

## *To Embody the Marvelous:* The Making of Illusions in Early Modern Spain

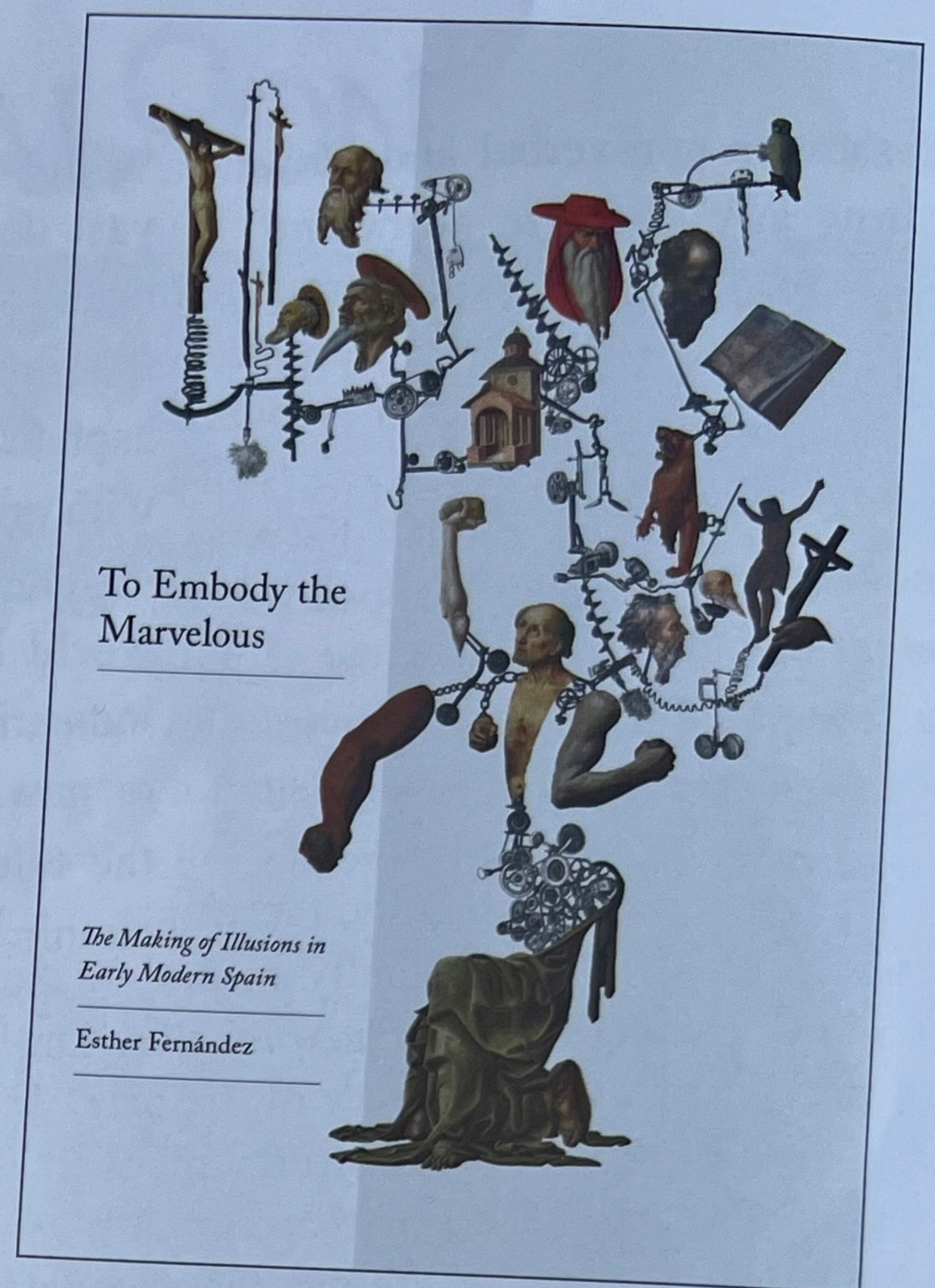
by Esther Fernández

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2021. 284 pages.

*To Embody the Marvelous* looks upon various ways that 16th and 17th century religious practitioners, authors, playwrights, and others undertook the task of creating supernatural events in both live performance and within novels and plays. Such fantastical “stagings” served a variety of purposes, and Dr. Fernández guides us through their various manifestations and the ways in which they reflected the concerns of their viewers.

