

The Madman in the Public Square: Civic Education in *Don Quixote*

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“May God help them,” said the priest, “and let us be on the alert: we’ll see where all the foolishness in this knight and squire will lead, because it seems as if both were made from the same mold, and that the madness of the master, without the simplicity of the servant, would not be worth anything.”

—*Don Quixote*, part 2, chapter 2

In recent years, a renewed movement for civic education has taken shape in American higher education. After two and a half centuries of constitutional self-government—punctuated by conflict, crisis, and constitutional reinterpretation—this movement seeks to restore the teaching of foundational principles of American constitutionalism and citizenship both to citizens and in public institutions. Its emergence is not incidental. Today, a striking number of university graduates leave college more disenchanted with their country than when they entered. More urgently, many leave without the habits or dispositions needed to sustain civic life across disagreement. That citizens will disagree is not a problem to be solved; as James Madison famously argued, disagreement is a precondition of

*A sound mind might consider it mad to write about *Don Quixote* as a model for civic education. My thanks to those who, sharing that suspicion, helped me pursue this vision nonetheless. I am especially grateful to Paul Carrese, Thomas David Bunting, and Mikael Good for their careful reading of the manuscript and to the participants at the Jack Miller Center’s 2025 civics conference in Miami, Florida, for their engagement. I also thank Rick Avramenko and the PSR team, whose comments helped bring this paper to completion.

a free society.¹ But the distinction between disagreement that fortifies liberty and division that corrodes it has grown perilously thin.

Were voting the only shared civic activity, democracy would quickly devolve into majoritarianism. Liberal self-government requires more than procedural guardrails; it depends on the formation of citizens capable of acting together despite moral, religious, or ideological differences. Danielle Allen has rightly diagnosed our moment as a crisis of faction and fracture—conditions that leave citizens vulnerable to disinformation, despair, and manipulation. Her call for “social learning”—the cultivation of mutual understanding across difference—is a partial remedy. But it opens onto a deeper problem, one central to the project of civic education itself: How can civic thought form citizens who resist the errors of the past and present without collapsing into snide cynicism or scapegoating their predecessors into *persona non grata*? Put differently, how can democratic citizens disagree with one another in a productive manner, without tearing each other apart? Moreover, how can civic educators hope to teach a citizenry that is thoroughly disillusioned with democratic republican politics?

These questions have not been lost among theorists of democratic citizenship. Most famously, Jürgen Habermas proposed a model of “constitutional patriotism,” in which citizens rally around shared democratic norms rather than inherited identities—an ideal that was meant to foster toleration and civil disagreement more successfully than ethnic nationalism.² Sara Wallace Goodman focuses on the behavioral norms—such as toleration, rule-following, and voting—that sustain democratic life.³ Paul Caresse has promoted a “reflective patriotism” that encourages rational people to “love their polity and be grateful for it but also be argumentative.”⁴ As free citizens, Caresse reasons, they will disagree about what their fundamental principles mean or require and about the meaning of their history, and thus they need Aristotelian virtue-friendships to aid them in their pursuit of the good life. These responses offer important insights. Yet each, in its own way, remains bound by the procedural, the rational, and the technocratic. None confronts directly the moral imagination, the symbolic

dimension of citizenship, or the need for civic courage in the face of disillusionment.

A deeper diagnosis is needed. Much of this proceduralism descends from the paradigm of John Dewey, whose vision of democratic education emphasized inquiry, activism, and the perpetual interrogation of institutions. Dewey's legacy has been generative, but it has also, over three-quarters of a century of dominance in American schooling, tilted civic education toward critique without a corresponding cultivation of attachment—toward teaching students what is wrong with their institutions while leaving unaddressed why those institutions, and the ideals they imperfectly serve, are worth believing in at all. The result, visible in the disenfranchised graduates this essay opened with, is a citizenry skilled at diagnosis and starved of conviction.

This essay posits that a salve might be found in the wisdom of literature. Scholars of politics have long recognized that canonical literary works are not merely aesthetic objects but resources for civic formation.⁵ As Martha Nussbaum has observed, the “narrative imagination”—the capacity to inhabit another's perspective through literary experience—is indispensable to democratic citizenship precisely because it cultivates the moral capabilities that abstract political philosophy cannot supply on its own.⁶ This essay proposes that Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote de la Mancha* belongs in this tradition. For the American reader, turning to *Don Quixote* for lessons in democratic citizenship may seem an odd choice. What could a deluded Spanish nobleman from the early seventeenth century—wandering La Mancha in rusty armor to chase imaginary phantoms—possibly teach us about civics? I argue that *Don Quixote* is an especially powerful civic text because it does not present virtue simply or triumphantly. It shows virtue as tragicomic, costly, and easily mocked, forcing the reader to inhabit the experience of principled failure rather than merely observe it from a comfortable distance. Moreover, where Shakespeare illuminates the virtues and failures of rulers, Cervantes gives us something rarer and more democratic: the ordinary citizen who dares to act on principle in the public square, who teaches not from a throne or

a pulpit but from a roadside inn, a village square, a chain of prisoners on a dusty road. Don Quixote is, in this sense, the Socrates of the novel—a gadfly in rusty armor, practicing his philosophy of life in public.

