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# Sacred Geometry and Alchemical Process in Miguel de Cervantes' 'Las dos doncellas'

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## **Abstract**

Miguel de Cervantes' collection of short stories, *Novelas ejemplares*, differs from his other works: within this collection, Cervantes admits to having incorporated hidden mysteries – without identifying those mysteries. What Cervantes does not explicitly confess is that these mysteries involve alchemical references and that the plot of each of the thirteen stories illustrates different aspects of the alchemical transformation process. Moreover, in the specific case of the story 'Las dos doncellas', traditionally dismissed by critics as a rather mediocre work with unnecessary redundancy and a poor argument, the four characters (or four elements) and the circular and triangular structure of the plot represent hidden alchemical references and aspects of sacred geometry overlooked by dismissive scholars. In sum, not only do these alchemical references validate Cervantes' claim about concealed mysteries but they also further interrogate the *Novelas ejemplares* and enrich the text for the aware reader.

## **Resumen**

La serie de historias cortas de Miguel Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares*, es diferente a sus otras obras: dentro de esta serie, Cervantes reconoce haber incorporado misterios ocultos – sin mencionar cuales son esos misterios. Lo que Cervantes no confiesa explícitamente es que esos misterios se refieren a aspectos alquímicos y que la trama de cada una de las trece historias ilustra diferentes aspectos del proceso de transformación alquímica. Por ejemplo, en el caso específico de la historia de 'Las dos doncellas', tradicionalmente considerada por la crítica como una historia mediocre, llena de redundancias innecesarias y pobre argumento, los cuatro personajes (o cuatro elementos) y la estructura circular y triangular de la trama representan referencias alquímicas y aspectos de la geometría sagrada pasados por alto por los críticos. En resumen, las referencias alquímicas no solo confirman la confesión de Cervantes sobre misterios escondidos; sino que provocan un cuestionamiento de las *Novelas ejemplares* que hace más interesante el texto para el lector iniciado.

In the prologue to the *Novelas ejemplares* (1613) Miguel de Cervantes expresses his satisfaction in the publication of the collection, emphasizing that although the stories have been created for entertainment, they contain ‘hidden mysteries’ that make them worthy of the readers’ consideration: ‘Sólo esto quiero que consideres, que pues yo he tenido osadía de dirigir estas *Novelas* al gran Conde de Lemos, algún misterio tienen escondido que las levanta’ (Cervantes Saavedra 2001: 20).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Cervantes advises that a ‘careful reading’ is important to benefit from the intention of the works: ‘Heles dado nombre de ejemplares, y si bien lo miras, no hay ninguna de quien no se pueda sacar algún ejemplo provechoso’ (18). Several critics have linked the works of Cervantes to the esoteric, alchemy, and magic, suggesting that the ‘hidden mysteries’ of the *novelas* may also manifest such links.<sup>2</sup> This article explores the presence and function of sacred geometry in the figures of the circle, square, and triangle and of alchemical language in ‘Las dos doncellas’, and suggests how these elements aid the reader in discovering the hidden mystery of this novela.

Biographical information on Cervantes’s education is limited,<sup>3</sup> but specific language and images in his works substantiate the fact that he possessed a comprehensive knowledge of the intellectual and philosophical movements of his time, including the discourses of Hermetic Neo-Platonism and alchemy, and that he made a thematic and structural use of this knowledge in his works, particularly in the collection of short stories known as the *Novelas ejemplares*. From various specific references in the *Novelas ejemplares* it is clear that Cervantes knew the alchemical practice and the poor results that this practice offered when tainted by charlatans,<sup>4</sup> yet he also held in the highest regard the image of

1 All references to the text of ‘Las dos doncellas’ are from the text of the *Novelas ejemplares* published under the direction of Francisco Rico, edition, prologue and notes by Jorge García Lopez, with a preliminary study by Javier Blasco (Barcelona 2001).

