

Alternate Arbitrios: Status, Justice, and Decline in Chapters I-XVIII of The Second Part of the Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha

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J.H. Elliott's seminal essay on "Self-Perception and Decline in Early Seventeenth-Century Spain" opens with a letter from the Count-Duke of Olivares, an impassioned rejoinder to the accusation by an elderly countryman that "*se va todo a fonda*—'the ship is going down.'"¹ Enumerating a list of national successes to counter his compatriot's dire vision, Olivares seeks to frame Spain's foundering fortunes within actionable terms, serving as a proxy for the countless *arbitristas* (reformers) who composed "tracts and treatises, published and unpublished, which [aimed] to analyse and prescribe remedies for Castile's many woes."² But as Elliott argues, Olivares' efforts were for naught. While the reformers' reactions to an approaching catastrophe can be considered both expected and understandable,³ they now function as a sort of intellectual archive for the circumscribed worldview that presaged Spain's progressive fall.

A similarly unsettling atmosphere of decay and disillusionment is introduced in the initial pages of Miguel de Cervantes' 1615 *Second Part of the Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*,⁴ although the novel's response to this disquieting shift does not conform to the historical choices catalogued within Elliott's study. On the part of several key characters, an awareness of decline is coupled with corresponding forays into cultural commentary, exercises in (more productive) argumentation which

act to highlight critical questions involving status, stature, ethics and action. As is true of *Quixote's* first volume, the conduct of Don Quixote himself serves to structure these assorted explorations, though a number of incisive assessments also stem from each episode's more peripheral inhabitants.⁵ But while the text's core concerns are addressed via the words and deeds of disparate actors, introduced in a meandering, equivocal, and piecemeal manner, it is this essay's argument that there is a deep associative—and perhaps causal—relationship between decline/disenchantment, the re-evaluation of hierarchy/lineage/power, and a foregrounding of right behavior or just action on the part of Cervantes' cast.

In accordance with this overarching claim, close readings of a few critical passages will be combined with an inquiry into the opinions expressed by Cervantes (as narrator), Don Quixote, and the wife of Quixote's squire. Within each arena, an engagement with darkness or decline—via poverty/precarity for Cervantes and Teresa Panza, by means of Golden-Age *desengaño* for Quixote—engenders both a reckoning with extant status-systems *and* a corresponding re-articulation of personal integrity. These incidental efforts at ethical 'revision' cannot be directly tied with the work of "Self-Perception's" *arbitristas*, but their narrative effect does function to provide a modified mirror for Elliott's argument. In his dramatization of an alternate national reaction, an *unchosen* path of reform, Cervantes constructs an imaginary Spain that is made real within the lives and minds of *Quixote's* characters.

1.

The alteration in tone which attends *DQ II's* prefatory remarks becomes apparent only gradually. Cervantes' introduction involves a dedication—to

⁵ I.e., individuals who exist at the outskirts of both plot and context. These marginal figures are not irrelevant, and indeed act to add weight and verisimilitude alongside the knight-errant's narrative role. See below.

¹ J. H. Elliott, "Self-Perception and Decline in Early Seventeenth-Century Spain," *Past and Present* 74, no. 1 (1977): pp. 41-61, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/74.1.41>, 241.

² Elliott, "Self-Perception", 243. The term '*arbitrista*' refers here to the writers of '*arbitrios*', the "tracts and treatises" invoked above.

³ To a certain extent. According to Elliott's account, the good-faith advice dispensed by various nobles was interspersed with a not insignificant number of crackpot theories. Cf. *ibid.*, 243.