Where Cervantes's contemporaries saw the character of Don Quixote as a satirical figure worthy only of ridicule, as the author himself describes him in his author's preface, modern readers have often viewed him as a tragic idealist, out of place in a disenchanted world.⁷ In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spain, a group of thinkers known as the *Quijotistas* reclaimed him as a national hero. They found in him a symbol of civic courage and moral imagination, one who acts in fidelity to ideals even when the world denies their reality. Contemporary readers have continued this reclamation. Aaron Hanlon sees quixotism as the logic of moral exception.⁸ Jacqueline Stevens reads Don Quixote as a theorist of performative citizenship.⁹ Jacob Hoerger treats Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as embodying dueling visions of liberty.¹⁰

This essay both builds on and diverges from these interpretations. I turn to *Don Quixote* as a civic text precisely because it does not present virtue simply or triumphantly. It shows virtue as tragicomic, costly, and easily mocked—and it shows that such virtue can nonetheless be contagious. I call this vision “civic quixotism.” It consists in the will to pursue ideals despite a grim reality and to lead by example. As the historian Johan Huizinga has argued, culture is born not of solemnity but of play; Don Quixote teaches citizenship by playing a part, enacting his ideal so fully that it begins to reshape the world around him. This is a brief not for tearing down the civic inheritance Dewey's critics rightly wish to preserve but for animating that inheritance with conviction rather than treating it as a target for perpetual critique. In this vein, this essay will argue that civic quixotism is an ideal that citizenship theorists can employ to teach students to forgo the cynicism prevalent in eras of national decline.

This argument unfolds in three parts. First, I analyze dominant interpretations of Don Quixote, from literary critics to Spanish cultural movements, arguing that Quixote embodies the

virtues of a civic educator. Second, I explore Don Quixote's performative idealism as a model for civil engagement, highlighting his ability to reshape the moral perceptions of those around him through public example. Finally, I define civic quixotism as a normative and pedagogical framework for renewing democratic citizenship, offering practical insights for educators seeking to foster principled, hopeful civic engagement among citizens of a pluralistic self-governing republic.

The Varied Interpretations of the Knight-Errant

Even those who have not read Cervantes's *Don Quixote* are likely familiar with its premise: A man in seventeenth-century Spain named (as he tells us at the end of part 2, on his deathbed) Alonso Quixano becomes so consumed by chivalric romances that he invests his fortune in books of chivalry, reads into the night until "his brain became dry," and comes to believe he is a knight-errant, naming himself Don Quixote. Renouncing his former life, he dons ill-fitting armor, mounts his faithful steed Rocinante, recruits the loyal Sancho Panza as his squire, and sets out to combat imaginary foes in pursuit of eternal glory and in the name of his idealized beloved, the invented lady Dulcinea. His madness leads him into misadventures undertaken with the conviction that he is pursuing justice or freeing the innocent, whereas in reality his actions seem to cause more harm than good.

The central question of the novel—and the source of centuries of debate—is how to interpret the figure of the knight-errant himself. Is Don Quixote a madman, plain and simple? An idealistic hero to be praised for his pursuit of authenticity in a disenchanted world? Or perhaps a wise fool, comparable to the Jester in Shakespeare's *King Lear*—a figure who, despite his appearance, is the least foolish of the cast? One might instinctually try to characterize him as fitting all three, at various parts of the play, as the great translator of the novel Edith Grossman has argued. For Grossman, the novel is both a comedy and a tragedy, as its complexity never lets the reader rest, introducing contradictions as soon as one tries to interpret the meaning of the text.¹¹ J. M. Sobré argues,

in contrast, that one might see him exclusively as a madman throughout both volumes.¹²

A majority of literary critics, however, have argued for what I call the developmental reading of *Quixote*. This reading suggests that one's interpretation of the hero Don Quixote must change to fit his development across the two volumes of the narrative. In part 1, which was initially the only volume intended for publication, Don Quixote is unambiguously depicted as a fool: a man who thinks windmills are giants and that a peasant woman is the embodiment of idealized beauty. In part 2, however, he is increasingly cast in the role of a wise fool, who offers ironic counsel, persuades others to entertain his quixotic vision, and even succeeds in "quixoticizing" the down-to-earth Sancho Panza by the novel's end.¹³ He has, it seems, a false perception of reality, combined rather oddly with a sharp capacity for reasoning.

