery, we are told, keeps the mariners from succumbing to despair and to the sea. After three days and nights, the tempest leads to the moment of shipwreck. Carrie L. Ruiz points to three moments of shipwreck in this novella: the first in the frame tale; the second, Don Jaime's shipwreck; and the third is found in an interpolated tale, the story of Don Manuel. For Ruiz, shipwreck "functions as a metaphor for female/male relationships" (2022, p. 13) and indicates "that a social breakdown is inevitable" (2022, p. 23). My reading, instead, will deal with the curiosity aroused by ekphrasis; and, echoing Ruiz's somber analysis, the absence of miracles in the world of the novella. Neither the sailors are saved nor, in the end, will the main female character achieve happiness in life. The somber attitude towards social life and gender relations, however, will be questioned in a final but quite hidden ekphrasis of a French painting subtly inserted, one deriving from a novella by Marguerite de Navarre.

## 2. Calm Seas

The ship, four days into the storm, is tossed towards a strange land with high mountains. Surprisingly, here, we find a moment of solace as Don Martín and a fellow traveler manage to reach shore and take shelter in a "hueco o quiebra que en la peña había, donde, por estar bien cóncavo y cavado, no llegaba el agua" (1983, p. 233). The curious use of the term concave recalls the importance of the "manipulation of concave and convex lenses beginning in 1590s Italy (García Santo-Tomás 2017, p. 30). This would lead to the creation of the telescope, and its eventual use by Galileo to gaze at the heavens and publish *Sidereus Nuncius* (Sidereal Messenger) in 1610, destabilizing the traditional view of the planets and the heavens. Mariners would thus start using the telescope as an aid to navigation. In Zayas' story, it is as if the text invites us to look through such lenses at the natural beauty that follows the storm and even follow the waters to its point of origin: "salió el sol y dio lugar a que, las olas retiradas a su cerúleo albergue, descubrió una arenosa playa" (1983, p. 233). The text contrasts the dark/gray atmosphere of the storm with the luminosity of a new day and the brightness of the sands. The survivors can also glimpse how the stormy sea has retreated to its calm blue home. We view it further away, as through a telescope. The term *cerúleo*, used by Zayas is a Latinism typical of the imitators of Góngora, although it was used by poets long before him. Annotating the *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea*, Dámaso Alonso explains "Cerúleas sienes: Cultismo: Cerúleo (en latín *aeruleleus*) vale 'azul oscuro'. A los dioses marinos se les atribuía miembros de color azulado. Vilanova ha comprobado que se usaba abundantemente en poesía española desde fines del s. xvi" (Alonso 1974, vol. 1. p. 109).[10] Zayas, writing for the eyes, has created two scenes of great visual impact. First, the dark and tenebrous storm with its many waves and the dangers of shipwreck; and second, the scene following, a bright beach, illumined by the sun, and behind, as if seen through the lenses of a telescope, the sea of deep blue, reposing in its own home.

## 3. The Man with Wavy Black Hair and His Tapestries

The opposition between the violence of the storm and the docility of a calm sea, the contrast between horror and beauty, anticipate future events and prepare Don Martín to observe the shocking events at a castle in the island. As an idealized hero, who led others through the storm, he is the most authorized person to observe what will soon transpire. Nevertheless, his great prowess in battle does not prepare him to deal with horrific domestic violence. As he arrives at the castle he observes the rich owner of this site, dressed in ornate and expensive clothing and with "el bigote y cabello negro y algo encrespado" (1983, p. 235). His appearance invites us to link the sea with his hair. After all, the term *encrespado* comes to mean curly hair as well as choppy seas. The metaphor of ocean waves with the curls of hair in a beautiful lady is a common one in the poetry of the period. It points to the beauty of the lady but also to her haughty disposition. We need only recall Quevedo's "En crespa tempestad del oro undoso," (Roig Miranda 1998, vol. 3, p. 174). Zayas inverts the genre, foregrounding the dark masculine hair as the locus for passion. The curls of Don Jaime de Aragón reveal that we are about to turn from ocean fury to a terrestrial tempest impelled by this figure.[11] Thus, woman does not hide passion in the curls of her hair; nevertheless, man unleashes his passionate and tormented inner self.

In order to augment the ekphrastic power of this third visual and chromatic scene, the narrative alerts us to the "ricas colgaduras y excelentes pinturas" (1983, p. 236) that cover the walls of Don Jaime's castle.

## 4. The Black Lady at Dinner

With this in mind, and satiated by the visual narrative, we turn to the evening meal. This dinner, given in honor of Don Jaime's guests, presents the fourth and fifth ekphrastic

scenes, filled with theatrical elements and utilizing a chiaroscuro that includes elements of race. Martín and his traveling companion experienced the following: "Se les ofreció a la vista dos cosas de que quedaron bien admirados" (1983, p. 236). Two very different doors open up. According to Victor Stoichita, "Hornacinas, ventanas y puertas son fragmentos de realidad que se distinguen por su capacidad de delimitar un campo visual" (2000, p. 59). Thus, each door serves as frame for a "painting". Through one of them appears the lady of the castle, paradoxically, a black woman that resembled the devil: "una negra... que si no era el demonio, que debía de ser retrato suyo" (1983, p. 237). Slaves headed for the Americas often passed through the Canary Islands. Notice how ekphrasis is underlined once again through the use of the term *retrato* or portrait: the black lady seems to be a "picture" of the very devil. She is further described using comparisons with animals thus making her appear less than human. Don Jaime de Aragón's castle has, surprisingly, white slaves and a lady of African origin. The black lady and mistress of the fortress was born in the castle and is the daughter to two black slaves. In recent times, she has become a consort to Don Jaime. The narrative does not include any kind of criticism of slavery nor does it speak of a racialized society.[12] This black lady is adorned with a profusion of rich vestments and jewels that seem ridiculous in their excess. The chromatic spectrum is displayed in this ekphrasis, from the black of her skin, to the white of her pearls, and including the rich golden red fabric of her dress. Numerous stones and flowers of many colors further animate this quasi-grotesque portrait. The word "retrato" then calls for other paintings of this type. If readers are astonished by Zayas' art and cannot recall a specific work, they can at least recognize that it is in the style of Caravaggio. After all, the Italian artist heavily influenced Jusepe Ribera and Diego Velázquez (Brown 1986, p. 12). The lady's way is lighted by two young women carrying candles in a silver candleholder. Let us recall, among others, paintings by the Flemish artist Adam de Coster (1586–1643), called *pictor noctium* for his many scenes lighted by a candle;[13] or even the works of Francisco de Zurbarán, called the Spanish Caravaggio, who in the decade of the 1630s painted a series of women saints dressed with great elegance. The golds and reds of St. Dorothea, for example, along with her flowers, could serve as contrastive image of Don Jaime's companion. I would argue that we cannot then discard this ekphrasis as an ironic allusion to Zurbarán, Philip IV's painter. In fact, Zurbarán painted more than one image of Mary Magdalene, which Zayas may have known, as explained in Section 6. Indeed, while the martyred Dorothea shows her compassion to one who mocks her, sending him fruits and flowers, the black lady's portrait suggests cruelty. According to William Fichter, who has analyzed the theater of Lope de Vega, the different shades of red mean different things. The color "encarnado" (1927, p. 221), as used by Lope, points to the person's cruelty. Zayas may have been quite aware of this connotation in dressing her figure (1983, p. 237).

## 5. The White Lady's Dinner

The other door, a much smaller one, depicts another portrait, this time of a woman that contrasts with the black lady and calls for the compassion of a St. Dorothea:

La mujer que por la pequeña puerta salió parecía tener hasta veinte y seis años, tan hermosísima, con tan grande estremo, que juzgó Don Martín, con haberlas visto muy lindas en Flandes y España, que ésta las excedía a todas; mas tan flaca y sin color, que parecía más muerta que viva, o que daba muestras de su cercana muerte. No traía sobre sus blanquísimas y delicadas carnes más que un saco... Traía en sus hermosas manos, que parecían copos de blanca nieve, una calavera (1983, p. 237).

This clearly ekphrastic passage, as well as the one already described, immediately arouses the curiosity of the two travelers and of readers that peruse this novella. Such a prominent black lady would arouse curiosity in an age that shunned interracial marriages.

Readers soon become aware of the terrible cruelty enacted by Don Jaime, who has locked up Elena, the white lady and his actual wife, in a small room so low that she can only come out of it on her knees. Crawling on the floor, she is allowed to collect crumbs and scraps that fall from the dining table. She is only allowed to drink out of the skull of her dead cousin, her supposed secret lover. This shocking punishment derives from ill-founded jealousy, having been the now black lady who had denounced Don Jaime's true wife, Elena, for infidelity. It is remarkable that the novella is constantly arousing the readers' curiosity, but within the tale, Don Jaime is never curious to discover sufficient proof of his wife's infidelity. If he had been curious, the events in the tale, which arouses our curiosity, would never have transpired. Instead, Don Jaime lets himself be moved by the tempestuous blue of jealousy and the black of his passionate hair, never realizing that the black lady's red dress is the color of cruelty. The scene or portrait, done with great detail, fully contrasts with the other one. Here, chiaroscuro is evoked through the white beauty of the woman who lives cloistered in a minuscule and dark space, and who eats under the shadow of the dining table. The great lights of the dining room only emphasize the feeble whiteness of a body that seems to be disappearing into nothingness. Laura Catelli leads us to admire the "juego de marcos visuales: los de las excelentes pinturas que cuelgan alrededor de los caballeros y los de las dos puertas de las que salen las dos mujeres (2011, p. 418). This double contrast reiterates the double frame of the story where a dark and violent storm contrasts with the natural beauty of a calm sea at home in its "cerúlea" or blue natural beauty.

## 6. Mary Magdalene

The motif of a woman drinking from a skull is often related to Mary Magdalene. She traveled with Jesus and helped support his ministry, thus being named in the Gospels She also witnessed his crucifixion and resurrection. Earlier, Jesus had exorcized the seven demons that accosted her. While not in the canonical Gospels, she was considered a repentant prostitute. By the time of the Counterreformation, the Catholic Church came to emphasize her penance for her sins. She was one of the most popular saints during the early modern period. There are hundreds of works of art that portray her, and thus the image of Elena and the skull in Zayas' novella becomes an allusive ekphrasis pointing to Mary Magdalene, where a series of paintings may be evoked.[14] Beginning with 1998, three essays have imagined Zayas' Elena as a Mary Magdalen, pointing to paintings by Titian, El Greco and José de Ribera. To these, we can add the possibility that Zayas may have known Zurbarán's depictions of Mary Magdalene. The first of these three essays underlines that hagiography and its pictorial contexts provide new depth to the characters. Elena is one of many examples in Zayas where women "are often crossed by men and must bear the cross of living in a patriarchal society" (De Armas 1998, p. 11). In the second article, Laura Catelli takes up this concept and reiterates that, in *Tarde llega el desengaño*, we have an allusive ekphrasis which points to pictoric representations of Mary Magdalene.[15] She concludes that "Los intertextos de los *Desengaños*, particularmente los ekfrásticos, parecen subrayar una y otra vez la idea ortodoxa del martirio del cuerpo y la pureza del espíritu. El objetivo aquí no sería expresar el mensaje ortodoxo, sino enmarcar para resaltar y comentar la violencia que se ejercía sobre el cuerpo femenino y el sistema de valores misóginos que justificaba esa violencia" (2011, pp. 430–31). More recently, Sonia Pérez Villanueva foregrounds *The Penitent* Magdalen (1635–1640) by José de Ribera, a painting that includes a skull, and represents just as in Zayas "la fugacidad de la vida terrenal" (2021, p. 204). She adds "La belleza de Elena refleja la sensualidad de Magdalena en su agonía y la eleva a un estado de santidad" (Pérez Villanueva 2021, p. 204). The martyrdom of Elena/Mary Magdalene is thus the most impacting moment in the novella. These three essays show different ways in which hagiography and art metamorphose a character, in this case Elena,

layering her with elements that transform her into a figure akin to a saint and martyr. This martyrdom is brought about by negative/cruel masculine power.

## 7. Marguerite de Navarre

As if all these ekphrastic elements were not enough, we need to turn the screw one more time in order to discover an even more complex pictorial scheme. María de Zayas, as Edwin B. Place mentions in a now almost forgotten study from 1923, takes the motif on the skull and much of the main plot of *Tarde llega el desengaño*, from a French novelist, Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549). The sister of Francis I of France (whom Emperor Charles V incarcerated), Marguerite was a well-known figure at this time and her works could well have impacted Spanish writers of the Renaissance and early modern periods.[16] Published posthumously, nine years after the death of the queen, it was reprinted the following year, in 1559, by Claude Gruget as the *Heptaméron*, the title that we associate with her collection of tales.[17]

Very much like María de Zayas, Marguerite de Navarre assures the reader of her *Heptaméron* that her novellas derive from historical events.[18] In tale 32, a gentleman named Bernage travels to Germany, sent by Charles VIII in a diplomatic mission. There, he discovers that his host has punished his wife, who had been unfaithful to him, forcing her to stare every day, while locked in her room, at the skeleton of her lover. When she is allowed out of her room in order to dine with her husband, she must drink out of the skull of her lover. While Zayas did not use the hanging skeleton, Marguerite did not include the woman who ate scraps under the table. While Elena still preserves her golden hair, albeit mangled, the woman in Marguerite's tale must shave her hair and appear bald. Furthermore, while the woman in Zayas must come out from a small door, the one in Marguerite comes from behind a tapestry, thus underlining the ekphrastic elements of the tale.[19] When Bernage returns to France from his diplomatic mission, the King, upon hearing of the great beauty of the suffering lady, sends a painter to Germany, Jean Perréal, also called Jean de Paris, so that he capture on canvas this sad beauty. Marguerite de Navarre uses a historical figure here, and many critics have affirmed that the painting was transformed into a saintly one: Jean reproduces this sad beauty as Mary Magdalene, a lost work of art (Rigolot 1994, p. 60). The tale also mentions that before departing Germany, Bernage had asked the husband to show compassion to his wife, and this does happen. We learn that years later, the couple lives happily and have "beaucoup de beaux enfans" (1967, p. 245).

Given the many parallels between the two tales, it is quite likely that Zayas was pointing to a hidden model, Marguerite de Navarre's novella. If such is the case, we must foreground two key elements. First, Zayas rewrites the French novella to underline man's cruelty to women. Just as the devastating storm destroys the ship, here Don Jaime's extreme choleric response leads to Elena's death. Her innocence is discovered too late since she has just perished from grief, mistreatment, and malnutrition. Marguerite's tale inserts an ekphrasis of a future painting, a work by Jean Perréal, a work that impels an ekphrastic game with Zayas's work. The original painting leads the Spanish writer to imagine an Elena as seen by Perréal, but now with a tragic ending. Zayas also rejects the verbal ending of Marguerite's novella, where woman can end up smiling and surrounded by her family and children. Instead, like Perréal, she paints a martyr. In Zayas, Elena dies incarcerated, suffering and innocent. She does so not only to show man's cruelty, but that fulfillment can only be attained beyond this world: "el premio de su martirio, que ya Dios se le ha dado en el cielo" (1983, p. 253).

## 8. A Cruel Man and His Lucretia (Borgia)

Before concluding, we need to seek some kind of an explanation for Don Jaime's cruelty—some feeble rationale that can never excuse him. As stated, he never seems curious to find out if his wife was truly unfaithful; and readers are curious to discover his motivation. Don Jaime explains that, in his youth, an invisible mistress (a woman who would not allow herself to be seen by her gallants) ordered him never to reveal their trysts. This tale then is presenting the reverse of the Cupid and Psyche myth, since, here, the male is the curious one, as he tries to figure out who the woman is. In the darkness of her home, Don Jaime states that "sin luz empecé a procurar por el tiento a conocer lo que la vista no podía, brujuleando partes tan realzadas que la juzgué en mi imaginación por alguna deidad" (1983, p. 241). Even in the dark, the imagination creates images, portraits, making Lucrecia a perfect being, an angel or goddess. When Don Jaime reveals their secret meetings against her commands, the cruel lady attempts to assassinate him.[20] Lucrecia turns out to be a great princess, that of Erne. Her social position does not permit a scandal, and thus she seeks to hide all traces of intimacy by seeking to murder her talkative lover. This interpolated story, just like the Don Jaime plot, has a literary model. It is based on the famous plot of the invisible mistress, well known in the theater and in early modern prose through works by Castillo Solórzano, Céspedes y Meneses, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, Calderón de la Barca, and Ana Caro (De Armas 1976). Be it a fictional tale or a true one (as Zayas asserts), Don Jaime seeks to ameliorate his portrayal as a cruel man by underlining the murderous attempts of this princess. Zayas's narrative, although feigning to create a balance between men and women, clearly tips the balance in favor of women and against men's cruelty. Don Jaime's actions are of un-imaginable cruelty.[21] At the same time, the tale of the cruel princess, as an interpolation, becomes a frame tale and thus an ekphrastic passage. As Laura Catelli (2011, pp. 418–19) point out, the name of the princess recalls Lucretia Borgia, who was said to have ordered the murder of her former lovers. What is really curious is that Don Jaime marries Elena because she looks like Lucrecia. So much so that she appears to be her "retrato" (1983, p. 247). We thus come to discover that Don Jaime may have punished his wife because of the murderous impulses of his still-beloved princess Lucrecia.

Indeed, when Don Jaime enters the palace of his princess, his emotions are so exalted that he exclaims that he has ascended to heaven: "En la gloria que siento en el alma, y en el olor y dulzura deste albergue" (1983, p. 241). As we have noted above, the novella plays with the term "albergue" to underline contrasts. The day following the storm, Don Martín and his companion can move from their "peligroso albergue" (1983, p. 234) and admire the beauty of the day and of the calm sea with waves that have returned to its "cerúleo albergue" (1983, p. 233). While enjoying the sumptuous dinner offered by Don Jaime, our shipwreck survivor observes admiringly the beautiful woman, Elena/Magdalene that takes only crumbs from the floor, soon to return to her cramped quarters: "volviéndose a su estrecho albergue, cerró el criado la puerta con llave y se la dio a su señor" (1983, p. 238). Using a key, a servant locks her in. "Albergue" takes on a series of meanings, from the home of a princess and the blue spaces where the ocean resides to a dangerous cave and the closed-in and dark spaces where Elena is incarcerated.

These unlikely places and spaces arouse the readers' curiosity as they navigate through a series of impacting and chromatically dense ekphrases that further augment admiration and curiosity. Indeed, this is a curiosity shared by characters in the work. While Don Martín is intensely curious as to the strange goings on at the castle in the Canary Islands where he is lodged, Don Jaime is curious as to the identity of his invisible princess hiding in the darkness of her palace. Giving in to his curiosity, Don Jaime is punished and almost murdered. Reacting to this adventure in early life, he refuses to investigate if his wife

Elena has indeed committed adultery. This lack of curiosity again places him at fault, only discovering her innocence after she dies, martyred by his many cruelties. From the storms at sea to the storms of passion, Zayas' *Tarde llega el desengaño*, creates unforgettable images of violence and emotion, filled with an impacting palette and dramatic chiaroscuro. Each of the eight main ekphrasis in the tale is a visually stunning work of art, rendered through words.[22] From the peaceful blue of a calm sea, we move to the red cruelty of a false witness; and from the vivid candlelight that reveals the darkness of a body and soul, we move to the darkness in which a shining and tormented soul, with golden hair is martyred. Elena's hair contrasts with the waves of her husband's dark and curly hair, a sign of tormented passions. To these many pictures filled with *enargeia*, Zayas adds references to a tale by Marguerite de Navarre, one that ends with a happy picture of marital love. That such an image existed in reality and was painted (in a tragic manner) by Jean Perréal, adds further depth to the ekphrastic impetus of the tale, and shows that, even in the times of Marguerite, men were not as cruel to women. In this novella, then, Zayas paints with strong and damning colors the brutalities of men without failing to assign the red of cruelty to a demon-lady and the darkness of secrecy to a willful princess.

