Metafiction Across the Centuries: Humanism in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and its Stories within the Story

Dennis Riches

Don Quixote is among the most famous characters of world literature, and the novel he inhabits, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, is also ranked among the greatest works of fiction. The errant knight was created by Miguel de Cervantes for two works, *First Part* (1605) and *Second Part* (1615) ten years later when the author felt compelled to discredit fake sequels that had appeared. This essay discusses how Cervantes (1547-1616) expressed his humanistic philosophy by establishing a dialectical relationship between the main narrative and the stories within the story. This discussion is then related to modern historical figures who faced dilemmas similar to those of the characters in these tales from the early Enlightenment period.

In the early 17th century (when, coincidentally, Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*), Spain had just spent a century plundering the silver of the new world, but the galleon trade had corrupted the nobility, caused global financial chaos, and ultimately weakened the Spanish empire. In his review of Edith Grossman's translation of *Don Quixote*, Carlos Fuentes described Spain of the time as "a country that has conquered and plundered and built a New World in the Americas and returns, exhausted."[1]

Don Quixote tells the story of a late middle-aged small estate owner who, having read too many romantic tales of chivalric knights, seeks meaning in life by setting off on a life of adventure and daring-do with his servant and sidekick, Sancho Panza. As the road story unfolds, Don Quixote must see every mundane encounter through a lens of delusion in order to make it meet his expectation of adventure and his need to do good. Imagination must test reality, or reality must

test imagination.

Part 1 was a very late-career literary success that Cervantes added to ten years later with *Part 2*, and with these he gave the Western canon some of its earliest meta-fiction before there was a word for it (Shakespeare's play within the play in *Hamlet* was a contemporary work). In the present era, we have become accustomed to the blend of mockery and pathos we see in reality TV "characters," and we know that real gangsters watch the fictional Silvio from the television drama *The Sopranos* doing an imitation of Al Pacino from the fictional movie *The Godfather Part 3*. Before all this, in the early seventeenth century, Cervantes had his hero in *Part 2* living in a world in which everyone he meets has read *Part 1*, and his celebrity as the foolish, errant knight is what leads him to be invited by real aristocrats to a real castle for their mocking amusement and his humiliation.

In the castle, Don Quixote is finally living the dream, but it is here that he eventually becomes aware that only his make-believe at the country inn, which he took for a castle, has lived up to his ideals. Life with true aristocrats has shown him their treachery. After all, the noble baron turns out to be a greater fake than the deluded knight. It is revealed by his servants that he is hopelessly in debt to the rising merchant class. As Don Quixote wakes up from his illusions, the aristocrats are disillusioned as well, for they have been slow to realize that they needed Don Quixote more than he needed them. He possessed the ideals they lacked in themselves. As the reviewer Richard Eder put it, "Seeking to toy with him, they are toyed with, just as readers have been ever since."[2]

Carlos Fuentes wrote, in the review cited above:

> The illusion comes crashing down. Books are no longer the grand, imaginative truth that moved Don Quixote through perils without end. So the windmills were not giants. So the armies were only flocks of sheep. So reality is shabby, gray, unarmed... What can Don Quixote do but return home, get into bed, recover his reason and peacefully die? The "impossible dream" is over. No wonder that Dostoyevsky, in his diary, calls

> Don Quixote "the saddest book ever written." For it is, he adds, "the story of disillusionment." That [the translator] Edith Grossman has brought all these levels—and many more—to contemporary life is a major literary achievement. For to read Don Quixote, in an increasingly Manichaean world of simplistic Good versus Evil and inquisitorial dogmas, becomes one of the healthiest experiences a modern, democratic citizen can undertake.[3]

Other writers have praised Cervantes as the creator of a work that looms above all of world literature. Vladimir Nabokov wrote:

> Don Quixote is greater today than he was in Cervantes's womb... The parody has become a paragon. …[He] looms so wonderfully above the skyline of literature, a gaunt giant on a lean nag, that the book lives and will live through his sheer vitality... He stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, pure, unselfish, and gallant.[4]

