

**Happily Ever After?
Marriage, Honor and Feminism in Two *Novelas ejemplares***

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In the early sixteenth century, treatises commonly referred to as conduct manuals define what European nobility interprets as appropriate behavior. Emphasizing gendered archetypes, these texts teach their readers to reproduce masculine and feminine traits based on honor, courtesy and moderation. These didactic sources act as vehicles for the cultural expansion of a hegemonic aristocracy that perpetuates Aristotelian notions of natural feminine inferiority and masculine superiority. Early modern fictional works also play a large role in addressing the moralizing discourses that circulate in courts, and especially “the novel played a crucial role in the development of a new mode of thought that viewed women as agents” (Graf 2005, 194). Miguel de Cervantes’s *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613) embody this formative and moralizing goal intended for men and women, reflecting the rapid expansion of courtly ideals in Spain. His didacticism has already been widely documented: Charles B. Quaila stated decades ago that “all the works of Cervantes, with the possible exception of a few comedies, bear witness to his enthusiasm for the literary ideals of the Renaissance, namely, the use of reason and restraint, genius supported by study, simplicity of style, didacticism, and, finally, verisimilitude” (11). Cervantes’s irony has also been widely confirmed as a tool that allows him to present himself as “escurridizo e irónico a la vez que solemne y ejemplar” (Williamson 795). This ironic tone is particularly relevant when we consider whether Cervantes’s stories embrace or reject feminist values, a topic on which the critical field has produced highly divergent perspectives.

Cervantes’s representations of femininity make visible the flaws he identified in his patriarchal society’s treatment of women, and in this study, I intend to create a point of convergence between opposing theories on Cervantes’s feminism. Focusing on “La fuerza de la sangre” and “Las dos doncellas”, I propose that the apparent antifeminism with which women are treated is intended to convey, through the use of irony, a hidden, opposite message. The combination of an antifeminist semblance and irony generates what I call a ‘paradoxical feminism’, a combination of antithetical traits both for and against women. This self-contradiction strengthens Cervantes’s didactic objective and provides the intended *exemplum*, if not regarding the morally preferred treatment of women, at least as an illustrative warning of the ways in which patriarchy undeservedly undermines them.

Gender inequality in early modern Spain originates in the Aristotelian concept of natural sexual complementarity that states that man is to woman what form is to matter, meaning man is superior to woman just as form is superior to matter by virtue of shaping it.¹ For centuries, superior masculinity was deemed to be combative because confrontation between enemies showcased one’s dominance.² In *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* (1575), Juan Huarte de San Juan justifies that humors hinder feminine ingenuity because “la frialdad y humedad que las hizo hembras, esas mesmas calidades hemos probado atrás que contradicen al ingenio y habilidad” (627-8). Lisa Perfetti corroborates the historical perception of a greater feminine volatility in comparison to men,

¹ Aristotle repeats the idea that the female is inferior to male in various works and numerous times; see, for example, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*.

² José Fernando Martín traces these historical precedents from “los remotos orígenes de la tradición oral griega, los discursos dominantes de occidente siempre han dejado que el campo de batalla decida el género de los hombres” (31).

pointing out that its basis was women's lack of corporeal heat, which protects men from outbursts, melancholy, and emotional instability (4-5).

Marriage in two *Novelas ejemplares*

Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares* represent the tensions arising from this traditional juxtaposition of masculine idealization and feminine subjugation. The two stories analyzed herein conclude with problematic marriages that bolster an antifeminist tone and imply the book's failure in providing its main objective: moral *exemplum*. "La fuerza de la sangre" highlights the perils that women face in an oppressive patriarchy based on masculine domination, which is represented by the antagonist Rodolfo, a young man whose illustrious bloodline is corrupted by permissiveness and bad habits.³ His initial critical description soon escalates as he kidnaps and rapes Leocadia – implicitly inferred from the narrator's explanation that he had fulfilled his desire before she had the chance to wake up– and his compulsion is exacerbated immediately after abusing her body because he "quisiera luego [...] que de allí se desapareciera Leocadia, y le vino a la imaginación de ponerla en la calle, así desmayada como estaba" (2: 79). His debauchery is not punished, in fact, the negative framing of his actions is only seen in Leocadia's lament of her misfortune, trapped within "el infierno de mis culpas" (2: 80). Leocadia swears to forgive this 'atrevido mancebo' and his indecency if he remains silent to avoid her public dishonor. Instead of agreeing to her request, Rodolfo attempts to sexually victimize her yet again, leaving little doubt that he is governed by criminal immorality.⁴ The narrator mentions Leocadia's resistance against her assailant, but never pronounces judgment of any kind regarding Rodolfo's unlawful behavior. Leocadia manages to escape the hostile encounter, Rodolfo flees to Italy and "el narrador finge que no pasa nada y cambia el tema" (Gopar Osorio 105). The expected indictment never comes.

