

An Everyman Knight Errant: Performing Don Quijote in *Las cortes de la muerte*

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Por la fe de caballero andante, ...que así como vi este carro imaginé que alguna grande aventura se me ofrecía. (II.11, 627)

A Chance Encounter in/with the *Quijote*

In 2005, Brigham Young University celebrated the quadricentennial anniversary of the publication of the first volume of *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* with a series of events. The university undertook a range of activities, including a scholarly colloquium, a dedicated library exhibition, and, most pertinent here, a theatrical adaptation of *Las cortes de la muerte* – an *auto sacramental* alluded to in chapter eleven of the second volume of the *Quijote*. Convinced by Sancho that Dulcinea has been magically disfigured, Don Quijote wanders despondent through the woods until he chances upon a cart laden with a motley ensemble of actors still clothed in their allegorical dress required by the performance of an *auto*.

Estorbóselo una carreta que salió al través del camino cargada de los más diversos y extraños personajes y figuras que pudieron imaginarse. El que guiaba las mulas y servía de carretero era un feo demonio. [...] La primera figura que se ofreció a los ojos de don Quijote fue la de la misma Muerte, con rostro humano; junto a ella venía un ángel con unas grandes y pintadas alas; al un lado estaba un emperador con una corona, al parecer de oro, en la cabeza; a los pies de la muerte estaba el dios que llaman Cupido, sin venda en los ojos, pero con su arco, carcaj y saetas. Venía también un caballero armado de punta en blanco, excepto que no traía morrión ni celada, sino un sombrero lleno de plumas de diversos colores. (II.11, 625-26)



Fig. 1. Pinelli, Bartolomeo, “La carreta de *Las cortes de la muerte*” (1834)
Etching in the Biblioteca Nacional de España.

Caught in-between performances of *Las cortes de la muerte* during the Corpus Christi festival, the actors decide to remain in costume while they travel to their next destination. Don Quijote, against his natural inclination to mythologize unremarkable events and encounters, unexpectedly views this retinue of fantastic characters for what they are – a group of actors on their way to a performance – and even wishes them well, reflecting on his own childhood fascination with theater: “desde muchacho fui aficionado a la carátula, y en mi mocedad se me iban los ojos tras la farándula” (II 11, 627). Alonso Quijana, an *hidalgo* fully committed to the role of Don Quijote – his version of a knight errant –, takes to theater like a fish to water. He intuits that the “fin propuesto” of drama, as Lope writes in his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*, “[es] imitar las acciones de los hombres / y pintar de aquel siglo las costumbres” (134). Amidst actors, persons fully committed to playing the part of someone else, Don Quijote discovers kindred spirits.¹

Tapping into Don Quijote’s affinity for theater, BYU’s Spanish Golden Age theater group created an extraliterary opportunity for the knight errant by combining his encounter in the second book of the *Quijote* with a version of the play Angulo el Malo’s company was outfitted to portray, *Las cortes de la muerte*. The resulting adaptation placed the literary Don Quijote in the role of the theatrical Hombre, the everyman character found in the *auto*.² Given that the goal of an *auto* is to educate its viewers about the spiritual power of the Holy Eucharist, the introduction of Don Quijote, a secular figure in a religious drama, formulated new intertextual exchanges – on madness, love, and the pastoral genre – between the play and the novel.

Brigham Young University’s Golden Age Theater Project

Between 2002 and 2010, BYU students had the unique opportunity to directly participate in the preparation, production, and performance of Golden Age plays. Under the mentorship of Valerie Hegstrom and Dale J. Pratt, the group produced (in Spanish) five full-length *comedias*, a convent play, a *loa*, multiple *entremeses*, many abbreviated scenes from iconic Golden Age plays, and an *auto*.³ “We believe that the best way to teach theater is through performance,” write Pratt and Hegstrom in their 2006 article, “Mentoring Environments and Golden Age Theater Production” (198). They continue:

[i]f supplemented with a set of carefully designed (but not rigid) mentoring experiences, including a substantial writing component, exposure to current critical discourse, and

¹ While in theory the actors share Don Quijote’s dedication to dramatic interpretation, they clearly do not respect his calling as knight errant, going so far as to startle Rocinante – causing him to throw his rider to the ground –, steal Sancho’s donkey, and threaten to hurl rocks if either knight or squire retaliate.

