

1000 Words: Assisting Students of Cervantes through Iconography

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1 Introduction

Many humanities departments take special interest in Spanish literature. In particular the work of Miguel de Cervantes is the subject of interest both to humanities education and research. Cervantes is one of the most studied writers from the Golden Ages of Spain because of the significance in the development of the modern novel in the Hispanic world. The pinnacle of his contribution to the Spanish literature is *Don Quixote*, which was recently voted the greatest novel ever written in a poll of one hundred contemporary writers. In fact, in popular Hispanophone culture *Don Quixote* inhabits a similar place as Shakespeare's tragedies do in Anglophone culture.

At Texas A&M University, many Hispanic studies students take a course in which they analyze Cervantes life and cultural milieu. In this course, students are challenged to take a comprehensive and critical view of Cervantes' major prose fiction, focusing initially on *Don Quixote*. Additionally, these courses investigate how Cervantes' reputation has been consolidated over the centuries and how he has come to be considered a classic of world literature. Theories of comedy, narrative technique, notions of fiction and fictionality are also covered. Students also re-examine some of the rich

iconographic tradition of Don Quixote, which despite the existence of the Cervantes Project’s iconographic database, students largely rely on textbooks and Internet sources that are not only dispersed and incomplete, but may be of questionable authority.

With a collection of around 10,000 images, and a brief introduction to the project as part of the course itself, why then is it not utilized? Some past students of the class indicated that they just didn’t know it was there, but a Google search for “Cervantes images” returns a link to the Cervantes Iconography project in the top ten results. Another complaint made was that the system seems to be intended more for scholars than students and thus was unable to meet the unique needs of students. This complaint seems to be more persuasive. In particular, students find situating pictures in the context of the text to be difficult. In fact, it is believable that even scholars would find difficulty in recalling and finding the exact images as they examine the text.

Lastly, a manual pruning of the collection may not be desirable. Robinson pointed out that “[the] view of what editions might be some time in the future opens up many possibilities. A school-teacher wants to build a lesson about a scene from Hamlet: in a few minutes, he or she could combine different versions of key lines of the text, linked with images of those lines in the Folio and Quarto prints, commentaries, [sic] images of performances.” [1]

2 Purpose

While illustrated editions are nothing new, they dealt with small sets of images created by a single illustrator in the context of that particular edition. The ability to choose from 10,000 images in diverse styles, forms, and sources provides unique challenges in building a synthetic digital edition. Questions from which images are appropriate in a given place in the text, to how the selection affects the understanding of the context, and even of inter-image consistency provide challenges. The basic question all of these lower questions derive from is how would a scholar select the best proper image to be inserted in a text from this vast collection of images? We intend to try and identify the appropriate attributes of an image to guide selection of a consistent and helpful set of images for this a synthetic digital system. From these attributes we intend to design a system to select the most suitable images to be inserted in the context of a given place in the text of Don

Quixote.

3 Proposed System

We intend to create a web-based system that will compose a synthetic illustrated edition based on the preferences identified by a user. Images that match the global attribute parameters will be associated with paragraphs based on a comparison of paragraphs to the keywords that are associated with the image. The system will provide two interfaces one where thumbnails in the margin of the page will indicate an associated image and one where a user can walk through a picture book of each selected image and read the excerpt from the text that the image has been associated with.

4 Evaluation

The prototype of our system will then be evaluated with a short user study where a number of students will be asked to use and evaluate the ease of use of each of the interfaces in comparison to the current reading interface. Each user will be given a set of 30 reading comprehension questions 10 of which they will use the current reading interfaces, 10 with the thumbnail interfaces, and the last 10 with the picture book interface. A predefined pool of questions will be randomly divided in to the categories for each user. After the experimental portion of the study, the users will be given a short interview and questionnaire focused on their perceptions and satisfaction.

References

- [1] ROBINSON, P. Where we are with electronic scholarly editions, and where we want to be. <http://computerphilologie.uni-muenchen.de/jg03/robinson.html>, March 2004.