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## Notes

1. As Heinrich Plett asserts "Thus visual reception is more effective than auditive and the rhetoric of the image more persuasive than the rhetoric of the word" (Plett 2012, p. 45).
2. The passage in Zayas is so striking as to require citation: "El primero que dio principio al airoso paseo fue Don Juan, que por guía y maestro empezó solo, tan galán, de pardo, que se llevaba los ojos de cuantos le veían, cuyos botones y cadenas de diamantes parecían estrellas. Siguióle Lisarda y don Álvaro, ella de las colores de don Juan, y el de las de Matilde, a quien sacrificaba sus deseos. Venia la hermosa dama de noguerado y plata; acompañábala don Alonso, galán, de negro, por salió asi Nise, saya entera de terciopelo liso, sembrada de botones de oro. Traiala de la mano don Miguel, también de negro, porque aunque miraba bien a Filis, no se atrevió a sacar sus colores, temiendo a don Lope por haber salido como ella de verde, creyendo que sería dueño de sus deseos" (Zayas y Sotomayor 2000, p. 170; O'Brien 2012, p. 126).
3. Zayas places all the guests for the feast to comfort Lisis close to her bed, as each is described. The scene is made up of tiny ekphrasis, description of clothing and other adornments worn, such as jewels. But, here, everyone is showing off, looking at each other for symbolic signs. Thus, the whole scene becomes an ekphrasis, a work to be viewed. Although there is no specific work of art it replicates, it calls upon its own chromatic and painterly nature. Thus, it is possible to see it as a variation of a narrative ekphrasis which tells a story while emphasizing the painterly aspects. It can even be called a dramatic ekphrasis "using the art object to construct a developing action—thus taking to an extreme, the narrative ekphrasis" (De Armas 2005, p. 22).
4. Rosa Navarro Durán prefers to foreground women's cruelty: "porque son crueles muchos de los hombres que las protagonizan, pero también las mujeres; y estas son casi siempre las que ponen en marcha la crueldad de los caballeros.¨ pointing to Alejandra in the first tale" (Navarro Durán 2021, p. 138).
5. Murray Krieger explica: "The early meaning given 'ekphrasis' in Hellenistic rhetoric. . . was totally unrestricted: it referred most broadly to a verbal description of something, almost anything, in life or art" (1992, p. 7).
6. At times, the scene paints an ekphrasis that recalls that even devout or saintly women are "martyred" by men. Indeed, it appears as if a hagiographic narrative or a devout painting is transformed into a narrative ekphrasis. Patricia Grieve claims that "Zayas invests her novellas with the formal properties of hagiography while subverting the ideology of that Church-sanctioned genre" (Grieve 1991, p. 86). Deviating from this reading, Marina Brownlee searches for "the true magic of the book" in the double narrative, the devout and the one that draws the violence against women (Brownlee 2000, p. 128). Sonia Pérez Villanueva points to the transformation of violence into an aesthetic and even painterly category in Zayas: "la estetización de la violencia vista en la hagiografía" (2021, p. 195).

7 Carrie L. Ruiz points to painters such as "Juan de la Corte, Enrique de las Marinas and Juan de Toledo [who] focused on naval battles and shipwreck" (Ruiz 2022, p. 11).

8 This Christian submission to the will of God compares with pagan acceptance. For Boris Dunsch, "Homer depicts the sea as dangerous and hostile, but something to be faced and ultimately accepted" (Dunsch 2014, p. 43).

9 Let us recall that storm that threatened shipwreck for Mary Magdalen, her sister Martha, her brother Lazarus, and a friend called Maximino. They miraculously arrived safely in Marseille (Rigolot 1994, p. 65).

10 Indeed, a pilgrim warmed by the sun after a shipwreck is also a motif that appears in Góngora's *Soledades* (Góngora 1994, 1. vv 1–41).

11 It should not surprise us that Gongora's detractors complained of his "encrespado y oscuro estilo" (Cueto [1869] 1952, p. XX). *Encrespado*, is a much more violent term than curly or frizzy. It will come to reveal a dark and macabre vision.

12 "Zayas's work reveals here an awareness of the means of racial differentiation through language as well as the impossibility of black Africans possessing the rights entailed by citizenship at the time, but, as I am arguing, it does not offer a straightforward critique of those practices" (Delehanty 2018, p. 951).

13 Let us recall the candle held in *Young woman holding a distaff before a lit candle* or *A man singing by candlelight*.

14 In an allusive ekphrasis, "the work of art is not described, nor is a narrative created from its images. Instead, the poet, playwright or novelist simply refers to a painter, a work of art, or even to a feature that may apply to a work of art. This becomes an ekphrasis only in the mind of the reader/spectator who can view the work in his memory and imagination" (De Armas 2005, p. 22).

15 Utilizing De Armas' definition of allusive ekphrasis (2005), Catelli explains "Las instancias ekfrásticas que se relacionan con la figura de María Magdalena podrían considerarse alusivas, es decir que no se describe una obra o un objeto específico, sino que se introduce una referencia a un tema o una característica iconográfica que estimula la imaginación del lector, quien reconstruye una o varias obras relacionadas en su mente (2012, p. 412).

16 According to María Soledad Arredondo, French was read even more than Italian during the Spanish Golden Age, "al comprobar que el francés había sido una lengua intermediaria para el conocimiento en España de algunas novelas italianas. Como es sabido, éste era el caso de las *Historias trágicas* de Bandello, conocidas a través de las *Histoires tragiques* de Boistuau y Belleforest" (Arredondo 2001, p. 255). We also know that *La mayor confusión* a novella by Juan Pérez de Montalbán included in his *Sucesos y prodigios de amor* (1624), "presenta paralelismos con la novela XXX del *Heptamerón* de M. de Navarra" (Gómez 1998, p. 38). In his edition of this work, Luigi Giuliani asserts that "la novela de la escritora francesa tiene más posibilidades de ser el modelo seguido por el novelista español, si es que hubo algún modelo directo" (Pérez de Montalbán 1992, p. XXXVI).

17 The first edition consisted of 67 novellas and was titled *Histoires des amans fortunez*.

18 In the frame of the work, we read that a series of travelers arrive at the Abbey of Cauterets, by the Pyrinees, after surviving floods and robbers. They cannot keep going since the bridge will be opened in ten days. Thus, Parlermante asks her husband Hircan that, together with Lady Oisille, they find ways to entertain the pilgrims. In addition to devotional texts and sermons, they will compose ten short novellas, one for each day.

19 "Et ainsy que la viande fut apportee sur la table, [Bernage] veid sortir de derriere la tapisserye une femme, la plus belle qu'il estoit possible de regarder, mais elle avoit la teste tondue, le demeurant du corps habillé de noir a l'alemand" (Marguerite de Navarre 1967, p. 242).

20 "Salieron de una casa más abajo de donde yo estaba seis hombres armados y con máscaras, y disparando los dos dellos dos pistolas, y los otros metiendo mano a las espadas, me acometieron, cercándome por todas partes" (Zayas y Sotomayor 1983, p. 246).

21 "While Don Jaime's punishment is deserved since he was not able to keep a secret and thus 'dishonored' the lady who was favoring him, Elena's punishment is undeserved since she was innocent of any wrongdoing. Her punishment is far more shocking than the one suffered by Don Jaime. In addition, while Don Jaime is able to escape, Elena must remain in the castle and endure her torture: Man is free, but woman must always obey the husband (or father) and is for all intents and purposes incarcerated" (De Armas 1976, p. 46).

22 The eight main ekphrastic images and their triggers for curiosity are as follows:
(1) Storm and shipwreck/curiosity aroused by violence.
(2) The calm seas with waves that have returned to its blue abode (cerúleo albergue)/curiosity aroused by the sudden calm.
(3) The description of the castle with its many tapestries and ruled by a man with wavy dark hair/curiosity created by anticipation.
(4) The dinner: a black lady, dressed in "cruel" red and lighted by candles/curiosity as to how she became mistress of the fortress.
(5) The dinner: a white woman kept in the darkness of her cell and in the shadow of the floor under the dining table/curiosity over her plight.
(6) The death of Elena as martyr, recalling the ecstasies of Mary Magdalen/curiosity over the saintliness of Elena.
(7) The uses of novella 32 by Marguerite de Navarre/curiosity as to a future painting.
(8) The cruel man and his princess (Borgia)/curiosity concerning a cruel princess and her impact on the male protagonist.

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# On Floods and Earthquakes: Iberian Political and Religious Readings of Natural Disasters (1530–1531)

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**Abstract:** This article explores the ways in which writing about natural disasters conveyed a fraught sense of instability and ever-changing political alliances in the early sixteenth century. It centers on a broadsheet comprising two letters and a song sent to a Castilian statesman, the Marquis of Tarifa, from the papal curia and the court of Portugal. The two letters, one by Baltasar del Río and another by an anonymous informant, reveal that disasters could be potentially seen as moments of political action. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the papal curia suffered several floods, the plague, factional violence, and internal divisions with long-lasting consequences. In turn, Lisbon, was hit by a major earthquake, which impacted major structures. These letters allow us to reconstruct how the concept of curiosity and that of an untamable nature came together to make sense of natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes. I analyze the ways in which Iberian agents negotiated the supposedly natural or divine character of these events in order to advance political and religious calls for action.

**Keywords:** floods; earthquakes (1530–1531); political and religious readings

## 1. Introduction

Rain hit Rome in October of 1530. As had been the case on previous occasions, the currents first overflew the banks of the river. On 7 October, the waters arrived at Tor di Nona, and the next day the Roman streets became water canals. On 9 October, the city was flooded, and some of its magnificent houses near the Tiber were swallowed by the untamable waters (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir). A few months later, "on 26 January 1531, between 4 and 5 a.m., a strong [earthquake] occurred in Lisbon and along the Tagus margins. The shock heavily struck downtown and neighboring areas, causing approximately 1000 casualties. It was preceded by at least one foreshock, probably around 7 January 1531" and by a tsunami (Baptista et al. 2014, p. 2150; see also Justo and Salwa 1998). In the eyes of the Iberian agents residing in Rome and Lisbon, the world seemed to crumble.

In 1531, a printshop in Burgos hastened to put together a broadsheet that featured a description of these natural catastrophes.[1] The brief compilation, entitled *Traslado de dos cartas*, contained two separate letters describing the calamities or whips ("açotes") which had struck the two cities only a few months apart.[2] Weaving together the two accounts were a title page and a song. While the title page provided a brief description of the events, the song demanded that all Christians "get rid of" any "damned sect" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv). *Traslado* understood both catastrophes as divine and frightful signs ("temerosas señales," Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, air). While Rome's overflowing waters might have reminded readers and listeners of widely circulating prophecies of a global

flood, the Lisbon earthquake perhaps evoked for many the tremors that had accompanied the death of Christ (Matthew 27, 51 and ff.), as well as the earthquake prophesized for the end of times in the *Book of Revelation* (16,18) (Schenk 2010, p. 29). The letters shared the same addressee, the Marqués de Tarifa, Fadrique Enríquez de Rivera (1476–1539), a statesman and a writer well connected with key enclaves of Iberian political action. Their content informed Castilian audiences of how agents based in Iberian diplomatic hubs, such as Rome, and Lisbon perceived the flood and the earthquake. Little is known about their circulation in Burgos and how the broadsheet was sold and distributed, or how it traveled to other Castilian towns. It is very likely that its news spread quickly, and its content was read or listened to by people of all socio-cultural backgrounds. Some of its materials, and especially its final song, might have been composed with a wider dissemination in mind. As *cantastorie* sung prophetic verse pamphlets in Rome, street singers and amateurs could have raised their voice in Burgos and other Castilian cities to read the news and put the song's lyrics to music.

The *Traslado* offered the curious readers up-to-date information and a way to cope with catastrophe while also providing them with a prophetic and politico-religious interpretation of the events. Historians have used its contents, amalgamated with other sources, to reconstruct the effects of the 1531 Lisbon earthquake (Justo and Salwa 1998, p. 320).[3] However, the matter of this broadsheet was not unique, as it formed part of an abundant body of literature on natural catastrophes and political propaganda with apocalyptic undertones, produced in a period when crises and adverse events were frequently interpreted in eschatological terms (Cunningham and Grell 2000, pp. 1–17). To put it otherwise, these letters belonged to a vast array of early modern cheap prints on natural disasters presented as divine signs circulating in Europe.[4] Their consumption was especially frequent in what is now France, Germany, Spain, and central and northern Italy. As Ottavia Niccoli has noted, the success of these pieces (whether in epistolary or verse form) relied on the plurality of readings they allowed and their transversality and reach across social classes, given that their circulation had grown together exponentially thanks to the involvement of the printing shops. They became an important element "in the formation of public opinion, particularly in periods of crisis, and their use was quite consciously contrasted with other modes of furthering political ends" (Niccoli 1990, p. 59). Indeed, news on natural disasters enticed the curiosity of readers and presented an opportunity for printers and agents to use that curiosity to propagate politico-religious ideas.

This paper will center on how the descriptions of the 1530 Rome flood and the 1531 Lisbon earthquake connected a variety of disciplines, including natural sciences such as meteorology, with political propaganda and prophecy in pocketable literary products designed to be consumed by an ample readership, connecting key enclaves of political action.[5] I will argue that the readers' curiosity could become a nest for a plurality of scientific and prophetic political readings.

## 2. On Monsters, Portents, Prodigies, and Marvels

By the turn of the sixteenth century, a vocabulary to describe and make sense of things whose explanation went beyond the ordinary had emerged. Scientists, tricksters, and humanists coexisted in a world plagued by monsters, prodigies, portents, and marvels. Some of these monsters were made of flesh, while others were the product of human machinations, fears, and shortcomings. Prodigies, broadly understood, dealt with the wonders of nature in all its might and fright. Perceived monsters, prodigies, and portents were often instrumentalized to predict what was about to happen, or what could happen if people failed to take action. The echoes of this terminology reached far and wide. One could read or hear about prodigies and monsters in books of ceremonies, sermons, broadsheets,

street performances, and private and public correspondence, so much so that some of them became common talk in inns and public squares. The printshop that put together the *Traslado* made use of this vocabulary in its title page. The flood was "frightful," the earthquake "frightful and strange," and the signs of the earthquake had provoked "fright" and "wonder" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, air).

In Rome, where the first letter of the *Traslado* originated, monsters and prodigies had long been interrelated concepts. For instance, the index of a manuscript book of ceremonies recording Leo X's papacy enticed the reader with accounts of "monsters" and "prodigies" recently seen in different places, conflating the two notions.[6] One of them was the flood of 1514, also called a "portendus" in another manuscript composed at the Roman curia.[7] The destruction caused then by the overflowing waters of the Tiber was placed under the umbrella category "De monstris," which encapsulated prodigious events and "monsters" (fabricated, imagined, or real).[8] The flood belonged together with other prodigious events: the three suns seen in the sky in France, the eerie sound of a bell that tolled in Catalonia without anyone playing it, or the apparition of the Virgin.[9] Among them were also still-born or born babies, such as the so-called monster of Bologna, the Roman serpent-boy, the dog-boy, and so on.[10] Many of them had been the talk of the town in the Northern Italian Peninsula in 1513 and 1514, interpreted in the context of the Italian Wars as signs of unrest and divine forewarning.

This lexicon of prodigy, wonder, marvel, and monstrosity permeated accounts of floods and earthquakes both in Rome and in the Iberian Peninsula. The prolific writer Giuliano Dati penned a poem on the famous flood of 1495, the most devastating before that of 1530, calling it a deluge (*diluvio*). *Del diluvio de Roma del MCCCCXCV a dì IIII de decembre* was published as a broadsheet in Rome and Florence. It promised to deal with the deluge "and other marvelous things" ("Et daltre cose di gran marauiglia"). Dati's "marvelous deluge" was sung on Roman streets by performers and *cantabanchi*, who sold hundreds of copies to listeners.[11] The image of Rome covered by the waters was also visually projected onto a woodcut on its titlepage. It displayed a couple of half-submerged inhabitants swimming in despair against the currents, while another roamed the city on an improvised boat.[12]

The 1495 flood also made headlines in a series of rumors turned into pamphlets. Among other marvels, it recounted the vision of a Tiber monster that further conflated the flood with monstrosity. North of the Alps, the Lutheran reformer Philip Melanchthon reconceptualized a representation of the monster as a "Papal Ass" in a polemical anti-Catholic pamphlet published in 1523, which used a modified version of a woodcut representing the monster carved in the workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder. As had happened in Rome, the flood was once again interpreted as a divine sign but with a different political reading. For Melanchthon, the calamities that occurred in Rome were a clear proof of the corruption of the Roman Church, and the Tiber monster incarnated the pope himself. However, twenty years later, when this image made it to the lavishly illustrated manuscript *The Book of Miracles,* produced in Augsburg, any mention of the pope had vanished.[13] Even if some readers could still recall the association, the free imperial city, directly under the command of the emperor, sought to prevent religious turmoil and anti-Catholic agitation (Waterman 2022, pp. 28–39).

The term "deluge" ("diluuio") also appeared in the title page of the 1531 *Traslado.* Considering that none of the two letters used that word in their text, this choice constituted a selling strategy most likely devised in the printer's shop.

In short, natural catastrophes, such as floods and earthquakes, could be defined through early modern terms as monsters, *prodigia*, marvels, and wonders (Barnett 2019, p. 25). As Neil Kenny has pointed out, terms such as "wonder," "marvel," "strangeness,"

and their multiple cognates in Romance and Germanic languages were intrinsically linked to the later development of 17th-century curiosity in all its complexity (Kenny 1998, pp. 14–15). Although the concept of curiosity had not yet become mainstream and lacked the connotations it would assume a century later, the consumption of meteorological novelties presented as strange transformed them into curious objects suitable for curious people.

## 3. The Roman Flood of 1530

The first letter of the *Traslado*, containing a firsthand narration of the calamities that occurred during the flood of Rome, was penned by Baltasar del Río on 20 October 1530. Del Río was a learned curial, Bishop of Scala, and papal master of ceremonies. He was a writer and advocate of the republic of letters who used his position at the curia to promote the arts in his hometown, Seville, as well as to communicate precise news (Albalá Pelegrín 2021, pp. 8–13). Some of Del Río's readers might have recognized his name as linked to the literary joust and the confraternity that he founded in Seville. In the letter sent to Fadrique Enríquez de Ribera, information flowed through private and public channels from Rome to Castile. Baltasar del Río knew Enríquez de Rivera personally. He had been his longtime friend and informant, and he accompanied him in 1519 during his stay in Rome. In the letter, Del Río made sure to leave a trace of the Marquis's visit to the papal city. Enríquez de Rivera himself had written an account of his trip to the Italian Peninsula and Jerusalem.[14]

In Del Río's letter, Rome became another Venice. Unlike the Serenissima, untamed water canals covered its buildings, not leaving a single stone visible to the human eyes. According to the account of a contemporary Frenchman, Piazza Navona, where the Church of San Giacomo degli Spagnoli stood, was completely flooded.[15] The high waters halted communication opportunities in the adjacent market and one of the centers of news exchange for individuals who maintained close ties with the Spanish faction. The description of Rome as another Venice, with boats navigating its waters, coincidentally recalled the earlier metaphor of the *cavallo venetiano* in the initial woodcut of Francisco Delicado's *La Lozana andaluza,* which predates the flood of 1530 and has been read in the tradition of the "ship of fools" or *Narrenschiff*. In the woodcut, the character of Lozana flees from Rome on a boat bound to Venice (Delicado 1950). This was an impossible route unless one circumnavigated the Italian Peninsula or imagined the Northern Italian peninsula along with Rome submerged in water. A completely flooded landscape, in which Lozana could navigate from Rome to Venice, was not far from the imagination of some of Delicado's and Del Río's contemporaries. Since the end of the fifteenth century, predictions of a universal flood that would take place in 1524 circulated across all social spheres, instilling what Ottavia Niccoli has described as a case of "collective panic" (Barnett 2019, pp. 29–30; Niccoli 1990, pp. 140–44). Believed by some and derided by others, the supposed 1524 flood had become such a commonplace that in 1521 Machiavelli included it in a "listing of banal topics of conversation" for tavern benches (Niccoli 1990, p. 142).

The opening of Del Río's letter resorted to a rhetoric of fear, recalling the author's poor mental and physical state after the catastrophe.

> I don't even know where or how to start—first, because the magnitude of the frightfulness of what I am about to tell has distraught me, so I cannot make sense of what I say, since fear has taken upon me in this place (. . .) I have such trembling hands that I cannot write, and I cannot make enough sense of this to make someone else write it.[16]

The first words of the letter conveyed a sense of immediacy. Del Río, still suffering from the consequences of the flood, wrote with trembling hands as an eyewitness of the natural disaster. The overflowing river had carried animals away, the currents' strength

had destroyed houses, and left corpses floating. City structures had been affected, among them cardinal palaces. It had also left a terrible burden for those who had survived. The price of grain had quadrupled, complained the humanist Giovan Battista Sanga in a letter to Alessandro de' Medici, leaving citizens in a dearth of staple foods. The cattle and the wine (old and new) was mostly lost (Gasparoni 1865, p. 21).

As the waters reached Paulo Biondo's house in Sant Simeon, where Baltasar del Río was living at the time, he rode to take refuge to the hill of Monte Cavallo (the Quirinal), where the Cardinal of Osma, the Dominican García de Loaysa (1479–1546), had gone to find some leisure ("holgando"). The Spaniards whose houses suffered through the inundation also found relief in the cardinal's hospitality. Around a thousand Spanish men and five hundred Spanish women had survived by sheltering in García de Loaysa's residence in Campo de' Fiori. They were well fed in the cardinal's house, where they "were provided from his pantry in such a way that no one missed their own house, nor their horses and mules (*caualgaduras*)."[17] Many had not sent [their servants] to the market to procure something to eat, instead busying themselves in preparing their houses for the flood, closing doors and windows to no avail.[18] The amount of detail given to Loaysa's actions clearly shows that Del Río's letter aimed to lavish praise on the Spanish Community in Rome and on one of its most distinguished members residing in 1530. García de Loaysa was among those closest to Emperor Charles V, addressing letters to the emperor from Rome between 1530 and 1532.[19] One of the Spanish curials who found shelter in Loaysa's house was the Valencian judge of the tribunal of the *Sacra Romana Rota*, Luis Gómez, who in 1531 penned an exhaustive Latin treatise on the Roman flood, dedicated to García de Loaysa (Gómez 1531, aiir).[20]

The letter also gave a minute account of the movements of the Pope and other members of the curia. Clement VII had survived the flood. He was in the port city of Ostia with a group of cardinals and the imperial ambassador, Miquel Mai, when the Tiber started to overflow.[21] On the advice of a local, the Medici Pope and those who were with him left Ostia to take shelter in the Quirinal, in the old house of St. Agatha, which had belonged to Leo X when he was a cardinal (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiiiv). Others, less fortunate, had perished, such as the apostolic secretary Misser Eusebio, whose house had sunk with nineteen persons inside (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiir).