² The everyman character has a long tradition as an allegorical figure in medieval morality plays. Its most famous rendition occurs in the 1495 play *Everyman* (author unknown). Hombre, the central figure in *Las cortes de la muerte*, is modeled after precisely such an everyman character. The lessons he learns over the course of the *auto* should, by virtue of its allegorical content, apply to everyone.

³ The BYU Spanish Golden Age theater group produced the following *comedias*: *La dama duende* (2002), *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* (2003), *El muerto disimulado* (2004), *El caballero de Olmedo* (2005), and *El Narciso en su opinión* (2006). In 2007, the group performed Sor Marcela de San Félix’s *La muerte del apetito* in conjunction with Moreto’s *El retrato vivo*. The 2002 production of *La dama duende* additionally included a performance of the *loa* from Calderón’s *El divino Orfeo*. The group also put on Cervantes’s *El retablo de las maravillas* as a supplement to the 2003 production of *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*. Throughout the project, key scenes were performed from famous works from Tirso de Molina, María de Zayas, Lope de Vega, and Calderón de la Barca during educational outreach visits. Critically important to this study, the group adapted Lope de Vega’s *Las cortes de la muerte* in 2005 (the 400-year anniversary of the publication of the first volume of the *Quijote*).

service to the greater community, the performance of a Golden Age play can become a transformative event in the lives of the students and the department. (198)

[The students] become deeply familiar with a single play and its relationship to *Comedia* conventions and early modern theatrical traditions. They are able to write and speak articulately about the play, its context, and performance choices. They spread knowledge about and appreciation for Spanish culture far beyond the university classroom and into the community. Most importantly, they leave the experience more likely to have a life-long interest in learning about Spanish literature and culture. (Hegstrom and Pratt, 176)

The Golden Age Theater Project allowed the students and their professors to reimagine the learning environment as a shared space where transformative educational opportunities could occur through service, instruction, and mentorship.

As a participant and direct beneficiary of this program, I can confirm that the BYU Golden Age Theater Project met its learning objectives for students. I performed as a student actor in four of BYU's productions: as Tello in *El caballero de Olmedo*, as Don Quijote/Hombre in *Las cortes de la muerte*, as Tadeo in *El Narciso en su opinión*, and as the Valiente in *El retrato vivo*. Each performance required substantial preparation; not only were the actors expected to memorize lines, learn staging, and travel to performances, but we were also enrolled as students in a class and expected to work accordingly. This work required that we tailor costumes, paint sets, apply for grants, write articles, and create graphic novel-style illustrated summaries to be included in guides provided to the audience for each play. One of the project's most significant outcomes took the form of community outreach when scenes were performed in schools, libraries, and detention centers in order to teach about Golden Age theater as a national pastime. In short, we had curricular and extracurricular responsibilities that, left unfulfilled, would have hampered the project's success. As Jason Yancey, the director of three of the productions, explains: "it's an enormous project. It's not a project about putting on a play. It's about outreach, it's about publication, it's about teaching the class, and it's about teaching people how to be actors" (Vidler, 215).



Fig. 2. Cast photo of BYU's 2005 adaptation of *Las cortes de la muerte*.⁴

In 2005, the BYU project produced not one but two Golden Age plays: *El caballero de Olmedo* (winter semester) and *Las cortes de la muerte* (fall semester). Since the anniversary celebrations associated with 2005 represented such a momentous historical occasion for Golden Age scholars, the group decided to perform the very *auto* that is named in the second volume of the *Quijote*. BYU's rendition of *Las cortes de la muerte* deliberately undertook a certain amount of metafictional creativity by recreating Hombre as Don Quijote himself, inserting the knight errant into the play. In a sense, they understood Sancho's observation that something was missing as a creative invitation: "...entre todos los que allí están, aunque parecen reyes, príncipes y emperadores, no hay ningún caballero andante" (II 11, 629).⁵ By layering the role of Don Quijote on top of the role of Hombre, the adaptation shifted the hermeneutic timbre of the play itself, paralleling mankind's redemption from sin with Don Quijote's emergence from madness.

