Episode 6: Oxford Spanish Literature Podcast

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Christy Callaway-Gale 00:02
Ever wondered what it would be like studying Spanish at the University of Oxford? Sit in on my conversations with Spanish tutors to find out what's so fascinating about the literature they teach, why they love teaching it, and why they think you might love it too.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:15
Hi Jonathan, can you hear me alright?

Jonathan Thacker 00:17
Hi.

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:18
How are you doing today?

Jonathan Thacker 00:19
I'm ok, thanks, yeah. I'm kind of gradually returning to the of[fice].

[CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

Jonathan Thacker 00:24
My name's Jonathan Thacker and I'm the King Alfonso XIII Professor of Spanish Studies at Oxford. I specialise in Spanish Golden Age literature, so that's literature from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:38
And so what's the name of the text that we're going to be speaking about today and who wrote it?

Jonathan Thacker 00:44
Ok, so Cervantes, Spain's equivalent of Shakespeare, if you like, wrote this text. He lived from 1547 to 1616, so as a contemporary of Shakespeare. The text in Spanish is the *Casamiento engañoso y coloquio de los perros*, which is 'The Deceitful Marriage and the Dialogue, or Colloquy, of the Dogs', and it's...it's two linked stories in a collection of *novelas*, or short stories, called the *Novelas ejemplares*, or The Exemplary Novels, sometimes translated as The Exemplary Tales.

Christy Callaway-Gale 01:29
And what's the basic plot of the double *novela*, these two linked stories?

Jonathan Thacker 01:35
Yeah. So this is a double *novela*. The *Casamiento engañoso* (The Deceitful Marriage) is very short, only about ten pages long. It's...it's told in the...in the first person, mainly, and it tells the story of the marriage of this first-person narrator, who's called Campuzano, to a certain Estefanía. And they tricked each other in this marriage, so she thought she was marrying quite a rich soldier and he thought he was marrying a woman who owned a house and was quite well off too. It turns out that they were deceiving each other and the marriage falls apart. The plot of the second story which leads on from this (because it's the same story teller) is...is not—well, plot may be the wrong word—it's…it's a...dialogue between two dogs who happen to gain the power of speech one evening, and it's overheard by this same Campuzano, the deceived husband, and he tells...he tells his interlocutor, the man he's speaking to, Peralta, about this dialogue which he has written down, and Peralta proceeds to read the dialogue of the...dogs, which as I say, doesn't really have a plot. It's one of the dogs, Berganza, that tells the story of his life to the other dog, Cipión, and it's—like life stories often are—rather episodic, and doesn't have an obvious beginning, middle and an end, as we'd expect of a story.

Christy Callaway-Gale 03:30
There's a lot to get our teeth into here, I think.

Jonathan Thacker 03:32
Yeah, there is!

Christy Callaway-Gale 03:33
Maybe tell us first, though, why you wanted to talk about this text, in particular?

Jonathan Thacker 03:38
Yeah. So I....one of the things I like most about Cervantes is his literary playfulness. So he tell[s]...he tells good stories, but he tells these stories in interesting ways. And we can see that through a lot of the *novelas* in this collection, but I think that this particular story is perhaps the boldest—or double story—is perhaps the boldest and most experimental of all. And you get a panoramic view of Golden Age Spain and a lot of the character types, the people who lived there, so it opens a window onto a period four hundred years in the past.

Christy Callaway-Gale 04:28
So speaking of the historical and literary context around the text, then, maybe you could talk a bit about when and where the text was written and what was happening at the time?

Jonathan Thacker 04:40
Yes, we don't know exactly, actually. It was probably written along with some of the other short stories in the collection and possibly along with *Don Quijote*, as well, (Cervantes's most famous work), in the early 1600s, so the first decade or so of the 17th century. It's the early years of the reign of Philip III. Philip II, perhaps the more famous monarch—the king who sent the Armada against Elizabethan England in 1588—he died in 1598 and his son Philip III had taken over. Now, Philip III was a less popular monarch and he was dominated by a favourite, or *privado* in Spanish, the Duque de Lerma. And these were, sort of, difficult years for Spain, when it was easy for

people to be rather cynical. Economically they were tough and there were signs of the decline of the enormous empire over which Spain had...had ruled in the 16th century.

