

Holy Moley: Don Quijote's Significant *Señal*

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IN HIS ESSAY "WHEN an Arab Laughs in Toledo," from the recently published *Cervantes and Modernity: Four Essays on Don Quijote* (2007), Eric Graf interprets the strange novel *Don Quijote* as "a manifesto in defense of the oppressed Morisco population of southern Spain" (22). Perhaps Graf is correct to the point of exaggeration about that particular defense, for Darío Fernández-Morera reminds us that Cervantes participated in the Christian navy's defeat of the Muslim Turks' massive naval force at Lepanto on October 7, 1571, that he was later captured by Muslim pirates and enslaved from 1575-1580 in Algeria in North Africa, and that he called upon Philip II to attack Muslim forces in North Africa and liberate 25,000 Christians enslaved in Algiers (Fernández-Morera, "Cervantes and Islam," 126-132; "Islam's Christian Captives," *passim*). Although his personal experience as a slave to Muslims may have offered him opportunity to form a more complex view of that religion, and though he may have felt empathy toward particular Muslims, Cervantes would appear unlikely to have had any great sympathy for Islam itself. His own Christian religious beliefs strongly influenced his final work, *The Wanderings of Persiles and Sigismunda*, a chivalric romance in which the knights and ladies are pilgrims wandering from the far reaches of the earth in a quest for the heavenly city of Rome on a journey signifying the stages of the soul's salvation through Catholic truth (cf. *The Cervantes Collection*). Given the strong Catholic views that Cervantes held, therefore, one might also suspect him of harboring a less-than-entirely-positive view of Muhammad as putative 'prophet' and thus wonder if any passage in *Don Quijote* perhaps expresses a negative view of that sort.

Cervantes is well known for using irony in *Don Quijote* to poke fun at various figures. In Part I, Chapter 30, of the book, he shows the lovely lady-

in-distress Dorothea inquiring after a great knight-errant, whose name she cannot quite recall but whom her father has sent her to find, so that this magnificent knight might free her kingdom from a dreadful giant. Cervantes makes Don Quijote's identity and valor depend upon the presence of a mole "on his right side under the left shoulder" — supposedly "the mark of a strong man," according to Sancho Panza (Cervantes, Part 1, Chapter 30 (Ormsby translation)). Quijote prompts the lady's memory:

—Don Quijote diría, señora —dijo a esta sazón Sancho Panza—, o, por otro nombre, el Caballero de la Triste Figura.

—Así es la verdad —dijo Dorotea—. «Dijo más: que había de ser alto de cuerpo, seco de rostro, y que en el lado derecho, debajo del hombro izquierdo, o por allí junto, había de tener un lunar pardo con ciertos cabellos a manera de cerdas.»

En oyendo esto don Quijote, dijo a su escudero:

—Ten aquí, Sancho, hijo, ayúdame a desnudar, que quiero ver si soy el caballero que aquel sabio rey dejó profetizado.

—Pues, ¿para qué quiere vuestra merced desnudarse? —dijo Dorotea.

—Para ver si tengo ese lunar que vuestro padre dijo —respondió don Quijote.

—No hay para qué desnudarse —dijo Sancho—, que yo sé que tiene vuestra merced un lunar desas señas en la mitad del espinazo, que es señal de ser hombre fuerte.

—Eso basta —dijo Dorotea—, porque con los amigos no se ha de mirar en pocas cosas, y que esté en el hombro o que esté en el espinazo, importa poco; basta que haya lunar, y esté donde estuviere, pues todo es una mesma carne. (Cervantes, Part 1, Chapter 30)

Cervantes makes rather a mountain of this mole, so much emphasis he puts on it! Why a mole? Why on don Quijote's back? Why the uncertainty about its location?

Vladimir Nabokov treats the "brown bristly mole" as a mark of irony, for while it may be "the sign of a strong man... there is but little flesh on those big bones of his," perhaps implying the mole's significant insignificance, thereby standing for Quixote's "bodily condition [as] a crazy quilt of vigor, fatigue, endurance, and twinges of hopeless pain"

(13 and 14). Similarly, Adelaida López de Martínez and Harriet Turner argue that the mole is an example of the “*menudencias*—the trifling things of life—[and that it] acts as a kind of inset mirror that reflects those trifles within a nexus of relations that confers upon the ordinary an extraordinary range of meaning.” Whereas Sancho sees the mole as the sign of a strong man, Don Quixote goes on to speculate that it signifies “his affinity to chivalric heroes like Amadís de Gaula.” Martínez and Turner conclude that “not only does the mole... provoke overlapping points of view and a belief in intersecting identities: the bristling hairs also denote a supra-textual vitality” (3).

