

PERSILE ET SIGISMONDE: CERVANTES REWRITTEN BY 18TH-CENTURY FRENCH FEMINISM

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On the title pages of six voluminous French works published in the 1730's, all tied to Spain either as adaptations or apparent imitations of Spanish works, the author's name appears, as so frequently happened when it was a woman, only in the form of her initials: Mme. L.G.D.R.¹ The French National Library interprets these as Le Givre de Richebourg, though La Grange de Richebourg and Le Gendre de Richebourg have also been mentioned as possibilities. Silas Jones reported that "*Le Cabinet des fées*, 1785, etc., v. 27, p. 300, says that the author was called Mme. La Garde de Richebourg, and that her husband was an inspector of mines" (49). Beyond that, her life can only be surmised from her literary works, and these are virtually unstudied.²

Nearly equally unexamined are the popularity and perception in 17th- and 18th-century France of the model used for her adaptation of Cervantes, modeled on his final book, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, Historia Setentrional*. Stegmann's study of the editions and translations of the work shows that it was published six times in Paris prior to 1800, on the basis of three separate translations (221). The first two, published in 1618, were by men, but each was dedicated to a duchess (Duchesses D'Uses and de Arques), as was a second edition of one of them published in 1626 (Duchesse de Chev-

1.- The titles are: *La veuve en puissance de mary, nouvelle tragicomique...*; *Avantures de Clamadès et de Clarmonde, tirées de l'espagnol...*; *Avantures de Flores et de Blanche fleur, tirées de l'espagnol...*; *Les aventures [sic] de Zelin et de Damasine, histoire africaine*; *Avantures de Dom Ramire de Roxas et de dona Leonor de Mendocce, tirées de l'espagnol...*; *Persile et Sigismonde, histoire septentrionale tirée de l'espagnol de Miguel de Cervantes...* See Cioranescu, p. 1082, though he erroneously lists the first word in the last title as Persiles.

2.- In a reply to a letter of inquiry from me, Joan Hinde Stewart wrote back on July 28, 1994, that "I wish I could give you some useful information about Madame Le Givre de Richebourg. But I know of no one working on her and know nothing about her myself." Although there is some bibliographical information in the reference works by Martin, Mylne and Frautschi and by Silas Jones, essentially the same as that found in the Cioranescu bibliography cited above, no criticism of her work appears to have been written, with the exception of two brief items I have co-authored with Marina Mazal Tov Compson. The first was a paper titled "Adaptation féministe de l'épique en prose de Cervantes," delivered in April, 1995, at the conference held at Washington University, "Les Femmes Ecrivains Sous l'Ancien Régime: Tentatives d'Emancipation." The second is an entry that will appear in the 18th-century section of the forthcoming *A Feminist Companion to French Literature*. Though both Prof. Hinde Stewart and Ms. Compson have recently looked in the French National Library for further information on Mme. L.G.D.R., nothing has come to light.

reuse). Mme. L.G.D.R.'s four-volume version (1738), undedicated but accompanied by illustrations, was issued in a second edition in 1740, with the addition of a life of Cervantes.

Somewhat surprisingly, Esther Crooks' 1930 study of Cervantes' influence in 17th-century France scarcely touched on the work, apparently due to her view that the impact of Cervantes' prose works was slight until the advent of Romanticism. She characterized his narratives, up through the end of the 18th century, as thought of only as part of the picaresque genre (199). However, the bibliographic information now compiled strongly suggests that *Persiles y Sigismunda*, though a romance, did appeal to French sensibilities of the time, although the reasons have never been examined. If we may judge from the better known case of *Don Quixote*, French readers were probably split along class and gender lines.

