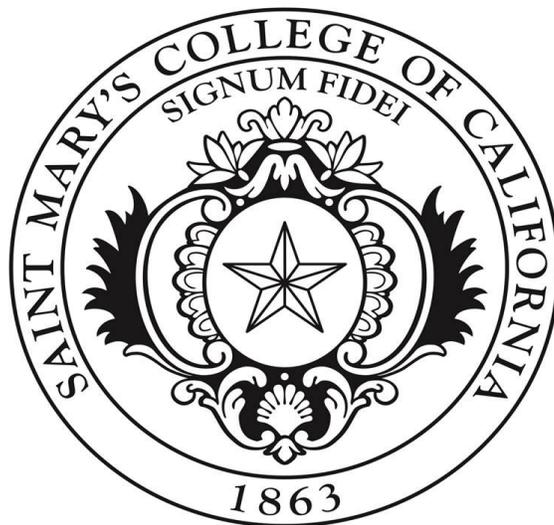


“Is Chivalry Dead?: An Examination of the
Women in *Don Quixote*”

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Is Chivalry Dead?: An Examination of the Women in *Don Quixote*

When Miguel de Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*, the chivalric way of life and knight errantry were already out of style; many of the trappings of chivalric society, such as knights sallying on horseback, had disappeared and were no longer familiar. In Cervantes' novel, however, Don Quixote is passionately inspired by old books of chivalry. They shape and define his understanding of justice and virtue. Don Quixote's comical actions and unsuccessful adventures make it clear that Cervantes is not advocating for the kind of world his main character envisions, but is actually parodying it. Through the stories of Dorotea, Zoraida, Marcela, and Ana Félix, as well as through the role of Dulcinea as Quixote's created lady-love, Cervantes shows that Don Quixote's need to be a chivalric hero to women he only *perceives* as helpless is problematic; it denies the real struggles these women face at the hands of society and instead imposes upon them fictional struggles which allow Quixote to take on his desired role as hero. One of the most striking aspects of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is that, even within a restrictive society, several female characters demonstrate that women are capable of intelligence, independence, and the maintenance of significant agency over themselves.

Some of these capable and autonomous female characters in *Don Quixote* include Dorotea, Zoraida, Marcela, and Ana Félix, all of whom defy social norms and challenge gender roles. These women's self-sufficiency and strength stand in opposition to Don Quixote's chauvinistic, chivalric ideals and reveal Cervantes' female characters to be anything but damsels in distress. They do not play the assigned, chivalric role of needy female requiring rescue. Despite their determination and resourcefulness, however, Dorotea, Zoraida, Marcela, and Ana Félix are not free from the suffering and restraints imposed on women by an outdated, chivalric,

patriarchal, social system. In order for these women to be truly independent, society must change its perceptions and attitudes about women. That would require making the chivalric model of society as irrelevant as knight errantry. Cervantes' gender analysis proves that women are capable of being their own heroes and serves as a foundation which facilitates a further critique of chivalry as a whole. The stories of Dorotea, Zoraida, Marcela, and Ana Félix, as well as the character of Dulcinea, all work indirectly to reveal the chivalric failures of the knight errant and to prove that chivalry and the patriarchal ideals within which it is rooted are both unnecessary and damaging.

In order to satisfactorily examine the roles of gender and chivalry in *Don Quixote*, it is necessary to begin by detailing the stories of the important female characters listed above. Dorotea, the daughter of vassal farmers, has lived most of her life in a position of relatively great economic privilege and independence. Although her parents are not noble, they have secured a fairly stable place in society as they are "so rich that their wealth and luxurious way of life are slowly gaining for them the name of gentlefolk, even of nobility" (230). Dorotea notes that she "was one of the most pampered daughters ever doted on by her parents" and that she was given the great responsibility of being in charge of nearly everything concerning their estate, from the crops planted to the servants hired and fired (230-1). Despite her privilege and successful management of the family estate, however, Dorotea can not control the advances of Don Fernando, the youngest son of the lord to whom Dorotea's family are vassals. Neither can she deny the pleasure she found in being "loved and esteemed by so distinguished a gentleman" and in "hear[ing] [herself] called beautiful" (232). For the sake of her parents' reputation and honor, as well as her own, Dorotea determines to resist Don Fernando's advances and to safeguard her

virtue and chastity. Unfortunately, her determination is overridden by Don Fernando when he finds his way into Dorotea's chamber with the intention of taking her virginity in a less than consensual manner. Dorotea responds with quick wit and explains that a marriage to a peasant, his own vassal, would not be viewed approvingly by his father (234). Dorotea's efforts to save herself, her virginity, and her own, as well as her parents' honor fails when Don Fernando falsely promises a sanctioned marriage and then succeeds in taking her chastity.