I would suggest that we look for a specific *intertextuality*, to wit, the work of Miguel de Luna: *The True History of King Rodrigo* (*Historia verdadera del Rey Don Rodrigo*), and investigate its significance. André Stoll informs us that Luna was a “Morisco doctor from Granada who was King Philip II’s Arabic interpreter,” and he took upon himself the honor of valorizing the Muslim leaders who ‘liberated’ Spain from “the last Visigoth King, Don Rodrigo” (71-73). John Bowle calls our attention to the specific point of contact between *Don Quijote* (1605 and 1615) and the *True History* (1592 and 1600). The two, notes Bowle, abound with the same phrases and diction, and Cervantes “has with great humour ridiculed a circumstance gravely related... of a Christian woman taken by sentinels of the [Muslim] captain Tarif Abenziet [and] brought into his presence, [whereupon she] informed him that she had heard her father read” a ‘prognosis’ (10-11):

A Prognostick [original, *pronóstico*] which said, that the Christians were to lose that land, and that it was to be conquered by the Moors: it said farther, that the Captain that was to gain it, was to be valorous and *strong*; and for a proof of the knowledge of him, he was to have a *hairy mole* as large as a garvanzo, or vetch, over the shoulder of his right hand. On conclusion of these words by that woman, the *Tariff* was much pleased, and before all his retinue *stripped himself*, and having carefully looked, *they found the mole* as the woman had said. (Bowle, 11, footnote)

Note that Cervantes draws upon this source by the Morisco Miguel de Luna but uses it to implicitly ridicule the story of the Muslim who was to conquer under the sign of a mole. Interestingly, Cervantes chose not to use

Luna's *pronóstico*, but instead *profetizado*. This is not merely a change from the noun *pronóstico* (prognosis) to the verb *profetizado* (prophesied), for the verb *pronosticado* (prognosticated) could have been used. By selecting *profetizado* (prophesied), Cervantes moves the language toward the sacred and the reader toward the sacrilegious.

Why sacrilegious? By using the religious term *profetizado*, Cervantes would seemingly be turning the ridicule subtly toward Mohammad, the prophet of Islam. The evidence, moreover, lies not just in this use of the term *profetizado*. An excursus will clarify my point. The *Qur'an* speaks in sura *al-Ahzab* 33:40 of *khatam al-Nabiyyin*, which Islam expert John Esposito tells us translates as "seal of the prophets" and refers to Muhammad. Muslims interpret this as meaning that their prophet is the last in the series of prophets who began with Adam. Additionally, "some biographers of the Prophet mention that he had a physical mark (seal) of some sort between his shoulders that was regarded as one of the signs of his prophethood" (Esposito, 171a). Another expression for the mark was *khatam an-Nubuw-wa*, which Thomas Patrick Hughes translates as "the seal of prophecy," and he explains that this is "a term used for the large mole or fleshy protuberance on Muhammad's back, which is said to have been a divine sign of his prophetic office." Hughes states that "Abdu'llah ibn Sarjis describes it as being as large as his closed fist, with moles round about it" (270), and often itself described as a mole (Elad 152; 153, n. 33). As such, the mark could be considered a physical seal on the Prophet that served as "the sign of the Prophet," a phrase that can be expressed in Spanish as "la señal del Profeta" (e.g., cf. Ibn Qutayba 10), the same *señal* in Sancho Panza's phrase "señal de ser hombre fuerte" ("the mark of a strong man"). This mark on Muhammad was supposedly first seen and identified as a prophetic seal by the Syrian Christian monk Bahira, who is reported by Ibn Ishaq to have looked at Muhammad's back and seen "the seal of prophethood between his shoulders in the very place described" in one of Bahira's sacred books (Ibn Ishaq, 81, qtd. in Peters 135). In addition to this report from Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad, several *hadith* describing the physical mark can be found in *Sahih Bukhari*, such as in Volume 1, Book 4: "Ablutions (Wudu)":

Number 189: Narrated As-Sa'ib bin Yazid:

My aunt took me to the Prophet and said, "O Allah's Apostle! This son of my sister has got a disease in his legs." So he passed his hands on my head and prayed for Allah's blessings for me; then he performed ablu-

tion and I drank from the remaining water. I stood behind him and saw the seal of Prophethood between his shoulders, and it was like the "Zir-al-Hijla" (means the button of a small tent, but some said 'egg of a partridge.' etc.) (Khan)

