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"Curiosa Impertinente": Women and Curiosity on the Spanish–North African Borderlands

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Abstract: In European imaginings of the Islamic world, women incited intense curiosity and were often depicted by early modern writers as sexualized subjects and curious objects of male desire. However, this Orientalist fascination ignores the very curiosity of these women and their desire to glean knowledge about the world around them. While curiosity became increasingly valued in the early modern period as a means of progress, female curiosity was still often linked to the perils of excess (Neil Kenny). This essay examines this apparent contradiction by focusing on the Muslim protagonist in one of Miguel de Cervantes's plays that takes place on the Spanish–North African borderlands. In *Los baños de Argel* (1615), Zahara defends her desire to inquire about the world by portraying herself as a "curious impertinent" ("curiosa impertinente"), a name that clearly recalls the tale of "El curioso impertinente" intercalated in the first part of *Don Quixote* (1605). Moreover, Zahara harnesses her ability to ask questions to further her goals and ambitions. Ultimately, through a close reading of the female protagonist in this play, I argue that Cervantes considers the ways in which women asserted their own curiosity and represented themselves as agents of inquiry.

Keywords: Miguel de Cervantes; North Africa; Iberia; women; gender; curiosity; Islam; theater

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1. Introduction

In European imaginings of the Islamic world, women incited intense curiosity and were often depicted by early modern writers as sexualized subjects and curious objects of male desire.[1] The captive Portuguese cleric Antonio de Sosa is one of these authors who displays his curiosity towards the physical features and customs of Muslim women, and he incorporates these commentaries into a work that principally depicts the city and multilingual population of Algiers at the end of the sixteenth century. In his *Topografía e historia general de Argel* (1612), Sosa dedicates various chapters to profiling women in Algiers, including descriptions of their clothing, beauty practices, and pastimes.[2] Among these portrayals, Sosa voyeuristically imagines women's activities in the gendered space of the bathhouse, scrubbing their bodies and softening their skin with special products: "They usually go in the afternoon because the men are there until then, and they all take at least one slave with a basket or bundle of linen or silk in which they carry their clean shirt and bloomers, their headdress, and some soap to scrub themselves [. . .] to whiten and soften their skin. And many also carry some scented water with which they spray their faces and breasts, and towels to wipe themselves off" (de Haedo [1612] 1927–1929, vol. 1, pp. 135–36).[3] Women's fashion also piques his fascination as he describes their plunging necklines and thin linen tunics while they walk barefoot in their homes (de Haedo [1612] 1927–1929, vol. 1, pp. 129–31). Sosa, like many of his contemporaries, offered

up a colorful display of women's bodies and spaces in the Islamic world for a curious European audience.

However, this Orientalist fascination with the female "other" ignores the very curiosity of these women and their desire to glean knowledge about the world around them. While curiosity became increasingly valued in the early modern period as a means of progress, female modes of inquiry were still often linked to the perils of excess.[4] As Neil Kenny argues, "the purpose of making women into curious subjects was not, on the whole, to empower them, but on the contrary to show what disasters ensue when women are given leeway to act on the curiosity that storytellers attribute to them" (Kenny 2004, p. 384). Narratives and exempla that circulated in medieval and early modern discourse only helped to emphasize the negative association between women and curiosity. Female names, such as the biblical figure of Eve or Pandora from Greek mythology, were harnessed by diverse authors to show the calamitous results of women's curiosity (Kenny 2004, pp. 395–400). As a consequence, men were able to display their curiosity towards women or other curious objects that oftentimes became feminized, but it was usually inappropriate for women to express their curiosity about the world around them (Kenny 2004, p. 423).

This essay examines this apparent contradiction between viewing women as curious objects and appreciating these women's own curiosity by focusing on the Muslim protagonist in one of Miguel de Cervantes's *comedias* that takes place on the Spanish–North African borderlands. In *Los baños de Argel* (1615), Zahara defends her desire to inquire about the world around her by characterizing herself as a "curious impertinent" ("curiosa impertinente"), a name that clearly recalls the tale of "El curioso impertinente" intercalated in the first part of *Don Quixote* (1605). Moreover, in collaboration with the other women in the play, Zahara harnesses her ability to ask questions to mobilize her own desires and aspirations. Ultimately, through a close reading of the female protagonist in this play, I argue that Cervantes considers the ways in which women asserted their own curiosity and represented themselves as agents of inquiry.