Still others make the case that because Cervantes constructs the novel through layers of ironic mediation—the frame of the fictional Arab historian Cide Hamete Benengeli, the unreliable translator, the self-conscious narrator—any straightforward extraction of "lessons" from the text are interpretively fraught. Anthony Close has argued against the Romantic idealization of Quixote that treats his madness as heroic self-assertion, insisting that Cervantes's contemporaries read the novel primarily as comedy and that modern readers systematically over-invest the character with philosophical dignity he was not meant to bear.¹⁴ E. C. Riley, similarly, has shown that Cervantes's theory of fiction is deeply ambivalent about the relationship between literary representation and moral instruction, resisting the didactic allegory that civic readings of the novel might seem to require.¹⁵

This essay does not resolve these disputes, but it takes a specific interpretive position: the civic meaning of the novel is located not in Quixote's intentions—which Cervantes deliberately keeps ambiguous—but in the observable effects of his behavior on those around him, especially Sancho Panza. What the novel shows, with remarkable consistency across both volumes, is that proximity to Quixote's enacted idealism changes people. Whatever Cervantes

intended, and however thick his irony, that pattern of transformation is textually undeniable—and it is that pattern, rather than any claim about Quixote's inner life, on which this essay's civic argument rests. Contemporary scholars have made claims about Don Quixote that are directly relevant to civic theory. Jacqueline Stevens reads Quixote as a theorist of performative citizenship, acting out ideals in a disenchanted world.¹⁴ Jacob Hoerger treats the characters of Quixote and Sancho Panza as dueling visions of liberty.¹⁵ Henry Higuera, perhaps the scholar closest to the present argument, analyzes Cervantes's political thought in relation to the Counter-Reformation, arguing that the novel constitutes a critical engagement with the dominant model of *caritas* as the animating virtue of public life.¹⁶ These scholars have illuminated important dimensions of the novel's political significance. What has received less sustained attention, however, is the specifically pedagogical dimension: not Quixote as a theorist of politics, but Quixote as a teacher of citizens—one who forms others through example, performance, and proximity rather than through argument or instruction.

I propose that Don Quixote should be read not primarily as a madman or fool but as a tragicomic teacher of civic virtue: one who reanimates a forgotten ethical idealism through performance, persuasion, and persistence. Like Socrates, who almost always philosophizes in the presence of a public audience, Quixote too seeks to correct apparent injustices in public. Always having spectators—whether disciples or detractors—he influences the beliefs and behaviors of those he encounters. Quixote's character is noteworthy, not simply because of his fearless resistance to the disenchanted status quo, but because he “quixotizes” Sancho Panza and in turn is “sanchopanzacized” by him. This mutual transformation provides a model for civic education that is neither naively idealistic nor cynically realistic, but genuinely dialectical.

There are, of course, multiple traditions of civic virtue to consider: the Aristotelian-Thomistic model of virtue ethics that dominated the Spanish Golden Age and the Inquisition, during which the novel was written; the republican ideal, which aims less

at cultivating personal moral excellence than at preventing domination; and a more idealistic or imaginative form of civic virtue, which seeks justice not by perfecting institutions or individuals but by sustaining moral aspiration even in the face of disillusionment.

Cervantes clearly distances himself from the first tradition. In the author's preface, he explicitly mocks scholastic pedantry and his contemporaries who, to make themselves seem learned, haphazardly quote Plato, Aristotle, and the Scriptures. Moreover, as Henry Higuera argues, Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* amid the Counter-Reformation, in part as a critique of the medieval Catholic vision of *caritas*.¹⁶ Quixote's virtues, if they can be called that, are not the result of proper habituation in a moral community, nor are they aimed at achieving the *eudaimonia* that grounds classical virtue theory. His world is fragmented, comedic, and post-heroic. Nor does Quixote embody classical or neorepublican conceptions of virtue. Although his method is grassroots—he roams from village to village and engages ordinary people—his objective is not to prevent domination or uphold popular sovereignty. He does not resist tyranny in any concrete sense, nor does he advocate for political equality. Instead, I propose, Don Quixote embodies a third, often overlooked form of civic virtue: idealistic virtue, which refuses to abandon moral aspiration even when the world renders it absurd. He acts not to restore a lost order, nor to reform present conditions, but to sustain a vision of justice that inspires others to imagine differently. It is worth noting that the chivalric order Quixote mourns was itself ideologically compromised—bound up with the *limpieza de sangre* ideology, crusading imperialism, and aristocratic honor culture of Habsburg Spain that Cervantes, a veteran of Lepanto and a former captive in Algiers, knew at firsthand and viewed with considerable ambivalence. The civic lesson of Quixote's idealism is not that his specific model was admirable but that the practice of idealism itself—the willingness to act as though a vision of justice were real—has transformative power independent of the content of the vision. Citizens who take Quixote as a civic model need not endorse knight-errantry but only recognize the form of his

