

Objects of Culture in the Literature of Imperial Spain. Eds. Mary E. Barnard and Frederick A. de Armas. Toronto: Toronto UP, 2013. 326 p. ISBN 9781442645127

The book is a collection of fourteen articles and a prologue. All of them are directly related, as the title indicates, to various objects of culture in the literature of Imperial Spain. The reference of "objects of culture" is not necessarily what we may associate with those kinds of objects, since they are not limited to famous or influential objects of art. Instead, the reader should expect to find analyses that take into account objects such as "clothing, paintings, tapestries, playing cars, enchanted heads, materials of war, monuments, and books themselves" (ix). Furthermore, the meaning of "culture" is not narrow (i.e., referring only to having a good education and/or "savoir-faire"), since it includes, just to name three illustrative examples, notions such as (1) the way of life of the audience to explain how Tirso uses portraits as "effective stage devices" (Christopher B. Weimer 113); (2) "the cultural resonance of the gambler" (Frederick A. de Armas 57) as it applies to "La novela del curioso impertinente" in *Part I* of *Don Quixote*, and (3) the "ocularcentrism of early modern epistemology" (Emilie L. Bergmann 143) applied metaphorically to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz *Primer Sueño*.

The purpose of the book is "to understand the various ways in which writers of the . . . [period] appropriated those objects for their own aesthetic, social, religious, and political purposes" (xii). Furthermore, the perspective of the analyses is limited to the performative aspect of the objects taken into consideration: "our emphasis is on writing as a way of preserving and transforming these cultural objects as the "resonate" in their performative role" (xiv); therefore, the main goal of the book may be summed up a collection of attempts to explain some of the ways in which authors of the period took advantage of the performative aspects of the objects of their culture (broadly understood), in order to produce the desired social, political or religious effects.

The book is divided into three main sections, which depend on the performative aspect of the kind of objects being considered: "objects of luxury and power"(1-118), "the matter of words" (121-202) and "objects against culture" (205-316). The general strategy in all the articles is to explain what the object in question *did* (how it performed, how it was

understood) during the period, and then apply that particular performance to the text being interpreted. For example, in the first section María Cristina Quintero explains the performance of objects that signify power, and then she applies that performance to Calderón's *La Gran Cenobia* (80-98); in the second section Heather Allen considers the cultural/political significance of the book of hours in order to explain how its inclusion, its veiled inclusion, or exclusion in three versions of the conquest informs us of the socio-political purposes of the respective authors that wrote them (121-140); and in the last section Ryan E. Giles explains the efficacy of the prayer of the *emparedada*, a "printed amulet" (228), and then he explains how that efficacy seriously undermines Lazarillo's relative material success at the end of his autobiography.

The strong general tendency of the articles is to find how the performance of objects problematizes, affirms and undermines at the same time, or calls into question, the surface intention/reading of the text being interpreted; therefore, were we to consider the theoretical approach of the articles, the conclusion would be that they exhibit a post-modern and even deconstructionist (at times) influence. Readers that share this kind of theoretical approach should find the articles especially valuable.

All the articles in the collection are quality work, in the sense that all of them present the reader with solid, well-researched investigations of how the objects performed during the period, and then they offer interpretations that are grounded solidly on that research. For example, Carolyn A. Nadeau investigates the role of the host of a feast in detail, the kind of food that ought to be served and the kind of things one ought to say and avoid saying in a banquet, and then, with this solid investigation backing up her argument, she argues convincingly that the feast in *La Celestina* subverts conventions: "the banquet celebration in Act IX . . . does not reveal the lofty ideals of virtue . . . but rather it shows . . . hunger . . . [and] repressive social structures" (223). This kind of procedure (solid investigation combined with rigorous argumentation at the center of the interpretation) applies to all the articles in the collection, but I have chosen to use Carolyn A. Nadeau's article as the example because it has proven to be especially relevant for my own research: it applies strongly not only to understand the banquet scene in *La Celestina*, but also, and just as strongly, to the interpretation of the work as a whole.

Finally, even though the three sections in the book (power, words, rebellion) do not mention as their primary targets other themes that are equally relevant, such as for example the performance of objects in terms of their cultural actions in relation to morality or religion, some of the articles do consider those themes as well. For example, in regards to morality, Luis F. Aviles investigates Aristotle's distinction between prudence and cleverness in order to explain why Scipio is clever but imprudent (252-276); and in relation to religion, Ryan A Giles takes into account the performance of religious objects starting in the Middle Ages in Spain when he interprets *El Lazarillo* from the perspective of the prayer *La Emparedada*.

Overall, given the high quality of the articles and the broad scope of themes covered in the collection, the book adds value to the fields of material studies, performance, and needless to say, the literature of Imperial Spain.

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