Baltasar del Río's words allow us to peek into how curial Iberian elites understood, digested, and politically (re)used natural disasters, and the tensions that arose from scientific and politico-religious interpretations. The description of the flood in Rome started with a scientific observation and ended with a (divine) warning, beginning as a natural catastrophe whose consequences could have been prevented and winding-up as God's punishment. This double reading was not unusual and can be found in other contemporary broadsheets with prophetic overtones.

First, Del Río pointed out how the more recent architects and city planners had ignored the habit of ancient Romans, who avoided building near the river. Contemporaries blatantly disregarded past floodings, erecting palaces adjacent to the riverbanks. People had "trusted water as a friend," unlike the Venetians who, having long lived surrounded by it, see it as an enemy (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, air). In addition, many houses were built on top of sand or earth filled with dung which, unlike solid rock, was unstable in the face of river currents (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiir). Holes had also been dug all over the city to accommodate a great number of cellars (*cantinas*).

> [Those cellars] flake the houses underneath when they are filled with water: and since the water filled the sewers, the pipes and the gutters, the cellars were flooded before the water was seen on the streets: and when the water was emptied (. . .) the houses fell little by little or altogether.[22]

Del Río's comments on the exploitation of earth and the careless planning of modern constructions occupy the first few pages of the letter. Human decisions and actions were (mostly) to blame for the loss of lives. Del Río's notes predated a letter sent in 1560 by the architect M. Antonio Trevisi to Pope Pius IV, proposing a series of measures to prevent future floods (Gasparoni 1865, p. 27). The letter's focus on human intervention can be put in dialogue with modern notions of the Anthropocene. Indeed, an overflowing Tiber was not alien to Rome. High water from previous floods had been inscribed on city walls since antiquity and could be easily perused by citizens and travelers in marble markers. Del Río took pains to record previous floods.[23] The most frightful one in living memory was the one that happened during Alexander VI's papacy, in 1495, and yet it only reached up to one meter below the new mark of 1530 (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiv). Contemporaries agreed that the 1495 flood had been "nothing" compared with that of 1530.[24] Given the dimensions of the calamity, Del Río further wondered about its impact on the city's livelihood and whether it would provoke a multiplication of disease and would be followed by a plague, as had happened in the time of Pelagius (r. 556–561).[25]

Besides describing how the flood affected the Spanish community and other dignitaries, the letter also reinterpreted the natural disaster in a politico-religious key. It situated the Spanish faction in Rome and its agents and curials, present and past, as essential to secure the wellbeing of Christendom whether in the Italian or the Iberian Peninsula. Del Río signals how St. Gregory, the successor to Pope Pelagius I, entrusted his *Moralia in Job* ("sus morales") to the bishop of Seville, St. Leander, who "ordered that many and highly devoted processions were performed to placate the wrath of God" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiii v).[26] As a procession was taking place in the vicinity of the Old St. Peter's Basilica, an angel appeared on the top of the mausoleum of Hadrian sheathing his sword. It was thanks to St. Leander's initiative, we are told, together with the Pope's prayers and the intercession of the Virgin Mary, that the apparition took place. The Pope and those surrounding him came then to realize that God had liberated them from his wrath. From that day on, the Mausoleum became known as Castel Sant'Angelo and processions were celebrated yearly to commemorate the miracle on the day of St. Mark (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiii v).[27]

The flood that occurred during the papacy of Pelagius I connected past religious conflicts with contemporary Christian and Iberian affairs. The "waves" caused by the Arian "heresy" were like the "ones now caused by Luther" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiiiv). Those latest waves promoted the rapid expansion of Lutheranism among notables from territories in dispute within the Spanish Monarchy. As such, Del Río compares the conversion of the Duke of Saxe-Lauenburg, Magnus I (1470–1543), to Lutheranism, to that of the Visigoth King Leovigild to Arianism. The letter closes with some advice on how to proceed next with the Lutheran heresy and expects the emperor to show a firm hand on these matters while informing Castilian notables, in a condemning tone, of the confessional tolerance that prevails in imperial territories. The call to the emperor in its last lines, together with the miraculous story of St. Leander, aimed at convincing readers and listeners of the necessity of an intervention by Charles V, not only as the emperor but also, especially, as king of Spain ("España") (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, bir). It also tried to monitor the emperor's actions. In the Imperial Diet of 12 November 1530, Charles V had invested Magnus with the title of Duke of Saxe-Lauenburg. A few months later, Magnus introduced the Reformation in his duchy and became a Lutheran.[28]

When ten years before Charles V had sent to Rome a letter condemning Lutheranism, which was read at the college of cardinals on 10 May 1521, Del Río had rushed to the printing press to publish a laudatory broadsheet. The publication recorded a gathering that had taken place in the house of Cardinal of Santa Croce, Bernardino de Carvajal, with the

objective of commending Charles V's decision. The pamphlet, with a preface by Del Río, encouraged the emperor in his fight against Lutheranism and the Ottoman empire (Albalá Pelegrín 2021, p. 15).

The politico-religious closing of Del Río's letter, and its call for action, was not at all unusual. It followed a tradition of broadsheets that weaponized monsters and natural catastrophes against Lutheranism (Niccoli 1990, p. 121). Yet, in doing so, Del Río appealed directly to the emperor and aimed at highlighting the importance of the Spanish faction in Rome. It was thanks to the intercession of García de Loaysa, he stated, that about a thousand and five hundred men and women had been protected. It had been St. Leander's processions that had pleased God together with the prayers of the Pope. It was Charles V as King of Spain, rather than as Emperor, who needed to interfere in the affairs of Saxony. To further understand Baltasar del Río's intervention, and his insistence in providing a reading of the flood that would both inform and benefit the Spanish community in Rome, his letter needs to be put in dialogue with several other politico-religious interpretations that circulated at the curia.[29] For example, the *Diluuio di Roma che fu a VII d'ottobre lanno M.D.XXX*, described the catastrophe as another sack, linking its destructive effects with those caused by the imperial troops in 1527, thus casting a less flattering perspective on Spanish intervention in Rome. The *Diluuio* circulated mainly beyond Rome. It was first printed in Bologna in November of 1530 (Gasparoni 1865, p. 3) and later reprinted in Venice (Gasparoni 1865, p. 8). Giovan Batista Sanga used the same metaphor to describe the 1530 flood as a sack in a letter to Alessandro de Medici (Gasparoni 1865, p. 21). Its destruction recalled for some contemporary readers the sack of Rome by the Colonna (1526) and for many others the one by the imperial troops (1527).

## 4. The Lisbon Earthquake of 1531

An anonymous letter, following the one penned by Del Río in the *Traslado*, informed Fadrique Enríquez de Rivera of the tremors in Lisbon, the "most frightful earthquake ever seen." In the early morning of Thursday, January 26, "it seemed as if the sky and the earth moved close together." On the same day, the earth trembled three times. The earthquake ravaged numerous houses, resulting in the loss of countless lives.[30] The tremors shattered numerous structures, among them several ecclesiastical buildings, such as the Church of Nossa Senhora da Escada, the Ribeira palace, and the Church of S. João de Praça. Statues fell to the ground in the monastery of Belem. Both the monastery and Belem's defensive tower suffered structural damage, but neither of them collapsed. Other buildings, including the Carmo monastery and the Lisbon Cathedral, suffered only minor damage.

As described by the Portuguese poet and royal secretary Garcia de Resende, the fear of death lay deep roots in the population. Many left their houses and farms, sleeping in the streets and open fields, filled with the fear of what could happen next:

> Out of fear, everyone left
> their houses and their occupations.
> They slept in the countryside
> and in public squares,
> in tents or in houses made of branches.
> Wary and fearful, they
> stayed up most nights,
> since the tremors didn't cease.
> The people, bewildered,
> seemed to be waiting for their death

(de Resende 1917, p. 104)[31]

Many royal palaces had been heavily damaged. The chambers of Queen Catherine of Austria (Charles V's sister) and those of the princess and Prince Henrique (1512–1580) crumbled, as did an orchard atop the house of Francisco de Velázquez, the Queen's wardrobe keeper. According to the anonymous informant, the earthquake killed some Castilians working for the Queen. The "rua dos hornos" sunk. Out of fear, no one dared to mention the plague ("pestilencia") (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biv), as earthquakes were often interpreted as apocalyptic signs heralding the disease (Smoller 2000, pp. 163–66). Many people in the royal quarters and beyond wore their day clothes at night, so that if another tremor were felt they could get out. For ease of exit, the King and the Queen decided to lay down in a chamber near a courtyard. The Valencian Doña Juana de Acuña had survived miraculously when all of her house, except for her chamber, had crumbled killing four women in her retinue. Conversely, the neighborhood where the ambassador of Castile, Lope Hurtado de Mendoza, resided had only a few cracked walls.[32] Similarly to Baltasar del Río's letter on the Roman flood, the one on the Lisbon earthquake informed about the whereabouts of the royal family and of individuals connected to the Spanish faction in Lisbon and nearby towns.

Outside of Lisbon, the damage had been paramount. For instance, a "quintana" where Prince Henrique and Prince Duarte, Duke of Guimarães (1515–1540) were staying cracked open ("se abrió," Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biv) one and a half leagues from the parish of Lavradio. In Tancos, the princess and her ladies escaped in their underwear through the windows when the residence of the prince fell. In Setubal, the *Casa del Mar* and the house of the Marquis and of his son cracked open (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv). Houses bordering the riverbanks in Santarem had been leveled to the ground, preventing the monarchs to go there. Almeirin had suffered a similarly ill fortune. It was said that in Vila Franca forty houses sunk, burying thirty people. In A Castanheira, the casualties amounted to sixty and in Azambuja no house stood up after the quake. As the narration progressed, the apocalyptic undertones became more evident. A town fountain poured blood instead of water, while ships reached the sky (in what was later described as a tsunami). The Tagus River split in two halves and sailors peeked through the deeps of the earth. They saw the sky open: "it seemed like a fiery oven, and (. . .) a large ray with a huge flame (. . .) fell in Vila Franca" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biir).[33] In Alcáçovas the earth split in two, spitting such quantity of water that people thought they would drown. An eerie sound accompanied the earthquake, with bells tolling as loudly as can be imagined and no one ringing them. Like the trembling hands of Baltasar del Río that guided the reading of the flood in Rome, here sound aimed at capturing the readers' curious minds and to transport them into the scene of the earthquake. The last page of the letter makes clear that the author intended these "marvelous" sights to be understood as divine signs. Once the earthquake was over, the King visited a monastery in Azeitão ("Azeyton") to entrust himself to God. "The Queen, the princess and the princess heir left on their own, without their retinues" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).[34] The Castilian ambassador Lope Hurtado de Mendoza made a pilgrimage to the church of Santo António.

In 1531, news of the earthquake also made it to Augsburg, where a broadsheet was published under the title *Wunderbarliche geschicht anzeygung, so newlich in Portugal vnnd sonnderlich zu Lisebona geschehen sind*.[35] It described a series of (divine) signs that had preceded the tremors. Among them were the sight of a huge whale in the coast of Portugal on January 18, followed by blood raining from the skies and fire falling from the heavens (S.n. 1531b, ai). The whale sighting depicted in the title page of the broadsheet was later reconceptualized in an eerie gouache illustration in *The Book of Miracles* (Borchert and Waterman 2022, p. 208).

The traveling of the news about calamities in the Italian and Iberian Peninsulas and in free imperial cities such as Augsburg shows the movement of information between diplomatic agents and centers of cultural production, between imperial and mercantile networks. Individuals in diverse geopolitical territories, linked in one way or another to Spanish and Habsburg imperial or royal networks, engaged in the production and consumption of accounts about these catastrophes in different formats: in broadsheets, as a form of street spectacle, or as rumors they listened to or carried out as part of their daily errands. By the sixteenth century, attention to local natural disasters became keener, and their impact was often understood in relation to global calamities. As Barnett has claimed, local floods garnered increased attention, even though "earthquakes, plagues, comets, famines and various forms of extreme weather had long been interpreted as signs of God's wrath and human sinfulness" (Barnett 2019, p. 28). Calamities carved themselves into the social, religious, and political conflict that brought the Reformation and the Counterreformation. Both Catholics and Protestants instrumentalized these disasters, analyzing them as divine signs, and often blaming each other (Fulton 2012, pp. 54–74). Like conquests, disasters—either natural or unnatural and God-sent, and often the two things at the same time, as it was the case in Del Río's account—worked hand in hand with the mobilization of political factions. And their recollection in writing created areas of shared "interest."

As people feared for their own death in a flooded Rome or a destroyed Lisbon, political actors tried to seize the moment to surveil what they might have deemed as radical religious ideas, animating readers and audiences to police even within kinship ranks. A case in point is Baltasar del Río's attempt at influencing Charles V so that he should not bestow privileges on imperial territories. Unlike Castile, some of them enjoyed confessional freedom, as was the case with free imperial cities. Some Iberian political circles advocated eliminating religious difference. However, even within the most recalcitrant groups, individuals such as Baltasar del Río, himself a converso, had made a career thanks to the different regulations and the lack of power of the Castilian Inquisition in Rome. Although the path for standardization into a universal Christian Church was not seen in a similar fashion in Rome and Castile, for the readers these differences were erased and put aside in favor of a unitarian vision of an Iberian Christian stronghold that needed to defend its "identity" against other forms of government in imperial (perceived as somehow Iberian) enclaves.

Garcia de Resende's *Miscelânea* presented a similar interpretation of a Christian (and Iberian) universalism.[36] The *Miscelânea* recorded signs of the perceived malaise of an era. In it, as in the *Traslado*, the 1530 Roman flood and the 1531 Lisbon earthquake were analyzed in contiguous stanzas. Resende minutely recorded the frightfulness that the events had instilled in the population, as well as the pilgrimages, processions, and religious celebrations devoted to placating these divine warnings. The seamless association of the flood and the earthquake in the *Miscelânea* further shows that, in the mind of some Iberian contemporaries, the Roman flood and the Lisbon earthquake were inextricably linked and perceived as contiguous realities affecting Iberian subjects, regardless of whether Resende had access to the *Traslado* when writing his *Miscelânea* or not.

## 5. Singing Disaster

The closing song (*canción*) of the *Traslado* spelled out in clear terms the connection between the two "divine signals," while taking a blunt stand in religious polemics. In its stanzas, the use of language—including consonant rhyme and repeated lines—served as a mnemonic device for singers, listeners, and readers alike. Aiming to instill fear, the lyrics offered a rudimentary politico-religious interpretation of the events while addressing the

audience directly. By employing the first-person plural (*nosotros*) command form, the text conveys a sense of urgency and fosters a collective identity among readers. The first stanza instrumentalized the flood and the earthquake, urging people to act and take control of their own destinies:

Let's get rid of heresy
and worship Jesus Christ
so that we can live
without fear of the ravages He sends us[37]

The lyrics exhorted Christians to unite and actively eradicate any "heretical" group. The second stanza encouraged them to spread their faith throughout the world to avert God's wrath, ending with the same final line as the first stanza:

Let's praise our Faith
and expand it through the world.
Let's burn and destroy
any damaging sect.
Let's all join forces
to destroy heresy,
so that we can live
without fear of the ravages He sends us[38]

By turning both the flood and the earthquake into manifestations of God's punishment, the song capitalized on the potential fear that catastrophes provoked. Heresies were left in plural (to accommodate any act that could be deemed as such, anywhere in any given moment), thus making its message more powerful and frightful than Del Río's direct attack on imperial decisions about subjects converted to Lutheranism. Moreover, in the third and final stanza, the song called for a single-faith world—a universal Christian Church in which Christians would erase any other religion as the only possibility for their survival:

For these tremors here [Lisbon]
and the floods in Rome
come to us because we don't tame
the damages coming from here and there,
and so this is clear to us:
in order for all to be safe
let's get rid of heresy.[39]

In a haunting circle, the final line of the last stanza mirrored the first, binding the song in an endless loop that echoed the call to uproot heresy, as if each repetition dug deeper, making it possible to re-sing the song ad infinitum.

Though capitalizing on disaster was (and remains today) a recurrent phenomenon, examining these early accounts of natural disasters allows us to see that catastrophe, marvel, and curiosity were often inextricably linked. The narration of those calamities, and their publication in the Iberian Peninsula, created a community of readers across different centers of political influence, while making sure of providing a specifically "Iberian" interpretation of the events, different from readings originating in other places, spaces, and cultural circles. The eradication of heresy was seen as something that happened not only outside of Castile, where the letters originated, but also within Iberian territories. The insistence of the final song on monitoring behaviors both in Iberia and beyond aligned with the Iberian

factions featured in the *Traslado*. For example, Garcia de Loaysa and many Mendozas (there included Lope Hurtado de Mendoza) had sided with the imperial troops and against the Comuneros. The fear among certain Iberian factions of any form of political or religious divergence, including Lutherans and *alumbrados*, seemed to justify a call to unity against any "deviant" thought. As Niccoli has noted, prophetic language permitted a fully fleshed-out interpretation that "could be used not only to express a generic concern for a traumatic situation (. . .) but also (. . .) to formulate a quite specific political analysis or to organize a line of propaganda" (Niccoli 1990, p. 59). Curiosity was also a powerful tool of propaganda (Benedict 2001, p. 4). Political actors used their channels of information and intelligence to try to stop political movements on the ground. Significantly, readers' and listeners' curiosity about natural disasters provided fertile ground to act.

## 6. Conclusions

The devastation wrought by both calamities instilled fear among people and left diplomatic agents attentive to who had perished and how frightful and out of the ordinary the events had been. The *Traslado* exploited the curiosity of people in key enclaves of Iberian and Imperial political action. In Rome, Lisbon, Burgos, and Augsburg, readings about these events could be strikingly different, but their instrumentalization followed similar paths, always accommodated to the agenda of their writers.

Even letters addressed to the same readers presented divergences. Layers of meaning kept accumulating on top of one another between the poet and the printer via the incorporation of a title page, a summary, and lyrical materials, all of which introduced new connotations. Authorship and style also differed. Readers could interpret the letters as complementary. While the account of the Roman flood was signed and accommodated historical, scientific, and prophetic readings, the letter describing the earthquake was unsigned and provided a tabloid-like summary of the events, with a pronounced interest in the calamity's prophetic signs. Curiosity was manifold. Some readers, especially those interested in political affairs, could be on the lookout for political and diplomatic news conveyed by the agents and statesmen who had originally written and received the letters. First, it was important to determine who had survived, the whereabouts and condition of the representatives from allied powers, how opposing factions had been affected, and, lastly, who would need to be replaced. Second, it was also critical to describe a sensorial experience of the event so that the reader could be imbued with wonder. Third, these letters allowed writers to cultivate a sense of community among readers (and listeners) through what can be described as affective catastrophic bonding: as readers, they did not suffer the events, but through their description they could (re)imagine them and feel themselves implicated in the shared emotional aftermath. Lastly, the letters laid the groundwork for an analysis of pressing political and religious matters, such as the rise of Protestantism, the imperial ambitions of neighboring Islamic states, and the political movements of the emperor. Incorporating these texts into the broader history of early modern curiosity allows us to reconstruct the manifold ways in which natural catastrophes and politico-religious readings shaped Iberian thought during this period.

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## Notes

1 The *Traslado de dos cartas* is preserved at the Hispanic Society of America (HSA). I would like to thank John O'Neill and Vanessa Pintado for their assistance in securing a copy of the *Traslado*.

2 The complete title of the broadsheet reads: *Traslado de dos cartas que embiaron al marqués de Tarifa. Una que embio de Roma el muy reuere()do y magnifico señor don Baltasar del Rio: obispo de Escala: maestro de cerimonias de nuestro muy santo padre: en que le recuenta mas por entero todo lo que enel espantoso diluuio de Roma acaescio./Y la otra que le embiaron de Portugal: en que haze() relacio() del muy espa()toso y estraño terremoto: y temerosas señales d() gra() admiracio(): que fue y se vieron en la mar: y en la tierra*. Another edition of the letter about Lisbon's earthquake circulated separately with a different title page. A copy of it is now held at the BNE in a volume containing *relaciones* that once belonged to Pascual de Gayangos. This edition of the letter also contains the song at the end. *Traslado de una carta que de Portugal embiaron al Muy Ilustre Señor el Marqués de Tarifa que le hacen relacion del muy espantoso y estraño terremoto y temerosas señales de gran admiracion que fue y se vieron en la mar y en la tierra jueves a veynte y seis de Enero deste año de treinta y uno*, R/11907(1). (S.n. 1531a)

3 Henriques et al. put together an exhaustive compilation of Portuguese historical sources for the 1531 earthquake. (Henriques et al. 1988).