2. Curious Characters and Spectators in *Los baños de Argel*

In *Los baños de Argel*, Cervantes draws heavily on his own experience as a captive in Algiers (1575–1580) to represent the captivity of Don Lope and his subsequent rescue and return to Spain with Zahara, the wealthy Agi Morato's daughter. The play is a reworking of some parts of "The Captive's Tale," intercalated into part one of *Don Quixote*, and broadly speaking, it presents the dynamics of Christian–Muslim encounters and conflicts in the early modern Mediterranean world.[5] Aside from an exploration of Zahara's curiosity that will be central to my argument in this essay, it is important to first note how the play also alludes to the curiosity of many of its characters, especially their interest in the religious "other." Christian characters probe the actions and customs of their Muslim counterparts and vice versa. Right from the start of the play, the Christian captives are enthralled with trying to figure out who Zahara is and how to decode the messages with coins she sends out her window. The captives inquire about what and who they encounter in Algiers and try to make sense of these scenes.

The noble captive Osorio, for example, is also curious about Zahara's planned wedding with Muley Maluco, while likewise depicting the Muslim personage as "well versed and curious": "Muley Maluco is to be her husband, the one who aspires to be king of Fez, a very famous Moor, well versed and curious in his sect and evil law. He knows Turkish, Spanish, German, Italian, and French; he sleeps on a raised bed and eats at a table, sitting in Christian fashion. Most of all, he's a great soldier, generous, wise, composed, adorned with many graces" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 84).[6] This character is based on the historical dignitary 'Abd al-Malik of Morocco (1541–1579). Near the end of his life, he married the

daughter of the Ottoman official Hājjī Murād—the same woman who inspired Cervantes's characters of Zoraida in *Don Quixote* and Zahara in *Los baños de Argel*. [7] As Osorio suggests in the play, Maluco's Europeanized customs do not necessarily line up with the captive's expectations. The historical 'Abd al-Malik also aroused the attention of other visitors to North Africa, like Edmund Hogan, the English ambassador to Marrakesh, who commented on his interest in European music and sports. The early modern Arabic historian al-Ifrānī remarked on his distinctive use of Latin characters to sign his name and that he was a man inclined to new things (Oliver Asín 1947–1948, p. 259). Thus, the brief commentary about Muley Maluco's curiosities in the play reveals the interest he incited not only in the other spectators in the play but also in the real-life readers/audience of Cervantes's *comedia* in early modern Spain.

Just like the Christian captives were curious about the people and practices in the world around them, Cervantes also shows how the Muslim characters on stage take an interest in the peculiarities of Christian customs. This idea is best illustrated at the start of act three when the Christian captives are preparing to celebrate Easter with a Mass, including other accompanying musical and dramatic performances. Just as the religious celebration is about to start, the Muslim wardens guarding the entrance to the bagnio express their curiosity about the event, and one of them incites his fellow worker to look on with him: "Let's watch from the door how they say their Mass, for I imagine in concert they must have excellent music" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 68).[8] The other guardian enthusiastically agrees, suggesting that the captives' sacred performance must really be a sight to see.

The fact that the captives were celebrating an Easter Mass, or any Sunday Mass for that matter, would not have been so surprising to Muslim onlookers in Algiers since these captives were permitted to carry out these religious rites. As Ellen Friedman explains, conversion to Islam in Algiers was generally discouraged since this would diminish the value of their captives as merchandise that could be bought and sold. Thus, the captives' masters were open to allowing them to practice their Catholic traditions as they thought their captives would be more obedient and they could retain their economic value (Friedman 1975, p. 34).[9] Antonio de Sosa, for example, wrote about the celebration of religious rites in Algiers, which were especially lively on Easter: "And since by God's grace there is never a lack of devout Christians, there is usually a great gathering on Sundays and holidays, for those who can, to hear Mass there, and at Easter there are usually so many that there is no room, and it is sometimes necessary to say Mass on the patio outside" (de Haedo [1612] 1927–1929, vol. 1, p. 195).[10] Sosa goes on to explain that the motivation for allowing captives to participate in these religious observances, in part, also had to do with the collection of money they obtained from captives to access the celebration.

