

The Curious Case of the Suspect Epistle

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he poem headed “De Miguel de Ceruante [sic], captiuo, a M. Vazquez, mi Señor” was discovered in a private archive in Madrid in 1863, written as a separate manuscript, devoid, we may assume, of any indications of origin or other markings (which would surely have been recorded, had they existed).

After almost 150 years the authenticity of this document still remains an open question. One can hardly say that “it remains matter for dispute,” scholars and critics having shown a marked disinclination to discuss the matter at all. This curious reluctance has impelled us to investigate the ramifications of the problem more fully, in the hopes of establishing a firmer basis for the poem’s acceptance or rejection.

Note that the title “Epístola a Mateo Vázquez” was coined by its nineteenth-century editors; the original had no title.

The discovery.

“Early in April,” 1863, in the course of “historico-literary” investigations being pursued by Tomás Muñoz y Romero, a distinguished member of the Royal Academy of History, in the Conde de Altamira archives in Madrid, the archivist, Luis Buitrago y Peribáñez, discovered a *legajo* marked “Diversos, de curiosidad,” contain-

ing, among other items, the "Epístola," previously unknown, and the holograph manuscript of Lope de Vega's play *Los Benavides*. Thus La Barrera (9 n. 1). Schevill adds that it also contained "las cuentas del Gran Capitán" and "una Biblia en vitela" (30).

What happened next is best recounted by the biographer Morán: "El señor conde, y el digno apoderado de su casa, Señor Don José Genaro Villanova, no han tenido inconveniente en dar vista y copia de aquellas composiciones a las personas ilustradas, facilitando por medio tan generoso su publicidad" (166). (We are not told who the "personas ilustradas" were, but we may assume that their number included La Barrera and Morán.) Given the widespread interest aroused by the poem, it was submitted to Eugenio Hartzenbusch, then Director of the National Library, for his presumed expert opinion, which was that it was indeed by Cervantes, but not in his hand.

His acceptance was the signal for general publication of the poem. On April 23rd it appeared in the Madrid evening newspaper *La Época* (with the original orthography), and other journals followed suit (Schevill, 30). Morán rushed to include it in his biography, which came out in the same year. In 1864 the procession continued: it formed the first appendix of Hartzenbusch's Arga masilla edition of *Don Quijote*, and was included in the Rivadeneyra edition of the *Obras completas*. A French prose translation by J. M. Guardia appeared in 1864, and Gibson's English version in 1883. In 1905 Cotarelo y Mori brought out an edition with introduction and notes.

In this first explosion of publicity and for years thereafter there was no questioning of the poem's authenticity. It is easy to see why: experts and public alike clearly *wanted* it to be genuine: this was no piece of conventional verse penned by its author in an idle moment, this was a cry from the heart of Spain's greatest novelist, who had faced unflinchingly the unspeakable horrors of Algiers and now called on his country's leaders to wipe out this stain on Spanish honour. This first impact of the "Epistle" is admirably illustrated by the words of Morán: "¡Qué locución tan castiza! ¡Qué pincel tan valiente! ¡Qué inspiración tan patriótica! Y, cuando vuelve sobre sí, icómo se siente destilar el dolor infinito que rebosaba

en aquel corazón tan noble, tan tenazmente lacerado por la adversidad!" (174). Even the young Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, writing in 1873, praised the "magnífica epístola" (1: 267). It is probable that the poem's patriotic appeal is still a factor in many Hispanics' belief in its authenticity.¹

The manuscript.

Schevill, in 1922, professed to find "cierto misterio" in "todo lo relativo a esta 'Epístola,'" adding that no printer of the poem in 1863 gave a description of the manuscript, and that Hartzenbusch limited himself to saying "es copia de buena letra," without suggesting a date for the manuscript (30–31). In this same year Morán had given his testimony in his biography: "el manuscrito no es autógrafa, pero su autenticidad es indudable" (174), his denial that the document was in Cervantes' hand implying that its script was of the novelist's time. We need hardly add that Morán was fully acquainted with Golden Age documents. Both he and Hartzenbusch were convinced that they were dealing with a copy, not a holograph, but care was taken to preserve the original orthography in the published version; a description of the physical properties of the manuscript would have added little, if anything, of value. Schevill also daims to find it "odd" that, in 1922, the manuscript could not be located. We find nothing odd in that fact at all. The Count, having performed a public service by ensuring that the outside world was apprised of the discovery of this new poem by Cervantes, would almost certainly have had the manuscript returned to the shelves of the archives. His literary treasures were jealously guarded: when, shortly afterwards, three volumes of Lope de Vega's letters (mostly autograph) were also discovered on the shelves, the envoy of the National Library was required to make his copy in the archives themselves. The "Epistle" would have been equally well guarded. Gibson, in 1883, believed it to be "in the possession of the Duke of Baena" (302). The statement, though unsupported, is believable, the Duke and the Conde de Altamira being members of the same family (Cadenas y López,

