

Directed Studies: Literature  
Professor Richard Maxwell

Knocking Down the Puppet Show: Dangerous Readers in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*

by Katy Waldman

In *Don Quixote*, the knight errant writes, edits, and disseminates his own reality. He represents the character-turned-author, whose vital imagination doesn't fit inside the world he inhabits. Like Cervantes (only less tongue-in-cheek), Quixote constructs a chivalric romance from the features of everyday Spain. But as a reader and receptacle for ideas, he also stands for the mysterious jury that reviews the novel's testimony. In his judgments about illusion, he shows us alternate ways to react to the book in our hands. The incident with Master Pedro reveals that Quixote is a bad audience member and implicitly, a bad reader. He believes fiction at its most lifeless, when a discerning man might deem it unworthy of imaginative investment. He believes when incompetent narration makes engaging with the story almost impossible. He believes so thoroughly that he tries to integrate fantasy into the real world, to the ultimate destruction of the fantasy and at no small inconvenience to the real world. Don Quixote's delusion, presented elsewhere as endearing, harmlessly funny, beautiful, or noble, seems here stubborn and ruinous. Worst of all, it looks familiar. As readers, we are constantly beguiled by the novel's tricks. In an unusual, disenchanted moment, Cervantes tears down Pedro's theater. Is he punishing our credulity, or perhaps implicating us as foolish destroyers of our own texts? The author upends literature's "due process" in a move that can't help but speak to Inquisition-era Spain. While he submits his words to us for judgment, Cervantes empowers them to indict their jury.

In Master Pedro's performance, we see Don Quixote interacting with the sources of his fantasy for the first time. When Part I opens, the knight has already read and re-read his chivalric

tomes, internalized their rules, and gone mad. He travels across Spain reconstructing the adventures of Amadis, Orlando, and Lancelot in creative, hare-brained ways. Cervantes' descriptions of the romances—"grandiloquent, noble, distinguished, magnificent" (474)<sup>1</sup>—imply, if not truthfulness, their richness as source material for Quixote's fancy. But in the puppet show, we observe how flimsy, insubstantial, and lifeless are the triggers of the Don's madness, and begin to doubt the value of the entire chivalric tradition. Pedro, a famous puppet master with a patch on his face and "the devil in his body" (624), enters the inn on the heels of Don Quixote, Sancho, a page, and a townsman-in-arms. He has with him a monkey that can answer any question, except those concerning the future, a boy narrator, and a stage upon which he presents the ballad of Gaiferos and Melisendra. By the time the puppet show begins, the boundaries of human nature have blurred or dissolved. The townsman's tale of two councilors who bray like donkeys anticipates Pedro's talking monkey, and both predict the devolution of Gaiferos and Melisendra into "pasteboard figures" (632). These one-dimensional cut-outs suit the strange, artificial enterprise at hand. Their lack of physical depth reflects a lack of emotion, substance, or spirit. Instead of speaking, they bob around on strings, and a narrator helpfully alerts us if one should experience an emotion. "Look how [a Moor] kisses [the princess] right on the mouth, and how quickly she wipes her mouth with the white sleeve of her dress, and how she laments, and in her grief tears at her beautiful hair as if it were to blame for the offense," the boy urges (630). He speaks in chivalric clichés—the purity of the white-sleeved maiden, the pagan deviant, the pathetic and erotic desecration of lovely femininity. These tropes seem especially lifeless when applied to figures whose limbs follow the motion of visible strings and whose faces never change expression. Could Cervantes be making a broader statement about courtly romances? Has Don

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<sup>1</sup> Cervantes, Miguel, *Don Quixote*. Trans. Edith Grossman, with introduction by Harold Bloom (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).

