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Maria del Carmen Artigas
University of New Orleans, martigas@uno.edu

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María del Carmen Artigas

Was Cervantes a Faithful Jew?
A Subtext Reading of **Don Quixote**:
Analysis of the Conjectural Language

Critics have discussed the probability that Cervantes was a **Converso**, or a Cryptojew. However, the question if he was a faithful Jew still lingers on.¹ Some critics, such as Américo Castro, believe that Cervantes was a faithful Christian, while others, such as Professor Leandro Rodríguez believed Cervantes was a faithful Jew.

Recently many scholars have tried to unearth documentation in order to verify Cervantes's faith or his ancestry. We know Cervantes was denied a visa twice to go to the Indies (1582; 1590).² This fact created a suspicion since only "Old Christians," or people who had four Christian grandparents were allowed to pass to the New World.³ Professor Einat Talmón, of the Hebrew University, citing Rodríguez, explains that a man who was of Jewish ancestry and a relative of Cervantes had a manuscript in his home with proverbs from the Talmud.⁴ This finding suggests that perhaps Cervantes' ancestors were Jews.

But, even though we know little of Cervantes's life, we have his immortal work **Don Quixote** and, I believe that if we amplify the conjectural language, the suspicion that Cervantes

maintained his Jewish faith in secret could be seriously examined.

Therefore, in this paper, I would like to explain a few excerpts of **Don Quixote** that they may show the probability that Cervantes professed the Jewish faith in secret.

I will discuss the following topics: First: I will clarify what it means to me to be a **converso**; Second: I will briefly mention topics regarding Cervantes' faith that have been studied by scholars. Third, I will study sections of **Don Quixote**, and I will express a conclusion.

The first point: who was a **converso** in seventeenth century Spain. Scholars have different opinions. Some believe **conversos** were Jews who kept the Jewish faith in secret, even though there were "practicing" Christians to the outside world.⁵ Other scholars consider that the **converso** was a creation of the Inquisition in order to keep the population under control.⁶ These scholars to an extent, they are right because it is a proven fact, through documents, that the Inquisition served a political purpose.⁷

I believe the **conversos** were many. I do not base my conclusion in historical documentation, but through the metaphorical language of sixteenth and seventeenth century literature. Most of the research dealing with **conversos** comes from historians and not from literary scholars. Historians use

concrete facts. However, the literature of this period of terror, social injustices and repressions was a social literature. Authors, whether **conversos** or Christians, employed literature to criticize their society. A well-known Cervantes scholar, Joseph Silverman, explains that the study of Cervantes's text or by that matter, all the texts of that time, implies to be able to read on layer upon layer of meaning which varies in the degree of clarity."⁸

The preservation of the faith among **conversos** varied greatly for obvious reasons.⁹ Many were born into families who desired to preserve the faith, and in earnest believed themselves to be Jews, no matter how limited were their religious practices.

My second point: Topics in **Don Quixote** that have already been studied by scholars:

Cervantes seemed to indicate the faith of his hero by giving Don Quixote's birth place as **La Mancha**, which is a region in Spain. But at the same time, the name could be a pawn of words, "**mancha**" means "**spot**," or the spot in the soul of the ones who had not received the Christian baptism, according to the Catholic Church; Cervantes gives not definite name to his hero: **Quijada, Quesada, Quejana**....**Conversos** changed their names in order to avoid persecutions;¹⁰ we do not know where Don

Quixote was born, and again, **conversos** changed locations in order to disguise their past; On the Sabbath, Don Quixote ate "**duelos y quebrantos**." For four centuries authors tried to explain that "**duelos y quebrantos**" was a potage. But the word **duelos** in Spanish means: mourning, and **quebrantos** means to break. On the Sabbath Don Quixote broke the law, thus, he mourned.

Don Quixote's niece, his housekeeper, and the curate burn Don Quixote's books. In this episode, Cervantes ridicules the Inquisition. Some scholars deny this is the case. But Cervantes calls the books "bodies" (**cuerpos**) and explains that they were burning "inocentes;" Also, another important research was done by professor Talmón who discusses Talmudic excerpts in the book.

The third point: My textual analysis. The book has two parts: The first one was published in 1605 and the second in 1615. I will discuss seven excerpts: four from the First Part and three from the Second Part. The excerpts support each other. In the Second, Cervantes clarifies what was taking place in the first.

The first excerpt is a passage where Sancho Panza, Don Quixote's squire, reaffirms the divine unity. Using an archaic language and trying to imitate the speech of Don Quixote, Sancho tells his master: "**For only One God, my lord, I hope I will not have any other problems....**" Sancho testify to One God and not

to the Christian Trinity. (Photocopy of the First Part, p. 180).