Given the commonplace of these religious ceremonies in Algiers, the curiosity on the part of the wardens seems to be based more on their own desire to catch sight of the captives' religious and cultural practices rather than on some perceived novelty of these taking place. In fact, Cauralí, the captain of Algiers who leads raids on Spain and is enamored by the Christian Costanza, also shows up to witness the spectacle. Although Cauralí is characterized as a bold captain in act one, rich and prosperous from the booty and captives he plundered off the Spanish coast, in act three, he shows up to the captives' Easter celebrations wanting to be nothing more than a curious spectator. When he enters the scene, he insists he is only there to "see your celebration" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 325).[11] He is not there to harm anyone but instead tells the other captives to sit and watch the show with him as it is about to start. In a way, he sets aside his role as captain and is just another spectator interested in the performance.

In his study of the captives' Easter celebration and public performances in *Los baños de Argel*, Javier Irigoyen-García observes how the prevalent "hybridity" in the play within a play "underscores the quandaries of creating a 'pure national culture' in early modern Spain, exposing the pastoral mode as a vehicle for articulating Iberian anxieties over cultural sameness and difference" (Irigoyen-García 2010, pp. 45–46). He sheds light on this performance, noting how the Muslims and Christians mirror each other; the prison guards assume they will hear what they consider to be "Spanish" music, and one of the captives considers the music "heretical" or Moorish (Irigoyen-García 2010, p. 251). Thus, Cervantes subtly points to the similarities and blurred lines of cultural practices, as well as the dangers of defining "national" cultures with tidy labels (Irigoyen-García 2010, p. 59). As we have seen in both of these cases, with Muslims' desire to observe captives' religious celebrations in Algiers, as well as previously with Osorio's curiosity towards Muley Maluco's Europeanized cultural practices, Muslims and Christians display an interest in each other's knowledge and cultural practices. In both cases, however, the play suggests that a curiosity in what the characters consider to be different or unique instead reflects the familiar.[12]

In this brief review of how the Cervantine characters display their curiosity, we must also consider how Cervantes creates curiosity for the spectators/readers outside the play's fiction. In Adrienne L. Martín and Esther Fernández's introduction to *Drawing the Curtain: Cervantes's Theatrical Revelations* (Martín and Fernández 2022), they show how Cervantes's theatricality is frequently predicated on the notion of revelation. As they demonstrate through various examples, this notion is ripe for moments of anagnorisis in which certain unexpected details that have been concealed from other characters and/or the audience are suddenly revealed. As they put forward, "The act of revelation suggests that something has been intentionally concealed, thus its disclosure and the recognition of hidden truths produce moments of high drama" (Martín and Fernández 2022, p. 4). In *Los baños de Argel*, these moments of revelation and high drama are what unveil how Cervantes also sparks the curiosity of the spectators off the page. To use but just one example, we could turn to the scene in act one where the captives Don Lope and Vivanco notice a reed stick coming out of one of the windows from the adjacent building, leaving them with a small package of gold coins. At first, the captives imagine it might be a young lad who dropped the present down from the window, and then they speculate that it is perhaps a renegade Christian woman locked in the house. The motive behind their speculation is the window lattice (*celosía*) that blocks their line of vision to the human behind the screen, inciting the captives to imagine the who and the why along with the readers/audience who follow their clues. The moment of revelation only comes later when Hazén tells the two captives that it is not a renegade Christian slave but rather the daughter of the prominent Agi Morato who lives there and that she has been promised to marry Muley Maluco. In a world in which Christian–Muslim encounters are so frequent, the play also satisfies the curiosity and whets the appetite of the readers/audience who are anxious to learn about these peoples and places that are at once close but out of reach.[13]

3. Zahara's "Impertinent" Curiosity

As we have seen, a thread of curiosity towards other religious and cultural practices runs throughout *Los baños de Argel*, all with different implications. If we pay close attention to these examples, however, we see that the majority of these cases are limited to the male characters of the plot. In part, this could be due to the fact that there are more men populating the pages of this *comedia*, and only three principal women (Zahara, Halima, and Costanza) are included in the main storyline. Therefore, we must also consider how the intersection of gender and curiosity was understood in the early modern period.

