
Camila's Story

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I curioso impertinente" ("Curioso" hereafter), which occupies chapters 33–35 of the first part of *Don Quijote*, has been perceptively discussed, among other things, as a study in triangular desire (Girard), hysteria (Sieber), pride (Hahn), obsession (Clamurro), jealousy (Wey-Gómez), and homoeroticism (Amat), almost always with emphasis on Anselmo and his madness/obsession.¹ I would like to suggest in this essay that "Curioso" is also a prototypical exemplar of a basic cognitive principle and, at the same time, a study in agency and narrative discourse. And I would place primary emphasis on Camila as the protagonist of the story.

The cognitive principle has to do with the modes of epistemology available in human thought. Cognitive psychologist Je-

¹ Four other important areas of scholarship on "Curioso" have been sources, influence, the *novela's* role among the embedded narratives in the structure of *Don Quijote*, and its potential relevance to the protagonist Don Quijote. Since I do not deal directly with these matters, I will not refer to significant research in these areas.

rome Bruner has argued that “[t]here are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality” (11). Bruner maintains that the two modes, while complimentary, “are irreducible to one another” and that each of them “has operating principles of its own and its own criteria of well-formedness.” The two modes are “a good story” and a “well-formed argument.” The latter, “the paradigmatic or logico-scientific one, attempts to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation” (12). It is this form—logic, argument, abstraction, theory—that has traditionally (at least since the days of the ancient Greeks)² been privileged: human beings are reasoning entities (as opposed to brute animals, which are guided by instinct and sensation); the culminating and distinguishing cognitive achievement of *homo sapiens* is the ability to think logically, argue coherently, and convince by means of abstraction. Men (gender exclusiveness intended) have often been presumed to use reason and logic to govern their thought and are not to be swayed by emotion, feeling, or stories. Of the two ways of ordering reality, argument has been identified with the male.³

The second mode Bruner describes is narrative: “Good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily ‘true’) historical accounts” (13). Throughout the centuries it has been consid-

² I do not mean to imply that in the ancient world myth (story, fiction) was not also valued. Although the Greeks, for example, explicitly privileged history over fiction, they also accorded great value to myth—the only means of understanding the remote past or the world of the gods—and invented story, particularly if they conveyed some sort of edification and/or truth (Nelson, 2–8).

³ “The freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature” (Aristotle 1260a). Lorraine Code (9–10) cites this passage at the head of a list of similar male thinkers, calling special attention to Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Humboldt. The feminist critique of traditional male assumptions of men’s intellectual, biological, and logical superiority over women, usually expressed in a simplistic binary metaphor, is substantial. See, for example, the important and impressive studies by Code, Haste, Keller, Labouvie-Vief, and Tavis.

ered more characteristic of women to gossip, tell tales, and swap anecdotes. Men, with their superior intellect, have tended to employ the superior logico-scientific epistemology; women, less gifted intellectually, have traditionally and more characteristically resorted to narrative.

So goes the traditional account. But today's approach to embodied cognition joins feminism in rejecting the traditional male-logical/female-narrative binary and all other simplistic dichotomies. Interestingly, however, Bruner also maintains that in everyday life, throughout the evolutionary history of human beings, it has been narrative that has proven to be much more important than argument. In the course of evolution, vision is older, more primitive, and more powerful than language; and in the same way narrative is older, more primitive, and more powerful than logic. Logic is not superior to narrative and, in fact, narrative is, as Bruner and others maintain, our primary cognitive mode.⁴

Story trumps argument: this, I submit, is what happens in "Curioso." My premise, in short, is that the first half of the tale is dominated by the men, Anselmo and Lotario, whose discourse is characterized primarily by argument, while the second half of the story is dominated by the women, Camila and Leonela, whose discourse is characterized above all by narrative. By the time the tale reaches its conclusion, Camila's narrative has proven to be superior to the men's argument. "Curioso" is Camila's story.

The story begins as the tale of "los dos amigos" (395); from the beginning, the two men occupy center stage and the readers' interest. After his marriage to Camila, however, Anselmo becomes obsessed with the idea that his wife may not be as perfect as he had assumed, and that the only way to find out the truth is to put her to the test, to conduct an experiment; he couches his proposal

⁴ There is abundant and increasing evidence that narrative is an essential characteristic of the human mind/brain. For example, the case for narrative is made in evolution by Donald and Dunbar; in neuroscience by Gazzaniga and Calvin; in artificial intelligence by Lloyd and Schank; in the study of memory by Schacter and Freeman; in everyday cognitive processes by Sarbin and Turner; in social science discourse by Fisher and Polkinghorne; in scientific philosophy by Dennett and Flanagan. The fact that narrative is a human universal further underscores the fallacy of the logical male vs. storytelling female dichotomy.

in terms of *probar* (398) and *instrumento* (399). Anselmo is described by E. Michael Gerli (112–13) as “a rationalist who seeks to query universally acknowledged truths, as he systematically fails to believe what he sees and hears”; his quest is for “absolute truth and knowledge.” Anselmo is a man who lives (and later dies) by the logic of argument.

