

## Steel-Plated Petticoats:

### The Heroism of Women in *Don Quijote*

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Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote* is infamous for its title character's mistaken perception of himself as a knight errant. In contrast with Quijote's desire to epitomize heroism and perform deeds befitting such a champion, his actions have the opposite effect; rather than restoring justice and order, the madman produces injustice and confusion. Cervantes does not leave his tale hero-less, however. In a clever display of wit, Cervantes transforms many of the novel's "damsels in distress" into true portrayals of the heroic. By creating female characters who embody elements of the chivalric code, Miguel de Cervantes not only produces substantial and active female characters, thereby portraying the women of Spain with dignity, but he also differentiates *Don Quijote* from other chivalric tales via the novel's more expansive dialogue on the heroic.

In writing *Don Quijote*, one of Cervantes's primary aims was to produce a critique of the romantic knight epics crafted by such writers as Englishman Sir Thomas Malory. To this end, Cervantes creates Don Quijote, a landowner who "spen[ds] his free time (which mean[s] almost all the time)

reading tales of chivalry with such passion and pleasure that he almost forg[ets] to keep up his hunting, not to mention taking care of his estate...In a word, Don Quijote so burie[s] himself in his books that...he drie[s] out his brain and lo[ses] his sanity" (Cervantes 13-14), believing himself to be a knight. Through his well-meaning, but catastrophe-yielding attempts to live out this knighthood, Quijote stands as a picture of the de-evolution which would necessarily result in a man who believed in and structured his life according to the paradigms established by chivalric tales.

Yet, the values established by the chivalric code and glorified by epics like Malory's *Le Mort d'Arthur*, if integrated into a realistic perception of life and followed by a sane person, certainly would not be without value. In accordance with the virtues expected of a knight errant, Malory's King Arthur exhorts his knights

[N]ever to do outrageousness nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy... and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, nor for no world's goods. (Malory 70)

Here, we see several virtues heralded as heroic: first, loyalty to one's lord ("always to flee treason"); second, guardianship of feminine honor and chastity ("always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death"); and, third, discernment and defense of the just cause ("take no battles in a wrongful quarrel"). Certainly, Don Quijote can be said to aim for these noble attributes, a heroic attempt which encourages



the reader to accept Quijote as a good, if not lucid, man. Yet, the futility of his attempts to embody such chivalric principles is proved by the inability of Quijote's deeds to produce the justice and order he so desires to create.

Yet the noble virtues Don Quijote fails to personify, Cervantes imputes to several of Quijote's female acquaintances through the novel. Within these women, the aforementioned qualities dwell so as to allow each woman to bring order to her world. Specifically, Cervantes establishes the angelic Dulcinea del Toboso, the courageous Anna Felix, and the assertive Marcela as the respective personifications of unquestioned loyalty, defended chastity, and discerned justice. This use of the feminine as a vessel for communicating virtue, though unconventional for Cervantes's time, is representative of what critics view as "Cervantes's kindly attitude toward the [female] sex" (Cameron 137). In the above women and others found throughout the leaves of *Don Quijote*, Cervantes overturns the chivalric prototype of the "damsel in distress" by replacing it with a woman who is equipped to relieve the distress of those around her.

The impetus for Quijote's mock-heroic odyssey, Dulcinea del Toboso is uniquely representative of feminized chivalry, and in particular, the virtue of loyalty. It is loyalty to Dulcinea, after all, which drives Quijote's every exploit and helps to fuel his imagination. From the novel's beginning, Quijote recognizes his inability to function as a knight without a Dulcinea to honor. Indeed, after "accepting" the mantle of knighthood, one of Quijote's most immediate goals is "...to hunt for a...lady to be in love with, since a knight errant without love entanglements would be like a tree without leaves or fruit, or a body without a soul" (Cervantes 16).

