

BOOK REVIEW

ANATOMY OF LIBERTY IN *DON QUIJOTE DE LA MANCHA*: RELIGION, FEMINISM, SLAVERY, POLITICS, AND ECONOMICS IN THE FIRST MODERN NOVEL

ERIC CLIFFORD GRAF

LANHAM, MARYLAND: LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2021, 290 PP.

ALLEN MENDENHALL*

“A major thesis of this book,” Eric Clifford Graf says of *Anatomy of Liberty in Don Quijote de la Mancha*, “is that [Miguel de] Cervantes’s great novel offers a realist bourgeois solution to the confusing labyrinth of tyranny, bondage, and corruption” that characterize early modern Europe (p. 3). Widely recognized as the first early modern novel, *Don Quijote* advances “positive themes like freedom, harmony, and progress” that commerce and exchange make possible (p. 3).¹ It falls, arguably, within the liberal tradition, advancing a distinctly humanist vision of liberty and, at times, a sardonic critique of undue coercion, containing “a significant set of

* Allen Mendenhall (AllenMendenhall.com) is Associate Dean and Grady Rosier Professor in the Sorrell College of Business at Troy University.

¹ Following Graf, this review uses the spelling *Quijote* rather than *Quixote*.

sophisticated casuistic lessons about liberty as an economic science of unusual complexity" (p. 180).

Don Quijote is a picaresque² featuring the ridiculous nobleman Alonso Quixano, or Don Quijote, and his simple sidekick Sancho Panza. Their carnivalesque, absurd adventures—comical spoofs on medieval, romantic, knight-errand legends of gallantry and chivalry—result in irony, hilarity, and, alas, tragedy. Criticism in the manner of wit rather than militant provocation or brute force is less likely to invite violent reaction, and Cervantes deftly and prudently employed the satirical mode to popular effect.

That *Don Quijote* is the first modern novel is no trivial fact. Compared to the high ecclesiastic treatises of the Roman Catholic Church or the urgent tracts and polemics of the Protestant Reformers, the novel itself was, in the seventeenth century, a proto-liberal medium of expression that represented bourgeois values: commerce, commercialism, trade, exchange, interaction, entertainment, and work. The internal form of novels, in fact, resembled (and resembles) the everyday hustle-bustle of their presumed audience. "The wide-ranging and all[-]embracing character of the novel at its best may be purchased at the prices of a certain disunity and inconsistency by the standards of strict poetic form," Paul Cantor (2009, 49) alleges, "but this is a price we are prepared to pay in return for the novel's greater ability to capture the texture of lived experience." Graf points out, as well, that "respect for women on a cosmic scale" was integral to "the novel form" (p. 55).

The point of a review such as this is to summarize and assess the subject author's leading, seminal arguments. Elements of Cervantes's plot, which Graf analyzes with depth and breadth, will not appear here. Graf, not Cervantes, is my focus. He sets out to clarify Cervantes's probable intents and decisions for *Don Quijote* by providing historical context to interpret details from the text, compare scenes in which Cervantes renders economics broadly conceived, and link *Don Quijote* to other works and thinkers who influenced, or may have influenced, Cervantes. To accomplish this objective, Graf arranges his case topically by themes that define the liberal tradition, namely "religious tolerance," "respect for women," "abolition of

² "A picaresque," Graf avers, "is an episodic and satirical type of narrative fiction" (p. 13).

slavery,” “resistance to tyranny,” and “economic freedom” (p. 5). Each chapter of this book tracks one of these themes.

It is probably too much to call Cervantes a classical liberal, so Graf, at the outset, cautiously posits that Cervantes *anticipated* and *influenced* classical liberals such as Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Mill, and certain American Founders—to say nothing of the numerous Hispanic liberals who valued economic freedom and individual rights to varying degrees. By the end of his book, however, Graf changes his tune. His conclusion is surprising in its boldness: “So, am I saying Cervantes was a capitalist? An Austrian? A free-market Randian? A libertarian? An English classical liberal? In a general sense, yes, and probably to a greater degree than most readers recognize” (p. 189). Strong words, even if they are qualified by the adjective “general.”