2 Julio Caro Baroja (1967), Jean Paschal Percheron (1999), José Enrique Díaz Martín (2003), Manuel Castillo Martos (2005) and Mar Rey Bueno (2005) have carried out studies that place Cervantes and his work right in the centre of the historical context of the Renaissance and its intellectual environment, a time when the widespread fascination with alchemy was an important phenomenon in Europe and, certainly, in Spain, where the practise of alchemy can be traced to a very distant past.

3 In *Cervantès* (1986), Jean Canavaggio indicates that in the dearth of factual information about Cervantes’ life, especially in what concerns his education, the objective of his biography is: corroborates the scarcity of information: ‘D’abord établier, avec toute la rigueur requise, ce que l’on sait de lui: faire le départ entre le fabuleux, le certain, le vraisemblable. On ne peut plus affirmer aujourd’hui, même s’il s’agit d’opinions communément admises, que Cervantès a été l’élève des Jésuites de Séville ... Un récit critique s’avère indispensable, des expériences et des actions qui constituent le vécu cervatin, même si ce vécu n’est appréhendé que de dehors (11). On the other hand, it is a historically accurate fact that when Miguel de Cervantes travelled to Italy with Cardinal Aquaviva in 1569, the intellectual, artistic, and religious centres in that country had been deeply influenced by the translation and publication of the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Marsilio Ficino in 1484.

4 In ‘La gitanilla’, Preciosa, the main character, asserts: ‘Ojos hay engañados que a la primera vista también les parece el oropel como el oro... Esta mi hermosura que tú dices que tengo, que la estimas sobre el sol y la encareces sobre el oro, ¿qué sé yo si de cerca te parecerá sombra, y tocada, cairás en que es de alquimia?’ (2001: 74). In ‘El casamiento engañoso’

alchemical transformation as an allegory of individual interior transformation. Through all his works it is evident that Cervantes hoped for transformation of his own chaotic society,<sup>5</sup> one in which poverty and injustice were widespread and other transgressions such as rape, kidnapping, honour killing, clandestine marriages, abandonment of children, prostitution, witchcraft, organized crime and venality were common ills, as is illustrated throughout the collection of the *Novelas ejemplares*. Using the text literally as a laboratory, Cervantes experiments with examples of what could be done to remedy certain tribulations of society using images of personal renovation as the first step in the transformation of the entire society. In addition to the recurrent motifs of renovation, journey, descent, immersion, blackness, marriage and ascent, in this collection there are specific mentions of gold, silver, emeralds, redeeming blood, blinding light, eagles, phoenixes, unicorns, orphans, widows and other words and symbols unambiguously associated with the art of alchemy, such as *Sol* and *Luna*.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Cervantes knew well the figure of Mercury, as it is evident in *El viaje del Parnaso*, where the author takes an imaginary trip to the legendary mountain in the company of the god Mercury, who tells him to collect his gatherings to travel with him and to 'prepare to carry out the great work'.<sup>7</sup> Cervantes, in respectful

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the ensign Campuzano confesses to Licenciado Peralta: 'pero como no es todo oro lo que reluce; las cadenas, cintillos, joyas y brincos con sólo ser de alquimia se contentaron' (532). In 'El coloquio de los perros' Berganza narrates to Cipión that in the hospital he made the acquaintance of an alchemist: 'Digo que en las cuatro camas que están al cabo desta enfermería, en la una estaba un alquimista, en la otra un poeta, en la otra un matemático' (617). Furthermore, in a footnote referring to this specific passage in 'El coloquio de los perros', Jorge García López comments: 'La alquimia (extracción de oro o plata de los metales menos nobles mediante procesos "químicos") era una creencia todavía fuertemente arraigada en la época' (617). In 'La tía fingida', doña Claudia advises Esperanza: 'Los estremeños tienen de todo, como boticarios, y son como la alquimia, que si llega a plata, lo es, y si al cobre, cobre se queda' (639).

