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Ana María G. Laguna. *Cervantes and the Pictorial Imagination: A Study on the Power of Images and Images of Power in Works by Cervantes*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009. 175 pp. ISBN 978-0-8387-5727-7.

This book parts from the premise that we need to “decompartmentalize” our approach to Cervantes, which would involve an appreciation not just of his engagement with literature but also with the complex “visual culture” in which he lived. Laguna differentiates her project from recent work by De Armas and others in two ways: rather than focusing primarily on *ekphrasis*, attributing Cervantine scenes and characters to specific paintings and frescoes, she is interested in broader speculation on how Cervantes’ writings were affected by an intensely “representational” culture and its varied political, aesthetic, and theological concerns; and, in addition to considering the influence of Italian masters, Laguna maintains that Cervantes was receptive to Flemish aesthetic and spiritual currents. The proposed “veiled allusions” are not always convincing, and the reader may occasionally lose track of the pictorial aspect of a particular line of inquiry. Furthermore, too much can be made of Cervantes’ use of the terms *pintar* and *retratar*, which are often just synonyms for representing and describing; they do not necessarily signify an emphasis on the visual over the verbal. But Laguna’s approach allows for the treatment of significant issues, some of them well worn (*Don Quijote* as a critique of decadent monarchic pretensions), some suggestively novel (*El coloquio de los perros* and the representational logic of Northern still-lives).

I say suggestively because the study is brief—one hundred and twenty-three pages of body text, including twenty-eight illustrations—and relies more on rapid summarization and citation of secondary literature, and juxtaposing Cervantine text and other representations, than it does on sustained analysis. The risks of such a process emerge as links in the argumentative chain are sometimes quite tenuous. For example, despite being taken from an article by no less an authority than Ruth El Saffar, the first epigraph to the first chapter is, to me, almost completely unintelligible: “Cervantes does not work with literary norms or ideas at all, but through images which, unstated, carry the imprint of his vision of the world” (22). Some contextualization of El Saffar’s statement might have helped. As it is, the content of the chapter itself only partially cleared my confusion. Albrecht Dürer’s *The Witch* is considered an ekphrastic model for Cañizares in *El coloquio de los perros*. While the two representations share some conventionally witchy attributes and associations—wild hair, lean breasts, goat—the taut musculature of Dürer’s figure, who possesses a strikingly powerful neck and torso, does not put one in mind of the hyperbolically sagging belly and “scraggy neck” of Cañizares, a “veritable sack of bones covered with a dark, hairy, leathery skin” (33). Two chapters later, this quick comparison is treated as an established ekphrasis (87). Laguna then places side by side Brueghel the Elder’s *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind*

with the invocation at the beginning of *La ilustré fregona* (36). The hellish despair of Brueghel's painting could not be much further from the festive description in Cervantes' *novela*, the purpose of which is to illustrate the allure of the roguish life for the adventure-seeking youths, Carriazo and Avendaño. The truncation of Laguna's citation, which omits the "¡Oh pícaros de cocina," beginning instead with "[S]ucios, gordos y lucios..." and leaves out the exclamation mark at the end as well, suggests an awareness that the comparison was a bit forced. The omissions tone down the passage slightly. Oddly, the English translation that follows does begin with "Kitchen skivvies," and includes the final exclamation mark.

The second chapter focuses on "hegemonic connotations" of traditional representations of feminine beauty (Petraarch, Ariosto, Titian) and homeliness (the *ser-rana*), and how Cervantes complicates such reductive conventions in his treatment of Dulcinea / Aldonza: "Through his madness, Cervantes makes of Quixote a dramatic example of the dangers and effects of those who take literally the female fabrications of a culture of desire that through poetic trends and visual representations imprints in porous minds an exaggerated longing for supreme archetypes" (67). While I think Laguna's basic point is valid, the same principle seems misapplied to *El coloquio de los perros*. Proposing that Cervantes critiques a Neoplatonic association of physical beauty and goodness in the figure of the old witch, Laguna writes that Berganza "...systematically mistreats Cañizares as a result of a code of action guided by aesthetics," calling Cañizares "an old woman whose only proven crime is that of being unsightly" (88). This is a bewildering description, given Cañizares' centrality to the nightmarish, degraded world of the *Coloquio*, her prolonged meditation on her own vices and ineffectual struggle against evil inclinations ("soy bruja y cubro con la capa de la hipocresía todas mis muchas faltas"), and her function as a distorted mirror figure of Campuzano, the confessed sinner hoping for redemption in *El casamiento engañoso*. Berganza, whose behavior is the opposite of "systematic," is deeply troubled by Cañizares' avowed guilt and reflections upon divine permissiveness of evil. Laguna's attempt to make sense of Cañizares in light of the *novela's* reflection on epistemological problems is not unfounded. But Cervantes makes it abundantly clear that Berganza's dragging the naked witch into the courtyard is the result of an overwhelming fear and disgust based as much on moral/theological preoccupations as on aesthetic concerns.

Much of chapter three argues for a "Flemish sensibility" that would account for the symbolism and muted optimism of *El coloquio de los perros*. Laguna proposes that coherence can be found in the apparent fragmentation and disorder of the narrative by comparing it to the techniques of still-life painting, whose crowded canvases form a symbolic unity (75-85). The section includes some informative review of canine emblems and their numerous exemplary associations. Laguna then considers the redemptive elements of the dogs' charitable work with Mahudes, the emphasis on inward spiritual reflection rather than outward display, and the theme of friendship and "fraternal correction" as manifestations of the *Devotio moderna*

and *Imitation of Christ* (89–94). This strikes me as a potentially fruitful way to distinguish the overall vision of the *Coloquio* from Counter-Reformation *desengaño*, and it seems more or less consistent with humanist approaches.

The final chapter, “Charles V, Don Quixote, and the Art of Self-Glorification,” returns to the notion that Cervantes meant his novel as a satire of Spain’s delusions of grandeur, and that don Quijote is a “veiled parody” of Habsburg obsession with image and with manipulating history. Here the “pictorial imagination” has less to do with ekphrasis or Cervantes’ engagement with a particular artistic movement. Laguna traces some ways in which don Quijote’s strategies to create and sustain an idealized self-image are parallel to those of Carlos V, who also makes use of heroic models and conventions, some of them chivalric. Such an approach certainly raises significant issues related to power, self-fashioning and historiography. Especially given the brevity of this study, the recurrent lack of concision is a problem. Lest my own opacity be at fault, I quote from a representative passage, at the end of the last chapter:

When read aligned with the historical anxieties of the Habsburgs and the imperial machinery’s efforts at iconography, Cervantes’s *Quixote* appears not only profoundly steeped in the social and economic reality of Habsburg Spain, but also as a literary testament to fiction and the iconographic fabrications of the monarchs, *validos*, and historians of the 1500s and 1600s. By collapsing nearly 150 years of Spanish history, Cervantes explored and denounced the “logical” associations that pervaded the historical imagination of the rulers and heroes of such a period. By associating the figure of Quixote with the conceptual and iconographical anachronisms that surrounded the figure of the Holy Roman Emperor—his precarious balance of reality and fiction, his historical ambition and artistic aspirations—Cervantes adds another layer of complexity to the already challenging fictions of his world. (121)

This is followed by a one and a half-page “Afterword” containing a similarly interesting and vague summary. Laguna’s scope and density of reference are ambitious. But the somewhat plodding and redundant prose adds layers of complexity for a reader attempting to form a clear idea of how Cervantes’ works do indeed relate to the fascinating visual culture of early modern Europe.

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