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CLARK COLAHAN

**KNIGHT-ERRANTRY.
CODE WORD AND PUNCH LINE IN EDMUND
GAYTON'S "FESTIVOUS NOTES ON DON
QUIXOTE" (1654 AND 1768)***

1. The early English interpretation

For the first two centuries of *Don Quijote*'s life it was thought of, and especially in Britain, as a farce mixed with social satire. The way of life ridiculed was understood as both Spanish and part of the past, two cultures that the country saw itself struggling against as it emerged as a European power, though as the decades passed there was a growing delight in turning the tables on readers by drawing parallels to modern times in

* This research is part of a project ("Reception and interpretation of Don Quixote (1605-1800). Translations, editions, opinions") financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Ref. FFI2009-11898).

England.¹ This social dimension meant that the humor was early perceived as more than simply slapstick, more than endless drubbings and mad confusions. The target was not only a foolish old man making a spectacle of himself. It was the whole life program he had absorbed from his reading of Spanish romances.

2. From ‘*caballería andante*’ to knight-errantry

Cervantes, and the works he parodied without ever entirely giving up his admiration for them, had called it with high praise *caballería andante*, meaning something like knighthood on the move. Today English speakers might use the old word *paladin* to suggest the same positive idea and tone.² It is contrasted in Cervantes’ novel with the sedentary frivolousness of decadent aristocrats. Thomas Shelton, the first English translator of the First Part (1612), took the word *knight-errant*, literally a wandering knight, which had been in the language since *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the fourteenth century, then sought to generalize it as a way of life. There is no earlier recorded use of the neologism.³

¹ For the evolving seventeenth-century English view of *Don Quijote* see D. B. J. Randall – J. C. Boswell, *Cervantes in Seventeenth-Century England: the Tapestry Turned*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. XVI-XXXVI. Specifically on the satire of the archaic aspect of Cervantes’ hero see J. A. G. Ardila, *Thomas D’Urfey y la recepción del “Quijote” en el siglo XVII inglés*, in “Hispanic Research Journal”, 10, 2, 2009, p. 95.

² Dale Randall and Jackson Boswell, who summarize research on the extent of the demise of chivalry as an English ideal in the period, clarify: “Even [...] England’s own Sir Philip Sidney claimed to know men who through reading *Amadís* had ‘found their hearts moved to the exercise of courtesy, liberality, and especially courage’ [...] but chivalry and its accoutrements were fading from the English cultural scene in the closing years of the 1500s [...] giving way to the more mundane demands of citizenship and public duty” (cf. D. B. J. Randall – J. C. Boswell, *Cervantes in Seventeenth-Century England: the Tapestry Turned*, cit., p. XXXIV).

³ See *Oxford English Dictionary* on line, web address www.oed.com, s. v. *knight-errantry*. The French term *chevalier errant* is defined, sans humorous

But in English *errant* also means physically or morally erring, so an errant Don Quixote conjures up the image of someone off the track, both socially as well as spatially. Shelton, of course, knew this and so very possibly added tongue in cheek the parodic twist involved. In the 1620 rendering of the Second Part (putatively Shelton's but now considered anonymous) the phrase is a favorite of the translator.⁴ Similarly, in I, 19, Cervantes famously, ambiguously and jokingly calls his protagonist “El Caballero de la Triste Figura”, The Knight of the Sad (or Ill-favored) Countenance. The negative connotation of *errant* is intensified by another variant of the same word, *arrant*, which means thoroughgoing or complete, and since the sixteenth century has usually be used in harsh descriptions, as *an arrant knave*.⁵

Such a linguistic bias to the term used in English for *caballería andante* may have been, then, both the effect and subsequent cause of a prejudiced view of the idealistic elements implied. The *caballero andante* most often appealed to as a model in the novel, Amadís of Gaul, personifies the achievement of grand objectives, including the exercise of altruism, actions that determine the fate of whole nations, and the protection of women from every sort of harm, an extension of the knight's faithfulness and general concern for the well-being of the mistress of his heart. Such lofty goals are met by the possession of exceptional personal qualities.

connotations, in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (1694), but it does not appear in 1606 in Jean Nicot's *Le Thresor de la langue francoyse*. See *Dictionnaires d'autrefois. French dictionaries of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries* (The ARTFL Project), web address www.artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois.

⁴ On the authorship of the translation of the Second Part see D. B. J. Randall – J. C. Boswell, *Cervantes in Seventeenth-Century England: the Tapestry Turned*, cit., pp. XX-XXI.