Christy Callaway-Gale 05:54
And so do we know what sort of other literature, other authors, around a similar time in Spain were writing and how this text that we're looking at today compares to those works?

Jonathan Thacker 06:05
Yeah, that's an interesting question. The...the most popular form of "literature" (in inverted commas) was, in fact, drama. So the theatre, as it was in Shakespearean England, was incredibly popular in Spain in this...in this period. And Cervantes himself had started out as a dramatist, so his first literary works were written in the 1580s. But his drama, in the end, wasn't being bought by the actor managers, who were more interested in the works written by his contemporary and literary rival, Lope de Vega. So the drama was very important. Poetry was also....a very…very important form. Prose, perhaps not so much but it was coming into its own, particularly with *romances*, so that is...stories...long prose stories with multiple characters, idealized characters and happy endings. And so...so what Cervantes is doing in writing a short story is something that's actually quite new in Spain in this period. And he says that. He writes a prologue to the *Novelas ejemplares*, in which he claims to be the first to 'haber novelado en lengua española' ('the first to have written novels, or...short novels, short stories, in Spanish').

Christy Callaway-Gale 07:40
And so, if what Cervantes is doing is quite new, do we know how this text was received, then, when it was first published?

Jonathan Thacker 07:49
We don't know in terms of actual sales—those sort of...figures are very difficult to discover. But we know that Cervantes was much imitated. Cervantes himself, we should say, was...was partly imitating a successful Italian form, the Italian *novelli*, although he...he claims to be the first to write novels in Spanish because his *novelas*, short novels, are...are a little...are a little different. The Italian ones are quite short and often bawdy. And he writes something that's a little bit more complex. This seemed to go down well, and we know that from the amount of imitation the other writers, including actually his rival Lope de Vega who began to write short stories after reading Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares*.

Christy Callaway-Gale 08:47
Great, so I think let's move on to some detail on the text now. Let's focus on the first story from the double *novela* to begin with, and maybe you can give us a bit more detail on the plot of this first story now?

Jonathan Thacker 09:02
Ok, so the first story, the *Casamiento engañoso*, is introduced by a frame narrator, a third-person narrator who then disappears from the narrative. This narrator introduces Campuzano, an old soldier, who's emerging from the...from hospital, having...been treated for syphilis that apparently he caught from his deceitful wife, Estefanía. He bumps into an old friend, Peralta, who asks him why he's not looking so well, and they sit down to eat in Peralta's inn, where Campuzano tells his story in the...in the first person.

Christy Callaway-Gale 09:49
So this first part of the double *novela* revolves around this concept of deception, which is sometimes referred to as *engaño*. Can you explain this concept of *engaño* and maybe also speak a bit about its significance at the time that Cervantes was writing?

Jonathan Thacker 10:07
So *engaño* is a staple of the Italian short stories, so they often involved trickery, often trickery in love, so Cervantes is acknowledging a debt to that tradition. But I think he takes the idea of *engaño* a little bit further and involves the reader in it, since, firstly, we actually don't know the full story. Campuzano tells us a version of how he was deceived by Estefanía, but Estefanía's voice is almost absent from the story and we don't really hear her point of view about the trick. We forget to a certain extent that Campuzano is tricking Estefanía just as much, if not more, than she is tricking him. Secondly, there's an admission from Campuzano during the story, during this narration to Peralta, that he's not telling the full truth: 'aunque estoy diciendo verdades, no son verdades de confesión', he says ('although I'm telling truths, they're not the kind of truths that you could speak in a...in a confessional'). So, deceit comes into the form of the story, the way it's told, and...and he himself is an unreliable narrator.

Christy Callaway-Gale 11:47
So let's move on now to the second story from the double *novela*, and maybe you can give us a more detailed summary of this second short story before we get into more, kind of, detailed questions on the text itself?