Quixote's beloved genre degenerated so completely into a pile of conventions that all feeling has escaped it? For, if not, how could the uninspired, bloodless, empty spectacle of the puppet show awaken the knight's noble madness as surely as Ariosto or de Silva? By implicating Gaiferos and Melisendra in Quixote's insanity, Cervantes strips the magic from chivalric literature (and perhaps from literature in general). He raises the possibility that Quixote is neither a heroic idealist nor a charismatic crazy, but a fool.

Ironic references to the *Aeneid* reinforce the puppet show's degradation of fiction. Before the performance starts, Cervantes tells us, "All fell silent, both Tyrians and Trojans" (628). This quote from Vergil describes the hush that settles over Carthage before Aeneas begins his account of the fall of Troy. In *Don Quixote*, it cues us that something important, illuminating, and transformative might happen; furthermore, it seems to situate Gaiferos, Melisendra, and their audience in an epic tradition. Yet the borrowed line actually highlights the decidedly non-palatial inn, the un-pedigreed "senate and assembly" inside it, and the feebleness of Pedro's illusion compared to Aeneas' true recollection. No Priam will fall, but in a few pages a pasteboard Charlemagne will be comically split in two and then reimbursed with five and a quarter reales. At the same time, the intrusion of epic sends us back to everyday reality, where elevated speech suddenly sounds archaic and ridiculous<sup>2</sup>. What use has the Spanish commoner for either Troy or courtly adventures? The *Aeneid* itself urges us to move on from fictions and dreams. We recall the "puppet town" of Buthrotum as an unacceptable alternative to new empire in Rome. We remember that nostalgia for a vanished world haunted Aeneas, who constantly battled the temptation to "feed his soul on empty pictures" (I.652)<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps most importantly, we see Dido,

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<sup>2</sup> Master Pedro chastens his young narrator for mentioning the classical hero Nestor, "Simplicity, boy, don't be arrogant, all affectation is bad" (631).

<sup>3</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fagles, with intro and notes by Bernard Knox (New York: Penguin, 2005).

the paradigmatic “bad listener,” who becomes so swept up in Aeneas’ story that she simultaneously falls in love and goes mad.

Cervantes also weaves obstacles to belief into the narrative style of Pedro and his assistant. These “reality checks” highlight Quixote’s credulity, for if the tale itself does not give him pause, its incompetent telling should. The boy interrupts the illusion on stage with digressions about the Moorish legal system. He dwells on Melisendra’s undignified escape from the tower, during which “the lace of her skirt [catches] on some of the wrought iron at the balcony, and she hangs in midair and cannot reach the ground” (631). This slapstick moment tarnishes the romantic mood built by the narrator in so many purple phrases. It even recalls Don Quixote’s night spent hanging by the wrists from a window of the enchanted inn. Although common details demystify the ballad, Master Pedro himself corrects anyone who mistakes it for historical truth. When Quixote objects to the inaccurate mention of bells in Sansuena, the puppeteer says, “Your grace should not concern yourself with trifles...or try to carry things so far that you never reach the end of them. Aren’t a thousand plays performed almost every day that are full of a thousand errors and pieces of nonsense...Go on, boy, and let them say what they will, for as long as I fill my purse, there can be more errors than atoms in the sun” (632). This materialistic admission reveals the insincerity of the artist and the cynicism of his project. We note, even if Quixote does not, that Pedro cares little for accuracy and less for preserving a mimetic illusion. Greed, not poetic license, sits at the core of his enchantment, and we refuse to waste our belief.

Yet neither the weakness of the fantasy nor the botched narration checks Don Quixote’s imagination. He insists on seeing the puppet show as a historical event, and then as a present reality. Again, when the boy describes Sansuena “flooded with the sound of the bells that ring

from all the towers of the mosques,” Don Quixote indignantly interrupts, “No, that is wrong! The Moors do not use bells but drums and a kind of flute that resembles our flageolet” (632). The knight values Pedro’s fiction more deeply than the rest of the audience, but he burdens it with factual standards. He attacks the story’s self-sufficiency, interrupting the narrative flow and breaking the illusion. Worst of all, instead of respecting the autonomy of a fictive world, Don Quixote imposes his own vision. He proves a harsh judge. When the action resumes, “trumpets blare...flutes play...drums and tabors sound,” but the bells are silent (632).

The push-and-pull between loving a fantasy and destroying it intensifies as the puppet show continues. Don Quixote grows increasingly unsettled as he watches the pasteboard Gaiferos escaping on horseback with his beloved Melisendra. When at last enemy soldiers “ride out of the city in pursuit of the two Catholic lovers,” he “unsheathe[s] his sword...and with swift and never before seen fury [begins] to rain down blows upon the crowds of Moorish puppets” (632). Quixote surrenders himself so completely to the story that he feels like a participant in it. He delivers “slashes, two-handed blows, thrusts, and backstrokes” to both pagan and Christian adversaries, “knocking down some, beheading others, ruining this one, destroying that one” (633). But by trying to treat the fiction as a reality, the knight strips away its last vestiges of enchantment. His credulous “readership” and subsequent impulse to invade the fantasy exposes the puppets for what they really are. When Quixote’s rampage is over, the illusion vanishes to reveal “all the scenery and figures cut and broken to pieces,” and a grief-stricken Pedro standing helplessly among his ruined dolls (633). Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Emperor who presides over the world of knight errantry, sustains the most casualties—in his zealous defense of chivalric values, Don Quixote splits him in half.

Desires that ironically destroy their objects often figure in courtly romances, and Cervantes' use of this trope here seems genuine. Although the puppet show itself embodies a shoddy, inferior fiction, its demolition still evokes in us a sense of loss. Pedro's hyperbolic lament somehow fits: "Yesterday the lord of all Spain/ today not even a tower/ that I can call my own" (633). The collapse of the theater represents the second step in a demystification process that begins in Montesinos' cave. Cervantes seems to link it to the impossibility of full-blown fantasy in the modern world, and especially to the Reformation's assault on Catholic ritual. Religious imagery pervades the puppet show: a shrine-like stage glows "with the light of little wax candles," the narrator promises "marvels" and "mysteries" (628), and Pedro calls his ruined figures "relics" (634). When the theater breaks, we almost see the magic draining from Christianity, a process which for Cervantes may have amounted to a spiritual fall from grace. These layers of theological disillusionment heighten the chapter's despair, but they also raise more questions about what it means to read, love, or judge. Do people allow themselves to become carried away by stories, to the point where they feel qualified or obligated to reform them? Do their interventions in pursuit of an ideal necessarily place the ideal in peril? Such concerns, painfully relevant to Inquisition and Reformation-era Spain, raise the stakes of the marionette sequence<sup>4</sup>.

Cervantes' devastation of the puppet theater has further implications for his readers. We see the feebleness of the ballad and the additional correctives to belief imposed by incompetent narration. We scorn Quixote for trusting obvious lies, and we duly note how his dogmatism accomplishes the final destruction of whatever romance remains in "The Liberation of Melisendra." The Don's errors as an audience member invite us to compare his credulity with

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<sup>4</sup> Catholicism, the devil, prophecy, and conversion all appear in chapters XXV-XXVII. Especially after Don Quixote's adventures with the Assembly of Death, the puppet show recalls a medieval mystery play. A deeper exploration of religion in the Pedro incident would need another paper!

our discernment. Picking up on every “reality check” that Cervantes throws our way, we share a joke with the author at the knight’s expense. Yet *Don Quixote* soon turns the tables on self-congratulatory readers. A chapter later, we learn that Master Pedro is “Gines de Pasamonte, to whom...Don Quixote gave his freedom in the Sierra Morena,” and who, “fearful of being captured by the officers of the law...decided to take up the trade of puppet master” (637). Cervantes dupes us while we laugh at Quixote’s gullibility. Beguiled by the “patch of green taffeta” that Hamete almost “forgets to mention,” we like and pity Master Pedro (623). In fact, he is the scoundrel who stole Sancho’s donkey. When his true identity comes to light, we must confront the resemblance between Don Quixote and ourselves<sup>5</sup>.

On a second reading, we seem as impervious to “reality checks” as the guileless knight. Cervantes loudly hints that his narrative cannot be trusted. He mocks Quixote for buying into Pedro’s fantasy, and then reveals parallels between the puppet show and the novel. For instance, lovely Melisendra in her tower recalls Zoraida, a “renegade Christian woman” from the Moorish Algiers (345). The princess, who sits “astride [Gaifero’s horse] like a man” (631), also evokes Dulcinea, “astride [her mule] as if she were a man” (519). Play and book feature soldiers, marriages, mistaken identities, Christian-Islamic conflicts, questions of leisure versus work, and violence. Furthermore, Don Quixote’s criticisms of the puppet show narrator sit equally well on Cervantes’ shoulders. The knight complains, “Boy, tell your story in a straight line and do not become involved in curves” (630). Yet the novel itself winds through more than five interpolated tales, and its long, meandering sentences rarely mean what they say. Pedro accuses the assistant

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<sup>5</sup> George Haley treats these issues very thoroughly in his essay *The Narrator in Don Quijote: Maese Pedro's Puppet Show*. (*MLN*, Vol. 80, No. 2, Spanish Issue, pp. 145-165).

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of affectation in a chapter that opens with a quote from the *Aeneid*. And just as the puppet master constantly interrupts his illusion, Cervantes/Hamete breaks up events with long, self-conscious chapter titles. Given the similarities between the obviously false play and the novel that contains it, why do we never doubt Pedro to be the man Hamete says he is?

Gines is not only a rogue, but an author: like *Don Quixote*, his *Life of Gines de Pasamonte* professes historical truth. The criminal takes the name Master Pedro much as Cervantes adopts the persona of Cide Hamete. And in the same way Hamete speaks through a Marisco translator, Pedro enlists an assistant “to act as interpreter and narrator of the mysteries on stage” (628). This identification of Gines as a writer (and perhaps a stand-in for Cervantes) makes explicit the link between spectator-Quixote and reader. It also raises the question: how can we avoid destroying the theater of fiction? Don Quixote wrecks the puppet show when he forces his way, first imaginatively and then literally, into a preexisting vision. His belief gives him a false sense of ownership over the fantasy, emboldening him to invade and alter it. For instance, Quixote attacks the Moors because he cannot “consent to [their] offense against an enamored knight...in [his] lifetime and in [his] presence” (632). Ironically, such moral intervention prevents Gaiferos and Melisendra from reaching Paris. Our acceptance of Master Pedro may not threaten the existence of *Don Quixote* in the same way that the knight’s delusions overturn the puppet show. However, the more we feel part of a literary world, the more likely we are to commit ideological vandalism.

Cervantes has good reason to fear over-eager readers. The protagonist of Avellanada’s false sequel haunts the pages of *Don Quixote: Part II*<sup>6</sup>. As the novel unfolds, participation in someone else’s fantasy seems less and less innocent. To enter a fictive world often means to

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<sup>6</sup> Black, Shameem, “The Afterlife of Don Quixote,” DS lecture 2/6/2007, WHC Auditorium.



undermine its autonomy—to blend what existed before with personal values. Therefore, one of the consequences of quixotic belief may be the destruction of the dream believed in. More disturbingly, we consider ourselves discerning readers even when we’ve fallen under an author’s spell. We look at Gines and see Pedro, or look at a madman and see a knight, or look at a knight and see a madman. Cervantes cautions us to give every word in *Don Quixote* the attention it deserves, teasing out all the possible meanings before believing, imagining, or deciding. Only by letting books “do and say and show” by their own lights can we prevent the theater of literature from collapsing (628).