

UC Merced

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

Title

Velázquez, Mariana Cecilia. Cultural Representations of Piracy in England, Spain, and the Caribbean. Travelers, Traders, and Traitors, 1570 to 1604. Routledge, 2023. 235 pp.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0cn843cr>

Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 11(1)

ISSN

2154-1353

Author

Giráldez, Arturo

Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/T411162847

Copyright Information

Copyright 2023 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Velázquez, Mariana Cecilia. *Cultural Representations of Piracy in England, Spain, and the Caribbean. Travelers, Traders, and Traitors, 1570 to 1604*. Routledge, 2023. 235 pp.

ARTURO GIRÁLDEZ
UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC

Atlantic pirates are figures in popular films, novels, operas, and comics. The history of these delinquents has occupied historians for centuries. To cite a late example, *Pirate Enlightenment, or the Real Libertalia* (2019) by David Graber deals with a Madagascar's pirate republic of the eighteenth century and its possible ideological impact on the Enlightenment. Mariana C. Velázquez's book adds to this genealogy from the perspective of cultural studies.

The book studies pirate activities, using textual analysis to examine categories that Spaniards and English employed in debates and propaganda. During what she calls a "piracy cycle" of the Caribbean emerged a conceptualization of piracy present in texts and cartographic representations of historical events. After Francis Drake's capture of Spanish treasure, the concept of piracy became entangled in both countries' politics, religions, and commercial interests. Drake's raid allowed writers in Europe "to craft imperial narratives of power and insert the West Indies into the larger Anglo-Spanish conflict" (13). These narratives stimulated the theories of incipient international law, such as the famous *Mare Liberum* (1609) of the Dutch Hugo Grotius about maritime jurisdictions.

One of the international controversies about the nature of piracy was Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the world in three years (1577-1580). Queen Elizabeth, who knighted him on board the Golden Hind, dramatically welcomed him. This maritime knighthood indicated shifts in English social identities in which the "merchants" of the sixteenth century became "gentlemen" in the following one. In his *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625), Samuel Purchas presented Drake as a hero, indicating the growing status of pilots and the strategic importance of cosmographical information. By 1569, Alonso de Ercilla, in his epic poem *La Araucana*, mentioned the poor Spanish knowledge of the Magellan Strait. The strategic value of such an essential strait between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans was not lost on the British. In 1579, Richard Hakluyt had already addressed a pamphlet entitled *A Discourse of the Commodity of the Taking of the Straight of Magellanus* to the English court. Geographical knowledge was power.

Drake's royal recognition "speaks to an emerging cultural geography marked by maritime flow and exploration" and is the origin of a rivalry with Spain for routes of commerce and colonization (22). Maps depicting Drake's figure or ships were numerous, including one inserted in Peter Martyr's *De orbe novo* (1587). Such cartography symbolized the oceans as a non-Spanish jurisdictional space. According to Lauren Benton, maps were political propaganda "used in intra-imperial controversies over extra-European territorial claims" (96). In these intra-imperial disputes Queen Elizabeth actions challenged the Pope's bull—*Inter caetera* (1493)—distributing the planet between Portugal and Spain and dismissing Philip II claims as "*proprietie that is merely imaginary*" (38). M. Velázquez concludes that "the articulation of the discourse on piracy depended less on claims of robbery and illegitimate reprisals than on the transgression of specific geographical and politicized spaces" (43).

Again, in 1585, Sir Francis Drake sailed from Plymouth and besieged the cities of Santo Domingo and Cartagena de Indias, returning to England with a considerable ransom. The expedition generated an abundance of colonial writings and letters in which discourses about piracy were employed to criticize rivals inside the colonial administration and simultaneously bolster the idea of Spanish imperial power. Polemics about territorial disputes are present, for instance, in Juan de Castellanos' (1522-1607) *Discurso del capitán Francisco Draque*. Velázquez maintains that this literature reflects debates about territorial authority and the appearance of a nascent Creole sensibility.

Chapter 3 of Velázquez's book is entitled "Dangerous Representations of the Caribbean in the Sixteenth Century." It begins with a critical appraisal of Juan de Castellanos's famous work *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias* (1589)—a monumental poem of more than one thousand hendecasyllables in real octave stanzas. Agustín de Zárate, a censor of the Council of Indies, recommended its publication because it addressed the history of Columbus's voyages and the conquest of Caribbean islands that Zárate considered neglected in previous historical accounts. The characters of this epic were the military men and governors such as Fray Nicolás de Ovando y Cáceres, who began the process of discovery and pacification of the Taino and Caribs. In Velázquez's words, Castellanos depicted the Caribbean "as a locus of chaos" (83). The islands were represented merely as a web of ports only useful for the further conquest of continental territories and a proving space to elaborate military strategies and administrative procedures.

Concerning natives, Castellanos wrote that they "infested" the islands—"infestada de todos los caribes comarcanos"—with their "inhumane traditions" creating a dangerous focus of "infection and infestation" (87). Piracy aggravated the situation with its foreign "pestilence." Such a state of affairs required military protection against native and foreign diseases. Illness as metaphor appeared,

for instance, in the friar Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (c.1540-1577), which metaphorically considered idolatry as a *maladie* only to be cured by Christian conversion. Sahagún portrayed the Spaniards as spiritual healers effacing their role as conquerors.

In 1587, Francis Drake unsuccessfully attacked Cadiz; subsequently, both countries prepared for war. The command of the English fleet was given to Admiral Charles Howard, and Drake was under his authority. On July 30, 1588, the Spanish Armada was defeated, boosting English confidence and greatly damaging the prestige of Philip II. The maritime confrontation was parallel to writing controversies about Drake's figure. Velázquez reminds us, "Let's not forget that characters like Drake functioned as metonymies of their respective powers" (135).

To answer Spanish propaganda and the rumor that Drake was dead, *A Packe of Spanish Lyes* was published, containing translations of Spanish accounts and refutations in English. Concerning the famous mariner, it reads: "Drake is returned with honour: his shippe called Revenge is in harborow, ready for a revenge for a newe service" (134). This indefatigable character finally died after an attack on Puerto Rico on his way to Panama. The impact of Drake in his times is attested by Lope de Vega's epic poem *La Dragontea*, versifying Drake's life from his circumnavigation voyage until his death. Obviously, Lope deplored Drake's biography and defended Spanish wars, justifying forced religious conversions and the conquest of the New World.

The criminal nature of piracy was legally defined in the Treaty of London, and further clarification was achieved in the treaties of Westphalia (1648) and Madrid (1750), which distinguished the legality of piracy and privateering. Contemporaneously, piratical activities transitioned from individuals attached to a kingdom to communities of marginal people, the buccaneers, who settled in the Caribbean islands during the seventeenth century.

The Caribbean geopolitical changed in the seventeenth century when the English, French, and Dutch established colonial enclaves that engaged in contraband with Spanish possessions. Miguel Enríquez (c.1674-1743) of Puerto Rico was representative of the mix of legal and illegal trading practices. He supported the Crown in many ways through donations and other favors. From 1704 to 1735, he was a privateer, and during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714), he kept the islands safe from Spain's enemies, England and Holland, relentlessly attacking their ships. Initially, he received royal favor from King Philip V the *Medalla de Su Real Efigie*, making him a knight, and giving him the right to be called "don Enríquez." Unfortunately for him, when diplomatic relations improved between Spain and England, previous activities against the British caused his disgrace. He took refuge in the Carmelite convent of San Juan de Puerto Rico, where he died after eight years of seclusion. His

daughter suspected that her father was poisoned. During these decades, Puerto Rico's contraband and privateering were a prominent part of the island's economy, but surprisingly, currency was scarce. Writing to an associate in Curaçao, Enríquez observed that war and commerce depended on each other and added, "Silver is the principal weapon of commerce." That's why the parrot on *Treasure Island* repeated "pieces of eight! pieces of eight!"; the universal silver currency of the modern era.

The book by Mariana C. Velázquez results from a rigorous scholarship based on documents from the main archives in Latin America and Spain. An up-to-date secondary bibliography complements manuscripts and printed sources. Reading how known historical characters and famous literary works share the chapters with less familiar poems, pamphlets, and people is an intellectual pleasure to show the rich semantics embodied in "the conceptualization of piracy and its repercussions" (204). This rigorous work is an excellent example of "cultural studies" showing manifold relationships between historical events and textuality. Literary scholars and historians will learn much and greatly enjoy reading Velázquez's pages.