

### **When Ants get their Wings – Sancho Panza’s Role in the Ruling Class**

Sancho Panza, a peasant born and bred, seemed the most unlikely candidate for higher office. After all, feudal society believed that people are born into what they are supposed to do, and occupation is linked to nature, not nurture. Making Sancho a governor, then, is a way for Cervantes to take on this claim, but he never wholly supports nor denies its validity. Instead he leaves us with a complex sentiment towards peasant rulers and the current ruling class, which, by examining the views of Sancho’s rule held by the duke, the duchess, Don Quijote, and the Panzas, we can seek to understand a little bit better. Not all peasants would make good rulers, indeed many fall prey to greed or superiority, but Sancho, influenced by Don Quijote, has a unique blend of humility, compassion, and wisdom that makes him more than just a simpleton or a governor. The purpose of this essay is to explore the political implications of his governorship.

In “The Duke’s Theatre of Sadism,” critic Henry Sullivan notes that the duke and duchess derive pleasure from putting Don Quijote and Sancho Panza in positions that challenge their character, exposing Don Quijote to women and Sancho to hunger, pain, and sleeplessness. If we accept the sadist argument and take it one step further, the duke and duchess think that the very act of making Sancho a governor will cause him harm. This reveals an underlying assumption of the upper class: peasants are born to be peasants, not to rule. The duchess does not think that Sancho could ever act like a governor. When she brings him in to talk about Dulcinea’s enchantment, she seats him on a lower chair next to her and calls for him to be “seated like a governor and talk like a squire” (537). First, note the low chair: physically and symbolically, we should never think the duchess sees Sancho as in the same plane as her, regardless of what he says or does. Second, even though he now ought to be seated as a governor, the duchess still thinks he will act as a squire, not

truly adopting the traits of a governor. Sancho can transcend class in name, but never in the opinion of those above him. Whenever Sancho tries to contribute to conversations regarding higher topics than his position, such as in the conversation about dueling when he and the duchess first met, her first reaction is to laugh. The duchess simply thinks that seeing Sancho out of his element is funny, humor which, in satire, usually indicates an important lesson: that they don't respect his lowly thoughts. It is only after all of Sancho's trials, in his letter to Don Quijote, that the duchess finally has "a good deal of doubt about the governor being truly a simpleton" (639), but this is a Sancho who has already renounced his gubernatorial throne and can't wait to get back to his old life – he even signs the letter "your graces faithful servant" instead of with a more distinguished closing. It seems as though the duchess might be able to see him as a wise peasant but not a wise governor, even if to be wise as one is the same wisdom required to be wise as the other. Nevertheless, she sees him only as a foolish source of entertainment as a governor – too bad for peasants who want to climb the social ladder.

Perhaps Sancho's peasant mind really isn't fit to rule, though, for the duke claims once Sancho governs for a little bit, he "won't be able to get enough of it, because the sweetest thing of all is to command and be obeyed" (578), but after just a little bit, Sancho wants to stop being governor. What if peasants and rulers really are different, and Sancho is inferior simply because he does not enjoy being superior? In "Sancho Panza Wants an Island," Luis Corteguera highlights three qualifications that prevent peasants from rising in class: humble birth, lack of education, and physical appearance and behavior. Traditionally, a peasant could not come to rule much more than his local village, if that (Corteguera 263-264). In Don Quijote's advice to Sancho Panza, he accounts for all three of these setbacks and more. First, Don Quijote lays waste to the idea that one must "have the blood of kings to be emperor" as he notes that "blood is inherited but virtue must be acquired" (580). Cervantes here, through Don Quijote, acknowledges that just because one is of noble birth

