



Finello, Dominick. *Cervantes: Essays on Social and Literary Polemics*. London: Tamesis, 1998. 107 pp.

In the preface to this compact volume, Dominick Finello tells us that he will be addressing “controversial questions about Cervantes that have long bewildered scholars” (ix). The first of these questions has to do with Cervantes’s ambivalent relationship with the “academies,” by which Finello refers to two institutions: a) the people and way of life of the universities, and b) the literary

academies where intellectuals, writers, artists and critics gathered regularly to discuss a variety of topics related to letters, philosophy, and aesthetics. Finello tells us that the formalized language and rigid customs of these two academic spheres provided Cervantes with rich material for humorous treatment. He also states that the author's response to the academic life shaped the style and content of his works.

Basing himself on the work of José Sánchez, Jeremy Robbins, and Willard King, among others, Finello provides a useful overview of how the literary academies became centers for debate and literary combat. The debates, the author reminds us, represented a continuation of the Renaissance dialogue form and helped regenerate or sustain the vitality of certain poetic genres. Calling the famous prologue to *Don Quijote* "a short humorous story," Finello makes a case for reading it as Cervantes's premier statement on academic life and as his contribution—along with the rest of the novel—to the on-going literary debates in the academies. Not surprisingly, many of the topics favored by the academies for discussion—the dignity and utility of poetry, the literary value of minutiae, the role of artistic and empirical truth in fiction, etc.—all appear in many of the conversations and colloquia of the novel. In turn, *Don Quijote* itself became the subject of the academic debate, generating the kind of literary circularity that is so characteristic of Cervantes's work. Less successful in this chapter is Finello's exploration of whether the "university types" that appear in Cervantes's work—Grisóstomo, Don Lorenzo, Vidriera, the *primo humanista* and Sansón Carrasco—are typical of "real" university students. With regard to this question, I did not find very convincing or relevant the assertion that Cervantes's most definitive response to the academy "was through human example: scholars and students whose academic training continues to live with them and to influence decisions in their daily lives beyond their schooling" (15).

The most controversial issue of the book is presented in the second essay. The topic is the influence that the *converso* question had on Cervantes's thinking. This chapter also contains a comparison between Lope's *comedia* and Cervantes's *oeuvre*, specifically how these two authors approached the thorny question of "purity of blood." Finello begins the chapter with the following statement: "The role of the Jews in Spanish society of Cervantes's time was and remains a subject of impassioned discussion" (24). Perhaps it is not too pedantic to point out that there were technically no Jews in Spanish society in Cervantes's time, as they had been expelled or forced to convert some one hundred years before *Don Quijote* was written. This confusion between Jews and *conversos* reappears several times in the chapter, becoming particularly vexing in the rhetorical question presented toward the end of the chapter: "If we could prove that Cervantes was a Jew, would it matter?" (44). I do not mean to suggest that Finello does not know the difference between Jews and *conversos*, but the careless way in which this chapter is written may well create confusion in the mind of a reader who is not familiar with the history of the time and exasperate one who is. Finello makes the valid claim, which other critics have made before him, that Sancho with his Old Christian pride and rhetoric represents an artistic response to the presence of the *converso*. Nevertheless, it is hard to agree with the assertion that "Sancho and his

fellow *labradores* are supportive of the statutes of blood” or that “what stimulates Sancho’s negative reaction is the Old Christian peasant’s aversion to titles of nobility since they had the stigma of impurity” (31). How much this aversion is a literary trope rather than a historical reality is not addressed; and overall, it is problematic to view a fictional character as complex and multivalent as Sancho as a representative of an entire social group. Sometimes the confusion in this chapter is due primarily to awkward phrasing. For example, Finello tells us that the spectacle presented in “El retablo de las maravillas” is a “work whose illusions are detected only by *conversos*.” This is a misleading description of Cervantes’s celebrated *entremés*. The point is not that *conversos* can detect fraud but rather that no one will admit to the fraud for fear of being thought a *converso*, a somewhat different reading. Although he cites the work of critics such as Americo Castro, Joseph Silverman, and Albert Sicroff, Finello does not mention the more recent bibliography on the complicated issue of the *conversos* and other minority populations in early modern Spain. In the light of the scrutiny that these topics have received (the controversial work of Netanyahu, for example), comments like “the *converso* sought to coexist as a quietly anti-establishment force” (44) or “off-beat thinking was attractive to the *converso* who lived outside or resented the Christian majority” (45) seem unnuanced at best.

The third chapter, titled “Cervantes and Storytelling,” is by far the strongest, although it covers ground well-trodden by other critics. It deals with the interpolated stories and the criticism and controversy that their inclusion in the *Quijote* generated among his readers. Finello calls the controversy a “credibility polemic” and tells us that these stories have to be seen in light of sixteenth-century theoretical disputes. He establishes thematic, technical, and verbal links between the main narrative of *Don Quijote* with Cardenio’s tale, Dorotea’s stories, the Torralba-Lope Ruiz account, the “Curioso impertinente,” and Don Quijote’s tale of the Knight of the Lake. Finello isolates “storytelling” as an important criterion for analyzing the characters of the book. For example, he studies Cardenio’s tale and its different levels/layers of storytelling, artifice, and artfulness, and explores just how successful the character is in establishing his credibility as a storyteller. Finello is particularly thorough when he discusses Dorotea’s rhetoric, specifically her manipulation of rhetorical devices and details. The close textual readings are intelligent, if not particularly ground-breaking, and it is hard to disagree with his assertion that Cervantes was “most likely” very much aware that he was developing a new rhetoric of storytelling. Finello is, of course, not the first critic to study the interpolated stories and their relationship to the main story and Cervantes’s narrative technique. I was surprised that no mention was made (either in this chapter or in the bibliography) of Ruth El Safar’s classic *Distance and Control*, which even after twenty-five years continues to be one of the best readings of the interpolated tales. The last part of the Finello’s chapter—a comparison between Don Quijote’s story of the Knight of the Lake with John Keats’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn”—is perhaps the most original, although not the most successful, section of the book.

The last chapter is a seventeen-page meditation on the daunting topic “Cervantes and Language: *Don Quijote*.” Given the complexity of the topic and the

short space allotted to it, it does not come as a surprise that the chapter seems vague and diffuse. Finello highlights the knight's versatility and eloquence in discussing diverse topics. He also reminds us that *Don Quijote* is a novel about talking and about memorable conversations, but he undermines his own assertions by not citing some of the more interesting articles written on this subject (Elias Rivers, Anthony Close, and Alberto Rodríguez come to mind). Often there are contradictions, as when Finello praises Don Quijote for his spontaneity, only to immediately reverse himself with the following statement: "his words evince a self-assurance, a fluidity and harmony that makes his speeches appear as if they were planned" (87). Imprecise terms such as "vitality," "rhetoric of insistence," or "rhetoric of honesty" are used freely to discuss Don Quijote's manipulation of language, but are never really fully explained or developed.

This book is clearly the work of someone who has dedicated many years to the reading and teaching of Cervantes. Finello knows the texts and the characters intimately; and there is profit to be had from reading his reflections on these four topics. Nevertheless, while it is hard to disagree with most of what the author says, the controversial issues that he announces in the preface are not discussed in a compelling, original, or methodical manner. The lack of engagement with the latest historical research (in the case of the *converso* issue) or the more recent and innovative Cervantine criticism, and the almost total absence of contemporary literary theory gives the work an old-fashioned flavor. It is also unfortunate that Finello did not have the benefit of a good editor who might have caught some of the infelicities in style and organization.

Maria Cristina Quintero
Bryn Mawr College