

Paralleling Reality: The Storytelling Tapestry of *Don Quixote*

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The curious phenomenon of storytelling is unique to human beings, and has for millennia been vital to the growth of human civilization. Epic poems glorify the deeds of heroes, stories embody religious beliefs, histories establish and strengthen nations, and news stories piece together the disparate events of our daily world. Defining a story as events represented in language includes both factual relations of events and imaginative works. Both of these examples of a story expand a reader's or listener's experience of her own life, and consequently her understanding of the world. Her sense of her own self deepens, as does her web of experiences, as does (possibly) her empathy with others, so that she nudges towards becoming a better moral agent in our shared world, as her character expands through the experience of reading or listening to stories. Suzanne Keen writes in *Empathy and the Novel*, "that the novel should be singled out as a technology most adept at invoking empathy and shaping moral behavior . . . endorses what many people [instinctively] believe about the transformative power of reading and of reading fiction in particular" (35). Many argue that the experience of reading and listening to stories can improve our world for ourselves and for those around us, as society strives to create a better future history for our collective human story.

Miguel Cervantes' character Don Quixote pursues exactly this path, albeit in an unusual and (arguably) dubious manner. Obsessed with stories as Quixote becomes through his zealous reading, he strains the boundary between fantasy and reality when he charges off in imitation of his fictional hero Amadís to "[right] all manner of wrongs and . . . [win] eternal renown and everlasting fame" (*DQ* 21). Quixote remains sure that some future author will chronicle his great

deeds, which signifies his awareness of his own role in the story he creates for himself as he makes his world a better place. This extreme example of one character's fascination with stories nonetheless represents our collective fascination with and dependence on stories. We see this especially as we watch our world's history in the making through nightly news reports, read current issues narrated in novels and see these issues dramatized on stages, and watch imaginative works such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* run like lightning through our society's imagination. Cervantes, too, is keenly aware of how stories electrify the mind at the same time that they harmonize experience. In Part I of *Don Quixote* especially, Cervantes pointedly uses miniature narratives to enhance and elaborate on themes and smaller stories which otherwise occur seemingly at random in Quixote's haphazard world. Two interpolated stories in particular harmonize the novel's disparate events, as well as dramatize two significant themes and ideas that Quixote delivers in unusually eloquent discourse. The complication Don Fernando creates of false love and betrayal dramatizes a stark contrast to the theme of the Golden Age which Quixote delivers in Part I, chapter 11. In the same way, the much-studied Captive's Tale dramatizes and challenges Quixote's speech in chapters 37 and 38 of Part I, on the issue of the superiority of arms and military glory over letters and learning. Using these and other stories within the larger story of his novel, Cervantes harmonizes the seemingly disconnected and chaotic events that his "crazy" Quixote encounters throughout Part I. These events, disorganized and jumbled as they seem, match Quixote's mentality as he exuberantly yet clumsily embodies knight errantry. But by using stories within stories, Cervantes harmonizes these disparate events by the end of his novel, transforming his crazy Don Quixote into "the ingenious knight from La Mancha," as Sancho Panza frequently calls Quixote. Insofar as Quixote represents our collective

fascination with stories, Cervantes' novel about this crazy and ingenious knight becomes a microcosm of our storytelling tradition that is essential to our civilization's development.

Defining a story as a relation of events includes factual as well as imaginative stories. Examples are histories that establish nations, news stories that comprise history in the making, law cases which confirm, change, and create our laws as they define our society, and, in the Western tradition, biblical stories that define concepts of good and bad and a citizen's purpose on earth. Other examples of stories are imaginative works of fiction which further explore ideas of good and bad, such as Shakespeare's dramatization of timeless characters and themes, Leo Tolstoy's immortal examination of war and peace, and the works of other imaginative writers, including Shakespeare's contemporary, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. Sarah Worth defines storytelling, which she calls narrative, as "the representation of an event or sequence of events" (43). Her definition should specify only representations *in language*. Lynne Tirrell joins Robert Scholes in further honing the definition of a story to " '[allow] for or [encourage] the projection of human values upon . . . material' " (qtd. in Tirrell 115). These definitions apply both to imaginative stories and to factual relations of events, for stories, true and imaginative, represent our world.