- 5 In *Don Quijote* I. XI, Don Quijote refers with nostalgia to the ideal society of the golden age: 'Dichosa edad y siglos aquellos a quien los antiguos pusieron nombre de dorados, y no porque en ellos el oro, que en esta nuestra edad tanto se estima, se alcanzase en aquella venturosa sin fatiga alguna, sino porque entonces ... no había la fraude, el engaño ni la malicia mezclándose con la verdad y la llaneza' (Cervantes Saavedra 1967: 1066–67).
- 6 Because alchemy is a sacred art, alchemical discourse is intentionally obscure. It utilizes specific images in a series of allegories and metaphors to relate to different elements and stages of the transmutation process. The terms utilized throughout the *Novelas ejemplares* are common to alchemical discourse and recognized by initiated readers: renovation is the end result of the alchemical process; journey, descent, immersion, and ascent are regarded as steps of transformation in the crucible or in the vessel. According to Carl Gustave Jung in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, matter, or the *prima materia*, is also called 'the orphan' and may originate from different metaphorical sources, among them the womb of a widow (Jung 1963: 18). When matter is tortured and tested, achieving its ultimate transformation, the figure of the phoenix appears in the vapours of this last stage of the process as a symbol of rebirth. *Sol* and *Luna*, represented by a King and a Queen in the emblems of the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, are symbolic opposites that need reconciliation through the mediation of Mercury.
- 7 In the context of the Renaissance, Hermes/Mercury is renamed 'Trismegistus' and regarded as the father of alchemy. One of the most recognizable attributes of Hermes Trismegistus is the caduceus. The 'great work' is the name given specifically to the process

silence, attends to the call of the great Mercury:

En cuyo traje y ademán severo  
 vi de Mercurio al vivo la figura  
 de los fingidos dioses mensajero.  
 En el gallardo talle y compostura,  
 en los alados pies, y el caduceo,  
 símbolo de prudencia y de cordura.  
 [...]
   
 de esta manera comenzó a hablarme  
 [...]
   
 Ármate de tus versos luego, y ponte  
 a punto de seguir este viaje  
 conmigo, y a la gran obra dispónete. (Cervantes Saavedra 1967: 68)

Juan García Font states that in alchemy there is an important relationship between the way things are presented and the intention behind what is presented. He calls this relationship the ‘cortex-nucleus’, which normally consists of making an announcement that something has a much deeper meaning than what can be perceived at first glance. The ‘shell’ or external wrapping should not prevent the reader from enjoying the nucleus hidden as a promise (1976: 17). ‘Las dos doncellas’ seems to present an uncomplicated tale or cortex.

The openly moralizing purpose of the *novelas*, however, is consistent with the essence of alchemical philosophy, which uses ancient images of transmutation of metals as an allegory for personal and spiritual transformation.<sup>8</sup> These concepts were widely acknowledged throughout Europe and in Spain during the time of Cervantes. In the case of ‘Las dos doncellas’, an initiate of alchemy would recognize a sacred geometric composition in the organization of the events of the story. This geometric pattern is achieved through a structure of circles, triangles and squares hidden in the development of the plot and in the number of characters. To illustrate this argument I have designed a geometric interpretation of the story Plot (Fig. 1), inspired by Michael Maier’s alchemical emblem XXI in *Atalanta Fugiens*, published in 1617 (Fig. 2), which is also consistent with the geometric explanation of alchemy provided by Frances A. Yates in *The Occult Philosophy in Elizabethan Age*:

The Art in its workings is immensely complex ... the Art uses three figures, *the triangle, the circle, and the square*. The artist in moving up and down the levels of

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of alchemical transmutation. In Jose Ramón Luanco’s compilation of ancient alchemical texts in Spain, there is a mention of Hermes in an alchemical manual titled *Del thesoro del Rey Don Alonso X.º llamado el sabio, Libro segundo* in a verse that reads: ‘El nuestro Hermes dice que es Cielo/E Tierra, mas otros home é muger,/E del matrimonio suelen fazer /Otros enigmas que sirven de velo’ (1998: 174).