⁴ Henceforth "*Quixote*" or "*DQ II*."

the Count of Lemos, his patron and protector—which appears at first to buttress a traditional assessment. This opening device acts to endow the work with an air of conventionality, a familiarity that is only heightened by *DQ II*'s status as a sequel to what had already become a classic tale. Cervantes reports in his opening paragraph that "Don Quixote [has] his spurs ready" and is poised to make his journey to greet the reader; the implication, of course, is that this continuation has been much anticipated.⁶ By all accounts, *Quixote*'s arrival should be a joyous occasion, and even the Emperor of China is said to have begged Cervantes for his presence, requesting that he

send the knight to him [the emperor], because he wanted to establish a college in which the Castilian language would be read, and the book he wanted the students to read was the history of Don Quixote...⁷

Entertainment does indeed hold a privileged place within the world of Quixote, a prerogative that our author makes clear in his preface to *DQ*'s first volume.⁸ But the present project is not so straightforward. Alongside this introduction's familiarity and humor lies a different sort of sentiment, an ambience and argument at once threatening and hopeful. *DQ II*'s dedication is hounded by the time elapsed between Parts I and II, preoccupied with the vagaries of encroaching events (and authors!),⁹ and formulated in a manner which raises more than one relevant question. There is a notable focus on Avellaneda, the pseudonymous writer whose apocryphal continuation to the original *Quixote* was so odious

⁶ Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York, NY: Ecco, 2003), 453.

⁷ Cervantes, *Quixote*, 453.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 8, where Cervantes writes that "reading [his work] should move the melancholy to laughter, increase the joy of the cheerful, not irritate the simple, fill the clever with admiration for its invention, not give the serious reason to scorn it, and allow the prudent to praise it..."

⁹ The reference here is to Avellaneda's efforts (addressed below), but might also be understood to invoke the 1609 expulsion of Spanish Moriscos, an event which adds political valence—and personal poignancy—to Cervantes' use of an Arabic 'historian' (Cide Hamete Benengeli) as his novel's basic framing device.

as to warrant more than two full pages of scathing condemnation;¹⁰ there is the inclusion of three strange, ambiguous, and surprisingly unsettling parables about dogs and madmen;¹¹ and there is, too, a repeated interaction with the less-than-cheerful material facts of Cervantes' literary life. "[N]ot only am I ailing", reads the author's response to China's 'request,' "but I am lacking in funds."¹²

This odd exposition is matched by an unexpected or even unorthodox articulation of status and nobility, an authorial undertaking which undermines even the dedication's mollifying role. In expressing his debt to the "Great Count of Lemos," Cervantes writes that he "considers [himself] luckier and richer than if fortune had brought [him] to the heights by any other means."¹³ But the Spaniard's framing of successfully executed *noblesse oblige* is followed by a reformulation of status and character which appears almost to disambiguate the two. "A poor man may have honor," Cervantes continues, "but not a villain; need may cloud nobility, but not hide it completely; if virtue sheds her light, even along the crags and cracks of poverty, it will be esteemed by high, noble spirits, and so be favored."¹⁴

The contradictions apparent within this passage are not insignificant. While attributing the entirety of his literary output to the auspices of an hereditary lord, Cervantes manages to articulate a conception of status and justice which divorces honor from wealth. By using his own economic circumstances as a model, and by situating his success both in terms of internal effort and as a result of Lemos' generosity, our author presents an unusual portrait of conventional taxonomies, a surreptitious inversion of status-quo cultural categorizations. In Cervantes' construction, it is not chance nor fate but *right action* and *individual worth* which hold the reins of ethics and esteem—that is, in an ideal situation. What, an intrepid reader might ask, would result if this happy coincidence had not materialized?¹⁵ Could there be other Cervanteses wandering the countryside, destitute talents brimming with unwritten books?

¹⁰ See especially *ibid.*, 455.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 456-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 454.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 457-8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 458.

¹⁵ In other words: without Lemos, would we have *Don Quixote*?

This shift from an amorphous unease to an engagement with poverty to a celebration of individual virtue is not (by itself) definitive. Analyzed alone, Cervantes' comments cannot be ascribed to some shockingly radical or fully-realized critique. Nevertheless, *DQ II's* second preface functions to set a precedent, to establish a pattern of thought which echoes within the volume's first fifteen-odd chapters. The incremental intervention conceived in these collected passages paves the way for a more expansive reformulation of integrity and power, a continued conversation which unfolds alongside Cervantes' plot. Throughout the novel's next hundred pages, the complexity of Lemos' presentation is extended and enriched by a series of episodes which—while unique—follow a philosophical trajectory established in *Quixote's* inaugural lines.¹⁶

2.

