

## LEAR AND QUIJOTE, TWO WANDERERS ON UNEVEN PATHS

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### **Abstract**

King Lear of Britain and Don Quijote de la Mancha, both old and frail, are dwellers of two very different worlds and eras. The ways they were devised and shaped by William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes generate nonetheless diverse similarities that emphatically expose crucial traits of the human nature.

The meaningful, more obvious dichotomies in the texts – such as Reality/Fantasy, Sight/Blindness, Truth/Falsehood, Loyalty/Treachery – frame the complexity of the protagonists and are metaphors of their antithetical features. On the other hand, their alienation, misapprehension and distortion of the surrounding realities turn them into wanderers on uneven, problematic paths, while their frail physical condition discloses a surface layer that encapsulates assertive individuals.

This essay approaches Shakespeare's and Cervantes' texts by focusing on such aspects, as well as on the respective contextualisation. Each work constitutes a challenging exemplum of a unique, proficuous broad age that wisely amalgamated the old and the new: amidst a multitude of cultural traditions, King Lear primarily embodies the expansion of Tragedy, while Don Quijote de la Mancha primarily materialises the transition to a new stage of Modernity.

**Keywords:** Lear; Quijote; dichotomies; alienation; tradition; innovation

### **Resumen**

Ambos viejos y débiles, King Lear de Bretaña y Don Quijote de la Mancha viven en dos mundos y eras muy distintas. La forma en la que fueron creados y moldeados por William Shakespeare y Miguel de Cervantes generan sin embargo varias similitudes en donde se empatiza con los rasgos más cruciales de la naturaleza humana.

Estas significativas y más obvias dicotomías en los textos – como Realidad/Fantasia, Vista/Ceguera, Verdad/Falsedad, Lealtad/Traición – describen la complejidad de los protagonistas y son metáforas de sus características antitéticas. Por otro lado, su alienación, confusión y distorsión de

las realidades que les rodean los convierte en nómadas por senderos irregulares y problemáticos, mientras que sus delicadas condiciones físicas revelan una capa superficial que condensa a unos individuos asertivos.

Este ensayo hace una aproximación a los textos de Shakespeare y Cervantes centrándose en dichos aspectos, al igual que su respectiva contextualización. Cada trabajo constituye un complejo caso de una era única y productiva que sabiamente amalgamó lo Viejo y lo Nuevo: entre la multitud de tradiciones culturales, King Lear principalmente personifica la expansión de la Tragedia, mientras que Don Quijote de la Mancha principalmente materializa la transición hacia una nueva era de la modernidad.

**Palabras clave:** Lear, Quijote, dicotomías, alienación, tradición, innovación

William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Lear* and Miguel de Cervantes' *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*,<sup>1</sup> published a few years apart, belong to a proficuous broad age when a multitude of cultural traditions coexisted, when the old and the new learning were wisely amalgamated, when both England and Spain experienced a series of peculiar events, in the aftermath of their sovereigns' policies. Consequently, the texts cannot but encapsulate the diversified, heterogeneous elements that were intrinsic to such rich, complex broad age.

Amidst the incessant production of critical readings on canonical texts, in general, and on the ones here under consideration, in particular, the present essay proposes further perspectives to approach the English play and the Spanish narrative;<sup>2</sup> above all, it seeks to understand the way their protagonists, two of the most outstanding fictional characters of Western literature, were devised and characterised by the authors. The following fundamental guidelines will then be taken into account: on the one hand, the assumption that each work constitutes a relevant *exemplum* of the context briefly alluded to a while ago; on the other hand, the nature of the works themselves – Shakespeare's play as primarily embodying the expansion of Tragedy, Cervantes' narrative by primarily materialising the transition to a new stage of Modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> Quixote, in the frontispieces of the 1605 (Primera Parte/First Part) and 1614 Segunda Parte/Second Part) editions.

<sup>2</sup> *King Lear* Act I and *Don Quijote* Primera Parte constitute the *corpus* for the textual analysis, which constitutes, in its turn, the basis for the major reflections developed in the essay.

