

IS DON QUIXOTE A LOSER?

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Abstract

One of the most controversial issues in academic discussions has been the inconsistent characterisation of Don Quixote as a madman with instances of sanity. What this article is mainly concerned with is the analysis of particularly the ending of this well known work where the representation of Don Quixote is completely left ambiguous in terms of his being triumphant or a loser. There is no critical agreement on the reasons why Cervantes created such an ambiguous character. However what seems to be clear regarding this issue is that, from the very beginning of the novel, Cervantes tries to portray Don Quixote as a madman, because the story begins with the narrator's explicit interpretation about a poor gentleman called Alonso Quijano who seems to go insane from reading too many chivalric romances and decides to become an errant knight. Nonetheless, Quixote's madness and naiveté seem undoubtedly to have put his life in danger while his restoring his health seems to have killed him. Therefore, the primary goal of this article is to clarify whether his alleged madness represented through his chivalric deeds makes him a loser or not.

Key words: Loser, madness, society, hypocrisy, insanity

DON KİŞOT BİR KAYBEDEN MİDİR?

Özet

Don Kişot'un temsil ettiği akılsallık ve delilik arasındaki eğri akademik platformlarda sıkça tartışılan konulardan biri olmuştur. Bu makale Cervantes'in eserinde delilik imgesinin karşılık geldiği sorunsalı ele almaktadır. Cervantes'in Don Kişot gibi karışık bir tiplmeyi neden yarattığına dair üzerinde uzlaşıya varılmış bir görüş bulunmamaktadır. Bu konuyla ilgili olarak kesin olan bir şey varsa o da Cervantes'in Don Kişot'u toplumsal normların dışında deli bir karakter olarak resmettiği gerçeğidir. Çünkü Cervantes hikâyenin daha en başında başkarakter Alonso Quijano'yu resmederken onu çok fazla şövalyelik hikâyeleri okumaktan şövalye olmayı saplantı haline getirmiş bir karakter olarak sunar. Don Kişot'taki naifliğin onun hayatını nasıl tehlikeye soktuğu bu eserde şüphesiz ön planda sunulmaktadır. Gizil bir mesaj olarak işlenen tema ise delilikten sıyrılıp, iyileşen yani başka bir ifadeyle normalleşen Don Kişot'un sonunun da geldiği gerçeğidir. Bu yüzden bu makalenin temel bağlamı Don Kişot'un şövalyevari serüvenlerinde tezahür edilen sözde deliliğinin onu gününün şartlarında bir kaybeden yapıp yapmadığını açıklamaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kaybeden, delilik, toplum, riyakârlık, cinnet

Don Quixote is often taken as the world's greatest work of fiction (Friedman, 2012:7). Cervantes's masterpiece stands in a unique position between medieval chivalric romance and the modern novel. When it was first published, it was interpreted as a comic novel. After the French Revolution it became popular because of its prominent values which supported the idea that individuals can be right while society is quite wrong. Later in the nineteenth century it was regarded as a social commentary, but no one could easily claim whose side Cervantes was on. By the twentieth century it was accepted as the first true modern novel, as

Daniel Eisenberg writes: “a systemical and structural masterpiece, inspired by the Zohar, the cornerstone of the Spanish Kabalah” (Eisenberg, 1987:126).

Having been put under several different categories, *Don Quixote* has always been a mile stone in world literature yet there could never be a consensus upon its messages. To Auden, *Don Quixote* was the picture of a Christian saint. To Unamuno, he was almost Christ himself. Nabakov called the novel an encyclopaedia of cruelty and hence objected to its crudity and violence. Freud, who learned Spanish to read *Don Quixote*, appreciated of its psychological depth. Carlos Fuentes regarded the knight as a perfect instrument of Erasmian humanism. The German Romantics turned him into an emblem of the soul in opposition to the body, the ideal in opposition to the real, poetry in opposition to prose (Ziolkowski, 1991:128). Therefore, it is needless to say that *Don Quixote* is probably one of the most ambiguous and well-known characters in the history of literature.

