From satire to comedy: *Don Quixote in England*; or, the sense of Quixotic social morality

In Chapters 47 and 48 of Part I of *Don Quixote*, the Canon of Toledo’s conversation with the barber Nicolás turns into a long-running debate on the pernicious effects of chivalry books legitimately dismissed as a bad genre, as it derogates from present-day literary norms. Inveighing against their lack of proportion between parts and the whole, preposterous or questionable content, unpolished style and cheap delight as their only aim, the Canon recommends the observance of the Aristotelian unity of action\(^1\) which adds to the delicacy of style, non-servile imitation, *el ingenio* and *la invención*,\(^2\) all meant to create

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1 The Canon echoes Cervantes’ view on the Aristotelian unity of action informed by Juan de la Cueva’s *Filosofía antigua castellana* (1582) and Antonio López El Pinciano’s *Philosophia Antigua poetica* (1596). Nevertheless, by calling *Don Quixote* a *historia*, Cervantes subverts this unity which, corroborated with the Aristotelian principles of the universality of poetry and the particularity of history, mingles poetry and history in a work paradoxically based on a story disguised as history, which claims to be true due to the author’s manipulation of particulars, i.e. adventures, in order to achieve an artistic end. Bruce W. Wardopper’s thought-provoking article called “*Don Quixote: Story or History?*”, *Modern Philology*, LXIII (August 1965), 1-11, provides a lengthy discussion of this aspect by considering sixteenth-century aesthetics as posited by the Spanish philosophers just mentioned: history is natural because it records a logical succession of events based on a cause-and-effect relationship whereas story is *artificiosa*, since “events are made to happen in a peculiarly satisfactory way” (*ibid.*, 2). Américo Castro’s groundbreaking study, *El pensamiento de Cervantes*, Madrid: Hernando, 1925, views *Don Quixote* as a liminal space between *vertiente poética* (“poetic truth”) and *vertiente histórica* (“historical truth”) (*ibid.*, 30).

an impression of verisimilitude in a work of fiction whose role is to entertain and, above all, to instruct the reader.

Abiding by these rules, the Canon confesses that he experimented with the idea of writing a book of chivalry just for the sake of finding out the opinion of two different types of readers: some learned, prudent and discerning, others ignorant and eager to read foolish things. The Canon is puzzled to notice that the latter type provides the same feedback as the former: flattering approbation. As a good connoisseur of human nature and especially of the kind of fiction that such an uninstructed (Quixotic) readership devours, the Canon sadly concludes that the vulgus deceives him whereas wise people are the ones who praise him honestly and disinterestedly. Surprisingly enough, the Canon makes an unexpected analogy with plays which, whether fashionable or historical, account for the same degrading taste of the vulgar keen on absurd plots that are also financially rewarding. It is playwrights who are to blame, argues the Canon, not the vulgar audience, because playwrights do not master the rules of art as stipulated by Aristotle and write such productions according to the precepts of supply and demand. Deploiring the debased condition of theatre performances in Spain, the barber Nicolás replies: “porque habiendo de ser la comedia, según le parece a Tulio, espejo de la vida humana, ejemplo de las costumbres y imagen de la verdad, las que ahora se representan son espejos de disparates, ejemplos de necedades e imágenes de lascivia.”

By the same token, the poet’s and the player’s criticism of the poor quality of modern English drama in *Joseph Andrews* (III, x-xi) is actually based on mutual recriminations, with the former blaming the actors because they “know not to give a sentiment utterance” and the

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“generates”, whereas *invenición* stands for understanding or judgement. Gilman points out that Huarte subdivides ingenio into “categories corresponding to imagination, memory and understanding, which are indispensable for ‘invention’, understood in the postrhetorical sense” (101).