As critics such as Daniela Dalla Valle and C. J. Davison have pointed out, the nature of the French reception of Cervantes' parody of chivalry was tied up with the persistence of the ancien régime. The socio-political circumstances were reflected, among aristocrats and those who identified with them, by an unbroken tradition of nostalgic admiration for antiquated chivalric ideals, all the way from the reign of François Premier to the eve of the Revolution. The immense popularity in France of the translation of *Amadís de Gaula* is indicative of the tastes of the country's readership in the mid-sixteenth century and well beyond (Davison 82). On the other hand, the growing urban bourgeoisie responded with enthusiasm to ridicule of an institution that both sought to check middle-class development and failed to address the sources of violent discontent among the peasantry. Thus in works like the Quixote trilogy of Guérin de Bouscal (1640) both Don Quijote and Sancho are stripped of their good qualities, reduced, in the case of the master, to a bragging fool with delusions of amorous as well as heroic grandeur (Dalla Valle 458).

But the situation was different in the salons, where aristocratic women and their imitators wholeheartedly made the connection, not as naive in their time and place as now, between the ideals of *fin amour* and the advancement of women. Whatever the reason for Mme. L.G.D.R.'s interest in things Spanish, it is not surprising that she chose to rewrite medieval French works that had been successful in Spanish versions as well: *Clamadès et Clarmonde*, *Flores et Blanchefleur*. In more general terms, reasoned gallantry and the analysis of passion -as, for example, in Racine- carried the day (Davison 82), while the writing of novels came to be thought of as a feminine skill and occupation. As Hinde Stewart has observed, the "feminization of males and of French society itself was... a frequent theme, underscored by Jean Jacques Rousseau, among others" (28).³

For these same reasons of respect accorded to women and the feminine, but without as much danger of distancing idealization, Byzantine novels, such as *Persiles y Sigismunda* - which recounts the adventures of a young Scandinavian couple in love escaping to Rome on a pilgrimage - were much cultivated by women writers. Isabelle de Montolieu, for instance, wrote one supposedly translated from the Greek, titled *Le triomphe de l'amitié* and published in 1751. As the title suggests, the genre presents love as intense friendship between equals, and Ruth Anthony El-Saffar's highly influential reading of Cervantes' posthumous romance has stressed that the author's choice of form reflected an affirmation of the feminine (Anthony El Saffar 12-13). His affinities with Erasmian thought regarding women and marriage (Forcione, *Humanist Vision* 191) similarly suggest that Byzantine romance was for Cervantes, as for later French feminists, a compatible literary vehicle for emerging social ideas about women.

In its more secular French form known as the *roman fleuve* (a sprawling adventure tale whose plot sweeps all before it), described by Françoise Bargaüllet in its earlier form as heroic and gallant with moral and intellectual dissertations inserted (38), it flourished in France somewhat later than in Spain, retaining its popularity throughout the 17th century and on into the 18th. In this more intellectually

3.- This direction of change was, naturally, not a complete transformation. Nancy Miller has analyzed the contradictions within the so-called "reign of women" over eighteenth-century French social life (71). She also examines women's role in the development of the French novel in chapter 3, "Men's Reading, Women's Writing: Gender and the Rise of the Novel".

ambitious mode it also lent itself, as in Cervantes, to the portrayal of religious experiences of spiritual death and rebirth (Hinde Stewart 33, 201). In both periods it offered the possibility of including tidbits of scientific information, a narrative feature prized in the 16th-century for creating opportunities to present the amazing combined with the true (Forcione, *Cervantes, Aristotle*, 95-104), while in the 17th and 18th it allowed women to show their competence in the predominately masculine world of "hard" facts and theories.

Persile et Sigismonde begins with a more secular tone than its model, an impersonal predestination or irresistible fate seeming to replace divine providence, but it curiously reverses itself in the final book. The description of the religious instruction received by Sigismunda in Rome is much expanded, and - in a reversal of the Cervantine storyline - the narrator reports that the Pope's theologians included Persiles in their instructional program, not just his intended bride. Still, on balance, an examination of what Mme. L.G.D.R.'s rewriting of Cervantes keeps and develops from the original shows that she was attracted to *Persiles y Sigismunda* for other reasons: the prominence of women characters, their strength of intellect and will. Such a comparison also reminds us that she writes from the perspective of the French Enlightenment, largely overlooking the allegorical exaltation of women typical of the Renaissance and instead portraying women as *savantes*, not goddesses. Instead of emblematic symbols, there are detailed explications by her narrator to lay out the causes and effects behind Cervantes' more elliptically presented plot and characterization. A general 18th-century preference for clarity of logic and symmetry may also be involved in her decision to move six chapters from Book III to Book IV, a shift that results, since her additions change the length of some chapters, in nearly exactly the same number of pages (350) in each of the four books.

