Modernity in Don Quixote

Don Quixote is filled with ridicule via satire of the traditional, old notions; Don Quixote’s lunacy is the most apparent device to ridicule the notion of the knight-errant, chivalry, and the feudal system in general. Don Quixote is repeatedly portrayed as ridiculous in his inability to progress ideologically, in his fixation with the past, in his insistence that all measures of greatness existed only long ago and must be brought back—all these characteristics are evidence of Cervantes’ call to modernity.

As Mario Vargas Llosa recognizes in his preface to a recent translation of Don Quixote, the “fifty-something gentleman” of the title is garbed in “anachronistic armor” (“A Novel for the Twenty-first Century”). The would-be knight-errant is, in the very fact that he is an anachronism, precisely a modern creation. His “mad plan” to “revive a long-eclipsed era...of knights-errant, who traveled the world helping the weak, righting wrongs, and dispensing justice” is based far more on chivalric romances than on actual history (“A Novel for the Twenty-first Century”). Thus, Cervantes’ infamous character exists to demonstrate the ludicrousness of looking backward nostalgically, refusing to recognize that the world marches on towards the new. Llosa believes that “throughout his long adventure, Don Quixote does not change, that he never loses his certainty that it is the enchanter who distort reality so that he appears mistaken when he attacks windmills, wineskins, sheep, or pilgrims, believing them to be giants or enemies” but rather as a
result of his intense convictions, those around Don Quixote undergo change, and this alteration of reality is “one of the most subtle and most modern aspects of the great Cervantine novel” (“A novel for the Twenty-first Century”). The use of the “enchanters” as a virtual character may call attention to humankind’s ancient tradition of explaining the inexplicable in supernatural terms. By mocking this tendency, Cervantes may be subtly offering a critique of religion and those who defy logical and scientific discovery by clinging to the “old ways,” which are typically those of the priestly class who derive great power via intimidation and condescension. Despite the fact that those who ostensibly wish to cure poor Alonso Quijano of his madness by burning the majority of his books on chivalry, and thus compel him to accept the reality of the present age, they participate in several absurd ruses, often playing dress-up in the process and accepting his Don Quixote’s vision instead. Certainly, Sancho Panza is seduced by the romance of these antiquated notions, though more for personal reasons than ideological. Looking to the past has its charms, though ultimately, the past must give way to the future. Despite the tendency to romanticize Don Quixote, Cervantes appears more inclined to impose ridicule on his creation. Ultimately, those who would deprive Don Quixote of his preferred “reality” succeed in forcing him to “renounce his arms for a year and return to his village, bringing the story to its denouement” (“A Novel for the Twenty-first Century”). Or does he renounce anything?

Modernity is also expressed in the Cartesian method of doubting the Aristotelian conception of reality: “I will suppose... some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions
of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement" (*Meditations on First Philosophy: First Meditation*). Ironically, Don Quixote, of course, is represented as having little or no doubt in the “reality” of his vision of the world, and who can say what he sees is not real? Consequently, it is the reader who is compelled to question his or her own reality. Other characters who enter Don Quixote’s world, especially Sancho Panza, are compelled to either accept or resist Don Quixote’s vision. And while Don Quixote does not doubt his own existence, he does think; therefore, he must exist, and by extension, his thoughts, and to exert the point to its logical conclusion, so too must exist his vision of the world. Of course, Descartes would not accept such a solipsistic approach, although Don Quixote likely would. Cartesian skepticism is defined as "Any of a class of skeptical views against empirical knowledge based on the claim that claims to empirical knowledge are defeated by the possibility that we might be deceived insofar as we might be, for example, dreaming, hallucinating, deceived by demons, or brains in vats" (*Dictionary of Philosophy of Mind*). Don Quixote’s enchanter’s certainly are in league with Descartes’ Malicious Demon, and on numerous occasions, Don Quixote admits of the possibility that he is in fact being deceived by appearances. Then again, broken teeth are hard to deny; Don Quixote’s pain is empirically real enough. If in doubt, and further proof is needed, along the lines of Descartes’ mediator, he [Don Quixote] could resort to doing some math, since two plus two is always four whether one exists or not, which he does: he counts to three, the number of days he was in the cave. Of course, those up top “know” only a matter of hours had passed. This lack of certainty of reality is modern to the extreme, an astonishingly daring artistic achievement, given the times in which Cervantes lived.
Elements of the “Modern” abound in Don Quixote: in its notion of individual freedom, liberty from the authority of church and monarchy, the simple wish to live as one pleases; in its avoidance of sectarianism and the limited view of humanity that would eventually result in the schismatic paradigm of nationalism; in its employment of multiple narrative voices that call into question the very idea of authorship and reader; in its convolutions of the idea of time resulting in a disavowal of certainty between past and present; in its dramatization of the psyche at work and its fuzzy line between rationality and psychosis; and of course in its metafictional phantasmagoria of characters who are aware they are characters in a novel. Don Quixote remains a cornucopia of modernity and discovery.
Works Cited


[http://philosophy.uwaterloo.ca/MindDict/cartesianskepticism.html](http://philosophy.uwaterloo.ca/MindDict/cartesianskepticism.html)
