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"La gitanilla" ("The Gypsy Girl") by Miguel de Cervantes

A Proto-racist Narrative from Today's Point of View

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It is well known that literature will miss
no opportunity to subvert its own foundations.

Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica* (160)

The literary motif of the child-stealing 'gypsy' has been traced down to Cervantes' *novela* "La gitanilla", first published in 1613 after it was approved by the censor in 1612 (Charnon-Deutsch 18n7). Cervantes was not the first writer to make use of this motif as it had already been in circulation among his literary predecessors.[12] But it was Cervantes' exemplary tale that turned into a source of major influence across Europe, inspiring an astonishingly large number of European writers,[13]

12 The classic 'gypsy' motifs of Golden-Age Spanish Literature – baby snatching being one of them – were already employed by Cervantes' sixteenth-century Spanish and Portuguese predecessors (Charnon-Deutsch 18). Lope de Rueda, one of these authors, used the motif of child-abduction for his plays *Comedia ilamada medora* (*A Comedy Called Medora*) (1567) and *La gitana ladrona,* having in turn borrowed the device from Luigi Artemio Giancarli's *La Zingara* (*The Gypsy Woman*), written in 1545. The myth of baby-snatching by 'gypsies', according to Charnon-Deutsch, was first propagated by German historians in the fifteenth century (56). Already in the sixteenth century, stories about paupers who turn out to be aristocrats and other tales of mistaken identity constituted the literary stock in trade (35). Iulia-Karin Patrut, in turn, suggests that the story of 'gypsy' child-theft most probably emerged in the early modern period as a result of a phantasmal transfer of knowledge and narratives from the terrain of the Christian-Jewish conflict onto the newly arrived internal strangers (72; see also Meyers 44; Hille 27–28; Gilsenbach 223).

13 In a chapter called "Die schöne Zigeunerin: Cervantes' *La gitanilla* und ihre Doubles in Europa", Bogdal anchors the *novela* in its historical context, referring briefly

playwrights, poets, painters, musicians and filmmakers. "La gitanilla" has been the object of countless scholarly studies,[14] so I will refrain from a detailed analysis of the text and provide first a short summary.

The story is as follows: Preciosa is an extraordinary young woman, a fair-skinned 'gypsy' with golden hair. Admired by everyone for her wit and beauty, she earns her living by selling her prodigious talents on the streets of Madrid: singing, dancing, reciting poetry, and fortune-telling. A young nobleman, Don Juan, falls in love with her. He is ready to give up his name and social status to be with Preciosa. She agrees to become his 'gypsy' wife but sets one condition: Don Juan has to spend the first two years living as a 'gypsy' among her people. The nobleman agrees. During the test period Don Juan, now dressed as a 'gypsy' and renamed Andrés, is falsely accused of theft and sent to prison. To save him from death, Preciosa's grandmother confesses to the magistrate and his wife that Preciosa is their long-lost daughter whom she stole as a baby. Many proofs are brought out to confirm Preciosa's true identity, her Christian name being Doña Constanza de Azevedo y de Meneses. Andrés, in turn, steps forth as Don Juan de Cárcamo. The parents, astonished by the miraculous nature of these revelations and overwhelmed with happiness, consent to the marriage of the two high-born youths, allowing Preciosa to keep her 'gypsy' name.

Some explanation is in order from the outset about the context of the *novela's* emergence. Cervantes penned his "La gitanilla" in what Ryan Prendergast aptly describes as an "inquisitorial culture" (2). Spanish Golden Age literature was written in the oppressive environment generated by the Spanish Inquisition and the Spanish Crown in their joint effort to shape the nascent nation-state, to construct a unifying citizen identity, and to ensure general support for the empire-building project. Royal and ecclesiastical policies extended beyond mere censorship aiming at the elimination and punishment of cultural, intellectual and religious difference. In order to appraise literary works of this period,

to its stage adaptations in Spanish as well as to its first translations in French, German, English, and Dutch (87–104). On the European literary tradition established by "La gitanilla", see also Brittnacher; Solms; Charnon-Deutsch; Niemandt; Wurzbach; and Schneider. The literary motif of 'gypsy' child-theft, its functions and/or its social ramifications have been discussed by Jago; Patrut; Kugler; Saul; Nord; Hille; Schäffer; Macijewski; Brüggermann; and Meyers.

