

An Interpretation of *Don Quixote de la Mancha* Based on Literature Study, Historiography and Philosophy Mutually Rooted

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Abstract

Don Quixote de la Mancha is a laying-foundation work of modern novel. It does deserve its value for its integration of literature, history and philosophy. This paper attempts to discuss the reason why it becomes a classic based on the theoretical perspective of Literature Study, Historiography and Philosophy Mutually Rooted.

Key words: *Don Quixote de la Mancha*; Literature study; Historiography and philosophy mutually rooted; Humanism

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INTRODUCTION

The first volume of *Don Quixote de la Mancha* was published in the year of 1605 and the second volume, 1615. More than 400 years have passed since then. During the period, the image of Don Quixote has spread all around the world despite of the differences in languages, culture, locations, time and age. The book has also been regarded as one of the classics and a pioneering work for modern fiction by people from different generations. Such glory can never be expected by the author Cervantes when he wrote *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Why a novel that is written to let the world

detest the absurdity of knight novels (Yang, 2015, p.486) can still be so intensively studied at present when almost all knight novels have already disappeared. The author of the paper believes it can be attributed to the sparkling integration of literature, history and philosophy in the book. As a work influenced by literature, improved by historiography and refined by philosophy, *Don Quixote de la Mancha* implicates the conscience of human beings, concerns about man's destiny and involves the discussion of the settlement of human spirit (Luan, 2007). Only such a work can survive the 4-century-long examination to the modern world.

There are a large number of interpretations of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. The earliest ones date back to the age when Cervantes wrote the book. But most writers and literary critics at that time abused the book, either thinking it is crazy and ridiculous or believing reading it is harmful to the soul and a waste of time (Hernandez, 1998, p.13). Fortunately, such situation did not last long. Since the Enlightenment between the 17th and 18th century, people have begun to notice the anti-feudalism, anti-theocracy spirit of the book. Later in the waves of neoclassicism and romanticism, the humanist and idealist spirit of the book have been highly recognized and appreciated. Modern literary critics have given multilevel analysis and interpretation of the book from the perspectives of structuralism, deconstructivism, feminism, new historicism and post-colonialism. The study of *Don Quixote de la Mancha* is quite fruitful. It has not been limited to the literary field. There are also scholars of aesthetics, religious studies, archaeology and ethics regarding the book as their object of study. The paper attempts to reinterpret the book based on the theory of literature study, historiography and philosophy mutually rooted, so that it can explore how history and philosophy are perfectly integrated in the great literary work.

1. LITERATURE: A REFLECTION OF HISTORY AND A POWER TO CREATE HISTORY

(a) Literary works must be deeply rooted in life and history. Every work is created based on a certain social background. As a combination of fiction and reality, a literary work is a channel for its author to either sing praises for an age and imagine a beautiful future or give a bitter account of history and satirize a social prototype.

First, *Don Quixote de la Mancha* is a comprehensive and reliable reflection of the Spanish society between the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century. During the period, Spain was on the way of declining from its golden age, but the feudal forces were still in the dominant position trying to suppress the development of the emerging capitalism. The hardship of ordinary people stood in sharp contrast to the luxury life of feudal nobles before their doomsday. “An olla of rather more beef than mutton, a salad on most nights, scraps on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, and a pigeon or so extra on Sundays, made away with three-quarters of the income” of Don Quixote (Ormsby, 2016, p.44). However, on the wedding of Camacho, “a whole ox” was

spitted on a whole elm tree, and in the fire at which it was to be roasted there was burning a middle-sized mountain of faggots, and six stewpots that stood round the blaze had not been made in the ordinary mould of common pots, for they were six half wine-jars, each fit to hold the contents of a slaughter-house; they swallowed up whole sheep and hid them away in their insides without showing any more sign of them than if they were pigeons. (Ibid., p.642)

Sancho Panza also needed to make money to pay his son’s tuition fees and prepare some dowries for his grown daughter. Thus, he agreed to take adventures with Don Quixote who promised him an island.

