

Engendering the Orient: Cervantes' *La gran sultana*

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Choosing the crossroads of Constantinople as the setting for *La gran sultana* was by no means arbitrary. By placing the negotiation of his characters' identities within such a heterogeneous atmosphere, Cervantes simultaneously stages not only the city and its Topkapi Palace but also the construction and the performance of gender and religious identity. As a drama (and despite the fact that it was never staged during Cervantes' time) *La gran sultana* packages the near-East, in all its fetishized and stereotypical excess, for a uniquely Spanish audience. At once employing stereotypical Orientalist motifs such as setting and décor, Cervantes also meaningfully moves beyond simple concepts of Us and Them towards a more hybrid, cosmopolitan Mediterranean experience, one that represents not simply a clash of religious cultures but also facilitates the possibility of a trans-imperial interconnectivity. Yet kaleidoscopic alternations of identity are not simply centered around differences of faith; Cervantes' material Orientalism simultaneously exaggerates the arbitrary divide between Christian and Muslim as well as between male and female. However contemporary gender theory, with its ubiquitous and excessive focus on *performance* and ignorance of the somatic, neglects to illuminate how sex and gender were perceived in the pre-Enlightenment. This study examines how Cervantes forges a notion of a gendered Orient, and attempts to reconcile traditional Orientalism's insufficiency for the Spanish early modern. I propose an alternative view of the body in this time period, during which religious and gendered identity were conceived of as the ontological, and the body as a social sphere of meaning, thereby completely inverting contemporary paradigms. Through the use of gender play and religious crossings, categorical differences of identity are rendered inessential and incidental in *La gran sultana*. Instead, Cervantes ultimately reaffirms his characters' shared humanity in spite of ethnic and religious alterity.

La gran sultana is often treated in conjunction with Cervantes' other "captivity plays", *Los baños de Argel* and *El trato de Argel* in particular, and with good reason: Catalina is certainly a captive member of the Gran Turco's harem, and she is not alone. Her own father suddenly winds up being held against his will in the Sultan's seraglio, along with the characters of Clara, Lamberto and the decidedly anti-Semitic Spaniard, Madrigal. Despite these coincidences, I have chosen to treat this play separately for a number of reasons: due to the different economy of race and religion in Constantinople versus that of Algiers; owing to the fact that this play wasn't performed live until 1992; because it pertained to a much later period in Cervantes' life and writings; was published many years after his captivity and for a reading audience; and also because, generally speaking, this play presents such a fantastical course of events that it actually works to undo many of the firm social delineations we see in his Algerian dramas. What's more, the critical tendency to see this play as just that, a fantasy, divorces it from his painfully veridical accounts of Algerian captivity, perhaps allowing Cervantes to engender a more utopian intermingling of race and religion in a city that epitomizes Mediterranean interconnectedness in its truest sense.

In *La gran sultana* racialized, gendered bodies are figured culturally onto a regal Ottoman backdrop. Turkey is inscribed upon the characters of the play through extravagant costuming and exotic stage directions that are meant to transport the audience according to Cervantes' imagination. The East for the early modern Spaniard was unrelenting and alluring, a religion of

violence in this life and of paradise after death.¹ With Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) first came a theoretical approximation of this phenomenon of hegemony and fascination between East and West. Indeed, the case of Spain is particularly interesting when considering the field of Orientalism because of its rich yet tumultuous history with Islam. Yet Said focuses uniquely on British and French Orientalisms, although he does ultimately concede his ignorance of Iberia. This exclusion has been widely noted by scholars such as Suzanne Akbari, Barbara Fuchs and Mercedes Alcalá Galán, who have all called for the need to reevaluate Orientalist theory in order to specifically consider the Iberian Peninsula. I position myself in line with Akbari, who in *Idols in the East* (2009) argues for an Orientalism founded upon religious orientation, reasoning that "the Orientalism that emerged in the late Middle Ages is constituted not only on the basis of bodily qualities associated with 'Oriental' physiology, but also on the basis of religio[n]" (12). Alcalá Galán similarly struggles with what to coin early modern Spanish Orientalism, divulging: "When I began this investigation I intended to use the term 'proto-Orientalism' because I assumed that talking about Orientalism in early modern Spain would be anachronistic" (14). But later she argues for dropping the prefix "proto" since the case of Spain, as she persuasively notes, required no external colonial forces and whose particular iteration of Orientalism arose from, first, an internal occupation by Islamic tribes, and later from tense Christian-Ottoman relations. Conversely, William Childers describes an "internal colonization" of Spain that runs parallel to its course of nation-building, taking place when the State stopped recognizing separate spheres of Jewish and Islamic life, thus rendering these groups colonial subjects with a now-valueless cultural patrimony (6-7). The effect of this internal colonization by the Christian Monarchs was to reshape identity and create systematic racial and ethnic inequalities with the Peninsula, thus edifying what I consider a religion-based racism which formed alongside an Iberian iteration of Orientalism.

