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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Quixotic Rewriting in
William Goldman's *The Princess
Bride* (1973)

Alumna: Natalia Gutiérrez Mendoza

Tutor: Pedro Javier Pardo García

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Tutor: Pedro Javier Pardo García

Signature:

Abstract

In *The Princess Bride* (1973), William Goldman explores the conflicting duality of life and literature, mocking fairy-tales conventions, but at the same time reaffirming the importance of “high adventure” and “true love,” values that are unattainable in real life. Articulating a critique on both literature and reality, this novel can be regarded as a reconstruction of the ideas presented in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. This paper aims to analyse the application of the quixotic formula to the novel, in which the act of re-writing can be understood as a quixotic attempt to recover the romance within literary space. In the first place, I will introduce the notions of quixotic and Cervantine reproduction. In the second place, I will analyse the ways in which the quixotism of Cervantes’ hero and his quest are transferred to the narrator of the work and to his editorial project in Goldman’s novel. Finally, the ambivalent dialogical implications of this quixotic stance will be examined, namely the parody of a genre, but also the satire of the debased nature of the world, which identifies Goldman as an heir of the Cervantine tradition.

Keywords: The Princess Bride, William Goldman, Don Quixote, Miguel de Cervantes, Quixotism

Resumen

En *La Princesa Prometida* (1973), William Goldman explora la dualidad entre vida y literatura, parodiando las convenciones propias de los cuentos de hadas, pero a su vez reafirmando el valor de las nociones de “gran aventura” y “amor verdadero,” inalcanzables en la realidad. Al articular una crítica tanto de la literatura como de la realidad, la novela puede ser vista como una reconstrucción de las ideas presentadas en el *Don Quijote* de Cervantes. Este ensayo pretende analizar la aplicación del patrón quijotesco en esta obra, en la que el acto de reescritura puede ser entendido como un intento de recobrar lo romántico en el espacio literario. En primer lugar, presentaré las nociones de reproducción tanto quijotesca como cervantina. En segundo lugar, profundizaré en la forma en que el quijotismo del héroe de Cervantes y su misión son transferidos al narrador y su proyecto editorial en la novela de Goldman. Finalmente, se examinarán las implicaciones ambivalentes de esta actuación quijotesca, en virtud de la cual se lleva a cabo una parodia del género literario, pero también una crítica de la degradada condición del mundo, lo que identifica a Goldman como heredero de la tradición Cervantina.

Palabras clave: La Princesa Prometida, William Goldman, Don Quijote, Miguel de Cervantes, Quijotismo

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| I. Introduction | 1 |
| II. Quixotic Narration | 3 |
| III. Cervantine Novel | 7 |
| IV. Conclusion..... | 10 |
| Works Cited | 12 |

I. Introduction

The impact of Miguel de Cervantes' novel, *Don Quixote*, on the literary tradition is so wide that tracing the limits and the forms of its imitation would be an extensive and demanding task. The model established by Cervantes' character has remained stable in the collective imagination, prompting the dominance of the myth over the novel *per se* in its reproduction over the centuries. As Pardo suggests when discussing the significance of such work in the literature developed in the 20th century, this supremacy of the myth is the result of "la reescritura del mismo tanto reproductiva (traducciones, comentarios) como productiva (adaptaciones, imitaciones) a lo largo de los tres siglos previos" ("Del mito a la novela" 195). Thereby, when analysing the influence of *Don Quixote*, it is necessary to bear in mind the relations between quixotic myth and Cervantine method. Going back to Pardo's words, the reception of the Cervantes's masterpiece is marked by "la presencia en ella de un tipo de (anti)heroísmo quijotesco y de (meta)ficción cervantina" ("Del mito a la novela" 197).

In a broad sense, a work of fiction can be considered *quixotic* insofar as it implies the adoption of an attitude akin to the hero of Cervantes' novel by a character. The main trait of the latter, described in the first chapter of the novel, was that of blending reality and literature, or, more precisely, the chivalric romances that he consumed assiduously. Through his innocent imitation of that literary pattern, the hero can be perceived as a "deluded fool or as an anti-hero" (Pardo, "Romantic and quixotic heroes" 118). Nevertheless, considering literary imitation as the only defining feature of the quixotic figure is insufficient. In his study, Anthony J. Close examined the interpretation of Cervantes's creature adopted by the German Romantics. According to his view, the Romantics read "*Don Quixote* as a work of art which directly anticipated the

preoccupations and values of Romanticism” (29). Thus, the interpretation of Don Quixote varied from a fool who carries on a ridiculous imitation of literature, to a flawed hero whose idealism is unfit for the world. This reading, which compares the character and his mission of enchanting reality to a tragic quest that leads to disillusionment, has contributed immensely to the construction of the *quixotic myth*, to the present-day meaning of *quixotic*: “naively idealistic; unrealistic, impracticable.” In any way, this double dimensionality of the quixotic figure, through which it can be perceived as a fool or tragic hero, gives way to other paradoxical dualities (such as the conflicting nature of literature and life, the clash between romantic imagination and a debased reality) that are part of the *dialogical principle* identified by Bakhtin and characterizing Cervantes’s novel. The ambivalent nature of the quixotic hero is closely connected to the dualities that are evident in the novel and are materialized through the contrast between reality and literature. In this dialogical conflict both literature and reality are criticized and commented on, therefore producing, respectively, parody and satire.

In *The Princess Bride* (1973), William Goldman introduces the reader to the story of a writer, a dramatized or represented William Goldman, and his attempt at abridging the novel that his father used to read to him when he was a child. The writer tells the reader, in the prologue of the book, how his father used to read S. Morgenstern's classic fairy tale, *The Princess Bride*, with the boring parts left out. After discovering that his memory of the novel does not correspond to the actual printed text, Goldman sets to rewrite the original work for contemporary readers and retells the story, constantly interrupting the flow of the narrative with droll, self-conscious comments on the text and his rewriting activity. Described by Jack Zipes as “a mock fairy tale that plays with traditional motifs and themes and challenges the reader to consider whether fairy tales have any value for us today” (24), the novel can be defined as a piece of fiction that

combines quixotic idealism and the Cervantine dialogical treatment of life and literature. The Hidalgo's quest of retrieving literary idealistic values in the real world is reimagined into the writer's mission of rewriting a work of fiction so as to endow it with "high adventure" and "true love" (Goldman 32). The result of his failure to recover those values is a parody of the genre as well as a satire of the world, so his purpose and method can be compared to those of Cervantes in *Don Quixote*.

II. Quixotic Narration

In *The Princess Bride*, the pivotal conflict between literature and life, embodied in the figure of don Quixote in Cervantes's work, is highly displaced and reformulated, since it does not concern a character performing deeds of chivalry, but an author rewriting a book. The reasons for the fictionalised Goldman to rewrite S. Morgenstern's novel are explained in the prelude narrated by him. Upset with his son for not liking *The Princess Bride*, the writer examines some of the book's pages until he discovers that "Morgenstern wasn't writing any children's book, he was writing a kind of satiric history of his country and the decline of the monarchy in Western civilization" (30). The novel that his father read to him had a deep impact on the narrator, who claims that it was "the single best thing that happened to him" (12), and that, to some extent, shaped his life and encouraged him to write his own adventure stories. Upon the discovery that the novel he was so fond of does not match his idealistic remembrance, the narrator decides to publish S. Morgenstern's classic book in abridged form with his own comments, which is the novel that the reader can access right after the prologue, therefore taking the role of the *editor*.

Right before diving into the novel, the narrator clarifies on many occasions that neither the "high adventure" nor "true love" that feature prominently in the subtitle of *The*

Princess Bride can be found in real life. As the fictionalised Goldman claims: “I thought my life would take that path. Prayed that it would. Obviously, it didn't” (32). Reality is presented as a corrupted and debased place where those romantic notions cannot bloom. Therefore, it makes sense for the narrator to direct his corrective action toward the enchantment of the only place where these values can still prevail: fiction.

The work can be defined as quixotic in its core. The quixotic figure can be perceived, according to the Romantic interpretation of the myth, as “the paradigm of disillusionment, of disenchantment” (Pardo, “Romantic and quixotic heroes” 119). Following this idea, don Quixote's myopic and romantic lens through which he sees reality makes him a tragic hero, for the idealistic values that he tries to impose on reality are unreachable out of the literary realm. His final realisation and failure at his mission are what ultimately define his fateful condition. Taking into account this wide interpretation of the myth, we can identify features of quixotism in the narrator, since he is the subject of the same quixotic quest, the restoration of romance in the real world, but as a writer instead of as a character.¹ This is the most substantial change concerning the pattern presented in the original, that is, the change from reality to literature. In *The Princess Bride*, the narrator is not trying to enchant reality with the conventions of literature, like don Quixote in Cervantes' novel. On the contrary, the editor aims to enchant literature again, guided by the conventions of the adventure novels he used to consume.

Qualifying the fictionalised Goldman as a pure reincarnation of the Quixote, however, might be difficult precisely due to his undeceived and pessimistic view of the world and life which ultimately causes his quixotic quest. Yet, considering what has been

¹ The consideration of the character of don Quixote as a writer is pertinent to the analysis. In some way, he lives his life to have it written, since he assumes that there is an enchanter or sage writing his deeds while he is performing them, as was the case with the heroes of chivalric fiction.

already explained, it is noticeable that the editor is still deluded in only one respect: literature. As Renieri describes:

The *editor* is a disillusioned man who shares, without a filter, his frustrations with life: marriage issues, issues connecting with his son, issues with his employer and ultimately, dissatisfaction with his life in general. Only when he reminisces about childhood and his father reading him this book does his language perk up and a sense of whimsy is offered (18).

