Don Quixote's Troubles (Editorial Introduction)

SAMARA ANNE CAHILL

*S*tudies in Religion and the Enlightenment 3.1 is a special issue prompted and made possible by *The Quixotic Eighteenth Century*, the 2023 conference of the South Central Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (SCSECS). Hosted in Bryan-College Station, Texas, February 24-25, 2023, and supported by the Language, Culture & Gender Studies program at Texas Woman's University, the conference was the first SCSECS meeting to be held since the pandemic erupted. The recovery pains were apparent but not insurmountable: SCSECS hadn't met since the glorious 2020 conference in St. Augustine, Florida, and while the 2023 conference was a smaller-than-usual affair, it nonetheless captured the trademark SCSECS sociability and magic. While severe weather deprived us of the company of central members of the SCSECS family traveling from out of state, the gathering brought together participants from all over the US and featured speakers from across the professional timeline, from undergraduates to graduate students to independent scholars, faculty, and retired scholars.

Dr. Eduardo Urbina—founder of the [Cervantes Project](#) at Texas A&M University and Plenary Speaker for *The Quixotic Eighteenth Century*—delighted us with a rollicking deep dive into eighteenth-century English editions of *Don Quixote*. He and Dr. Beth Kilmarx, of Texas A&M's Cushing Memorial Library, also organized an accompanying exhibit of eighteenth-century editions lovingly identified, purchased (many of them online in the early days of the internet), and catalogued by Dr. Urbina and his team. The exhibit showcased the tremendous, multi-decade labor of scholarly love that is the irreplaceable Cervantes Project. It was also gratifying to see how traditional scholarly methods intersected with the nascent digital humanities approaches used by Dr. Urbina even at the earliest stages of the Cervantes Project. Indeed, digital humanities became somewhat of an unofficial touchstone for the conference: Texas A&M's well-regarded Center of Digital Humanities Research merges the best of scholarship between the Humanities and the university's nationally recognized College of Engineering. And Dr. Lauren Leibe presented a very popular "Digital Humanities Workshop" on the closing day of the conference.

I am so grateful for the generous support of Dr. Beth Kilmarx and all of the staff at the Cushing who went above and beyond to make our group feel welcome and engaged and to ensure that everything ran smoothly. Due to fitful weather and bad traffic (Friday evening on a college campus!), the walk from the bus stop to the Cushing entrance was quite daunting for some of us, but Dr. Kilmarx not only transported attendees from the bus to the Cushing entrance in her own car, but also made a last-minute arrangement for a golf cart (and driver) to transport attendees harried by the weather. It was instances like Dr. Kilmarx's spontaneous personal generosity that truly aligned the conference with its namesake: a figure of creativity and kindness in the midst of crisis.

The conference experienced something of a quixotic journey from its announcement in 2020 through the pandemic and two postponements to 2023. I appreciate the patience and graciousness of the contributors and all of our editorial staff, including our fabulous website team in Singapore—Er Bee Eng and Ernawatie Binte Erawan—the Brigham Young University copy editing team, and our wonderful founding editor, Dr. Brett McInelly, who shared some exciting news for this issue! As readers and members of the eighteenth-century studies community will remember, several journals and many individual authors and editors

were devastated by the collapse of AMS Press several years ago. Our parent publication, *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment* (RAE), was one of the journals left stranded without a publisher. Nanyang Technological University (NTU) generously stepped in to publish the journal under its new title, *Studies in Religion and the Enlightenment*, but the editorial team was unable to provide access to Volumes 1-5 of *RAE*.

That access is now available! Dr. McInelly and his amazing team at Brigham Young University have scanned all of the back issues of *RAE*, uploaded them online, and allowed *SRE* to link to the *RAE* archive on our website. We are delighted to be one of the portals by which the widest possible audience can access one of the invaluable journals that was impacted by the AMS collapse. We thank Brigham Young University, Dr. McInelly and his team, and Nanyang Technological University for enabling a branch of eighteenth-century studies to survive its night of troubles.

In another update, SCSECS 2024, "The Book and the City" will be hosted by John Scanlan and held in Portland, Oregon (March 1-2, 2024) at the Heathman Hotel. Readers interested in romance will notice a thematic connection between the 2023 conference on *Don Quixote*, perhaps the most famous critique (or not?) of the chivalric romance, and the 2024 conference held at the distinguished Heathman Hotel—a pivotal location in one of the most (in)famous romances in recent memory: the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. The romance genre—its pleasures and its status as catnip for critics—seems indeed to have been created to cause trouble, *Don Quixote* perhaps even more so.

How is it possible to discuss what a text like *Don Quixote* is other than to describe what it does? *Don Quixote* crosses generic boundaries, celebrates an older literary tradition (chivalric romances) that it simultaneously denounces as outmoded, and upholds an ostensibly "bad" reader as the best reader—someone who cares as much, if not more, about literature as "real" life, as much about the power of story as about the power of lived experience. But how do we understand lived experience if not through the meaning-making power of story? *Don Quixote*, like the denigrated genre of the romance, challenges the very boundaries that we use to "think critically."

