

Beauty, Love, and a Clumsy Lover in Cervantes's
Neoplatonic World:
The Case of "La gitanilla"

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Abstract

While critics have commented widely on the overall Neoplatonic tone of Cervantes's "La gitanilla," little has been said about the profound ways in which this *novela ejemplar* diverges from its Platonic frame. By considering Plato's and Marsilio Ficino's writings, this article explores the irony present in Cervantes's articulation of the Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas of beauty and love and suggests that Juan de Cárcamo's failure to fully embody the exemplariness of a Platonic lover points to the moral and spiritual deterioration identified by Cervantes in his own society.

Even to his *lectores descuidados* Cervantes's views on beauty, as expressed in some *Novelas ejemplares*, may reveal an inherent instability that invites reevaluation.¹ In "La gitanilla," for example, Preciosa's physical beauty seems misplaced among the contrasting coarseness of the gypsy world, and the same can be observed with Costanza in "La ilustre fregona," whose beauty contradicts both her occupation and the environment in which she operates. As many critics have noted, these disparities concerning the plot and the ending of this and other of Cervantes's novellas are professedly resolved with each denouement, as the true identities are revealed, and original and rightful noble statuses are reinstated. Within the literary tradition with which Cervantes is associated, beauty, it seems to be implied, belongs with cast and with an elevated social status, and is necessary to earn a novelistic character, and particularly a female character, protagonist status. In "La fuerza de la sangre," Cervantes's engagement with the concept of beauty appears once more to be grounded on instability. Leocadia finds herself immersed in the aristocratic and courtesan environment that has traditionally supported the idealism of the physical beauty she symbolizes, that is, the Neoplatonic essence of a *heavenly* appearance traditionally called upon to guide the lover's soul into a celestial, transcendent realm. Here, nonetheless, this idealism seems to be coupled with a reality of pain, desperation, and self-destruction. Alban Forcione, perhaps one of the most eloquent proponents of Cervantes's engagement with Renaissance Neoplatonism, describes how Juan de Cárcamo and the page-poet Clemente in "La gitanilla" contemplate Preciosa's beauty, stating that "in an experience recalling the neo-Platonic *furor amatorius*, in which the loving individual, 'through the desire for the divine beauty and passion for Good,' awakens his slumbering higher faculties, calms the affections, and reunites with the One in the circle of love flowing from the Creator to the creation and back" (*Humanist*

¹ I am indebted to my student Elizabeth Stalter for opening the path to my revisiting the issue of beauty in Cervantes.

Vision 140-41). On the other hand, Juan Bautista Avalle-Arce sees in Cervantes's fictionalization of Neoplatonic conventions a movement toward unorthodoxy and eclecticism: "Hay otros casos que aclaran aún más el desapego cervantino a encajonar la vida en armazones teóricas. . . . Por consiguiente, los predicados del neoplatonismo quedan librados a la problemática personal, y no es de extrañar que ésta a menudo los invalide. . . . La invalidación ocasional del neoplatonismo por una apreciación vitalista del arte literario es novedad de excepción" (241). In that way, interpretations of Cervantes's employment of beauty as strictly reflecting Renaissance Neoplatonic or Hellenistic Platonic principles are put into question.

On the opposite spectrum of the beauty continuum, Cervantes's readers will recall how both Maritornes's and Dulcinea's physical appearances in *Don Quijote* correspond to their social rank, and how their *ugliness* is forgiven and transformed into beauty by the redeeming force of D. Quijote's Platonic gaze. David Estrada Herrero proposes that Cervantes, through a calculated effort to blur the line between beauty and ugliness in the *Quijote*, extends the blank of his criticism beyond the traditional conventions that sustain the world of romance: "[Cervantes] pretende la recuperación, por la vía estética de lo grotesco, de valores tan esencialmente humanos como los de lo cómico y lo lúdico. Estos valores, en tanto que *intensificadores* de la vida . . . son elementos constitutivos de un concepto amplio de *belleza*, y son, a la vez, *catárticos*" (3). That the reader may or may not be delivered to a state of catharsis through Cervantes's play with the concept of beauty is secondary to the idea of his taking advantage of "un concepto amplio de *belleza*." This ample, deep-rooted concept may position Cervantes's employment of the beauty motif within an ancient and intricate literary and philosophical tradition, and engaging this tradition may point, yet once more, to Cervantes's affinity for appropriating old concerns for the sake of exploring the fictional possibilities they may provide.² David Boruchoff anchors his discussion on beauty in the *Quijote* on this idea and states that "the opposition of 'hermosura y concordancia' to 'fealdad y descompostura', and their meaning in the realm or art, would be as familiar to early readers of Cervantes's novel as they are alien to us today, connoting not merely aesthetic difference but a conflict of moral proportions, as Aristotle makes clear in the equation of 'The Ugly' and the 'Ridiculous' with 'a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others'" (125). Therefore, all the glaring contrasts and inconsistencies pertaining to beauty in the presence of moral ugliness, contrasts which are pervasive in Cervantes's narrative and that may evade today's untrained critical eyes, would have been more easily detected and assimilated by Cervantes's contemporary readership.