¹ On praises of the poem, see Fernández de la Torre 120 n. 9.

Nos. 61, 92, 621).

The poem.

We need recall the contents of the "Epistle" only briefly. After ninety lines of flattery of Philip II's Secretary, the writer contrasts his own miserable state with Vázquez's prosperity (15 lines; 91–105); he then reviews his years of service to Spain in the army: his part in the battle of Lepanto, where he received three wounds, and in the later actions of Navarino, Modon, and Tunis (54 lines; 106–59); his capture by the corsairs is then narrated (18 lines; 160–77). The rest of the poem repeats (with trivial variants) verses from the first act of *El trato de Argel*, in which Saavedra appeals to the king to take action against the corsair stronghold (67 lines; 178–244). The writer's account of Cervantes' life agrees with the established facts, except in one particular: the poem indicates that it was written, or allegedly written, in 1577 ("dos años ha que mi dolor se alarga," line 174). (The novelist was made captive on September 25, 1575.) Yet lines 106–07 ("Diez años ha que tiendo y mudo el passo / en seruiçio del gran Philippo nuestro") imply that Cervantes therefore enlisted in 1567, not, as now believed, in 1571. Those who, like Byron, believe the "Epistle" to be genuine, cite the discrepancy as another example of what he calls the "documentary inflation to which the Cervantes family was prone" concerning the length and details of Miguel's military service (210). Marasso (316) claims that it was suggested to a nineteenth-century forger by a similar example of "inflation" in Navarrete's biography of 1819.

When we come to consider the "Epistle"'s literary qualities, we are struck by the strength of the support for its authenticity, not only immediately after its discovery but in later years also. Aubrey Bell, who allied solid scholarship with critical sensitivity, had no doubts: "This letter has every sign of authenticity. It would have required real genius to imitate both the halting character of the meter and the sincerity of the phrase" (53 n. 27). The judgment of the biographer Byron is strikingly similar: "If the poem is a fake, it is an astonishingly good one, stylistically and psychologically. The forger, if there was one, was a master mimic, able to capture Cervantes' tone, his rhetoric, even his awkwardnesses" (216). On this

latter point there is the supporting view of Cotarelo y Mori: “no puede negarse que, como obra de arte, tiene algunos de aquellos defectos comunes a las demás poesías de Cervantes [italics added]. Hay en ella expresiones poco poéticas, consonantes vulgares, frases obscuras y transposiciones nada graciosas” (7–8).

Those believing the poem to be forged, in contrast, produce little evidence to support their case. Buchanan, who argues that “some of it [the “Epistle”] was garbled from other works of Cervantes” (27 n. 10), refers the reader to the Schevill and Bonilla edition of *La Galatea*, where similarities between novel and poem of one line, two words, and one word are noted (2: 285–86). Rodríguez-Moñino, who identified the once-famous letter to Sandoval y Rojas as a forgery, stated that the “Epistle” is “sospechosísima.” However, his only evidence is that “no he visto el manuscrito ni sé de ninguna persona solvente que lo haya tenido en sus manos,” and he died before completing his planned essay on attributions for the *Suma cervantina*.² Eisenberg on one occasion attacks Adolfo de Castro’s ability as a forger of Cervantine works (*Semanas* 24), and two years later cites Rodríguez-Moñino and concludes, without noting the discrepancy, that Castro was the author of the “Epistle” (“Repaso” 93–94). For Canavaggio the “Epistle” is “probably” only “un apocryphe fait de pièces et de morceaux” (101), a statement totally unsupported by evidence. We have in the past (“Epístola” 382–83) rebutted Casalduero’s argument that the presence in the poem of a twelve-syllabled line provides sufficient grounds for questioning its authenticity. As for Marasso, he devotes two pages to a “sucinto análisis” (!) of the three words “senda y camino” (line 85), to demonstrate that, for philosophical and stylistic reasons, Cervantes would not have used them, “a pesar del uso continuo de este procedimiento aun en el mismo Cervantes” (317); he then lists a number of typically Cervantine imitations of Garcilaso in the “Epistle,” to arrive at the devastating conclusion that “difícil es que Cervantes...se dé tanto trabajo en utilizar sus anteriores expresiones”