In 1860, Ivan Turgenev described the essence of Don Quixote's character in an essay in which he brilliantly described Quixote and Hamlet as a pair of iconic opposites, both born like fictional brothers in the early 17th century, from the imagination of two writers who never met. Turgenev writes:

> Hamlet is self-conscious, aware of his own weakness, he knows how restricted his powers are. But his self-consciousness itself is a force; emanating from it is the irony that is precisely the antithesis of Don Quixote's enthusiasm… What does Don Quixote typify? Faith, first of all, a belief in something eternal, indestructible—in a truth that is beyond the comprehension of the individual human being, which is to be achieved only through the medium of self-abnegation and undeviating worship. Don Quixote is entirely permeated by an attachment to his

ideal for which he is ready to endure untold misery, even to sacrifice his own life, if need be. His own life he esteems only insofar as it can serve his ideal, which is to institute justice and truth on earth. It may be said that his deranged imagination draws upon the fantastic world of chivalric romance for his concept. Granted that this constitutes the comic side of Don Quixote, but his ideal itself remains undefiled and intact. To live for oneself, to be concerned with one's own ego: this Don Quixote would regard as a disgrace. He exists (if one may put it so) outside himself; he lives for others, for his brethren, in the hope of neutralizing evil and to outwitting those sinister figures—sorcerers and giants—whom he regards as the enemies of mankind. There is no vestige of egotism in him; his own self concerns him least of all, he completely personifies self-sacrifice—and please note what this term implies! He does not probe or question; he believes, forever undismayed. Hence, he is undaunted, uncomplaining, satisfied with meagre rations and happy garments. What cares he for exuberance? It never even enters his mind! Serene at heart, he is in spirit superior and valiant; his touching piety does not curb his liberty. Though not arrogant, he does not distrust himself, nor his vocation, nor even his physical capacity. His will is a will of iron, and unswerving. The continuous striving toward one and the same goal has fixed the unvarying tenor of his thoughts. His intellect takes on a one-sided uniformity. Hardly a scholar, he regards knowledge as superfluous. What would it avail him to know everything? But one thing he knows, the main thing: he is aware of the why and wherefore of his existence, and this is the cornerstone of all erudition. Don Quixote may at times resemble a total maniac, since he often overlooks the plainest objects when they are directly in front of his eyes; the most obvious things unmistakable to anyone, vanish before his eyes, melting like wax in the fire of his knightly fervor; he actually sees living Moors in wooden puppets, and a host of knights in a drove of rams; at other times he shows the limits of his mental scope, by appearing

> incapable of sharing in trifling amusement, incapable of easy participation. He is like an ancient, firmly anchored tree, its roots thrust into the deep layers of the soil, from which it is unable to move, in his inability to alter his convictions or to shift from one subject to another. The massiveness of Don Quixote's moral structure (it must not be forgotten that this distracted knight errant is the most moral creature on earth) imparts a particular gravity and stateliness to whatever he may say or do. In a word, his ethical character gives an uprightness to his whole figure despite the preposterous situations and the humiliations into which he is incessantly tumbling. Don Quixote is an enthusiast, radiant with his devotion to an idea.[5]

Cervantes' novel is of interest for much more than his famous protagonist. The novel is a reflection of the age in which it was written, and a critique of it to the extent that strict censors would let criticism pass. In this period of the early Enlightenment, Cervantes describes the decline of the nobility and their conflict with the rising merchant class. He depicts the discrimination still faced by Muslim converts to Christianity (a century after the worst period of Inquisition), and, in fact, all of Don Quixote's flight from reality and his quest to do good and fight for justice serve as a social criticism that highlights the sordid reality that he flees.