4 Pieper refers to early letters similar to the *Traslado*—which conveyed news on a variety of topics during the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century—as "cartas de nuevas" (Pieper 2005), while Bulgarelli classifies some of these letters, along with other materials, as "avvisi a stampa." The *Traslado de dos cartas* does not figure in Bulgarelli's catalogue of early letters (Bulgarelli 1967). Early news pieces and (early and current) journalism "is a special kind of literary product whose real text is the collectivity at large" (Dooley 1990, p. 485). For an analysis of seventeenth-century accounts of catastrophes and their connection to the diffusion of news, see Gennaro Schiano's work (Schiano 2021).

5 Meteorology constituted a popular genre of natural philosophy from the thirteenth century onward. It encompassed the subjects included in Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, that is, "the state of the planet's surface, interior, and atmosphere, its weather and climate, and the periodic disruptions and disasters to which it was subject, including hail, comets, earthquakes, and floods" (Barnett 2019, p. 24). Alongside meteorology, other scientific genres—such as the *cronologías*—were also popularized in the Ibero-American world, combining astrological and cosmographical knowledge.

6 "De Monstris. Monstra & prodigia qua hoc tempore uisa sunt diuersis in locis" Vatican Library (hereafter BAV), Barb. Lat. 2683, f. 42v.

7 BAV, Barb. Lat. 2683, and f.113r.; BAV, Vat. Lat. 3351, f. 133v.

8 On the category of monsters as linked to bodily malformations, see Ottavia Niccoli's work (Niccoli 1990, pp. 30–60).

9 BAV, Barb. Lat. 2683, f.88v–f.89r.

10 The so-called monster of Bologna was a girl named Maria who only lived a few days. Her two heads and two mouths were interpreted in a myriad of ways, and predominantly as a sign of ominous times, connected to the Italian Wars (Niccoli 1990, pp. 51–55).

11 Giuliano Dati specialized in rendering news, chronicles, legends, and saints' lives into vernacular poetry (Niccoli 1990, pp. 14–15).

12 Philine Helas has described the remarkable interplay of image and text in Giuliano Dati's 1495 broadsheet of the Roman flood, and has also provided reconstructed map of the 1495 flood (Helas 2017).

13 *The Book of Miracles* contains depictions of miraculous signs and catastrophic events since the times of the Old Testament up to its completion (ca. 1560) along with a vision of an apocalyptic future. Its production has been traced to Augsburg area. (ca. 1560) and a preview into an apocalyptic future. Its production has been traced to the Augsburg area. See Borchert and Waterman (2022).

14 Enríquez de Rivera's pilgrimage account remained in manuscript form until it was printed in Lisbon in 1608 under the title *Este libro es de el viaje que hize a Ierusalem de todas las cosas que en el me pasaron desde que sali de mi casa de Bornos, miercoles 24 de noviembre de 1518 hasta 20 de octubre de 1520 que entre en Sevilla*, Lisbon, 1608. The account of his pilgrimage was printed after the journey, together with Juan del Encina's *Viaje de Jerusalem*. Rivera's account—published alongside that of Juan del Encina, who had accompanied him as part of his retinue to Jerusalem—offers a wealth of information on the political configuration of the Italian states. Rivera had a humanist education, and was an avid collector of books and art. During his stay in the Italian Peninsula, he acquired books, maps, and musical instruments, commissioned translations, and collected coins, statues, and astrological devices (Lazure 2012, pp. 93–94).

15 BAV, Barb. Lat 3552, f. 51v.

16 "Ni se por do comience a escreuir ni como, lo vno porq(ue) la gra(n)deza d(e)l espa(n)to de lo q(ue) he de d(e)zir me tiene turbado: que no sepa lo q(ue) me digo: y lo otro porq(ue) el miedo q(ue) avn aca puesto en mo(n)te Cavallo te(n)go: da tal te(m)blor a la mano: que juro por dios que no puedo dela mia escreuir: ni se lo q(ue) me diga para escreuir con agena." (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiv).

17 "a los quales de su despe(n)sa se proueyo en tal manera q(ue) ninguno sentio menos su casa, ni a sus caualgaduras falto nada dello" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir).

18 "porq(ue) a vn esse dia no embiaro(n) a co(m)prar de comer los mas: vnos por hazer baluartes a sus cantinas: otros a sus puertas: otros a sus casas" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir).

19 García de Loaysa had paramount political influence in matters of state. As noted by the Venetian ambassador Gasparo Contarini in 1525, Loaysa was not only Charles V's confessor, but was also present every time that wars, councils, benefices, or any other matters of state were discussed. Loaysa held the titles of president of the Council of the Indies (1524) and member of the Council of State (1526) and would become Grand Inquisitor in 1546. Notably, Loaysa sided with the imperial forces in the Comunero Revolt and was instrumental in convincing the emperor to go to Bologna to be crowned emperor by Pope Clement VII in February 1530. Shortly afterwards, in March 1530, he was made cardinal of Santa Susana. Nieva Ocampo has argued that Loaysa's influence over Charles V might have been in decline by 1530. Nevertheless, Loaysa resided in Rome from 1530 to 1532, and his letters to the emperor—preserved in the Archive of Simancas and transcribed by W. Heine—offer valuable insight into this period. In a letter dated 8 October 1530, coinciding with the heavy rains that would provoke the flooding of the Tiber, Loaysa expressed concern over the defiance and persistence of the Lutherans in their beliefs. He argued that the only effective solution was force, drawing a parallel to the Comuneros Revolt, where according to him, leniency had led to wasted time and no results until military action was taken. Loaysa concluded that a similar firm approach was needed. (Nieva Ocampo 2015, pp. 652–53, 661; Barrado Barquilla n.d; Heine 1848, pp. 41–42).

20 Luis Gómez's treatise has recently been translated into English and is described by its editors as 'the first systematic treatise on the Flood and the first Latin treatise on the topic' (Bariviera et al. 2023, p. 12). This fine and valuable translation includes several related texts in the appendix; however, Baltasar del Río's letter is not among them. This article seeks to highlight Del Río's overlooked contribution and bring renewed attention to this significant yet underexamined source.

21 For a biographical note on Miquel Mai see (Bellsolell Martínez 2019, pp. 42–57).

22 "las de poco tie(m)po aca se labran debaxo de tierra descama(n) las casas por debaxo quando se hinchen de agua: y como por las cloacas, cañas, y husillos d(e)la tierra se hallaro(n) llenas las ca(n)tinas: antes q(ue) el agua se viesse por las calles: assi como se yua(n) las aguas delas ca(n)tinas vazia(n)do y co(n)sumie(n)do por los mismos lugares: se yua(n) avn va(n) las casas caye(n)do poco a poco y mucho a mucho" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiir).

23 Del Río engaged with the legacy of past Roman floods through surviving texts and the physical traces embedded in the cityscape. Some floods had been memorialized by writers, including those that occurred during the times of Hadrian I and pope Pelagius. Others remained visible through marble inscriptions scattered across the city, particularly those that took place during the papacies of Martin V, Sixtus IV, Alexander VI, Julius II, and Leo X. (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiiir–aiiiiv).

24 See note 15 above.

25 "Algu(n)os escriptores leemos q(ue) en tiempo de Pelagio a quie(n) sucedio señor sant Gregorio primo: fue tan gra(n)de la inu(n)dacio(n) y auenida deste rio q(ue) crecio sobre las almenas de Roma: y que traya tales y ta(n) gra(n)des y malos animales muertos que qua(n)do el rio torno a su madre: se quedaro(n) por los ca(m)pos y tales q(ue) de su hedor se inficiono el ayre y sucedio tras ello ta(n) gra(n) pestilencia q(ue) el mismo papa Pelagio murio della: y en solo estornuda(n)do las p(er)sonas caya(n) muertas por las calles: por lo qual dizen q(ue) de alli quedo qua(n)do algu(n)o estornuda dezirle luego Dios te ayude" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiii r-v).

26 "y hizo hazer muchas y muy deuotas processiones p(ar)a aplacar aquella tan gra(n)de yra de nuestro señor" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiii v).

27 According to Del Río, the angel appeared atop the Castel Sant'Angelo ("la gran mole o sepultura de nuestro Adriano") on the day of St. Mark (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiii v).

28 Given the dates of the Duke of Saxe-Lauenburg's investment and conversion, it is very likely that Del Río's letter was completed and sent in early 1531.

29 For documentation about the flood, see (Gasparoni 1865).

30 The 1531 earthquake destroyed 1500 houses in Lisbon. Most of the heavily damaged houses were located near the river "in new, unconsolidated landfills" (Baptista et al. 2014, p. 2150).

31 "Todos cõ medo q(ue) auiãm/deixaram casas, fazendas;/nos campos, plaças dormiã,/em tẽdilhões, y em tendas,/casas de ramas faziam;/has mais das noctes velando,/temendo, & receando;/porq(ue) tremor nõ cessaua:/ha gente pasmada andaua/com medo, morte esperãdo" (de Resende 1917, p. 104).

32 On 24 March, Lope Hurtado de Mendoza, the Castilian ambassador in Portugal, wrote from the town of Palmela to inform the Spanish monarch, Charles V, of the latest news then circulating. His letter included updates on the upcoming papal council, as well as mention of the earthquake that had struck Lisbon nearly two months earlier. Mendoza noted that the Lisbon earthquake—and the aftershocks that continued to be felt—had left people in Portugal deeply fearful. Driven by that fear, many began to claim that "the Jews who remain in this land have brought about the wrath of God. In Lisbon, Old Christians took up arms to slit the throats of New Christians". Mendoza reports—cautiously, and emphasizing the need for secrecy—that the King of Portugal has ordered an Inquisition and has already removed many New Christians from their positions. Mendoza adds that if the King

of Portugal carries this out effectively, he will likely accumulate a great fortune, as many of the New Christians are extremely wealthy. (Viaud 2001, pp. 442–43).

[33] In the Spanish original, "en este mismo derecho viero(n) abrirse el cielo: y que parecía como vn horno ence(n)dido: y vieron salir de alli vn gra(n) rayo co(n) vna grande llama de fuego: y fue a caer a villa fra(n)ca" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biir).

[34] "La reyna y la infanta: y la princesa salieron sin ninguna gente" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).

[35] The extant copy of the broadsheet, *Wunderbarliche geschicht anzeygung, so newlich in Portugal vnnd sonnderlich zu Lisebona geschehen sind*, is now preserved in Munich at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 271, Beibd.2.

[36] While describing news of conquest, the *Miscelânea* praised the Portuguese royal family and their kin. It chronicled the lives of the notables of the kingdom, and both enemies and allies abroad. It reported on fratricidal Christian wars, the expansion of Islam and of Lutheranism.

[37] "Vaya fuera la eregía/a Jesu Christo adoremos/porque sin temor estemos/destos açotes que envía" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).

[38] "Sea n(uest)ra fe ensalçada/y en todo el mundo creyda/y quemada y destruyda/qualquiera seta dañada/y todos nos ayuntemos/a destruyr la eregia/porque sin temor estemos/destos açotes que embia" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).

[39] "Questos te(m)blores de aca/y los diluvios de Roma/vienen porque no se doma/el daño de aca y de alla/y pues que tan claro vemos/que de aquesto procedia/porque seguros estemos/vaya fuera la eregia" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).

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# Leo Africanus Curiously Strays Afield of Himself

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**Abstract:** The word "curiosity" has an opaque history with contradictory attitudes and connotations acquired ever since Antiquity. This poses an interesting problem in the case of Leo Africanus, who never uses the word in his *Cosmographia de l'Affrica* yet exhibits curiosity at every turn as a traveler and a writer. This essay relies on a distinction that Michel Foucault makes regarding types of curiosity: that which produces conventional knowledge (which he rejects) and that which seeks extraordinary knowledge that "enables one to get free of oneself", resulting in "the knower's straying afield of himself". Both as a traveler and a writer, Michel de Montaigne demonstrates that such an attitude was a living reality in sixteenth-century Europe. Montaigne's many reflections on his "straying afield of himself" provide a bridge to interpreting Leo Africanus's practices of traveling and writing. Leo's profession as a diplomat, his economic expertise and his training as an Islamic legal expert all led to his far-reaching journeys, particularly in Islamic Africa but also Asia as of a young age, bringing about his many encounters with historical figures and events while also granting him access to uninhabited nature, as well as every sort of human settlement, from remote villages to great cities. His will to knowledge—curiosity that leads him to 'stray afield of himself' by seeking out the unusual and the unknown—proves to be the key to his travel and his writing.

**Keywords:** curiosity; travel; writing; cities; knowledge; Leo Africanus; Michel de Montaigne; Michel Foucault; Miguel de Cervantes

Not once in the manuscript of his monumental *Cosmographia de l'Affrica* (1526) does Leo Africanus (alias Al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Wazzān) use the word *curiosità* or *curioso/a* (Leo Africanus [1526] 2014). These words and their equivalents in many Western European languages were by no means neutral signifiers but words to which conflicting attitudes and values within different social contexts had accrued over time. To take a rather extreme example, Barbara Benedict portrays curiosity in England over the period 1660–1820 as predominantly held to be perverse, trivial and trivializing, associated with vice, and essentially an epistemological threat to the status quo (Benedict 2001, pp. 1–23).[1] People with curiosity produced or collected curiosities, and they themselves were viewed as objects of curiosity. Such attitudes would have drowned out those voices (e.g., Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Samuel Johnson) that eloquently coupled curiosity with knowledge, truth and intellect. Anyone using these words would presumably have been aware of how much extraneous matter, indeed hostility, had stuck to them. As Friedrich Nietzsche observes in an analysis of 'revenge', multiple meanings and even contradictions inhere in many key words that function like pockets:

> The word 'revenge' [in German, *Rache*] is said so quickly it almost seems as if it could contain no more than one conceptual and perceptional root. And so, one continues to strive to discover it: just as our economists have not yet wearied

> of scenting a similar unity in the word 'value' [*Werth*] and of searching after the original root-concept of the word. As if every word were not a pocket into which now this, now that, now several things at once have been put! Thus 'revenge', too, is now this, now that, now something more combined. (Nietzsche 1986, p. 316)

So it is with 'curiosity', whose assumed unity as a word with an identifiable 'root' sense likewise obscures markedly divergent meanings, and in varying contexts takes on nuances well outside common definitions.

If Leo had used *curiosità* it would have been within his understanding of how the word was used in early sixteenth-century Italian. A glance through the 45 or so instances of *curiosidad* and *curioso* in *Don Quixote* would probably mirror Italian usages in their bifurcation between things performed with care, skill, expertise, and alternatively, the condition of wanting to know. As the following examples show, the meaning of 'curiosity' tends to be defined by the other words around it—e.g., an adjective, a noun in apposition—as well as the social context in which it appears:

- "llegó a tanto su curiosidad *y desatino* en esto, que *vendió muchas hanegas de tierra de sembradura* para comprar libros de caballerías en que leer" (Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 1, p. 37);

- "como van agora nuestras cortesanas con las *raras y peregrinas invenciones* que la curiosidad *ociosa* les ha mostrado" (Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 11, p. 122);

- "Anoche *supimos la muerte* de Grisóstomo, y que en este lugar había de ser enterrado, y así, de curiosidad *y de lástima*, dejamos nuestro derecho viaje" (Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 13, p. 145);

- "mira por *cuán vana e impertinente* curiosidad quieres revolver los humores que ahora están sosegados en el pecho de tu casta esposa" (Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 33, p. 388);

- "«Somos fulano y fulana, que nos salimos a espaciar de casa de nuestros padres con esta invención, *solo por* curiosidad, *sin otro designio alguno*», se acabara el cuento, y no gemidicos, y lloramicos, y darle" (I Cervantes [1605/1615] 1998, I, 49, pp. 1033–34—emphasis mine in all citations).

Only when we know *who* has curiosity, *about what* and *for what purpose*, can we begin to understand its positive or negative inflections in any context, because curiosity 'in itself' is simply a desire to know something, for better or for worse, without any particular value or legitimacy. Even in Roman times, *curiositas* often meant inappropriate or excessive inquisitiveness. The kinds and degrees of inquisitiveness already identified in classical Latin have undoubtedly spread through the Romance languages and beyond, such that, with added doses of small-minded moralism over the ages, the *Diccionario de la Real Academia* (22nd ed., 2001), in one of its least inspired entries, defines *curiosidad* in its sense of wanting to know *only* as inappropriate prying, and therefore as a vice: "1. Deseo de saber o averiguar alguien lo que no le concierne. 2. Vicio que lleva a alguien a inquirir lo que no debiera importarle". The stern condemnation of curiosity in Ecclesiastes 3:22–26 could have left its mark indirectly on definitions like this as it did explicitly on that of Covarrubias (Covarrubias 1611). Dictionaries of other Romance languages tend to be more generous and comprehensive, yet all of these traditions endow curiosity with a range of often contrary attributes.

While Natalie Zemon Davis's superb study of Leo Africanus reveals much about him, particularly with regard to his nine years in Italy, he remains—as she often acknowledges—a profoundly complex and enigmatic figure. Nearly all of what we know about him apart from that period comes from the autobiographical aspects of his *Cosmography of Africa*. It is in his own work where his curiosity as a traveler and writer comes to light. The question might arise as to whether his curiosity was shaped by the language and traditions in which he was raised. The main word for 'curiosity' in Arabic is *fuḍūl* (curiosity,

inquisitiveness, nosiness), as defined in Hans Wehr's Arabic to English Dictionary, which registers *fuḍūlī* as the adjective (inquisitive, curious, busybody, meddlesome, etc.) and *fuḍūlīya* as a variant abstract noun (inquisitiveness, curiosity; obtrusiveness, importunity). Interestingly, these definitions closely mirror the definitions of 'curiosity' in Latin and other European languages. This suggests that the Arabic language did not offer an idea of 'curiosity' much different from what Leo Africanus would have encountered in Latin and Italian. Moreover, the work translated as *The Book of Curiosities* (ca. 1200) does not use the word *fuḍūl* in its title but rather *gharā'ib* (i.e., '*marvels*', 'strange things', etc.). Other terms can likewise be translated as 'curiosity' but with different connotations. More broadly, we have no way of knowing what attitudes toward curiosity Leo might have been exposed to in his immediate social circles in Fez and elsewhere in his travels, nor can we assume that he would have shared those attitudes because, as has been noted with regard to several European philosophers and writers, practices regarding curiosity are often very personal, adapted from life experience and character dispositions and in those cases have little to do with their languages or cultural traditions. My sense is that Leo's curiosity emerges in similar ways rather than being culturally prescribed.

If the absence of the words *curiosità* or *curioso* in Leo Africanus's work would seem to place the author in a kind of semantic void, the overwhelming evidence of his curiosity as a traveler and writer might pose the problem of how to situate him in relation to the extremely varied modes of curiosity ostensibly practiced during that epoch. Yet this turns out to be a false problem. We know very well that the inexistence of a word in any particular language by no means prevents speakers of that language from having concepts that can be most closely associated with such a word, which in turn may be useful to us in understanding their thought and behavior even if they lack the word.[2] However, the fact that a fairly common word does not appear in a long work in which we might deem it to be highly appropriate seems significant in its own right, as it begs the question as to why a writer does not use it and whether this could have been a deliberate choice. Given the often negative connotations of 'curiosity' and how antithetical these were to Leo's traveling and writing, one might surmise that he avoided using it, or perhaps was indifferent to it and its conceptual baggage. Since 'curiosity' in its most positive sense so aptly expresses Leo's extraordinary will to knowledge as a traveler and writer, the absence of that word in his text in effect frees us up from having to tease out negative and positive strands of his curiosity as reflected in definitions of the word in various languages during his era. At issue is how he pursued knowledge and reached understanding in the vast, complex world he traveled and wrote about.

As we are not tied down to what is supposedly 'good' or 'bad' about curiosity, a more useful dichotomy could be adapted from Michel Foucault's reflections on his motivation for undertaking *The History of Sexuality* project:

> As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity—the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself. (Foucault 1985–1986, vol. II, p. 8)

Foucault refers here to a curiosity-induced will to knowledge that, driven by passion, astonishes, challenges and alters the knower, quite the opposite of socially predetermined, self-reinforcing procedures for acquiring knowledge. It might be objected that this self-liberating curiosity, as opposed to a curiosity that merely incorporates conventional forms

of knowledge, would perhaps be unthinkable in, say, sixteenth-century Europe. My sense is that, though numerous exceptions come to mind, the sole example of Michel de Montaigne suffices to dispel such an objection, particularly when we look at his reflections and practice with regard to traveling. What is more, despite the fact that Montaigne and Leo Africanus are separated by half a century, not to mention by religion, language, culture and geographical space, I aim to point out how they are akin in their modes of travel, which derive in part from comparable attitudes toward what kinds of things intrigue them and lure them to pursue their interests.

