

# The concept of liberty in servantes' novel



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In the Prologue to *Don Quixote*, Cervantes presents his protagonist as a “dry, shriveled, whimsical offspring... just what might be begotten in a prison, where every discomfort is lodged and every dismal noise has its dwelling” (41). But if conceived in an Iron Age of limited religious, social, and intellectual freedoms as the product of Cervantes’s own poverty and privation, Don Quixote liberates himself through his transformative capacity, first of his will and imagination and later of his reason. Alongside this is the parallel tale of the squire’s own pilgrimage to personal freedom. Cervantes uses the characters Don Quixote and Sancho Panza to advance his argument for liberty in literature and society, and when this is not possible, in the individual.

Don Quixote can be read not as an “invective against the books of chivalry” but as an invective against the abuse of literature (46). As Part I opens, Don Quixote has “stumbled upon the oddest fancy that ever entered a madman’s brain,” one that moves him to take up arms as a knight-errant and venture out into the world, “redressing all manner of wrongs” (59). He is enslaved to a chivalric fiction, though this is a fiction of his own narration: he chooses what he sees, turning inns into castles, wenches into ladies-in-waiting, and giants into windmills. To the point of fault, Don Quixote is irreverent not only to the constraints of society but to its demands; thus, his liberty develops only as his idealism begins to wane in Part II. Here, Cervantes continues to manipulate the motif of conflicting authorship and duality of characters to establish his quarrel between reality and fantasy.

As Don Quixote begins to recognize that his life is descending into a staged presentation of himself, his defiance grows. He shows less willingness to

serve for the enjoyment of others, for the Dukes and Duchesses and Don Antonios of the world. As he writes in his letter to Sancho Panza, " when it comes to the point, I must comply with my profession rather than with their pleasure" (895). In a faintly concealed assertion of Cervantes's own authorial liberty and command, Don Quixote acts in defiance of the actions set forth in the false sequel by Avellaneda, who has brought the knight to Saragossa. Don Quixote proclaims, " For that reason, I will not set foot in Saragossa, and so the forgery of this new historian shall be exposed to the eyes of the world, and mankind will be convinced that I am not the Don Quixote of whom he speaks" (953). Don Quixote asserts his freedom by refusing to be merely a character proposed by another, losing his own identity in the process. However, at this point, he is still not truly free but only a character proposed by himself.

It is in his death, when all delusion releases him, that Don Quixote's liberty achieves its highest form. He dies as his own master, who, " though he was conquered by another, nevertheless conquered himself" (1038). It is not the contrivance of the " Knight of the White Moon" that ultimately frees Don Quixote but rather his own mind; he dies renouncing his knight-errantry and with his judgment " clear and unfettered" (1045). Should the Don's journey therefore be viewed simply as one that takes him from the bondage of living in an idyllic past to the freedom of an " unfettered" mind Cervantes seems to suggest otherwise, passing his final judgment on Don Quixote through the mouthpiece of Sansn Carrasco, who writes in the epitaph for the hero's tomb:

He reck'd the world of little prize

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And was a bugbear in men's eyes

But had the fortune in his age

To live a fool and die a sage (1049). Both the life of the fool and the death of a sage are acts of Don Quixote's own free will; it is his immense fortune, in an Iron Age that constrains ideas, to have lived and died both. The novel takes the knight from an imaginative liberty that "reck'd the world of little prize" to a liberated and rational reality. Cervantes believes that both types of liberty embodied by Don Quixote, of the imagination and of reason, have value for the reader in claiming one's life as one's own. Earlier in the novel Sansn tells the knight that "his life did not belong to him, but to all those who needed him to protect them in their misfortunes" 554). But in his defiant life and defiant death, when those around him are hesitant to relinquish him and to end the charades, Don Quixote proves that his life does belong to himself, both as the Knight of the Rueful Figure and as Alonso Quixano the Good. He is its sole author as the knight and its sole savior as Alonso.

But the novel is not just the romance of a strong individual character, Don Quixote, who affirms the possibility of freedom in a constraining environment. Within Cervantes's treatment of the theme of liberty are many layers that support and articulate the others. Although Cervantes does profess an explicit goal to overthrow "the ill-based fabric of these books of chivalry" through his satire of the genre, he tries to reconcile this with his belief that literature can be liberating to the reader (47).

This is accomplished not only through his account of Don Quixote as an imaginatively liberated figure but also through Sancho Panza, who discovers

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his freedom along the way and forces us to reflect on our own. As Sancho Panza sets out in Part I, Cervantes describes him as a “ laboring man . . . with very little wit in his pate,” a “ poor wight” who is coerced into playing the role of squire for Don Quixote (95). Yet, even as Sancho sets out, his subsequent development is foreshadowed by the image Cervantes gives us of Sancho astride “ his ass like a patriarch” (96). The image at this point in the novel is comical, but should not be dismissed because it prefigures Sancho’s move to grasp the autonomous rule of his own, if humble, domain.