doesn't give him the virtues commonly associated with that title. This dig at the upper class has merit, because even the duchess notes that "no one is born knowing anything, and they make bishops out of men, not stones" (539), so one implication of Don Quijote's comment is that sometimes those of high birth don't ever learn the lessons they were supposed to, and a peasant with good morals could have greater virtue, because "virtue is greater than blood," (580) and Sancho might just have a natural talent for governing (539). Don Quijote puts further pressure on the humble birth setback by emphasizing the need for Sancho to know himself. He tells Sancho to "be careful to watch yourself, seeking to know who you truly are" as "knowing yourself...will serve you as the peacock's ugly feet help him to counterbalance the glory of his tail, for you will remember that once, in your birthplace, you had to take care of pigs" (580). Touching on the arrogance of the upper class, Don Quijote says that if Sancho revels in his humble roots he can avoid being a "proud sinner" like those who are unable to temper their responsibilities with a "gentle manner," a problem which belongs to peasants who climb to power as well as nobles born into it (580). Finally, Don Quijote tells Sancho to never spurn those who are from his past and to embrace his humble roots. Heaven, he says, "wants to see no one scorn what it has made" (580). If Sancho knows himself and remembers his roots, his humble birth can in fact prevent him from a plaguing vanity that afflicts many highborn rulers and let him live out the virtues he already has.

The second issue of contention Don Quijote must face deals with Sancho's lack of education, which, with his illiteracy and all the undirected proverbial knowledge Sancho has, seems to be a big problem. Don Quijote solves this problem with an appeal to Sancho's innate goodness. In their discussion of proverbs, Sancho lips off tens of bits of "compressed wisdom" which, Don Quijote points out "sound more like foolishness than wisdom" (716). Sancho defends his ignorance by saying that when you're father's the judge, you can feel safe going to court (584), and since he is going to be a governor, it won't matter whether his proverbs are relevant or not, because he has

power now. This answer is perhaps the most frightening one that Sancho could have given, because it justifies the claim that uneducated peasants should not be given power, as it goes to their heads. Luckily, though, Don Quijote again forces Sancho to seek to know himself, and truly analyze his knowledge, and when he does this we see why it may not matter that Sancho can't write his own name: a pure heart. Sancho tells Don Quijote he "knows as much about being a governor as a hawk does, and if there's any chance that being a governor will help the devil get hold of me, [he]'d rather go to Heaven, being just plain Sancho, than go to Hell as a governor" (585). With this realization, Don Quijote settles the issue: Sancho's "naturally a good man, and without that there isn't any knowledge worth a cent" (585). Free from greed, it can only follow that Sancho will pass pure judgment. Also, Don Quijote also notes that there are at least a hundred men who can govern like hawks but can barely read or write, the "essential thing being that they mean well and wish always to do well" (535). Cervantes brings up the issue of knowledge, of knowing Latin and being able to properly use a proverb, a lot throughout the novel. Even in the prologue, he mocks those who lace their statements in fancy Latin. It follows, then, that Cervantes agrees with Don Quijote when he says a good heart is more important than knowledge, and certainly not all rulers have that, so this is one more point for a peasant ruler being as likely a good ruler as a high born one, because he will have an ample supply of advisors, so in a leader compassion matters most. As Don Quijote tells Sancho, "let the poor man's tears move you more, though never to unfairness, than the rich man's writs and reports. Try to pick the truth out of the rich man's gifts just as in the poor man's sobs and prayers" (581). We see here that truth and knowledge deal more with human interaction, a compassionate and interpersonal sensibility, than they do with schooling and Latin.

Considering a peasant ruler can avoid affectation and have greater virtue by remembering his roots as well as be more committed to God and goodness than those born into ruling who might be more 'knowledgeable,' the only issue still left to combat is Sancho's peasant like behavior and

appearance. With this, Don Quijote launches into how Sancho is supposed to act. He tells him to sit up straight on a horse, to not eat garlic, onion, or eat too much, to not sleep too much or be lazy, and to say eructate instead of belch (at which point Cervantes throws in some fun linguistics about speech being governed by its usage), all of which seem to belie his previous notion that Sancho should be true to himself. Indeed, we cannot call any of the ways Don Quijote tells Sancho to behave anything but superficial. If Sancho were to adhere to every bit of this behavioral advice, it would affect nothing other than the verisimilitude of his rule; that is to say, people would believe ore he was born a governor instead of a peasant. Other than in title, though, this has absolutely no relevance to ruling. So how do we a peasant ruler evade the contradiction of staying true to himself while acting like something he is not? While it is important for Sancho to remember his humble roots, he must act as though he belongs as a governor. Perhaps this is the point at which even Sancho, an exceptional peasant, is unable to truly rise above his class. Indeed, we soon learn that Sancho forgoes his position due precisely to a desire for food, sleep, and the pleasures of his peasant life. So we have it – though Sancho is able to use his humble roots and lack of education to his advantage via humility and compassion, he cannot change the way he acts, and thus was not a good governor, unless Don Quijote was missing the point, getting caught up in the details of actions like that.

