

*El vizcaíno fingido* and the Basque Colonial Enterprise

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At first glance, the *Vizcaíno fingido* interlude is one of the least compelling theater works written by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. It contains too many familiar narrative tropes; an inarticulate *vizcaíno*, rudimentary women dreaming of being carried out in coaches (like real ladies), excess of *refranes*, tricksters that end up getting their own medicine. When examined in detail, however, this seemingly stereotyped story reveals a provocative exploration of one of the most disruptive socioeconomic dynamics of Cervantes's world: the emergence of the Basque super minority that would end up controlling the Spanish empire's administrative and financial system.<sup>1</sup> The ethnic and regional elements that are explicit in the story are thus highlighted in my reading, since I believe that it is through them that Cervantes expresses a targeted critique of the (official and shadow) Basque commercial operations of the early 1600s. In what follows, I explore how our author appears critically aware of the disproportionately benefits that this Northern Spanish elite was reaping at the expense of the fortune and opportunity of other regional interests. My aim is to show how this inglorious tale of 'fake' Basque merchants and genuine Madrilean prostitutes conveys Cervantes' denunciation of the Spanish plutocratic practices of the day.

Plutocracy, defined as the rule of the wealthy for the wealthy, did not start with the whims of the Wall street of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but with the compromised crown finances of the 1500s.<sup>2</sup> No one less than John H. Elliott had reminded us that in the late 1500s "a new plutocracy had arisen, which was making its money out of the sufferings of others, a plutocracy of tax-gatherers, of government officials drawn from that *letrado* class."<sup>3</sup> Elliot identified that super class with the "crypto-Jewish Portuguese financiers."<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I am associating it with the Basque bureaucrats and investors (often addressed as *vizcaínos*) given their pivotal role in the early modern financial global system.

In the last two decades, we have learned the extent of the success that a hefty number of Basque businessmen achieved when they moved to Madrid and Seville in the 1500s; in less than seventy years, they managed to occupy an exorbitant number of high-ranking positions at the most prestigious official institutions.<sup>5</sup> "¿Quién es aquí mi secretario?" asks Sancho Panza as soon as he is appointed Governor of Barataria, "Yo, señor, porque sé leer y escribir, y soy vizcaíno," answers an anonymous witness. "Con esa añadidura," Sancho retorts, "bien podéis ser secretario del mismo emperador." (*Don Quijote* 2.43, 390, emphasis added). Cervantes' observation is, as

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<sup>1</sup>Cervantes' interest in the workings of markets and institutionalized workings of monetary value has been demonstrated by Carroll Johnson, Steven Hutchinson, David Quint, Eric Graff, and Miguel Angel Galindo Martín, among others. See Elvira Vilches for a general introduction to the theme.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald P. Formisano defines the plutocracy as a "government of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich" (3). He agrees with the Martin Filens that political and social equality is largely dependent on the influence that citizens can have over the policies and legislation of a government. That influence is never going to be equal, they say, but "when inequalities become too large, democracy shades into oligarchy (rule by the few) of plutocracy (rule by the wealthy)" (234).

<sup>3</sup> Elliot, 205.

<sup>4</sup> Elliot, 205. Vizcaíno here refers to anybody from the Basque region, not only Vizcaya.

<sup>5</sup> See Fernando Fernández González, Lutgardo García Fuentes, Francisco de Solano, Pierre Chaunu, Antonio García Baquero, and Antonio Miguel Bernal.

usual, incisive and factual; assumed to have a ‘pure’ Christian blood, *vizcaínos* had enjoyed an unusual number of high, official appointments in the Spanish court.

The process had started with the Reyes Católicos but it intensified with Charles I and Philip II. With the emperor, key advisors like Pedro de Zuazola had risen to become a war minister, royal secretary and treasurer of all his kingdoms (holding more than one appointment at the same time) an unusual feat. Philip II normalized the meteoric career of administrators of Basque origin by naming —after the disgrace of Antorio Pérez— three *vizcaínos* (out of four) as secretaries: Juan de Ibarra, Cristóbal de Ipiñarrieta and Antonio de Aróstegui.<sup>6</sup> The spectacular rise of Basque administrators would be particularly evident in Seville, where Northerners would be asked to serve in prominent positions at institutions like the *Casa de Contratación*, the *Consulado de Cargadores de Estado*, or the Supreme Court of Indies affairs, *el Consejo Real y Supremo de las Indias*. There, at *el Consejo Real y Supremo*, Luis de Oyanguren and Mateo Ibáñez de Mendoza would become council members; doctor Verástegui, Pedro Gamarra y Arriaga, and Francisco de Barreda prosecutors, and Ulloa de Luyando and Manuel de Aperregui secretaries.<sup>7</sup> This is a minuscule example of a widespread practice. As José Luis Ortigosa concludes, “the list” of high-ranking Basque appointees is simply “never-ending.”<sup>8</sup>