Jonathan Thacker 12:02
Ok, so the *Coloquio* is perhaps the most interesting of Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares*. It's...it's written in the form of a colloquy, or a philosophical dialogue. It's a…it's a Platonic, or a Humanist, model. The aim of a...of a conversation between the two interlocutors is to reach a kind of truth through argument and through logic. But it's also a dialogue between two dogs. So it has a…it has a low-life, picaresque element—the picaresque is a form that's first-person, that's comic, satirical, that's episodic, and as I say, has these low-life characters. Now, Berganza tells the story from when he was a puppy to the present day and we have a trawl through the various masters that he served in various roles, from butchers, to shepherds, to merchants, to gypsies, and to...his final master (his current master), who is an alms collector at the hospital in which Campuzano has been...has been staying. And this trawl...so we get a trawl through Golden Age low life, set mainly in Seville and in other parts of Andalusia. And Cervantes's purpose seems to be mainly satirical, to shine a light on what is wrong with the society of his...of his day.

Christy Callaway-Gale 14:01
And I think this second part is really interesting because there's so many different narrative layers. So, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think it's a "story, within a story, within a story", because we have this story about the dogs, which is embedded within Campuzano's wider story about his marriage and deception and his time in hospital (which is where he heard these dogs talking), and then this, in turn, is embedded in the story that we…are reading. So why do you think Cervantes chooses to have all these different layers of narrative and present this text in this way?

Jonathan Thacker 14:39
That's a really good question. I think for...for a number of reasons. The...the presence of a frame narrative allows for...comment within the text on...on a text included within it. So it allows for, for example, moral judgments to be made by an individual who is sitting outside the text. So that's one thing. A second...a second thing to think about, perhaps, is the reliability of these narrators. So, an important part of the double *novela* is that the first story throws light on the second and we understand the first differently after reading the second. So once we know that Campuzano says he has heard these dogs talking, we start to doubt his first story of the deceitful marriage. So there are questions of authority and trust which come up, and also questions of truth and fiction. Why is it that we believe what we do? Once we start to question who it is who's telling a particular story, then we can start to question that story, itself. A third...a third thing I'd say here is that it allows Cervantes to be playful. Cervantes is quite a meta-fictional writer—that means that he writes literature about literature—and he includes intertext, so, for example, some of the characters from other *Novelas ejemplares* appear in the...in the *Coloquio*. And that allows him to open up this area of *ser* and *parecer*, of 'being' and 'seeming', which is a common preoccupation of Golden Age Spain.

Christy Callaway-Gale 17:07
And so you've just said how Cervantes is quite a playful author at times and I'm quite interested in the idea of humour in this second short story, here. Right at the beginning, the two dogs (Cipión and Berganza) they start off—and I think this is quite comic—they start off by commenting on the surprising fact that they can talk, like humans, when they're dogs and they shouldn't be able to do that. So do you think we're supposed to find this second short story funny?

Jonathan Thacker 17:39
Yes, we are. I think that you've put your finger on one of the reasons why. It's...it is because of the different, unexpected, source of the dialogue. We get a new take on our world, a "dog's-eye view" of the world about us. That...that also ties in with...a view of comedy from the...from the Golden Age. One of the things that Golden Age readers and audiences found amusing was the contrast between styles, styles which are higher and styles which are lower. So we have a...What I mean by that is that we have a philosophical form, the colloquy, that we have, as protagonists of it, not clever individuals, but two dogs. And Cervantes plays with that as well in his...when Berganza spends some time with the shepherds, who actually are as unlike the shepherds of pastoral literature as it's possible to be. They don't go around singing songs about love and carving their initials in trees, they go about defrauding their...their masters, so again you have a contrast there between the two styles which Cervantes is very keen to...to point out. So there's that side of it. But there are also some amusing moments, for example, when Berganza has access to the magistrate and wants to tell him about an idea he's heard of, of how to make sure that you get...you can get prostitutes off the street and makes his contribution. But of course it all just comes out as wild barking and...Berganza is beaten and sent out of the…out of the house. So you get...so it's a comic...it's a comic *novela*, but it also has those individual funny moments.