It is unnecessary to recall how deeply consumed Cervantes was by the intellectual tradition that informed his times and by the epistemological and literary allure which this tradition afforded him. Through his concern with ancient and contemporary literary theory—the references to which, as E. C. Riley reminds us, "occur too frequently and in a good many cases with too much emphasis to be dismissed as a species of otherwise meaningless intellectual ornament,"—and through his constant back and forth between fictionalizing philosophy and philosophizing fiction, Cervantes articulates in his writings a sagacious social critique and an acute observation of humanity's idiosyncrasies (6). In contextualizing Cervantes's involvement with the humanistic energy that surrounded him, Frederick De Armas recalls the importance of Cervantes's travels through Italy during the height of the Renaissance and how this journey would have contributed toward the enhancing of his humanistic education:

² I refer here, for example, to Cervantes's appropriation of the Neoplatonic discourse as pointed out by Forcione (1982), pp. 113-136, or by his experiment with the satirical dialogue (see also Forcione [1984], pp. 3-18), or with the fictional merits of Skepticism (see Sherman 2015).

While it is said that López de Hoyos taught Cervantes an Erasmism that was no longer tolerated in Spain, Rome would reveal to him the ecclesiastic pomp, ritual, and luxuriant majesty that the humanist from Rotterdam often criticized. It was also a Rome teeming with ruins, which impelled humanists and artists of the Renaissance to turn to archeological pursuits, to focus their attention on rediscovering antiquity, finding in the ancients ‘a powerful impetus to revive the contemporary world in light of its accomplishments.’ (32)³

Cervantes’s rediscovery of antiquity would have occurred through his engagement with the texts that shaped the foundation of his aesthetical and theoretical views and that forged the basis of the *imitatio* that would constitute his dialogic style. However, and as De Armas observes, “Cervantes’ interest in the ancients is not an erudite and philological one. Although Cervantes points to Greek literature, he does not read it in the original language but constructs his perception of its meanings through translations, summaries, and adaptations. Even when dealing with some of the Latin writers, mediation is utilized” (34). One observes this feature of Cervantine humanism and scholarship, for example, in the way Cervantes engages Aristotelian literary theory most likely without having ever read Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but through Aristotle’s sixteenth-century commentator López Pinciano.⁴ It is plausible then that whatever concerns the ancients had regarding the concept or definition of beauty, or beauty’s place within the continuum of intersecting aesthetical, literary, or religious thought, may have found their way into Cervantes’s discerning eyes and ears through the many commentaries and appropriations made available to him, directly or indirectly, during the Renaissance, both amid his days in Italy and back in Spain.⁵ If indeed Cervantes’s ambiguous articulation of beauty in the *Novelas ejemplares* may have stemmed from both an appropriation or imitation of an ancient concern—one that may find its roots in the place beauty has within the Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophies of antiquity and the Renaissance—and from a desire to adapt this concern to the author’s social and political critical needs, an attempt to summarize this question, no matter how briefly, is warranted.⁶

David Konstan reminds us of how

Platonic beauty . . . retains a close connection with the visible, evident in the very term *idea*, which derives from the verb meaning ‘to

3 De Armas quotes from Stinger, p. 2 here.

4 For the complexity of narrowing down Cervantes’s genealogy concerning literary theory, see Riley 1-13.

5 As De Armas states, “the very textuality of [Cervantes’s] works, the constant reference to classical and Italian Renaissance authors, is often conjoined with the visual, since there seems to be both an acceptance of poetry and painting as sister arts and a desire to surpass the visual through the written word” (34).