Serving as both a Roman/Byzantine and Islamic capital, the strategic narrative decision to locate this play in Constantinople sets it apart from Cervantes' other *comedias de cautiverio*, which otherwise take place in North Africa. Cervantes himself experienced the Orient during his captivity, learned of the Turks and Ottomans fighting in Lepanto and wandering the winding streets of Algiers, and transported images, sometimes disconnected from reality, for representation in the West. Said alludes to precisely this drama of capturing the East and reimagining it for the theater:

. . . the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. An Orientalist is but the particular specialist in knowledge for which Europe at large is responsible, in the way that an audience is historically and culturally responsible for (and responsive to) dramas technically put together by the dramatist. (63)

Indeed these two geographic regions represented polar opposites when considered in the binary system of male and female, Christian and Muslim. Yet it is the wholly imprecise geographical dividing line separating these two, combined with the sheer fact that neither does the "Occident" necessarily correspond to any stable, empirical reality that renders Cervantes' account of the Topkapi Palace not just a delightful anomaly but rather a deliberately stylized and material account of Christian-Muslim relations, one in which the characterization of the Turk and the Spaniard alike is exaggerated "bizarramente", as Cervantes himself remarks in his stage notes. But

¹ For the purposes of this study I will be using the terms "Islam", "the East" and "the Orient" interchangeably, as during the Spanish early modern these were the same intimidating threat, the same unbridled paradise and synecdoche for the large geographic portion of the Earth under Islamic law.

unlike Said, Cervantes seems to imply that these two antitheses had more in common than they did in opposition, and as Alcalá Galán observes, in this work he intensifies and distorts the Oriental exotic to such an extreme that stereotypes are absorbed and to some extent even diminished (27). Cervantes' distortions challenge head-on the modern assumptions made by Saidian Orientalism, which considers the Middle Ages and early modern as Orientalism's adolescence, when in fact what we tend to find in this time period is that often it serves to undermine the strict binarization of East and West which Said condemns in later Orientalist manifestations. This fluidity despite confrontation between the Self and the Other that I find to be fundamental to the play's message has also been the critical focus of, among others, Moisés Castillo, Alcalá Galán and George Mariscal, who in particular sees in this work a "benign orientalism" that deftly problematizes monolithic conceptions of religion, nation and ethnicity (194). Other studies have similarly focused on the male/female binary such as Edward Friedman and Ellen Anderson, who focuses on how Cervantes combines "the signs of gender and the signs of faith" (54). Yet I find that upholding the binary is in fact not the central focus of this play, whose final moments instead stage the triumph of hybridity, widening the spectrum of possible identities.

The play's first moments, however, do serve to amplify the ethnic and cultural chasm between the audience and the Turkish backdrop. Cervantes uses elaborate stage directions to perform this difference: "Sale SALEC, turco, y ROBERTO, vestido a lo griego, y, detrás dellos, un alárabe, vestido de un alquicel."² Here the character Roberto, a Spanish renegade, is already patently feigning appearances as he is dressed like a Greek. Salec, the Paje and the Alárabe are pointedly outfitted like the Other and the scene is so elaborately set that the play instantly becomes a parody of a parody, reminiscent of Maese Pedro's puppet show in Book II of *Don Quijote*. A focus on material culture, such as the opulent garb and processional items, objectifies and Orientalizes the Turkish court and presents it for Western consumption. Cervantes continues: "Entra a este instante el GRAN TURCO con mucho acompañamiento; delante de sí lleva un paje vestido a lo turquesco con una flecha en la mano levantada en alto, y detrás del TURCO van otros dos garzones con dos bolsas de terciopelo verde." By commodifying the Ottomans and using cultural relics as synecdochical of the entire region, Cervantes portrays their culture as shallow, materialistic and obsessively focused on appearance, as if to imply that Spaniards were the complete opposite. In fact, Cervantes' stage notes indicate that he intended to represent these characters such that we are immediately reminded that they are patently enacting a performance of Muslims according to his Orientalist imagination. Salec, Roberto, the Paje and the Alárabe are so exaggeratedly dressed, the scene so elaborately set, that the play becomes parodic from the very first moments. Even Salec and Roberto cannot help but comment on the bizarre and spectacular nature of the opening processions, echoing our own sense of distance and delight (I, 1-6). Dually voyeuristic, we become passive receptors not just as an audience but also to Salec and Roberto's consumption and recounting of these opening processions. Yet our understanding of the events is colored by the slight disdain they both express regarding the ways of the Ottoman crown. "¿Qué te parece Roberto, / de la pompa y majestad / que aquí se te ha descubierto?" inquires Salec (I, 50-52). "Que no creo a la verdad, / y pongo duda en lo cierto", Roberto begrudges (I, 53-54).