This move is symbolically represented by Sancho’s forsaking of his governorship and return to Dapple, the “ friend and partner of [his] toils and troubles” (909). As Sancho says, “ Make way, gentlemen, and let me return to my former liberty. Let me go in search of the life I left, and rise again from this present death” (909). Sancho would rather “ rest under a shady oak in the summer and wrap [himself] up in tough sheepskin in winter, at [his] own sweet will, than lie down, with the slavery of a government, in holland sheets”(910). The squire recognizes the sweet drudgery of ruling himself. If he follows Don Quixote now, it will not be because of ambition but because of his “ own sweet will;” because, as he tells the squire of the Knight of the Wood, “ love him as I love the cockles of my heart, and I can’t invent a way of leaving him, no matter what piece of foolishness he does” (613).

Sancho’s association with the Don has not only brought him to an understanding of his own personal liberty, but it gives him something of the imaginative liberty the knight fiercely displays. No longer the “ poor wight,” Sancho in his ingenuity deceives his master in the adventure of the fulling-hammers and later transforms a peasant girl into Lady Dulcinea by invoking

the knight's own panacea of enchantment. When Ricote questions the possibility of Sancho's governorship of his island by telling him, "Hush, Sancho, islands lie out in the sea; there are none of them on the mainland," Sancho replies, "Why not?" (917). In this single statement, Sancho incorporates both his master's defiance and his insistence on the sovereignty of his own will.

But Sancho's pilgrimage is not simply one toward self-awareness. It also encompasses Cervantes's subtle criticism of his time, an era of oppressive class structures and limited speech. In Part I, Cervantes presents a disturbing episode of the whipping of the servant-boy Andrs that is left unresolved and worsened by Don Quixote's involvement. This is a dark portrait both of the destructive potential of Don Quixote's delusion and the incorrigibility of the provincial social structure. The knight's renunciation of his disillusion solves the first problem, but what of the second? Cervantes offers some resolution in Part II, when Don Quixote attempts to whip Sancho in order to disenchant Dulcinea. The possibility of physical violence in this scene is reminiscent of the violence suffered by Andrs.

Sancho overpowers the Don, who cries, "How, traitor! Do you dare raise a hand against your master and against the hand that feeds you?" Sancho replies, "I neither mar king nor make king. I only defend myself, who am my lord. If you promise me, master, that you'll let me alone and not try to whip me, I'll set you free" (956). In this parable of the reversal of roles, Cervantes indulges in a type of wish fulfillment where the limits on freedom "here the fabricated norms of knight-errantry but also the norms of a hierarchical society" disintegrate. As Sancho questions authority and asserts his own

basic rights, Cervantes questions the limits on human freedom in society even while conceding that these limits exist.

The suppression of speech is a secondary target of Cervantes's social commentary articulated through Sancho. Don Quixote tells Sancho, "you must abstain and curb your desire for so much talk with me in the future, for never in any of the innumerable books of chivalry I have read have I found a squire who talked to his master as much as you do to yours" (196). But although Don Quixote takes his squire to be "a perverter of good language," Sancho recognizes that his words, even when lacking in precision and laced in proverbs, are no worse than the "balderdash" his master spouts about knight-errantry and enchantments (661, 693).

"I know you, Sancho," replied Don Quixote, "so, I pay no heed to your words."

"No more do I to yours," said Sancho, "even though you beat me or kill me for those I've spoken or mean to speak if you don't correct and mend your own" (693).

Sancho's unwillingness to compromise his free speech leaves the reader of Don Quixote with a lasting consciousness of and appreciation for Sancho's speech in all its idiosyncrasies. Because the squire's words persist, the series of exchanges between master and squire on the matter of speech are not merely humorous, but testify to the triumph of speech over a force that threatens to suppress it, a force not nearly as restraining as the literary censorship of the Spanish Inquisition but suggestive of it. Through the course of the novel, Sancho develops an awareness of his own worth and autonomy, <https://assignbuster.com/the-concept-of-liberty-in-servantes-novel/>

circumvents the master-servant relationship, and makes a case for freedom of speech. Cervantes presents Sancho's journey to freedom with a bittersweet longing that this could be the case for each "poor wight"(95).

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are complementary characters that together express Cervantes's commitment to the cause of liberty, both in society and in literature, where ideas should be given free reign. Don Quixote's journey shows that both the imagination and the mind are liberating "if one can have the fortune both "to live a fool and die a sage"(1049). Sancho brings this concept further, illustrating that the individual can liberate himself. As Don Quixote leaves the castle of the duke and duchess, he turns to his squire and says, "Liberty, Sancho, my friend, is one of the most precious gifts that Heaven has bestowed on mankind...

For liberty, as well as for honor, man ought to risk his life, and he should reckon captivity the greatest evil life can bring" (934)2E Perhaps this is the attraction of knight-errantry to Don Quixote: the disciplined rule of self and the crusade to emancipate the oppressed. His is that "noble mind . . . ranging freely" in the castles of his imagination before coming home and liberating itself (935). But if Don Quixote breaks free from the prison in which he was conceived, perhaps Sancho does so even more. Throughout the novel he advances his personal liberty, and when he returns to La Mancha, the reader remembers the image of the squire atop "his ass like a patriarch"(96). But this time the image is not just a caricature but an affirmation of the fiercely individualistic freedom he has found and that is available to us all.