One key to understanding Don Quixote appears in Chapter 11 of the First Part when he compares the present with the classical Golden Age that Greek philosophers pondered:

> Fortunate the age and fortunate the times called golden by the ancients, and not because gold, which in this our age of iron is so highly esteemed, could be found then with no effort, but because those who lived in that time did not know the two words thine and mine. In that blessed age all things were owned in common; no one, for his daily sustenance, needed to do more than lift his hand and pluck it from the sturdy oaks that

so liberally invited him to share their sweet and flavorsome fruit… In that time all was peace, friendship, and harmony; the heavy curve of the plowshare had not yet dared to open or violate the merciful womb of our first mother, for she, without being forced, offered up, everywhere across her broad and fertile bosom, whatever would satisfy, sustain, and delight the children who then possessed her. In that time simple and beautiful shepherdesses could wander from valley to valley and hill to hill, their hair hanging loose or in braids, wearing only the clothes needed to modestly cover that which modesty demands… In that time amorous concepts were recited from the soul simply and directly, in the same way and manner that the soul conceived them, without looking for artificial and devious words to enclose them. There was no fraud, deceit, or malice mixed in with honesty and truth. Justice stood on her own ground, and favor or interest did not dare disturb or offend her as they so often do now, defaming, confusing, and persecuting her… Maidens in their modesty wandered, as I have said, wherever they wished, alone and mistresses of themselves, without fear that another's boldness or lascivious intent would dishonor them, and if they fell it was through their own desire and will. But now, in our detestable times, no maiden is safe, even if she is hidden and enclosed in another labyrinth like the one in Crete… despite all their seclusion, maidens are brought to ruin. It was for their protection, as time passed and wickedness spread, that the order of knights errant was instituted: to defend maidens, protect widows, and come to the aid of orphans and those in need. This is the order to which I belong, my brother goatherds, and I thank you for the kindness and hospitality you have shown to me and my squire.

The passage is important because it reveals a repeating pattern throughout the novel. Don Quixote is shown to be increasingly irrational and deluded, but he regularly has moments of extreme lucidity that surprise and humble everyone

around him. This speech about the Golden Age is one such moment. It is eloquent and heartfelt, and it moves the characters, and the reader, from mockery to sympathy. We feel the great disappointment Don Quixote has experienced with a corrupted world, and the other characters and readers may feel a certain shame in their own hardened immunity to it. We have accepted the fallen world as it is and abandoned the pursuit of ideals, but this "madman" has not.

Cervantes' description of the Golden Age notably makes protection of women, respect for women and female autonomy the touchstone of morality. The world is either saved or destroyed depending on whether humanity can care for the mother earth and care for the mothers of all people. This is the central issue throughout the story and the many stories within the story told along the way. The characters belong to the propertied classes, and rights to property and inheritance pass through men and their socially sanctioned ownership of a woman of breeding age. Thus, every story hinges upon female honor and the ability of men and women to uphold it as a reflection of their own honor.

One of the common criticisms of *Don Quixote* is the inclusion of these stories within the story that seem like unnecessary diversions from the main narrative. The two discussed below are the longest of these. In the introduction to the Second Part, written ten years after the First Part, Cervantes mentioned the criticisms he had received about these elements of the First Part, but he did not go as far as explaining why he had put them in his novel.

Both of the stories involve young characters suffering betrayals in love and friendship, and they are set amid class conflict and social status anxiety. These young people and their parents are all concerned with maintaining or improving their social status. The first story involving Cardenio, Luscinda, Fernando and Dorotea (the CLFD story for subsequent reference in this discussion) is the back story of characters who enter the main narrative of *Don Quixote* and interact with the barber, the priest, Sancho, Don Quixote, and various others gathered at an inn. Cardenio and Dorotea tell the first part of the story, but they must pause while other events occur and while the priest reads aloud a novella called *The Man Who*

Was Recklessly Curious (the RC story, for subsequent reference in this discussion). After this story is completed, CLFD comes to its conclusion as Fernando and Luscinda enter the main narrative by stopping at the inn where the characters have been gathered and have been listening to the telling of RC.

