Don Quixote: From Text to Icon

E. C. RILEY

—Yo apostaré—dijo Sancho—que antes de mucho tiempo no ha de haber bodegón, venta ni mesón, o tienda de barbero, donde no ande pintada la historia de nuestras hazañas.

(Don Quixote II, 71)

In 1985 there was a pop song enjoying a fair measure of success in Britain. Some of the lines went like this:

Your mind can play tricks
Makes you what you want to be
Just like super heroes
You saw them on TV

...In my old red saloon
I'm the knight in shining armour

...Don Quijote what do you say
Are we proud are we brave
Or just crazy
Don Quijote what do you say

1 This paper is a revised version of that given at the Washington Symposium, and in subsequent modified forms at the Royal Irish Academy's National Committee for Modern Language Studies Thirteenth Annual Research Symposium (October 1986) and the British Comparative Literature Association (December 1986). I am still working on it.

In February of the same year the following advertisement appeared in the periodical Your Computer:

The latest generation of laser-generated cartoon games—like Super Don Quixote—would make Hanna-Barbera drool. You can sit and watch the entertainment rather than play yourself, as a would-be windmill-tilter guides the Don past hazards new, fending off giants or skipping from rock to rock to avoid being swept off in a flood.

During the last ten years Don Quixote has also appeared as an animated cartoon in fifty-two parts, in audible form for cassette recorder lasting forty-eight hours, and in new adaptations for television and radio. Before that there was a successful Broadway musical which fathered a Hollywood film. There is more outlandish recent testimony to the durability of Cervantes' creation. For instance the goings-on at the "Mr. Cervantes 1986" competition held at the Hotel Cervantes, Torremolinos, as reported in the London Times, 4 June, 1986. The details of the event—animal impressions, transvestment, striptease—may be passed over hurriedly. The establishment boasts a Don Quixote Restaurant, a Sancho Panza Cafeteria and a Dulcinea Ballroom. No less bizarre but more endearing was something that occurred near the foothills of the Lammermuirs, not five miles from my house (I had nothing to do with it) in October 1985. Here it is reported in the East Lothian Courier, 1st November, 1985:

Don Quixote found hanging!

A funny place to hang a painting—from a tree—so thought keen cyclist, George Fenton, as he meandered along on his bicycle near Bolton crossroads, last week.
It turned out not to be an old master, worth millions of pounds, but being an amateur artist himself, George, who hail from West Saltoun, appreciated that the oil painting was someone’s original work. He handed it in to the local police station in Haddington.

So, if any reader has misplaced a 2-1/2 ft x 2 ft canvas of that

— it is now in the hands of police in Dalkeith.

Examples of a more traditional nature can be multiplied. Don Quixote has been continued, translated, imitated and adapted within its own genre, in other genres, and in other media, such as film. It has inspired poets and dramatists, provided material for scores of composers of orchestral music and opera, for choreographers of ballet and dance, for countless illustrators, painters, sculptors and weavers of tapestries. The Knight and the Squire have become a part of civic decoration. Well-known are the monumental figures in the Plaza de España, Madrid, which dwarf the little statue of their creator in a manner which would surely have earned a nod of approval from Unamuno. I have seen figures made of cleverly woven wire on the banks of the Guadalquivir, and there is another impressive metallic one in Guanajuato, Mexico.

That is not all, Don Quixote and Sancho have become profitable merchandise for the Spanish tourist industry. The ultimate phase in their diffusion is the commercial exploitation of their visual images, either on monitor or screen or as artefact. If you can literally sell the image, you have achieved the necessary condition of celebrity in the twentieth century. They are not as universally known as Mickey Mouse or Snoopy (who are only known visually), but they are in the next league.

You will note that I am not speaking of figures which came into being as graphic inventions, like Tintin or Asterix. I am not speaking of fictitious characters which began in a text and then became identified with actors playing the roles in film or other adaptations, like Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan or Dorothy in Frank L. Baum’s Wizard of Oz. Nor am I speaking of characters in books whose images are stamped on our minds via the pictures of a great illustrator, like Alice, through the marvelous drawings of Tenniel. It is true that modern illustrators of the Quixote, Gustave Doré in particular, have done a lot to stabilize the images of Quixote and Sancho, but the image-making process was under way long before that.

