

Quixote Wasn't Crazy

He Knew He Was Playing

“A gentleman of fifty, with nothing to do, once invented for himself an occupation. Those about him, in his household and his village, were of the opinion that no such desperate step was necessary. He had an estate, and he was fond of hunting; these, they said, were occupation enough, and he should be content with the uneventful routines it imposed. But the gentleman was not content. And when he set out in earnest to live an altogether different life he was thought by everybody, first at home and then abroad, to be either strange or mad. He went away three times, returning once of his own accord, but in the second and third cases being brought back by persons of the village who had pursued him for this purpose. He returned each time in an exhausted state, for the occupation he embraced was strenuous; and soon after his third homecoming he took to bed, made his will, confessed his sins, admitted that the whole enterprise had been an error, and died.”

– Mark Van Doren,

the opening paragraph of his essay, *Don Quixote's Profession*, originally a series of three lectures, first published as a monograph by Columbia University Press in 1958.

“Don Quixote was not mad. At any time he could have abandoned his quest and returned home, had success not appeared to be within reach. A real madman does not have such a choice: he is the prisoner of his madness; when it becomes unbearable he cannot drop out of it and simply go home to resume his previous way of life.”

“The occupation which Don Quixote chooses for himself is that of knight errant. He is not under the delusion that he is a knight errant—no, he sets his mind on becoming one. He does not play at being someone else, as children do in their games; he is not pretending to be someone else, like an impostor, or impersonating a character, like an actor on stage. And Quixote adopts the profession of knight after due reflection: it is the result of a deliberate choice. After having considered other options, he finally decided that the career of a knight errant would be the most rewarding, intellectually and morally.”

“But how does one become a knight? Van Doren asks. By acting like a knight—which is the very opposite of pretense, of make-believe. To imitate as he does is a profound

apprenticeship – the true way of learning and the key to understanding. 'What is the difference between acting like a great man and being one?' Van Doren asks. 'To act like a poet is to write poems; to act like a statesman is to ponder the nature of goodness and justice; to act like a student is to study; to act like a knight is to think and feel like one.'"

"Had Don Quixote been simply and plainly mad, or had he indulged in a protracted game of self-deception and play-acting, we should not be talking of him now, Van Doren observes — 'We are talking of him because we suspect that, in the end, he did become a knight.'"

– Simon Leys, condensed from his essay contemplating Van Doren's book, *Don Quixote's Profession*, in *The New York Review of Books*, June 11, 1998

"There is, of course, in Don Quixote's stable a half-starved nag. After four days of meditation on such names as Bucephalus and Babieca, (the stallion of the Cid), Quixote christens his jade Rocinante. *Rocin* means hack horse: wherefore Don Quixote meant that his mount was *before* all the other hacks of the world."

"This detail, appearing in the first chapter of the Book, might give the canny reader pause. 'Why,' he might ask, 'if the deluded eyes—as we are told—of Don Quixote saw his hack equal to the steeds of Amadis or King Alexander, did he christen him with a name so comical and so revealing?' The reader will be aware of a curious shift in this Don Quixote's madness: a note of self-conscious irony, not usually found in the insane upon the point of their mania."

"In the matter of the selecting of a Lady (that needed spur of every true knight-errant) it is clear that Don Quixote knows the facts about Aldonza Lorenzo, wench daughter of Lorenzo Cochuelo of El Toboso. Quite consciously, he turns her into the divine Dulcinea whom henceforth he will worship. This he makes his 'truth': there is no evidence that the *fact* of the girl is ever hidden from him. He needs a helmet—indeed he needs Mambrino's magic helmet. A barber comes, riding an ass and on his head (for it is raining) a copper bleeding-dish. This is the golden helmet of Mambrino; and as such Don Quixote takes it. But in the parley before and after, with Sancho Panza, it is plain that the knight accepts Sancho's *fact* about the dish: he merely turns it, for his own purpose, into his knightly "truth."

- Waldo Frank, *Don Quixote: A Modern Scripture*,
a feature in *VQR*, Volume 2, Number 1, Winter 1926

Closing Thoughts

"In debates, the word "quixotic" is nearly always meant as an insult—which puzzles me, since I can hardly think of a greater compliment. The way most people refer to Don Quixote makes you wonder if they have actually read the book."

– Simon Leys, *The New York Review of Books*, June 11, 1998

"'Don Quixote,' the critics wrote, 'was a perpetual loser.' Nabokov checked the book in detail, scene by scene, and found this was not so. He even scores Don Quixote's victories and defeats as games in a tennis match which proves surprisingly close: "6-3, 3-6, 6-4, 5-7. But the fifth set will never be played. Death cancels the match."

– Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*

"He has ridden for three hundred and fifty years through the jungles and tundras of human thought—and he has gained in vitality and stature. We do not laugh at him any longer. His blazon is pity, his banner is beauty. He stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, pure, unselfish, and gallant."

– Vladimir Nabokov, in a series of lectures on Don Quixote delivered at Harvard in 1952, when Nabokov was a visiting professor on leave from Cornell.

Compiled by Roy H. Williams, Nov 23, 2016

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