The resolution of the story restores order by legally cleansing Rodolfo and Leocadia's honor: the infraction is concealed by marrying perpetrator and victim, thus transforming the rape into a marital encounter.⁵ This indemnification is problematic because Rodolfo's primary reason to return from Italy is not moral repentance, but his lecherous 'golosina' of enjoying the beautiful woman that his parents have promised him. Rodolfo acknowledges as much by proudly admitting that "unos hay que buscan nobleza, otros discreción, otros dineros y otros hermosura; y yo soy destos últimos... la hermosura busco, la belleza quiero" (2: 91). Leocadia's discontent is evident upon recovering consciousness and finding herself in Rodolfo's arms. Her sudden change of heart once she is told that it had been decided to marry them while she was unconscious and her consequent admission that she feels honored in Rodolfo's arms has generated much critical debate.⁶ Although Leocadia's reputation is restored and, most importantly, her son born of the rape is now legitimized, it is also an inescapable truth that Rodolfo's past crimes are left unresolved.

³ Cervantes describes these as "atrevimientos que desdecían de su calidad" (2: 77).

⁴ This can be inferred by the narrator's explanation that he behaved "dando muestras que quería volver a confirmar en él su gusto y en ella su deshonra" (2: 81).

⁵ As Julius R. Ruff explains, in early modern society "a rape might also be concluded by marriage. Indeed, the matrimonial conclusion of rape drew on traditional canon law, which stipulated that rapists be forced to marry their victims or to provide them with a dowry sufficient to permit marriage to another" (143).

⁶ Among others, Rosilie Hernández-Pecoraro explores Leocadia and Rodolfo's case in "'La Fuerza Del Amor' or 'The Power of Self-Love': Zayas' Response to Cervantes' 'La Fuerza De La Sangre'". Anne J. Cruz (2013) also analyzes their tense relationship in "Cervantes, Zayas, and the Seven Deadly Sins". Most recently, Susan Byrne questions Leocadia's "inexplicable, repentine smitteness with Rodolfo" (42) in "Transcendence as Hyperbole in 'La fuerza de la sangre'".

Instead of chastising the lascivious behavior through which Rodolfo sexually victimizes Leocadia, Cervantes rewards him with a morally admirable woman who has been deprived of choice on the matter if she wants her reputation restored.

“Las dos doncellas” also showcases female exploitation, but instead of powerless women (like Leocadia) Cervantes presents Teodosia and Leocadia (the latter unrelated to the previous protagonist) as ladies who, despite being victimized, are self-sufficient and try to avenge their own honor. Teodosia condemns that Marco Antonio “apenas hubo tomado de mi la posesión que quiso, cuando de allí a dos días desapareció del pueblo” (2: 207), and Leocadia similarly reproaches his deception “para entrarse en el secreto de mi pecho y robarme las mejores prendas de mi alma” (2: 217). This type of ruse was notably conflictive in seventeenth-century Spain, as women seduced by false promises of marriage could be prosecuted by their own families for staining the familial honor.⁷ Marco Antonio’s actions perpetuate a patriarchal order that leaves victimized women with little to no legal mechanisms to argue against crimes of sexual exploitation even after the stipulations drafted in the Council of Trent.⁸ After Marco Antonio takes advantage of both women by falsely promising them marriage, they cross-dress to acquire masculine privileges and embark on a journey to cleanse their reputations.⁹ In the end, Marco Antonio admits that his loving intentions towards Leocadia were insincere (2: 228), a confession that would have facilitated a verdict in favor of legally restoring her reputation in an official trial. Cervantes’s narration, however, does not grant her this justice.

