

From: Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America, 26.1 (Spring-Fall

Barbara Fuchs. *Passing for Spain: Cervantes and the Fictions of Identity*. Urbana: U Illinois P, 2003. xi + 142 pp. ISBN: 0-252-02781-7.

In *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: U California P, 1975), Robert Alter informs us that *Don Quixote* “presents us a world of role-playing, where the dividing lines between role and identity are often blurred” (5). He could continue to argue (or, at least, I would argue) that much if not all Cervantes’ writing is self-conscious, a type of fiction “that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality” (Alter x). By “reality” I would suggest that Alter does not refer merely to verisimilitude but to the actual contemporary world of the author. Generations of critics have readily acknowledged the social implications of Cervantes’ “realist” fiction, particularly of *Don Quixote*, although they have been more reluctant, until recently—especially with the rise of new historicism and cultural criticism—to plumb the historical depths of his “idealist” fiction. Many critics, have, nonetheless, convincingly demonstrated the historical underpinnings and implied social criticism of Cervantes’ generically and culturally subversive romances. Although Barbara Fuchs makes no direct reference to Alter and little to recent scholarly investigations on historically grounded, self-conscious, and metafictional aspects of Cervantes’ romances, her work follows this critical approach and brilliantly channels it, taking cues from the efforts of Carroll B. Johnson, William H. Clamurro, and others in order to examine “playfulness with genre” and “slipperiness of disguise” in selections from a variety of Cervantine texts (Fuchs ix).

In order to fully appreciate Fuchs’ study, the reader must come to grips with two terms: “passing” and “transvestism.” Although not exactly synonyms, the two words work together to refer broadly to the same concept: the ability to disguise essence with superficiality. With delightful prose and appealing argumentation, Fuchs demonstrates that these concepts, as applied to Cervantes’ writings, enhance our understanding of

the fictions of seventeenth-century Spanish identity; in particular, of the artifice of honor and blood purity (3), and, by extension, of gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. Spain found herself in a period of identity crisis at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Conquest, colonization, expansion, and defense—with all of their political, social, economic, and religious implications—created a series of physical and social frontiers or boundaries, both literary and real, that people and characters regularly subverted, manipulated, and defied, rendering the limits ineffectual in practice, if still mythically maintained.

Fuchs' book is comprised of a brief preface; an introductory chapter (Chapter One); chapters on *Don Quijote* (Chapter Two), "Las dos doncellas" (Chapter Three), "El amante liberal" and *La gran sultana* (Chapter Four), the *Persiles* and "La española inglesa" (Chapter Five), and a short "Afterword." It has 22 pages of endnotes and a six-page index, but no bibliography. The second chapter, "Border Crossings: Transvestism and Passing in *Don Quijote*," argues that transvestism deconstructs Spanish binarisms: "male versus female, Christian versus Moor, masculine versus effeminate" (22). Fuchs suggests that Cervantes destabilizes gender and religious identities by exploiting traditional romance cross-dressing conventions in narrated, rather than dramatized, scenes. If, Fuchs claims, in the *comedia* transvestism was eventually "corrected" to produce the reintegration of the transvestite into his or, more often, her "proper" role, cross-dressing in narrative texts has no clear temporal boundaries and introduces the speculation that "any beautiful young man may be a woman in disguise" (22–23), or that any handsome woman may be a young man in disguise. One cannot imagine, of course, that either the priest or the barber would have fooled anyone but Don Quixote when they planned to place their poorly improvised female costume on almost assuredly less-than-shapely bodies, nor, for that matter, was anyone sane fooled by the barber's beard. As Fuchs suggests, however, these episodes underscore the constructed nature of gender, particularly of masculinity, in the case of the beard, which, she claims, represents not only man's traditional honor but also his sexual virility. Fuchs also shows that these episodes reveal the dependence of masculine identity on women: Dorotea rescues the priest and the barber; the innkeeper's wife recovers his/her tail from the barber, thus restoring her husband's "thing" to him along with his "masculine potency" (27). Fuchs also explores the cross-dressing of the brother and sister who swap clothes on Sancho's "island" and set off to see the world. She describes this episode as more disturbing of conventions, since there is no logical explanation for the brother to dress as a woman. Thus Fuchs determines that the "brother's transvestism seems motivated mainly by an irreducible desire to occupy a 'feminine' subject position" (34).

Not all female cross-dressers allow themselves to be reinscribed into patriarchal society. For example, Claudia Jerónima challenges conventional denouements by refusing to allow men to accompany her to the convent after she abandons her masculine role. Ana, the daughter of Ricote, saves Don Gregorio from sodomy by dressing him as a woman; she is in control, leaving him, a "damsel in distress," to wait for her (or "him," since she is cross-dressed) to rescue him/"her." Fuchs suggests that Cervantes' depic-

tion of the relative ease of transition between genders and religions undermines “the prevailing patriarchal modes of racialized homogeneity and masculinity in the novel” (44) and also suggests that sodomy is not as foreign as Spanish orthodoxy pretends to believe.