After the scene in which Don Fernando lies in order to take Dorotea's chastity, he betrays and abandons her for another woman. Dorotea is left with few viable choices. Though Don Fernando is clearly the villain in this story, Dorotea is the one who suffers and is forced to accept the consequences of Don Fernando's despicable actions. She has lost her virtue, and, although she was overpowered and tricked, a patriarchal society (and possibly her own family) now view her as tainted. Despite the judgment of a world that believes her "good name had been sullied, besmirched" (236), Dorotea remains resilient and determines to disguise herself as a male shepherd and travel with a servant to find and claim Don Fernando (236). Her journey to find the man, however, is not as much about wanting to be with him as it is about regaining for herself and her family the virtue and honor sanctioned marriage would confer. By seeking marriage, the only route a patriarchal society makes available to a woman in Dorotea's situation, Dorotea is attempting to secure what little agency she can claim for herself.

Dorotea never reclaims the honor society insists she has lost. In fact, she is "filled with so much shame" that she cannot bring herself to appear before her parents, despite her acknowledgement of "the great love [her] parents have for [her]" (239). Society has harshly judged Dorotea an immoral criminal for trusting the wrong man and losing her virginity. It has,

furthermore, taught Dorotea to define her own worth by her chastity. Dorotea internalizes the critical voices condemning her for loose morality. The destruction of her self-worth and the damage to her positive connection to her own family do not mark the end of Dorotea's abuse by society. Once she escapes to the mountains, additional attempts are made to take sexual advantage of Dorotea. The first is by the servant she has brought as a guide for her journey; he tries to rape her. Dorotea responds by shoving him off a cliff to his death. By punishing her base servant, Dorotea demonstrates the ability and willingness to defend her own honor. She is not the docile, passive damsel in distress traditionally idealized in books of chivalry. Thus, Dorotea embodies the damage done to her by society while still demonstrating the strength to stand against evil and act as her own hero.

The base servant is not the only man who degrades and objectifies Dorotea on her journey to find Don Fernando. Cervantes cleverly uses the characters of a priest, of Cardenio, and of Don Quixote to reveal how deeply the degradation of women is ingrained in society; all three men objectify Dorotea, even when she is dressed as a boy (228). Not only do these men drool over her feet and complexion when she is camouflaged as a male, they unsurprisingly continue to do so once they discover she is a woman "disguising [her] beauty in clothing so unworthy" (227-9). By reducing Dorotea to her physical characteristics, the three men take away her agency and personhood. In a chivalric move, the priest falsely assumes that Dorotea, whose story clearly proves she is strong and capable, needs help. He notes that "it is fortunate [they] found [her]" as they can now provide "a remedy for [her] ills" or "at least...give [her] counsel". The fact is, Dorotea requires neither "remedy" nor "counsel". The priest has forced her into the role of a helpless woman (229). Dorotea agrees to share her story, although she notes that she

would rather not. She knows that these men, having seen her alone and dressed as a male, have reason to distrust her honor and reputation. It is only societal standards which coerce Dorotea into telling a story she does not want to share.

Eventually, Dorotea is reunited with Don Fernando and pleads her case. After explaining that she has forfeited to Don Fernando her freedom, “a gift so little valued by [him] that [she has] been obliged to come to the place where [he] find[s] [her] now,” Dorotea begs Don Fernando to “at least want [her] and take [her] as [his] slave” (316-7). Dorotea’s subjugation in this scene stands in sharp contrast to her self-assertion earlier in the novel while Don Fernando is forcing himself on her; at that time, she insists that she is “[his] vassal, but not [his] slave and that his nobility should not give him the power to dishonor her humble station” (233). Once in Don Fernando’s company again, Dorotea selflessly determines her willingness to become a slave so that she can gain back at least some of her own and her family’s honor. Before her ill-use at the hands of Don Fernando, Dorotea would not accept anything less than an honored marriage to the man. Now, Dorotea is painfully trapped by societal rules which require she lower herself and do anything possible, even subjugate herself as slave to an unworthy master, in order to reclaim her honor and virtue.

Don Fernando agrees to accept Dorotea as his wife, essentially “elevat[ing] [her] to [his] own height” and “rais[ing] her and mak[ing] her equal to himself” (318-9). In the end, Dorotea manages to escape a societally-imposed disgrace with her honor and virtue as perceived by society largely intact; but has she truly escaped anything? Although she now has social status and acceptance, she is bound to a traitorous and disrespectful husband. It might seem that, upon reuniting with Don Fernando, Dorotea has regressed from surviving as a strong, independent,

capable, resilient woman to instead complying as a dependent, weak wife reliant on the power and status of an unworthy husband. In reality, however, Dorotea claims her position as Don Fernando's wife because she recognizes that any security or perceived honor in her patriarchal world will come only from her connection to a powerful man. That fact reveals more about the repressive society in which Dorotea lives than it does about her character. To be safe, she must play the game. Dorotea has grown stronger and more clever. Despite a patriarchal society which objectifies her and judges her virtue by her chastity, Dorotea is intelligent and determined enough to exploit an oppressive system and wittingly claim the only favors it offers any woman.