The quixotism that can be attributed to the narrator and commentator of *The Princess Bride* is not related to an incorrect perception of reality, as in the case of the original Hidalgo, but to an incorrect and extremely idealised perception of literature based on his childhood experience. Consequently, his quixotic quest is that of bringing back the enchantment he once attributed to literature, specifically to S. Morgenstern's classic, upon the discovery of its truly debased and corrupt nature. In order to do so, he modifies the novel by following the conventions of fairy tales and his memory. Don Quixote's endeavour to live through the rules of romance in the real world is transferred into the narrator's editorial effort to create a text that matches his fantasies. Thus, the exaggerated reduction of the contents of several chapters, ("The Groom" [69] and "The Preparations" [89]); or the necessity to create new scenes, such as the reunion of the lovers —about which he comments that "I think it was unfair not to show the reunion. So, I wrote one of my own, what I felt Buttercup and Westley might have said" (195)— constitute attempts at bringing the text closer to the adventure genre, where he once placed the novel.

As well as in the case of the Quixote, the narrator's enchanting quest is doomed and ultimately fails at providing the reader with a novel close to the idealised version that he used to enjoy as a child. Even though the text presented is framed as a fairy-tale, reality is constantly slipping into the narrative, through the comments of the narrator and also the language of the characters or even the action, that is to say, both through the

extradiegetic and the intradiegetic.² The final comment of the novel reveals the failure of the editor in his restoring task. Goldman's pessimistic final remark calls into question whether Buttercup and Westley, the heroes of the story, will live happily ever after:

[...] they squabbled a lot, and Buttercup lost her looks eventually, and one day Fezzik lost a fight and some hot-shot kid whipped Inigo with a sword and Westley was never able to really sleep sound because of Humperdinck maybe being on the trail. I'm not trying to make this a downer, understand. I mean, I really do think that love is the best thing in the world, except for cough drops. But I also have to say, for the umpty-umpty time, that life isn't fair. It's just fairer than death, that's all. (Goldman, 461).

The disillusionment and disenchantment observable in this passage end up defining a story that should have restored the values of “high adventure” and “true love,” those that the editor set for to recover. His efforts prove to be fruitless, like those of Don Quixote in implanting the values extracted from chivalric romances into reality. Alonso and Frago, explain that the conflict of *The Princess Bride* is, as a matter of fact, “the enjoyment of idealistic adventure fiction, in contrast with the real tragic world” (6). In that sense, the narrator fails at this intent to recover romance.

In *The Princess Bride*, the quixotism that characterised Don Quixote and his imitation of romance conventions are transferred into the fictionalised William Goldman, the narrator of the novel, and hence to his rewriting exercise. An interpretation of the work in quixotic terms is possible as long as the turn taken by Goldman is considered: the aim of the Hidalgo of imposing literary conventions into the real world is transformed into a purely literary quest triggered by an idealistic and distant memory of a novel that changed the life of the narrator. In his use of quixotism. As we are about to see, this results

² Among some instances of the story that go against the grain of romance, fairy tales, and adventure narratives in general, it is worth mentioning, Miracle Max's use of magic not for a noble cause but for pure vengeance (Goldman 321), Inigo's relapse into alcohol after being defeated by the Man in Black (Goldman 269), or Wesley's lack of noble background and association with piracy (Goldman 210).

in a parody of the fairy-tale genre, as well as a satire of the world, and this brings Goldman very close to the tradition initiated by Cervantes.

III. Cervantine Novel

Just like *Don Quixote*, *The Princess Bride* by Goldman introduces a series of contrast or dualities that resonate with the dialogism of Cervantes' masterpiece. The undeceived attitude of the editor towards life, not literature, contrasts with the absolute romantic and hopeful discourses of the characters of the novel that he is rewriting, where even the impossible, namely coming from the dead, is possible (321). These conflicting worldviews are not the only contrast visible in the story, since the paradoxical goal of the novel is to carry on a critique of both literature and reality. As Zipes states "[*The Princess Bride*] parodies all the conventions of the fairy tale but not with the intention to dismiss the value of the genre. The fictitious author named Goldman recalls how his father's telling of Morgenstern's fairy tale introduced him to a new world of fantasy that cured him of his sickness, and that this imaginative story remained with him because it changed his life" (26). The narrator's quest, which, as has already been argued, can be defined as quixotic, provides the key for Goldman to carry out both a parody of the fairy-tale genre and a satire of the debased nature of the world.

