



Pretension as Epistemic Performance: Madness, Genius, and the Verdict of Uptake in Don Quixote

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Abstract

Background: Readers of Don Quixote have long divided between two verdicts: the knight is mad, or the knight is a martyr to a disenchanted world. Both readings assume that the truth of his acts lies inside the acts themselves; this paper argues that it lies in the world's answer.

Methods: The paper develops pretension as an epistemic category and constructs a three-term reading grammar — frame, uptake, and aftermath — through Austin, Butler, Goffman, Schechner, and related theories of performance and recognition. It applies this grammar to two structurally opposed scenes in Cervantes's novel: the inn where Quixote is dubbed a knight and the windmill plain where his wager is refused, and a third, where the verdict is neither granted nor refused but held in dispute.

Analysis: At the inn, the keeper grants sanction without belief: the rite is completed, the designation acquires social currency, and Quixote leaves with a standing conferred by others. On the plain, Sancho refuses endorsement of the frame, and the same kind of wager returns to Quixote as error and madness.

Conclusion: Madness and genius are not simply differences of content or psychology; they are also verdicts rendered by audiences before whom claims are staged. The paper extends this structure to scholarship itself, where knowledge is never ratified privately but waits on uptake.

Novelty: The article reclaims pretension from its moral weight and proposes it as a technical term for performance with consciousness of performance, tested by social uptake.

Keywords: Cervantes, frame-uptake-aftermath, performativity, pretension as epistemic performance



Introduction

A man asks the keeper of a roadside inn to dub him a knight, lays his armour on a water-trough, and keeps vigil over it by moonlight. For four centuries, readers have tended to call this act, and the long campaign that follows it, either madness or faith: Quixote the fool, always wrong before a world that is always right, or Quixote the martyr, whose will redeem a world too disenchanted to deserve it — the idealizing tradition whose history Close (1978) traces and contests. The two verdicts agree on almost nothing except the assumption beneath them both, that the truth of the act lies inside the act, waiting to be judged right or wrong. This paper argues that they are looking in the wrong place. In their hurry to judge the knight, both pass over the man who made the wager.

The wager begins before judgment. Before anyone has called him mad or holy, Quixote does something simpler and stranger than either: he acts *as if* he is a knight, in the hope that the acting might help make it true (Slootweg, 2025). He stakes a claim he cannot yet make good on and waits to see whether the world will ratify it. There is already a name for this, an old and unkind one. We call it pretension, and we mean by it vanity, affectation, the claim that outruns its warrant. But the word carried, alongside the contempt, a different sense. Its Latin root is *prae-tendere* — to stretch forth, to reach before the grasp. To pretend, in that other sense, is not simply to falsify but to lean forward: to extend a claim into the world ahead of the world's consent.

Whether the claim comes true is not the claimant's to decide. He can stage the performance and hold his conviction; the verdict belongs to whoever is watching — to the world's willingness, or refusal, to grant the claim its standing. This is the hinge the paper turns on, and it has a name: uptake. Grant it, and the wager acquires standing as knowledge; withhold it, and the same wager is thrown back to the claimant as madness, error, or empty pretension. Madness and genius, on this reading, are not differences of content. They are differences of verdict — formally similar acts granted or refused by the audiences before whom they are staged. What looks like a fact about Quixote's mind turns out to be a decision made by those around him.

It is not new, of course, to refuse the diagnosis of madness. The most developed performance readings of the novel have already done this, recasting Quixote not as a patient whose acts the world must correct but as an actor conscious of his role. Francisco Larubia-Prado, for example, puts the case most directly: Quixote is "not mad at any moment, but acting" (Larubia-Prado, 2009, p. 337), sustained by a double consciousness — the performer's awareness that he is performing — and engaged in "re-describing himself and the world" through chivalric forms (Larubia-Prado, 2009, p. 338). The present argument builds on this insight, restoring Quixote's agency and treating his enactments as acts of cognition rather than symptoms of disorder. But the performance reading reaches its limit at a point the novel itself insists on. Quixote's consciousness of his performance is no less present at the windmills than at the inn; what differs decisively is not in him, but in the world's answer. Larubia-Prado sees the actor, and the field of interaction around him — an audience to be impressed, witnesses whose responses the



performance arranges. What remains to be theorised is uptake: the audience's power not merely to witness the performance, but to grant or refuse its standing.

