LIBRO RESEÑADO
ISBN 1-58871-104-8

AUTORA DE LA RESEÑA
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FECHA
22 agosto 2007
The year 2006 saw the publication of two separate volumes of conference proceedings dedicated to the comparative study of Cervantes and Shakespeare. The question might well be asked: why this sudden surge of interest in comparing these two figures? One of the volumes (published by the University of Alicante) explicitly places itself within the context of the Cervantes quadricentenary celebrations, and the other was presumably published in conjunction with the same occasion. But would it not have made more sense to celebrate these two authors together in 2016, the alleged fourth centenary of both of their deaths? Perhaps we will indeed be doing that, less than a decade from now; and in that sense these two volumes are only precursors of many yet to come. These two authors do indeed deserve to be studied together, but for reasons which run much deeper than a supposed (but undoubtedly apocryphal) shared death date.

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This lengthier volume is a collection of essays which were originally presented at a conference held at the University of Huelva in 2004. Divided into two parts, “Cruces de caminos / Crossroads” and “Sendas paralelas / Parallel Paths,” it is a fine anthology of articles written in the traditional mode of comparative literature. The second part is considerably longer than the first (seven essays as opposed to four), with both parts containing some essays in English and others in Spanish. The predominance of Spanish overall may be seen as a reflection of the geographical location of the conference.

The editors explain their vision for the volume in an extremely short “Advertencia preliminar” (the only part of the book—aside from the title—to be translated and printed in both Spanish and English. One might wish that they had seen fit to knit together this heterogeneous collection of essays more tightly, as the preface does not contain even a brief summary of the contents, not even titles or themes of the essays. Their stated aim for the first part is to “entender a cada autor en el contexto natural del otro” (7). Fair enough; but a good comparatist is usually trained to justify the rationale for any given comparative enterprise at the outset. The goal of the second part sounds more convincing: to trace “motivos literarios y culturales, así como poéticos y tradiciones comunes a ambos autores” (8). To my mind, this half is considerably more successful, established as it is upon a firmer basis for comparison (and indeed, provides an explanation for its nearly doubling the length of the first part).

The first essay in the collection, by Richard Wilson, is inexplicably the same exact essay (not even a translation) which he published in the other volume, above. It would have been desirable for this gifted comparatist to find something new to say.

The third essay in the first part, Pedro Javier Pardo García’s “La tradición cervantina en la novela inglesa: De Henry Fielding a William Thackeray” offers a survey of Cervantine influences on the English novel, beginning with Tom Jones (1749) and ending with the Victorian Vanity Fair (1847-8). During this century of English literature, many more Cervantine models were followed than have previously been
identified. The other two essays in the first part, though not appearing together, form a nice pair: Daniel Eisenberg’s piece on John Bowle and José Montero Reguera’s commentary on Luis Astrana Marín. These two modern Hispanists’ assessments of the contributions of two earlier great Hispanists (who also happened to be important cross-cultural figures) offers a rare chance to compare not only two classic authors—Shakespeare and Cervantes—but also two pioneer scholars who studied them.

The second half of the volume opens boldly with Roland Greene’s study of “Shakespeare, Cervantes, and the Project of Early Modern Blood.” While this exciting essay jumps on the bandwagon of contemporary cultural studies, in particular through its attention to the physical body, its limited focus on Don Quijote and The Merchant of Venice almost begs for inclusion of La fuerza de la sangre. Following this strong start is Augustin Redondo’s comparative analysis of Sancho and Falstaff, which—if not exactly original— is still illuminating in its attention to detail. Much more wide-ranging is Valentín Núñez Rivera’s study of madness in Shakespeare and Cervantes, which draws upon such varied sources as Twelfth Night, As You Like It, Hamlet, and Lear for the English material, compared to Don Quijote and El Licenciado Vidriera for the Spanish side. Somewhat clumsier is Jorge Casanova’s yoking together of disparate elements from our two authors to form what is supposedly a study of ekphrasis and emblem, but instead amounts to some cursory comments on images (including author portraits as well as possible similarities of characters like Don Quijote to the recognized engravings published by Alciato).

