

Frederick A. De Armas. *Don Quixote among the Saracens: A Clash of Civilizations and Literary Genres*.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. xvi + 238 pp. \$60. ISBN: 978-1-4426-4345-1.

The present book by Frederick A. De Armas continues, and at times repeats, his efforts to explain the reminiscences of classical and Italian authorities — from Ovid and Virgil to Tasso and Titian — that he and others have discerned in Cervantes's writing. De Armas's focus is now what he by turns calls "the confluence of genres," or "the clash of genres" (x), which in the *Quixote* of 1605 allegedly "echoes today's clashes of civilizations" (xi). A good many others have examined Cervantes's use of conventional modalities and discourses — the pastoral, chivalric, Moorish, and picaresque novels, as well as legal, epic, historiographic, panegyric, and religious (hagiographic, inquisitorial, homiletic) formulas — to forge a more complex, rich, and adaptive novel. However, few critics have thought to associate this formal innovation with the aspirations and anxieties that seemingly drive the protagonist on one hand, and with the social, religious, and political interests of the author on the other. This is the originality of De Armas's study; yet, due to the speculative and idiosyncratic bent of the linkages that he detects in the text, it is also the source of frustration for readers concerned to understand what Cervantes himself intended and did.

Although it is difficult to summarize De Armas's arguments, in that the common element in his largely start-to-finish excursion through the *Quixote* of 1605 is the idea that the protagonist "moves through" a series of literary genres (x), the main premise is that the Christian knight Don Quixote is "haunted by anxieties" about his own Jewish ancestry, his lady's Muslim lineage, and a secret sympathy for Saracens — by which De Armas means "the non-Christian Other" — even as he vows to battle these and all infidels. Most readers will find the evidence for this argument unconvincing. Perhaps most problematic is the focus on arcana: small and often isolated details that point, in De Armas's view, to what he repeatedly calls "the mystery in the text." To elucidate the significance of these arcana, De Armas employs an associative logic. For example, as also argued in *Quixotic Frescoes*

(2006), because Don Quixote is melancholic and might formerly have had the surname Quijada, meaning “jawbone,” rather than the alternatives Quesada or Quejana, one may suspect that he “is related in some manner to the emperor” Charles V, who also experienced melancholy and was, like other Habsburgs, distinguished by a deformed jaw (34). To flesh out this suspicion, De Armas notes that one of Don Quixote’s favorite books was *Belians de Grecia* (34) — a novel in fact mentioned but once, and unfavorably, in the first chapter — a predilection allegedly shared by Charles V. If this is far from compelling, it is nevertheless more sound than what follows, for De Armas goes on, first in an allegorical reading of *Belians de Grecia* as approval for Charles’s wars against the Turks, and then by commenting an equally fleeting mention of Trapisonda — an empire that, as the author’s cynical friend tells him in the prologue, should be adduced whenever one needs a pedantic reference — to conclude that Don Quixote aspires to bring about “the return of an age of chivalry, the return of Trebizond as a Christian empire, and the return of Charles V’s Holy Roman Empire” (40). Indeed, Don Quixote is said to be “a ghostly recollection of Charles V” (42).

This manner of argumentation runs throughout De Armas’s book to explain why a variety of otherwise unrelated and innocuous elements all inform and betray Don Quixote’s “melancholy phantoms of Otherness and heterodoxy” (163). Besides the problematic use of the term *Otherness* in reference to non-radical differences in religion, dress, and social habits that were less troubling to Spaniards of Cervantes’s time than to literary critics of ours, this analysis eschews philology, a curious choice given the focus on literary genre and the novel’s explicit attention to *topoi*, modes of expression, and idioms in its construction. The consequence of this approach is manifest in the interpretation given especially to conventional metaphors such as the equation of the first rays of dawn with the golden tresses of Apollo. To many readers, it will seem absurd that “Don Quixote evokes the quaternary through the number four since the sun is the fourth of the Ptolemaic planets” and thus, due to “a crossover between the Pythagorean narrative and Don Quixote’s desires,” the text casts “the knight as a false Hercules and a mock-Apollo” (43). So, too, will most readers balk at the idea that, because one character asks in conventional and flowery language if Marcela has come to observe Grisóstomo’s funeral from on high “like another pitiless Nero,” she “is truly bemoaning the fall of Troy in the sense that it had become a common metaphor for the conquest of a woman’s body” (72). Moreover, because, according to Seutonius, Nero watched Rome burn from a tower owned by Maecenas, famous as a patron of poets in the Augustan Age, we are told that Marcela presumes “to become a new—a female—Virgil” (73). Similar examples abound in De Armas’s book: the Paternosters, Ave Marias, Salve Reginas, and Credos said over the balsam of Fierabrás by Don Quixote become evidence of both his heterodoxy and his *converso* lineage; the name Zoraida (used almost as a default in other of Cervantes’s works) is said, due to its possible etymology, to point to the Pleiades, and thus to the need for a new Aeneas and Palinurus to steer the narrative and Spain in their respective struggles with genre and the Morisco Other; the oxcart used to transport the

protagonist home is a symbol of Saturn, the planet of melancholy and of “esoteric knowledge, of strange and compelling visions” (170), and thus the means by which Cervantes’s hero comes to know “the astral magic that has led him to this point and has allowed him to catch a glimpse of his true ghosts, of his anxieties” (175); etc.

Cervantes’s novel is profitably read from a variety of divergent perspectives, many based in cultural studies rather than philology. In all of these, however, it takes more than intuition and speculation to be convincing. In the present study, the reader is pushed along by the discussion of features that “may recall,” “resemble,” “seem to imitate,” “might reveal,” “may envision,” etc. In conjunction with a barrage of leading questions at every turn — “What is the mystery he is hiding and that comes out in moments such as these? Is Otherness something he is fleeing because it is an integral part of his being? Or is it all due to the lineage of his beloved Aldonza/Dulcinea? Is it her Otherness that drives him from home? Are his actions meant to adorn her with chivalric feats so that Aldonza/Dulcinea’s ‘real’ ancestry would not be revealed?” (52) — supposition is recast as fact, and the result is disappointing, to say the least.

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