

Reviews

Villalba, Estefanía. *Claves para interpretar la literatura inglesa*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1999, 211 p.

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Once read through, *Claves para interpretar la literatura inglesa* leaves the reader with the impression that the author has indeed granted what the title promises. The book does meet its prefatal advertisement, a survey of the traditionally established periods and authors of English literature. This is done concisely, and with order and clarity. However, a work's fitness depends on its purpose and objectives, and how these are met. As it happens, this manual both ails and benefits from the plan to which it was destined and its execution. Which is a way of saying that the book is a mixture of lesser failures and rewarding successes.

As would be expected from a textbook aimed at a non-proficient audience – Villalba's addressees are those with a general interest for English literature and beginner students as, possibly, those reading '2ª Lengua y su Literatura' – its length is reduced, and its critical apparatus limited and sometimes inconsistent (examples of my latter claim appear below). On the other hand, *Claves* offers at the beginning of each chapter an evaluation of the confluence of interdisciplinary areas – history, sociology, economy – conducive to textual and authorial interpretations on more than just the literary level. The selection from the canon, while acknowledging its traditionalism, does fulfil the author's aim: period and author representation, universality and atemporality. This is by no means the whole stock of the book's virtues, as I point out further down.

Yet one of Villalba's pleas in the Preface strikes my attention as a discordant note. Her *excusatio non petita* on the need to include some feminist criticism (p. 10) is justified since, she says, it will allow the reader to bring literature closer to his or her personal world. But then I believe that whatever the critical approach one takes before a literary production, the reader as such is decoding that text as forming part of her or his imaginative world. In other words, one does not necessarily *have* to abide by the feminist contentions to come close to a text. Readers have been doing this for centuries before post-modern feminism was even envisaged.

Far from my intention to vindicate here one particular critical discipline over others. But scientific rigour must rule over personal preference. It is of particular relevance in a work such as *Claves* to eschew partiality, unless it is made clear in the preface or advertisement that the selection and commentary of works will be executed according to one specific critical fashion. Otherwise by definition, the reader who takes up a book such as *Claves*, will *a priori* seek an impartial, encompassing attitude towards English literature.

The danger of favouring one particular *-ism* over others is that some may be left neglected. Of Post-colonialism, for instance, Villalba says little in the closing chapter, an otherwise synthetic and comprehensive survey of the latter critical attitudes towards the

literary canon. She offers a sound analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but misses the opportunity of connecting the coloniser-versus-colonised issue with the current zeal for the so-called 'new literatures'. The amateur student should be given adequate advice, if only for the proliferation of studies on ethnic, marginal, silenced and minority literatures, on the type of discipline that Post-colonialism is becoming. My point here is that all critical modes should be mentioned, but none given preference on the grounds of personal bias, however scientifically committed, as the book vouches for a general view.

It is true that Villalba's concessions to feminist interpretations are limited in number and length. Yet not all of them are fitting. Gilbert and Gubar's protest against Milton's treatment of Eve in *Paradise Lost* (pp. 91-92) seems articulate enough. But it does not seem reasonable to grant a writer like Aphra Behn a separate subsection (pp. 114-16) in the chapter dealing with Dryden and Swift (chapter 5). Not that she should be ignored, far from it. Her prominence as the first English professional female writer is uncontested. But a sense of proportion is needed. As it happens, there is not one allusion, for instance, to Sir Walter Scott. My mention of him is due to the customary concurrence of criticism of his *Waverley* novels with those by Austen: choice of authors in concise reference works is always problematic. But if one must stick to one's guidelines – universality, atemporality, typicality – then one must be consistent. Similar notable absentees, for the same or other reasons, come to mind: Burke, Lord Byron, Gibbon or Tennyson, to give a few examples, are given scanty mention or none at all.

In this light the last chapter poses a clear problem: 'Del Modernismo al Posmodernismo' (pp. 184-204) is an enormous label. In the space of twenty pages, Villalba makes a difficult choice. She sacrifices the mention and interpretation of prominent authors and their works, with the above mentioned exception of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for an overview of the development and proliferation of critical schools over the last hundred years. Her assessment is detailed and rich, but unavoidably, a long array of authors are forgotten, especially as regards Britain's prolific output in the last thirty-odd years.

It is understood that in textbooks of these characteristics space rules over detail, and it is impossible to include each and every one of the authors and philosophers of every single discipline. Yet there are literary and scientific figures that demand a place in every history on their own right. And although Villalba argues, convincingly so, that the novel is the easier and more representative genre for a student's approach to literature (p. 10), it is also true that a reference to first rate authors of all disciplines is essential in all histories.

Other discordant notes are struck with some of Villalba's unfortunate comparisons: equating George Eliot's agnosticism with that of Unamuno's *San Manuel* (p. 178) would be plausible in a reasoned essay on comparative literature, but reads somewhat lamely if mentioned *en passant*. Similarly, one of Villalba's roundest essays, that on Romanticism (pp. 141-54) at some points tends to imprecision. Her account of Shakespeare as one of the 'great romantics', sustained on the grounds that the movement reflects "a series of characteristics that do not fall within one specific period" (my translation; p. 144) is also simplistic. The connection of Heathcliff with King Lear on the grounds of their asocial affective capacity remains as bitty, in spite of its potential cogency, as the parallelism

between the beginnings of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (pp. 54-55). The latter comparison closes the chapter, and is brought to an end before the author has provided proof of its viability. Similar abrupt endings wind up the majority of chapters. An opportunity is missed in them to round off the periods under study, and connect them to the new scene that the following chapter opens.

The author is right in addressing her book to amateurs with an interest in English literature and beginners in the field. Villalba's prose is never complex, and the reader feels grateful for her efforts to elucidate the literary, critical, social and even political and economic terminology she employs. This is also kept to a well-balanced minimum. It is gratifying to read a literary history that does not indulge in unnecessary over-luxuriant sentences that both obscure the author's intentions and clot the reader's mind.

Chapters are clearly divided into broad chronological and stylistic periods, and subdivisions deal with specific authors or groups within one movement or period. The chapters are also introduced by tasty surveys of the socio-political and economic factors that contributed to the appearance and development of the works and writing conventions under scrutiny. In this view the studies of both Chaucer (pp. 33-42) and Shakespeare (pp. 56-68) in their respective contexts, two of many examples, are enlightening and lively. In the like manner, explanations of specific terms – *kenning*, *heiti*, understatement, epiphany, stream of consciousness, etc. – are given and contextualised.

Quotation conventions are loose, as in general longish prose quotations are written in a separate paragraph in smaller type, but for example on page 156, the famous dictum from *Emma* should have been incorporated in the text, as the rest of the shorter quotes. An inconsistent use of italics and quotation marks gets in the way of systematisation when the author uses critical or literary terms, or even authors' names and works. All this variation could have been avoided if the author had chosen to stick to a neutral variant, or better still, the Spanish translation when possible. She should, in my opinion, have stuck to the language in which she chose to write her book. More traditional compilations of English literature in Spanish (e.g. Bestard, J. et al. 1980: *Introducción a la literatura inglesa*, or Pérez, C. 1978: *Temática de la literatura inglesa*) avoid the mixture of languages, even when referring to a term that was born with, and makes specific reference to, a work of literature in English. I acknowledge the untranslatable nature of certain names, and also the usefulness of giving both the English and Spanish variants of a term for the benefit of the reader. But if 'stream of consciousness' (pp. 137 and 188), 'mock heroic' (pp. 100 and 106), 'uncle Toby' (p. 138) or 'happy ending' (p. 164), to give but a few, have perfectly valid and recognised variants, as is the case, there is no reason to shift languages.

Errata of the type '*Gulliver Travels*' (p. 128) and also '*Gulliver Travel's*' (p. 107) would probably pass unnoticed by the inexperienced reader, but indicate a lack of commitment in the proof-reading process. Similarly, Dryden's *Stanzas to Cromwell* become '*Herioque*' (p. 97). Misspellings occur also in some common Spanish words, a taint which should have been put right before the press phase. Poor translations are scarcer, but still evident. 'Gloriosa Revolución' is bad word order, but still worse is its placement in the year 1668 instead of 1688 (p. 77). An easy slip, but one which should have been detected.

No footnotes or endnotes are included in the book's critical apparatus. In addition, both the citation system and the bibliography are an assortment of things. It is understandable that the author would not want to offer an exhaustive list of the works she has drawn on for her research. But then the section called 'Bibliografía' (pp. 205-11) should have been called List of References and Further Reading. It is a useful list as such. The works chosen are representative, and most fall within the critical output of the last fifteen years. But one major problem ails this compilation. The main text has been composed with an English-unskilled reader in mind. By definition, the target readership will not be able to read much of what is recommended, as all of the suggested bibliography, with the sole exception of Bernárdez's works, is written in English.