This irresolvable tension, the simultaneous love and rejection of what one voluntarily occupies one's time with (reading is the ultimate escape into a different "reality"), has echoed through the centuries since *Don Quixote*'s publication. From Margaret Cavendish's "Blazing World" of the imagination to Jane Austen's sophisticated defense-critique of the gothic (and of teenage readers everywhere) in *Northanger Abbey*, from Charlotte Lennox's dark-quirky vision of female self-alienation in marriage in *The Female Quixote* and Richard Graves's *The Spiritual Quixote* all the way down to Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and other works of contemporary metafiction, *Don Quixote*'s frail, benighted knight has cast a long shadow over all modern prose fiction.

Recent scholarship has studied Don Quixote as a figure not only for the modern age but also for the vagaries of the present day. Aaron Hanlon has seen in the Quixote a figure of exceptionalism, even political exceptionalism; Amelia Dale has argued that quixotism is a gendered and psychological impression enabled by print culture; and Scott Black has defended the power of the romance genre by linking it to Quixotism and the recursive reading that suspends and therefore disrupts the present moment. Indeed, *Don Quixote* has always troubled theories of the novel, particularly those dependent on an Anglocentric focus on the eighteenth-century "rise" of the novel for middle-class Protestant audiences. It is past time to disrupt that canon, for if *Don Quixote*—a product neither of English culture, nor the eighteenth century, nor the Protestant work ethic—can be a novel, what even is the novel? How useful are the generic boundaries we use to theorize it? Margaret Doody has raised these issues not only in *The True Story of the Novel* (1996) but also in her brilliantly insightful introduction to the Oxford edition of *The Female Quixote*. More recently, works by Nicole

Horejsi (*Novel Cleopatras*, 2019) and Bethany Williamson (*Orienting Virtue*, 2022) have, from very different angles, used the figure of the female Quixote to challenge both the global and the canonical place of the eighteenth-century English novel. But at the center of these invaluable studies is the place of fantasy in modern literature: romance is traditionally excluded from "serious" fiction—because it is for women, or because it is about feelings, or pleasure, or sex, or private life rather than the serious business of politics, statecraft, and History. But don't politics, nationalism, and history all rely on stories, even, sometimes, outright fantasy? Hasn't romance—hasn't Don Quixote—been the great scapegoat of modern literary history: foolish and believing; wandering, troubled, and troubling?

All six of the articles in our special issue are devoted to some aspect of this troubling aspect of *Don Quixote*—its invitation for us to see the world through an unfamiliar lens. **Anaclara Castro-Santana** leverages the gendering of the quixote figure in the "long" eighteenth century. While Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) is the most famous instance of a women author writing about women's experiences as those of a Quixote, Castro-Santana takes a longer view of the gendered quixotic tradition to explore Aphra Behn's engagement of "Cervantic ingredients" in *The Emperor of the Moon* (1687). **Charles Tita** reads Ignatius Sancho's *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African* (1782) as a rhetoric that resists the dismissal of Black British genius, "artistic imagination," and critical political awareness by his white contemporaries and, ultimately, even his editors. **Serena Foster** analyzes quixotic villains and the strategy of veiling in gothic literature. Foster's analysis raises the possibility that quixotism may be monstrous—that the fantasies of those with power can be very dangerous for everyone else. **Jonahs Kneitly** focuses on the gendered exceptionalism of the Quixote figure in *The Female American* (1767) while also exploring the liminality and limits of religious performance. **Susan Spencer** explores Quixotic resonances not in one but two "long" eighteenth-century East Asian classics: the Korean novel *Kuunmong* by Kim Man-jung and the Vietnamese poem *Truyện Kiều* by Nguyễn Du. Spencer, like Foster and Kneitly, focuses on female Quixotes and shows how male authors in non-Western contexts also used female characters to wrestle with historical periods of crisis. Finally, **K. A. Kale** takes up the Quixotic gauntlet of defending the much-maligned "formula" fiction genres of the romance and the whodunit.

Kale uses the test case of the McGuffin plot device to analyze the structural similarities of novels by Charlotte Smith and Wilkie Collins. Kale explores how the narrative closures so demanded by formula fiction might not have developed as they did. This line of inquiry challenges some of the most basic and dearly held assumptions about genre fiction, thereby troubling the formula-fiction-is-too-pleasurable-to-be-taken-seriously assurances of some criticism. After all, formula, like genre, informs meaning while enabling variety. To dismiss formula fiction outright is like Glanville dismissing the romance genre before finishing a single book. Who does it serve to believe that marrying Glanville is Arabella's happy ending in *The Female Quixote*? Is *The Female Quixote* a happily-ever-after story? Or something else?

Taken together, these articles reaffirm the vibrancy of the Quixotic tradition while troubling comfortable notions of what realism, the novel, and the modern imagination are and are supposed to do. After a year of global upheaval and trauma, it remains for the reader to decide whether Don Quixote is a figure of much-needed escapism from a brutal world, or a fellow-traveler in that same world. Perhaps neither is an impossible dream.

*

This issue is dedicated to the fellow travelers that SCSECS has lost since 2020: Howard Weinbrot, Colby Kullman, and John Burke—whose genial spirit will always be associated with the Miracle of Malacca journey the SCSECS board shared … once upon a time.