

Barbara Simerka. *Knowing Subjects: Cognitive Cultural Studies and Early Modern Spanish Literature*.

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Cognitive cultural studies comprises an emerging field of literary analysis just as it constitutes one of the latest trends in humanistic scholarship. Through the application of theory of mind, which examines how primates, including human beings, seek to conceptualize and understand the thoughts and incentives that motivate individual actions, cognitive studies strives to provide scientific insights into how social relationships are perceived, crafted, and negotiated. By examining the portrayal of the workings of the mind, the senses, feelings, and the psychological dynamics of subjectivities, it endeavors to come to a deeper understanding of the constitution of the social identities portrayed in texts.

The ability to understand others' subjective states is a fundamental human aptitude that is crucial to the comprehension of the complex communal relationships that define society. Cognitive activity enables people not only to recognize, but to predict what others will do, feel, think, and believe and is a capacity that is a necessary precursor to a wide variety of human interactions that range from projecting emotions and empathizing to deception, deceit, and dissimulation. At the intersection of psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, evolutionary psychology and biology, philosophy of mind, and cultural criticism, cognitive studies has in recent years proclaimed itself as a decisive tool for engaging in the interpretation of written texts that leads to the more complete understanding of their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Cognitive cultural studies thus comprises acts of interpretation that claim to rest on scientific bases and fashion themselves as a kind of social-cultural laboratory in which works of literature may be studied as instances of human mental faculties at work. Literary texts are hence considered as historically specific records of both human culture and biology, at the depths of which lies the radical materiality of the human brain.

In *Knowing Subjects*, Barbara Simerka offers an introduction both to theory of mind and cognitive cultural studies, seeking to delineate new ways of looking at

early modern Spanish texts, while aiming to understand both the nature of cognition and social identity in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Simerka considers texts from the pens of authors as varied as Cervantes and Baltasar Gracián, as well as picaresque romances and popular theater (the *comedia*). In this undertaking, she weaves together several strands of cognitive theory to analyze the synergies between neurological, anthropological, and psychological findings so as to offer new insights into the human situations these texts portray. Some of her reasoning draws on scientific studies involving courtship and social advancement, activities in which deception is not only prevalent, but often very productive. In the process, she offers interesting insights into questions of social intelligence and the early courtship drama, plus several other types of texts and social phenomena (the honor narrative and skepticism, foraging primates and the pícaro, courtesy books and social climbing, among others). Simerka also looks at the construction of gender and the cognitive aspects of patriarchal expectations while contrasting the views of canonical male authors to those of female writers like María de Zayas and Ana Caro. At the same time, Simerka studies the construction of social class, intellect, and honesty, and in a chapter on *Don Quixote* looks at the cultural norms for leisure and reading at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Not surprisingly, she argues that early modern Spanish literary forms, much as those of today, reveal the relationship between urban culture, unstable human subject positions, and hierarchies, plus social anxieties regarding social perceptions and cultural transformation.

Simerka's study marks the first book-length study to apply cognitive cultural theory to the early modern literary and cultural production of Spain. At the same time, it offers the reader a broad panorama of disciplinary interweaving that, given its breadth, leads one not only to marvel at her analyses, but to entertain misgivings regarding an adequate mastery of all the components claimed to be at work in them. While applying cognitive science to the study of literature and culture may seem to be enriching, the results I fear are less definitive than they look, especially given the demanding task that must be performed by the critic to claim full mastery of the complexities of so many different fields of study.

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