commitment and ask what ideals of their own republic are worth enacting with equivalent fidelity. In this sense, Quixote does not model virtue in the classical sense but incites it—awakening others, especially Sancho Panza, to the possibility of a life lived in fidelity to ideals no longer widely believed. Moreover while it is true that Quixote often causes chaos, his disruptions are not mere spectacles of a man gone mad; they are also challenges to others' complacency in a world devoid of idealism.

Performative Idealism: Quixote as Civic Educator

This section examines Don Quixote's performative idealism—his deliberate enactment of chivalric virtues—as a means of imparting civic lessons to his companions and, through Cervantes's narrative, to his readers. I aim to demonstrate how Quixote's madness functions as moral provocation: not merely a failure of perception, but a challenge to the moral complacency of those he encounters. In particular, this section shows how Don Quixote begins as a man with a willfully altered perception of reality that becomes tempered—and thereby more genuinely civic—through his relationship with the materialistic realist Sancho Panza. The episodes chosen for analysis here illustrate how Quixote's madness challenges the often immoral norms of those around him, especially in part 1. To avoid the pitfall of cherry-picking, I first explore isolated events but then identify their tying thread.

One of the clearest examples of this is the episode of the boy Andrés and the farmer (part 1, chapter 4). Quixote comes upon a young boy being whipped by a cruel master. Outraged by the injustice, he intervenes, commanding the farmer to release the boy and pay his wages. The farmer outwardly agrees, and Quixote departs triumphantly. Yet as soon as Quixote leaves, the farmer gives Andrés a worse beating than before: "a flogging that left [him] like a flayed Saint Bartholomew." At first glance, this scene seems to mock Quixote's naive idealism. He fails to ensure justice is done, and his intervention arguably worsens the boy's suffering. But Quixote's failure is attributable not to bad principles but to a kind

of structured naivete, for he trusts that the appearance of justice will bring its reality. While the outcome is tragic, the moral impulse behind his action is unambiguous: He alone is willing to risk personal harm in defense of a powerless child. His flawed intervention thus becomes a visible, public act of resistance that calls out injustice, even if it cannot yet undo it.

A second pertinent episode is that in which Quixote frees the galley slaves (part 1, chapter 22). Upon seeing a chain gang of prisoners, Quixote assumes they are victims of oppression and orders their release. "It is hard enough to suffer misfortunes," he says, "without having to endure being taken to the galleys in chains." His appeal to universal dignity and mercy—while profoundly moving—results in disaster: The freed criminals turn on their liberators, robbing and scattering them. Miguel de Unamuno, in his masterful *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, offers the most powerful defense of this episode: Quixote was just in freeing the galley slaves *precisely because* they were ungrateful in return, since acts of justice are repaid in heaven, not on earth.¹⁷

Unamuno's reading is internally consistent and morally serious, but it is insufficient as a foundation for civic pedagogy. A civics education that operates in a pluralistic, nonconfessional democratic republic cannot rest on the premise that civic acts are redeemed by divine accounting rather than by earthly consequences. More to the point, the galley slaves episode illustrates a genuine limit of civic quixotism that the article must acknowledge rather than evade: The unilateral override of institutional authority, divorced from practical judgment about consequences, does not become a civic virtue simply because it is motivated by moral principle. Quixote is not wrong to feel that the prisoners' humanity transcends their legal status; he is wrong to act on that feeling without any consideration of what his action will actually accomplish for them or for others.

This distinction between prophetic witness and unilateral action is crucial for understanding both the civic value and the limits of Quixote's model. The civic lesson of the galley slaves episode is not "emulate this act" but rather recognize the moral

question Quixote raises—are these men merely the sum of their crimes?—as a genuinely civic question that complacent onlookers have failed to ask. Quixote's value is in the provocation, not the intervention. It is this prophetic dimension—the willingness to speak and act in ways that make others see differently—that constitutes his civic contribution. It is the part 1 Quixote, impulsive and heedless of consequences, who liberates galley slaves. The part 2 Quixote, tempered by experience and by Sancho's counsel, is a more adequate civic model precisely because his idealism has been chastened without being extinguished.

