

REVIEWS

María Antonia Garcés. *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive's Tale*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002. 349 pp. ISBN: 0-8265-1406-5. \$39.95.

Américo Castro, Juan Goytisolo, and Juan Bautista Avalle-Arce have all pointed to Cervantes' five years in Algiers as the central experience of his life, and decisive in his formation as a writer (15). In this book, María Antonia Garcés studies the links between that experience and Cervantes' literary production. It is divided into an introduction and five chapters.

The first chapter offers background information on the history of the emergence of Algiers as a major center of privateering, relations between Algiers and Spain, the circumstances of Cervantes' capture and transfer to Algiers in September 1575, his four escape attempts, and a brief overview of life in late sixteenth-century Algiers based principally on the *Topografía e historia general de Argel* (1612), which Garcés believes was written entirely by Antonio de Sosa. Chapter Two contains a more detailed study of the life of elite (ransomable) Christian captives in Algiers in the 1570s, information about some of the notable Muslim and Christian personages with whom Cervantes became acquainted while in Algiers, and details about his ransom by a Trinitarian friar in 1580, and the written affidavits he had compiled before leaving Algiers to defend himself against mysterious charges that he had behaved in an ugly and vicious manner while in captivity there.

In Chapter Three Garcés studies Cervantes' first two literary treatments of his captivity—the plays *El trato de Argel* and *Los baños de Argel*—comparing them with the accounts of Sosa's captivity in the *Topografía* and with Primo Levi's writings about his experiences in Auschwitz. The fourth chapter focuses on the largely autobiographical "Captive's Tale" in Chapters 39–41 of the 1605 *Don Quixote*, which she believes was written in 1589–90, and following L. A. Murillo, terms the "*Ur-Quijote*." She also devotes considerable space in this chapter to speculating about Cervantes' reasons for adopting the surname Saavedra. The concluding chapter studies recurring images that ap-

pear in works written throughout Cervantes' career—including *La Galatea*, the novella "La española inglesa," and his posthumous romance *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*. She examines how the treatment of those images gradually changes, which she views as symptomatic of "a gradual liberation of the chains of captivity in Cervantes" (242), resulting from the therapeutic benefits of his writing. The book is illustrated with seventeen engravings portraying the city of Algiers, its customs, people, and their costumes. It is also accompanied by a very thorough bibliography, and a five-page chronology of the history of Spain from 1453 to 1617 and the major events in Cervantes' life.

Garcés was kidnapped and held hostage by Colombian guerrillas from December 1982 to July 1983 (6). She wrote this book while mourning the death of her eldest son (xi). Although she doesn't say so, I assume that it was those terrible experiences that led her to become deeply interested in the relatively new area of psychology known as trauma theory, which has attracted considerable attention in the popular news media since the Vietnam War, and especially since the American Psychiatric Association adopted post-traumatic stress disorder as an official diagnosis in 1980. What she does say is that: "More than anyone or anything else, Cervantes has been the great teacher, the healer who has helped me to reattach *"el roto hilo de mi historia"* as I read, and wrote about, his fictions. Laughing with these fictions, reinterpreting them time and time again, often from different perspectives, pondering the profound questions that arise from Cervantes' texts, I have been pressured to sound the complexities of literary and psychic constructions, both in Cervantes and in myself" (xi).

She seems then to have come to the conclusion that trauma theory might provide a key to understanding how Cervantes used his writing as a tool to recover from the psychic "wound" inflicted by the experience of captivity, and that appears to be how this book came about. As is well known, the basic premise of trauma theory is that the human mind is simply unable to absorb, process, or react to a sudden catastrophic shock. The event is therefore repressed, but returns to haunt the survivor in the form of repetitive nightmares, flashbacks, or fragmented memories. In especially severe cases, ego-splitting or multiple personality disorder occurs, whereby the survivor develops a new personality to separate him or herself from the one damaged by the trauma. This is primarily how Garcés explains Cervantes' adoption of a new surname. Finally, it is only by telling his or her story to others that the survivor is at last able to assimilate the trauma and begin to recover from it. According to Garcés, this explains why Cervantes included fictionalized versions of his experience as a captive in so many of his literary works throughout his career.