⁵ For the history of the English word knight-errant see Webster's *New World Dictionary of the American Language. College Edition*, Cleveland and – New York, World Publishing, 1962, s. v. *knight, knight-errant*.

Caballeros andantes exhibit an aristocratic superiority that often spills over into grandeur, as when they demonstrate extraordinary self-discipline as regards food and sex. They understand deep mysteries and penetrate to the heart of confusing situations since they are well-versed in all branches of knowledge; in II, 16 Don Quixote tells Don Diego de Miranda, the studious Knight of the Green Overcoat, that *caballería andante* is a *summa*, a compendium of all sciences.

3. Gayton's deconstruction of 'errantry'

Such a project, completely undoable as described by Cervantes and so doomed to failure and resultant hypocrisy, is designed to elicit ridicule, and did so even more when presented to an adversarial culture in which practicality and skepticism were on the rise. The literary work that best demonstrates this, while at the same time articulating a range of specific objections to stereotypical archaic culture, belongs to a meta-genre, that of jocular literary criticism. It is Edmund Gayton's *Festivous notes on the History and adventures of the renowned Don Quixote*, of which John Ardila writes: "Gayton must be credited with being the author of the first critical analysis of *Don Quijote*, where he managed to envisage the ontological qualities of Cervantes's hero".⁶ His commentary was so in tune with the direction in which English culture was moving when it appeared in 1654 (originally titled *Pleasant notes upon Don Quixot*) that it was published again in 1768 after being rewritten in clearer, updated language

⁶ Cf. J. A. G. Ardila, *The Influence and Reception of Cervantes in Britain, 1607-2005*, in *The Cervantean Heritage: Reception and Influence of Cervantes in Britain*, Editor J. A. G. Ardila, London, Modern Humanities Research Association, and Maney Publishing, 2009, p. 8.

for Illustration-era readers, though remaining in substance unchanged.⁷ In Gayton *knight-errantry* became a humorous code word for old-fashioned delusions of martial, political and even intellectual grandeur, as deconstructed by numerous English plays and novels. It is likely that his attention was drawn to the term by the first republication, two years earlier in 1652, of the combined 1612 and 1620 Shelton and ‘putative Shelton’ translations of both parts of *Don Quijote*.

Gayton’s credentials for authoring such an analytic reading at first surprise, but then illuminate, his book’s critical breadth and insight. Imagine today an academic switching from something like the study of anatomy to deconstructing the elements, simultaneously stereotypical and parodic, in a popular film series based on an out-of-date literary genre about a foreign culture, films such as *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Similarly, Gayton held a degree from Oxford and was a medical doctor. Later he was a beadle there in arts and medicine but went on to write light literary pieces to support himself in London.

4. *From the heroic sublime to the erotic, and dietary, ridiculous*

Gayton was not the first to laugh at chivalry or adapt *Don Quijote* in England, of course.⁸ Writers had zeroed in, as he would, on one of the Don’s more flagrant transgressions of idealized knight-errantry. In Francis Beaumont’s theatrical romp *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1612), the

⁷ See E. Gayton, *Festivous notes on the history and adventures of the renowned Don Quixote*, First Published... in the year 1654, Revised with Corrections, Alterations, and Additions..., London, Printed for F. Newbery, 1768. I cite from this later edition due to its greater clarity for readers today and its better availability.

⁸ For the English works that ridiculed chivalry both before and immediately after the appearance of *Don Quixote* see D. B. J. Randall – J. C. Boswell, *Cervantes in Seventeenth-Century England: the Tapestry Turned*, cit., pp. XXXII-XXXVI.

paramount failing in the knightly code played for robust laughs is a substandard effort by the pseudo-knight to reign in his sexual impulses.⁹ The Don Quixote figure swears to pursue a lady, purportedly to assist her:

“By this bright burning pestle of my honor
The living trophy, and by all respect
Due to distressed damsels, here I vow
Never to end the quest of this fair lady.”¹⁰

The Dwarf who acts as the squire of the would-be knight jokes in reply, playing on the term *errant* and questioning the type of assistance he wishes to provide: “Heaven bless the Knight / that thus relieves poor errant Gentlewomen”.¹¹ The penile imagery of the title recurs constantly throughout the farce, a leitmotiv that keeps the primary target of the play’s satire in mind. And should one all-too-human knight not be enough, the ‘shaft’ figure migrates to another character:

“I am an errant knight that followed arms
With spear and shield, and in my tender years
I stricken was with Cupid’s fiery staff.”¹²

Sébastien Bremond,¹³ a French ex-patriate novelist living in Restoration London and making his living as a novelist, made similar jokes about modern knight-errants, and pilgrims too, using their lances and staffs for erotic purposes:

⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. XXXIV: “Though the pros and cons regarding Cervantine influence on *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* have been contested over the years, it does seem likely that this comedy, with its sendup of knightly adventures, owes at least a little something to ‘*Don Quixote*’”.

