

The Sanity of Humanity: Don Quixote as the Renaissance Hero

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Reality becomes the least common denominator of a plethora of subjective imaginings. —St. Augustine, City of God

*For such defects, and for no other fault, we are lost, and afflicted but in this, that without hope we live in longing.
—Dante, Inferno IV 40-42*

Hope keeps people alive. Most often this hope is not found in things bound to time and place or to the rules of this world. Some critics and readers view and argue that Miguel Cervantes's hero, by some deemed an antihero, Don Quixote is a madman; however, their arguments are lacking either in proof or in that they fail to take into regard the full scope of the work, humanity, and the burgeoning Renaissance spirit sweeping Europe during the time of Cervantes. In Don Quixote, Cervantes depicts a man, nothing more than a simple yet nothing less than a human. In his introduction to the 2001 John Rutherford translation, Roberto Gonzalez

Echevarria properly explains, “what *Don Quixote* attempted to do: to bring his reader’s imaginings to the bruising world of tangible reality and to the withering present” (*Don Quixote*, viii).

As the European Renaissance was coming to fruition in the time Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*, the early 17th century, humankind was turning inward. In the area of arts, theology and philosophy, scholars and laypeople were not concerned with making sense of the world around them, but thought that the key to discerning and making sense of the external world was to first look and understand their very own self and soul. The external corporeal world did not hold as much strength as it did in the time when earlier epics, such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, were written. Humanity’s mind played a part in the shaping of their world. The arts, philosophy, and popular worldviews began to take on a much more individualized approach as the focus of the interior person. *Don Quixote* is not merely a comic, entertaining tale of a madman who renounced his life and reality in order to live in his romantic and chivalric world constructed out of the words of literature he held all too near to his heart and mind. Nor is it merely a story that serves to warn the public of the harm of reading chivalric, unrealistic romances, nor only a parody of the romances, mocking them. *Don Quixote* has elements of the latter two, but to think this work is limited to only those view points is to undermine Cervantes’s hand as the author. In *Don Quixote* he showed a man, just a man, trying to live passionately, trying to live a life worth breathe. Humankind must have a purpose, must have a hope in order to live as vibrantly as our hero Don Quixote. Reality did not offer him this. People seldom find themselves in circumstances that arouse in them a passion for living, a passion for siezing every breath of life. Few characters, even fictional, have had this passion more than Don Quixote. He had this not only because the author created for him a purpose and a stimulating environment and life situation; but also because Don Quixote in his very context as character “created this for himself.”

The history of the time in which Cervantes wrote is important not for the histories of politics and wars, but for knowledge of the popular mindset, the changing worldview, and the philoso-

phies that were changing so much. Humanity was becoming aware of themselves as individual entities. Before, individuals had been aware of themselves but only as they were part of the context of a community or a country and most likely in the context of religion. In the Renaissance, individuals entered into discourse on “individuality” allowing them to envision themselves as a part *from* the whole. People were not valuable for their connections with anything else; they were valuable for being human. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a popular Italian philosopher during this time, captures this mindset in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, where he praises humanity: “Man is the most fortunate of living things, and consequently, deserving of all admiration” and “Man is, with complete justice, considered and called a great miracle and a being worthy of all admiration” (2). Man is wonderful on his own; though Pico still believes man is a creation of God and that man’s beauty will direct one’s praise ultimately to God, man’s value is not in this connection to God. Man is valuable for what he is.

The philosopher John Locke took this one step further. Not only were people valuable as individual units disconnected from their surroundings, but people also now had the right to question all things. Locke concentrated on how this new mindset did or should alter views on religion. Religion was no longer a matter of only dogmas or proofs; it was a matter of self-introspection above all else. Locke, in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, states, “All the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing” (pg). During this time, the inner being rose to importance; the individual mind was extremely important.