6 The roots of this question can be easily illustrated through the work of David Konstan and Drew Hyland, who have explored extensively the manifold applications and significations of the word *kalós/kalon*—commonly translated from Greek as “beauty”—and in showing just how so very complex both the idea of beauty and the use of *kalós/kalon* itself were during the classical era. Konstan acknowledges that “serious scholars of the classical world have argued that ancient Greek possessed no word that unambiguously signified ‘beauty’ or ‘beautiful’” (31), and that aesthetics, the characteristic modern sphere to which beauty seems to be attached, is hardly valid when considering the Greek take on *kalós*: “the ancient Greek had no sense of art as a self-standing sphere of experience, any more than they had a word for ‘literature’ in the way that we understand it today” (3). Even more pertinently, Konstan traces the same ambiguity pertaining to *kalós/kalon* and its path toward a graspable concept of beauty during early Christianity and the preparation of the Hebrew and Vulgate Bibles, both of which relied in Greek texts and hence were byproducts of these semantic negotiations. Hyland considers similar questions by asking “why does Plato choose to address certain issues [in his dialogues] with the explicitness of an attempt at definition”, and others through absence or silence? “This mystery becomes especially acute with the question of *kalon*, beauty. For it is addressed in at least three different ways in the three dialogues, the *Hippias Major*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*, in which the thinking about beauty becomes focal” (3).

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see.' In Plato's system, the self-subsisting, objective idea of beauty serves two purposes. First, it inspires the desire that attracts us toward the transcendent . . . Second, it accounts for why certain things in this world are beautiful: it is by virtue of participation in the ideal form, a process that Plato never quite explains satisfactorily but which relates sensible phenomena to the noumenal universe. (123)

The idea of the beautiful as participant in the ideal form, that is, "not in the realm of concrete particulars but in the realm of abstract ideas," resonates directly with the Neoplatonic attempt to reconcile an ancient pagan philosophy with the Christian sensitivities that permeated Europe particularly during the Reformation and Counterreformation period (Scruton 41). By substituting the "realm of abstract ideas" with the realm of celestial Divinity, as expressed in the writings of Marsilio Ficino and as outlined by Forcione in his analysis of "La gitanilla," the soul goes on rising toward God, as if having found an alternative route to the mystical one already explored by religious (and literary) figures throughout Europe. Drew Hyland highlights the fact that Plato's writings "uphold the conviction that the first and most fundamental experience of beauty that we have is of *beautiful people*," and adds a detail that may help to illuminate the following analysis of Cervantes's novellas. When discussing the notion of beautiful bodies as expressed in Plato's *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Hippias Major*, Hyland notes that

It is instructive that when we put these three texts together, the shared conviction that the original experience of beauty is the beauty of a person is 'gendered' differently: Hippias says it will be a beautiful maiden; *Phaedrus* teaches that it will be a beautiful boy; and in the *Symposium*, Diotima is neutral on the question . . . The larger point, then, seems not to be an issue of gender preference, but the more generic importance of beautiful people as the core experience of beauty. (14)

Following De Armas's elaboration, one should not count on Cervantes having had direct contact with any of these texts or with any of Plato's texts. However, Plato's influence was to permeate the history of continental thought to such an extent—from Plotinus, often referred to as the first Neoplatonist, to Augustine, Aquinas, Erasmus, Luther, and so many others—that it is not only plausible but expectable to find the continuation of this intellectual tradition and philosophical concern in the works of a Renaissance thinker like Cervantes.⁷ It is also reasonable to think that these Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas reached Cervantes through the thought of Marsilio Ficino, the most notable Renaissance proponent of Neoplatonism, and through those influenced by Ficino's writings, most noticeably Leone Ebreo and Baldesar Castiglione.⁸ Cervantes could well have been exposed to Ficino's commentaries on the *Phaedrus* during his time in Italy, as he arrived in 1569 and the first Italian translation by Felice Figliucci was published in 1544 (Allen, "Introduction," *Commentaries* xiii). Likewise, Ficino's commentaries on the *Symposium*

⁷ As Konstan notes, "Alfred North Whitehead characterized the entire European philosophical tradition as 'a series of footnotes to Plato'" (123-24). For a discussion of Plotinus's ideas on beauty and aesthetics, see Vassilopoulos. For the Neoplatonism of St. Augustine, see O'Meara and Matthews. For a panoramic view of the parallel paths of Neoplatonism and Christianity in the western world, see Moran. For Aquinas on beauty and how his views relate to those of Plato and Neoplatonists, see Sevier. For Neoplatonism's influence on Erasmus, see Christ-von Wedel. For Luther on beauty and how his views relate to those of Plato and Neoplatonists, see Mattes.