¹⁰ Cf. F. Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, London, printed for Walter Burre, 1613, p. 30. The spelling in the citations has been modernized.

¹¹ Cf. *ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 54.

¹³ His given name is often shown, instead, as Gabriel.

“That which they have retained of their ancient custom, which devotion itself could not persuade them to alter, is a little miss, which still sticks close to them, and for whose sake sometime the palmer’s staff does wag, as the lance did formerly.”¹⁴

This same shortcoming of many knights is, naturally, pointed out by Gayton, tracing it back to the Cervantine source. Annotating *Don Quijote*, I, 15, he comments that the amorous advance by Rocinante, mirror of his master in this as in other behaviors, was

“ [...] a great error in the *Cephal-errant*, for by order of his horse-hood he should have relieved the mares, who were oppressed and overladen with heavy packs, he being the horse-errant of the only lady-relieving knight-errant in the world.”¹⁵

A few pages earlier, in regard to Don Quixote’s interest in Marcela, Gayton had likewise debunked the idea of errantry as altruistic service of women performed with no ulterior animal motives, stating that Don Quixote’s

“ [...] integrity was liable to suspicion, as will appear in his pursuit of Marcella; for had he overtaken her (after his late feast on goatsflesh) it is imagined he would have felt *caprizans pulsus*.”¹⁶

As humorous terms like “*Cephal-errant*” (from Bucephalus, the name of Alexander the Great’s horse) make clear, Gayton found the ambiguous nature of *errant* highly entertaining and enjoyed attaching it to a variety of words where the new combination of meanings proved funny. He applied its naughty connotation even to a Greek god: “Is not *Apollo* a *deity*-

¹⁴ S. Bremond, *The Pilgrim, a pleasant piece of gallantry*, English translation by P. Belon, London, printed for R. Bentley and M. Magnes, 1680, cit. p. 2.

¹⁵ Cf. E. Gayton, *Festivous notes on the history and adventures of the renowned Don Quixote*, cit., p. 103

¹⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 96.

errant? [...] And like a valiant knight-errant, did he not make choice of the celebrated Daphne for his Dulcinea?”.¹⁷ The well-known image from Classical mythology suggests a frenzied Alonso Quijano chasing lasciviously after Aldonza / Dulcinea while pretending to be engaged in altruistic pursuits. This sort of off-color word play is not absent in Cervantes’ novel, of course, and English writers thought up humorous variations also on the name of the protagonist.¹⁸

Another laugh at unrealistic standards not upheld involves the diet that Don Quixote ostentatiously sets for himself:

“*Sancho* was [...] fit for nothing but to pick salads, which being the chief food (as the only *parabile*) wherewith the nature of knight-errants was contented, what could be expected but faint performances from a *grass* diet?”¹⁹

5. *Aristocratic arrogance*

Under the heading of aristocratic delusions of grandeur is Don Quixote’s arrogantly aristocratic reaction at the attempt of a highway patrolman to arrest him for having violently released criminals condemned to the galleys. The English conviction that the law is the foundation of society lends an energetic bite to the satiric commentary by Gayton:

“He declared their writ to be false. It was *error personae*, not directed to attack a knight-errant. [...] Warrants for vagrants are not extendable to knight-errants, who ever demand an *exeo regno*, and have and hold by *de forresta charta* of their own: do as they list, live as they list, pay what they list, say what they list, and are the only men of the list.”²⁰

¹⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 200.

¹⁸ For the English distortions of the name Quixote from the period see D. B. J. Randall – J. C. Boswell, *Cervantes in Seventeenth-Century England: the Tapestry Turned*, cit., pp. XXXV-XXXVI.

¹⁹ Cf. E. Gayton, *Festivous notes on the history and adventures of the renowned Don Quixote*, cit., p. 74.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 224.