As a traveler, Montaigne is much less interested in common knowledge than in whatever may be novel, unusual or strange. Like numerous other early modern travelers, he reveals a genuine fascination with differences in culture, ways of life, the diversity of ceremonies and material culture. In his *Journal de voyage en Italie*, had he gone alone he would have opted for more distant lands, he says, but he did not want to impose his desire to see lesser-known places on his younger companions.

> When they complained that he took them on strange roads and landscapes, sometimes returning near the place from which he had departed (which he would do when he heard there was something worth seeing, or sometimes when he changed his mind), he responded that for his part he was not going anywhere other than where he happened to be, and that he could not change his route because he had no plan other than to pass through unknown places. [. . .] As for Rome, which was the destination of the others, he had less desire to see it than other places because it was known by everyone, and there was no lackey who could not tell them news of Florence or Ferrara.[3]

> Quand on se plaingnoit à luy de ce qu'il conduisoit souvent la troupe par chemins divers et contrées, revenant souvent bien près d'où il estoit parti (ce qu'il faisoit ou recevant l'avertissement de quelque chose digne de voir, ou changeant d'avis selon les occasions), il respondoit qu'il n'alloit, quant à luy, en nul lieu que là où il se trouvoit, et qu'il ne pouvoit faillir ny tordre sa voïe, n'aïant nul project que de se promener par des lieux inconnus; [. . .] Et quant à Rome, où les autres visoient, il la desiroit d'autant moins voir que les autres lieux, qu'elle estoit connue d'un chacun et qu'il n'avoit laquais qui ne leur peust dire nouvelles de Florence et de Ferrare. (Montaigne 1962b, pp. 1176–77)

He actively shuns his own countrymen abroad and seeks out conversation with 'foreigners', be they local people or travelers from elsewhere. "I consider all people my compatriots, and as readily embrace a Pole as a Frenchman, holding in less esteem the national liaison than the universal bond"; (j'estime tous les hommes mes compatriotes, et embrasse un Polonois comme un François, postposant cette lyaison nationale à l'universelle et commune) (Montaigne 1962a, p. 950). His switch to writing in his own hand the last third of his *Journal de voyage* in Italian attests to his commitment to estranging himself through his medium.

Above all, he seeks what is *human* in all its variety, what is unfamiliar or previously unseen by him, and all of this gives him enormous pleasure, which is the primary purpose of his travels. Moreover, he is personally implicated in this search outside of himself, and he remarks on how the continual motion on horseback is good for the body as well as the soul, particularly as the soul observes what is new and alien. Travel frees him from his domestic responsibilities and worries, allows him to be unfettered, in constant motion and in contact with the different and unknown. His mode of travel is also a search for knowledge that "enables one to get free of oneself", as Foucault would put it. It is guided throughout by an all-round curiosity and a keen eye for local customs, habits and ceremony, with minimal if

any judgmentalism on his part. For example, on his travels he (as a nominal Catholic) visits Protestant churches and converses with the parishioners, witnesses a Jewish ceremony of circumcision and describes it with extreme equilibrium, and relates with equanimity and amusement the story of a local 'renegade' named Giuseppe, who escapes back to Muslim lands after presenting himself to his mother back home and unwittingly startling her to death.

What is more, Montaigne transfers his travel to his writing, letting himself be taken along by its apparently chaotic movements, such that writing becomes a form of travel that enables him to stray afield of himself and, if we read him the way he reads the classics, perhaps also enables us to stray afield of ourselves:

> "*Quo diversus abis*? [Why this detour?]" [. . .] I go out of my way, but rather by licence than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is at a distance, and they look at one another, but with a sidelong glance [. . .] They [the ancient authors] are not afraid of these changes and have a marvelous grace in letting themselves roll with the wind, or seem to [. . .] I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. It is an art, as Plato says, light, winged, and daemonic [. . .] I head for change, undiscerningly and tumultuously. My style and my mind go roving in the same way. ''You must have a dash of madness if you do not want to have still more stupidity," say both the precepts of our masters and even more their examples.

> "*Quo diversus abis*? . . . Je m'esgare, mais plustost par licence que par mesgarde. Mes fantasies se suyvent, mais par fois c'est de loing, et se regardent, mais d'une veuë oblique. [. . .] Ils ne creignent point ces muances, et ont une merveilleuse grace à se laisser ainsi rouler au vent, ou à le sembler [. . .] J'ayme l'alleure poetique, à sauts et à gambades. C'est une art, comme dict Platon, legere, volage, demoniacle. [. . .] Je vais au change, indiscrettement et tumultuairement. Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes. Il faut avoir un peu de folie, qui ne veut avoir plus de sottise, disent et les preceptes de nos maistres et encore plus leurs exemples". (Montaigne 1962a, p. 973)

Bearing in mind Montaigne's extraordinary reflections on travel and writing—both driven by curiosity—we can now reflect on how they may lend insights into Leo Africanus's practices as a traveler and writer. Even if Leo, as author, usually refers to himself modestly as *il compositore*, a reading of his text reveals that as a traveler and an author, he is everywhere both on the page and in the page. His portrayal of Africa is highly autobiographical because his travels are associated with nearly every place he mentions and because his authorial perspectives guide the entire work. A brief synopsis may be in order here.

Born around 1488, al-Ḥasan would have been very young when his family, just before or after the conquest of Granada in 1492, emigrated from there across the Strait of Gibraltar to Fez. It was there that he grew up, received an élite education and was ultimately qualified as a *faqīh* (expert in Islamic law). He provides glimpses here and there of his work and schooling in Fez, his travels with his merchant father to family-owned lands and with his diplomat uncle to Timbuktu. While still an adolescent, he began his major employment with the royal family of Fez as a diplomat, at first within the kingdoms of Fez and Marrakesh, but soon afterwards including missions across North Africa as well as sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahara itself and along the Atlas Mountains, not to mention travels to Istanbul, Western Asia and Saudi Arabia. In 1518, he was captured by a Spanish corsair, probably off Djerba, and taken to Rome, where he spent 15 months as a prisoner in the Castel Sant'Angelo. Medici Pope Leo X took a keen interest in him and baptized him with his own names in the presence of three cardinal godfathers in January 1520. As Natalie

Zemon Davis has insightfully documented, this opened up a new and unexpected phase in Leo's life as he was drawn into various scholarly projects with the upper clergy as well as humanistic scholars, some of whom were Jewish (Davis 2006, pp. 55–87). The manuscript of his *Cosmography of Africa*, which he undertook on his own, is dated 10 March 2026. Leo is thought to have left Rome for Tunis in 1527, probably during the sack of the city, after which he left virtually no trace of his whereabouts.

Even with so many lacunae, a quick look over this biographical sketch will show that his life was radically reoriented on several occasions, that he would at times have experienced the extremes of emotions during his travels, that his career would have undergone abrupt vicissitudes, and so on: he had no choice but to stray afield of himself, again and again. As a nominal Christian in Italy, he would have been given opportunities that he might not have imagined before, namely, those of becoming a scholar and a writer, albeit in a couple of languages that were previously unknown to him (Italian, Latin). It seems more interesting to speculate why he stayed in Italy for so long after he was freed than why he disappeared. Be that as it may, he apparently abandoned his life in Italy as suddenly as it began, crossing over to Dar al-Islam in perhaps dangerous conditions for someone who could have been suspected of apostasy.

Few 'ordinary' individuals of that era could have found themselves in the midst of so much history in the making. As a diplomat, he of course received many months of hospitality from the monarchs of the major royal courts of sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. He negotiated with attacking Portuguese forces on Moroccan shores, witnessed from Cairo the Portuguese attempts at seizing the spice trade in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, directly observed the workings of the Barbarossas in transforming the early modern Maghrib, and met the Ottoman emperor Selim in the Nile delta after he conquered Egypt in 1517, among many other top-level encounters. In Italy, he came to know three popes as well as many cardinals and bishops, in addition to a number of humanistic scholars. Even his capture and imprisonment opened him up to an enormous arena because those who came into contact with him, among them his corsair captor and his clerical interlocutors while he was in the Castel Sant'Angelo, saw much potential in him. His catechizer, the Bishop Paride de' Grassi, acknowledged in his diary that in all probability Leo agreed to be baptized in order to be released from prison. For his part, Leo writes in the *Cosmographia*—extracting the moral from his fable of the amphibious bird—that "whoever spies an advantage will always wait and go after it" (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 48).[4] For his part, the pope believed that Leo could be of use to him in his strategies against Islam and the Ottoman Empire. However, the case is not merely that each took advantage of the other, but that each was very curious about the other and what that other might make possible for him. In effect, throughout his travels, Leo as a royal messenger is seen by others to be extremely interesting in his own right for a wide variety of reasons, and he arouses *their* curiosity. In his mode of travel, both interest and curiosity are often mutual. He would have had this capacity from a young age. He recounts an anecdote about how an important tribal chief learns that Leo's uncle is headed to Timbuktu on a diplomatic mission. The chief's messengers insist that he go several days out of his way to accept the chief's hospitality, but instead he composes a poem of praise and sends his 16-year-old nephew Leo with sumptuous gifts. On the way, Leo composes his own panegyric poem in classical Arabic. The chief greets him effusively, offers him a feast, receives the gifts with much gratitude, responds enthusiastically to both poems, and especially looks in awe at this talented adolescent, as our author recalls. Finally, Leo is escorted away with warm gestures and equally lavish gifts. The author explains that he wanted to relate this at length "so the reader can understand that Africa indeed has great nobles like this ruler" (Leo Africanus

[1526] 2023, p. 105).[5] His continuous travel over the years put him in perpetual contact with the unexpected, and he must have come to anticipate this as part of his modus vivendi.

Leo travels primarily as a diplomat, but often his journeys are combined with mercantile interests, and occasionally he acts as a *faqīh* settling local disputes. He seems always to be more or less on a mission, yet his itineraries frequently allow for days, weeks or months in which he has no specific work to do, leaving him to do whatever he chooses. Royal courts in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa were notorious for keeping diplomats for months. Of the court of Tlemcen, he says: "The author had business there on several occasions and stayed many months at different times. He has left out the customs and precise order of things, since they are like those of Fez and he didn't want to grow too long and tedious, having spent his time on other things" (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 276). In Tunis and Cairo he also spent many months, but those two cities captured his fancy and imagination, allowing him to get to know them intimately, as his animated accounts of them reveal. Despite the radical change after Emperor Selim's defeat of the Mamluk Sultanate and Abbasid Caliphate in Cairo, Leo has a long-standing interest in Cairo and its culture, which he insists on explaining: "But because the author lived in the time of the [mamluk] sultan, making three journeys to Egypt, he witnessed and studied its life and customs, as has already been narrated in the present work, and likewise he informed himself of the court and the sultan's hierarchy, as follows now" (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 417). In fact, several of the liveliest passages of the *Cosmographia* tell of the festivities in nearby suburb Bāb al-Lūq after Friday prayers in the mosques: "all the people of Cairo" go to this neighborhood with taverns, prostitutes, puppeteers, soothsayers and mountebanks. Leo devotes a page to one of these who can make his ass play dead, mimic human emotions, and choose a young (human) bride for itself, much to the crowd's delight, while Leo's prose enacts with live utterances how it all happens. Over many exuberant pages, Leo tells of Cairene festivities, domestic sexual intimacies, the rituals associated with the flooding of the Nile, as well as the magnificent mosques, gardens, and the like, all of it exhibiting his utmost curiosity. None of this keen observation issues as such from his expertise in diplomacy, commerce or Islamic law; rather, it stems from the abundant free time he had available to him during these court visits, coupled with his fascination for Cairene "life and customs", which, as he says, he has "witnessed and studied" during his three lengthy visits to the city. Spurred by his own interests, his own curiosity, he has become an ethnographer and historian of sorts in his ample free time, a "participant observer". This serious pose by no means detracts from his euphoria in being present at festive events, just as other places rouse melancholy or other emotions.

The same could be said about his travels everywhere else, from remote settlements to major cities, including his own adoptive city of Fez, which reveals so much variety of esoteric religious and sexual practice that Leo cannot simply rely on having grown up in the city to understand its more clandestine workings: moved by curiosity, he has to seek them out. For Leo, Fez exemplifies what is most noble in the Maghrib and indeed all of Africa, but he refrains from idealizing it, as when he describes the city's inns, some of which serve as houses of prostitution and foment drunkenness (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, pp. 146–47).

Leo's disapproval of the debauched revels of the Sufis in Fez and elsewhere does not detract from his fascination with regard to them. He does indeed see them as utterly bereft of the inspired teachings and poetry of early Sufi leaders and regards them as religious impostors among so many other 'heretics' (he uses the closest Italian term), whom he nonetheless observes with great interest throughout the book (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, pp. 175–79). I would venture to say that, in his book that essentially covers Islamic Africa, the majority of the Muslims he mentions *as* Muslims are 'heretics', including the first

preachers of Islam in the Maghrib, the founder of Fez, the Mahdi, these Sufis in Fez, and many other self-styled prophets and 'holy men' of the past and present who evoke such skepticism in him. Although there is no doubt that he identifies with the orthodox Maliki Sunni Islam of his training, his own practices and beliefs do not seem to interfere with his endless curiosity for religious deviation within Islam. Besides this, it would not surprise me that his frequent mention of 'heretical' Muslims contributed to a strategy of presenting Islam to his European readers as a divided religion, perhaps just as Christianity was when he was baptized barely two years after Luther posted his 95 theses on the Wittenberg church door.

Leo also presents a fascinating cult of female 'fortune-tellers' who say they have red, white or black demons as lovers. When one of them wants to tell somebody's fortune, she perfumes herself, assumes the voice of her demon lover and becomes possessed by it. Yet, says Leo, these women are actually *suḥāqiyāt*, that is, *fregatrice* "who have that bad practice in which one of them rubs the other" sexually (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 306).[6] When a beautiful wife is visited by such a diviner and likes what she sees, she asks the diviner to 'rub' her, believing that the diviner is merely an intermediary between her and the demon. Leo explains further that women who want to be "of that sort" first feign illness and fall to the ground, and their 'cuckold husbands' call for the diviners to cure their wives. The wife then secretly tells the diviner that she wants to join the guild, whereupon the diviner tells the husband that his wife is possessed by a demon who wants her as a lover and that he must allow his wife to do what she wants with the diviner. The husband thus prepares a feast with 'Ethiopian' musicians, and after eating they dance as demons with changed voices. After this the wife freely joins the group of diviners as one of them. Leo adds that a decent man, undeceived, will whip the demon out of his wife, and that some men pretend to be possessed by the demons' wives so as to have sex with the diviners, who play along (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, pp. 172–73).

This anecdote caught the attention of Dr. Ambroise Paré, who reproduced it in his *Des Monstres et prodiges* (Paré [1573] 1987), from Jean Temporal's 1556 French translation of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's version of Leo's *Cosmographia* (Leo Africanus and Ramusio 1550). Appearing in an extensive series of descriptions of occult or extraordinary practices (including the Sufis) in Fez, this intricately detailed story contributes to the sense that, somehow beneath standard religious and social practices, there is a substratum of quasi-esoteric individuals and activities ostensibly related to health, sexuality, spirits, the future, and so on, all of which are conjugated by this group of mock diviners. The ritualistic, theatrical setup of the complicated ruse also has an element of suspense as it could also play out in unexpected ways, as indicated at the end of the passage. Or so Leo says, and he obviously presents it as an authentic and ingenious work of artifice. It is remarkable that a group of women would have to go to these lengths to get what they want. This narrative is among many forms of occult practice—whether with deceptive intentions or not—believed to have been happening in Leo's own city. Then again, if speculation is permissible here, a collective enterprise of women enacting demons and spirits, illness and vitality, feasts and diabolic dance, beguiling naïve husbands with their lewd and ludic 'rubbing', might have its own emotive recompense perhaps unmatched by more accessible sexual relations. While Leo is reluctant to celebrate the means and intentions of this subterfuge, his curiosity far outshines any moralistic disapproval. The underground cultural world of Fez fascinates him and forms a significant part of how the city works. Without his curiosity this underground world would be vacant, as would those of Tunis and Cairo. One can easily imagine the majority of the population of Fez having no awareness of what he relates here.

There are indeed moments in the text where Leo acknowledges that he would prefer not to say more about a particular practice or event. Several of the occult or sexually marginal topics in his account of Fez—or Tunis or Cairo, for that matter—would have been considered morally censurable or religiously illicit, and yet he recounts them in detail. As an apparent exception, one of the many occult topics in Fez is that of *zāīrja* magic, to which he devotes a couple of pages before declaring that Muslim authorities forbid it as a "dishonorable science" and consider its practice punishable, concluding that he was lazy and looked no further into it. This might be viewed as a kind of self-censorship, but he obviously sees *zāīrja* as a false art of little interest (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, pp. 173–75), unlike the other practices mentioned such as those of the women 'fortune-tellers' and the Sufi revels. We should also recall that he writes his magnum opus in Italian in Rome for a European readership, and he does so as an implausible convert to Christianity. One gathers from comments throughout his book that he was considerably more curious than what he thought prudent to say in his text, but that he would not refrain from broaching religiously proscribed materials when he saw fit to do so. Occasionally, he admits feeling shame when relating things he has witnessed, at which point he interrupts his story.

From a panoramic viewpoint, his major book reveals the natural, geographical, economic, historical, social, cultural, political and religious dimensions of the Africa he came to know or—as he sometimes indicates—to hear about from trusted others he met along the way, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where he visited 15 kingdoms, he avers, but acknowledges hearing about many more. Even so, by the time he was captured at about the age of 30 he knew much more about Africa than any European or African writer of his time or earlier. He was captured with notebooks in his possession, and though we know little about those notes, including how extensive they were or what their purpose was, he does tell us now and then what kinds of things he wrote to aid his memory. Doubting critics have wondered how he could have remembered so much about hundreds of places, but he would have had no trouble organizing his notes (as in fact he says he did) to write the book. My impression is that his remarks about each village, town or city are a unique synthesis of what he regards as its defining traits, such that every portrait is different but interesting, guided by shifting criteria that emerge in each case.

He follows a geographical sequence, moving from west to east across North Africa and then proceeding southwards to the other climatic zones one by one, through Numidia, the Sahara and the Lands of the Blacks (Bilād as-Sūdān), and finally Egypt (part of which is in Asia by some geographers' criteria including Leo's), a method that could become dull in the hands of many writers. At the risk of disputing centuries of unquestioning praise, my impression is that even the great traveler and *qadi* Ibn Baṭṭūṭa often becomes tedious when he routinely fills his text with dry itineraries or visits to holy men—or their tombs—along the way: he may well believe that this is what is most piously worthy of narration, but one might wish for more description and narrative about countless other humanly interesting themes such as the peoples and places he visits, his encounters and conversations throughout his travels, the marriages and divorces that marked his sojourns in different places, and much else that would bring out the story-teller in him rather than the severe, devout judge.

Just as Leo's mode of travel is marked by conversation with nearly everyone he meets, his style as a writer also seeks to converse with his readers as though they were present within his present.[7] He explains why he has devoted so much space to one topic or another (e.g., to Fez, whose description covering nearly one-seventh of the entire work is a masterpiece that would provide a model for the description of cities by other writers), or why he tells or does not tell autobiographical stories at certain moments in the text, and so on. Among the various genres he develops in his work, geography and autobiographical

travelogue complement each other and yet interrupt each other: while his lived experiences intensify the interest invested in every place he describes, his overriding organization requires a suppression of many personal stories. He thus inserts his own travels not in their chronological sequences but according to how they coincide with the order of places he describes. He is aware that this interrupts the main sequence but adds great interest to the places he describes. His ongoing comments to his readers about how he does not want to bore them, or why he cannot at times insert more personal or festive material, bring to light his awareness of the effects of his mixing or combining textual genres.

A primary aim of his is no doubt to convey what he finds remarkable about every place he mentions: his interest is at least partly intended to spur the interest of his readers, through contagion. The curiosity that he as a traveler brought to every place he visited should thus have the effect of prompting his readers' curiosity, though he is willing to suppress things that he might like to tell if he suspects they may be tedious for his readers or disruptive to his primary design. Ultimately, then, his sense of what might interest his readers seems to have priority over whatever other criteria he may have for including descriptions and narratives in his book.

Taking into consideration how Leo manages his ample free time, we can infer that, for him, curiosity may be understood as a desire to see, engage with, experience, know and comprehend especially human life in its many aspects, contexts and variations, as he the traveler encounters them and as he the writer recollects them. It is a curiosity that is never satisfied with what is all too apparent or obvious. This mode of curiosity undoubtedly pervades his travel and writing perhaps as much as it does those of nearly anyone in the early modern period, and it has undoubtedly contributed to the astounding success of this work for half a millennium despite the dismal editorial history of his work via Ramusio (Leo Africanus and Ramusio 1550) and the ensuing translations into different languages.