In the age when Cervantes lived, the Islamic regime just came to an end in Spain. An increasing number of Moors were subjected to persecution and expelling. Cervantes expressed his sympathy and compassion to Moors through the words of Ricote: The emperor’s “proclamations were not just threats, as some said, but positive enactments which would be enforced at the appointed time”; “Wherever we are we weep for Spain; for after all we were born there and it is our natural fatherland. Nowhere do we find the reception our unhappy condition needs”; “such is the longing we almost all of us have to return to Spain”; “and now I know by experience the meaning of saying, sweet is the love of one’s country” (Ibid., p.891).

Second, the novel has also, to some extent, reflected the personal experience of Cervantes, who lived a rough but heroic life. Cervantes used to be an attendant of a bishop of Rome. Later, he left the Holy See to join an infantry. His courage in the Battle of Lepanto resulted

in his loss of his left arm, and thus got a nickname of the one who lost his arm in Lepanto. On the way back to Spain, he was kidnapped to Algiers by pirates and imprisoned. During the period, he planned large-scale collective escapes for four times, which all ended in failure. But he shouldered the responsibility on his own so that the security of his companions was ensured. He was impoverished after returning to Spain. When he served as a beadle of grain requisitioning and taxation successively, his unsophistication offended the local bigwigs and led to his being falsely charged and put into prison for three times. The qualities of bravery, persistence and righteousness of the hero Don Quixote were also shared by the author Cervantes. Similarly, Cervantes also wrote into the novel his attack to knight novels and his feelings of the real world. He satirized Don Quixote, saying “his fancy grew full of what he used to read about in his books, enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, agonies, and all sorts of impossible nonsense” (Ibid., p.45).

(b) Literary works are imaginary, based on the real world, and their imagination can also influence the real world. Their circulation can get echoes from the society, and shape the social process more or less objectively.

The Spanish Renaissance entered its “golden age” between the second half of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century. The rising and prevailing of knight novels then demonstrated the development and growth of the feudal aristocracy, the national confidence of Spanish people, the adventurous spirit of the Crusades and pious religious faith. The emerging bourgeoisie who wanted to break the bondage of feudal theocracy had to rely on Ancient Greek and Roman classics to achieve this goal, because they had not formed a mature ideological system yet. *Don Quixote de la Mancha* utilized the structure of knight novels. The important elements of such novels, love, friendship, adventure, duel and glory can all be found in the book. But Cervantes exposed the absurdity of knight novels to readers through exaggeration and jokes. The book has swept away all the fixed patterns of knight novels and diminished their influence and reputation among ordinary people and in the society (Yang, 2015, preface). The author’s intention was actually fulfilled, which could be proved by the fact that knight novels gradually disappeared after the publishing of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. However, the other intention of Cervantes, to use the image of Don Quixote to satirize those over-confident, ivory-towered and opinionated knights, was not achieved. The significance of the image has gradually changed and now it symbolizes those heroes who pursue their dreams courageously, stick to their own beliefs and dare to challenge social injustice regardless of common people’s mockery.

Cervantes has also put forward new ideas about the relationship between creating and reading in *Don*

Quixote de la Manch, for whom reading is an extension of creating (Chen, 2000). The book is a pioneering work for modern fiction. It has laid a solid foundation for modern literary creation and literature theory development, and thus occupies an irreplaceable position in the history of literature.

Besides, the book has also played an important role in the development of philosophy and social ideological trend, which will be further illustrated in the part that analyzes the philosophy of the book.

2. HISTORY STIMULATING PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PHILOSOPHY PROMOTING HISTORICAL COURSE

History and philosophy are born connected with each other. They are mutually supplemented and promoted. It's reasonable to say that the form of philosophy can determine that of historiography.

(a) Social consciousness is determined by social existence. The reality and changes of a society can be reflected in ideology, and result in the change, transformation and development of ideology.

