



# Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 10, Issue 05, 2021: 08-14

Article Received: 22-04-2021

Accepted: 31-04-2021

Available Online: 25-05-2021

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18533/jah.v10i05.2101>

## Cervantes' Philosophies: The Performance *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* by Rēs Ratio Network

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### ABSTRACT

The article examines the performance *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* by the Greek theatre collective Rēs Ratio Network which was presented in 2018 at the Municipal Theatre of Piraeus. The performance is partly based on the novel by Cervantes and constructs a postdramatic philosophical universe that focuses on the existential angst of human nature. The article investigates the performance as a case study of adaptation dramaturgy in contemporary Greek theatre. As I argue in my study *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* proposes an adaptation practice that distances itself from the concept of fidelity to the prose source material. In order to clarify the dramaturgical reconfigurations of the performance I look into the episode of the Cave of Montesinos in chapter 23 of the second book of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Additionally, I analyze the philosophical perspective of the performance that draws from the concept of 'homo ludens' by Johan Huizinga but also correlates with the myth of Sisyphus as it was explored by Albert Camus. Finally, I present the postdramatic aesthetics that are evident in the performance.

**Keywords:** Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Postdramatic Theatre, Adaptation Studies, Homo Ludens.

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### 1. Introduction

The study at hand is the result of my research interest for contemporary Greek adaptation dramaturgy. The examination of "adapturgy" (Barnette, 2018, p. 2), that is the dramaturgy that is based on adaptation (mainly of prose into theatre) has been rising steadily in recent bibliography leading to innovative hermeneutics and seminal classifications. This scientific growth posed the need for a "reflective, textured research milieu" that will frame the examination of adaptation in theatre (Barnette, 2018, p. 2). On the other hand, this study field has not received a systematical investigation that examines multiple case studies and their aesthetic and thematic connotations in Greece. As a result, the Greek 'geography of adaptation' remains a desideratum which I will tackle with articles such as the present one. It is useful to start with a review of selected monographs on the subject, focusing mainly on recent ones. The examination of adaptation has led to the formation of the relevantly new 'adaptation studies' (Leitch, 2017, pp. 1-22) that embrace pluralism, mostly from the 1980s, and provide

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various comparative approaches that celebrate “adaptation as a diverse cultural practice” (Cardwell, 2018, p. 7) inviting intertextuality and metatextuality, intermediality and transmediality. Theatre adaptation is closely connected both to adaptation theory and adaptation practice and examines both (Elliot, 2020, pp. 1-12; Barnette, 2018, pp. 2-3). The epicenter of adaptation dramaturgy lies at the formation of theatre pieces from prose and the performing of literature (Murphy, 2013, pp. 1-16).

The dramatization of prose is always an ambivalent endeavor as it is often perceived as a reduction of the literary work, especially when it comes e.g. to established novels (Babbage, 2017, pp. 1-2). The onstage performance is often viewed in an antagonistic relationship with the primary textual material, maintaining the need for ‘fidelity’. However, contemporary approaches to adaptation in theatre have led to onstage transformations that go well beyond a performative depiction of the written word. Devised adaptations, musical performances, live-cinema productions, hypertheatrical reincarnations, postmodern metatheatrical configurations (Reilly, 2017, pp. xxi-xxviii) lead to a plethora of adaptability. In this way literality is often defused, allowing for radical adaptations (Laera, 2014, p. 121). The philosophical postmodern adaptation of *Don Quixote* that takes place in the performance by Rēs Ratio Network is a characteristic example of an adapturgy that is only partly inspired by the novel itself. My main findings clarify that *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* is a reconfiguration of the episode of the Cave of Montesinos in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. The performance explores themes of fantasy and reality that encompass the novel but leads to a drastically differentiated mise-en-scène that poses questions on the futility of human nature and proposes an ascetic perspective to daily life. The article contributes to the mapping of contemporary adaptation dramaturgy in Greece. In the sections that follow I look into the episode of the Cave of Montesinos and present the events it describes and the interpretations it has received, then I narrate the repetitive ritual of catharsis that is depicted in the performance, afterwards I examine aspects of adaptation that rise from the performance in relation to the novel, then I decode the philosophical aspects of homo ludens, homo asceticus and the myth of Sisyphus that relate to the performance and finally I present my conclusion on the postdramatic universe that is constructed by director Efi Birba and Rēs Ratio Network.

## 2. Methodology and research questions

The article examines *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* and illustrates the philosophical, aesthetic and adaptation connotations of the performance. Specifically, the research questions posed are the following: What events does Cervantes describe in the chapter on the Cave of Montesinos? Which are the major interpretations of this chapter? How does the performance depict a ritualistic dystopia of futility? In what way does Rēs Ratio Network adapt the chapter of the novel into a performance? How does the novel become the backdrop of a reinvented existential depiction of the picaresque Quixote? In what way does the concept of homo ludens and the aspect of homo asceticus inform the performance? How does Cervantes’ frivolous *Don Quixote* turn into a saint-like Sisyphus? Finally, what are the postdramatic elements of the performance? In terms of methodology the theoretical framework employed in the critical analysis draws from adaptation studies, ludic studies and performance analysis. Additionally, philosophical aspects are examined. For example, the concepts of Johan Huizinga and Albert Camus are taken into consideration to decode the metamorphosis of Quixote into a persistent eremite. It is also important to underline that the article aspires to take a first step towards bridging the existing research gap on adaptation dramaturgy in Greece by proposing a bibliography on the subject and examining *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* as a case study. The existing research gap, that is both a knowledge and a theoretical gap (Jacobs, 2011, pp. 125-142) is also a vital opportunity for identifying and framing unexplored contemporary adaptation dramaturgy in Greece.

## 3. The Cave of Montesinos

In the “grotesque Purgatory” that takes place in the second book of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes presents his protagonist’s passage from madness to sanity (Sullivan, 2010, pp. 1-10). The 23rd chapter of the book presents the account of Quixote about the Cave of Montesinos, after his ‘catavasis’ and three-day stay in the cave. The chapter bears the title “Of the wonderful things the incomparable Don Quixote said he saw in the profound Cave of Montesinos, the impossibility and magnitude of which cause this adventure to be deemed apocryphal” (Cervantes, 2016, p. 86). Quixote describes the way in

which, after taking a short nap, he appeared in a locus amoenus, a magnificent place with a phantasmagorical palace which was constructed by transparent crystal. There he talked to an old man named Montesinos, who explained that his dead cousin, Durandarte, asked him at the time of his death to extract his heart and carry it to his wife, Belerma. Durandarte now lies in a marble tomb in the cave, which Quixote sees, and he talks from time to time. Montesinos explains to Quixote that the wizard Merlin enchanted them. Then two quite different groups of women appear. The first one consists of three girls that Quixote recognizes as his beloved Dulcinea and her maidservants. Although he approaches her, she rejects him and runs away from him. In this episode, much like Orpheus, Quixote descends into Hades in order to save Dulcinea, his personal Eurydice (Kahn, 2021, p. 127). The second group of women consists of damsels with turbans followed by their lady Belerma who is saddened by the loss of her lover. Montesinos dares to compare the beauty of Belerma with the beauty of Dulcinea and Quixote is offended. Finally, Quixote concludes his narration, which Sancho listens in obvious disbelief. He states that what his master experienced in nothing but a figment of his imagination.

The chapter on the Cave of Montesinos demonstrates both the illusions and the insecurities of Don Quixote. It uses romantic and comic undertones in order to delve into the mind of the protagonist who experiences a dream-like journey of grandeur and self-doubt. It is characteristic that Sigmund Freud was quite fond of Cervantes' work (Kahn, 2021, p. 127). The episode has been examined extensively in the bibliography receiving various interpretations. For example, it has been analyzed as an allegory of descending into hell that embodies symbolic action and supernatural elements (Fry, 1964; Redondo, 1998; Riley, 2001). The metaphors of the episode have also received attention, such as the dagger used to extract the heart of Durandarte (Stallings-Ward, 2006). The episode has been studied as a literary piece that reconfigures motifs popular in the chivalric novel, such as the scene that depicts the quest for the Grail (popular in the twelfth and thirteenth century French and German chivalric romance) in order to breathe new life into the genre (Tracy, 1994; Alvar, 2009). It has been investigated as an exploration of Spanish geography, depicting a real-life cave in the Province of Albacete (Selig, 1982), as an Erasmian parody (Edigo, 1994) and as a case study of demonology (Padilla, 2011; Williamson, 2015). Finally, the episode of the Cave of Montesinos has been interpreted as rite of passage, where Quixote is initiated into a personal spiritual transformation much like Ulysses, Jesus, Muhammad, Aeneas or Dante (Badiella, 2020). It is important to point out that the specific episode, which showcases the "sacred, epic and picaresque" that are predominant in the novel (Molina, 2012) lends itself to various religious, literary and philosophical transmutations. The chapter, open to interpretations that combine aspects of chivalry, hagiography and violence in an unexpected quixotic conjunction, is the perfect textual starting point for a postdramatic performance which explores onstage the allegorical struggle of a Sisyphus-like Quixote who balances between exhaustion and hope.

#### 4. A ritual of catharsis

The performance *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* presents onstage a scenography of a despotic cave. A dead horse lies at the right end of the stage. Flashes of red and green light flicker in the beginning before the whole theatre is encapsulated in darkness. The first human figure that appears is none other than Don Quixote. He is slowly brought down in the space, supposedly the Cave of Montesinos, hanging from a rope. He wears a white and grayish costume that resembles more a fencer than a knight. He is stripped of his shining armor. He seems bare, unprotected, fragile. Quixote, portrayed by actor Aris Servetalis, lights a torch and comes across a series of frantic figures, men and women, who wander in the cave. He joins them frustrated, almost sleepwalking, and finally collapses exhausted. In the meantime, a woman dressed in dark clothes narrates in German excerpts from the chapter, adding context to the actions of the protagonist. She wanders: "Are all these real?" posing the theme of deception that is central in *Don Quixote*. An atmospheric haunting music compliments the performance, echoing a cinematic and, at times, almost operatic sensibility with ecclesiastical undertones. In the next scene two mysterious figures, a man bearing a sword and a flag and a woman in a pale pink dress, appear and help Quixote get back on his feet. These are nameless figures, that could easily be representing characters from the chapter of Cervantes, namely enchanted Montesinos and the equally enchanted Dulcinea. Quixote is slowly energized and appears to regain his ability to walk.

After this introduction to the Cave of Montesinos, as it is reimagined by Rēs Ratio Network and director Efi Birba, the main part of the performance ensues. Quixote, fully awake and alert, engages in a series of actions within the cave and the steep slope that leads to the exit of the cave. These actions are corporal games, futile and tiresome, through which Quixote seems to try to find a meaning in the dark and hopeless space of the cave. For example, he tries to climb in the slope and balance himself on the edge of the exit only to crumble soon down to the bottom of the cave. He tries to walk on the uneven ground and uses a self-made seesaw in order to test his agility and ability to execute difficult tasks. Soon after, Quixote, always silent and persistent, engages choreographically in a relationship with the woman resembling Dulcinea. The girl is taken away from him by a man in black clothes while she struggles and fights furiously to break free. Attentive and careful, Quixote comes close to his beloved one to make sure she is safe and conscious. But the girl soon moves away from Quixote, dancing elegantly. She finally faints exhausted and Quixote bears her tenderly in his arms before letting her go. After meeting his loved one Quixote appears more decisive and willing to exit the cave. Much like Sisyphus, he starts to climb time after time without succeeding in his endeavor. The focus of the performance then shifts to the dead horse on the ground. The narrator describes the effort of the horse when it runs bearing the burden of the rider. The narration draws a parallel between the struggle of man and animal.

The performance then enters its final course. A rather fatalistic ritual starts in the Cave of Montesinos and marks the beginning of the end. Dark clothed performers enter the space and raise on their shoulders the lifeless bodies of Quixote and two women, possibly representing Dulcinea and Durandarte's wife, Belerma. Then the bodies are dragged through the soil from the one end of the cave to the other. The journey of Quixote in the cave seems, for a moment, to end in meaningless defeat. However, the performance has in store one more surprise for the spectator. One more episode that illustrates the possible triumph of man against futility. Quixote, who claims he stayed in the cave for three days in the novel, seems to rise from the dead much like Jesus did according to the New Testament. But this is not a performance of messianic exuberance. Quixote, exhausted, gets back on his feet with the help of a rope and a man. He slowly regains some of his strength in a grim atmosphere of darkness and music while the narrator repeats a phrase stressing that "a labor camp is catharsis". In the final scenes of the performance Quixote gets back to what he knows best: striving to find his balance on stone columns and engaging in repetitive actions. In a Beckettian sense he tries again to fail again but fail better. The narrator mentions in German then Quixote is an "eremite". He is a sacred body, a stylite that believes that the mortification of his body will lead to the salvation of his soul. This last part of the performance becomes almost a religious experience both for the performers and the spectators. Quixote seems to reclaim for one last time his knighthood and fights alone with his sword and helmet while the cave becomes full of smoke and noise. Soon he collapses. Then he is tied with a string of ropes along with his horse in order to be finally erected, noble and sanctified, back to the surface.

