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The Historical and Materialist Subtext of the Battle of the Sheep

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Abstract
In his perceptive work on the interrelationship between history and literature, Louis Montrose advocates a resituation of texts within their contexts which leads to "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (20). For Montrose, aesthetic works can historicize the past and provide an understanding and explanation of times past, even though they cannot provide an objective portrayal of history (20). It is in this spirit that I would like to approach the Battle of the Sheep in Don Quijote. To resituate this well-known episode within its socio-historical context is to make possible a more profound understanding of the various contemporary economic issues that inform its plot. In the Battle of the Sheep, Don Quijote mistakes two opposing flocks of sheep for two great armies preparing for ferocious battle. Always interested in showing his heroic virtues, the knight sallies out to fight the infidel, Muslim squadron. Once recontextualized, however, the "great" battle is really indicative of socio-economic issues related to agrarian policy and reform which were chief concerns during Cervantes' lifetime.

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The Historical and Materialist Subtext of the Battle of the Sheep

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In his perceptive work on the interrelationship between history and literature, Louis Montrose advocates a restitution of texts within their contexts which leads to “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (20). For Montrose, aesthetic works can historicize the past and provide an understanding and explanation of times past, even though they cannot provide an objective portrayal of history (20). It is in this spirit that I would like to approach the Battle of the Sheep in Don Quijote. To resituate this well-known episode within its socio-historical context is to make possible a more profound understanding of the various contemporary economic issues that inform its plot. In the Battle of the Sheep, Don Quijote mistakes two opposing flocks of sheep for two great armies preparing for ferocious battle. Always interested in showing his heroic virtues, the knight sallies out to fight the infidel, Muslim squadron. Once recontextualized, however, the “great” battle is really indicative of socio-economic issues related to agrarian policy and reform which were chief concerns during Cervantes’ lifetime. Briefly stated, the fact that a memorable episode in Don Quijote features sheep and shepherds brings to mind political, legal and economic battles between a prosperous wool industry and a decaying farming sector in Golden Age Spain. It is my contention that the Battle of the Sheep references these agro-economic problems and places the two most important industries of the day—sheepherding and farming—in direct conflict with one another. This struggle is further highlighted when Don Quijote slaughters the sheep, thus symbolically defending the farming industry and, by relation, making a declaration about the declining state of agriculture in the peninsula.

The adventure begins when Don Quijote and Sancho have left the Inn where Sancho was unceremoniously tossed in a blanket after his master refused to pay the bill. In the distance Don Quijote sees two clouds of dust approaching each other that he immediately declares to be enemy armies preparing to engage in battle: “¿Ves aquella polvareda que allí se levanta, Sancho? Pues todas es cuajada de un copiosísmo ejército que de diversas e innumerables gentes por allí viene marchando.” For Murillo Don Quijote’s sighting of the dust clouds serves as a visual marker, an “all-powerful and decisive” visual stimulus for adventure that subsequently leads him to form inaccurate conclusions about what is really happening (59). But, Sancho is skeptical and notes that the two “armies” are really only ewes and rams which have happened along the same trail at the same time. Don Quijote

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1 All citations from Cervantes’ El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha are from the edition Fajardo and Parr.
attempts to convince his doubting squire by naming an entire list of combatants, their armor, their origins, and how they came to do battle on this day:

Y has de saber, Sancho, que este que viene por nuestra frente le conduce y guía el grande emperador Alifanfarón, señor de la grande isla Trapobana; este otro que a mis espaldas marcha es el de su enemigo, el rey de los garamantias, Pentapolín del Arremangado Brazo, porque siempre entra en las batallas con el brazo derecho desnudo.

