

Reading as Serious Play and Amusement:
The “Billiard Table” Trope in Cervantes’s Prologue to
Exemplary Novels

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Abstract

Similar to *Don Quixote*, which Cervantes dedicates to a “*desocupado lector*” (idle reader) (Cervantes Prologue), *Exemplary Novels* project an audience for whom reading is meant both as play and diversion. Analogous to the recreational game of billiards highlighted in the Prologue, play and diversion, however, become tricky occupations in a world of fictional games and surprising changes that challenge the status of the twelve stories as “exemplary.” My aim in this article is to focus on the “billiard table” (*mesa de trucos*) trope as a *modus operandi* underlying Cervantes’s volatile fiction which transcends the boundaries of gender, race, class, on the one hand, and those of what is familiar and conventional, on the other. I claim that the “billiard table,” which brings forth not only the idea of careful calculation but also the idea of chance and random ball-shooting, is a strategy whereby Cervantes mixes genres, transgresses codes of conduct and identities, making readers think through complex textual alterations of exemplarity, in pedagogical terms, and, more significantly, reflect on their own complicity in the vices depicted in the stories. Cervantes thus mingles fictional playfulness (authorial stratagems) with seriousness (the content of the stories) in accordance with the Aristotelian definition of *eutrapelia* as witty and temperate amusement experienced prior to the return to serious work and

moral piety. In this light, I suggest that *Exemplary Novels* is a telling example of the Renaissance concept of *serio ludere*, in that the light-hearted subject matter of the tales is inextricable from the ethical issues they raise.

Keywords: authorial tricks, billiard table, *eutrapelia*, exemplarity, fictional games, *novela*, reading as recreation, *serio ludere*, subversion of genres, transgression

Seeing the light of day in 1613, eight years after the publication of Part I of *Don Quixote*, *Exemplary Novels* were yet another immense success measured by the twenty-three editions (Lipson xii) printed in Spain throughout the seventeenth century, as well as by the number of imitations, adaptations and translations into French, English and German. It comes as no surprise that, being acutely aware of the prevalent genres exploited by his contemporary fellows, Cervantes was an expert at capitalizing on, and experimenting with, the contemporary public's literary tastes, as was Lope de Vega, his rival who gave a boost to the Spanish Golden Age theatre in terms of sophisticated plots and characters. In *La Perinola*, a harsh attack against Juan Pérez de Montalbán, an imitator of Lope de Vega's plays, Francisco de Quevedo extolls Cervantes's narrative genius displayed in *Exemplary Novels*, urging Montalbán, "to leave the novellas to Cervantes" (Quevedo 507; translation mine). Although the title of Cervantes's work echoes the popular Italian *novella*, which was first explored by Giovanni Boccaccio and afterwards promoted by Matteo Bandello and Giovanni Battista Giraldi, the genre was terminologically problematic in early modern Spain, since short stories – *novelas* in Spanish – "known alternatively as cuentos, consejos, exempla, facecias, fábulas, and patrañas, grounded mainly in the oral tradition, are often cited by critics when seeking to establish the novels' beginnings" (Cruz 16). The English translation of the Spanish term *novela* as "novel" may sound very misleading, for *Exemplary Novels* are rather stories or tales. As such, the term

“novel,” much like the verb “novelar” coined by Cervantes in the Prologue, must not be mistaken for the rise of the popular and modern genre of the novel in the mid-eighteenth-century England. Therefore, I avoid any anachronistic use of both terms.

The more or less synonymous genres mentioned by Cruz were a mixture of amusement and instruction, following the classical Horatian principle of *prodesse et delectare* and, furthermore, the mediaeval power of *exemplum*. However, Cervantes’s reworking of the *novela* as “exemplary” is as terminologically oxymoronic as ambiguous. In spite of their storytelling dimension, *Exemplary Novels* depict a world of social injustice, criminals, rape, captivity, violence or abduction, most of them being circumscribed to the arch-theme of love and marriage. Such topics are, therefore, at loggerheads with the notion of exemplarity proposed by Cervantes. I side with Roberto González Echevarría, who argues that “Cervantes never wrote that kind of story” (8), although a large number of critics have attempted to identify the moral meaning of the novels.