A Knight Errant in *Las cortes de la muerte*

Traditionally, studies of *Las cortes de la muerte* attempt to determine to which version of the play Cervantes alluded in chapter eleven of Part Two of the *Quijote*. Two plays titled *Las cortes de la muerte* exist: the first, by Miguel de Carvajal and Luis Hurtado de Toledo, was published in 1557; the second, attributed to Lope de Vega, was published much later (1892) by Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo in volume VII of Lope's *Obras* (Mata Induráin, 220). While some earlier critics vouch for Carvajal and Hurtado's play, ample evidence exists – from the number of characters in the work to Lope's contemporaneity with the author of the *Quijote* – to suggest that Cervantes's metafictional reference deals with the version attributed to the "monstruo de naturaleza."⁶ For the purposes of BYU's rendition of the *auto*, we decided to use the script associated with Lope, with a few embellishments.

The combination of elements from both texts created a rich doubling of metaphorical meanings when the re-created *auto* found its way to the stage. The decision to cast Don Quijote himself in the role of Hombre created a secondary layer of meaning for both of the characters. On the one hand, rather than solely represent the penitent sinner, Hombre became a wandering knight errant with a famous history of chivalric mishaps and misunderstandings. On the other hand, Don Quijote found himself playing an everyman role with an overtly religious message:

⁴ All photographs from *Las cortes de la muerte* are courtesy of Brigham Young University's Golden Age Theater Project.

⁵ While Sancho intends to dissuade Don Quijote from engaging in combat with the group of performers (due to the fact that it is dishonorable for a knight errant to fight anyone who does not share the same occupation), BYU's production of *Las cortes de la muerte* acts on Sancho's observation by inserting Don Quijote into the play.

⁶ Cervantes designates Lope as the "monstruo de naturaleza" in the prologue of his *Entremeses*: "dejé la pluma y las comedias, y entró luego el monstruo de naturaleza, el gran Lope de Vega" (93). For a thorough (albeit slightly dated) summary of criticism involving *Las cortes de la muerte*, see Madés's 1968 article, "El auto 'Las cortes de la muerte' mencionado en el 'Quijote.'" A neglected (and even older) 1925 study by Dale insists that Lope never even wrote *Las cortes de la muerte*, but that the work attributed to him is a dramatic bricolage of scenes from "*autos, loas*, and one *entremés*, composed by Tárrega, Rojas, Tirso de Molina, Moreto, Benavente, Lope de Vega and others" (281). Critics have yet to reach a consensus regarding the play's authorship, but recent scholarship (Iffland [2012], Induráin [2016]) suppose Cervantes intended the play attributed to Lope. "[S]egún el consenso actual de estudiosos," writes Iffland, the *auto* Cervantes refers to "es de Lope" (607). According to Induráin, "tras ser editado por Menéndez Pelayo formando parte del corpus dramático del Fénix, la crítica lo viene considerando obra suya" (221).

ÁNGEL. Esta parábola enseña
 lo que el Hombre debe a Dios;
 y que es locura que pierda
 gloria eterna, por no hacer
 por Él cosas tan pequeñas,
 pues haciéndolas tendrá
 el Cielo, donde le espera
 premio, que es el mismo Dios
 con su bendición eterna. (vv. 1096-1104)

According to Ángel, “es locura que pierda / gloria eterna.” The statement contains a double meaning – the first referring back to *Locura*, a character in the *auto* who casts all mortals, regardless of their status or health, as “locos,” but also with a secondary interpretation whereby the passage can also be interpreted literally – meaning that anyone afflicted with madness will consequently lose eternal glory (v. 292). In effect, *Las cortes de la muerte* challenges its audience to resist “locura” by doing the “cosas tan pequeñas” – i.e., partake of the eucharist and confess one’s sins – in order to receive “su bendición eterna.” By linking Don Quijote with Hombre, this staging of the play also requires that we confront *Locura* personified and attempt to secure salvation by overcoming literal madness.

In one of the novel’s most famous scenes, Sancho has good reason to question his master’s sanity. Conflating the massive sails of windmills with the arms of giants, Don Quijote spurs Rocinante onward:

“¿Qué gigantes?” dijo Sancho Panza.

