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Historical note

Sleep and sleep disorders in Don Quixote

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Abstract

In *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Miguel de Cervantes presents Don Quixote as an amazing character of the 17th century who suffers from delusions and illusions, believing himself to be a medieval knight errant. Besides this neuropsychiatric condition, Cervantes included masterful descriptions of several sleep disorders such as insomnia, sleep deprivation, disruptive loud snoring and rapid eye movement sleep behaviour disorder. In addition, he described the occurrence of physiological, vivid dreams and habitual, post-prandial sleepiness—the siesta. Cervantes' concept of sleep as a passive state where all cerebral activities are almost absent is in conflict with his description of abnormal behaviours during sleep and vivid, fantastic dreams. His concept of sleep was shared by his contemporary, Shakespeare, and could have been influenced by the reading of the classical Spanish book of psychiatry *Examen de Ingenios* (1575).

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Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605–first part, 1615–second part) is the story of Don Quixote, a 17th century gentleman who, after spending most of his time reading novels of chivalry, believes himself to be a medieval knight. In the company of his faithful squire Sancho Panza, Don Quixote rides through Spain searching for exciting adventures and his imaginary lady, Dulcinea del Toboso [1,2]. During occasional reading of the novel we realized that it contained several accurate descriptions of some sleep disorders and decided to re-read the book systematically in order to identify references to sleep and sleep disorders. We have found examples of insomnia, sleep deprivation, rapid eye movement (REM) sleep behaviour disorder, fantastic dreams and snoring.

Insomnia and sleep deprivation are associated with reduced cognitive and psychomotor performance [3]. Cervantes explained that the cause of Don Quixote's mental disturbance was the loss of sleep that he suffered from reading books of chivalry, and located its origin in the brain, saying, in Part I, Chapter I:

In short, our hidalgo was soon so absorbed in these books that his nights were spent reading from dusk till dawn, and his days from dawn till dusk, until the lack of sleep and the excess of reading withered his brain, and he went mad.

Don Quixote subsequently suffered chronic insomnia due to persistent ruminations and worries about his fantastic adventures and love for the lady Dulcinea, and this continuous sleep deprivation, according to Cervantes, preserved his madness during the rest of his adventures. Examples of Don Quixote's insomnia are found in Part I, Chapter VIII:

Don Quixote didn't sleep at all during the night, thinking about his lady Dulcinea, to conform with what he'd read in his books, where knights errant spent many sleepless nights in glades and deserts, engrossed in the recollection of their ladies.

And in part II, chapter XLVIII:

Don Quixote didn't appear in public for six days, and on one of the nights when he couldn't sleep, as he brooded

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on his misfortunes and on Altisidora's persecution of him, he heard someone unlocking the door of his room...

In the final chapter of the book, as Don Quixote is dying of fever in his bed, his mental disturbance is finally cured after sleeping more than 6 h. He realizes, only then, the absurdity of his adventures as a knight errant, and regrets having read those books of chivalry:

Don Quixote asked to be left alone, because he needed a little sleep. They did as he asked, and he slept for more than six hours at a stretch, as the saying goes. Indeed, he slept for so long that the housekeeper and the niece thought that he was going to die in his sleep. But he did eventually awake, and he bellowed,
 –(...) My mind has been restored to me, and it is now clear and free, without those gloomy shadows of ignorance cast over me by my wretched, obsessive reading of those detestable books of chivalry.

Although habitual *snoring* is now associated with several medical disorders, such as obstructive sleep apnea syndrome and vascular complications [4], Cervantes considered snoring a sign of a good night's sleep. In contrast to Don Quixote, Sancho Panza is greedy, fat (in fact, 'panza' translated into English means 'belly'), a 'good sleeper' and a habitual, heavy snorer. There is no strong evidence that Sancho suffered from obstructive sleep apnea syndrome, since there are no references in the book to episodes of cessation of breathing at night, complaints of unrefreshed sleep upon awakening or excessive daytime sleepiness. In Part II, Chapter XX, there is a reference to Sancho Panza's habitual snoring and good sleep habits that contrasts with Don Quixote's insomnia:

(Don Quixote) called to his squire Sancho, who was still snoring; seeing which, Don Quixote addressed him thus before awaking him:
 –O happy you above all who dwell upon the face of the earth, for, neither envying nor envied, you sleep with a tranquil spirit and without enchanters to pursue you or enchantments to alarm you! Sleep on, I say again, and so shall I say another hundred times (...).