8 Mircea Eliade has written extensively on the relationship of metallurgy and the philosophical/religious allegories of transformation: ‘To collaborate in the work of Nature, to help her to produce at an ever increasing tempo, to change the modalities of matter – here, in our view, lies one of the key sources of alchemical ideology...what the smelter, smith and alchemist have in common is that all three lay claim to a particular magico-religious experience in their relations with matter’ (1978: 8).

creation applies these figures on each level. The geometry is symbolical; the triangle symbolizes the divine; the circle stands for the heavens (by which Lull always means the seven planets and the twelve signs of the zodiac). The square symbolizes the four elements. (2001: 11, emphasis added)

A close analysis of Cervantes' story plot reveals that the three sacred figures mentioned by Yates, and their symbolism, are indeed present in the development of the story (see Fig. 1). Four characters in conflict constitute the angles of a square that we come to identify with the *quaternio* of two male elements (fire and air) and two female elements (earth and water) necessary for universal harmony. The chaotic situation at the beginning of the story is caused by two male elements and two female elements that represent conflicting elements of society.

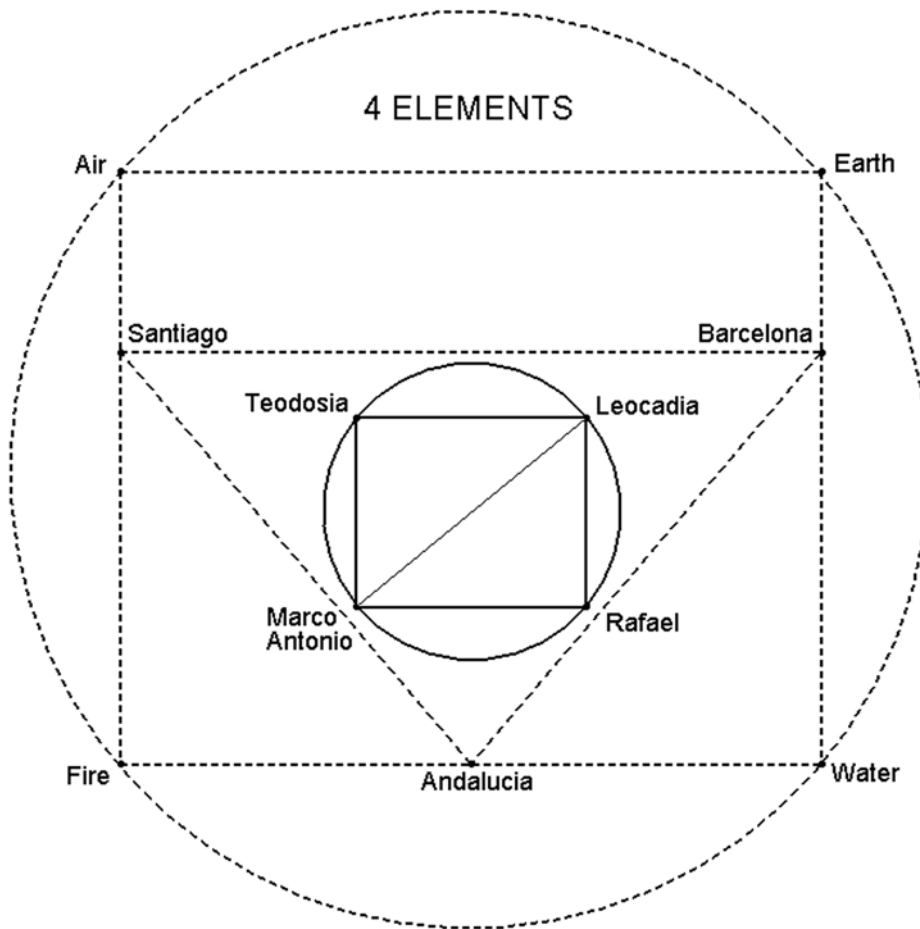


Fig. 1: Geometric interpretation of Cervantes' 'Las dos doncellas'.