Don Quixote is an extremely long novel, so readers have always wondered what the author's purpose was in including these apparently unrelated stories. Was Cervantes just trying to show off his creative writing skills, or stuffing the novel with some unpublished stories he had in his files? The following analysis suggest Cervantes had a clear purpose in mind, one that justifies a place for these stories within the main narrative. He made a meaningful connection between the metafictional characters and the fictional characters in the main plot, and by doing so he revealed his humanist philosophy, his satire of Spanish society, and his beliefs about the interaction between fiction and reality, or the reality we create with our imagination.

Synopsis: *The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious* (*Don Quixote*, First Part, Chapters 33-35)

The young nobleman Anselmo marries Camilla, a beautiful, faithful, and honorable noblewoman. In spite of his wife's excellent reputation and character, Anselmo is plagued by doubts as to whether she would be faithful in all possible situations. He tells his dear friend, Lotario, that he wants to test Camila's fidelity. He asks Lotario to persistently woo Camila to see whether she will be able to resist. Lotario tries to convince his friend that this is a foolish plan that will make Camila think Lotario is a man of low character and a disloyal friend. Anselmo's anxiety remains unchanged, so he insists that Lotario carry out the plan. Lotario agrees reluctantly, with a secret intention to do nothing but then tell his friend that he tried and Camila remained faithful.

Anselmo leaves town on the pretense of having to travel for business, and he tells his wife that Lotario will come to the house every evening for supper and watch over the house during his absence. For a while, Lotario carries out his

plan as he intended, but one evening he gazes too long at the beautiful Camila, and he begins to make a serious attempt to seduce her. Camila soon succumbs to his charms. At this point, the personalities of these two people flip to being the complete opposite of what they were, or what they supposed themselves to be. They go from being faithful friend and wife to being the most treacherous liars and betrayers, consumed by a fear that their reputations and social standing will be destroyed if their secret is revealed. They carry on their affair for several weeks after Anselmo returns, continually piling worse deceptions one upon another. Camila's maid, Leonela, knows the secret of her mistress, so Camila finds herself now a compromised servant of her servant. From the start, Leonela actually does much to manipulate her noble mistress toward her poor choices, so there is a certain element of class warfare in this story, which Camila loses badly. The downfall of the characters comes when Leonela is caught in a compromising situation by her master, Anselmo. Fearing that Leonela will reveal the secret, Camila flees to a convent and Lotario runs away to join a mercenary army. All three of them Camila, Lotario and Anselmo are soon dead through acts of self-destruction.

Synopsis: *Cardenio, Luscinda, Fernando and Dorotea* (*Don Quixote*, First Part, chapters 24 and 27—Cardenio tells his story, chapter 28—Dorotea tells her story, chapter 36—all four principal characters meet at the inn and the story concludes)

This story begins before the telling of RC in the main narrative and finishes after it. Cardenio is found by the principal characters in *Don Quixote* (the priest, the barber, Sancho and Don Quixote) living in the mountains as a ragged madman in the hollow of a tree. He relates to them the miserable story of his lost love, the wealthy and beautiful farmer's daughter, Luscinda.

As the story begins, Cardenio has received a letter from Luscinda suggesting that she might accept his proposal of marriage, so he asks his wealthy and noble friend, Don Fernando, to help arrange the wedding. Cardenio has been sent by his

father to live with the Don Fernando's family as a sort of hired friend and servant of the youngest son, Fernando. They are high ranking nobles, so Cardenio's father saw this as an opportunity to raise his family up in the social hierarchy. Sending Cardenio away on this mission took precedence over arranging his son's marriage to Luscinda.

Fernando has recently agreed to marry a wealthy farmer's daughter named Dorotea. He bribed his way into her bedroom one night and forced her to consent to sex out of fear of being raped and caught in a scandal if she didn't consent. So she was essentially raped by her "seducer," from whom she extracts a promise of marriage. He got away with this crime because of his power as a son of the highest-ranking noble family in the region. However, when Fernando later meets Luscinda, he forgets about Dorotea and decides to steal Luscinda from Cardenio. To do this, he sends Cardenio away on an errand. Luscinda then writes a letter to Cardenio to alert him to the fact that he is being double-crossed, and that her father has agreed to have her marry the high-status Don Fernando. The marriage will be an opportunity for her father, a *nouveau riche* farmer, to elevate the family to the ancient ranks of noble families.