When Anselmo asks his friend Lotario to test Camila’s virtue, Lotario responds with a long discourse in which he logically assails Anselmo’s impertinent curiosity. He employs a series of sententious statements (maxims, general “truths” that do not depend on context for understanding), analogies, and rhetorical questions. He marshals evidence from religion, mathematics, literature, law, custom, and an impressive array of metaphorical comparisons (woman is diamond, jewel, imperfect animal, ermine, mirror, relic, garden) in a vain attempt to convince his friend not to put Camila’s virtue to the test. Anselmo argues back that although Lotario is logically correct, he is determined to carry the project out and eventually convinces his friend to act as the test instrument. The discourse of the two friends/rivals throughout the first half of the story offers almost a prototype case of logico-scientific epistemology. Throughout their discussion, there is no emotion or feeling, simply impersonal, intellectual inquiry, and a conscious rhetorical structure. Without exception, all of their discussion is characterized by the same impersonal, rational discourse.⁵

What happens next is inevitable: Lotario tries to fake his interest in Camila and lies to Anselmo. Anselmo catches him in the lie and the rivalry between the men for the affection of Camila begins in earnest. Finally, in Anselmo’s absence, Camila and Lotario become lovers. The phrase in which the infidelity becomes reality is “Rindiose Camila; Camila se rindió” (413).⁶ This sentence is a

⁵ The most detailed study of the rhetorical nature and structure of the story is that of Rossiello, who argues that “Curioso” “puede leerse como una sucesión de intentos de persuadir y convencer” (167). The emphasis in Rossiello’s study, and the majority of his analysis, centers on the Anselmo-Lotario exchange.

⁶ Just three pages earlier (410), the narrator describes Camila’s distress when Lotario begins in earnest to seduce her in a parallel construction: “Afligiöse Camila.” The switch from *afligiöse* to *rindiose* is the action upon which the entire

perfect chiasmus: verb-reflexive pronoun-proper name / semi-colon / proper name-reflexive pronoun-verb. At its heart is the repetition of the name: "Camila; Camila." The language simultaneously reproduces syntactically the reversal of role from wife to lover and repeats the protagonist's name twice. It is not an accident that this phrase is located almost exactly in the geographic center of the whole narrative.⁷ More precisely, there are 8109 words (exactly 49% of the text) that precede this sentence and 8440 words (exactly 51% of the text) following it.⁸ Before this scene, Camila is never quoted; she is silent as the men talk—argue—about her. But after it, she dominates the discourse.

Following the lead of M. M. Bakhtin, I take the utterance as the basic unit of linguistic communication.⁹ An utterance may consist of anything from a single word (or even a single syllable or phoneme) to a very lengthy speech; the length matters less than the fact of being a single uninterrupted string of speech with a clear beginning and end. It is worth citing Bakhtin at length on the nature and function of the utterance, which he considers the only "*real unit of speech communication*":

...[S]peech can exist in reality only in the form of concrete utterances of individual speaking people, speech subjects.

story depends.

⁷ I refer here specifically to the manuscript read by the priest, not including opening and concluding remarks or the interruption when Don Quijote fights with the wineskins.

⁸ I am not suggesting that Cervantes consciously and deliberately contrived to locate this key phrase exactly in the center of the story, counting words or *pliegos* in order to achieve this effect. Rather, it is a frequent practice of writers (as first observed in the nineteenth century by Gustav Freitag in his theory of drama) to locate the climax of a story or drama very near the center of the work. This practice may be conscious to some degree, in at least some writers, but to a large extent it is instinctive and/or unconscious in others. There is no way of knowing how aware Cervantes might have been of his practice in a case like this.

⁹ Bakhtin insisted from his earliest writings in the 1920s, throughout his entire career, up to his final essays in the 1970s, that the utterance—and not the Saussurean word or the Chomskyan sentence—is the proper unit for linguistic analysis. In this, he anticipated modern pragmatics, the study of actual language use in context.

Speech is always cast in the form of an utterance belonging to a particular speaking subject, and outside this form it cannot exist. Regardless of how varied utterances may be in terms of their length, their content, and their compositional structure, they have common structural features as units of speech communication and, above all, quite clear-cut boundaries. Since these boundaries are so essential and fundamental they must be discussed in detail.