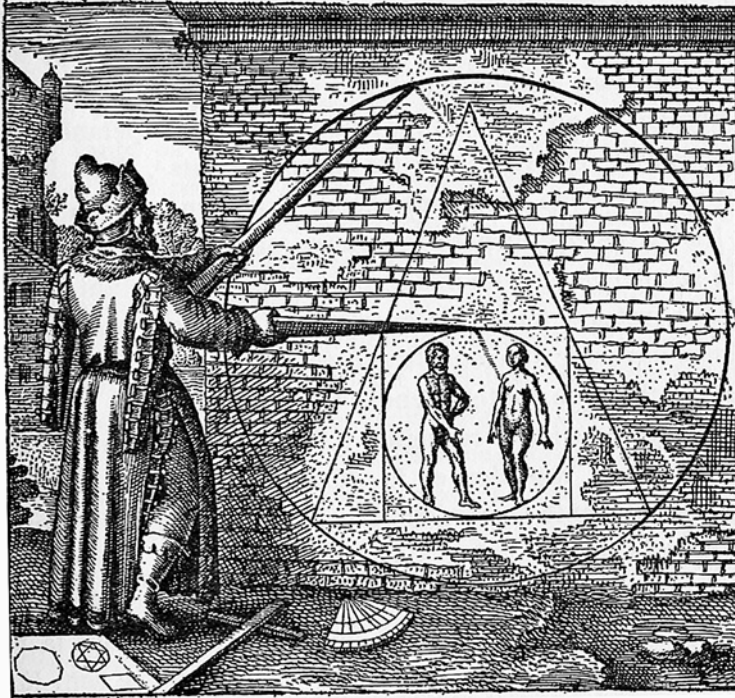


Fig. 2: Illustration for Emblem XXI, 'De Secretis Nature', from Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* (1618): 'Make of the man and woman a Circle, of that a Quadrangle, of this a Triangle, of the same a Circle and you will have the Stone of the Philosophers'.

Some Cervantine scholars criticize the doubling of the male and female characters as repetitious and pointless,<sup>9</sup> as Ruth El-Saffar observes in her book *Novel to Romance*:

Inevitably there has been much commentary regarding the roles of Teodosia and Leocadia in 'Las dos doncellas', most critics simply giving in to the overriding similarities of the two girls to declare them identical. [...] Leocadia will be shown to function as an exaggeration of the repressed aspects of Teodosia. (1974: 110)

For an active reader, the addition of one extra male and one extra female character to the main characters indicates that Cervantes is putting together a much more ingenious plot than can be perceived at first sight: a gemination of pairs consistent with the alchemical theory of the *quaternio*, the universal

9 In fact, 'Las dos doncellas' is among the least commented on and appreciated of Cervantes' *novelas*. Marsha Collins, for example, states: 'Hay cervantistas que alaban algún aspecto de la composición de la narrativa, pero la mayoría persiste en mirar la novela con menosprecio, considerándola una bagatela de poco o ningún valor' (26). Jennifer Thompson comments on the lack of verisimilitude of the *novela* and the mirror-like roles of the two women. More in line with my reading of the work, however, Thompson indicates that 'this implies some special purpose on the part of Cervantes' (1963: 146).

restoring of order through the harmony of the four elements or forces that correspond to four different worlds: the intelligible or divine, the heavenly, the earthly, and the infernal. The four initial characters will constitute the four corners of a quadrangle. The correspondence of the characters is regarded as essential in the Middle Ages according to Jung: 'Owing to the theory of "correspondencia", regarded as axiomatic in the Middle Ages, the principles of each of the four worlds – the intelligible or divine, the heavenly, the earthly, and the infernal – corresponded to each other' (1963: 184). Leocadia corresponds to Teodosia just as Rafael corresponds to Marco Antonio in the sense that out of the four elements, earth and water are normally considered to be feminine and fire and air are normally labelled masculine. According to the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, Gold is formed by four elements: '*Lapis noster est ex quator elementis* [our stone consists of the four elements]' (2, xii), and in gold the four elements are contained in equal proportions: '*In auro sunt quatuor elementa in aequali proportione aptata*' (2, xii).<sup>10</sup> It is necessary for the author to duplicate the masculine and the feminine elements for the allegory of a quadrangle of four harmonious elements to function.

