Libro reseñado
Eric J. KARTCHNER (2005),
Unhappily Ever After:
Deceptive Idealism in Cervantes’s Marriage Tales,
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This study is yet another addition to the burgeoning collection of criticism based on the premise that “Cervantes is more liberal and post-modern than unenlightened readers think.” Like most such efforts, it purports to establish a theoretical basis that will allow the reader to assert that the stories mean the opposite of what they say.

Kartchner bases his interpretation on two concepts: metafiction (also referred to as self-reflective and self-conscious texts) and “deceptive idealism,” a term borrowed from Friedman. According to Kartchner, signs of the presence of metafiction include the naming of characters, multiple intrigues, doubles, etc., in essence, just about every narrative device in the author’s toolbox. These strategies, according to the critic, “undermin[e]” the romantic conventions and therefore, the explicit idealism of the stories’ plots and endings, “demonstrat[ing] self-consciousness” (p.11) on the part of the texts. Thus, “In spite of the narrators’ declaration of post-marriage happiness, marriage often appears to be more a conventional narrative closure that a reverent
enactment of holy vows that will seal the characters in an eternal bond of happiness” (p. 15).

The paradoxical nature of this approach is evident in the brief summary above. First of all, Kartchner admits that “metafiction, in a sense, is a function of critical discourse” (p. 26), and that “we read as much into a text as we do out of it” (p. 27), which contradicts his argument that “the metafictional elements [are] present in the marriage tales” (p. 11, emphasis added). Secondly, we can question whether something created non-living can be “self-conscious” or “self-reflexive.” What such terms really seem to be saying is that the *author* is conscious of the fictive nature of his work, is aware that conventions are only that, and that readers are (perhaps) ingenuous for enjoying stories that end “y vivieron felices y comieron perdices.” Since fiction in the seventeenth century remained a fraught category, authors were, if anything, even more conscious of its slippery nature than the postmodern reader. If this is the case, then the elements that communicate such an idea are less “metafictional” than they are a function of the incipient realism present in even the most idealistic tales, which encode into the fictions themselves the realization that “life is not like this.”

Furthermore, it is anachronistic to speak of “romantic conventions” with regard to Baroque works; there is a distinct difference between “romance conventions” (those that pertain to a narrative genre that in various permutations has existed since classical times) and “romantic conventions” (those characteristic of various literary genres of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century). Therefore, there is no metafictional sleight-of-hand involved in the use of marriage as a conventional closure rather than something that Kartchner seems to regard as more “authentic.” The stories incorporate the assumptions of reverence, sanctity, and life-long happiness into the nature of narrative closure: the stories can end because marriage provides those values to the characters; in other words, their wandering, suffering, and uncertainty are over. We as readers may question whether this would actually be the case (especially in stories such as *El amante liberal* and *La fuerza de la sangre*), because we have been made aware of the level of coercion involved in those values, but the characters and the narrators do not.

Kartchner’s assertion that the *novelas*’ discourse undermine their stories has one especially unfortunate result: it reanimates the age-old stereotypes about women’s responsibility for the crimes committed against them by men, using the language of “empowerment” to argue
that the stories indict them for their desperate attempts to salvage their honor and their lives. He spends several pages contemplating the “suspect” use of doncella in the title of Las dos doncellas. By giving herself to the Duke of Ferrara under the promise of marriage, the tale supposedly makes the noble Cornelia no better than a prostitute. Constanza’s mother in La ilustre fregona is duplicitous, manipulative, and somehow tainted by the double-bind that the regard for honor imposed upon her when faced with rape. Kartchner stops (just) short of claiming that Leocadia invites her own rape to advance her socioeconomic position, and proposes that she actually victimized her rapist, Rodolfo. Furthermore, he overlooked to mention the institution of clandestine marriage in his analysis of those characters that have lost their virginity. Although the Council of Trent had de-legitimized the practice in the sixteenth century, it remained a conventional element in fictions written later. Both Teodosia (Doncellas) and Cornelia, like Dorotea in DQ I, gave themselves to their lovers under what they considered to be religiously and legally binding commitments to make the marriage formal and public later.

It is this kind of fruitless speculation that may have the effect of reducing, rather than elevating, comprehension of Cervantes’s artistry and significance. With all of his Baroque artifice (his contemporaries had no need of postmodern theory to recognize and appreciate the latter), games, and inversions, Cervantes nevertheless writes with a humane, even tender, understanding of his characters’ foibles, while at the same time recognizing the dangers into which they can lead, given the society in which they “live.” I would prefer to think that we can trust him at his word.