The introduction of the logical clarifications also helps to explain why her text is one third longer than Cervantes' (195,000 words versus 145,000). The extra length is explained, as well, by the presence of two stories not in Cervantes at all, both of which foreground a woman character and confirm several aspects of feminist ideals pointed to by the shorter explanatory additions. The first of the two is incorporated, with all the casualness of *El curioso impertinente in Don Quixote*, at the end of Book I, and while Cervantes' dominant image of his female protagonist at this point in the progression toward Rome is a classical wisdom goddess (Colahan 33-38), here the icon that comes to mind is the female half of French literature's pair of archetypal tricksters, Béroul's Tristan and Iseut. If there is one specific form of women's emancipation that Mme. L.G.D.R. could be said to hammer away at, it is freedom from paternally arranged marriages, and the distance from that to *fin amour's* defense of adultery as escape from the hardships of such bonds seems to melt away to nothing.

Though Mme. L.G.D.R.'s heroine, Mlle. de Quency, is not yet married, she elopes shortly before her arranged marriage/sale to a repulsive, nouveau riche hunchback, and with an exotic young foreign gentleman named Kingston whom she has just met while hunting in the woods. Although she speaks of the folly of ignoring her duty and of following a stranger, love transforms her into a conscious rebel. By claiming sexual freedom without even consulting her father to see if he might be willing to allow her to marry Kingston instead of the repulsive fiancé - behavior that often leads to at least some suffering in Cervantes - she would seem to raise the question of whether love justifies all acts or whether, instead, it leads to an irresponsible disregard of the needs of others, specifically one's parents.

But Mme. L.G.D.R. shows no sign of scruples about presenting the rash deed in an entirely favorable light, and clearly on the basis of it being the woman's right, not the father's, to choose.⁴ Other echoes of the social defiance at the root of courtly love are perceptible in the description of the bond between the young people as springing from powerful natural impulses, while trickery and even some violence, in moderation, are used and justified. In contrast, in Cervantes, whose Persiles is Christlike in his non-violence and whose Sigismunda is designed to recall the Virgin Mary (Colahan 27, 36), the reconciliation of nature, religion and individual freedom is more central, the tone correspondingly less

4.- Such a rejection of amorous self-sacrifice was typical of French women's writing at the time. See Hinde Stewart, p. 55.

rebellious and more spiritual (Avalle Arce 243, Garrote Pérez 157-58). In contrast, Mme. L.G.D.R.'s image of the heroine seems to have taken energy and outline from medieval glamour, i.e., feminine power derived from the combination of sexual attraction and hidden knowledge, which characterizes not only Iseut but, even more, the seductive sorceress Morgain le Fey.

Intelligence and knowledge are also applied in the service of the protagonist of the second interpolated tale, but in a way that looks less back toward older forms of social organization and more forward toward 20th-century manifestations of feminism. Hortense is introduced during the pilgrim's short visit to Milan, and the possession and skillful exposition of information is her distinguishing characteristic. Highly knowledgeable and liked by all, she first serves the protagonists as guide to the city. But when the famous academy is brought up, in conjunction with the question of whether love can exist unaccompanied by jealousy, she engages Sigismunda and Persiles in debate, recounting the events of her own courtship to make her point that the two emotions are inseparable. Although the male protagonist refuses to admit defeat, arguing that an example does not establish a general rule, he concedes that she has demonstrated a closely related point, that love and fear of losing the loved one are always bound together.

