

Don Quixote. Bridging Reality and Fiction
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When fiction becomes the preferable reality, true reality itself is easily forgettable and in all likelihood unnecessary. Miguel Cervantes grants the literary world a character that has pushed all the boundaries that separate fantasy from reality: Don Quixote de la Mancha. His simple story, an obsession with chivalric romances which spur him into the insane notion of sallying forth into the world as a practicing knight, becomes more than its intentional comedic effect; it has evolved into a commentary on the magical aspects of reality and their influences, and in Don Quixote's case, their overwhelming attraction on the everyday individual. A major theme in *Don Quixote* is the vanishing line that separates reality from fantasy, and the way in which Miguel Cervantes structures his novel lends to this theme and provokes the idea that this thin line, while being insignificant for Don Quixote and those involved with his knight errantry, is also becoming inconsequential for most readers.

Don Quixote loses his sanity in the first few paragraphs of Book I in Cervantes's novel. He has become enamored of chivalric romances and after the "lack of sleep and the excess of reading...Everything he read in his books took possession of his imagination: enchantments, fights, battles, challenges, wounds, sweet nothings, love affairs, storms and impossible absurdities" (Cervantes 365). His transformation is sudden; he names his horse Rocinante, declares a peasant girl as his sweet lady Dulcinea, fashions his armor and sets out to make a name for himself.

His first adventure lies with the inn, or rather the castle, as he sees it through his imagination, where the wenches are fair maidens, and the innkeeper is a lord. Although

the wenches and the innkeeper find entertainment in the knight's madness, they nevertheless act out the roles that Quixote has himself given them. To satisfy Quixote's desire to be properly knighted, the innkeeper "decided to humor him; so he said that he [Quixote] was quite right to pursue these objectives...that he himself in his younger days had followed the same honourable profession, roaming...through the world in search of adventure" (372). The innkeeper did not need to indulge Don Quixote to this extent, but he does so because he is eager to not only be rid of the troublesome knight, but to include himself in his game. Although these characters somewhat humor Quixote, his "madness forces them into their roles...Reality willingly cooperates with a play which dresses it up differently every moment" (Auerbach 351). Cervantes has Don Quixote's first adventure pass smoothly by having those residing at the tavern play along with the farce that they are thrust into upon the knight's arrival. They accept Quixote's insanity and become a part of it, skewing the line between reality and imagination. This first example of Quixote's follies sets the stage for those that are still to come; the fact that the wenches and innkeeper were so willing to become characters for the knight errant pushes the reader into a desire to believe in the magic as well.

Upon returning home, Don Quixote persuades neighbor Sancho Panza into becoming his faithful squire. The two of them encounter many adventures, including the windmills (or giants), the herds of sheep (or opposing armies), and the (ominous) fulling-mill in the night. Quixote always has the same excuse for why things do not appear as they seem: enchantment. After having failed to attack the windmills, Quixote explains to Sancho, "I am certain, that the same sage Frestón who stole my library and my books has just turned these giants into windmills, to deprive me of my victory" (Cervantes 388).

This instance is only one of the countless times that the knight errant claims sorcery; this lends to the idea that “fiction can become a reality in the imagination of its beholder, even as he recognizes the materials from which the fiction has been composed” (Alter 26). Don Quixote realizes that the giants are indeed windmills, but this example of reality does not faze him because he has a fictional excuse. All of these sallies and more become subject for conversation in Book II of Cervantes’s story. Sancho and Quixote meet up with Sansón Carrasco, who relates to them that Quixote is “one of the most famous knights errant that have ever existed or indeed will ever exist in the whole wide world. A blessing on Cide Hamete Benengeli for having written the history of your [Quixote’s] great deeds” (Cervantes 448). The reader learns from Carrasco that the knight’s story has been written and is widely circulated; according to Cervantes, everyone, young and old, knows Don Quixote’s name.

At this point, one is pulled into the realization that “Don Quixote himself is no more than the product of the very processes he observes, a congeries of words set up in type, run off as proof, corrected and rerun, bound in pages, and sold at so many reales a copy” (Alter 4-5). This proves that the knight is nothing more than a fictional character and yet for him to be speaking about his own character in a novel places him in a firmer reality: “If we begin to wonder where literature stops and ‘reality’ starts in a world so profuse in its mimickry of the printed page, Cervantes himself makes a point of compounding our confusion” (Alter 6). Cervantes is poking fun at the false Book II of *Don Quixote*, but in this stylistic choice, he is elevating his characters’ position in a real world because he “understands that there is an ultimately serious tension between the recognition of fictions as fictions and the acceptance of them as reality, however easy it

may seem to maintain these two awarenesses simultaneously” (Alter 14-15). This is the prime example of the fading line between these two spectrums of existence: a fictitious character versus a real person. The author deliberately defends his true version of Book II and also probes his audience to consider their stance on Quixote’s realism.

In their conversation with Carrasco, Sancho and Quixote begin to pick out the errors that “Cide” has written about them. Although these errors are not even real to begin with, they are real for the characters in the story, and therefore, they become real for the reader. The boundaries between perceptions begin to bend.