Although Garcés treats these notions as if they were established fact, all

of them are in fact highly questionable and are the subject of heated debate among professional psychologists, as Richard McNally has amply demonstrated in his recent book *Remembering Trauma*. More importantly, they really contribute nothing to our understanding of Cervantes' writings or of the five years he spent as a captive in Algiers. Far from repressing the memories of his experiences in Algiers, Cervantes had his alter ego Ruy Pérez de Viedma—protagonist of "The Captive's Tale"—state explicitly that "de todos los sucesos sustanciales que en este suceso me acontecieron, ninguno se me ha ido de la memoria, ni aún se me irá en tanto que tuviere vida." In other words, the trauma he experienced in Algiers, rather than causing his memory to fail him, actually strengthened it. Oddly, Garcés uses this quote as an epigraph to the chapter of her book in which she discusses "The Captive's Tale," yet does not seem to notice that it blatantly contradicts her argument.

I have no doubt that the five years Cervantes spent in Algiers were painful and frustrating, perhaps even "traumatic." To focus solely on the traumatic aspects of that experience, however, is a gross oversimplification. Located in an extraordinarily beautiful natural setting and enjoying a superb climate, Algiers in Cervantes' day was one of the largest, wealthiest, and most cosmopolitan cities in the world. Especially in comparison with Cervantes' native Spain, Algiers was home to an amazingly free and tolerant society. It had a large, prosperous, and influential Jewish community that was mostly Spanish by language and culture, and Christians too were free to practice their religion. Most notably, it was a society in which any man, regardless of race or ethnicity, could rise to the very pinnacle of power by dint of intelligence and hard work. A former slave could, and did, become king there. Cervantes, who hated Spain's rigid class system based on ancestry rather than merit, cannot have helped admiring this aspect of life in Algiers. During the five years he spent there, Cervantes became acquainted with all sorts of Moors and renegades, ranging from noble, generous, enlightened men such as Hājji Murād (Agi Morato) to amoral and cruel ones like his master Ḥasan Pasha (Azán Agá). He also formed close friendships with many fellow Christian captives. He was well aware that many of the native Algerians felt oppressed and exploited by their Ottoman overlords. This was by no means a simple society, nor was Cervantes' experience there simply one of unalloyed pain.

Whatever it may have been, Algiers was certainly no Auschwitz. What I found most disturbing about this book was the author's constant comparisons of the situation of Christian captives in Algiers to that of Jews in the Nazi death camps. She acknowledges that "my comparison of sixteenth-century Algiers with the modern Lager [concentration camp] may seem shocking to some readers" (144), but goes on to defend the comparison on the grounds that "the extent of the tortures and dreadful deaths perpetrated

on these captives was appalling," and that many of them were civilians. The comparison is invalid and grossly misleading. The captives in Algiers could obtain their freedom at any time simply by converting to Islam. Furthermore, whether they were being held for ransom or simply used for slave labor, they were extremely valuable commodities. It was obviously in the interest of their owners to keep them alive and healthy. There were cases of extreme cruelty and even murder of captives, but they were few and far between and usually resulted from some provocation, such as an escape attempt.

The very fact that Garcés would make such an absurd comparison is indicative of her own ignorance of, and contempt for, Arab/Muslim culture, which is abundantly evident throughout this book. For example, she describes the great philosopher Ibn Sīnā, who was born in Bukhara of a Turkic mother and a Persian father and never set foot in Spain, as an "Andalusian intellectual" (94-95). Rather than taking the trouble to find out the proper way to transliterate the Arabic word *Qā'id*, she gives three different versions: *Ca'id* (73); *Kā'id* (75) and *cāid* (188). She is generally much too willing to take the *Topografía's* anti-Muslim propaganda at face value. In an attempt to demonstrate the "intellectual decline" of Algiers in Cervantes' time, she spends pages speculating that books in European languages were probably very scarce there, only to conclude that nevertheless Cervantes somehow managed to write and obtain books during the time he was there.

