My reading of *Don Quixote* this semester was more than a casual read-through of a classic Spanish novel. Throughout my journey through the text, I periodically stopped to analyze themes and connections across the story itself and in the broader cultural context of the novel during the Spanish *Siglo de Oro*, a bloom of arts and literature in the 15th and 16th centuries. Below are a collection of mini-essays exhibiting some of the topics I found most interesting throughout my reading of the novel.

**The Knight Errant is a Burden on Society**

Throughout the first part of the novel, Don Quixote attempts to help the world around him acting as a knight errant following the chivalric code; however Quixote’s actions show that the role of a knight errant in society is more of a burden than a boon. From the start of the novel Quixote is an ironic character, an unlikely hero attempting to live the fantasy of a fictional character from a bygone era. The stereotypical chivalric knight has cultural connections to the Reconquista movement in Spain during the 15th century, a Christian soldier fighting a war of culture, territory, and religion. Although the character of Don Quixote is not meant to be taken seriously, his interactions with Spanish society demonstrate how Cervantes sees the Reconquista harming pre-modern Spain.

The grand irony of the knight errant is that the main moral pillar of a knight’s quest is his selflessness and willingness to help others, especially his lady. In reality, the situation of a traveling knight requires him to depend on the help of others for food and shelter. Although the knight is supposed to be selfless and do good to others, he takes food and shelter from those he meets in his adventures, without giving much in return. This is exemplified by Quixote in chapter three, when he stays at the inn, eating food and injuring others in battle, only to leave the next day without repaying the innkeeper. In the pursuit of the “greater cause,” a knight errant will take more than he gives to those he meets along his journey. Likewise, another moral pillar of a chivalric knight is his humility
and selflessness, especially towards his lady. This is often contradicted, as a knight will demand respect of others, placing himself above all with his armor, combat skills, and polite demand of provisions from those he meets. These are all contradictions in the seemingly utopian storyline of the knight errant.

There is a lost cause of knights errant: they claim to fight and adventure for a “valiant cause” and the idolized lady instead of for a greater cause or a common God. It seems noble to be fighting for a lady, but in fact these brutish knights were just picking fights and tromping around on useless missions until they happened to kill or intimidate someone wealthy enough to cede their land to them. This is the fantastical quest of a knight errant, a storyline plagued by irony and deluded in the grandeur of an unimportant woman who never asked to be fought for. Cervantes makes it clear that Don Quixote is an ironic character attempting to embody the fictional character of a knight errant. However, the negative interactions between Quixote and society subtly suggest that the idealized chivalric code does more harm than good. Through the character of Don Quixote, Cervantes expresses his resentment of the Reconquista movement in 15th century Spain.

“Enchantments” Mask the Shortcomings of the Reconquista

As a truly noble and good person, Don Quixote attempts to see the world in the most positive perspective as he lives his life as the archetypical chivalric soldier, or knight. However, when presented with a situation that is too horrible or threatening for him to fathom, Quixote shields himself from the cruel reality of the situation by explaining that the only reasonable explanation for the trouble must be an “enchantment”. Although this manages to help him maintain part of his innocence, Quixote’s “enchantment” scenarios are often caused by his own actions. If the actions and motivations of Quixote are a metaphor to the ideals of the Spanish crusades, Cervantes expresses the negative and modern outcomes of the Reconquista mentality as “enchantments” in Don Quixote’s mind. Without his excuse of enchantments, Quixote would have no option but to realize that the age of chivalry has given birth to a less ideal, capitalized world.

In chapter 17 of part one, Quixote believes that the inn servant is a beautiful lady coming to render him service, and as a result the mule driver and innkeeper beat him and Sancho Panza senseless. Rather than admit the faults in the chivalric assumptions he made that night, Quixote explains to Sancho that they must have been in an enchanted inn, as the attack was clearly unprovoked. As Alonso Quijano begins to develop as a knight, he maintains such delusion of
enchantments, stuck in a medieval mindset whose values and calls to action are no longer relevant. In chapter 26 of part two, for example, Quixote attacks a puppet show thinking that the Moorish puppets are actually enemy soldiers. Eventually, he realizes that he has destroyed somebody’s puppet set, and is frustrated by his impulse to attack the Moorish puppets. He pays for the damages, but blames the puppeteer for “enchanting” him into believing that the show was real. Again, Quixote starts to realize that the ways of the Reconquista, blindly attacking the Moors, have caused him to destroy a person’s puppets. As a metaphor to the entire war and casualties of the crusades, Quixote’s excuse of enchantment hides the xenophobia and racial hatred so basic to the Reconquista movement. In using the recurring term of enchantment, Cervantes points to the flaws of chivalry and pre-modern Spain with each negative consequence that Quixote faces as a result of living a knightly life.

