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Response to Gossy

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Response

Megan Thieme

In “The Route of Writing,” Professor Mary Gossy explores the idea of writing and creating by “route” versus “rote” as a means through which to approach the reading of Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*.¹ It is clear that Cervantes was conscious of such a distinction between writing as a formula and writing as a creative process. In responding to Professor Gossy, I wish to focus on and expand the points she makes regarding Cervantes’s attitude toward rhetorical writing and the ways in which he explores the challenges of writing for the first time. In particular, I will address the importance given to naming as creation, the connections drawn between authorship, authority, and paternity, and several means through which difference is introduced into the text.

Cervantes had a profoundly unconventional attitude toward his own role as a writer, an attitude that one can find without going any further than the title page of *Don Quixote*. As Gossy points out in the introduction of her essay, the title of Cervantes’s novel is not an act of naming. The book is not called “The Adventures of Don Quixote” or “The Story of Don Quixote,” after the formula of old chivalric tales; it is simply the protagonist’s name, and not even his real name but the name he gives himself. Naming is the principal act of authority in Western tradition. The God of the Old Testament created the entire world simply by giving names to the light and the darkness. Cervantes, however, rejects this authority over his novel and its protagonist. He even goes one step further and says explicitly that, while he cannot deny his authorship, he does not want a paternal responsibility for his creation. It was a common literary convention of the time for an author to profess himself to be the father of his work and to humbly plead with the reader to forgive his child’s shortcomings (thus also implicitly giving himself permission to glory in his work’s successes). Cervantes, however, in the prologue to Part I, tells readers that, “though I seem to be the father, I am the stepfather of Don Quixote” (3). With this statement, Cervantes not only makes fun of the false humility of other authors, he also draws the reader’s attention to the connection between authorship and paternity, a crucial relationship in the novel.

In rejecting that first task of most fathers—that of naming his child—Cervantes not only relinquishes paternal authority over his work, he also allows his protagonist to name himself, thereby introducing the

theme of self-authorship that is one of the primary focuses of Gossy's essay. As Gossy notes, Don Quixote takes a childish delight in the task of naming himself, not unlike the mindless pleasure that many people take in idly doodling their signature in the margins of their notes. There is a joy in being simultaneously the subject, author, and medium of creation, and in practicing that one piece of writing that lends our authority to documents and protects our identity against imposters. Even more than that, as Gossy suggests, there is a pleasure in being the author of ourselves.

Cervantes quite literally "authors himself" when he creates a fictional Cervantes who converses with a friend in the prologue to Part I. However, he almost immediately undermines that self-authorship on a number of levels when he creates the character of Cide Hamete Benengeli, the Arab author who (the narrator claims) wrote the original manuscript of *Don Quixote* (67). Cervantes refuses the role that Teresa de Lauretis assigns to canonical narrative—that of affirming the fantasy that we can give birth to ourselves.² Instead, he creates an infinite cycle of authorship and self-authorship within the text: Cervantes created Cide Hamete Benengeli, who, as the "real" author, must have created the fictional Cervantes and also the fictional Cide Hamete Benengeli, and so on ad infinitum. It is the classic chicken-and-egg paradox; the reader can never know who is the author of whom.

Don Quixote's attempt at giving birth to himself is no less intriguing. Not only does he act as a contemporary Adam, systematically naming everything around him, but he also takes on God's Edenic role when he names himself. It is a subtle removal of God from the process of creation that can be read as a daring challenge on the part of Cervantes, writing in the land of the Inquisition. Of course, this rebellion of self-creation is mitigated by the fact that Don Quixote is not able to transform himself into what he wants to be, a noble knight-errant, but instead becomes a ridiculous figure who injures far more people than he helps and returns home ridiculed and defeated. However, the completeness of this failure is called into question if one examines more closely the name that Don Quixote chooses for himself. It is modeled after the names of knights in the romances of chivalry and is meant to sound grandiose, but in fact it produces quite the opposite effect. First of all, "*don*" is a title in Spanish similar to "sir" in English, and, in Cervantes's day, a minor landowner like Don Quixote would not have been entitled to use it. As for "Quixote," it comes from a root word meaning a piece of armor that covers the thigh, coupled with the aug-

mentative suffix “ote” that, along with large, suggests bulky and awkward. Not an especially ennobling connotation! And La Mancha is not the sort of exotic locale where most knights-errant claimed roots; it is a dry, barren land with nothing in particular to recommend it. In short, the name that Don Quixote chooses for himself would have sounded silly to Cervantes’s contemporaries. Though no self-respecting translator could be asked to do so, Cervantes’s intentions might be better conveyed if we called our noble hero not “Don Quixote de La Mancha” but something like “Sir Prancelot of Podunk.” If Don Quixote becomes a bumbling and laughable knight, it is because he chooses a bumbling and laughable name. He is the author of even the most undesirable aspects of his new identity.

These questions of naming have considerable relevance for readers of today. In a society steeped in dense political rhetoric and misleading marketing campaigns, it is worth asking how much of our vision of the world is determined by how we name what is around us. Don Quixote charges into a herd of sheep because he sees them as an enemy army, led by the villains of the books of chivalry that form his reality (130). But it is crucial to note that Don Quixote does not aim his lance at the level of a horsed knight, but at the level of a sheep. It is not that he does not know what he is doing; it is that he has chosen to hide reality behind a veil of rhetoric that justifies his actions to himself. Through his protagonist, Cervantes warns against the sort of rhetoric that numbs that part of the mind that accepts difference, challenges authority, and separates truth from fiction. It matters little whether that rhetoric comes from books of chivalry or from the mouths of politicians and pundits. Don Quixote becomes convinced that he knows who his enemies are, and that he must take dramatic and often violent action to save innocent people from injustice. We laugh at his delusions, and yet it is no struggle to find examples of past and present political rhetoric that have lulled citizens into a similar mindset, in which they find themselves willing to accept as true a distorted and often fundamentally fictionalized view of the world.

If naming is so essential, however, one must ask why it is that Cervantes explicitly refuses to tell his readers the real last name of his protagonist. According to Gossy, departing from such an expectation breaks with a formula that “seeks to meet a yearning for certainty that

is closely tied to anxieties about paternity and power." Before the story even begins, Cervantes has already left the reader with at least one question about paternity: If Cervantes is merely the book's "stepfather," then who is its father? There will be many more such "anxieties" as the book progresses, one of the first of which comes from the fact that Don Quixote himself lacks even that trace of a paternal connection that comes from a last name. Maybe he is Quixada, or maybe Quexada, or maybe Quixano, no one knows. All the reader knows for certain is that he is an *hidalgo*, not a noble, but a landowner with modestly respectable social standing. Yet, even in the title of *hidalgo* lurks a trace of uncertainty. The word comes from the Spanish *hijo de algo*, "the son of something," but no one in the novel seems to know quite what.

Don Quixote is acutely cognizant of this lack of lineage. When he tells a chivalric tale to Sancho in Chapter XXI of Part I, his hero only manages to marry his princess because it is discovered that he is the long-lost son of a king. After the tale is finished, Don Quixote begins to worry about his own lineage, saying, "I do not know how it can be discovered that I am of royal lineage, or, at least, a second cousin to the emperor...for this reason I fear I shall lose what my arm so justly deserves" (160). But he comforts himself with the thought that the "wise man" who will one day write his story (a person that he himself invented upon his second sally) will be able to discover his true ancestry and find him to be "a descendant, five or six times removed, of a king" (161).

However, one of the most interesting things about Don Quixote's discourses on lineage is that the reader has heard them before. Cervantes, or at least his fictional representation in the prologue, feared publishing his book without the conventional quotes from classical authors filling the margins or lengthy bibliographies full of well-known thinkers whose traditions he claimed to have followed. Just as Don Quixote lacks that trace of a lineage that comes from a last name, Cervantes lacks that trace of literary precedent that comes from having an established tradition behind him. He fears, as Don Quixote does, that his book will lose what it "justly deserves" because it lacks a literary genealogy. The solution provided by the friend in the prologue is not unlike the answer that the protagonist finds to his problem. Why, it's simple! Just insert classical quotes into your footnotes at random and attach someone else's bibliography. No one reads those anyway. All that matters is that you have them there to give your book an improvised authority (7).

Cervantes, of course, is making fun of the friend's solution, and of the dependence of other authors on precedent rather than originality as a means of seeking literary success. He is also drawing attention to the originality of his own work. Cervantes has no authors to cite because he is doing something that no author had done before: writing a psychological, character-driven novel during an age in which most books were nothing more than a standardized plot adorned in different ways.

The real Cervantes, unlike his fictional counterpart, appears to have few doubts about his ability to succeed without literary lineage (a well-justified confidence, it would seem, as we are still reading his novel four-hundred years after its publication). Yet he continues to use the parallels between authorship and biological paternity to further justify his role as the creator of a genre.

Even Don Quixote, so profoundly steeped in chivalric rhetoric, comes to realize that lineage is not as essential as he once believed. As Sancho prepares to become governor, Don Quixote advises him, "Take pride in the humbleness of your lineage, and do not disdain to say that you come from peasants." Sancho agrees, saying, "Not everybody who governs comes from the lineage of kings" (730). It turns out that Sancho is, in fact, an excellent governor, ruling fairly and with sound judgment. In this way, Cervantes affirms through his characters that illustrious predecessors are not a prerequisite of success, and thus also establishes the viability of his own work—the prototype of a genre still in the process of creation.

There can be no doubt that Cervantes was conscious of the magnitude of his undertaking. Many consider Cervantes to be the father of the modern Western narrative, and particularly of the novel. What is especially impressive about this feat, however, is that Cervantes not only writes the first novel but gives his readers insights into *how* he wrote it, all without ever providing the sort of formula for writing that he so despised. Much of what Cervantes does in *Don Quixote* is to guide the reader through what Gossy refers to as "a narrative exploration of what it is to write something for the first time." In the prologues to both parts he allows the reader a glimpse into his creative process: the difficulty of putting pen to paper for the first time, the struggle with literary precedent, the outrage at seeing his life's work unabashedly copied by Avellaneda.

Cervantes also has a lot to say, although not explicitly, about the difficulties of writing something new in the face of centuries of con-

ventions. Gossy talks a great deal about the inherent absurdity in self-reinscription, in “armoring” ourselves against events in the past that we would like to avoid. Žižek’s revision of the Wolf-Man story cited by Gossy was written largely to draw attention to this absurdity. Cervantes highlights it as well through the transformation of his protagonist. Don Quixote starts out as a rather pathetic figure—a fifty-some-year-old virgin who never leaves his house—but in attempting to rewrite this identity he only succeeds in making himself even more ridiculous. Like the Roman emperor that Gossy discusses, Don Quixote writes a new name for himself by scratching out the old name of Alonso Quixano (or whatever it is), the reader of books, and then writing a new identity based on the very books that formed the foundation of the self he wanted to erase. Rewriting, as Gossy puts it, redoubles his trauma. Because he will not directly acknowledge that the obsession with books of chivalry has been traumatic for him, he cannot move on from them; he can only make them manifest themselves in increasingly absurd ways.

The difficulty Don Quixote faces in overcoming this trauma supports Gossy’s argument that, “the narrative of Don Quixote...is the story of a man of La Mancha coming to terms with, and working through, the un-rewritable.” It takes a great deal of physical and emotional struggle and a thousand-page book’s worth of therapeutic conversation with Sancho for Don Quixote to admit the trauma in his past and accept his real name. At the end of the book, as he lies on his deathbed, Don Quixote finally admits that, “I am no longer Don Quixote of La Mancha but Alonso Quixano” (935). He also recognizes that the books of chivalry were the principal trauma of his life, and declares himself the enemy of all knights-errant. This recognition, followed by the protagonist’s death, gives a certain amount of closure to the story of Don Quixote’s struggle with the un-rewritable. However, there remains the possibility that Don Quixote’s acceptance of his name was not so much an acceptance of reality as yet another transformation. He becomes “Alonso Quijano el Bueno,” a once-erring, now-redeemed saint-like figure found often in books, but rarely in reality. It is entirely possible that Alonso Quijano el Bueno would have been as ridiculous as Don Quixote de La Mancha, but readers will never know, because the man who incarnated both dies. Many critics believe that, had Cervantes not

felt the need to definitively prevent another unofficial continuation like Avellaneda's, he would not have even provided this degree of closure, but would have simply left his protagonist living in La Mancha with his new identity, and let the reader decide what would become of him.

Cervantes, too, like Don Quixote, faces a struggle with the "unrewritable." However much he loathes the state of literature in his day, it is an undeniable part of his past. He may hate the romances of chivalry, but he has clearly read them and knows them well, and reveals this familiarity in the offhand ease and fluency with which he quotes them through the words of his protagonist. He also has a sense of the absurdity inherent in trying to write over such a trauma in his past, since he has Don Quixote do so and fail. Writing as if the romances of chivalry had never existed or influenced his mind would be to repress that traumatic event in his literary past, or worse, to attempt to write over it. So Cervantes makes a choice that, in many ways, is the true measure of his creative genius. Rather than hiding or writing over the traumatic past of literature, he acknowledges it on practically every page, but he acknowledges it through parody. He embraces the absurdity inherent in trying to eliminate an unwanted part of his past, and by acknowledging that trauma from the beginning, leaves himself free to take whatever attitude toward it he wants from then on.

In many ways, this use of parody and humor is the key to the book's success, both as a work of literature and as a liberating discourse. Cervantes does not hesitate to present ideas that "discomfort" by breaking with cultural norms. He critiques censorship and the Inquisitional *autos de fe* in the book-burning scene, he makes fun of prevailing philosophical ideas with the Cave of Montesinos, he undermines the importance of lineage in countless ways discussed above, and he even forces readers to question how they read while they are in the middle of reading. However, by encasing these discomforting ideas in layers of parody, he is able to say through humor what he might never have been allowed to say seriously. It may be permissible in theory for a text intended to question cultural boundaries (Roland Barthes's "texts of bliss"³) to discomfort the readers "to the point of a certain boredom," but Cervantes understood that another layer was necessary if his message was to reach the general reading public. It may have taken decades for *Don Quixote* to be read as anything but a funny story, but in that time the text continued to be transmitted. Whether or not they realized it, readers were absorbing not only *Don Quixote* the "text of pleasure," but *Don Quixote* the "text of bliss." Today, readers continue to work

through a deep psychological exploration of a character and deal with the uncomfortable cultural questions presented in the text even while, on the surface, they are laughing at an amusing story about a bumbling old man.

No discussion of humor in *Don Quixote* would be complete, however, without an exploration of the role of Sancho, whose comedy provides a good part of the real belly laughs in the novel. Sancho is infinitely more than “comic relief;” he is a character at least as richly developed as Don Quixote and arguably far more so, but his sense of humor is essential in that it is one of the primary means through which difference is introduced into Don Quixote’s world.

Don Quixote’s resistance to otherness in any form is exemplified by his constant need to rename everything to fit with his chivalric rhetoric. It is strange, therefore, that he does not rename Sancho, because Sancho—clumsy, ineloquent, and uninterested in abstract ideals—hardly belongs in the glamorous world of a knight-errant. Sancho’s name is no better. *Panza* is roughly “pot-belly,” a connotation which, while fitting well with the reality of his master’s new name, does not fit at all with the image that Don Quixote thinks he is creating of himself. That Don Quixote does not rename his squire seems to indicate, as Gossy states, that “Sancho’s is the first difference that Don Quixote can confront on its own terms.”

There is, however, an essential difference from Don Quixote that Sancho lacks. Don Quixote has a very curious relationship with the female body and femininity in general. When the story begins, Don Quixote is a man possessing many of the characteristics traditionally associated with women and none of the masculine attributes of the typical chivalric hero. He is unmarried, probably a virgin, fussy, idle, passive, and prone to excessive flights of imagination, and he is the owner of a rusty, broken sword that can be easily extrapolated into a phallic symbol of his own impotence. Yet he has a terror of female bodies that is evident through his repeated accidental encounters with prostitutes. His fear of sexualized femininity is so great that he rewrites nearly every woman he encounters as a lovely, milky-skinned maiden damsel, a literary stereotype with which he is comfortable because it is essentially sexless. Dulcinea is an object to be admired from afar, never married and certainly never touched.

Not surprisingly, it is Sancho who calls this stereotype into question. In Part II, Sancho claims that a peasant girl riding down the path is Dulcinea, and Don Quixote, for essentially the first time in the book,

cannot see her. He sees only the peasant girl as she really looks (516). It is also Sancho who points out to Don Quixote (and the reader) that the “real” Dulcinea does not look how she has been described. Don Quixote admits in Part I that his model for Dulcinea was Aldonza Lorenzo, a peasant girl with whom he had once been in love. Sancho is delighted to realize that he knows the girl; she is a burly, aggressive, hairy-chested woman from his village (199). The scene is quite funny, but in classic Cervantine style, the humor is only a thin veil over the text’s quite serious insistence on presenting real female bodies, which rarely look at all like Dulcinea.

Sancho, as one of the few men in Don Quixote’s life, has just enough of an element of “sameness” to make Don Quixote unafraid to enter into open dialogue with him. By allowing this dialogue, Don Quixote makes room in his world for Sancho’s other differences, and is thus able to gradually face, though him, what Gossy calls “the trauma of otherness in what has historically been, in the West, its most graphic form...the trauma of sexual difference.”

Thus, in a sense, Sancho represents the introduction of otherness into Don Quixote’s life, as well as personifying what Gossy calls “the rupture with the rote” —the constant interruption of Don Quixote’s rhetorical discourses. It is not coincidental that he is also the personification of humor. A large part of Sancho’s role in the novel is to constantly break with the role that Don Quixote assigns to him—a discontinuity between expected and actual that is the essence of comedy, and also of rupture with established tradition. Cervantes is quite conscious of the importance of Sancho’s humor to his function in the book, to the extent that, when he has the characters in the second part read Avellaneda’s unofficial continuation of the story, the principal criticism they make of it is that the false Sancho is not very funny.

It is important, however, to note just how Sancho goes about breaking down Don Quixote’s walls of rhetoric. Sancho is able to disagree with his master in a way that still facilitates dialogue, a task that no other character in the novel seems able to accomplish. Much of the novel is about the impossibility of dialogue that Don Quixote constantly faces because his interlocutors either have no idea what he is talking about, or understand him, but deem him crazy. Sancho’s and Don Quixote’s relationship is different because it is based on the Principle of Charity that Gossy discusses. The two men find a basis on which they can agree, and let dialogue develop from there. At the beginning, their grounds for agreement comes from two nearly polarized motives:

Sancho agrees to participate in Don Quixote's fantasy for practical, capitalistic reasons (the promise of a governorship) while Don Quixote agrees to allow Sancho into his world for rhetorical, idealistic ones (the need for a knight to have a squire). It matters little, however, what the underlying motives are; the result is that Sancho, while disagreeing about the reality of what Don Quixote sees, agrees to believe that he sees it and that he does have some final goal in mind. Don Quixote, for his part, agrees to believe that Sancho does not see giants standing in place of the windmills, even if he has to create an "enchanter" to justify this disparity. By virtue of being the only person in the book who "agrees to disagree" with Don Quixote rather than dismissing him as mad, Sancho becomes the only person capable of breaking through that madness to create the dialogue that eventually saves him.

It is curious, however, that in their struggle to understand and identify with one another, Don Quixote and Sancho seem to absorb each other. By the second part of the novel it is Sancho, not Don Quixote, who is speaking in archaic language and seeing maiden damsels in the street, and Don Quixote who is using Sancho's characteristic malapropisms and finding himself unable to see anything but peasant women in Sancho's damsels. The identification with the other has become so strong that the two men are practically indistinguishable.

This idea of absorbing the other ties in with Gossy's discussion of the letter Q as a literal representation of difference. While her argument seems difficult to support from within the text itself, it does acquire force upon an examination of other groundbreaking literature, where such strategic uses of spelling are much more explicit. Gossy, following Barthes, discusses the play of S and Z in Balzac's *Sarrasine*. A more recent example can be found in Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), published in 1963. With this novel, Cortázar is (quite explicitly) attempting to create a new genre to replace the worn-out, formula-prone novel, and in this sense is following Cervantes's lead. His protagonist, Horacio Oliveira, spends most of the story struggling with his relationship to the *other*, first La Maga, his lover, and then Traveler, a friend of his youth. What is particularly relevant to the current discussion, however, is Horacio's method of calming himself down when he begins to feel overwhelmed by rhetoric or nonexistent in the presence of the *other*. He begins writing or imagining H's at the beginning of

words that start with vowels. It is an alteration that, in Spanish, does not change the pronunciation of the words; the consonant is absorbed by the vowel. Yet the change is nevertheless enough to reassure Horacio that difference is present, that words don't have to be formulas, and that the H that begins his name is not completely absorbed by the other, even if it goes unheard. Cervantes may not develop the importance of spelling as explicitly as Cortázar, and it is possible he never even thought about it consciously, but I believe that Gossy makes a valid argument in suggesting that the letter Q may have appealed to Cervantes's desire to highlight, in every way possible, the difference of his text.

Cervantes's success in creating a discourse that liberated Spanish (and indeed Western) literature from stifling conventions is all the greater because he explicitly explores the process through which he accomplished that feat. Through countless parallels between Don Quixote's undertaking and his own, Cervantes succeeds in making a book about making books, a metatext that, while never providing a formula for writing, does provide valuable insights into the process of overcoming convention to create something entirely new.

Notes

1. Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003).
2. Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 156.
3. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 14.

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