

Michael Armstrong-Roche. *Cervantes' Epic Novel: Empire, Religion, and the Dream Life of Heroes in "Persiles."*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. xiv + 406 pp. index. append. bibl. \$70. ISBN: 978-0-8020-9085-0.

Michael Armstrong-Roche's new book is a significant contribution to the ongoing revival of interest in Miguel de Cervantes's final work, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, first published posthumously in 1617. Armstrong-Roche's book can be added to such recent works of *Persiles* scholarship as Diana de Armas

Wilson's *Allegories of Love: Cervantes's "Persiles and Sigismunda"* (1991), Stephen Harrison's *La composición de "Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda"* (1993), Amy Williamson's *Co(s)mic Chaos: Exploring "Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda"* (1994), Isabel Lozano Renieblas' *Cervantes y el mundo de "Persiles"* (1998), and William Childers' *Transnational Cervantes* (2006), all of which bring unique and challenging critical perspectives to bear on the book Cervantes considered his masterpiece, and which remains one of his most complex and enigmatic works. The re-release this year of Celia R. Weller and Clark A. Colahan's English translation of *Persiles* suggests that this complex romance may be gaining a new audience even as critical discourse on the work continues to grow and diversify.

Employing the Renaissance master trope of paradox as a point of departure, *Cervantes' Epic Novel* seeks to reconcile idealizing and realistic interpretations of the *Persiles*, exploring the text as one that meshes the idealizing conventions of epic and romance with active exploration of a host of contemporary social, political, and religious issues. Readers will in large part judge Armstrong-Roche's success in realizing this goal based on the extent to which they find convincing the central argument of chapter 1, "Europe as Barbaric New World." The author asserts that *Persiles'* northern world serves not so much as a foil for the Catholic south, but rather as a paradigm of barbarism, which is then replicated in various forms both latent and active in the Europe encountered by the protagonists. Armstrong-Roche thus finds *Persiles'* Rome, the destination of the heroes' spiritual journey, a city identified with Christian law and morality, but characterized by questionable customs and behaviors resonant with echoes from the barbaric, northern world.

This expansive dialectic of poetics and the material world, epic and empire forms the basis for the remaining three chapters of *Cervantes' Epic Novel*, which focus on the themes of religion, love, and politics respectively. Armstrong-Roche discusses *Persiles'* treatment of religion as highly ambiguous in its conflictive dramatization of the interplay between Christian law and *caritas*, and in its embodiment of reform grounded in Pauline principles not aligned with Tridentine orthodoxy. Armstrong-Roche delves into epic theory and dream lore to examine love in *Persiles*. Here the author argues that Cervantes reverses the priorities of the opposing heroic and erotic values depicted in classical epic, making love the ultimate goal of the epic romance. Cervantes recasts the protagonist of his work as a lover, poet, and dreamer, in opposition to the warrior ethos enacted by the traditional epic hero. The final chapter of *Cervantes' Epic Novel* analyzes Christian politics in *Persiles*, examining Cervantes's text as a *speculum principis* in which the hero and heroine witness or experience a series of adventures that question the stated beliefs of the Church and monarchy in relation to institutional practice. Armstrong-Roche intriguingly links *Persiles* with *Don Quijote* in the forging of alternative worlds that serve as repositories for values and viewpoints at odds with those espoused by the official, privileged authorities.

Readers of *Cervantes' Epic Novel* will find impressive the breadth of knowledge Armstrong-Roche wields to interpret *Persiles*: dream lore, classical romance, Council of Trent decrees, treatises on kingship, sixteenth-century theories of the epic, and

more. The author's command of the immense bibliography on Cervantes and *Persiles*, and his meticulous notes and documentation are equally impressive. *Cervantes' Epic Novel* offers readers a gateway not only to the complex world of Cervantine texts and scholarship, but also to the conflictive world of early modern Spain.

Armstrong-Roche fittingly poses an array of paradoxes as an open-ended conclusion to his book, presenting a series of conundrums regarding *Persiles* as well as Cervantes's views on a variety of aesthetic and sociohistorical issues. These challenging questions, and *Cervantes' Epic Novel* as a whole, will provide abundant material for debate and thought for years to come.

MARSHA S. COLLINS

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill