

Don Quijote: Cervantes's Liberal Comedy

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Deirdre McCloskey (2019, p. 8) observes that “[i]n the eighteenth century the liberal idea aborning was that every person regardless of age or gender or ethnicity or position in the hierarchy should have equal rights.” Similarly, Peter Boettke (2017-2018, p. 31) defines what he terms the “liberal order” as a conceptual framework predicated upon “basic human equality” that promotes “the mutually beneficial interaction with others of great social distance—overcoming such issues as language, ethnicity, race, religion and geography.” If we therefore think of liberalism as a socially leveling, egalitarian cosmopolitanism, then it is evident that its premises were inoperative in pre-Enlightenment European societies organized according to a rigidly stratified “harmonious inequality” conceived as a metaphorical reflection of the cosmic order created by God.¹ In this regard, early modern Spain was no different. “La realidad política y social que imperó en la España de los siglos XVI y XVII se fundó sobre la idea de que la armonía social residía en la desigualdad funcional” (The prevailing socio-political reality in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain was based on the idea that social harmony stemmed from functional inequality; Rivero Rodríguez 2005, p. 55).² The literature produced in Spain and other early modern European cultures largely accepted the illiberal suppositions of the age, and the corpus of theoretical writings of the period codified and reinforced the pre-existing social structures. On the basis of precepts expounded by Aristotle and Horace, and systematized into elaborate rhetorical structures by Cicero and Quintilian, literary theory prescribed hierarchical compartmentalization of genres and character differentiation determined by essential qualities of collective identity, such as age, sex, social class, profession, race, religion, nationality, and so on. The compositional principle *inventio* governed the selection of these pre-established *loci* or *topoi* (commonplaces).³ Authors and theorists recognized that these categories represented stylized typologies, but the principle of decorum, an indispensable requirement of an appropriate imitation (i.e., work of literature), dictated that characters within each classification speak and act according to an accepted understanding of their common nature. Any deviation from these standards was regarded as unnatural by definition and therefore relegated to the realm of the comic. One of Miguel de Cervantes’s greatest achievements in *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (Part one, 1605; Part two, 1615), and one that legitimately qualifies him as liberal thinker, was to invest fundamentally comic characters with a particularity and dignity that his contemporaries typically denied them.

The dominant representational aesthetic of Cervantes's Spain judged commoners (in the sense of both non-noble and ordinary) as inherently comical and unfit for the heroic genres of epic and tragedy, and it prescribed the use of exaggerated character types to better extol virtue and reprove vice. In other words, it mandated a hierarchical taxonomy of essentialist character traits for fundamentally didactic purposes (López Pinciano 1998, pp. 117-123, 137-138).⁴ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all theorists of comedy followed Aristotle in defining comic characters as worse than average and Cicero in arguing that comedy was predicated upon moral baseness and physical ugliness (*turpitudō et deformitas*; *torpeza y fealdad* in Spanish). In this tradition, laughter was “moralizante y aristocrática” (moralizing and aristocratic) and based upon the idea that only the lower social classes were fit for comedy (Roncero López 2006, p. 325).⁵ The Spanish humanist physician Alonso López Pinciano (1998, p. 343), whose *Philosophía antigua poética* (*Ancient Philosophy of Poetry*) of 1596 was both the first complete treatise on literary theory written in Spain and one that Cervantes certainly knew at first hand, describes the nature of comedy and comic characters by first quoting and then explicating Aristotle:

‘La comedia ... es imitación de peores y no según todo género de vicio, sino según el vicio que es ridículo y mueve a risa, de manera que comedia es imitación del ridículo; y tragedia, del grave.’ ¿No veis las oposiciones manifiestas y que el Philosopho, por buenos y malos, entiende aquí las personas, o graves o ridículas? (‘Comedy ... is an imitation of worse people, not in all manner of vices, but in those that are ridiculous and cause laughter. Therefore, comedy is an imitation of the ridiculous, and tragedy, of the serious.’ Do you not see these manifest opposites, and that by good and bad people, the Philosopher [Aristotle] means those who are either serious or ridiculous?).

The definition of “ridiculous” in the sixteenth century was precisely that which induced laughter. It was the standard adjective to mean comic, before it was displaced in the seventeenth century by *cómico*, derived from *comedia* (both a comic play and theatre in general, including tragedy) (Jammes 1980, p. 4). López Pinciano (1998, pp. 389-390) defines laughter tautologically, “la risa es risa” (laughter is laughter), but he is clear as to the *causes* of the risible: “fealdad y torpeza,” moral and physical ugliness. For example, a person’s face: “como un rostro hermoso mueve a admiración, uno muy feo mueve a risa” (just as a beautiful face causes astonishment, a very ugly one causes laughter). Note especially the high/low framing (beautiful/ugly), a practical illustration of the “manifest opposites” of the serious and the ridiculous that López Pinciano, following Aristotle, defines as the essence of comedy. Other examples of bodily humour are groan-inducingly scatological, but they are worthy of consideration because they render the high/low dynamic physically explicit. To wit: wind that is expelled through the mouth (i.e., a belch) is not funny at all, whereas if it escapes “por la parte contraria, ¿quién hay que no se mueva a risa, especialmente en tiempo y en sazón?” (through the opposite end, who does not laugh, especially at the right time?; López Pinciano 1998, p. 392). The “right time” is not, as we might expect, in a schoolyard. López Pinciano (1998, pp. 392-393) references the widespread but apocryphal story of the poet Juan Boscán, who inadvertently broke wind before the lady he was courting, for which mortifying indiscretion he was said to be more famous than his poetry. A further example is the case of an actor playing a ruffian in a comic farce staged in the home of a grandee. When threatened with death on stage, the actor let slip a thunderous fart that caused the aristocratic audience to dissolve in hysterical laughter and subsequently to shower the thespian with gifts for his lifelike portrayal of a terrified person. Importantly, both anecdotes take place in public and derive some of their humour from the humiliation felt by the objects of laughter, which illustrates the derisiveness of contemporary comedy and is fundamentally another expression of the standard high/low paradigm.⁶