Uncertainty and unhappiness birth a similar re-orientation on the part of Cervantes' protagonist. The overcast and ever-darkening narrative context established at the novel's outset is progressively tied with a sense or awareness of each character's historical-cultural *milieu*, and this process is nowhere more apparent than in the introductory deeds of Don Quixote himself.

After a month-long stay at his home in La Mancha, *Quixote's* wayward *hidalgo* is visited by a set of familiar friends. Burning with curiosity, the novel's priest and barber "decide to [call on Quixote] and see his [post-adventure] improvement for themselves."¹⁷ In order to avoid triggering their neighbor's now-infamous chivalric delusions, these concerned companions "agree[] not to make any mention at all of knight errantry so as not to run the risk of reopening his wounds."¹⁸ Pursuant to such delicate psychological ends, the priest steers their discourse towards matters of statecraft, setting the stage for a dialog on "ways of governing, correcting this abuse and condemning that one, reforming one

custom and eliminating another."¹⁹ Nevertheless, matters soon drift in the direction of knightly endeavors, and Don Quixote is launched into an *arbitrista*-esque monologue on the political merits of chivalric creeds. Cervantes' barber attempts to intervene, cautioning Quixote (and echoing Elliott) by noting that "all or most of the schemes presented to [the king] are either impossible, or absurd, or harmful," but is met with a forceful retort.²⁰ "Mine," Quixote claims, "is neither impossible or absurd, but is, rather, the easiest, most just, most practical, and shrewdest that has ever occurred."²¹

The barber's attempted diversion signals a certain topical tendency within Quixote's thoughts, but the nature of our knight's fantastical harangue is both wildly sensational and strangely apt, subversive in its own nonsensical way.²² Like Cervantes' dedication, this episode stems from a place of unease—about Quixote's mind, about the health of his nation—that then moves towards an engagement with contemporaneous structures, wending its way from darkness to re-examination to the proposal of something new. Beginning with the contention that "His Majesty [should] command by public proclamation that on a specific day all the knights errant wandering through Spain are to gather at court," Quixote backtracks to provide a contextual basis for his proposal, arguing that he

only devote[s himself] to making the world understand its error in not restoring that happiest of times when the order of knight errantry was in flower. But our decadent age does not deserve to enjoy the good that was enjoyed in the days when knights errant took it as their responsibility to bear on their own shoulders the defense of kingdoms [...]. Now, [...] sloth triumphs over diligence, idleness over

¹⁶ A trajectory, that is, from considerations/acknowledgments of darkness/decline to a re-evaluation of status and its behavioral/ethical requirements (or lack thereof).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 459.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 459.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 459-90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 460.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 461.

²² In another formulation: by virtue of its compound composition, which includes both reform-oriented tenets and a fundamentally delusional substrate, Quixote's credo transcends the categories of relevance/irrelevance as they are constructed within seventeenth-century *arbitrista*-discourse.

work, vice over virtue, arrogance over valor, and theory over the practice of arms, which lived and shone only in the Golden Age.²³

It is an outlandish vision, a utopian view, but Quixote's musings do share a certain affinity with those of Elliott's *arbitristas*. The moralizing tone taken by one Martín González de Cellorigo in a 1600 tract is distinctly reminiscent of the *hidalgo's* complaints, and Cellorigo's contention that Spain's woes stem from a combination of inactivity and "excess wealth" reads almost as a less-eloquent gloss on Quixote's speech.²⁴ Nevertheless, the knight-errant's language is notable in its dearth of the ingredients associated with a species of self-serving status-climbing that (as Elliott identifies) was endemic to the *arbitrio* genre, and a similar principle is in operation regarding Quixote's larger case.²⁵ Here and below, a refusal to articulate a national 'solution' founded in the reinforcement or revitalization of an idealized system for political stratification marks a break from the gubernatorial preoccupation which haunted Spain's historical reformers. Quixote's hopes are—like those of many *arbitristas*—oriented toward a romanticized past,²⁶ but our protagonist's proposition is soon revealed to contain key provisions which are

²³ Ibid., 461, 464-5.