In the same way that the presentation of the Turkish characters affects the audience's reaction to them, Catalina and Lamberto's outward appearances likewise dictate their reception. The first time we see Doña Catalina she has just left the harem to be presented to the Sultan and is dressed in the Turkish style. Even outfitted "a la turquesca" (or performing a Muslim) she is so

² An *alquicel* was a wide, cape-like garment often worn by *moriscos* and made of wool, linen or cotton.

exquisitely beautiful that she manages to entrance the asexualized eunuch Rustán. The other eunuch, Mamí expresses Catalina's beauty in definitively Arabic terms while also alluding to her distinctly fair skin:

Es tan hermosa
 como en el jardín cerrado
 la entreabierta y fresca rosa
 a quien el sol no ha tocado;
 o como el alba serena,
 de aljófar y perlas llena,
 al salir del claro Oriente. (I, 352-58)

Upon hearing word of Catalina's beauty, the Sultan is understandably surprised to learn that there has been a Christian in his harem that has not converted to Islam. Mamí, however, advises him that she might not be the only one, "Más deben de estar de tres; / mas, ¿quién podrá averiguallo?" (I, 404-05). Cervantes implies through the mouth of his characters that sometimes, perhaps even often, Christians are hard to differentiate from their Muslim counterparts. The implications of this revelation are far-reaching. Firstly, he suggests that a system of racial profiling in order to expel all Jews and *moriscos* from Spain might never function, because in effect these communities are not so physiologically or fundamentally different from their "pureblooded" Spanish counterparts. Secondly, it is clear from this excerpt that identities in Ottoman Constantinople are so slippery that one can move between them fluidly, just as Catalina moves from a Muslim exterior to a Christian one, and in the same way that Lamberto slips by unnoticed as a man in woman's clothes.³

But Saidian Orientalism, as I have mentioned, relies too heavily on the existence of strict binarization or atomization of identity to solely explain the cultural contact staged in *La gran sultana*. Cervantes' ability to satirize and defamiliarize the distance between Christianity and Islam reveals how cutting-and-pasting *Orientalism* as a tool for analysis of the early modern is an incomplete exercise. If Cervantes' characters can slip in and out of identities with simply a change of clothing, then taking Said's worldview at face value can result in a slippery slope of misunderstanding. What's more, one of Said's main blind spots is in the question of gender and how it relates to this religious economy of power. Reina Lewis in particular criticizes Said for using gender "only as a metaphor for the negative characterization of the Orientalized Other as 'feminine' or in a single reference to a woman writer" (18). In a similar vein, Anne McClintock laments that Said only sees gender and sexuality as a metaphor for the power relations at work in imperial projects, thereby denying gender its central role, in fact its constitutive dynamic, in these economies of domination (14).

It is for this reason that I would now like to move to an exploration of how gender theory can work alongside Orientalist theory to elucidate some of the machinations of power at work in early modern Spain. Just as I would be remiss to speak of Orientalism without making mention of Said, certainly any discussion of the performance of identity must refer to Judith Butler. Butler makes a very important yet albeit fuzzy distinction between *performativity* and *performance* to differentiate between, firstly, the gendered performances which we all unconsciously enact on a daily basis (performances which, importantly, correspond only to the surface yet produce the *effect* of an internal gendered core) and secondly, the intentional imitation of gender such as transvestism

³ Although in this case, and unlike for Catalina, Lamberto's ability to pass for a *mora* within the seraglio becomes a permanent transformation, if not of gender then of religious, and even political, affiliations (Fuchs 85).

(136).⁴ Gender considered within this paradigm is inherently fictive or contrived, and the notion of an interior gendered core is an illusion maintained only for the regulation of sexuality in a strictly heterosexual (or in this case, Christian) framework. Genders, then, can never be true or false. They do, however, enact a discourse of identity that is read culturally. While Butler's theory does contest the notion of a gender binary, just like Cervantes' characters in *La gran sultana*, in truth there are still a limited number of gender "styles", constrained by discourses of power and heteronormativity. One is not free to choose a gender, as if selecting a different costume to wear each day. Instead, crossover figures like Catalina and Lamberto commit border transgressions that shape them into revolutionary subjects within a Butlerian framework, subverting the norm without subverting the logic of gender, as they both must ultimately "choose" one gender or another.

Although Butler's formulation of performance and performativity are seminal in the field of gender studies, the theater and its actors help to illuminate some of her theory's shortcomings, especially in regard to pre-Enlightenment contexts. If gender is performative, something one *does* but not something one *is*, if there really is no pre-discursive subject without the constituting effect of performative acts of gender, then Butler's formula does not allow for a performer behind the performance, for an actor behind the act. Butler therefore negates that the body might have any prior gendered inscriptions, while simultaneously implying that the performance of gender can be summoned from a vacuum without any prior referent. Here Peggy Phelan's elaboration of performance theory helps to clarify some of the resulting paradoxes. Contending that visibility itself is a trap, Phelan theorizes that identity emerges when the body fails to convey meaning exactly. This is indeed more akin to the transformation we see in Cervantes' Catalina, who reaffirms her Christian gendered identity once she comes into contact with the Other, when dressed *as* the Other. Identity, for Phelan:

. . . is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being. (13)

Contrary to Butler, Phelan affirms the notion of the past performance in the creation of an identity, one that Catalina, for example, relies upon when her own Christian sense of self is reawakened, but she argues that it can never be faithfully replicated and is therefore necessarily constrained temporally.