This same dynamic structures the expression of moral ugliness, which, following Aristotle, was not evil but the normal foibles of common people. López Pinciano (1998, p. 391) gives an example that neatly illustrates both the physical and non-physical aspects of *turpitudō et deformitas*:

Pregunto: ¿Hay algún hombre, o mujer, que caiga hermosamente?; si la caída es sin culpa del que cae, trae consigo fealdad en el cuerpo y descompostura dél; y si cae por culpa suya y falta de aviso, lo cual es más ordinario, allende de la fealdad del cuerpo, trae otra del alma, que es la ignorancia (I ask you: does any man or woman fall gracefully? If the fall is not the person's fault, it produces ugliness and inelegance of the body. And if it is the person's fault, because of inattention, which is more usual, beyond the ugliness of the body, it shows ugliness of the soul, which is ignorance).

For a modern reader, the humour of slipping on a banana peel is unlikely to be enhanced because the person who takes the spill is not paying attention, but in the early modern comic ethos, the victim's perceived culpability in his own misfortune heightens the risibility. One further anecdote, taken from folklore and widely known in the period, demonstrates the point. A farmer riding a mule was eating a meat pie when he was approached by two students, one of whom distracted the man while the other stole the meat from the middle of the pastry. The farmer rode on a few steps and, when he noticed the meat missing from his pie, he looked incredulously to the sky as if a bird had taken it. The students went away roaring with laughter, in which they were joined by a group of onlookers. López Pinciano (1998, p. 392) explains: "Cuento es ridículo ése ... y mucho, porque tiene lo feo doblado: fealdad de parte del labrador, que fue la ignorancia, y fealdad de parte de los estudiantes, que fue picardía" (That is a ridiculous story ... and especially so because it is doubly ugly: ugliness on the farmer's part, which is ignorance, and the ugliness of the students, which is trickery). The protagonists of this story are paradigmatic of their comic types, the rustic bumpkin and the cunning students. Of particular interest is López Pinciano's reaction to the trick: he wastes no sympathy on the dupe, but neither does he fully identify with the pranksters, who are, after all, thieves. He appreciates the wit of the jest, but he ascribes moral culpability to both the perpetrators and their butt. This complex perspective, which both admires and reproves an act of comic immorality, is quite alien to a modern reader, who tends to a more empathetic response and typically seeks to identify with either the malefactor or (more typically) the victim. It is important, however, for understanding how Cervantes's readers could have laughed at and loved Don Quijote and Sancho Panza as comic characters, without necessarily identifying intellectually or emotionally with them.

Those characters were immediately recognizable to Cervantes's contemporaries in a way that time has obscured for modern readers. Precisely because he was so readily identifiable as a traditional *figura*, a comically exaggerated physical and/or moral grotesque, Don Quijote was immediately assimilated into the frequent public festivals of the period, where his presence was a source of mirth (Cabanillas Cárdenas 2006, pp. 27-32). Agustín Redondo (1980, p. 51) has shown that "Don Quijote se inserta en una tradición que se remonta hasta el loco medieval" (Don Quijote belongs to a tradition that dates to the medieval madman). Much of his characterization (his name, including its multiple possible variants, his gaunt physical appearance, his restless wandering, his loquaciousness, etc.) is based on popular types and was associated in the period with lunacy. The same is true of two of the most iconic images related to the crazy knight, the windmills at which he tilts and the barber's basin that he wears as an improvised helmet, both of which symbolized wind and thus empty-headedness, i.e., insanity.⁷ Even his lucid intervals, during which he speaks and acts with the wisdom and reserve appropriate to his age, education, and station in life and which become increasingly frequent, lengthy, and complex throughout Part two, were for early modern readers simply markers of his madness that served as comic contrasts to his insane words and deeds (Russell 1969, pp. 315-316; Cabanillas Cárdenas 2006, p. 30). This is precisely what we would expect in a cultural context in which genres were defined by the "manifest opposites" of high and low content and characters, as López Pinciano explains.