Luscinda tells Cardenio that she is in her wedding gown, and that "the traitor Don Fernando," along with her father and witnesses, are all assembled for the wedding. She secretly has a knife hidden in the folds of her dress, and she intends to commit suicide. Cardenio arrives at the marriage ceremony and hides behind a tapestry to watch the wedding. When it comes time to exchange vows, Luscinda pauses, and then in a dismayed voice says "I will." The bridegroom goes to kiss his bride, but she swoons. Cardenio, upset, hops on his donkey, leaves town, and becomes the angry, deranged man living in the mountains.

Before consummating the marriage, Luscinda runs away to a convent to escape from Fernando. Dorotea runs off to live in the mountains just as Cardenio did. The principal characters in *Don Quixote* (the priest, the barber, Don Quixote and Sancho) find Dorotea in the mountains, after they find Cardenio, and listen to her story just as they listened to Cardenio's story. They return to the inn and listen

to the priest read aloud the other story of betrayal, RC.

Later a mysterious gentleman and veiled woman arrive at the inn. They are discovered to be Fernando and Luscinda. Fernando has kidnapped Luscinda from the convent where she was hidden, and now they are at the inn where they will have their fateful meeting with Cardenio and Dorotea, the friend and the fiancé betrayed by Fernando. The story ends with all the principal characters being brought together and reconciled to the fact that Cardenio and Luscinda must be reunited. Whereas earlier in the story Dorotea expressed only hatred for the treacherous Fernando, Fernando has now agreed to marry her, so she pledges eternal love as his true wife in the eyes of God. He repents and apologizes to a forgiving Cardenio and Dorotea. All is well that ends well.

Discussion: *The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious*

The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious is in many aspects quite absurd. Within the novel, when the story is concluded, the priest comments, "This novel seems fine… but I cannot persuade myself that it is true; if it is invented, the author invented badly, because no one can imagine any husband foolish enough to conduct the costly experiment that Anselmo did… as for the manner in which it was told, I did not find it displeasing." The premise of the story is ridiculous yet it raises many interesting questions about the nature of personality, morality, and identity. Consider some questions that the story raises.

Should human beings be put to a stress test, or is it better to avoid pushing them to the breaking point? We can study natural phenomena and subject our machines to stress tests, but obviously problems arise if we try to experiment on humans to find out what they will do in the most extreme circumstances.

If we can't put humans to a stress test, or experiment on them, is it possible to know the truth of the human heart? The social sciences pursue such truths, but they remain unknowable because we shouldn't put people through stress tests, and even if we do, the results will remain elusive mysteries.

If we cannot put people to such tests, can we know their true character? Can

an untested person be called virtuous? If not, would it be reasonable to see virtue as a tentative concept and refrain from judging people on either their perceived merits or perceived failings?

Does the performance of social roles force us to put on masks that hide our true nature from us? What is the cost of wearing these masks, unconscious of their arbitrary nature? If a person experiences an unmasking, or the removal of his or her social role, or the destruction of his or her reputation, how can this individual manage the anxiety that comes from this crisis? In the RC story, the destruction of the old personas quickly leads all of the characters to their tragic and unnecessary deaths. Camila, especially, does not simply make one mistake. She doubles down on her mistake and becomes an extremely duplicitous liar, far removed from the virtuous person she was a short time before. The panic over her ego disintegration forces her to never consider stopping the escalation of lies and coming clean with a confession. Why did these characters find it impossible to resolve their tragic circumstances in some way that would allow them to start a new life? Why was it inconceivable for Lotario and Camila to just run off to Mexico and start over?