²⁴ Cf. Jon Cowans, *Early Modern Spain: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 134-5: "The decline in [Spain's] population [... has] not arise[n] so much from wars as from the shortcomings in all things caused by the laziness of our people..."; "There is nothing worse than the excessive wealth [...] which has done so much to disorient our republic"; etc. The population-oriented prescriptions found within this manifesto may appear to coincide with some of the counter-historical reforms proposed by Cervantes, but Cellorigo's armchair status lends these lines a good deal of venom and condescension which is entirely absent from the ethics espoused by Quixote (& co). For each set of *DQ II's* characters, any proposed action entails *their own effort*. Cellorigo's status-informed perspective was such that he could not practice what he preached.

²⁵ Cf. Elliott, "Self-Perception", 243: "The arbitrista was the product of a society which took it for granted that the vassal had a duty to advise when he had something to communicate of benefit to king and commonwealth, the assumption being that he would also benefit himself."

²⁶ See also Cervantes, *Quixote*, pp. 76 and 142.

progressive in a way that even Elliott's most forward-looking *arbitrios* were not.²⁷ The *hidalgo* harbors a dream which is quite complex, a compound wish that functions (however unexpectedly) in a manner hostile to the discrete hierarchical categories which were embodied and epitomized by an increasingly baroque Iberian court.

It is in a sequel to Quixote's original speech that these egalitarian leanings become most apparent. Defending his delusions against the protests of a niece, the knight-errant posits that

Not all those called knights are knights through and through; some are gold, others alchemical, and all appear to be knights, but not all can pass a test by touch-stone. There are baseborn men desperate to seem knights, and highborn knights who appear ready to die in order to seem base; the former rise up through ambition or virtue, the latter descend through idleness and vice, and it is necessary for us to use our knowledge and discernment to distinguish between these two kinds of knights, so similar in names, so dissimilar in *actions*.²⁸

The action-oriented ethics of Cervantes' dedication resound throughout this passage, adding an important point of intra-textual substantiation to bolster Quixote's sentiment. Within our protagonist's *Weltanschauung*, it is not birth but conduct that determines an individual's merit. By emphasizing a process of ethical differentiation centered on behavior and agency, the *hidalgo* constructs a framework for honor which eschews titles and demands *effort*. As Quixote argues, "the path of virtue is very narrow, and the road of wickedness is broad and spacious; [...] the expansive, spacious road of wickedness ends in death, and the road of virtue, so narrow and difficult, ends in life."²⁹

²⁷ Cf. Elliott, "Self-Perception", 258 and 261: even "proponents of innovating economic remedies [...] tended to think in terms of collective guilt [...]. Jeronimo de Ceballos, who proposed the introduction of a national banking system, also wished Castile to devote its energies to the reconquest of Jerusalem...."

²⁸ Cervantes, *Quixote*, 495. Emphasis mine.

²⁹ Ibid., 495.

But this is no mere—or mediocre—meritocracy. Quixote's re-articulation of virtue and status is indeed substantial and is also accompanied by a particular view of *justice*. Individual accomplishment cannot be constructed in a void, and benevolent behavior (or 'right action') wears a very specific face. The code of chivalry is opened for anyone to follow, but only the most magnanimous conduct can turn a given adherent into the 'kind of knight' which can be considered gold. That this system affords specific praise for those who "rise up through [...] virtue" is not irrelevant.³⁰ And likewise for the potential to fall.