She has also crafted, albeit within the limits of the 18th-century French novel's fondness for improbable coincidences, a vivid fantasy centered on the resolute outwitting of abusive paternal authority and of old men's misuse of marriage. Hortense tells Persiles and Sigismunda of her discovery that the man who had won her heart, and professed to love her, suddenly turned fickle, drawn away by the sight of another woman, Félicie. With the help of her aunt, abbess of the convent in which she has been placed by her father, she plans a daring strategy to defeat her rival, a plan involving cross-dressing in order to appear to be her own identical twin brother. But while playing her role with both finesse and success, it is revealed that her true love is the longlost brother of Félicie, and his inexplicable attraction to her merely unconscious sibling affection. With sisterly solidarity, Hortense joins forces with her former rival.

The two young women and the abbess need all the combined strength they can muster on discovering that the two fathers have signed a contract in which each promises the other his daughter in marriage. The burden of the law of the fathers takes on painful immediacy, but, after the oppressive document has been purloined, the aunt adroitly raises the patriarchal ante by calling in the assistance of the Inquisition. Its representative, fully aware that such unnatural marriages would not produce children, proves most cooperative to the young lovers, and the terrified reaction of the old men to his threats, including the avowal of purely monetary desires in planning the marriages, produces the comic satisfaction invariably connected with the humiliation of petty tyrants.

Thus, as usually happens in comedy and Cervantes, church and society ultimately support trickery and social rebellion when carried out by the young to escape oppression by the old, especially in the context of marriage. In *Persiles y Sigismunda*, the possibility of society's collective persistence in an unnatural vice, such as that plotted by the fathers in this tale by Mme. L.G.D.R., is examined in Cervantes' narration of Transila's defiance of an entire society's adherence to the custom of ritual rape of brides by the groom's male relatives (Book I, ch. 13). But even in that barbaric setting, as in the story of Hortense, there is the optimistic belief in a final vindication by a larger, more civilized portion of the human family, and so Transila, together with her father and husband, eventually moves to England.

But the optimistic, woman-centered quality of Mme. L.G.D.R.'s work is not limited to these original expansions. Throughout the entire two-year storyline, the female characters get more than in Cervantes - more respect, more emphasis on women's concerns, and more narrative space to express their judgments and feelings. The following examples, far from exhaustive, are only illustrative. Early in Book I, Transila receives the epithet of sage, and her role expands from foreign languages interpreter to spokeswoman for the band of pilgrims, delivering an important speech on their behalf (I:162). There is a huge increase in sympathy for Rosamunda's plight as an aging beauty whose life has centered on her ability to attract men, and the narrator emphasizes that it is the female characters who show this

compassionate understanding while the senior male pointlessly moralizes at her for pages and pages (1:287-300).

Similarly, near the beginning of Book II while the pilgrims are on Policarpo's island, the debilitating effects of Auristella's jealousy of Sinforosa are de-emphasized, and the author inserts an indignant comment on the inappropriateness of Cervantes' lengthy observations on the subject.⁵ The chapters set in Policarpo's court, however, are in general among those least modified, since in them Cervantes, in a parallel to the prevalent tendency throughout Mme. L.G.D.R.'s adaptation, reduces his emphasis on the peripeteia of the journey in favor of a detailed analysis of the emotions behind the relationships at court. The most remarkable character of this section is Cenotia, in Cervantes a self-important magician overcome by lust for the young Antonio. But in the French version her questionable skills in magic are secondary to her accomplishments as a royal confidante, an occupation in which she has demonstrated a powerful mastery of rhetoric and applied psychology (2:125-134, 144, 187).

With the arrival of the band on the European mainland at the beginning of Book III, the gallant language of courtly lovers becomes prominent in the adaptation. Where Cervantes reports that Persiles checked to see that Sigismunda (traveling under the name of Auristela) was in agreement with a decision ("con parecer de Auristela"), the phrase in French becomes "qui se regloit toujours sur la volonte d'Auristelle" (3:33). The pilgrims' brief encounter with a playwright, in which Sigismunda turns down an offer to become an actress, clearly fired Mme. L.G.D.R.'s imagination; she inserts a full description of the glories and pleasures enjoyed by such unfettered and admired women (3: 32-35).