While we may well never know what circumstances and considerations led him to undertake the writing of the *Cosmographia*, there is no doubt that he was uniquely well positioned to do so. Judging from the growing interest in Europe about Africa during this time, coupled with the abysmal ignorance about it beyond its Mediterranean shores and its coastal contours, Leo could take up the challenge of bringing to life the Africa that he knew, assuming the perspective of writing both as an insider and an outsider. His outsider status is somewhat tenuous, based on his birth in Granada and perhaps bolstered by his years in Italy and his writing in Italian. Yet he insists on his Granadan origins not only in his fable of the amphibious bird (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 48)—with which he identifies—but also in the closing lines of his book where he declares who he is and what the book is about (with habitual touches of Spanish in his Italian): "Finito el libro o vero tractato del prefato compositore Ms. *Ioan Lione granatino* circa *el significato de Affrica* [. . .] per modo de cosmogrophia; in Roma alli 10 di marzo 1526" (Leo Africanus [1526] 2014, p. 606, my emphasis). [Here ends the book or treatise of the author, Messer Giovanni Leone of Granada, on what is meant by Africa [. . .] in the manner of a cosmography. Rome, 10 March 1526 (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023, p. 467).] Leo's claim to be from Granada stems not only from the fact of his birth and early years there but also because he belonged to a prosperous immigrant family from Granada, judging from how well-established his father and uncle were in the kingdom of Fez and how early his own diplomatic career was launched. Moreover, he reveals a fascination and admiration for Granadans throughout his book, aware that during those decades significant numbers of Granadans settled and made their mark in important towns and cities in the Maghrib, including Marrakesh, Fez, Chefchaouen, Tlemcen, Cherchell, Algiers and Tunis. In sum, he signs off as a Granadan (bearing the names of Leo X) who has written about "what is meant by Africa" at a time when the meaning of "Africa" was evolving but by no means definite. He knows this Africa

from the inside out—its settlements and peoples, its cultures and languages, its climates and topographies, its economies and routes—yet always seems to have that curiosity of an outsider looking in. Everywhere he goes, even within the kingdom of Fez, he acts like a stranger, and for good reason, because the places he describes such as the village with houses full of serpents as pets bear no resemblance to the city where he grew up. Even that city, as we have seen, harbors many hidden alterities that require curiosity to discover and tell about them—and to incite our own curiosity.

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## Notes

1 For a variety of studies on the topic in early modern times, see (Evans and Marr 2006).

2 I explore an example of this in my book *Frontier Narratives* (Hutchinson 2020, pp. 185–6).

3 English translations of passages by Montaigne are mine.

4 The primary text is the 1526 manuscript (Leo Africanus [1526] 2014). We are fortunate to have an excellent new English translation by Anthony Ossa-Richardson and Richard J. Oosterhoff based on this Italian manuscript (Leo Africanus [1526] 2023). This is the translation I use except when otherwise indicated.

5 This episode is analyzed in my forthcoming article "Radiant, Unsettling Gifts" (Hutchinson, forthcoming).

6 Leo uses the word *fregatrice* (derived from the Latin *frictrix*, a woman who rubs, already understood in an erotic sense in Ancient times). The Italian verb *fregare*, to rub, was an obvious erotic code word. The Arabic *suḥāqiyāt* is the plural of *siḥāqa*, a woman who rubs. In discussing this passage I have preferred Leo's 1526 Italian manuscript to the new English translation of Ossa-Richardson and Oosterhoff, which, though justifiable in its choices, deprives the text of the playful erotic use of the Italian *fregare* (reinforced by the Arabic word), and translates "quello male costume, cioè che una de loro frega una altra" as "the *wicked* practice of fucking each other"—rather than something less evil such as "that *bad* practice in which one of them rubs the other" (Leo Africanus [1526] 2014, p. 172; [1526] 2023, p. 306). For me, 'wicked' is too harsh for the judgments that Leo typically expresses.

7 While treating distinct topics and focusing on different aspects of Leo Africanus's life and text, this essay dovetails in many respects with my article "'Nada humano. . .'" (Hutchinson 2023). Each of them can stand on its own but also provides an explanatory context for the other.

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# Curious Knowledge: Diego Valadés' *Rhetorica Christiana* as a Cabinet of Curiosity

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**Abstract:** This essay examines Diego Valadés, a Franciscan missionary, as a Renaissance "curioso" whose life and work were driven by insatiable inquisitiveness and a desire to acquire knowledge. Through his *Rhetorica Christiana*, Valadés, much like collectors of cabinets of curiosities and Wunderkammer, celebrated the richness of indigenous cultures in New Spain. Following the Renaissance ethos of curiosity-driven exploration that fostered a global pursuit of knowledge, Valadés' work functions as a textual cabinet of curiosity, reflecting his experiences in New Spain and incorporating indigenous flora, fauna, and cultural elements unfamiliar to European readers. His text, originally intended to be titled *Suma de todas las ciencias*, embodies a new and modern knowledge system that is encyclopedic and proto-scientific in nature. However, Valadés' intellectual pursuits were constrained by the conservative court of Philip II, where intellectual freedom often faced scrutiny. His work bridges the Renaissance's intellectual curiosity with mnemonic practices, illustrating how collecting and memory techniques were intertwined in expanding the global understanding of the natural world.

**Keywords:** Renaissance "curioso"; Diego Valadés; cabinet of curiosities; Wunderkammer; *Rhetorica Christiana*; knowledge-making; memory; encyclopedia; Suma de todas las ciencias

## 1. The Pilgrim Fish and the Early Modern Curioso

At the close of the sixteenth century, the Valencian painter Pedro Juan Tapia (1563–1597) immortalized a leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea, "tortuga laúd"* in Spanish) that had been found stranded in the port of Denia (see Figure 1). What makes this painting particularly striking is its accompanying inscription, which not only describes the turtle's physical attributes but also situates it within the natural world as it was understood at the time.

> "This pilgrim fish, captured in the tuna catch in Denia this year on August 28, 1597; of the same magnitude, color, and shape as it appears here, is the other species of Galapagos sea turtle called coriaceous by Latin authors because it is covered with a leather-like that of a turtle or also a mercury turtle, since it is said that Mercury invented the lute in its shape. The body tube is formed by its spine and ribs, and in its cavity, it contains everything that perfect animals usually have, so it belongs to the kind of fish that breathe and form a voice; it is amphibious, oviparous, and omnivorous".[1]

This inscription highlights the fluidity of early modern natural classifications, where turtles were still considered part of the category of "fish", and knowledge about them was shaped by both classical texts and direct observation. More than just a visual record,

Tapia's painting (Tapia 1597) reflects a broader intellectual culture that sought to document and categorize the natural world. The portrait was commissioned by the Marquis of Denia and Duke of Lerma, Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas (1553–1625) for El Escorial, specifically for Philip II's cabinet of curiosities. When physical specimens were difficult to acquire, paintings often served as substitutes, helping to build vast collections of wonders (*mirabilia* and *exotica*), artificial creations (*artificialia*), and natural curiosities (*naturalia*). These collections, assembled by monarchs, nobles, and scholars, functioned as microcosms of the known world, bringing together rare and exotic objects to classify, compare, and display.[2]

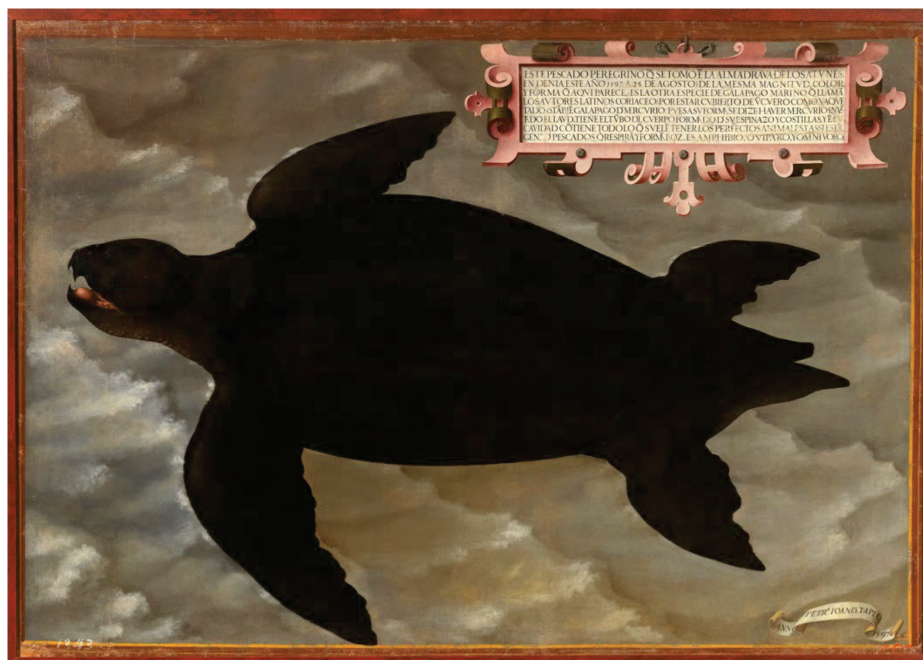

**Figure 1.** Leatherback Sea Turtle, 1597. Oil Canvas. Source: Prado Museum.

The growing fascination with such collections in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was fueled by imperial expansion, mercantile networks, and a renewed drive to systematize knowledge. Philip II's collection stood as one of the most illustrious of its time, rivaling Rudolf II's (1542–1612) *Kunstkammer*, known for its masterpieces by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527–1593), as well as the monarch's collection of *scientifica*, which included astrolabes and celestial globes. Among other prominent collectors were Samuel Quicchelberg (1529–1567), Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605), Francesco I de' Medici (1541–1578), and Ferrante Imperato (1525–1615)—the latter possessing a cabinet of 35,000 specimens. These cabinets not only reinforced princely authority but also shaped scientific inquiry by fostering a culture of observation, classification, and comparative study.[3]

The fervor for collecting not only enriched individuals from various professions, including physicians, apothecaries, lawyers, clergymen, and merchants, with "the marvels of the art and the secrets of nature"[4] but also bestowed upon them recognition as refined individuals of good taste, granting them a privileged place in the intellectual circles of society. In Spain, figures like Captain Vicencio Juan de Lastanosa (1607–1682), a close friend of Spanish Jesuit writer Baltasar Gracián (1601–1658), epitomized this fascination of constant pursuit of knowledge fueled by curiosity. Lastanosa's transformation of his childhood home in Huesca into a sprawling chamber of wonders, replete with books, medals, coins, and archaeological artifacts, attracted curious travelers from across the Iberian Peninsula.[5] In his writings, according to William Eamon (Eamon 2010a), Lastanosa identified himself as

part of a diverse community described as *virtuosi* or *curiosi*, characterized by their insatiable appetite for original, rare, or unusual specimens and objects. To be part of this select group of curious minds, as per Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, one had to combine "a thirst to know with an appetite for marvels" (Daston and Park 1998, p. 218). As some of these cabinets developed into the first scientific collections and museums, *curiosi* rewove the fabric of empirical understanding and influenced the perceptions of intellectuals.[6]

The early modern "curious" impulse to collect, document, and classify knowledge in early modern Europe provides the broader intellectual framework for this study. During this period, cabinets of curiosity (*Wunderkammern*, *studioli*), encyclopedic collections, and visual documentation played a central role in shaping emerging epistemological and scientific frameworks. These practices reflected not only a growing impulse to catalog the natural world but also an intellectual landscape in which visual representation, memory techniques, and ethnographic inquiry intersected. This essay examines these intersections through the work of the Franciscan missionary, artist, and writer Diego Valadés (1533–1582) and his *Rhetorica Christiana* (1579), a richly illustrated text that functioned as both a cabinet of curiosities in textual form and a mnemonic system. Written after his return from New Spain in 1571, the *Rhetorica Christiana* integrates ethnographic detail with visual and rhetorical strategies to structure and preserve knowledge of the Americas. Originally intended to be titled *Suma de todas las ciencias*, the work incorporates "ejemplos tomados de sucesos de las Indias" [examples taken from events in the Indies], signaling its encyclopedic and proto-scientific ambitions (Valadés 2003, p. 25).[7] Valadés' firsthand experience in Nueva Vizcaya—encompassing present-day Querétaro, Zacatecas, and Durango—allowed him to offer a perspective rarely available to European readers. His detailed ethnographic account positioned indigenous culture within broader intellectual traditions, emphasizing aspects of daily life, architecture, and artistic expression. Having spent years preaching to the Aztecs and Chichimecas on behalf of the Spanish Crown and the Church, he deliberately incorporated descriptions of indigenous flora, fauna, and cultural traditions unfamiliar to European audiences. His text highlights the architectural grandeur of Aztec temples, intricate ornamentation, and finely crafted textiles, as well as the indigenous use of feathers, native stones, and sacred trees. He also documents musical and ritual practices, including polyphonic choirs and ceremonial dances, blending religious instruction with keen ethnographic observation.

Designed as more than a religious manual, Valadés' work aligns with early modern intellectual traditions that sought to systematize knowledge through classification, visualization, and mnemonic aids. By combining ethnographic detail with mnemonic structures, the *Rhetorica Christiana* reflects a larger intellectual trend in early modern Europe—the integration of collecting practices with memory systems. As Lina Bolzoni has shown, early modern knowledge organization was deeply dependent upon the art of memory techniques, strategies that structured information visually and spatially to enhance retention and comprehension. Just as cabinets of curiosity sought to impose order on the unknown, mnemonic systems extended beyond conventional subjects to incorporate new discoveries from distant lands. In the sixteenth century, collecting practices across Europe—from Bavaria to Florence—mirrored the principles of memory theaters, reinforcing the idea that knowledge was most effectively preserved when arranged through systematic visual frameworks (Bolzoni 2001, p. 249).

Ultimately, the early modern drive to collect—whether through physical specimens, visual representations, or textual accounts—was part of a larger epistemological shift. The intersection of collecting, memory, and classification in works like the *Rhetorica Christiana* foreshadows the systematic methodologies that would later inform modern museums and scientific inquiry. As an ethnographic and mnemonic project, Valadés' work embodies

the era's complex relationship with *curiosity*—a concept that straddled both intellectual virtue and potential transgression. While *curiositas* was celebrated as a thirst for knowledge that fueled discovery and classification, it was also viewed with suspicion, particularly when it challenged existing structures of authority. However, this intellectual pursuit of classification and visualization was not without tensions. In Philip II's Spain, *curiosity* was both encouraged and restricted; while the Crown sought to expand its understanding of overseas territories, it also imposed strict controls on knowledge production. Missionaries and scholars like Valadés, who engaged deeply with indigenous traditions and mnemonic practices, navigated a complex intellectual terrain where knowledge was simultaneously a tool of empire and a potential threat to established authority. Valadés, operating within this tension, used *Rhetorica Christiana* to document indigenous cultures while adhering to the rhetorical and religious frameworks expected of him as a missionary. His work reflects the enthusiasm for cataloging the unknown as well as the constraints imposed on knowledge production in Philip II's Spain. Just as Tapia's painting of the leatherback turtle served as a record and a stand-in for the real creature, Valadés' text functioned as a repository of knowledge about the Americas. In doing so, it helped shape how Europe understood the natural and cultural world beyond its borders, demonstrating how *curiosity*—both encouraged and restricted—drove the intellectual landscape of the early modern period.

Building on this foundation, the following pages will explore *Rhetorica Christiana* through the lens of early modern curiosity and its dual role as both an intellectual pursuit and a source of tension within structures of power. First, I will examine how Valadés embodies the enigmatic curiosity of an early modern mind, balancing missionary zeal with a scholarly impulse to document and categorize knowledge. Next, I will discuss the limits of knowledge and the concept of *epistemic disobedience*, analyzing how Valadés' engagement with indigenous traditions subtly challenged European epistemological hierarchies. I will then turn to *La Suma de todas las ciencias* as a theater of knowledge, demonstrating how its visual and rhetorical strategies align with early modern mnemonic traditions and encyclopedic ambitions. Finally, I will analyze Valadés' engravings as cabinets of curiosity, investigating how his representations of *naturalia* and *artificialia* parallel the collecting practices of the time and reflect broader intellectual efforts to systematize the wonders of the New World. Through this exploration, I will argue that Valadés' work not only participated in early modern knowledge production but also foreshadowed later debates on the intersection of ethnography, memory, and imperial control over knowledge.

## 2. Diego Valadés and the Enigmatic Curiosity of an Early Modern Mind

Diego Valadés, a figure shrouded in historical ambiguity, embodies the essence of early modern curiosity in both senses of the term: as an individual deeply inquisitive about the world and as someone whose own life and work defied easy classification. His *Rhetorica Christiana* functions as a graphic cabinet of curiosities, blending mnemonic systems, ethnographic documentation, and missionary pedagogy. However, just as his book challenges conventional categories of knowledge, his own identity—marked by multiculturalism, polyglotism, and extensive engagement with indigenous cultures—places him outside the rigid binaries of his time. The limited biographical information available about Valadés only deepens the enigma surrounding his origins and early life. As scholars note: "su origen mestizo y los datos relacionados con los primeros años de su vida hasta su adolescencia han quedado envueltos en el misterio" [his mestizo heritage and the information related to the early years of his life up to his adolescence have remained shrouded in mystery] (Palomera 2003, p. viii). This uncertainty has fueled scholarly debate, with two dominant theories regarding his birthplace. One suggests he was born in Tlaxcala, Mexico, in 1533, the son of a Spanish conquistador of the same name and a

Tlaxcalan woman. The other posits that he was born in Villanueva de Barcarrota, in Spain's province of Badajoz. While the latter view has gained traction, the mystery surrounding the Franciscan's birth intertwines with the enigmatic nature of his body of work, reinforcing his identity as an intellectual figure who does not fit neatly into traditional categories.

The *Rhetorica* embodies the reflections and encounters of an individual deeply immersed in diverse environments, serving as a dynamic bridge between disparate cultures. This hybridity extends to his writings, actions, and self-representation. Even his own recollections of his early experiences in New Spain emphasize the complex trajectory of his life: "Y no quisiera que esto lo tomasen como nacido solamente del afecto de la benevolencia *por haber sido yo criado casi desde mi niñez en esa tierra*, pues ésa es también la opinión unánime de varones muy autorizados que han visto las costumbres de muchos hombres y sus ciudades" [And I would not want this to be taken as born solely from the affection of benevolence, *for I have been raised almost from my childhood in that land;* for that is also the unanimous opinion of very authoritative men who have observed the customs of many men and their cities] (Valadés 2003, p. 451).[8] Valadés' assertion of his upbringing in Mexico has fueled the debates surrounding his birthplace, though ultimately, the question of his exact origin is secondary to his intellectual contributions. What remains crucial is how Valadés portrays himself in his writings—not just as a missionary but as a culturally hybrid intellectual, deeply engaged with indigenous traditions while firmly grounded in European humanist scholarship.

For Valadés, his assimilation into Mexican society from childhood forms the foundation of his perspective. His education in theology and philosophy at Mexico City's Colegio de San Francisco, under the sponsorship of Flemish Franciscan Pieter van der Moere (Fray Pedro de Gante, 1480?–1572), shaped the intellectual framework that informed his *Rhetorica*. He continued his studies at the Colegio de la Santa Cruz de Santiago Tlatelolco before joining the Order of the Observants of San Francisco.[9] In addition to Gante, he studied under Fray Juan de Gaona (1507–1560), Fray Francisco de Bustamante (1485–1562), and Fray Juan Focher (1497–1572)—all influential figures in the pedagogical and mnemonic methods developed by mendicant orders in the Americas (Palomera 2003, p. x). The brotherhood's approach to education was deeply rooted in memorization and mnemonic techniques, a legacy that naturally shaped Valadés' work. His *Rhetorica Christiana* functions as a mnemonic and organizational tool, designed not only to instruct but to systematize and transmit knowledge about the New World. His thirty years as a missionary among indigenous groups gave him firsthand experience in indigenous languages and customs: "[...] he morado entre ellos [...] treinta años más o menos y me dediqué durante más de veintidós años a predicarles y confesarlos en sus tres idiomas: mexicano, tarasco y otomí" [I have lived among them for approximately thirty years, and I dedicated more than twenty-two years to preaching to them and hearing their confessions in their three languages: Mexican, Tarasco, and Otomí] (Valadés 2003, p. 419). Clearly, Valadés had a complex relationship with his own hybrid identity and upbringing. Significant gaps in the understanding of Valadés' life, his interactions with indigenous communities, his dissatisfaction with Philip II's policies, and his subsequent challenges to the prevailing social order have contributed to his portrayal as an anomaly within society—a figure who, rather than conforming, embodied the defiance of rigid classifications. Drawing on Barbara Benedict's insightful analysis in *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Benedict 2001), it may be precisely this perplexing nature of Valadés that fueled his insatiable curiosity. Benedict sheds light on the inherent connection between curiosity and the defiance of societal norms. Her observation delves into the complexity of curiosity, highlighting how figures like Valadés represent more than mere personal intrigue—they actively challenge conventions and disrupt established categories. Curiosity, in this sense, is not merely about

asking questions but about possessing traits or behaviors that deviate from accepted norms. These deviations, whether in behavior or physical appearance, disrupt rigid classifications and the structures that seek to contain them.