With respect to the sacred figure of the triangle in the plot, the *quaternio* of characters also form two small triangles within the quadrangle that reconcile two pairs of opposites. On a bigger scale, the journey to Santiago de Compostela, the most sacred of places, where the tomb of the Apostle Santiago (Saint James) is located, represents the highest point in a geographical triangle that takes the characters from Andalusia to Barcelona to Galicia and then back to Andalusia (see Fig. 1). The alchemical symbolism of the pilgrimage to Santiago is important because attendance at the holy place confirms the purification of the characters and sanctions their respective marriage in the Church. This sanction constitutes the highest principle of renovation, and it is in fact the highest point in the plot of the novel.<sup>11</sup> The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is specifically recognized in hermetic circles as an initiation. Ernesto Fazioli, for example, notes that all the stages a pilgrim undergoes finally to reach Santiago are in fact part of an esoteric and alchemical journey, an allegory of the alchemical process represented as a symbol of death and resurrection in which the opposites are reunited (2003: 9). The symbolism of the triangle has constituted, since ancient times, the search for the divine that allows us to see that the relationship of the individual transformation with the potential to transform society is a reflection of the higher order of the universe, a microcosm-macrocosm relationship cherished

10 The alchemical text known as the *Rosarium Philosophorum* was first published in 1550 in Frankfurt, as part of the collective work *Alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum*. There are no known reproductions of the entire text, although the twenty images of the *Rosarium Philosophorum* section were recreated numerous times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to illustrate other alchemical treatises and studies.

11 However, some scholars who regard the plot of 'Las dos doncellas' as 'intricate and somewhat unbelievable' (Britt 1998: 39), also see the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela as an event 'strictly anticlimactic' (45).

also by alchemists, epitomized in the dictum 'As above so below'.<sup>12</sup> According to Pierre Jean Fabre (2001), the alchemical process is viewed in many instances as a process compensatory to Christianity. Christian alchemists sometimes portray the Mass as the alchemical work where the faithful receives the body of Christ as the ultimate rite in a process of purification, and in general throughout Fabre's famous work, the spirit of Christianity can be explained through the images of the alchemical process. Fazioli mentions that as early as the fourteenth century, the identification between the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and alchemy was already common knowledge, brought about by the similarities in their respective symbolism 'Il pellegrinaggio a Santiago di Compostella diventò spesso soltanto un evento immaginario e già nel XIV secolo, l'identificazione tra pellegrinaggio a Compostella e alchimia era un fatto compiuto' (2003: 11).

The circular pattern of the events in 'Las dos doncellas' is represented by the journey of the four characters, which starts and ends in Andalusia once the transformation has been accomplished and the order is restored. The particular choice of Andalusia as a starting and ending place points also to a very ancient alchemical tradition in this area of Spain. Garcia Font states that in one of the alchemical treatises from Byzantine and Greek origin, there is a book called *Libro de Ostones* which mentions an initiation with seven doors and mysterious hieroglyphics, and special mention is made of Andalusia (1976: 59).<sup>13</sup>

The symbolism of the circle in alchemy is related to the Ouroboros, the dragon or snake that devours its own tail and its symbolic meaning of a transformation that concludes in the same point where it began (Troisi 1997: 263). Fazioli also mentions that in Santiago:

Il portico diventa il laboratorio dentro il quale si condensano gli elementi magici, atti a compiere questa modifica. Da luogo segreto e cuore iniziatico, esso si trasforma in centro spirituale dove si concreta l'incontro tra la realtà del mondo superiore, il macrocosmo, e la realtà della sfera inferior, il microcosmo. (2003: 32)

The story of the two maidens is not transcendently removed from the macrocosmic reality of the Spanish Golden Age, where it was important to reconcile many social forces in conflict, but it has the purpose of reconciling certain dualities of the microcosm as well: man and woman, brother and sister, prejudice and love, and death and life (see Fig. 1). In the end, Marco Antonio, the irresponsible youth, becomes a husband to Teodosia and a good father for an illustrious progeny; Rafael refuses to go along with the traditional attitude of arrogant males

12 The most important principle in the Emerald Table attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the dictum refers to the unification of dualities necessary for harmony between the macrocosm and the microcosm.