Sancho’s comment above demonstrates that Cervantes is aware of this process, of the extent to which a Basque origin facilitated a bureaucratic ascent in and beyond the domestic limits of the Peninsula. The international repercussions of this trend became more acutely evident after 1602. By then, essential American institutions like the Mexican and Peruvian Consulates were headed by Basque officials, as Basque merchants started to control —though pivotal governmental positions— the new commercial routes to and from the Indies, *and* those from the Indies to other important posts in the Pacific:

Los hombres de negocio vascos de México operaban en todas las plazas importantes del virreinato; mantenían intensas relaciones con las demás provincias indianas y muy especialmente con las Filipinas, a través de Acapulco: en la última década del siglo XVI la compañía de S. Urieta, Sebastián Labarrieta y Diego de San Román enviaba grandes textiles a Manila (García Fuentes, 39).

The interlude, then, may target the figure of a *vizcaíno* for reasons other than his linguistic vulnerability, although it clearly uses the stereotype.<sup>9</sup> It is easy to understand why, as an attentive political observer and low-ranking official, Cervantes (a man keenly interested in

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<sup>6</sup> José Antonio Escudero remembers that “Durante el reinado de Fernando el Católico los secretarios habían sido preferentemente aragoneses, como el monarca. Con Carlos V hubo de todos los reinos de España y también del extranjero. Con Felipe II se produjo una irrupción masiva de secretarios vascos, o vizcaínos, como entonces se les llamaba. Los secretarios vascos, entre los que hubo algunas familias ilustres, como los Idiaquez, coparon buena parte de las secretarías de los Consejos y de las oficinas del rey. Luego, al sucederse en el seno cerrado de las familias, se perpetuaron a lo largo del siglo XVII en auténticas dinastías.” (21)

See also by Escudero 2005, 67-84. Juan de Amézqueta, the royal secretary that issues the authorization (privilegio) to Cervantes to publish *Don Quijote de la Mancha* was also vizcaíno. See also Bernd Hausberger.

<sup>7</sup> García Fuentes 37-38.

<sup>8</sup> José Luis Ortigosa, 145. Lutgardo García Fuentes reaches the same conclusion, that “the list [of Basque, high ranking officials] is never ending” (37).

<sup>9</sup> Cervantes’ awareness of this stereotype is usually attested by his reference to Lope de Rueda’s theater production in the “Prologue” to the *Ocho Entremeses*. There, he claims that Lope produces “entremeses, ya de negra, ya de rufian, ya de bobo, y ya de Vizcaino, que todas estas quatro figuras ( ... ) hazia el tal Lope con la mayor excelencia” (1615, fol. IIIr).

starting an American career) would have paid acute attention to the power achieved by this super minority. After all, this power made the group a perfect target for political satire.

Using an interlude to mock the Basque exploitative operations that plagued both the Spanish underworld and the (already flawed) imperial commercial system seems then a perfectly understandable choice, especially if the twist of having a ‘fake’ vizcaíno protagonist assures the author some distance from the real object of the criticism, Basque financiers. And yet, the interlude’s plot is implacable in its undreaming condemnation of all characters, regardless of their ‘true’ origin. To the caricature of the Basque, wealthy merchant, too fond of ‘vino’ and terribly provincial, we must add the ‘commercial’ (criminal) emulations of Castilian and Sevillian operators like Cristina, who decide in the blink of an eye to rob an innocent and unsuspecting man just because he is wealthy *and* vulnerable. The criminal plot has demolishing consequences for the deceived party, Cristina, while the architect of the feat, Solórzano, suffers no repercussions whatsoever. Ultimately, Cristina discovers the truth about her accomplice (Solórzano) too late and is forced to pay dearly for her ‘mistake.’ The lesson, as we will see, recalls the painful awakening of Spanish local dealers and vendors like Cristina (some better-intentioned than her) that realized too late the truth of their financial partners, and with it, the extent of their displacement and exclusion from colonial commercial operations and networks.

Cervantes uses a comic interlude, then, to explore some of the social dynamics created around those ambitious Basque men that had taken over Madrid, the city of Seville, and many territories overseas, as they apparently run them all. In a true Cervantine twist, a text that starts with an allusion to a law (*Pragmática* of January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1611) that claimed to improve the ‘moral’ health of the nation aims to regulate the transportation practices and appearance of women — prostitutes— rather than surveilling and controlling the maneuvers of powerful men — financiers; it was obviously women who had to be rein in, not the superclass that so heavily contributed to the crown’s financial troubles and bankruptcies. It is easy to see this emphasis on women and commoners’ transportation practices an indication of the cosmetic and inconsequential legal measures applied by the crown to remedy the Spanish commercial, economic and social erosion.

As it is often the case, the most essential element of a cervantine critique is not given full attention by the narrator. In the cervantine fictional universe, prominent Basque administrators conveniently appear in the background, like in *Don Quixote* 1.8, when the knight fights the Basque squire of a lady who is traveling to Seville to join her reputed and wealthy husband with an enormous position overseas. Cervantes places this principal lady in the kind of carriage that the two protagonists of our interlude, Doña Brígida and Doña Cristina, are now forbidden to employ: “Venía en el coche, como después se supo, una señora vizcaína, que iba a Sevilla donde estaba su marido, que pasaba las Indias con un muy honroso cargo” (1.8, 133).



“La dama vizcaína observa el combate desde el carruaje”

*El Ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*. 1887. Ed. Felipe González Rojas. QBI, Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes

In a way, the law that in 1611 forbade men and women of low class, such as Brígida y Cristina, from cruising La Mancha in this fashion did achieve a clear (if futile) purpose, as Carroll Johnson explained, allowing the Spanish establishment to “codify society visually, to create a system of visual signifiers that could be translated into reliable data concerning social class, caste, and status” (8).<sup>10</sup> In other words, the law that was directed to women like Christina and Brígida, managed to prevent them from using a vehicle that could suggest the social mobility they craved, in this case by impersonating women like those Basque spouses illustrated in 1.8 of *Don Quijote*. Cervantes allows those humble women to voice their reactions in this interlude, dedicating a significant textual amount to how these women processed the news: “Ni se ha muerto mi madre, ni viene mi marido,” claims Brígida, “ni me han robado mis joyas; pero hame sucedido otra cosa peor” she argues, finally admitting that (“[les] quitaban los coches”) (114-15).

It is in their dialogue where we first note the stray of significant but subtle transoceanic allusions, as Cristina’s mentions a “galera de tierra,” in a tirade where, “a la Ricote,” she justifies the new law:

Yo creo, hermana, que debe de ser alguna reformación de los coches: que no es posible que los quiten de todo punto; y *será cosa muy acertada*, porque, según he oído decir, andaba muy de caída la caballería en España, porque se *empanaban* diez o doce caballeros mozos en un coche, y azotaban las calles de noche y de día, sin acordárseles que había caballos y jineta en el mundo; y, como les falte la comodidad de las *galeras de la tierra*, que son los coches, volverán al ejercicio de la caballería, con quien sus antepasados se honraron. (116, emphasis added)

The *Diccionario de autoridades* confirms that a “galera” is both a “navy powered by rows and sails where the king had slaves and forced laborers” and a “big coach of four wheels,

<sup>10</sup> The law is generally assumed to have been an effort of the Spanish establishment to protect the interests and status of those true ladies able to travel in that fashion (expensive coaches pulled by four or five horses). Women also had to stop using any facial coverings that could create any confusion about their identity (in terms of race or religion), class, and profession (prostitutes could have facial scars from venereal diseases).

that is powered by horses or mules.”<sup>11</sup> According to Cristina, it was the comfortable nature of these earthy vessels that had ruined Spanish chivalry. The transportation reform was then, in her view, “necessary” and directed towards lazy knights, not active female “entrepreneurs” like themselves.