Don Quijote's name is a good example of this principle. The name was a traditional *locus a persona* that corresponded to a character's basic attributes. In this case, it is also a comic application of the rhetorical device *antonomasia*. Specifically, it is a humorous variant of *antonomasia vossiana*, which is used to describe a personage with the name of a famous individual who exhibited the same qualities (Azaustre and Casas 1997, p. 88).⁸ For instance, Alexander the Great was proverbially associated with generosity, so to

call a character an Alexander the Great (as Cervantes, hyperbolically and humorously, terms Don Quijote; 2016, 1, Preliminares, p. 15; 1.52, p. 526) is to emphasize his magnanimity.⁹ In keeping with Don Quijote's self-image and aspirations, his (self-applied) name recalls the greatest of the Arthurian knights, Lanzarote (Lancelot), while the toponymic de la Mancha references the chivalric knight par excellence, Amadís de Gaula. But a *quijote* is a thigh guard in a suit of armour (thus approximating "Don Quijote" to something like "Sir Codpiece"); the suffix -ote sounds ridiculous in this context (a fact that Cervantes exploits for great humour at his hero's expense; 2016, 1.26, pp. 250-251); and La Mancha is not a faraway, fantastical land filled with knights, giants, and enchanters, but a hot, sparsely populated plain (Cervantes underscores the July heat to emphasize the character's madness; 2016, 1.2, p. 34).¹⁰ The name Don Quijote is thus a burlesque inversion, the manifest opposite, of the chivalric heroes that the character intends to evoke.¹¹

Some of the basic folkloric or archetypal attributes of the old and insane were compiled in the form of humorous anecdotes and jokes in the popular miscellanies of the sixteenth century, such as Melchor de Santa Cruz's 1574 *Floresta española* (*Spanish Forest*; 1947, pp. 100-102, 179-182). They were also codified in the treatises on literary theory that proliferated in Spain around the turn of the seventeenth century. Recall that the principle of decorum dictated that literary imitations represent people according to their natural (stereo)type. In *Cisne de Apolo* (*Apollo's Swan*, 1602), Luis Alfonso de Carballo (1958, vol. 2, p. 114) defines decorum as "vna decencia y consideración que se ha de tener a toda la obra, y a cada parte della, a las personas, cosas, y palabras" (an appropriateness and consideration that must be taken of the whole work and each of its parts, people, things, and words). So, for example, in Santa Cruz (1947, pp. 179-180) we read: "Decía un caballero: El hombre de cincuenta años arriba, más ha de ocupar los pensamientos como ha de recibir la muerte, que no en buscar regalos para alargar la vida" (A gentleman said: A man over fifty should occupy his thoughts in how he should receive death, rather than in seeking comforts to extend life). Note the age at which one becomes typologically old, fifty, an assumption that Alfonso de Carballo (1958, vol. 2, pp. 118-119) reflects in his description of the decorous presentation of an old man in a literary text:

Al viejo que ya passa de los cincuenta, pintaremos padeciendo muchas miserias, enfermedades, y trabajos, auariento quexoso, malacondicionado, y todo su cuerpo sin prouecho ni agilidad, si no es la lengua, con la qual se jata siempre de las cosas de su mocedad, loando las cosas de otros tiempos, corrigiendo y reprehendiendo a todos (An old man over fifty will be portrayed as suffering from many infirmities, illnesses, and pains; a quarrelsome miser, irascible, and his whole body without benefit or agility, save for his tongue, with which he will forever brag about the things in his youth, praising the way things used to be, correcting and finding fault with everyone).

Not coincidentally, Don Quijote "[f]risaba ... con los cincuenta años" (was nearly fifty years old; Cervantes 2016, 1.1, p. 28) when he lost his mind. Francisco Cascales (1975, pp. 216-217), in his *Tablas poéticas* (*Poetic Tables*, published in 1617 but written circa 1604), copies a long list from the Italian theorist Minturno setting out "las propiedades y condiciones de las personas y naciones" (the attributes and conditions of persons and nations) in comedies. Among the comic characters he includes *el viejo*, the old man, who can be quite variable, from wise, serious, and courtly to foolish, profligate, and lecherous. Of particular interest is Cascales's (1975, p. 215) exclusion of married old men from comedy, on the grounds that their affairs bring dishonour on their wives and children. "Pero si el tal viejo fuere soltero, no le excluymos, pues sin perjuizio de parte causa contento y risa con su requiebro y amor" (But if that old man were single [like Don Quijote], we wouldn't exclude him [from comedy], since without causing harm to others his wooing and courting give pleasure and laughter).

López Pinciano's comments on the relationship between real people and literary personages in the context of comedy are particularly developed and important in ways that are quite illuminating of Don Quijote's character. Like Cascales and Alfonso de Carballo, López Pinciano (1998, p. 211) recognizes that fictional representations are, of course, stylizations. According to the character El Pinciano, the author's alter ego:

los viejos todos no son ... avaros, indeterminados y espaciosos. Veo yo en las comedias algunos pródigos determinados y, más que unos niños, ligeros en las acciones corporales y aun espirituales, que no parecen mal (not all old men are miserly, indecisive, and sluggish ... I have seen some in comedies who are incorrigibly profligate and quicker than children in their movements and decisions, and they are not bad at all).

The more learned character Ugo responds (Ibid.) by drawing an Aristotelian distinction between the general and the particular, the latter of which is fit for comedy:

en cosas graves conviene que el viejo se pinte guardoso, indeterminado y espacioso, porque es la común y natural acción suya; mas, en cosas de burlas y de pasatiempo, está muy bien pintar a un viejo de la manera que decís haber visto (determinado, colérico y aun enamorado, si queréis) por dar más causa de reír y más sal a la comedia (in serious matters, an old man should be shown to be frugal, hesitant, and slow, because that is their common and natural behaviour; but in facetious or entertaining subjects, it is quite proper to portray an old man like you have seen (decisive, choleric, and even in love) to cause more laughter and sharpen the comedy).