14 See, for example, the English anthology of articles on Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares* edited by Stephen Boyd or the German anthology edited by Ehrlicher and Poppenberg.

it is necessary to "read between the lines" or "against the grain" as Prendergast demonstrates with his close text analyses (2). So, bearing in mind the cultural climate in which "La gitanilla" emerged, I will highlight in the following paragraphs some important features of the narrative that are of relevance to the subsequent interpretations and representations of the child-abduction motif in the various visual media.

Cervantes' exemplary *novela* is, in the first place, a very unstable text. The story of the 'gypsy'-turned-aristocrat is told by an omniscient narrator (*Er*-form), whose invisible but all-knowing presence creates, at least on the surface, an illusion of a reliable reality. To better understand how the fictional world of "La gitanilla" is constructed, it is useful to employ the terminology from Doležel's possible-worlds semantics of fictionality, paying special attention to the text's procedure of authentication. Under authentication, we shall understand the text's performative force to construct fictional worlds. In "La gitanilla", there are two opposing forces at work: one of authentication, which is dominant and takes up almost the entire text, and one of disauthentication, which is subtle and generally remains unnoticed.[15] The bulk of the *novela* has the form of an authoritative narrative (*Er*-form). Yet, at three different instances, the text's authentication force is undermined hinting at the behind-the-scenes presence of an author-narrator, at his unreliability and also at his ulterior motives for spinning the story. In the first instance, with a series of questions and imperatives (you-narrative) placed in brackets, the text addresses the main heroine Preciosa, giving her advice what to do (53), and in the next scene she acts as instructed. In the second instance, again in a paragraph enclosed in brackets, a first-person narrator (*Ich*-form) comments that he does not know if Preciosa is improvising or not (91). While in the third instance, and this is the *novela's* closing sentence, the omniscient narration switches to a first-person narrator who confesses to having forgotten to tell the story of Carducha, one of the peripheral characters. One sentence earlier, the text gives a name to this author-narrator, calling him Pozo[16] (115).

15 On the authentication force of the fictional text and its counterforces, see Doležel, 145–168.

16 Jacob Cats, a Dutch poet, who transposed Cervantes' tale in verse, producing his popular exemplary poem *Het Spaense Heydinnetje* (1637), was, for example, unaware of Cervantes' authorship of the story. In a letter to Van Baerle from November 1633, Cats ascribed the authorship to Pozo. Presumably, he had read the story in a version in which the name of Cervantes was not mentioned; perhaps it was De Rosset's French translation (Gaskell 268n52). In a scholarly article of 1933, Hep-

Gradually and almost imperceptibly, the author's persona emerges from the anonymous void of omniscient narration, gets a name, and then speaks in his own voice admitting to his limited knowledge and forgetfulness. Thus, a good part of the assertions that the text makes with regard to its characters are, in some way or another, destabilised and shown to be personally subjective and market-oriented rather than reliably and verifiably truthful. The notorious opening statement of the *novela*, which appears to frame 'gypsy' men and women as thieves,[17] is subverted not only by the words *parece que* "it would seem", as a number of scholars[18] have pointed out, but also by a later remark in the text aired by the omniscient narrator: "because a thief thinks everyone is of the same nature as himself" (75). (The remark is dropped when Andrés, overcome with jealousy, interprets the actions of another character, ascribing to him his own feelings towards Preciosa.) Discreetly, the text asserts that 'gypsies' are used as a screen onto which one projects one's own vices. There are a number of indications that allow us to surmise that "La gitanilla" was written in defence of perceived 'gypsies', the author giving expression to his sympathy towards the people in a roundabout way.

Interestingly enough, Cervantes uses the same trope of rascals-appearing-to-be-'gypsies' in *Don Quixote*, in one short but telling scene. In Chapter 30, Part I, Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, Cardenio, Dorothea, the barber and the priest see a man who, upon approaching them, "seemed to be a gipsy" (261). Sancho, though, spots his stolen ass Dapple under the man, and then recognises the rider to be Gines de Pasamonte, a famous villain whom Don Quixote, with Sancho's help, had earlier freed from the commissary. Hoping to sell the ass for a good price, Gines de Pasamonte, also called "Thief-above-measure" by the commissary (169), "had put himself into the garb of a gipsy, whose language, as well

pner refers to "Pozzo" as the author of the story (79). Such anecdotal examples illustrate the literal reading to which Cervantes' text has been subjected.