An answer to this predicament can be found in the Panzas. Sancho's family's reaction to his rule, his own attitudes towards ruling, and his conclusions after patrolling the island all bring political motifs are brought to the fore. First let us consider how his wife and daughter reacted to becoming members of the upper class. The Panza women are examples of peasants who would not make good rulers. Teresa and responds in an opposite fashion than Sancho - she is quick to change her behavior and leave her humble roots behind. Before she reads the letter from the duchess containing the news, the page kneels before Doña Teresa Panza to her plea of "oh, my lord, get up from there!

Don't do that, because I'm nobody in particular, but just a poor peasant woman" (623). After finding out about her new position, though, her first instinct is to tell her friends and get a hoopskirt and coach. Sanchica also shows the most excitement for the *image* of being in the upper class, the third of Corteguera's qualifications, cursing her jealous neighbors as "mud sloggers," stating, "I'm sure going to ride in my coach, and *my* feet won't touch the ground" (627). Rather than trying to be better than the "stuck up" kind of aristocrats around her town, who "think just because they're somebody the wind blows on other people, but not on them," the Panza women decide to go parading around just like them. In doing so, they lose all advantage that might have come from being a peasant who makes it to the upper class. In addition, the wisdom that Teresa shows with her proverbs does not reveal a deeper understanding of human nature but only a base greed and selfishness of her character. All of her proverbs deal with immediately taking anything offered to her, so as not to miss an opportunity, a peasant sensibility but one that would not help her as a ruler or as a functioning member of the upper class. Sanchica does revert back to her peasant instincts when she wants to travel to see her dad, however, protesting "I can travel on a she-ass just as well as in a coach! What kind of a finicky Phoebe do you think I am" when the page says she must take a coach and not ride on his horse to which Teresa replies "if he's just plain Sancho, you're just plain Sancha, but when he's a governor, you're 'my lady' and that's that" (628). Sanchica briefly tries to make a move that reconciles her peasant self with her noble self, a practical move that would have allowed her to see her dad. Teresa, however, prevented the seeing Sancho because of her obsession with image. Because she did not want to be seen as simple or plain, she lost the opportunity. Because they forget their past selves and are too greedy, the Panza women, Teresa in particular, show not all peasants have within them the peasant's advantage.

Sancho too sometimes seems victim of this materialist peasant outlook. Sancho's capitalist sensibilities bring him to Don Quijote's side in the first place, and thus deliver him to the island. In a

letter to Teresa, Sancho admits that he wants “to make a lot of money, which is how they say all new governors begin,” to which the duchess responds that a “greedy governor makes for ungoverned justice” (555). His greed has no place in being a good governor, but is Sancho really greedy? Indeed, though he vocally wishes for the island day after day, in a discussion about Dulcinea, Sancho reveals that he thinks “a good name’s worth more than piles of money” (540). Sancho’s greed and dream of an island did more for him than the actual object of his desires, just like Don Quijote and Dulcinea. For this reason he does not actively seek wealth as a governor, because he is “naturally charitable” and sympathizes with poor people, noting “who’ll let you steal a loaf when he’s kneaded and baked it?” (539) The fantasy world often cannot be reconciled with the real, so when Sancho becomes governor, he abandons his peasant dream of wealth and instead turns to governing them well. This incompleteness of his dream, that he doesn’t seek money as governor, shows that Sancho is class conscious and aware. He held onto the dream when it was all he could get his hands on, but once he had the power to judge, he had no need for it and was able to change his character appropriately. This is another response to Corteguera’s third setback to peasants as rulers, because Sancho changes his peasant character, except he does it meaningfully instead of superficially like Don Quijote recommended.