My aim in what follows is to focus on the Prologue and show how these novels can be exemplary by virtue of Cervantes’s experimental method of writing predicated on his ability to mix various genres and styles, on the one hand, and to subvert the generic conventions of the picaresque, pastoral and Byzantine romance or the Italian erotic plots, on the other. In doing so, his notion of “exemplarity” – which stands on an equal footing with his claim to originality – is purposefully advanced in the Prologue so as to contest the readers’ hackneyed perception of the Italian *novella*, implying that his own version of it is superior in terms of seriousness and complexity. This generic originality is strengthened by the importance of reading as a recreational activity or play that is co-extensive with the billiard table placed “in the public square of our nation” (Cervantes 4). I claim that the billiard table is both a *modus operandi* and a metaphor that stands for authorial tricks and twisted expectations on the part of the reader, echoing the Aristotelian notion of *eutrapelia* understood as playful wittiness when one jokes “in a tasteful way” (Aristotle 69)

or, more significantly, when conversation is based on temperate yet beneficial amusement. Reworked by Thomas Aquinas, the Aristotelian concept of *eutrapelia* retains the benefits of play and entertainment prior to a return to serious work and moral fortitude. My argument considers the relationship between Cervantes and his readers as a witty and playful dialogue whereby he seeks to refine the readers' literary taste and reading strategies in order to understand and enjoy his stories. Analogous to the game of billiards which implies randomness and uncertainty, the novels are deprived of a clear, fixed meaning, providing readers "the opportunity of discovering for themselves why it [the billiard table] may be especially appropriate as an analogue of the *novelas*" (Boyd 55).

Claiming that the *novelas* are original in comparison with many stories printed and read in Spain at that time, Cervantes actually foregrounds his own merit in inventing a new yet elusive genre: "I am the first to write short stories in Castilian. For the many examples that are already in print in Spanish are all translated from foreign languages, while these are my very own, neither imitated nor stolen. They are conceived in my imagination, brought into the world by my pen, and are now growing up in the arms of the printing press" (Cervantes 5). Such a blunt declaration – meant to puzzle the reader who was familiar with Boccaccio's, Bandello's and Giraldi's short stories translated from Italian into Spanish – revolves around the idea of novelty closely related to the *novela*. Notwithstanding their entertaining dimension, Cervantes's stories can be seen as a literary experiment whereby he mixes generic conventions and twists the reader's expectations at a time when the Council of Trent (1545-1563) redefined the doctrine of the Catholic Church in more rigid moral terms. Thus, many religious and humanist scholars inveighed against the unorthodox message conveyed by the *novelas*, insisting on the pedagogical, rather than entertaining, function of such stories that abound in frivolous and immoral matters. According to Stephen Boyd, "this is the primary reason why the title *Novelas ejemplares* would have seemed improbable to the Spanish reading public in 1613" (11).

Nevertheless, the adjective “exemplary” ostensibly compensates for the bad reputation of the stories. Originated from the Latin *exemplum*, “exemplary” meant not only a model of worthy imitation but also an example of bad conduct meant to instruct the reader. In the Prologue, Cervantes writes that “I have called them ‘exemplary,’ and on close examination you will see that there is not one from which you cannot extract some profitable example” (4). Cervantes alludes to those tales that reveal the negative connotation of *exemplum* as well, although he always depicts the follies and vices of human nature with irony and good humour, inviting the reader to discover the meaning(s) that lie behind the text. In this sense, “exemplarity” points to a new form, if not aesthetics, of story-telling which, in spite of numerous attempts made by Cervantes scholars to establish a thematic or structural unity of the stories, fails to provide a unifying interpretive pattern able to unveil “some hidden mystery which elevates them” (Cervantes 5). By calling his *novelas* “exemplary,” Cervantes purposefully juxtaposes two conflicting aspects: the classical *exemplum* inextricably linked to “Roman heroism or Christian preaching; and the truant modern Boccaccian novella” (Taylor 458). The “hidden mystery,” as Berry Taylor suggests, signifies “a *sensus mysticus*, a term in exegesis, a type of allegory” (460) that evades a straightforward meaning. It is precisely elusiveness that makes Cervantes a modern author of *novelas*. In the words of Echevarría, “the stories are an assemblage of literary artifacts of the utmost complexity and sophistication, as *Don Quixote* had been, presented in such a light, entertaining way that the reader, entranced by the twists and turns of the plots and the antics of the protagonists, hardly notices their artistry” (viii).