1492 is a significant year on the Spanish history when Christopher Columbus discovered the new world and Spain begun its colonial rule in Latin America. In the same year, Spain was unified again after Spanish people conquered the last city occupied by the Moors in the country, Granada. The hegemony of Spain was gradually achieved within Europe, the power of Spanish feudal aristocrats was sharply expanded and the dominance of theocracy in the country could not be challenged. During the period, the secular world appreciated knights' adventurous spirit and the whole society was bound by religion. Cervantes was born in a pious Catholic family, the influence of which can be seen in the novel. He said, in the Author's Preface of the second volume of the novel, "I am not likely to attack a priest, above all if, in addition, he holds the rank of familiar of the Holy Office" (Ormsby, 2016, p.508). Before ill Don Quixote passed away, he suddenly woke up and cried "blessed be Almighty God, who has shown me such goodness. In truth, his mercies are boundless, and the sins of men can neither limit them nor keep them back" (Ibid., p.1035). Similar to Cervantes, Don Quixote also confessed to a priest before he died and let the priest release his soul from purgatory.

However, the prosperity of Spain did not last long. In 1588, the Spanish Armada collapsed. The maritime hegemony of Spain was replaced by the emerging capitalist countries. Spain begun to decline, its golden age came to an end and the good old days vanished like a bubble. Destiny is like a waterwheel. Those who

stood high above the masses yesterday take a back seat today. Capitalism begun to burgeon in Spain. Meanwhile, Renaissance that originated in Italy in the middle of the 14th century started to influence Spain. Humanism flourished in the country and let the Spanish people rediscover the objective world and their spiritual world. In *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, Cervantes gave a vivid description of two very different characters, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Both of the two characters practiced humanism in the novel: Don Quixote was the embodiment of truth and justice, fighting for the weak against the strong, aiding the world and saving the people; Sancho Panza was a model of loyalty and responsibility, whose traits achieved a qualitative leap after becoming the governor of an island. Sancho Panza implemented the humanistic thoughts of Don Quixote, or to be more accurate, Cervantes.

(b) Social consciousness can promote the development of social existence. Once an ideological trend is formed, it can influence different social classes and various aspects of social life, even lead to qualitative changes.

On the one hand, *Don Quixote de la Mancha* led to the disappearance of knight novels while kept the spirit of Chivalry. On the other hand, the humanist ideas hidden between lines have influenced people from different generations. Ideological trends like the Enlightenment, neoclassicism and romanticism have all benefited from the book. The significance of the book also lies in the fact that it encourages the following innovators. Zhou Zuoren commented in *The History of European Literature* published in 1918 that using the book as a weapon, Cervantes showed the world old thoughts could not be applied to new age. The achievement of the book is surprisingly significant. Ironic stories that discussed temporary issues would fade soon. But *Don Quixote de la Mancha* talked about perpetual problems of man and life, and thus it would never be out of date. It told brave and fantastic stories in an ordinary and real background, which demonstrated to readers the conflict between fancy and real life, and the clash between man's enterprising spirit and the secular world. Don Quixote was left behind the time and failed. His behavior was ridiculous. But his spirit was similar to those heroes who failed because of their thinking ahead of time. Therefore, the story of Don Quixote is worth deep thinking (Quote from a secondary source: Chen Guoen, 2002).

3. LITERATURE: ONE OF THE REPRESENTATIONS OF PHILOSOPHY

What makes a literary work popular around the world for several consecutive centuries is not its beautiful language, well-knit structure or attractive plot, but the spirit, quality

or philosophical thoughts the author wants to deliver through his work.

It can be discovered from *Don Quixote de la Mancha* that Cervantes lived in a transitional period between the old and the new world, and thus there were contradictions in his experience and thoughts. He was a pious catholic who believed in the sovereignty of God. Meanwhile, he was also influenced by the Renaissance and the humanistic trend of thought, realizing the corruption of feudal aristocracy and theocracy. As a result, Cervantes did not oppose the spirit of the Middle Ages radically. In his novel, he belittled neither Don Quixote nor Sancho Panza. Religion and chivalry, Ancient Greek and Roman spirit and humanism can all be found in the book.