In Chapter Three, “Empire Unmanned: Gender Trouble and Genoese Gold in ‘Las dos doncellas,’” Fuchs claims that the Spain depicted by the novella is a “nation embarked upon increasingly untenable imperial campaigns while plagued by internal strife” (49). In addition to the much commented cross-dressing of the not-so-virginal damsels Teodosia and Leocadia, this chapter focuses on Marco Antonio Adorno’s Genoese ancestry, assuming that his economic ties to Genoa remain strong, as might be evidenced from his choice of Italy as a destination for his flight from his spousal obligations. Adorno’s escape parallels the rapidity with which gold and silver from the New World passed from Spain to Genoa. Fuchs bolsters her argument by speculating that the battle at the waterfront may well have been a result of the animosity between mercantile rivals—Catalans and Genoese—the townspeople of Barcelona protecting their business interests and the sailors on the galleys shielding a likely cargo of Genoese funds. Fuchs concludes that, although a superficial reading of this novella may suggest that young men should not enlist in the army, that Spanish gold should remain in the country, and that young men and young women should attend to domestic and religious duties, the implicit critique is the opposite: Spain is a country in turmoil, overrun by corruption, foreigners, and social breakdown.

Chapter Four, “Passing Pleasures: Costume and Custom in ‘El amante liberal’ and *La gran sultana*,” takes the reader away from Spain to the frontier of the other, “stressing the porosity of borders in the eastern Mediterranean” while simultaneously mounting “a critique of Spanish empire *in disguise* [sic] by transforming the trope of cross-cultural transvestism into a powerful ironic device” (64). In “El amante liberal,” Fuchs suggests, Cervantes shields himself from censors by setting his critique of Spain in a Hispanized Sicily, where Christian characters serve as doubles for Spanish counterparts. Religious and national identity for both Christians and Muslims becomes fluid in this exotic setting, apparently more determined by expediency than by conviction, the renegade, perhaps, representing the epitome of transvestism or passability. Fuchs suggests that Sicily’s open reception of self-declared Christians—regardless of their previous religious or ethnic provenance—without submitting them to interrogation and forcing them to produce witnesses as to the sincerity of their conversion, depicts a critique of contemporary Spanish intolerance. Fuchs also returns to the topic of sodomy, suggesting that Cornelio functions as a homeland-bound, emasculated male, unperverted by foreign experience or desire, thus, indicating, by analogy, that sodomy can be found home-grown in an ever-more-effeminate Spain. *La gran sultana*, similarly, serves to underscore Spanish intolerance. In this play, the Muslims gladly allow the Christians to practice their religion, thus highlighting their “ability to incorporate difference and transform it into a source of strength” (82).

The final chapter, “La disimulación es provechosa’: The Critique of Transparency

in the *Persiles* and “La española inglesa,” suggests that these two texts promote the concept that little is to be gained by searching for a hidden identity underneath the one that is apparent. In both texts, for example, when the heroines are poisoned and lose their superficial beauty, their lovers remain true to them, refusing to abandon—or, worse, to expel—them, undaunted by the ugliness that lies only on the surface. In the same vein of tolerance, the Queen of England seems to have no qualms about recognizing the loyal Roman Catholic faith of Isabela, who, were she in Spain, as the daughter of a merchant, might be suspected of *converso* origins and would be considered a tainted Christian. Fuchs suggests that Clodio, in the *Persiles*, represents a slanderer, who attempts to question and denigrate Auristela’s origins and the truthfulness of her explanations. Arnaldo refuses to act on Clodio’s warnings, stressing that her lineage is unimportant; rather, her worth comes from within. To ensure that we as readers comprehend the significance of the episode, Cervantes punctuates it with a swift death administered to Clodio by an arrow through the mouth. Tolerance is also demonstrated when Ricaredo as well as Sigismunda and Persiles are readily welcomed into the Church at Rome, despite their potentially “heretical” upbringing.

Fuchs outlines clear objectives, argues them with elegant style and plausible hypotheses, and presents them without forcing the Cervantine texts. Although her topic—transvestism and passing—often tempts critics to transgress taboos, Fuchs playfully skirts erotic zones, revealing sufficient evidence to suggest a clear understanding of her subject, but leaving the object tantalizingly covered enough to keep our desire piqued. In the Afterword she calls for further exploration of this topic, acknowledging that she has merely scratched the surface of the Cervantine corpus, let alone of the entire body of Golden Age literature. Appropriate for undergraduates, graduates, and professionals alike, this book is a valuable and vibrant addition to the vast bibliography of criticism on Cervantes.

Eric J. Kartchner  
English and Foreign Languages  
Colorado SU-Pueblo  
2200 Bonforte Blvd., PSY 156  
Pueblo CO 81001-4901  
eric.kartchner@colostate-pueblo.edu