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Author's email address:

daniel.eisenberg@bigfoot.com

Author's Web site:

<http://bigfoot.com/~daniel.eisenberg>

[**Note in 2002:** This article, which eventually grew into the book *A Study of Don Quixote*, no longer represents my current thinking about the work. As explained in Chapter 6 of that book, while I believe Cervantes did indeed set out to write a funny book, *Don Quixote* is a classic precisely because he wrote a different, and richer, book than what he intended.]

Teaching *Don Quixote* as a Funny Book

Daniel Eisenberg

If I understand it correctly, this Book of yours...is an attack on the romances of chivalry, ...despised by many, yet praised by many more.

Don Quixote, pt. 1, prologue

Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* to make us laugh at the amusing misadventures of a burlesque knight-errant. By so doing, he hoped to end the great popularity of romances of chivalry, in which the deeds of knights-errant are portrayed; he saw these works as deficient, incapable of properly entertaining their readers. At the same time, he wished to supply what the romances could not offer: entertainment that was not only harmless but beneficial.

Many modern critics are reluctant to see *Don Quixote* this way, which is the way Cervantes' contemporaries saw it. Even Philip III testified to this fact; on hearing a student laugh uproariously, he concluded that the "student is either beside himself, or reading *Don Quixote*" (Russell 318). The modern resistance to this interpretation may arise from nationalism ("*Don Quixote* portrays the spirit of Spain, so it cannot be comic"), the low [p. 63] prestige of humorous writing ("Since *Don Quixote* is a classic, it cannot be

a funny book”), the belief that we should not laugh at a fictional character’s misfortunes, or a simple lack of familiarity with Cervantes’ literary and cultural milieu. Some ignore the humor altogether: Luis Murillo’s recent bibliography does not even include “humor in *Don Quixote*” as a category, and it misplaces Peter Russell’s fundamental article “*Don Quixote* as a Funny Book” under the heading “*Don Quixote* in England.”

Cervantes certainly had secondary purposes, as well as secondary sources, and I do not mean to imply that the study of sources or of humor is anything like a comprehensive approach to *Don Quixote*. Yet to claim that *Don Quixote* is not primarily a work of humor is to claim that it is a failure. As Russell has shown, Spanish as well as foreign readers of the time unanimously considered *Don Quixote* a funny book.

If Cervantes had a “true” purpose, it eludes even modern critics, who cannot agree on any alternative interpretation. What Oscar Mandel (in “The Function of the Norm in *Don Quixote*”) has called the “soft” approach—one that sees Quixote as admirable rather than ridiculous—is a product of the Romantic movement’s exaltation of suffering. The influence of that movement on contemporary interpretations of *Don Quixote* remains strong (see Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to Don Quixote*). To a degree, the Romantic misinterpretation of *Don Quixote* is a result of the book’s success: the romances of chivalry that Cervantes attacked are, in fact, no longer read. Yet the teacher or scholar who wishes to understand the work must begin with an examination of its stated topic and with some knowledge of its protagonist’s preferred reading. The failure to begin at the beginning accounts for much of the current confusion in Quixote criticism.

The favorite pleasure and escape reading of the Spanish Renaissance, the romances of chivalry (which I treat extensively in *Romances of Chivalry in the Spanish Golden Age*) exercised considerable influence on both culture and literature, an influence that has still not been adequately explored. The chivalric romances both reflected values and helped to shape them. They reminded soldiers that Christianity should be promoted as well as defended and that infidels should be vanquished and converted or killed; the Spaniards acted on this belief in the New World as well as in Europe. The chivalric novels stressed the pleasant (and minimized the unpleasant) aspects of traveling to little-known parts of the world; chivalric names like “California” and “Patagonia” were applied to strange lands. The Emperor Charles V, the most powerful and expansionist ruler Spain ever had, was a great fan of such works. They even had an influence on the church; the soldier Loyola, for example, was to some degree inspired by them to found that quasi-military, mobile, practical order of “soldiers of

Christ,” the [p. 64] Jesuits. The romances were far too expensive for the poor, but illiterate people who heard them read were enchanted. In short, the books were addicting.

This addiction was all the more serious because the books were not only bad literature; they were also pernicious, at least according to many thoughtful writers of the period. The chivalric romances distracted readers from the essential task of saving their souls. They taught young men how to win, not only the heart, but also the body of a young woman. They undermined the institution of marriage and the authority of parents, and they encouraged youths to leave home on foolish endeavors. Cervantes was hardly the first to feel that the chivalric romances should be suppressed. He chose burlesque, and a fictional demonstration of the books’ negative effects, as his means of attack.