⁸ See Rossella Pescatori's critical introduction to Leone Ebreo's *Dialogues of Love* and Daniel Jatevitch's critical edition of Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*. See also Boruchoff, 127-130.

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first appeared in Latin in 1484 and were followed by a Tuscan version in 1544 (Farndell xiii). Why Ficino's translations and interpretations of Plato and Neoplatonists from antiquity would have resonated with Cervantes and thinkers and authors of the Reformation/ Counterreformation generation is made clear in Michael J. B. Allen's words:

There was an intellectual appeal and novelty of his revival of Neoplatonism, which bordered on unorthodoxy or even heresy, and the unfamiliar nature of what he had to say about the complementary roles of religion and philosophy in nurturing the spiritual and noetic life. His ecumenism, his delight in the notion that worship is natural and inherently various, and his diverse interests would even today align him with the very liberal wing of Christian theologians. ("Introduction," *His Theology* xv)

Ficino's eclectic blend of Christian philosophy, not unlike the Erasmism that Cervantes allegedly embraced, would have provided a platform from which to develop a fiction that, more than accentuate the social, political, and religious status quo, questioned the norms and conventions of a society lost in a conspicuous existential crisis. The question of beauty and the ancient roots of and concerns over this *idea* (both in the general and in the Platonic sense) may well have informed Cervantes's narrative and provided him with a frame within which to exercise his own variety of fictional philosophizing. For reasons of space, I will limit this discussion to "La gitanilla," perhaps the most overtly Platonic of Cervantes's novellas, since it can provide a profitable angle from which to contemplate the question. As stated earlier in the introduction, the sheer number of problematic examples concerning beauty as a tool of fiction in the *Novelas ejemplares* invites further investigation.

"La gitanilla" is the novella that, as Forcione's exhaustive study illustrates, most readily reflects Neoplatonic principles, and the idea of beauty occupies its core: "Salió la tal Preciosa . . . la más hermosa y discreta que pudiera hallarse, no entre los gitanos, sino entre cuantas hermosas y discretas pudiera pregonar la fama. Ni los soles, ni los aires, ni todas las inclemencias del cielo a quien más que otras gentes están sujetos los gitanos pudieron deslustrar su rostro ni curtir las manos" (61-2). After establishing the magnitude of Preciosa's beauty in a way that recalls the bucolic nature so common to the Neoplatonic literary style of the period, Cervantes indicates that this beauty, much according to Platonic and Neoplatonic principles, can soften one's hardened soul and reactivate one's innate sense of goodness which, at this preliminary point in the novella, is referred to as a dormant kind of charity: "que también la hermosura tiene fuerza de despertar la caridad dormida" (66). This early reference to the redemptive, or in more Platonic terms, transcendent power of beauty, stems from Plato's view that "[when] a man sees beauty here, in this life, he is reminded of true beauty. He grows wings, and stands there fluttering them, eager to fly upwards, but unable to do so" (Plato 127). Of course, Plato is referring to the beauty through which our sight, "the most brilliant of our senses" (129) can propel "the souls of gods and men [through a flight around the cosmos] where the absolute reality of the Forms can be experienced, and the ways in which a soul loses its wings, growing too closely attached to the corporeal life of the world we live in" (Rutherford xxii). Yet, Preciosa's beauty, being the ultimate Platonic conduit to the ascension of the soul beyond terrestrial affinities (as articulated by Cervantes and read by Forcione), is capable of more than just inspiring charity. It inspires the very love that, as Plato reminds us in the *Symposium*, "implants in men the thing which must be their guide if they are to live a good life. And what is that? It is a horror of what is degrading, and a passionate desire for what is good" (178). Forcione, while centering his argument on the Chris-

tian ideal of marriage proposed by Erasmus, identifies Preciosa as able to “still the wild horse raging in her infatuated courtier and guide him to a state of perfect friendship, which sanctified in Christian marriage, replicates on earth the harmony of celestial spheres” (*Humanist Vision* 113). While Plato’s idea of love lacks any direct connection to marriage, its overall progression from beauty, to love, to the elevation of the soul toward a celestial sphere is clear. It is interesting to note here the words of Marsilio Ficino, who as a Catholic priest operating within a largely Neoplatonic continuum, would have had to mediate two potentially conflicting sets of beliefs. In his *Commentaries on Plato* he states that “There is a power in the soul dragging it downwards toward sensibles, namely the power responsible simultaneously for imagination and ordinary life functions; there is also a power higher than this lifting the soul towards things divine. The elevating power in the soul’s intellect or reason is called a **wing** . . . : it lifts the soul to love, contemplate, and worship the divine” (79). Ficino is careful to define what wings are, hence turning a potentially problematic Platonic image, at least from a Christian standpoint, into an acceptable metaphor. But more importantly, he offers an attempt at an objective definition of beauty, one that Plato seems to have evaded:

In the gods what is **good, wise, and beautiful**? In any god there is intellect, the process of understanding, and the intelligible. The intelligible exists as good, for it is perfect, sufficient, and desirable. . . . Wisdom . . . is the understanding which broods over the intelligible light and unfolds the intelligible species within. Beauty, finally, is the completed unfolding of the intelligible light and of the intelligible species. Although beauty there is last, as it were, to proceed, yet it is first to confront those ascending thither. Since beauty manifests itself most and appears first and reflects back from all those lights as splendor, Plato often calls it **the clearest and most obvious** of all divine things. (*Commentaries* 79-81)

From this angle it is easy to see why Cervantes would have juxtaposed beauty, and most importantly physical beauty, which is so readily apprehended by sight, with the world of social and moral decadence presented in his novellas. More than merely satisfying a thematic convention and conforming to the tradition—an ugly protagonist would have propitiously provided a stable foundation from which to depict moral and social deterioration, hence lacking the shocking epistemic contrast for which Cervantes is so celebrated—he identified the fictional possibilities encompassed in this antithesis and fully developed their potential. Preciosa’s beauty is hence called upon to remind her fellow men (and women) of that which is being forgotten: the unadulterated beauty and good that our souls long to contemplate in a higher sphere. From this Platonic and Neoplatonic standpoint, the Christian marriage ideal that Forcione so deeply emphasizes becomes weakened. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato (but not Ficino in his commentaries) insists on identifying beauty and the love it incites as an affair between men, and hence completely dissociated from the idea of marriage, as I will discuss in more depth ahead. Although Cervantes may refer to that Platonic theme of man-to-man love elsewhere, in “La gitanilla” beauty remains a strictly heterosexual tool of spiritual ascension.⁹

Although many may have felt moved by Preciosa’s beauty, it is Juan de Cárcamo that embodies the quintessential Platonic lover, for her beauty and her wisdom have awakened such love in him—a young nobleman member of one of Spain’s prestigious military orders, with a solid

9 I refer here particularly to “Las dos doncellas.”

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reputation at the royal court and a purse full of gold coins—that he has surrendered all resistance to her charm and makes her an offer of marriage worthy of a man gone madly in love: “Yo vengo de manera rendido a la discreción y belleza de Preciosa, que después de haberme hecho mucha fuerza para excusar llegar a este punto, a cabo he quedado más rendido y más imposibilitado de excusarlo. . . . y con ser de la calidad y nobleza que os he referido . . . quisiera ser un gran señor para levantar a mi grandeza la humildad de Preciosa, haciéndola mi igual y mi esposa” (83-4). Juan’s state reflects the precise mix of obsession and resignation used by Plato in the *Phaedrus* to describe the Platonic lover becoming overcome by divine madness: “When he sees a good likeness of beauty—a face or bodily shape like those of a god—the first thing he does is shiver feverishly, and there comes over him something of the awe he saw before. Then, gazing at it, he worships the beauty he sees, as he would a god; only the fear of being thought completely mad stops him sacrificing to his [girlfriend] as to the statue of a god” (129).¹⁰ Juan, much as the lover described by Plato, subjects himself to Preciosa’s trials accepting therefore her superior wisdom and her position as the Platonic guide in the relationship, and assuming a false identity as the gypsy Andrés Caballero. In this way, he submits nearly completely to her experimentation. As Plato states,

Unsure what to do, [the lover’s soul] is driven into a frenzy, and in its madness it cannot sleep at night, nor by day remain where it is; full of desire, it rushes to the place where it thinks it will see the one who has this beauty. And when it does see [her], it lets desire flow in like an irrigating flood, freeing the pores which were obstructed. . . . It forgets mother, brothers, friends, the whole lot of them. As the men’s wealth is destroyed through neglect, it pays no regard. And it now views with contempt the conventions and proprieties on which it once prided itself. (130-31)¹¹