Why are social identity and social roles founded on sexual behavior? The modern sexual revolution involved an effort to say sex could be casual and inconsequential, but in this story, it is the foundation of character and virtue, and after one act of transgression of sexual mores, the characters suffer a complete disintegration of ego, reputation, and social identity. Has anything changed since the "sexual revolution" or are we still bound by an innate need to moralize sexual behavior? Is this moralizing essential in an economic system based on inheritance of family wealth that requires legally sanctioned claims to sex with a designated partner?

The actions of the servant Leonela show also that because sex has the power to dissolve individual social identities, it is an instrument for subverting the social hierarchy. She gains power over her mistress and is the person who, in the end, reveals all the secrets that destroy the three noble characters who are above her in the social hierarchy. In this sense, she shows that there is potential for political

insurrection in the manipulation of human sexuality.

Does primary blame go to Anselmo for his original distrust of his wife? Was Lotario motivated to seduce Camila out of resentment over being put in this situation? Was he insulted that Anselmo had asked him to act in a way that would make Camila lose respect for him? Was Camila motivated by her anger at her husband for having left her with Lotario? Both she and Lotario seem to act out of a feeling that their reputations had already been damaged because the servants and neighbors could see that Lotario was spending every evening at his friend's house while his friend was away. In this situation, they might have thought there was nothing more to lose. One thing that Cervantes couldn't do in the 17th century that a modern storyteller would do, was depict explicitly what was going on in bed between the married couple. Perhaps Anselmo wasn't interested in Camila as much as he was in his friendship with Anselmo.

Why do we never see more clearly into the minds of the female characters? Cervantes portrayed his female characters as simply surrendering to their seducers. We never learn anything about their desires and temptations. We get no explanation as to why Camila quickly became so attached to Lotario and had no interest in going back to her husband.

Was Anselmo motivated by feelings of shame and unworthiness? Did he unconsciously want to lose his wife because he felt unworthy of her? Was he suffering from imposter syndrome?

Was Lotario envious of his friend? Why did he not have a better place to go in the evenings? Did he have a secret desire for Camila right from the start?

The narration of the story suggests that beauty itself was the power that made Lotario betray his friend. Simply because he stopped talking and quietly looked too long at Camila's beauty, his virtue disappeared. Is this possible? If so, humans have no free will, no agency.

Don Quixote is a story about a man who wears a mask and adopts a contrived identity. In contrast with the characters in RC and CLFD, Don Quixote sheds his given identity and constructs a new one deliberately, with a purpose to do

good. In RC, Anselmo, Lotario and Camila play their conventional social roles unconsciously, as they have been handed to them, and it is for this reason that they panic when they are unmasked after having lost their identities so recklessly. When the masks were off, they were shocked to realize their fragility and what lay underneath. They had no ability to construct new identities for themselves.

Is the moral of the story pessimistic, or is there any reason to be optimistic after learning everyone is corruptible and character is subject to circumstance? Who can we trust more, the person who claims to be virtuous, or the person who makes no such claim but does her best in the present moment with an imperfect self in an imperfect world?

Discussion: The story of *Cardenio, Luscinda, Fernando and Dorotea*

This story's resolution reflects the philosophy of humanism that arose in the fifteenth century. It emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism and empiricism) over acceptance of dogma or superstition.[6] This humanism is on display in the CLFD story, and throughout the entire novel. Through their creativity and optimism, the characters display a humanistic world view. Unlike their counterparts in RC, they avoid tragic ruin and bring their story to a resolution that makes the best of a bad situation. The story resembles a Shakespearean comedy rather than a tragedy—all's well that ends well. Fernando is forgiven for his grievous betrayals and all is set right. When the reading of the RC story concludes, Luscinda and Fernando appear at the inn. Fernando has found Luscinda at the convent where she was taking refuge. He used his money and power to have her released into his custody. When they come to the inn, they have their fateful reunion with the other two characters in the CLFD story, Cardenio and Dorotea. The story, which has been related previously to Don Quixote and his friends by Cardenio and Dorotea, now continues in "real time" before everyone at the inn. It comes to a conclusion when Fernando is convinced by everyone present that he must set right all the wrong he has done. The only solution is for

Fernando to give up his claim on Luscinda so that Cardenio can marry her, and to keep his promise to marry Dorotea. The tragedy of the RC story hangs in the air like a negative example that they must avoid. It is much more reasonable for the offended parties to forgive and for Fernando to apologize and accept the situation.

