

Carlos Fuentes

*CONSTANCIA AND OTHER STORIES FOR VIRGINS*

Translated from the Spanish by Thomas Christensen

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Reviewed by Alfonso González

*Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins*, Carlos Fuentes's latest book, is a collection of five novelettes whose themes, strategies, and narrative techniques will please his avid readers. In this collection, perhaps more than in any of Fuentes's works, reality contradicts itself in a never-ending process; as soon as something is said or established, it is immediately challenged by a different or opposite statement or action.

"Constancia," the first novelette, is a love story with supernatural happenings and social implications which are subsequently developed in other narratives in this collection. This process is suggested by the narrator's observation: ". . . you think you've opened your eyes, but in fact you've only introduced one dream inside another. And inversely one reality adheres to another, deforming it until it seems a dream" (3). Constancia, who is a curious blend of religious fervor and sexual passion, has the habit of dreaming stories and telling them to her husband. She dreams that she "was a mannequin in a shop. Two wild young men, perhaps students, stole her from her window" (23-24). This dream becomes the second novelette, "La desdichada," Constancia later dreams "that she is born again, far away, a dark girl, ignorant" (24). This dark girl turns out to be the woman protagonist of "The Prisoner of Las Lomas." Next, she dreams that "a bloody specter follows her from the depths of the tomb," a dream which becomes her reality in the fourth novelette, "Viva mi fama." Finally, she dreams that she is a virgin giving birth, an action which takes place in "Reasonable People." Because most of the women protagonists resemble Constancia (passionate and with long hair which they wear in a bun behind their head), one could say that Constancia is the protagonist of all the stories.

Whitby, Constancia's husband and a man of science, creates suspense by narrating supernatural events as he attempts to find a logical explanation for them. The narrator is surprised to discover that Constancia has the ability to transport herself from one part of the house to another in a matter of seconds. Another suggestion that there might be something unreal about her movements is a faint noise of fluttering wings which accompanies them. The first indication that Whitby's wife may have a past of which he is not aware is his discovery of an old photograph in which a Russian neighbor, Plotnikov, is holding a child and standing next to Constancia. The narrator realizes that Plotnikov, Constancia, and their son had been rounded up by the Guardia Civil in 1939 and shot. Notwithstanding this disturbing ambiguity, one thing is clear: Constancia is the ideal woman-mother who will stop at nothing in order to help her loved ones and keep them with her. She is a symbol of eternal feminine passion and tenderness, of men's ideal of a mother-lover.

The social implications of this novelette are first suggested when Plotnikov expresses his bewilderment at the wanton persecution and annihilation of men like Blok, Esenin, Mayakovsky, Mandelstam, Eisenstein, and others as a result

of political repression after the Russian Revolution (35). They are further suggested when Whitby finds out that Plotnikov was really Walter Benjamin, a Jew who was shot with his wife and baby as they were trying to flee Spain during the Civil War. The social commentary becomes clear at the end of the novelette when, upon his return from Granada, the narrator finds a young couple and their baby hiding out in the cellar of his house. They are refugees from the civil war in El Salvador. The persecution of the family then takes on universal significance by suggesting the immorality of the oppression of human beings because of political beliefs.

Fuentes's fascination with women as repositories of men's needs and desires, as both creators and destroyers of men, is reflected in "La desdichada." The story is told by two would-be-writer friends, Tofo and Bernardo, who stumble upon a female mannequin which holds a sort of fatal attraction for both. Tofo brings the mannequin into their apartment, and they both dress it, talk to it, and in general carry on the farce that the mannequin, which they name "La desdichada" (=The Unfortunate Woman), is a real woman. They sit her at the table to eat with them, and Tofo even has her sitting down with her legs crossed as he shaves in the bath, and he sleeps next to her. This "game" becomes a "reality" when the mannequin comes to life: she winks at the men, and cries when they scold her. In a fit of anger, Tofo drowns "La desdichada" in the bathtub. Tofo and Bernardo buy a coffin for her and hold a wake, during which their friends steal the "corpse" and bring it back to life to nourish their own fantasies. Twenty-five years later, in a sort of epilogue, the two friends meet at the "Waikiki" night club. Here they find "La desdichada" once again, dancing the night away with her abductors. In an ironic twist, Bernardo tells us that she looked at them "as if we were lifeless wooden dolls" (111).

"The Prisoner of Las Lomas" is a masterful example of reader manipulation. We are made to feel contempt for the braggard protagonist who is constantly alluding to his manipulation of others—especially his most significant sexual partner, a dark girl—be it via the computer, the telephone, or his day-to-day relations with his servants. He savors his power and the impotence of those around him until one day, when his dark girl is assassinated, he becomes the prisoner of his own mansion. This is an ironic event, since he had always been a captive of his own immense power. He could not, or would not, leave his mansion. When he finally tries to do so, he realizes that he has also become a prisoner of his servants: they will not allow him to leave his position as master of the house. The reader now feels sorry for this character. "The Prisoner of Las Lomas" can be seen as a metaphor for power in Mexico and elsewhere, since the bases for power in this story are lying and cheating while its effect is the loss of freedom of movement.

As in other novelettes in the collection, there is a variation of the triangular relationships of father-mother-child and one-woman-two-men in "Reasonable People." The novelette is the saga of Santiago Ferguson, a professor of architecture, Catarina, his daughter, and the Vélez twins, José María and Carlos María. The story is told mainly by the brothers, both of whom are madly in love with Catarina. Through a series of unexpected and extraordinary events, Catarina turns out to be her own father's lover, and though she marries a pudgy bureaucrat who appears only at her wedding, she continues to be the object of desire for the twins. Ironically, the practical narrators find themselves involved in a

series of bizarre events having to do with the divine apparition of a Madonna and her child. They also encounter nine nuns, who are transformed into monsterlike beings, and whose efforts to preserve their virginity take them to extremes of self-mutilation. The title of the story refers to the brothers who are reasonable people, unlike the superstitious Mexican masses. The Vélez twins are obsessed with a woman whom they can not have, Catarina, and their nightmarish adventure with the nuns reflects their frustration.

Because of the suggestion that the stories in the collection are Constanca's dreams and nightmares, the reader can accept the bizarre obsessions of the protagonists. All male and female characters share physical and temperamental traits. Most of the women are tall, passionate, and mysterious. The men—usually the narrators—are pragmatists who do not believe in mystery or the supernatural. An exception, of course, would be Toño and Bernardo of "La desdichada," who play with their fantasies and imagination and find themselves trapped by them. In each of the novelettes men seem to feel an irresistible attraction for a woman. Aware of this seductive force, some of the male protagonists, as well as the omniscient narrator, feel that women are the repositories of a secret force which controls them. *Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins* is one of Fuentes's most fascinating and challenging works.

Christensen's translation for the most part flows. It is occasionally flawed, however, by (1) the textual translation of Spanish proverbs such as "a true guava of a girl" (126) for "un verdadero mango de muchacha," and "You have a golden beak" for "Qué pico de oro"; (2) a pedantic tone not consistent with the original, as in "a breach of quotidian reality" (85) for "sin importancia a la realidad cotidiana," or "My sainted fiancée" (12) for "Mi novia santa"; and (3) carelessness as in "The general's bad" (116) for "El general está muy malo," and "Abandon for example" (323) for "Un abandono por ejemplo."