To one who has read romances of chivalry, *Don Quixote* is a hilarious book. The protagonist of a romance was always young, handsome, and strong. Don Quixote is old, rides a broken-down horse, wears armor patched with cardboard, and claims a special competence in making birdcages and toothpicks (pt. 2, ch. 6). The knights of the romances traveled through colorful parts of the world, such as China, North Africa, and Asia Minor. Often they went to countries like England and Greece, noted for their “chivalric” history; they never visited Spain. Don Quixote tries to be a knight in Spain, and in one of its least attractive regions: the treeless, desertlike, underpopulated plain of La Mancha. References to this region constitute a pervasive jest: Don Quixote is famous “not only in Spain, but throughout La Mancha,” and Dulcinea is not only “the most beautiful creature in the world, but even the most beautiful of La Mancha.” The very name Don Quixote de la Mancha is one of the most prominent jokes in the book. A mancha ‘stain’ is exactly what a knight should avoid.

Whereas the knights-errant were accompanied by respectful admirers of chivalry, Don Quixote chooses a fat, garrulous, ignorant, greedy, unhappily married peasant as his squire. Knights performed useful deeds—restoring queens to their thrones, helping kings repel invaders, and eliminating menaces to the public order. Don Quixote sets prisoners free, attacks armies of sheep, and bothers merchants peacefully going about their own business. In his mad lust for glory, he also attacks windmills, wineskins, and puppets. Pigs run over him, and the narrator pronounces it “an adventure.” Whereas people in distress asked knights to come to their rescue, Andrés specifically requests Don Quixote not to complicate his life with any more help (pt. 1, ch. 31). On the one occasion when Don Quixote’s help is urgently and sincerely sought—when someone really needs assistance—he does nothing

(pt. 1, ch. 44). [p. 65]

As Don Quixote, expert on chivalric culture, tells us, knights were usually in love. But those knights were of royal blood, and they fell in love with women of similar rank. Don Quixote, an impoverished lesser noble, chooses to love a peasant girl who has a loud voice and smells like a man (pt. 1, chs. 25, 32). Her virtue is repeatedly questioned in the novel, in the introductory sonnet of the Caballero del Febo, for example, we discover that only because of Don Quixote could one pretend that Dulcinea was chaste. Sancho is surprisingly enthusiastic about Aldonza Lorenzo (pt. 1, ch. 25), and this enthusiasm may have something to do with his wife's jealousy, of which he complains in part 2, chapters 22 and 25.

Don Quixote's other contacts with women are no more successful, and they are equally funny. If beautiful women and princesses fall in love with the attractive, competent young knights of the romances, Don Quixote has to seize, and hold on to, a prostitute so repulsive that she would make anyone but a mule driver vomit (pt. 1, ch. 16). Women leave him dangling by the wrist (pt. 1, ch. 43), throw cats in his room while he sleeps (pt. 2, ch. 46), and discuss his *caspa* (a dandruff-like disease of the scalp) in verse (pt. 2, ch. 44).

These, of course, are not the only unchaste women in the book. The point needs to be made that one of the book's humorous elements involves its many sexual and excretory allusions, a fact of considerable interest to contemporary American students. Such material was, of course, never found in the romances of chivalry, but it did have a long tradition in humorous writing. In Don Quixote, people smell (pt. 1, chs. 16, 20, 31; pt. 2, ch. 10). They have bugs (pt. 2, ch. 29). They urinate (pt. 2, ch. 52). Women menstruate, or rather, enchanted women fail to do so (pt. 2, ch. 23). Unmarried women get pregnant (pt. 2, ch. 52). Sancho's donkey farts, and this event is declared by its owner to be a good omen, as Donald McGrady has pointed out in "The *Sospiros* of Sancho's Donkey." Obscene words are used and discussed (pt. 2, ch. 25; pt. 2, chs. 12, 29). On occasion, the hero himself appears quite indecently dressed (pt. 1, chs. 25, 35).

If I have elaborated on the comic side of Don Quixote, ignoring his altruistic goals and wise and eloquent words, as well as his companion, the wise fool Sancho, it is because this crucial element is the one most often missed by modern readers. I offer a more comprehensive view in my forthcoming book *A Study of Don Quixote*.

Teaching *Don Quixote* as a funny book can improve student motivation, for students, like most people, are more interested in

entertainment than in philosophy. In many ways, however, this approach is devilishly difficult. I have never had a student who has read a single romance of chivalry or one who has seen the Cantinflas movie *Don Quijote cabalga de nuevo* (also [p. 66] released as *(Un Quijote sin mancha)*, the adaptation that is most faithful, humoristically and geographically, to the novel.

Many have seen *Man of La Mancha*, and one of my first tasks is to undo the damage caused by that adaptation and by the misleading statements found in literature textbooks: to convince students that it is permissible to laugh. With some I never succeed. Most, however, cannot help but laugh, following the example I set for them when I explain the book from the perspective of the chivalric romances.

To help students appreciate the humor, I often translate it into contemporary terms. “Don Quixote de la Mancha” is like saying “Don Quixote of Taylor County,” a similarly remote and relatively uncultured place. Many popular comedians use misfortune or impotence to elicit laughter: Woody Allen, for example, who dresses inappropriately, misunderstands what is said to him, is incompetent with machinery, doesn’t know how to get the girl, yet wins our heart all the same. The inns, filled with colorful characters, I compare to truck stops, and the mule-driver, satisfied with Maritornes, to a truck driver.