> "People can be deemed 'curious' in this sense not because they inquire but because they have socially irregular aspects: behavioral or physical traits that seem to violate accepted norms of use. Human curiosities exhibited in newspapers, ethnographical writings, and fairs, and awful or natural wonders displayed in cabinets and museums escape both the taxonomies of the spectator and the ontologies of the subject. This escape is translated as the desire to violate cultural boundaries, the ambition to replace public values with idiosyncratic meanings" (Benedict 2001, p. 3)

These words resonate with Valadés' case: his mysterious origins, hybrid identity, and unconventional life trajectory defy societal norms. His story resists easy categorization, compelling us to reconsider our understanding of how cultural identity and societal expectations challenge knowledge acquisition. His journey embodies the idea that "Curiosity is seeing your way out of your place. It is looking beyond" (Benedict 2001, p. 2). In this sense, Valadés is not just a historical figure but a symbol of curiosity's transformative power, urging us to embrace the unconventional and explore beyond the confines of established boundaries.

## 3. Epistemic Disobedience: Valadés, Curiosity, and the Limits of Knowledge

Valadés embodied the notion of the curious mind during his time, where curiosity took on multifaceted forms, each contributing to the intellectual dynamism of the early modern period. His life and work encapsulate the nuanced perception of curiosity, a notion that is reflected in the evolution and consequent ambivalence surrounding the term. Cesare Ripa's emblem book, *Iconologia* (Ripa 1593), offers valuable insight into the prevailing concept of curiosity during the period. In Ripa's depiction, curiosity is personified as a wild-haired, winged woman, her head keenly alert and hungry for knowledge, with arms outstretched as if to seize all that she desires to know.[10] Adorned with ears and frogs on her garment, symbolizing human energy, Ripa's text highlights that "curiosity is the unbridled desire of those who seek to know more than they should".[11] This portrayal resonates with the complex interplay between exploration, knowledge-seeking, and the boundaries of acceptable inquiry that characterized Valadés' life and work. Just as curiosity propelled Valadés to explore the wonders of the New World and document them in his *Rhetorica Christiana*, Ripa's emblem illustrates the allure and peril inherent in the relentless pursuit of knowledge beyond prescribed limits.

Ripa's depiction also mirrors the ambivalent view held towards curiosity throughout history. On one hand, curiosity was regarded as a vice, echoing Saint Augustine's interpretation from the fifth century, when it was associated with the original sin—Eve's curiosity to taste the forbidden fruit.[12] This negative perception persisted into the early modern period, exemplified by characters like Goethe's Doctor Faustus, who famously made a pact with the devil to satisfy his insatiable curiosity. Although *Faust* is a later literary work, it reflects enduring anxieties about the pursuit of forbidden knowledge, a tension deeply embedded in early modern intellectual thought. Conversely, during the Renaissance, curiosity also began to be viewed in a more positive light. As Aemon notes, natural philosophers of the time hailed curiosity as "the Perpetuum mobile" of early modern sciences, recognizing it as the driving force behind wonder and the engine of discovery.[13] This shift in perception marked a profound departure from the traditional wisdom encapsulated in Saint Paul's admonition, "*Noli alta sapere*", or "Do not seek to know high things". This cautionary

advice, rooted in a reverence for divine mysteries and humility before the unknown, was an especially useful message for the Church, which urged individuals to refrain from delving too deeply into matters beyond human comprehension. However, with the advent of the Renaissance and the pre-Enlightenment, a new ethos emerged, encapsulated in Horace's more encouraging maxim, "*Sapere aude*", or "Dare to know". This rallying cry encouraged individuals to embrace intellectual curiosity and to boldly explore the realms of knowledge. It emphasized the importance of critical thinking, independent inquiry, and the pursuit of truth. The transition from Saint Paul's caution to Horace's encouragement symbolizes a broader cultural shift marked by humanism, rationalism, and scientific inquiry. It reflects a growing confidence in human intellect and a rejection of blind deference to authority. Instead of passively accepting received wisdom, individuals were urged to question, challenge, and seek understanding for themselves. As cities flourished, commerce expanded, and the printing press disseminated knowledge, curiosity gradually transformed from a perceived vice into a celebrated virtue, heralding an era of exploration, innovation, and intellectual expansion. Such an evolution of the term during Valadés' time was a precondition of modernity, leading to scientific discovery and the emergence of new systems of knowledge.

The shifting characterization of the term "curiosity" stemmed from different ideological perspectives around its understanding and use. Sebastián de Covarrubias' definition of the term "curioso" captures this ambiguity. Covarrubias describes a "curioso" as someone who attends to things with particular care and diligence, suggesting a positive connotation associated with meticulous attention to detail. However, he then explores its etymology, suggesting that it derives from the Latin word "cur", (to inquire or ask questions) and the word "ociosidad" (idleness or leisure). This juxtaposition implies a more negative view, associating curiosity with idle questioning rather than genuine inquiry.

> "CURIOSO, el que trata alguna cosa con particular cuidado, y diligencia, y de allí se dixo curiosidad, vel a curia, o del adverbio cur: porque el curioso anda siempre preguntando, porque es esto, y porque estotro. Yo digo, que la palabra curioso, o curiosidad, se deriva del adverbio cur, que es adverbio de preguntas, y del nombre ociosidad; porque los curiosos son muy de ordinario holgaçanes, y preguntadores como su maestro, que su primera palabra que habló fue quando dijo a Eva".
>
> [CURIOUS: One who deals with something with particular care and diligence, and from there came the word curiosity, either from 'curia' or from the adverb 'cur' because the curious one is always asking why this and why that. I say that the word curious, or curiosity, is derived from the adverb 'cur', which is an adverb of questions, and from the noun 'ociosidad' (idleness) because the curious are very often idle and inquisitive like their master, whose first word spoken was when he said to Eve] (de Covarrubias Orozco 2006, p. 178)

Covarrubias' definition reflects the duality of curiosity, recognizing its virtue in careful attention and diligent inquiry while also acknowledging its potential pitfalls, such as idle questioning and transgressive knowledge-seeking.

In a similar vein, Benedict delineates this dichotomy in perceptions of curiosity, emphasizing how conservatives and progressives viewed it differently. Conservatives associated curiosity with a "perverse" desire to know the forbidden, while progressives saw it as a means of improvement and advancement.

> "For conservatives, curiosity retained its moral taint: as curious people showed a perverse desire—the desire to know the forbidden—so curiosities commodified a perverse pursuit. For progressives, curiosity promised improvement. Both kinds

> of thinkers, however recognized that as humanity's traditionally insatiable appetite, curiosity is always transgressive, alleys a sign of the rejection of the known as inadequate, incorrect, even uninteresting. Whether scientists or performers, curious people seek and manifest new realities and reshape their own identities, and their products—curiosities—incarnate these new realities and identities as examples of ontological transgression. As they acquired these new identities, curious people and curious things destabilized the categories and identities of others" (Benedict 2001, p. 4)

This tension between conservative and progressive thinking regarding curiosity can be seen in the relationship between Valadés and Philip II. The monarch, deeply Catholic and representing the conservative stance, approaches curiosity with suspicion, fearing its potential to undermine orthodoxy and challenge existing structures. His interest in collecting extraordinary objects, akin to the cabinets of curiosity of his time, reflects a controlled inquisitiveness tempered by traditional values. This conservatism is evident in his adherence to established norms and his reluctance to embrace unconventional pursuits. In contrast, figures like Valadés embraced curiosity as a means of advancement precisely because of its transgressive nature. Valadés' pursuit and presentation of information about the reality of New Spain not only dismantles and challenges the limits of knowledge imposed by the Church and the monarchy but also integrates indigenous epistemologies, visual mnemonics, and rhetorical strategies that expand the frameworks of early modern knowledge production. This is evident in his detailed descriptions of indigenous education, spatial organization, and artistic practices, such as the use of *amoxtli* (painted codices) as pedagogical tools and mnemonic devices. For instance, in *Rhetorica Christiana*, Valadés illustrates a didactic model that fuses European memory arts with Mesoamerican forms of knowledge transmission, presenting a hybrid approach that subverts monolithic understandings of intellectual authority. These textual and visual examples demonstrate how Valadés negotiates the constraints of his time while preserving indigenous ways of knowing within the missionary context.

Benedict's insight into curiosity as a mechanism for identity formation further clarifies Valadés' role. Curious individuals like Valadés not only seek new realities but also reshape their own identities in the process. His defiance of societal expectations and willingness to challenge conventional narratives contributed to the disruptive influence he may have had on the perceptions and norms of his time, particularly in relation to figures like Philip II. Valadés' intellectual pursuits, his interest in American nature, and his zeal to introduce Christianity to indigenous communities ultimately led to his punishment by Philip II, exposing the tensions between the Church–State agenda and the pursuit of knowledge. His *Rhetorica Christiana*, rather than reinforcing monarchical and ecclesiastical narratives, instead dismantles the limits of knowledge imposed by authority. In this sense, and as Benedict states: "[. . .] their curiosity constitutes an attempt to poach the status of their social superiors" as their "curiosity sometimes runs against cultural conservatism"(Benedict 2001, p. 18). Valadés' life and work exemplify this dynamic, as his insistence on documenting the New World's cultural and linguistic diversity directly contradicted the restrictive policies of Philip II's Spain. His journey demonstrates how curiosity—whether feared or celebrated—remains a force of transformation, challenging hierarchies, reshaping identities, and expanding the boundaries of knowledge. In this instance, it is imperative to consider the context that sets the tone and objectives of Valadés's *Rhetorica* upon his return journey to Europe and how his aspirations for a significant religious career in Rome would undergo a radical shift.

During his sojourn in Rome in May 1575, while participating in the General Chapter of his Order, Valadés was unanimously chosen to serve as the "Procurador General" of the

Franciscans for the subsequent four years (Palomera 2003, p. xii). Meanwhile, influential figures within the Spanish Catholic hierarchy had started to scrutinize the early colonial Franciscan humanist social and pedagogical initiatives, including those that facilitated Valadés's education.[14] These reformist policies, once championed by missionaries in the Americas, now faced increasing resistance amid the anxieties of the Counter-Reformation.

This ideological shift led to severe institutional measures targeting specific segments of the population. For instance, during a synod convened by Archbishop Alonso de Montúfar in Mexico (1555–1565), amidst growing apprehensions over indigenous conversions and religious orthodoxy, the ordination of Blacks, mestizos, and indigenous peoples was officially prohibited. This exclusionary policy reflected a broader effort to regulate and control religious access in the Spanish Empire. It was only a matter of time before the Inquisition extended its reach to missionary-authored works in indigenous languages, scrutinizing them "to detect any possible contamination by indigenous religions" (Bolzoni 2001, p. 132).[15] These restrictions also encompassed the manuals utilized by missionaries to teach Christianity to Native Americans, marking an escalation in censorship efforts.

By 1577, Philip II formally banned works documenting native traditions, reinforcing his broader strategy of controlling knowledge production about the Americas. This policy directly impacted Valadés—just two years after his appointment as Procurador General, he was dismissed from his position by Philip II, reflecting discrepancies in the ongoing discourse on indigenous evangelization. No longer aligned with the Spanish monarchy's increasingly conservative stance, Valadés relocated to Perugia, where he published his renowned *Rhetorica Christiana* under the patronage of Pope Gregory XIII. Its publication, in defiance of Philip II's restrictive policies, was not merely an intellectual endeavor—it represented a direct act of disobedience against monarchical control. In this way, Valadés exemplifies Benedict's notion that curiosity entails a transformation of the self. By daring to question, explore, and challenge the status quo, Valadés sought not only to understand the world around him but also to redefine his own position within it. His journey serves as a testament to the profound impact that curiosity can have on individual identity and the broader social and cultural landscape of his time. Remarkably, Valadés' curiosity stands out as one of the most powerful and strategic tools woven throughout his work. It enables him to challenge hegemonic discourses on various fronts, rendering the *Rhetorica* essentially a subversive work. His personal experience as a mestizo deeply rooted in European tradition undermines prevailing Eurocentric conceptions of universality. In this light, Valadés' intellectual project aligns with what Walter Mignolo describes as "epistemic disobedience"—a deliberate act of unsettling dominant narratives in order to "unsettle art historical assumptions that some art is of higher quality than other art and chronological borders. (Mignolo 2000) This approach thus encourages intellectual rebellion against accepted discourse about the Renaissance" (Black Villaseñor and Álvarez 2019, p. 4). By documenting indigenous cultures and languages, Valadés actively disrupted the dominant structures of early modern European knowledge production. His *Rhetorica* challenges Eurocentric perspectives of expansion, resisting the tendency to marginalize non-European knowledge systems. In this sense, Valadés' mnemonic art functions as both a method of preservation and resistance—a means of remembering indigenous cultural traditions while simultaneously rejecting the hegemonic historical narrative imposed by the Spanish Crown and the Church.

## 4. *La Suma de Todas las Ciencias* as a Theater of Knowledge

Valadés transcends conventional works and established formulas, producing a unique creation that reflects both European mnemonic traditions and indigenous ways of encoding and transmitting knowledge. His *Rhetorica Christiana* demonstrates an awareness

of structured memory techniques, evident in the way he organizes information through hierarchical visual schemes and spatial arrangements that aid recollection. The text and its accompanying engravings not only serve as instructional tools for missionaries but also mirror indigenous mnemonic devices, such as the use of symbolic imagery and sequential ordering found in Mesoamerican codices. In this way, Valadés pioneers what can be recognized as the first mestizo art of memory, blending elements of *ars memorativa* with non-Western modes of preserving and conveying knowledge. This departure from the norm marks a significant shift in the literary landscape, as *Rhetorica Christiana* bridges distinct intellectual traditions, demonstrating the adaptability of mnemonic practices across cultural boundaries.

Valadés' curious and innovative spirit emerges in the way he reconfigures conventional mnemonic techniques to reflect his hybrid cultural experience. Rather than merely replicating Western memory traditions, he transforms them, illustrating how mnemonic systems can serve as bridges between worlds rather than reinforcing rigid intellectual categories. His *Rhetorica Christiana* moves beyond conventional mnemonic treatises by integrating indigenous memory systems with European *ars memoriae*. His awareness of structured memory techniques is evident in his systematic organization of knowledge through visual and spatial arrangements. For instance, he describes how memory images (*imagines agentes*) should be arranged hierarchically within a structured space, akin to the mental of classical memory tradition: "Por medio de las imágenes que se nos imprimen de los lugares, podemos venir en conocimiento de lo que en esos lugares se encuentra" [Through the images imprinted on us of places, we can come to know what is found in those places] (Valadés 2003, p. 386). Yet Valadés' innovation extends beyond European frameworks, incorporating indigenous mnemonic practices such as pictographic writing, color-coded symbols, and the structured use of materials like textiles, codices, and engraved stone. He explicitly draws parallels between indigenous communication systems and Egyptian hieroglyphs, underscoring their complexity and sophistication: "Tienen ellos de común con los egipcios el expresar también sus ideas por medio de figuras [jeroglíficos]. Y así representaban la rapidez por medio del gavilán; la vigilancia, por el cocodrilo; el Imperio, por el león" [They have in common with the Egyptians the practice of expressing their ideas through figures [hieroglyphs] as well. Thus, they represented speed by means of the hawk, vigilance by the crocodile, and empire by the lion] (Valadés 2003, p. 381). By aligning indigenous mnemonic techniques with revered European traditions, Valadés strategically legitimizes native ways of knowing within a broader epistemological framework. Moreover, his engravings function as mnemonic tools that visually encode indigenous knowledge, reinforcing its accessibility and durability: "Y porque hay algunos que no saben leer, o no tienen afición a la lectura, añadimos algunas láminas con el fin de que rápidamente se recuerden esas cosas, como también para que se conozcan debidamente y con claridad los ritos y costumbres de los indios" [And because there are some who do not know how to read or have no inclination for reading, we have added some illustrations so that these things may be quickly remembered, as well as to properly and clearly understand the rites and customs of the Indians] (Valadés 2003, p. 113). By employing visual memory techniques, Valadés not only preserves indigenous knowledge but also renders it comprehensible to European audiences. This strategic use of mnemonic imagery situates *Rhetorica Christiana* at the intersection of two intellectual traditions, challenging the Eurocentric monopoly on knowledge production. In doing so, Valadés pioneers a mestizo art of memory—one that resists erasure, bridges cultural epistemologies, and redefines the boundaries of mnemonic practice.

Valadés fully embraces this adaptation, recognizing the new perspective it lends to his work. His unconventional application of *ars memorativa* principles is made explicit in his

dedication to Pope Gregory XIII, where he declares: "De donde he procurado, conforme a mis limitaciones, extraer un trigo ciertamente no nuevo si no que es el mismo trigo antiguo presentado nuevamente bajo otra forma y aderezado de distinto modo" [From where I have tried, within my limitations, to extract wheat that is certainly not new but is the same old wheat presented again in a different form and seasoned in a different way] (Valadés 2003, p. 9). This transformative process echoes Benedict's assertion that curiosity catalyzes new literary forms. As Benedict suggests, curiosity often manifests in the ability to reshape preexisting knowledge into novel configurations. Valadés exemplifies this notion, as his liminal position between cultures allows him to reshape mnemonic traditions, adapting them to a new epistemological framework (Benedict 2001, p. 10). His work does not merely preserve knowledge—it reimagines the mechanisms through which it is structured, transmitted, and remembered.

Valadés' contributions highlight curiosity as a driving force behind literary and artistic innovation, cultural synthesis, and intellectual transformation. His approach not only bridges distinct knowledge systems but also expands the very form in which knowledge is organized. In this sense, his work aligns with broader intellectual currents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where memory systems played a central role in shaping early modern scientific and philosophical inquiry. As Paolo Rossi argues in *Logic and the Art of Memory* (Rossi 2006), the mnemonic tradition was not merely a pedagogical tool but a fundamental methodology for structuring thought. Leading intellectuals of the period—including Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650)—incorporated memory techniques into their conceptual frameworks, reinforcing the idea that memorization was essential to scientific reasoning and symbolic representation: "The Baconian viewpoint on the scientific method was fundamentally part of a culture and a broader dialogue that conceived of memorization as a foundational methodology for structuring knowledge and for developing symbolic means for representing scientific concepts" (Sarma 2013, p. 1). This integration of mnemonic practices into intellectual discourse is evident not only in the work of well-known intellectuals like humanists Rodolphus Agricola (ca. 1444–1485) and Pierre de la Ramée (1515–1572)[16]—the latter a contemporary of Valadés—but also reflects a broader concern with reforming methods of knowledge organization and education.[17]

Valadés' *Rhetorica Christiana* should be examined within this intellectual framework. While his primary objective was theological instruction, the work simultaneously functions as a structured, encyclopedic repository of knowledge, aligning it with the mnemonic principles that underpinned early modern encyclopedic projects.[18] His curiosity drives a comprehensive intellectual endeavor, one that shares the universalizing impulse of early modern pansophic projects. These encyclopedic aspirations, deeply intertwined with the art of memory, sought to construct a unified model of knowledge, as seen in the Llullian and Baconian traditions: "Like the *ars generalis* of the Llullian tradition, the Baconian project of a *scientiae universalis, mater reliquarum scientiarum* aimed to uncover the unity of knowledge which has its foundation and justification in the immanent unity of the world" (Rossi 2006, p. 111). The intended scope of Valadés' project becomes clearer when he explicitly states that the title *Rhetorica Christiana* was imposed upon him due to constraints from his superiors and the Church.

> "este libro debiera intitularse '*Suma de todas las ciencias más excelsas*' ya que en él se habla sumariamente de casi todas las ciencias, sin embargo, por la desobediencia debida a mis superiores en la impresión de este libro, se le puso el nombre de *Retórica cristiana*, para que así se entienda que no se encuentra en esta obra nada que no apruebe y enseñe la Iglesia" [This book should be titled *Sum of all the most sublime sciences* since it briefly discusses almost all sciences. However, due to the obedience owed to my superiors in the printing of this book, it was given the

name *Christian Rhetoric*, so that it is understood that there is nothing in this work that the Church does not approve of and teach] (Valadés 2003, p. 25)[19]

Valadés' use of the term *desobediencia* (disobedience) underscores his nonconformist nature as a *curioso*. His assertion that the book *"discusses almost all sciences"* is crucial for understanding the comprehensive scope of his work and its contribution to the advancement of the art of memory—a contribution that, I argue, serves as a precursor to the scientific method. His endeavor unfolds alongside burgeoning efforts to classify and disseminate knowledge, where memory played a pivotal role:[20] "La memoria (que con razón es llamada tesoro de la ciencia) [. . .]" [Memory (rightly called the treasure of science)] (Valadés 2003, p. 137). As I will develop below, the concept of the *Suma de todas las ciencias* presents a visible totality that functions simultaneously as a *theater of images and a museum of wonders*, both of which are dependent on memory. At the same time, Valadés' *Suma* immediately evokes an encyclopedic vision, encapsulating the knowledge of the New World. Through this ambitious intellectual project, he not only integrates indigenous and European mnemonic traditions but also redefines the boundaries of knowledge itself.

Valadés' extensive textual and visual catalog, which showcases the arts, sciences, and natural wonders of New Spain, echoes the *theater of knowledge* envisioned by Giulio Camillo (1480–1544) in *L'Idea dell Teatro*. Camillo, one of many early modern scholars devoted to the art of memory, influenced poets, painters, and architects across Europe. His *Theatre of Memory* was a remarkable system, blending architectural principles with esoteric knowledge drawn from Kabbalah, magic, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and rhetoric. This universal mnemonic system aimed to encapsulate all human knowledge, enabling its storage and retrieval at will—an early conceptualization of a memory machine (Bolzoni 1991, pp. 23–24).

