Cervantes and the *Decameron*: A Note on the Sources and Meaning of Don Quijote's Prototypical Chivalric Adventure (I, 50)

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The reader of *Don Quijote* has at his disposition a veritable banquet of delights, for beneath the surface of almost any of its episodes there lies a wealth of literary allusion, as well as implicit observations about the human condition in general and that of the novel's protagonist in particular. A case in point is the prototypical adventure that Don Quijote improvises as a reply to the Canon of Toledo, who, to the hidalgos' infinite chagrin, professes not to believe in the historicity of books of chivalry (Part I, chapters 47-50). It will be remembered that, to substantiate his claim for the truthfulness of romances, Don Quijote relates (I, 50) an adventure that actually illustrates precisely the opposite, because it epitomizes the most fantastic elements of the genre:

A knight standing near a boiling lake hears a woman's voice calling to him from the middle of the mere, praising his valor. He accepts her challenge to plunge into the roiled waters, and at their bottom finds an Other-Worldly realm, placed in an eerie but beautiful landscape; in this setting there arises a marvelous castle overlain with all manner of jewels, including emeralds and rubies. A group of persons issues forth to welcome him into the palace; there he is entertained by music, and served a lavish banquet by beauteous maidens dressed in stunning attire, but who remain utterly mute all the while.

To be sure, such descriptions of a Nether World abound in the romances of chivalry as in few other literary genres,¹ but all the features just enumerated in Don Quijote's account proceed directly from a similar episode in the *Libro del caballero Zifar*.² But there is more here: taking the adventure of the Caballero Atrevido in the *Zifar* as his basic text, Don Quijote then goes on to embroider additional decorative motifs upon its fabric, using odd bits taken from other chivalric descriptions. To cite one such example, the notion of having serpents swimming around in the frightful lake may well derive from Feliciano de Silva's *Amadís de Grecia* Part II, chap. 47.³ However, by far the most striking modification made by him of the Rueful Countenance to his basic *Zifar* model is the following passage:

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Y ¿hay más . . . que ver salir por la puerta del castillo un buen número de doncellas, cuyos galanos y vistosos trajes, si yo me pusiese ahora a decirlos . . . sería nunca acabar, y tomar luego la que parecía principal de todas por la mano al atrevido caballero . . . y llevarle, sin hablarle palabra, dentro del rico alcázar o castillo, y hacerle desnudar como su madre le parió, y bañarle con templadas aguas, y luego untarle todo con olorosos ungüentos, y vestirle una camisa de cendal delgadísimo,
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² Pages 214-17 in the new edition by Joaquín González Muela (Madrid: Castalia, 1982). This influence was pointed out rather recently, by Roger M. Walker, “Did Cervantes Know the *Cavallero Zifar*?” BHS, 49 (1972), 120-27, at 125-26. To Walker's very perceptive analysis can be added two further coincidences: at one point Don Quijote refers to his imaginary hero as “el atrevido caballero” (ed. Francisco Rodríguez Marín, 10 vols. [Madrid: Atlas, 1947-49], III, 386 [all citations refer to this edition]); while the protagonist of this same adventure in the *Zifar* is similarly called “El Caballero Atrevido” (ed. cit., p. 214); and in both accounts emphasis is given to the luxurious manner in which water is served to the knights for washing their hands (Don Quijote: “¿Qué el verle echar agua a manos, toda de ámbar y de olorosas flores destilada?” [p. 387]; *Zifar*: “las donzellas . . . diéronles de vestir e luego en pos ello del agua a las manos en seños baçines, amos a dos de finas esmeraldas, e los aguamaniles de finos robís” [p. 217]).

It is decidedly shocking that an elderly and apparently staid gentleman such as Don Quijote should indulge his imagination in a scene so salacious as this, in which a knight errant allows himself to be bathed nude by a young maiden, who then anoints him with fragrant ungüents. This highly erotic description is redolent of Oriental sybaritism, calling to mind the perfumed bedrooms of the *Song of Songs* or the baths administered by slaves of the opposite sex (eunuchs, in the case of males) in the *Arabian Nights*. It seems likely that Don...
Don Quijote has suppressed here the sexual licence that probably would have been present in his source of inspiration —only in a work as unrealistic and imaginative as Don Quijote's could a vigorous young warrior be laved by a young girl without any sensuous ideas passing through his mind. But what would have been those pieces that provided Don Quijote a model for the epicurean washing accorded to his prototypical cavalier?