Feliciana de la Voz, who has given birth after secretly daring to choose her own future husband and now finds her life threatened by her father and brother, is revealed in the adaptation to have lost the mother who would have looked out for her interests (3: 54). While in the original she fearfully stumbles away from the paternal home lost in the night, in the French version she furiously defends the newborn against her father's sword, later tells her story in a long speech. The hymn she sings to the Virgin of Guadalupe adds advocations of Mary related to women's activities (Protector of Widows, Mother of Orphans), transfers metaphors for Christ's power to his mother, and places all of the blame for the fall of the human race on the serpent, entirely exonerating Eve (3: 91-106).

In the episode that introduces Luisa, whose boyfriend is described by Cervantes as frequently kicking her, in Spanish the young man is called just that, a *mozo*, but in French he is "*ce Brutal*" (3: 136), and there are several sarcastic uses of the word "galant" in reference to him (3:137-140). When the band reaches the home of the elder Antonio, who has not seen his parents for many years, Cervantes claims that they do not recognize him for several days until he reveals who he is, but Mme. L.G.D.R. shows his mother as not taking long to see the truth (3: 180-182). When the agent of the Duke of Nemours has Sigismunda's portrait surreptitiously painted he declares that she, a woman, is the most faithful image of the Creator (3: 285). The burning desire for revenge felt by the widow Ruperta is presented in a context of such suffering as to appear very nearly justified (3: 345), while the lady's decorum and social position are protected by the innovation of someone fetching a "Pasteur" for an instant marriage as soon as she has climbed into the bed of her chosen second mate (3: 356).

In Book IV Isabel says much more and is more prudent than in the original, getting to know Andrea before arranging the charade of demonic possession that allows her to marry him (4:145-147). And finally, in the retroactive explanations of how the action of the entire romance was set in motion, Persiles' mother figures even more prominently than in the original, demonstrating practical and political savvy in more detail, making provision for situations at the close of the story and beyond (4:170-171, 317-320).

Still, all these very twentieth-century changes regarding women notwithstanding, the work's aristocratic politics makes its worldview as different from ours as it was from Cervantes'. In the first half

5.- "Nous retranchons, dans cette Traduction, une Definition aussi longue qu'ennuyeuse, pour en venir à la narration du Fait, dont il est maintenant plus à propos de prendre connoissance, que de suivre dans sa Philosophie un Ecrivain qui paroît abandonner son Sujet, pour entreprendre un Traité des Passions de l'Ame, comme si le Lecteur ne sçavoit pas aussi-bien philosopher que lui" (2: 2).

there is a strong defense of the divine right of kings (1:203), while sovereigns are compared to fathers who rule over their children (1:260) and win their love by foreseeing and solving their problems (2:17). In the second half the run-away servant Bartolomé literally grovels at the feet of his lordly masters, who speak to him with great harshness (4:30-33), while it is the Pope himself who marries the protagonists (4:343). And in day-to-day activities, especially after the three French ladies join the band, there is a pervasive and thoroughly unreligious concern with making sure everyone has appropriate clothes (2:36, 3:11, 4:23), horses and servants (4:35), and appropriate social events to attend (4:1-2). The narrator is frequently at pains to reassure the reader that life on the road and among peasants is not as bad as one would imagine, whether it's a question of cuisine (2:157), sleeping accommodations (3:51) or music (3:159).

The rewritten description of the pilgrims near the beginning of Book III captures the feel of the work's differences from both CounterReformation Christian idealism and modern egalitarianism. The generosity of spirit, good will and attractiveness expressed in Spanish with *bizarria... humildad*, and *buen parecer* is transmuted into a gilded aura of "le port majestueux des uns, & l'air noble des autres" (3:34). Mme. L.G.D.R., though more modern than Cervantes in her firm belief in the power of secular knowledge, does not seem to have glimpsed the coming Revolution that would, eventually, give some measure of reality to that betterment of women's lives that she had imagined in fiction.

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