Christy Callaway-Gale 20:09
And the collection of stories that this double *novela* is part of, as you've mentioned already, is called *Novelas ejemplares*, which we might translate as Exemplary Tales. What, if anything, is exemplary about this double *novella* and is there supposed to be a moral to this, sort of, second half of the story or the two stories together, as a whole?

Jonathan Thacker 20:31
Well, there are in the stories, both stories, condemnations of deceit and trickery. So that, if you like, is a...is a fairly clear moral to the story...particularly perhaps to the...to the *Casamiento*, the first story. But there's more to it than that. The exemplariness of the stories comes in two areas: in the moral, which I've just touched upon, and the aesthetic, and I think you could argue that Cervantes is more interested in the latter. So, for example, what are the implications of a story, or...or a history—an account of something true—being told in a certain way. So it takes us back to this...these central ideas of the...of not just the *Novelas ejemplares*, but of Cervantes's writing. Of course, the form of a...of a narrative does have an effect on the reception of a story and that, in itself, may well have moral consequences. And we can see that, of course, not just by reading Cervantes's fiction, but in the world around us today. Whose version of events do we believe? Why? Whose assumptions are we subject to? How do we know what the truth is? And I think Cervantes wants us to think about that, he wants to educate us, as readers, and he does it through...through telling stories in...in different ways. So, I think Cervantes is more interested actually in aesthetic examples, than in moral examples, in this story, and in the collection as a whole.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 22:47
A big part of studying Spanish at Oxford is looking at literary texts in a lot of detail. So I'm asking Jonathan to pick out a couple of quotations from this double *novela*, so we can analyse it a bit more closely.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Jonathan Thacker 23:00
I've chosen two sections of text because I want to contrast them. So, after Campuzano has told the story of the deceitful marriage to Peralta, admitting as he goes along that he's not telling the whole truth, Campuzano has then mentioned that he's overheard the dogs talking, which makes Peralta respond in this fashion: he says, 'hasta aquí estaba en duda si creería o no lo que de su casamiento me había contado, y esto que ahora me cuenta de que oyó hablar los perros me ha hecho declarar por la parte de no creerle ninguna cosa. Por amor de Dios, señor Alférez, que no cuente disparates a persona alguna, si ya no fuere a quien sea tan su amigo como yo'. So what he's saying (paraphrasing) is: 'up until this point, that is that you mentioned the talking dogs, I was in doubt as to whether to believe what you told me about your marriage. And now that you've told me that you heard these dogs talking, I'm convinced not to believe a word you've said. For God's sake, señor Alférez', he says, 'don't tell that nonsense to anybody unless they're a really good friend of yours, like I am'. And then the second quotation is some fifty pages later, after Peralta has sat down and agreed to read the story of the...of the talking dogs. And so at the very end of the...of the double *novela*, he says to Campuzano: 'Aunque este coloquio sea fingido y nunca haya pasado, paréceme que está tan bien compuesto que puede el señor Alférez pasar adelante con el segundo'. That is: 'Even if this dialogue is made up and never happened, it strikes me that it's so well put together, or composed, that you can go on and write the second'. The second would be the story that Cipión will tell of his life to Berganza the next night, although that was never written.

Christy Callaway-Gale 25:36
So let's dive into looking at the first quote in a bit more detail now. So here, as you said, Peralta reveals that he's unsure whether to believe the story that Campuzano has told him about his marriage. So, to what extent do you

think Peralta's playing the role of the average reader here, kind of, starting to doubt what they've been reading previously? And, if so, do you think this is a comment on what a good reader should be?

Jonathan Thacker 26:09
I think…Peralta is, over the course of the two stories, representing all of us as readers. But I think, after the first story, he's not an average reader in fact, no, he's...partly because he's a listener and he's a listener who trusts his friend to tell him the truth. Partly, of course, because the story that Campuzano tells Peralta, is told as fact, as something that has happened to him recently in his life, but partly because of their friendship...and friendship engenders trust. So I think, here, with the first story, and this first quotation, it's more a comment on trust and authority, which is, of course, an element of...an element both of storytelling and of friendship.