Thus, just as Butler is incapable of fully explaining the gendered economy of Cervantes' Turkey, and even though Phelan serves to round out the notion of *performativity* within the context of other bodies, her notion of temporality reminds us that we must be true to the historical context in which this play was written. Although slightly less so in Phelan, the body becomes incidental for Butler in a manner that is not entirely consistent with early modern Spain. The somatic in Cervantes' epoch at times confirms the notion of *performance* when (perhaps in the theater) it calls attention to the disconnect between corporeality and gender (or religion). But problematically the body was also understood in the seventeenth century as "a signified space [and] a quite delicate sphere of inscription in that merely mingling with certain non-same bodies could cause the meaning of the body to slip away. Gender as a social construct was considered by many as 'contagious'" (Vigo 31). So, it would follow that just because the body can absorb meaning and becomes secondary to identity, this does not also mean that the inverse isn't true; it does not

⁴ It is the effect of a gendered core that Butler emphasizes, not the existence of one. Language and discourse, for Butler, create gender. The aspect of performativity contests the very notion of an inherent gender, of a subject, whereas the performance of gender presupposes a pre-existent subject.

necessarily deny the body's ability to transmit gendered identity. The corporeal can indeed call attention to what it opposes, but in seventeenth century Spain (and Cervantes' Turkey) the body was also capable of confirming identity, *ex ante*.

In fact the model of gender and sexual difference that was most ubiquitous prior to the Enlightenment (and before Butler's Foucaultian-defined "modernity") was one that arranged and categorized men and women according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, the woman being considered as simply the inverse of a man. Even her reproductive organs were seen as very much like the male's but with contrary placement in the body. Whereas Butler constantly emphasizes "real" identities, as opposed to subversive performances of identity, in medieval and Renaissance texts, as Thomas Laqueur convincingly finds, we cannot read backwards with the same sort of epistemological (or even ontological) lens "through which the physical world—the body—appears as 'real', while its cultural meanings are epiphenomenal" (7). He reminds us that the human body in Cervantes' time was believed to be capable of remarkable conversions—Jewish men were said to menstruate like women and males and females were believed to be constructed in the image of God. The somatic was understood in distinctly sacred terms, and in direct contrast to Butler, Laqueur proposes that in a pre-Enlightenment context the body (or sex) was not considered an ontological category, but as a social one.⁵ Julian Vigo summarizes this distinction between pre- and post-Enlightenment philosophy in the following manner:

the body of the Enlightenment was strictly regarded as symbolic of social relations while gender was the 'real' space upon which somatic definitions were 'read'. Today, antithetical to the Enlightenment paradigm where gender is the only real and the body is in constant flux, destruction and reconstruction of sexed identity, we are facing a linguistic vicissitude in which gender and sexuality are constantly being reworked, reordered and molded and instead it is sex which remains intransigent to these reworkings. (33)

If gender, then, is the "real", then it must precede sex. But an obsession with determining which is the "real", gender or sex, has become a game of chicken and egg for gender theorists, and Cervantes' *La gran sultana* exposes the interminable nature of this pursuit.

Catalina and Lamberto's explicit performances of female identities, both as Spanish Christian and Turkish Muslim, subvert hetero/Christian-normalized notions of gender and sexuality, allowing the body to become a blank canvas. Catalina's incarnation of religious hybridity, symbolized most deeply by her unborn child, presents a counterargument to Inquisition Spanish dogma. Indeed, Lamberto's apostasy and "sex change" thoroughly queer his identity. Yet we mustn't ignore Laqueur's compelling argument for the primacy of gender in this era, which Lamberto's sex change (incidentally "caused" by his time in the harem) confirms. In order to reconcile this cyclicity, I turn again to Vigo, who envisions a "non-Body",

a frame which is always performative and always in construction and a site upon which all meaning is temporal, incidental, and subjective. [. . .] If we dispose with the idea that language or corporeality must express clearly or linearly, we would be

⁵ "I want to propose instead that in these pre-Enlightenment texts, and even some later ones, *sex*, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary or 'real.' Gender—man and woman—mattered a great deal and was part of the order of things; sex was conventional, though modern terminology makes such a reordering nonsensical. At the very least, what we call sex and gender were in the 'one-sex model' explicitly bound up in a circle of meanings from which escape to a supposed biological substrate—the strategy of the Enlightenment—was impossible. . . . To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, to assume a cultural role, not to *be* organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category" (7).

opening up social discourse to understanding the body as a field of meanings upon which are vectored historical, linguistic and cultural traces. [. . .] The non-Body has no “original” gender, no true sex and certainly there is nothing natural about it. (26) Vigo calls for a return to the somatic, to viewing bodies as agents of exchange, as that which can be read culturally but simultaneously in a state of constant construction. This way the body can take on multiple meanings depending on its surroundings, and can become a chimeric form (a cyborg, perhaps) that “necessitates that we dispose with the notion of a ‘real’, sexed body and requires us to embrace the mixing of genres, forms and functions” (55). Language falls away as the centerpiece of identity and is replaced instead by physicality, one that allows for multiple meanings, desires, gestures.