17 "It would seem that Gypsy men and women were only born into the world to be thieves: they are born to parents who are thieves, they grow up among thieves, they study to be thieves, and finally succeed in being thoroughgoing thieves on every occasion; and the desire for stealing, and the act of stealing, are like inalienable traits in them, not extinguished except by death." (Cervantes 3).

18 In "Inszenierte Alterität: Spiel der Identitäten in Cervantes' *La gitanilla*", Kirsten von Hagen argues that the ludic instability of the *novela's* text is indicatory of Cervantes' opposition to the antigypsy tendencies in his day and of his search for a novel discursive articulation of established stereotypes (162–177).

as several others, he could speak as readily, as if they were his own native tongues." (262).

A second historical note is called for here. During the Golden Age, contrary to what its name suggests, Spain was in economic decline. The country roads were filled with vagabonds and bands of roving outlaws whom Cervantes was well familiar with. Peripatetic Roma in those days travelled in small close-knit family groups, they rarely associated with the *bandoleros* (a mixed group of returning soldiers, displaced foreigners, underemployed peasants, career bandits, etc.) and were distinguishable from ordinary vagabonds. Yet, in the public imaginary, the perceived 'gypsy' identity was coalesced into that of the other disaffected groups, turning the minority into a symbol for the recalcitrant Other and a handy scapegoat (cf. Charnon-Deutsch 20). In all likelihood, Cervantes had this form of antigypsyism in mind when he asserted indirectly in his *novela* that none other but the hardened villains projected their vices upon 'gypsies' and/or disguised themselves as 'gypsies'. We should also consider the fact that the often-impecunious writer was not indifferent to the revenues coming from his published works. He must have been well aware that he could have passed neither the censorship of the Church, nor that of public taste if he tried to sell a text that was openly favourable towards 'gypsies', so he pulled a clever sleight of hand by penning a two-faced tale, one that – while mimicking the dominant discourses circulated by the Church and the Spanish Crown[19] – delivered a blistering social critique.

If we are to describe "La gitanilla" in a nutshell with regard to its authentication procedure, we can say – again referring to Doležel's terminology – that it is both a self-voiding and a self-disclosing text. It ruptures the convention of omniscient narration, undermines the credentials of its first-person narrator, and employs irony alluding to its fiction-making procedures. To put it in another way, the text's instability derives from its affinity to a masquerade: "La gitanilla" bears many similarities to a theatrical exchange of masks or a play of identities in which characters act like ventriloquist puppets, guided by a mostly invisible narrator and his partly undisclosed, partly overtly pecuniary motives. There are many textual clues exposing the figures as figments of imagination, their identity fully dependent on the narrator's decision to give them a name and a costume, or to swap the latter. What is more,

19 In *Phantasma Nation*, Patrut asserts that Cervantes' tale is a poetic work on the discourse of 'limpieza de sangre' (70).

the three main characters in the story have double identities or two faces, one of a 'gypsy' and one of an aristocrat, that are paired with a name and a set of clothes. In one scene heavily loaded with irony, Juan's/Andrés' father praises Preciosa's trustworthy face and promises her a golden doubloon with two faces, the latter faces belonging to two monarchs.[20] Later, he gives her the doubloon in exchange for a dance (cf. 51, 55). This parallelism – the two-faced characters and the two-faced golden coin – could be subjected to various interpretations. For the sake of brevity, I shall only suggest that Cervantes either identified the image of nobility and the image of 'gypsyness' as the two poles of symbolic, hence economic power, or that he viewed his protagonists, i.e. the fruits of his imagination, as a highly valuable currency – or both.