By bringing the image of loaded, overflowing galeras full of capable (although “empanados”) men, taken out of the Spanish infantry, the text prompts a nautical image that continues to be invoked throughout the text. Brígida bitterly laments at this point not being able to ride on the “popa” (stern) of this *galera* anymore (“linda cosa era ir sentada en la popa de un coche” [116-17]) which is hardly the position of a prominent woman on earth but constitutes an area reserved for the most important passengers at sea. In an Atlantic galera, “la *comodidad*,” of the journey—determined by the social status of the voyagers—indicated that from “de palo mayor a *popa* era la zona vip”, notes Ignacio Jáuregui-Lobera, while “la proa era lugar de marinería.”<sup>12</sup> Cervantes’ parodic allusion, in the dialogue of two ladies “de *rumbo sevillano*” (134, emphasis added) could have been a conscious trigger for the reader or spectator used to seeing single Spanish women, especially Sevillian, to embark on those overcrowded American galleys.<sup>13</sup>

We know that from 1493 to 1600, the financial capital of the empire, Seville, had sent “more colonists (19,638) than the next sixteen cities combined [Toledo, Trujillo, Salamanca, Madrid, Córdoba, Granada, Valladolid, Jérez, etc] (10, 478)”<sup>14</sup> and [that] almost 30% of those travelers (28.5% ) were women.<sup>15</sup> Between 1560 and 1579, of the 5,013 women registered in the passage only 40% (1,980) were widows or wives, while the rest, a whooping 60% (3,024) were single, Sevillian ladies making that crossing accompanied by their fellow women.<sup>16</sup> This huge female contingent of humble adventurers were described as servants but suspected of another profession. Like their male counterparts, those female travelers were determined to find a better,

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<sup>11</sup> The first meaning of *galera* in the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1734): is of course the “Embarcación de baxo bordo, que vá a remo y vela, donde tiene el Rey los esclavos y forzados” (IV, online). The second definition provided is “Se llama tambien el carro grande de quatro ruedas, que tiran algunos pares de mulas, para llevar mucha carga, y regularmente vá por la parte de arriba cubierta de cañas en forma de bóveda” (ibid). A seventeenth century traveler to Spain, Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Baroness d’Aulnoy (1650/1651–1705), takes time to describe the poetic invocation of the term “galera de tierra” noting, “Acabo de ver llegar diez galeras, cosa que resulta bastante sorprendente en una ciudad que se encuentra a ochenta leguas del mar; pero son *galeras de tierra*; [sic] porque si hay caballos y perros marinos, ¿por qué no ha de haber galeras terrestres? Tiene forma de un carro, pero son cuatro veces más largas, cada un tiene seis ruedas...La caja es redonda y bastante semejante a la de las galeras” (297, emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> Ignacio Jáuregui-Lobera explains that “El capitán, maestre, piloto y pasajeros distinguidos iban bajo la tolda y en las cámaras de la toldilla. Otros oficiales bajo el castillo de proa. En general se buscaban los lugares más ventilados, a fin de evitar olores y calor en las partes bajas o más cerradas. Para paliar los olores se vaciaba la sentina periódicamente, un lugar inmundado de residuos, ratas, piojos, pulgas y mosquitos” (347). See also Esteban Mira Caballos, 39-57.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Boyd-Bowman, whose study on the demographic composition of the Conquista is still a fundamental reference, sees a striking change in the Spanish emigrant patterns of the mid century (1540-60). By then, [w]ith virtually no rich lands left to conquer, we now find fewer military adventurers and an increasing number of women and children going out to join their kinsmen, often *para hazer vida maridable* with husbands who had emigrated several years earlier” (582).

<sup>14</sup> Boyd-Bowman, 591.

<sup>15</sup> Boyd-Bowman, 583.

<sup>16</sup> Boyd-Bowman, 591.

more prosperous life in the Indies.<sup>17</sup> And until 1559, they had a pretty good shot, since until then Spanish women were apparently preferred as the wives of the male explorers and conquistadors.

