

Andrew Braverman
Professor Corinne Scheiner
CO100: Introduction to Comparative Literature
10/13/14

Don Quixote and King Lear on the Nature of Madness

In Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Cervantes illustrates his protagonist in a comical and empathy-evoking light. Quixote's friends and neighbors label him "insane" because of his pronounced, romantic notions of knighthood and chivalry. Those nearby the valiant Don Quixote often join together in laughter towards him, acknowledging that the poor man is in a state of absolute insanity. So the plot forms around that subjective truth of Quixote being crazy. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, we see a comparably crazy character in King Lear. Other characters again, join in chiding and poking fun at the tragic king. The audience witnesses every stage in Lear's transition into evident insanity. But in Lear's road to madness, the true nature of madness becomes much clearer than in Quixote's case. The king unearths one new element of this wretched mental transformation: the gained "sight" that can accompany one's transition into insanity. *King Lear* helps to shed a new light on *Don Quixote*, creating a very different reading of the text wherein we see that Quixote's madness may have also given him sight.

Don Quixote inhabits a reality far different from the reality which those around him do. Most who interact with the knight errant see nothing but a disturbed man when looking at him. Whether he is stabbing windmills, or romping around with a bucket as a helmet on his decrepit horse, Quixote has a hard time convincing anyone to take him seriously. In one of Quixote and Panza's earlier

stops at the inn that they frequent, Quixote awakes telling a story about “one of the strangest adventures one could ever imagine”(Cervantes 117). He describes how a beautiful princess came on to him, but out of fidelity towards Dulcinea, he declines. After a long-winded tale Quixote concludes that this “princess” “must be guarded by some enchanted Moor,” and that was who beat him up the previous night (117). The audience discovers however, that in fact the “princess” is the servant Maritornes, and the “enchanted Moor” is another servant with whom Maritornes is actually trying to sleep. Quixote’s recollection of this story baffles all, and proves how and why others understand him to be crazy: he has a different perception of reality.

Immediately after leaving this incident at the inn, we see the squire Sancho lamenting all their misadventures to his knight, Quixote. Quixote interrupts him to examine “two armies coming to attack and fight each other” (126). It is not until Quixote finds himself barely conscious from the slingshots of some shepherds that he realizes his grave mistake. He is in a herd of sheep, not an army. Don Quixote fails to learn from this lesson unfortunately. Soon after that misfortune, the dynamic duo finds themselves amongst a traveling group of mourners with a dead body. After one man tries to tell Quixote that they are in a hurry, the fabled knight errant “attack[s] one of the mourners, wound[s] him, and knock[s] him to the ground” (137). He states that he is “avenging” something that he does not describe. As seen here, Don Quixote conducts himself in such a manner that leaves one doubting his sanity and intelligence. His amalgam of peculiar adventures contributes to that difficulty of proving sanity, thus assumption of insanity.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, we see a character utter outrageous suggestions, and partake in crazy tasks similar to that of Quixote. His own daughters usurp absolute power of the country from poor King Lear. The only virtuous daughter of his is living as an exile in nearby France, by the king's own doing. As he realizes the decreasingly little power he maintains, and the bellicose trend of his kingdom towards war, the king becomes increasingly insane. Lear proclaims, "[his] heart/ Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,/ Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!" (Shakespeare 2.4.259-281). Lear even acknowledges his own insanity here. But, in Lear's state of madness we see something different emerge: gained insight/ perspective that accompanies one's going mad.

Stumbling around, in a torrential downpour with the fool, Lear starts to converse more and more nonsensically. Towards the beginning of the third act, we see Lear literally cursing the heavens. The king screams at the storm he is caught in, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks/...Till you have drench'd the steeples, drown'd the cocks!" (3.2.1-4). Shakespeare creates irony to emphasize Lear's craziness. The king's only companion is a fool, but it is actually the king himself who is acting like a fool in his insanity and screams. Lear's speech and behavior here show him to be insane. But by becoming mad, Lear learns an important objective truth. He discovers which of his daughters are deserving of his love, and which betray him for example. Many a time Lear condemns and curses Regan and Gonnerril in his mad rants. He laments his decision to exile his one altruistic daughter Cordelia, and resolves to make amends to her.