The knight then explains the specifics as to why these two great armies are preparing for battle: it seems the pagan emperor Alifanfarón wishes to fight the Christian king Pentapolín, whose daughter Alifanfarón wishes to marry. Despite Sancho's pleading that they are only sheep, Don Quijote charges onto the battlefield favoring the Christian side, and crying "¿Adónde estás, soberbio Alifanfarón? Vente a mí; que un caballero solo soy, que desea, de solo a solo, probar tus fuerzas y quitarte la vida, en pena de la que das al valeroso Pentapolín Garamanta." The rest of the episode ends as so many others have: Don Quijote is defeated, this time at the hands of angry shepherds who have pelted him with stones. Torrente Ballester points out that if Alifanfarón was a man of normal size and height and on horseback, how is it that Don Quijote, who is also on horseback and should carry his lance parallel with the ground, happens to kill sheep that are much smaller and, obviously, lower to the land. According to Torrente Ballester both Cervantes and Don Quijote are professional soldiers who should know how to use a lance in any given situation; if Don Quijote goes after Alifanfarón but his lance finds sheep, "es porque ve ovejas y no soldados" (124-25).

Could it be that Don Quijote's slaughter of the sheep may really just be an attack on sheep, and not armies, as Torrente Ballester maintains? Murillo calls attention to the fact that "Only the windmill episode has impressed itself on the universal imagination with greater force and permanence than the episode of Quixote's attack on the sheepflocks..." (58). Despite Murillos' insistence on the indelibility of the Battle of the Sheep, surprisingly little has been written about this memorable episode. Critics have treated the battle as a parody of classical literature or as a parody of military tactics and war. Some years ago Krappe suggested the entire episode might be derived from a tragedy by Sophocles depicting the story of Ajax who went crazy and killed an entire flock of sheep. Selig, however, cautions against fixing the episode on any one particular subtext since Apuleius' Golden Ass also may have contributed to the story (285). There is, however, little doubt that Cervantes drew on many traditions and sources for the episode, just as he did throughout Don Quijote. In Selig's words, "the madness of Ajax may be just one more reference or 'source' which may possibly, among many other 'sources' and references, resonate in this textually and artistically brilliant and exuberant episode" (286). Indeed, for McGaha, Don Quijote's depiction of the armies is very much in line with how Cervantes makes use of constant references "—blatant or
oblique, serious or playful—to other texts” (154) and it is a part of how the author “renders his novel’s meaning ultimately undecidable” because he neutralizes how words represent reality (152). I would like to suggest another subtext, namely that socio-economic issues may have played an important role for the conception and development of the Battle of the Sheep. References to ancient agrarian and locations herding peoples as well as geographical formations that served the wool trade in the peninsula are fundamental to our understanding of the entire episode. This idea is echoed by Tirado, who mentions in passing that the Battle of the Sheep may index the problematic agricultural situation of the period (43).

In early modern Spain, agricultural problems were primarily related to the continuous struggle between farmers and sheep herders for land. Ever since the thirteenth century, a major economic activity in the peninsula was the rearing of merino sheep for the export of their wool, a breed from North Africa introduced by the Moors in Andalucía around 1300. Spanish merino sheep were remarkable for the fineness of their wool, the thickness of their fleeces, and for retaining their wool longer. Where land was unfertile or there was more farmland than necessary, herding supplemented the incomes of local farmers. The subsequent profitable wool trade resulted in a boom in herding. However, as the number of people grew within the peninsula, so did a need for greater agricultural production. What hindered crop production most was the frequent demand for more grazing lands. As a result, there were constant legal disputes as farmers argued that transhumant migratory flocks destroyed local agricultural lands as they crisscrossed the peninsula in search of better weather and more pasture lands. Shepherders responded to these complaints by forming the Consejo de la Mesta, a powerful guild designed to defend their rights to land use, and to strengthen their position in the world wool trade. The Mesta acquired incomparable political, legal, and economic advantages over farmers, and was effective at putting large tracts of lands to use for grazing at the expense of agricultural production.

The negative effects caused by the dominance of the wool trade in the peninsula were numerous: a shortage of agricultural lands coupled with frequent drought meant that Spain would suffer major food shortages. Moreover, laborers abandoned the land to search for work within swelling urban populations. As Diez Borque points out, it was well known that there was a smaller chance of suffering from hunger in the cities than in the countryside (314). Indeed, between 1530 and 1610 the peninsula was gradually transformed into a land of deserted villages. Government officials eventually became concerned about the exodus from farming communities and the crown passed several laws in 1603 to curb the authority of the Mesta at the same time as world demand for Spanish wool declined. And vocal opposition to the Mesta came from “arbitristas,” social-minded writers who generally supported agricultural reforms. It was already too late, however, for advocates to change a worsening situation. Throughout Spain, the second half of the sixteenth century was a period in which local food production was proving increasingly inadequate for a still-growing urban population (Elliot: 290).
It is this subtext that we must keep in mind as we examine the Battle of the Sheep. The episode, wrought with political and economic commentary, moves beyond mere aesthetics, forming part of the debate of the epoch. In *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson writes that aesthetic works that reference previous historical accounts can be studied as a symbolic reconstruction of those previous historical events, what he calls "(...) the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext, it being always understood that the 'subtext' is not immediately present as such" (81). It seems to me that the poor state of agriculture in Spain brought on by the unfair legal, economic and political advantages afforded the shepherders is the "prior historical or ideological subtext" that underwrites the entire Battle of the Sheep.

Close textual analysis reveals that Don Quijote’s description of the participants in the pending battle also point to this socio-economic subtext. The two military squadrons—one Christian, the other Muslim—are both backed by troops of twelve Christian or Islamic nations involved in the rearing of sheep. In the list of invented names and contrived descriptions there is a plethora of elements and imagery that bring to mind the commodification of the wool trade in the peninsula. In many ways the places mentioned reflect Cervantes’ formidable geographical and historical knowledge since most refer to important Middle Eastern or African locations that are directly related to the economic activity of raising sheep. For example, concerning the Islamic army Don Quijote mentions the following Byzantine tributaries found in Classical literatures around which the sheep trade was often centered: the Janto, a river in Troy celebrated by Homer and Virgil (Rodriguez Marin: 40), the Thermodon, a minor river in Asia Minor (now part of Turkey), and the Pactolus, a tributary of the ancient Hermes river in Turkey which, according to legend, had sands of gold because King Midas was said to have bathed in it (Manuel: 537). Don Quijote also lists peoples of “diverse nationalities” from North Africa and the Middle East, some of which were known to be shepherds, others who were nomads: the Masilios from African Numidia; Persians from modern-day Iran; the Parthians and Medes (Persian tribes famous for archery) (Rodriguez Marin: 127); Arabs of “mudables casas,” or nomads such as the Scythians and the Ethiopians who were some of the earliest domesticators of sheep (6000 B.C.). Since time immemorial, these peoples made their living through herding. Raising sheep was not just an important economic industry, it was *the* economic industry. In short, herding was their major source of income, and sheep acted as currency. This was no different than in early modern Spain where the material significance of wool was the life blood of more than a few landholders, nobles or the crown.

Don Quijote’s description of the Christian squadron seems to concentrate most on soldiers who hail from important rivers valleys that also were known to be important points for watering transhumant flocks during their frequent moves along the “cañadas,” established routes which ran across the peninsula. Specifically, Don Quijote mentions: the people of the Guadalquivir area, here understood as the
“olivífero Betis,” and who likely are the inhabitants of Seville; the people from the “rico y dorado” Tajo valley from Toledo to Lisbon, so named because the Tajo was believed to enjoy special virtues (Rodríguez Marín: 43); the populace of the Genil river which flowed through Granada and the south of Spain and empties into the Guadalquivir; the descendents of the “tartesios,” who lived along the Guadalquivir; the people of the famous “campos eliseos” (the valley of Jérez de la Frontera) through which ran the Guadalete river; the Basques, “los de hierro vestidos,” known for the quantity of iron fields in the region and their talents as iron artisans; the inhabitants of the Pisuerga, a river running through Valladolid and emptying into the Duero; the shepherds of the Guadiana river valley whose herds “apacientan en las estendidas dehesas;” as well as the people of the Pyrenees and Apennine mountains, also fertile grounds for shepherding. These references indicate that shepherding not only played an important role in the livelihood of many laborers, but also it was an important enough profession to highlight its significance in *Don Quijote*.