Perhaps the most sustained and emblematic example of Quixote's performative idealism is his unwavering insistence that Aldonza Lorenzo, a rough country girl, is in fact the noble lady Dulcinea del Toboso—"a name suitable for a princess and a great lady" (part 1, chapter 1). Dulcinea never appears in the novel as a real character; she exists entirely in Quixote's imagination. Yet her power over him as his *raison d'être* is immense. In renaming Aldonza, Quixote performs an act of imaginative recognition that elevates the dignity of the lowly and insists on seeing nobility where society sees none. While the gesture is absurd on its face, it functions as a kind of performance that challenges his companions to reconsider what constitutes worthiness, honor, and virtue. Over time, even Sancho Panza begins to speak of Dulcinea with reverence, demonstrating the contagious moral effect of Quixote's symbolic act. In this, Quixote remakes the social perception of his imaginary pauper girl by treating a humble person as inherently dignified, showing that imagination itself can be a form of moral witness.

These examples—flawed, earnest, morally charged—show Don Quixote enacting civic quixotism in its most unmediated form: the attempt to live by civic ideals even when the social world dismisses or punishes such attempts. His actions do not always succeed, and often backfire, but their impact is visible and consequential. They challenge those around him to see differently, act differently, and, as the following scenes will show, to become different.

This performative quality becomes even more pronounced in part 2, where Cervantes adds an extraordinary metanarrative dimension that further reveals Quixote's role as a civic educator. In a moment that anticipates postmodern narrative technique, Quixote and Sancho become aware that their past adventures have been published and widely read. Rather than react with shame or retreat from public life, Quixote insists on continuing his mission. In part 2, chapter 3, Sancho candidly reports to his master the harsh ridicule they have received from various strata of Spanish society:

The common people consider your worship a mighty great madman, and me no less a fool. The hidalgos say . . . you have assumed the "Don," and made a knight of yourself at a jump. . . . The caballeros say they do not want to have hidalgos setting up in opposition to them. . . . Some say, "mad but droll"; others, "valiant but unlucky"; others, "courteous but meddling," and then they go into such a number of things that they don't leave a whole bone either in your worship or in myself. (part 2, chapter 3)

This scene is striking not only for its unembellished honesty but also for Quixote's response: He remains unfazed, asserting that he is "ragged more from the wear and tear of arms than of time." Rather than retreat into disillusionment, he embraces the consequences of his public actions. This exemplifies one of the core tenets of civic quixotism—the refusal to abandon one's ideals even when they invite ridicule. Like the civic educator committed to unpopular but necessary truths, Quixote models principled action that stands apart from social validation.

The effects of this idealism are most visible in Sancho Panza, whose transformation across part 2 is this essay's central evidence for civic quixotism's pedagogical power. Sancho begins the novel as the antithesis of Quixote: materialistic, earthbound, motivated entirely by the prospect of personal reward—the governorship of an island, the promise of riches. He is the anti-player: the man who

cannot enter the imaginative world of play because he is too thoroughly anchored to the economy of practical need.

Yet the transformation that occurs over the course of part 2 is profound. In part 2, chapter 10, Sancho insists that Dulcinea must be respected, chastising those who would mock her. Later, in chapter 58, after witnessing Quixote's courage in facing a pair of lions, Sancho offers one of the most striking recognitions in the novel: "You are the greatest madman or the wisest man in the world." This is not merely a statement of bewilderment—it is a confession of conversion. Sancho has been changed. Once a symbol of rustic common sense, he now defends the quixotic dream. His transformation is not imposed but inspired. He learns, not through argument, but through proximity to a man who dares to act as though ideals are real. This moment is significant not because Sancho has become deluded but because he has been genuinely formed by proximity to someone who takes ideals seriously. Civic quixotism, then, is not merely an individual stance but a contagious ethic—an example that reshapes the desires and perceptions of those around it, not through argument or instruction but through the sheer force of embodied commitment. Quixote educates not through lectures but through performance, persistence, and presence.

Others, too, are drawn into Quixote's imaginative orbit. In the extended sequence involving the Duke and Duchess (part 2, chapters 30–57), Quixote is made the object of elaborate mockery. Yet even within this cruel charade, his dignity persists. He upholds his principles in the face of aristocratic condescension, revealing that the real absurdity lies not in his ideals but in the idle amusement of those who have abandoned their own. "The truth may be stretched thin," he tells them, "but it never breaks, and it always surfaces above lies" (part 2, chapter 32). Here, Quixote's madness becomes a moral mirror, one that reflects not only his own delusion but also the corruption and spiritual exhaustion of those who consider themselves sane.

The contagious effect of Quixote's idealism culminates in the novel's final chapter. As Quixote lies on his deathbed, renouncing his chivalric illusions and reclaiming his identity as Alonso Quixano,

it is Sancho who begs him to continue the adventure: "Let us go . . . through the woods, dressed as shepherds . . . that will be a second pastoral life." Sancho, once a gritty realist concerned only with food, money, and governance, now longs to inhabit Quixote's imagined world. His plea is not simply nostalgic—it is aspirational. It signals that Quixote's civic madness has taken root. Through absurdity, he has taught dignity; through delusion, he has taught loyalty; through failure, he has modeled courage.