The societal acceptance of female subjugation is patently appreciable in the story’s problematic ending that hinges upon matrimony as an antidote to return to social order: Teodosia marries Marco Antonio, and Leocadia marries Teodosia’s brother Rafael. Marco Antonio’s initial sins go unpunished despite causing both women’s public shame, and when he finally accepts marrying Teodosia he justifies his dismissal of Leocadia arguing “si a vos os di cédula firmada de mi mano, a ella le di la mano firmada y acreditada con tales obras y testigos, que quedé imposibilitado de dar mi libertad a otra persona en el mundo” (2: 228). Once again Cervantes considers his plot solved because marriage has washed away Marco Antonio’s initial sexual infractions. Instead of penalizing his crimes, the author rewards his character’s sins with a laudable wife in Teodosia and gives Leocadia a consolation prize in Rafael.

⁷ These complex legal cases often determined that “premarital sexual acts, according to Catholic doctrine and contemporary notions of honor, should have caused a woman’s immediate descent into disgrace, and, later, hell” (Dyer 440) and could have dire consequences for women. It was because of this that “women had every reason to be concerned about being followed, watched, and set upon, particularly when alone and in isolated places [...] the acts of stalking or waylaying and other unexpected male actions were undoubtedly unsettling to women” (Barahona 12) and led victims of rape to bring these cases to the attention of authorities as a way to find justice or some degree of financial compensation for themselves and their offspring. Allyson M. Poska explores the nuances of these expectations in “Elusive Virtue: Rethinking the Role of Female Chastity in Early Modern Spain” (2004) and in “Gender on Trial — Attitudes about Femininity and Masculinity: The Inquisition” (2017).

⁸ Dyer posits that the effects of seduction by false promise of marriage eventually started to be contested by victims once it became known that “post-Tridentine canon law commentaries agreed that a woman who had been seduced by promise of marriage was entitled to an award equivalent to her dowry to ameliorate ‘the great damage done to her reputation’” (445).

⁹ As Margaret Greer corroborates in her book, “female-to-male cross, common in Golden Age *comedias* [...] was presumably an acceptable transformation for male readers and viewers (strict moralists excepted) because it could be easily explained instrumentally, not as an end or pleasure in itself, but as dressing ‘up’ in the gender hierarchy, and thus a validation of the superiority of the masculine position” (201).

Women's honor and men's punishment

The lack of punitive consequences for Rodolfo and Marco Antonio and the victimization of these women, robbed of their ability to choose a preferable husband, is further complicated when we compare Cervantes's resolutions to works by coetaneous popular authors. Widely regarded as a defender of women, María de Zayas wrote a rich variety of stories that provide justice by and for women in *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (1637) and *Desengaños amorosos* (1647). For example, in "La burlada Aminta y venganza del honor", Aminta avenges her own honor after being dishonorably deceived by Jacinto and "sacando la daga, se la metió al traidor don Jacinto por el corazón dos o tres veces, tanto que el quejarse y rendir el alma fue todo uno" (245).¹⁰ Luisa de Padilla also registers her frustrations with men that harm women in her moralistic treatise *Lágrimas de la Nobleza* (1639), where she exonerates women –especially wives– of the weaknesses and defects that society attributes to them. Across a variety of memorable tales about adulterous men chastised in hell, Padilla hopes to dissuade sinners from desecrating honest women's virtues.¹¹ Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla* (1630) punishes don Juan after he falsely insists to the ghost of don Gonzalo that "a tu hija no ofendí" (3.2764), and for his sins he is finally dragged to the depths of hell bemoaning "¡Que me quemó! ¡Que me abrasó! / ¡Muerto soy!" (3.2770-71). Lope de Vega's implication that the Comendador raped the mayor's daughter Laurencia in *Fuenteovejuna* (1619) prompts her visceral condemnation of the village's men and becomes the leading cause for his assassination in the town's search for justice as "¡Fuenteovejuna, y Fernán Gómez muera!" (3.1890).¹² We see a certain degree of feminist vindication even in the legal and political impasse at the end of *La Estrella de Sevilla* (1623), where Andrés de Claramonte gives Estrella a powerful voice with which she rejects marrying the man she initially loved after he fulfils king Sancho's order to assassinate her brother Busto.¹³

In all those works, we find examples of justice that is mindful of women's suffering due to men's harmful extremes. These canonical authors' resolutions greatly differ from the reparations that women receive at the end of "La fuerza de la sangre" and "Las dos doncellas". This tension is made obvious by myriad critics who have presented opposing views on Cervantes's embrace or lack of feminism in his stories and deem his assistance to suffering women inconsistent. If we understand feminism as "the recognition of the systematic inferiorization of women resulting in women's oppression or relative disempowerment, tied to a strategy for changing that