King Lear also experiences extreme epiphanies, one of which shows him how much he has neglected the poor/homeless in his time as leader. This particular realization is important because it shows how Lear gains sight through madness. Because of the lucid thoughts that he displays, Lear shows that maybe he is partially sane. Spurts of craziness and jibberish though ensure that Lear is still seen as mad by those around him. "Fie, fie, fie, pah! pah!" Lear mumbles at one point (4.6.126). In his reunion with altruistic Cordelia, Lear acknowledges that she must hate him and with good reason too. "I fear I am not in my perfect mind," speaks a concerned King Lear to his daughter upon seeing her (4.7.60). Here the king again recognizes his own mental instability, thus proving himself to be insane. Even after admitting insanity, he has in fact gained some vision through his transition into madness. Considering that Lear was capable of this, we are now able to review Don Quixote, and *Don Quixote* in order to acquire a new reading of the text suggesting that Quixote mad be more than just mad.

Initially, Don Quixote appears to be nothing but insane. There is no wisdom to be found in his eloquent discourses, or bizarre behavior. But after reading *King Lear*, and applying the knowledge we have gained from that text, we begin to see the aforementioned knight-errant in a different light. Perhaps some of what Quixote does has roots in rationality, and is not just a result of his mental craziness. Looking at *King Lear* closely helps to teach us this. Let us dissect some instances of Quixote's purported "insanity." When Panza and Quixote stumble upon a gang of shackled prisoners being escorted by guards, we see an instance where some may interpret Quixote's madness as something else (e.g. sight). Upon encountering the group of

men, Quixote declares that “here it is fitting to put into practice my profession: to...come to the aide and assistance of the wretched” (163). He thinks that the king is wrong for imprisoning these men. While it may seem that Don Quixote is again just acting illogical and crazy here, if we examine this scene more closely, it seems that Quixote’s madness could be something else. Maybe through his madness, he has come to the vision that the death sentence and imprisonment are not the best ways to deal with criminals like these, particularly those who have committed a relatively harmless crime, like stealing cattle. Quixote is certainly baffled that “[it is] possible that the king forces anyone [to be a galley slave]”(163). His surprise here supports the suggestion that in this case it is not madness, rather a gained perspective of justice that motivates our valiant knight to act.

Another instance where we see an action of Quixote’s that could signify sight gained through insanity is with Cardenio. Quixote repeatedly demands to Sancho and the goatherds that he must meet Cardenio, and hear his story out in entirety. They remain skeptical, but Quixote shows resolution. Quixote says that he “had resolved not to leave these mountains until [he] found [Cardenio]” (183). He is of the opinion that men deserve second chances, which we see in his refusal to spurn Cardenio with the other men because of past aggressions. This is part of the sight that he gains as a result of being mad. He is not just purely being mad; he’s applying recently gained knowledge. This realization of Quixote’s about second chances is comparable to Lear’s recognition of how badly he has neglected the wretched/homeless particularly with regards to how they both illustrate insights gained by madness.

Both of these characters show how one can actually gain insight/sight, while going mad. On our initial reading of *Don Quixote* it proves difficult to see that, but after reading *King Lear* and re-examining *Quixote*, we see that there are many instances in which Quixote's actions could easily be illustrating his gained sight from madness, instead of just madness itself. So, Quixote is not just a madman whose actions are all products of said madness. He does gain sight from his insanity, as we see in interactions with Cardenio and the chain gang. King Lear's new insight on the goodness of all his daughters, and on some of the past mistakes that he has made supports the same idea about sight gained through madness. Lear's newly gained sight helps to illuminate how Quixote gains the same thing, both of them through madness.

Works Cited

De Cervantes, Miguel. "First Part." *Don Quixote*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. 1-449.

Print.

Shakespeare, William, Tucker Brooke and William Lyon Phelps. *King Lear*. New

Haven: Yale UP, 1947. Prints