Any possible monotony of bifurcated comparison is then, happily, broken by Elena Domínguez Romero in her valuable essay on Cervantes, Shakespeare and Montemayor. Focusing on recognized pastoral works such as La Galatea and La Diana, she compares them successfully to Shakespeare’s plays As You Like It and Love’s Labours Lost. The volume is rounded out by Zenón Luis Martínez’s commentary on Renaissance narrative arts, concentrating on the themes of verisimilitude, trabajo / ordeal and moral exemplarity as illustrated by the Persiles and Pericles. Finally, Luis Gómez Canseco and Cinta Zunino Garrido put the finishing touch on this book with their study of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and their respective uses of Apuleius’ Golden Ass. Their source texts for animal metamorphoses range from the obvious El coloquio de los perros and Midsummer Night’s Dream to the somewhat less apparent Comedy of Errors.

A note on the funding for this volume is telling, as it reveals much about the state of the comparative literature field in Spain. A
perfunctory acknowledgement to the Research Plan of the Regional Government of Andalusia contains an important clue to the dynamics at work behind this enterprise: the editors state that the funding for this volume was obtained by combining monies allotted to two different research groups, called Literature and the History of Ideas and Theory and Cultural Studies, respectively. To North American ears, at least, these names sound like banners (or perhaps even rallying cries) for rival factions in academia. The fact that these two research groups were obviously persuaded to cooperate within a Spanish academic setting may be seen as both an admonition and a note of encouragement by North American comparatists. We who are so used to hearing the mantra “cultural studies will bring about the death of literature” can take courage at this proof that such is not necessarily the case. It is an unpleasant fact of U.S. academic life that discussions tend to become polarized before anyone has even started talking, by mere virtue of the fact that participants are automatically labeled and separated into opposing camps. That is not to say the Spanish academic scene cannot also be vicious, but perhaps we can all at least learn something through exposure to different scholarly traditions.


This volume publishes the proceedings from an eponymous conference held at the Universidad de Alicante in 2005. Short and compact, it is also very handsomely produced. Consisting of three parts of two essays each, it is rigorously symmetrical in structure. Surprisingly for a volume published in Spain, it contains four essays in English and only two in Spanish. The first part, “Los géneros literarios en Cervantes y Shakespeare,” opens with a comparative essay by B.W. Ife, “Cervantes and Shakespeare: asymmetrical conversations.” By default, given the lack of a substantive introductory essay by the editor, it serves as an introduction for the entire volume. Ife’s essay is centered around the theme of what he calls “a fundamental asymmetry in the relationship between Shakespeare the
playwright and Cervantes the novelist” (22). He argues that this asymmetry should be embraced, not wished away, as we consider these two writers in the context of two fundamentally different genres. However, in the course of his essay, he finds surprising symmetries also between these two literary giants, stating boldly: “Cervantes’s novel already is a play. Its multiple voices and its parade of genres create a world of illusion which many readers would expect to find in the theatre” (48-9). Alongside his discussion of the two authors Ife develops a parallel argument concerning what he calls an “asymmetry of cultural influence” (32), describing the impact of Spanish literature on English authors, but noting: “The traffic was all one-way . . . there was no equivalent import of English drama, or any form of English literature, into Spain” (32). He proves this point by taking the unusual (and rather preposterous, albeit effective) step of listing books in Don Quijote’s library—containing no English titles, of course—and then constructing a hypothetical list for “Sir Quixote’s Spanish Library” of Spanish titles which an English “Sir Quixote” might have read if he had lived in England. Such outrageous (though amusing) argumentation aside, this essay is a treasure trove of information regarding Anglo-Spanish literary relations of the time period.

The second essay of Part I, Antonio Rey Hazas’ “Cervantes como dramaturgo,” ironically seems to engage in that “fearful pursuit of symmetry” which Ife so vehemently rejects (23). It does this while attempting to level the playing field by focusing only on drama, thereby allowing a discussion of these two authors on the same terms. This essay, though informative, seems to rehash work already published by Canavaggio and others. Rey nonetheless offers confirmation of Ife’s theory that “Cervantes [...] era un autor de comedias incluso en sus narraciones” (73).

Part II of this book strikes one as unusual, given its focus on scholarly editions (as opposed to criticism) and its limited focus upon two great representative works, Don Quijote and Hamlet. In this section, Ann Thompson’s “The challenges of editing Hamlet” is paired with Florencio Sevilla’s “Editar el Quijote según Cervantes.” Once again (whether intentionally or accidentally, it would be difficult to determine), what strikes one immediately is a certain dissonance between the diametrically opposite approaches taken by these two scholars to a similar topic. Thompson reports on her new Arden edition of Hamlet, which includes not two but actually three complete versions of the text, representing the first Quarto, second Quarto and Folio iterations respectively. This approach to scholarly editing would seem
to reflect an almost postmodern undecidability. Meanwhile, Florencio Sevilla insists—flying in the face of nearly all philological tradition—that the editio princeps of Don Quijote is the closest thing we have to the author’s lost manuscript, and should therefore be adhered to with an almost religious sense of loyalty. Refusing to allow for even possible authorial revisions to the first edition, he espouses chronological precedence over all other editorial criteria. While this position might seem outmoded or even (to some) absurd, he supports it with the rather ingenious argument that Cervantes himself recognized certain blatant discrepancies in the princeps and chose playfully to incorporate an overt discussion of them into Part II as yet another layer of his elaborate literary game. Sevilla’s argument is that if subsequent editors correct these obvious errors, they will then face the dilemma of what to do with the corresponding metaliterary discussions in the second part. While this quandary certainly gives one pause, Sevilla’s apparently willful dismissal of 400 years of Cervantine philology seems unnecessarily iconoclastic. One suspects that a certain amount of righteous indignation has crept in to color his judgment, stemming perhaps from the widespread popularity of Francisco Rico’s editions.

Finally, Part III gets around to the business of comparing these two authors explicitly. Richard Wilson’s “‘To Great Saint Jaques Bound’: All’s Well that Ends Well in Shakespeare’s Spain,” has a clever title which is also misleading. It is not so much a reading of this one play as a very useful overview of English / Spanish connections during this time period. Noting that Shakespeare’s plays are full of Spanish exiles, and that “for a supposedly patriotic Englishman the dramatist had a provocative trick of setting happy endings in Habsburg territories of the Mediterranean” (148), Wilson nonetheless observes a conspicuous absence of Spanish settings on Shakespeare’s stage. Concluding that “the Europe Shakespeare presents is split by the same iron curtain as the fractured continent of this day” (149), Wilson presents a detailed picture of (often covert) Spanish / English relations maintained despite the iron curtain, largely by way of religious pilgrimage. It turns out that the play is mentioned in the essay’s title by way of a pun, considering that “the [water] wells that lined the pilgrim routes became covers for Catholic resistance in Reformation England” (158). This somewhat complicated argument nevertheless offers a fascinating glimpse into wishing wells, sea shells and other ritual objects associated with the road to Compostela which were not completely divested of ritual significance when transposed into an English context.

The volume’s editor, José Manuel González, ends this collection on a rather poignant note with his parting commentary, titled simply
“What else after Cervantes and Shakespeare?” At best, this piece repeats Bloomian cliché; at worst, it incongruously focuses on violence and even terrorism as common threads running through these two authors (an approach which must be contextualized within the framework of recent terrorist attacks). As subsequent critics have asked of Romantic interpretations of Don Quijote: where is the humor here? It gets lost in this dark vision, which even goes so far as to label Don Quijote a terrorist (200) (!). It seems to me that this is going rather too far. While we can appreciate González’s observation that “The dichotomy reality-appearance is a major concern in Shakespeare and Cervantes” (188), as well as even possibly his assertion that “Shakespeare and Cervantes also explore the complexity of the tragic aspects of modern man” (194), his persistent emphasis on violence and cruelty seem way over the top and incongruously out of place in an explicitly celebratory volume. His *excursus* on Macbeth and the Gunpowder Plot is not fully developed enough to salvage this line of reasoning. He ends the essay with the paradoxical suggestion that “Shakespeare and Cervantes will continue to attract us when violence, war and terrorism conspire to persuade us against them” (203). This rather weak conclusion leaves us dangling, ending the volume on a sour note. The discordant voices in this collection make for entertaining reading, however, especially when placed in such close juxtaposition to one another. One can only imagine the lively exchanges which must have taken place in person at the original seminar.