Suzanne Keen's work compiled in her book *Empathy and the Novel* explores the possibility of how reading, particularly fiction, enhances our innate tendency to empathize with others. Tirrell makes exactly this point in "Storytelling and Moral Agency" when she claims, "Through its articulation of characters and events, storytelling provides the means for entering into sentiments not our own" (119). Tirrell also argues that stories shape selfhood and enhance one's sense of themselves in relation to others, which Tirrell sees as crucial to becoming a moral agent in the world (117). Regardless of any moral effect which stories have or do not have on an

individual, a reader's moral judgments inevitably arise as she encounters events dramatized in narratives, just as they arise when she encounters real-life situations. These judgments, whether they arise in real-life or while reading or listening to a story, confirm and sometimes change each individual's inherent moral values. In elaborating on how crucial stories are to a culture, Martha Nandorfy endorses Thomas King's claim that " 'the truth about stories is that that's all we are' " (qtd. in Nandorfy 325). Nandorfy goes on to say, "[King's statement] doesn't mean that we are paltry creatures, but that stories encompass everything; that our reality is determined by which stories we choose to remember or create, and which stories we live by" (325). Referencing Leslie Marmon Silko and the works of other aboriginal storytellers, Nandorfy points out that "stories are not representations; a story is not just a story but has the power to conjure reality into being" (325). Keen's work on reader empathy and mirror neuron activity in the human brain confirms how this reality takes shape in the reader's mind. Clearly, stories are essential to our world in ways which, with science's help, are only lately becoming fully realized. Guillermo Corona, writing about *Don Quixote*, makes a claim similar to Nandorfy's: "the complex nature of reality, with its contradictions, has its parallelism in a structure of stories in which there are also contradictions" (435). We see this in *Don Quixote*, when the complex nature of Quixote's reality resolves into the interpolated novels. With Quixote as our example, we see that what Corona writes about literature in general also applies to real life: "every work of literature is an intertext where different texts, styles and themes interact" (434). Quixote himself is so full of stories, texts, and intertexts, that their great amalgamation has altered his reality. Similarly, we see our world altered by the stories—both factual and imaginative—that weave the web of reality each one of us lives by.

In light of modern research and story theory, Quixote's transformative obsession with stories becomes more realistic and important, for a reader sees Quixote as a reflection of his or her own self as he or she balances in the web of stories that comprises our world. Quixote's concern with his future history represents each of our concerns with our own lives and what we leave behind. Quixote's admiration for Amadís represents our admiration for heroes, cultural and personal. Quixote's experience of disconnected events represents our own daily lives, unified only by our single apprehension of these events.

Despite the seeming chaos of *Don Quixote*—with its haphazard, random adventures, its confusions and muddles, and its headstrong central character—the novel is, as Ruth Snodgrass El Saffar finds it, “an incredibly well-unified work, in which the interpolated stories are as much a part of [its] structure as the deeds of Don Quijote and Sancho” (171). She continues about the novel's multiple narrators: “At a remove which transforms both character and author into characters, and fiction and real life into fiction, the amalgam [of the interrelation between stories and narrators] produces an effect of unity rather than of unresolved oppositions” (173). Perhaps El Saffar means specifically the two interpolated stories within the main narrative: Don Fernando's complication of false love and betrayal, and the Captive's Tale.

Don Fernando's story of false love, true love, betrayal, and anguish involves four characters: himself, Luscinda, Dorotea, and Cardenio, and winds through chapters 23 to 36 of *Don Quixote* Part I. Of this story's four players, two of them relate the story to different audiences at different times. Cardenio's version is broken into two separate relations to a different audience each time, whereas Dorotea's version is delivered all at once to one audience. The reader assembles the entire story piecemeal, similarly to the way he or she assembles the world at large from the disconnected events he or she perceives. Fernando's deception of the

trusting Dorotea, and Cardenio's incurable agony at Luscinda's betrayal of him to marry Don Fernando, sharply contrast the theme of the Golden Age which Quixote delivers in chapter 11, where noble morals and values create an Eden-like world. Cardenio's misery as he lives in the Sierra Moreno, described in chapters 23, 24, and 37, is the most vivid example of this contrast. Luscinda's unhappiness as she relates it in chapter 36 (*DQ* 316) equally impresses the reader, as does Dorotea's swoon when she hears Cardenio and sees Don Fernando, described also in chapter 36 (*DQ* 315). Such evident unhappiness affecting so many people from Don Fernando's actions begs the question of the morality of his actions. As a result, even the reader of *Don Quixote*—far removed from the events these characters relate—empathizes to some degree with these characters' sufferings.

Cervantes takes a similar tack when he foregrounds the Captive's tale with Quixote's eloquent speech on the superiority of arms over letters. Though Quixote stands by arms as superior to letters, the contrary position of letters' superiority over arms emerges when a judge, a man of letters and the Captive's brother, as they find out, resolves the Captive's and his intended's situation in chapter 42, establishing them in Christendom which they have struggled to reach. The Captive's Tale is delivered at the inn over three consecutive chapters in Part I: chapter 39 to chapter 41. The Captive relates to the audience in the inn the events of his life leading up to his imprisonment at Moorish hands. Similarly, Zoraida writes her girlhood and her wish to live in Christendom, and why, in a letter to the Captive, which the Captive in turn relays to the audience at the inn in chapter 40. The Captive also describes how his and Zoraida's relationship deepened as they began planning their elaborate escape from Algiers to Christian Spain. Part of their plan involved inventing the story of Zoraida's kidnapping to facilitate their escape. Once the captive has arranged the staged kidnapping, he travels to tell Zoraida to prepare

herself for the event so that it may run all the smoother, like a well-rehearsed play. When the captive is discovered in the garden belonging to Zoraida's father, to maintain his cover he must quickly invent the false story about being sent on an errand by the father's friend Arnaúte Mamí (*DQ* 353 – 54). This false story permits the captive and Zoraida to accomplish their staged kidnapping and their escape at last to Christendom. As a whole, the Captive's Tale is the clearest example of how true and false stories compound into stories that create the reality of lives.