King Lear of Britain and Don Quijote de la Mancha are introduced as aged dwellers of different fictional spaces, times and social milieus. The elaborate ways they were shaped by the authors go, however, far beyond the obvious differences and similarities that simultaneously separate and approach them, emphatically exposing crucial, universal traits of the human nature. An antithesis starts to be delineated right at the opening of each text and will steadily take consistency until the end: for different reasons and circumstances, Lear and Quijote are out of reality, in the sense that they do not fit in the spaces they physically occupy; concomitantly, there is a discrepancy between the way they see the others and the way they are seen by the others, certainly more acute in the case of Quijote but substantially more hazardous in the case of Lear. These antithetical aspects will be replicated in a series of meaningful dichotomies that frame the characters' complexity.

In Shakespeare's play, the antithesis starts with the monarch's disastrous, hubristic decision of parting the realm and abdicating:

Meantime, we shall express our darker purpose.  
Give me the map there. Know that we have divided  
In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent  
To shake all cares and business from our age,  
Conferring them on younger strengths while we  
Unburdened crawl toward death. ...

(Act I, Sc. 1, 36-41)

Although here the adjective 'dark' (in "darker purpose") corresponds literally to Lear's own intention, or plan, secretly devised by himself before the public announcement, one cannot ignore its inherent primary meaning that, as a shadow, will spread along the play to be fully projected on the tragic epilogue. By parting the realm and abdicating, Lear ceases to fulfill his duties, deprives himself of his 'Body Politic', of his essence invested by God, thus shattering vital bonds; he opens a Pandora's box, metonymically coincident with the play's first scene, that will unleash chaos and lead to catastrophic events. Such decision implicates yet another distortion, when matters of the Mind, or Reason, are blended with matters of the Heart, i.e. when the king grounds the way he divides the kingdom on exterior signs of filial love:

... Tell me, my daughters—  
Since now we will divest us both of rule,  
Interest of territory, cares of state—  
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,  
That we our largest bounty may extend

Where nature doth with merit challenge?

(Act I, Sc. 1, 48-53)

He then misunderstands his three daughters' words, misreads their intentions, misapprehends their characters – summing up, he mistakes semblance for essence and vice-versa, when Goneril says

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;  
 Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;  
 Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,  
 ...  
 Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

(Act I, Sc. 1, 55-61)

The same happens, when Regan states

I am made of that same mettle as my sister,  
 And prize me at her worth. In my true heart  
 I find she names my very deed of love—

(Act I, Sc. 1, 68-70)

The king's misunderstanding is eventually emphasised by Cordelia's short, incisive, proleptic asides, which immediately insert a sense of uneasiness also at the beginning of the play:

What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent.

(Act I, Sc. 1, 62)

Then, poor Cordelia—  
 And yet not so, since I am sure my love's  
 More ponderous than my tongue.

(Act I, Sc. 1, 77-79)

When Lear urges her to speak ("Now our joy ... what can you say ...? – Act I, Sc. 1, 82-85), she simply replies "Nothing, my lord" (Act I, Sc. 1, 87). This brief declaration, which deeply contrasts with her sisters' hollow verbosity, constitutes the heart of the matter, because Cordelia's 'nothing' is rather 'everything', full of meaning and power, containing the essence of her feelings, not only towards her father but also towards her king, whose dimension is emphasised and reminded by her through 'my lord' and, later, through 'your majesty'. Kent will become a sort of Cordelia's *alter ego*, another pillar of fortitude and devotion towards the legitimate lord and sovereign.

Lear is unable to grasp where truth and falsehood, loyalty and treachery, generosity and greed, stoicism and eagerness lie; his sight and insight are therefore not coincident (as it happens with Gloucester regarding his sons). He does not understand Cordelia's 'nothing', as he does not catch the true meaning of her next speech, which starts with

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave  
My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty  
According to my bond, no more nor less.

(Act I, Sc. 1, 91-93)

Subsequently, Lear does not understand Kent's reaction either, when the Earl objects to the way Cordelia is treated by her own father.

The king will only gain (or regain) the capacity of judgement after taking a long step from hubris to anagnorisis that involves alienation, repentance, madness and despair. From the moment he abdicates and shatters both the unity of the nation and the integrity of his private dwelling, he initiates an uneven walk on sinuous, deserted, lonely grounds, by deambulating from Goneril's to Regan's households, gradually becoming aware of the gravity of his previous decision, the consequence of his deeds and the repudiation of his 'Body Politic'. Eventually accompanied only by his Fool and the Earl of Kent, disguised as Caius, Lear's loneliness is the materialisation of the void where he had placed himself.

