

DON QUIXOTE
Miguel de Cervantes

A critical paper by
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February 7, 2017

An Ear the Less: Musings on Affairs of the Crossroads in the Digital Age

Let's face it: Don *Quixote* is an idiosyncratic book. It's not your typical romance of knighthood, not like most novels, not exactly a comedy, nothing like a tragedy. As a work of literature, it's its own thing. Cervantes' narrative is eccentric, yet groundbreaking; preposterous, but at the same time entertaining; a compelling diversion that culminates in disturbing questions. Its central character is an obvious madman, but one who continuously pulls the "sane" people around him into his delusion without their really seeing what is happening to them. As much as I ask readers of this work to be honest, let me also come clean and say that I honestly sympathize with the ingenious gentleman of La Mancha. Don Quixote is a ridiculous figure because he has been driven mad by too much reading. As a professor of literature, I totally get it. He has a totalizing vision of a heroic life of knight-errantry, dedicating himself to aiding the helpless, defending the faithful, upholding truth and beauty. For my own literary career, I have always had similar ambitions. He has the misfortune to be pursuing his chivalric goals at least a century too late, since the narrative template of medieval romance tales that frames the Don's life had long been discarded by Spain's audience for such tales, and that audience had long preceded Cervantes' readers. And as an educator rounding out my career in a new century featuring social media and computer gaming, I see my quixotic self in my students' eyes: left behind, slightly (to greatly) clueless, pompous, boring, hallucinating fantasies of cultural significance, chasing an ideal that will never again be fulfilled and, (like Dulcinea) may never have existed, after all.

Attempts to revive Cervantes' narrative for a contemporary audience have been somewhat compromised by the very complexities that make it memorable. A recent film, *Lost in La Mancha*, is a documentary by Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe

of an attempt by Terry Gilliam to make his own film adaptation of Cervantes' book, *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, in 2000. According to the Wikipedia site for the movie, Gilliam failed to manage the breadth and detail of Cervantes' original, so Fulton and Pepe released their "the making of" for Gilliam's aborted movie as a modern take on Don Quixote's knight-errantry. One critic observed it to be "one of the best films about the process of moviemaking," which is a tad backhanded as far as Cervantes is concerned. Even his literary home city of Madrid has let Cervantes slip aside. The *New York Times*, "International" section reported in 2004 that Madrid has largely relegated him to the borders of civic memory: "Madrid is the city where Miquel de Cervantes did most of his writing, published "Don Quixote," died and was buried. But his tomb is closed to the public, his house no longer stands, and the shop where "Don Quixote of La Mancha" was first printed is marked only by a plaque." (Renwick McLean A4 November 18, 2004) During the 90s, I taught the book with reasonable success in my World Literature Survey class, but I would never put it on the syllabus now: the propagation of digital "devices" into every aspect of work and play has significantly undercut the amount and type of reading currently tolerated by people between the ages of 18 and 49! (According to the Internet: "... 63 percent of U.S. households surveyed include at least one frequent gamer. 65 percent of homes own a video game-playing device, while 48 percent own "a dedicated game console." 47 percent of gamers are between **18** and **49 years old.**" Apr 29, 2016). The world of the medieval romance has taken up residence in computer games, where armies clash under titles such as *Assassin's Creed*, *Crusader Kings*, *The First Templar*, *Medieval II: Total War: Kingdoms*. Game narratives have compressed the heroic into robotic characters like virtual chess pieces and compromised our ability to identify the ridiculous with a rapid prototyping of social media "legends" like Kim Kardashian and internet "memes" like Harambe. But we, as The Novel Club, all agreed to read and discuss *Don Quixote, Part One and Part Two*, published by Cervantes in 1605 and 1615. How quixotic a commitment is that for a "game" reader in the digital age?

The phenomenon of the book's immediate popularity is well known. At first publication, it was perceived as a satire of chivalric romances, and was widely enjoyed by enthusiastic readers who didn't want Don Quixote's story to end. In 1615 Cervantes was prompted to publish a continuation of his narrative by the appearance of an outrageous false sequel by an author using the name of Alonzo Fernandez de Avellaneda, who, fittingly, was as hard to identify by scholars as were windmills by our knight. First readings of *Don Quixote* as a satire gave way in time to a more complex understanding of the work's effects. Cervantes was not simply exploiting the humor of acts of knight-errantry performed in a time more concerned with the real than the ideal; his central character is marginalized by

poverty, loneliness, and insanity, and therefore his readers resisted recognizing him as a hero. They began to read Don Quixote's "high, old story," instead, as a new one in which a crazy old man takes on the evils of "modern day" Spain by resuscitating a narrative genre that had long been considered irrelevant. Cervantes' new narrative began to be seen as a critique of the medieval romance at the same time that it used that romance to critique the inequities – or, as Nabokov, in his *Lectures on Don Quixote*, characterized them, the "cruelties" – common in the modern culture of its readers (10). Cervantes had created an invigorating synergism, that according to Nabokov, integrated the heroic epic with the more entertaining romance tale, resulting in "a new species, the European novel" (5).