² Rodríguez-Moñino’s statement is in a letter to Elias Rivers, which the latter cites in his edition of the *Viage del Parnaso y poesías variadas*, 33.

(321). Comment seems unnecessary.³

Recapitulation.

We have seen that the discovery of the poem was described by credible witnesses clearly and concisely; that there is evidence that the Altamira archives enjoyed tight security; and that the highly qualified scholars who actually saw the manuscript variously agreed that it was a copy—probably in handwriting of the sixteenth century, but not Cervantes's—of a poem composed by the novelist. Those who, much later, expressed doubts about these findings never saw the manuscript, were few in number, and offered no, or few, or highly debatable arguments to support their case.

Yet others have stoutly defended the authenticity of the poem, on the grounds of its peculiarly Cervantine characteristics of phrasing, versification, or emotional response. Their arguments have been supported by other readers' occasional observation of agreements in detail between the "Epistle" and Cervantes' early verse.

Such evidence is useful, in the sense that there can be no claim to authenticity at all unless the "Epistle" offers a close correspondence to Cervantes' other early verse. But it is useless alone, for such correspondence may simply be the mark of the excellence of a forgery. Proof of authenticity, if applicable, must be based on other sufficient evidence *as well*.

A forgery?

Let us therefore approach the problem from another angle; let us assume that the "Epistle" is a forgery, and test whether that assumption can meet all necessary conditions. First, the forger's qualities. He (for we shall gallantly assume that no lady could have been guilty of such villainy) must have been a passable versifier,

³ Alberto Sánchez, in three articles (see Fernández de la Torre 117–18 nn. 4–6), argued against the fragment's authenticity, adding to Casaldueiro's arguments the allegation that Cervantes would never use the same material in two different works. Fernández de la Torre refutes Sánchez (118), but nevertheless argues against authenticity, without new arguments. He also states that Rivers was the first to suggest authorship of Adolfo de Castro; actually Marasso was the first.

conversant with Cervantes' early verse, life, and military career, some of his family's activities (especially its petty deceptions about the length of Miguel's service, and probably Rodrigo's ransom in 1577), and familiar with Mateo Vázquez's career and character (especially his pretensions as poet and patron of poets; Byron 216). He probably also had a knowledge of sixteenth-century handwriting, and was able to forge it or employ someone who could, and had a copy of *El trato de Argel* to hand. Sancha had published his edition of *El trato* in 1784, Navarrete his excellent biography in 1819. We would therefore be concerned with someone operating in the nineteenth century, more precisely between 1819 and 1863. Such a person would have pronounced literary interests and be something of a scholar (able to consult sixteenth-century documents). Marasso (322–23) points out that the years leading up to 1863 were a period of intense interest in Cervantes, and of literary forgeries and imitations; he then brings up the name of Adolfo de Castro, and blandly remarks: "No supongo que sea él quien escribió [la "Epístola"], ni tampoco Hartzzenbusch" (323). (Then why mention their names?)

The forger must have been willing to undertake the composition of 177 verse-lines generally complying with the rules of Golden Age prosody, closely imitating all the characteristics of Cervantes' early verse and introducing a series of correct references to the author's life and military career, with some thought also to the manner in which the novelist might have attempted to please and interest the king's Secretary. A formidable task.

But this may not have been all. He may then have had to inscribe, or find an accomplice ready to inscribe, the 244 lines of the whole "Epistle" in neat Golden Age handwriting ("buena letra"), a most exacting and time-consuming undertaking. (And let it not be forgotten that, if so, the forger must have been able to procure and retain for some time not just a supply of aged blank paper, but a number of Golden Age documents to study and copy. This was the pre-photographic age.)