Lina Bolzoni highlights Camillo's enduring influence on the interplay between the art of memory and collecting, demonstrating how these two traditions converge. She draws an intellectual link between Camillo and Samuel Quicchelberg, the renowned collector often regarded as the father of German museology. In *Inscriptiones vel Tituli Theatri* Amplissimi (1565), Quicchelberg describes the museum as a *theater*, paralleling Camillo's mnemonic system, which sought to encompass "all things in the world". For Quicchelberg, both the museum and the memory theater shared a fundamental objective—aligning mental and physical spaces to structure and categorize knowledge. This convergence of memory and collecting finds eloquent expression in the words of Agostino del Riccio, a Dominican friar from Florence, in his *Arte della memoria* locale (1595):

> "do as wealthy and powerful kings do with the many rooms in their palaces; in one room there will be antiques, in another tapestries, in another the silverware, in another the jewels, in another weapons of warfare, both offensive and defensive, in other rooms the provisions used to maintain the armies, etc. This is what you must do if you wish to be universal in your knowledge: have many rooms in which to place sermons, speeches, concepts, sayings, histories, and whatever you choose to profess"[21]

Del Riccio's analogy of a palace's rooms filled with diverse treasures mirrors the universality of knowledge advocated by both Camillo and Quicchelberg, emphasizing the need for multifaceted repositories to encompass the breadth of human understanding. Similarly, in the words of contemporary scholar Patrick Mauriès (Mauriès 2011), "the *Wunderkammer* attempted to capture all knowledge, the whole cosmos arranged on shelves. Some were as small as cabinets, others as vast as labyrinths of large rooms".[22] These definitions help establish a significant transition between the cabinets of curiosities and the

art of memory, as evidenced by their shared terminology in referring to their structure and arrangement, as noted by Bolzoni and others:[23]

> "The importance of collecting in the second half of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, its specific characteristics, and its most significant manifestations give consistency and new credibility to the old metaphors of memory like the treasury, the archive, the universal library, and the coffer of knowledge. In a certain sense, those metaphors can now be taken literally" (Bolzoni 2001, p. 245)[24]

Collecting, with its meticulous categorization and preservation of objects, mirrored the functions of memory systems in its quest for comprehensive understanding. The act of amassing and organizing diverse artifacts and specimens became a tangible manifestation of humanity's relentless pursuit of knowledge—an effort to classify, preserve, and exert control over the world. This convergence of memory systems and collecting practices reflected a broader societal shift towards a more systematic and structured approach to understanding reality, setting the stage for the intellectual and scientific revolutions that followed.

## 5. Valadés' Engravings as Cabinets of Curiosities: Collecting *Naturalia* and *Artificialia*

Valadés' *Rhetorica Christiana* stands as a testament to his ability to merge mnemonic traditions, transforming conventional techniques into a mestizo art of memory that bridges indigenous and European epistemologies. His innovative approach does not merely replicate Western mnemonic systems but actively reconfigures them, demonstrating how memory serves as a means of both preservation and resistance. This hybridization is particularly evident in his engravings, which function as mnemonic tools that visually encode indigenous knowledge. As he states: "Y porque hay algunos que no saben leer, o no tienen afición a la lectura, añadimos algunas láminas con el fin de que rápidamente se recuerden esas cosas, como también para que se conozcan debidamente y con claridad los ritos y costumbres de los indios" [And because there are some who do not know how to read or have no inclination for reading, we have added some illustrations so that these things may be quickly remembered, as well as to properly and clearly understand the rites and customs of the Indians] (Valadés 2003, p. 113). By strategically employing visual memory techniques, Valadés ensures the transmission of indigenous knowledge while making it accessible to European audiences. His engravings, much like his textual content, transform the *Rhetorica* into a mnemonic theater of knowledge—an idea explicitly acknowledged in one of the commendatory poems preceding the text. "Que en sus grabados ante tus ojos/pone las proezas de las Indias" [Who, in his engravings before your eyes, presents the feats of the Indies] marks the beginning of one of the two commendatory poems preceding the *Rhetorica*. In this poem titled "En loa de la *Retórica cristiana* y de sus láminas sobre las Indias" [In praise of the *Rhetorica Christiana* and its illustrations of the Indies] (Valadés 2003, p. 5), the Italian Franciscan Giulio Roscio de Orte (1550–1591) compliments Valadés' engravings for their power to bring the feats of the Indies to the readers' eyes. The poem underscores the role of visualization as a principal means of rendering both tangible and intangible concepts perceptible, mirroring Quicchelberg's insistence that his use of the term *theatrum* was not figurative but literal. The emphasis on physical presentation, accessibility, and visual impact aligns with Valadés' engravings, which, much like cabinets of curiosities, translate knowledge into a structured, visual form.

Recognizing the power of images in knowledge transmission, Valadés deliberately presents his work in a visually engaging manner, resonating with a broad audience. Trained as a skilled draftsman under Pedro de Gante and later as a teacher, he understood the role of printing in the dissemination of knowledge. His awareness of how images could shape

perception and reinforce memory is evident in his statement: "para ayudar gráficamente y en forma objetiva a la sólida formación del orador Sagrado" [to help graphically and objectively in the solid formation of the sacred orator] (Palomera 2003, xiv).

His twenty-seven copper engravings serve as visual mnemonic aids, embodying the three fundamental components of the art of memory: *imagines agentes* (potent images), *loci* (places), and *ordo* (order). Through these elements and the innovative spatial arrangement of the page, Valadés introduces new ways of structuring knowledge.[25] One of his most striking engravings immerses the reader in a Neoplatonist *Great Chain of Being* (*scala naturae*), meticulously organizing living and non-living entities within a hierarchical structure that blends indigenous and European classification systems. This engraving exemplifies hybrid mnemonics, incorporating elements from ancient and medieval cosmography, Aristotelian physics, and Neoplatonic hierarchies while introducing indigenous groups to early modern European modes of classification:[26] "ancient and medieval cosmography, Aristotelian physics and Neoplatonic hierarchies introduced natives to the concepts of the Great Chain of Being, the Genesis creation and the original sin" (Cañizares Esguerra 2021, p. 110). As Jorge Cañizares Esguerra has articulated, the mnemonic fusion depicted in this engraving placed Mexico at its focal point. In crafting this mnemonic landscape, Valadés also situated "Mexican crops (prickly pear and corn), fishes, animals, birds and natives along the central ascending axis of his global and preternatural hierarchies" (Cañizares Esguerra 2021, p. 110). Just as the art of memory trains the mind to navigate rooms and streets, the ascending structure of Valadés' hierarchy becomes a mnemonic *locus*, making indigenous knowledge more familiar and comprehensible to European audiences. This system facilitates classification, memorization, and learning, reinforcing core principles of the art of memory.

The Great Chain of Being is not the only example of hybrid mnemonic visuals in the *Rhetorica* that make it a cabinet of curiosity adorned with elements and specimens from distant lands. As examined in recent studies by Linda Báez Rubí,[27] Bolzoni, Alan Braddock, and Cañizares Esguerra, among other critics, the reader of the *Rhetorica* also can contemplate mnemonic alphabets in native languages. Depictions from Nahuatl, Tarascan, and Otomi[28] served to teach the letters of the alphabet to the indigenous groups based on previous European models such as Ludovico Dolce's (Venice, 1562); Aztec calendar wheels adorned with hieroglyphs and Nahuatl names delineate years comprising eighteen months and months consisting of twenty days, which also align with the European Julian calendar.[29] This presentation not only introduces unique non-Western concepts of temporality but also demonstrates how mnemonic systems, with their distinct *loci* and *imagines agentes*, could accommodate diverse epistemologies.[30]

Similarly, as highlighted by Cañizares-Esguerra, Valadés transforms the city of Tenochtitlan into a mnemonic site—a *locus* filled with a plethora of objects acting as *imagines agentes*. These objects introduce novelty to the viewer, each forming part of a broader Aztec urban landscape (Cañizares Esguerra 2021, p. 107). This mnemonic landscape, meticulously rendered in engravings, includes the central pyramid and various examples from natural histories, as noted by Cañizares-Esguerra such as pisciculture, waterworks, and *materia medica* like cocoa, dragon's blood, guava, liquid amber, balsam, maguey, tuna, acacia, and ahuehuete, alongside staples like Indian corn, pineapple, and banana trees. To familiarize European audiences, Valadés Latinized each name, ensuring accessibility while preserving indigenous knowledge. Further extending this mnemonic system, Valadés includes an Aztec tributary state diagram in which demons deliver tribute items, such as guinea pigs, quetzal and *guajolote* birds, and Peruvian llamas (Cañizares Esguerra 2021, p. 107). These depictions resemble a *miscellanea*, assembling a wealth of specimens that present distinct categories of *artificialia* and *naturalia*. By integrating these elements into his

mnemonic framework, Valadés bridges the epistemological divide between the Old and New Worlds, mirroring the rising popularity of early modern cabinets of curiosity, *studioli*, and *Wunderkammer*—spaces designed for the curious mind (*curioso*).

## 6. Conclusions

Much like Pedro Juan Tapia's leatherback turtle, displayed in Philip II's cabinet of curiosities, Valadés' *Suma* presents a vast collection of flora, fauna, and cultural artifacts gathered during his travels. Each engraving transports the reader beyond the myopic gaze of European observers and the rigid structure of traditional memory systems, offering a vision that challenges established epistemologies. Through these visual representations, Valadés assembled a catalog of the peculiarities of the New World, presenting them not merely as objects of study but as imaginative artifacts—each possessing a narrative that invites speculation, reflection, and intellectual engagement. His engravings function as mnemonic possessions, evoking the ownership of experience that collectors sought in their cabinets. However, this endeavor was not solely an exercise in religious indoctrination. Rather, it was a multifaceted intellectual project that blended artistic, ethnographic, and scientific objectives. Valadés sought to document not only the flora, fauna, and material culture of indigenous peoples but also the narratives embedded in these objects, allowing European readers to envision a world beyond their known reality. His work underscores his deep understanding of the power of images, particularly their ability to shape perception, spark curiosity, and reframe knowledge.

In many ways, *Rhetorica Christiana* parallels Philip II's broader imperial efforts to catalog, chart, and categorize the realities of the New World. His project resonates with the *Relaciones geográficas de las* Indias (1577–1584), a meticulous survey encompassing geography, botany, agriculture, and mineral studies, reflecting the Crown's desire for systematic knowledge production. His work also aligns with the early botanical and natural history investigations undertaken by figures such as Francisco Hernández de Toledo (1517–1587), whose exploration of medicinal plants laid the foundation for later pharmacological studies; Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478–1557), who wrote the first treatise on the natural history of the New World; and Nicolás Monardes (1493–1588), whose groundbreaking research on American *materia medica* introduced European audiences to the medicinal applications of New World flora.[31] Like these endeavors, Valadés' *Suma* functioned as a *miscellanea*, a collection of *artificialia* and *naturalia* that foreshadowed the emergence of seventeenth-century scientific discourse. His engravings and descriptions anticipated the utopian vision of knowledge that would later be encapsulated in Francis Bacon's *New* Atlantis (1627), where vast halls filled with collections symbolized humanity's pursuit of universal discovery (Ekman 2016, p. 152).[32]

As I have argued throughout this essay, Valadés' curiosity was not merely an intellectual exercise—it was a disruptive force that unsettled the boundaries of knowledge and challenged societal norms. His hybrid identity, which some perceived as *pseudo-mestizo*, and his unorthodox intellectual pursuits positioned him as both an innovator and an outsider, drawing admiration and suspicion alike. His *Suma de todas las ciencias*, as he would have preferred to call it, became more than a compendium of knowledge; it was a vehicle for both discovery and defiance, transcending cultural, scientific, and artistic boundaries. Driven by an insatiable thirst for knowledge, Valadés bridged worlds, reimagined mnemonic traditions, and left a lasting imprint on early modern understandings of the New World's natural and intellectual landscapes. His work stands as a testament to the power of curiosity—not only as a means of knowledge acquisition but as a force capable of reshaping intellectual traditions and expanding the horizons of human understanding.

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## Notes

1 My own translation. "Este pescado peregrino que se tomó en la almadraba de los atunes en Denia este año 1597 a 28 de agosto; de la mesma magnitud, color y forma que aquí parece, es la otra especie de galápago marino que llaman los autores latinos coriáceo: por estar cubierto de un cuero como vaquetado o también galápago de mercurio pues a su forma se dize haver Mercurio inventado el laúd. Tiene el tubo del cuerpo formado de su espinazo y costillas, y en su cavidad contiene todo lo que suelen tener los perfectos animales y assi es del género de pescados que respiran y forman boz, es amphibio, ovíparo, y omnívoro".

2 "Su colección en El Escorial sumaba, a las grandes obras pictóricas, las curiosidades de la naturaleza y las producciones de origen ultramarino, e incluía multitud de animales exóticos, vivos -tenía en el batán rinocerontes, elefantes, adives, leones, onzas, guepardos, camellos, avestruces-, disecados o representados" (Blanco 2013, p. 80).

3 See the works by DaCosta Kaufmann (2021), Marr and Evans (2006), and Kenny (2004) on curiosity, wonder, and cabinets in early modern.

4 William Eamon's "The Renaissance Curioso" Blog. Available online: https://williameamon.com/the-renaissance-curioso- (accessed on 10 April 2025).

5 See notes 4 above.

6 See Kirkbride (2008).

7 English translations are my own.

8 My emphasis.

9 Valadés serves as a prime example of what historian Elena Schneider terms "the mestizo elite", a group that, alongside indigenous communities, emerged within a liminal space, assimilating the cultural vocabulary brought by the Spanish while also adapting and reinterpreting certain elements to reflect indigenous culture (as cited in Braddock 2021, p. 126). This is exemplified in his work, where indigenous words, albeit written in Latin, are subtly modified into Latinized Aztecisms such as "hamaca", "maíz", or "maguey", representing a fusion of two linguistic systems. Méndez Plancarte describes this phenomenon, noting Valadés' boldness in integrating indigenous American words into the Latin language with slight modifications, akin to Cervantes de Salazar's approach in his Dialogues. This anticipates the Latinized Aztecisms later employed by Father Rafael Landívar in the 18th century in his renowned descriptive poem, *Rusticatio Mexicana* (Méndez Plancarte 1946, p. xxxii).

10 My translation from Italian, original in *Iconologia, overo, Descrittione dell'imagini vniversali cavate dall'antichita et da altri lvoghi*, 1593. 56–57 (Ripa 1593, pp. 56–57).

11 Image from *Iconologia*, 1603.

12 Similarly, God punished Lot's wife by turning her into salt for her curiosity and disobedience in turning her gaze to see the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed.

13 Eamon, "The Disease Called Curiosity" (Eamon 2010b).

14 See Ortega Sánchez (2013).

15 See also Ricard (1986, p. 149).

16 Ramée positions his perspective within the intellectual period "concerned with the reform of methods of invention and transmission of knowledge", a theme closely aligned with the ordering function of memory repeatedly referenced by Valadés in his *Rhetorica*. As highlighted by Rossi, for Ramus, memory serves as a tool for organizing knowledge and discourse, with his concept of method emphasizing systematic and orderly arrangement of ideas, absorbing many principles of mnemonics (101).

17 Hence, a method emerged as a pivotal component in the art of memory, laying the groundwork for the scientific method; such a method "would strictly regulate both knowledge, and the means of communicating and recalling it. Diagrams, tables, and large tree-form schemas were designed to visualize the logical path to be taken" (Bolzoni 2008, p. 128). This transition evolved concurrently with the global epistemological shift underway. The importance of knowledge permeates the *Rhetorica* consistently. Valadés utilizes significant figures such as Saint Augustine, referred to as "hombre de sagrada memoria", to underscore the significance of knowledge in accessing the Sacred Scriptures: "sin las letras y sin la aplicación a la piedad no puede estar franco el acceso a la inteligencia de las letras sagradas" (65). Knowledge also serves as a fundamental element from a pedagogical standpoint: "porque primero debemos aprender y luego enseñar" (67), as he advocates for "el conocimiento de todas las ciencias, y especialmente las liberales, necesario para los propagadores de la doctrina cristiana" (67).

18 See Rodríguez de la Flor Adánez (1985).

19 See notes 8 above.

[20] Familiar with the tradition of the art of memory, Valadés, in Chapter XXIV titled "De la memoria, tesoro de las ciencias", provides a common definition of this faculty, akin to those articulated by other contemporary intellectuals like Pedro Mexía. He illustrates the memory process through visual representations reminiscent of the celebrated images by Leporeus or Romberch. Valadés describes memory as "more necessary for life and a unique treasure of eloquence [. . .] the treasure of discoveries [inventorum] and guardian of all parts of rhetoric [. . .] 'preserver of things subject to the senses' [225]".

[21] Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, cod. Magl. II, 1, 13, folio 13v, I take the reference from Bolzoni (2001, p. 251).

[22] Cited in Artsy (Eccentric Cabinets of Curiosity Captivated Renaissance Europe 2024). Available online: https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-eccentric-cabinets-curiosity-captivated-renaissance-europe (accessed on 10 April 2025).

[23] "The analogical affinity between repositories for collections and repositories for knowledge was a common Renaissance leitmotif, as discernible in book titles such as Thomas Lambert Schenkel *Treasure House of the Art of Memory* (1610) or in Agostino del Riccio's advice for practitioners of the art of memory from 1595" (Ekman 2016, p. 152).

[24] Bolzoni 245. This idea of memory as storage has always been viewed as a catalog or warehouse of images. In numerous treatises on rhetoric and mnemonics, it is considered a treasure of invention, as described by the anonymous author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Quintilian speaks of memory as a "treasure-house of eloquence". This connection is further emphasized by the abundance of references to memory as a spatial entity resembling an architectural structure. Teresa of Jesus, in *The Interior Castle* (1577), describes her mystical experience as one in which the soul returns to its chambers with the certainty of having amassed the riches contemplated in her encounter with God (see Bolzoni *Gallery* 256). Among the many metaphors alluding to the spatiality of memory are the theater, the palace, the museum, etc.

[25] We must consider the influence of both painting and architecture on the conceptualization of the work and its engravings. In Europe, Valadés bore witness to the magnificent pictorial and architectural masterpieces in Spain, France, and Italy, which left an indelible imprint on his work. Drawing from his teachings under Pedro de Gante, this amalgamation of styles shapes the mental and knowledge structures of his work. According to Francisco de la Maza (1945)",Muestra dos influencias palpables y bien conjugadas, sin violencia, con un perfecto sentido humanista: la europea del Renacimiento y la indígena prehispánica. [. . .] Algunas de sus figuras recuerdan a Durero, a Lucas de Leyden, a Isarea van Meckenem y, sobre todo, Urs de Graf. Sus diablos -aún medievales- están en Schongauer y Beccafumi. Pero también ha observado códices indígenas, relieves y esculturas [. . .]". (Cited in Palomera "Introduction" [xiv]. Chaparro highlights the Italian influences in Valadés's text and the innovative visualization methods and tools pioneered by Ludovico Castelvetro (1505–1571) and others (Chaparro Gómez 2008).

[26] For a more extensive study on the *scala naturae*, see Braddock (2021).

[27] For Báez, such visualization strategies attest to the presence of European iconic-figurative models that, "upon arrival to the New World, were adapted to original needs and expressions in order to serve new objectives and realities" (Báez Rubí 2012, p. 171).

[28] In his well-known book on the evangelization of Mexico, Richard Ricard maintains that the relationship is phonetic, using the initial Nahuatl sound of the object (Ricard 1986).

[29] "Pero de todo lo que diré, lo que es muy admirable entre todo lo admirable, es que aunque sean tan estúpidos por haber nacido en un clima tan pesado, sin embargo, redactan, siguiendo ese método, sus efemérides, calendarios y anales. El año de ellos constaba de 18 meses, y el mes de 20 días, como se podrá apreciar el dibujo correspondiente" (Valadés 2003, p. 229).

[30] "On the other hand, Valadés also offered an image in which the indigenous model is dominant: the Aztec calendar [. . .] linked to a reinterpretation of the Aztec calendar in terms of a mnemonic system with its *loci* and *images*. The accurate reproduction of an Aztec calendar was certainly not common in the 16th: indeed, Europeans missionaries systematically destroyed indigenous ritual calendar manuscripts. But in this context, it is pertinent to recall that *Rhetorica Christiana* was dedicated to Pope Gregory XIII, who was interested in calendar reform. In any case, it is significant that Valadés cited the construction of this extremely precise and efficient calendar to demonstrate the intelligence of these native peoples" (Bolzoni "Mexican Nature" 133).

[31] See Pardo Tomás (1998).

[32] "The 17th-century theories of science and knowledge were developed in symbiosis with the growth of new architectural types, themselves devised for the practices of science, collecting and ordering of [new] knowledge such as in Heinrich Khuurath's *Amphiteatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (1608)" (Ekman 2016, p. 156).

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