A second important character in *Don Quixote* whose story gives insight into the roles of gender and chivalry in the world of the novel is Zoraida. In the beginning of her story, Zoraida is relatively powerful compared to other women because she is the daughter of a powerful man: her father is a "very prominent and wealthy Moor...who had been the governor of La Pata, which is a very distinguished position" (346-7). Zoraida enjoys the privileges of social status, good reputation, and access to her father's money (346-7). Though her favored position in a patriarchal society derives only from her connection to a man, Zoraida is clever on her own. She not only orchestrates a plan to leave for Spain and convert to Christianity, she funds it by secretly using her father's money. In the first note she drops to the captive, Zoraida makes sure to mention that she is "very beautiful and young, and [has] a good deal of money to take with [her]," intelligently making herself and her offer appealing by emphasizing qualities that objectify her in the way society has taught and values (347). After the captive, a Spanish sailor imprisoned by the Moors, agrees to help her with her plan, she secures her future and virtue by making sure he knows that he "must marry [her]" once they have escaped (350). Zoraida

knowingly uses the rules of the objectifying system that oppresses her in order to design for herself a route to greater freedom and deeper significance.

Zoraida continues to prove herself intelligent and cunning, qualities not valued in a woman by a chivalrous social system. She shrewdly feigns suspicion of the captive while in the presence of her father, falsely expressing to the captive a supposed belief in the stereotype that Christians are notorious liars (355). When caught with her arm around the captive, Zoraida slyly pretends to faint so her father will have no suspicions of her plan to seek religious freedom; she proves, yet again, that she is as “intelligent and clever” as the captive notes (356). Despite guilt about tricking her father, a deceit she would not need to practice if patriarchy allowed her self-determination, Zoraida remains steadfast in her mission. She defies chivalric notions of femininity and refuses to let her emotions or her relationship with her father control her. When the time comes to carry out the final piece of her plan, the captive explains what the reader has known to be true all along: Zoraida is completely in charge. He notes “that nothing [is] to be done except what Zoraida wishe[s],” and each man Zoraida ransomed from prison complies (359).

A chivalric patriarchy that views women as extensions, even property, of men creates the deep tension between Zoraida’s desire to obey and respect her father, on the one hand, and her noble need to choose for herself a religion she believes to be the route to righteousness and salvation, on the other hand. Zoraida fails her father, and thus the chivalric patriarchy, by lying to and stealing from him, hurting them both, yet she honors herself by claiming her own beliefs and moving to Christian Spain. Both Zoraida and her father suffer terribly from living in a world where daughters are not free to choose their own paths. Zoraida’s father feels betrayed by a

daughter who sneaks behind his back. He believes that she has “evil desires” and that she wants to convert to Christianity because “she knows that in [Spain] there is more lewd behavior than [where she is from]” (363). In the end, he is “put ashore” on an island where he will likely die (362). Zoraida, for her part, suffers at least as much as her father for living in a world that refuses to recognize the true value of women. She understands that because of her choice against patriarchy, she has sacrificed the freedom and life of her own father. Zoraida hides her head so she will not have to see him, but when her father manages to articulate how important his daughter is to him, Zoraida cannot help but look at him and feel pity enough to approach him and join him in his weeping (361). When her father questions whether she is truly a Christian and if she willingly handed him over to his enemies, she confirms that she is a Christian, but explains that her “desire never was to leave [him] or to do [him] harm, but only to do good for [herself]” (361). In a world of equality between all men and women, Zoraida never would have been forced to choose between honoring her family and honoring herself and her sacred calling. Additionally, it is worth noting that Cervantes’ audience would have sympathized with Zoraida’s plight and supported as holy her conversion to Christianity even though that conversion required Zoraida to subvert contemporary gender and power roles.

Zoraida’s problems get no easier after losing her father. A renegade throws her money into the sea and thus diminishes her chances of thriving in Spain (364). When Zoraida and the captive land, they use all their remaining funds to purchase an animal on which they ride to the inn. The captive notes that Zoraida patiently “endures the hardships that poverty brings,” though at this point it is impossible to know exactly how Zoraida feels about anything since she can only speak her native tongue (368). The captive, therefore, speaks for her, even providing her name

when Don Fernando asks; Zoraida resists another man naming her and insists her name is María (327-8). Keeping in mind that Zoraida neither understands or speaks “Christian,” it is hard not to question the captive’s retelling of events (326). Not only is the tale told solely from his perspective, he could very well be drastically changing certain details; Zoraida, the only other person at the inn who is part of the story, would not even know. Since she is unable to explain her story for herself, Zoraida is judged solely on the captive’s portrayal of her and by her physical appearance. She is described as being so beautiful that “everyone present realized that if any beauty could equal that of [Dorotea and Luscinda], it was the Moorish lady’s” (327). Zoraida is reduced to a voiceless, beautiful woman without any family and with a husband who is unsure if he “can shelter and protect her” (368). The man acts like more of a father or caregiver than her equal. Zoraida may be said to have gained religious freedom, but she has lost a great deal of her identity and independence in the process; the patriarchal society into which she was born, the one that pushed her into leaving a father and then depending on a foreign husband in order to seek her truth, has forced her into the ironic position of claiming religious freedom but once again losing daily agency and the ability to define herself to the world.

