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Don Quixote's Code of Honor

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In the thinking of Don Quixote, the life of a knight should be governed completely by a code of honor. Every action of the knight should be dictated by the laws of chivalry. Each one of his gestures, deeds, and thoughts should have these laws as its foundation. However, adherence to this code is difficult, complicated, sad, and—at times—amusing for Don Quixote because he tries to live a chivalrous life when society has lost its acceptance and respect for its practice. When Don Quixote brings his code of honor into practice, his madness and his insistence on following the code clouds his ability to distinguish his successes from his failures. There are instances when he follows this code and succeeds in one form or another. On the other hand, there are also those occasions when he fails because he anachronistically follows the laws of chivalry. Accordingly, there are examples of his triumphs and his defeats. An example of failure and defeat occurs when Don Quixote “saves” a young laborer from a beating by a master. An example of success and triumph occurs when Don Quixote defeats the Knight of the Woods in a joust.

In the adventure with the young laborer and his master, Don Quixote's chivalric efforts appear to succeed in rescuing the young boy. The master, Juan Haldudo, is afraid of Don Quixote, a man with a sword, dressed in armor, claiming to be a knight-errant. The master promises Don Quixote not only to spare the young boy Andrés a beating, but also to pay the boy for his labor. Upon securing these promises, Don Quixote departs from the scene with the belief that he has triumphed in one of his first challenges as a knight-errant. In reality he has failed. After Don Quixote's departure, young Andrés is beaten even further.

In contrast, there is the episode of Don Quixote's joust with the Knight of the Woods. The code of honor obliges Don Quixote to defend the honor of his lady, Dulcinea de Tobolso, and thus to accept the other knight's challenge. In the face of all that this "knight" has in his favor—his youth, his strength and his sanity—Don Quixote wins the joust and triumphs in this test of his knight-hood.

Don Quixote's belief in his code of honor prompts him to accept these challenges. His moral sense and his trust in the goodness of others, including his enemies, guide his actions in these adventures. For example, a moral imperative forces Don Quixote to defend the young worker against the brutality of the master; a vow to Dulcinea forces Don Quixote to defend her as the most beautiful woman in the world. In the "rescue" of Andrés, Don Quixote convinces the master not to beat the young man and to pay what was promised. Don Quixote does not wait around to see the fulfillment of these promises. He simply accepts and respects the word of the brutal master as if it came from another knight. Don Quixote believes that other men will abide by the laws of chivalry with an identical sense of honor and purity of conviction. Not even the advice and pleas of the young laborer can do anything to shake Don Quixote's trust in the good faith of the cruel man's promises. Cervantes writes "basta que yo se lo mande para que me tenga respeto: y con él me lo jure por la ley de caballería que ha recibido, le dejaré ir libre y aseguraré la paga."¹ If Quixote had not demonstrated this naïve trust, he probably would not have failed. The master had been afraid of Don Quixote and had been ready to do what Don Quixote had commanded of him. If Quixote had waited in order to witness the fulfillment of the master's promises, Andrés truly would have been saved.

In the episode of the Knight of the Woods, the chivalric obligation that Don Quixote holds toward his lady Dulcinea forces him to defend her honor. However, in this case, as in the other, Don Quixote's trust that others share his sense of honor leads him to make mistakes. True, Don Quixote challenges the Knight of the Woods because of a vow to Dulcinea, but a belief that this knight

shares the same code leads Don Quixote also to believe that Sanson (the Knight of the Woods) would accept defeat with good grace and fulfill a promise to present himself to Dulcinea. In this situation, Don Quixote wins the physical battle, but he loses what he sought to achieve in the first place—the knight's submission to Dulcinea. Once again, Don Quixote does not actually witness the fulfillment of a promise, but this time the consequences of that mistaken trust do not result in physical harm.

One aspect of Don Quixote's code of honor—the notion that a knight-errant must make sacrifices—dampens his ability to distinguish between his true successes and failures. Such sacrifices include going days without food, spending nights without sleep, and losing his teeth. To Don Quixote, all the physical punishment and embarrassment that he endures are justified in his mind as parts of the training of a knight-errant. Upon discovering that Andrés has actually been beaten, Quixote resolves to avenge the injury and injustice, believing that this time he will triumph. He sees this situation as a continuation of the adventure, not a failure on his part. The same is also true in the episode with Sanson. All the clues signaling that Don Quixote has not defeated another knight lead him to believe instead in the deceptions of enchanters. According to Riquer, “Don Quijote llega a la conclusión de que se trata de una nueva jugarreta de los encantadores que le persiguen, que para quitarle la gloria de la batalla ganada han convertido al Caballero de los Espejos en el bachiller y a su escudero en Tomé Cecial.”² His belief that he is a knight-errant being pursued by enchanters does not permit him to see the truth that his friends are deliberately deceiving him. Don Quixote has difficulty accepting his failures because he does not see them as such. Instead, he sees all of his mistakes as small steps toward his ultimate achievement: being a knight-errant.