The Battle of the Sheep, like other episodes in *Don Quijote*, symbolically reference political, economic, religious or social subtexts, and I think this indicates a political unconscious at work. Maravall, for example, has pointed out that “the nucleus of *Don Quixote’s* world of villagers, shepherds, and knights is thoroughly political. It opposes the political forms that the social and economic transformations of the time bring with them (...)” (157). If this is true, then *Don Quijote’s* slaughter of the sheep symbolizes a resistance to change, a rejection of the modern state, and an opposition to new political structures that have “destroyed religion, peace, happiness, and justice among people” (Maravall: 158-59). If the state has always upheld the wool trade at the expense of agriculture industry, then by slaughtering the sheep *Don Quijote* is symbolically resisting the crown and its economic or political policies. In this way, returning once again to Jameson, the knight’s actions can be studied as symbolic resolutions to real-life political or economic problems, what Jameson might call “imaginary or formal solution(s) to unresolvable social contradictions” (79).

In *Cervantes and the Material World* Carroll Johnson shows that there is a whole influx of socio-economic issues in Cervantes’ society that are reflected in his literary works. While we tend to skip over, ignore or simply miss references to the economic conditions of the time, Johnson has demonstrated that allusions to materialist practices form a substantial part of Cervantes’ work. For Johnson the commodification, commerce and exchange of capital often served as driving forces behind such noteworthy writings as *Rinconete y Cortadillo*, or the Captive’s Tale and the Story of Ricote in *Don Quijote*. Adding to that list, we also might point to the episode of the “batanes” (I, 20), the famous episode of the windmills (I, 8), or when *Don Quijote* and Sancho are run over by a herd of pigs (II, 68) as excellent examples of how capitalist practices in industry, commerce and trade play significant roles in the socio-economic subtext. In turn these episodes give us a seldom-viewed glimpse into the political makeup of early modern Spain, and delineate the
importance of economic matters in Cervantes’ writings. Indeed, if we are to understand the Battle of the Sheep as a reflection of early modern society, politics and economics, it seems impossible for Cervantes not to make references to the sheep trade considering the importance of the wool industry during this period in Spain. We see, for example, his real and philosophical interest in pastoral life through Don Quijote’s time with the shepherds before Grisóstomo’s funeral (I, 13), in his conversations with the goat herders (I, 12), in his desire to become a shepherd toward the end of his life, taking the name “el pastor Quijóte” (II, 57), and in various references to shepherds and their rustic way of life. These pastoral experiences highlight a preoccupation with the state of agriculture and shepherding in the peninsula.

As we study Don Quijote we should always keep in mind what happened just before this episode, and what will come next. Just before the Battle of the Sheep Sancho is tossed about in a blanket—probably made of wool—because Don Quijote has sworn off money as a means of exchange and hence refuses to pay the bill for his stay at the Inn. Perhaps this incident is related to the state of the economy and how the wool trade has taken over as the main source of revenue and the principal means of payment. What is interesting, however, is that after Don Quijote has been beaten by the shepherds and lies broken on the ground, he takes a shot of his hâl-sano, vomits all over Sancho, and then there is a conversation between the two about how hungry they are. Is this too a reference to the overall agrarian situation and how poor farming production had led to famine? What is clear to me is that, borrowing Jameson’s terms, there is a political unconscious in operation in this episode which is bound up in a not-always-visible socio-economic, historical and materialist subtext involving the wool trade and a decaying agricultural sector. Don Quijote’s slaughter of the sheep may attempt to symbolically resolve what kings and government officials were unable to do for nearly 200 years: lessen the grip of the wool trade and grant farming a more equitable footing.

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