Cervantes underscores his method of telling stories in relation to other stories with two major connections that link these otherwise unconnected stories. Each of these interpolated stories is true within the fictional world of the novel, involving as each story does real-world characters that walk alongside their audiences. Also, both stories are resolved within five short chapters of one another, and in the same setting: the inn which Quixote believes is the enchanted castle. The close proximity of these stories—both within the novel's structure and its geography—is significant. That Cervantes resolves both stories at the so-called “enchanted inn” is also significant, for it makes the inn a symbol for the storytelling tradition. The reader remembers Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, told “In Southwerk at the Tabard [Inn]” (*General Prologue*, line 20). Quixote's and Sancho's different perspectives of the inn demonstrates the dual nature of storytelling as factual and imaginative. Quixote persistently believes the inn to be a castle, where he has been welcomed, tended to, and adored by the maidens in the tradition of knight errantry. For Sancho, however, the inn is the rock-bottom of reality after he is tossed up and down in a blanket as payment for money he and Quixote owe the innkeeper (*DQ* 122). The dual nature of storytelling as these characters demonstrate it resolves as both a practical means for understanding our world, shown in our interest in history, news

stories, and law cases, and also a means of augmenting the significance of real events, shown in our interest in the imaginative literature of novels, plays, and epic poems.

In addition to the symbolic inn, another significant symbol for the storytelling tradition is Quixote himself. Jay Farness finds it ironic that “from the debut of Cardenio in chapter 23 until [Quixote’s] return home in chapter 46, the madcap knight’s role in events is largely peripheral,” particularly regarding the two major subplots of Don Fernando and the Captive (105). Quixote’s position as Farness describes it is our position regarding many stories we encounter, for we sit as spectators to past history, to court cases shaping our laws and our civilization, to news reports flashing our daily realities across a screen. Though we are removed from these worlds and realities insofar as we cannot affect such remote events, these realities nonetheless seep into each of our own realities as our emotions and judgments engage at the descriptions of events and actors, true and imagined, so that we are compelled to act as moral agents to change in any way we can the history taking shape around us. Quixote, similarly removed from the reality taking shape around him as he sits reeling with stories of knight errantry, takes every opportunity to enact the virtues of knight errantry. But regarding the major interpolated stories within his novel, Quixote hangs as a portrait on a wall, as it were, a symbol for our collective fascination with the stories that comprise our lives and our world.

Finally, not only Cervantes’ interpolated stories, but also his layered narrative structure makes *Don Quixote* a microcosm of the storytelling tradition. The reader reads about Don Quixote of La Mancha from four distinct narrators: Cide Hamete Benengeli, plus the translator of Benengeli’s Arabic manuscript, plus the so-called Second Author (whom Grossman identifies with Cervantes himself [*DQ* 65]), and finally the Ur-author or original author (El Saffar 175, Polchow). John Allen finds that “[this] whole complex structure of the novel leads the reader to

increased identification with the protagonist [Don Quixote]” (212), rather than with any of the shifting storytellers. This seems to be exactly Cervantes’ purpose in writing *Don Quixote*: to demonstrate our amusing lunacy at such a balance within and dependence on the web of stories comprising our lives and our world. These patterns of stories within stories, and storytellers within storytellers, show to what deep extent Cervantes is aware of the importance of stories for his real world readers, for whom he writes the larger story *Don Quixote* out of his central character’s obsession with stories of knight errantry. Clearly, stories were one of Cervantes’ own fascinations, too.

Four hundred years after its conception, *Don Quixote* continues inspiring artists and thinkers to such works as diverse as *Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and René Descartes’ work on epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge) (Bloom 33, Nadler). Harold Bloom reports along with Edith Grossman that even Cervantes’ great contemporary, William Shakespeare, “wrote a play, *Cardenio*, on Cervantes’s character in *Don Quixote*, but so far the play is lost” (Bloom 38, Grossman 184). Bloom also finds in Cervantes the influence of Erasmus, who distinguished between sublime madness and pernicious madness (34). Quixote’s sublime madness of his obsession with stories parallels our own, as we, amidst the web of stories comprising our lives, strive ingeniously to harmonize our world through telling and listening to stories, true and imaginative, as we strive to create not only our personal, but also the great human history.

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