Graf dubs his book an “anatomy,” the term Murray Rothbard employed for his *Anatomy of the State*. Both texts “dissect” their subjects, so to speak, as the scientist might probe the human body in all its intricate particulars. Graf joins Darío Fernández-Morera (2009, 101) in treating Cervantes “as a writer whose works present situations, statements, and ideas that illuminate sympathetically important aspects of the market economy, while providing material for a critique of collectivism, statism, and redistributionism.”

The School of Salamanca is among the influences that Graf identifies as central to Cervantes’s humanist style of religious tolerance. That is also the school, of course, from which Rothbard traced the origins of Austrian Economics. Graf sees in Cervantes Erasmus-like and quasi-Protestant sympathies, which, in his telling, seem more political (i.e., anti-monarchical) than theological or doctrinal. Protestantism thus understood placed a primacy on the individual, resisted state surveillance and persecution, advocated mass literacy and learning, and rejected ecclesiastic power and orthodoxy. “Cervantes was himself excommunicated,” Graf adduces in support of his view (p. 32). Cervantes’s “Protestantism,” if that is the correct label, was historically and geographically contextual and in contradistinction to the systematic coercion institutionalized by the Spanish Inquisition.³

³ “Cervantes criticizes the Inquisition as an immortal, brutal, random, superstitious, and hypocritical institution that suffers from considerable ideological inconsistency.” Graf, p. 29.

Graf connects religious freedom with freedom of thought because they both concern "the limits of the state's ability to control the inner lives of its citizens" (p. 17). A negative example of religious coercion against which Cervantes wrote was the Expulsion of the Moriscos under Phillip III. Here, a monarch exercised state compulsion to enforce religious conformity and oppress heretical individuals or groups. Graf notes that this religious and ethnic conflict occurred between the publication of the first and second parts of *Don Quijote*. The fact that state-religious censors cut irreverent passages from *Don Quijote* before its second edition appeared suggests the extent to which freedom of thought and religion are bound together. Cervantes's strategic irreverence was "part of a dramatically down-to-earth discourse aimed at subverting orthodoxy" (p. 23). One explanation for why *Don Quijote* continues to appeal is that light humor is more enjoyable than violent sanctimony. Comedy, done well, has staying power.

Don Quijote "should be of great interest to feminists" (p. 55), according to Graf, for several reasons: (1) Because it "defends women characters against the kinds of brutality often practiced and permitted by the Islamic, Protestant, and Catholic men of his day" (p. 55); it "mocks the extremes of male sexuality" (p. 56); it depicts "comical, prosaic, and pathetic renditions of male fantasy" (p. 58); it portrays women "as no different from men when it comes to their moral status" (p. 59); and it "recognizes that since women get pregnant, their experience of sex is more consequential, both in terms of social stigma and material cost" (p. 59). Only a lengthy exposition beyond the scope of this review could adequately address Graf's account of the multifaceted "feminism" (an anachronistic designation for Cervantes) communicated by *Don Quijote*.

The same might be said of Graf's account of slavery, which, he says, is "essential to any serious understanding of *Don Quijote*" (p. 85) in light of Cervantes's treble objections to human bondage: that "slavery itself is wrong, the new racial justification of it is absurd, and any material advantage it offers over a free labor market is likely an illusion" (p. 85). Equating slavery and skin color grew increasingly common during the seventeenth century, when Spanish investment in the slave trade increased and Cervantes himself encountered human bondage in Algiers. That experience, combined with his imprisonment for embezzlement, among other things, turned him against slavery. Graf credits the School of Salamanca and principles of natural law for

Cervantes's gradual opposition to slavery and claims that *Don Quijote* was part of a larger "Spanish innovation in early modern fiction" (e.g., *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *El coloquio de los perros*) that folded "the themes of race and slavery into a picaresque satire against slavery" (p. 87).