From the very beginning of the novel, Cervantes portrays Don Quixote as a madman, since the whole story begins with the narrator’s explicit explanation on how a free-spirited idealist called Alonso Quijano goes insane from reading too many chivalric romances and decides to become a knight errant. As for the meaning of knight errant George Frederick Watts states: “A knight-errant is a figure of medieval romantic chivalric literature” and he adds “‘Errant’ meaning wandering or roving, indicates how the errant-knight would typically wander the land in search of adventures to prove himself as a knight” (Eisenberg, 1987: 48). At the onset of Don Quixote’s madness, the narrator tells us that “his fantasy filled with everything he had read in his books” (Cervantes, 2001:13). Don Quixote seems to be enthusiastic in pursuit of his goal and the revival of knight-errantry. But, when he comes into contact with the “real” world, he is beaten by the forces of “modernity” and “modern world” which in this context refers to a new world order which had appeared in only a few decades after the discovery of the New World by the Spanish. It is because of this, throughout the whole book, Don Quixote, who serves as a means of antagonism for the rapid change occurring around, tries to mend the wrongs of the world but fails each time.

In this respect, the novel can be argued to touch upon one of the crucial debates concerning the fact that reality is not always what it seems to be and the ambiguity arising from it. In addition, Don Quixote’s process of insanity might be said to represent an exploration on the particular relationship established between idealism and realism.

No doubt, Cervantes portrays Don Quixote as a madman who can not conform to the norms of the contemporary world. Hence, his delusions transform the everyday reality of early seventeenth-century Castile into the implausible world of Amadis of Gaul and the other heroes of the chivalric stories that had been popular in the preceding ages. Accordingly, through his eyes an ordinary roadside inn becomes a castle and two prostitutes become noble women; windmills become giants; herds of sheep become armies; a wine-skin becomes a monster. His madness, in this respect, is explicitly put in the foreground in terms of his regarding of the happenings around. However, when his madness is discussed as a means of pure humane feelings conflicting with the harsh material change in the society, then his madness might mean an anti-utopian ideal. The idea of madness should

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therefore bear a particular goal in his mysterious adventures. As Kenneth Krabbenhoft argues in his "Uses of Madness in Cervantes and Philip K. Dick": "His madness alternates with spells of complete lucidity. 'Cuerdo' (sane), he possesses great wisdom, as can be seen in his speeches on arms and letters, or on the Golden Age, or in his dealings with Sancho and other characters. Sane, he is also free of the violent impulses that characterize his delusional episodes." As for his madness he also adds "The word often used to describe him is 'loco-cuerdo': 'crazy-sane'" (Krabbenhoft, 2000:225).

Although Cervantes confesses Quixote's insanity even on the onset of the novel, when overall regarded it becomes evident that Cervantes presents him as a character continually shifting through his sane and insane ways which as a result makes the understanding of his stance within the novel more confusing. For instance, in the first part of the novel when Don Quixote comes across the windmills he takes them as gigantic monsters. At this point, one may be sure of his madness at her/his first impression:

He spurred his horse, Rocinante, paying no attention to the shouts of his squire, Sancho, who warned him that, beyond any doubt, those things he was about to attack were windmills and not giants. But he was so convinced they were giants that he did not hear the shouts of his Squire, Sancho, and could not see, though he was very close, what they really were; instead, he charged and called out: "Flee not, cowards and base creatures, for it is a single knight who attacks you." (Cervantes, 2001:108)

Yet, late in the novel the narrator appears to cancel his early portrayal and implies that Don Quixote always had reservations about the things he experienced. In this regard, when Don Quixote and Sancho arrive at the palace of a duke and duchess who read about Don Quixote's madness; this time, we see a Don Quixote who shifts from his insanity to sanity. Don Quixote sees the duke and duchess's exaggerated greetings for him. Upon this, the narrator tells us that "this was the first day he really knew and believed he was a true knight errant and not a fantastic one" (Cervantes, 2001:290). As seen here in this confession it is needless to say that the narrator suggests, despite what the readers have already read, that Don Quixote was never fully convinced of the story he told to the world.