Reading gender and sex in this manner, Cervantes’ characters’ bodies become formless, slipping in and out of sincere or manipulative religious and gendered performances. All the more pertinent to a conceptualization of this sort is the full title of this play, *La gran sultana doña Catalina de Oviedo*, in which Catalina, whose Christianity is evident from her name alone, through an alchemy of amalgamation becomes the Islamic “Sultana”, thereby demonstrating this sense of the corporeal self as a canvas of hybridity, undoing any notion of the “real” in a dizzying game of hide-and-seek. Catalina’s strict maintenance of her Christian gendered core throughout the play and *despite* her garb exposes how Butler’s *performativity* concept cannot fully explain gender in seventeenth century Spain (and perhaps not in modern times either). Catalina seems to show that her identity invariably maintains a tie to that which is somatic, to her prior sense of self that has recently come under fire due to contact with the Other. Phelan, of course, is helpful in this sense, showing how the self both merges with and diverges from the Other in articulating an identity. Ultimately, *performativity* for Catalina involves a ritual social drama made up of the reenactment of a set of meanings for “Christian” and “woman”, significations that were already socially established for her before she arrived in Muslim Turkey, and which she attempts to reproduce while in captivity.⁶

Butler’s notion of gender parody “does not assume that there is an original from which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original” (175, original emphasis). Here Butler departs from a Christian or Cartesian sense of duality, of separation of soul and body, by contending that there is no primordial human essence prior to discourse. Problematically, this is a notion that Catalina’s inner sense of self relies heavily upon and is in fact consistent with Laqueur. Even when Catalina is dressed in Muslim garb, her body codified as a *turca*, she insists upon the immutability of her Catholic soul. This Cartesian sense of duality is one that Friedman hints at in *La gran sultana* as well, “If Doña Catalina’s discourse prioritizes the soul (*alma* above *cuerpo*), the sultan’s foregrounds beauty (*hermosura*, *belleza*) to create an ironic variation on the topos of love’s heresy” (222). It is, after all, her external, exquisite beauty that captivates the Sultan’s attention, and not the purity of her spirit. The Sultan’s somatic materialism, accentuated by Cervantes’ stage notes, signifies a focus on precisely the opposite of Catalina’s *alma*. In fact the only reason that the other characters seem to treat her with any reverence is, at least initially, because of her stunning appearance. Agapita Jurado Santos similarly focuses on this conflict between the material and the spiritual, locating the Sultan’s interest uniquely in “el frágil cuerpo y no en el alma” (17). Cervantes expresses the Sultan’s attention towards Catalina’s remarkable beauty (despite her Christian core) in the following manner:

⁶ But let us be reminded that Phelan argues that performance is presence and cannot be exactly repeated. This immediacy and temporality indicates that although Catalina is relying upon past performances of “Christian” and “woman” cauterized in Spain, they will never produce the same effect.

SULTANA

He de ser cristiana.

TURCO

Sélo;

que a tu cuerpo por agora,
es el que mi alma adora
como si fuese su cielo. (II, 1238-41)

Once the Sultan falls in love with Catalina she immediately reverts to her traditionally Christian garb in order to regain and reaffirm her “true” and original sense of identity, Laqueur’s “real”. But Catalina’s expression of the *performativity* of identity is in fact at times also a *performance*. Catalina is first culturally inscribed as a Muslim slave, but she recuperates her “Spanish” self by later dressing as she would at home. In typical Cervantine fashion, when Catalina reemerges as a proud and powerful Christian woman she does not do so modestly: in act III she reappears with her new Gentile clothes made, ironically, by her father, a tailor who has mysteriously turned up in the Turk’s palace. In this moment Catalina’s new Spanish appearance is remarkably contrasted with the Oriental exterior of her counterparts. Cervantes’ stage directions call for Catalina to “vestir a lo cristiano, lo más bizarramente que pudiere” (Act III). This grand reveal comes along with the following additional directions by Cervantes within the same act: “Salen los dos músicos y MADRIGAL con ellos, como cautivos, con sus almillas coloradas, calzones de lienzo blanco, borceguíes negros, todo nuevo, con vueltas sin lechuguillas.” Cervantes purposefully pits Catalina against the Turkish musicians and dresses her so absurdly that Catalina’s body becomes a field of othering, even in the eyes of the Spanish audience. Catalina’s Christian identity reveals itself in this moment because it is able to exist in relation to another, to the Other. For the first time in the play the excess of her Occidental nature aligns itself with the artificial, Saidian Orient. And in contrast to the way that *moras* and *turcas* were systematically portrayed as highly sexual, Catalina is always excessively robed, often bearing a cross around her neck and dressed in a most severe and chaste manner.

Eschewing the sociocultural infrastructure and gender policing of his time, Cervantes constantly calls our attention to clothing and its importance in signifying outward appearances. The body in *La gran sultana* is always under siege, resisting against and sometimes surrendering to external cultural forces. Then and now, clothing was meant to denote one’s interior identity, an identity sometimes separate from the body spiritually but often externally in accord. Males and females alike were expected to regulate their identities in order to conform to religious and gendered expectations. However, Cervantes makes clear that one’s self does not necessarily reside in the way one dresses, and that appearances are often deceptive (Phelan’s “trap”). He uses theatricality as a vehicle to remind us, the reading and viewing audience, of the daily performances we enact in order to convey some notion of a unified interior core identity. Through quick and dramatic costume changes he asks us to consider the rigidity and veracity of social distinctions, while also contesting the body’s borderlines, pushing it into new frontiers of inscription.

