

The fascinating case of Don Quixote

Sobre el fascinante caso de Don Quijote

Dear Editor:

Drs. Ezpeleta, López Velasco and Iniesta López have recently published some interesting notes on the always fascinating case of Don Quixote. There can be no doubt that Don Quixote has aroused great interest in Neurology and Psychiatry there is nothing new in that. Cervantes's novel was bedside reading for the great Sydenham and Freud mentioned a few possibilities.¹ Each generation has its own explanations, all worthy of respect. Drs. Ezpeleta and López Velasco mention an observation of their own; a patient with chronic mental illness showing signs of delirium who improved, against all prognosis, just before his death. This case quite rightly reminds them of the evolution of Cervantes's hero and they suggest an "Alonso Quijano syndrome" for similar cases. Dr. Iniesta, for his part, suggests the "Don Quixote syndrome" to designate the neuropsychiatric disturbances caused by reading works of literature (perhaps we should also include here the fascinating case of the *Lawyer of Glass*). In any case, they are two very welcome options to add to the long list for the differential diagnosis of Don Quixote. I suspect that each generation has its own options and that future generations will add many others ... for example, perhaps an immunological limbic encephalitis² might be another option; these conditions may occasionally improve spontaneously following a stormy course.

However, I should like to reflect here on another thrilling possibility: if we analyze Don Quixote's characteristics directly from the novel [English versions taken from Edith Grossman's 2005 translation], we find the following key points:

1. Cognitive impairment: a) Alterations in reasoning: "... and so with too little sleep and too much reading his brains dried up, causing him to lose his mind"; b) Confusion of time and space (the Cave of Montesinos): "... How long ago did I go down? asked Don Quixote. A little more than an hour, Sancho replied. That cannot be, [...] because night fell and day broke three times while I was there"; c) False identification of individuals He mistook the village priest, someone he had known for a long time, as "Archbishop Turpin"; and d) Agitation: "when they reached Don Quixote, he was already out of bed, still shouting and engaging in senseless acts, slashing forehand and backhand with his sword, and as awake as if he had never slept".
2. Psychotic symptoms. a) Extremely complex auditory and visual hallucinations: "... there you see, friend Sancho, thirty or more enormous giants, with whom I intend to do battle ..."; and b) paranoid ideas: "Enchanters have pursued me, enchanters pursue me now and enchanters will pursue me until they find me".

3. Cognitive fluctuations. Don Quixote varies rapidly between aberrant and completely lucid behaviour: his housekeeper and niece both noted "... that there were moments when their lord and master gave signs of being in his right mind (...) And Don Quixote spoke with so much intelligence [to his friends] that the two examiners thought he was completely well".

Don Diego observed that: "I have seen him do things worthy of the greatest madman in the world and heard him say things so intelligent that they wipe out and undo his mad acts".

Don Diego's son noted that: "He is a madman full of lucid spells".

4. Alterations in REM sleep. His friends found him: "his unsheathed sword and was slashing with it in all directions and shouting as if he really were fighting a giant. Best of all, his eyes were not open because he was sleeping and dreaming that he was doing battle".

In short, Don Quixote's behaviour is characterized by a) cognitive impairment; b) psychotic alterations; and c) cognitive fluctuations and d) disturbances in his REM sleep. This information, according to already classic criteria,^{3,4} enable a likely diagnosis of Lewy body disease.⁵ It is within the bounds of possibility that Cervantes might have known a true patient with Lewy body disease on whom he might have inspired his character.

In any case, it is fascinating that a literary figure can arouse such controversy; we shall never be able to examine Don Quixote in person, nor can we analyze his brain ... but we will always be able to conjecture on the thousand and one facets of Cervantes's character.

References

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