A third character of Cervantes’ offers the chance to examine gender and chivalry in *Don Quixote*: Marcela. Marcela’s plight in a male-dominated world is not one, like Dorotea’s or Zoraida’s, in which she must face danger in order to gain security or personal integrity. She is born to respected and wealthy parents. Her mother, especially, is highly regarded; not only is she a hard worker who helps the poor, she is “the most respected woman in [the] whole district” (83). After both her parents die, Marcela is “left a very rich girl” under the care of an uncle (83). Marcela is described as so attractive that “no man could look at her and not bless God for making

her so beautiful” or help “fall[ing] madly in love with her” (83-4). Thanks to her family’s good reputation, her wealth, and her excessive beauty, Marcela has many suitors. She is not yet ready to marry, however, or to “bear the burdens of matrimony” (84). As she is only fourteen or fifteen, Marcela’s desire to remain single seems completely reasonable. Surprisingly, in the patriarchal society of the time, her uncle does not believe in marrying her off without her consent. Marcela therefore appears to be in an especially good place for a woman of this era as she is financially secure, physically safe, and being raised by a prominent and understanding uncle who respects her wishes regarding marriage.

Despite the gifts a patriarchal society can bestow upon a woman, however, Marcela still is prisoner to a code of chivalry that defines her as needy and requiring rescue by a gallant knight and future husband. Of those, there are many. So many that Marcella is unable to live like the free-spirited shepherdess she longs to be. The need of men to play knight errant in service of their false idealization of courtly love make it impossible for Marcela to be herself. Not one of her suitors loves the real Marcela, only the fiction of a fair lady who makes him feel gallant. The real Marcella, after spending most of her young life “carefully and modestly secluded,” as her uncle thinks best, determines to live her life her own way (84). Though she chooses to live freely, hoping to avoid ceaselessly pestering suitors, she in no way sacrifices her personal values. Marcella maintains modesty, virtue, and honor so that none of the men “[can] truthfully claim that she’s given him any hope of achieving his desire” (85).

Cervantes chooses to tell Marcela’s story first through the voice of a male-centric goatherd and then through the corrective, rational lens of Marcela herself. Although the goatherd who tells her story acknowledges that Marcela gives her admirers no false hope, he is quick to

criticize her for dismissing marriage offers. He compares Marcela and her behavior to the plague and its effects. With unintended irony, the goatherd deems Marcela “cruel and ungrateful” and deserving of “other names that plainly show the nature of her disposition” (85); it does not occur to the goatherd or any of his male listeners that their slurs may be more fitted for Marcela’s suitors than for her.

When Marcela is finally introduced into the work as herself rather than as the goatherd’s object of derision, she explains the relationship between herself and the suitors from her own point of view and she sets the record straight. Marcela’s logical perspective on the death of Grisóstomo, a persistent suitor, changes the way in which Don Quixote views her. Ultimately, Marcela demonstrates that it is Grisóstomo’s “obstinacy” and foolish belief in an unrealistic romantic ideal that kills him; it is “not [her] cruelty”. The public is incorrect and unfair in its judgment of her (99). Marcela supports her position by questioning why her God-given beauty and random men’s affections should require her to return their love. Why, if chastity is deemed honorable and virtuous, should she be despised for desiring to be “free” without “submit[ting] to another” (100)? Her impassioned and persuasive speech prove that Marcela is at least as intelligent as she is beautiful. Her triumphant exit reveals her to be anything but the “maiden in distress” that Don Quixote imagines her to be (101). He now holds her in high esteem, declaring her honorable and virtuous despite a distinct lack of chivalric frailty (101).

It seems that Don Quixote is confused by his encounter with Marcela. Though his chivalric madness forces him to see Marcela as a maiden in distress and to follow her after her exit, he is competent enough to understand that it is the love-sick Grisóstomo, and not Marcela, who is responsible for his own death. Still, Don Quixote cannot help but identify with the

chivalrous sentiments of Marcela's suitors since he has exhibited the same feelings and actions toward his own beloved Dulcinea. In fact, Don Quixote's and the suitor's actions parallel one another. Within Marcela's story are myriad descriptions of chivalric love, all from a male point of view. Though Marcela rebuffs their lovesick overtures, men court her mercilessly; her name is carved into countless beech trees and her suitors lament their misfortune all night, foregoing sleep to sigh over her. It is just such chivalric love and its courtly expression that allow Don Quixote to consider himself an authentic knight errant to Dulcinea. Without a woman to love, a man cannot truly be a knight errant. Marcela, however, does not want to be the object of any man's affection or the reason he acts on his chivalrous inclinations. She simply wants to be left alone and to have agency over her own life.

Don Quixote's uncertainty regarding how to respond to Marcela's situation highlights Cervantes' criticism of the society in which Marcela lives. Despite the logic Marcela employs to explain her point of view, the majority of her audience remain loyal to Grisóstomo, completely blind to the ridiculousness of their beliefs. Such blindness is exactly what Cervantes is critiquing, but because Don Quixote ultimately treats Marcela as a damsel in distress, Cervantes' negative critique must stand. The independent Marcela is clearly not helpless or in need of saving, but she is also unable to live her life as she pleases because of her confinement in an oppressive patriarchal society enamored with the false ideals of chivalry. Even a strong non-conformist ahead of her time cannot escape society's norms or gender roles.

The story of Ana Félix in *Don Quixote* provides a fourth opportunity to study the roles of gender, patriarchy, and chivalry within society. Ana is privileged in that she, like the three previously detailed female characters, is "as famous for her beauty as she is for [her father's]

wealth” (882). Although Ana’s tale is not given as much attention as those of Dorotea, Zoraida, or Marcela, it is a rich example of female courage, determination, and heroism. Ana Félix is first introduced as a captured and bound male captain in a group of pirates. The viceroy who has captured her questions her nationality, at which point Ana Félix reveals that she is not a man, but “a Christian woman” in disguise. She pleads to share her story before she is executed (879). The viceroy affords this courtesy, and Ana proceeds to explain her situation.

Although she was born in Spain to parents who had been baptized as Christian, Ana Félix was exiled to Barbary as a result of her Moorish descent. Before her exile, however, a young man, Don Gaspar Gregorio, “lost his heart to [her]...and wanted to accompany [her] into exile” (880). It might be expected that a woman, overcome by her emotions, would follow her male love-interest to the ends of the earth, but here the situation is reversed. Don Gaspar Gregorio follows Ana Félix into exile and the unknown; he willingly accepts the consequences of leaving his own country and family for a woman. Gender-assigned characteristics, particularly male domination, therefore seem less rigid in Ana’s life than they appear to be in any of the other characters’ stories.

Upon the travelers’ arrival in Algiers, the king, having heard of Ana Félix’s wealth and exceptional beauty, summons her (880). He asks about her famed fortune and jewels, and Ana Félix cleverly explains that she has brought none of her wealth with her but would be able to access her fortune if she were allowed to return to Spain. The king agrees, providing Ana with an opportunity to end her exile. Before she is able to leave, however, the king is informed that “one of the most gallant and handsome young men imaginable,” referring to Don Gregorio, “had accompanied [Ana]” from Spain and to Algiers (881). Ana knows that “among those Barbarous

Turks a handsome boy or youth is more highly esteemed than a woman, no matter how beautiful she may be” (881). She therefore determines to protect Don Gregorio from the Turks, again reversing gender roles in her world by acting as female savior to her male companion. Up to this point in the novel, Cervantes has described many women as unbelievably beautiful, but Don Gregorio may be the first man to whom the author has attached romantic descriptions of attractiveness. Not only is it atypical in *Don Quixote* for a man to be sexually objectified, it is unusual for a male to be sexually threatened. Don Gregorio thus embodies a role typically experienced by women. The intentional role reversal by Cervantes is deepened when Ana Félix executes her plan to protect Don Gregorio.

In order to shield Don Gregorio from the king’s potential sexual advances, Ana lies; she declares that the attractive man is actually a woman. Ana makes a deal with the king and agrees to present Don Gregorio to him once she has had a chance to “dress [Don Gregorio] in her rightful clothes so that her beauty could be fully displayed, and she might appear before him without awkwardness” (881). Ana later returns with the feminized Don Gregorio, who stuns the king. Rather than eliciting feelings of desire in the king, as Ana feared, Don Gregorio’s femininity prompts the king to protect Don Gregorio by sheltering him with a group of Moorish women. Ana explains to her maritime captors that even as she is telling her story, Don Gregorio remains in Algiers disguised as a woman. Ana Félix’s tale softens the viceroy’s heart. He releases her, at which point her father reveals himself to Ana and helps her devise a plan to rescue Don Gregorio, a plan which results in the man’s safe return to Spain and in the episode’s end (882-3).

Ana Félix's story showcases her emotional strength and ingenuity; she remains calm despite exile from her home, and she quickly devises a plan to save herself and protect Don Gregorio. From the moment she is introduced as an authoritative and powerful male sea captain, it is clear that Ana Félix will be the hero of her own story, not to mention the hero of Don Gregorio's story as well. The fact that Ana may only have been taken seriously because she was first presented as a powerful man is problematic. Additionally, although the gender roles are reversed in this story, the female-presenting figure (Don Gregorio in drag) still takes on a stereotypically feminine role while the male-presenting character (Ana Félix in disguise) takes on a stereotypically male role. Even within a complete gender role switch, societal norms remain extremely apparent. The two characters do not act as equals but derive their power from the gender roles they play.

All four of these female characters prove that women can be intelligent, independent, and agents of their own destinies. At the same time, however, their stories illustrate the various ways in which society limits even privileged women's access to power. In the beginning of her story, Dorotea confidently, independently, and successfully runs her family's estate, a responsibility not usually entrusted to a female. In this way Dorotea works outside gender norms and societal expectations. Still, after being raped, she is coerced by male-centric cultural standards to marry her attacker and work within gender norms and social expectations in order to regain access to the security, safety, and necessities of daily life. Despite her family's privilege, Dorotea remains subject to violence and objectification by various men. She is judged based on her sexual purity. Ironically, society prevents her from acting independently in her own best interests yet blames her for her supposed impurity after Don Fernando rapes her. In the same way that Dorotea does

not marry Don Fernando out of love but to re-engage with the system that provides at least some security, Zoraida marries the captive in order to obtain her safety once in Spain. Zoraida's connection to her family's status and wealth cannot insulate her from a society in which no woman is safe without a man governing her life. Both of these women act within societal expectations, in that they marry, but refute those expectations at the same time by marrying only for self protection. They'd prefer to live in a world that allows women independence and the means to self-support; in the absence of that world, they will take from society what little they can get.