This description of a comic old man is notable for how precisely it maps onto the basic contours of Don Quijote's character. Acting out of madness, he is rash, hot-tempered, profligate (he wastes his money first on books of knight errantry, and then on financing his own adventures), and in love. In fact, he is only pretending to be in love, with a figment of his own imagination, no less, because as a (literary) knight he must necessarily be so. His professions of love for Dulcinea are therefore especially ridiculous, and especially befitting of a bizarrely aberrant comic character.¹²

The basic attributes that López Pinciano, Cascales, and Alfonso de Carballo associate with old men in comedies (unnaturally quick to action, absurdly spendthrift, and preposterously in love) are all descriptive of Don Quijote. These traits, explicitly deemed uncharacteristic of a serious person, are the direct expression of his insanity, and they signaled unmistakably to contemporary readers that he was a figure of fun. For them, the comic elements of his character were so strong as to overwhelm any seriousness in his lucid moments, which in any case were understood to function as contrasts that heightened his lunacy. Because the passage of time has obscured the character's underlying comic paradigm, modern readers, in a curiously ironic inversion of their early modern predecessors' response, are apt to disregard the comedy as mere camouflage for an epistemologically serious or politically subversive message, if, indeed, they perceive the comic material at all. I do not deny the presence of such serious subject matter in *Don Quijote*; the Horatian maxim *ridentem dicere verum* was, after all, a Renaissance commonplace. Rather, I subscribe to Anthony Close's (2002, p. 7) argument that "one cannot treat the comicality of Cervantes's fiction as simply an obvious and superficial layer, detachable from more thought-provoking layers that lie beneath. It pervades and conditions the whole work, and if we neglect it, our understanding of the work is basically skewed." Cervantes (2016, 1.28, p. 274) declares *Don Quijote* a tonic for his age, "necesitada de alegres entretenimientos" (in need of comic entertainments). I conclude that he deemed the writing of good comedy to be both a serious and socially useful endeavour, and that a full accounting of *Don Quijote's* richness is best developed from that premise.

Sancho Panza, Don Quijote's portly squire, is subject to the same interpretative disjunction as his master. His fundamental characterization is based on an immediately identifiable archetype common to Spanish and European folkloric traditions, the "tonto-listo" or clever fool (Molho 1976, p. 248). He is first introduced as a paradigmatic *simple* or simpleton, a poor farmer ironically described as honourable but with very little between the ears ("de muy poca sal en la mollera;" roughly, with very little salt in the shaker; Cervantes 2016, 1.7, p. 72). For Cervantes's contemporaries, Sancho represented a basic character type, and *Don Quijote's* original readers recognized in him a cluster of comic attributes:

su simplicidad e ingenuidad sin límites, su socarronería y actitud burlona, las exigencias y quejas con que a menudo asaetea a su amo, su glotonería, la cobardía y poquedad que a menudo exhibe, su materialismo e inclinación escatológica, sus infundadas ilusiones, y los frecuentes dislates lingüísticos en que incurre (his simple mindedness and unbounded gullibility, his sarcasm and sardonic attitude, the demands and complaints with which he frequently harasses his master, his gluttony, the cowardice and timidity that he often displays, his materialism and scatological tendencies, his baseless dreams [of wealth], and the verbal absurdities that he repeatedly spouts; Salazar Rincón 2004, p. 213).

Just as Cervantes develops Don Quijote's character through the inclusion of increasingly extended lucid intervals in contrast to his basic insanity, however, he gradually emphasises Sancho's cleverness in explicit counterpoint to his simple mindedness. Also as with Don Quijote, this contrapuntal dynamism constitutes a progressively complex manifestation of pre-existing traits within the overarching representational framework of the "manifest opposites" of high and low subject matter.

As with the case of the old man in love, this popular comic type was also codified in literary theory. López Pinciano (1998, pp. 403-404) claims that the "simple" (simpleton) is the prototypical comic character in whose creation the Spanish exceed all others:

es una persona la del simple, en la cual cabe ignorancia, y cabe malicia, y cabe también lascivia rústica y grosera. Y al fin es capaz de todas tres especies ridículas, porque, como persona ignorante, le está bien el preguntar, responder y discurrir necedades; y, como necia, le están bien las palabras lascivas, rústicas y groseras; y, en la verdad, por le estar bien toda fealdad, es la persona más apta para la comedia de todas las demás, en cuya invención se han aventajado los españoles a griegos y latinos y a los demás; todos los cuales usaron de siervos en sus comedias para el fin de la risa y a los cuales faltaba alguna y algunas especies de lo ridículo, porque, o no tenían más que la dicacidad, o la lascivia y, cuando mucho, las dos juntas, de manera que carecían de la ignorancia simple, la cual es autora grande de la risa ([The simpleton] is a person full of ignorance, and malice, and also coarse and crude lechery. Above all, he can express all three kinds of ridiculousness because, as an ignorant person, it suits him to ask, answer, and reason with foolishness; and, as a fool, he is suited to lewd, coarse, and crude language. And, in truth, because he is apt to all manner of ugliness, he is the character most suited of all to comedy, in whom the Spanish have outdone the Greeks and Romans and everyone else. They all used servants in their comedies to cause laughter, and they were all lacking in some kinds of ridiculousness, because they were limited to caustic wordplay, or lewdness, or, at most, both of them together, so that they lacked simpleminded ignorance, which is a great source of laughter).