In *Don Quixote*, it was the Hidalgo's imitation of the conventions of the chivalric romance, and their impracticability on reality, that exposed the absurdity of that literary genre. In *The Princess Bride*, there is no imitation from the fictionalised William Goldman. Rather than imitating, the writer applies or enforces many of the fairy tale conventions in S. Morgenstern's more realistic novel. It is especially interesting the editor's insistence on removing the original writer's attempts to provide any general

background that does not contribute to fuel his idea of the text (Goldman 81). In that respect, the parodic impulse can be perceived especially in the contrast between the idealised memory that the author had about S. Morgenstern's novel—which is associated with the stereotypes of fairy tales or adventure novels—and the more unimaginative, or unromantic narration of Morgenstern. In the case of *Don Quixote*, the figure of the Hidalgo “because of his fatal reliance, suggested a critique of romance/heroic literature and underscores the limitations that reality imposes on romantic fantasy” (Pardo “Romantic and quixotic heroes” 118). On the other hand, in *The Princess Bride*, the limitations of the fairy tale pattern are highlighted through the divergence between the roles that the characters are meant to perform according to the formula in which the editor once inscribed the text, and the form in which they are represented by S. Morgenstern. The description of Buttercup is especially enlightening in this respect, for, even if she is meant to fulfil the role of the most beautiful damsel, she is only placed around “the top-twenty of beautiful girls when she was fifteen”: “Buttercup at this time was nowhere near that high, being barely in the top twenty, and that primarily on potential, certainly not on any particular care she took of herself” (Goldman 41).

The forced application of fairy tale conventions in S. Morgenstern's realistic narration is what proves their folly. However, as in Cervantes' novel, the corrupted nature of the world is made clear through its contrast with literature, especially with the editor's idealised memory of his favourite novel. Although the fairy tale formula is parodied, the values that it promotes are not dismissed. As a matter of fact, the objective of the editor is that of restoring these values in his abridgement of the text, with the aim of preserving in literature what is impossible in the real world. As the fictionalised Goldman claims, “I don't think there's high adventure left anymore. Nobody takes out a sword nowadays and cries, ‘Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father; prepare to die!’ [...] And

true love, you can forget about that too” (32). The idyllic aspiration of the writer to recover those notions in his writing, although he fails in his effort, works as a reminder of the degraded state of the world. This satire of the world and its lack of noble values can also be seen when the fictionalised Goldman, in his commentaries, ridicules the academic study of the text, which does not appreciate its ideas, but only focuses on the possible symbolism or allegories: “When this version comes out, I expect every Florinese scholar alive to slaughter me” (57). In accordance with this vision, the editor’s impossible quest reproduces that of don Quixote, who is “committed to lost causes, and old-fashioned values in a world given over to corruption, materialism, and fashion” (Pardo, “Romantic and quixotic heroes” 119). In that way, this aspect of his quixotism is a “critique of the world itself, of a society or culture incapable of comprehending or accommodating the spiritual and intellectual idealism of don Quixote” (119). In *The Princess Bride*, the world is the object of satire, of examination, for the impossibility of fulfilling the expectations set by literature.

Goldman thus revives in his novel the paradoxical goal of criticising literature by its contrast to reality, and reality by its contrast to literature, initiated by Cervantes with his method, through which “the opposition between an illusion-haunted hero and a prosaic reality is used to mock the one and panoramically scan the other” (Close 2)

IV. Conclusion

While far from being considered a canonical imitation of *Don Quixote*, especially considering the lack of references to Cervantes or his novel, *The Princess Bride* engages in a dialogical representation of the conflicting duality of literature and life, embodied through a very particular quixotic figure, the main narrator and editor of the work, the

fictionalised William Goldman, who transforms quixotism into a purely literary or editorial practice. The novel can be considered therefore an example that proves the wide possibilities and productiveness of the quixotism”, proving its relevance and vitality at the end of the 20th c. In addition to this, the dialogical method employed by Cervantes is preserved in Goldman’s novel, through which the work poses a critique on both literature and reality. The connection of Goldman with the method developed by Cervantes is even more evident when taking into account the reflexive dimension of the work, which echoes the underlying complex metafictional framework that operates in *Don Quixote*.

As Pardo comments “es difícil encontrar ejemplos de seguimiento de la teoría y la práctica cervantina de la novela (cervantismo) comparables a los que podemos encontrar en novelistas de épocas anteriores, por ejemplo en Fielding, Smollett y Sterne durante el siglo XVIII” (“Del mito a la novela” 196), alluding to the situation commented at the very beginning of the essay, in which the reproduction of the myth took over the practice of the Cervantine method. In that regard, the paradoxical and dialogical nature of *The Princess Bride*, in combination with the uncommon and displaced quixotism of the editor of the novel, makes Goldman an interesting figure to consider in the never-stopping development and transformations of the Cervantine tradition.

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