REM sleep behaviour disorder is a parasomnia first described in the medical literature in 1986 by Schenck et al. [5]. The minimal diagnostic criteria include limb or body movement associated with dream mentation, and at least one of the following: harmful or potentially harmful sleep behaviour, dreams that appear to be 'acted out', or sleep behaviours that disrupt sleep continuity [6]. In Part I, Chapter XXXV, there is an episode where Don Quixote's sleep behaviour fulfils these minimal criteria; he shouts and vigorously attacks some wineskins while dreaming that he is fighting a giant [7,8] (Fig. 1):

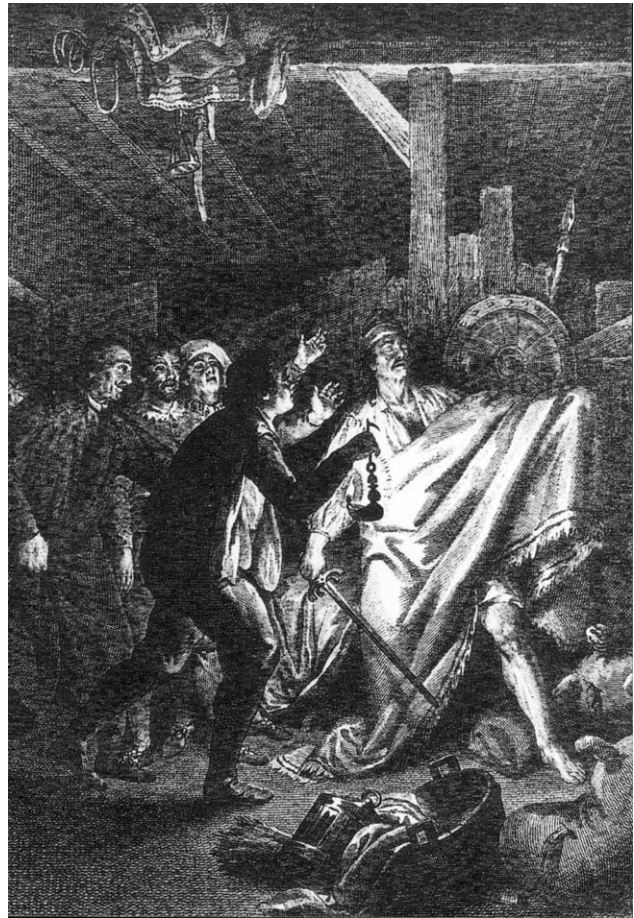


Fig. 1. Don Quixote, with eyes closed and a sword in his right hand, is found by Sancho Panza and friends slashing the wineskins lying on the floor while dreaming he is slashing a giant. This drawing by Antonio Carnicero, engraved by Manuel Salvador Carmona in 1779, can be found in the 1780 edition of the Real Academia Española.

Sancho Panza came running in a frenzy from the loft where Don Quixote had gone to bed, crying
 –Come on, come on, all of you, come and help my master, he's got himself into the roughest and toughest battle I've ever set eyes on.
 (...) They heard a great uproar in the loft, and Don Quixote bellowing:
 –Stay, robber, scoundrel, poltroon; I have you at last; and your scimitar shall not save you!
 (...) And he (Sancho Panza) burst into the loft, and the others followed him, and they found Don Quixote wearing the strangest outfit in the world. (...) Round his left arm he had wound the blanket from his bed (...) and in his right hand he grasped his sword, with which he was letting fly in all directions as he shouted out as if he really were fighting with a giant. *And the best part of it all is that his eyes were tight shut, because he was asleep and dreaming that he was battling against the giant:* so intensely had he lived in his imagination the adventure in which he was going to be triumphant that he was dreaming he'd reached the kingdom of Micomicón and

was at grips with the enemy. And he'd given the wine-skins so many slashes, thinking he was slashing the giant, that the loft was flooded with wine. (...) Yet the poor knight still didn't wake up, until the barber brought a large bucketful of cold water from the well and drenched him from head to toe, and then Don Quixote did awaken, but not fully enough to be aware of his situation.