It is equally significant to point out that Cervantes' *novela* has the structure of an initiation rite.[21] In this rite of initiation, the dimension of time is of crucial importance: the story unfolds over many years and contains two key events that, being significantly removed in time from each other, furnish it with its complication and climax. "La gitanilla" is a story of loss and recovery. Beautiful, green-eyed and golden-haired Preciosa is first lost and then found. As an infant, she is stolen by a 'gypsy' woman and raised among sun-tanned 'gypsies'; then, years later, when she is already an adolescent woman, she is found, recognised as Doña Constanza de Azevedo y de Meneses and restored to her rightful place in society. In schematic terms, her movement in space-time can be represented as a disappearance and re-appearance: an entry into the shady world of 'gypsies' and a return to her own world, that of 'white' Spanish nobility. It should be noted that Cervantes' story takes little interest in the act of child-theft. The incident is just a plot device used to generate the necessary tension that arises from the heroine's dramatic decline in social status (Fallhöhe), but it itself remains in the background and is brought to the reader's attention only in retrospect. The *novela* foregrounds the climactic moment of recognition, the anagnorisis, which takes place on two separate occasions. The first moment

20 As Robert ter Horst points out, the doubloon is the largest and finest gold coin ever struck in Spain (118).

21 For a discussion on the initiation rite structure of "La gitanilla", see also Brittnacher ("Das Märchen") and Wiltrout. For a discussion of rites of passage from an anthropological point of view, see Gennep. Even though I disagree with Gennep's essentialist notions, I find his description of the structure of initiation rites useful. According to him, rites of passage have three distinct phases: a phase of separation, a phase of transition or liminality, and a phase of incorporation (21).

of recognition is instant and as if confirming the miraculous nature of love: guided by his heart, Don Juan recognises Preciosa's true identity – her immutable noble nature (hence her baptismal name Constanza), and succumbs his entire being to her. The Spanish aristocrat needs no proof of his beloved's noble descent and is ready to sacrifice everything in her name. The second moment of recognition is staged with the ceremoniousness of a court hearing.[22] Preciosa's parents ascertain her true identity based on a number of tangible pieces of evidence: a small coffer containing Preciosa's trinkets from when she was a baby; a folded note with the old 'gypsy's hand-written confession stipulating the full names and the titles of the stolen child and its parents as well as the exact time: "Accession Day, at eight in the morning, in the year fifteen ninety-five"; a white mole below the girl's left breast and her two toes on her right foot joined together by a small membrane (103). It is worth noting that the physical marks are to be found in the 'hidden' parts of the body: not only the bared breasts but also the naked feet[23] were erotically loaded taboo zones in Spanish culture.

22 In his article "Cervantes, Heliodorus, and the Novelty of 'La gitanilla'", Mayer persuasively argues that the scene of anagnorisis in "La gitanilla" is influenced at formal level by *Aethiopica*, a model tale of recognition in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. The scholar discusses the inconsistencies and ironic inversions in Cervantes' text, noting, for example, that the old 'gypsy' provides evidence against herself acting as a messenger of truth. His interpretation, however, falls flat when he advances the essentialist claim that the mercenary nature of the old 'gypsy' and of 'gypsies' in general provides the key to the final scene. One more remark is pertinent here: Mayer points out that, in the context of the tale, Preciosa's birthmarks fall under the shadow of doubt since the 'gypsies' have demonstrated their ability, in an earlier scene, by altering the appearance of Don Juan's mule. "The Gypsy mastery of manipulating appearance", to borrow Mayer's words, takes on a new meaning when we consider that the 'gypsies' only propose to transform Don Juan's mule in order to save its life, because they consider it a sin "to take the life of an innocent creature" (57). Don Juan, though, is not to be mollified: "I absolutely refuse … to let the mule live, no matter how different you assure me she'll look" and then one of the 'gypsies' acquiesces with the words "Since Senor Andres Caballero wishes it so, … let the blameless one die." (59). It is really revealing how the scene with the mule has dubbed 'gypsies' as con artists while hardly anyone notices the actual critique directed at aristocrats and their murderous acts.

23 In his satirical *Persian Letters* of 1721, Montesquieu writes that Spanish men "are more aware of women's weakness than are other men: they cannot allow anyone a glimpse of a woman's heel, and they fear the worst from the exposure of a toe" (106). It is as if Cervantes designed the scene for Dutch history painters who, as we are about to see, had a penchant for female nudity and, generally, for subject matter in which the didactic was combined with the erotic.