First of all, it is apparent that Don Quijote has introduced the present bathing scene to replace a segment of the *Zifar* episode from which he takes his entire tale. In the latter book, the Caballero Atrevido, after attending the sumptuous banquet in the enchanted palace, is invited to participate in yet another pleasurable diversion:

> Cuando anocheció fuéronse todos aquellos cavalleros de allí e todas las donzellas que allí servían, salvo ende dos, que tomaron por las manos la [una] al cavallero, e la otra a la señora, e laváronlos a una cámara . . . E echáronlos en una cama noble . . . e salieron luego de la cámara e cerraron las puertas. Así que esa noche fue ençinta la dueña(p. 217).

Later on, the Bold Knight once again lives up to his name, making another amorous conquest; however, upon returning to the presence of his irate lady, he is informed by her that she knows of his infidelity, and expels him from her realm.

It is highly understandable that Don Quijote should want to change the undifying end of his source tale: the conduct of the Caballero Atrevido is at opposite poles from that of the Manchegan hidalgo’s ideal, the chaste Amadís. Don Quijote’s point of departure, then, was to replace the Bold Knight's two amorous escapades with a less indecorous action, avoiding unseemly philandering. His solution was the bathing scene, which retains all the sensuousness of his

Indeed, the Caballero Atrevido’s inclinations are comparable to those of the licentious Galaor, Amadís’ disreputable brother.

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### Model

Don Quijote’s description is far more suggestive than any in the *Zifar*—but without the sex act as its culmination. This attitude of have-but-have-not parallels exactly Don Quijote’s earlier deportment in his adventure with Maritornes at the inn (I, 16). In this episode the old gentleman had worried about “el peligroso trance en que su honestidad se había de ver,” and yet “a pesar de sus bizmas y con dolor [de] sus costillas, tendió los brazos para recibir a su fermosa doncella . . . tirándola hacia sí . . . la hizo sentar sobre la cama. Tentóle luego la camisa . . .” (I, p. 433). In other words, despite the idealized image created by Romantics (the poets of the nineteenth century, and numerous critics of the twentieth), Don Quijote most certainly is a sensualist, although his libido is held in check by devotion to his lady.

The problem now arises of where in his readings Don Quijote would have encountered the bathing scene that served as inspiration for the passage cited above. A priori, the most likely possibility would of course seem to be one of the innumerable books of chivalry that our hidalgo so loved; however, no specialist in that area —Diego Clemencín among them— has ever proposed a source or analogue from the genre. A model does exist, nonetheless, and in a work so widely read that Don Quijote—as well as his creator—can plausibly be assumed to have known it: the *Decameron*.

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### Story VIII

10 of Boccaccio’s masterpiece relates how the young merchant Salabaetto is at first fleeced by the clever and attractive courtesan Iancofiore, and then wreaks his revenge upon her. The only part that concerns us here is the lovers’ initial tryst:

> Cuando anocheció fuéronse todos aquellos cavalleros de allí e todas las donzellas que allí servían, salvo ende dos, que tomaron por las manos la [una] al cavallero, e la otra a la señora, e laváronlos a una cámara . . . E echáronlos en una cama noble . . . e salieron luego de la cámara e cerraron las puertas. Así que esa noche fue ençinta la dueña(p. 217).

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Let us now turn to that portion of Boccaccio's tale that appears to have inspired Don Quijote:

Appresso questo, come a lei [Iancofiore] piacque, ignudi ammenduni se ne entraron nel bagno e con loro due delle schiave. Quivi, senza lasciargli por mano addosso a altrui, ella medesima con sapone moscoleato e con garofanato maravigliosamente e bene tutto lavò Salabaetto, e appresso sé fece e lavare e stropicciare alle schiave. E fatto questo, recarono le schiave due lenzuoli bianchissimi e sottili, de' quali veniva si grande odor di rose, che ciò che v'era pareva rose; e l'una inviluppò nell'uno Salabaetto e l'altra nell'altra la donna . . . 9 (p. 766, §§16-17).