Despite the positive or negative connotations of exemplarity as a pragmatic form of narration and evaluation, critics like Karlheinz Stierle have convincingly shown that the concept was subject to a severe semantic crisis in the Renaissance period. According to Stierle, “Cervantes does not put exemplarity into question; however, he pushes it to its ironic corrosion” (589). I find Stierle’s remark of utmost importance not only for the modernity of Cervantes’s stories but also for the role of *serio ludere*. In this light,

Cervantes portrays human nature as the secular version of *exemplum*. Equally significant, “the ironic corrosion” of exemplarity also points to the new form of the *novela* as well as manner of story-telling predicated on twists and turns similar to the random permutations on the billiard table. Employed as a medium of instruction in the Prologue, the billiard table invites the “amiable reader” (Cervantes 4) to be “an accomplice to the text’s ironic mode” and, since its main function is to amuse citizens, to offer “a delicate game of action and reaction, disguise and discovery” (Fuchs ix). Ultimately, the Prologue urges the reader to grasp the ironic dimension of exemplarity in terms of both genre and characters, the more so as the meaning conveyed by the stories is always ambiguous. What makes Cervantes’s *novelas* exemplary is the capacity of this new form of fiction to secularize *exemplum* and to explore it within a multilayered plot full of authorial tricks.

Although the Spanish author guarantees that “the delicious and wholesome fruit” will be “gathered from each individual story as well as from the collection as a whole” (Cervantes 4), his *novelas* project an evasive character of human condition, which is often translated in ironic and humorous terms. More importantly, rather than instructing the reader how to properly read the stories via the classical or mediaeval interpretation of *exemplum*, Cervantes seems to question the extent to which the genre of the *novela* can be exemplary from a moral point of view. Boyd maintains that “the offer to reveal what meaning and profit one can pluck from his *novelas* (as one might pluck fruit from a bush) is withdrawn, and equally no wonder that most of the stories do not come with a statement of their *ejemplaridad* appended” (28-29). For instance, Cervantes’s portrait in the Prologue is revealed through the eyes of an invented friend, a metafictional strategy often used by the writer in order to mock his physical appearance and, at the same time, to extol his own originality:

The man you see before you, with aquiline features, chestnut-coloured hair, smooth, unwrinkled brow, bright eyes, and curved though well-proportioned nose, silver beard that not twenty years

ago was golden, large moustache, small mouth, teeth neither large nor small – since he boasts only six of them, and those he has are in poor condition and even worse positions, for not one of them cuts against another – of medium build, neither tall nor short, a healthy colour in his cheeks, fair rather than dark complexion, slightly stooping, and not very light on his feet. This, then, is a description of the author of *La Galatea* and *Don Quixote of la Mancha* and the man who wrote *Journey to Parnassus* . . . He is commonly known as Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. (Cervantes 3)

Notwithstanding his old age and experience, Cervantes's self-staging in an ekphrastic manner is the result of his strong desire to stir "the curiosity of those people who want to acquaint themselves with the face and figure of the man who dares to display such inventiveness in the market-place and expose it to public scrutiny" (Cervantes 3). The presence of the portrait in the opening pages of the book is suggestive of the serious play between fiction and Cervantes's personal experience as a captive for over five years and a soldier who fought in the 1571 Battle of Lepanto, where he injured his left arm. Acting as an example in the Prologue, the portrait may serve either as an accumulation of fictionalized physical details and historical facts – since the contemporary painter Juan de Jauregui "could easily . . . have printed and engraved my likeness on the first page of this book" (Cervantes 2), which he fails to do – or as a manner of writing inspired by his own life. The reader is always struggling with this labyrinthine *qua* ironic approach in an effort to discover the exemplarity of the stories, of their content and characters alike. Yet again, *serio ludere* comes into question and is reinforced by another series of remarks meant to advertise the morality of his *novelas*: "the amorous compliments that you will find in some of them are so proper and so tempered by reason and Christian discourse, that they could not inspire undesirable thoughts in any reader, whether careful or otherwise" (Cervantes 4).

In a jocular tone, Cervantes refers to the exemplarity of his tales by telling us that they should not be mistaken for a "fricasee" (Cervantes 4), a culinary term echoing Sebastián de Covarrubias

Orozco's definition of *pepitoria* as "a stew made from the necks and wings of fowl" (qtd. in Boyd 51). This metaphor allows Cervantes to play with, and tease, the reader, who struggles to establish a common denominator between the foregoing dish and the hybridized form of the *novelas* which "possess no feet, nor head, nor entrails, nor anything of the kind" (Cervantes 4). However, Cervantes warns us that reason and Christian principles are their pivotal ingredients. This playful fictional game, much like the billiard table placed "in the public square of our nation" (Cervantes 4), requests the presence of an astute reader whose interpretative endeavour is at loggerheads with amusement. In connection to the *novelas* as such, the "fricassee" points to variety, rather than to thematic unity. Then, the lack of a proper shape or body of the *novelas* seems to contradict the reasonable discourse that underlie them and, along with it, Cervantes's self-proclaimed ingenuity in writing exemplary stories. As Boyd cogently argues, after reading *La española inglesa* (The English Spanish Girl) and *El celoso extremeño* (The Jealous Old Man from Extremadura), the only two *novelas* that contain any explicit statement of their exemplary content, we may begin to appreciate that Cervantes's withholding of such summaries is exemplary in itself, a device to make us reflect on our assumptions about how moral literature functions" (53).