Christy Callaway-Gale 27:13
And is there anything about the vocabulary in this first quotation that you want to pick out...that, kind of, complements these ideas of trust, for example?

Jonathan Thacker 27:25
Well, Peralta calls his interlocutor, Campuzano, 'amigo'. So there's that idea of...of friendship. And we also get the...the notion of belief 'estaba en duda si creería o no' ('whether, or not, to believe the story that's been told'). And, we have the verb *contar* used three times, I think, in this...in this section. A *cuento* which is *contado* is a...is a story which is, which has been told. Here, Peralta thinks that he's been told the truth, something that actually happened, but it turns out probably to be a...to be a *cuento*. And I'd also underline, I think, Peralta's need to know, you know, his...this is black and white for him; he wants to decide ('declarar por la parte'), he wants to know for certain, to be convinced, whether he's being told the truth, or not.

Christy Callaway-Gale 28:42
Let's move on now to the second quotation that you chose, which is from the end of the second short story that makes up the double *novela*. So, here, there seems to be a sort of progression, where Peralta seems to let go of the fact that the story might not be real and he kind of revels in the idea that the story is well put together. What does this quote seem to tell us about the importance of a story being well constructed?

Jonathan Thacker 29:12
Yeah, this is a really important point, I think, and why I chose these contrasting quotations: one with Peralta angry and feeling deceived, and one with him...happy. And he's happy, I think, because he has a "book" (in inverted commas) in his hands. He...Campuzano goes to sleep but hands him the notebook in which he's written down the story of the...of the talking dogs. So he knows it's a story and he's not expecting the truth. Behind that, I suppose—and the reason the two stories are linked by Cervantes—is...is because Cervantes as a writer is aware that both stories are made up of the same basic building blocks: words, words which can be truthful, or which can be deceptive. So...with the second story, Peralta relaxes...he relaxes into a story that lets him escape, that has certain codes, both generic—so it has picaresque elements, it has satirical elements—and structural codes that he's comfortable with. He knows what kind of story this is. He doesn't feel that sense of betrayal by...by a friend, even if he doesn't believe that dogs can talk.

Christy Callaway-Gale 30:41
And do you think these quotations that you've picked out for us to look at in more detail shed any light on the theories of fiction that authors, like Cervantes, were influenced by at the time Cervantes was writing?

Jonathan Thacker 30:54
Yes, they do. Cervantes is writing at a time when, first of all, it was harder to ascertain the truth of facts. How could you know, for example, that a story told by a traveller to the far-off New World...how could you know that stories they told were true? You couldn't...you couldn't look these things up. And, secondly, prose fiction itself was a fairly new form, at least in many of the forms it was beginning to take. So, it was hard for an individual reader to know, or harder than it is today, for an individual reader to know whether to believe in *romances*, for example. And, I'd make one further point: Cervantes is bolstered at this time, as a writer, by the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle said, in this work, that in some ways poetry—by which he means fiction, in general—was of graver import than history, because it told universal truths rather than particular stories. So, one implication of that for Cervantes is that the *Coloquio*, however untrue the dogs talking, is in fact, in some ways, more true than Campuzano's factual, but individual, story of his deceitful marriage.

Christy Callaway-Gale 32:42
And, looking at the quote again, now, I'm quite interested with the way this second quotation ends—kind of, leaving us hanging almost...this idea of the next part of the story. Why do you think Cervantes does that?

Jonathan Thacker 32:59
I think he does that…partly because he probably wanted to write Cipión's story—whether he ever did we don't know—but partly because storytelling never stops, words never stop, stories keep going...forever.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 33:22
Thinking about applying for Modern Languages at uni? Well keep up to date with the latest episodes of the podcast and find out about our upcoming outreach events by following us on Twitter @OxMML_Schools.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 33:34 You might also like to take a look at our Modern Languages blog, 'Adventures on the Bookshelf'.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 33:42 This podcast was created by Professor Ben Bollig, produced by me, Christy Callaway-Gale, and brought to you by the Sub-faculty of Spanish at the University of Oxford. Special thanks goes to the tutors that participated and the Taylor Institution Library.