The laws of chivalry that a knight must follow are ultimately a moral code. According to Agustín Basave Fernández del Valle, “Don Quijote se hizo caballero andante no por azar ni locura, sino por amor a la justicia, por llevar el bien a todas partes, por sincera cristianidad, por arrojo a toda prueba.”³ This moral code dictates

that a knight must fight for justice on the side of God. Don Quixote believes therefore that the will of God guides him to victory. Upon first hearing the screams of the young laborer, Don Quixote gives thanks to the heavens for the opportunity to aid someone as a knight. Next, when he commands Andrés' employer to untie the young man, Don Quixote, with an oath to God, warns the brutal man: "Pagadle luego sin más replica, si no, por el Dios que nos rige, que os concluya y aniquile en este punto."⁴ Confident that he battles in defense of God's laws, Don Quixote believes in the righteousness of what he does, even when he injures others. Everything that he does has a justification—a divine justification. He can thus ignore his failures because God would not permit defeat for someone honoring the moral laws of chivalry.

In the "rescue" of Andrés and in the joust with the Knight of the Woods, the failure to follow the code of honor with common sense eventually comes back to haunt Don Quixote. When he saves Andrés from a brutal and cruel man, Don Quixote doesn't consider the man's lack of basic human decency and so orders him to treat the young worker fairly. All of the initial reasons why Andrés needed help at the beginning disappear for Don Quixote when the mission seems complete. The same process of reasoning occurs with Don Quixote's victory over the Knight of the Woods. After the joust, Don Quixote believes Sanson's deceptive admission of defeat. This mistake is made again when Sanson cites the code of honor to make Don Quixote abandon knight-errantry. This irony is described by Van Doren: "That happens, and then Don Quixote is obliged to remember the condition he accepted: if defeated to return to his village and live peaceable there for the whole of one year. He remembers, and he consents. It never occurs to him to do otherwise, nor has Carrasco doubted that he would keep his word."⁵ The code of honor eventually brings Don Quixote to his downfall: he does not simply lose his life; he also loses his faith. As MacLaurin has written, "Like most idealists he died a sad and disappointed man, certain of one thing only—that he was out of touch with the majority of mankind."⁶

Don Quixote believes that the laws of chivalry must be strictly obeyed. They are more than guides by which he should live his life. His lack of common sense is derived from both his naïvete and his madness. Everything that Don Quixote knows of the world comes from romances of knights, ladies, and chivalry. He has no practical experience on which he can base his actions. His delusions regarding enchanters are symptoms of madness, not just means of excusing his failures: "Su mundo de fantasía no es, para él, una mera hipótesis, sino un hecho histórico probado, irrefutablemente, por las fuentes de todos los libros—casi sagrados—de caballerías andantescas."⁷ He believes, with complete conviction, in the honesty and purity of his code of honor. His madness provides "reasonable" explanations of events when the laws of chivalry do not produce the result that he expects from his faithfulness to them.

There are two conclusions one can make about Don Quixote's adherence to the laws of chivalry. On the one hand, following them does not achieve what Don Quixote sets out to accomplish. Whether this failure is due to the anachronism of their practice, his naïvete, or his madness, his adherence to these laws seems to fail him in his quest to become a knight. For example, while giving advice to Sancho about the duties of a good governor, Don Quixote displays a practical sense not displayed in his own life as a knight. On the other hand, perhaps the code of honor gives him exactly what he wants. In his madness, he chooses the life of a knight, determined to follow it with Christian fervor for the rest of his life. The small battles that he loses hold no significance for him; the manner in which he chooses to live his life does. Others do not respect him and do not follow his moral code, but their failure does not tell him that he should change. What makes Don Quixote strong and noble is that he does not change and that he maintains his faith in his beliefs. To Don Quixote, the ultimate victory depends on the way a man lives his life. Indeed, the power of the code of honor to make him abandon his life as a knight errant demonstrates that his faith is stronger than his madness. In the

words of Van Doren, "His last act as a knight is possibly his truest. He is faithful to his vow."⁸

Notes

¹Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. Martín de Riquer (Barcelona: Planeta, 1997), 58.

²Martín de Riquer, *Aproximación al Quijote* (Barcelona: Teide, 1967), 139.

³Agustín Basave Fernández del Valle, *Filosofía del Quijote* (México, DF: Editora Americana, 1968), 26-27.

⁴Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, 57.

⁵Mark Van Doren, *Don Quixote's Profession* (New York: Columbia UP, 1958), 94.

⁶C. MacLaurin, *Post Mortem* (New York: George H Doran, 1923), 145.

⁷Agustín Basave Fernández del Valle, *Filosofía del Quijote*, 15.

⁸Mark Van Doren, *Don Quixote's Profession*, 94.