On the other hand, Don Quixote says many things which imply that his madness is complete. As stated earlier, he addresses whores as noble women; he attacks on a flock of sheep etc. But of course, by keeping his shifting representation in mind, we must take Don Quixote's madness as a matter of conscious will, and himself as a player performing his role. Other characters in the novel, especially in the second part, often admire his intelligence and contemplation on almost every subject. For instance, while talking about his own experiences he speaks in a way that reveals his sanity and he, in a sense, lets out the fact that his is only performing his role. He asks Sancho after the adventure of Mambrino's helmet: "Is it possible that in all the time you have travelled with me you have not yet noticed that all things having to do with knights errant appear to be chimerical, foolish, senseless, and turned inside out?" A little later, he talks about Dulcinea in a way that implies that he is perfectly conscious of fabricating his ideal: "I imagine that everything I

say is true, no more and no less, and I depict her in my imagination as I wish her to be in beauty and in distinction” (Cervantes, 2001: 252).

However, in the second part, after his encounter with Master Pedro’s puppet show, he seems to say that his madness overwhelms him in the instances of great enthusiasm:

Now I believe... what I have believed on many other occasions: the enchanters who pursue me simply place figures as they really are before my eyes, and then change and alter them into whatever they wish. I tell you really and truly, you gentlemen who can hear me: it seemed to me that everything that happened here was actually happening. (Cervantes, 2001: 262)

Cervantes himself explicitly claims that his purpose in this novel is to ridicule the chivalric romances through such a “mad” character: “My sole aim has been to arouse men’s scorn for the false and absurd stories of knight-errantry” (Cervantes, 2001: 685). But, no matter what he states, with the aid of the idea “death of the author” whether his sole aim is to repudiate those stories of knight-errantry or not is debatable. In a book full of ironies can one really submit to such words Cervantes seems to be playing with? Or wouldn’t it be more proper to allege that it was an experimental work for Cervantes himself who constructed his hero within the stream of writing process where he presented his protagonist at times with some rapid changes in his ways. In this sense, the modern Spanish philosopher Ortega Gasset makes a crucial argument: “If the author of Quixote himself says that his purpose was such and such, who are we, the readers, to doubt the authenticity of his claim?” (Gasset, 1962:57). Another scholar John Ormsby explains: “Cervantes said emphatically...that he had no other object in view than to discredit these books, and this, to advanced criticism, made it clear that his object must have been something else”(Ormsby, 2000: 26).

Don Quixote’s final words at the very end of the novel have been regarded by some scholars as the climactic moment of the story since according to them Cervantes’s real intention of the Don is clearly presented there. On his deathbed Don Quixote declares that God has granted him mercy and that his “judgement is now clear and unfettered, and that dark cloud of ignorance which the perpetual reading of those detestable books of knight-errantry had cast over” his “understanding has disappeared.” In a mood of peace he adds that “Welcome the happy news! I am no longer Don Quixote of La Mancha, but Alonso Quixano, the man whom the world formerly called the Good” (Cervantes, 2001: 680). As seen in these words Don Quixote now abandons the code of chivalry for which he was once willing to give his life. However, the primary question to be asked here is why is this sudden shift? Does he simply recover his conscious?

At this point, regarding the issues from a traditionalist point of view, one could argue that during the Renaissance, especially in ultra-Catholic Spain, “those who had diverged from Christianity during their lives were expected to renounce their misdeeds and come back to God’s way on their deathbeds” (Eisenberg, 1987: 68). It is because of this that the common interpretation of Quixote’s revelation on his deathbed has been that the only reason Cervantes made the Don to reject

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chivalry on his deathbed was to conform to the traditions of his era in which all men were supposed to die with pure hearts.