But whereas Catalina’s maintenance (and even embellishment) of her Christian-self permits her ascent in the Ottoman court, Lamberto’s gendered performance as a Muslim woman results in his apostasy. Willfully entering into captivity, Lamberto/Zelinda has come to Constantinople from Transylvania to save his lover, Clara. Once he is discovered to be a male, however, he invents an elaborate ruse about his divine gendered transformation from female to male, one that involves Lamberto converting to Islam on a whim. Religion is thereby portrayed as ambiguous in the same way as gender—Lamberto easily slips between roles, performing male and

female, Christian and Muslim with ease, suspending his virility while masquerading and disrupting the continuity of gender and its binary orthodoxy, or the strict separation of sexes that the harem system functioned to protect. Cross-dressing comes to symbolize a disruption, resulting in a crisis of categories and uncovering a troubling spot in the identification system promulgated by religious and state authorities during Cervantes' time. Yet transvestism is also “*a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (Garber 17, original emphasis). Lamberto is in fact liberated by his transvestism: It allows him to be near his lover, Clara/Zayda, and to penetrate the sensual, gendered space of the harem, the site of the Western male exotic fantasy. Cervantes, through the character of Lamberto/Zelinda, explores this space of carnal abundance via a sexually ambiguous male, tapping into the erotic wishes of his Orientalizing audience and readers.

A leitmotif found in contemporary Occidental texts was of the virtuous Muslim woman who converts to Christianity, her soul “saved” by a good Christian man, such as in the captive’s tale of *Don Quijote*. Yet in *La gran sultana* Cervantes writes the reverse: a Christian man who not only magically “changes” gender but also apostatizes. But masculine and feminine metamorphoses are not only relegated to the Christian characters. Cervantes effectively parodies the gendered identity of the entire East through his characterization of the powerful, polygamous yet somewhat subordinate Sultan. He embodies an effeminate but hypersexual Orient that prominently finds its way into most depictions of the Eastern Other during the Spanish early modern. In *La gran sultana* the smitten, submissive Sultan becomes a synecdoche of all of Islam, whose followers were seen as having an unbridled, often perverse sexuality. Considered by many to be sodomites and pedophiles, the Orientalist stereotype of overly sexed men flippantly selecting from a brimming harem represents precisely this atmosphere of excess that so many Christians reviled.⁷ (Fascinatingly this signals a departure from current Islamic stereotypes, which generally replaces sexual licentiousness with heteronormative conservatism.) There are even nuanced references to the character of the Cadí enjoying the company of *garzones*, or young men, a fondness echoed by the Cadí character in *Los baños de Argel* as well.⁸

Jokes about Islamic male homosexuality aren’t confined to the Cadí, however, as even the Gran Turco is publicly made a fool for choosing Lamberto/Zelinda as his escort for the evening. When he discovers his error, he parades Lamberto across the stage, leading him by the neck and with his dagger *desenvainada*, or unsheathed, such that he hints at the penetrative act of both stabbing Lamberto out of anger and also as a part of a romantic evening with him. The veiled women (and in this case, men) of the seraglio incited the sexual curiosity of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans, hungry for stories of lust and desire yet bound by the constraints of an increasingly rigid and chaste Christianity. Vitkus shows how the veil and the heavily guarded harem masqueraded as both virtue and chastity, thus emphasizing not only sexual excess but also

⁷ References to sodomy and homosexuality are widespread in Antonio de Sosa’s *Topografía de Argel*, as mention of deviant sexual practices can be found with regard to janissaries, renegades and corsairs and even with reference to bestiality. Speaking of renegades in particular, Sosa reports “[les] aplice la vida libre y de todo vicio de carne en que viven los turcos, y a otros dende muchachos lo imponen sus amos en la bellaquería de la sodomía a que se aficionan luego” (53). (Sosa appears in bibliography as “Diego de Haedo”, who was previously thought to have written the *Topografía* and is listed as the author of the edition I cite.) Akbari similarly concludes that “medieval Orientalism had associated Islam with sexual license, and even specifically with heterosexual sodomy” (283).

⁸ “Ella dijo, en conclusión, / que andabas tras un garzón, / y aun otras cosillas más”, chides Madrigal, in reference to the Cadí (II, 1607-09).

repression, in a titillating game of deception and desire (223). Alcalá Galán similarly traces the European desire for the Orient through women, whose sexuality was always at risk yet accessible to the Occident through the slave trade and the seraglio (11).