Quixote's strategic divorce between titles and virtues is also made evident within a lecture on lineage which almost immediately abuts this original argument. In a continued attempt to assuage his niece's assorted concerns, the ersatz knight veers off into an extended discourse with descent as its initial focus. "Look, my friends," his defense begins: "the confusion surrounding lineages is great" indeed, but only bloodlines that are truly "distinguished and illustrious" act in accordance with their aspirations, "display those qualities in their virtue, and [demonstrate magnanimity] in the wealth and generosity of their nobles."³¹ Quixote continues, echoing his earlier case:

[T]he great man who is vicious will be extremely vicious, and the closefisted rich man will be a miserly beggar, for the person who possesses wealth is not made happy by having it but by spending it, and not spending it haphazardly but in knowing how to spend it well.³²

The proper choice among these collected options is nonnegotiable within our protagonist's preferred practice, all-but-imperative as per the code and conduct of noble pursuits.³³ As the *hidalgo* argues, an "impoverished knight

has no way to show that he is a knight except through his virtue, by being affable, well-mannered, courteous, civil, and diligent, not

proud, arrogant, or prone to gossip, and above all, by being charitable, for with two *maravedís* given joyfully to a poor man, he will show that he is as generous as the man who gives alms to the loud ringing of bells...³⁴

Once again, an emphasis on right action is paired with an understanding of its inverse—as well as an acknowledgment of the circumstantial darkness or contextual injustice which drives Quixote's chivalric convictions. After all, it is a world in which "sloth triumphs over diligence, idleness over work, vice over virtue, [and] arrogance over valor" that has made such a rigorous ethos so utterly imperative;³⁵ and it is, too, a specific set of material realities which necessitate alms-giving from the poor to the poor.³⁶ As was true of Cervantes' opening dedication, so also here. Perceptions and realities of darkness and decline act as the catalyst for a reimagined world.

3.

In spite of its narrative centrality, Quixote's provincial status does not prevent his chivalric vision from adopting a universalizing lens. The nature of the knight's madness is such that even his most intimate

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 464-5.

³⁶ The realization that Quixote himself numbers among the impoverished petty nobility is also germane. When the *hidalgo's* action-oriented arguments are considered alongside his relative destitution (introduced in the novel's opening lines and emphasized throughout its span), it becomes clear that this unconventional figure both illuminates and embodies the structures he seeks to challenge. The often threadbare and frequently fanciful nature of institutional nobility is epitomized in Quixote's undignified material circumstances, and the frivolity of performative status becomes more than evident within his disordered words. Our madman is a part of the Spanish nobility, however nominal; he takes part in the gentry's discussions and participates in its *arbitrios*. Nevertheless, his own prescriptions are subversive of its aims, and his verbal emphasis on status' illusory nature is borne out by the hardship that he himself—as *hidalgo*—endures.

It is in this sense that Don Quixote is a liminal figure, a rebellious member of his rejected reality. Perceived conditions of decay and decline are (thus) substantiated by both word and deed.

³⁰ Ibid., 495.

³¹ Ibid., 493-4.

³² Ibid.

³³ 'Noble', of course, in the abstract sense.

conversations are subject to civilizational interludes, interruptions made necessary by the missionary (and messianic) character of our protagonist's delusion. Cervantes' novel would not function were Quixote not fixated on a proselytizing fiction, for it is the knight-errant's expansive/expansionist activity which drives both plot and psychology. Quixote's dreams escape the particularity of his character's predicament, crafting national parables and inter-state fantasies out of a hallucination limited to the mind of one very singular man.³⁷

Similar effects can also be attributed to the efforts of less 'imperial' individuals. Don Quixote's foray into the world of Elliott's *arbitristas* is directly connected with his ability to loudly espouse an unconventional message, but a matching pattern of reorientation and re-evaluation is likewise apparent in some of *DQ II*'s less public passages. The final episode addressed in *this* brief essay involves (indeed) a very personal debate, a familial disagreement which reveals one final parallel to Cervantes' paradigmatic preface.

