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Frederick A. De Armas. *Quixotic Frescoes: Cervantes and Italian Renaissance Art*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 285 pp. ISBN: 0-8020-9074-5.

At a time when Cervantes criticism has been increasingly “trans-Atlantic,” concerned with issues of Colonialism and the Americas, Frederick A. De Armas calls our attention back to the Mediterranean. *Quixotic Frescoes* focuses primarily on Part I of *Don Quijote*, discussing a number of key scenes and episodes as products of Cervantes’ engagement with the painting, sculpture, and architecture of Renaissance Italy. This

is appealing subject matter, and De Armas proposes his numerous connections as an alternative manner of discussing the rich generic and cultural content of the novel: epic and pastoral, pagan and Christian, ancient and early modern. Marcela, for example (I, 12-14), takes on new dimensions as De Armas relates her character to visual representations of Diana (chastity), Venus (eros), and the Virgin Mary (160-65). Due to his undoubtedly enthusiastic immersion in Italian art, De Armas himself becomes a sort of Quixote, interpreting every conceivable similarity—of mythological and geographic reference, of theme and form, of attribute and color—as proof of a particular painting's presence within the landscape of *Don Quijote* (his brush strokes are brisk, and his imaginative connections accumulate, "thus" piling upon "thus," at a dizzying pace). But the fruits of his inquiry, consisting of varied observations regarding "Empire," the "Other," "mercantile capitalism," "desire," "transgendering," "gendered style," "homoerotics," "politics of imitation," "sites of culpability," the "monstrous," etc., assure us that he is firmly grounded in the present concerns of academic discourse.

De Armas builds upon the following premises: 1) Since Cervantes spent time in many Italian cities that housed the famous artworks, and since he occasionally expressed his admiration for these cities, one can assume he saw and appreciated many of the works in question; 2) Since the Arabic manuscript containing the continuation of Don Quijote's adventures includes an illustration of the knight fighting the Basque (I, 9), and since numerous descriptive passages and interpolations occur in *Don Quijote*, Cervantes had an active interest in ekphrasis; 3) Since many of the references in *Don Quijote* (mythological, hagiographic, Homeric, and Virgilian) may also be found in visual arts of the Italian Renaissance, much of the novel constitutes ekphrasis: that is, verbal transposition of pictorial images. (De Armas also discusses how the term may apply to narrative digression and interpolation.) A peril of De Armas' approach is that a good deal of the subject matter in question—references to Helen and Lucretia, to saints and giants, gods and emperors—is so prevalent in the print, oral, and visual culture of the period that the specific attributions sometimes seem quite speculative. For instance, in his argument regarding Cervantes' adherence to the Pythagorean tetrad, in which he points out groupings of four throughout *Don Quijote* I (e.g., four parts, four heroes serving as models to Don Quijote, references to the four humors, the tetrad of "Day and night, wakefulness and sleep" that the knight fails to heed, 59), De Armas makes the following connection between Cervantes and Raphael:

Indeed, Hermann Iventosch tells us that the first chapter of the novel is onomastic in nature, dealing with the Platonic vision of the creation of a new world through naming (1963-4, 60). This Platonic vision proposed by Iventosch is represented by Raphael in his depiction of Plato holding the *Timaeus* in *The School of Athens*. Let us recall that this dialogue has a strong Pythagorean flavour. Thus, in the first chapter of *Don Quixote*, the Platonic vision is conflated with the Pythagorean notion of cosmos so as to establish this initial sequence as the foundation of creation, be it the creation of a poetic world or the *hidalgo's* re-creation of himself as a

knight. (57)

The sequence of evidence, proceeding from what a critic “tells us” to the “flavour” of a book depicted in a painting, seems like rather tenuous proof of a Raphael-inspired conflation of a Platonic and Pythagorean “notion of cosmos” in Cervantes. Assuming one accepts De Armas’ point about the importance of names and numbers in *Don Quijote*, it is still difficult to see why such concepts were “triggered” (another frequent term in the study) by Cervantes’ possible study of *The School of Athens* rather than by other, textual sources.

A cornerstone of De Armas’ attributions is Cervantes’ presumed reading of Vasari’s *The Lives of the Artists*. The presumption is based on the renown of the biography, and on chronology: “It is very likely that Cervantes had read Giorgio Vasari’s interpretation of the frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura—after all, the revised and augmented second edition of the *Lives* was published in 1568, the year before Cervantes’ arrival in Italy” (41). Not many pages later, this probability becomes an established premise: “Cervantes certainly consulted Vasari’s *Lives*—its second and definitive edition was published in 1568, the year before his arrival in Italy” (76). Cervantes’ reading of Vasari is then presented as a major source for the prologue to *Don Quijote*, since Vasari praises Michelangelo’s *David* and maligns Baccio Bandinelli’s *Hercules and Cacus*: “I believe that the mention of David/Goliath and Cacus in Cervantes refers to the battles between Bandinelli and Michelangelo over the fashioning of giants” (76). The fact that the prologue contains two references to the Gospel of St. Matthew dealing with enmity and “evil thoughts” (80), and that both Raphael and Michelangelo created works depicting St. Matthew allow De Armas to extend his claims regarding Cervantes’ interest in the Italian masters:

One may thus superimpose Michelangelo’s *St. Matthew* upon the apostle of Raphael’s *Disputa*, thus inscribing the artistic rivalries between the two artists and between the two styles in the prologue. This double vision points to the prologue’s comic rejection of Raphael and the triumph of Michelangelo, whom Cervantes emulates in his break with so many of the genres and techniques of his time. (81)

This is a fairly ingenious way of looking at the prologue, and the subtlety of the connections requires reference to three types of ekphrasis: “allusive,” “fragmented,” and “veiled” (77-78). Interesting as it all is, one remains unsure why the major issues under discussion—the awareness of artistic precept and innovation, verbal illustration, authorial self-consciousness—are not more convincingly discussed in the context of, say, Ariosto and neo-Aristotelian literary theorists, which Cervantes read and discussed quite explicitly.

Another complexity of De Armas’ study stems from his use of “ekphrasis” as an informing concept. In addition to allusive, fragmented, and veiled ekphrasis, he employs the following modifiers: “combinatory,” “dramatic,” “hagiographic,” “heraldic,” “notional,”

“quirky,” “transformative,” “true or actual,” and “ur”-ekphrasis. There is also “pseudoekphrastic technique,” and other presumably less precise types of writing that refer to images, such as “narrative pictorialism,” “hidden allusion,” “vague reminiscences,” and “inscription” or “*contaminatio*” of a painting into a text. Other terms from the visual arts, such as “terribilitá [sic],” “theophany,” “teichoskopia,” and “anamorphosis” are used to describe aspects of Cervantes’ narrative technique. A risk of such terminological proliferation is that the reader may lose his or her bearings. Are we really being given evidence of influence, or rather an intriguing display of similarities, and ways to consider narrative by using visual terminology? The question also arises as to whether the multitudinous terms contribute to the making of fine distinctions, or rather serve to justify—by sheer accumulative force—what might otherwise seem somewhat dubious associations. Taking Don Quijote’s stonings as a basis for comparison with Giulio Romano’s Genoese painting of St. Stephen, De Armas offers the following flurry of nomenclature: “He [Don Quijote] would thus create a transformative, fragmented, and narrative ekphrasis [sic] or picture of himself. The text goes beyond the painting to fashion a highly transgressive dramatic ekphrasis, where the saint becomes a deluded gentleman attempting to live out a fantasy” (98).

In addition to Giulio Romano’s St. Stephen, De Armas claims that Don Quijote is modeled on David (Titian), Aeneas (Virgil’s “ekphrastic” *Aeneid*), Icarus, St. George (Raphael), and Charles V (Titian). The latter association builds on an assertion that “Quijada,” one of the *hidalgo*’s possible names, is a reference to the emperor’s famous jaw, and proceeds through numerous parallels: “Different segments keep being exhibited, such as the lance, the horse, the chivalric pose, the solar qualities of the emperor/knight, his melancholy, etc.” (119). De Armas also affirms that Cervantes’ novel, like Titian’s painting, “eschews the allegorical” (119). But it seems to me that the bulk of this study is concerned with suggesting a multiplicity of decidedly allegorical readings: the knight’s adventures as a failed quest for empire, as degraded martyrdom, as a parody of the Christian saint defeating heretics, as subverted sexual conquest, etc. While describing five models behind Dulcinea, De Armas talks of “Don Quixote’s feminine map of empire” (186), which includes “allegorizations of Europe” in the references to Helen and Lucretia, and Aldonza Lorenzo, here a lesbian of Moorish ancestry, who “must represent the Spanish empire” (187).

One can easily imagine De Armas providing stimulating visual supplements to the assigned reading in his courses. Many of us have surely enjoyed displaying Velázquez’s *Las meninas* in order to help our students conceptualize the fascinating involutions of *Don Quijote*, or comparing Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* with Murillo’s *El mendigo* to illustrate the contrast between idealizing and starkly realistic modes of representation. De Armas’s study suggests how one might add, perhaps with a greater degree of sophistication, to such an archive. His advocacy for an appreciation of frequently conflicting models behind *Don Quijote*, and his repeated reminders that the novel requires a careful, active reader, certainly underscore long-admired qualities of Cervantes’ masterpiece. However, in addition to my reservations about the speculative nature of

many attributions, I recall aspects of *Don Quijote* that receive little illumination from De Armas' approach, such as virtuosic storytelling, brilliant and often hilarious dialogue, proverbs, games with etymology, and virtually every linguistic register and literary genre. Cervantes' supreme work of imaginative literature is, after all, principally inspired by and about books, poems, and plays, not painting, sculpture, and architecture. It is concerned with the perils and pleasures of reading, and the particular ways in which reading can sustain us even as it deceives. De Armas has contributed to our understanding of how Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian illustrate a number of themes and aesthetic developments pertinent to the period and appreciated by Cervantes. But this reader remains convinced that the roots of *Don Quijote* lie firmly in Boccaccio, ballads (*romances*), *Celestina*, *Amadis*, and Ariosto, alongside the playwrights and pastoral and picaresque authors.

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