

Directed Studies: Literature
Professor Charles Hill

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Joshua Tan

Sanity's Dream: Reason and Madness,
Modernity and Antiquity in *King Lear* and *Don Quijote*

by Joshua Tan

O matter and impertinency mixed,
Reason in madness.
—*King Lear*, Act IV, Scene 5

Madness is fluid—it comes with the darkling tide and goes with the waning moon. One moment a man speaks with humble eloquence and the next he proclaims himself an Olympian god.¹ One moment a man sits calm and poised and the next he pleads insanity to the bench. If we ask King Lear and Don Quijote, “What is right and what is wrong,” their answers—love and loyalty are right, dishonor and betrayal are wrong—will certainly be reasonable. But then how can they be mad? For surely, just as Quijote has had his strangely self-aware moments, so Lear has shown a suspicious rationality in his most deranged displays. But madness is not insanity. Madness in *King Lear* and *Don Quijote* is passion, is folly, but it is not unreasoned. Far from being irrational, the madness of Lear and Quijote begins with reason, lives by reason, and ends in reason. Reason having a part in madness, we may find upon closer examination that it plays subtly-diverging roles in the two works, hinting at the origins of a fundamental divide between the antiquity that represents *Lear* and the modernity that represents *Quijote*.

Madness and Method

Reason is a significant cause of Lear and Quijote's decline into madness. It is Goneril and Regan's cold rationality that drives Lear to plead, “O reason not the need! Our basest beggars are

¹ Cervantes. *Don Quijote de La Mancha*. Pg. 463

in poorest things superfluous.”² Shuddering, he recognizes the weight of his own human needs that go beyond the scope of rationality, but it is exactly his capacity for reason which enables his madness. Like Gloucester who says, “I stumbled when I saw,”³ it is Lear’s own human capacity for perception (and his misuse of it) that forces his madness.

In madness, Lear strips himself of his irrational denials and sees the world as it is. Like Edgar and the Fool, Lear’s nonsensical verse belies a sharp but troubled insight into the pitiless heart of nature: “We came crying hither. / Thou know’st the first time that we smell the air / We wawl and cry.”⁴ But where rationality guides the madness of Bedlam Tom, only madness and pain guides the reasoning of Lear.

In *Don Quijote*, the eponymous knight says to his squire, “Wherever extraordinary virtue resides, there it is persecuted. Very few, if any, of the famous men of the past escaped the slanders of the wicked.”⁵ Here and elsewhere in the novel, there is an inescapable sense of self-awareness in Don Quijote’s words, an active understanding of the position he takes against the norms of his time. His madness is less irrational or nonsensical than idealistic and delusional. Tilting at windmills may be “crazy,” but it is the strength of Don Quijote’s imagination and belief that creates his seeming madness, rather than any lack of reason or intelligence, which he plainly has in abundance. In a way, this ambiguity between sanity and madness is deliberate: we are not sure of the

² Shakespeare. *King Lear*. 2.4.257-8.

³ Shakespeare. 4.1.19.

⁴ Shakespeare. 4.5.170-2.

⁵ Cervantes, Pg. 460

characters' madness, just as they are not sure of it themselves. There are no true Bedlam Toms in either *King Lear* or *Don Quijote*: only desperate men who jump from their capsizing reality and fall into chaotic delusion and the "dreadful pudder"⁶ of the storm.

This reason-in-madness is necessary to both works. Perfect sanity and perfect insanity preclude true character development. Neither Milton's Jesus nor *Beowulf's* Grendel possess Lear and Quijote's aura of comic/tragic fascination. Thus, for madness to be tragic, it *must* end in reason. In terms of Aristotelian tragedy, without reason, there can be no anagnorisis, and without anagnorisis, there can be no catharsis. If madness did not contain the seed of reason, then there could be no salvation from grief and all would spiral endlessly into death.⁷ For all that men are compared to beasts again and again in *King Lear*, there is still that unavoidable difference of reason between man and beast: it is partly why Lear finds Cordelia's death to be more tragic than that of "a dog, a horse, a rat,"⁸ and partly why we find Lear's own death to be so tragic. Less civilization, Lear may be "such a poor, bare, forked animal,"⁹ but he still has one thing above beasts—a capacity for tragedy.

The Origin of Tragedy

But does the Aristotelian logic fit *Don Quijote*? The don's sudden renunciation of knight errantry and equally sudden death seem arbitrary in a sense—lacking catharsis. How then did Don Quijote's madness end in renunciation, death, and tragedy just like King Lear's yet lack that key element of emotion, of culmination, of closure? Where did this divergence begin?

The most obvious answer would be in the heroes themselves. Don Quijote and King Lear are mad in the same way, but not for the same reasons. In both there is an antique sense of

⁶ Shakespeare. 3.2.49.