It is commonplace today to say that Cervantes's fiction debunks literary conventions and thwarts the readers' expectations by creating ambiguity and irony or by designing fictional games that can be seen as experimental when it comes to form, structure, themes, characters, language and the hybridization of genres. Lesley Lipson has noted that "a basic literary precept of the day was the need to inspire *admiratio* or a sense of wonderment in the reader, and Cervantes achieves this by displacing recognizable character types into unexpected contexts and frequently dismantling generic conventions to create new combinations with which to surprise and challenge the reader" (xiv). For example, in *The Little Gypsy Girl*, Doña Constanza, a beautiful gypsy girl, is proposed by Don Juan, a young and rich nobleman from Madrid, who is

accepted by her community. She is exemplary as long as her honesty and reason impose the respect of her tribe, who choose to call her Preciosa, whereas Don Juan crosses the boundaries of wealth and prestige in order to adopt a new yet challenging – because marginal – identity. Despite creating dichotomies such as the ideal world of fiction versus reality, Cervantes conveys a deeply humanist message by training his readers “to suspend their disbelief” rather than “to recreate a realistic picture of his society” (Lipson xiv).

Aiming to undermine any calculations, well-thought-out design or predictions, the “billiard table” trope brings into question the idea of chance, which I couple with the “suspension of disbelief” at the fictional level. Apart from being an unharmed tool for entertainment in public, the “billiard table” metaphor, despite its random permutations, stands for the idea of poetic justice, which compensates for providence as a “principle of coherence in history and fiction” (McKeon 407). As noted earlier, the *novelas* are structurally united by reason and Christian principles which ostensibly fend off the reader from any vices or bawdy scenes, but the moral lesson of each story is hard to be extracted, given the thematic variety of the collection. From this perspective, the “billiard table” metaphor initially befuddles the reader, although Cervantes promises to provide unharmed readerly entertainment. According to Boyd, the metaphor can stand on an equal footing with the negative comparison of the *novelas* with a “fricassee,” but it must be understood in clear terms as a way of recreation which is “so original and specific, and implants itself so vividly in the imagination, that it actually distracts attention from the simple truth it is meant to represent” (54). Yet contrary to Boyd, who affirms that billiards “involves two or more players pitting their skills against one another” (54), I believe that, when played in solitude, the game allows the player – as reading does to a solitary reader – to train themselves at ease and thus improve their playing skills by thinking of infinite ball combinations or game strategies which, like reading, are very subjective. This is yet one more explanation why Cervantes derives pleasure from tantalizing his readers all the time,

raising their awareness of the subtleties and subtexts that make the act of interpretation difficult. In spite of their materiality ensured by print, the text is as flexible as the moving balls on the table, “shifting patterns of meaning and plays of irony that seem designed to make the stories reveal themselves to different readers in different ways in different successive acts of reading” (Boyd 54).

Closely related to the game of billiards and, by extension, fictional games is the author’s salutary advice about the “proper and agreeable exercise” of our body and soul through recreational activities, for “we cannot spend all our time in church; the oratories cannot always be occupied; we cannot be always attending to business, however important it may be” (Cervantes 4). At this point, Cervantes also underlines the importance of other diversions for ordinary people: “For this reason poplar groves are planted, fountains created, sloped levelled, and gardens neatly laid out” (Cervantes 4). Such pastimes are mentioned by Cervantes in order to subliminally strengthen the readers’ interest in his work as a beneficial leisure activity which animates “the weary spirit” (Cervantes 4). This is the moment when the “billiard table” becomes a trope, in that the game as such, which implies both physical and mental activity, has been transferred to the realm of literature as an artistic form whose role is to stimulate intellectual agility in a very agreeable manner. Moreover, due to the fact that the *novelas* do not cause harm “to either body or soul,” they are exemplary insofar as their content has a restorative effect upon their readers.