“Aquellos que allí ves,” respondió su amo, “de los brazos largos, que los suelen tener algunos de casi dos leguas.”

“Mire vuestra merced,” respondió Sancho, “que aquellos que allí se parecen no son gigantes, sino molinos de viento, y lo que en ellos parecen brazos son las aspas, que, volteadas del viento, hacen andar la piedra del molino.”

“Bien parece,” respondió don Quijote, “que no estás cursado en esto de las aventuras: ellos son gigantes; y si tienes miedo quítate de ahí, y ponte en oración en el espacio que yo voy a entrar con ellos en fiera y desigual batalla.”

Y, diciendo esto, dio de espuelas a su caballo Rocinante, sin atender a las voces que su escudero Sancho le daba, advirtiéndole que sin duda alguna eran molinos de viento, y no gigantes, aquellos que iba a acometer. (I.8, 75)

Don Quijote’s stubborn persistence to battle the “gigantes” despite Sancho’s desperate warning that his master is mistaken reinforces the patent absurdity of the iconic scene and sets the prototype for future adventures. As Erich Auerbach writes:

[d]on Quijote [...] encounter[s] everyday phenomena, spontaneously s[ees] and transform[s] them in terms of the romances of chivalry, while Sancho [is] generally in doubt and often trie[s] to contradict and prevent his master’s absurdities. [...] As soon as his madness, that is, the *idée fixe* of knight-errantry, takes hold of him, he acts unwisely. (339, 347)

These elusive “gigantes” are symbolic (and symptomatic) of Don Quijote’s madness. Curiously, Locura also invokes the personages of “gigantes” in *Las cortes de la muerte*.

When Locura summons “gigantes” in order to assimilate the festivities associated with Corpus Christi, these colossal figures create an intertextual bridge that facilitates Don Quijote’s entrance into the cast of the *auto*.⁷

LOCURA. [...] ¡oh señores! Que si os place,
haré una fiesta que en el Corpus se hace.
Yo la he de hacer, usando de mis chanzas,
los carros, los gigantes y las danzas. [...]

Vaya de carros y de representantes,
mientras otro apercibe los gigantes. (vv. 747-50, 753-54)

The scene becomes almost self-aware as Locura, the very condition that distorts Don Quijote’s perception of reality, calls for “gigantes,” the same misconception that he erroneously applies to windmills. In BYU’s production, we highlighted this symmetry through performance choices in blocking and action accompanying dialogue delivery, particularly when Locura finally witnesses the arrival of the “gigantes:”

LOCURA. Mas ¿qué ruido es éste? ¡Ah, son los gigantes!
Vedlos, que ya a la puerta los arriman,
y quieren los que sustentan la maraña
dar a alguna taberna un ¡cierra España! [...]

Desarrimen los gigantes
y con tiento cárguenlos,
porque traen los que los cargan
diferente cargazón. (vv. 813-16, 823-26)

Upon hearing Locura utter “¡Ah, son los gigantes!” I leaped from the stage – no small feat when foisting a seven-foot lance – and bellowed, “¡LOS GIGANTES!,” while searching desperately to combat the figments of Locura’s (and my character’s) imagination. As I scrutinized the darkness of the theater, I would swing the lance, tipped with a heavy six-inch iron spike, mere inches above the heads of the spectators, while cursing the *sabio Frestón* under my breath.

⁷ *Gigantes* and *cabezudos* are common figures created specifically for religious feast days to be included in ceremonial *procesiones*. See footnote 11 of Iffland’s “Don Quijote ante *Las Cortes de la Muerte*” for more information (612).

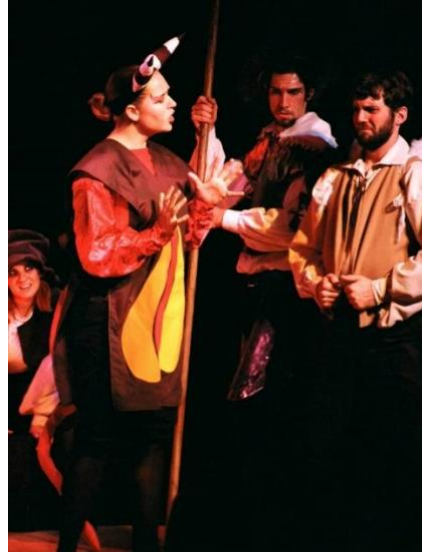


Fig. 3. Diablo (played by Anna-Lisa Halling) attempts to persuade Ángel/Sancho (Chris Nielsen) while Hombre/Don Quijote (Jared White) listens attentively.