What is interesting is the instant and almost unrivaled recognizability of Cervantes’ two heroes. In Edinburgh there is a large neo-Gothic monument to Sir Walter Scott, embellished with sixty-four carvings of characters from his novels. But how many of them would we recognize out of context (or in context, for that matter)? In London’s Kensington Gardens there is a well-known statue of Peter Pan. That one is easier to identify. Indeed, there are a few figures from fiction which we can probably recognize without too much trouble. Huckleberry Finn? Certainly some from fairytales and nursery rhymes. There is also a poster in the London subway station at Baker Street: a silhouetted head in profile, hooked nose, deerstalker hat, curved pipe. We would surely know him even in some other subway station.

But as for the merchandise and tourist souvenirs, is there anything quite comparable? I would seriously like to know. Who has a statuette of Oedipus? Can one find Orlando furioso on an ashray? Has Lady Macbeth been seen on a soup plate? Tartuffe on a T-shirt? A Manon Lescaut pencil-sharpenor? Anna Karenina on a bathroom tile? A set of Brothers Karamazov bookends? I am ready to believe that such things may be on sale in Milan, Paris or Stratford-on-Avon. But which of these figures from the world’s great literature would one honestly know by sight without being told? One the other hand, Don Quixote, whom I have seen ornamenting nearly all these objects, is usually identifiable at once. Sancho Panza on his own just possibly might not be. But together with Don Quixote, there is no problem.

Cervantes has achieved the dream of every advertising man: a widely recognized symbol for his product. Like advertising men, politicians and national propagandists (following their heraldic ancestors) are no less eager to coin suitable symbols. So Don Quixote and Sancho have come quite close to being adopted as an emblem for Spain. If that has not actually happened, the reason must be a natural disinclination to embody the nation’s pride in a pair of comics, however lovable. In that context they remain marginal — a holiday souvenir of España from the Costa del Sol.

The surprising thing is that not only do people who know the novel recognize them, but so apparently do a very much larger number of people who never have and never will read the book, and that must include most of the pop-song and computer-game aficionados. A writer in the Guardian newspaper, reviewing a BBC radio version of Don Quixote in 1980, observed that, after the Bible, Don Quixote “must be one of the most widely published, translated and commented upon books of all time. But it is also one of the great unread.” He went on, significantly: “Not, of course, that we don’t know about Quixote: windmills, old gents on rickety horseback, even a familiar adjective.”

How do people know him so well if they do not read the book? It is not a sufficient answer to say that in the last century or two he has been taken over by other media, nor to attribute it to today's commercialism. For the fact is that within six months of the novel's first appearance in print, when its two heroes existed solely as verbal constructs, these visual materializations started to occur. The first evidence of Don Quixote's iconic power dates from June, 1605. The semi-official account, by Tomé Pinheiro da Veiga, of the festivities which took place that month in Valladolid to celebrate the birth of the prince who would later be King Philip IV, includes a description of a Portuguese nobleman dressed up as Don Quixote, riding a grey nag and accompanied by his Sancho Panza squire. Elsewhere in the same account he describes as “a Don Quixote” a certain tall skinny gentleman in green, who was courting some ladies so extravagantly in public that he caused a crowd to collect and aroused its mirth and mockery. From which we may conclude that both the masquerader and the chronicler could count on a public visually receptive to Cervantes' invention as early as the year 1605. Just two years later, 1607, in distant Peru, Don Quixote, together with Rocinante, Sancho, the Priest, Barber and Princess Micomicona, appeared along with others as processional figures in festivities held to honour the Viceroy. At least ten such appearances are recorded, from Cuzco to Heidelberg, by 1621.

The horse had a principal role in the recognition process from the first. This is acknowledged within the book itself. In the discussion of Part One which occurs early in Part Two the Bachelor Carrasco comments: “que apenas han visto algún rocín flaco, cuando dicen: ‘Allí va Rocinante.’” This kind of visual recognizability is soon confirmed by other writers. There is an example in Calderón’s Alcalde de Zalamea which will suffice:

Un hombre, 
que de un flaco rocinante

a la vuelta de esa esquina
se apeó, y en rostro y talle
parece aquel don Quijote,
de quien Miguel de Cervantes
escribió las aventuras (Act I, ll. 213-19).

The two basic constituents of our icon are the figure of the tall thin gentleman complemented by his short fat peasant companion. Rocinante is usually present, and sometimes the donkey. In most modern representations Don Quixote is equipped with arms and armour and there is most probably a windmill or two. Think of Picasso’s masterly scribble. Recall the pop song, the computer-game advertisement and the words of the radio-play reviewer, “windmills, old gents on rickety horses.” There was an inspired cartoon which appeared around 1965 or ’67, showing Don Quixote in his underwear, riding the donkey, while Sancho, in full armour, and riding Rocinante, is saying: “You realize, don’t you, that this will change all Western literature!”