3.1 Humanist Ideals

Don Quixote is a character with contradictions. Ridiculous but lamentable, he sometimes acts insanely while sometimes rationally. However, in the whole process, he was practicing the chivalry and his humanist concern. Don Quixote was definitely a doer. He begun his adventure wearing some armor “eaten with rust and covered with mildew” (Ormsby, 2016, p.46), riding a hack “with more blemishes than the steed of Gonela” (Ibid.), and taking with him an esquire “with very little within his pate” (Ibid., p.85). In his eyes, windmills were giants, flocks of sheep were troops in heavy fighting and wine bags were enemies’ heads. But he continued to fight fearlessly against the evils in his eyes until the last moment even when he thought he was overpowered. His absurd behavior showed his sympathy to the enslaved people and his rebellion against feudal aristocracy and theocracy. He believed

heaven sent me into the world and caused me to make profession the order of chivalry to which I belong, and the vow I took therein to give aid to those in need and under the oppression of the strong (Ibid., p.208).

He also advocated individual equality and freedom, saying “our will is free, nor is there herb or charm that can force it” (Ibid., p.205) and “it seems to me a hard case to make slaves of those who God and nature have made free” (Ibid., p.208). He was wealthy in knowledge. When he was sober, he had sharp opinions about social criticism, war, law, morality, literature and art.

As a peasant, Sancho Panza shared both the merits of the working class like simplicity, kindness, alertness and pragmatism and the defects including shortsightedness, narrowness and selfishness. He began the adventure with Don Quixote because Don Quixote promised him the government of an island. Although keeping complaining about the insane behavior of Don Quixote and the disadvantages of being an esquire, he increasingly adored the gentleman on the road and was willing to endure hardship with him. He gave up his dreams of fortune when

he became a governor. Instead, he regarded the mission of Don Quixote as his own, handled matters impartially, refused corruption and upheld justice.

3.2 Idealism and Pragmatism

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are the representatives of idealism and pragmatism respectively.

In today’s Spain, a saying goes like that: We still have Don Quixote even if we lose all the other things. Despite of his ridiculous behavior and lamentable ending, it cannot be denied that the inner spirit of Don Quixote was never shaken and he pursued unremittingly the beautiful future in his mind. He chose to begin his adventure for three times facing other people’s ridicule, although he ended in failure every time and finally in death. Maybe, it was just a denial of knight novels when he came to his senses in the end and told her niece in his will she “shall marry a man of whom it shall be first of all ascertained by information taken that he does not know what books of chivalry are” (Ibid., p.1037). Actually, he never doubted knighthood nor gave up his dream.

Sancho Panza was created as a contrast to Don Quixote. Don Quixote represented idealism while Sancho Panza was realistic. Don Quixote lived an ascetic life while Sancho Panza was an opportunist who lived for enjoyment. The reason why Sancho Panza decided to follow Don Quixote was that he wanted to “pass the rest of his life in ease and honor” (Ibid., p.106). But he was gradually influenced by Don Quixote. The contradictory personality, knight-like speeches and behavior after he got the government of the promised island all demonstrated that he was practicing the dreams Don Quixote did not achieve through knighthood.

CONCLUSION

Don Quixote de la Mancha was one of the classics that have been examined by time. Readers can get new experience every time they read it. It was accepted by readers and critics at first as a pastime, because the absurdity of Don Quixote was quite amusing. Later, they began to sympathize with his lamentable fate. After that, they discovered the concerns of the novel about social reality, politics, religion and ideology. The worldly ideal and positive attitude in the book, the humanistic concern of the author has shown the integration of literariness, historical significance and philosophical thinking in the book. And thus, *Don Quixote de la Mancha* became a timeless masterpiece.

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