¹⁰ Zayas also writes stories where honest men help wronged women. For example, in "La esclava de su amante" Luis confronts Isabel's rapist Manuel and "le tiró una estocada tal, que, o fuse cogerle desapercibido, o que el Cielo por su mano le envió su merecido castigo y a mí la deseada venganza" (163). Similar justice is found in "La Inocencia castigada", where authorities imprison Ines's necromantic rapist Diego and sentence her brother, husband and mother-in-law to death for torturing her despite her innocence in the resulting familial dishonor.

¹¹ Padilla laments that "los Nobles (a quien aquí se llora con tanta razón) no contrahen cumplidamente el verdadero Matrimonio, pues faltan a todo lo dicho, con faltar al amor que deven a sus mugeres, el qual ponen en las ajenas" (Padilla 408), and warns they would be punished by demons and dragons who "rompiendo por las partes más sensibles, y dolorosas de los atormentados, les hazían dar tales alaridos que asombraban el infierno" (424-25).

¹² Laurencia harshly criticizes her townsmen as "hilanderas, maricones, / amujerados, cobardes" (2.1781-82) for failing to act while "vuestras mujeres / sufrís que otros hombres gocen!" (2.1772-72). While the rape is never acknowledged verbally, Stacey Parker Aronson points out that only "those versed in medieval imagery will be able to interpret Laurencia's "desmelenada" hair as an indication that she has been raped" (36).

¹³ Estrella argues that she must decline this marriage because "ver siempre al homicida / de mi hermano en mesa y cama / me ha de dar pena... no ha de ser mi esposo / hombre que a mi hermano mata, / aunque le quiero y adoro" (3.3006-16). Her decision is respected by her suitor Sancho Ortiz, who claims that "yo, señor, por amarla / no es justicia que lo sea" (3.3017-18), leaving the king astonished at their honor and Estrella's self-sufficiency validated.

circumstance” (Kaminsky 21), it would be difficult to argue that Cervantes is antifeminist. His works often showcase feminist issues, or as Richard Rorty puts it “the fact that people with the slightly larger muscles have been bullying the people with the slightly smaller muscles for a very long time” (233). Female subjugation at the hands of immoderate men is recurrent in the *Novelas ejemplares*, in reflection of the long-standing, “ancient tradition of scapegoating women” (Graf 2007, 59) that was common in seventeenth-century Spain. Cervantes’s treatment of femininity (see El Saffar, Cruz, Fuchs, Hernández-Pecoraro, and Wilson) and his representations of women (see Alcalá Galán, Ciallella, and Jehenson) have frequently been analyzed in scholarly research and are often considered a reflection of widespread conceptualizations of womanhood during his time.

Although criticism of Cervantes’s works from a feminist point of view is more developed than ever before, some scholars believe this research has not clarified much about the author’s intent towards women. Isabel Navas Ocaña points out that despite the many voices defending Cervantes’s feminism, there are just as many that show evidences of misogyny in his representation of female characters (228). The feminist novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán said as much in her *La mujer española y otros artículos feministas* (1892), where she criticized Cervantes’s treatment of Dulcinea as a demonstration of women’s oppression (122-23). Perhaps most well-known is Theresa Ann Sears’s perception that Cervantes’s treatment of women is a form of male chauvinism, which she attributes to his numerous endings designed to leave women tamed by matrimony (201). This kind of analytical perspective has garnered critiques from detractors for being a “paranoid investigation of the masculinist ideology supposedly lurking about in his marriage plots” (Graf 2007, 92), and it has been accused of ignoring Cervantes’s numerous representations of masculinity as a more dangerous gender identity than femininity. As this divide indicates, there is no widespread consensus on Cervantes’s feminism.

