



Ronald Paulson. *Don Quixote in England. The Aesthetics of Laughter*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xx + 242 pp.

Paulson's book is about the influence of *Don Quijote* on the evolution of the aesthetics of laughter and satire in eighteenth-century England. Cervantes' novel was immensely popular in that period, being a key reference-point for its foremost writers; and, because of the rise of empiricism and the decentralizing of political power, they used it in a way that was unmatched in contemporary France and Spain. It put in question—Paulson argues—the conventional equation of comedy with satire and laughter with ridicule, as expounded by Hobbes in his *Leviathan*. For the royalist and Anglican Jonathan Swift, Don Quijote's madness symbolizes the Moderns' quest to change

the world: using the norm of common experience, it exposes the folly of the unfettered enthusiasm of Dissenters and radical nonconformist sects. The Whig Joseph Addison, on the other hand, in the *Spectator* (1711-12), takes Quixotic madness as a model for revaluing the imagination that Swift treats as transgressive, and transforms Swiftian satiric ridicule into pure comedy, based on an aesthetics of pleasurable response or sympathetic laughter, an area which he designated as the Novel, New, or Uncommon. In this Addison follows the Earl of Shaftesbury, who, in his "Letter Concerning Enthusiasm and *Sensus Communis*: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour," upholds civilized, good-humored raillery, which he sees as a test of gravity, and while criticizing Enthusiasm in its fanatical religious form, defends it, in poetry, as an instrument of the Sublime. The engraver and cartoonist William Hogarth, a prominent figure in Paulson's story, adopts a position akin to Addison's. His transformation of religious symbols into aesthetic equivalents involves secularizing and humanizing them, assimilating them to a Sancho-panzine ideal of blemished but living beauty, which is experienced as Novelty and grounded in a response of laughter.

Many other writers and themes figure in Paulson's account: Henry Fielding's debunking and transformation of Richardson's *Pamela*, the Quixotism of the hero of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Sterne's conception of the hobby-horse in *Tristram Shandy*, and the conversion of Marcela (*Don Quixote* I, 14) into the heroine of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1742). Cervantes' masterpiece is a paradigm in all these cases, which bring four contentious problems into play: the madness of the imagination, the cruelty of laughter and ridicule, the question whether there are objective norms of beauty, and the extension of madness to religious belief.

Paulson's book takes its cue from two seminal texts. The first is Milan Kundera's essay "The Day Panurge No Longer Makes People Laugh," in which the Czech novelist defines humor as bound up with the birth of the novel and as an imaginary terrain where moral judgement is suspended. Paulson also draws on Michael McKeon's chapter on *Don Quixote* in *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987), according to whom Cervantes' work entails that the modern disenchantment of the world involves not the eradication of enchantment but its secular reappropriation.

This is a detailed, substantial study, particularly illuminating on the interconnections among the foremost aestheticians of the period, their diverse responses to *Don Quixote*, and the interplay between aesthetics and ideology, political or religious. I sometimes found the exposition over-detailed, perhaps because of my unfamiliarity with some of the texts. Had Paulson stuck to the brief that he defines on p. xi: "Bracketing the intentions of Cervantes himself or the response of his Spanish readers in the seventeenth century, I examine the text of *Don Quixote* from the perspective of an eighteenth-century English reader," I would have had few quibbles. However, in Chapters One and Two in particular he pursues a line indicated by

the sentence immediately following the one just quoted: "I do not wish to deviate from the Cervantean text: everything to which I draw attention is there." In general, I found Paulson's interpretations of passages in *Don Quijote* and comments on its background shaky and outdated. Readers of this journal will be surprised to read statements like these: "*Don Quixote's* one fictional predecessor in Spain was *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes*" (p. 7); "Maritornes's jest that leaves Quixote hanging from the gate precariously balanced on the back of Rocinante" (p. 19); "to judge by the comedia of Lope [de Vega] and Cervantes, many of these plays were essentially Plautine comedies" (p. 38); "from the view of Sancho the peasant, 'a figure as low and repulsive as that village girl' [i.e. the wench sighted outside El Toboso], is beautiful" (p. 85). I also find it odd, given that Paulson aims to look at *Don Quijote* from the perspective of the eighteenth-century reader, that he chooses as his base text Samuel Putnam's prim and modernizing translation. Doubtless none of these defects will matter much to the staff and students of English literature and comparative literature departments to whom this book is primarily addressed. However, Hispanists should be warned of them. This does not detract from the book's merits as a source of information about how *Don Quijote* was interpreted by posterity.

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