Another *hadith* occurs in *Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 4, Book 56: "Virtues and Merits of the Prophet (pbuh) and his Companions":

Number 741: Narrated As-Scab bin Yazid:

My aunt took me to Allah's Apostle and said, "O Allah's Apostle! My nephew is sick." The Prophet passed his hands over my head and blessed me. Then he performed ablution and I drank the remaining water, and standing behind him, I saw the seal in between his shoulders. (Khan)

Several times, the mark is mentioned in *Sahih Muslim*, Book 30: "The Book Pertaining to the Excellent Qualities of the Holy Prophet (may Peace be upon them) and His Companions (*Kitab Al-Fada'il*):

Chapter 28: The Fact Pertaining to the Seal of his Prophethood, its Characteristic Feature and its Location on his Body

Number 5790: Jabir. Samura reported:

I saw the seal on his back as if it were a pigeon's egg.

Number 5791: This *hadith* has been narrated on the authority of Simak with the same chain of transmitters.

Number 5792: As-Sa'ib b. Yazid reported:

My mother's sister took me to Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) and said: Allah's Messenger, here is the son of my sister and he is ailing. He touched my head and invoked blessings upon me. He then performed ablution and I drank the water left from his ablution; then I stood behind him and I saw the seal between his shoulders.

Number 5793: Abdullah b. Sarjis reported:

I saw Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) and ate with him bread and meat, or he said Tharid (bread soaked in soup). I said to him: Did Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) seek forgiveness for you? He

said: Yes, and for you, and he then recited this verse: "Ask forgiveness for thy sin and for the believing men and believing women" (xlvi. 19). I then went after him and saw the Seal of Prophethood between his shoulders on the left side of his shoulder having spots on it like moles. (Khan)

The seal of the prophet, identified as a large mark, apparently a kind of mole, in various Islamic traditions, seems to be placed somewhat differently according to the particular tradition. Several of the *hadith* above state that the seal is between Muhammad's shoulders. Abdullah b. Sarjis, however, states that it is "between his shoulders on the left side of his shoulder." That expression "left side of his shoulder" is a poor translation for "his left shoulder blade," for the original text says *naged*, an archaic Arabic word meaning "shoulder blade" (cf. modern Arabic *nagd*, "cartilage of the shoulder blades," Steingass 1134). Even with this correction, the precise location seems unclear, either between the shoulders or on the left shoulder blade.

Let us here return to Miguel de Luna's *True History of King Rodrigo* (*Historia verdadera del Rey Don Rodrigo*), for Mercedes García-Arenal has noticed a connection:

Luna introduce en su libro,... otro pronóstico claramente emparentado con las *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (i.e., "Stories of the Prophets," adapted from the *Qur'an*): una mujer se acerca al conquistador árabe, el capitán Tarif, recién desembarcado en la península y le reconoce como aquél del que habla un pronóstico que le había transmitido su padre, según el cual un hombre milagroso había de ganar la península y su seña había de ser «un lunar peloso, tan grande como un garvanço,... situado sobre el hombro de la mano derecha». Esta historia está claramente inspirada en la del monje Bahīrā, que aparece en todos los compendios de «historias de los profetas», un monje cristiano que fue el primero en reconocer la calidad profética de Mahoma al ver que tenía sobre el hombro derecho un lunar, la marca de la profecía. (García-Arenal 564)

García-Arenal notes the allusion in Luna's passage concerning the mole on Tarif's back to the Bahira story of the 'mole' on Muhammad's back. Although Kamal-ud-din mentions the right shoulder in his 1925 biography of Muhammad (12) but provides only a general reference to Bukhari (11), Muslim sources generally locate the mark not on Muhammad's right

shoulder but on his *left* shoulder or between his shoulder blades. Perhaps García-Arenal has a *hadith* such as the following in mind:

“Allah never sent down a prophet who did not have the sign of prophethood on his right hand. The Prophet Muhammad (saas) was the only exception to this. His sign of prophethood was (not on his right hand) but between his shoulder blades. When asked about it, the Prophet said, ‘This mark between my shoulder blades is like the marks on the prophets before me’...’” (*Harun Yahya*)