Marcela, however, is different from Dorotea and Zoraida: she refuses to marry regardless of the cultural punishment relentless suitors impose upon her. While choosing not to marry is a privilege not available to women of lower classes, no degree of privilege can protect Marcela from societal double-standards. She is called to chastity on the one hand and is criticized for refusing marriage proposals on the other. She is loved by countless men, yet none of them know or value her real self. Ana Félix is another character who defies gender roles in her own way; she disguises herself as a man and completes the societally proscribed duties of a man. Although she is wealthy, she is only respected by her captors because of her apparent gender. The King in Algiers, on the other hand, knows Ana is a woman and sees her as a target. Masculinity claims respect. Femininity creates risk. Of these four female characters, Marcela and Ana conform the least to gender norms and societal expectations but are nevertheless limited by society. Even when Dorotea, Zoraida, Marcela, and Ana succeed, it is with great effort and at high cost. Their world recognizes only their beauty, marriageability, chastity, and virtue.

Cervantes depicts these clearly capable female characters as oppressed by a societal structure which undermines their strength and independence, but not just by any societal structure, by a societal structure that mirrors Don Quixote's chivalric ideals. Don Quixote's standards are exhibited through his creation of Dulcinea: a projection of the ideal, pliable, and helpless woman, one who fits perfectly into a chivalric framework. Dulcinea is imaginary. She has absolutely no agency or independence and functions solely as an anchor for Don Quixote's chivalric ideal. Dorotea, Zoraida, Marcela, and Ana Félix stand in stark opposition to Dulcinea's character. Not only do they refuse to conform to Don Quixote's chivalric standards, and in some cases challenge it, their stories of independence, strength, and unconventional desires shed light on the ridiculousness of chivalry and show that it prevents women from actually existing in the way Cervantes seems to describe them.

Throughout *Don Quixote*, the hero of the novel roams the countryside as a knight errant, dedicating all that he does to the unrivaled and most perfect Dulcinea. His adventures are inspired by his penchant for books of chivalry and their "enchantments as well as combats, battles, challenges, wounds, courtings, loves, [and] torments" (21). Quixote seeks to become the perfect knight "both for the sake of his honor and as a service to the nation" (21). Like any knight errant, Don Quixote desires to "right all manner of wrongs and, by seizing the opportunity and placing himself in danger and ending those wrongs, [win] eternal renown and everlasting fame" (21). These early descriptions of Don Quixote's motives begin to paint a picture of what it means to him to be a knight bound to the chivalric code. Not only will he participate in battle, sustain wounds, come in contact with love, and experience torment, but he will bring about justice by placing himself in dangerous situations. Throughout the remainder of the work, Don

Quixote expands on this understanding of chivalry so it includes adventuring on behalf of those in need (30), aiding damsels in distress (100-1), maintaining the truth (197), and acting only inoffensively towards women (439). If he is able to carry out the duties of a knight errant, Don Quixote believes that he will be praised and esteemed.

Once he gathers his armor and renames his horse and himself, all that is left for Don Quixote to do is find a woman to love. The aspiring knight explains that “if [he]...meet[s] with a giant somewhere, as ordinarily befalls a knight errant, and...conquer[s] and defeat[s] [the giant], would it not be good to have someone to whom [he] could send [the giant] so that he might enter and fall to his knees before [his] sweet lady...so [her] highness might dispose of [the giant] as [she] [chooses]?” (23). Finding an object of his love is so crucial to Don Quixote’s understanding of what it means to be a knight errant that he believes that “the knight errant without a lady-love [is] a tree without leaves or fruit, a body without a soul” (23). Luckily, he is not without a lady-love for long. Don Quixote recalls Aldonza Lorenzo, a woman from a village close by with whom he used to be in love, and deems her “the lady of his thoughts” (23). Her common name, however, will not suit her as it does not connote a princess or important woman, but rather matches her true character. In the same way that he renames himself and his horse, Don Quixote decides to refer to Aldonza as Dulcinea of Toboso, which he deems a more elevated name, one that is “musical and beautiful and filled with significance” (24). Unsurprisingly, Don Quixote describes Dulcinea as the “most beauteous of all the beauteous” and characterizes her as being perfectly virtuous (38). Indeed, she is so perfect that, to Don Quixote, she is the most “beautiful, wise, modest, gallant, [and] wellborn” woman of all time (746). As the reader well knows,

however, Dulcinea is only a figment of Don Quixote's imagination, a fictional construction in a fanciful world of the fake knight's own making.

