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LETTER FROM DOCTOR KNIFE REGARDING WOMEN IN THE MOON AND SUNDRY CURIOUS FACTS

*Introduction by Mariano Martín Rodríguez and
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Imaginary voyages to the Moon have a long history in European literatures since Lucian of Samosata. Means of locomotion for that trip have been diverse. In his hoax story “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall” (1835), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) described the arrival of that Hans Pfaall to the Moon using his newly invented balloon. Following the translation of this story into

French by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in 1856, it became well-known all over Europe. It was soon imitated as well, among others by Abdón de Paz (1840-1899). This Spanish writer and philosopher is now best remembered as a vocal defender of the contention that modern science and the Christian faith were compatible, a position rarely held back then. However, he was also a writer of short stories,

legends and other literary works, among which a collection of mildly feminist narratives compiled in his hefty book, titled *La biblia de las mujeres* (Women's Bible, 1867). In its summary, the only piece that can be considered an early example of early modern science fiction is "Las mujeres de la Luna" (The Women from the Moon),¹ later republished in shortened form with the title of "Desde la Luna" (From the Moon) in his collection of stories *Sueños y nubes* (Dreams and Clouds, 1884). Both narratives were, similarly to *De la Terre à la Lune* (From the Earth to the Moon, 1865) by Jules Verne (1828-1905), rather about the preparations on the trip than the voyage itself. This was going to be undertaken by an English gentleman who had settled in Polán, the village near the Spanish city of Toledo where Abdón de Paz was born. That gentleman, named Dr. Knife, finally took off from that location in a balloon, along with his dog Night and his servant Tobias, after having betrothed his daughter Carlota to Martin, a friend from a nearby town, Sonseca.

The use of a balloon for such a journey is probably borrowed from Poe's Moon story, with which it partakes its ironic tone as well. However, whereas the American writer hardly described the lunar civilisation that Hans Pfaall had allegedly discovered, Paz's Dr. Knife is able to send a letter to his friend Martin describing his life among the inhabitants of the Moon. This letter is reproduced in "Las mujeres de la Luna" under the title "Carta del doctor Knife acerca de las mujeres de la Luna y otros pormenores curiosos" (*Letter from Doctor Knife Regarding Women in the Moon and Sundry Curious Facts*), but it can be read independently as an example

of utopian/speculative fiction using the formal discourse of the epistolary genre.

The portrayal of Moon life, where there is a single civilisation, is rather utopian. The narrative voice is, however, not necessarily to be trusted, since Dr. Knife had become the supreme scientific authority on our satellite following his obvious exploit of having reached it by material means. He had then been invested with great political power as well, as the humorous portrayal of his welcome by the Lunarians shows. Dr. Knife's views on Lunarian society might be not fully reliable, in particular if we consider how pervasive the trope of irony is in this letter, even when its alleged author praises, above all, Lunarian women and laws. Women are not spendthrift or frivolous, but cultivated, as well as moderate in their tastes and behaviour. They enjoy equal rights within their marriage, unlike Earth's women. Regarding laws, there are few and clear. Some articles of the Moon code are quoted, such as those forbidding people from trying to interfere in other people's professions in the framework of a political order that could be considered technocratic and universal, free from idle controversies sparked by sensationalist press, as well as by nationalist feelings. Wars and serious conflicts seem to be absent from the Moon.

Such utopian order is explained through myth: at the beginning God had created two primordial couples, one pale and the other one swarthy, but the latter had become evil and been destroyed by divine decree, having remained the pale couple, the progenitors of current Lunarians. Thus, Paz modifies the Hebrew myth of creation accepted as their own by both later Jews and Christians, and he proposed an alternate origin taking sin out of the equation.

¹ The translation is based on the text of the first edition: Abdón de Paz, "Carta del doctor Knife acerca de las mujeres de la Luna y otros pormenores curiosos", in "Las mujeres de la Luna", *La Biblia de las mujeres*, Madrid, Miguel Guijarro, 1867, pp. 629-637.

Moreover, he also introduces original details on the shape and figure of the first Lunarians, always with his characteristic humour. Therefore, his myth is not a simple rewriting of Hebrew lore, but one of the earliest examples in Europe of fictional mythopoeia in the Tolkienian sense. Karl Immermann had already published in his novel from 1836 *Die Epigonen* (The Epigones) a story written as a subcreated origin myth titled “Mondscheinmärchen” (Tale of the Moonshine), but such kind of subcreation was still rare when Paz published his imaginary letter, especially in the framework of a science fiction tale. Only this would warrant this letter

to be more widely known and disseminated, but it also deserves to be appreciated for its innovative use of other genres of fictional non-fiction, such as the prescriptive discourse of the law, as well as for the refreshing irony and humour of its utopian descriptions. Paz spares us the boredom of being preached at as all too many lecturers of utopias do. Like Lucian and Poe, Paz never forgets that he is writing pleasant literature, not a moral or political tract. As far as literature goes, we believe that he did not disgrace that good company, at least in this single masterpiece of his.