Moreover, it has also been argued that Cervantes repudiates chivalry because that is what is expected of him since he is a man of “modern age” in which there is no longer a room for pastoral life style for which the knight has strong bounds. Cervantes’s frequent commentaries both on the time frame of the story and the antiquity of Don Quixote’s interests are said to be the proof for the owners of such assertions: “The first thing Don Quixote did was to refurbish some rusty armour that had belonged to his great grandfather and had lain mouldering in a corner” (Cervantes, 2001: 59). Undoubtedly, the age of chivalry had passed three or four generations before Don Quixote’s time. Therefore, it was frequently asserted that if Cervantes had glorified the virtues of a forgotten age it would have seemed truly unconventional and strange. On this account, Cervantes is thought to have been compelled to conform to the expectancies of his age. However, although on the surface he seems to repudiate the chivalric norms, still the inner message of the novel can never be so simple. In this sense, the way Cervantes represents Don Quixote’s characteristics may be helpful to perceive what he might have intended to do.

The purity of Don Quixote’s intentions, in this sense, can never be ignored. One of the best examples presenting his pure intention can be seen in his intervene with Andres’s story in which while Andres is being beaten by his master the Don meets them. Upon seeing this, the Don intends to fulfil his noble duty as a knight who is supposed to save anyone who is unjustly treated. Therefore, he asks the master to stop beating and makes him promise not to beat him again. Not to expose the Don’s rage the master readily accepts his request but as soon as the Don leaves he resumes his business. Here, what is prominent about the master is that he does not care for the code of chivalric honour that Don Quixote is deeply bounded by. A knight’s word on its own is known to be the law itself in principles of which he lives and dies with no hesitation. As a knight errant Quixote’s parodied representation cannot stand for a solely comic feature. As a symbol of both pure humane intentions and the validity of a word regardless of by whom it is uttered, chivalric codes of behaviours work as a medium to display how the new world order with its new mischievous codes corrupt the society. Therefore, the role Quixote performs as an interferer does not serve a funny contribution to the story at all.

Can his well intentioned behaviour be regarded as madness? Don Quixote’s fault is his assuming that the master would keep his promise. According to the tenets of chivalry, men were to keep their words and live by their words but the world Don Quixote lived in was now cold and dishonourable. What is for sure is that the victims of the new world no longer need the Don’s humane assistance -as an honourable man- that is why later in the novel when Don Quixote meets Andres again, he, this time, tells him: “For the love of God... if you ever meet me again, though you may see them cutting me to pieces, give me no aid... May God send his curse on you and all the other knight-errant that have ever been born” (Cervantes, 2001: 454). Undoubtedly, Don Quixote did nothing wrong to deserve this unfaithful curse. His being loyal to some human virtues is his only fault.

His madness, at the base, is related with his extreme purity in his intentions. The society he lived in has the main fault as it has wronged both Don Quixote and the young boy. In other words, a distorted reality of a new world order is what in fact beats the ideal virtues in practice. In this sense, regarding the Don as a loser may seem practically right but if his intentions are what to be discussed, then it would be unfair to take him as a loser. What Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh states upon this issue is worth quoting here:

Does the author mean to say that the world is right and that those who try to better it are wrong? If that is what he means, how is it that at every step of our journey we come to like the Don better, until in the end we can hardly put a limit to our love and reverence for him? Is it possible that the criticism is double-edged, and that what we are celebrating with our laughter is the failure of the world? (Raleigh, 2000:4)

From Raleigh's point of view the primary conflict of the novel is brilliantly presented in the end. As it is underlined in his evaluation, it is needless to say that Cervantes's only aim in this novel cannot be to repudiate the chivalric codes because as a man of honour and virtue, Don Quixote does his best to improve the world yet in this process he cannot fulfil his task and fails. Consequently, one must seek for the fundamental flaw in the society because Don Quixote's insanity can well be regarded as virtue, and as a form of higher perception serving to the purpose of social criticism. Accordingly, although Don Quixote cannot convert the world to his own point of view, he himself with other characters and situations in the story serves to express Cervantes's criticism towards the world in which he lived.