Bridging the divide: paradoxical feminism

In the presence of such varied dissenting voices, it is possible to bridge the opposing feminist and antifeminist interpretations of these *novelas* with the ‘paradoxical feminism’ I mentioned earlier, because Cervantes’s apparent lack of criticism regarding noblemen’s immoderacy may be justified if we account for his use of irony when it comes to his treatment of women. Irony demands from Cervantes’s readers the responsibility to judge the scenes they find in the *Novelas ejemplares* (Deupmann 349). It is “the art of saying something without really saying it. It is an art that gets its effects from below the surface, and this gives it a quality that resembles the depth and resonance of great art triumphantly saying much more than it seems to be saying” (Muecke 5). Irony, however, can be a double-edged sword. When used as a literary tool, it “serves to mock and unmask untruths, while at the same time perpetuating them” (Dahl 33). Despite being able to criticize between the lines, irony takes the risk of cementing the preexisting gender inequality, of which there is ample historical evidence.¹⁴

We can read Cervantes’s stories as ironic reflections of social tensions between genders. Cervantes was cognizant of the authorities’ watchful eyes, and so he had to sanction men implicitly because his ability to conceal “a destructive criticism under sanctimonious and patriotic sentences,

¹⁴ One clear example are the varying degrees of corporal punishment applied to either sex: women were often harshly disciplined “as long as this was not extreme, with a common standard being that he did not draw blood” (Wiesner-Hanks 284). On the contrary, men were usually lightly reprimanded and advised to behave more moderately, without applying any more severe corrective until the third or fourth appearance in court.

is Cervantes' defense against possible troubles with the Inquisition" (Hatzfeld 322).¹⁵ His criticism could not be overt, but it could be inserted within an ironic framework that hid its feminism under the surface. It is important to keep in mind that "la función de la ironía del narrador [...] consiste en propiciar la ambigüedad de significados" (Gopar Osorio 116). This ambiguity is directly responsible for guiding Cervantes's readers to reach their own judgment and makes the incongruities of some of the endings in the *Novelas ejemplares* more consistent.¹⁶ Looking at this vagueness through the lens of irony we see the paradox between an antifeminist abandonment of women to their misfortune –a perpetuation of centuries of masculine domination– and its feminist or at least pro-woman effect in Cervantes's audience. The clash between textual evidence and poetic justice provokes a reaction to the apparently unaddressed maltreatment of women that stimulates an overtly feminist interpretation of the story. In this light, paradoxical feminism is one of the many "elaborate narrative barriers that Cervantes sets up in order to distance himself, as the historical author, from his readers" (Cruz 2019, 264), which he uses masterfully to hide a feminist message without explicitly supporting it.

Let's return to the two *novelas* at hand, this time looking at them from a paradoxical feminism perspective. Their problematic marriages solve the *enredos* that ignite their plots and restore the status quo but simultaneously communicate to readers an obscured sense that they are not, in fact, acceptable solutions.¹⁷ If we consider Cervantes an antifeminist, these unions represent an androcentric discourse exculpatory of men's misdeeds and takes precedence over exposing the damages that women experience. If we consider him a feminist, we cannot reconcile these two stories' resolutions with their concluding lack of defense of women. Leaving Leocadia trapped in a marriage she did not choose in "La fuerza de la sangre", while Rodolfo's original crime receives no consequence perpetuates traditional preconceptions of women's inferiority.¹⁸ This apparent antifeminism detracts from the moral *exemplum* that the story aims to provide: espousing victim and perpetrator satisfies the requisites of the honor code by transforming the affront into a marital relation as if by legal alchemy, but it is inescapable that the original rape has remained unpunished for the majority of the story.

This problematic solution ironically signals Cervantes's disconformity.¹⁹ In the final scene when Leocadia learns she is to marry Rodolfo, the author implicitly paints matrimony as a patriarchal mechanism to exert masculine domination onto women: what is left unsaid appends a paradoxically feminist tone to what is said. We see this, on the one hand, in the description of Rodolfo's impatience, aching for nightfall because "tan grande era el deseo de verse a solas con su querida esposa" (2: 95). His sexual expectations, not his honorable intentions towards Leocadia, are emphasized; a fundamental distinction that undermines the legitimacy of their marriage as a

¹⁵ As Frances Luttikhuisen points out, Cervantes "was not about to be exposed for an unguarded remark... The slightest slip of the tongue could easily become compromising information" (77).

¹⁶ Although he does not touch upon Cervantes's feminism, Bradley J. Nelson similarly argues that "Cervantes's implicit structural irony can help explain the abrupt and violent endings of many of the *novelas*" (127).

¹⁷ Cervantes's contradictory attitude towards marriage as a questionable tool to regain order has already been explored by scholars who argue that "when not offered as a solution to social problems, the heterosexual union is proposed as one to be resisted or undermined" (Cruz 2008, 93).

