

Introduction to Alexandro Malaspina's *Critical Letter of the Work of the Quixote, and on the Analysis that the Spanish Academy has prefixed to its edition.*

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This essay by Malaspina is one of several works on literary, historical, ethical, economic and philosophical topics, written in the isolation of the Castle of San Antón, where he was imprisoned from 1796-1802.¹ These essays came to light only in 1929; all of them remained unpublished until 1990, when the *Tratadito de las monedas de España* appeared. The essay on *Quixote* was only first published in 2005 by the Universidad de Alicante, under the editorship of Daria Manfredi and Blanca Saíz. In the words of Malaspina, these pieces were written out of the fear that idleness would have led him into either a “despicable apathy or a precipitous depression.”² In addition to the critical letter on the *Quixote*, these works include a treatise on currency in Spain, a philosophical meditation on beauty in nature, and a translation of a discourse on the nature and character of philosophy by the French Jesuit, Père Guénard.

Some background is required for the reader to appreciate text's discourse, which involves consideration of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, evidently in response to a “commission” by a “judge” (“Your Honor”), although it is not known whether Malaspina ever sent this letter to the “judge” in question;³ and examined in light of and in relation to the claims made about the text, its position in Spanish and world culture, in the *Análisis del Quijote* by Vicente de los Rios, published in 1780 on behalf of the Spanish Academy, and reproduced in editions of the *Quixote* published by the Academy in 1782 and 1787.⁴ Manfredi and Saíz summarize the essential aim of de los Rios: “to demonstrate how, from whatever point of view it may be considered, the *Quixote* is an original, noble,

¹ Having returned to Spain in September of the year before, Malaspina was arrested on November 23, 1795 and charged with conspiracy against the state. The trial was suspended in the spring of 1796, and Malaspina was sent to prison in Galicia without any formal sentencing. See Alessandro Malaspina, *Carta Crítica sobre el Quixote*, eds. Dario Manfredi and Blanca Saíz, Universidad de Alicante, 2005: 23 n.4.

² Cited in Manfredi and Saíz 13 (my translation)

³ See Manfredi and Saíz 21

⁴ See Manfredi and Saíz 14

moral, entertaining, perfectly constructed, elegantly written and, above all, universal work.”⁵ De los Rios’ analysis relies on what is evidently meant to be a rigorous and rational schema, unfolded in the opening chapter, which is titled, “The Principles on which the present analysis is based.” Subsequent chapters consider aspects of the *Quixote* according to these highlighted “principles,” which include novelty, the quality of the action, the morality of the characters, the quality of narration, the propriety of style and the usefulness of the moral. Concluding chapters are devoted to responding to objections and to examining faults that Cervantes could hardly have avoided.⁶

The *Análisis* is an *apologia* as much as it is a literary analysis. De los Rios aims in the opening chapter on “principles” to do more than just praise Cervantes, as others before him had done, though he does evidently aim to praise. But de los Rios hopes to justify and validate the praise by elaborating “rigorous principles”⁷ that may in their application serve to “demonstrate each excellence of the work and the merit of its author.”⁸ The ambition of de los Rios is that he might codify the rules (the “art and method”⁹) of the burlesque fable, invented by Cervantes just as Homer and invented the epic, and thus that he may thus become a latter-day Aristotle, whose analyses of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the *Poetics* established the fundamental aesthetic rules for others to follow in this genre. De los Rios aims to do for the burlesque and for Cervantes what Aristotle did for epic poetry and Homer.

As part of his analysis, de los Rios seeks to discover whether Cervantes’ work, like that of Homer, can arouse the types of sentiments that are universal and intrinsic to human nature. En route, de los Rios appeals to rules of good taste, fine feeling and properly universal emotion, claiming that these are “brief, clear and simple” and that they are all ultimately derived from one well established law, according to which the author, intending of course to “instruct and delight,”¹⁰ achieves his end through the work of art the author precisely and surely (for instance, by presenting arguments in a fresh and original way, so as to maintain the reader’s curiosity; by unfolding the action in simple

⁵ Manfredi and Saíz 15 (my translation)

⁶ See Manfredi and Saíz 15

⁷ Manfredi and Saíz 16, my translation

⁸ Malaspina, cited in Manfredi and Saíz 16, my translation

⁹ Manfredi and Saíz 16, my translation

¹⁰ See Manfredi and Saíz 17

and unified fashion, so as not to confuse the reader; and by using a lively, varied style, so as to keep the reader's attention). However, de los Rios fails to mention exactly how this general law of absolute aesthetic economy was "established," Manfredi and Saíz note.¹¹

It was noted above that de los Rios' *Análisis* of the *Quixote*, while presenting itself as a critical exposition, is nonetheless ultimately subservient to adulation. De los Rios betrays his desire to praise the masterpiece of the great genius in the conclusion to the first chapter on "principles," when he writes:

The novelty of the chosen subject matter makes the plot original, discretion in morality makes it useful, and other elements make it pleasing. The merit of Cervantes, and the skill with which he knew how to unit and manage these three qualities, will become palpably obvious by applying the outlined elements to the *Quixote* in order to judge the work: in which only those more exquisite or more hidden graces and perfections will be noted, passing over in silence many more, which no reader not uneducated in these matters will fail to appreciate in any case.¹²

The remainder of the text proceeds through analyses of the aspects of *Quixote* according to the "principles," making repeated comparisons to the works of Homer, Ariosto and Milton, and culminating in with encomiastic praise. The reader of Malaspina's "Critical Letter" will notice that Malaspina's refutation basically follows the same structure as that of the *Analysis*, attacking each argument in turn, before adding at the end a comparison between the *Quixote* and the Palladium of Troy (its sacred effigy of Pallas Athena), suggesting that the nation of Spain treats the work of Cervantes as a kind of talisman offering magical or divine protection, in the same way that the Palladium of Troy protected that city, until, that is, it was stolen by Odysseus and Diomedes during the war.

The addressee of the "Critical Letter," whoever the correspondent may have been who had asked for Malaspina's thoughts on the *Quixote* and the *Análisis*, remains unknown. Dario Manfredi has suggested that it is not unlikely that he might have come from the ranks of the Spanish Academy itself. For, although in the years immediately following the publication of the *Análisis* in 1780 criticism might have been muted out of respect (Vicente de los Rios having just died the previous year), with the passage of time it is plausible that more critical attitudes toward the work began to circulate and that

¹¹ Manfredi and Saíz 16

¹² Cited in Manfredi and Saíz 17, my translation

some member(s) of the Academy sought to learn the judgment of other readers and scholars. However, it is unknown whether other erudite intellectuals were consulted along with Malaspina.¹³

Malaspina mentions that the reflections contained in the essay are “the fruit of the solitude in which I live,” not the only reference to his imprisonment. Another particularly poignant comment is the quixotic allusion to his fall from grace owing to persecution by first minister Manuel Godoy in a suggestive manner but one that would still have left him protected from prosecution even if it were detected by government censors: “because I am pursued by mischievous magicians.” Other important recurrent references in the text that have clear autobiographical import surround the themes of miscarriage of justice and the abuse of power by magistrates.

This is the first English translation of the text. It has been published also in *Metamorphoses*, a journal of literary translation (Spring 2013: 129-51).

¹³ See Manfredi and Saíz 18-19