**Critique of the Spanish Class System**

Cervantes makes a mockery of the Spanish nobility and class system in the title of the novel, making the main character, Quixote, a hidalgo, the lowest of the nobility with neither great advantages nor disadvantages in society. Cervantes seeks to demonstrate the inadequacy of the aristocratic class system and the human potential it stymies. Through the medium of storytelling and the relationship between Quixote and Sancho, Cervantes shows that true friendships transcend class barriers.

During the Golden Age in which *Don Quixote* was written there was a great deal of new art and culture emerged from Spain, while the divide between social classes kept the nation entrenched in poverty and locked in a state of halted economic development. Cervantes makes his criticism of the class structure obvious throughout the narrative, presenting the noble duke and duchess as main antagonists of the second part of the novel and centering many character conflicts around class mismatches. The majority of love stories in the novel cross-class boundaries between the man and the woman. Amongst these love interests are Cardenio and Luncinda who are from families of different wealth, Quixote and the peasant Dulcinea he claims as his lady, and Zoraida and the Christian captive whose love for each other costs them their entire fortunes and impacts their families. Cervantes demonstrates the possibilities of loving and marrying across class and religious boundaries through these love stories with happy endings.
Perhaps the most memorable story of a successful relationship between two characters of separate classes is the friendship of Quixote and Sancho. Cervantes uses slow character development to illustrate the two adventurers growing closer to each other. At the beginning of the novel, Quixote treats Sancho as his subordinate and as a person whose opinions are insignificant. At one point, Quixote even goes as far as to suggest Sancho not speak to him for the remainder of their adventure. The two were raised in different social classes: Sancho as a peasant and a servant, and Quixote as a gentleman. By the end of the novel, Quixote and Sancho have grown closer and are good friends. They treat each other as equals, and Sancho stays with Quixote as he dies. Cervantes shows through the growing relationship between Quixote and Sancho that some of the best friendships cross class barriers.

**Nobility as a false indicator of character**

Cervantes had a general negative view of nobility and the class system in Spain, and he expresses it though the characters in *Don Quixote*. The actions and positions of the characters in the novel are closely tied to social classes. Cervantes chooses lower class characters to be the honest, good characters in the novel and vice versa as a method of exaggerating his beliefs of the class system. In addition to adjusting the inherent morality of the characters, Cervantes makes the characters themselves revolt against the social system.

In general, the poorer and lower class characters in *Don Quixote* are more ignorant about things, but they are also the characters who are morally the best in the novel. For example, Sancho is a loyal companion to Quixote, helping him and serving him even when he doubts the future of getting his fiefdom. Sancho does not just accompany Quixote but he cares for him and wishes him the best. When Quixote decides that he needs to spend time hurting himself to give penance, it is Sancho who looks for help and seeks to bring him home.

On the opposite spectrum of morality, the duke and duchess are represented as both the richest and most cruel characters in the novel. The two use their wealth and intelligence to play jokes on Sancho and Quixote, taking advantage of their superior position. They seem to have little regard for the well-being and happiness of others and are the true antagonists of the novel. It is not a mistake that these characters are the most cruel, Cervantes seeks to illustrate the worst aspects of the social class system. *Don Quixote* does not idolize the rich and powerful, and tries to make the point that nobility is a false indicator of character.
Reflection on “Theoretical Implications in Don Quijote’s Idea of Enchantment”  

Bryant Creel’s essay on enchantment in *Don Quijote* agrees with many of my ideas about the role of fantasy in the novel and how it promotes the Quixotic storyline throughout the novel. Although Creel shies away from connecting Quixote’s journey with the broader societal context of chivalry and the Spanish Reconquista, he explores the deeper meaning of illusions and enchantment and their philosophical significance. Creel has similar ideas to mine, stating that the concept of evil enchanters is a method of sustaining the Quixotic belief; Don Quixote uses the concept of enchantment to rationalize any situation in which the reality contradicts his internal chivalric fantasies. Creel comments that “because of Don Quixote’s insistence that enchantment changes appearances, it is impossible to convince him that he is in error.” Thus, Quixote must only personally discover the flaws in the ideals of the chivalric way of life. In this, the novel hinges upon the literary device of the enchantment. Through Don Quixote’s personal journey in discovering the stark differences between his fantasies and the real world, Cervantes demonstrates his discontent with the Reconquista movement in Spain.