A dive into the affairs of Quixote's wayward squire provides the best introduction to this concluding investigation. The novel's fifth chapter, "[c]oncerning the clever and amusing talk that passed between Sancho Panza and his wife, Teresa Panza," acts as a window into the experience of status as articulated by those who live within its lower rungs.³⁸ In this episode, Sancho—who has once again been promised an *ínsula* kingdom by his master—takes it upon himself to elevate his daughter in a corresponding manner. After explaining to his wife that he has "decided to serve [his] master [...] again" (i.e. to follow Quixote on another adventure), the peasant launches into a rhapsodic oration on the assorted luxuries that such an opportunity might afford his family.³⁹ But while Sancho recovers his breath for a fresh round of fantasizing, Teresa takes the opportunity to emphasize her husband's worldly duties, noting that he has managed to survive

without any ostentatious titles during his first forty-odd years. Sancho's response is predictably oblivious, a high-flying retort which evinces no small measure of hubris. "By my faith," the squire says, "if God lets me have any kind of governorship, I'll marry Mari Sancha so high up that nobody will be able to reach her."⁴⁰

The argument which ensues acts as a second echo or recapitulation of Cervantes' introductory reorientation. In a manner which also mirrors Quixote's soliloquy, this fresh view of familiar considerations is introduced via an engagement with grubby realities, a tally of the stakes which attend Sancho's hypothetical windfall. The Panzas do not live in squalor; of that Teresa is sure.⁴¹ But the potential security that could be afforded by such an unusual opportunity is not to be overlooked. As is true of Quixote's speech, the awareness of an unhappy material reality presages this discourse; as is true of Cervantes preface, the following points are presented—at least at first—in what can appear to be quite conventional terms.

After her husband suggests his starry-eyed marriage scheme, Teresa responds by positing that their daughter

should marry an equal, that's the best thing; if you raise her from wooden clogs to cork-soled mules, from homespun petticoats to silken hoopskirts and dressing gowns, [...], the girl won't know who she is, and wherever she turns she'll make a thousand mistakes.⁴²

Sancho retorts that María simply "needs to practice for two or three years," but Teresa does not take the bait. "*Be content with your station*," she replies, "and don't try to go to a higher one; remember the proverb that says: 'Take your neighbor's son, wipe his nose, and bring him into your house.'"⁴³ "Sure," she continues,

³⁷ For the full geographical scale of Quixote's imagined domain, cf. *DQ I*'s Micomicona episode (chapters XXXX-VI- approx. XLIII).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 485.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 485.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 487.

⁴¹ See below.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 487.

⁴³ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

it would be very nice to marry our María to some *wretch* of a count or gentleman who might take a notion to insult her and call her lowborn, the daughter of peasants and spinners! *Not in my lifetime, my husband!*⁴⁴ *I didn't bring up my daughter for that!* You bring the money, Sancho, and leave her marrying to me; there's Lope Tocho, [...] a sturdy, healthy boy, and we know him, and I know for a fact that he doesn't dislike the girl; he's our equal, and she would make a *good marriage* with him, and we'd always see her, and we'd all be together, parents and children, grandchildren and in-laws, and the peace and blessing of God would be with us; so don't go marrying her in these courts and great palaces were *they don't understand her* and she won't understand herself.⁴⁵

Once again, a progression from economic acknowledgments to an emphasis on well-being or prudent action is met with a rejection of expected aspirations. While it is indeed possible to read this passage as a reinforcement of hierarchical mores, Teresa's repeated emphasis on María's welfare—coupled with a healthy dose of skepticism about the manners and scruples of high-status suitors—indicates the coexistence of another eventuality. For the Panzas, as for Quixote, social climbing can appear as a means of escape, a route by which poverty might be overcome. But for the Panzas, as for Quixote, this understanding is not the end of the line. The mismatch between Sancho's materialism and Teresa's familial focus is significant indeed; as the mother argues, there is both an unbecoming frivolity *and* a legitimate risk to the uncritical acceptance of unalloyed wealth. Faced with Sancho's continuing obstinance, Teresa argues that "if [her] daughter becomes a countess *it will be to her ruin*."

⁴⁴ This sentiment contrasts quite nicely with the injunction of silence contained within Luis de León's 1583 discourse on "The Perfect Wife" (Cowans, *Early Modern Spain*, 117-125).

⁴⁵ Cervantes, *Quixote*, 487. Emphasis mine.

You'll do whatever you want, whether you make her a duchess or a princess, *but I can tell you it won't be with my agreement or consent*. Sancho, I've always been in favor of equality, and I can't stand to see someone *putting on airs* for no reason. They baptized me Teresa, a plain and simple name without any additions or decorations or trimmings of *Dons* or *Doñas*, [...] and I'm satisfied with this name without anybody adding on a *Doña* that weighs so much I can't carry it,⁴⁶ and I don't want to give people who see me walking around dressed in a countish or governorish way a chance to say: 'Look at the *airs* that sow is putting on!' [...] You, my husband, go and be a governor or an insular [sic] and put on all the *airs* you like; I swear on my mother's life that my daughter and I won't set foot out of our village.⁴⁷

Like Quixote's commentary on his imagined chivalric ideal, this expression can at first glance appear to reinforce customary conceptions of status and stratification. (Teresa's repeated invocation of a "right" place for impoverished peasants certainly jives with the strict hierarchical separation espoused by Elliott's assorted *arbitristas*.⁴⁸) But there is something more to this case, and the bulk of the mother's argument appears to operate upon quite different lines. Here, status *qua* status is seen as something almost *silly*; as is apparent in Quixote's tale, nobility itself is not without its own more risible aspects.⁴⁹ For Teresa, too, there is something insidious about these

⁴⁶ It is Elliott's argument that such was the fate of Spain. Cf. Elliott, "Self-Perception", 261.

⁴⁷ Cervantes, *Quixote*, 488. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁸ Cf. Elliott, "Self-Perception", 255 for the anxiety which attended increases in social mobility. Cellorigo's tract also contains a similar concern. Cf. Cowans, *Early Modern Spain*, 140: "In former days, [the high nobles], together with the rich and noble hidalgos [...] were in proper balance with the number of the others, the poor and those in the middle... Since then, [those in the middle] have been moving to either to the side of the rich or to the side of the poor..."

⁴⁹ And is (indeed) often of a hollow, performative sort. See note 50 below.

image-oriented practices, an unnatural affectation which acts to undermine hard-earned happiness.⁵⁰ That the Panzas' status-quo existence is presented in such a positive light is likewise relevant, and the mother's insistence upon her preexisting dignity appears itself to be a radical act.⁵¹

It is easy enough to identify a Quixotic or Cervantine trajectory from darkness to status to re-evaluation in this rich exchange, but where in the mix might we locate virtue? Teresa Panza certainly provides a compelling case for the rejection of contemporaneous ambitions, but what—if anything—is offered up to replace these goals?

Like Don Quixote's chivalry-speech, the peasant's thesis contains both a unique formulation of right action as well as a call for its proper application. Like Cervantes' preface, this conversation includes an emphasis on character as it conflicts with titles and estates. Unlike these two efforts, however, Teresa's argument outlines a vision of virtue which consists of *being*. There is no positive or prescriptive code to be found within this particular passage; instead, agency involves a *repudiation* of vice and a corresponding acceptance of one's own inalienable adequacy. Here, "right action" is equated with well-placed priorities and an emphasis on existence.

⁵⁰ Teresa's decision to couch her description of local nobles in highly aesthetic terms is rendered even more reasonable when considered alongside Elliott's emphasis on the ineffectual, self-interested, and outlandish schemes of Spain's historical *arbitristas*. This preoccupation with appearances also applies in matters of inter-state interaction; cf. Elliott, "Self-Perception", 260: "The overwhelming concern with 'reputation' in the conduct of Spanish foreign policy was at least in part the compensating response of ministers uneasily conscious of their country's *declinación*. Ironically it was Olivares' son-in-law, the statesman of a new generation, who despairingly observed after fifty years of obstinate effort culminating in the great disasters of the middle years of the century that 'the true reputation of states does not consist of mere appearances'...."

⁵¹ Cf. "They baptized me Teresa," etc. The plain but compelling logical force (as well as the rhetorical skill) hidden within Teresa's harangue is one other aspect which begs to be addressed.

Cervantes' inaugural insistence on the dignity of virtue exercised sans status and without wealth is yet again germane. But the humble nature of Teresa's challenge is not merely relevant, and indeed indicates something of critical importance about each of this study's interconnected investigations. In all of these arenas, there is no blatant, unambiguous, or outright 'activism'; the brilliance of each actor's intervention involves its proximity to (or place within) the systems it serves to subvert. We can now argue that there are "critical" commentaries present on the parts of Cervantes, Quixote, and Teresa Panza, alternate *arbitrios* that place a refreshing emphasis on the sorts of individual agency that Elliott's actors were unwilling to admit. But none of these cases exist outside of their larger cultural context, and every act is dependent upon its own circumstantial impetus.

Quixote's speeches and Cervantes' writings, then, can be said to act both in tandem—as a result of—and in combat with an increasingly unhappy image of their constituent characters' contemporaneous context. It is no coincidence that each passage's intervention appears or is augmented right alongside the novel's descriptions of decay and decline. In every iteration or adventure or episode, these attempted reforms are framed within an acknowledgment that something about Spain's upper echelons has gone seriously awry. Don Quixote does not desire to be a man of high status (or high status *alone*) but rather a virtuous knight-errant; Teresa Panza refuses—as Elliott implies most *did not*—to climb the social ladder in order that she might live among her 'betters'; and Cervantes himself constructs an image of individual merit that operates outside the confines of hierarchical orthodoxy.⁵²

Nevertheless, the question can be asked: why is all of this so this salient? Why does each character's reformulation or reorientation fit so well within the "darkening vision" of *Don Quixote's* second half?⁵³

The absurdity of abstract status as it is portrayed in the efforts of Cervantes, Quixote, and Teresa Panza contrasts quite clearly against a notable purity of ethical vision apparent in each character's credo, but the systems and structures which act as these agents'

⁵² See Elliott, "Self-Perception", 243-4.

⁵³ This felicitous phrase is borrowed from a Harold Bloom essay excerpted in the frontmatter of Edith Grossman's 2003 translation.

opponent were not the object of a unidimensional or universal dislike. While emphasizing a *different* vision on a societal scale, Teresa endows one aspect of her current context with the dignity that it in truth deserves; in his paean to a forgotten 'era',⁵⁴ Quixote attacks the present by ennobling a still-related Spanish past; and Cervantes' introduction frames a cultural failure within an ode to his own (Lemos-bestowed) economic success. Every character puts forth a new vision of good-faith reform, acting as an idealized *arbitrista* but an *arbitrista* nonetheless.⁵⁵ That these assorted approaches are tied with a well-delimited historical moment via the documents of Elliott's interest is of no little relevance, and each actor's individual convictions shine a rejuvenating light upon the political project undertaken by a generation of Iberian gentry.⁵⁶

In the end, it is this more benevolent moral foundation which allows *Don Quixote's* 'reform' to avoid the cynicism one might otherwise expect. The novel's continued investment in a reimagined topical discourse imbues Spain's national occupation with a strange sort of counterfactual grace, a legitimate honor however farfetched. Within a world of turmoil and uncertainty, Cervantes' characters persist in their attempts, placing justified action over and above the possibility of profit. It is an effort both tragic and inspired, a doomed image suffused with unexpected hope. What can *we* say to this tale, after all? *Plus ça change?*

⁵⁴ An age of dubious historicity, that is.

⁵⁵ However incidental such a 'political' effect might actually be. Not all 'interventions' are created (or presented) alike; Don Quixote's speech is the most explicit in its public-facing nature, while Cervantes' intervention is more muddled. By virtue of its more personal context, Teresa's case is quite challenging to connect with explicit or intended efforts at national reform. Nevertheless, this very feature—an inward-oriented focus on community health—is itself sociologically significant. Cervantes' audience is called to complete Teresa's implicit work.

⁵⁶ See Elliott, "Self-Perception", 243 and Teofilo F. Ruiz, *Spanish Society, 1348-1700* (London: Routledge, 2017), 288 for the prevalence of these pursuits... and for a survey of their products' use in constructing cultural-historical analyses.

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