Sancho, the simpleton servant, repeatedly demonstrates every one of these characteristics, from foolish ignorance (his core attribute) to malicious wit and bawdiness.¹³

As characters, therefore, Don Quijote and Sancho were both drawn from a longstanding and pervasive comic tradition within popular and literary culture, and both characters remain expressions of their basic comic types, old madman and clever simpleton, until the end of the story (Martín Morán 1992). Cervantes's contemporaries recognized Don Quijote and Sancho as such and responded to them as the typologically stylized figures that they were. Their reaction was not, as has been claimed (González Echevarría 2015, p. 11), "obviously a misreading." Adrián Sáez (2012, p. 240) reminds us that "[e]l marco genérico y el contexto son capitales para la hermenéutica, pues activan o anulan determinados significados" (genre and context are crucial to interpretation, since they enable or preclude certain meanings). The expectations of Cervantes's readers, who, after all, shared his language and culture, helps explain their response to *Don Quijote*. This is true, not just of the anonymous public who made *Don Quijote* a popular success, but also of some of the preeminent authors of the period, including Tirso de Molina, Guillén de Castro, Alonso Jerónimo de Salas

Barbadillo (a close friend of Cervantes), Pedro Calderón de la Barca, and Francisco de Quevedo (Cabanillas Cárdenas 2006, pp. 32-36; Sáez 2012). Nevertheless, it would be quite incorrect to conclude that, in *Don Quijote*, Cervantes did no more than deploy the tropes of traditional comedy. While he made use of comic commonplaces based on physical and moral grotesques and verbal ribaldry to a greater degree than critics sometimes acknowledge (Brewer 2022; Redondo 1984), the comedy in *Don Quijote* is qualitatively more sophisticated than the slapstick and scatology that López Pinciano and other theorists defined as the essence of the risible.¹⁴ Indeed, Cervantes insistently emphasises the intelligence necessary for great comedy (i.e., his own), particularly throughout Part two. Don Quijote himself declares: “Decir gracias y escribir donaires es de grandes ingenios: la más discreta figura de la comedia es la del bobo, porque no lo ha de ser el que quiere dar a entender que es simple” (Speaking and writing with humour and wittiness is for great wits: the cleverest character in a comedy is the fool, because only one who is not foolish can convincingly play a simpleton; Cervantes 2016, 2.3, p. 572). The duchess subsequently uses exactly the same language (“gracias,” “donaires,” “discreto,” “ingenios”) to (somewhat ironically) describe Sancho:

De que Sancho el bueno sea gracioso lo estimo yo en mucho, porque es señal que es discreto, que las gracias y los donaires, señor don Quijote, como vuesa merced bien sabe, no asientan sobre ingenios torpes; y pues el buen Sancho es gracioso y donairoso, desde aquí le confirmo por discreto (I value good Sancho’s humour greatly, because it is a sign that he is clever. Humour and wittiness, as you well know Sir Don Quijote, do not come from dull wits, and since good Sancho is humorous and witty, I hereby confirm that he is clever; Cervantes 2016, 2.30, pp. 782-783).

Don Quijote further emphasises both facets of Sancho’s increasingly complex “tonto-listo” characterisation when describing his squire to the duke and duchess:

quiero que entiendan vuestras señorías que Sancho Panza es uno de los más graciosos escuderos que jamás sirvió a caballero andante: tiene a veces unas simplicidades tan agudas, que el pensar si es simple o agudo causa no pequeño contento; tiene malicias que le condenan por bellaco y descuidos que le confirman por bobo; duda de todo y créelo todo; cuando pienso que se va a despeñar de tonto, sale con unas discreciones que le levantan al cielo (I wish your lordships to understand that Sancho Panza is one of the funniest squires that ever served a knight errant. Sometimes he comes out with such sharp simplicities that pondering whether he is simpleminded or quick-witted causes no small amount of enjoyment. He lets fly malicious sayings that expose him as a rogue and shows carelessness that confirms him for a fool. He doubts everything and believes everything. Just when I think that he is going to fall into the abyss of foolishness, he shows discretion that raises him to heaven; Cervantes 2016, 2.32, pp. 802-803).

These statements reflect Cervantes’s increasing focus on the characters’ elaborately refined psychologies, which build progressively on their traditional comic origins. The extraordinary chiaroscuro quality that Don Quijote and Sancho demonstrate, manifested through the former’s mix of madness and lucidity and the latter’s combination of foolishness and intelligence, are initially expressions of the kinds of “manifest opposites” described by López Pinciano, but Cervantes goes much further than merely juxtaposing comic dichotomies. Rather, he portrays complex cognitive processes as emerging organically from within each character’s basic typology. This development is especially in evidence throughout *Don Quijote*, Part two, but it is equally well attested by an episode near the end of Part one. In an effort to return the mad knight to his home for rest and recovery, the priest and barber from his village, in concert with several other characters staying at a roadside inn, disguise themselves in masks and cloaks, tie up Don Quijote while he is sleeping, and put him in a wooden cage in the back of an oxcart, claiming to be enchanters who have cast a spell on him. The scene is a burlesque restaging of similar sequences in the chivalric romances that drove Don Quijote mad, but he is astonished by the unprecedented particularities of the adventure:

Muchas y muy graves historias he yo leído de caballeros andantes, pero jamás he leído, ni visto, ni oído que a los caballeros encantados los lleven de esta manera y con el espacio que prometen estos perezosos y tardíos animales (I have read many serious chronicles of knights errant, but I have never read, seen, nor heard of enchanted knights being carried away in this manner and at the slow pace of these sluggish and slothful beasts; Cervantes 2016, 1.47, p. 482).