The journey towards further dilution of reality continues with Sancho tricking Quixote by presenting the lovely Dulcinea. Sancho realizes that he will not be able to produce the actual Dulcinea, so he conjures up a plan to “make him [Quixote] believe that some peasant girl...is lady Dulcinea” (Cervantes 456). Sancho coaxes Don Quixote in the direction of three peasant girls riding their donkeys toward them. This time, Sancho is in control of the fantasy, and when Quixote does not recognize his lady among the three girls, Sancho exclaims, “Do you keep your eyes in the back of your head or something, to stop you from seeing that they’re these ladies here, shining like the very sun at noon” (457). Sancho is now feeding Quixote’s fantasy in order to get himself out of trouble concerning Dulcinea and also for self-entertainment. Don Quixote, of course, believes that the peasant girl is an enchanted Dulcinea, because the real Dulcinea is beautiful and this unfortunate woman is much more homely. This final encounter with the pseudo Dulcinea, whom Quixote holds in such high regard, is “the climax of his illusion and disillusionment: and although this time too he manages to find a solution, a way to save his illusion, the solution (Dulcinea is under an enchantment) is so intolerable that

henceforth all his thoughts are concentrated upon one goal: to save her and break the enchantment” (Auerbach 339).

Lady Dulcinea is perhaps the most fictitious and intangible character in the story because she is never encountered until now. Even though this woman is not the real Dulcinea as Sancho explicitly relates in his plot, she is the real and enchanted Dulcinea for Quixote. Sancho has pushed his master even further into the realm of fantasy with a very realistic situation. The level at which Don Quixote has placed his lady Dulcinea reminds the reader that the knight himself “exists in a flesh-and-blood world against which the divine Dulcinea...must begin to seem purely a verbal concoction” (Alter 27). Although the concept of such a lavish and unbelievable woman is in the realm of fiction, the comparison between Dulcinea and her knight pushes Quixote further into reality.

The knight errant, now on a quest to cure Dulcinea for the remainder of Book II, comes across Carrasco again, though this time Quixote is brought home through a fantastical trick. Carrasco has dressed up as a knight, and though initially defeated by Quixote, he finally conquers him; through defeat, Quixote is forced back home. In that example alone, Carrasco demonstrates the intrusion of fantasy into an otherwise legitimate task; he does not simply try to bring Don Quixote back, but instead participates in the same lunacy that causes Quixote’s current madness.

However, it is within these last few chapters that Don Quixote falls ill and regains his sanity, now cursing his beloved books of chivalry. This turn made by Cervantes brings the reader into a state of loss and disappointment; the fiction has become the novel’s reality. Sancho and Carrasco are eager to return to their imaginations, proving Quixote’s eventual effect on those around him. No one questions his madness now that

he has claimed his real name, Alonso Quixano, and in fact, they want their bold knight errant to return to them. Sancho pleads with Quixote, "If you're dying from sadness because you were defeated, you just blame me and say you were knocked down because I didn't girth Rocinante properly" (477). Now the squire is urging his master to humor him when throughout the novel up to this point, it was exactly the opposite. One might feel that this ending is merely putting things right: Don Quixote was once insane, and now he is not. However, there is something beyond this simple character development. Cervantes fashioned Don Quixote as "a tall elderly man, dressed in old-fashioned and shabby armor, a picture which is beautifully expressive not only of his madness but also of asceticism and the fanatic pursuit of an ideal" (Auerbach 349). This man went out into the world with hopes of becoming a great knight, to right wrongs, and fight for justice; with this kind of goal, the matter of his sanity should be excused.

Readers that have traveled with Quixote in his endeavors are reminded now, in the most shocking climax, that the entire novel was full of fiction and that the real knight is only a simple man who lost his mind. But,

It is on the very wings of madness that his wisdom soars upward, that it roams the world and becomes richer there. For if Don Quixote had not gone mad, he would not have left his house. And then Sancho too would have stayed home, and he could never have drawn from his innate being the things which- as we find in delighted amazement- were potentially contained in it. (Auerbach 350)

What makes Don Quixote's return to sanity and eventual death so tragic is in the fact that the world has somehow lost magical appeal upon his leaving it. Sometimes a fictional

reality is preferable, and in this case, Sancho, Carrasco, and the readers have become absorbed in the chivalric world to the point of not caring whether or not it is real. It is Quixote's reality and it is more intriguing than "reality," so it might as well be true reality; since this was Cervantes's design, it raises the novel up beyond its framework story.

Don Quixote is a fictional novel that dances on the line between fantasy and reality. Books can often take readers into new worlds, but the land of La Mancha beckons for a complete relinquishing of the senses of reality. Cervantes created a romantic fool who captures both hearts and minds with his chivalric pursuit of knight errantry. Don Quixote represents someone who creates his own brand of reality and gives himself over to it completely, while taking others along for the ride. Fiction is only fiction because it is not believed to be true, but once fantasy becomes truth, it can evolve into a more desired reality.

Works Cited

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