And if knight-errants are ridiculous when they claim a special social status, they become even more laughable when they assert that the gods are watching over their fortunes with special care. To save face when forced into a cage to be taken home in *Don Quijote*, I, 47, Don Quixote tells Sancho that it is best to wait for the adverse influence of the stars to pass. Gayton mocks this grandiose attribution of knight-errants' problems and successes to the attention paid them by the Classical deities. To judge by the Don's dismal record, he would be better off without divine aide, or perhaps, with his inflated self-image, to aspire to godhead himself :

"If once a knight-errant (like Ben. Johnson's Braggadocio) is *planet-struck*, he never returns a blow. [...] And certainly if knights ever were born under malignant planets, *Quixote* was. Venus was cross-legged; Mars, retrograde; Sol, *in nubibus*; *Juppiter*, excentric; Saturn, sullen; Luna and Mercury only conspiring to assist him home again. [...] In so much, that if ever the number should be augmented, he is in election to make the eighth planet."²¹

6. *Know-it-alls*

Knight errants, as noted, are supposed to be keenly perceptive and immensely learned. Gayton plays on the word *errant* again, this time in the sense of spatially wandering, to argue that Don Quixote, who in order to buy more books of chivalry sold lands and sent them on their way to another owner, made of himself only a foolish know-it all:

²¹ Ibidem, p. 249. For Ardila's different reading of this passage, seeing it in relation to Gayton's recognition that at times Don Quixote is rational, see J. A. G. Ardila, *Thomas D'Urfey y la recepción del "Quijote" en el siglo XVII inglés*, cit., p. 95.

“It seems our knight (pardon the application) made his lands errant before himself, and dubbed his acres first, so that what he did afterwards was but in pursuance of his lands which went before, and so made himself a wise-acres.”²²

Still the educator and social critic in him goes on to remind the English of the time of one of their own particular obsessions, alchemy:

“Laugh not too soon at our Spaniard, unless you can acquit yourselves, countrymen, of as great a folly. Are not books of this kind as well bought as those of the philosopher’s stone?”²³

7. *The ‘summa’ of nonsense and ranting*

Gayton’s academic perspective on the claim that errantry is the sum of all the sciences can be presumed, but the delusionary code’s hazardous activities and unholy foundations are forcefully conjured up. When Sancho receives permission from Don Quixote to complain about the buffetings he takes in the course of his duties (I, 18), Gayton draws a parody of a scholastic distinction:

“Sancho [...] had now two capacities, one *personal*, and the other *squire-errantical*; and therefore it was worth the inquiry in which of these capacities he should suffer. The Don asserted that the bodies of knight- and squire-errants did also suffer personally (as witches and enchanters are not exempt from punishments when they assume the shapes and forms of other creatures), for as errantry is but a noble form of witchcraft, we may conclude *a simili* that it is subject to the same inconveniencies. Excellent logic!”²⁴

Gayton’s assertion that knight errantry is little better than witchcraft, perhaps not entirely intended as a joke, seems to be a metaphor for its constituting an old heap of nonsense. The introduction of the neologism

²² Cf. E. Gayton, *Festivous notes on the history and adventures of the renowned Don Quixote*, cit., p. VII.

²³ Cf. *ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 56-57.

“*squire-errantical*” pulls off the slight of hand of shifting the stressed syllable in *errant* and so making the word *rant* visible within it.

8. *Summary*

In sum, Gayton lays out the reasons why *Don Quijote* and its protagonist were viewed as both an example and a satire of knight-errantry. By the middle of the seventeenth century Britain had come to see its own moribund chivalric roots, perceived as still alive in Spain when Cervantes had satirized them, as typical of an outdated and even alien culture. The negative connotations of the principal word used in English to refer to the ideas and behaviors in question, *errant*, in combination with a word marking a formerly prestigious social role, *knight*, contributed to a highly critical reading of the goals and actions around which plots revolved that had come to seem far-fetched and socially irrelevant.

While Cervantes’ love of word play in the service of parody remained lively in Gayton and his peers, the Spaniard’s ability – his compulsion, rather – to see both the good and the bad of the figure of the knight, suffered a long eclipse by a growing British exaltation of reason and utility. The Archaic and the seemingly Alien were indeed unhorsed, as in Cervantes, by the unstoppable modernity represented by windmills, but in Britain those gigantic antagonists were aided and abetted by comic ‘attack ads’ against the Other for failing to live up to its own vaunted standards.

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