As a second doubling of character crossover between our two source texts, BYU's Golden Age theater project inserted Sancho Panza into the role of Ángel. Given that Ángel accompanies Hombre throughout his trial, frequently recognizing and explaining his wayward choices, Sancho's faithful companionship to Don Quijote made him the logical partner for our Don Quijote-turned-Hombre. In their first interaction, Ángel advises Hombre to repent and express contrition:

HOMBRE. ¡Oh, qué arrepentido vengo!
 ÁNGEL. Pues, Hombre, si fuiste loco,
 no seas necio; como un necio
 es terrible de sufrir.
 HOMBRE. Bien dices, del mal lo menos.
 Ya la locura del mundo
 me ha cansado y la aborrezco,
 porque me entregó al olvido,
 y no hay peligro más cierto
 que el olvidarse de Dios. (vv. 140-49)

In the original *auto*, Ángel delivers instruction to an everyman character who awaits his final judgment. By replacing this character with Don Quijote, Ángel's entreaty "si fuiste loco, / no seas necio" and Hombre's response, "[y]a la locura del mundo / me ha cansado y la aborrezco," insinuate that Hombre, in the guise of Don Quijote, now finds himself on the path towards sanity and redemption. Grown tired of "locura," an actual character he confronts several times over the course of *Las cortes de la muerte*, he seeks to reconnect with divinity.

While BYU's adaptation remained faithful to the other characters in the *auto*, their interactions with Hombre/Don Quijote create unique intertextual exchanges between the play and the novel, including amorous confusion and pastoral imagery. Consider, for example, Cupido's exposition on love:

CUPIDO. [e]s un desvanecimiento
de la dulce fantasía,
de la esperanza porfía
y engaño del sufrimiento (vv. 247-50)



Fig. 4. Ángel/Sancho and Hombre/Don Quijote stare into the distance while Cupido (played by Chris Lewis) grins.

The “desvanecimiento / de la dulce fantasía” that Cupido describes mirrors the disillusionment the knight errant experiences after meeting the peasant woman that Sancho identifies as ‘Dulcinea:’

“...el maligno encantador me persigue y ha puesto nubes y cataratas en mis ojos, y para sólo ellos no para otros ha mudado y transformado [s]u sin igual hermosura y rostro en el de una labradora pobre. [...] Sancho, que no se contentaron estos traidores de haber vuelto y transformado a mi Dulcinea, sino que la transformaron y volvieron en una figura tan baja y tan fea como la de aquella aldeana. [...] Yo lo creo, amigo,” replicó don Quijote, “porque ninguna cosa puso la naturaleza en Dulcinea que no fuese perfecta y bien acabada.” (II.10, 621-22)

The cognitive dissonance that affects Don Quijote shifts his primary motivation from restoring the lost values of chivalry into reversing the curse that afflicts his beloved Dulcinea. As Auerbach explains: “Dulcinea is under an enchantment [...] so intolerable that henceforth all his thoughts are concentrated upon one goal: to save her and break the [spell]” (339).

Like Cupido’s entreaty on love, dual imagery between the play and the novel occurs when Niño Dios converses with Hombre:

(Ábrese ahora una apariencia y se ve al Niño Dios, vestido de pastorcico, en un trono en manera de juicio, y al lado derecho los corderos blancos, y al otro los cabritos negros.)

