

The Saddest Funny Story: Four Centuries of *Don Quixote*

Reviewed by Steve Mentz

Cervantes's Novel of Modern Times: A New Reading of Don Quijote.

By David Quint

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

192 pp. 2nd paperback printing 2005.

Imágenes del Quijote: Modelos de Representación en las ediciones de los siglos XVII a XIX.

Patrick Lenaghan, ed.

Sevilla: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2004.

"Of all tales 't is the saddest – and more sad,

Because it makes us smile."

--Byron, Don Juan

Some literary masterpieces did not make a splash when they were first published – think of Walt Whitman reviewing *Leaves of Grass* under a pseudonym, or Emily Dickinson's poems sitting unpublished in her desk drawer – but four hundred years ago Cervantes's *Don Quixote* was all the rage. Published in 1605 and quickly translated across the continent (an English version appeared in 1612), the adventures of the mad knight and his squire took early modern Europe by storm. The book's instant fame itself became grist for Cervantes's gently ironic mill ten years later when he published Part 2, in which the waggish university graduate Sansón Carrasco explains why the first part was so popular:

"...because it is so clear that there is nothing in it to cause difficulty: children look at it, youths read it, men understand it, the old celebrate it, and, in short, it is so popular and so widely read and so well-known by every kind of person that as soon as people see a skinny old nag they say: 'There goes Rocinante.'... There's no lord's antechamber where one does not find a copy of *Don Quixote*: as soon as it is put down it is picked up again; some rush at

it, and others ask for it. In short, this history is the most enjoyable and least harmful entertainment ever seen, because nowhere in it can one find even the semblance of an untruthful word or a less than Catholic thought.”¹

The year 2005 has seen a variety of celebratory volumes and anniversary conferences, including several major events in Spain, and the two books I'll review here speak to two very different understandings of the mad Don's influence and legacy. David Quint's critical study explores how Cervantes's intricate narrative structure replicates and critiques the cultural changes associated with early modernity and the transition from feudal to capitalist social structures. His version of the great novel reads it as a unified masterwork, and he explicitly challenges past readings of the text as eclectic or unstructured. *Imágenes del Quijote*, by contrast, collects illustrations from various European editions of the novel from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries to provide visual evidence of the diverse responses it incited over its first three hundred years. The combination of Quint's analytical perspective and the pictorial range of *Imágenes del Quijote* represents the Don as an enduring cultural obsession, a visual and textual symbol of attempts to order our confusing world of stories and things.

Visitors to the fourth floor of the St. John's library in the fall of 2005 will have already encountered evidence of the multiplicity of *Don Quijote*. A glass-case display curated by Bill Keogan, Reference Librarian, presents a series of modern editions of the novel, some selected quotations, and a variety of critical responses and artistic interpretations. Modern illustrations of the hero and his squire include images by Hogarth, Daumier, Dali, and Picasso, and the exhibition also includes more recent popular items like album covers and lyrics from the musical "Man of La Mancha" and Gordon Lightfoot's 1972 album *Don Quixote*. The widespread attention given to the 400th anniversary of the book usually called the "first modern novel" (even though the key terms, "modern" and "novel," are still hard to define) reminds us of how imposing and universal a figure the mad knight remains.

Quint's study represents close literary analysis at its clearest. Taking the apparent disorder and episodism of Part 1 as a challenge, he argues for the "artistic integrity" (ix) of the novel. The attempt to find aesthetic unity in a book whose two parts were published 10 years apart and which contains episodes that Cervantes's own narrator calls "impertinent" seems properly quixotic, though Quint is much more successful in his jousts against Cervantes scholarship than the Don is against windmills. The larger objective of the study, however, is not merely to show that the novel achieves "formal unity" (ix) but to read that unity as having a representative content: "Thus *Don Quijote* throughout tells and retells a master narrative of early-modern Europe: the movement from feudalism to the new order of capitalism that will become the realistic domain of the modern novel, the genre this book does so much to invent" (x). Quint begins with a bravura reading of the smallest and least well-known of the many episodes in Part 1, the story of Leandra's abortive romance with the outlaw Vicente de la Roca. He shows that this barely noticed episode, told by the traveling goatherd Eugenio to Don Quixote and his party, serves as a "kind of laboratory case...it picks up echoes and details of *all* the other interpolated tales that precede it" (3, Quint's emphasis). Building from this point of maximum narrative humility, Quint demonstrates both the artistic unity of Cervantes's text and its structural analogues with cultural transformation.