He concludes that “quizá la caballería y los encantos de estos nuestros tiempos deben de seguir otro camino que siguieron los antiguos” (perhaps knighthood and enchantments in our times must follow a different path than the old ways), or perhaps new forms of enchantment have been devised just for him (Cervantes 2016, 1.47, p. 483).

This line of reasoning reveals the dual mechanism of the character’s psychological development. On the one hand, the anchoring constant of literary delusion, the infallible historicity of the books of chivalric romance; on the other, the concession to reality requiring a new explanation, that modern knight errantry may function according to a different set of rules. These two poles, static insanity and dynamic adaptability, structure Don Quijote’s peculiar yet recognizable process of cognition, which neutralizes cognitive dissonance by incorporating empirical evidence into his elaborate madness. His carefully reasoned arguments lead to ridiculous conclusions, not because they are irrational in themselves, but because they derive from the preposterous premise that he is a knight errant like his literary heroes. Thus, he explains his inability to extricate himself from a flimsily improvised wooden cage through the strict formality of a comic syllogism: only an enchantment could prevent a real knight errant such as he from escaping the cage; he cannot escape the cage; ergo, he must be enchanted. This is not the on/off binary of insanity/lucidity implicit in the high/low antitheses of the “manifest opposites” described by López Pinciano, but a sophisticated synthesis illustrative of actual psychological functions. For all its bizarre singularity, Don Quijote’s mind works in fundamentally human ways.

A similar process defines Sancho’s reasoning in the same episode.

¡Ah, señor cura, señor cura! ¿Pensaba vuestra merced que no le conozco y pensaba que yo no calo y adivino adónde se encaminan estos nuevos encantamientos? Pues sepa que le conozco, por más que se encubra el rostro, y sepa que le entiendo, por más que disimule sus embustes (Oh, my lord priest, my lord priest! Did your grace believe that I do not know you and that I do not see through and deduce the purpose of these new enchantments? Well, know that I recognize you, however much you cover your face, and know that I understand you, however much you cover up your tricks; Cervantes 2016, 1.47, p. 488).

This perceptiveness is immediately undone, however, by the motives that Sancho ascribes to the priest’s actions: “En fin, donde reina la envidia no puede vivir la virtud, ni adonde hay escaseza la liberalidad” (So be it, where envy reigns virtue cannot live, nor can there be generosity where there is meanness; *Ibid.*). He subsequently tries to convince Don Quijote that two of the masked figures are really the village priest and barber, who have conspired to carry the knight home in a cage “de pura envidia que tienen como vuestra merced se les adelanta en hacer famosos hechos” (out of pure envy that they have for the way your grace is getting ahead of them in the doing of famous deeds; Cervantes 2016, 1.48, p. 499). This is a deceptively complex form of reasoning. It reveals Sancho’s Theory of Mind, the ability that “enables humans (and advanced primates) to predict what others are likely to do, feel, think, and believe; this capacity is a necessary precursor to a wide variety of human interactions—both positive and not—including projecting and empathizing as well as lying and cheating” (Simerka 2013, p. 5). The greatest demonstration of Sancho’s Theory of Mind comes early in Part two, when he uses his knowledge of Don Quijote’s peculiar logic to successfully convince his master that a homely and uncouth peasant girl is really Dulcinea in enchanted form (which, as if on cue, the madman takes as further evidence that there are new types of enchantment applicable only to him), but here he reveals the same mental process. Unlike Don Quijote, Sancho is not insane and is eas-

ily able to recognize that two of the pretend enchanters are just the priest and barber in disguise, while his Theory of Mind allows him to devise what seem to him like plausible motives for their actions. Because he remains fundamentally a typological simpleton, however, his reasoning is predicated on his absurd belief that Don Quijote is a real knight errant who will earn fame through great deeds. From that preposterous premise he proceeds, quite logically, to the nonsensical conclusion that the priest and barber are motivated by envy of their neighbour's heroic exploits, even though he has by this point repeatedly witnessed Don Quijote mistake the mundane for the marvelous and suffer numerous falls and beatings as a result.

Sancho's attempt to convince Don Quijote that he is not, in fact, enchanted, refines this comic psychology still further. Nonplussed by Don Quijote's insistence that the enchanters in question only *appear* to be the priest and barber, Sancho changes tack and euphemistically enquires if his master needs to "hacer aguas mayores o menores" (make large or small water; Cervantes 2016, 1.48, p. 500). When Don Quijote exclaims that he does, and urgently, Sancho springs the rhetorical trap:

¿podría negar lo que comúnmente suele decirse por ahí cuando una persona está de mala voluntad: 'No sé qué tiene Fulano, que ni come, ni bebe, ni duerme, ni responde a propósito a lo que le preguntan, que no parece sino que está encantado?' De donde se viene a sacar que los que no comen, ni beben, ni duermen, ni hacen las obras naturales que yo digo, estos tales están encantados, pero no aquellos que tienen la gana que vuestra merced tiene, y que bebe cuando se lo dan y come cuando lo tiene y responde a todo aquello que le preguntan (could you deny the common saying about someone who is out of sorts: 'I don't know what's wrong with so-and-so, he doesn't eat, or drink, or sleep, or respond to questions with any sense, and it seems like he must be enchanted?' From which I conclude that those who don't eat, or drink, or sleep, or do their business are enchanted, but not those who have urges like your grace, and who drink when offered and eat when they have food and answer every question they're asked; Cervantes 2016, 1.49, p. 501).