But the marriage chances deteriorated dramatically by the turn of the century. In the early 1600s, Mexican and Peruvian authorities were warning that there were already *too many Spanish women* unable to find a husband in their main cities. Women apparently refused to believe these inferior prospects, however, because the flow of Andalusian (i.e. Sevillian) female colonialists did not slow down at all. At the time that Cervantes published this interlude, in early decades of the sixteenth century, “one in every three” of the women that emigrated to the Indies continued to be “from the city of Seville itself” and their fortune was uncertain.<sup>18</sup>

What about the men? The humble men. In contrast to the extremely wealthy Basque minority of Basque colonists (less than 5%), the number of Sevillian gents that made the Atlantic journey and were of humble origin too was almost 60%; between 1595 and 1598, for example, “one-sixth of all the women and well over *half* (58.2 percent) of all the men” that got a spot on the vessels “were servants.”<sup>19</sup> Men’s hopes for a better life did not depend on a marriage proposal but on their implication in the colonial exploitation. We almost assume that anybody allowed to go to the Indies (Cervantes’ unfulfilled aspiration) would return an *Indiano*, a rich Carrizales... but around the 1600s, the prospects of humble Castilian and Andalusian male colonists had also been crippled, and a good number of them would never even be close to such wealth.

It became progressively clear that the prospects were quite different for adventurers and/or bureaucrats of a Basque descent, since “a partir del siglo XVII,” it was almost impossible “no encontrar un vasco en los puestos de mayor responsabilidad de distintos sectores y ámbitos de la sociedad.”<sup>20</sup> The advantage included also positions of lesser obvious significance, such as “fiscales, contadores, relatores y alguaciles mayores,” a detail extremely important for the *Vizcaíno Fingido’s* interlude.<sup>21</sup>

In this climate, a clear pejorative anti-Basque sentiment started brewing all over Spain and perhaps beyond. A document from the 1600s describes the local frustration of a Sevillian sailor that claimed that:

los pobres hijos de este país por falta de caudales y manejo en sus paisanos con poca diferencia nada disfrutaban en empleos y consignaciones de lo mucho que gozan en una y otra clase *los vizcaínos a quienes la protección y fortuna de sus paisanos enriquece* al mismo tiempo que el *andaluz obrando con la misma buena fe que el vizcaíno y trabajando y arriesgándose en la navegación muchos más años, apenas puede alcanzar lo que necesita para su subsistencia.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Boyd-Bowman, 584.

<sup>18</sup> Boyd-Bowman is here talking about the period between 1560 and 1579 (599). Overall, the historian concludes that the linguistic and social “importance of this preponderance of Andalusians among the Spanish women of the colonies cannot be overemphasized.” (598)

<sup>19</sup> Boyd-Bowman, 584.

<sup>20</sup> García Fuentes, 19.

<sup>21</sup> García Fuentes, 37

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in García Fuentes, 20.

There seemed to be a public understanding among Spaniards of the age of Cervantes that an adventurer or entrepreneur of Castilian and/or Andalusian origin had not the same chances as a *vizcaíno*, and that such unequal footing was systemic and class-based.

But how would that critique translate to an *entremés*? First, by understanding that although seemingly unrelated to the *Carrera de Indias*, the text exposes ironically all the basic elements of this trade. A prostitute does not need a down payment for agreeing to rob a supposedly drunk, rich, and ignorant merchant, but Solórzano's ruse utilizes a business logic that invokes all the elements associated with it: a down payment (chain worth 20 escudos), an appraisal (by the *platero*) and the risk analysis that results from that assessment. Cristina is aware of the importance of that key element (an honest appraisal) and insists on the need to get an honest judgement from her neighbor:

CRISTINA...Pero mire el vecino no se engañe en lo que dice de la fineza del oro y cantidad del peso.

PLATERO.- ¡Bueno sería que yo me engañase en mi oficio!

The Platero's collaboration (he confirms to know a trickster like Solórzano) is essential for convincing Cristina to seal the deal, and for her ensuing downfall. We must remember, furthermore, that since 'plateros' needed to prove the 'limpieza de sangre,' they were often *vizcaínos* as well. At least, that is impression that reaches us today based on the comments of contemporary witnesses. A seventeenth-century chronicist, for example, states that in Seville "el oficio de platero lo ejercen personas muy nobles, caballeros de hábito, y *vizcaínos de toda integridad*."<sup>23</sup> The sentence that Cervantes puts in the mouth of his *platero*, "¡Bueno sería que yo me engañase en mi oficio!" illustrates the expectation of honesty that the plot disrupts, in part because of his association with the untold but suggested partnership with Solórzano, reinforced by the contextual understanding that *plateros* were often *vizcaínos* as well.<sup>24</sup>