There is a remarkable irony in the fact that while Don Quixote is ridiculed throughout the story for going off in search of maidens to rescue, the sane characters in the story actually do find a maiden in distress (Dorotea), and they rise to the opportunity to come to her assistance like chivalric knights. By having made them chase him down to return him to his village, Don Quixote has brought them to this point where they have an opportunity to do good deeds— rescuing him and rescuing the maiden in distress, Dorotea. Cardenio gains the opportunity to play heroic knight to Dorotea, for real, not in a fantasy as Don Quixote does, yet this stunning contrast seems to go unnoticed by the characters, and by many readers.

Like the story of the reckless husband, class conflict and social ambitions are the driving forces in the CLFD story. The ambitions of the parents cause the misery of their children, Luscinda, Dorotea and Cardenio. Dorotea's family is actually on its way to surpassing the wealth of the noble families. As the wife of Fernando, we can easily imagine Dorotea and her family displacing the influence of Fernando's family. In the Second Part of *Don Quixote* we meet a duke who is hopelessly in debt to the new bourgeois class of merchants and bankers, and even to a farmer.

In the first part of the story, Fernando created a situation in which Dorotea is forced to consent to sex out of fear of being raped, or out of fear of being dishonored in reputation, if not in deed. When relating the events of her horrible ordeal, she says, "What arguments will be enough to persuade my parents, and others, that this nobleman entered my bedroom without my consent?" But she also reveals some ambiguous feelings about whether to consent. She admits it is a good opportunity to rise in social rank, if she could extract a promise of marriage. Her pleasure at being flattered during this encounter seems to be a consideration.

Does she feel lust or temptation in this scene, or does she only see herself as a prize that is about to be taken? The contradictory thoughts she expresses about her night with Fernando raise unanswerable questions about the consent that occurs in the shadow of power struggles engaged in by both the seducer and the seduced. Later, at the story's conclusion, she is willing to marry Fernando to restore her honor, and this is not an attitude one would expect from a victim of a sexual assault. At the conclusion of the story, Dorotea expresses deep devotion and love to Fernando after having expressed deep disdain for him earlier in her story. We cannot know to what extent she is playing a role (or wearing a new mask) that she has learned to play—the role of devoted lover—in order to restore her honor and obtain the benefits of marriage to nobility. This is the best possible outcome for her now, so she might as well make the best of it. In the same way, there are no better alternatives now for Fernando, so he must go along with Dorotea's wishes. Their marriage will be based on a pretense that certain unpleasant things can be forgotten. One senses that she will be the dominant force in the marriage, especially since she represents the rising merchant class that is more competent and ambitious than the fading aristocracy.

While Don Quixote has been seen by all as a fool pursuing a meaningless fantasy, he is indirectly responsible for bringing all of these characters together, bringing out the best in them, and leading Cardenio, Luscinda, Fernando and Dorotea to a non-tragic conclusion of their story. In this way, Don Quixote's deliberate creation of his identity and his actions did actually change the world for the better. He achieved what he set out to do, though in a roundabout way.

After the lovers are reconciled, they, the barber, the priest, and the people at the inn all come together to play contrived roles in order to deceive Don Quixote that he is needed for the rescue of a maiden in distress. With this lure they will lead him safely back to his home. Whether Don Quixote is deceived or he lets his friends think they deceive him, through his real or contrived madness, he has turned his friends into heroes.

In this contrivance designed to trick Don Quixote into coming back to his

village, Luscinda, Dorotea, and others effortlessly put on masks and play fictitious roles, and this playing, this ability to play, is key to their salvation. As stated above in the definition of humanism, they exercise their agency in creating their world. The characters in RC completely lacked these powers of recreation. Keep in mind the possible meanings of Renaissance and Enlightenment. *Don Quixote* was written in a transitional period between the two that could be called late Renaissance and early Enlightenment. The Renaissance refers to the rebirth of classical knowledge, but also here to the potential for personal and cultural *rebirth* (renaissance) through conscious acts of rational inquiry and creation.