While curiosity had often been linked as a vice to original sin, in Cervantes's world, curiosity began to take on a more positive undertone, especially when it was associated with men. During this time, natural philosophers persistently worked to establish the moral acceptability of curiosity, thereby legitimizing their scientific pursuits and the emergence of new scientific principles. As a result, curiosity began to be actively promoted in a manner unprecedented in previous times (Cottegnies et al. 2016, pp. 2–3). Within the particular context of early modern Spain, in his *Tesoro de la lengua española*, Sebastián de Covarrubias reflects this volatile meaning of curiosity: "This word *curious* . . . is understood in good and bad ways. In good for the one who treats things with diligence, and in bad for the one who works hard to scrutinize those things that are very hidden and reserved, and that do not matter to us according to that place" (Covarrubias Horozco [1611] 2006, p. 656).[14]

Even though curiosity was on an upward trajectory in terms of its moral acceptance in the early modern world, feminine curiosity continued to be viewed as transgressive. As Barbara Benedict has argued, "Early modern cultural critics depict female inquiry [. . .] as an act of transgression that endangers society or the individual" (Benedict 2001, p. 155). On the contrary, male inquiry was frequently explained "as an act of impiety or insanity shaped by a corrupt culture" (Benedict 2001, p. 155). Benedict goes on to show how female curiosity leaned more towards superstition and uncontrolled wonder rather than to the perceived scientific pursuits of their male counterparts. Early modern authors, thus, depicted curious women as transgressive, capable of challenging established societal norms and conventions (Benedict 2001, p. 155).

The inclusion of Zahara and her desire to inquire about the world around her in *Los baños de Argel* offers an important perspective on the debates about the societal acceptability of women's curiosity. In the second act of the play, Zahara pays a visit to her friend, Halima, and tells her about the most recent local news: the Cadí has just sentenced Hazén to impalement because he killed Yzuf. Zahara admits that she waited around to watch the impalement, observing that Hazén died happily as he confessed his Christian beliefs. This dreadful scene moves Zahara, and when Cauralí interjects to ask why she stopped to watch such a dreadful scene, Zahara identifies herself as a "curious impertinent" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 283).[15] While not directly condemning Zahara, Cauralí's expression of incredulity ("You stopped to watch such a sight?") implies that her decision to pause and observe the impalement might not align with what is considered an acceptable form of curiosity, even though he too is curious about Hazén's fatal outcome (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 34).[16]

Zahara's reaction to Cauralí appears to be influenced, to a certain degree, by his expectations of her. Zahara's justification for her inquisitive nature directly follows the portrayal of her emotions in gendered terms. She admits that she was brought to tears by the spectacle of Hazén's death because her "heart is naturally merciful and humane; in short, a woman's heart" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 34).[17] Continuing with her gendered portrayal, Zahara labels her inquiry as "impertinent," thereby conforming to society's expected behavior associated with her gender. In the early modern world, many (principally men) viewed feminine curiosity as excessive and with suspicion. As Kenny explains, excessive or impertinent curiosity was widely attributed to women's natural inclination towards excessiveness in general (Kenny 2004, pp. 388–89). Juan Luis Vives, for example, cautions against the "uncontrolled curiosity of women, who are dying to know what is happening everywhere: who is out banqueting at whose invitation, how they are dressed, with what splendid apparel" (Vives [1524] 2007, p. 142). He proceeds to imply that the excessive curiosity of women might result in adverse outcomes, affecting not only these women but also those around them. Thus, for Zahara to qualify her curiosity about Hazén's demise and the surrounding world as "impertinent" is a defense that aligns with

the expectations that early modern society held for women. The way she refers to her curiosity as "impertinent" is particularly striking, especially when compared to Cauralí, who is able to express interest in Christians without any scrutiny or the need to explain his curiosity. In contrast, Zahara feels compelled to explain or qualify her inquisitiveness.