The citation system is inconsistent. Villalba never makes up her mind as to whether she is going to cite through author, editor, work, or none of the above. We can take for instance the two quoted extracts on page 54, one from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the other from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In the former, the extract carries the citation format '(Chaucer, 1987: 1)', whereas Eliot's extract is cited as '(*The Waste Land*, 1-4)'. Furthermore, Shakespeare's sonnets are cited as '(*Soneto X*)' (pp. 62-64), where the Spanish term is preferred, but which gives no indication as to the page in the reference volume used.

Two items are missing as complements to the contents: a chronological table and an index. Both are extremely useful to the neophyte, the latter is essential to any work of study, be it compilation or research. It is all right to make a work accessible to the general public by presenting ideas in an unsophisticated way and keeping the laborious critical apparatus to a minimum. But it is necessary to provide the scholar and student, whether experienced or not, with the adequate tools.

I am aware that the above are basically technical faults. I am aware also that the author's intention was not to comply to exactness to *MLA* or such other editorial requirements, but her main concern was with the contents, and an approach attractive to a specific readership looking for a chronological literary survey. This, *Claves* achieves with success. The work's greatest virtue is its user-friendliness. Since it seems aimed at those with little or no proficiency in the English language, it is an advantage that the quotations up to the Renaissance period are noted mostly in contemporary English, that is, linguistic modernisations of the originals.

By way of conclusion, I would recommend this manual to the readership to which it is addressed, and to any scholar with the intention of freshening up his or her grasp of the development and formation of the English literary canon. Villalba's command of the field is comprehensive in her choice of authors, both of the literary and critical corpora. She is particularly good at selecting contemporary critics' opinions on earlier authors, such as in her partiality for C. S. Lewis, David Lodge, Gilbert and Gubar or Virginia Woolf to give a few examples. Her exposition of concepts and ideas is clear while approaching her subject from an interdisciplinary point of view. Her chapter endings are somewhat abrupt, but her progression within specific movements is swift, and although by design the work does not afford ample commentary, her synthesis capacity is remarkable. As indicated above, her

manual is deficient in mostly editorial and typographic matters. Those readers in search of keys for the interpretation of English literature will put down her textbook more than satisfied.

Works cited

- Bestard, J. et al. (1980): *Introducción a la literatura inglesa*. Madrid: Sociedad General Española de Librerías.
 Pérez Gallego, Cándido (1978): *Temática de la literatura inglesa*. Zaragoza: Librería General.

Dieter Stein & Rosanna Sornicola (ed.) *The Virtues of Language. History in Language, Linguistics and Texts*. Number 87. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Pub. Co., 1998

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The book reviewed here is part of the series Studies in the History of Language Sciences, established as a companion to the journal *Historiographia Linguística* and contains thirteen papers. These papers are organised into four different sections. The first section is dedicated to the memory of the Austrian-born British scholar Thomas Frank and to his scientific and academic work. The second section includes three papers about the 'History of the English Language' based on literary texts. The author of the first paper, Susan Fitzmaurices, deals with the progressive aspect in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and with other related topics such as grammaticalisation and subjectivity. This paper offers an interesting insight into the origins and development of the progressive aspect during Old English besides providing a textual analysis of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Nicola Pantaleo, author of the second paper analyses the concept of wit in *Piers Plowman* through the dichotomy *scientia/sapientia* which he defines as 'rational acquisition' and 'intuitive grasp of the truth' respectively. The author also comments on some lexical associations with the terms wit and wisdom and provides a morphological classification (un-forms, root manipulation, affix-based and compound-based terms) of the vocabulary used in this literary work. The third paper of this section, 'Relative Sentences in Middle English' by Dieter Stein, is based on a syntactic analysis of relativisers in the *Cely* and *Paston Letters*. This article focuses on the change of relativisers from Old into Middle English, showing through several examples taken from these *Letters* how 'pe' was replaced by 'that' in the 13th century and finally by the wh-series of relativisers such as *which*, *whom*, *whose* and *who*. Stein focuses on the 15th century as most of the research done up to now concentrates on the later stages of the development of the English system of relativization. The author provides an in-depth analysis of over a thousand examples of relativisers in the *Cely* and *Paston Letters*, from which he concludes that the most important relativiser in both documents is 'that', closely followed by 'which'. Stein also checks and examines the occurrences of three specific relativisers in both documents from the syntactic point of view, showing some interesting differences such as