Cervantes shows that his characters' ability to put aside their identities and play-act is an element of their empathy and humanity. This is how they avoid a tragic fate. They re-invent themselves in ways that the characters in the reckless husband story could not. Because Cardenio, Dorotea and others listened to that story, it may have influenced their ability to avoid tragedy and bring their own story to a positive conclusion. No doubt it has influenced readers over the last four centuries in similar ways.

Here we can answer the question of why Cervantes layered these two stories into the main narrative about Don Quixote's wanderings. The novel is an illustration of humanism at work. Human agency is displayed in the meta-fictional and fictional characters, whether they are apparently rational or apparently delusional. The thoughts and actions of the meta-fictional characters influence those of the fictional characters, and in turn these have influenced the thoughts and actions of readers and other writers over the last four centuries. Cervantes had a justifiable purpose in putting these stories within the longer narrative about the wandering knight. They are integral to the novel and not just extras thrown in to pad the story. The interactions between these stories highlight the fact that thought creates reality, and vice versa. Elsewhere in the novel, the characters often discuss the purpose and value of fiction, and these dialogs suggest what Cervantes must have believed. Fiction is an essential element of the non-fiction reality in which we create and play our roles in the world.

Humanism then and now

Considering *Don Quixote* in the 21st century, we may be tempted to believe humanism has won the day, but the modern period is still replete with people, some of them our most mythic heroes, who choose the route of the characters in *The Husband Who Was Recklessly Curious*. Take, for example, one of the most famous political figures of the modern era: John F. Kennedy. Since *Don Quixote* was a satire of tales of chivalry, it seems fitting to discuss the American president whom many Americans elevated to the status of a mythical Camelot for modern times.

The question I ask here is whether John F. Kennedy (and Robert Kennedy and many other American politicians) would have been more successful in their professional and private lives if they had not been so ashamed of confronting their personal demons. JFK's hagiographers avoid the darker questions about how much his potential was cut short by blackmail and his fear of exposure. Questions have lingered over why he changed his mind at the last-minute and chose the corrupt and incompatible Lyndon Johnson as his candidate for vice-president. The speculation has been that Johnson and his friend J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, had compromising information which JFK did not want revealed.

The Jeffrey Epstein saga of recent years revealed that this syndrome of shame and blackmail in politics has grown enormously and rotted the entire political system. In spite of the lauded achievements of secularism and liberalism, when caught, leaders still choose to go down in flames like the characters in *The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious*. Cervantes' humanism is still relevant. The world would be better off if these leaders dealt with their personal issues before they tried solving the problems of the world, but when leaders do get caught, Cervantes shows us that they and the world would be better off if they simply shrugged and chose the path of confession and redemption, whatever the costs to them might be. In their roles in the hierarchy of power, they are replaceable, but their souls, and the souls of nations, are not.

Notes

1 Carlos Fuentes, "Tilt," a review Edith Grossman's English translation of *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, *New York Times*, November 2, 2003. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/02/books/tilt.html

2 Richard Eder, "Beholding Windmills and Wisdom From a New Vantage," *New York Times, Books of the Times*, November 14, 2003. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/14/books/books-of-the-times-beholding-windmills-and-wisdom-from-a-new-vantage.html

3 Carlos Fuentes.

4 Vladimir Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov: Lectures on Don Quixote, ed. Fredson Bowers* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xix, 28, 112.

5 Ivan Turgenev, *Hamlet and Don Quixote* (1860). http://www.donquixote.com/uploads/4/3/9/6/43962907/turgenev_-_hamlet_and_don_quixote-libre.pdf

6 Nicholas Mann, "The Origins of Humanism," *Cambridge Companion to Humanism*, Jill Kraye, editor (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–2.