

Illusions, Irreverence, and Inquisition: A History of Ideas in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish World

KATRINA OLDS

In 1789, the Spanish watchmaker, metallurgist, and inventor Joaquín Muñoz Delgado was prosecuted for blasphemy by the Inquisition in Mexico. Muñoz Delgado's unusually rich inquisitorial trial record reveals a biography that, with its many near-misses, prison escapes, and unscrupulous deeds, resembles the plot of a picaresque novel. Like the rogues who protagonized so many Golden Age Spanish novellas, Muñoz Delgado was a jack-of-all-trades, always on the move in search of a well-placed patron to support his multifarious schemes. As he traveled through Spain, the Caribbean, and Mexico, he played many different roles – all of them imperfectly and often scandalously – including that of militia captain, physician, magician, and mining engineer. Yet Muñoz Delgado's expertise was not entirely fraudulent, nor were versatility and cunning his province alone. To the contrary, everywhere he found other religiously skeptical, scientifically curious, literate men – including wigmakers, soldiers, and royal bureaucrats – several of whom were, like Muñoz Delgado, eventually arrested for blasphemy by the Inquisition in Mexico. Just as the tribunal was unable to rein in this shape-shifter, who disappeared across the Atlantic rather than serve out his sentence, the Inquisition writ large found itself unable to restrict the movement of ideas from France and beyond. While the high political and intellectual history of Enlightenment-era Spain and Latin America are well known, the social and intellectual demimondes which Muñoz Delgado traversed remain relatively obscure to scholars. Muñoz Delgado's case reveals the fertile terrain where charlatantry, erudition, artisanal practice, and popular culture intersected, at the margins of, but not completely separate from, high culture. In this way, Muñoz Delgado's social and intellectual journeys help illuminate an understudied history of ordinary or vernacular Enlightenment in Spain and its territories, one that sheds new light on hitherto disparate bodies of scholarship, including the history of science and of medicine, of books and reading, and of the history of ideas in popular culture.

In his reading materials and practices, Muñoz Delgado epitomizes the contradictions of the long eighteenth century: this was a man who sneered at the supernatural, and regarded himself as one of the very few truly wise men of his age, but who also claimed to have invented a perpetual motion machine. Indeed, in his kaleidoscopic range of hands-on interests and pursuits, constant search for patronage, and misplaced optimism in his own talents, Muñoz Delgado resembles not so much a modern skeptic as that proverbial charlatan and jack-of-all trades, the alchemist. As Tara Nummedal and other historians of science have suggested, there were many such men – and some women – like Muñoz Delgado in early modern Europe, everyday practitioners of a miscellaneous mix of skills and pursuits sometimes lumped together as “alchemy,” who, like Muñoz Delgado, often faced accusations of fraud.

This combination of skepticism and credulity helps explain Muñoz Delgado's idiosyncratic reading of another book, one not usually associated with natural philosophy or religious skepticism in the eighteenth century: Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. In the decades and centuries after the publication of its two parts (in 1605 and 1615, respectively), the *Quijote* was widely disseminated in the territories of the Spanish Atlantic. Yet Muñoz and his circle of friends in Mexico did not share the common perception of Cervantes' novel and its protagonist as the object of jovial ridicule and laughter. Rather, for Muñoz and his friends the ludic tone of

Quixote was a smokescreen which concealed the text's true nature as a vicious critique of Christianity. Cervantes' novel was as a cipher – a book of secrets, in a sense – which very few, not even the Inquisition, had been able to decipher.

If *Quixote* the novel was a heuristic tool for skeptics such as Muñoz Delgado, it can also be read as an unwitting metaphor for his Muñoz's life, in which he confronted some of the same dilemmas around honor – and played with the same ambiguities about illusions and reality – as did Cervantes's protagonist. Like his fictional counterpart, Muñoz Delgado believed himself to be honor-rich but cash-poor. It was said that he still wore the captain's uniform from his former militia unit in Havana, even though it had long ago been disbanded; like Quixote, wearing his makeshift armor around the Spanish countryside, Muñoz was determined to appear respectable, and in so doing, gave off the distinct impression of desperation and perdition.

This paper will examine whether this latter-day Quixote believed his own delusions, of what windmills *he* was tilting at, and ask, more broadly, how we should tell his story as part of a history of a “magical” eighteenth century – one that takes into account enchantment, credulity, and illusions, not only as the foils to modernity, but co-constitutive with its emergence.