I see two points of special interest in all this: (1) A piece of verbal discourse (and initially nothing else) has evoked an image in the minds of individual readers clearly enough for them to recognize immediately visual reproductions of the original made by other minds and hands. (2) These visual reproductions are capable of triggering a response of recognition from people who only know the textual original by allusion and hearsay.


8 (1988) 

Don Quixote: From Text to Icon

Márquez Villanueva, Alban Forcione— have gone on to show that there is even more of the carnivalesque in the Quixote than had been thought. Carnival’s antagonist, Lent, was a tall emaciated figure, sometimes riding a bony horse: an old woman (Doña Cuaresma), the image of penitential austerities. Being a woman, the correspondence with Don Quixote is less marked, but there is a physical
resemblance and other associations are suggested by the frugality of the Knight's eating habits and his essential chastity.

So in Carnival and Lent there already existed a pair of figures, one fat and one thin, well known in festivals. By luck or design Cervantes had hit on a couple of human shapes, which were popular emblems of religious observance, with something like an archetypal element, to which his first readers must have responded. The frequent appearances of Cervantes' two characters in festive masquerades so soon after the book came out must be connected with this.

Another secular parallel of the time tends to confirm it. There were two Italian comics well known in Spain in the later sixteenth century. They were Ganassa, who was a thin man, and Bottarga, a fat man. There is some reason (as Monique Joly and Áugustin Redondo have noted) for associating the first with Lent and the second with Carnival, and each with Don Quixote and Sancho respectively. A late sixteenth-century engraving of a Harlequin figure, probably Ganassa, dressed farcically as a knight errant with a cooking pot on his head and riding a scraggy mule, looks strikingly like Don Quixote.

Ganassa and Bottarga are a convenient reminder that much of the popular novelistic success of Quixote and Sancho stems from their being a comic double act, where dialogue plays an important part. Not only did Cervantes' pair provide paradigms for literary duos like Parson Adams and Joseph Andrews and Sam Weller, but the likeness to Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello (to restrict myself only to thin and fat ones). The latest encapsulations herald an interesting development. They are the robots C3PO and R2D2 of Star Wars. After robots, what?

Carnival associations and archetypal elements help to explain the success of the two figures in the icon. There may well be other gestalt possibilities and psychological implications present. Those elementally Freudian shapes remind us that Gerald Brenan once compared the Quixote-Sancho relationship to a marriage.

However, before any of these factors could work, Cervantes had to find the right words to evoke the images. Three particular aspects of his narrative technique seem relevant here. Previously I had thought that the acutely memorable nature of the visual evocations had something to do with realism, or at least with Barthes' "effet du réel." But if it does, it is obvious that it is of a different kind from that produced by the profusion of minute description favoured by the great modern realistic novelists such as Balzac, Dickens, Galdós, Arnold Bennett. Cervantes' physical descriptions of his two heroes and other components of the icon are always concise and relatively infrequent. The first one of Quixote is in the prologue: "seco, avellanado." Then, "frisaba la edad de nuestro hidalgo con los cincuenta años; era de complexión recia, seco de carnes, enjuto de rostro" (ch. 1). And: "subió sobre Rocinante, puesta su mal compuesta celada, embrazó su adarga, tomó su lanza" (ch. 2). Sancho on first appearance is not described physically at all, not until they both set out, when he is shown "sobre su jumento como un patriarca, con sus aforjas y su bota" (ch. 7). Initial sketches are later filled out with sporadic or repeated graphic details. Rocinante comes poignantly to life when we read of him standing "melancólico y triste, con las orejas caídas" (ch. 43, p. 531). Vividness is achieved by the sparing use of well-chosen detail rather than by much cataloguing of sporadic or repeated graphic particulars. Rocinante comes poignantly to life when we read of him standing "melancólico y triste, con las orejas caídas" (ch. 43, p. 531).

So (secondly) is this the verbal equivalent of graphic caricature? The answer is yes, perhaps it is, if the term implies, as Gombrich says, taking up and emphasizing a distinctive and consistently identifiable trait, however trivial. The gaunt lankiness of the Knight and the corpulence of the Squire would constitute such traits. But obviously there can not have been any distortion of an extratextual physical shape, such as happens with portrait caricature. There is no origin of which the caricatured representation is a distortion. It is just worth noting that portrait caricature emerged precisely around this date in the work of the Caracci brothers, according to Kris and Gombrich. Soon after, dramatic caricature entered the seventeenth-century French theatre.