13 'Antes de que se llevasen a cabo versiones del árabe sobre este material, circularon una serie de tratados que procedían de fuentes bizantinas y griegas, la mayoría redactados en árabe, en los que parece recogerse una antiquísima tradición. En uno de estos textos, llamado *Libro de Ostones*, se aportan ochenta y cuatro nombres distintos para la piedra filosofal, se describe un fantástico sueño en el que aparece un itinerario de iniciación con siete puertas y misteriosas inscripciones jeroglíficas y por si fuera poco... ¡Se hace especial referencia a Andalucía!' (García Font 1976: 59).



who avenge the honour of their families by murdering the woman who causes the shame. The passage in which Rafael forgives his sister Teodosia is exemplary of the potential for change; it shows that men can change and that society can change one individual at a time. As an alternative to the condemnation of dishonoured women as corrupt and stained elements of society, Cervantes might be suggesting that families must take care of them and do whatever is necessary to repair the injury inflicted on society as a whole when a woman is dishonoured and abandoned. This principle is not only present in the story 'Las dos doncellas' but also in other stories of the collection, such as 'La fuerza de la sangre', 'La señora Cornelia', 'La ilustre fregona', and 'La tía fingida', where the subject of dishonour and the solutions proposed are controversial as well.

There are seven characters of importance in 'Las dos doncellas' who will be transformed and will ultimately contribute to the transformation of society. The first four characters – Teodosia, Marco Antonio, Rafael, and Leocadia – are reunited first in two reconciled pairs, and ultimately in an extended family that includes Rafael and Teodosia's father, Leocadia's father, and Marco Antonio's father. The circle is a metaphor for the Great Work of alchemy, consisting of seven basic steps for the process in which matter is transformed or purified; most importantly, the number seven is attained by the sum of three and four, in which four symbolizes the union of the divinity with men, according to Troisi (1997: 234). Four main characters in this novel are fundamentally transformed by the different events that they have to confront; they triumph over their own faults and imperfections. They find wisdom and return to their place of origin, where three other characters await to complete the process. With the marriage of the first four and their reconciliation with the last three characters represented by their parents, the social injury of both families is healed, making the point that if society changes one individual at a time and one family at a time, the total harmony of society will be restored eventually. The reconciliation of the seven characters symbolizes the union of the seven who become four and the four who become one. The circle is complete. Alchemy, according to Fazzioli, relates perfectly with the circularity of the pilgrimage of the characters; it is an essentially esoteric affair to depart from one point to return to that point transformed after a cleansing and purification process has taken place: 'Innanzitutto l'alchimia si lega perfettamente con la circolarità del pellegrinaggio ed è un tema essenziale dell'esoterismo partire da un punto per ritornare al medesimo, trasformati' (2003: 11). The metaphoric gold, the philosopher's stone which in Cervantes' view is the perfect society, is obtained at last and the seven essential characters are finally integrated into one large family that represents hope for a better society.

Throughout the story the four characters are by no means perfect or complete. The physical consummation of the clandestine marriage between Marco Antonio and Teodosia and her search for her other half is treated by Cervantes in an original way: using the image of the woman disguised as a man, so common in Golden Age literature, Cervantes portrays the alchemical androgyne with

accuracy. In alchemical literature the hermaphrodite, an incomplete creature, product of the conjunction of the opposites, exhibits male and female characteristics and symbolizes also the impending arrival of the philosopher's stone. Fazioli mentions that: 'Adamo raffiguro così l'immagine de l'androgina, archetipo spesso usato dagli alchimisti per simboleggiare il compimento del loro operato' (2003: 26). Teodosia, the hermaphroditic product of the *conjunctio* interrupted by Marco Antonio's abandonment, is appropriately represented by Cervantes as the woman dressed as a man, signifying that a clandestine marriage is an incomplete union. Teodosia needs to find her other half, but she also needs the social and religious sanction of her marriage to culminate the process of purification.<sup>14</sup> The institutions of marriage and family have paramount importance for the improvement of society in Cervantes' works. In alchemy the reconciliation of the opposites, *conjunctio*, or alchemical wedding of the elements is the most important stage of the process. One of the most interesting aspects of the plot in alchemical terms is Teodosia's androgynous appearance and her success with her disguise as a man, fooling, for a time, even her own brother. Leocadia, on the other hand, is not a part of a consummated union; consequently she is all female and fails to impersonate a man with her unconvincing disguise, her perforated ears and her effeminate behaviour, details that do not go unnoticed by Teodosia, who discovers the truth almost immediately.