Of the five chapters of Graf's book, the fifth, regarding economics, is the most exciting, going great lengths to demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of Austrian economics to literary theory and criticism. Those familiar with the Austrian School, however, may flip past sections of this chapter that are addressed to an audience lacking economics training. For instance, Graf spends six pages describing subjective theory of value as articulated from Carl Menger to Rothbard. The wide range of economic concepts that Graf finds in *Don Quijote*—price theory, money, markets, usury, interest, debt, credit, inflation, counterfeiting, and more—testifies to Cervantes's sustained interest in that subject, which appealed to future classical liberals. "[T]he essential attraction of Cervantes's great novel for the likes of Locke, Hume, Jefferson, and Bastiat, all of whom emphasized individualism, private property, stable money, and free markets in lieu of market intervention and control," was, Graf submits, Cervantes's apparent proto-liberalism (p. 227).

Globalization, the "influx of gold and silver from the New World" (p. 175), economic treatises that Christianized business and trade, fresh financial practices and active commerce in and around Spain—these and other factors explain the economics that figures in *Don Quijote*. "Over the course of his life," Graf asserts, Cervantes "acquired tangible micro- and macro-economic knowledge about things like tax laws, the quality of different coins, and the gain, loss, and risk of a range of debt and credit arrangements" (p. 179). Graf maintains that Cervantes was economically sophisticated, comprehending "abstract concepts like Gresham's Law and the subjective theory of value, and that he grasped the folly and immorality of authoritarian decrees like price controls, penalties for usury, and compulsory exchange rates" (p. 180).

Because of the time and place in which Cervantes wrote, Graf's presentation of liberalism, which centers on Cervantes, seems to imply an incompatibility with, or opposition to, religious establishments and institutions. Yet there is an appreciable difference between religious establishments and institutions—especially those endowed with government or state power—and the movements and

teachings of historical Christianity and those religious texts around which it developed. Larry Seidentop's *Inventing the Individual* supplies a cogent case for Christianity as an impetus for individualism and liberalism in the West. Graf's treatment of Christianity may have looked different had his subject matter been different.

Graf is a self-proclaimed independent scholar; he maintains no formal affiliation with a university, research institute, think tank, or other scholarly organization. That Lexington Books would publish an author without such establishment ties suggests that it is committed, chiefly, to intellectual merit and not, say, credentialism. Too many university presses would pass on this book because its author does not grace the Ivory Tower. That is a mistake because the quality and rigor of Graf's arguments far exceed that of many tenured professors in the hallowed halls of higher education.

Readers already familiar with Cervantes and *Don Quijote* are the target audience for this book, which might come in handy as a curricular supplement in a course on Cervantes or *Don Quijote*, the emergence of the novel as a literary form, Spanish literature, and so forth. The benefit of teaching Graf's perspective in a college classroom involves his counteraction of Marxist or quasi-Marxist—or at least anti-capitalist—exegeses and discourses that abound in humanities disciplines.⁴ It has been over a decade since Cantor and Stephen Cox's *Literature and the Economics of Liberty* reached print, and optimism regarding a sudden flowering of libertarian literary criticism has, no doubt, diminished. But Graf's effort is one small deposit in a slowly growing stock of research that reconsiders literary texts with an eye towards liberty as a guiding good. There is, indeed, hope and promise for a more humane economics in literary theory and criticism. If we are patient, it will come.

REFERENCES

- Cantor, Paul. 2009. "The Poetics of Spontaneous Order: Austrian Economics and Literary Criticism," in Paul Cantor and Stephen Cox, eds. *Literature and the Economics of Liberty: Spontaneous Order in Culture*. Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute.

⁴ "The vast majority of authors, critics, and professors of literature attend an anti-capitalist perspective regarding economic literary criticism." (Spivey 2020, 4).

- Fernández-Morera, Darío. 2009. "Cervantes and Economic Theory," in Paul Cantor and Stephen Cox, eds. *Literature and the Economics of Liberty: Spontaneous Order in Culture*. Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute.
- Spivey, Matt. 2020. *Re-Reading Economics in Literature*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.