This is the paradox of Quixote's performative idealism: Although his acts often fail by worldly standards, they succeed in moral formation. His civic education is not a formal curriculum but a contagion, an ethic embodied so fully that it becomes impossible to ignore. And even when the knight dies disillusioned, the moral thread he wove endures in the hearts of others.

Civic quixotism

How necessary is quixotism today? At first glance, it may seem that we do not need it, especially when our chief challenge lies in the disintegration of the social fabric itself. In such a fragmented world, the space for a figure like Don Quixote—an idealist who challenges prevailing norms—might appear obsolete or even dangerous. A helpful analogy comes from *King Lear*: When Lear is still sane, the Fool can advise him with truth veiled in jest. But as Lear descends into madness and the structure of his kingdom collapses, the Fool disappears. There is no longer a place for the wise fool once the world loses its coherence. So too, when society is fractured, we may wonder whether there is still room for Quixote's vision.

But this reading of Quixote is incomplete. It neglects the full arc of his journey, particularly the transformation that occurs through his companionship with Sancho Panza. Quixote alone is a tragicomic figure, noble yet misguided, often causing more harm than good in his deluded pursuits. Yet by the end of part 2, something has changed: His idealism has been tempered by Sancho's realism, while Sancho himself has been uplifted by Quixote's vision. They have reshaped each other. This mutual transformation provides a model for what I call civic quixotism—a democratic

virtue grounded in the interplay between imagination and reality, idealism and practicality.

What, then, is civic quixotism? It is an approach to civic life that draws on Quixote as a pedagogical exemplar within the tradition of democratic idealism. It champions the pursuit of ideals—truth, justice, dignity—even when the surrounding political reality renders those ideals seemingly fruitless. It is the act of “behaving as though the republic were real”: embodying the principles of an ideal democratic polity—justice, mutual respect, civic responsibility—even when the actual political reality falls short of these aspirations. Like Quixote, who animates his life through the fiction of a chivalric code, civic Quixotes anchor their actions in the imagined republic they seek to realize.

It is important to be clear about what civic quixotism is not. It is not a license for unilateral action against institutional authority, as the galley slaves episode illustrates. It is not mere wishful thinking or self-deception. And it is not a continuation of the Deweyan tradition of civic education’s degeneration into critique without affirmation. Civic quixotism does not displace knowledge of constitutional forms and institutional processes; rather, it provides the animating spirit that keeps such knowledge from becoming merely procedural. The new civics it proposes is one that supplements, not supplants, the constitutional and institutional foundations that civic-republican and constitutionalist educators rightly emphasize.

At bottom, civic quixotism is a form of tragic hope: It is the recognition that one’s efforts may end in failure, mockery, or marginalization, yet one persists nonetheless. This “heroic folly” is not naive utopianism; it is the refusal to surrender to cynicism while remaining clear-eyed about the costs of principled action. The concept has predecessors. Ernst Bloch’s account of the “principle of hope” as a constitutive feature of human consciousness, Cornel West’s notion of prophetic pragmatism as a blues-inflected democratic faith that neither denies suffering nor succumbs to it, and the tradition of absurdist political thought that counters nihilism not with a new foundationalism but with the act of persistence itself—all anticipate what this essay calls tragic hope.¹⁷ Civic

quixotism draws on this tradition while distinguishing itself from pure absurdism on one crucial point: It is not merely about individual persistence but about the social and pedagogical effects of that persistence. One must imagine Quixote happy, but more importantly, one must notice that his happiness is contagious.

Underlying all this is a claim about publicity that deserves explanation. Hannah Arendt's account of political action is illuminating here. For Arendt, action—the capacity to begin something genuinely new—requires the public realm: the space of human plurality where deeds become visible; where they can be witnessed, judged, and remembered by others; and where they therefore achieve a durability that private conviction alone cannot.¹⁸ Quixote's idealism would be mere delusion if he enacted it in private. It becomes civic precisely because he enacts it before witnesses—at inns, on roadsides, in village squares—and because those witnesses are changed by what they see. The public square is not incidental backdrop but the constitutive condition of his pedagogy. This is why the metanarrative twist of part 2 matters so much: When Quixote learns that his adventures have been published and read, he does not retreat—he redoubles. His idealism was always addressed to an audience, and the expansion of that audience only deepens his commitment to the performance. Civic quixotism, then, is not a private disposition but a public practice; it is the enactment of ideals in spaces where others can observe, evaluate, and—if the example is compelling enough—be formed by them.