The most tantalizing questions surrounding Cervantes' experiences in Algiers are: (1) why did Cervantes' master, Ḥasan Pasha—who was notorious for his cruelty—never inflict any serious punishment on Cervantes, even after he attempted to escape, and help other notable prisoners to escape, no fewer than four times?; and (2) what were the "cosas viciosas, feyas y deshonestas[s]" of which Cervantes was accused? One suspects that there must have been at least a grain of truth in the allegations—or they must at least have seemed plausible—since Cervantes went to such great lengths to try to clear his name. The choice of words suggests that the alleged offenses were of a sexual nature, as do the words of one of his defenders, who insists that in Algiers, Cervantes "ha vivido con mucha limpieza y honestidad [which does not mean "honesty," as Garcés would have it, but "chastity"] de su persona y que no ha visto en él ningún vicio que engendre escándalo a su persona y costumbres" (101). Among the solutions scholars have proposed are the following: (1) Ḥasan Pasha forcibly sodomized Cervantes; (2) Cervantes had a consensual sexual relationship with Ḥasan Pasha; (3) a prominent Muslim woman—possibly Zahara, daughter of Hājji Murād and future wife of Ḥasan Pasha—seduced Cervantes or forced him to have sex with her; (4) Cervantes had a consensual sexual relationship with her. It has even been suggested that he might have had a sexual relationship, consensual or forced, with both Ḥasan Pasha and Zahara. Any of these possible solutions

would explain why Ḥasan Pasha did not punish Cervantes severely for his escape attempts (i.e., either the two men were sexually involved, or Zahara intervened with Ḥasan Pasha on Cervantes' behalf). While it is certainly possible that Cervantes engaged in homosexual activity other than with Ḥasan Pasha himself—with the latter's male harem, for example—Garcés indignantly rejects allegations of any sort of homosexual behavior, even involuntary, on Cervantes' part. She quotes Antonio de Sosa, "perhaps the most adamant critic of deviant sexual practices in sixteenth-century Algiers" (115) who stated that in the almost four years he had known Cervantes, he had never observed any vice or scandalous behavior in him, and otherwise would have had nothing to do with him. Garcés suggests that it was Hājjī Murād who intervened with Ḥasan Pasha on Cervantes' behalf, because he was engaged in secret negotiations with Spain and valued Cervantes' services as an informant. There is of course no evidence whatsoever that Cervantes ever actually performed any such services.

I found Garcés's extremely superficial and one-sided analysis of "The Captive's Tale" particularly disappointing. Américo Castro viewed this story as the most violent and tragic episode in the entire novel. In Garcés's opinion, it is "one of the most charming creations of the Cervantine corpus" (202) and is permeated with "gaiety or joie de vivre" (218). She never even hints at the serious moral and ethical problems posed by this story of a daughter who deceives and robs her noble and loving Muslim father in order to run away with a Christian captive and embrace his religion. Is her real motive love of the Virgin Mary, as she states, or sexual attraction? It is telling that Garcés concurs with the *Topografía's* opinion that "if many renegades took advantage of the newly found sexual freedom [in Algiers], some even converted to Islam because of its views on sexual practices" (111); while Cervantes has Zoraida's father tell her Christian friends that her reason for converting is not the superiority of the Christian religion but rather "el saber que en vuestra tierra se usa la deshonestidad más libremente que en la nuestra."

At the beginning of this book María Antonia Garcés noted that laughing with Cervantes' fictions had helped her recover from her traumatic experience, yet she never considers how Cervantes' sense of humor helped him survive the tragedies in his own life. Most great writers draw material for their fiction from their own life experiences. The five years Cervantes spent in Algiers provided an abundant source of material that his Spanish readers were sure to find fascinating. His long exposure to a society so different from the Spain he knew—but at the same time reminiscent of the tolerant, pluralistic Spain of the Middle Ages—certainly broadened his horizons. The suffering he endured as a captive gave him a passionate love of freedom and a profound compassion for all oppressed people. It is really too bad that by focusing so narrowly on trauma theory, María Antonia Garcés somehow

managed to overlook all of this.

Michael McGaha
Department of Romance Languages & Literatures
Pomona College
Claremont, CA 91711-6393
mmcgaha@pomona.edu