Dulcinea's role as Quijote's lady-love becomes equivalent with the position a king might hold in a true knight's life. Without a king to serve, such a knight would lack the momentum necessary for empowering his deeds. Similarly, without a love whose honor must be advanced, Quijote would be without sufficient inspiration for performing his heroic deeds. Dulcinea is indeed so intricately a part of Quijote's story that hardly a scene in *Don Quijote* passes without some mention of the "Empress of La Mancha" (Cervantes 29). Quijote characterizes himself as Dulcinea's "loyally dutiful heart, which has suffered so much for [her] love" (Cervantes 18); several times, he engages in combat simply because another character resists his demand that "everyone in the world halt, unless the entire world acknowledges that no where on earth is there a damsel more beautiful [than Dulcinea]" (Cervantes 29). By inspiring such unswerving obedience in her knight, Dulcinea serves as the embodiment of the chivalric value of loyalty.

Because of the traditionally non-active role of women in chivalric tales, one might expect the woman fulfilling the damsel function to be insubstantial, particularly since Dulcinea's inventor (Quijote) is a product of the Spanish culture. Quijote's is a society which author Gendarme de Bevette has claimed had its women "locked up in [their] house[s] and...[their] social function blotted out" (Sanchez y Escribano 189). Yet Cervantes's Dulcinea, as well as his other female characters, "can be seen unraveling the tales of fragility and helplessness which are generally intended to represent [women]" (Saffar 208). Despite Quijote's absolute control over Dulcinea, as she is a figment of his imagination via his "idealiz[ation of] a good-looking country girl to meet [his] need [as] knight-errant of a lady whom he might

love," Dulcinea takes on the role of lord in their relationship (Cameron 139). Upon meeting the village girl Sancho claims is Dulcinea, Don Quijote readily humbles himself—despite his persistent pride in his high-rank as knight. Kneeling before "Dulcinea", the would-be knight pleads, "Please: give me a gentle and loving look; see, in this submissive posture I have assumed before your disguised and undone loveliness, with what perfect meekness I adore you from the very depths of my soul" (Cervantes 410).

One can easily imagine Quijote using similar language, generously sprinkled with words like "submissive", "meekness", and "ador[ation]" (Cervantes 410), to address a king or lord to whom he'd pledged his life and service. Quijote's devotion to his lady is touching in its unwavering, ever-believing loyalty. Even when Quijote literally sees that the Dulcinea of his imagining is only "an ordinary village girl, and not a very pretty one" (410), Quijote is unflagging in his perception of his lady as "magnificent" and "matchless" (483). The self-appointed knight is so unwavering in his devotion to this lady that he crafts a new reality—a vengeful assault by magicians—which allows for a loyal adherence to his idealized perception of his Dulcinea (410-1). In so doing, Quijote fulfills the chivalric injunction "always to flee treason" (Malory 70) by steadfastly refusing to believe his lady less glorious than his fantasy has painted her.

Ultimately, Dulcinea's power over Quijote becomes so strong that she surpasses her role as Quijote's earthly lord to become his divine one. God-like, she is described by Quijote as "the rare and singular lady who occupies [his] most hidden thoughts" (Cervantes 90). In Quijote's estimation she has, as only God can, "every perfection," as well as a knowledge of his inward spirit

(Cameron 139). Dulcinea's divine control over Quijote becomes even more evident in her ability to cut short the thread of his life. Quijote's loyalty to her idealized image is so great that Don Quijote's friends partially attribute the knight's fatal decline to his "being unable to finally disenchant and set free Dulcinea" (Cervantes 741). This mutual death of Don Quijote and his invented love reminds one of warriors so loyal to their king they would ride into battle so they might face death by his side. Even at *Don Quijote's* close, Dulcinea's idealized character remains thoroughly emblematic of loyalty via Quijote's devotion to her. Despite the knight's death-bed renunciation of his madness, Quijote never does confess Dulcinea to be imaginary (742-4).