Although Dulcinea is loosely based on a real person, she is only a concept, a representation of Don Quixote's ideal woman and of female perfection; she has no substance and exists only to provide a motive for Don Quixote's adventures. Essentially, Don Quixote creates Dulcinea to fulfill his desire to live as a knight errant, relegating her to a position of passivity and servitude. Without Dulcinea, he would have no one to whom he could dedicate his chivalrous deeds, no one to think about during his sleepless nights, no subject for his romantic poetry. Don Quixote is forced to invent Dulcinea because, on some level, he is aware that a woman as perfect as she does not exist. His vague awareness of the difference between ideals and reality is only one of the ways Cervantes shows that the real world is incompatible with the ridiculous fantasy world of a chivalric romance. Most important to the exploration of Don Quixote's sanity is the knight's own consciousness that he is creating Dulcinea. His awareness is shown in a conversation he has with Sancho in which he emphasizes that "not every poet who praises a lady, calling her by another name, really has one...most are imagined in order to provide a subject for their verses...therefore it is enough for me to think and believe that my good Aldonza Lorenzo is beautiful and virtuous; as for her lineage, it matters little, for no one is going to investigate it...I can think she is the highest princess in the world...I depict her in my imagination as I wish her to be in beauty and in distinction" (201). Don Quixote directly acknowledges that Dulcinea exists in his imagination rather than as a woman "of flesh and blood" (201). He also indirectly indicates that Dulcinea fulfills the role of a subject, a subject who allows him to act as a knight errant

enforcing the code of chivalry. Don Quixote's imagined world hinges entirely on Dulcinea's existence.

The fact that the chivalric code which Don Quixote attempts to implement is largely reliant on his invention of a completely unrealistic lady-love should make the reader suspicious of the code as a whole. Don Quixote's already established pattern of treating females as weak and helpless "Dulcineas," even when confronted with strong, real women, makes it clear that the self-appointed knight lives in a delusional world that conflicts with reality. Although he does want to help women, Don Quixote is so disconnected from reality that he fails to see the ways in which women *actually* struggle and the ways in which he *actually* could assist. He instead imposes his own knightly narrative onto the females he encounters and proceeds to use them as a catalyst for his chivalric deeds. Cervantes presents women in the novel as damaged by chivalric society. Don Quixote is almost certainly blind to the toxicity of chivalry and to the patriarchy that makes it possible. He views women's suffering as the result of feminine incapacity. Only in the case of his interaction with Marcela does Don Quixote seem to realize that women may struggle in ways not represented in his books of chivalry. Even though he ultimately treats her as a maiden in distress by following her into the woods, Don Quixote presents the reader with a glimmer of hope, if only for a moment, that he might see how society fails women. Don Quixote decidedly fails to realize, however, that the chivalric narrative he imposes is the *cause of* rather than the *solution to* many of women's real problems. The irony in the knight errant's desire to help women is, first of all, that he tries to solve a problem which does not exist, and, secondly, that his approach to helping is so flawed that he does more to oppress women than to aid them. Ultimately, just like the fictional Dulcinea, Don Quixote's chivalric code has no place in reality.

That Don Quixote's chivalric view of women is incongruent with reality is further shown in an episode which casts him as the damsel in distress and Dorotea as the knight errant. In the first part of the novel, Don Quixote ends up on top of the Sierra Morena where he vows to stay until "he [has] performed such feats as [will] render him deserving of [Dulcinea's] grace" (241). Despite Sancho's efforts to convince his master to return home, Don Quixote refuses to leave the mountains. In an attempt to help, the priest, barber, licentiate, Cardenio, and Dorotea enact a plan based on the typical plot of a book of chivalry. The well-intentioned scheme requires Dorotea to "play [an] afflicted damsel...as she had read many books of chivalry and knew well the style used by damsels in distress when they begged boons of knights errant" (241-242). Dorotea disguises herself as Princess Micomicona, who requires Don Quixote, famed "throughout the known world as a brave and virtuous knight," to "right a wrong or correct an injustice done to her by an evil giant" (242). Dorotea kindly and cleverly engages in this role reversal which parodies the chivalric trope of a damsel in distress. Although she convinces Don Quixote that Princess Micomicona needs his help, Dorotea knows that Quixote is really the one in need of assistance. While Dorotea pretends to be a damsel in distress, her role in the plan is really more that of a knight errant to Don Quixote's damsel. The success of their scheme relies on Don Quixote's naïveté regarding the role reversal. Don Quixote will only descend the mountain if he believes he is doing so to fulfill his duty as a knight errant.

When Dorotea confronts Don Quixote as Princess Micomicona, requesting the knight's assistance, he responds by agreeing to follow her down the mountain since he must "do what [he is] obliged to do and what [his] conscience dictates, in accordance with the order [he has] professed" (244). Dorotea uses Don Quixote's obsession with knight errantry and chivalry to her

advantage after identifying those constructs as Quixote's weakness. This episode by Cervantes so forwards Dorotea's defiance of chivalric standards that she actually parodies them. The contrivance provides one of the only examples in *Don Quixote* where chivalry is useful. Given the deceitfully contrived situation, can it truly be considered chivalry?

