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Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter

Ronald Paulson

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Seldom has a single book, much less a translation, so deeply affected English literature as the translation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in 1612. The comic novel inspired drawings, plays, sermons, and other translations, making the name of the Knight of la Mancha as familiar as any folk character in English lore.

In this comprehensive study of the reception and conversion of *Don Quixote* in England, Ronald Paulson highlights the qualities of the novel that most attracted English imitators. The English Don Quixote was not the same knight who meandered through Spain, or found a place in other translations throughout Europe. The English Don Quixote found employment in all sorts of specifically English ways, not excluding the political uses to which a Spanish fool could be turned.

According to Paulson, a major impact of the novel and its hero was their stimulation of discussion about comedy itself, what he calls the "aesthetics of laughter." When Don Quixote reached England he did so at the time of the rise of empiricism, and adherents of both sides of the empiricist debate found arguments and evidence in the behavior and image of the noble knight. Four powerful disputes battered around his grey head: the proximity of madness and imagination; the definition of the beautiful; the cruelty of ridicule and its laughter; and the role of reason in the face of madness. Paulson's engaging account leads to a significant reassessment of current assumptions about eighteenth-century literature and art.

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