The humour stems, not from the scatological, but from Sancho's transference of the popular, figurative meaning of *encantado* (out of sorts) to the absurdly literal plane of his master's literary enchantment. Rather than show Don Quijote soil himself, Cervantes displaces the focus from the bodily act to the thought processes of the characters regarding its possibility and implications. Don Quijote is forced to admit the truth of Sancho's argument, but he retreats into a reiteration of the unfalsifiable assertion that he is subject to a new kind of enchantment.

Sancho's failure to convince his master is illustrative of a larger pattern that is consonant with the madman's own specific psychology: arguments exogenous to Don Quijote's literary insanity never persuade him, while those that are endogenous to it do so easily. In fact, it is the priest and barber, not Don Quijote himself, who initially introduce the subsequently ubiquitous idea that the erstwhile knight is pursued by enchanters, after the curate burns most of his parishioner's library in Part one, chapter 6. Other such examples abound, none more salient than Sancho's own enchantment of Dulcinea in Part two. Just as that episode reveals the squire's astonishing amalgamation of typological simplemindedness (he continues to believe that Don Quijote is a real knight errant who will bestow upon him the governorship of an island) and highly developed Theory of Mind, it demonstrates that Don Quijote's own progressively complex cognitive processes continue to reflect the peculiar delusion that is the basic comic attribute of his character. In neither case does the unprecedented psychological sophistication transcend the characters' traditional comic origins; rather, it develops directly from within them.

The same is true of the general aesthetics of the whole episode, which gestures toward a conventional scene of scatology and public humiliation in Don Quijote's need to relieve himself before abandoning that comic cliché to focus on the dialogue and psychological evolution of its two protagonists. To be sure, Cervantes employs copious amounts of excrement, vomit, and other corporeal effluvia for humorous purposes earlier in *Don Quijote*, Part one, but here he adopts the much more sophisticated approach of using it as a means to reveal the inner workings of his protagonists' minds. In this way, the scatological becomes

the analogue of the characters' comic typology (crazy old man and simpleton): an element of coarse traditional comedy that Cervantes retains but refines in unprecedented ways. The degree of originality in this approach becomes clear in contrast to the inclusion of similar material in contemporary monuments of comic writing, Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (Part one, 1599; Part two, 1604) and Francisco de Quevedo's *El buscón* (circa 1605), both of which subject their picaresque protagonists to degrading physical abuse, including repeatedly covering them in excrement (their own and others').¹⁵ Cervantes's treatment of Don Quijote and Sancho, while sometimes harsh by modern standards – Vladimir Nabokov (quoted in Hart 2009, p. 228) famously considered *Don Quijote* “a veritable encyclopedia of cruelty” – is by comparison both mild and dignified.

I have previously noted Victoriano Roncero López's description of early modern comedy as moralizing and aristocratic. López Pinciano (1998, p. 385) aptly demonstrates that perspective by differentiating between deaths that occur in tragedies (and thus, by definition, befall nobles) and those that might happen (to commoners) in comedies:

las muertes trágicas son lastimosas, mas las de la comedia, si algunas hay, son de gusto y pasatiempo, porque en ellas mueren personas que sobran en el mundo, como es una vieja cizañadora, un viejo avaro, un rufián o una alcahueta (tragic deaths are pitiable, but in comedies, if there are any, they are pleasant and entertaining, because in [comedies] the people who die are useless in the world, like a gossipy old woman, a miserly old man, a ruffian or a procuress).

This statement, unremarkable in the late sixteenth century, is entirely alien to Cervantes's aesthetics, and it underscores what a radical proposition it was in 1605 to treat a lunatic old man and a rustic bumpkin as intrinsically deserving of the attention and refinement that Cervantes dedicates to them. Don Quijote and Sancho remain fundamentally comic characters (Alonso Quijano, his wits recovered, dies an exemplary Christian death, not Don Quijote); no matter how far they deviate from their original types, there is always regression to the comedic mean. But precisely therein lies one of Cervantes's deepest contributions to the historical development of liberalism: his willingness to portray Don Quijote and Sancho, not as stereotyped representations of collective attributes, but as meticulously particularized individuals with idiosyncratic personalities who exist for their own sake. Freed from the determinism of a reductive group identity, they emerge as revolutionary creations, comic figures imbued with psychological complexity, emotional depth, human pathos, and individual dignity unlike any afforded to such characters before.



“Liberals like laughter. They are anti-anti-laughter.”

— Cass R. Sunstein. *New York Times*, November 20, 2023.