## 5. The art of adaptation

The performance *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* is a characteristic case of a free adaptation of a literary work. The director draws sparse elements from Cervantes' novel and uses the Cave of Montesinos episode as a reference in order to anchor her vision on the struggle that burdens the human condition. In order to specify the liberties that rise in the performance in comparison to the novel it is useful to mention firstly the six building blocks that are seminal tools for the traditional adaptation from page to stage. These are a) the selection of the literature and the definition of the theme b) the selection of the dialogue and the narrative c) the identification of principal characters and primary relationships d) the choice of evocative stageable imagery e) the construction of the storyline and f) the crafting of playable actions (Murphy, 2013, p. 10). As I will analyze, these building blocks are reconfigured in the performance by Rēs Ratio Network, leading to a radical postdramatic adaptation that philosophizes rather than a traditional dramatization that narrates. More specifically, the director selects a chapter of *Don Quixote* and defines as the main theme of the performance the existential solitude of the protagonist, not the picaresque aspect that prevails in the novel. In terms of dialogue and narrative, the performance presents a mute Quixote that 'speaks' through his body and actions,



not his words. Only excerpts of the novel are used, as a textual material in a postdramatic “theatre of heterogeneity” (Lehmann, 2006, pp. 132). The principal character identified by the performance is Quixote, who becomes a symbol of the ascetic man. The rest of the characters that take part in the Cave of Montesinos episode, both men (Montesinos, Durandarte) and women (Belerma, Dulcinea) are not portrayed in a straightforward manner. Instead, one of the female performers seems to portray enchanted Dulcinea and one male seems to take up, in part, the role of Montesinos. The key relationship in the performance is the one between Quixote and Dulcinea, which is extracted from the novel. Additionally, the director adds multiple dark clothed men who illustrate haunting figures, possibly in Quixote’s imagination. The choice of evocative imagery is the most clear connection between the novel and the performance (besides the figure of Quixote). The Cave of Montesinos loses its sparkling fantasy quality but retains the mechanism of ‘catavasis’ and personal journey. Finally, in terms of storyline, the performance disposes the plot of Cervantes and depicts instead the entrance to the cave, the struggle and the exodus. Step by step, the director employs the art of adaptation in order to realize a dystopian vision.

## 6. Homo Ludens or Homo Asceticus?

The philosophical reinterpretation of Cervantes’ novel by Rēs Ratio Network, where Quixote appears as ‘homo ludens’, is partly inspired by the well-known book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (originally published in 1938) by Dutch cultural theorist Johan Huizinga. In his study Huizinga introduced the concept of ‘homo ludens’ (Huizinga, 2002, pp. 1-27) which corresponds to the archetypal human at play and more precisely the “active explorers and negotiators of societal possibility” (Henricks, 2010, p. 162). Huizinga argued that play behavior existed before culture and illustrates the individuality and multidimensional aspect of humans. Play enables the imaginative exploration and fuels culture, while at the same time it is produced by culture itself. The concept of Huizinga, which remains relevant today as a cultural and sociological tool, has inspired the investigation of play in postmodern society (Mielicka-Pawlowska, 2016) and the exploration of play as a modality that offers interdisciplinary engagement and new epistemological directions for the humanities (Rapti & Gordon, 2021). Ludic Studies inspire *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* leading to an onstage interpretation of the Cave of Montesinos that presents play as an existential part of human struggle rather than a device of social dialectics and evolvment. Quixote (not the character but the performer), as Servetalis proclaimed in an interview, confronts the challenges that rise in front of him like a child that transforms objects with imagination, focusing solely on the materiality of the objects (Chiaro, 2019). The element of playful freedom is also relevant in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, where the line between reality and fantasy is blurred. However, Cervantes chooses a picaresque mixture of dramatic and comic elements, while the performance presents Quixote as homo asceticus even more than homo ludens. As a man striving for absolution, not a child experimenting with playfulness. The performer is encapsulated in a persistent solipsism that transforms the Cave of Montesinos into a metaphysical monastery of agony and religious catharsis, rather than a space of creative imagination.