Appraisals —also down payments, and some form of insurance— were the backbone of loan system that run the *Carrera de Indias*. Loans, claims Antonio-Miguel Bernal, were "el nervio de la negociación mercantil con las Indias," since "los préstamos y cambios marítimos" would become "[el] primer instrumento crediticio en el comercio oceánico."<sup>25</sup> In the mid 1500s, the profusion of these loans forced an unsuccessful, institutional attempt to regulate its requirements in order to strip these operations from any fraudulent intents and practices.<sup>26</sup> Part of the problem was the minimal existence of bank system. As Eberhard Crailsheim has explained,

In spite of the constant demand for cash money in Seville, the number of banks was very low during the reign of Philip II. During the third quarter of the 16th century, Castilian and Viscayan bankers (either *cambiadores banqueros or mercaderes banqueros/merchant banker*), who had acquired royal licenses, took over much of the financial business in Seville, which lead to some sort of bank oligopoly.<sup>77</sup> At the end of the 16th century, the Spanish Crown tried to establish a bank monopoly, and in 1595,

<sup>23</sup> Velasco, *Memorial por los maestros sastres de sevilla* (1691), Qtd Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, 171.

<sup>24</sup> Envious of the easy profit Brígida believes that Cristina is about to receive, she (Brígida) asks to have an "ayuda de costa," literally a bonus from Cristina and Solórzano, which in this case refers to "algún Borgoñón [also rich] más borracho que un zaque" that she could cheat and rob.

<sup>25</sup> Antonio Miguel Bernal, 27 and 73.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Philip II's decree of November 1552 and March 1556 to forbid the so called "cambios secos."

after a series of failures.... numerous merchants became victims” of these bankers’ “maladministration” (53-54).

The inefficiency (or corruption) of these *compradores de oro y plata* exacerbated the troubles of the city, because such *compradores* were needed by the Indies merchants that desperately necessitated cash as they waited for the return of their American bullion.<sup>27</sup> José Maria Oliva Melgar notes that the number of local investors in Seville expanded in the 1600s, because “quienes antes eran mercaderes and armadores, no resistiéndose a la tentación del mayor y más fácil beneficio de los riesgos, encontraron en ellos, si su solvencia lo permitía, la manera de convertirse en financieros.”<sup>28</sup>

There had been in those years a documented “mutación funcional” in the way of doing business that expanded “las formas tradicionales de negociar con las Indias... [dado que] abría mucho más el abanico de quien podía hacerlo.”<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, in the ‘age of fraud,’ what that apparently broader economic market brought to the Sevillian, modest and Andalusian investor was the illusion of financial opportunity, an illusion that too often resulted in dramatic losses. Records indicate that the new, modest “sagas mercantiles” that appeared in these years went out of business fairly quickly, since “en pocos casos llegaban a superar el par de generaciones.”<sup>30</sup> The extraordinary risk of the enterprise, and the established experience of wealthy financiers (often working alongside partial appraisal experts, and insurance brokers) would customarily increase the wealth of the richest investors and accelerate the troubles (or bankruptcy) of the most vulnerable partners.

Is a short interlude like the *Vizcaíno fingido* illustrating this process, demonstrating the misuse of legitimate, business tools for criminal operations? The text could invoke the corrupted angles of a market controlled by the few (a Basque oligarchy), and the consequences of that financial and legal manipulation for the many.<sup>31</sup> Commerce ultimately necessitates warranted and transparent transactions, since legitimate operations are at the heart of any form of functioning market. While Cristina’s intent is far from licit, her humiliating experience reminds readers and spectators that there is not such a thing as a zero risk financial operation in the Seville of the 1600s.

We could say that the scam Cristina falls prey to is an unavoidable consequence of attempting to commit a crime with accomplices as unscrupulous as Solórzano and Quiñones. But if the abuse on an established ‘financial’ system is so facile, if a *platero*’s ethics can be so easily compromised, and can deceive his *vecina* so readily, it is easy to wonder if Cristina could have really avoided the theft, had her business been more honest and the partners more principled. Ultimately, what we witness in the *Vizcaíno fingido* a satirical breakdown of a system (insurance, ‘tasador,’ etc.) designed to protect the partners of a commercial deal regardless of their initial level of ‘innocence.’

History continues to demonstrate that even the most detailed contracts or piece of legislation cannot not fully prevent some level of ambiguity, or loopholes, susceptible to be used for unintended purposes. While this type of corruption and fraud is thus not particular to the

<sup>27</sup> An example of a risky, eventually highly profitable business was the trade of used clothes, since their price (based on their demand) was assumed to be exponentially higher once they arrived at the colonies.

