



Classics in Short No.84: Don Quixote

Article Author:

[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

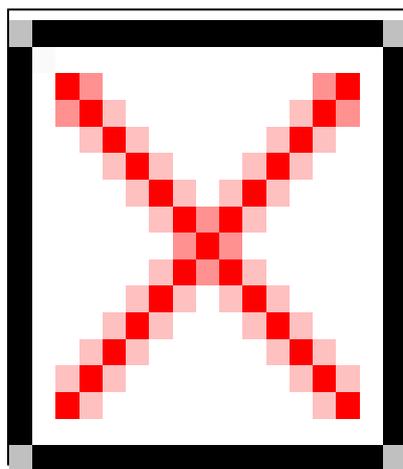
[185](#) [2]

Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on Miguel de Cervantes's **Don Quixote**.



Brian Alderson

Questing among the adaptations of?

Don Quixote

Alonso Quixano

sometimes called 'the Good', hailed from the district of La Mancha in Castile. Becoming obsessed, if not deranged, by the reading of too many chivalric romances, he converted himself into the knightly Don Quixote and rode out to do great deeds on his nag, Rocinante, soon to be joined by his indispensable peasant squire Sancho Panza.

We know of this

thanks first to his countryman, Miguel de Cervantes, who set about composing the Don's biography. Although he lost track of the story quite early on, he was able to make headway again after discovering a mass of Moorish documents by one Cid Hamete Benengeli. These, translated for, and furbished up by him, resulted in a first volume of **The Adventures of Don Quixote**, sent out into the world in 1605, with a successor volume following ten years later.

This waywardly conducted spoof,

amounting eventually to nearly a thousand pages, achieved instantaneous bestsellerdom (indeed, characters in Volume Two remark on how much they enjoyed Volume One) and for that very reason the **Adventures** came to be perceived as open for plunder by the publishers of children's books. In fact **Don Quixote** looks to be the earliest work of fiction to be so treated, if you don't count Aesop, or Malory, or the author of **Reynard the Fox**. But it presented editorial hurdles that were more formidable than later conversions such as **The Pilgrim's Progress**, or **Robinson Crusoe**, or **Gulliver's Travels**.

Length and form

were the chief of these, aside from the difficulty shared with all such transferences that their authors had no intention of writing for the young whose presence as readers figured not at all in those distant times. The prodigality of the Don's encounters during his questing demands some nifty editing in order to preserve his story's momentum without overdoing the repetitious demonstrations of his quixotry in action. And while the situations are sometimes fraught in themselves, as with the affair with the chain-gang of prisoners, they may sometimes only become so through the Don's crazy intervention, as with the assault on the windmills. (Incidentally, that passage, surely the most famous in the book, occupies less than a page of its text.) Furthermore, these direct accounts of Quixote and Sancho at work are often interlarded with sometimes complex serial narratives of other people's trials and tribulations where the knight may be not much more than an interested spectator.

The first version reduced for children

appeared quite late on compared with reductions of those other famous novels: a little book of 276 pages published round about 1777. It simplified things considerably, unlike some Victorian successors which displayed a perhaps misplaced faith in young readers' capacity to cope with much of the original text, but where the effort was aided by a ready supply of illustrations. And it was artwork that seems to have prompted the first committed attempt at an approachable version when, in 1900, Judge Edward Abbott Parry (the author of several children's books including **Katawampus; its treatment and cure**) supplied a text to accompany a set of illustrations in black and white and colour by Walter Crane. The two of them wisely made no attempt to represent the huge scale of the original but rather to excite an interest which might encourage young readers to explore further at some later date.

That too was an aim

of the great (but now seemingly so soon forgotten) editor, James Reeves, whose abridgment and, by his own admission, 'somewhat free' re-writing produced a finely proportioned version, enhanced by line-drawings and colour plates by Edward Ardizzone. The great authority on book illustration, Edward Hodnett (also seemingly forgotten) expatiated at length on this book as 'one of the most satisfying' of all the English illustrated editions, and I find it certainly the most satisfying reduction for children.

A modest and unpretentious endeavour,

it contrasts mightily with the most recent assault on the Knight of the Doleful Countenance: that published last year with text by Martin Jenkins, squired by the illustrator Chris Riddell, as in their partnership over **Gulliver's Travels** in 2004. Repeating their earlier formula, they seem to be straining once more towards a conversion of the classic novel into a large-scale graphic book. They have gallantly attempted to include all the main incidents of the original adventures, a scheme all the more ambitious since every page-opening either incorporates a full-colour plate or is furnished with vigorous drawings which have blocks of text plonked on top of them. These wild and pop-eyed caricatures, along with Jenkins's nicely-managed modern demotic, makes the whole thing rather exhausting, but that, I suppose, is as it should be.

The illustrations by Chris Riddell are taken from the Walker Illustrated Classics edition of **Don Quixote** by Miguel de Cervantes, retold by Martin Jenkins (978 1 4063 2430 3, £12.99 pbk).

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Book Editor for **The Times**.

Page Number:

32

Source URL (retrieved on Oct '19): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/185/childrens-books/articles/classics-in-short/classics-in-short-no84-don-quixote>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/brian-alderson>