Instead, by queering the Sultan, Cervantes delineates a path to Orientalism not only through female sexuality. Despite his perceived sexual excesses, because of the way he so willfully acquiesces to Catalina's desires, the Sultan of *La gran sultana* does not exactly conform to the stereotype of the almighty Gran Turco, who at the time instilled both fear and intrigue in the minds of the West and whose unlimited power was seen as unjust and oppressive.⁹ Using the relationship between the two eunuchs, Rustán and Mamí, Weimer finds that the former aligns himself with a more feminine sense of self-identity ("parezco mujer", he laments) whilst Mamí is more closely associated with the masculine gaze that objectifies Catalina; "Thus, the entire confrontation between the sensual, Islamic East and the chaste, Christian West can be discerned within the rivalry between these two eunuchs, whose primary defining characteristic—their emasculation—is linked to the work's overarching opposition" (52). I find that the presence of these two degendered eunuchs at the harem's entrance in fact ensures that the Sultan is the only one whose male virility is intact once he crosses the threshold of the inner living quarters. Their sexual passiveness and arrested state of development enhances and reminds the audience of the Sultan's uniquely potent sexuality. These eunuchs also come to represent a "third sex", a destabilizing presence within the gender politics of the palace. Cory Reed, in his article on Cervantes' "El celoso extremeño", remarks that many Western travelers' fascination with doors and guarded entrances in representations of the East is probably due to the fact that they could not pass through them (202). The eunuchs lived in quarters adjacent to but separate from the harem and carefully guarded the women from being seen, thus ensuring their regulated passage within the palace. In fact, nearly every relationship in this play presents some sort of implied or even explicit sexual relationship, and not always a heterosexual one (Connor 513).

As the play's title suggests, this work creates an environment of *mestizaje*, of old Christian lineage bound with an intrinsically and increasingly heterogeneous eastern Mediterranean empire.¹⁰ This ambivalent amalgam of transreligious and even transracial characters is edified with Catalina's pregnancy and thus marks a poignant contrast between Cervantes' earlier captivity plays, which center wholly on the struggle between Self and Other, mainly between renegade and Christian. Moreover, Cervantes seems to express through the Sultan his opposition to the concept of *limpieza de sangre*. In the Sultan's eyes (and in Cervantes' words), this child will be superior because of his dual heritage—Catalina and the Sultan have made an "otomano español", or perhaps it could be understood to be an "español otomano" (II, 1217). Regardless of which word is the noun and which is the adjective, considering that Cervantes wrote this play for immediate

⁹ Even today Islamic stereotypes such as hotheadedness and violence are widespread. In Cervantes' time, "the early modern demonization of Islam tends to focus upon the overwhelming, absolute power of Islamic culture. In these representations, this unlimited power is often embodied in an Islamic ruler, a sultan or king whose authority over his subjects is equated with the power for a master over his slave. It is therefore, by definition, an unjust, tyrannical, and oppressive power" (Vitkus 218).

¹⁰ Peirce insists on the importance of renegades within the Ottoman Empire and their necessity as a source of imperial unity (29). What's more, she finds that while Europe may have called the Sultan the "Grand Turk" (or *Gran Turco*, in this case), to the Sultan (actually an Ottoman) Turks were just one of many groups within the subject population (36). The Sultans were Ottomans, or rulers, not Turks, subjects. This subordinate population, known to Cervantes as the *turcos* was instead only a fraction of the sum. Cervantes' confusion (like that of so many other Orientalist writers of the early modern) conflates the location of the Ottoman Empire's seat, Constantinople, Turkey, with its entire ethnic identity.

publishing and supervised the publication of it (a rarity in his time) we can assume that he might have at least seen some value in interracial relationships as well as sensed the absurdity of a monolithic Spanish-ness. He further evokes a union of the two empires by bringing together their symbols: the Turco refers to himself as a “león” on multiple instances, to which Catalina counters that her children will be “águilas”, significant as the eagle figures prominently on the Habsburg family crest (II, 1221-23). Yet not only does this play end on a sort of utopic hybridity but it also, as Alcalá Galán points out, renders cultural, ethnic and religious distinctions baseless, “erod[ing] the function of the stereotype in the construction of the collective imaginary” (29). Furthermore, the play asks us to consider who is conquering whom at its close—has Christianity prevailed over Islam, or is Cervantes asking the reader/audience to decide if a work of this sort must definitively portray the dominance of one culture over another?

Whereas Casaldueiro argued in 1951 that this play stages the triumph of Christianity over Islam in a Biblical sense, I find that it does not seem to exalt one religion over another, especially in considering the question of miscegenation (139). If Catalina was so insistent on the maintenance of her own religious norms, will she be equally demanding with regard to their child’s faith? Perhaps not, as Cervantes’ careful phrasing seems to imply that the child will be firstly an “otomano”. The Turks often welcomed Christian captives into their harems and there are indeed historical accounts of Christians who have become a Valide Sultan, or the mother of a Sultan. Yet in order to maintain the empire’s continuity under the law of Islam, and despite the Ottoman’s tolerance elsewhere, it is likely that the child will worship Mohammed. Thus conceiving of the child as a crossover figure is only possible to a certain extent; Islam will necessarily overshadow Christianity in order to assure the laws of succession and consequently the child cannot fully embody true religious hybridity. But what does shine resplendent is the possibility, indeed the actuality of miscegenation. It therefore seems to me unreasonable to presume that Christendom has finally found victory in Constantinople, when as a religion it has no future in the Islamic Ottoman’s system of governance. Once again, in the final moments of the play religious categories break down in the face of conflict, and like gender it is rendered inconsequential. Perhaps religious accord is not even the argument of *La gran sultana*. In fact, I am not convinced that Cervantes is necessarily trying to force a conclusive outcome in this play. Instead, it seems to me that he confirms his increasing sensitivity to questions of religious and ethnic (in)tolerance, an awareness made especially notable throughout his evolution as an author.