LETTER FROM DOCTOR KNIFE REGARDING WOMEN IN THE MOON AND SUNDRY CURIOUS FACTS

Nutis, capital of Sumbralesia, the Moon, ten days before the month of Aries (30th of March), first of the year 204,321,547 of the world (year of the Lord 1866)

To the citizen Martin from Sonseca

My dear and unforgettable friend,

At a distance of 68,769 leagues and after a month of continued congratulations and festivities, I wish to take advantage of a moment's respite to honour the promise I made to you upon our farewell and recount my journey into these regions.

Shortly after entering the Moon's atmosphere, which we achieved seven months after our departure from P... owing to our

persevering efforts, we heard below us a hellish noise which greatly surprised us.

The Lunarians had spotted us, and the bells of their sanctuaries tore the air calling the people to arms against the formidable enemy come from high above.

The noise lasted some minutes, until at last it occurred to me to fly the white flag, symbol of peace here as much as at home. Upon showing the flag the clanging of bells ceased, and an uncountable multitude gathered in the town's square, where we waited hovering.

It will be impossible for me to describe the effect our unexpected arrival had in the spirit of that people. Even though Nutis is the most populated city in the Moon, not a single soul remained in it, not even Jad the chief leader of the Republic. They all rushed to meet us,

disregarding the inconveniences of all large gatherings. Some looked at us, some turned their faces in order not to see us, some laughed and some stood ecstatic not quite believing what their eyes told them. And everywhere, there were cries, confusion, disorder, and uproar.

Since the President invited me with gestures to enter in his palace, I answered him in the same language that I would accept provided that he would give me his word of honour that neither my balloon, nor Night, nor Tobias were to suffer any damage whatsoever. My mistrust shocked the very honourable statesman so, that I feared for his life.

It goes without saying that Tobias remained in the square by the balloon and that Night followed me as was customary. While on our way to the palace, and despite being well encircled by the President's Guard, I felt suffocated by the waves of populace that driven by curiosity crowded together, excited, watching me pass by.

I was greatly puzzled by the ostentatious wall hangings adorning the facades, as well as the countless songs that festively accompanied my march. However, what excited exceedingly my attention was that Jad introduced me to his people from the main balcony of his palace, kissed my brow and, immediately after delivering a short but applauded speech, knelt before me.

I immediately attempted to bring him up from that position, yet he resisted tenaciously. Before I could realise, the chamber was occupied by guards putting down their weapons before me and around a hundred elders kneeling down after the fashion of their President.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked.

Before I could further question them, a tall magistrate approached Jad to give him a silver

wand. Jad reached out to place it in my hands in a display of submission and respect.

Presently, the chamber was vacated from the crowd. Only the Head of State remained with me, and he explained to me mimicking the mystery of such odd ceremonies.

In Nutis, there is the post of Prime Wiseperson, who dwells on the Palace of the Nation, together with the President, and who is revered by everyone like a demigod of mythology. Upon my arrival, the post had become vacant, and, since the Nutsians regarded me as wise as no other on the Moon, they honoured me by assigning me such high post.

Since then, I live in the palace and, for the last thirty days, I have been receiving the congratulatory wishes of countless personalities who ceaselessly overwhelm me with their visits.

They leave me with not much time, and so I will attempt to use it carefully to tell you some things, rather strange, about these dwellers.

According to them, creation dates back to two hundred million years, as you will have already read in the date of this letter. In this regard, they are akin to those Brahmans who deem the world to have witnessed more than three hundred million winters. Since fixing such age is a rather uncertain matter, they do well not being stingy about it.

Their legends tell there was a dark night when nothing had been created, until the hour of bliss came and God, after giving being to the stars, send with a puff of his will two women followed by two men from the Sun to the Moon.

One of the couples was pale, the other swarthy, and both three feet high, which is how tall these people are. They have a tail of three spans ending in an eye, just as the Frenchman Charles Fourier wished for Terrans to be able to see what happened on their back.