In addition to the physical evidence, the noble parents also offer evidence of a spiritual nature, insisting that their souls recognised Preciosa as their long-lost daughter. At the start of the *novela*, the omniscient narrator drops an enigmatic remark that "there are poets who get along with Gypsies and sell them their works, just as there are poets for blind beggars who make up miracles for them and share in their proceeds" (5); close to the end of the *novela*, the topic of miracles[24] is taken up again, this time by the governor, who – overjoyed by the recovery of his lost daughter and her indisputable identity – exclaims: "how could there be so many coincidences together without a miracle?" (105). The governor's exclamation is clearly an ironic remark put in the character's mouth by the author-poet who obliquely points to his dominion over the fictional world of the story, i.e. to his performative force to call into existence fictional facts, or as he calls them "miracles" but also to his dependence on the literary market and the commodity status of his work of art. In other words, the text discloses that Preciosa's identity, together with all the evidence that the same text brings to ascertain its truth, should be read as a malleable fictional construct entirely contingent on the author-narrator's goals: at any point, they can undergo a change, if that suits him and his story.

The tension in the story arises from the stark asymmetry between the two worlds Preciosa travels through during her passage into adulthood. The world of 'white' Spanish aristocrats is juxtaposed to the world of sun-tanned 'gypsy' outcasts, the two worlds representing the two ends of the social hierarchy. Something more, the 'gypsy' world is constructed as a mirror inversion of the Spanish nobility. The dramatic tension between these two polar opposites is coded simultaneously along social, proto-ethnic, and symbolic lines. Stories of paupers-turned-princes are a common literary fare in the Golden Age of Spanish literature where, notably, only the social disparity is foregrounded. Cervantes' text adds what we would call today an ethnic marker to the opposition; 'gypsies' are introduced not only as individuals of lower social standing but as a sovereign

24 Patrut also ponders on the question what exactly constitutes a miracle in the *novela*. Focusing exclusively on the second recognition scene – the ascertainment of Preciosa's true origin on the basis of tangible pieces of evidence – the literary scholar offers textual clues that the story of the abduction could be a figment of the old 'gypsy's imagination, one that resonates with the parents' wishful thinking. Preciosa's identity, Patrut concludes, is but a pure fiction, "an arbitrarily fillable empty space" ["beliebig ausfüllbare Leerstelle"] in a story about the social ascent of a female 'gypsy' which brings the fifteenth-century Spanish law of 'blood purity' and its concomitant virtue *ad absurdum* (68).

group with specific customs and ways of life. The proto-ethnographic description[25] in the text (see 59–63) plays an important role in constructing 'gypsies' as a separate people against whom the sovereignty of Spaniards as a people (an ethnic majority, or a modern 'white' nation nowadays) gains a clear outline. Strongly influenced by Cervantes, Prosper Mérimée also describes 'gypsies' in his story "Carmen" in pseudo-ethnographic terms. As we are about to see, the device of pseudo-ethnographicity has since then become a staple feature of 'gypsy' representations not only in literature but across all arts.

Moreover, the opposition between the two groups is colour coded. There is, on the one hand, one oblique mention at the start that the 'gypsies' are sun-tanned (3). On the other hand, there are several descriptions presenting Preciosa as an embodiment of the ideal of whiteness. Her beauty is explicitly equated with light: "Preciosa shone forth among all the rest like the light of a torch among other, fainter lights." (23). We are told that her face and hands are untarnished by the sun (3), that she has "golden hair", "emerald eyes" (23), "a foot of snow and ivory" (103). She is also called "golden girl, silver girl, pearl girl, garnet girl, heavenly girl" (25). Not only is Preciosa fair,[26] but her beauty is presented

25 In the form of a first-person narrative, the old 'gypsy' man introduces the aristocrat Juan/Andrés to the ways of his people. According to Bogdal, his elaborate speech is unparalleled in literature until 1800. Providing a seeming panegyric of 'gypsy' customs and laws, it was used as a source of reliable information by numerous writers and scholars, including Goethe and Heinrich Grellmann. No one doubted the truthfulness of Cervantes' description (97). Actually, the speech of the old 'gypsy' is much more complex, and as Thompson persuasively argues, it requires an alert reader who mistrusts rhetoric. For what appears, at first, a eulogy of 'gypsy' friendship, freedom and lack of jealousy, turns out, at a closer look, to be a commendation of theft, adultery, murder, and incest. Thompson concludes that Cervantes condemns "a male society which devotes itself with bestial ferocity to the oppression of women" (268). In my opinion, Thompson's view is couched in rather vague terms for Cervantes' critique is unequivocally, albeit indirectly, aimed at the Spanish nobility. The opening paragraph to "La gitanilla" is also discussed by William Clamurro and Walter Starkie. Clamurro's stance towards the clichéd 'gypsy' portrayal is only halfway critical, yet the author asserts that the world of the 'gypsies' serves in the *novela* "as the backdrop for a more sly and subtle commentary of society's often hypocritical inconsistencies" (73). Starkie's vivid narrative in "Cervantes and the Gypsies", however, is racist through and through and, if anything, testifies to the scholar's purely literary ambitions.

26 Similalry, the personae of Dorothea in *Don Quixote* is constructed along the aspirational ideal of whiteness. Dorothea moves around disguised as a male peasant, so not only her concealed onlookers in Chapter 28, Part I (the priest, the barber, and Cardenio) but also the readers are overcome with astonishment at the scene of undressing in which the young man turns out to be a girl: "his feet … seemed

as a manifestation of her spiritual virtue: the young woman's greatest merit lies in having succeeded to preserve her virginity while growing up among 'gypsies', who do not recognise the sacrament of marriage. It appears that Preciosa's heroism concurs with and naturalises the existing social disparity: aristocrats *seem* to be superior to 'gypsies' by birth. All the while, equating social identity with costume, the story makes a point that noblemen can commit murder and be pardoned on account of their noble origins, while 'gypsies' are punished with the utmost severity only on the grounds of the rumours that surround them. As Thompson points out, through the witty techniques of the creator, the *novelas* constantly draw attention to the gap between what the characters say and what they actually do (cf. 280).

Still, from today's vantage point, the colour symbolism woven into the narrative furnishes a proto-racist layer of signification. The text can be read as an initiation rite *out* of 'gypsyness' and *into* 'whiteness' where 'white' and 'gypsy' can simultaneously denote a social, an 'ethno-racial', and a symbolic attribute. One can hardly fail to recognise that the abduction of a blond girl of aristocratic descent by supposedly 'non-white' 'gypsies' poses a threat to the idea of noble lineage, i.e. to the legitimacy of aristocratic rule in feudal societies and its ideology of classism, in the same manner as it poses a threat to the 'white' nation in European societies underpinned by the ideology of racism (see also Nord; Matthews 2010). Patrut expresses the same idea pointing to the initial religious layer of signification in the narrative:

> Für die europäishe Literatur wurde Cervantes' Erzählung jedenfalls zu einem Referenz-Text, zu literarische ‚Urszene' ‚zigeunerischer' Intervention in christliche, ‚nicht-zigeunerische' Familien-Genealogien. Die Brisanz des Kindsraubs besteht darin, dass ‚Zigeuner' in die ‚Reinheit' der Generationenfolge und eines Selbstentwurfs eingreifen, des sich kostituiert, indem es sie ausschliesst. (71)

In any case, Cervantes' tale has become a reference text for European literature, a literary 'primal scene' of 'Gypsy' intervention

to be two pieces of pure crystal growing among the other pebbles in the brook"; "the whiteness and the beauty of the feet"; "[h]er long golden tresses not only fall on her shoulders, but covered her whole body, excepting her feet"; "her feet in the water seemed to be of crystal, her hands and her hair were like driven snow" (231). Both Dorothea's and Preciosa's whiteness comes across as an eroticised and fetishised fiction, artificial and exaggerated.

> in Christian, 'non-Gypsy' family genealogies. The brisance of the child-theft is that 'Gypsies' intervene in the 'purity' of successive generations and in a self-image, that constitutes itself by excluding them. [my translation, R.M.]

Since they are derived from figurative language, the colour-coded categories of 'whiteness' and 'gypsyness' are highly unstable, not to say unpredictable. In their shifting matrix, different social strata within a majority society, as well as different 'ethno-racial' groups, can be imagined along dividing skin colour lines. Needless to say, such a reading of Cervantes' text, which expounds on its proto-racist fabric, is informed by posterior intellectual developments in Western culture: the secularisation of culture, the growth and increasing hegemony of modern science (and especially of racial anthropology), the emergence of ethnocentric nationalism, etc. As Charnon-Deutsch rightly observes:

> The discourse of Gypsy difference that evolved in the wake of Cervantes' novella would feed the ethnocentric and scientific racisms of later centuries. … Gypsies played a role in the conceptualisation of contending ideological matrices. … It was during Spain's Golden Age that Gypsies became an important symbolic pretext, a ground-zero platform on which to raise question of difference and to rehearse sacrificial rites of purgation and ostracism. (43–44)

Finally, I need to highlight one more aspect of Cervantes' text that is simply remarkable and that testifies to the genius of his imagination and the perceptiveness of his humanism. My explicit aim here is not only to acquit "La gitanilla" of its subsequent misuses but also of the charges voiced by contemporary scholars who indict both the author and his work for maintaining an antigypsy stance.[27] Cervantes' Preciosa is precious in one very significant way. In her figure, the story reconciles two extremes, merging together two mutually exclusive identities: an aristocrat and a 'gypsy', the aspirational ideal of whiteness and its lowly dark shadow, the social norm and the resulting residual anti-norm.

27 Charnon-Deutsch, for example, imputes the negative characterisation of 'gypsies' in the *novela* to events in Cervantes' life (34). The Irish scholar and renowned Hispanist Walter Starkie recounts the same events, albeit with a racist gusto. Both scholars quote as their source the first volume of Luis Astrana Marín's monumental biography: *Vida ejemplar y heroica de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra*, Madrid: Instituto Editorial Reus, 1948–58.

The text creates a unity out of these two poles during the years Preciosa lives under a 'gypsy' guise, producing something new and, in my view, here lies its true exemplarity. Cervantes' extraordinary heroine embodies, albeit for a limited stretch of time, a new model of femininity: sharp-witted, worldly-wise, artistically creative, free to move, in charge of her own life and subsistence, i.e. financially independent, and most importantly, in control of her sexuality, for Preciosa is the one who imposes conditions on her potential partner. As Clamurro pertinently observes, Preciosa has the power to "lay down the law" (75). In creating the matrix of what we can recognise today to be the emancipated modern woman, Cervantes imagined the unimaginable, greatly expanding the repertoire of possible roles for women. Little wonder that hardly any of his male contemporaries had eyes for this bold invention. It is rather the clichéd climax of recognition, when Preciosa submits her will to that of her parents, which is celebrated in the literary, theatrical or pictorial spinoffs of "La gitanilla" – a rather boring and disappointing happy end.

In conclusion, the brief survey of "La gitanilla" reveals that Cervantes employs the archetypal structure of an initiation rite to frame his story, furnishing it with a proto-ethnic dimension. The narrative is colour coded and characterised by temporal dynamics: a female child of noble birth ('white') is first stolen by a 'gypsy' outcast ('non-white') and then restored to her due place in the social order where the entire focus falls on the second incident – the recognition of her true ('white') identity. When we point to Cervantes' exemplary *novela* as the origin of the child-stealing motif, "the most menacing facet of the European Gypsy stereotype" (Landon 58), we have to bear in mind that the complexity, subversiveness and self-reflexive irony of the text[28] are lost on the majority of its readers. The misreading of the *novela*, or rather its crude instrumentalisation for the needs of the various nation building projects in Europe, is the prevailing tendency in its otherwise widely enthusiastic reception. In the following sections, holding our focus steady on the motif of the child-snatching 'gypsy', we shall trace the transformations, adaptions and re-interpretations of the story across several visual media.

28 In his perceptive article "Enchantment and Irony: Reading *La gitanilla*", Clamurro remarks that Cervantes chose "La gitanilla" to open his entire collection (69). Discussing the ironies and 'loose ends' of "this quintessentially Cervantine text", Clamurro concludes that one should approach it "as a story that is constantly recreating experience, a challenge to our own acts of reading" (83).