

Cervantes on the European Stage: Introduction

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Although Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares* (1613) and his *Ocho comedias y entremeses* (1615) were published in close succession, publication meant very different things for the prose and for the drama. The novellas were a confident testament to Cervantes's cosmopolitan conversation with Italy, as he proudly declared himself the first to write such fictions in Spanish: "yo soy el primero que ha novelado en lengua castellana, que las muchas novelas que en ella andan impresas, todas son traducidas de lenguas extranjeras, y éstas son mías propias, no imitadas ni hurtadas" (I am the first who has written novellas in the Castilian tongue, for the many novels that are printed in it are all translated from foreign languages, and these are my own, neither imitated nor stolen).¹ The plays, for their part, were published as a chagrined alternative to production, for Cervantes was not well received as a dramatist in his own time, and his less agile works for the stage languished in the era of Lope de Vega's *comedia nueva*. Ironically, however, Cervantes's novellas soon became plays themselves, as both the originals and their various translations were abundantly adapted for the stage across Europe, especially in France and England.

¹ Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Novelas ejemplares*, ed. Harry Sieber, 2 vols. (Madrid: Cátedra, 1980), "Prólogo al lector," 1:52. Translations are my own.



In the early seventeenth century, the *Novelas* were arguably more popular and influential across Europe than *Don Quijote*, and their transposition into drama meant that they had the potential to reach a much larger audience.

This special issue and the conference from which it originated place Cervantes's broader corpus—the *Novelas* but also *Don Quijote* and Cervantes's own plays—in conversation with the drama that they inspired on the European stage. Together, the essays collected here transcend not just the divisions among national traditions that typically organize our study of early-modern literature but also the strong distinctions that we make between drama and narrative. In addition to foregrounding a transnational perspective, that is, they remind us that transnationalism requires reading beyond traditional generic distinctions. If the stage quickly absorbs the Renaissance novella, both often hark back to the romance, so that it becomes unproductive to consider separately works for the page and for the stage. A more capacious reading across genres and national contexts reveals how voraciously dramatists across Europe consumed Cervantes's novellas, repurposing them as sources for dramatic plots, and, conversely, how theatrical were the *Novelas* themselves—a key component of their appeal. Moreover, the dissemination of the *Novelas* across Europe sheds light also on early-modern translation practices, both intra- and interlinguistic. When playwrights work from intermediary translations, as is often the case, they must grapple with the appropriation and transformation of redoubled sources, making choices for the stage that may or may not coincide with those of prose translators.

Paradoxically, the circulation and adaptation of the *Novelas* across Europe helped to solidify national styles and national preoccupations. In “Cervantes and the Domestication of Romance in Seventeenth-Century French Theater,” Ellen Welch explores how Spanish models became central to debates about the nature of French theater in the 1630s. Despite increasing military and political tensions that would culminate in the Franco-Spanish War, Welch argues, “Part of the theater’s work in fabricating a national aesthetic in this decade entailed dealing with an intensifying cultural rivalry with Spain.” Spanish themes and sources animated the Paris theaters even as Spanish forces reached the outskirts of the city. Having established this heightened context, Welch productively complicates our understanding of the cultural translation between Spain and France. She reads Jean Rotrou’s *Les deux pucelles*, a tragicomedy based on Cervantes’s *Las dos doncellas* and first staged in 1636, to show how Spanish sources could provide “alternative exemplars” that complicated and enlivened the French reliance on classical authorities. In this sense, she argues, to explore plausibility Rotrou must negotiate not just ancients versus moderns but domestic versus foreign and French versus Spanish. To domesticate romance is, thus, not just to privilege *vraisemblance* but to translate it into the French sphere.

In “*La gitanilla* in France: From Page to Stage,” Karen Newman shows how different was the treatment of gypsies in Cervantes’s original *La gitanilla*, the novella that opens his collection, and in two French versions: the hugely popular translation by François de Rosset and the adaptation for the stage by Alexandre Hardy. Constrained not only by decorum but by a much deeper sense of the gypsies’ racial otherness than what operated in Spain, Rosset and Hardy produce a paradoxical “belle Egyptienne” whose beauty is the most surprising thing about her, as opposed to her charm in Cervantes’s original. Thus, by the end of the stage version, Preciosa is domesticated even beyond her source in the novella. Nonetheless, as Newman argues, her remarkable earlier freedom animates the enduring French romanticization of *la vie bohème*, in striking contrast with the vilification of actual Roma people to this day.

