

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF DON QUIXOTE

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QUIXOTE'S SOCIAL ROLE

. Quixote voraciously read hundreds of books on chivalry and knighthood, and assumed a role of the chivalrous righter of wrongs, and the role of an idealistic, adventurous adversary of evil roaming the country in search of honor and glory. These books provided the script for Quixote's grand performance. They provided him the rules of conduct, the flowery language, his fair maiden, and a soaring desire for goodness and honor. Quixote's role and identity were bestowed on him in acts of social recognition (Berger 1963). The innkeeper, Sancho, the barber, and others gave recognition so as to humor the gentle knight, and thus validated and reinforced his role.

. The rite of passage is incorporated into Quixote's role. To become a true knight, he must be dubbed by an authority figure. The dubbing is the initiation into a new higher order of knighthood and service to a liege lord. As Riesman put it, the sincere man is one who believes his own propaganda. Quixote's sincerely sustained him through bouts with windmills, highwaymen, and sheep. His sincerity caused him to be mocked and ridiculed by a society that no longer cared for idealism, honesty, and knighthood. Sancho Panza did not believe in his own propaganda, nor in that of Quixote, but he did believe in the lanky person in the rusty armor, and in Quixote's search for honor and glory.

. Quixote presented himself so well that he was able to engage others in his quest. He organized his presentation of cues to make himself what he desired to be. With rusty sword and armor, and words of idealism, and fighting for the honor of his lady, Quixote assumed the knightly role, and defined all situations which he met in chivalrous terms, as if he were a knight of a time two centuries earlier.

. Quixote was eager for the part he played. He projected himself into the part, and validated his new identity through the responses of others. The villagers' responses reinforced his self-image and the concept of knight errantry. When addressed as a knight by Sancho and the innkeeper, Quixote becomes a knight. Faced with reality, he interprets his views in others' perceptions.

OUTMODED SOCIAL IDEALISM

. Idealism and ideology, although a major part of Quixote's role, were outmoded. The ideals of chivalry and knight errantry were no longer in vogue. The old ideology presumed to be a social structuring of the masses. The newer ideology of Quixote's time supported a new status quo in Spain and the rest of Europe. The social upheavals arising from economic, political, and technological factors eliminated the need for knights, castles, and solitary heroism. The manifest function of chivalry was to instill certain values in the populace, to hold honor and glory in high esteem, and to maintain a social caste system which then seemed necessary. The latent function was to prepare a fighting force to protect the fief and the castle from attack, and to maintain the necessary fighting forces. It maintained the social caste system and separated the masses. It perpetuated the socio-religious atmosphere of the day. Under the pristine purity of knight errantry and chivalry, there was social manipulation which was unknown to most. Quixote saw only the good. He observed only honor and glory, and saw in his own image the high power of innocence.

. His attempts to instill these ideals of chivalry and knighthood fell on deaf ears. Society had moved to a different era, and social values had changed accordingly. So Quixote charged about the country searching for combat

and adventure to continue an out-dated system. During his travels, he underwent much suffering which he accepted in a noble fashion as befitting his station in life. He suffered for his own ideology whereas in the past, the knights of the castle suffered for their liege lord and their own glory. This suffering perpetuated the social classes of feudalism.

. In assuming the role of knight, and in defining himself as a member of the group of knights-errant, Quixote could define his situation as real, and could validate his experiences. As he journeys from field to castle to courtyard, his role grows to form, shape, and pattern both the action and the actor. His failures are all rationalized to Sancho with esoteric rules of chivalry. The movements of both knight and squire are explained very well by Quixote's reference to his books.

IMAGE AND REALITY

. Don Quixote was born Quesada. He became a knight through reading, and through social reinforcement, both from the village barber, the local curate, and from the legions of evil knights from whom he must save the world.

. Quixote's journey was not so much a search for adventure as an affirmation of self. He desired knighthood and sought this to win recognition in his own mind and in the minds of others. His self image was maintained throughout Cervantes' classic by a number of literary devices, and by the reader's interest in Quixote's idealistic personality, as contrasted to the simple realism of Sancho Panza. Sancho's realism lends comic relief and juxtaposes reality with the idealism mouthed by Quixote. Sancho can see the windmills and sheep for what they are, whereas Quixote does not evaluate any of the absurdities of the situation. What he sees appears self-evident and unquestionable. He takes the world for granted. He can see no alternatives, as he searches for Truth.

. Unfortunately, Quixote was not

a member of his illustrious reference group, typified by such romantic knights as Cid Ruy Roland the Enchanted, and Bernardo del Caprio. He did obtain his values, opinions, convictions, and beliefs from this group, but he could not be a part of it. Cervantes invented Quixote to satirize chivalry and knighthood. Quixote's was a role held up for observation in light of the social and historical spirit of the times. The juxtaposition of the knight and the times lent humor and social criticism, while the character of Sancho Panza was incorporated to give the view of Everyman, particularly the view of the poor peasant, a view familiar to Cervantes, who lived in poverty most of his life.

. Of course, others have been held up for ridicule in their times. Columbus, Galileo, Da Vinci and the Wright Brothers pursued ridiculous quests. Each was an anachronism to the time, with beliefs and ideologies which were misunderstood and rejected.

QUIXOTE AS A SOCIOLOGIST

. Quixote was not only a knight-errant, but a sort of sociologist in his own right. He served as a pedestal of idealism from which to observe and criticize society. Quixote participated in the debunking process, in common with many sociologists. The reader observes Quixote traveling in his chivalrous role of knight-errant, by which he must comply with certain customs, folkways, and mores peculiar to his reference group. How valuable is such bunk as this? Wars were fought, and lives were spent to sustain these ideals, societies, and class systems. A sociologist who analyzes any quaint culture must be careful to view its customs in the perspective of its own period. Quixote never questions the reality of the situation in which he finds himself. Most of the humor derives from his comic interchanges with Sancho on the facts of the situation, and what must be done about it.

. Quixote is relieved of responsibility of questioning the reality

of his situation by the religious system of chivalry and by the religious spirit of the times and the various social rituals that surround the code of chivalry. He is condemned to freedom within his knightly role. He is Spinoza's social animal in interaction with others; and he is Aristotle's political animal in view of his sociological functioning. He is social in his strivings for Dulcinea, in confrontation with Sancho, and others whom he meets on the quest. He is political when he examines the mores, political structure, and social class system.

THE IMMORTAL HERO-FOOL

.At an earlier time, Quixote's ideals would have been highly regarded by his peers. He could have served many distressed maidens, and could have honored himself in combat while honing his skills in chivalry. He could have taken part in sustaining the current status quo, and would have met all the customary obligations. He could have sustained the ideals of heroism. His exploits could have been chronicled and held up as an social model for others. But he was late by 200 years. He was seen as a madman, as one possessed. He was, in fact possessed by idealism and gallantry in an age where society mocked such qualities and dealt with idealists accordingly.

. Quixote's quest ends in death, whereas Sancho Panza receives the governorship of an island. Quixote regained his senses just before his death, and realized his folly, but the ending is anticlimactic, as the spectre of reality has been a part of Quixote's pilgrimage from the start. However, Dulcinea, the whore, has been touched by Quixote's idealism, and longs for his return. She needs the idealism which Quixote has brought to her.

. Then what was Quixote's function in society? He served to remind society of a past age, and of past values which were no longer esteemed. His personality was a means to that end. His

innocence and purity combined with his blind desire to serve and to sacrifice for the good and noble virtues which chivalry held dear was the vehicle for his message. He saw only the good in others, and sought their positive characteristics. In so doing, he provided others with a different view of themselves and of the world.

. His virtues earned him mockery and ridicule. Society of the time could not accept concepts such as holiness, purity, and honor. The times could not reflect on the virtues which he preached and exemplified. He served only as a reminder that ideals which he represented were still valued by some.

. Quixote served other functions in his role as knight. Others, by mocking him, were able to validate their own roles and positions in society. They could reaffirm their own sanity by labeling Quixote "the crazy one." In the framework of his own society, he was an outcast, and a misfit. He was a knight without a battlefield, a hero without a cause. But he endures yet today. He will continue to endure as long as society needs to be reminded of its foibles. And Sancho will continue his support, mixing idealism with reality.

. The Man of La Mancha will expose his personality openly, as he did for Dulcinea, despite public mocking. His personality grew as a result of this, and as a result of his quest with Sancho. He did leave the world better for his strivings. He wrote his own epitaph, as inscribed by Carrasco on his tomb: "He had the fortune in his age, To live a fool and die a sage." He will continue to be seen as idealist rather than madman.

REFERENCES

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