Aside from the gendered expectations that associated impertinent curiosity and excess to women in the early modern world, Zahara's reference evidently recalls the intercalated tale in *Don Quixote* (Part I, chapters 33–35). The narrative of "El curioso impertinente" follows the relationship of two close friends, Anselmo and Lotario, whose bond is tested when Anselmo's curiosity gets the best of him, and it motivates him to devise a plan to find out whether or not his wife Camila will remain faithful to him. He enlists Lotario's help, even "if only for the sake of curiosity and amusement" (Cervantes Saavedra 2003, p. 291).[18] Despite Lotario's initial reluctance, he becomes entangled in the scheme, leading to disastrous consequences when Anselmo discovers the truth and meets his tragic end. Cervantes's cautionary tale on the perils of curiosity rapidly gained popularity, piquing the interest of various authors beyond Spain's borders. As Marina S. Brownlee has shown, seventeenth-century English playwrights were among those captivated by this narrative. At least a half dozen of them crafted plays inspired by Cervantes's "El curioso impertinente," translating and adapting the plot to different contexts (Brownlee 2020). The popularity of Cervantes's storyline compelled early modern writers to use Anselmo's curiosity for various moral considerations. At the crux of their exploration of Anselmo's imagination was often an examination of women's virtuousness. Even when not directly referencing Cervantes, references to a "curious impertinent" in their plots oftentimes alluded to an Anselmo figure and a similar series of events. On the one hand, these narratives were employed to caution against male curiosity akin to Anselmo's, highlighting how such "impertinent" curiosity might mobilize a sequence of negative consequences that could have likely been avoided. Yet, other early modern authors adapted Cervantes's plot to suggest that as long as men refrain from questioning female chastity, they could limit any adverse consequences (Kenny 2004, pp. 346–52).

Taking into consideration the potential for moral lessons about "impertinent" curiosity in Cervantes's tale and later adaptations of it, the use of the same phrase in reference to Zahara is all the more perplexing. As Kenny has suggested, male authors were much less interested in delving into women's curiosity about their husband's fidelity than exploring female curiosity as wayward behavior that reflected poorly on their husbands (Kenny 2004, pp. 384–424). While the possibility of crossed love interests exists in the drama, the discussion of curiosity in the play does not revolve around women's chastity. Instead, Zahara's curiosity stems from her own motivations to learn about Don Lope and Christian customs and values, with the desire to leave behind her life in Algiers and travel to Spain. While the narrator of Cervantes's intercalated tale ultimately affirms that "Anselmo's reckless curiosity cost him his life," thus emphasizing the calamitous possibilities of being curious about something unnecessary or "impertinent," the use of Zahara's curiosity in *Los baños de Argel* has quite a different outcome (Cervantes Saavedra 2003, p. 305).[19] In effect, Zahara's curiosity does not lead to her end, but instead, it paves the way for new opportunities in her life, evident through her subsequent questioning and information seeking alongside the other women on stage.

It is worth noting that, at this point in the play, Zahara's curiosity is closely tied to her religious transformation. In act one, she claims that a captive Christian woman introduced her to Christianity and the Virgin Mary at a young age, but in act two, her curiosity about religious practice deepens. As Zahara witnesses the scene of the repentant renegade Hazén's impalement, which is visually charged as he holds up a wooden cross, proclaiming his return to Christianity, she exclaims: "I saw him die so happily that I think he did not die

at all. If his death were by any other means, I would have envied it" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 34).[20] In this moment, Zahara's curiosity evolves into a quest for knowledge, which seems to drive her toward a religious revelation, even bringing her to the point of almost wishing for her own death on African soil as a Christian convert.[21] As Márquez Villanueva reminds us, Cervantes's captivity plays are shaped not just by autobiographical or documentary elements of life in Algiers but also by religious and literary influences, crafted with moral and educational intent, akin to other captivity writings inspired by religious redemptionists seeking financial support for their cause (Márquez Villanueva 2010, pp. 39–40, 337n126).[22] Zahara's curiosity about Hazén's gruesome martyrdom stands in stark contrast to the superficial interest of characters like Cauralí, whose fascination with the captives' religious spectacle lacks any deeper understanding of their devotional practices. Considering this context, it is clear that, to a certain extent, religion shapes Zahara's desire to understand her world, though other factors in the dramatic work also play a role.

If we expand our focus beyond Zahara's curiosity about Hazén's impalement and the discussions justifying her inquiry, we see how gender and women's roles in the adjacent scenes play a particularly interesting part in the broader context. Just before Zahara expresses her curiosity about the latest news of Hazén's death, Cervantes sets the stage for act two with a revealing conversation between Halima and Constanza on the limits and possibilities of women's freedom. While Constanza, a Christian captive in Algiers, is deprived of certain freedoms, Halima laments her even more constrained position as a married woman, asserting, "Clearly she who belongs to herself is better off. There's no misfortune like not having freedom: I know it well, though I'm no slave" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 31).[23] This gendered discourse in the opening scene of act two highlights the experiences of women in a society shaped by rigid norms and power structures. As both women grapple with their powerlessness—whether as a slave or a wife—Zahara's later appearance contrasts sharply with these expectations, as she makes independent choices that defy the constraints of her world, partly driven by the curiosity she has about it.

4. A Defense of Women's Inquiry

In contrast to the explanation Zahara presents to Cauralí regarding her curiosity, her ensuing discussion with Halima provides an alternative viewpoint on how Cervantine women perceived their own inquisitiveness and their ability to acquire knowledge about the world. When Cauralí leaves, the two female friends are left alone with the new captives, Fernando and Costanza, and Zahara takes advantage of the situation to ask them about the customs and practices of Christians. In fact, the action of the whole scene is propelled because of Zahara's questions. She is curious to know if the captives are new to Algiers, who their love interests are, and the cultural practices around loyalty and truth telling. After posing a series of questions aimed at the new captives, Halima exclaims, "How fond you are of knowing everything!" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 37).[24] This time, however, Zahara has a different response in defense of her curiosity, answering her friend with another question: "Who does not like to know?" (Cervantes Saavedra 2012, p. 37).[25] She justifies her right to knowledge and desire to inquire about her interests, reframing it as more than just a mere "impertinent" curiosity and not defined with any gender expectations in mind.

Indeed, much of the remainder of the act is dominated by her pursuit of knowledge, and her questioning allows her the chance to control her destiny to a certain extent. Zahara's inquiries enable her to interact with the Christian captives and ultimately take control of her own fate. Initially, Zahara capitalizes on her inquiries to ascertain that the Christians will keep their word. Later in the act and with the help of her friends, Zahara coordinates the collection of certain details to acquire a better understanding of Don Lope. She instructs

Costanza to observe Don Lope and extract any details about his social standing. As Ana M. Rodríguez-Rodríguez notes, Zahara's actions stand in stark contrast to the expected feminine norms of early modern Spain. Her behavior is marked by a certain dissimulation, which she carefully manipulates throughout the play (Rodríguez-Rodríguez 2013, p. 153).[26] Alongside her curiosity, Zahara uses her physical appeal to manipulate the Christian captives. She enlists the help of the other Christian and Muslim women to support her ruse of being stung by a wasp, allowing her to remove her veil in public. Her ultimate aim is to ensure that Don Lope witnesses her beauty, thus securing his commitment to her. Her strategy proves successful, as he expresses his desire to take her to Spain soon, precisely as she had planned.

Cervantes's dramatic rendering of women's defense of inquiry, in particular on the Spanish–North African borderlands, can be extended to some of his other writings on women within this sphere. *El gallardo español* (1615), the first play in Cervantes's collection of *comedias*, centers on another Muslim protagonist who, as Mercedes Alcalá Galán has argued, is the "true nucleus of the plot, a magnet that attracts to itself the dramatic action, and the live portrait of a magnificent, interesting, surprising, and powerful feminine character" (Alcalá Galán 2019, p. 90). Rather than existing within the play as a curious object of desire for the other characters in the plot, her own curiosity is a central feature of her persona. In a conversation with her captive, the female protagonist fiercely expresses her curiosity and interest in meeting Fernando de Saavedra, about whom she has heard so many intriguing things. Within this context, Arlaxa portrays herself as "more than discreet, curious," a characteristic responsible for mobilizing much of the plot (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015b, p. 46).[27] This does not necessarily imply that curiosity is universally viewed as a positive quality in Cervantes's play. In fact, the text juxtaposes curiosity with discretion, suggesting that feminine inquiry could still be seen as a flaw. However, in this particular passage, Arlaxa embraces her curiosity, validating a woman's pursuit of information to affect her own needs.