The story of 'Las dos doncellas', traditionally dismissed by critics as a rather mediocre story,<sup>15</sup> with unnecessary repetitions and poor argument, becomes alive and vibrant with the application of an alchemical interpretation, performed in an effort to find the hidden mysteries. It is possible to conclude that in creating this story with its squares, triangles and circles, Cervantes was following the alchemical principle of 'making of man and woman a Circle, of that a Quadrangle, of this a Triangle, of the same a Circle in order to find the Stone of the Philosophers', as illustrated in emblem XXI of Michael Maiers' *Atalanta Fugiens*, where the alchemical process is graphically represented (see Fig. 2).<sup>16</sup> The harmony of society as a

14 Forcione does not concentrate on alchemical practices in his studies on Cervantes; nonetheless, he utilizes traditional alchemical terms to identify the relationship between the transformation, which he calls *renovatio*, and marriage as the need for 'a general sanctification of the secular world', as the influence of Erasmus in Cervantes (2003: 20).

15 In *Beneath the Fiction*, Clamurro states: 'The deeper point of all this is that this particular *novela* is – among all those of the Collection – the most stylized and unrealistic in its subtle but crucially important shift of tone, to a world of the legendary, the unrealistic, and the archaic' (1997: 215). Julio Rodríguez Luis indicates: 'De esta exageración [of detail] de una característica del estilo cervantino podría deducirse que se trata, en cuanto a la que nos ocupa, de una *novela tardía*, escrita sin mucha gana para completar la docena' (1980: I.78). Concerning the perceived lack of verisimilitude in the ending of the story, Rodríguez Luis also comments: 'Al describir la felicidad de los personajes vuelve a insistirse en la autenticidad de la historia [...] quizá para atenuar el efecto de inverosimilitud de un relato tan lleno de coincidencias extraordinarias' (I.86); Joseph Ricapito states that the ending of the story is disappointing: 'The last gesture is exhausted – and in a happy way – leaving the readers with a nonconventional resolution of the lost *honra* lingering in their minds' (2000: 113).

16 The seminal work of Frederick de Armas on the concept of ekphrasis addresses the

macrocosm and the microcosm of individual life could only be achieved through individual transformations, of which Cervantes gives us examples in the *Novelas ejemplares*.

The happy ending of the story attests to the success of the experiment and its exemplarity: sins are forgiven, reputations are restored, and the marriages result in 'ilustre generación y descendencia, que hasta hoy dura en estos dos lugares, que son de los mejores de la Andalucía (Cervantes 2001: 480). Sacred geometry and alchemical process function as keys in interpreting the *novela* and the multiple transformations that take place in it. Understanding the many points of contact between the plot of the story, its characters, and the alchemical process visualized in a geometric form, helps a reader of 'Las dos doncellas' to re-evaluate both the aesthetic value of this often overlooked work and perhaps discover a 'hidden mystery' within it.

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influence of visual and artistic material, especially Italian art, in the work of Cervantes. De Armas states that; 'Ekphrasis can [...] tell the story depicted in the art work – and even expand on the incidents (narrative ekphrasis)' (2006: 10). Following de Armas's theories it is possible to extend this visual influence in Cervantes to alchemic treatises and illustrations in circulation in Italy and in Spain for centuries, a fact already evidenced in the works of Jose Ramón Luanco, Juan García Font, and Mar Rey Bueno. Rey Bueno indicates that a characteristic of alchemic treatises, the *Mutus Liber* (1677), for example, was the absence of printed words: 'Su mensaje alquímico lo transmitía a través de ilustraciones' (2002 : 30), but throughout the centuries illustrations have been the favoured means of alchemists to transmit those messages.

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