¹⁸ While the matter of Leocadia's choice to marry may seem questionable given that young people were generally expected to defer to parental or familial decisions regarding marriage, in truth, clandestine or secret marriages were not unheard of, as "individuals often skirted ecclesiastical tenets and codes of conduct in various ways" (Barahona XX) that defied familial expectations.

¹⁹ As Linda Hutcheon argues, we need to recognize that "lo 'dicho' y lo 'no dicho' coexisten para el intérprete y los dos toman su significado el uno en relación con el otro, porque están literalmente en interacción para formar el sentido irónico" (244). In this scene, what is left unsaid has as much or even more importance than what is said.

harbinger of order. Instead, it insinuates a return to the foundation of their relationship: rape.²⁰ On the other hand, the cryptic description that after the wedding “quedó toda la casa sepultada en silencio” (2: 95) contradicts the apparent order in which the story ends. The use of ‘sepultada’ signals that Leocadia is left to live honored but as good as dead, buried under Rodolfo’s oppression in a marriage that will forever reenact the sexual victimization that united them. Rodolfo’s triumphant destiny, free from penalty after his crime is silenced through matrimony, corroborates the irony of this resolution in which supposedly “muchos y felices años gozaron de sí mismos, de sus hijos y de sus nietos” (2: 95). Leocadia’s embrace of this “alegría universal” (2: 94) and an apparently joyous future she did not freely choose are presented as an acceptable return to order, but the ironic undertone criticizes this purportedly blissful, orderly household where, paradoxically, the central domestic component (the woman) is left for dead.

In “Las dos doncellas”, the resolution also suggests Cervantes’s implicit disapproval of Marco Antonio’s debauchery. His misdeeds are not judged by the law despite infringing courtly expectations.²¹ The efficacy of these marriages as tools to resolve the plot is questionable. With both women dishonored by the same man, only one of them may restore her reputation through marriage, so the law may, at best, justify the legality of Teodosia and Marco Antonio’s marriage. Leocadia’s grievance, according to the code of honor, can only be cleansed by the man responsible for it, and even though she assures that her body remains unsullied because “no le gocé, ni me gozó” she promptly acknowledges that “se hizo ceniza mi honra y se consumió mi crédito” (2: 218).²² Leocadia’s dishonor is no longer legally solvable once Marco Antonio becomes unavailable to her, which reveals Spanish laws’ insufficiency to assuage the sociopolitical needs of women subjugated by sinful men. Cervantes sidesteps this quandary and forces a return to order by uniting Leocadia and Rafael: he affirms that because of her incredible valor “se me ha de olvidar, y ya se me ha olvidado, todo cuanto en esto he sabido y visto” (2: 231) and marries her willfully ignoring her dishonored status.

Once again, authorial disconformity is communicated implicitly by remarking upon the reticence of “la dudosa Leocadia”, resigned to accept this supposedly desirable marriage to Rafael “pues así lo ha ordenado el cielo y no es en mi mano, ni en la de viviente alguno, oponerse a lo que él determinado tiene [...] no porque no entienda lo mucho que en obedeceros gano” (2: 232). Her conformity poses two latent complications: either God designed this future of inevitable dishonor for her (in direct contradiction with Christian expectations), or the code of honor is unequipped to solve dilemmas where a woman loses the option to reinstate her good name through no fault of her own. Either way, the implication is the same: women are harmed while men suffer little to no consequence. With Marco Antonio now inaccessible to Leocadia and no solution for the legal offense caused by his breaching the signed document with which he proposed marriage

²⁰ As Edward H. Friedman points out, “because Leocadia's virtue is established from the outset, the focal figure in terms of conversion would be Rodolfo” (127). However, his attitude towards the end of the tale demonstrates that he has learned no moral lesson from his unpunished crimes. This characterization renders the supposedly exemplary conclusion one that is effective in appearance but that is internally collapsed.

²¹ Both Rodolfo and Marco Antonio exemplify the type of impunity that Padilla will denounce years later, horrified that “solo en España, ahorcando los que hurtan joyas de precio, dexan de castigar el adulterio” (418).

