

Summer 1999

Review of Ronald Paulson, *Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter,*

Peter M. Briggs
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Briggs, Peter M. (1999). Review of "Review of Ronald Paulson, *Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter,*" *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 1 : No. 1
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol1/iss1/6>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol1/iss1/6>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Ronald Paulson, *Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. xxii + 242pp. ISBN 0801856957.

Reviewed by Peter M. Briggs, Bryn Mawr College

Mr. Paulson has written an ambitious and wide-ranging study of the reception and reputation of Cervantes' great novel in England. One small part of his effort is to reexamine the formalities of reception: when was *Don Quixote* translated and how well? Who provided illustrations and when? How widely was the book read and cited by other writers? How did early readers understand the characters of Quixote himself and Sancho Panza? But the far larger and more interesting tasks that Mr. Paulson has set for himself are, first, to examine the problematics of reading *Don Quixote* in the context of a new culture, and secondly, to assess its impact in the ongoing development of English literary culture. The central question, then, is not just how Cervantes' novel was read, but rather, how the habits of mind and patterns of imagining made available by the publication of *Don Quixote* were put to use—adopted, adapted, converted, transmuted—through a long and various succession of English writers. By the time Mr. Paulson has explored this latter question thoroughly, he has offered a surprisingly comprehensive glance into the dynamics of eighteenth-century literary culture in England.

One thing that made *Don Quixote* such a vital resource was Cervantes' use of "grave irony" to tease his readers into attention. Repeatedly he opposed Quixote's chivalric fantasies, ideal yet deluded, to the more down-to-earth views of Sancho (views given extra credibility in England by the rise of empiricism)—and then failed to pick between them. Moreover, there are usually onlookers puzzling over Quixote's grand gestures, who have outlooks and interests and temperaments of their own—and again Cervantes didn't pick a side. In general, then, *Don Quixote* is a novel of partial views held in ironical juxtaposition, and most of the time its readers are left to sort things out. This doubt-filled method encourages multiple interpretations, of course, but Mr. Paulson urges that it also has a cumulative function: the novel can become a site for cultural contestation where different interpreters review unresolved issues in their own system of values. More specifically, Mr. Paulson argues, the currency of *Don Quixote* in Restoration and eighteenth-century England gave high visibility to four important contested issues: the "madness" of trusting imagination; the implicit cruelty of laughter; the problematizing of what is and is not beautiful; and the dangerous extension of ideas of madness or delusion into the area of religious doctrine.

In the opening chapter he tackles both imagination and humor. Don Quixote's chivalric projections allowed many readers to ask, how much is imagination to be trusted as an interpreter of the world? The reasons for mistrusting imagination had been laid out by Hobbes, dramatized by religious and political "enthusiasts" of various stripes, and finally given a definitive literary form by Swift; the hack narrator of *A Tale of a Tub* is a recognizable descendant of Don Quixote in the sense that both have imaginations made overheated and unruly by their respective readings. It was also Hobbes who had theorized that laughter sprang from a feeling of "Sudden glory" or triumph over its object—so all laughter was by implication satirical; and once again Swift in his writings seemed to supply abundant confirmation to this view.

Joseph Addison is the hero of this section of Mr. Paulson's argument. In his *Spectator* essays on the "Pleasures of the Imagination" Addison offered a much more positive and aesthetic-minded account of the place of imagination in human culture: Imagination is really the enjoyment of the Novel, New, and Uncommon, and as such provides an innocent step out of "Business" without stepping into "Vice or Folly." Addison also argued the possibility of a more complex and good-natured kind of laughter, one more appreciative and more commensurate with a complicated object of humor like Don Quixote. Laughter can be disinterested, pleasurable, an expression of wonder and affection as well as amusement; laughter can reflect human responsiveness—surprise, sympathy, and the aesthetic delight of novelty. Finally Addison contributed the figure of Sir Roger de Coverley in the *Spectator* papers—again, a recognizable descendant of Quixote, with his avuncular innocence and out-of-date dress—as a confirmation of this more genial (and Whiggish) understanding of humor.

The second chapter is a rather miscellaneous one, loosely organized around ideas of high and low burlesque as they are reflected (or sometimes conspicuously not reflected) in *Don Quixote* itself, in the illustrations that accompanied the English editions, in Hogarth's illustrations to Butler's *Hudibras*, and in Quixotic fictions stretching from *Paradise Lost* to *The Beggar's Opera* and *Joseph Andrews*. Mr. Paulson's range of cultural reference is very broad and many of his particular suggestions are bold and provocative (he reads *Paradise Lost* as constituting simultaneously a burlesque of the *Aeneid* and a tragic version of *Don Quixote*), but some of the connections between the different segments of his argument seem tenuous or perhaps just insufficiently explained.

