CHAPTER 5

Ludology, Self-fashioning, and Entrepreneurial Masculinity in Iberian Novels of Chivalry

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The four romances that are the focus of this essay present themselves as the life story of their respective protagonists. They confirm Daniel Eisenberg’s definition of the Spanish chivalric romance as the “fictitious biography” of a knight-errant. This biographical armature is revealed by such works as the Libro del Caballero Zifar (early 14th century; hereafter, Zifar), Curial e Güelfa (late 15th century; hereafter, Curial), and Tirant lo blanc (late 15th century; hereafter, Tirant). The extant version of the most popular fictional chivalric biography of them all, Amadís de Gaula (hereafter, Amadís), dates from the early 16th century but closely adapts earlier versions dating back to the mid-14th.

In their ostensibly biographical form, these stories are comparable to the lives of real-world knights, as recounted, for example, in the 15th-century Victorial. Unlike the latter narrative, however, which attempts to convey in plausible terms the personal history of a verifiably real historical personage, the chivalric romances discussed here are entertainments designed to take their readers away from the real world. Recounting a kind of ego’s-progress along an eventful and circuitous itinerary, they reflect an artisanal conception of the self on the part of their respective protagonists and other characters. Constantly preoccupied with the fabrication and maintenance of a self-image,

1 Daniel Eisenberg, Romances of Chivalry in the Spanish Golden Age (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 1982), 7.
2 The present essay does not cover the various works of the Palmerín series or individual romances and romance series of the 16th century. Demonstrably inspired by the plot and publishing success of Amadís and its sequels, the Palmerines and other later romances comprised a corpus of more than 70 individual works whose aggregate popularity made the genre one of the mainstays of the printing industry in the 16th and 17th centuries. See Juan Manuel Lucía Megías, “Introducción,” Antología de libros de caballerías castellanos, ed. Lucía Megías (Alcalá de Henares: Centro de Estudios Cervantinos, 2001), xiii–xv.
donning and replacing personae, sometimes in the latter term’s literal original sense of masks, they exhibit skillful artifice within the highly competitive environment of their literary universe.

The motives and behavior of the characters in this universe are illuminated by applying Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of self-fashioning. The latter concept, argues Greenblatt, implies a notion of personal autonomy, which is to say, “the power to impose a shape upon oneself.” This power of self-shaping, in turn, is “an aspect of the more general power to control identity.” In the early modern context, this control is exerted within an environment whose intellectual, social, and psychological structures “govern the generation of identities” and in which we may discern “a new stress on the executive power of the will.” Furthermore, argues Greenblatt, this emphasis on will power manifests in a generally “increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process.”

Within the greater socio-historical realm, self-fashioning as a socially prevalent personal style encompasses, notes Greenblatt, the practices of parents and teachers, the discourse of “manners or demeanor,” and the “representation of one’s nature or intention in speech or actions.” At the same time, self-fashioning occurs “without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life.” It thus necessarily “crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one’s own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one’s control.”

Greenblatt points out several caveats. The mere profiling of authors as historical actors would, for example, yield a mere series of literary biographies. Nevertheless, while attempting to situate authors and their works within “larger networks of meaning,” we must not read literary works solely as “the expression of social rules and instructions.” To do so risks absorbing literature into “an ideological superstructure.” Literature cannot be seen as a mere “detached reflection upon the prevailing behavioral codes,” nor can individuals and institutions be regarded as the elements of an “obligatory” historical background.

“Social actions,” writes Greenblatt, are necessarily “embedded in systems of public signification, always grasped, even by their makers, in acts of interpretation.” The literary works he scrutinizes are thus created as the interplay among texts, authors, and “the larger social world as constituting a single, complex

5 Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, 3.
6 Ibid., 4.