Barletta, Vincent. *Covert Gestures: Crypto-Islamic Literature as Cultural Practice in Early Modern Spain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 195 pp. ISBN 0-8166-4476-4

If you have never heard of *aljamiado* literature, you now have a good reason to familiarize yourself with the topic. Vincent Barletta's book, *Covert Gestures*, with its fresh, interdisciplinary approach and originally conceived studies, will do a great deal to interest Hispanists in a Spanish literary tradition that has been neglected for centuries.

Barletta's object of study is the literature of the Moriscos, the Spanish Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity after the formal prohibition of Islam in 1502. Written in Castilian or Aragonese but in Arabic characters, *aljamiado* texts are the final witnesses of Spanish Islamic life that ended with the expulsion of the Moriscos in the early 17th century. *Aljamiado* literature consists largely of Islamic religious texts, but also includes examples of Romance and Epic. For the scholar of Early Modern Spain, it is the sole voice of Spanish Islam after 1492, one nearly completely silenced by the bonfires of Inquisition.

Barletta takes a boldly novel approach to the study of *aljamiado* and Morisco studies, traditionally the domain of historians and philologists. He combines philology, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, phenomenology, and literary/cultural approaches in his study of the emergent, socially constructed contexts and meanings of *aljamiado* texts. His overarching argument is that the literary, social, and ritual uses of *aljamiado* texts helped to define and preserve the Morisco communities of Early Modern Spain through the construction of a communal sense of time. In the introduction, he lays out his methodology, and gives an overview of the demographic and historical situation of Spanish Morisco communities in the 16th century. In chapter 1, Barletta details some of the problems with approaching *Aljamiado*-Morisco narrative as a traditional literary critic, and explains his own approach. He details the folkloric nature of the texts, fleshes out the socio-religious context of their use, and discusses the problems involved with the manuscript traditions.

Chapter 2, "Written Narrative and the Human Dimension of Time," frames the use of *aljamiado* texts as a way for Moriscos to "make sense of their complex and precarious existence in Spain" (31). In Chapter 3, "Contexts of Rediscovery and Contexts of Use," Barletta contrasts the contexts of use of *aljamiado* literature for the 16th century Morisco communities with those of modern literary scholarship. Early Modern Morisco audiences "negotiated, questioned, and aligned themselves with their communal and personal identities" (77) through *aljamiado* narrative texts. Three hundred years later, the 19th century literary scholars who 'rediscovered' *aljamiado* literature envisioned it either as a pedagogical tool for Spaniards to learn Arabic, or as fodder for Romantic historical novels about the 16th century Moriscos. In chapter 4, "The Prophet is Born, Muslims are Made" Barletta discusses the uses of the traditional tales recounting the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, both in the education of teenage Morisco boys and in the community-wide celebration of the Prophet's birthday, *Mawlid an-nabi'*.

Chapter 5, "A Morisco Philosophy of Suffering and Action," studies the traditional tale of the Sacrifice of Ishmael in the context of historical reality and ritual practice. Formulaic prayers in Arabic are woven into the tale, linking narrative with ritual practice of a community that feels itself about to be sacrificed at the altar of Christian religious hegemony. Chapter 6, "Language Ideologies and Poetic Form," deals with the *Poema de Yuçuf* as an example of how

Author's open access post print version. For scholarly record, refer to publisher's version:
Wacks, David. Review of Barletta, Vincent. *Covert Gestures: Crypto-Islamic Literature as Cultural Practice in Early Modern Spain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. *Hispania* 89.1 (2006): 50-52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20063229>

linguistic practice can reinforce a community's sense of a shared past, while simultaneously grappling with its precarious present and unknowable future.

Barletta has written his book expressly for the non specialist, and the reader benefits from his strengths as a teacher. He thoroughly contextualizes and explains the various theoretical approaches he includes, commenting all the way on the specific problems of adapting it to the particular realities of *Aljamiado*-Morisco narrative practice. The resulting study offers the reader a double education: one in *aljamiado* literary studies and the history of 16th century Spanish Islam, the other a rich overview of important currents in sociolinguistics and related fields as pertains to his material.

Real interdisciplinary work will inevitably draw accusations of dilettantism, and indeed, as Barletta himself predicts (2), his study may seem too literary and qualitative for the social scientist, too scientific and extra-textual for the literary critic, too speculative for the philologist. One cannot please all readers at all times. But then again, why would one want to?

This having been said, *Covert Gestures* is a clearly a valuable contribution to *aljamiado* literary studies. In fact, it is a very useful resource solely on the merit of the theoretical material brought together by Barletta. Even those literary scholars whose interest in *aljamiado* literature is casual or accidental at best will benefit a great deal from the theoretical and methodological sources Barletta brings to light. Barletta's book will draw the attention of non-specialists, challenge the methodological habits of specialists, and provide a model of interdisciplinarity for both. It may even help to awake in us Hispanists a desire to restore Spanish Islam to memory, after centuries of Inquisition and institutional 'forgettury.'

David Wacks
University of Oregon