The boundaries of each concrete utterance as a unit of speech communication are determined by a *change of speaking subjects*, that is, a change of speakers. Any utterance—from a short (single-word) rejoinder in everyday dialogue to the large novel or scientific treatise—has, so to speak, an absolute beginning and an absolute end: its beginning is preceded by the utterances of others, and its end is followed by the responsive utterances of others (or, although it may be silent, others' active responsive understanding, or finally, responsive action based on this understanding). The speaker ends his utterance in order to relinquish the floor to the other or to make room for the other's active responsive understanding. The utterance is not a conventional unit, but a real unit, clearly delimited by the change of speaking subjects, which ends by relinquishing the floor to the other, as if with a silent *dixi*, perceived by the listeners (as a sign) that the speaker has finished. (71–72)

Thus, I am concerned with the frequency of speech and not the length of specific speeches. Of course, the longest utterance in the story is that of Lotario (2438 words on pp. 400–06). Overall, the total words spoken by each of the characters (rounded to nearest whole number) are as follows:

	Utterances	Words	Words per utterance
Lotario	9 (20%)	3905 (51%)	434
Anselmo	10 (22%)	1362 (18%)	136
Camila	14 (31%)	1455 (19%)	104
Leonela	9 (20%)	836 (11%)	97
<i>Ciudadano</i>	3 (7%)	132 (2%)	44
Total	45	7690	171

But my argument is that it is how often—and not how long—a character speaks that matters most. A single brief remark can easily outweigh a long speech—think, for example, of the effectiveness of Sancho Panza's "¿Qué gigantes?" or "Todo puede ser," or "Y aun algos" in comparison with some of Don Quixote's lengthy discourses.

In the first half of the story Anselmo has six utterances and Lotario two; neither Camila nor Leonela ever speaks. After the central moment, Camila speaks fourteen times and Leonela nine, while Lotario has seven utterances and Anselmo four. Overall, the women speak 23 times, all in the second half of the story; the two men speak a total of 19 times throughout the story. And the discourse employed by Camila and Leonela is often familiar, personal, and intimate, in comparison with the discourse of the males in the first half of the story, which is abstract, formal, and theoretical.¹⁰ After Leonela playfully recites the alphabet of the perfect lover in order to describe Lotario, Camila laughs (418), the only

¹⁰ There are, of course, some strong rhetorical and theoretical features to Camila's discourse also; women are not excluded from the logico-scientific epistemology. Furthermore, the strong rhetorical discourse of characters such as Marcela and Dorotea elsewhere in the novel, and some of the women in Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares* (e.g., Preciosa) and *Persiles y Sigismunda* (e.g., Transila), makes it clear that (in spite of the narrator's sexist remark: see below) gender *per se* is not a factor in the type of language or style used by any individual.

laughter recorded in the story. The women's discourse is filled with references to emotions and feelings, is personal, and contains exclamations and lamentations: all elements absent from the men's discourse of the first half of the story.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Camila's taking charge of the story she narrates. As Joanne Frye states, "Once the female 'I' has spoken, the subversion is begun" (50):

When the protagonist of the novel is made her own narrator, she thus achieves a very immediate kind of agency and a capacity to renew our notion of plot. She is the agent by which events come into being as part of her story: she makes the selection as to which information is relevant to the plot she constructs; she sets the context for the casual links in her own life. She cannot, of course, claim total control.... But she does have the freedom of construction that lies at the heart of the human need to narrate, and in using that freedom openly, she subverts the convention of plot as an apparently inevitable unfolding of causal relationships. (56)

Frye concludes: "A woman who speaks in her own voice of her own experience is a subject rather than an object, and as such, she is capable of self-definition and autonomous action" (143).¹¹ This is precisely what happens in Camila's case: she transforms herself from passive object to active agent; she takes control of her life and her story and in the process relegates to secondary status the men who quibble over abstract concepts.

The dramatic highlight comes when Camila stages an elaborate deceit for her hidden, voyeuristic husband and her pathetic, helpless lover. The stage for this is set when Lotario sees a man

¹¹ Frye's important book, inspired in part in cognitive science and recognizing the value of the theories of M. M. Bakhtin, on female agency in the novel and the role of the first-person female narrator has been largely ignored in an age obsequious to theory inspired in French (read: Lacanian) feminism. The primary reason for this marginalization is that she writes of agency, context, self-determination, and other concepts inconsistent with the poststructuralist paradigm. Frye's work is consistent with modern cognitive psychology and contemporary linguistic theory, and it deserves more recognition than it has received.

leaving the house by way of a window and assumes that he must be Camila's lover. His reasoning here is that of the syllogism of classical logic:

- Camila betrayed Anselmo with me;
- Camila is an unfaithful woman; and therefore
- the presence of another man means Camila has betrayed me also.