The philosophical concept that is key for the hermeneutic dissection of the performance is none other than the myth of Sisyphus, as it was explored by French existential writer and essayist Albert Camus. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), investigates philosophically the modern attitude towards futility and absurdity (Camus, 2018). According to Camus the only human response that can produce a sense of meaning is revolt. As he proposes, we should not turn to hope but live without illusions and consolations (Sagi, 2002, p. 113). In this way Sisyphus becomes the symbol of the modern man. Defying Gods, Sisyphus was condemned to push a huge boulder up a hill in a repetitive manner, day after day, in a circular life of hopeless persistence. His love of life made him choose this world, paying a steep price, rather than returning to Hades. In *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23*, the modus operandi of the performance corresponds to this daily routine of tireless struggle. Quixote, and consequently the modern man of the 21st century, can regain his courage for everyday futility by abiding to the mentality of a child that focuses firstly on what is plausible before reaching for distant grand narratives. The metadiscourses of modernity are shattered and Quixote, in this performance, finds consolation in what Jean-François Lyotard called “petits récits” (Taylor & Lambert, 2006, p. 185). He focuses on mundane actions such as balancing on obstacles and climbing up a steep hill. The *raison d’être* of man becomes his strenuous corporal engagement within a world of fantoms and illusions.

This interpretation deconstructs, in a way, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and depicts the pragmatism of persistence, without clear hope or solution, rather than the escape from reality into an invented cosmos. The enchanting Cave of Montesinos is stripped of its crystal palace and beautiful women with lavish turbans. The utopia of a vibrant colorful vision, as the one experienced by Cervantes' Quixote is replaced by the bare brown and gray stage where Quixote becomes an ascetic Sisyphus.

## 7. Conclusion

The performance *Don Quixote Book 2, Chapter 23* presents a post-Beckettian universe, where Quixote engages in repetitive actions without Godot ever appearing on the horizon. The chapter on the Cave of Montesinos becomes a point of departure for the adaptation by Rēs Ratio Network which constructs a philosophical interpretation of the episode. At the same time, it includes a "sacred" quality within an imposing scenography verging on installation art (Ioannidis, 2019). The aesthetic of the performance incorporates elements of postdramatic theatre, a choice which is still common in the recent work of major international directors and collectives such as Ivo Van Hove, Punchdrunk and Signa (Carlson, 2015). The common thread in such performances is that they challenge the traditional concept of mimesis and resist narration (Nikitas, 2016, p. 83). Indeed, the figure of Quixote in this performance is more connected to the corporal action of the performer rather than the fictive aspects of the famous character by the Spanish novelist. The classic text by Cervantes is deconstructed and removed, as it is often the case in a postdramatic approach. It is replaced by what the semioticians would call a 'performance text' (Lehmann, 2006, pp. 85). The fact that the narrator (the actress Effi Rabsilber) speaks in her own language, German, in front of a Greek audience is not only a sign of the international character of the cast and the performance but also a clear indication of the source of its aesthetics. Contemporary German theatre has been "both the birthplace and the place of the fullest development of the postdramatic" (Carlson, 2015, p. 579).

One of the most characteristic scenes of the performance appears twenty minutes after the beginning. Quixote, exhausted on the ground, strives to get up using his flagpole. The flag, that symbolizes the grand ideas that inspire the self-deceiving idealism of the knight, is in rags, shredded, disheveled and dirty. It is very clear to the spectator that the performer is fighting for a lost cause, a vision already refuted. For the next several minutes Quixote tries persistently to get back on his feet. He circles around the flagpole, pushes against the ground with his feet, climbing up the pole strenuously. In the end, just for a moment, he rises decisively before kneeling again down to let go of his flag and surrender his ideas. In *Don Quixote, Book 2, Chapter 23* Quixote is stripped of delusional hope and love. He does not fight blinded against windmills but struggles with the futility of his own existence. He lets go of all his belongings and desires. All the characteristics of his 'normative masculinity' and personal identity that are depicted in the novel – estate, family, social class – (Parr & Vollendorf, 2015, pp. 100-120) are subtracted in a bare space that acquires metaphysical dimensions. In this adaptation we do not face Cervantes' Quixote but a performer that becomes an onstage marionette. He becomes a fragile shadow flickering in a dark existential cave. However, as the performance indicates, the man who is left bare and unprotected on earth, just like Adam after leaving paradise, can always retain his personal revolt against demise. And that is none other than his unceasing persistence.

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