NOTES

- 1 Two of this ideology's controlling metaphors were the theatre and chess, in which the actors or pieces play their assigned part (king, knight, servant, pawn, etc.) but are then equalized at the end of the play or game (i.e., death). See Cervantes (2016, 2.12, pp. 631-632).
- 2 On the dynamic matrix of religious beliefs, cultural values, and material interests that formed the "economía moral" (moral economy) of early modern Spanish society and that conditioned the attitudes and behaviours of the nobility in the period, see Yun Casalilla (2004, pp. 528-554; 2005). Yun points out that none of the ostensibly anti-bourgeois, "aristocratic" values that traditional historiography has proffered as causes of Spain's presumed cultural backwardness and economic stagnation were exclusive to it. Similar social norms were prevalent throughout Europe, even in England and the Netherlands. All translations from Spanish are my own.
- 3 *Inventio* did not, as it might seem, refer to what we today understand as the "invention" of an original character, but to the "discovery" (in the author's memory or commonplace book) of the appropriate commonplaces for a given subject matter. Cicero (*De Inventione*), the most influential rhetorician for the Renaissance, outlined nine such general *loci a persona* (with multiple subcategories), which Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria*) expanded to fifteen. There were many other *loci* related to cause, time, place, etc. See López Grigera (1995, pp. 17-32, 179-182) and Azaustre and Casas (1997, pp. 23-69), who provide numerous examples drawn from medieval and early modern Spanish literature, including *Don Quijote* and other works by Cervantes.
- 4 Cervantes makes two direct, comic references to this tradition. The first is in Part one, when Don Quijote announces to Sancho his intention to imitate his hero, the (fictional) knight Amadís de Gaula, drawing a parallel with Ulysses and Aeneas, whom Homer and Virgil portrayed, not as they were, but as they should have been, to serve as examples to future generations (2016, 1.25, p. 234). The second is early in Part two, when Sansón Carrasco brings news of the publication and reception of Part one, giving rise to a discussion of its inclusion of the many beatings that Don Quijote suffers and prompting Don Quijote to again reference the exaggeratedly favourable depiction of the Greek and Roman heroes, while Sansón appeals to the Aristotelian distinction between writing (factually) as an historian and (verisimilarly) as a poet (2016, 2.3, p. 569).
- 5 On comedic theory and practice in early modern Spain, see Jammes (1980, pp. 3-11); Close (2002, pp. 179-276); Roncero López (2006, pp. 285-328).
- 6 Flatulence humour continued to be practiced by great wits long after the age of Cervantes. See, for example, Benjamin Franklin's (2003, pp. 13-17) satirical "Letter to a Royal Academy" of 1781, popularly known as "Part Proudly," in which the Founding Father proposes a prize for the discovery of a drug that will perfume flatus. Note, particularly, the concluding pun, that other lines of scientific enquiry are "scarely [sic] worth a FART^hing" (2003, p. 17). This kind of scatological word play was also characteristic of humour in early modern Spain and occurs in *Don Quijote*.
- 7 The connection between wind and windmills is obvious. In the case of the basin, it stems from a pun on the word in Spanish, *bacía*, phonetically indistinguishable from the adjective *vacía*, "empty."
- 8 Cervantes makes joking reference to this precept in the character of Princess Antonomasia (2016, 2.38, p. 842).
- 9 I cite *Don Quijote* by part, chapter, and page number.
- 10 Don Quijote's madness is described in physiological terms, based on the ancient (but still current) theory of the four humours. His dominant humour is choler (hot and dry); when his passion for reading chivalric romances deprives him of the restorative, humidifying function of sleep, "se le secó el cerebro de manera que vino a perder el juicio" (his brain dried up so that he lost his mind; Cervantes 2016, 1.1, pp. 29-30). The summer heat exacerbates his insanity. See Green (1957).
- 11 Sancho Panza's name was equally evocative for Cervantes's contemporaries (Molho 1976, pp. 249-255).
- 12 The degree to which this is so is attested by the satirical "Diálogo entre Babiéca y Rocinante" (Dialogue Between Babiéca and Rocinante), included among a number of similar poems in the preliminary materials of Part one. Babiéca, steed of the great Castilian hero El Cid, asks Rocinante, Don Quijote's emaciated nag (his name is literally Used-To-Be-A-Nag, a portmanteau of "rocin," "nag," and "antes," "before"), why he is so skinny, to which Rocinante replies that his master does not feed him:

- B. Andá, señor, que estáis muy mal criado,
pues vuestra lengua de asno al amo ultraja.
- R. Asno se es de la cuna a la mortaja.
¿Queréislo ver? Miraldo enamorado.
- B. ¿Es necedad amar?
- R. No es gran prudencia (Cervantes 1, Preliminares, pp. 24-25).
(B. Fie, sir, you are very ill bred, / since your ass's tongue slanders your master. R. An ass is an ass from cradle to grave. / Want to see what I mean? Look at him, in love. B. Is it foolish to love? R. It's not very wise.)
- The exchange includes some untranslatable wordplay on “criado” (“bred” or “reared” and “servant”); and “amo” (“master” and “I love”), “enamorado” (“in love”), and “amar” (“to love”), which was very typical in the period and which López Pinciano (1998, p. 403) and Cascales (1975, pp. 221-223) associate specifically with comic writing.
- 13 On Sancho's ribaldry, see Joly (1992).
- 14 There is an exactly contemporaneous example of such a traditional treatment of Don Quijote and Sancho, in the pseudonymous Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda's (2005) apocryphal continuation of Part one, published in 1614. Here, the humour is coarse and crude, Don Quijote's madness is uninflected, and Sancho is every bit the typological *simple* described by López Pinciano. Cervantes reacted to Avellaneda's churlish presentation of his characters with withering contempt. See Cervantes (2016, 2.59, pp. 998-1002; 2.62, p. 1033; 2.70, pp. 1079-1080; 2.72, pp. 1089-1093).
- 15 For a discussion of scatological comedy in *Guzmán de Alfarache*, see Roncero López (2016). On *El buscón* as a work of comedy, see Tobar Quintanar (2012).

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