NIÑO. Corderos blancos y puros,
los de mi mano derecha,
los benditos de mi Padre,

venid a la gloria eterna. [...]
 Apartad de mí, malditos,
 los de mi mano siniestra,
 al fuego eterno, a las llamas. (vv. 1027-30, 1043-45)

Through Niño Dios, the *auto* depicts the common Christian motif that separates the saved “corderos” from the damned “cabritos” and invites the righteous to enjoy “gloria eterna.”⁸ Sheep and goats, common fodder for the pastoral genre, make frequent appearances in the *Quijote*. As B.W. Ife observes,

[i]t should not surprise us to find pastoral themes and incidents recurring in *Don Quijote*. We know that Cervantes was a great admirer of the genre, and even if he had not been, his fascination, even obsession, with the interplay of genres would have led him to include elements of classical, renaissance, and home-grown Spanish pastoral in what is, after all, the classic example of a book about books. (“Some Uses”)

After recounting his mission to restore chivalry to a fallen world (to a group of goatherds of all people), the knight errant’s next series of forays in the novel include attending the funeral of the heartbroken shepherd, Grisóstomo, hearing the moving discourse of the shepherdess Marcela (the object of the deceased shepherd’s affection), and attacking two flocks of sheep that he mistakes for opposing armies. From goatherds to shepherd and shepherdess, Don Quijote regularly mingles with pastoral figures, yet, in a manic episode, attacks defenseless flocks of sheep: “se entró por medio del escuadrón de las ovejas y comenzó de alanceallas con tanto coraje y denuedo como si de veras alanceara a sus mortales enemigos” (I.18, 161). This episode of “strange madness,” as Nabokov describes it, echoes Niño Dios’s words of caution for Hombre in *Las cortes de la muerte* (126).

NIÑO. Vela, vela pecador,
 mira que el mundo te engaña,
 que anda el lobo en la campaña,
 huye y teme su rigor. (vv. 1062-65)

Don Quijote’s chivalric world of illusions “[l]e engaña,” causing him to massacre several sheep, acting as a “lobo en la campaña,” and “los[es] most of his teeth when stoned by some shepherds” (Nabokov 54). Once again, madness distorts his perception of reality.

In the closing scenes of the play, Don Quijote, playing the part of Hombre, emerges from his folly:

HOMBRE. Ahora conozco mi engaño
 y os suplico arrepentido
 me oigáis, Señor, condolido
 de mi culpa y grave daño. (vv. 1073-76)

⁸ In the New Testament, Christ tells the parable of the sheep and the goats, clearly dividing the righteous from the wicked. See Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 45-46.

Clearly, a religious undertone permeates *Las cortes de la muerte*. This final scene can be read as framed in the original *auto* – the everyman character recognizes his misdeeds and pleads for divine forgiveness – or, as BYU’s adaptation suggests, a moment of lucidity for Don Quijote, a point of emergence from his madness.

In Conclusion

While Don Quijote’s encounter with Angulo el Malo’s roving acting troupe is only one of many instances of theatricality in the *Quijote* itself, there is no indication that the original cast of characters calls for a wandering knight errant; in fact, Sancho’s observation informs us of the absence of such a figure (II.11, 629). Since the play is not performed during the novel, Don Quijote never has a chance to forcefully insert himself into the production (as he does during Maese Pedro’s puppet show [II.26]). BYU’s 2005 adaptation of the *auto* reverses the encounter in the novel by re-framing the play itself as the central text. Don Quijote and Sancho stumble into the production and adopt the roles of Hombre and Ángel, respectively. This unique combination brokers new intertextual possibilities that enhance the dramatic experience: as an everyman knight errant, Don Quijote’s literary identity folds into the religious character of Hombre; Sancho’s faithful companionship translates into Ángel’s constant camaraderie; and the *auto*’s glancing references to giants, disenchantments, and shepherds resonate with common themes explored throughout the *Quijote*.

In the minds of readers across time and space, it is Don Quijote’s madness that drives him to discover chivalric equivalents in mundane circumstances – an inn becomes a castle, wineskins convert into giants, an underground grotto shifts to a magical cave. These fabulous transformations shape the quixotic persona that romanticists find so inspiring, imposing imagination and creativity onto an otherwise bland existence. Nevertheless, there remains the element of uncertainty, the moments in which Don Quijote defies the reader’s expectation by finding, for example, that a group of fantastically costumed actors might just be a tired group on their way between engagements. BYU’s adaptation of *Las cortes de la muerte* attempted to harness this duality, revitalizing Hombre as an everyman knight errant. This created a metafictional reduplication of the soul in search of redemption, an interdependent relationship between two texts and two characters that clarifies the meanings of both. Indeed, in the *auto*, “alguna grande aventura se [l]e ofrecía” (II.11, 627).

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