Civic quixotism also entails what we might call performative dissent, which is a willingness to challenge prevailing orthodoxies, not out of contrarianism, but from principled commitment to a higher standard of justice. Like Quixote, who insists on seeing giants where others see windmills, civic Quixotes question dominant assumptions about power, identity, and the limits of the possible. But this questioning is civic in character, for it aims to reshape the public sphere through dialogue, example, and persuasion, not through the unilateral imposition of one's private moral vision.

The closest real-world analogue to the tempered civic quixotism of part 2 is not the impulsive heroics of Quixote's first

adventures but Martin Luther King Jr.'s model of nonviolent direct action. King's model is instructive precisely because it is *not* delusional: The civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s were clear-eyed about the injustice they faced, deliberate in their strategy, and under no illusion about the violence they might suffer. What they shared with Quixote was something different: the commitment to act as though the republic's promises were already binding—to embody the equality the Constitution proclaimed even when the political order denied it. King's insistence on thorough preparation, self-examination, and nonviolent discipline *before* taking any direct action mirrors the trajectory from part 1 to part 2 in Cervantes's novel: idealism chastened by experience, tempered by relationships, and disciplined by a commitment to persuasion rather than coercion.¹⁹ It is this tempered model—not the impulsive liberation of galley slaves—that civic quixotism offers to civic education.

This distinction has direct implications for how civic quixotism should operate in pedagogical settings, particularly with young people. In educational contexts, the primary function of civic quixotism is formation, not direct action: Students learn to imagine the republic's best self; to embody civic virtues through role-play, narrative, and community engagement; and to develop the moral resilience to persist in civic life despite disillusionment. This is the "contagion" model—Quixote's effect on Sancho, not Quixote's effect on the galley slaves. Direct political action is downstream of this formation and requires additional practical and ethical judgment that goes beyond what civic education itself can or should prescribe.

Lessons for the New Civics

Don Quixote carries several practical lessons for those engaged in civic education. Each is derived not from general pedagogical principle but from the specific dynamics the novel enacts.

The first and most fundamental lesson is that formation through example is more powerful than instruction. This is what the Sancho arc demonstrates across two volumes: Sancho is not argued into idealism, lectured into moral seriousness, or incentivized into civic engagement. He is changed by proximity to someone

who takes ideals seriously enough to live by them publicly, at personal cost, without demanding that others agree. Teachers who model civic courage—who hold fast to moral commitments in the face of disillusionment, who treat the republic's promises as binding even when the political order falls short—do something that no curriculum can replicate. The goal is to produce not idealists who ignore consequences but citizens who take ideals seriously enough to act on them even when the outcomes are uncertain.

The second lesson is that principled dissent must be distinguished from institutional subversion. The galley slaves episode is this essay's test case. Quixote's moral instinct—that these men's humanity transcends their legal status—is right. His method—unilateral action without regard for consequences—is wrong and produces harm rather than justice. Civic education must teach students to hold both of these judgments simultaneously: to cultivate the moral sensitivity that makes Quixote ask the question no one else asks, while also cultivating the practical judgment that distinguishes prophetic witness from reckless intervention. Students should learn to question prevailing assumptions, not from cynicism, but from commitment to justice, and they should do so through persuasion, dialogue, and example within the constitutional order rather than against it.

The third lesson concerns the relationship between idealism and realism, or what the novel calls the Quixote–Sancho dialectic. Neither pole alone is adequate: The untempered Quixote of part 1 causes harm; the unquixotized Sancho of part 1 merely accumulates. It is their mutual transformation that produces something genuinely civic. Civic education should therefore cultivate both the imaginative idealism that is willing to enact the republic before it exists and the practical judgment that keeps idealism from becoming reckless. Role-play, narrative, and project-based learning can create the conditions for this dialectic in educational settings—not by assigning students to be Quixotes or Sanchos, but by designing experiences in which idealism and realism must negotiate with each other in real time.

The fourth lesson is that civic education must not abandon the constitutional and institutional content that gives citizens

something to be idealistic about. Quixote's chivalric code, for all its absurdity, was specific enough to generate specific commitments—to the protection of the weak, the honor of one's word, the dignity of the lowly. A civic quixotism without specific constitutional content would be mere enthusiasm. Students need to know what the founding documents say, how American institutions work, and why constitutional forms matter—not as inert information but as the substance of the ideals they are being formed to enact. Civic quixotism is the spirit that animates that knowledge; constitutional education is the knowledge that gives that spirit direction.