Besides the description of these sleep disorders, Cervantes included references to some characteristics of normal sleep, such as the occurrence of vivid dreams, and to the physiological post-prandial sleep habit of the siesta.

In Part II, Chapter XXII, Don Quixote has a *fantastic dream* [9] inside the Cave of Montesinos, where he was lowered with a rope before falling into a deep sleep.

(...) They pulled Don Quixote right out, seeing that his eyes were shut and that he seemed to be asleep. They laid him on the ground and untied him, yet he still didn't wake up. But then they rolled him back and forth and shook him to and fro so much that after a good while he did awake, and stretched himself as if emerging from deep and heavy sleep.

In the next chapter, Don Quixote explains his fantastic dream, in which he met Montesinos and visited an enchanted castle. But surprisingly, his dream recollection is so precise and vivid that he believes the dream to be real. Several weeks later [Part II, Chapter LXII] Don Quixote addresses a question to an enchanted bust that has "the property and the virtue of replying the truth to all questions spoken into its ear."

–Tell me, O you that answer so well, was what I describe as having happened in the Cave of Montesinos the truth or a dream?

In Part II, Chapter XXXII, Sancho Panza comments on his habit of taking extremely long *siestas*:

The Duchess begged Sancho, if he wasn't feeling too excessive sleepy, to come and spend the afternoon with her and her maidens in a lovely cool room. Sancho replied that although he did usually sleep four or five hours on a summer afternoon he would, for her goodness' sake, try with all his might not to sleep for a single hour that particular afternoon, and would obey her command.

Although Cervantes described several sleep disorders, he mainly considered sleep to be a passive state similar to death, where all mental activities are almost absent. In Part II, Chapter LXVIII, Sancho Panza launches into a speech about the nature of sleep, saying:

–All I do know is that so long as I'm asleep I'm rid of all fears and hopes and toils and glory, and long live the man

who invented sleep, the cloak that covers all human thoughts, the food that takes away hunger, the water that chases away thirst, the fire that warms the cold, the cold that cools the heat and, in short, the universal coinage that can buy anything, the scales and weights that make the shepherd the equal of the king and the fool the equal of the wise man. There's only one drawback about sleep, so I've heard—it's like death, because there's very little difference between a man who's asleep and one who's dead.

–I've never heard you speak, Sancho, said Don Quixote, with such elegance (...).

Cervantes' concept of sleep was not unique in his time and was shared by his contemporary, Shakespeare [10]. In *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I (1601), Sancho's belief that sleep is a state similar to death is repeated:

–To die, to sleep, no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to (...)

Furthermore, Sancho Panza's concept of sleep as the 'cloak that covers all human thoughts' resembles Shakespeare's 'sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care' from *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene II (1606). Thus, it seems that in the late 16th and early 17th century, Cervantes (1547–1616) and Shakespeare (1564–1616), shared similar concepts about the nature and significance of sleep. Shakespeare included in his plays descriptions of several sleep disorders such as insomnia and snoring [10] that Cervantes also included in *Don Quijote de la Mancha*.

It is interesting to note that the concept of sleep as a restorative brain process, indicated when Cervantes tells us that the cause of Don Quixote's madness was that 'the lack of sleep withered his brain', could have been influenced by the following passage from Doctor Huarte de San Juan's classical Spanish book of psychiatry *Examen de Ingenios* (*The Examination of Men's Wits*, 1575) [11], known to have been read by Cervantes [2,12]:

The brain is withered when we are awake, but a night's sleep makes it strong and wet.

In the 16th century, physicians considered madness to be a state where the brain was completely withered and dried, both during sleep and wakefulness. It has been suggested that Huarte de San Juan's descriptions of some of his psychiatric patients, including those in the *Examen de Ingenios*, inspired the character of Don Quixote as well as others, such as the main character of the exemplary novel *El Licenciado Vidriera* (*The Glass Graduate*, 1613) [2,11,12].

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