

## RESEÑAS

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MERCEDES ALCALÁ GALÁ. *“Con esta carga nacemos las mujeres”. Discurso femenino en la España de Cervantes*. Madrid/Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana/ Vervuert, 2022. 366 pp.

Mercedes Alcalá Galán convincingly argues that Miguel de Cervantes’s representation of female characters humanizes their dilemmas and psychologies to an extent that is extraordinary for his times. Wisely avoiding the question of a “feminist” Cervantes, she bases her methodology on a mixture of close reading of texts, archival research, and references to non-literary discourse. She also strengthens her case for the author’s general humanizing stance by analyzing female characters from a variety of texts, including *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615), *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (1617), and “La señora Cornelia” and “La ilustre fregona” from *Exemplary Novels* (1613). In addition, the characters Alcalá Galán chooses to focus on are those whose sexual experiences render them marginalized by the dominant norms governing women’s social behaviour at the time: the sexually violated, the childless, and the mothers who reject their children. She also examines the ways that women’s bodies were controlled by looking at fertility, infertility, childbirth, and breastfeeding. The entire book is well worth a careful read, but given the constraints of the review, I will limit myself to an overview with a few highlights.

Chapter 1 deals with the representation of sexually assaulted women and contextualizes the depiction of Costanza from “La ilustre fregona,” Dorotea from *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, and Leocadia from “La fuerza de la sangre” within both the artistic portrayal of sexual violation and *rapto* as well as the judiciary treatment of these crimes. Dealing first with the better known artistic tradition of glorifying mythological scenes such as is seen in Rubens’s voluptuous treatment of the kidnapping of Leucippus’s daughters or the well-worn trope of Lucretia as the perfect wife, Alcalá Galán then introduces her important archival work on the financially sums that were regularly awarded families in Spanish courts in exchange for the loss of their daughters’ virginity. This contribution to the scholarship casts an important new light on Cervantes’s depiction of the cases of Dorotea and other violated women, showing, as Alcalá Galán argues, a lack of confidence in the text for the capacity of the judicial system to guarantee the rights of female victims.

in Chapter 2, Alcalá Galán turns to medical writings on the female body as well as treatises on the royal and noble woman stating that they were responsible for the reproduction and succession of noble houses in order to recontextualize Cervantes’s representation of the childless duchess in *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Although it is easy to read her oozing ulcer as evidence of moral perversity, Alcalá Galán convincingly shows that within her own

house the duchess occupies an unstable position due to her inability to fulfill her social duty to conceive; this important social fact destabilizes her relationship with both her husband and her servants and plays an important role in her participation in and organization of the faked, and often cruel, festivities involving Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Another scintillating chapter, Chapter 4, involves the analysis of Feliciano de la Voz from *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*. Found in Extremadura by the company of pilgrims, Feliciano has recently given birth to a baby whom she has rejected and has fled her father and brother, who threaten her in a case of attempted honour violence. Joining the group, she travels to the Sanctuary of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, where she recites an ecstatic hymn to the Virgin, is reunited with her lover, and receives her newborn child. The extraordinary characterization of Feliciano has received much critical attention recently, which the author deftly incorporates into her own analysis. Alcalá Galán adroitly shows Feliciano's own exteriorization of her pregnant and child-giving body, as she sees herself as a mother only from the outside and maintains an interior subjectivity that denies her maternal role. The author also brings to consideration the custom of the *misa de parida*, in which the postpartum mother undergoes a ritual of purification after having given birth and is reintegrated into society.

This book is essential reading for all Cervantes scholars as well as scholars of the early modern period in general not only because Alcalá Galán provides a nuanced, contextualized interpretation of Cervantes's representation of female characters but also because she brings to the table so much new, historically documented information about the lives of women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain. For those who are interested in historical practices and attitudes toward breast feeding and the abandonment of newborns, Chapter 5 is essential reading, as Alcalá Galán brings to the table information from a variety of sources: historical documents, medical treatises, manuals of behaviour, visual material, and literary texts. By adopting an eclectic methodology and examining often-overlooked characters from different texts, Alcalá Galán persuasively demonstrates that Cervantes represented women who did not fit the mold of the good mother or the chaste wife, and that he did so in ways that honoured the complexities of their experiences and the social traps that they endured. Alcalá Galán is to be congratulated for this major contribution to the fields of *cervantismo* and early modern studies.

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