In coming to terms with the tremendous influence of this narrative invention, it might be wise to distinguish the work's regency as a narrative form from the legacy of the doleful knight at its heart. The book offers literature a new set of possibilities, not just in blending the two previous forms of the classical epic and the medieval romance, but in capitalizing on an existing literary genre, plotted along a rhythm of recycling events in which an ambiguous human figure neither quite heroic nor exactly comic encounters a broad array of different experiences and events, subsuming them in all their diversity into one hilarious, delusional proposition of reality. Following Cervantes' example, early novelists employed the "plot-less" picaresque structure in the early novels of the eighteenth century, such as Fielding in *Joseph Andrews*, Defoe in *Moll Flanders*, and Smollet in *Roderick Random*. From sixteenth century Spanish literature, the narrative of the rogue or "picaresque" can be traced through nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century European and American literature in such books as Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* (Literature Glossary, Schmoop; *Wikipedia, Picaresque*). The picaresque is, of course, only one aspect of *Don Quixote's* influence on the novel: from this angle alone, there is no denying "the long shadow" of Cervantes' master work (Nabokov 11).

But if the narrative structure of the work is easy to follow into our own times, the character of Don Quixote himself is neither easy to recognize in modern and contemporary literature, nor is he (or she) as entertaining, challenging, or simply fascinating to more recent audiences as was the "gaunt hidalgo" to those who first embraced him (Nabokov 12). Nabokov is not the first or last to point out Flaubert's debt to Cervantes in the character of Emma Bovary, and I am probably not alone in connecting Don Quixote's love of Dulcinea to the ideal-driven love of Florentino Ariza, the passionate devotee of his "crowned goddess," Fermina Daza, in Garcia Marquez' novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*. But these bastard children don't bear an obvious resemblance to their father. The distinctive heroism of Odysseus is not only easier to pick out of a line-up of modern fictional protagonists

(the thinking man's warrior, the strategic teller of lies, the brutal slayer of his wife's suitors), he also simply appears much as himself in narratives honoring Homer from medieval times to the twentieth century, such as those by Dante, Tennyson, and Joyce. As a central character, Odysseus' protean powers of self-invention have resulted in a notable amount of characterological staying power across the literary ages. But despite the natural attractiveness of his courageous ideals, the Knight of the Doleful Countenance is also always hampered by the hallucinated ground over which he chases them. As Nabokov tells his students at Harvard:

Odysseus is essentially safe; he is like a healthy man in a healthy dream who, whatever happens to him, shall awake. ... But in our book, the melancholy Don is on his own (18). Such a pathetic, lost, hermetic character – no matter how much he makes us laugh or how much he grows on us over the narrative's span, can easily drop off the literary map, depending on the tastes of readers over the centuries.

Don Quixote does, though, grow on readers. The entire narrative invites us to take sides because it's agon is precisely located in the polarizing question of whether the crazy Knight is right or wrong. We can accept that he is not in his right mind; within the boundaries of his delusion, we can give him his horse, his squire, and his lady, but we are still called upon to judge him when he breaks the heads of muleteers, albeit defending his sacred vigil over his armor, or when he brutally attacks two Benedictine friars and a Biscayan squire in order to free a lady traveler whom he insists is a captive princess. Badly frightened by the Don's aggression, she agrees to send her vanquished servant to Doña Dulcinea for the sentencing phase to follow Don Quixote's victory, agrees, indeed, to humor his entire hallucination of this adventure. As the audience for this spectacle of the crossroads, however, we must judge before we can agree. Yes, it's a funny romp, yes, people are more frightened than severely injured, but as the original narrator of Part One repeatedly observes (and as continued by the Arabic Historian, Cid Hamete Benengeli), Don Quixote's violence is driven by extreme rage at the imagined insults of relatively "innocent" people, and many of the wounds suffered would have been fatal, if not for the slapstick quality of the attacks themselves.