To some extent, one might expect that women's curiosity in both *Los baños de Argel* and *El gallardo español* could be excused because of society's different moral expectations for these characters. In the world of Cervantes's Spanish–North African borderlands, Muslim women were oftentimes portrayed as sexualized subjects and curious objects of male desire. Consequently, a certain male subsection of this domain held different expectations for the moral standards of these women. This dynamic created a point of pressure, as unrestrained curiosity was typically deemed inappropriate for women. Yet, societal expectations were distinctive for them, allowing such behavior to be excused in some contexts. As Kenny has argued, "[s]ome writers tried to resolve this new tension by attributing plot unravelling curiosity to protagonists of whom one did not expect high moral standards in any case: women in general and female servants in particular rather than say noblewomen" (Kenny 2004, p. 419).[28] Yet, Zahara's and Arlaxa's curiosity is more than just excused; rather, it is what allows them to mobilize their desire. More importantly, it is the women themselves who justify their modes of inquiry and pursuit of knowledge.

As I alluded to at the start of the essay, feminine curiosity was presented as a moral lesson, highlighting the dire consequences that could arise when women yield to their inquisitive nature. In the narratives of early modern authors, as Kenny has convincingly argued, the inclusion of curious female characters typically served as a cautionary tale, emphasizing the potential negative outcomes of uncontrolled curiosity. Figures such as Eve, Psyche, and Pandora were some of the most predominant examples. Despite the recurrence of these few female exemplars, they came to represent the perils of curiosity more than men in similar situations. The unchanging nature of their narratives contributed to the perception that all female curiosity inevitably led to catastrophic results (Kenny 2004,

pp. 395–400). In contrast to this conventional view of women in Cervantes's world, Zahara emerges as a striking deviation. The North African woman mobilizes her own desire, in part through her curiosity and ability to ask questions to further her goals and ambitions. Therefore, Zahara's probing prompts the audience to contemplate for whom curiosity is problematic or impertinent. While curiosity often carries a negative undertone, the text suggests that this is primarily from the perspective of men rather than necessarily being regarded as such by women. In the play, female characters such as Zahara exemplify how curiosity can serve as an instrument to garner knowledge and, to a certain extent, the power to enact one's own destiny.

5. Conclusions

In Barbara Benedict's *A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, she shows how literary works, especially canonical sources, are an important form of "cultural documents," highlighting their role in reflecting historical perspectives on curiosity. In particular, she posits that literary texts designed for a cultured audience provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the tensions surrounding the desire for knowledge in the early modern world (Benedict 2001, pp. 22–23). In line with Benedict's proposal, Cervantes's writings set in the Spanish–North African borderlands are especially fertile ground for considering how the author's contemporaries viewed the inner workings of curiosity. As we have seen, his exploration of curiosity encompasses not only the religious "other" living in this sphere but also the particular intersection of gender and the pursuit of knowledge within this context. His plays, and, in particular, *Los baños de Argel*, demonstrate a move away from portraying women on this Mediterranean frontier as more than curious objects to be exoticized. Cervantes's drama significantly suggests that women could indeed harness their own curiosity, characterizing themselves as active participants in their own desire to inquire about their worlds. Even though early modern society may still define this inquiry as impertinent, Cervantes creates a space where women like Zahara can justify their ability to be curious.

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Notes

1 For a relevant analysis of European writings on women in the Islamic world, see Grosrichard (1998, pp. 123–84), Kahf (1999), and Schick (1999, pp. 176–226). For a focus specifically on the context of early modern Spain, see Alcalá Galán (2012). Mas offers a summary of literary works that emphasize the "exoticism" of the Islamic world (Mas 1967, vol. 2, pp. 415–68).

2 For the descriptions of women within the broader context of Antonio de Sosa's work, see Garcés (2011, pp. 4–5).

3 All translations into English are my own unless otherwise noted. "Suelen ir después de mediodía, porque hasta allí van los hombres, y llevan todas, alomenos, una esclava con cesta o envoltorio de lienzo o seda, en que llevan su camisa lavada y zaregueles para mudar su tocado y algún jabón con que se frieguen [. . .] para emblanquecer y ablandar las carnes; y también llevan muchas alguna agua olorosa con que rucian la cara y pechos, y tobajas para enjugarse."

