

CHAPTER III

BACKGROUND OF THE PERIOD

Cervantes is said to have imitate the society of the sixteenth century Spain in his novel Don Quixote. Out of this reason, it is important to know about the background of the period to see the attitude of the society that time. In analysing the character of Don Quixote, the use of this approach is needed to see the reactions of the society as Don Quixote interacts with them, and vice versa.

To begin with, I will first discuss the historical background at that time. The sixteenth century is known as El Siglo de Oro, the Golden Age, of Spanish history, in which Spain rose in power under the Emperor Charles V and was influenced by three great movements -- the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and the Renaissance. The golden Age lasted about a century, from 1550 to 1650. (Monarch Notes, 1965, p.11)

The Spanish Empire was in the full glow of triumph, and universities, cathedrals and palaces were springing up as wealth poured in from Peru, Mexico and the East. In the arts, sculpture, poetry and music flourished, and the instincts of

artisans were expressed architecturally and culturally in works of intricate beauty and exquisite richness. (Monarch Notes, 1965. p.12)

In this respect the Spanish Renaissance was unique. inasmuch as it received a cultural impact from Italy, and was also hammered into its unique shape by the twin intellectual blows of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Spain was the recipient and the donor of cultural influences as the Moorish, Oriental, Italian, and Northern European. Add to this, passionate, proud, chivalric, and mystical qualities which are ingrained in the Spanish character (Monarch Notes, 1965. p.12). Historically it was a period of fervor and optimism; culturally it was a time of flourishing activity; intellectually it was an age of hope.

Education was not restricted to the wealthy, and many poor children found their way to one or another of Spain's great universities, where they achieved eminence. There was a genuine spirit of adventure abroad, and an expansive mood of creativity permeated the Spanish atmosphere. Yet, beggars, robbers and vagrants swarmed the streets, while there was a marked difference between the wealthy comfort of nobles and priests. and the abject living of the poor (Monarch Notes, 1965, p.13, 15). So, although the country was in its glory, and the poor people had a chance for better educations, there were injustices especially to the lower class which forces them to become beggars and robbers. These situations were the

results of the political conditions of the country at that time.

Philip II, the son of Charles V helped defeated the Turks in the sea battle of Lepanto in 1571. But in his other endeavors Philip was less fortunate. He was engaged in a long and finally unsuccessful struggle to keep the Low Countries Catholic and Spanish. This led him into conflict with England. It was Philip who dispatched the Invincible Armada against Queen Elizabeth I's fleet in 1588 -- an adventure that ended disastrously for the Spanish Armada and seriously diminished Spain's position as an international power.

The decline of Spanish power continued slowly throughout the reigns of Philip III and Philip IV. Like other monarchs of the time they entrusted much of their power to their advisers who governed for them. In fact when the kings acted on their own the results were often disastrous, as was the case when Philip III expelled almost 500,000 Moriscos -- converted Muslims -- from his kingdom in 1609. The loss of these able, hardworking citizens had serious economic consequences for Spain. At the beginning of Philip IV's reign, however, Spain was still a great power in Europe. By the time of his death, in 1665, France had become the leading power on the continent and Spain had lost its European territories, including Portugal in 1668. (Source: Lands and Peoples: Spain, Vol IV, 1981, p. 115).

Cervantes, who lived in this age (1547-1616), was well aware of the situations in the society at that time, both the political situations and the social conditions, since he himself lived poorly all his life and had been in the Battle of Lepanto. Since he was well-acquainted with the lower class in his country, he depicts them and their way of life very real in his novel: the folk custom, the traditions, the proverbs, and the like.

But, Cervantes did not depict the lower class only, but also the upper ones. So, we find that there are the shepherd, the innkeeper, the student, the barber, the galley-slaves/convicts, the nobles, the Holy Brotherhood (the predecessors of the Civil Guards), and the dukes and duchesses, as was said by John Drinkwater in The Outline of Literature:

"Don Quixote gives the reader, as has been well said, a brilliant panorama of Spanish society as it existed during the sixteenth century." (1923 : p.286)

Beside the society, Cervantes also depicted the attitude of the society towards chivalry. Since Spain was turning from a medieval country into a more modern one, medieval chivalry was not practiced anymore, and only existed in books of romances of chivalry, which were very popular in the early sixteenth century, as mentioned in the Encyclopedie Americana:

"These books of chivalry reflected the enthusiasm of the Spaniards in the era of conquest and discovery. They were read by all class of society: the innkeeper and the

serving wench knew them by heart no less than the lords and ladies in their palaces." (1970 : p. 351)

So, though chivalry itself had gone out of practice. people at that time knew about it from books. And, in Don Quixote, Cervantes shows that many other people, besides the Don, have read the books of chivalry, such as the priest, the innkeeper, the barber, and the Canon.

The characteristic trait shared by all Spaniards is pride. Pride and dignity have always been vital for Spaniards. The Spaniard accepts a king, a duke, a great landlord, and even a dictator, but he never grovels before him. He accepts his place in society, but -- though he may be a peasant -- he considers himself, as a man, equal to his prince.

This Spaniard pride has its side effects. One of them is anger. Defied, challenged, or insulted, the Spaniard is quick to react. "Honor" is one of the most commonly used words in the Spanish language, and woe to him who blemishes the Spaniard's honor or leads him to suspect that his honor has been blemished. (Lands and Peoples, vol. IV, 1981, p.97)

Courage, too, is related to pride in the Spanish character. About this courage of the Spaniards of the sixteenth century no one has borne witness more wholeheartedly than their great enemy Sir Walter Raleigh (from The Background of English Literature, Classical and Romance):

"Here, I cannot forbear to commend the Spartan fortitude of the Spaniards. We seldom or never find that any nation has endured so many adventures and miseries as the Spaniards have done in their Indian discoveries; yet persisting in their enterprises with inviolable constancy, they have annexed to their kingdom so many goodly provinces as bury remembrance of all danger past." (1970 : p. 44)

Pride and courage inevitably breed a sense of romance and adventure as well as the belief that the Spaniard can succeed in everything he undertakes.