One particularly valuable technique in Quint's study is his exfoliation of *Don Quijote's* complex narrative structure. He argues that the novel is best read through highlighting the intentional juxtaposition of its narrative strains; to describe this technique, he uses the term "narrative interlace," which he adapts from studies of the same medieval romances of chivalry that drove the Don mad. The book's schematic tables transform the myriad interlaced episodes into comprehensible visual images. Perhaps the most useful table is the first, which splits the episodes in Part 1 into "Dulcinea" stories and "Princess Micomicona" stories (19). The distinction between these two kinds of stories separates "Don Quijote's ideal love for Dulcinea" from "his fantasy of a rise to power and riches" – or, in larger analytical terms, it separates feudal idealism from early modern capitalism. Counting up the episodes suggests that the modern Princess gets one more than the premodern Dulcinea (this sort of episode-counting has been a feature of Cervantes criticism since Nabokov's *Lectures on the Quixote*, which famously concludes that the knight wins exactly one more battle than he loses over the entire two-part novel), but Quint also emphasizes that the novel's heart (and its hero's) seems firmly devoted to the past. He reads *Don Quijote* Part 1 as an ambivalent representation of the arrival of modernity; practical and even mercenary characters like Dorotea and Captain Viedma represent a future that cannot be resisted, but the Don's old-fashioned ideals of service and bravery, and his mad commitment to them, remain powerful and attractive.

Differences between Part 1 and Part 2 are a staple of *Quijote* criticism, and here Quint's analysis takes an unexpected turn. While he suggests early on that Part 2 will "make peace with and discover positive worth in the conditions of modern society" (20-1), he goes on to claim that Part 2 is the inferior half of the novel: the hero's "vision is gloomy" (94), he becomes less of a radical challenge to the injustices of seventeenth-century Spain as well as "less violent" (103), and in Quint's view this "harmlessness and child-like simplicity sentimentalize the hero" and lead to erroneous romanticized interpretations of him as semi-secular saint (104). (Quint does not mention the moment early in part 2 in which Sancho naively proposes that they abandon knight-errantry in order "to be saints" [2.8], but of course when post-Romantic writers like Miguel de Unamuno pledge allegiance to the figure he calls *Our Lord Don Quixote* they do not employ Cervantes's pervasive irony.) Quint observes that in preferring the ornately interlaced Part 1 to the more unified narrative of Part 2 he is working against the grain of modern *Quijote* criticism (178n), and he finally suggests that the novel's resignation to "a debased world ruled by money" (161) mirrors Cervantes's recognition of how Spain was changing: "The modern world of money is here to stay" (162). His structural analysis of the episodes of Part 2 is no less illuminating than his reading of Part 1, and his table outlining the ways Part 2 repeats the interlaced patterns of Part 1 (96) is particularly helpful, but his heart does not seem comparably engaged. When exploring the novel's perception of "a general disenchantment of the world" (105), he relegates to a footnote the ways in which the pervasive experience of *desengaño* has been read as defining the modernity of the novel in criticism from Lukács to McKeon (179n). If disenchantment is a defining condition of modernity, as cultural critics from Marx and Weber to Habermas argue, Cervantes's wrestling with this phenomenon may represent less a falling-off from the interlaced ironies of Part 1 than the author's conversion of feudal nostalgia into an ethical or philosophical response to modern life. Quint's skepticism about a sentimentalized or Romantic Don Quixote animates his analysis throughout, but disenchantment may have broader implications for Cervantes's understanding of post-feudal European culture than he acknowledges.

Quint's pessimism about Part 2 reflects his awareness of the novel's increasing emphasis on mortality and the limits of human power. By contrast, the images collected in *Imágenes del Quijote* trumpet myriad creative responses to the mad Don throughout Europe. From the cover image, which presents a late nineteenth-century German image of an intently-reading Don balancing a massive tome on his lap while a lance that resembles a pen stands by his side, these illustrations chart the evolving reception of the hero over time. Early illustrations emphasize what has been called the "funny book" side of *Don Quijote*: images of physical comedy and ridiculousness like the attack on the windmills dominate. These versions of the hero gradually cede center stage to portraits that highlight the contradiction between the knight's nobility and his world's errors, like Jerome David's mid-seventeenth-century French illustration of the noble cavalier holding his nose as a frightened Sancho defecates at his feet (the episode is from Part 1, Chapter 22). Eighteenth-century images emphasize the heroic Quixote admired by novelists like Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett. Four illustrations by Francis Hayman for the 1755 edition of the Smollett translation show the Don being knighted, treated by Sancho after battling the armies of sheep, threatening the Knight of the Wood after vanquishing him in combat, and Sancho dispensing justice on his island: three out of four choose moments in which knight or squire are triumphant, at least for the moment, and the fourth shows Don Quixote wounded rather than actively mad or violent. The collection ends in the nineteenth century and thus does not include familiar versions of the hero like Picasso's sketch, but the three centuries' work collected here shows how quixotism became the ironically inflected idealism that Byron identifies when he claims that this "saddest" tale also makes us smile.

The illustrations provide an extra-textual way to demonstrate the evolution of the hero. Another place to chart the progress of Don Quixote after Cervantes's death is the changing habits of translators. For example, the knight's title, *el caballero de la triste figura*, was first translated as a reference to physical ugliness: Shelton's "knight of the ill-favored face" in 1612, and Gayton's "Knight of the Ill-Face" in 1654. It later became an image of melancholia and Romantic alienation: Smollett's "Knight of the Rueful Countenance" in 1755, Clark's "Knight of the Woeful Figure" in 1864, and eventually Cohen's "Knight of the Sad Countenance" in 1950. Most recently, Edith Grossman's wonderful 2003 translation draws upon both these two traditions to give us, "the Knight of the Sorrowful Face," a figure whose misery seems both physical and symbolic. Grossman's Don, like Quint's, is a hybrid, simultaneously facing and denying the massive social changes of his day.

In the twentieth century Don Quixote towers over his literary peers. Even more than Hamlet and Faust, he has been transformed by modern writers and artists into a representation of modernity itself. Jorge Luis Borges's story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quijote" imagines the ultimate modern literary work as a word-for-word rewriting of the novel, "verbally identical" to Cervantes's version, but also "infinitely richer." Michel Foucault sees the Don's transformative vision as the leading edge of the modern crisis, in which "words" and "things" lose their ancient unity. Ian Watt treats Don Quixote as one of the four "heroes of modern individualism," along with Faust, Don Juan, and Robinson Crusoe. (Watt notes that of these four, only Don Quixote is purely a creature of the human imagination; the others have roots in folk narratives, historical personages, or both.) Critics like Lionel Trilling and Rene Gerard claim that "All ideas of the Western novel are present in germ in *Don Quixote*," and novelists like Carlos Fuentes and Milan Kundera echo them. The novel remains both a challenge to the ingenuity of literary critics and an inspiration to artists and creative writers.

After four hundred years, perhaps the strangest thing about the sorrow-faced *caballero* is how contemporary his dilemma seems: his adventures rewrites the epic as a story about reading, not fighting, and in a world saturated by texts of all kinds, his madness remains the temptation always at our elbows. Quint's portrait of a literary master's careful ambivalence about his own era's cultural transformations, and the evidence of later illustrations and translations that show Don Quixote engaging with emerging capitalism (and the Romanticist revolt that capitalism incited) underscore the dual legacy of Cervantes's creation. *Don Quijote* is at once a creature of the Renaissance and of the present, a figure insanely tied to stories that are radically at odds with his own experience and a literary symbol of our own efforts to make the narratives of fiction and reality coincide.

Notes

1. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Edith Grossman, trans., (New York: Harper, 2003) 478.

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