Mr. Paulson's next chapter traces the complex and shifting relationship of wit and humor between 1650 and 1750. In the earlier years Don Quixote provided some with a model that allowed them to praise humor—in the sense of "an amiable eccentricity"—over wit. Addison worked to recuperate wit much as he had done with laughter, by seeking to take away its satiric edge and thereby rendering it more good-natured. Properly understood, wit is an agreeable and aesthetically pleasing form of surprise, a comic way for knowing and organizing the world of experience. Mr. Paulson argues that the rebalancing of wit and humor was completed in fact when Fielding gave the world his Quixote-like Parson Adams, admirable yet fallible in equal measure, and justified in theory when Corbyn Morris published his *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule* in 1744.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the aesthetics of flawed beauty. Mr. Paulson begins by drawing attention to a split between the idealist Quixote who expects his Dulcinea to be a perfect beauty and realist Sancho Panza who supposes that even the loveliest woman will have a flaw or two to set off her beauty. Those who adopt the idealist position are likely to see anything less than perfect beauty as ugliness. An impossible standard of beauty crowds out ordinary humanity, and Mr. Paulson uses this fact to suppose that Swift's famous "Dressing Room" poems of disillusionment were written from a Quixotic point of view. But real human beauty is a matter of taste and the flexible Sancho position was more prevalent in eighteenth-century England: Mr. Paulson invokes witnesses from Addison to Hume to show that that which departs from perfect beauty can still be beautiful. His real emphasis, however, is upon the "plebeian aesthetics" of Sancho and William Hogarth which find both continual pleasure and creative energy in the flawed realities of the living world. Mr. Paulson ends this section by glancing at a succession of flawed heroes and

heroines from mid-century novels—Fanny Goodwill, Fanny Hill, Amelia, Tom Jones. The "mixed" qualities of a Tom Jones have more appeal than the ostensible perfection of a Pamela Andrews.

Chapter 5 is nominally about religion, but in reality it is more about secular aesthetics put in the place of religion. First Shaftesbury and then Addison borrowed upon traditions of religious cheerfulness and turned them in the direction of aesthetic responsiveness. Man is "the merriest Species of the Creation" (Addison) who should be free to pursue the pleasures of novelty. Mr. Paulson next returns to Hogarth and the down-to-earth aesthetics of Sancho Panza: Hogarth lent more credence (and more cultural visibility) to isolated individual acts of charity and goodness than to all the formalities of high church religion. Mr. Paulson closes this section with an extended discussion of the accommodation of Quixotic elements, religious impulses, and secular fictions in *Joseph Andrews*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Robinson Crusoe*. His observations are acute and often thought-provoking: Is Friday's relationship to Crusoe really like that of Sancho to Don Quixote? And occasionally a reader has to pause simply to say, "Wow!", as when Mr. Paulson manages to crowd Defoe, Cervantes, Milton, the Bible, and Vergil into a single breath-taking sentence: "*Robinson Crusoe* was a melding of *Don Quixote* and its sacred equivalent, *Paradise Lost*, connecting the practical 'how to' aspect of home rebuilding with the Fall and Redemption of Man (with, inevitably, a secular strain of georgic renewal adapted in Milton's religious fable)."

The final chapter departs from the perspective of Quixote and Sancho, beginning instead with the interpolated story of Grisóstomo and Marcela: when the beautiful Marcela withdraws from the world to become a shepherdess, Grisóstomo dies for the unrequited love of her. What gives this story particular interest is the fact that Marcela gets to speak on her own behalf at his funeral. Why, she asks, should she have to submit to admiration, just because men wonder at her beauty and desire her? Can she not enjoy her beauty at a distance from others? Can she not be a person in her own right? Cervantes leaves the answer to these questions in suspension, juxtaposing Marcela's rights of personhood against the melancholy fact of Grisóstomo's death.

Mr. Paulson uses Marcela's claims to open a discussion of female subjects in the English Quixote tradition; the obvious first example is Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*. He finds Lennox's protagonist Arabella a problematic figure, partly because her relative passivity makes her less comic than Quixote was, more because she combines the Don Quixote and Dulcinea roles in herself and thereby becomes a deluded romance-reader seeking after an idealized version of herself. In short, Arabella is too serious, too self-assured, too much like Pamela. Mr. Paulson finds Jane Austen's Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* more appealing: she too has read herself into fantasy—now Gothic fantasy—but her excesses are kept in perspective by the controlling ironies and the moral seriousness of her author.

Mr. Paulson's conceptual leaps and bold literary connections are sometimes hard to follow, so this is not an easy book to read; on the other hand, his various discussions are intelligent, substantial, comprehensive, and well researched, so there are many reasons to read the book all the same.