⁷ Like Hamlet?

⁸ Shakespeare. 5.8.284.

⁹ Shakespeare. 3.4.94-5.

romanticism¹⁰ that throws them headlong to their dooms, but Quijote's madness functions as a protection against the cruel, unromantic world, whereas Lear's madness is a cause of his understanding. The bachelor Sansón would reveal Quijote's madness, but Quijote fells the Knight of the Mirrors and conquers, at least for this time, the reflection in the glass. Quijote's madness extends even to Sancho, whose "apprehension... created by what his master has said... did not permit him to give credence to the truth he was seeing with his own eyes."¹¹

So whereas Lear is in some sense the classic tragic hero progressing from hubris to madness to realization, Quijote is a modern hero: modern in his comic obliviousness, modern in his mad, foolish gallantry. Of course, *Lear* as well as *Quijote* has an internal division between antiquity and modernity, as exemplified in Lear and Edmond's opposing conceptions of an ideal nature: the emphasis on duty and obligation of the former contrasting with the any-means-necessary, "all with me's meet that I can fashion fit"¹² policy of the latter. But though romantic antiquity and ruthless modernity seem to represent very similar forces in *Lear* and *Quijote*, the conflict between the two forces plays out quite differently in the two plays. Though there is nothing truly definitive of the works except themselves, it may yet be relevant to ask: if Lear is an *example* of the power of that "pitiless storm,"¹³ then could The Quijote be Cervantes' *challenge* to that selfsame modern nature?

We return to our original question: "What is right and what is wrong?" But instead of questioning the king or the don, we must question ourselves: "Can we really try Lear and Quijote against our modern standards of authenticity?" The question, taken in the context of the above

¹⁰ Sebastian Cano-Besquet, in class.

¹¹ Cervantes. Pg. 547-8.

¹² Shakespeare. 1.2.156.

¹³ Shakespeare. 3.4.29.

antiquity-modernity division, leaves different answers for the two works: we cannot judge Don Quijote, but we can judge King Lear.

By Act III, Lear knows full well of the difference between the true nature of the world and the nature he had hoped for in Act I. “When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools,” he proclaims, and our only power can be to “kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.”¹⁴ Lear is no innocent, no fool. Cordelia lies dead at his feet and his heart breaks at his fools’ deaths.¹⁵ He is born within the world of man and though he sojourns briefly outside, he returns hence to die. Thus the tragedy of Lear is not that he realizes man’s state of nature, but that such a state of nature is true, that it becomes true for all to see. In the end, Lear’s madness serves his reason and the power of the outside world.

Don Quijote’s madness, in contrast, overpowers reason and reality. The problem with judging him by modern standards is hardly that he is unauthentic but that we would fall into the same trap as the other characters in the novel. There is reason in madness and madness in all who meet Don Quijote, all who read *Don Quijote*. Like the Duke and Duchess, we enter his world by reading his book. So whereas the role of reason in Lear is merely to observe, Quijote’s reason *acts*. Lear relinquishes his power at the beginning of the play, but Quijote’s madness *is* his power. Thus the origin of tragedy in *Don Quijote* is not, as it is in *King Lear*, that the world really is a cruel and afflicted place, but that it conquers Quijote, that Quijote actually accepts it as true.

Going from *Lear* to *Quijote*, we have moved forward from antiquity to modernity, “progressed” from the end of the medieval to the beginning of the Renaissance, but in what is most important—the two works’ tragedies—we have barely moved at all. In a way, all madness is modern, and Shakespeare and Cervantes dealt with the same problem in the same way but only

¹⁴ Shakespeare. 4.5.174-9.

¹⁵ Shakespeare. 5.3.279-84.

from different perspectives. It is one of literature's most perfect moments: *Don Quijote* looks forward, *King Lear* looks back, and they see each other.

Sanity's Redemption

Thus this grand paradigm shift from example to challenge and these "hints at the beginnings of a fundamental divide" are ultimately false. Both Shakespeare and Cervantes ask the same question: if the modern world is truly so nasty, brutal, and short, then how can we help our madness? How is it any less natural than accepting the values of this new society of power and hubris, of dust and windmills? We see responses in Goethe, in Dostoevsky, and in Fitzgerald, but we also feel them implicitly in our own joys, sorrows, comedies, tragedies—all those emotions which push the bounds of our sanity. For though madness needs reason, reason also needs madness. As in Quijote's relationship with Sancho Panza, madness and reason speak to each other, deceive each other, and befriend each other. Shakespeare and Cervantes together portray a rich and wonderful conception of reality that is modern yet stands against modernity: a fiction, a world where madness plays an intrinsic part. Madness is fluid—madness is life.

Works Cited

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