



Reed, Cory A. *The Novelist as Playwright: Cervantes and the Entremés nuevo*. New York: Peter Lang, 1993. 212 pp.

Critical views of Cervantes's later plays have recently undergone a radical change. Long considered too complex and diffuse for the stage, they are currently exciting interest as performance texts and challenging scholars to revise their ideas of Cervantes as playwright.

To some extent, the eight *Entremeses* and eight *Comedias* published in 1615 have escaped this general neglect. Nevertheless, because Cervantes elected to publish them after they were rejected for performance, there has been a tendency among scholars to regard these works as texts specifically directed to readers, rather than to a theatergoing audience. This view is most cogently expressed by Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Talens in their recent book *Through the Shattering Glass: Cervantes and the Self-Made World* (Minneapolis, 1993). They go as far as to claim that "[Cervantes] opts to publish his dramatic works *instead of turning them over to theatrical producers*" (52; my emphasis).

Cory Reed stops short of making a similar claim in *The Novelist as Playwright*. Instead, while he sets out to show that Cervantes's failure as a playwright in his own time can be attributed to the novelistic elements in his plays, Reed also in-

sists that Cervantes "did not fail because of any lack of theatricality" (188). He concludes that

[t]he same open, inquisitive, novelistic stance which characterizes Cervantes's prose infiltrates the Cervantine *entremés*, resulting in a thought-provoking dramatic form which makes for enjoyable reading and successful modern performance, but which violates the theatrical codes of the Golden Age. (189)

Few would disagree with this observation. However, I have reservations about Reed's treatment of the concept of novelization in the *Entremeses*. As a theoretical framework, he takes Mikhail Bakhtin's view that in a period when the novel is a dominant literary form it exercises a strong influence on other genres and serves as a liberating catalyst. Reed also argues that two other aspects of Bakhtin's definition are evident in the *Entremeses*: "heteroglossia," or the "potential coexistence of many meanings . . . in one word or phrase . . . depending on its social or linguistic context," and "dialogism," defined as "a crossing of two languages, attitudes or styles [resulting] in a dialogue between points of view" (22).

While these characteristics certainly exist in Cervantes's writing (and not just in the *Entremeses*), I wonder whether it is necessary to force Cervantes onto the procrustean bed of Bakhtinian theory in order to prove that it is so. It is true, of course, that any discussion of Cervantes's work must take *Don Quijote* into account, yet we should be wary of attempting to define his skills as a novelist as separate from those of the playwright. What are we to make of the equally persuasive counterclaim (put forward by Jill Syverson-Stork, among others) that Cervantes was given to *theatricalizing* his novels? Reed acknowledges that the argument is sometimes difficult to sustain: for example, in discussing the two *entremeses* in verse (97) and the metatheatrical nature of *El retablo de las maravillas* (158) he is at pains to argue for a wider application of Bakhtin's concept.

Undoubtedly Reed is right to suggest that Cervantes's plays and interludes did not easily fit the mold established by Lope de Vega with the *Comedia nueva*. Undoubtedly, too, there were practical reasons why contemporary actor-managers were unwilling to take on these plays, featuring a large number of characters and unusually lengthy interludes. Yet these were not insuperable hurdles, and Lope himself sometimes packed his plays with characters as, for example, in *El Arenal de Sevilla*, which calls for a total of twenty-nine characters, although no more than nine are on stage together at any one time. I believe that it is reasonable to speculate that Cervantes was also the victim of Lope's success in more direct ways. That personal rivalry between the two men, together with Lope's domination of the theatrical "monarquía" (to which Cervantes bitterly refers in the prologue to the *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos*), effectively ensured that in 1613 no one would be willing to make the extra effort required to perform Cervantes's plays.

If this supposition is correct, then Cervantes's decision to publish the plays was probably influenced by economic considerations as much as it may have been by aesthetic ones. Nowhere does he say that he actually revised the plays

and interludes in order to redirect them to a reading public. While Reed does not directly address this question, he does point out that there is no reason to suppose that the published version of these plays found any favour with contemporary readers. On the contrary, he notes that the next edition was not published until 1749 (2)!

Despite Reed's careful analysis of what, in the true sense of the term, he calls the "*Entremés nuevo*," something is still missing. The details are all meticulously accounted for, but there is no sense of an overarching whole. Perhaps a better approach to Cervantes's refashioning of the interlude is to start with its theatrical aspects, instead of concentrating on its affinities with the novel. Such a focus brings the *Entremeses* into a closer relationship with their accompanying *Comedias*, giving them a closure that is lacking when they are viewed as isolated units.

Although it is notoriously difficult to place Cervantes's work in categories, Reed divides the interludes into two groups, which he designates as plays of choice and plays of deception. At first this arrangement seems too simple, with its neat division into two groups of four, the first following the order in which the interludes appear in the 1615 edition; ultimately, however, Reed is able to convince the reader of the usefulness of this approach as a basis for analysis. His references to Bakhtin's ideas about carnivalesque uncrowning and regeneration are often illuminating, although his search for a symbolic "new order" seems inappropriate. Indeed, he admits as much in dealing with *El viejo celoso*, where, he concludes, "The result is an open-ended work whose very indeterminacy obligates us to reflect on society's problems" (142). Perhaps, but no analysis of these small masterpieces can be complete without taking Cervantine irony into account as a powerful driving force.

There is much that is fresh and stimulating in this book. Reed is particularly good when he talks about *El retablo de las maravillas* as an example of "Uncrowning the *Comedia*" (150). He is also perceptive in his treatment of the individual *entremeses*, although parts of the discussion could benefit from some pruning. Occasionally he misreads the text: for example, in *La guarda cuidadosa* Cristina is given advice by her *mistress*, not her mother (120). It is not accurate to say that *El juez de los divorcios* "is pure fantasy in that its argument rests on a social impossibility in seventeenth-century Spain" (75). Although the Catholic Church maintained that the sacrament of marriage was indissoluble, it allowed couples to seek a legal separation on certain grounds. This separation, termed divorce "a mensa et thoro," was granted under canon law in an ecclesiastical court like the one we are shown in Cervantes's interlude.

Cory Reed has written a stimulating study based upon careful research, with extensive footnotes and an exhaustive bibliography. It will be central to future discussion of Cervantes's interludes. While some of his ideas will meet with disagreement, that in itself is a reassuring sign that Cervantes continues to provoke healthy critical debate.

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