The pale and the swarthy couple alike had a deep sleep that lasted five nights and days, at the end of which they found themselves awakening to nature already created, with rivers and seas, valleys and mountains, birds and quadrupeds, trees and flowers, and everything that exists in those worlds since Jehovah pronounced the *Fiat*, with the difference that here everything is smaller, proportionate to the stature of the dwellers, and that the sea has no fish and occupies only a quarter of the Moon's surface.

The swarthy people became much taller than the pale people, yet they also grew more wicked. But the Sun, castle of the All-Mighty, ended them all, burning them with its fire. After that, there were only pale Lunarians.

Being exceedingly hard-working they have no other day of rest than the last of each month. They engage with equal enthusiasm in agriculture and in manufacturing, in commerce and in the sciences or the arts.

In the arts the sentimental school prevails, particularly in the literature, to the extent that the most reputed works are those who elicit the biggest crying.

They like strongly physics and chemistry, domains in which they have made notable discoveries. However, were it not because of me, they would still ignore the truths of aerostatics.

As evidence of how advanced their civilisation is, suffice it to say they know nothing of bull fights and that all Lunarians know how to read and write properly.

It also speaks of their business the fact that no place, however insignificant, is disconnected of the immediate rail and telegraph.

Their language is rich in expressions, elegant in twists, gayer than Andalusian and sweeter than Italian.

Their journals can be described as having no equal in dignity and sensibleness.

None of their public figures have ever felt the urges of ambition, and none of their writers the sting of envy.

And yet where this people, virtuous by definition, ought to be studied is in what pertains to their women and laws. Oh, the good it would do the Earth to follow in such matters the example of its beautiful satellite!

Women on the Moon have a remarkably benign character, know nothing of coquetry, do not gossip about others and come to the end of their lives without having known discomfort.

When they are young, they focus on the work that belongs to their gender and on books.

When they are married, even though they enjoy the same rights as their husbands, they are the embodiment of humbleness, thrift, and prudence.

Many nights, when on a stroll around the streets of Nutis, I have witnessed episodes such like this:

HE: Let's go in this shop – I want to buy you a dress.

SHE: Nonsense! I'll repeat it again: don't waste money. We'd rather save some, should we become ill or for the education of our children.

HE: You know how this bothers me.

SHE: Good, I'll know how to *un*bother you.

HE: Praised be your name! It's been fifteen years since we got married and it seems like it was yesterday.

SHE: I know, I know. How time flies!

Widows rarely marry twice.

There are countless special schools where poor women are educated, moralised and taught a decent trade.

The government ensures that they do not lack honest and lucrative work. And, while the punishment of tar and feather applies to any woman who spends more than her social status allows, there is also the punishment of

public ear-chopping for any man who misleads a woman.

If you happen to know a writer, please let them know about these details, for they could be the inspiration for a good book.

As token of the goodness of the laws of these citizens, I will reproduce some paragraphs taken randomly from the Kakoo, famous code and paradigm of wisdom and conciseness. In its 777 articles there is all the Moon legislation on religious, civil, military, criminal, political and administrative matters.

Art. 61: Priests shall occupy themselves with the churches, soldiers shall occupy themselves with the encampments, and lawyers shall occupy themselves with the government of the people. Punishment of loss of employment shall apply to anyone crossing the boundaries of their jurisdiction.

Art. 218: There shall be no other army than the President's Guard. Disputes among States shall be settled by the unappealable judgment of the Supreme Chief, the Deputies of the Nation and the Council of the Hundred Wisepeople. Disputes among provinces shall be settled by the President of the State to which they belong. Disputes among towns shall be settled by the President of the province to which they belong.

Art. 529: Recidivism in any crime shall be punished with life sentence and incapacitation for life.

Art. 777: There is nothing alien under the sun. All that exists is a child of God, who

sees everything and rewards and punishes accordingly.

So is this country.

As for me, I could hardly be more satisfied living in it.

The inhabitants of the Moon are thankful to me for the advances I have provided them with, and they praise me continuously. The press puts me on a pedestal, and my busts adorn even the humblest abodes.

If there is anything I miss, it is you and my daughter.

Such is my destiny! My return is impossible: I am forced to live and die here with Night and Tobias.

Wishing to pass my knowledge on to Europe for when a new aeronaut arrives with another balloon like mine, I have become a citizen of this Republic with the caveat that I shall never return to Earth.

Hence that I feel now both joy and sorrow submitting this letter to you, which together with the one addressed to the British Government will bring Tobias to Newcastle.

May Providence ensure the two letters arrive, like me, to their destination!

Goodbye, my unforgettable companion. Convinced that you will fulfil the oath you took before me concerning Carlota, following the good notion I had from you ever since I first met you, I bid you farewell.

Your friend forever,

Dr Knife