²² This assertion may seem surprising considering she had initially acknowledged that Marco Antonio had “robarme las mejores prendas de mi alma” (2: 217), which leads to the assumption of her loss of virginity. However, the popular understanding at the time deemed that all sinful premarital activities –including but not limited to fornication– made women waste “el tiempo, la salud, la hazienda, la reputación, y otras (qué desdicha!)” (Ezcaray 240). Juan Luis Vives famously warned of the gravity of this conduct in *Instrucción de la Mujer Christiana* (1523): “maldita doncella e indigna de vivir, la que de su grado pierde un tan rico y tan excelente joyel [...] ¿Qué dolor es el de los padres? ¿qué infamia reciben los parientes?” (40-1).

to her, Cervantes concludes the story with the lady's suspect union to Rafael. The paradox in the apocryphal feminist nature of this conjugal solution can only be framed reading ironically, between lines: rather than rectifying Leocadia's defamation, it only manages to stain Rafael's honor. The final acknowledgment that both men "luengos y felices años vivieron en compañía de sus esposas" (2: 236) clashes with the need to withhold the names of the andalusian villages to which they move because "quizá las lenguas maldicientes o neciamente escrupulosas les [harán] cargo de la ligereza de sus deseos y el súbito mudar de sus trajes" (2: 236-7). If marriage had truly restored order and honor such precaution would be unnecessary, therefore it follows that Cervantes considers these blameless women forsaken to preserve the illusion of an honorable patriarchy.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares* reveal tensions between men and women in seventeenth-century Spain, but it is only through his ironic ambiguity that we may appreciate further levels of criticism within these problematic, apparently antifeminist resolutions. Cervantes's representation of women may indeed be misogynistic, especially when we consider that his use of marriage seems to be "a convenient end to fictional narratives" (Cruz 2019, 272). When we account for irony, however, we find an underlying message that encapsulates a defense of women, albeit obscured. Irony impresses a paradoxical feminism on Cervantes's treatment of women that is arguably more effective than an overtly feminist approach because it allows educated readers to be aware of his true intent by parsing through his clever wording. In these two tales, we must consider that while "the final words of a text may bring closure, or they may leave the 'unwritten' future open [...] with regard to Spanish Golden Age literature, they may be subject to censorship by Church and State" (Friedman 129). Through his astute use of paradoxical feminism, Cervantes is able to convey a feminist message that would have attracted the attention of inquisitorial authorities under the guise of an antifeminist stance. While many of his peers do not have reservations in explicitly reproaching masculine misconduct, Cervantes embraces a more careful stance by using irony to permeate everything he chooses to say or not say, therefore "su silencio, entonces, no puede ser involuntario" (Gopar Osorio 109).²³ As I have demonstrated in this analysis, feminism in Cervantes may present itself in numerous, surprising and potentially contradictory forms, even to the point of appearing misogynistic. In the face of this ambiguity, and the disagreements in today's critical field, paradoxical feminism is a useful framework to better understand the ironic distortions of the author's affinity towards women in the *Novelas ejemplares*.²⁴ Whether Cervantes was a feminist or not, there is no denying that he influenced discourses on gender during his time, opening doors for women authors such as María de Zayas, Ana Caro and Luisa de Padilla to write overtly feminist works in the ensuing decades. Exploring Cervantes's dissonant representations of femininity allows us to look through the gendered veil of

²³ In one of the most overwhelmingly feminist early modern calls to arms, Zayas concludes her *Desengaños amorosos* warning men that "por despedida suplico muden de intención y lenguaje con las mujeres, porque si mi defensa por escrito no basta, será fuerza que todas tomemos las armas para defendernos de sus malas intenciones y defendernos de los enemigos, aunque no sé qué mayores enemigos que ellos, que nos ocasionan a mayores ruinas que los enemigos" (509). In contrast, concealment ran deep within Cervantes. In an anecdote used as a reference point for his analysis of the roles of mothers in Cervantine works, Maurice Molho reveals that even his last "name Cortinas allows itself, in turn, to be concealed - or better, masked - by Saavedra, the name Cervantes chose to put in the place where Cortinas would normally have appeared (240).

²⁴ As Anne J. Cruz puts it, it is "only by breaking the bipolarities imposed on Cervantes's narratives by masculinist modes of reading do we give his female subjects their due" (Cruz 1999, 146).

patriarchal order and better understand the impact he had upon early modern society by discerning the flaws he identified in Spaniards' treatment of women.

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- con su preciosísima sangre redimió nuestro amantísimo Jesús*. Sevilla: Thomas López de Haro, 1691.
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