7 Several different versions of the Decameron, in Italian and Spanish, were available in Spain. Expurgated editions of the Italian original appeared after 1573, but mainly with the purpose of eliminating references to licentious clerics; see Nancy L. D'Antuono, Boccaccio's Novelle in the Theater of Lope de Vega (Madrid: Porrúa, 1983), pp. 10-12 and 15-16.


9 After this, Iancofiore was pleased that both of them should disrobe and step into the bath, and two of the slave-girls with them. Next, without [p. 146] allowing the slaves to touch him, she herself washed Salabaetto all over with marvellous care, using a soap perfumed with musk and cloves; and then she had the slave-girls bathe her and rub her down. This being done, the slaves brought two very white and finely-woven sheets, which gave off such a fragrant rose scent that the whole bath seemed full of roses; and one girl wrapped Salabaetto in one of the sheets, and the other girl wrapped the lady in the other . . .” (my translation).

10 “Dove egli non stette guari che due schiave venner cariche: l'una aveva un materasso di bambagia bello e grande . . . e steso questo materasso in una camera del bagno sopra una letti
era, vi mise sù un paio di lenzuola sottilissime listate di seta e poi una coltre di bucherame cipriana bianchissima con due origlieri lavorati a maraviglie . . .” (pp. 765-66, §14). “Salabaetto had not long to wait before two female slaves appeared, loaded down; one carried a beautiful large cottonwool mattress . . . and having laid the mattress on a bedstead in one of the rooms in the bath, they covered it with a pair of sheets of the finest material and edged with silk, and on these they placed a quilt of the whitest Cyprian buckram, together with two marvellously embroidered pillows . . . .”

11 “E tratti del peniere oricanni d'ariento bellissimi e pieni qual, d'acqua rosa, qual d'acqua di fiori d'aranci, qual d'acqua di fiori di gelsomino e qual d'acqua nanfa, tutti costoro di queste acque spruzzarono . . .” (p. 766, §18). “And beautiful silver phials being taken from the basket, one full of rosewater, others of water of orange blossoms, and yet another of jasmine flowers, the slaves sprinkled them all over . . . .”

The crucial coincidence between this text and that of Don Quijote cited at the beginning of course lies in the key detail of the young lady who, having just met the youthful hero, proceeds to have him undress, and then bathes and rubs him with perfumes. But there are other minor coincidences as well: the “buen número de doncellas” that accompany Don Quijote's heroine could be seen to correspond to Iancofiore's four slave-girls, the maidens' “galanos y vistosos trajes” may be compared to the precious bedclothing in Boccaccio's story,10 the “templadas aguas” used to wash the knight may recall the variety of waters sprinkled upon Boccaccio's lovers;11 and the perfumed shirt and the mantle so carefully described by Don Quijote have their counterparts in the scented sheets in which the Italian lovers are draped after their bath. Thus, given the complete agreement between the central situation in the Decameron tale and Don Quijote's story, plus the general resemblance of several accompanying particulars, it seems safe to assume that the Spanish knight did indeed incorporate part of Boccaccio's narrative into the account which he took chiefly from the Caballero Zifar.

No less interesting than the fact that Don Quijote borrowed a motif from the Decameron, is the light that his imitation throws on his own character: upon deciding that the Bold Knight's amorous triumphs were inappropriate for his rendition of an ideal chivalric adventure, Don Quijote could easily have omitted all sexual references from his story. That he chose to insert a toned-down version of another lustful episode from the Decameron says much about his own suppressed libido. This important aspect of his character was perceived by some of the earliest readers of Part I of Don Quijote —those in Part II: when the invincible knight arrives at the palace of the Duke and Duchess, in chapter 31 of Part II, “seis doncellas le desarmaron y sirvieron de pajes” (VI, 16); then, doubtless recalling and imitating Don Quijote's own chivalric tale, “pidiéronle que se dejase desnudar para una camisa . . .” (VI, 17). However, the gentle knight refuses, showing much more modesty than the hero whom he himself had created: “nunca lo consintió, diciendo que la honestidad parecía tan bien en los caballeros andantes como la valentía.”

What are we to make of this? Are we to understand that already “en los nidos de antaño no hay pájaros hogaño” (VIII, 257)? No, not that, but probably that our knight, despite his reiterated contentsions that his beloved books of chivalry were but truth incarnate, was quite capable of appreciating the difference between life and fiction, long before his final defeat and disenchantment.

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