Though Dulcinea is never anything more than an invention of Quijote's fancy, the knight's beloved does far more to bring order to *Don Quijote* than the would-be warrior. From the genesis to the conclusion of Quijote's knightly career, Dulcinea is the common thread which runs throughout his every action. Quijote attempts noble deeds for a variety of reasons—defense of a punished servant, assault on group of giants, rescue of a kidnapped princess—but Dulcinea and her honor provide the undergirding motive behind Quijote's search for justice. Although Quijote's exploits often lead to chaos, Dulcinea's constant inspiration and Quijote's desire to please her organize the chaos of Quijote's brain into a logical framework. While the rationale of this framework does not bear out when tested against reality, it is at least logically consistent within Quijote's own mind. Dulcinea serves as such a powerful force for order within *Don Quijote* that it is the invented relationship between Quijote and Dulcinea which provides the novel's structure.

As the reader progresses through *Don Quijote*, he or she can easily anticipate the basic events Quijote will move through—1) misinterpretation of an occurrence or interaction; 2) “detection” of an affront to justice or Dulcinea’s honor; 3) execution of a purportedly noble action; and 4) association of his deed with Dulcinea, thereby crediting her for his nobility. Dulcinea’s providing even an insane man with a frame of reference, however skewed, reveals her critical role in preserving order in what could have become a completely unraveled mind.

Whereas Dulcinea may be associated with loyalty and devotion, Anna Felix, the Moorish beauty, personifies the protection of feminine chastity. One may be surprised to learn she does not do this by maintaining her own chastity, but rather by protecting the sexual well-being of her beloved, Don Gregorio. The gender reversals between these two young lovers is striking. Don Gregorio and Anna’s love story reverses the typical plot of male lover rescuing female beloved from sexual assault as it is Don Gregorio, rather than Anna Felix, whose chastity is in danger. In fact, the young man must adopt the guise of a woman in order to protect his sexual integrity (Cervantes 700), and subsequently becomes one of several male transvestites to populate Cervantes’s novel (Saffar 219-220). In contrast with other transvestites, however, Don Gregorio’s clothing is not the only aspect of himself to be feminized. Trapped “in a harem in Algiers, [he] awaits rescue by his fiancée, who has disguised herself as a Turkish sailor” (Saffar 220). In so doing, Gregorio yields the active role in his and Anna’s adventure, a role which would undoubtedly belong to him were he fulfilling the role typically afforded to males in chivalric romances. Gregorio is also described multiple times as “elegant and beautiful” (Cervantes

700), epitaphs almost always applied to the female characters of *Don Quijote* and other knightly tales.

Like Dulcinea, Anna Felix rejects the typically feminine role of damsel in distress and instead becomes one of the “aggressive women in Part II” of the novel (Saffar 219). Anna Felix first appears in a masculine guise, not even that of a common sailor, but of a captain. Such a rank, endowed with considerable authority and power, would never have belonged to a Spanish woman. Her possession of such a masculine position, as well as her engineering of Don Gregorio’s rescue, distinguishes her from many of the more delicate and inactive women—Dorotea, Leandra, Clara—of *Don Quijote*. The masculine position of Anna Felix is further underscored by the fact that she, not Don Gregorio, possesses fortune and the leverage which finances afford the wealthy. As possessor of the purse strings, Anna Felix takes on an even more authoritative, and thus conventionally masculine, position.

Because Anna Felix and Don Gregorio’s gender roles are so thoroughly reversed, it is Anna who become the protectress of sexual virtue, fulfilling the chivalric command that knights must be careful “always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death” (Malory 70). Significantly, Don Gregorio does not attempt to come to Anna’s rescue when she is brought, due to her beauty, before the Algerian king. Anna’s chastity clearly is in some danger as she is “worried that [the king] might be blinded by [her] beauty,” and yet Don Gregorio is curiously absent from this threatening circumstance (Cervantes 700). Certainly, it is not a lack of love for Anna which prevents Don Gregorio from intervening; rather, it is because Gregorio’s chastity is in greater danger than Anna’s—setting him up as the

more vulnerable and thus more feminized figure in their romance—that he remains hidden. Because the womanly Gregorio cannot protect himself, it is Anna who must take on the knightly role of championing feminine chastity and protection.