Another of the few times chivalry is useful in *Don Quixote* involves a similar manipulation of the knight errant. Quixote's gullibility once again calls into question the authenticity of an act of chivalry. Near the end of the novel, Don Quixote encounters a fully-armored knight, the Knight of the White Moon, during a casual ride with Rocinante. This Knight challenges Don Quixote's dearly-held belief that Dulcinea is peerless in her beauty, stating that "[his] lady, whoever she may be, is incomparably more beautiful than...Dulcinea of Toboso" (885). Although Quixote is not seeking an act of chivalry on this occasion, he decides that he must do battle with the Knight of the White Moon in order to defend Dulcinea's honor and status as the most beautiful woman in existence. Agreeing to this duel requires that Don Quixote accept the Knight of the White Moon's terms, the most important of which is that, if defeated, Don Quixote will "abandon [his] arms, abstain from seeking adventures, and withdraw and retire to [his] home for a period of one year, where [he] must live without laying a hand on [his] sword, in peaceful tranquility and profitable serenity" (885). The chivalric framework of this situation, however, seems manufactured, prompting the reader to question the Knight of the White Moon's identity and motivation.

After defeating Don Quixote in the duel, the Knight of the White Moon spares him and even agrees to "let the fame of Señora Dulcinea of Toboso's beauty live in its entirety," an allowance which defeats Don Quixote's purpose in fighting the duel (887). The main outcome of

the battle, therefore, is not an admittance of Dulcinea's inferior beauty; rather, it is that Don Quixote, "like a true and honorable knight," complies with the Knight of the White Moon's demand that he "retire to his village for a year, or for as long as [the Knight of the White Moon] shall determine" on the condition that the Knight "ask. . .nothing that was to the detriment of Dulcinea" (887). After achieving his goal, assurance that Don Quixote will return home, the Knight of the White Moon respectfully leaves the scene.

Don Quixote's chance meeting with a knight who seems to have his best interests at heart proves to be deliberate. Once he is away from Don Quixote, the Knight of the White Moon reveals that he is Bachelor Sansón Carrasco and is "from the same village as Don Quixote of La Mancha, whose madness and foolishness move all...who know him to pity" (888). Sansón is confident that, for the sake of his health, Don Quixote should return to his village home. He therefore "devised a way to oblige him to do that" (888). Sansón's plan is successful because Don Quixote is "so punctilious in complying with the rules of knight errantry" that he cannot refuse a chance to defend Dulcinea's honor (889). In the same way that Dorotea, pretending to be a damsel in distress, plays on Don Quixote's chivalric ideals in order to lure him down the mountain, so the Knight of the White Moon relies on Don Quixote's dedication to chivalry to force him back home. Additionally, the duel and subsequent agreement provide another example of Don Quixote's out-of touch and even harmful chivalric ideals being turned on him; chivalry only functions with a madman and not in the real world.

Throughout *Don Quixote*, Cervantes cleverly and comically spotlights chivalry's failures and misalignment with reality. He proves through his robust and complex female characters that women are not inherently defenseless. He acknowledges society's unjust treatment and

belittlement of women. Cervantes even hints that Don Quixote fails in his mission to re-implement a society based on chivalric ideals because, at least for women, a similar patriarchal society is still in place.

While Cervantes definitely disapproves of his knight errant's self-serving reduction of women to damsels in distress and critiques society's mistreatment of females, the author never suggests remedies for patriarchy's structural ills. At the end of their respective stories, Dorotea, Zoraida, Marcela, and Ana are all left limited by their female existence in a male-centric world. Dorotea and Zoraida both unhappily marry to secure honor and safety. Marcela, who will be remembered as the "icy heart...[the] cruel beauty" who killed Grisóstomo, flees society only to unwillingly be pursued by Don Quixote (101). Ana sheds the male disguise which gave her authority, returns to life as a woman, and is reunited with Don Gregorio, whom she presumably marries. Although each woman's story proves her strength, all four women remain in a society of men which renders them nearly powerless.

Don Quixote itself functions as Cervantes' critique and literal rewriting of the chivalric romance genre. It culminates in Don Quixote's death, a metaphorical death of chivalry and its corresponding literature and culture. Cervantes includes no such death, however, of the problematic patriarchal society which remains even after the chivalric lifestyle fades. It can be argued that Cervantes actually undermines the strength of his female characters by ending their respective stories with reincorporation into a sexist and unjust society. The conclusions of Dorotea's, Zoraida's, Marcela's, and Ana's tales might also be interpreted as a commentary on the necessity of repressing strong, independent women through marriage or expulsion from society. To view the text in this way, however, would be to discount Cervantes' construction of

several magnificently multidimensional female characters as well as to misunderstand the overall satirical tone of *Don Quixote*.

In his novel, Cervantes presents an intricate critique of society's mistreatment, underestimation, and lack of appreciation for women. Not only does the author vividly bring to life several passionate, strong, and engaged women who defy chivalry's requisite damsel in distress model of femininity, he also reveals a comically outdated and entrenched patriarchy no better for women than the chivalric society Don Quixote wishes to implement. Cervantes ultimately disappoints, however, by failing to provide any imagined solutions or alternate worlds to inspire real change. Perhaps Cervantes is similar to Don Quixote himself, a man who recognizes Marcela's courage and autonomy but is unable to detach himself from the decrepit models of behavior and institutions that harm half the human race and all society. Although Cervantes is a keen observer of gender roles, he only weakly suggests the possibility of bold transformation within human hearts, minds, and worlds.

Citation

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