



In Memoriam

Ruth Anthony El Saffar (1941–1994)

DIANA DE ARMAS WILSON

Foreword by John Jay Allen:



Ruth El Saffar was among the most pervasive influences on the Cervantes Society of America, both as a particularly articulate member of the Executive Council and as a working Associate Editor of *Cervantes* from the very first number we produced in 1981. It was particularly unfortunate that she was unable to preside at any of our CSA meetings during her presidency of the organization. Thus I am especially gratified that we were able to organize a session on *Quixotic Desire* for MLA 1994 in San Diego; Ruth took a keen interest in this in the months before her death, and it now becomes a fitting memorial to her.

It is as much the strength of Ruth's personality and the content of her character as the power of her intellect that etch her so sharply in my mind. I had remarkably little face-to-face contact with her during the twenty-odd years that have passed since we met on the street outside the building in which I now write. We corresponded, reviewed each other's books, spoke infrequently on the phone. I knew her almost exclusively through the written word. Thank God, then, for the decision Ruth made in 1975 that, as she said in *JHP* in 1989, "whatever I was going to do had to originate in something that mattered to me." The decision meant, she said, "that my mortality, vulnerability, sensibility, and limitations were being taken into account as a factor in my work and life." This made everything she wrote

uniquely hers. I have always seen her face and heard her voice when I read her words, and I always will.

We—Michael McGaha and I—have asked Diana de Armas Wilson, who knew her so well and was so close to her work in its most recent phase, to remember Ruth for us.



“¡Adiós, gracias; adiós, donaires;
adiós, regocijados amigos; que yo me
voy muriendo, y deseando veros
presto contentos en la otra vida!”

—Prólogo, *Persiles y Sigismunda*

On the morning of Ruth's death, and from her hospital bedside in Zion, Illinois, her friend Shirley Fontenot telephoned me in Denver. Ruth, she whispered brokenly, wanted to let me know that she was dying. In wild distress at this news, no less for having been anticipated, I spoke to Ruth, the phone held up to her ear, for the last time. I assured her that she had brought great bounty to my life, that I would never forget her, that we would meet again. Although our final exchange seemed more like a weeping monologue—and Ruth died within an hour of it—various family members present at her death later assured me that she had heard my lamentations, that she had even given a little sign with her hand. I am translating that sign into the epigraph above, Cervantes's final words to posterity. They may serve as Ruth's loving farewell to all of her friends in the profession.

Although it is customary, in the elegiac genres of academe, to catalogue the accomplishments of those we mourn, what follows must necessarily abstract and dwindle the great adventure of Ruth's life. She earned her B.A. in Philosophy from Colorado College, where she returned in 1987 to receive a degree as Doctor of Humane Letters, *Honoris causa*. As she lay dying, three colleagues from Colorado

College—Marie Cort Daniels, Herving Madruga, and Susan Wilcox—edited an *homenaje* for her entitled *Voces A Ti Debidas* (Colorado College Studies, 1993).

After her undergraduate years in Colorado, Ruth went on to earn her Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University in 1966, where she wrote a distinguished dissertation under Professor Elias Rivers, one of the first he directed there. Professor Rivers remembers that Ruth lived “in a Baltimore row house near the campus, where she first became a wife and a mother.” Ruth would go on to have three children, whom she mothered with great devotion and joy, a vocation that increasingly informed her scholarly writing. She often spoke of the mother as “the figure most severely neglected in Golden Age letters.” Because Ruth thought attention should be paid to the neglected, her writing was, in the best Kristevan sense, revolutionary.

Most of Ruth’s teaching career—which spanned over 25 years—was spent at the University of Illinois in Chicago. She also taught, however, at Johns Hopkins, Colorado College, the University College of Baghdad, the University of Maryland, and Northwestern University. During these teaching years Ruth was awarded fellowships from the Danforth Foundation, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Newberry Library. She was also the Director of two NEH Summer Seminars on Cervantes, and, from 1993 until her death, the President of the Cervantes Society of America.

Ruth published four books on Cervantes: *Novel to Romance: A Study of Cervantes’s “Novelas ejemplares”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974); *Distance and Control in “Don Quixote”: A Study in Narrative Technique* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures, 1975); *Cervantes’ “El casamiento engañoso y el coloquio de los perros”* (Grant & Cutler Ltd. in association with Tamesis Books Ltd., 1976); and *Beyond Fiction: The Recovery of the Feminine in the Novels of Cervantes* (Berkeley: U California P, 1984). She edited a collection entitled *Critical Essays on Cervantes* (G. K. Hall, 1986). She also co-edited *Studies in Honor of Elias Rivers* (Potomac, Md.: Scripta Humanistica, 1989), and, more recently, *Quixotic Desire: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Cervantes* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993).

Ruth’s final book, entitled *Rapture Encaged: The Suppression of the Feminine in Western Culture*, was published a few days after her death (London: Routledge, 1994). Six months earlier, during one bleakly autumnal afternoon in the cancer hospital in Zion, Ruth, by then too frail to write, dictated to me the book’s moving introduction. The culmination of a lifetime of writing, this last book attempts

to tie up whatever broken threads were left from her work as a *cervantista*. In the eighteen months of her illness, Ruth tried to do what Cervantes—"puesto ya el pie en el estribo"—had to promise for his afterlife: "Tiempo vendrá, quizá, donde, anudando este roto hilo, diga lo que aquí me falta, y lo que se convenía." *Rapture Encaged* focuses on aspects of the feminine in the early modern period that Cervantes did not, could not, recover. Some three weeks after her death, the Spanish Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago held a memorial service, organized by Reinaldo Ayerbe-Chaux, Professor and Chair, around the elegant responses of Ruth's colleagues to the five chapters of *Rapture Encaged*.

Apart from her academic career, Ruth was also a practicing Jungian analyst. At a memorial service given for her at the Jungian Institute in Evanston, Illinois, family, friends, academic and Jungian colleagues gathered together, on April 2, 1994, to honor her memory with diverse ceremonies of love. Her children—Ali, Dena, and Amir—conveyed their moving farewells to their mother through both words and music. We shall always remember two young men—one speaking eloquently, the other letting his trumpet speak for him—and a damsel with a dulcimer. As my own tribute to Ruth at that memorial service, I read aloud the passage that will close my eulogy here.

Because my first connection with Ruth was through a library—Chicago's Newberry Library—and because our friendship was so often based upon issues of books and translations, I found in John Donne, Cervantes's English contemporary, the most eloquent farewell for my beloved friend and *comadre*. Ruth's lifelong dedication to "the recovery of the feminine" would have moved her to emend Donne's gendered language to include womankind; God's hand, by the same token, would not have been, for Ruth, exclusively masculine. But this passage from Donne's "Meditation XVII" may nonetheless provide, for those of us who loved her, a consoling vision of Ruth's final "translation"—beyond fiction—to God's library:

All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language, and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation; and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.