And yet, even in the midst of the first volume's clash of terror and silliness, we feel the need to accommodate our judgements to an evolving appreciation of the Don's knightly bearing. That he lives by the chivalric code cannot be denied. We can see the scope of his faith when he builds his suit of armor from spare scraps and mad intention, first fashioning a helmet by building out an old morion with cardboard, and when this is bashed to bits by his testing blow, reinforcing it with iron and declining to test it again. We can see his courage when without hesitation he challenges the "lawless giants" that he and Sancho Panza encounter

on their maiden sally together. Despite his injuries at the giants' hands – or properly, the wings of the enchanted windmills, he isn't afraid to persevere in his obligation to destroy the "evil" magician Frestón, who made them appear. And as much as his knight-errantry involves wronging rights when he means to right wrongs, Don Quixote takes his equal share of significant hits to the body and soul. Quite a few of the sallies related in Part One are blood fests, requiring the courage, without wince or complaint, to bear up under the destruction of one's fighting equipment or the loss of an ear. We also learn in Part One of the courtly generosity of the Knight of the Doleful Countenance. If food or shelter is short on a given evening, he always insists that Sancho eat well and sleep under cover. Sancho's compensation for being his squire, in fact, best attests to the extent of the Don's possession of this particular knightly virtue. The governorship of an island, should one constitute the spoils of a future conquest, will be Sancho's in exchange for his loyal assistance in all of their travels. There is something irresistible in the scrupulous rigor with which our knight adheres to this vanished code.

But somewhere between the end of Part One and the beginning of Part Two, the moral coordinates shift slightly, and the narrative insinuates that though the agon remains the same, the sides are being differently drawn. By the darkening of events at the end of the first volume – Sancho's lie about delivering Don Quixote's letter to Dulcinea, the Don's inexplicably being hung by his wrists and imprisoned in a cage by the inn's staff and guests during his long stay there, the gathering determination among his "allies" – the curate, the barber, and the rest of the motley company who trail him on his early sallies – to make him face reality, our first easy reading experience of the narrative's comedies and ironies has been called into question. We wonder about Don Quixote's return home: is it really "good" for him? will he remain there? We are not sure of the motivations of the curate, the barber, and their party in their intention to "cure "Don Quixote's madness," and we begin to be uneasy about the ultimate value in such a goal. As we progress into Part Two, we find that Don Quixote's life has been "put into a book," an acknowledgement which should be a cause for satisfaction in the Don and for celebration among his champions, but instead raises not only our suspicions, but those of the knight and his squire, as well. In Part Two, the humiliations and torments that Don Quixote suffers while a "guest" of the ducal pair, in particular, do as much damage to his dream of service to mankind as is done to his body, and for suffering their endless, deceitful exploitation of his delusion for their pleasure, we cannot but begin to pity him.

The second part begins with a seismic shift from a life of action that has sprung from reading too many books to the appearance of a book that has the audacity to represent a life of action. While readers are still - and even more - deeply concerned with morality at the second part's opening, this ironic change in the

relationship between the word and the deed has added another layer to the agon. When the impoverished country gentleman, Señor Quejana, departs from his sanity, he begins, as Don Quixote de La Mancha, to live within a narrative (rather than telling it) of chivalric heroism. His sallies with Sancho string out a seemingly endless sequence of events that “tell” in action a romance of knighthood. But on his return home to take a brief rest from his adventures, he discovers that the life of the Knight of the Doleful Countenance has been closed back up into a narrative discourse created by others, determined by their perspectives, and one that shockingly misrepresents its subject. He realizes that many people are being given a false impression of his deeds, his honor, and even his identity. It is as if he has been studied by anthropologists and the book of his adventures is an ethnography written by those outside of his world, a book containing inevitable flaws and misunderstandings. The situation creates a need for him to recapture his story by enjoining battle in action with those, like the disguised Sansón Carasco, who are confused (or appear to be so) about the truth of his exploits. Thus, he is ripe for his first encounter with the Knight of the Mirrors, and when, by comical happenstance with Carasco’s horse, he manages to unseat his foe, he is satisfied that he has wrested his identity intact from the hands of wicked historians (the only thing more vile than wicked enchanters).