Thirdly, Don Quixote is a novel conceived in strongly visual terms, and fundamental questions of visual perception are built into the structure and fabric of the book. So is duality of perspective. It is a consequence of Don Quixote's peculiar madness that the reader is repeatedly reminded indirectly of the way things in the book and people, including the Knight himself, look. His optical aberration whereby everyday things are transformed in his mind's eye —windmills become giants, sheep warriors, inn's castles, etc.— has a reciprocal suggestive effect on the reader. It puts a comparison of the two images into his head, however momentarily. This applies also to the image of the man himself. He is presented picturing himself as a handsome knight in shining armour, or a youthful gallant, thereby making us repeatedly recall the absurd spectacle he presents to others. This counter-suggestion often works without any additional description at all, consolidating the original impression we have formed of his appearance.


E. C. RILEY

Cervantes

Frodo and Sam Gamgee, and even Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, but they are also in the tradition of comedian double acts, like Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello (to restrict myself only to thin and fat ones). The latest encapsulations herald an interesting development. They are the robots C3PO and R2D2 of Star Wars. After robots, what?

Carnival associations and archetypal elements help to explain the success of the two figures in the icon. There may well be other gestalt possibilities and psychological implications present. Those elementally Freudian shapes remind us that Gerald Brenan once compared the Quixote-Sancho relationship to a marriage.

However, before any of these factors could work, Cervantes had to find the right words to evoke the images. Three particular aspects of his narrative technique seem relevant here. Previously I had thought that the acutely memorable nature of the visual evocations had something to do with realism, or at least with Barthes' "effet du réel." But if it does, it is obvious that it is of a different kind from that produced by the profusion of minute description favoured by the great modern realistic novelists such as Balzac, Dickens, Galdós, Arnold Bennett. Cervantes' physical descriptions of his two heroes and other components of the icon are always concise and relatively infrequent. The first one of Quixote is in the prologue: "seco, avellanado." Then, "frisaba la edad de nuestro hidalgo con los cincuenta años; era de complexión recia, seco de carnes, enjuto de rostro" (ch. 1). And: "subió sobre Rocinante, puesta su mal compuesta celada, embrazó su adarga, tomó su lanza" (ch. 2). Sancho on first appearance is not described physically at all, not until they both set out, when he is shown "sobre su jumento como un patriarca, con sus aforjas y su bota" (ch. 7). Initial sketches are later filled out with sporadic or repeated graphic details. Rocinante comes poignantly to life when we read of him standing "melancólico y triste, con las orejas caídas" (ch. 43, p. 531). Vividness is achieved by the sparing use of well-chosen detail rather than by much cataloguing of particulars.

So (secondly) is this the verbal equivalent of graphic caricature? The answer is yes, perhaps it is, if the term implies, as Gombrich 12 Linda Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody (London & New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 27, thinks they are descended from Wizard of Oz characters, but the likeness to Quixote and Sancho is much more striking.


8 (1988) Don Quixote: From Text to Icon

111
The poetic and rhetorical treatises of the day say little about realism and still less that is relevant to the more unusual techniques in the *Quixote*. They followed Aristotle and Quintilian in requiring writers to put their subjects right before their readers’ eyes and achieve *enargia* in scenic description, but the representation of reality was expected to offer a point of departure for deeper meanings and was not normally regarded as self-justifying.17


---

Where caricature is concerned, despite the accepted connection between portrait caricature and the contemporary “science” of physiognomics, neither one of the well-known works by G. B. della Porta and Jerónimo Cortés have proved helpful in locating a standard model for Quixote or Sancho which relates physical with character traits.18 The system only works very partially, in a few particulars and not in others. Although they are a recognizable duo as fat-man and thin-man comics, they are too individualized to be stereotypes. None of this takes us to the heart of the process whereby language changes place with a picture. Ernst Kris illustrated the circularity of this process when he wrote:

> The purposeful translation of the dreamday into narrative form is dependent on a total translation of visual into verbal expression, the shortcut of visual imagination must be replaced by words which can evoke the vision in others.19

But precisely what happens at the interchange of verbal and visual codes I cannot imagine. This is a problem for the psychologist of cognition or the computer scientist. So much—as far as it goes—for the transition from verbal discourse to visual icon. It remains to say something of the quasi-autonomous status and evocative power of the latter.

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (more particularly the former, since Sancho is really a complementary figure) have detached themselves from the book which gave them birth and acquired autonomous existence. Some evidence for this was presented in the early part of this paper. This existence is a vast reduction of their intratextual one, but it is powerful enough evocative. At this point let me bring in another component of the icon, nowadays regularly included as part of it.