Approaching *Don Quixote* from a “hard” perspective means paying close attention to Cervantes’ language. His subtle, precise, and colorful use of words, still inadequately studied, accounts for much of the book’s charm and status as a classic, but also makes it difficult for students to understand and appreciate. No existing edition is properly annotated for students with immature skills in Spanish. “Read it slowly; he wrote it slowly,” I optimistically advise them, I also recommend reading aloud.

This problem is compounded when dealing with *Don Quixote* in translation, and I recommend that no one teach or even read *Don Quixote* in English without first reading the comments on existing translations by Russell (“*Don Quixote* as a Funny Book”) and John Jay Allen (“*Traduttori traditori: Don Quixote* in English”). Russell unequivocally states that no translation since the eighteenth century is faithful to the spirit of the work, and Allen shows that all versions are marred by serious inaccuracies. Allen’s call for a new translation has been answered by Jones’ and Douglas’ revision of Ormsby’s translation; however, Shelton’s version (London, 1612–20) is the most faithful to the spirit of the original, though inaccurate in many details and not available in a form suitable for classroom use. I believe, though, that the Spaniards are correct when they claim that *Don Quixote*, like much verbal humor, is to some extent untranslatable. Some levels

of style and some chivalric archaisms and proverbs can be reproduced in English, but the vivid dialogue with lines like “allá van reyes do quieren leyes (pt. 2, ch. 5), “¿Católicas? ¡Mi padre!” (pt. 1, ch. 47), “Muéreme yo luego” (pt. 1, ch. 10), “señor mío de mi alma” (pt. 1, ch. 12), and “paciencia y barajar” (pt. 2, ch. 23), can only be explained, never translated. [p. 67]

Teaching *Don Quixote* as a funny book means teaching Golden Age Spanish, for which a survey course—often the students’ only previous preparation—is inadequate. I endlessly explain linguistic features: the use of the second-person plural, metathesis (“dalde” for “dadle”), the future subjunctive, the different use of object pronouns, the unfamiliar or archaic words and constructions (“un su marido”), the proverbs and their implications (“a buen callar llaman Sancho”), and the changing levels of style. In addition, some of the action, and the implications of what characters or narrators say, must be explicated. As Riquer has pointed out (in his essay “Cervantes y la caballerescas” in the *Suma cervantina*), even Spanish students may not know what a barber’s basin is, and without such knowledge some of the humor is obviously lost.

There is, unfortunately, never enough time to discuss all this in depth. It would take about two years, and that type of study is impossible in an American university, if it is still possible anywhere. I have often had to teach not merely *Don Quixote* but all of Cervantes in a ten-week quarter. Although a course on Cervantes provides a good context in which to teach *Don Quixote*—most of the students will never study the complete opus of any other Spanish author—the undergraduate students I teach at Florida State cannot read the entire *Quixote*, much less the other works of Cervantes, in such a short period of time. Because I would rather have them read a lesser assignment well than a longer one superficially, I feel obliged to delete portions of the novel in preparing my syllabus. I usually choose for deletion—how I hate to write this!—such sections as the intercalated tales of part I and most of part 2 after the departure from the Duke’s castle.

The length of *Don Quixote* and the difficulty my students experience in reading it impose three restrictions on my teaching of the novel. Since reading the text is the first priority, and there is not enough time even for that, I do not ask students to write papers. Moreover, I do not expect them to read anything other than the text itself. I specifically ask undergraduates not to seek out books on *Don Quixote* or on Cervantes. At best they are likely to find a Romantic interpretation; at worst, they will consult books like Dominique Aubier’s highly misleading *Don Quichotte, prophète d’Israël*. I do give graduate students a summary history of Quixote criticism and a bibliography of suggested readings; this list includes, among others, Riley, Forcione, Allen, El Saffar, and

Riquer. I discuss the differing views of these critics, and I teach students how to use bibliographical tools (like the listings and commentaries in *Anales Cervantinos*) to orient themselves in the huge Cervantine bibliography. I describe the life and personality of Cervantes and discuss how they are reflected in his work. I lecture on the romances of chivalry and the parody of chivalric customs, style, and adventures; on the author's Horatian intent to give us lessons for living along with the humor; on Don Quixote's madness and Golden Age attitudes [p. 68] toward it; on the differences between the two parts; on the levels of reality and fiction found in the work; and on the continuation of Avellaneda, his interpretation of part 1, and its influence on the authentic part 2.

If all of this is done "simply, with meaningful, pure, and well-placed words" (pt. 1, prologue), the students—most of them—will come to the conclusion that I have reached, that *Don Quixote* is a brilliantly successful funny book. It is no chore to teach *Don Quixote* from this perspective. It's a different experience for me every time. Every time I go through the book, I find something new and funny in it. Every time I am amused, and pleased, and I wish it were possible to bring Cervantes back to life for one of those leisurely conversations at which he was so adept, "Quien a buen árbol se arrima, buena sombra le cobija" 'He who stays near a good tree, is covered by good shadow' (pt. 2, ch. 32). Vale.

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