The book begins by introducing the large, variously-articulated wooden figures of Christ (the *Cristo articulado*) and other religious figures. The precise use of the large “puppets” is of necessity somewhat speculative. Dr. Fernández does an excellent job of describing existing examples (in museums and religious settings in Spain and beyond) and the figures’ individual capabilities (such as the ability to shed tears). Using primary textual sources and images, she subsequently postulates their use in religious ceremony. In doing so, she effectively argues how such figures (even during times when the use of Christian iconography was highly controversial) reinforced faith and elicited the sense of wonder and awe that religious leaders desired for their followers. She draws a clear distinction between such obviously inhuman figures and the animated, realistic statues of mythology and literature.

Dr. Fernández continues by discussing how the smaller, lesser-known figures of the *máquina real* performances served to dramatize the lives of the saints (and in some ways could be seen as more acceptable forms of performance than the human theatre). In meeting the needs of the popular theatre, these plays frequently emphasized the dramatic aspects of their earlier lives. Dr. Fernández observes that the action-driven plots recounting saints’ early struggles proved far more popular with audiences than the contemplative themes of their later saintly lives. And since plays inevitably needed to conclude with the spiritual elevation of their protagonists, puppets—so effective in action—also proved highly effective as objects of veneration. As she observes, puppets are “unique props for engaging with new alternative languages and realms such as the cult of saints.”



The perspectives of Dr. Fernández reflect her appreciation of the religious and creative aspects of puppet performances, both in the historic record and in modern times. She cites the uneasiness she felt during one encounter with puppet figures, and she is willing to draw upon that experience to empathize with the sense of awe, wonder, and uneasiness that early viewers likely experienced. (While the book offers explanations of relevant Catholic religious practices, my own lack of personal experience did limit my appreciation of the mysteries being enacted and their significance to the faithful.) While deeply grounded in archival scholarship (the book is also well supported by illustrations), her discussions are refreshingly open to the insights that contemporary artists are able to offer. She discusses modern ceremonial practices and theatrical interpretations of their earlier manifestations. Jesús Caballero, working with La Máquina Real, an artist collective based in Cuenca, has researched and staged plays from the classic repertoire. She places special emphasis upon Ana Zamora’s contemporary staging of *Misterio del Cristo de los Gascones*, which featured a life-sized articulated Christ figure manipulated in the manner of Japanese *ningyo jōruri* puppets, noting that:

While most spectators nowadays do not look to strengthen their religious faith inside a commercial theater auditorium, they are open to engaging with questions loaded with theological and philosophical implications [. . .] when presented through an eclectic, innovative performance that highlights the mixed company of human and nonhuman actors. (53)

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The book offers far more than descriptions of the history and practice of such figures (or parallel performance techniques, such as those of the shadow theatre and automata). Dr. Fernández shows how the use of such creations could serve as metaphors for contemporary political and cultural developments. Most importantly, she observes that the figures' complex mechanisms themselves provided viewers with powerful experiences of the wonders of scientific thought. The design and engineering feats that enabled such miracles—regardless of whether or not the observer believed in the actual supernatural nature of the event—were in themselves subjects of amazement. She shows how religious awe and the sense of wonder that can be inspired by a greater understanding of the scientific mysteries of the universe are very closely related.

The book proceeds to examine the work of Cervantes as novelist and playwright, especially in the “Master Pedro’s Puppet Show” chapter of *Don Quixote*. Here Dr. Fernández is developing a kind of new theory of the marvelous object/event, and one in which the “destruction” of the object (as in *Don Quixote*’s disruption of the puppet play) has deep significance. In this way, she shows that the destruction of illusion—the revelation of the principles behind a human-made, miraculous vision—becomes as important as the illusion itself. I am not qualified to comment upon how closely they relate to theories related to performing objects, but I did find the discussion fascinating. She draws direct links between Cervantes’ likely exposure to the Sicilian *opera dei pupi* when living in Palermo and Messina to his depiction of the puppets (in multiple aspects) within *Don Quixote* and other writings.

She then shows how Cervantes’ themes found homes in early twentieth century works by Lorca and, of course, Manuel de Falla’s operetta, which itself receives in-depth analysis.

Dr. Fernández also looks at the work of playwright Calderón de la Barca and his own examinations of the marvelous. Much of the analysis here moves away from conventional puppetry and into the world of scenic properties in two of his plays, one featuring a cupboard that leads to a secret passageway and provides a metaphorical representation of the protagonist. (Some such scenic elements may still fall within the realm of the performing object.) The discussion continues to develop ideas established when discussing the earlier figures and deception inherent in those early, articulated religious figures.

The deep scholarship of Dr. Fernández’s study is firmly rooted in her extensively researched appreciation of the historical, cultural and literary aspects of her subjects. But she also demonstrates a firm appreciation for the practical aspects of performance and audience expectations (including those of contemporary revival efforts). As a result, *To Embody the Marvelous* is a dense, multi-faceted and utterly fascinating study that will certainly bear multiple readings.

—review by **Bradford Clark**  
Bowling Green State University

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