The superlativeness and nature of the tragic pathos bursts forth from the character's own features: because he is a sovereign, his decisions have deep, disruptive repercussions on every subject in the whole realm; because the metaphorical path from blindness to sight is a long one, anagnorisis and repentance come too late, thus ensuring the catastrophic epilogue whose climax is, naturally, Cordelia's death; and because order is eventually restored, not only through the king's process of anagnorisis but also through the punishment of Goneril, Regan, Edmund and Cornwall, catharsis is accomplished.

Let us now focus on *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. In Cervantes' narrative, the initial antithesis is anchored in the protagonist's voracious reading of chivalric books – Quijana, not yet Quijote, at this stage:<sup>3</sup>

... se daba a leer libros de caballerías, con tanta afición y gusto, que olvidó casi de todo punto el ejercicio de la caza y aun la administración

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, the English forms 'First Part' and 'Ch.' ['Chapter'] will be used for each quotation in Spanish.

de su hacienda; ... y así, del poco dormir e del mucho leer se le secó el cerebro, de manera que vino a perder el juicio.<sup>4</sup> ...

(First Part, Chap. I, 37, 39)

Quijana's submersion in the writings transports him to a dimension doubly alienated from his own time and world, once the events, characters and deeds depicted in the books belong to a fictional, idealised, mythical past that he, clad in another, also idealised identity – Don Quijote de la Mancha – will committedly seek to experience (the events), emulate (the characters) and perform (the deeds).

Llenósele la fantasía de todo aquello que leía en los libros, ... batallas, desafíos, heridas, requiebros, amores, tormentas y disparates imposibles; y asentósele de tal modo en la imaginación que era verdad ... [que] le pareció conveniente y necesario ... hacerse caballero andante y irse por todo el mundo con sus armas y caballo a buscar las aventuras ...

(First Part, Ch. I, 39-40)

The beginning of the work, particularly this passage, explains the genesis of the protagonist's long, adventurous, chivalric path, and encloses everything that will be developed later (as it happens with the beginning of *King Lear*), whereas the subtle epithet in the title – 'ingenioso'<sup>5</sup> – will be endlessly expanded. Don Quijote will prove to be a resourceful, tireless, fearless knight, full of energy, enthusiasm and commitment during his hard quest.

The royal abdication in the English play meets a relevant antithesis in the Spanish narrative, when an old member of the lesser nobility invests himself as rescuer, valiantly moved and motivated by the sense of loyal service, no matter how mad his decision, behaviour or actions may be (or seem to be). From the moment Quijote starts riding his Rocinante – and let us bear in mind that the horse was the paramount element of every knight, an extension of his own status – he chooses *praxis* and rejects *gnosis*, in total opposition to Lear.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the essay is in English, the author decided not to use a translated version for the quotations, once the work was studied and analysed in Spanish. Moreover, the use of a translation would involve hermeneutic questions that go beyond the scope of this work.

<sup>5</sup> The epithet encapsulates the plural meanings inherent to the Renaissance concept of 'wit', approached by Philip Sidney, Luís de Camões and Baltasar Gracián, among other authors.

... se armó de todas sus armas, subió sobre Rocinante, ... abrazó su adarga, tomó su lanza, y ... salió al campo, con gradísimo contento ...

(First Part, Ch. II, 45)

The knight-errant's activity could not but include a series of problematic occurrences, once he moves in a sort of parallel universe. The dichotomy sight/insight present in *King Lear* also constitutes a key issue in Cervantes' text but it assumes different contours. In Quijote's case, the process of misapprehension and misunderstanding is particularly emphasised in two emblematic episodes, both focused on the martial dimension of the knight and on his duties. First, he takes windmills for armies

... dio de espuelas a su caballo *Rocinante* ... él iba tan puesto en que eran gigantes, que ni oía las voces de su escudero Sancho, ni echaba de ver, aunque estaba ya bien cerca, lo que eran ...

(First Part, Ch. VIII, 95)

Afterwards, he takes sheep for armies:

... se entró por medio del escuadrón de las ovejas y comenzó de alanceallas, con tanto coraje y denuedo como si de veras alanceara a sus mortales enemigos.