Ficino succinctly restates this same thought, asserting that

Anyone who absolutely disapproves of love necessarily errs; and anyone who condemns intemperate love on the grounds that it is a frenzy, that is, an alienation of the mind, also errs. For the love that alienates a soul, which has been seized by a god and raised above man, is also a frenzy, though a frenzy we should venerate since it comes from a god, makes us godlike, and is both the cure of the greatest evils and the cause of the greatest goods. (*Commentaries* 115)

The reader then notices a peculiar contradiction in Cervantes’s handling of the Platonic/ Neoplatonic theme. While Juan displays many of the symptomatic traits of a Platonic lover, he fails to embrace the fully spiritual path associated with the love Preciosa’s celestial beauty has awakened in him, that is, Juan falls short of truly abandoning his earthly attachments. Although he temporarily distances himself from his family to satisfy Preciosa’s demands, he remains very much adhered to his aristocratic vein, which he uses to market himself to his beloved and to which he counts on returning at the end of his two-year trial. Moreover, one of Juan’s goals, as he himself expresses it, is “levantar a mi grandeza la humildad de Preciosa, haciéndola mi igual y mi esposa” (84). The desire to exist in equal status with his beloved may constitute a rhetorical

¹⁰ Plato uses the word “boyfriend” instead. Later in Cervantes’s text, Preciosa will also describe Juan as “algo enamorado, impetuoso y acelerado” (93).

¹¹ As before, Plato uses the word “him” here.

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trick on Juan's part; it may also relate to an Erasmian marriage ideal as Forcione argues, or it may allude to the idea of a celestial elevation of the lovers' souls toward a fundamental and godly beauty. However, Juan's proposal falls short of meeting the Platonic standard on which it seems to be based.¹² It is widely accepted that among the *duties* of a sixteenth/seventeenth-century wife, bearing children was of paramount importance, and Fray Luis de León emphasizes this point by stating that "al oficio de la buena mujer pertenece, y esto nos enseña Salomón aquí, hacer buen marido y criar buenos hijos" (132). It is also known that the structural function of marriage in the early-modern *novela* and *comedia* was primarily to allow stability and harmony to be introduced through the denouement. Cervantine prose is embedded with a critique of this false sense of resolution, particularly where female characters are concerned. As Theresa Sears affirms, "In the majority of the *novelas*, the story hinges on marriage, and on how a woman's will, rhetorically conceived as 'free,' is brought to choose the role that society has already chosen for her" (8). This role evidently comprises playing wife and mother and ensuring the perpetuation of the husband's name and blood while losing the autonomy so highly regarded by Plato and Neoplatonists alike, the very autonomy that can, paradoxically, be readily associated with the Catholic (but not Protestant) idea of free will.¹³ In other words, the idea of a Preciosa equal in status to her husband Juan, although Platonically possible, would have been highly unlikely within the social structure depicted by Cervantes. The complete silence and acquiescence that Preciosa displayed at the denouement are proof of this reality: "Once [Preciosa] assumes her proper role, the narrator records no words for her at all, directly or indirectly. The role contains all possible choices and embodies them fully within itself, without need for explanation or even articulation" (Sears 99).

With that in mind, one can appreciate Cervantes's deviation from the Platonic norm when adhering to the conventional and *harmonious* denouement based on a marriage outcome, no matter how Erasmian an idea of marriage. This deviation, or this contradictory appropriation of a Neoplatonic cliché, reflects Plato's words in the *Symposium*, where Diotima explains to Socrates the path of those lovers in whom love is a "desire to use beauty to beget and bear offspring" (60): "Those whose creative urge is physical tend to turn to women and pursue Eros by this route. The production of children gains them, as they imagine, immortality and a name and happiness for themselves, for all time. In others the impulse is mental or spiritual" (63). Diotima emphasizes the fact that, as far as the spiritual elevation of the lovers' souls is concerned, the spiritual or mental impulse is much more desirable than the physical one, for instead of producing human children, these lovers produce "what you would expect the mind to conceive and produce. . . . Thought, and all other human excellence." She concludes: "We would all choose children of this kind for ourselves, rather than human children," (64) for this type of creation constitutes a step toward contemplating a "beauty of a breathtaking nature . . . the beauty which is the justification of all [the lovers'] efforts so far. It is eternal, neither coming to be, nor passing away, neither increasing nor decreasing. . . . It exists for all time, by itself and with itself, unique" (66). One gathers that the real celestial beauty of the Forms is gazed at by those who surpass the need to engage in love at a physical level (which leads to human reproduction) and is reserved to those who follow a path of mental and spiritual engagement and pursuits. In this sense, Juan's

¹² Forcione is careful to point out Erasmus's emphasis on spiritual love over physical, sexual love. See *Humanist Vision* 103-106.

