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Rosa Rossi. *Tras las huellas de Cervantes. Perfil inédito del autor del Quijote*. Trans. Juan Ramón Capella. Madrid: Trotta, 2002. 123 pp. ISBN: 84-8164-393-0.

This short biographical essay is a translation of the author's *Sulle tracce di Cervantes*, published by Editori Riuniti di Sisifo in 1997. In it Rosa Rossi reiterates and defends the thesis she put forward in her 1987 book, *Ascoltare Cervantes* (translated into Spanish as *Escuchar a Cervantes* in 1988), to wit, that Cervantes' outsider status as a homosexual *converso* goes far to explain his dissidence from his culture's dominant ideology. Rejecting the notion that Cervantes is an enigma who revealed few clues to his interior life, Rossi insists that it is possible to follow the "tracks" left by historical documents and by the author himself, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. She also draws upon several novelized biographies, notably Bruno Frank's 1936 *Cervantes. Una vita più interessante di un romanzo* and Fernando Arrabal's 1995 *Un esclavo llamado Cervantes*. These novels, Rossi claims, offer valuable insights into the "irregularity" of Cervantes' psychological profile.

The question of Cervantes' *converso* lineage has been extensively debated since Américo Castro first elaborated the hypothesis in *Cervantes y los casticismos españoles* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1966). Rossi passes over in silence the difficulty of tracing *converso* heritage in a highly mobile society. But a more serious flaw in Rossi's argument is her assumption that *conversos* formed a homogeneous group and suffered from the same psychological trauma. Prejudice against *conversos* was real in Cervantes' day, but it was erratic and there were enormous local variations. By the same token, the *limpieza de sangre* statutes of 1547 were undoubtedly ugly racist laws, but recent scholarship⁴ has shown that they were widely criticized, ignored, and evaded, and that their impact on the lives of most Spaniards has been exaggerated. (It is also worth noting that during Cervantes' lifetime, the Inquisition's prime targets were not *conversos* but Old Christian peasants and artisans, charged with minor infractions such as denying that fornication was a sin.) But for Rossi, to be a *converso* was to feel constantly threatened, ashamed, and marginalized: "si resultabas ser cristiano nuevo, debías medirte con el hecho de que eso era algo 'nefando,' algo que no se podía ni se debía decir. Como la homosexualidad" (57). There are some valid reasons for speculating that Cervantes

⁴ See, for example, Henry Kamen, "Una crisis de conciencia en la edad de oro en España: Inquisición contra 'limpieza de sangre,'" *Bulletin Hispanique* 88 (1986): 322-56, and Vicente Parello, "Entre honra y deshonor: el *Discurso* de fray Agustín Salucio acerca de los estatutos de limpieza de sangre (1599)," *Criticón* 80 (2000): 139-53.

may have been a *converso*—his devastating satire of purity of blood obsessions in “El retablo de las maravillas” being one of the most convincing, to my mind. My objection is to Rossi’s over-simplified characterization of a *converso* mentality as ineitably and radically alienated.

And this brings us to the cornerstone of Rossi’s thesis regarding Cervantes’ “difference,” which she bases on a presumed erotic relationship with Hassan Pasha, his slave master during his captivity in Algiers. In 1579, after the last of four failed attempts at escape, Cervantes refused to reveal the names of his co-conspirators. Yet Pasha did not punish him harshly or indeed touch a hair of his captive’s head. Rossi assumes that this act of clemency was due to the fact that Cervantes had become one of Hassan Pasha’s *garzones* or boy-lovers. Emilio Sola and José F. de la Peña, who address the issue in *Cervantes y la Berbería* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995), offer a more plausible explanation for Pasha’s leniency toward the maimed thirty-two-year-old soldier: the expectation that he would bring a high ransom. This is not to say that the question of Cervantes’ exposure to or experience of homosexuality is irrelevant or uninteresting. But the exploration of this matter should be rigorously historicized. Although Rossi cites Foucault liberally, she seems not to have absorbed one of his most valuable contributions to the history of sexuality, namely that “homosexual” is a historically constructed category. Rossi’s account—a bisexual renegade seduces a handsome Christian captive who in turn realizes, in a *coup de foudre*, that he is “different” and who thereafter is inspired to write novels of astonishing epistemological skepticism—sounds much more like a late twentieth-century coming-out fantasy than what we know of sexual encounters between men in early modern Europe and the Mediterranean. Much more to the point, I would suggest, is the fact that the well-traveled Cervantes was familiar with a variety of cultures in which sex between men (especially adolescents) was not uncommon, in which men’s strongest affective ties were often with other men rather than women, and in which the act of sodomy was being prosecuted with increasing frequency. Did this atmosphere of intensified criminalization and demonization of sodomy have an impact on Cervantes’ writing? It might be argued that Cervantes has given us both the saddest (“El curioso impertinente”) and the funniest (*Don Quijote*, Part II, chapter 60) fictionalizations of homosexual panic in early modern literature, but this neither confirms nor denies that Cervantes had any homosexual experiences. In short, it seems to me that a much more fruitful line of investigation would be to understand how Cervantes’ writing reflects the anxieties of a world in which the sexual rules of the game are changing than to invent a sexual history for him on the basis of scanty evidence.

Rossi makes a number of other assertions—that Cervantes was a compulsive gambler, that he was impotent, that he admired the erotic autonomy

of his courtesan sisters—which are best ignored, not because they contradict the nationalistic myth of Cervantes as “heroic and exemplary” but because the evidence that underlines them is so tenuous. But Rossi’s most astounding claim is the following: “Realmente Miguel de Cervantes no hubiera podido escribir el *Quijote* de no haber asimilado profundamente la vinculación siguiente...que la transgresión en el terreno de la sexualidad es contemporánea de la consciencia histórica de la ‘muerte de Dios’ y consistente con ella, esto es, con el hundimiento del viejo edificio medieval del saber religioso” (33–34). Thus, while Rossi confidently fashions Cervantes as a multi-faceted impotent, gay, *converso*, atheist, compulsive gambler, she reduces him to a one-dimensional “non-fundamentalist” living within a one-dimensional “fundamentalist” ideology. If scholarship during the last twenty-five years has taught us anything, it is that in early modern Spanish empire the dominant ideology was so diverse and fractured with contradictions that it is hardly productive to refer to it in the singular. Nor can religious beliefs and practices, before and after the Council of Trent, be divided up neatly between “fundamentalist” and “non-fundamentalist” camps. Furthermore, it is specious to assume that “difference” in one arena entails identification with all other subaltern positions. For confirmation, we have only to open the newspaper, where we can read that the openly gay daughter of the Republican vice-presidential candidate is her father’s chief campaign manager and closest political advisor. In Cervantes’ day, we can look to Teresa of Avila, a *conversa* who hated purity of blood laws but who fervently believed that unbaptized Indians and Protestants were condemned to hell. Or Lope de Vega, the pro-woman womanizing priest who laughed at sodomites burned at the stake and who declared his love for his patron in unabashedly passionate terms. As long as “dominant” and “dissident” are the only two possible ideological positions allowed for early modern men and women, our understanding of their desires and actions will be impoverished.

Alison Weber
Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA 22903-4007
apw@virginia.edu