This victory, however, doesn’t seem to reverse a gathering darkness around his subsequent encounters. He and Sancho are repeatedly abused by people whom they meet on their travels, who are either genuinely wicked, like the ducal pair and their servants, or who, like Don Diego, simply misjudge them, however benevolently. Apparently rash acts on the part of the Don, such as confronting a caged lion and descending deep into a cave by himself, though accomplished successfully, do not quite reassure him of his ultimate valor. Though he has now dubbed himself the Knight of the Lions, and he has experienced an ecstatic dream of helpless and beautiful maidens that reaffirms his dedication to freeing the Lady Dulcinea from her enchantment, he becomes vulnerable to the cruel pranks and physical attacks of the Duke and Duchess, and by the middle of the second part, his vision of victory begins to dim. The extended deceit that their hosts create for Sancho is equally as cruel, though it doesn’t seem to demoralize the squire as much as it does the knight. It’s interesting that Sancho’s philosophy and policies of government of the island that they have “given” him are conceived in good detail, if quite conservative. In the more boring parts of the journey with Don Quixote to Saragossa, Sancho might have amused himself by drafting a model of good governance for the island that he had been promised. Despite losing it to an “invasion” so soon after finally winning it, he remains philosophic, in his typically practical way. Odious comparisons notwithstanding, he is not sinking under the burden of being Don Quixote’s squire, in the way that the spirit of Don Quixote,

deprived of Sancho's company and ever more gloomy about Dulcinea's release, is slowly drowning.

Again, the disturbing and dispiriting events during their stay in and after their departure from the castle have readied the Knight of the Lions for a final mauling, which he receives from the lance of the Knight of the White Moon. Since his earlier defeat, the bachelor has been guided by two objectives: the first and most urgent is to take his revenge on the knight who vanquished him when he posed as the Knight of the Mirrors, and the second and more consistent goal is to force the Don to confront his madness. This time, a chance inequity of their mounts gives Carasco the advantage, and Don Quixote, while remaining faithful to his point about Dulcinea's peerless beauty, agrees to return home for a year. He has lost almost all hope of rescuing Dulcinea, reading the homebound encounters with places, creatures, and people as omens of defeat. Finally, he takes to his bed, confesses himself of the "sin" of knight-errantry, wills his property to his niece (on the condition that she never have anything to do with anyone who reads books of chivalry), and "gives up the ghost."

Where they began split between a delusion of good and evil on the part of the knight and the more pragmatic continuum of permissions and prohibitions embraced by the people of all social ranks whom he met on his sallies, the moral coordinates end reconciled within the Catholic narrative. The entertaining dualism of Part One, with its riotous ironies, is diminished throughout Part Two, until the regenerate irony of Cervantes' chivalric narrative all but disappears. As much fun as it is, the book has a serious purpose, but as most of its scholars agree, that purpose is difficult to pin down. Perhaps Nabokov releases it, instead, by his evocation of what is lost in the passing of the medieval romance and in the defeat of the figure of the knight, who embodies truth, love, and courage: "His blazon is pity, his banner is beauty. He stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, pure, unselfish, and gallant" (Nabokov 112). I am very sorry that most of my students have not read and probably will never read this book.

Works Cited

Don Quixote, Miquel de Cervantes
Lectures on Don Quixote, Vladimir Nabokov
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The New York Times, 2004

Discussion questions

1. In some ways, *Don Quixote* is buddy literature, perhaps an originator of many famous novels that feature two characters who make up a unit in their complementary worldviews and emotional compositions. How do you see Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as a character pair? How would you characterize their relationship over the course of the narrative? What changes do their characters undergo? What do they learn (if anything) at narrative's end? How do these inflections change their original relationship (if at all)?
2. Do you think Miguel de Cervantes sees (or describes himself) more in Don Quixote or in Sancho Panza?
3. How would you distinguish between the two parts of Cervante's book? What are the principle differences that strike you? Why do you suppose Cervantes differentiated the two parts to the extent that he did? What effect do these distinctions have on your experience of the book?
4. Nabokov's *Lectures on Don Quixote* is a partisan reading, focused on the "cruelty," identified in both parts, that is directed at the deluded knight and his squire. He actually keeps score of all of their adventures, finding that in the end, victories and defeats come out exactly even. Do you agree w his partisanship? What implications does an even score have for our estimate of the Don's delusion of chivalry?
5. Does the book give us a sense of Spanish life and culture of the early 17th century? What kinds of social/cultural references (if any) are suggestive of the circumstances and culture of Cervantes' life?
6. This is an entirely hypothetical speculation: if someone between 18 and 35 were to read this work, how might he or she react to it? What aspects of their own lives and culture might produce such reactions?