Critics paid no attention to this text since they have considered Sancho an "Old Christian," because of his continuous claims of being one. The most painful problem conversos had to face was to declare their faith in a Trinitarian God, especially children who attended Catholic schools. The poet João Pinto Delgado (1580?-1653), in **"A la salida de Lisboa"**¹¹ writes the following: **(p. 44 in my Anthology, strophe 21 and in the same page strophe 23)**

"You fabricate gods by and invented law and your count is an impossibility... : You make twenty and ten and explain that three are one..."

Also, Miguel Leví de Barrios, after leaving Spain, in **Desembozos de la verdad**,¹² wrote the following:

(p. 117 in my Anthology) .

"No one will ever lie to me again as they did when I was a child in Spain and they taught me that three made one.

According to Benedetto Croce, the Italian critic, explaining an Ariosto's satire, asserts that "the peccadiglio de Spagna" (or the sin of Spain) was that most of the Spaniards did not believe in the Trinity. The statement by Ariosto means that none of the Spaniards were Christians since they did not believe in the Trinity. Of course, it was an exaggeration, but the words of Ariosto show that there was a large number of conversos in Spain otherwise he would not have made this comment.¹³

The second excerpt in this first part is regarding the words by Don Quixote when he enters Sierra Morena escaping the Kings' police because he had given freedom to a group of men going to the gullies.

Don Quixote says to Sancho the following:

"I want to wait here all by myself not only for the police that you fear, but for the brothers of the twelve tribes."

(First Part, p. 214)

The legend of the Ten Lost Tribes was kept alive through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and it increased with the Spanish Expulsion of 1492 since it involved the hope of a return to the Holy Land.¹⁴

Menasseh ben Israel, the well-known rabbi of Amsterdam, who wrote **La esperança de Israel** (1650, or **The Hope of Israel**, a few years later, firmly believed that the West Indies were inhabited by the **Ten Lost Tribes**.¹⁵

Don Quixote was waiting for "twelve" instead of ten. Thus, he believed then that all the tribes will be reunited.

Therefore, Cervantes through Don Quixote united himself with the Jews of his time who firmly believing that the return to the Holy Land was not only possible but that it would occur in a near future. Also, according to the contemporary scholar Edward Glaser, the literature of these centuries left enough proof that every time the word "**esperar**" appeared on a text was

applied to the Jews.¹⁶

The Second Part of **Don Quixote**, published ten years later, defers from the first. But before I analyze the text, in order to fully understand its meaning and Cervantes's motivation, I would like to explain what is taking place in the first chapters of this second part. The second volume is different in many literary aspects from the first. Critics have discussed these literary aspects and the many apologies Cervantes gives regarding the first part.

But critics have not discussed that in the first seven or eight chapters of this second part, there is a continuous proclamation by Don Quixote and Sancho that they are true Christians and that they have never intended to say anything against the Church or the Christian faith. Cervantes was afraid, but it did not deter him for using a conjectural language.

It is obvious from the text that not only Cervantes was afraid, but that the book had created suspicion among his contemporary. For instance, Don Quixote's niece tells him that if he continues discussing about certain topics, the Inquisition will be looking for him and he might have to wear a **sanbenito**, or the garment the condemned by the Inquisition were forced to wear.

(Second Part p. 579)

Then Don Quixote affirms that he should be counted among

the Christians knights. But when looking closely at the text there are two curious passages. In the ninth chapter when Don Quixote and Sancho enter a village at night, they see a large building. Don Quixote believes the building to be the Dulcinea's palace, but Sancho recognizes a church and says: "We bumped into the Church." (Second Part. p. 598).

Rodríguez Marín, the editor of the modern edition, explains that it was not lack of respect and that there is nothing on that indicates that Cervantes was giving a second meaning to the sentence. But it is not on that page. Cervantes had bumped into the Church after publishing his first part. Otherwise, the overwhelming apologies of the first eight chapters will not be there.

In addition, in the middle of these proclamation of Christianity by Don Quixote and Sancho, Cervantes plays an extremely shrewd trick. He writes the following: "Cide Hamete, the supposed chronicler of the story, begins the present chapter with these words: "I swear as a Catholic Christian," which leads his translator to remark that, being a Moor, as he without doubt was, the author merely meant that, he swears as a Catholic Christian when he takes an oath because he is supposed to tell the truth in all that he expresses. So, he will adhere to the truth in what he is telling about Don Quixote, just as if he were taking a Christian oath." (Second Part, p. 738).

This statement is astonishing. Cervantes expresses two things. First: Cide Hamete is a Moor but take an oath as if he were a Christian, even though he is not. Cervantes is telling us that anyone can swear as a Christian without being one. So the oaths of Don Quixote could be false. And also the reaffirmation that they are Christians does not indicate their religion. The second trick Cervantes plays with his readers, is that he says that all Christian Catholics always tell the truth. Which is an obvious joke?