One final step in the forger's plan remained to be taken: to gain admittance to the Altamira archives to "plant" the forgery. But a person with such literary attainments could find many plausible reasons for visiting such an establishment, and archivists will nor-

mally be concerned to control only material leaving their domain, not entering it.

At this point a simple but vital question arises. Why? What conceivable motive could any person have for behaving in such an extraordinary fashion? Why expend so much thought, care, time, and energy on the production of a document, only to consign it to the shelves of an archive where it might lie unnoticed for decades, especially when planted in a *legajo* bearing the label “oddments”? Why would a forger so good as to be able to deceive Hartzzenbusch and Morán not devote himself to more lucrative forms of deception, such as signed documents purportedly written by famous personages? There was a market for such things: for example, in 1887 a three-line official receipt of February 4, 1593, in Cervantes’ hand went on sale in Paris and London, with no asking price quoted—presumably so high as to be subject to special negotiation (*Inventaire*, 177). Why, for Heaven’s sake, *forge a copy, then hide it?*

With such considerations in mind, we feel that the case for forgery suffers fatal weaknesses.

Provenance.

This conclusion could be viewed as necessarily indicating the authenticity of the poem, and therefore justifying the end of our investigation. But such proof by default would be most unsatisfactory, leaving, as it would, too many important questions unanswered: Who could have made such a copy of the poem? Why? Where? When? How did it find its way into the Altamira archives? When? To answer questions such as these we must imitate the art historians, who, anxious to establish the authenticity of a work of art, seek to ascertain its full history from the time of its execution to that of its assessment. In similar fashion, therefore, we, assuming now the document to be authentic, humbly offer our reconstruction of its life from 1577 to 1863.

(1) In April 1577 Mercedarian Fathers arrive in Algiers with money to ransom a number of captives, including Cervantes. Overjoyed, he begins making plans for his return to Spain. He has not lost his love for writing in Algiers (witness his two poems to Ruffino, written around February, 1577 [Schevill, 18–21], as well as

the poems to Antonio Veneziano, captured in 1579),⁴ and he now decides to try to establish himself as dramatist in Madrid. He begins composition of the first version of *El trato de Argel*, based on the capture of the San Pablo on April 1, 1577 (Fifty years ago—"Date" 181–83—we advanced a series of arguments in support of such a first version.)

(2) The money provided for Miguel's ransom proving insufficient, it is used to free his brother Rodrigo. Miguel begins composition of a verse epistle to Mateo Vázquez, Secretary to Philip II, urging destruction of the corsair stronghold, at the same time plotting with his brother his own later escape. Perhaps he supposed a receptivity on the part of Vázquez because of the latter's birth in Algiers to a captive Christian mother, a relatively well-known fact, and because one of Vázquez's half-brothers was a captive in Algiers with Cervantes (Lovett, 3–4 and 8). When the time comes for Rodrigo's departure, Miguel has not yet completed his epistle, but improvises by borrowing a speech (by "Saavedra") from his new play to provide an ending.

(3) Rodrigo leaves, and in due course delivers Miguel's epistle to Mateo Vázquez. Cervantes himself narrates what happens next, in passages of Book IV of *La Galatea* (2: 35–40), written after 1580 (Stagg, "Composition" 16–18), involving three of the novel's seven real-life characters (Stagg, "Masks" 260–61), Damón (Láinez), Lauso (Cervantes) and Larsileo (Vázquez). Damón tells the shepherds that in earlier years Lauso had *composed and sent* (our italics) "una canción" "al famoso Larsileo, que en los negocios de la corte tiene larga y exercitada experiencia" (2: 35) and that the poem "fue tan celebrada de Larsileo quanto bien admitida de los que en aquel tiempo la vieron" (1: 40). One can imagine the Secretary proudly displaying the extraordinary missive to those whom he wishes to impress politically or culturally, then adding it carefully to his private papers, not to be lost among the welter of state documents. (It has never turned up in the Simancas archives.)

(4) In the summer of 1578 the Duque de Sesa is in Madrid. On

⁴ Garcés 67. For details about their publication, see Eisenberg, "Repaso" 95 n. 27.

