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### **Literary Metafiction in Don Quixote**

One of the biggest questions in the history of literature is whether Cervantes knew how much his acclaimed novel *Don Quixote* would represent not only for the people of his time, but for all the generations to come. *Don Quixote* is unique, not only because it includes every type of literature before and after its time, but also because of the use of metafiction, literature that talks about literature. Metafiction was a new concept in Cervantes's time (there was not even a name for it) and *Don Quixote* shows its brilliance by using it.

Metafiction is defined in the dictionary as "fiction about the nature of literature." It usually deals with this nature paradoxically, judging the techniques and conventions used in the fiction and judging the role of the author (Microsoft Works Dictionary). *Don Quixote Part 1* has a lot of moments like this. Since Cervantes was mocking the romance of chivalry, it was useful to critique this type of novel directly through his novel. A good and simple example to provide an understanding of the concept of metafiction is to see scene 1: 6, when the priest and the barber go through Don Quixote's library. During that chapter, both men discuss chivalric literature as a genre and how it deteriorates people's minds. They mention many books, commenting that some are worth keeping (like *Amadis de Gauda*, which is the center of every chivalric novel). This is

the simplest example of metafiction: the characters in *Don Quixote*, the novel mocking chivalry, discuss the bad influence of the romances of chivalry. If the objective of Cervantes was to tell the reader how pernicious this genre is, he could not have found a better way. People would be unwilling to listen to the author if he said that chivalric novels are mind-rotting. The reader is more likely to consider this suggestion if it seems a part of the story and if the characters who are commenting on it are fictional.

A similar example occurs later in the novel. In 1:32, the innkeeper, his wife, his daughter and the maid are discussing chivalric novels as a genre with the companions of Don Quixote. The former say that they are real stories that amuse people, while the latter fervently argue that chivalric novels are just fictional stories that are dangerous to the population. While the point of this discussion may be the distinction between reality and fiction, the scene as a whole is also a metafictional one. Within the chivalric novel of *Don Quixote* lies the discussion by the characters of the veracity of the chivalric novel. Once again, Cervantes' reason for taking this route was probably to air his own opinion without sounding imposing. The scene shows how chivalric novels convince people in the lower class to believe that they are real while the more educated sector seems to know they are just meant to entertain. In the end, that is the reason why chivalric novels are pernicious: people believe them to be real, and they are not at all educational.

A more complex example of literary metafiction in *Don Quixote* is the prologue, or what we should maybe call the metaprologue. In it, "Cervantes" (since he is not really the same author) and his best friend discuss how to write a prologue. The action helps the novel in two ways: the author's opinion seems less imposing since he is stating the qualities of the novel, which would make him sound arrogant and thus risk annoying the reader, and also it

foreshadows the unique type of novel that it is to come. This metapologue, some could say, is one of the most ingenious scenes in the first part of *Don Quixote*.

Finally, as a last example we have the story of *The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious*. In addition to everything that this story symbolizes, this interpolated story (as they have become known) is one of the most subtle metafictional moments in the novel as the reader does not realize right away what the story represents within the novel as a whole. The priest is reading a novel *inside* the novel, and he judges it afterwards. This is also an example of metafiction, the reading of a fiction within the fiction. Metafiction does not necessarily mean that fiction has to be directly criticized inside the novel. While reading *The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious*, Cervantes is also trying to transmit a message, but maybe not as directly as when the priest and the barber go through Don Quixote's library. In this particular tale, the message seems to point to the discussion about fiction versus reality. After the priest finishes reading the story, he says that the main couple should not have been married to make it more believable although the story is completely plausible. Later, the captive tells his story, which is very fantastic to a certain extent, and the people in the inn applaud the magnificence of the story as if it were an incredibly realistic tale. So it is interesting how this metafictional scene juxtaposes fiction and reality, and it makes you wonder how related they are and if, in fact, they are not as contradictory as they might seem at first sight.

*Don Quixote* is a novel about metafiction, and we can find such examples throughout the first part. But the point is clear: Cervantes used literary metafiction not only as a tool to mock the literature of his time, but also to send more subtle messages to the readers. Sometimes these messages are easy to grasp (like the criticism of the chivalric novel) and sometimes they are not

(like *The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious*). Nevertheless, it is this ambiguity that makes *Don Quixote* one of the best novels ever written.