
REVIEWS

María Antonia Garcés. *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive's Tale*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002. 349p.

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In recent years, several seminal studies of Cervantes' captivity in North Africa, as well as of his ideas concerning Islam and its adherents, have appeared in presses around the world. However, this current volume may well set the standard. It is undeniably a ponderous tome, carefully researched and thoroughly documented, including the ample illustrations throughout; yet it reads well, even quickly. *Cervantes in Algiers* is certainly accessible to specialist and non-specialist alike. Even those without a reading knowledge of Castilian will be able to move through these pages without difficulty (at least without linguistic difficulty), since Garcés provides an English translation in brackets for all the material she quotes in Spanish. The author's premise, that images of captivity effectively inform every facet of Cervantes' works, is demonstrated throughout her book, at times with some measure of the same pain and obsession that she diagnoses in Cervantes himself. That is not to minimize the suffering she continues to endure, as well as to reenact, however vicariously, which she also envisions as occurring in Cervantes, time after time, in the wake of his traumatic captivity in Algiers. To this effect, the author recounts how she was herself held prisoner for many months in her native Colombia, an experience she recognizes as having left a lasting and still dolorous impression on one's life, hopefully to be exorcised as it is exercised, repeated again and again, though in forms in which the subject can objectify the anguish, in turn confronting and compartmentalizing it.

For some readers, *Cervantes in Algiers* may figure as something akin to performance art itself, always in line with dimensions and details of Cervantes' own works in this regard. Garcés' explications of the meanings, together with the actual mechanics, of theatrical representations of Algerian captivity, as in, for instance, her chapter focusing on *El trato de Argel*, are particularly penetrating and poignant. The reader senses both authors' suffering, though perhaps only at a slant, as no words can communicate the full measure of trauma, so metaphor and similar approximations must generally suffice. For Garcés, as for Cervantes, theater and life continue to intersect at numerous points and on a variety of planes. Throughout her book, the critic provides invaluable insight into topics that in times past have become almost

critical truisms: this mix would include the interface of *vida* and *literatura, realidad* and *ficción*, whether in *Don Quijote*, or in other of Cervantes' works.

The theme of testimony likewise comes to the fore early on in this volume. Garcés cites extensively from the writings of theorists and testifiers of trauma, as she terms them, quoting from figures as diverse as Freud, Lacan, Primo Levi, and Shoshana Felman. She acknowledges her book as in many respects a hybrid, admittedly an admixture of history, cultural studies, and literary testimony, garnished with generous doses of psychoanalytic literary criticism. But the author is able to communicate on a variety of levels with the reader, intellectually, though also viscerally. Her studies of the isolation and liminality, whether psychic, physical, or some ratio of both, as well as of the doubling (what she calls "otro yo") that occur in Cervantes, as in other former captives, are at once profoundly effective and affective. Her assertion of the insufficiency of language for those who would testify of trauma, at one level embedded in an investigation of the Algerian argot, although the book is replete with this notion. She develops at length the idea that words are simply not sufficient. Nonetheless, a thrust of Garcés' discourse is that the traumatized keep trying to come to terms with their trials; both she and Cervantes, among so many other victims of violence, including writers on the European Holocaust and the Latin American conflicts of the 20th century, construct texts to give voice to their grief, though it is never fully expunged. Garcés studies 16th- and 17th-century scenarios, some of which initially might seem removed from our contemporary world, though she brings her material up to date, making the early modern relevant—even wrenching—to readers in a post-modern age.

The present volume focuses pointedly on *Don Quijote*, though not to the exclusion of others of Cervantes' works in which issues of captivity and involuntary servitude are addressed. Her chapter on the culture(s) of the Barbary corsairs is truly illuminating, not only for what it says about Cervantes' experience, but also for what might be its cultural implications far beyond the particular venue in question. Likewise, her study of the staging of theatrical pieces is excellent. But it is chapter four, where Garcés delves deeply into *La historia del cautivo*, interpolated into Part One of *Don Quijote*, that her insight comes into the sharpest focus. She brings into play a wealth of understanding of the captive captain, but it is Garcés' explication of Zoraida that the reader may find most illuminating. Not every reader of the *novela intercalada* will necessarily agree with the author on every point of interpretation, though most will surely admit that she plumbs depths of literary and psychological understanding. She calls her chapter on Zoraida, the captain, and the rest of the characters in *La historia del cautivo* "An Erotics of Creation," suggesting it becomes so through a "weaving of trauma and fiction." Her study of the erotic turmoil that characterizes

the participants in this *novela intercalada* is nothing short of exemplary. In turn, Garcés offers invaluable insight into the significance of the surname Saavedra, for don Miguel, as for the several characters in his works that bear it. Indeed, the author's investigation of names and naming extends throughout the book.

Throughout *Cervantes in Algiers*, Garcés also elaborates on questions of apostasy and renegadism, again shedding light via her Algerian critique on more contemporary situations that confront us, the ongoing trauma of which often remains essentially ineffable. Cervantes himself felt the attraction, as well as the repulsion, of this multiple milieu that would forever form him and his writings. In turn, one can sense the ambivalence of the critic, torn by her topic, yet apparently driven to confront it. In this regard, then, Garcés offers an exhaustive, as well as an exhausting, treatise, exhausting in the sense that it is emotionally wearing to all but the most casual of readers to experience the trauma, albeit vicariously, that is described here in such detail. In her last chapter, titled "Anundando este hilo roto," marks her explanation of Cervantes' efforts, not to mention her own and those of so many others of the traumatized, to fend off dissociation and dissolution, while reconstituting some sort of continuity of life, once severed by a traumatic experience. Don Miguel's own attempts to (re)establish psychological connections—old ones, as well as new ones—in light of his captivity, continue to emerge throughout his fiction, as apparently in his life. In turn, Garcés moves toward a coming to terms with her own grief, explicating Cervantes' words with her own, (re)braiding their mutually broken threads. Ultimately, such accommodation may never be sufficient for the writers themselves, though for their readers there remains plenty to assimilate, along with the wherewithal to do so. In short, *Cervantes in Algiers* is a volume that no serious *cervantista* should fail to ponder carefully. ✱