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Review Essay: Miguel de Cervantes, *The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda, A Northern Story*

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BOOK REVIEWS

His study is first-rate when it explores and explains the different genres in the various stages of Donne's career: the witty superior satirist entertaining a coterie of like-minded young men, the more traditional modes of the penitent husband, and the elitist performance of the *via media* Anglican preacher. Equally precise at contextualizing Donne's differences from satirists like Marston and Hall, as well as from devotional poets like Herbert, Parfitt makes a strong case for the continuing sense of restlessness, doubt, and debate with the self throughout Donne's mask-filled writing.

Yet, along with this thoroughness, there is a curious offhand quality to Parfitt's observations in two key areas: Donne's treatment of women and his role in the tense religious politics of the seventeenth century. Although Parfitt acknowledges "the rise of feminist studies" (30), he still parades the conquests of the "self-satisfied" young man as merely "a brilliant projection of a very common male viewpoint whereby women are to be denigrated (perhaps out of fear) and also celebrated as objects for male gratification, to be shown off, stripped and [f—d]" (37). He mentions pornography, colonization, and dehumanization and goes so far as to admit that "women may justly resent" (78) this portrayal; but he then concludes, somewhat stereotypically, that these poems tell the "disturbing truth" (79) about men. The question of Donne's religious loyalty is even more slippery for Parfitt. A self-declared "atheist" (125), Parfitt not only dismisses contemporary Anglicanism wholesale as "an etiolate memory of an idealized past and a sentimental indulgence for patriots" (119), he also accounts for Donne's "orthodox Anglicanism, . . . hybrid Calvinism . . . co-existing with residual Catholicism" (97) by resorting to labels rather than exemplifying these tenets in Donne's poetry and prose.

Situating writers in their time invariably involves some anachronistic assumptions. With certain gaps and simplifications, Parfitt has succeeded in keeping alive the drama between the secular and the spiritual, the opportune and the felt responses in the work of John Donne.

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Miguel de Cervantes, *The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda, A Northern Story*, trans. Celia Richmond Weller and Clark A. Colahan, University of California Press, 1989, 395 pp., ill., biblio., \$37.50.

Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, published posthumously in 1617, is, if we are to trust Cervantes's own assessment, his finest achievement in the realm

of letters. The lengthy narrative is an epic in prose, "a Northern story," with episodes set on Nordic shores and ending in Rome. Modeled after Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, an early Hellenistic romance, the *Persiles* traces the trials of the title characters—their separation, travels, tribulations, and eventual reunion—in a lofty and elegant prose style. Cervantes's creation is interesting from a number of perspectives. The *Persiles* invites comparison with other types of romance and with *Don Quixote*, which also re-creates an existing form. Reacting to criticism of the first part of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes finds a place in part 2 for commentary on the relation between the main plot and episodic digressions. The exotic adventures and the geographical range of the *Persiles* together with the open middle space of romance (the space between separation and reunion or, in this case, between love and marriage), offer the writer an opportunity to interweave plot fragments and to explore the art of description. Like *Don Quixote*, the *Persiles* allows Cervantes to incorporate elements from a number of genres, to cast literary conventions in a new light, and to set forth variations on the theme of love. Persiles and Sigismunda, who travel as brother and sister under the names of Periandro and Auristela, have been bred in the frozen North, a literary fact that may suggest points of contrast with their Mediterranean counterparts in Cervantine fiction.

Ideologically speaking, the *Persiles* is a fascinating blend of Renaissance and Baroque concepts. The protagonists seem to be victims of a capricious fate that constantly places them at the brink of disaster and relates to the Renaissance as a remnant of the blind fortune of classical antiquity. The happy ending, a papal blessing for the pair's love, attests to a new (Counter Reformation) vision, replete with a faith in Providence amid the dreamlike illusions of this life. The tale of growth and figurative rebirth adapts a pagan structure to a developing Christianity, a Northern saga to a Southern worldview.

Completed only days before his death, the *Persiles* represents Cervantes's final thoughts, his final outlook, an analogue of the quest for immortality. The idealism of the novel is, obviously, less playful and less ironic than that of *Don Quixote*, and the author is far more detached from the text. This is a novel not about the process of reading and writing, but about journeys, in real and allegorical terms. It is Cervantes's attempt at high art, and it is like a beautifully staged spectacle, full of motion and color, inspiring wonderment. One may miss the brilliant self-consciousness of *Don Quixote*, but the geography and imaginative breadth of the *Persiles* make it the ideal companion piece, an entirely different undertaking, but a tour de force nonetheless. Whether troubled by the false continuation or by life itself, or both, Cervantes concludes *Don Quixote* with the death of the knight-errant. In the *Persiles*, at the end of the road, he renews his trust in the world and in the word.

The *Persiles* presents a major challenge to the translator, and the collaborative effort of Weller and Colahan is quite impressive. The translation is accurate and reads smoothly, and it captures the rapid pace of the original. My only serious objection is to the use of contractions throughout the text, which, I believe, detracts from the dignified tone and classical spirit of Cervantes's prose. The ambitious and successful enterprise will introduce the *Persiles* to readers who have studied *Don Quixote* and the *Exemplary Novels* in English. A concise introduction, helpful notes, and an appendix that focuses on the territories traversed by the heroes complete the volume, a sweet and useful addition to Cervantine scholarship.

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John Ogilby, *The Entertainment of His Most Excellent Majestie Charles II in His Passage through the City of London to His Coronation*, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 43, 1988, 192 pp., ill., biblio., index, \$30.00.

Ronald Knowles's edition of Ogilby's *Entertainment* is volume 43 in the prestigious *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* facsimile series, whose general editor is Margaret M. McGowan. Ogilby's work, first published in 1662, describes the spectacle—the paintings, architecture, music, and poetry—used to celebrate Charles II's passage through London to his coronation at Westminster. The *Entertainment*, the most elaborate extant document for any English festival and an expanded version of an earlier description by Ogilby, was approved for publication by Edward Walker, Garter Principal King of Arms. Walker seems to have been primarily concerned with editing Elias Ashmole's appended description of the coronation ceremony, deleting, for example, a discussion of the dispute between the royal footmen and the Barons of the Cinque Ports about a canopy.

Knowles's brief, intricate introduction of only 42 pages is essential to his readers' understanding of the historical and contemporary context of the literary allusions of the spectacle, many of which were to Latin authors, especially Virgil. Some of the allusions, which are extremely obscure even for seventeenth-century audiences, would otherwise be incomprehensible to modern readers. Praising Sydney Anglo for making English festivals a serious subject for scholarly study, Knowles cleverly quotes the comment by the Earl of Newcastle to Charles in 1638: "For what preserves you Kings more than Ceremony. . . . For in all triumphs whatsoever or publick shewing yourself, you cannot put upon you too much King" (7). Having learned that lesson well, Charles decided to hold his coronation