Fifth, and finally, students must be equipped with what this essay has called tragic hope, which is a resilience that acknowledges setbacks without surrendering to them. Martin Luther King Jr.'s model is the closest real-world exemplar: the capacity to pursue the republic's promises with discipline, preparation, and nonviolent commitment, in full knowledge of the suffering that commitment may require. It is what sustained the civil rights movement through decades of opposition, and it must sustain students today as they face entrenched injustice and institutional distrust. Tragic hope is not optimism—it does not predict success. It is the refusal to let the gap between the real and the ideal be the final word.

Framed in this way, civic quixotism is a call to moral imagination. It is not more of the Deweyan tradition's critique without affirmation but an insistence on affirmation as the precondition of meaningful critique. It supplements constitutional knowledge with the civic courage to believe that such knowledge matters and that the republic's promises, however imperfectly realized, are worth acting on.

In a time of disillusionment, it invites citizens to dissent from despair and to act as though the republic were real, even if the rest of the world castigates their attempt.

Notes

1. James Madison, *Federalist* No. 10.
2. Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Polity Press, 1999).

3. Sara Wallace Goodman, "'Good Citizens' in Democratic Hard Times," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699, no. 1 (2022): 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211069729>.
4. Paul Carrese, "Civic Preparation of American Youth: Reflective Patriotism and Our Constitutional Democracy," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 705, no. 1 (2023): 39–52.
5. To find civics lessons in literature is an age-old practice. Shakespeare, for instance, has been the paradigm case. Among the persons mentioned by name in *The Federalist Papers*, for example, Shakespeare made the list whereas Rousseau did not. Moreover, his plays have generated a rich scholarly tradition examining the virtues and vices of rulers, the fragility of political order, and the nature of good judgment under pressure. Paul A. Cantor's reading of Falstaff as a Socratic figure for Prince Hal is particularly instructive here: Falstaff teaches Hal not through formal instruction but through performance, wit, and embodied example, reshaping the prince's moral perception from the inside out. For scholarship on the civic lessons of Shakespeare, see Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); John Alvis and Thomas G. West, eds., *Shakespeare as Political Thinker* (Carolina Academic Press, 1981); John E. Alvis and Sean D. Sutton, eds., *Perspectives on Politics in Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury, 2006); Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); David Lowenthal, *Shakespeare's Thought: Unobserved Details and Unsuspected Depths in Eleven Plays* (Lexington Books, 2017).
6. Martha Nussbaum, "The Narrative Imagination," *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University Press, 1997), chap. 3; see also *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Beacon Press, 1995).
7. The idea that Cervantes's contemporaries interpreted Don Quixote as a comedic figure has recently been scrutinized. Massimiliano Giorgini has argued that there are elements of anti-Inquisition beliefs hidden within the text. See Massimiliano Adelmo Giorgini, *The Quixote Code: Reading Between the Lines of the Cervantes Novel* (Purdue University, 2014).
8. Aaron R. Hanlon, *A World of Disorderly Notions: Quixote and the Logic of Exceptionalism* (University of Virginia Press, 2019).
9. Jacqueline Stevens, "Enacting Citizenship for the Healthy Politeia," *Citizenship Studies* 26, no. 4–5 (2022): 675–88.
10. Jacob Scott Hoerger, "The Rival Freedoms of *Don Quixote*," *History of Political Thought* 44, no. 4 (2023): 781–96.

11. Edith Grossman, *Edith Grossman on Don Quixote as Tragedy and Comedy*, 2009, wordswithoutborders, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muOZ6WdAg3o>. See also “Horrifying Quixote: The Thin Line Between Fear and Laughter,” in Stephen Hessel, *Fear Itself* (Brill, 2010), 23–41.
12. J. M. Sobré, “Don Quixote, the Hero Upside-Down,” *Hispanic Review* 44, no. 2 (1976): 128. Indeed, Don Quixote was truly mad, in the sense that psychological madness was understood in sixteenth-century medicine. As is well known, Alonso Quixano’s study of the nonsensical prose of chivalric literature caused his brain to dry out—signaling the desiccation of his “humors,” the balance of which was then considered the source of health.
13. For the developmental reading, see Jay Farness, “Clown and Jester in Don Quixote,” *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures* 5 (1994): 57–80; D. Van Maelsaek, “The Paradox of Humour: A Comparative Study of ‘Don Quixote,’” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 28 (1967): 24–42; Ruth El Saffar, “Apropos of Quixote: Hero or Fool?,” *MLN* 85, no. 2 (1970): 269.
14. Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to “Don Quixote”: A Critical History of the Romantic Tradition in “Quixote” Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1978).
15. E. C. Riley, *Cervantes’s Theory of the Novel* (Clarendon Press, 1962).
16. Henry Higuera, *Eros and Empire: Politics and Christianity in “Don Quixote”* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).
17. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (MIT Press, 1986); Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), chap. 6.
18. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), esp. chap. 5, “Action.”