Cervantes takes these ideals, beliefs and sentiments and applies them in *Don Quixote*. In just reading and contemplation, this seems perfectly reasonable. Cervantes, in his character, gives these sentiments shape and form, showing how they would actually look in modern society. J. M. Sobre, in his article “Don Quixote, the Hero Upside-Down,” tells his readers “to disperse any doubts: Don Quixote is a madman” and gives as reason that he “consistently fails to see reality” (128). Through the entire article, Sobre asserts this view as fact that Don Quixote is indeed insane. He does not

take into account a main point: Don Quixote is the first fictional character that shows a slight awareness of being a character in a story and uses this knowledge. Don Quixote, just like humanity at the time, was coming into awareness of the power that he had. Don Quixote is the creator of his adventures more so than Cervantes. In regards to his dear Dulcinea, Don Quixote states quite early in the work, “what merit would there be in confessing so manifest truth? The whole point is that, without seeing her, you must believe, confess, affirm, swear and uphold it” (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 50). Don Quixote is using a literary device; he is framing his tale that he is about to deliver. He is telling the readers what mindset they are to take in order to understand and have full enjoyment of his work. The reader is going on a journey with Don Quixote that might not be “so manifest a truth,” but “you must believe.” The character Quixote calls the reader into a philosophical contemplation of questioning the importance of physical reality in a world where passion arises in hope.

Don Quixote has constructed a world of his own around him. In the famous windmill scene, after he is defeated by the giants, Don Quixote says, “Freston who stole my library and my books has just turned these giants into windmills, to deprive me of the glory of my victory” (*Don Quixote*, 64). This seems odd proof for the sanity of Don Quixote; but if carefully looked at, this passage shows more than fantastic ideas. Don Quixote admits that they are windmills. This shows that he indeed does see reality; the reason that he made these windmills into giants is because his story would not be interesting otherwise. Throughout the text, Don Quixote makes reference to his history; this is why he feels it appropriate for Sancho to name him Knight of the Sorry Face, “because the sage whose task it is to write the history of my exploits must have thought it right for me to take some appellation, as all previous knights have done” (151). Don Quixote sees windmills and attacks them for his readers’ enjoyment. After all, who would want to read the tale of a knight who wanders about, had no interesting circumstances befall him, and participated in no adventure? Don Quixote never read any book such as that. Don Quixote is trying to create a story that he has read and enjoyed, a chivalric romance.

In Don Quixote's quote mentioned above that justifies why he fought the windmills, one must take into account who his enemy becomes. It is Freston who changed the giants into windmills to make Don Quixote into a fool. Freston is the one who burned his books. Freston has the power to destroy words and literature; thus, Freston has the power to destroy Don Quixote, because Don Quixote views himself as words and as a character of literature. The power over literature is the power over death. Freston is the only one with the ability to destroy Don Quixote because Cervantes has given him the power to destroy narrative. The way Don Quixote relates and phrases this is also important. He does not say that giants were never there or that he defeated the giants. He creates a myth; Freston turned the giants into windmills. It would make for a very interesting chivalric romance, perhaps even more entertaining and exciting than any Don Quixote has read, to have the knight's enemy have magical powers. This makes the possibilities of that knight's adventures almost endless, and so Don Quixote's adventures are.

Don Quixote is not a madman; he is not insane. Neither is he the antihero or a "hero upside-down." He is the Renaissance hero. As a character, Don Quixote has taken in all of the contemporary philosophies, contemplated them, and decided to put them into radical action. "Man" was a glorious being on his own apart from anything; this gave man a new sense of power. "Man" had a power over his own life. Cervantes gave his character this power by allowing him to create his own narrative. Reality is not objective; it is subjective. The way in which humanity interprets its surroundings has great importance. Cervantes made a character that not only interpreted his surrounding but created them as well. By making Don Quixote aware that he was a character in a story, yet still in the confines and rules of the world that humanity is bound by, Cervantes made the Renaissance hero: a man who exercises the power of his mind to the full and glorious extent yet is still *man*. Cervantes never endows Don Quixote with any magical powers or superhuman abilities. Man is too marvelous on his own; he does not need such embellishment. Don Quixote makes his own narrative, his own story. Though he has no pen, he is fully aware of

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his authorship. Don Quixote does not wish to appear insane to his readers; he merely wishes to entertain and inspire them.



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