(First Part, Ch. XVIII, 194)

Moreover, the peculiar ways his squire (Sancho Panza) and his idealised lady (Dulcinea) are characterised, together with their role in the adventures, reinforce such misapprehension and alienation.

Quijote *contra mundum* constitutes a metonymic long quest materialised in a myriad of episodes, where a multitude of characters takes part, providing consistency to the core of the long work: some are devised as stereotypes, some as caricatures, others as idealisations, but all of them appear to play a specific role in Cervantes' analysis of the human nature. A deep reflection on fundamental values, like justice, generosity, tolerance, equity, dignity and righteousness, takes then form, simultaneously exposing and rejecting devious traits of humankind, as it occurs, for example, in Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Baltasar Gracián's *El Héroe / El Discreto / Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, among many other Renaissance writings, Shakespeare's naturally included.

As Lear, Quijote also walks on sinuous grounds, despite the different circumstances and motives; as it happens in the play, a strong antithesis between semblance and essence takes form in the narrative and contains the dichotomies

sight/insight, reason/madness, order/disorder, as well as the dichotomic relation between the protagonist and each one of the other characters. However, Cervantes constantly reverts the primary, literal senses of the alluded dichotomies because it is Don Quijote who, moving in a parallel dimension and moved by strong, pure ideals, embodies all those positive traits of humankind.

Some lines of thought must now be recovered, regarding the wide context and further ones should be taken into account, regarding the particular circumstances that involved these two masterworks of Western culture, once the texts constitute perspicacious ‘signs of their times’.

As we have seen, it was an era of dynamic experimentalism, of intersection between tradition and innovation in every domain. The vernacular literature of the age, in general, and the two texts, in particular, vividly exemplify that same intersection and dynamism, by recreating, reinterpreting and rewriting cultural substrata through elaborate techniques. Then, in England, all the Tudor monarchs, in one way or another, faced the question of legitimacy, the precariousness of progeny and the survival of the dynasty, which could imply the loss of independence; therefore, the fictional staging of certain royal conducts, namely in *Lear* and *Richard III*, could constitute dangerous, inconvenient, bitter reminders of that same precariousness. In Spain, the powerful, opulent empire previously created by Charles V and Philip II was declining, ‘El Siglo de Oro’ was fading away, with broad consequences in every sphere of politics, religion, society, culture and economy; therefore, it was natural that disenchantment, nostalgia and uneasiness should coexist with a strong desire of change and improvement.

In the two fictional works here under consideration, the monarch’s and the knight-errant’s alienation, misapprehension and distortion of the surrounding realities turn them into wanderers on uneven, hard paths, while their frail physical conditions disclose a surface layer that nevertheless encapsulates assertive individuals whose actions didactically lead us not only to the exercise of reflection, but also to the exposition of every sort of abuse and the rejection of inequity. Shakespeare and Cervantes use elaborate rhetorical devices to emphasise a series of complex processes, regarding the art of writing, the characters’ conduct and the ambivalence that, in both works, regards the past, the present and the future. Quijote’s nostalgic eyes and mind are deeply fixed on the past; however, it is through the parodic use of convention that the positive side of innovation (or the need of it) is accomplished in the narrative. Lear’s eyes and mind are, contrariwise, placed on the future; however, it is through the rejection of the *status quo* ensuring stability, legitimacy and order, originated by the



unprecedented royal decisions, that the negative side of innovation is shaped in the play.

*King Lear* embodies Tragedy in its whole plenitude, exhibiting the calamitous consequences caused by lack of discernment and misrule, while *Don Quijote* ingeniously encapsulates a new form of prose which is wrapped in the shape of the ancient, conventional one. Shakespeare chose tragedy, Cervantes parody; but the two works, so different in genre and extension, are permeated by the same crucial premise: any need of change, no matter how urgent or inevitable it may be, must never erase fundamental values that reside – or should reside – at the core of human nature. Both authors were indeed ‘ingeniosos’, when, in early modern times, devised the elaborate complexity of these protagonists and of their paths in a complex world, full of contradictions, challenges and adversities. During the next four hundred years, and despite so many great achievements in every sphere, similar dilemmas took consistency, along with a series of new paradoxes. The notions of justice, generosity, tolerance, equity, integrity and righteousness, so outstandingly approached in the English play and the Spanish narrative, need therefore a constant re-evaluation in this world of ours, where perversity, distortion and abuse seem to subsist and to persist.

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