Furthermore, in terms of his stance within the society either as a loser or triumphant Don Quixote's bestowments on Sancho Panza must also be considered. As a symbol of corruption in a rapidly changing society, Sancho Panza metamorphoses into a materialist and egoist individual. His relationship with Don Quixote is of high importance. At the very beginning of the novel, Sancho appears as an ordinary farmer who is uneducated, illiterate and submissive. In their relationship, what we see is that the Don does not only show kind interest to him but also counsels and helps him to become a self-aware, mature and independent individual. Under his guidance Sancho seems to be very satisfied while intellectually growing at a certain pace. Therefore, as the story moves on, he gets mature and represents some developed intellectual characteristics. By the end of the book he and Don Quixote eventually become intellectual equals. In other words, Sancho's whole enlightenment process is laid bare before the readers. Don Quixote's pride about him can be deduced from his own words where he states "Never, Sancho have I heard you speak so eloquently as now; it makes me realize the truth of the proverb you are so fond of repeating: 'Not with whom you're bred but with whom you are fed'" (Cervantes, 2001: 674).

Yet, the reality of the situation is more complex than it seems. On the surface it is undoubtedly clear that Sancho starts as a poor farmer and gradually grows to become a great thinker thanks to his association with the Don and at the end of the novel he becomes the Don's intellectual equal. However, the final phase

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of their intimate relationship must be focused on because it reveals that as Sancho becomes more intelligent and more practical about the new capitalist world order, he replaces now outdated idea of loyalty with the current idea of hypocrisy. In brief, Sancho abandons the idea that the primary virtue in a new world order is no longer to be good against the evil but to be self servant to get higher profit out of the situations.

Don Quixote dies with an image of Sancho as his loyal and ever faithful squire, while nothing could be further from the truth. During his last three days Cervantes shows Sancho's final phase of transformation. At the Don's deathbed, his relationship with Sancho shows Sancho's new role shaped through the values of modern values: "Sancho Panza puffed himself up with satisfaction, for the thought of a legacy possesses a magic power to remove, or at least to soothe, the pangs that the heir should otherwise feel for the death of his friend" (Cervantes, 2001: 684). This last line proves Sancho's hypocrisy towards his friend who treats him as a son throughout the whole novel. On the surface Sancho seems as if he laments for Don Quixote's death, yet in reality he is happy about the legacy that the Don leaves for him. The transformation of Sancho is completed at this point. Quixote was a man of honour and virtue but Sancho is not even close. At the end of the novel, it is clear that the new materialistic world that the Don fought against overcomes Sancho and overshadows the honourable intellectualism Sancho learns from his mentor.

Therefore, it is not wrong to conclude that the character of Don Quixote is revealed in contrast to the world around it. The contrast is expressed through some binary oppositions such as madness and sanity, illusion and solidity, the real and unreal worlds. Although Don Quixote's death, on the surface, seems to conform to the conventions of chivalric romance that Cervantes parodies, the novel has a deeper theme, that is, the bitter consequence of his personal disillusionment with a gentler alternate reality. Erich Auerbach argues in *Mimesis*: "the world which Don Quixote encounters is not one especially prepared for the proving of a knight but an everyday, real world" (Mancing, 1982:13). Through such a representation what we are requested is to distinguish between the world Don Quixote fantasies and the world perceived by other characters and to see the latter as continuous with our own. Yet, the crucial question needed to be replied at this point is the question "what do we find when we compare these representations?"

In light of these examples, it is needless to state that Don Quixote has been betrayed by the modern materialist world. As seen above, no matter how hard he tried to remake his squire Sancho in his own image, the tides of the new materialist world order are against it. Therefore, even though on the surface it seems that Don Quixote has lost, in fact it is not the Don but the new world order. The world has failed to support the basic values of humanity, and instead allowed them to be overtaken by a corrupt self-centred materialist outlook. In this new world, Don Quixote, who possesses the ideal characteristics to become a role model for humanity, is beaten by the new world order, which is unwilling to pay attention to his call. Finally, it should be borne into mind that the world his alleged madness creates is a friendlier place for him than his little but now-materialist Castilian town.

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