The *Harun Yahya* website cites Tirmidhi for this *hadith* attributed to Wahb bin Munabbih but does not provide the precise citation. A search through Shamaa-il Tirmidhi's *Virtues and Noble Character of The Prophet Muhammad* does not locate this *hadith* (cf. Tirmidhi), but the source seems to be Hakim al-Nishaburi's *Al-Mustadrak alaa al-Sahibain* (aka *Mustadrak al-Hakim*), which apparently reports “from Wahb bin Munabbih that Allah (the most High) did not send a Prophet except that upon him was the sign (*shamah*) of Prophethood on his right hand, except for our Prophet for his sign (*shamah*) of Prophethood is between his shoulders [al-Hakim 2/577]” (al-Nishaburi). The emphasis placed upon the sign's location on the right hand of all other prophets might have influenced Luna's account of Tarif's mole, which is “located on the shoulder of the right hand,” to avoid contradicting Muhammad's exceptional status. García-Arenal may have confused the position of this mole on Muhammad, but Cervantes seems to have known what he was doing in placing Don Quijote's mole “on his right side under the left shoulder” or “on the middle of... [his] backbone,” for he can thereby allude to the mole of Tarif (“over the shoulder of his right hand,” Bowle, II, footnote) as well as to the ‘mole’ of Muhammad (“between his shoulders on the left side of his shoulder,” Khan).

One should be unsurprised that Cervantes would have knowledge not only of Luna but also of *hadith*, for as is well known and generally undisputed, Cervantes was intimately acquainted with the Islamic world. The name of his hometown, Alcalá de Henares, derives from the Arabic *al-qalat* (“the castle,” Phillips 420b), and the town itself retained an Arab quarter until the end of the *Reconquista*. Born there some fifty years later, Cervantes would likely have obtained cultural knowledge of Islam. But he also had firsthand knowledge of it, for he was captured by Muslims at 27

and sold into five years' slavery in Algiers, where he gained close knowledge of Muslims and their prophet. These biographical details should be noted, for as Manuel Duran persuasively demonstrates concerning Cervantes, "his biography sheds light upon his masterpieces" (23). Cervantes was thus probably well-positioned culturally to place Muhammad's 'mole' on Don Quijote's back by intensifying the allusions already present concerning the mole on Tarif's back in Miguel de Luna's *True History*.

Let us therefore recall the evidence that Cervantes intended these allusions. There is the mole itself, whether on Quijote's left shoulder or on his backbone between his shoulders—an imprecision similar to the imprecise location of Muhammad's mole. There is the allusion to prophecy (*profetizado*), recalling Muhammad as the "Prophet." There is the word *señal* used by Sancho Panza to refer to Quijote's mole as the "sign" of a strong man, recalling "the sign of the Prophet" Muhammad, a phrase capable of being expressed in Spanish as "la señal del Profeta." There is the confirming evidence that Cervantes intended his passage on Quijote's mole to allude to Luna's anecdote about the mole on Tarif's shoulder, itself an obvious allusion to *hadith* about Muhammad's mole. Given these connections, we see *that* Cervantes chose a mole and placed it on Don Quijote's back but left its position imprecise as a means of incorporating multiple allusions to Muhammad's 'mole'. But *why* would Cervantes transfer the mark of that strong man Muhammad onto Don Quijote? Is the notable, imprecisely located mole found on Don Quijote's back an *ironic*, if implicitly brusque reference—"a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable" (cf. Ratzinger)—to the extraordinarily significant, possibly imprecisely located mole found on Muhammad's back? Does Cervantes intend this irony as ridicule of Muhammad? Don Quijote certainly strikes readers as a ridiculous figure. Recall Nabokov's observation about Quijote, that "just as his mental state appears as a checkerboard of lucidity and insanity, so is his bodily condition a crazy quilt of vigor, fatigue, endurance, and twinges of hopeless pain" (13 and 15). Like Saint Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:10, Quijote could perhaps also say, "when I am weak, then am I strong" (KJV). The reverse, however, is just as remarkable, for when Quijote is strong, he is weak, and one should recall that the mole is considered by Sancho Panza to be "the mark of a strong man." Don Quijote, a complex character, stands before us as the expression of an equally complex author who knew strength as well as weakness from his own experience. Whatever one might say concerning his complexity, Cervantes was no multicult-

tural dreamer, despite Rothstein ("Regarding Cervantes"). As Fernández-Morera has persuasively argued in his article on "Cervantes and Islam," the author of *Don Quijote* certainly had no love for Islam but could empathize with individual Muslims (154), a view shared by Rothstein. Possibly, this extended to the founder of Islam himself, if Quijote with his ridiculous mole is meant to turn our eyes to Muhammad with his unusual 'prophetic' seal. If so, then the prophet of Islam, along with Quijote, is made by Cervantes to appear an unstable compound of the sublime and the ridiculous.

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