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The Supreme Pen (Al-Qalam Al-A'la) of Cide Hamete Benengeli in Don Quixote

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The Supreme Pen (Al-Qalam Al-A'la) of Cide Hamete Benengeli
in Don Quixote

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Cervantes closes the inverted chivalric saga of *Don Quijote de la Mancha* by giving the final word to Cide Hamete Benengeli's pen, a pen that is instructed to speak autonomously, without a hand to guide it, while hanging by a wire from an ordinary kitchen rack. A dazzling entelechy without doubt worthy of a wise conjurer, the scene is so incongruent that it would appear to be an unintentional trick.¹ But Cervantes himself advises us in the *Viaje del Parnaso* (1614) [*Journey to Parnassus*] that "extravagances" born of his "narrow wit" have secret resonances, that is, hidden meanings:

Nunca á disparidad abre las puertas
Mi corto ingenio, y hállalas contino
De par en par la consonancia abiertas.
¿Cómo puede agradar un desatino
Si no es que de propósito se hace,
Mostrándole el donaire su camino?

[My narrow wit hath ne'er its gates unbound
To things incongruous, but welcomes these
Which keep within the range of reason's bound.
How can Extravaganza hope to please,
Unless it hath some aim and purpose meet,
Where humour leads the way and sprightly ease?] ² [End Page 505]

Taking Cervantes at his word, Francisco Márquez Villanueva, who has solved so many of the hidden mysteries of the *Quixote*, insists that the author "ansía ser entendido y guarda sus tesoros para el lector culto y avisado" [yearns to be understood and keeps his treasures for the educated and sagacious reader].³ The scene of the pen suspended in the air and born exclusively for the "enterprise" (*empresa*) of writing the anachronistic knight-errant's story constitutes one of those hidden treasures replete with secret codes.

If we read the scene from the cultural coordinates of Islam—those with which Cervantes could have familiarized himself in his years of captivity in Algiers as well as in Spain—the prodigious pen that prepared the *Quixote* bears a close relationship to the "Supreme Pen" or *al-qalam al-a'la* of the Koran (68:1). Cide's pen, necessarily Arabic given the lineage of its owner, extols the fact that the novel was born "para mí sola" [for me alone] and that the enterprise of its writing was "para mí estaba guardada" [reserved for me alone] (2:592-93; 940).⁴ In this way, Cervantes gives homage to the work's Islamic context, for this primordial Arabic pen, associated with the sacred writing of God the creator and his Supreme Intellect, inscribes the inexorable destiny of human beings on the "Well-Preserved Tablet" (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*), also of Koranic origin (85:21-22). Looked at from this angle, the final scene of the *Quixote* no longer seems absurd but begins to yield up its secret ironies.

Let us recall, at the end of the *Quixote*, the "most prudent" Cide's apostrophe to his writing instrument:

Aquí quedarás, colgada de esta espetera y de este hilo de alambre, ni sé si bien cortada o mal tajada péñola mía, adonde vivirás lue ngos siglos, si presuntuosos y malandrines historiadores no te descuelgan para profanarte. Pero antes que a ti lleguen, les puedes advertir, y decirles en el mejor modo que pudieres:

"¡Tate, tate, folloncicos!
De ninguno sea tocada;
porque esta empresa, buen rey,
para mí estaba guardada." (2:592)

[Here you shall rest, hanging from this rack by this copper wire, my goose-quill. Whether you are well or ill cut I know not, but you shall live long ages there, unless presumptuous and rascally historians take you down to profane you. But before they approach you, warn them as best you are able: **[End Page 506]**

"Beware, beware, you scoundrels,
I maybe touched...

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Al-A'la) of Cide Hamete
Benengeli in *Don Quixote***

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