Sancho’s attitude after governing for a while makes one last great stand for his unusual peasant competence as a ruler, one that seems to support a Bourdieu’s theory of class *habitus* that came nearly 400 years later. In Chapter Three of *The Logic of Practice* by Pierre Bourdieu, he points out that high positions in the social structure view the world as a representation or performance, and “practices are seen as no more than the acting-out of roles.” Putting aside the fact that this perfectly describes the duke and duchess’s actions regarding Sancho and Don Quijote, it is also something that Sancho Panza distinctly is not. Though he may have the title of governor, he does not view the world this way. Rather, he has a lower class *habitus*, one that is anti-objectivist, meaning he does not

see interactions with objects as symbolic exchanges but rather as real and grounded and practical, traits that fit in historically with peasants. We see Sancho's class *habitus* strongly manifest itself as his rule is drawn out. When dealing with Pedro Recio, his doctor, Sancho tells hi "don't fix me any fancy things to eat, or any special dishes, because that would just throw my stomach out of kilter, because what it's used to is goat meat, and plain old beef, and bacon and... if we feed it palace food we're going to make it unhappy and even upset" (614). Unconsciously, we see that Sancho is a product of his class, and his body rejects the transition. His hunger, which throughout the adventure has been a lifedrive and undercurrent of his character, serves as a strong reminder that Sancho interacts with the world physically, not symbolically. As he puts it, "the guts hold up the heart, and not the other way around" (605). Additionally, in climbing the "towers of pride and ambition," Sancho's heart is afflicted with "a thousand miseries" (642) revealing a natural resistance to the way of the upper class. The *habitus*, as a University of Chicago summary points out, is both "an obstacle and prerequisite to social change." In Sancho's stint as governor, we get to see how a lower class *habitus* acts when it gets to play the upper. In doing so, his actions reveal that sometimes "jokes turn into truths, and jokers find that they're the ones being fooled" (615), this is to say, that maybe a lower class *habitus* might do rulers and the upper class some good, here and there, to keep people from just "eating the honey that the worker bees make" as Sancho says it. However, considering Sancho's entire rule, we see that a lower class *habitus* can only go so far in enhancing governments, and thus a combination of the two must be considered, and so we have social change.

In a time when the world around Cervantes was falling apart, with people starving and an imminent civil war, it seems as though Sancho's role as governor ought to be taken very seriously as class commentary. So what can we say about "the old saw: when ants got their wings, they didn't do good things" (538)? It can't be true, for Sancho was compassionate and humble, peasant traits that served him well as governor. In fact, aside from some occasional ridiculous logic, Sancho judgments



were also very good job, on par with Solomon as some onlookers exaggerated. Cervantes, or Sidi Hamid, or me, or whoever, shows that peasants have a lot to offer society, but that they too have limits. When Don Quijote regains his sanity (and his sadness) he comments “I now wish, being sane again, that I could give [Sancho] an entire kingdom, since the simple honesty of his nature, and his perfect loyalty, well deserve it” (743). Sancho had many things to contribute to a class that does not respect his own. But for all his success as governor, Sancho says he did not want the “ant’s wings that carried me up into the air, so the swallows and the swifts could eat me, because I’m going back to walking on the ground with my own flat feet, because if they’re not decorated with fancy shoes and fancy leather, at least they have hemp sandals with leather straps. Birds of a feather should flock together, and nobody ought to stretch out his legs without worrying how long the sheet is” (643). We wind up close to, but not quite where we started. In reaching beyond his class, Sancho began a move towards the creation of a new *habitus* – not one of peasant rulers, but one of rulers who are a little bit more grounded in reality. Cervantes was just calling for a little bit more groundedness in the upper class. An aristocratic bunch who won’t think quite so esoterically about “to be or not to be” but rather think “as long as we’re all alive, let’s all of us eat in peace and harmony, because when god sends the daylight He sends it for everyone” (614).

#### Bibliography

1. Corteguera, Luis R. “Sancho Panza Wants an Island: Cervantes and the Politics of Peasant Rulers” *Romance Quarterly*, Heldref Publications, USA, 2006
  - a. (as a sidenote, I thought of the topic before discovering this article – as you said, pretty much anything you can think to write about the Quijote has probably already been written. I tried not to repeat very much of it, though)
2. Bourdieu, Pierre, translated by Richard Nice. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press, 1990
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