4 On the reception of women's curiosity in the early modern world, see Kenny (2004, pp. 384–424) especially and the volume on this subject edited by Cottegnies et al. (2016).

5 Garcés (2002) provides an in-depth analysis of how Cervantes's experience as a captive influenced his writing on this topic in his fiction.

6 I have modified the English translation slightly to also note Muley Maluco's curiosity in the original Spanish: "Muley Maluco es su esposo, / el que pretende ser rey / de Fez, moro muy famoso, / y en su secta y mala ley / es versado y muy curioso; / sabe la lengua turquesca, / la española y la tudesca, / italïana y francesa; / duerme en alto, come en mesa, / sentado a la cristianesca; / sobre todo, es gran soldado, / liberal, sabio, compuesto, / de mil gracias adornado" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, pp. 343–44).

[7] For more on the historical 'Abd al-Malik of Morocco and Hājjī Murād's daughter, see Garcés (2002, pp. 90–92) and Oliver Asín (1947–1948, pp. 256–65).

[8] "Entremos a mirar desde la puerta / cómo dicen su misa, que imagino / que tienen grande música y concierto" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 322).

[9] For more on Christian captives' practice of religion in North Africa, see Friedman (1983, pp. 77–90).

[10] "y como nunca por la gracia suya faltan cristianos devotos, hay gran concurso dellos que los domingos y fiestas suelen, los que pueden, oír allí misa, y en las Pascuas suelen ser tantos que no caben, y es necesario algunas veces decir misa en el patio fuera."

[11] "ver vuestra fiesta."

[12] Christina E. Lee has discussed the uneasiness that arises when the distinguishing cultural practices of the dominant and marginalized segments of society are crossed, producing what she calls the "anxiety of sameness." As she argues, "while conspicuous religious and socio-cultural difference was certainly perturbing and unsettling, in some ways it was not as threatening to the dominant Spanish identity as the potential discovery of the arbitrariness that separated them from the undesirables of society—and therefore the recognition of fundamental sameness" (Lee 2015, p. 4).

[13] To offer just one indication of the popularity of these themes, Thomas E. Case outlines dozens of plays that Lope de Vega wrote about Christian–Muslim relations around the Mediterranean for a public that was eager to consume this drama (Case 1993).

[14] "Esta palabra *curioso* . . . se toma en buena y en mala parte. En buena por el que trata las cosas con diligencia, y en mala por el que se desvela en escudriñar las que son muy ocultas y reservadas, y que no nos importan según aquel lugar." See also Kenny's *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe: Word Histories* where he traces the multiple meanings of curiosity as a concept (Kenny 1998, pp. 123–43).

[15] "curiosa impertinente."

[16] "¿Que tal te paraste a ver?" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 283).

[17] "pecho humano y clemente; / en fin, pecho de mujer" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 283).

[18] "aunque no fuese más de por curiosidad y entretenimiento" (Cervantes Saavedra [1605] 1978, p. 421).

[19] "a Anselmo le costó la vida su impertinente curiosidad" (Cervantes Saavedra [1605] 1978, p. 437).

[20] "Vile morir tan contento / que creo que no murió; / si ella fuera de otra suerte, / tuviera envidia a su muerte" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 282).

[21] On the ambiguities of this scene, see Castillo (2004, p. 231).

[22] See also Stackhouse, who places Cervantes's Algerian captivity plays in a broader context beyond the confines of performance (Stackhouse 2000, p. 24).

[23] "Que gana más la que es suya / nien se ve ser cosa llana. / Al no tener libertad / no hay mal que tenga igualdad; / selo yo, sin ser esclava" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 279).

[24] "¡Qué amiga de saber eres! (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 285).

[25] "¿A quién el saber no agrada?" (Cervantes Saavedra [1615] 2015a, p. 285).

[26] See also Ortiz Lottman who notes how Zahara's "desire for knowledge" contrasts with how Cervantes's contemporaries depicted women in Algiers (Ortiz Lottman 2004, pp. 160–61).

[27] "más que discreta, curiosa."

[28] See Kenny´s recent essay as well on "Curiosity, Women, and the Social Orders" where he expands on this idea (Kenny 2016).

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