

## Remembering a Forgotten Hero\*

Gerald J. Gargiulo

What better pastime, amid the five-degree blistery cold days of January and February, than to pick up a book and return to a hero of one's adolescence? Fifty years after I thought I had said a reluctant goodbye to Don Quixote, I read in the New York Times' Sunday Book Review, my Sunday morning companion, of a new translation. A few hours later, at Book Hampton, I found the bright-red jacketed, thousandpage companion of my youth. Forget that I had more books than my desires, much less my needs could hold, – not to mention my wife's almost desperate observation that libraries had been founded for just such occasions! As I started rereading the adventures of this noble and seemingly mad knight, long-banished adolescent daydreams and phantasies hiding just below awareness slowly emerged from the crevices of my memory. Perhaps my life would be as noble, as adventuresome, as ultimately decent and praiseworthy, as my forlorn knight. (Great writers make their creations our friends.) But time, of course, is not particularly kind to our youthful aspirations; a quiet, sober acceptance of our own time and place is a better comfort upon which to rest our hopes. What I experienced, however, is why Don Quixote is a classic; its insights, its humor, its civility are as valid today as they were four hundred years ago.

I had forgotten how much Cervantes puts on the lips of his characters the term old Christian – distinguishing the speaker from the frequently coerced Moors or Jews who had to convert to Catholicism or leave home and fortune. So present-day tensions with Muslims, I was reminded, have a long history. As I read these references, I was momentarily distracted from the story, puzzled that we don't seem to know, or maybe don't want to know, that religious or political absolutes damage us; they undo our experience of connection with each other. I wonder if reading Don Quixote, a story so set within a particular culture, within a localized geography, can, paradoxically, help us appreciate the ebb and flow of time;

appreciate how our convictions flow from our particular historical perspective. Maybe Cervantes knew this, maybe not. I had a sense, as I read of the various adventures of rescuing Christians from Moors, or Moors from Christians, that he was contrasting such situations with Quixote's civility and idealism. As I continued reading, I learned, once again, what one should do to be more human in a world that seemed intent on frustrating such a task. His mad knight and uneducated Sancho Panza convey uncommon insights tucked within the humorous adventures that befall them.

His simple and repeated message to the reader is that one should defend the downtrodden, the abused, and especially maidens in distress. (I take that last injunction to mean don't take advantage of your strength.) Idealistic? Certainly. His idealization of his lady Dulcinea seems both fanciful and ridiculous. His fierce mistaking windmills for dangerous giants, his perception that prisoners on their way to jail were, in fact, slaves being taken off by the power structure, his conviction that "evil enchanters" haunted him and could change his world at their whim, did not, however, strike me as simple delusions. The Broadway musical "Man from La Mancha," loosely based on Cervantes' story, captures, with its hit song The Impossible Dream, a bit of the universal yearning for idealism, that is, for each of us to find and to create his or her own meaning in the face of the windmills life places before us. Is this mad knight reminding us not to give up our ideals for functionality, as useful as functionality is? I wondered, somewhat fancifully, as I continued to read of Quixote's adventures, whether, in his attempt at justice, freeing the prisoners he comes upon from the authorities was Cervantes' way of questioning a legal system that was sure it always had the right culprit – a system that today, even with DNA, we struggle with also.

Evil enchanters change rural country inns into towering castles, forlorn young lovers into princesses and princes, the exquisite Dulcinea into a coarse farm hand – only this knight knows of such deceptions! Of course, there are no enchanters today. Are there? We pride ourselves as being psychologically and technologically sophisticated; enchanters have been

banished to movies and novels. They do not inhabit our day-to-day world. There are no Merlin's to change the meaning of things. Is Cervantes suggesting, with this seemingly quaint delusion, something that we might do well to think about? Do we not have our own advertising, journalistic or political Merlins, our own television mystifiers? Should we not be cautious, and perhaps a little suspicious, as we look at and interpret our world? Cervantes, I believe, was too good a writer to bring in "evil-enchanters" merely as a cover-all for his knight's actions.

What seems to be one of the most fanciful of Quixote's delusions is his quest for his Dulcinea. Don Quixote, as we know, never does meet her; he seemed to me, in fact, to be reluctant to meet her. Again, I wondered, what was Cervantes suggesting here? Do we need something or someone outside ourselves to defend, to seek, to call on in times of struggle, and, most importantly, to inspire us to acts of generosity? It seems, from everything that I experience, that we do – and Cervantes knew this.

As I finished the story and put it down once again, I did not feel I had to say goodbye to my literary friend. I knew him better now than when we first met; I would have no trouble remembering him. What about his charming but temporary madness? My only response: what madness?

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