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Review of Lauren Beck, *Illustrating El Cid: 1498 to Today*

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Beck, Lauren. *Illustrating El Cid: 1498 to Today*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. xvii + 251 pp. + 33 ill.

There are few literary or historical figures as familiar to and revered by the Spanish public today as the country's legendary hero Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, better known as the Cid. Prized for his skill in battle against the Muslim enemy, as well as his loyalty and sense of justice, the Cid has been and continues to be a national icon and model of comportment for boys and men. The evolution of his identity, with its myriad political appropriations at home and abroad, is long and complex, shaped by the blurred boundaries between the categories of fiction and history.

It is precisely this evolution that Lauren Beck analyzes in an ambitious project that presents the first bibliography of all the illustrated editions of the Cid's story. Using a transhistorical approach that spans more than five centuries of material, this study examines both the staying power and transformations of certain features and symbols that appear in the illustrated corpus. It demonstrates the inherent malleability of representations of the Cid and provides a window into the social constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, religion and the concept of the medieval in each historical period of image production. In analyzing these changing constructions, the author remains attentive not only to innovations in illustration technologies, but also to shifts in the values, desires, and economic capital of the cidian audience. The result is a rigorously researched, richly intersectional study that offers valuable insights on the underpinnings of national identity formation that continue to influence Spanish politics today.

Beck organizes the analysis in five chapters, with the first dedicated to the parallels between illustrations of the Cid and those of a second legendary figure: Santiago Matamoros, Spain's patron saint believed to have miraculously appeared alongside Christians on the battlefield during the Reconquest. Historically, images of Santiago have adopted a fixed posture in which the Christian warrior, from atop his horse, slays the Muslim enemy on the ground who desperately looks to him for mercy. As Beck documents, this meme is exclusively grafted onto representations of the Cid relatively early in his illustrated history and is significant in that it inscribes the Cid and Santiago in a national mythology as respective historical and spiritual saviors of the country. For both legendary men, the meme offers a verticality in the imagery that underscores their brute masculine power over a weak, feminized, and immoral foe.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Beck moves on to consider the role that gender has played in constructing the potency of the Cid's heroism. The critic points out that

the stability of the Cid's medieval masculinity, still valued today as instructive for boys and men, contrasts sharply with the relative instability of medieval femininity across the centuries. To develop this point, the analysis focuses on several symbols that signify idealized masculinity, including the Cid's beard and his swords. For instance, Beck notes how the latter embody the transfer and subsequent return of the Cid's daughters in marriage, who have been described as the warrior's possessions as recently as in a 2008 edition. Indeed, as Beck astutely points out, the qualities of strength, bravery and loyalty continue to be reserved exclusively for men in the illustrations of the cidian corpus, while female characters remain cloaked in weakness and submission, even in the face of growing feminist activism in Spain. Furthermore, Beck shows that, as illustrated books have become destined for a juvenile audience, the image of the Cid's daughters has been increasingly sanitized. In what is arguably one of the strongest sections of the book, Beck explains that the early modern illustrations of the emblematic Afrenta de Corpes episode, in which Elvira and Sol are stripped and beaten by their husbands, may have constituted some of the first pornographic images in Spain, inviting readers to voyeuristically consume the women as sexual objects. This is markedly different from what we see in editions from the modern period, in which the women remain clothed and without visible signs of violence, a tactic that effectively recasts a sexual crime against women as a less egregious offense. This should strike us as a key observation at a time when femicide, sexual assault and domestic violence continue to increase in Spain.

After exploring the often-neglected roles of the female characters in the Cid's story, Beck moves on in Chapter 4 to consider how gender intersects with race and ethnicity to create a visual language that Orientalizes both the Cid's Muslim enemies and collaborators, as well as the broader Spanish nation itself. This chapter is provocative, significant, and well contextualized. Beck clearly explains that medieval and early modern Orientalism relied on the racist ideology of the white European Christian man, who applied harmful binaries and dehumanizing myths of sameness to populations he perceived as different, regardless of their geographic location. In the illustrated cidian corpus, this resulted in the use of essentialist symbolism in the form of crescent moons, curved swords and oversized turbans, all designed for the reader's easy identification of the Muslim foe. In looking transhistorically at these images, Beck documents that, despite enhanced knowledge and periods of sustained contact with Muslim communities, illustrators have not abandoned these archetypes to show more diversity in Muslim characters. The critic convincingly argues that the homogeneity of the Muslim Other is atemporal because

Westerners have conceptualized Islam and Muslim people as “unmodern.” In Beck’s words, “it appears that medievalness can subordinate knowledge and replace it with essentialism” (124).

In the concluding chapters of the book, Beck explores how the Cid and his narrative have featured in the advancement of political agendas among individuals, institutions, and cities, both within Spain and outside its borders. Chapter 5 focuses on the Monasterio de San Pedro de Cardeña and the city of Burgos as sites with a vested interest in the cidian narrative. The Cid’s relics continue to generate both nationalist pride and wealth in these places, most notably through tourism. In this same chapter, Beck also considers Francisco Franco’s appropriation of the Cid’s story and image to paint himself as a national savior beloved by the Spanish public. In Chapter 6, Beck rounds out the book with a discussion of how foreign nations have disseminated Orientalized images of Spain throughout Europe in illustrated translations of the cidian romances. Focusing on Johann Gottfried von Herder’s bestselling 1838 edition, Beck shows how German, British, and French artists decorated the pages of the Cid’s story with exotifying features reminiscent of Al-Ándalus. These same images later made their way into Spanish language editions within Spain, where they helped solidify racial archetypes that persist in children’s books today.

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