Greenblatt attests that self-fashioning always involves some experiences of threat or loss of self, an internal drama that Cervantes sets to stage in *La gran sultana* (9). After a deep existential crisis in which she even considers martyrdom, Catalina emerges resolutely as a woman and Christian. Similarly, Lamberto makes a dramatic switch to Islam in the face of severe punishment for his transgressions, and the Sultan mitigates his own religious eccentricities to find common ground with his bride. But ultimately *La gran sultana* is a testament to tolerance and receptiveness, leading Cervantes “to propose a more porous, less exclusive concept of national identity” (Childers xi). In this sense, Cervantes hints at some major tenets of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism* (2006), in which Appiah longs for a world where we can regard each other as a branch of a single family and recognize our obligations to one another, obligations that are not bound by kinship or religion but by our shared human experience (xv). By contrast, Appiah asserts that Germany during the rise of Hitler demanded “a kind of loyalty to one portion of humanity—a nation, a class—that ruled out loyalty to all humanity”, an anti-cosmopolitanism (xvi). The Spanish crown, in its violent process of Christianization during the Counter-Reformation, wanted the same of its subjects: unanimous, unilateral loyalty. This is precisely contrary to the message

conveyed throughout *La gran sultana*. And so despite Cervantes' role in creating and fomenting an early modern Spanish Orientalism as I discussed earlier, he is also exemplary of an early modern cosmopolitanism that is characterized by openness and connectedness. In *La gran sultana*, as in a vast number of his other works, Cervantes demonstrates a genuine attentiveness to life under Islamic Ottoman rule and, importantly, in spite of the trauma he once suffered at the hands of Muslim captors. It is significant that Cervantes does not demand strict acculturation for his characters, as he seems to realize that the appropriation of one culture and the complete erasure of another is always a violent act. The Sultana and Sultan, for example, arrive at a tenuous system of tolerance of each other's customs (although arguably the Sultan is far more acquiescent to the signs of Christianity than Catalina is to those of Islam). Coexistence and transculturation, then, become the ultimate aspiration for a story which initially relentlessly and parodically paints the Spanish as noble yet stalwart—and even anti-Semitic—and fashions the Turco as an oppressive tyrant. Later, however, Cervantes doubles back on this notion, humanizing the Ottomans and mocking the Spanish to the extent that we are forced to bridge a connection between Islam and Christianity, between Spain's King Philip II and the Gran Turco, “not *through* identity but *despite* difference” (Appiah 135, original emphasis).

By setting this work in the Near East, Cervantes upends the idea of a purely local identity and undoes the ties of nation and class that the Spanish Crown relied so heavily upon, especially in the midst of expulsions and religious fanaticism. In focusing on what they consciously chose not to be—heathen, Jew or Muslim—Spanish cultural authorities willed themselves the religious enemies of an entire part of the world and systematically created a discourse of religion-based racism that disavowed one cultural patrimony in favor of another. Christianity in this sense forced itself to be the dominant history of a nascent Spain. Daniel Brook similarly contemplates how some countries have voluntarily, even intentionally, inherited a cultural tradition. In speaking of how the Romans copied Greek artwork he wonders,

If even the Romans needed to will themselves Western, what does the vaunted East-West distinction even mean? If Westernness or Easternness is a choice rather than an immutable fact, what power does it really have? Though it feels like an immutable inheritance, whether a people sees itself as Eastern or Western is actually a conscious decision that only later becomes an unconscious patrimony. (392)

Cervantes stages the way that the Spanish willed themselves into the imaginary Christian West through policies of expulsion and racism, but at the same time he carefully does not negate any sense of Spanish Catholic patrimony. In fact, Cervantes even goes to great lengths to preserve it and to perform its ascendance on the stage. However, he nimbly avoids confusing religion and ethnicity with any sense of a belonging that is necessarily bound to territory.

By pulling the Oriental rug out from underneath rigid categories of identity, Cervantes exposes them to be as fictitious as the nebulous philosophical divide between these two corners of the Earth. *La gran sultana* engages in a dialogue across and through identities, exposing the permeability of the borders that surround categories of gender, race and religion, indeed of the Mediterranean Sea. Cervantes' engagement with these abstract concepts and with the policies of the Spanish Crown leave the audience and readers questioning their own common humanity. While strict cosmopolitanism potentially has the power to erode cultural difference, thus devoiding areas and nations of their most meaningful traditions and uniqueness, the type of cosmopolitanism that *La gran sultana* approaches admits the fallibility of both seventeenth-century Spanish and Turkish politics, while it affirms the possibility of deference in spite of difference. Madrigal, Catalina and Lamberto reveal a network of Mediterranean interconnectivity, in which they serve as trans-

imperial characters who facilitate contact, exchange and crossings. It is this connectedness and respect that explains why *La gran sultana* continues to intrigue and confound modern-day critics, calling into question what we know of Cervantes' canon and of each other.

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