<sup>28</sup> José Maria Oliva Melgar, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Oliva Melgar, 100.

<sup>30</sup> Oliva Melgar, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Elliot, 171, García Fuentes, 36-37.



early modern age of the Spanish context, Iberian authorities repeatedly tried (albeit completely ineffectively) to correct it.<sup>32</sup> Reformists and moralists associated with the *Escuela de Salamanca* were particularly active in calling out these systemic deficiencies. Thinkers like Juan de Salas, Luis de Molina, Martín de Azpilcueta and Tomás de Mercado tried to build a sort of ethical and/or administrative structure able to remedy or prevent financial fraud from occurring.<sup>33</sup> This intent would become another ‘*piedra filosofal*’ of the period, an impossible dream as improbable as popular, judging by the 38 editions of Azpilcueta’s *Comentario resolutorio de cambios* (1556) by 1626.<sup>34</sup>

But it was Tomás de Mercado’s work what is considered today “el hilo de Aracne para no perderse en el laberinto” of colonial financial abuses and distortions.<sup>35</sup> Apparently, some Sevillian merchants had approached him, asking him to write some form of manual that could denounce abuses and establish an ethical foundation for trade. Mercado clearly answered the call. Being a Sevillian that had traveled to the Indies (Mexico) and having had ample commercial experience in his past life (prior to entering the Dominican order), he was uniquely equipped for the task. Focusing on the city, Seville, that he described as “el centro de mercaderes del mundo...*donde todo tiene tan excesivo precio*, he published his *Tratos y contratos de mercaderes y tratantes* in Salamanca, in 1569 (expanded later in Seville, in 1571).<sup>36 37</sup> Reflecting on the reasons why “*usuras, cambios*” and other forms of “*hurto notable*” had become so customary in the city, Mercado argues that:

[D]e sesenta años a esta parte, que se descubrieron las Indias Occidentales...una gran comodidad y una ocasión tan oportuna para adquirir grandes riquezas...convidió y atrajo a [Sevilla a] algunos de los príncipes a ser mercaderes. . . .Hay ...ventas y compras fiado y de contado de gran suma, muy grandes cargazones, baratas de muchos millares y cuentos, que ni Tiro ni Alejandría en sus tiempos se le igualaron.

*Y en cualquiera de estos tratos no puede dejar de haber, supuesta la malicia y avaricia humana, algunos engaños y mil ardidés tan ingeniosos y, a las veces, tan encubiertos, que es menester particular ingenio para entenderlos y aun ayuda y favor de Dios para, vista la ocasión, no cometerlos y tramarlos.*<sup>38</sup>

It’s the *Vizcaino fingido*’s Cervantes’ contribution to Mercado’s worthy’s endeavor? As a man of letters *and* numbers, Cervantes, probably like Mercado, had both a witness and victim of some of these “*ardides...encubiertos*.”

As the most reputed cervantine biographer, Jean Cannavaggio states, “we owe to the author of the *Exemplary Novellas* the most colorful picture of th[e] Sevillian underworld that exists.”<sup>39</sup> Certainly, Cervantes’ exploration of the Spanish underworld was not limited to Seville, even though that was the city that had become the “capital par excellence of delinquency and

<sup>32</sup> A series of decreets appeared throughout the mid 1500s and continued throughout the 1600s. See Carlos Javier de Carlos Morales, 269-309 and Bernal 89-208.

<sup>33</sup> Jesús de la Iglesia García believes that Tomás de Mercado and Martín de Azpilcueta are the most important financial theorists in the Spanish 1500s. To contextualize this importance, see Hutchinson’s enlightening exploration of value and the School of Salamanca, 60-67.

<sup>34</sup> Rodrigo Muñoz, 176.

<sup>35</sup> Bernal 199.

<sup>36</sup> Reprinted in 1571, 1573, and 1587. An Italian translation was made in 1591.

<sup>37</sup> Mercado, emphasis added, I. 43.