In his fascinating and well-documented book entitled *Lector Ludens: The Representation of Games and Play in Cervantes*, Michael Scham has thoroughly analysed the meanings and implications of the Aristotelian concept of *eutrapelia* (witty and restrained amusement) in early modern Spain, when the concept was revived by Aquinas. Scham explains that “the Spanish thinkers consistently reveal their indebtedness to Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, and a Christian moral framework informs their notions of pleasure and profit. But there are also secular elements to the discussions, particularly regarding

assertions of the value of play for social cohesion as well as for physical and psychological health” (28). It is obvious that for Cervantes, the combination of “pleasure and profit” as a stimulus for “physical and psychological health” is rooted in the Renaissance belief that play – which involves sociability and interaction – is a pleasant means of animating the return to work. One may argue that the *novelas*, similar to the other leisurely activities enumerated by Cervantes, have a therapeutic function ensured by *eutrapelia*, a term which never refutes earnestness. The complex plots of the stories attest to the reader’s effort to decode the meaning of each of them, which is hinted at by the “billiard table” trope. I side with William Clamurro who, examining *Exemplary Novels* as part of the *serio ludere* tradition, claims that games are subversive because Cervantes transforms readers into picares who “learn to read with an ear tuned to the contradictions and dissonances that issue forth from the interaction of dramatized example and surrounding social and cultural conflicts” (5). A satirical *novela* such as *Rinconete and Cortadillo* depicts two picares who remain pure observers, although they become part of, the underground world of thieves in Seville. Their ironic detachment from vice, criminal events and even religious practices, which are humorously treated, coincide with Cervantes’s subversion of the picaresque genre itself, which, in this case, differs drastically from the vicious morality that defies religious faith in *Guzmán de Alfarache*, Mateo Alemán’s iconic picaresque novel. Etymologically, Scham wisely links *eutrapelia* to *tropelia* (prestidigitation) so as to demonstrate that Cervantes’s ingenuity relies on tricks concerning the mixing of the picaresque, pastoral romance and theatre elements that individualize characters by means of circumstantial detail. Ultimately, the Spanish author’s tricks are light-hearted, complying with the classical Horatian principle of *prodesse et delectare*, whose function is to keep pleasure and intellectual profit in perfect balance. In this context, *exemplum* becomes secular, jocular and ironic to the extent that it shifts the focus of attention towards playful catharsis. The same holds true of the author’s eagerness to “cut off the hand with which I wrote them [the *novelas*], than see them published” in case the

reading of his stories “provoked an improper thought or desire in one of my readers” (Cervantes 4). Not only does Cervantes cleverly and subtly promote his originality, but he also poses as a fully responsible writer who advocated morality and virtue. Through self-irony, Cervantes unveils “a more subtle kind of authenticity in what is said – not the over-earnest protestations of a morally anxious puritan, but the good humoured self-acceptance of true wisdom” (Boyd 57). Last but not least, in terms of *exempla* offered by the twelve stories, Cervantes’s design – in line with the *trompe-l’oeil* effect specific to Baroque painting – is living proof that, from a Christian point of view, perfect morality is as unattainable as the generic perfection that Cervantes purposefully omits to achieve, leaving it to the reader to decode the “hidden mystery” (Cervantes 5) of the tales.

Although inspired by the Italian model of the *novella*, Cervantes reworks the genre and even defends it against the contemporary belief that genres like romance corrupted the reader’s imagination and morality. He visibly encourages reading both as amusement and serious play, avoiding any direct statement about the power of didacticism. At the same time, Cervantes’s stories – which are not translations or adaptations of the Italian *novelle* – avoid repetitive or predictable patterns and clarity of meaning. As Scham suggests, “despite the conventional references to exemplarity, the traditional moral and theological vocabulary deployed throughout the stories, and even the seemingly unambiguous instances of vice punished and virtue rewarded, the reading experience of Cervantes’s stories is much closer to the fluid, improvisational play of *paidia*” (211). Thus, the spontaneous play typical of the “billiard table” trope – is mirrored by the ongoing interaction between the author and the reader who must be careful to the bumps and jolts of the text, shifting identities, “agonistic games” (Scham 213), mixed genres, contradictions and ambiguities, despite the highly visual representation of the action inspired by both the drama and the societal, cultural and political norms of Cervantes’s time. As a telling example of *eutrapelia*, *Exemplary Novels* bring into the limelight a multifaceted view of humanity, art,

imagination and social interaction. Acquiring the status of a trope whereby Cervantes juggles the reader's expectations, on the one hand, and with a wide range of popular recreations, such as gambling, music, dancing or story-telling, on the other, the "billiard table" stands for reading as a sociable means of diversion that is part and parcel of the ordinary life of people, especially when their "weary spirit may rest" (Cervantes 4). It accounts for the ludic, imprecise tone cultivated by Cervantes as a consequence of his sheer scepticism about worn-out genres such as the pastoral, the picaresque and chivalric romances, which he reconfigured in an ironic or satirical mode for the "idle reader" (Cervantes Prologue) not only in the realm of the Spanish *novela* but also in the world of the modern novel ushered in by *Don Quixote*.

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