One of Don Quixote's many oaths says: "I make a vow to the Creator of all things and to the four Holy Gospels that I will lead from now on the life that the great Marquis of Mantúa: not to eat bread of a tablecloth, not to sleep with my wife and other things...." The translator of one the English edition softens the meaning and writes "not to embrace my wife," but the Spanish text clearly says "**folgar**," a word used by sixteenth century writers that still appears in Spanish dictionaries with the meaning of having sexual relation." (This is following the tradition of the Courtly Love tradition). But to make sure the reader understands the joke Sancho tells his master that he should not compare himself with the "crazy Marquis of Mantúa."

The last excerpt I will study is from the first part: It is related with the obsession that appears in the text regarding "cleanliness" and ancestry. The idea of cleanliness is

practically the **leitmotif** of Don Quixote.

A lady, who Don Quixote helps, explains that he is not only famous in Spain but in all of La Mancha, and adds to cover the irony, "we have disembarked in Osuna." Rodríguez Marín, the editor, explains that Cervantes is talking nonsense. Marín writes: **"dos graciosos disparates seguidos: considerar a España como una parte de la Mancha y desembarcar en Osuna."**

Cervantes was not making foolish remarks.

Cervantes is telling his readers that Spain is part of La Mancha. And if we believe what Ariosto said about the **"pecadiglio of Spain."** Indeed all of Spain was in "La Mancha" because it was a country of **conversos**.

My conclusion is that Cervantes had to be a practicing Jew. No one could have defended the divine unity as he did so shrewdly; he believed in the reunion of the tribes; to him it meant nothing to take oaths. Cervantes believed that "la mancha" was in Spain.

To end, I would like to quote Freud's words: **"A writer must beware of....censorship, and on its account he must soften and sort his opinion. ...The stricter the censorship, the more far-reaching will be the disguise and the more ingenious the means employed for putting the reader on the scent of the true meaning."**¹⁷ Cervantes himself explains in the book: "I will need a commentator in order to make my book understandable."

Notes

¹ Among many, Guillermo Araya Goubet, in "Evolución del pensamiento de Castro," **Estudios**, 50.

² Anthony van Beysterveldt, "A New Perspective of Cervantes' Work," en **Américo Castro and the Meaning of Spanish Civilization**, eds. José Rubia Barcia, et. al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 184.

³ van Beysterveldt, "A New Perspective, 180.

⁴ Einat Talmón, "Elementos judíos en Don Quixote," **Reflejos** (Dec. 1997), 50-59, translation by Mery Erdal Jordan.

⁵ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, **From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto: Isaac Cardoso** (New York: Columbia University Press), 1971, 12-42.

⁶ Ellis Rivkin, "How Jewish were the New Christians?" in **Hispania Judaica**, ed. by Josep M. Solá-Solé, Samuel Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman (Barcelona: Puvill Editor: 1 n.d.), 105-115.

⁷ Bension Netanyahu, **The Marranos of Spain** (New York: American Academy for Jewish Study, 1966), 2-4.

⁸ Joseph Silverman, "The Spanish Jews: Early References and Later Effects," en **Américo Castro and the Meaning of Spanish Civilization** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 151.

⁹ Ellis Rivkin, "How Jewish were the New Christians?" **Hispania Judaica**, ed. Joseph M. Solá-Solé, Samuel Armistead and Joseph Silverman (Barcelona: Puvil Editor, 1, n. d.), 105-115.

¹⁰ Dominick Finello, **Cervantes: Essays on Social and Literary Polemics** (Great Britain: Thamesis, 1998), 26.

¹¹ *He adquirido la fotocopia del manuscrito de la colección Etz Haim* de la Universidad de Jerusalén. He mantenido el texto como se encuentra en el original. He modernizado la ortografía.

¹² Miguel Leví de Barrios, **Desembozos de la verdad**, 1670.

¹³ Benedeto Croce, **La Spagna nella vita italiana durante la Rinascenza** (Bari: Gius Laterza & Figli, 1949), 224.

¹⁴

Encyclopedia Judaica, article: "Ten Lost Tribes;" Abraham Gross, "The Expulsion and the Search for the Ten Tribes," **Judaism**, 41 (1992), 130-147.

¹⁵ Menasseh ben Israel, **Esperança de Israel** (Amsterdam: Impresión de Semuel ben Israel Soeiro, 5410).

¹⁶ Edward Glaser, "Referencias antisemitas en la literatura peninsular de la Edad de Oro," **Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica** 8 (1954), 60. Glaser mentions several authors of the time, such as Vélez de Guevara, Lope de Vega and Francisco de Rojas.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, **The Interpretation of Dreams** (New York, 1961), 142; in Silverman, "Spanish Jews," 161.