The best known of all Don Quixote's adventures, the one most often alluded to in popular versions and illustrations, is the adventure of the windmills. It has bequeathed a proverbial expression even to the English language. "Windmills" was the first word the *Guardian* reviewer associated with Don Quixote. Why? (I shall ignore the cynical answer that it is one of the first adventures in a long novel and many people do not read any farther.) The incident is related with something of the quasi-autonomous status and evocative power of the latter.

Charles Aubrun has interpreted the encounter in socio-economic terms. He explains that this kind of windmill was a technological innovation in sixteenth-century Spain. It helped to change the pattern of the agricultural economy in ways which undermined the prosperity of the small-time country hidalgos. Dressed up in terms of storybook chivalry, Don Quixote's hostility was rooted in very materialistic grounds.21 This interpretation, which was not addressed to our particular question, does not explain why a twentieth-century public should find the incident memorable.

The same is true of Márquez Villanueva's reminder that the episode may have an old emblematic significance.22 There existed an association between madness and windmills. To have "windmills in the head" was and is an Andalusian expression for thinking and behaving madly. Sancho uses the very expression to his master. Seventeenth-century English literature knew the same metaphor, the system only works very partially, in a few particulars and not in others. Although they are a recognizable duo as fat-man and thin-man comics, they are too individualized to be stereotypes.

20 In the year 1428, at certain courtly festivities organized in Valladolid by the king of Navarre, the Infante Enrique and King Juan II of Castile, an elaborate passage of arms called the "Fuerte Ventura" was devised. In the jousting which this involved it seems that the king of Navarre and his knights appeared disguised as windmills.
Of all the combats engaged in by Don Quixote, this one is arguably the most futile, absurd and unlikely to succeed. To try to beat up a large and powerful machine peacefully doing its job in the service of men and women is quite one of his most pointless acts of lunacy. It stands out by its very extremism.

But there is more. However harmless it is, a windmill is still a machine —big, powerful, mobile, mindless, and as such potentially or symbolically threatening. Here, in fact, is a very early version of an unsurpassably modern mythic motif: that of Man versus Machine. We have here a premonition of one of the few genuine new myths of the technological age: Frankenstein and his man-made monster. Feeble and absurd though he is, Don Quixote charging dauntlessly in to attack this enemy strikes a chord in us today.

With a flash of inspired and childlike animism our hero turns the windmills into wicked giants. He has perceived the mythopoeic possibilities of those churious structures on the plain of La Mancha (they are still to be seen there), hybrids of artefact and creature. He proceeds to consolidate his myth-making by comparing one of them with Briareus, the hundred-armed, one of the monstrous race of titans who rebelled against Zeus and the gods. But, like all the best fairytale giants, windmills are also rather comic (waving their arms and getting nowhere). Their menacing aspect is modified by this ridiculous note. This combination of qualities is precisely that which characterizes the ogres of fairytale and romance (confirmed by their ludicrous names). Freud held that the roots of comedy are buried in infantile fears. It was only to be expected that Cervantes would make the most of the comic potential of the event.

So far I have suggested that this icon derives its effectiveness from an extratextual association. But what it also clearly does with more immediacy is evoke the whole Quixotic context. To contemplate

the picture of Don Quixote tilting at a windmill is to grasp the sense of that “familiar adjective” quixotic. The icon is a visual expression of the main qualities we associate with Don Quixote in his early, maddest days —capricious, misdirected, impractical, idealistic, militant, ineffective. The chief function of windmills in the icon is to proclaim: “Attacking windmills is quixotic.”

In the right circumstances, they now even function synecdochically. At the end of the movie Patton—Lust for Glory, the defeated hero (George C. Scott) walks off into the distance —a landscape with windmills. The allusion is not lost on us. The visual image, a part of the icon, in another story and another medium, three and a half centuries later, still does its work.

It seems that I am going to end on a tautology. The Quixote icon gives expression to the idea of the quixotic. This needs no apology. It is the fate of every icon which contains a mythic figure. Such icons evoke first and foremost what they are. There is no longer any need even to remember the original stories they came from. St. George and the dragon, Romeo and Juliet, Dr. Frankenstein's creature: they have detached themselves from the stories they first appeared in. So too have Don Quixote and Sancho. We know them, perhaps, because we can find them in ourselves.

What is different, however, about Don Quixote is that somehow the comic parody of an older myth has generated an authentic new myth. To see how that happens we have to read the book after all.

8 (1988) Don Quixote: From Text to Icon 115

Prepared with the help of Myrna Douglas
Publications of the CSA
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH