

From: *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America*, 25.2 (2005 [2006]): 338-40.
 Copyright © 2006, The Cervantes Society of America.

Kurt Reichenberger. *Cervantes and the Hermeneutics of Satire*. Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2005. 129 pp. ISBN: 3-937734-11-2.

Kurt Reichenberger. *Cervantes ¿un gran satírico? Los enigmas peligrosos del Quijote descifrados para el "carísimo lector."* Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2005. 190 pp. ISBN: 3-937734-12-0.

Here we have two new books from an established publisher and scholar. One of them is quite good; the other is something of a mess. This is odd because they purport to be essentially the same work, as suggested by James Parr's remarks that appear in curtailed form on the cover of the Spanish text, and in their entirety as preface to the inferior English volume. The short essays that make up the chapters and appendices of both books read more like notes really (as in *MLN* or similar publications). Indeed, some of them seem to have originated as entries on the online discussion group that is the *Coloquio Cervantes*, where they have already stirred healthy debate.

Unfortunately, what is generally acceptable and felicitous prose in Spanish can become inarticulate English, and the author has done himself a disservice in allowing this to pass. While each book consists of twelve similar chapters, those in Spanish tend to be more developed—occasionally whole paragraphs have not made it into the English volume (notably in Chapter 11). This text suffers further from a lack of editing for English idioms and conventions of style, as well as simple carelessness. A complete list of errors would be extensive, but alarm bells go off as early as the first sentence ("Human Rights is a term that sounds very good"), and increase when the third one begins "Having discussed the title of the book": no such discussion takes place until Chapter 3.

The Spanish title asks a question whose answer is never in doubt—it is abundantly clear that, above and beyond any disingenuous effort to debunk chivalric novels, Reichenberger believes in Cervantes as the novel's true hero: a subtle social and political satirist in the tradition of Horace. The question, then, more properly becomes what exactly is being satirized? In this there lies considerable interest. Reichenberger's key to Cervantes' scheme of "encoded messages" is found in the preface's proverb "Debajo de mi manto al rey mato," which he calls "a first notion of the secret sense the author has in mind" (13). The English title is somewhat misleading, given that the term *hermeneutics* is never clearly defined for the purposes of the analysis, or even mentioned beyond the title page. Indeed, both titles might lead one to expect more pages dedicated to classical and contemporary literary theory, but this is not the case. What remains, however, is a frequently intriguing

interpretation, a strong reading of the 1605 *Quijote*.

There is much repetition of the facts upon which the reading is based: Felipe III's bankrupting of the nation and the resulting monetary scandal; Cervantes' ill-received recitation of a sonnet at the tomb of Felipe II; his frustration as a playwright. The premise is that Cervantes was moved to write *Don Quijote* when rebuffed for his sonnet on Felipe II's tomb, and to lace the first modern novel with symbolic (yet at the same time highly specific) criticism of his society and its decadent power structures. This is often compelling but not always convincing, as is the idea—found only in the appendix to the Spanish version—that Cervantes' wife Catalina was an inspiration for the novel, as well as a kind of ideal reader, given her *converso* family ties. One wishes for more sustained argument and less speculative mosaic, dazzling though it may be at times. Again, only in the appendix to the Spanish text do we find a summary of much of what the author is attempting, and even that is oddly placed as an introductory paragraph to an analysis of an allegorical painting called "El banquete de Herodes":

Los puntos álgidos en el *Quijote* de 1605 son los capítulos sobre los molinos de viento; el del furioso ataque a los rebaños de ovejas; y el episodio de los cueros de vino, donde la ventera y Maritornes... lamentan a viva voz la pérdida de sus bienes, el vino derramado por el suelo y la coda de buey estropeada por los huéspedes. Tres invectivas que evocan el mismo escándalo político: la aniquilación del sistema monetario por Felipe III y sus consejeros: el trueque de las monedas de plata, llamadas por los expertos "moneda de molino," por las de "vellón," moneda de cobre, oficialmente con el mismo valor, pero prácticamente sin valor alguno. Tal acción arruinó al artesanado y a la industria y causó la pérdida de casi todas las fortunas privadas acumuladas por los ciudadanos. No cabe duda de que las alusiones cifradas por Cervantes eran sumamente arriesgadas. Sin embargo, fueron comprendidas por sus compatriotas que, en tiempos de una estricta reglamentación [*sic*] estatal, aprenden a leer entre líneas. Existe para ello una prueba contundente: el entusiasmo unánime y universal con que se acogió la publicación del *Quijote* de 1605. (130)

The historical and economic claims are for the most part substantiated by bibliographical endnotes to each chapter, as well as a useful chronology at the end of each book.

A preliminary note in both volumes presents Cervantes' prologue to the first *Quijote* as a sly wink to the knowing reader; then Chapter 1 shifts

abruptly to treat a sonnet that Cervantes wrote about the tomb of Felipe II; Chapter 3, as mentioned, analyzes the full title of the novel, with attention to ironic wordplay. Much of the rest of the text provocatively interprets some of the best-known events from the novel: Don Quixote jousting with windmills, battling sheep, stabbing wineskins, and encountering galley slaves. There is nothing wrong in assuming that these major comic events could contain some of the novel's most biting critiques—e.g., “The angry reader of the day would link Don Quixote's crazy attack on the windmills with the maniacal machinations of Philip III that ruined the traditional *moneda de molino*” (33)—yet, beyond the economic argument cited above, Reichenberger never explains why he has chosen to explicate certain incidents over others, such as the burning of Quixote's library or “The Captive's Tale.” Given his readerly approach, such moments would seem to cry out for inclusion. The closest he comes to a general justification of his approach is in an interesting biographical epilogue on Cervantes, which will come too late for some readers.

It appears that scriptural exegesis informs much of Reichenberger's interpretive method. He finds the origin of Quixote in a name from the book of *Kings*, and pursues parallels between Maritornes and Mary Magdalene. Other onomastic gambits posited along more secular lines explain the origins of Rocinante, Dulcinea (alias Aldonza Lorenzo), and Don Fernando, but, surprisingly, not Sancho Panza. This rather hodge-podge approach can come across as tendentious because it is not based upon any thesis other than the assumption that Cervantes set out to circumvent the censors and pulled it off brilliantly, resulting in a bestseller. In sum, the Spanish text deserves to be read with the same care that has been put into its preparation. The other book may be consulted with some interest, but does not stand up to the sort of attentive reading that Reichenberger supposes to be crucial to a proper understanding of Cervantes' masterpiece.

Robert S. Stone
Language Studies Department
589 McNair Rd.
US Naval Academy
Annapolis, MD 21402
rstone@usna.edu