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Book Review of Syzigias y cuadraturas lunares by Manuel Antonio de Rivas

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Book Review of *Syzigias y cuadraturas lunares* by Manuel Antonio de Rivas

Abstract

Syzigias y cuadraturas lunares was written by friar Manuel Antonio de Rivas, a member of the Franciscan order in the Yucatán Peninsula, New Spain, in 1775. The text is the earliest known example of a marvelous journey to the moon written in the New World. In addition to narrating the lunar voyage and scientific experiments of one Onésimo Dotalón in its thirteen-odd pages, it also contains elements of the history of an advanced lunar society, directly and indirectly engages scientific and religious debates of the times, and makes thickly veiled references to figures of the day. As Carmen F. Galán states in her prefatory study, 'es un manuscrito con demasiadas intenciones' (38), though herein also lies much of the fascination of this work both for Galán and for the reader.

Disciplines

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Comments

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MANUEL ANTONIO DE RIVAS, *Syzigias y cuadraturas lunares...*

Edición y estudio de Carmen F. Galán. La Serpiente Emplumada 38. México DF: Factoría Ediciones. 2010. 159 pp.

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Syzigias y cuadraturas lunares was written by friar Manuel Antonio de Rivas, a member of the Franciscan order in the Yucatán Peninsula, New Spain, in 1775. The text is the earliest known example of a marvelous journey to the moon written in the New World. In addition to narrating the lunar voyage and scientific experiments of one Onésimo Dotalón in its thirteen-odd pages, it also contains elements of the history of an advanced lunar society, directly and indirectly engages scientific and religious debates of the times, and makes thickly veiled references to figures of the day. As Carmen F. Galán states in her prefatory study, ‘es un manuscrito con demasiadas intenciones’ (38), though herein also lies much of the fascination of this work both for Galán and for the reader.

Syzigias is a text that sits between genres—it is sometimes satire, sometimes utopia, proto-science-fictional imaginary voyage, or scientific treatise—and also between traditions, as the Baroque was slowly giving way to the Enlightenment, and the hermetic and experimental sciences coexisted often without clear separation. According to Galán, Rivas tended toward a more modern worldview, and for a cleric in eighteenth-century New Spain, this also made him particularly vulnerable to accusations of heresy. The Enlightened tendencies in *Syzigias* indeed contributed toward the Inquisition’s case against Rivas, though, as Galán demonstrates, the charges seem far more motivated by political infighting within the Franciscan order than by any religious transgressions. Indeed, the only extant copy of the original manuscript of *Syzigias* was discovered in the Inquisition collection of the Archivo General de la Nación in the 1950s by Pablo González Casanova (see his *La literatura perseguida en la crisis de la colonia*. México:

Colegio de México, 1958). It is bound together with an almanac for 1775 (this *Almanaque* begins on the same page where *Syzigias* ends) and is archived with other documents pertaining to Rivas's case, though Galán notes that there are many gaps in these documents and they are not in chronological order.

Because *Syzigias* has been republished a number of times, including quite recently, it is incumbent upon the reviewer to include a brief overview of those editions of the text that are most readily available as well as to indicate additional scholarship on the work. *Syzigias* was first republished with a brief page-and-a-half introduction and forty-eight useful footnotes by Ana María Morales ("Un viaje novohispano a la luna [ca. 1772], de fray Manuel Antonio de Rivas, franciscano." *Literatura Mexicana* 5.2 [1994]: 555-68). Subsequently, a number of longer studies appeared, such as Miguel Ángel Fernández Delgado's various essays, including the Rivas entry in *Latin American Science Fiction Writers: An A-to-Z Guide* (Ed. Darrell B. Lockhart. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. 168-70), and Aaron Dziubinskyj's "The Birth of Science Fiction in Spanish America" (*Science Fiction Studies* 30.1 [2003]: 21-32). In 2009 Carolina Depetris published the first book-length edition of the text: *Sizigias y cuadraturas lunares...* [note spelling variations] (Mérida: Universidad Autónoma de México, 2009). Depetris includes two introductory essays of some twenty-five pages, a somewhat modernized transcription of *Sizigias* with thirty-six useful footnotes, thirty-odd pages of transcribed documents from the Inquisitorial case against Rivas, and also a complete facsimile edition of *Syzigias* itself.

Galán's *Syzygias* includes an introductory essay of ninety-odd pages and a diplomatic edition of Rivas's tale, a strict transcription of the only known original manuscript. Her edition also includes twenty-six brief footnotes to the text, a somewhat helpful glossary of terms, a diplomatic edition of the *Almanaque*, one other document from the Inquisitorial case, seven

images from various sources that illustrate arguments made in the introductory essay, and a Bibliography. Hers is the longest study of *Syzigias*, containing the most in-depth discussion of the history of the text (including lengthy quotations from other documents from the Inquisitorial case) and detailed analysis of the scientific and literary milieu from which it emerged. The inclusion of the text of the almanac is also valuable, as Galán draws connections between *Almanaque* and *Syzigias* and traces what the composition of such a work establishes about the scientific background of Rivas and the degree to which the experimental sciences had penetrated the Spanish colonies. Galán's prefatory study would benefit from a more thorough grounding in the terminology and history of the proto-science fiction tradition that informs *Syzigias* provided by sources such as Dziubinskyj, Fernández Delgado, and Marjorie Hope Nicolson's landmark study *Voyages to the Moon* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948). The clarity of Galán's prose suffers in places, though her summative remarks for each section of the introduction are excellent. Though the reader may desire to supplement a reading of this edition of *Syzigias* with other editions, depending on interests and needs, Galán's edition does provide the most archival contextualization of the work and contributes an invaluable piece of scholarship on this remarkable tale.

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