Yet, Anna Felix's heroic role extends beyond her protection of Don Gregorio's sexuality to her position as a vehicle for religious and ethnic unification. As a woman whose "parents were both Moors... [but who is] a true and Catholic Christian", Anna Felix bridges the gap between the two different cultures vying for control over the Spain of Cervantes's day. Because she is a Moor, Anna's distinction of her "true" faith from that of the "feigned or nominal Christian" (Cervantes 699) was likely shocking to the original readership of *Don Quijote*, who lived in the midst of the tense relationships between Moorish and Anglo Spaniards. Even if one were unaware of the clashes between Islam and Christianity during the early Renaissance, Anna Felix's account of her woes reveals the charged religious conflict between the two faiths. Anna Felix's forced banishment due to her Moorish heritage and her Christian father's search for a land where Moorish Christians might "take refuge" both indicate the prejudice with which Anglo Spaniards viewed those of Muslim descent (Cervantes 699). Yet Anna Felix's "good habits", "beauty", faith, and "good sense" evidenced to Cervantes's audience that Spaniards of Moorish descent were capable of virtue and belief in the Catholic faith (Cervantes 699, 702). Anna Felix becomes emblematic, therefore, of the religious and social restoration which could occur between Moors and Anglos, perhaps serving to provoke such sentiments in his Spanish audience. Anna Felix's most significant reflection of the peace-making which might occur between Muslims

and Christians can be seen in her ability to gain more merciful treatment for the Turkish men with whom she is sailing. Although the admiral who runs down Anna Felix's ship originally swears to "hang every one of [the Moorish sailors he can] catch" (Cervantes 698), Anna's tears "was[h] away [his] vow" (702). In the end, not even the two treacherous Turks who killed the admiral's soldiers are hung. As a Moorish Christian, Anna Felix effectively acts as a bridge between the two cultures, ushering in reconciliation and truly enacting the heroic role of order-bringer.

Marcela the shepherdess, termed "the first feminist in Spanish literature" (Cameron 140), is also emblematic of chivalric virtue as she embodies justice and discernment. After Grisostomo's unrequited love leads to his death, his friend Ambrosia indicts Marcela with Grisostomo's demise, saying the young scholar's "life was stolen by [her] cruelty" (Cervantes 77). One might reasonably believe that fatal cruelty between a man and woman could be related to unfaithfulness or fickleness on the part of one of the would-be lovers. Yet, it is well-known among Marcela's and Grisostomo's community that "she treats [the men she encounters] courteously and pleasantly", gives no indication that her "virtue and chastity ha[s] suffered" (Cervantes 65), and that none of her would-be suitors "could have boasted, that she'd given him even the tiniest, smallest prospect of getting what he wanted" (66). Therefore, Marcela's innocence in Grisostomo's death quickly becomes evident, despite Ambrosio's calling her a "savage stone monument of these mountains... [and of being] some new and pitiless Nero" (Cervantes 77).

Personifying the knightly injunction to "take no battles in a wrongful quarrel" (Malory 70), Marcela comes to her own defense,

thereby embodying discernment and justice. Although the shepherdess could have been dissuaded from defending her case, as she must have anticipated Grisostomo's funeral's being populated by his most steadfast friends and supporters, she chooses to face her accusers and present an argument "marked by an almost scholastic rigor" (Hart and Rendall 291). In the face of accusations that she is cold-hearted and cruel, Marcela is unabashed in her intention to stand up for what she perceives to be a righteous cause—her own. She asserts that she comes to the funeral "only for [her]self, and to explain how utterly unreasonable it is to blame [her] for everyone's pain and for Grisostomo's death" (Cervantes 77). If justice is the correcting of imbalances between right and wrong, Marcela is determined to substitute proper reasoning for the damaging and illogical accusations of Grisostomo's friends and Marcela's disappointed would-be lovers. To forward this cause and prevent an unjust acceptance of a "wrongfull quarrel", Marcela is bold enough to leave the "the solitude of the fields...[and her] friends among the trees in these mountains" to defend the fair cause.

The logical intensity of her speech, which "makes effective use of the appeal to... *logos*", is a direct result of her discernment (Hart and Rendall 292). This same discernment not only protects Marcela from adopting unnecessary guilt, but also allows her to build a defense for herself which "focuses almost exclusively on logical issues" (Hart and Rendall 292). Another female, portrayed in a more stereotypically emotional way, might have attempted a *pathos*-based defense. But Marcela takes another track and assumes that her masculine audience will respond to her in a primarily logical fashion (Hart and Rendall 292). This is established when she addresses her audiences as "*los*

*discretos*" or "those who possess reason and judgment" (293). Marcela attacks the accusations leveled against her as a lawyer would: point by point with carefully structured refutations (Hart and Rendall 289-91).

Like Dulcinea and Anna Felix, Marcela, too, restores order within the novel. Prior to Marcela's arrival, the scene of Grisostomo's funeral is colored by fantasy and emotion, with an epic and mournful song in Grisostomo's honor and the incineration of Grisostomo's writings (Cervantes 72-6). While moving, the dramatic mournfulness of the scene seems overblown and exaggerated. Upon hearing the *Song of Despair*, Grisostomo's final literary production, one of the funeral attendants, Vivaldo, "said it didn't seem to fit with what he'd heard of Marcela's modesty and virtue...which was unfair to the fine reputation she had in such matters" (Cervantes 76). However the entrance of the woman concerned turns the funeral from the emotional to the cerebral. Her vindication-seeking speech at first seems unsuccessful, as the shepherds who still lust after Marcela despite her repeated rejection of their advances "sho[w] signs of wanting to follow after her, paying no attention to the plain truths they had heard" (Cervantes 79). Yet Marcela's "logic is incontrovertible" (Cameron 141). She thereby brings logic to the mind of her masculine audience and the funeral itself through her introduction of rationality and order. The shepherds finish the business of burying Grisostomo and, although the inscription Ambrosio has chiseled into his friend's tombstone refuses to acknowledge Marcela's demand for exoneration, the shepherds do depart without pursuing Marcela any further, proving her just appeal for solitude to be effective.

Even more important than Marcela's logic's injection of order into the minds of her

accusers is her reflection of order within the feminine mind. Like Anna Felix, she proves herself to be strong and substantial and can be counted among the “women [who] take on monstrously, overwhelmingly powerful roles” in *Don Quijote* (Saffar 219). Because Marcela has been credited as the first character in Spanish literature to bear the role of “feminist,” it is significant that “Marcela stands preeminent for her spiritual beauty and independence” (Cameron 141). In contrast with the confused Don Quijote whose own mind has overthrown logic, and the shepherds who cannot control their emotional, desirous responses to Marcela’s beauty, Marcela is logical to the point of indifference toward others (Hart and Rendall 292). By endowing a female character with such irrefutable reasoning, Cervantes created a new image of the Spanish woman all together, one more in-line with the intellectual capabilities which characterized Spain’s famous Queen Isabella, whose “intellectual powers were recognized by her contemporaries and became proverbial” (Sanchez y Escribano 190). Marcela’s intellectual prowess and formidable logic mark a rejection of the damsel in distress role which had so characterized chivalric literature and the initiation of a portrayal of women as whole and full people, capable of bringing order and representing heroic qualities.

Throughout *Don Quijote*, female characters play such a critical role that a thorough examination of the novel cannot be conducted without these women being acknowledged. Inspiring heroism, guarding chastity, and embodying justice, Cervantes’s females serve as important vessels through which Cervantes guides the reader toward an understanding of true chivalry. Although Don Quijote fails to embody heroism and is, at the novel’s close, disabused of his fantastic

beliefs, the women with whom he interacts model chivalric virtues worthy of emulation. By undressing preconceived notions, emphasized by the damsel in distress motif, of feminine weakness and then replacing such notions with the more complex and realistic model of the feminized hero, Cervantes sets his chivalric epic apart as unique. Rather than weakening the novel, the feminine touch woven throughout *Don Quijote* acts as a sort of armor, protecting Cervantes’s work from stereotypes and equipping the contemporary perception of Spanish women with new dignity.

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