His logic and reason leads him into error, but Camila corrects everything: "[Lotario] cayó de su simple pensamiento, y dio en otro, que fuera la perdición de todos, si Camila no lo remediara" (419). A sexist observation by the narrator also underscores the difference between Camila's (female) narrative and Lotario's (male) logic: "Pero, como naturalmente tiene la mujer ingenio presto para el bien y para el mal, más que el varón, puesto que le va faltando cuando de propósito se pone a hacer discursos, luego al instante halló Camila el modo de remediar tan al parecer irremediable negocio" (421).¹²

Camila's narrative lie wins the day and places her in control of

¹² Is this therefore Cervantes' own view? Impossible to say, since we should always be reticent to ascribe to the author the statement of any narrator or character. Is Cervantes the narrator here? Perhaps, but not necessarily. I have previously argued ("Cervantes as Narrator") that Cervantes is the public narrator of the primary text of *Don Quijote*, but I do not think that he is necessarily the narrator of "Curioso." Recall that this is a manuscript that had been left in the inn by a previous visitor. In I, 47, the innkeeper tells the priest that there is another manuscript, entitled "Rinconete y Cortadillo," in the inn, perhaps left by the same author. Since we know that Cervantes is the author of this second story, it is possible that he is also the author of "Curioso." But, as the historical Porras collection (which includes two by Cervantes—the early versions of "Rinconete" and "El celoso extremeño," together with "La tía fingida," which may or may not be his—along with other works) proves, it was probably not uncommon to keep a miscellany of works by different authors. Interestingly, some of the most astute critics of the narrative structure of *Don Quijote*, such as El Saffar (72, 139), Parr (34), and Paz Gago (115), believe that the narrator of "Curioso" is different from any other narrator in the novel, while García (433) explores the possibility that Cide Hamete is the narrator. But, no matter who is identified as the author and/or the narrator, the opinion expressed in the text cannot be assumed to be the opinion actually held in real life by the historical author.

her life and those of everyone around her. As Yvonne Jehenson has argued, "Camila's counter-scenario, however, changes everything," and she adds that "Camila's performance succeeds in altering the very rules that have previously governed her signification" (42). Only Leonela knows the truth behind her mistress's story and thus remains outside Camila's sphere of control. Leonela decides to write her own story, and, as a consequence, her actions lead to the downfall and death of everyone involved.

Camila's movement from a silent object of desire and discussion to a narrating and controlling agent makes her the most interesting and most autonomous character in the tale read in the inn of Juan Palomeque. As William H. Clamurro has noted, Camila's taking of Lotario as a lover "also marks her self-realization, both morally and creatively, as a person with voice. She takes on the role of speaker and becomes an autonomous, narrating presence within the story" (384). By wresting discourse and agency from the men, by humanizing that discourse, and by telling the best (i.e., most effective, most convincing) story, Camila becomes the central figure in the tale originally about and dominated by men; her story and her actions "show how fiction may topple over into truth" (Gerli 119).

"Curioso" begins as a story about the two men. They are the focus of the reader's attention and it is easy to be drawn into the story of Anselmo's madness and obsession, Lotario's desperate attempt to get out of a difficult situation, and the web of lies and deception that develops between them. Anselmo and Lotario have traditionally been perceived as—and, for me, remain—original and compelling characters. The title of the story is, after all, "El curioso impertinente," which makes Anselmo the titular protagonist, and no matter what else it is, "Curioso" is clearly a study in some kind of pathological obsession. It is characteristic of readers to form impressions of characters early in a narrative and not change those impressions even when the narrative emphasis shifts, the characters evolve psychologically, or other characters become more prominent.¹³ "Curioso" has been read

¹³ I have tried to study this process on three previous occasions: in two articles on the formation of character image and the deceptive narrative structure

much more often as a story about a man's madness than as one about a woman's self-assertion. And, I believe, it remains a fascinating story of madness, rivalry, and deceit, as well as an exploration of the nature of truth and the inevitability of unintended consequences.¹⁴ But, whether Cervantes intended it as such or not, "Curioso" also evolves from one kind of story into another. When all is said and done, "El curioso impertinente" is Camila's story.¹⁵

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of *Lazarillo de Tormes* (both published in 1975), and in my 1982 book on *Don Quijote*, where I coined the term "the windmill principle" (117) to describe how readers' images of characters do not evolve along with the characters themselves.

¹⁴ Sociologist Anthony Giddens has written extensively on the unintended consequences of our intentional acts, maintaining that "our activities constantly, I would even say routinely, have consequences that we do not intend, and of which we might be quite oblivious when undertaking the behaviour in question" (8).

¹⁵ An earlier version of this essay was read as a paper at the 15th Annual Southern California Cervantes Symposium, April 19, 2003, at the University of California, Riverside. I am grateful to James A. Parr, Daniel Eisenberg, and several other participants in that symposium whose comments during and after the discussion period helped shape the current version.

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