<sup>38</sup> Mercado I. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Canavaggio, 173.

crime” of his day.<sup>40</sup> Other cities, and various genres had allowed him to explore the dark side of the not so golden age. Theater has been recognized as literary platform peculiarly useful for the exploration of “the larger world around him.”<sup>41</sup> The *entremeses* are now regarded as an active tool of social critique and political commentary, since as Mercedes Alcalá Galán has noted, “Cervantes took advantage” of his poor dramatic success “to create a theater in which he could allow himself as series of dramatic and literary licenses” that being cleverly condemnatory could have been “scarcely...understood in live performance.”<sup>42</sup>

From this perspective, *El vizcaíno fingido* can be easily read as a critical exposition of the open and covert operations of “vizcaínos” that were so disproportionately benefiting that minority. We see that disproportion in the text, in the consequences that a low-grade criminal like Cristina is forced to endure. Unable to ride in a coach *like a lady* anymore, and unlikely to embark in a transatlantic galley at that point, prostitutes like her would seldom escape punishment of some sort for her economic and judicial infractions. Here, she is forced to accept the harsh terms of surrender dictated by Solórzano, which include paying the ‘alguacil,’ assuming the cost of the final banquet, and declaring herself ‘eternal slave’ of the trickster: “al señor alguacil daré media docena de escudos, y en la cena gastaré uno, y *quedaré por esclava perpetua del Señor Solórzano*” (135, emphasis added). The autonomy and ambition that we notice in this female protagonist when she first appears on the stage, are all gone now. This curious self-cancellation, as a slave, in a city that became the heart of the slave trade disproportionately run by again the Basque minority is another striking Cervantine choice that invites deeper consideration.<sup>43</sup>

Equally easy is the metaphorical extrapolation of woman, city, and nation here. Like Cristina, cities like Madrid, Seville, and even the Spanish central state —although far from being innocent from fraud, or involvement in slave trade— were being to a large extent indebted to a small oligarchy that benefited from financial public resources at the time it was also reaping the high profits from other colonial-related business, like the slave trade. While the interlude might be alluding to this profiteering *vizcaíno* practices, it also introduces the ‘fake’ oblique element that provides a safe authorial distance from the object of the critique. The resulting, ambiguous narrative only produces a juicy spectrum of possibilities, because Solórzano and Quiñones are the first ones to invoke degrading Basque stereotypes in order to lure Cristina and Brigida into their scheme. All four protagonists are clearly ready to rob and abuse an unsuspecting young Basque man just because he is wealthy. What Cervantes leaves completely out of this depressing social portrait is the possible reason why robbing that wealthy Basque financier could have had so much traction in the very flawed Spanish underworld: the perception that this Basque stereotyped, hyper privileged class, had ascended so much socially by acquiring local riches and opportunity.

We simply cannot know how prevalent or pressing was the frustration against Basque privilege or the role it could have played in an audience, had this interlude been performed in the early 1600s. But what we can do is consider how differently we read a text like this once when we take such grievance into consideration. Cervantes does not give free range to this hostility against the Basque rich man because there is no real Basque man in the first place —at least as

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<sup>40</sup> Canavaggio, 1990.

<sup>41</sup> Esther Fernández and Adrienne L Martin, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Mercedes Alcalá Galán, 81-97, 83.

<sup>43</sup> Javier Ortiz Arza, José Antonio Azpiazu Elorza, and Angel Goicoetxea Marcaida.

far as we know— and because Cristina is far from a sinless victim. But while Cristina's compromised position at the end does not redeem her from her ill intent, the precariousness of her final position provides a demolishing contrast with that of the victorious, male pretenders whose freedom, joy, and control of the situation perhaps seem closer to the Basque plutonic practices than we have traditionally realized.

These 'fake' *vizcaínos* 'win' in their ruse because they abuse the system (they clearly buy the *Platero*, and know the *Alguacil*), and not being happy with humiliating Cristina and taking her money, they force her to celebrate their victory with a lavish feast that they will be exempted from paying. In my view, this is the perfect metaphorical ending for an increasingly charged national situation where Andalusians and Spaniards in general were overburdened by taxes while the Basque oligarchy, exempted from most of such tributes, continued to reap profits from their public positions and private investments (like the thriving slave trade). In this regard, the *Vizcaíno fingido* final act summarizes the growing gap between those that control all the riches of those who work for them—like 'slaves'— without ever attaining any status or wealth.

When taken outside of the interlude's context, then, the commercial elements of the *Vizcaino fingido*'s plot paint a dark, fraud-ridden social landscape unfit for the light and funny genre of the interlude, but apt for understanding, a bit better, the murky waters of colonial capitalism.

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