¹³ As Charles Trinkaus comments, "Ficino attempted in his *Theologia Platonica* to demonstrate the divinity and immortality of man. What better way to do this than by showing how man, created in God's image and likeness, attained remarkable powers over himself and his natural environment, and in shaping his relations with his fellow men, provided he did not turn against and repudiate the very divinity within his soul?" (142)

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traditional Christian approach to love as an element within a social structure that favors men contradicts the Platonic frame in which the novella is set. On the other hand, Ficino, in his commentaries on the *Symposium*, presents a much more Christianized view of the relationship between love, procreation, and divinity, one that despite its inherent contradiction, would have cleared him and the people whose words he transcribes in his text from potential accusations of heresy. In interpreting Diotima's lesson, Ficino's text states that there are five loves within us, and he goes on to expand on two of them:

They are two daemons which Plato says are continually present in our souls. One of them draws us upwards, and the other downwards. The first is named Kalodaemon, Good daemon; the second is called Kakodaemon, Evil Daemon. In fact, both are good, for the procreation of children is as necessary and as honourable as is the search for truth; but the second is called Evil Daemon because . . . it often troubles us and diverts the soul to base acts by dragging her away from her chief good, which consists in the contemplation of truth. (95-96)¹⁴

Diotima's words in Plato's text fall very short of establishing the necessity of human procreation, suggesting instead that intellectual children or products are preferable and more profitable in the pursuit of divine truth. Furthermore, in Ficino's text one can detect a deterministic stance pertaining to one's inability to rise above the limitations of human love. As suggested in Ficino's words here, humanity is destined to contemplate only the resemblance of divinity, and not divinity itself: "Because procreation gives continuity to things and thereby makes them similar to things divine, it is undoubtedly a divine gift. . . . What is human love, and to what purpose? It is the desire to reproduce oneself in a beautiful subject in order to prolong life for ever within mortal beings. Such is the love of men living on this Earth, and such is the aim of our love" (110, my emphasis). By contrasting the Platonic and Neoplatonic nuances concerning love's many paths and beauty's place within this continuum, one can appreciate Cervantes's conflicting narrative as developed in "La gitanilla." This tension may clarify the question as to the employment of a commonplace Renaissance literary convention, Neoplatonism, in a way that may subvert its very roots, Platonism. If indeed Cervantes was inspired by Ficino's writings, this subversion would have been a handy inheritance, one that could have kept both thinkers aligned with the Christian thought of their societies and with the Catholic stringency of Counterreformation Spain.

Cervantes also infuses in "La gitanilla" other themes and details that accentuate Juan's shortcomings as a Platonic lover. Juan finds himself time and again plagued by jealousy, which as Socrates communicates in the *Phaedrus*, is not a god-like condition common to those in the spiritual path to the contemplation of celestial beauty: "[These lovers] show none of that jealousy or small mindedness toward their [girlfriend]. Their actions are governed by the attempt to bring him into a full likeness, in every respect, to the best of their ability, of themselves and the god they serve. So the enthusiasm of true lovers, and its outcome . . . is thus a fine thing, and the cause of happiness" (Plato 133). Plato also labels feelings such as jealousy as a direct "threat to the development of the [loved one's] soul" (113). Juan's examples of jealousy persist through

¹⁴ Farnell explains in the introduction to his translation of Ficino's text that "on November 7, 1468, nine men gathered at Careggi to honour Plato's birthday. After the meal, the *Symposium* was read out, and each of the guests . . . spoke on the nature of love. Ficino, who was also present, recorded what was said, although he himself did not speak, and his report constitutes the text of his commentary" (xiii).