Examining the translation of Cervantes's novellas to the stage also affords an opportunity to rethink our broader critical commonplaces. In "Secular Spectacle? Cervantes, Hardy, and the Question of Religion," Sonia Velázquez invites us to reconsider the place of religion in early modernity by comparing Cervantes's "La fuerza de la sangre" with Hardy's classicized adaptation for the stage. Velázquez argues that we are too quick to assume that the recourse to classical myth equals secularization. Instead, she proposes that Hardy's version recognizes the centrality of religiosity, however contested, in Cervantes's original. Instead of secularizing it, the play strains for a new language in which to describe the role of religion in the secular world, emphasizing its circulation and mediatory functions over sacralization.

The essays by Marina S. Brownlee and Alexander Samson take us from France to England, where, despite strong anti-Hispanic sentiment, Cervantes was enthusiastically read and adapted. From the English peace embassy to Spain in 1605 that coincided with the publication of the first part of *Don Quijote*, to the novel's swift translation by Shelton, to the rapid adaptation of both the *Quijote* and the *Novelas ejemplares* to the stage, England enthusiastically embraced Cervantes, and English authors quickly turned to him as a source.² Brownlee's "Experimental Architecture: Cervantes's *Curioso impertinente* on the English Stage" explores the connections between Cervantes and Thomas Middleton, focusing on the novella *El curioso impertinente* from the first part of *Don Quijote* and its reconfiguration in Middleton's *The Lady's Tragedy*, sometimes referred to as *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*. Brownlee proposes that we must attend to the different forms of cognition that adaptation negotiates: a narrative that is read or heard functions very differently than does a play that is staged and watched. Brownlee reads her texts for the "experimental architecture" that always already invokes the Benjaminian allegorical ruin. From the domestic space to the crypt, the texts chart the perversion of referentiality, of language, and of ethics in a Baroque vision of social decay. Instead of simply tracing the adaptation of Cervantes's novella in Middleton's asylum subplot, as source criticism has done, Brownlee powerfully shows how the main plot of the *Tragedy* is intimately connected to the larger ethical and political questions posed by Cervantes's original, with its fall from house to tomb amid the ruins of referentiality.

In "Maybe Exemplary? James Mabbe's Translation of the *Exemplarie Novells* (1640)," Alexander Samson takes us from the theater to the first English version of the novellas themselves and their subsequent publication over the course of the seventeenth century. Samson explores the paradox in the English reception of Cervantes's novellas: while their plots were used again and again for dramatic adaptations, there were no real imitations of their writerly complexity in prose. Instead, Samson suggests, the novellas were repackaged as light entertainment, particular suited for a female audience, depriving them of some of the force of the originals. Samson nonetheless finds a distinction between the edition of 1640, which emphasized recreation, and the more serious recognition in the prefatory materials to the 1654 reissue that the novellas, full of irony and undecidability, pose central problems as examples for female behavior. He then reassesses Mabbe as translator, arguing that the prolixity for which some critics have condemned him in fact reflects his sustained attempts to navigate the "political, ideological, and religious dimensions" of the vexed new context into which he introduces the Spanish source text. As Gary Taylor has noted, with Mabbe's pun on his own name—Don Diego Puede-Ser—the elusive Mabbe/Maybe winks at the reader, acknowledging the dangers attendant on fixing an identity in the charged

² For a comprehensive anthology, see Dale Randall and Jackson Boswell, eds., *Cervantes in Seventeenth-Century England: The Tapestry Turned* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Anglo-Spanish exchange.³ Samson shows how, despite the fragility of his position, Mabbe renders for the English reader a legible Spain, without either rehearsing widespread prejudices or simplifying the inherent complexity of the *novelas*.

With new perspectives on the reception and adaptation of Cervantes beyond Spain, “Cervantes on the European Stage” offers methodological and disciplinary alternatives to the national-literature optic and to the frequent overcompartmentalization of our investigations according to strict generic boundaries. Together, these essays suggest the rich possibilities that attend the study of adaptation and of traveling texts, as they consider performance, reception, and the ideological vectors of adaptation. A

³ Gary Taylor, “The Cultural Politics of Maybe,” in *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, ed. Richard Dutton, Alison Finlay, and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 242–58.