LIBRO RESEÑADO

Paul Kong,
The Raiders and Writers of Cervantes’ Archive:
Borges, Puig, and Márquez,
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AUTORÍA DE LA RESEÑA

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At this juncture, any book on Cervantes’ work (not to mention Borges and García Márquez) must answer the question “Does the world need another book on Cervantes?” The response provided by this monograph is a resounding “No.” So pervasive are the problems at both the micro and macro levels that if it were my student’s essay, I would have drawn a line after four pages and written “See me.” Even more dismaying is the way in which readers of the manuscript in draft, editorial boards, and editors have so thoroughly failed this author.

The core of this study is a relatively straightforward, uncomplicated tracing of the “anxiety of influence” suffered by Latin American “Boom” authors writing in Cervantes’ shadow (or, to use Kong’s characteristically odd phrasing, who “are playful with Cervantes’ shadow” [66]). Presumably, to raise it from the level of “term paper” to “scholarship,” the author has encumbered his comparisons with a full battery of copiously cited but poorly digested
post-modern theorizing. One after the other, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan make their appearance (not to mention, by inference, Bakhtin), leaving the author as befuddled by his reading as ever Don Quixote was by his own. Moreover, as in the mad knight’s case, Kong finds his theorists’ discourse so overwhelming that it invades his language: rather than applying, interpreting, or “unpacking” the meaning of his numerous quotes, Kong simply restates them, often using the very same words and expressions that appear in the theoretical text. In contrast, when Kong needs to back up his assumptions with some critical authority, he has none. So, for example, he generalizes that manuscripts are by their nature “often found by chance” and “very often cryptic” (28), which of course describes only a very particular kind of fictitious manuscript. Or, more egregiously, he concludes that Borges’ belief that Argentine writers should demonstrate their literary ability by writing like the Spanish “is a post-colonial response to the European colonization and domination which claims that writing should be coloured with its local culture, which in Borges’s view is a recent European cult” (69). Since when do colonization and domination claim anything about literature?

In short, at the “macro” level, *Raiders* suffers from a lack of conceptual sophistication: its reading of secondary and theoretical sources is nearly always uncritical and superficial. It is also frequently ahistorical, in that it demonstrates little comprehension of phenomenon such as “witches,” which the author insists on reading as a rebellious career choice made by women desiring to upend the patriarchal system, rather than as a crime of which women were accused by a society already implicated in marginalizing them for reasons of socio-economic, marital, or ethnic status. Furthermore, the notion of the “archive,” which is presented as the theoretical underpinning of the study, disappears for long stretches, giving the impression that the primary sources are being shoehorned willy-nilly into disparate theoretical material.

At the “micro” level, *Raiders* is even more peculiar and disturbing. The copyediting is careless at best; typographical and grammatical errors abound. As the description of Borges, et.al., manhandling Cervantes’ shadow suggests, infelicities of word choice and sentence structure are equally numerous. Together they give the impression that Kong is not sufficiently fluent in English to carry out a linguistic task of considerable complexity, or at the very least, would have benefited from the assistance of a committed and sympathetic editor. The evidence implies even less familiarity with Spanish: he appears to be
working from English translations of his primary sources, and not necessarily the best ones. For example, Kong uses “Sobrina” as the name of Don Quixote’s niece (54), when in fact she has no name: *sobrina* is simply the Spanish word for “niece.” Similarly, he keeps referring to the protagonist of *El licenciado vidriera* “drinking the Toledan quince” (68), whereas Cervantes knows that the quince is a fruit, not a liquid: he writes “*en un membrillo toledano dio a Tomás uno destos que llaman hechizos*” (emphasis mine).

In short, a reader is left with little alternative to concluding that some types of discourse are even more pernicious than a badly written *novela de caballerías*, and an undigested would-be post-modern literary analysis like this is certainly one. Although the author presumably did not know any better, the publisher’s editorial board and editors certainly should have.