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out the text. As the page-poet Clemente reappears as a mysterious guest at the gypsy camp, Juan experiences a new bout of jealousy, once more contradicting the intrinsic characteristics pertaining to the spiritually-minded Platonic lover. His response to Preciosa's clarification as to the identity of the mysterious guest makes his less-than-elevated state of mind clear: "la misma fuerza que a mí me ha hecho gitano le ha hecho a él parecer molinero y venir buscarte. ¡Ah, Preciosa, Preciosa, y cómo se va descubriendo que te quieres preciar de tener más de un rendido! Y si esto es así, acábame a mí primero, y luego matarás a este otro, y no quieras sacrificarnos juntos en las aras de tu engaño, por no decir de tu belleza." Preciosa's response is an attempt to redirect her lover and to remind him of the danger in allowing such low-order concerns to penetrate one's mind and soul: "¡Válame Dios . . . Andrés, y cuán delicado andas, y cuán de un sutil cabello tienes colgadas tus esperanzas y mi crédito, pues con tanta facilidad te ha penetrado el alma la dura espada de los celos" (110). Plato reminds us that "beauty's nature is lovable, just as goodness is absolutely desirable." He then contrasts the emotions contained in beauty and goodness with an "irascible power . . . which is attended by indignation with daring, by a sense of honor, shame, and fear, and by the desire for glory." Juan's jealousy is more aligned with these contemptible, irrational feelings than with the "philosophical disposition" that guides the lovers in pursuit of truth (165).

As the reader arrives at the final moment of anagnorisis, she is faced with an intriguing juxtaposition of self-sacrificing acts, love-professing proclamations, less-than cathartic resolutions, and morally-corrupt acts that sharply contrast with the Platonic tone set throughout the novella. If analyzed through the lenses of the Platonic thought concerning beauty, love, and the role of lovers on the path toward contemplation of the divine, Juan's actions fall very short of serving as an illustration of a model lover. In the events that lead up to the conclusion he succumbs, as he did when overcome by the mental turmoil of jealousy, to a deeply instilled desire to uphold and protect his earthly honor as a nobleman, a desire which, in this case, causes him to kill. This act, far from being connected to the higher spiritual realms to which the Platonic path of love leads, emphasizes Juan's attachments to human interests and his inability to really connect to the celestial essence that Preciosa's beauty, a mere likeness of the heavenly beauty of the Forms, is meant to reawaken in him. Plato recalls how it can be difficult for an individual's soul to recollect having ever experienced the truth of the Forms before, "either for the ones which caught only a glimpse of what was up there, or for those which fell to earth and fared badly down here, being led into injustice by bad company of one sort or another, and so forgetting the holy things they saw up there" (127-28). Given the context in which this novella is set, the reader is pressed to associate the world of injustice and detrimental relationships that Plato describes to the urban aristocracy depicted here, complete with its aesthetic and perhaps misguided cultivation of Platonism, its bouts of possessiveness and jealousy, its obsession with honor, and its controversial engagement with the idea of love, particularly as it concerns female characters.

In the fictional world that Cervantes elaborates in "La gitanilla," the reader's task is to discern and ponder upon the blend of an ancient philosophy's idealism with the mundane decadence of a society lost in greed, injustice, and prejudice. The forceful contrast into which Cervantes draws his readers—transparent and ironic depictions of unjustness and unlawfulness and the way these seem to clash with the morally sublime spiritual path—leads the reader to question Cervantes's use of Platonism and Neoplatonism as a mere literary convention. Cervantes realizes that the high-mindedness of these philosophies, which inspired Renaissance's most substantial literary and cultural contributions to the courtesan sphere, provides him with the perfect background from which to mount a disturbing contrast to the social inadequacies he wishes

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to expose. Gerli recognizes this tension when he asserts that “For some, *La gitanilla* will remain an inspirational tale of moral idealism; for those who perceive its ironic nuances, reversals, and counterpoint, it is a novel depicting a world fraught with moral traps and ethical apprehensions” (39). Juan de Cárcamo’s failure to fully embody the exemplariness of a Platonic lover may point to a more general moral and spiritual deterioration identified by Cervantes in his own society, and to a feeble attempt to hide this degeneracy under the guise of the beauty encompassed in Plato’s ancient ideology. In that way, Cervantes’s insistency on the theme of beauty, love, and marriage in the *Novelas ejemplares* makes Ficino’s words particularly germane: “We all love unceasingly in one way or another, but near all of us love wrongly; and the more we love, the worse we become” (*Nature of Love* 3). It would have been up to Cervantes’s *lectores amantísimos*, as it is up to the readers of our days, to unravel the sober exemplarity of his message and to strive for a higher moral ground.

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