At times, Creel steps back from the novel and questions the viewpoint of the reader. He claims that readers are more interested in what Quixote sees than what is actually in front of him. My analysis explained the enchantments as cases in which Cervantes sought to deliver a political message mocking feudal ideals. Creel sees these enchantment scenes as clashes between two different interpretations of the novel, believing either the fantastical world inside Quixote’s head or the harsh truth of the world around him. Ultimately, Creel states that it is up to the readers to interpret the novel as they choose.

Creel highlights that Quixote’s view of the world is not completely delusional; Quixote recognizes the difference between his fantasy and reality. At one point in the novel, Quixote demands that silk merchants profess the beauty of Dulcinea del Toboso. He confesses that they would refuse to if they ever saw her, since she is a plain peasant woman. This proves that Quixote is aware of his own illusions, however he notes that the reality is not what is most important, everyone is better off believing that she is beautiful. In this context Creel spreads the idea that Quixote’s illusions are not a delusional fantasy, rather an enriching creativity in seeing the world for what it ought to be. Quixote sees deeper than the face value of situations through his fantasies, adding contrast and perspective through metaphor. Creel argues that the hero uses these enchantments to make the world succumb to his value system. Although at times they border upon the ludicrous,
such as his stabbing of the windmill claiming it an aggressive giant, he oftentimes uses these enchantments to improve the world around him. In a way, Quixote is philanthropic in his actions, imparting a philosophy of good will to those around him in the only way he knows how. These illusions keep Don Quixote and Sancho Panza optimistic in the most dire circumstances. Using his inner mind and thoughts, Quixote deftly weaves a fantasy and uses creativity to better the world in his eyes and hopefully others’ as well.

**Reflection on “Un cierto claro ecuero:’ Night and the Performance of Class in the Palace Episodes of *Don Quijote*, II**

Mary Quinn recognizes the oppressiveness of the aristocracy in *Don Quixote*, but ties it to the symbolism of nighttime and misdirection in the second part of the novel. When night falls at the castle of the Duke and Duchess, Sancho Panza and Don Quixote take part in a pretend scenario in which Sancho is able to live out his dream as a noble, while Quixote suffers as a lower class citizen manipulated by others in power. Similar to my arguments connecting nobility in *Don Quixote* with cruel characters, Quinn associates the nighttime roles of aristocracy with manipulation and illusion.

According to Quinn, the night is a time that emphasizes the differences between social classes. The night is a powerful metaphor in *Don Quixote*, as the absence of light leaves most characters powerless in their inability to see anything. Quinn notes that the night creates the opportunity for illusion, relating the elongated shadows created during dusk and by torches at night to the distorted vision of Quixote while he is in the castle. The Duke and Duchess are able to disorient and scare Sancho and Quixote with candles and torches. Night is a metaphor for the oppressiveness of the aristocracy in pre-industrial Spain. This can be taken even further; if night brings about the potential for manipulation then light represents power. During night, those who own the fire and light have all the power, as they can misguide those who are blind in the dark.

Quinn argues that the night is a time when the classes are polarized and the nobility can exert influence upon the lower classes. The separation of classes is regressive concept in the modernization of Spain yet is almost impossible to prevent, like nightfall. She extends this by claiming that Sancho’s control over the *insula* at night is a result of his ability “to seize on night’s capacious possibilities” and mentions that the Duke and Duchess only torture Quixote during the night. Although I agree with Quinn’s main thesis, I disagree with her differentiation between Quixote and Sancho during their stay at the castle; both adventurers stayed beneath the aristocracy.
and were manipulated by the Duke and Duchess. Both Sancho and Quixote were tricked by Merlin several times. Although Sancho was not as miserable as Quixote was, he was still manipulated into thinking he governed a real insula. Both characters were manipulated during the cover of night, where the aristocratic Duke and Duchess exemplified their class differences between them and their guests, proving to Quixote that the chivalric system was once again flawed.
Sources