July 25 he writes a letter praising Miguel's military services (*Don Quijote*, ed. Rico, 1: ccli), a letter which Cervantes' mother presents to the War Council in support of her petition for its assistance in assembling the money needed for her son's ransom.

(5) The letter passes before the eyes of Vázquez, a member of the War Council. Anxious to consolidate his position with the King in the wake of the Escobedo affair, he calculates that in certain circumstances it might be useful to have the goodwill of the Duke (now old—but still the Duque de Sesa!), and decides to present that noble patron of poets with a copy (made by a palace scribe “de buena letra”) of the “Epistle” that he had received late last year “from our favourite warrior-poet”—or words to that effect...

(6) The Duke, pleased with his gift, adds it to his collection on the shelves of his archive.

(7) There it sleeps, its slumbers disturbed only perhaps by the attentions of archivists, or, on June 17, 1762, of the copyist Ignacio de Gálvez re-shelving the holograph of *Los Benavides* (Amezúa 2: 382), until it is finally awakened on that day “early in April,” in 1863.

But, it will be objected, the copy of the “Epistle” was discovered in the *Altamira* archives. True indeed, and here we come upon the most astonishing aspect of the whole affair. As far as we are aware, no interested person in the whole twentieth century asked the obvious question: “What was the history and nature of those archives?”

To the scholars of 1863 (especially La Barrera, who was just completing his biography of Lope de Vega), that question itself would have displayed an ignorance so lamentable as to be best ignored. But that was before the archives' dispersal, later in the century (see below, “Postscript”).

Over the centuries the Altamira family had acquired by marriage and inheritance the archives of a number of other illustrious Spanish families, including (in the eighteenth century) the Duque de Sesa archives (Micheli 1 n. 1), famous as the repository of the literary treasures collected by that Duke who had protected Lope de Vega and had fanatically preserved *anything* that that dramatist

in particular had written.

The evidence is clear that the copy of the "Epistle" came from the Sesa collection in the Altamira archives: the academician engaged there in "historico-literary" research; the holograph of *Los Benavides* thrust casually into a "miscellaneous" file; the discovery there of the Lope de Vega letters.

Once the connection "Cervantes–Duque de Sesa archives" has been made, everything falls into place, each episode in the adventures of the Altamira "Epistle" leading to the next with the capricious inevitability of history, so that, when one is possessed of all the relevant facts, the solution to our little problem becomes... well, elementary.

Postscript.

During the later nineteenth century the Altamira archives were dispersed worldwide. Ten thousand documents from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, for example, found their way to the University of Geneva (Micheli 1–2); many others were acquired by the British Museum, now the British Library (Gayangos); the Gálvez transcriptions of Lope plays reappeared magically in Madrid after the Civil War (Amezúa 2: 366–67); and the holograph of *Los Benavides* has finally found a home in the University of Pennsylvania.⁵ The Altamira copy of the "Epistle," for all we know, may still be in the possession of the Altamira–Baena–Sesa family.

Clearly, care was taken to ensure that the archives were distributed to those who would treat them with due concern for their preservation and availability to the public. Gibson (in an account published in 1883) was therefore patently in error when he wrote as follows: "When the library of the [Altamira] family was dispersed a few years ago, a vast number of Vázquez's State papers and correspondence were ruthlessly disposed of for the price of waste paper (nine *reales* the *arroba*!). A portion of these were eventually purchased by the British Museum" (302). Obviously he is confusing two events: the Altamira dispersal and an auction of the

⁵ Morley 230. A facsimile and edition of this manuscript were published by Reichenberger and Espantoso-Foley in 1973.

Vázquez papers. Lovett (105) recounts that Mateo had left a "vast" accumulation of State and Holy Office papers, but in his will had directed that these be handed over to the respective authorities. It appears that his wishes had been ignored, and that therefore *all* his papers had survived until the late nineteenth century. And then? Some of them at least seemed to have escaped the scrapheap, appearing in the document-market in the eighteen-eighties, one group, for example, emanating from Mateo's North African Intelligence Service (*Inventaire* Nos. 114, 116, 117, 122–24). But the odds against the survival of the Vázquez "Epistle" appear overwhelming. No matter: the words of the poem live on, the worthy legacy of a surpassingly brave man.

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