

The narrator-knight, or don narrador



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

For much of the opening part of *Don Quijote*, the narrator contents himself with narrating. Though we are made aware of his presence as a character by his first-person style, his subjective interpretation of Quijote's actions, and occasional references to his historical research, it is Quijote himself who rightfully takes center-stage throughout the first eight chapters. In Chapter IX, however, the first chapter of Part Two, the narrator steps forward into the limelight, turning away from Quijote's (mis)adventures for a few pages in favor of his own story, the story of the discovery of the second manuscript. On first reading this episode, one may be tempted to call it merely another tactic employed by Cervantes to support his elaborate framing device, designed to cast the novel as a history. (Indeed, the intricacies of the Spanish word "historía" come into play here, as the line between story and history was hardly drawn clearly in the late 16th century, when Cervantes was writing.) Upon closer examination of Chapter IX, however, we find a surprising pattern: the narrator's role over these pages mirrors that of don Quijote in Chapter I, moving from engaged reader to principled actor. By exposing this briefly evident parallel, we may well come to an unexpected conclusion about the novel as a whole. Chapter IX starts with don Quijote and el vizcaíno frozen, about to begin their duel; the original chronicle, we are told, came to a sudden halt here: " en aquel punto tan dudoso paró y quedó destroncada tan sabrosa historia, sin que nos diese noticia su autor dónde se podría hallar lo que della faltaba" (Cervantes 91). Perhaps the most significant word in this sentence, for our purposes, is the tiny personal pronoun " nos." With this easily-overlooked construction, the narrator places himself in a group with his own readers. There was a time, he tells us, when he experienced the Quijote story for the first time, as we do now, when he

reacted with grief to the abrupt break in the narrative. Much as Cervantes certainly wanted his readers to feel, the narrator simply had to find out what happened next. Yet the narrator is not just any reader. More specifically, he reads like don Quijote himself read: with great passion for the chivalric romance genre. In the second paragraph of Chapter IX, for instance, he expresses his surprise that Quijote didn't have his own personal scribe, describing the situation as "fuera de toda buena costumbre" and "cosa que no faltó a ninguno de los caballeros andantes" (91-2). In this way, just as don Quijote tries to write his own life story in accordance with the conventions of chivalric romance, the narrator reads his history fully expecting Quijote's experiences to mirror those of other caballeros andantes. Along the same lines and presumably due to these shared preconceptions about chivalry, the narrator repeatedly extols don Quijote, calling him "luz y espejo de la caballería manchega" (92), for instance. Some may say that these over-exuberant exaltations are meant to be read as tongue-in-cheek; I must rebut that while Cervantes the author is certainly using sarcasm, and while we readers must always remain aware of this technique, the narrator-historian must be taken at face value as a character within the novel. The narrator reinforces his own sincerity by proclaiming himself and all fellow historians to be champions of truth: "...habiendo y debiendo ser los historiadores puntuales, verdaderos y no nada apasionados, y que ni el interés ni el miedo, el rancor ni la afición, no les hagan torcer del camino de la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir" (95) He places history – and by extension historians – in opposition to time, constantly battling to maintain an accurate record of the past. This

antagonistic schema sounds eerily familiar; indeed, while the historian-narrator strives to provide a cultural memory, opposed by the continual passage of time that seeks to erase it, the knight-errant Quijote strives to provide an obsolete justice, opposed by a perceived Enchanter continually pointing out the current reality. Both historian and knight find themselves bound to a disappearing past, and both react angrily to that which drags them back to the present. The narrator makes this parallel even more explicit when he declares don Quijote deserving of “continuas y memorables alabanzas” and continues, “aun a mí no se me deben negar, por el trabajo y diligencia que puse en buscar el fin desta agradable historia” (93). While praising Quijote’s clearly outdated sense of righteousness, the narrator also demands praise and immortality himself for his own attempt to salvage the past. Indeed, not only are the narrator and the knight engaged in parallel quests, but they are also both defined by seemingly limitless self-assurance. As Quijote blames all his failures on the unseen Enchanter, so too does the narrator claim that history can never originate in imperfection, that any flaw or incompleteness therein must be blamed on “la malignidad del tiempo” (92). By the end of this chapter, the narrator has returned to his more passive role to finish the previously aborted duel between don Quijote and the el vizcaíno; yet now that we have established the clear parallel in Chapter IX between the narrator-historian and don Quijote himself, has anything changed? How does the narrator’s similarity to a lunatic protagonist affect his reliability? In the most basic sense, it doesn’t. With this historian’s manuscript serving as our only piece of evidence of don Quijote’s life, we have little choice but to trust it. In order to discuss don Quijote’s exploits, we must accept the chronicle we are given. To understand the book as a

complete entity, however, we must recognize our narrator as perhaps too vigilant about defeating time – we must at least acknowledge the possibility that we are not receiving the “ real” story, that he may be too eager to deem a tale ‘truthful’ in order to protect it from being forgotten. Though the novel is fiction, and therefore has no other, more accurate version for us to read, the story contained could be false even in the fictional world of the frame narrative, of the narrator. This is not to say that he’s lying, of course, or even deliberately embellishing; to the contrary, just as don Quijote believes the windmills to be giants, so too would the narrator trust his own story in this circumstance. The fact remains, however, that just as we do not trust don Quijote’s senses and interpretations – for they seem obviously incorrect – so too may we wonder about the narrator himself. Indeed, though the book offers the pretense of history, we know it is a fiction, a false chronicle created by an Enchanter of sorts. Under this new light, the historian-narrator becomes a kind of tragic figure, like Quijote, tirelessly battling to advance truth, yet trapped inside a work of fancy, a satire of all those who cannot differentiate between the real and the written.