This paper is premised on letting that audience judge. It claims that pretension — performance with consciousness of performance, tested by uptake — is a distinct epistemic structure, and that it is uptake, not content or conviction alone, that decides whether the act is ratified as knowledge or returned to its maker as madness. The argument proceeds in four movements: first, the reclamation of pretension as an epistemic category, against the moral tradition that condemned the word and alongside the theories of performance that came nearest to naming it; second, the translation of that category into a way of reading — a grammar of frame, uptake, and aftermath; third, the test — two scenes from *Don Quixote* held up as a diptych, the inn where uptake is granted and the windmills where it is refused, with a third in which the verdict is suspended in dispute; and finally, a reflexive turn toward the scholar who, in professing, makes the same wager, before the conclusion draws out what the diptych implies about the social structure of knowing itself.

Pretension as an Epistemic Category

If the performance reading found the actor but never asked the audience for its verdict, the task now is to name what passes between them — and that task runs immediately into a difficulty of vocabulary. The word this paper proposes, pretension, arrives already condemned, and the condemnation has a serious tradition behind it. Lionel Trilling gives that tradition its spine: over some four centuries, European moral life came to prize sincerity, which he defines as “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling, 1972, p. 2) — the match of inner truth to outer show, held up as the measure of an honest self. Its most quoted form is Polonius's counsel to a departing son, to thine own self be true; that the line is given to a tedious old man only sharpens the irony, for even Polonius, Trilling suggests, exceeds himself for the length of three lines (Trilling, 1972, p. 3). Against this ideal, pretension is simply the name for the failure: the show that exceeds the substance, the claim made before it has been earned. The condemnation is not even implicit — sincerity, Trilling records, came to mean “the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence” (1972, p. 13); the word this paper proposes to reclaim is written into the very definition of the virtue it offends. Nor is the suspicion free-floating. It sharpens when stations become permeable: Trilling sets the anxiety in a world where “it became more and more possible for people to leave the class into which they were born” (1972, p. 15). The anxiety found its sharpest image in a line attributed to George Sand — the French novelist whose own name and life were a sustained act of self-invention — in a reflection printed in *The North American Review* a decade after her death: “Throughout the world, the rill wants to be a river, and the goose-pond a sea” (Sand, 1887, p. 208). Whatever its exact provenance, the figure caught a moral commonplace of the age: that to reach beyond one's station is to overreach. The objection has, then, both a principle and a history. Any reclamation of the word must answer it, not wish it away.

The answer is that this demand — that the inner be settled before the outer dares speak — holds for one kind of knowledge and fails for another. Some things are possessed before they are



performed, and their performance only displays what is already complete: one does not recite a memorised line in order to learn it, nor name a capital to know it. The knowing is settled in private; the saying merely reports it. But there is a class of knowledge — and it may be the larger class — that cannot be reached this way, because it does not exist until it is performed. One cannot think as a scholar by waiting until one already thinks as a scholar; one becomes one by venturing the claim, teaching the seminar, writing the argument one does not yet fully command, and finding out in the act whether it holds. For this knowledge, the forward lean is not a substitute for knowing but its only route. The suspicion would condemn the rill for wanting to be a river; but no rill ever became a river by holding still.

This is why the word repays a closer look than contempt has let it have. The point is not to restore a pure original meaning, but to reopen a possibility that the modern sense has narrowed. Pull the word ‘pretend’ apart, and its parts are still legible beneath the modern sense of fakery: pre, before, and tend, to stretch or reach. The adjective the root yields, by the same rule that makes *attentive* from *attend*, is not the pejorative *pretentious* but *pretentive*. The very word we now use to mean feigning still carries, in plain sight, the older gesture of reaching ahead — of directing oneself toward what is not yet in hand. The Latin gives the gesture its plainest form: *prae-tendere*, to stretch forth, to put forward, to extend a claim before its grounds are secured. To pretend, in this sense, is not simply to feign. Phenomenology gives this directedness its most influential name — and the name is kin: intentionality, from *in-tendere*, to stretch toward, the same Latin verb that *prae-tendere* stretches forward. Consciousness, on Husserl’s account, is never sealed inside itself; it is always “consciousness of something,” always reaching past what is presently given toward the object it intends (Husserl, 1913/1983, §§44, 84). Pretension is not intentionality itself. It is intentionality made public and answerable — the directedness of belief turned outward as a claim, where the world may receive it, ignore it, or refuse it. To pretend, recovered through this root, is to lean one’s belief into the world ahead of the world’s consent, and to wait, exposed, on the answer.

The structure can be set down more precisely. Three things compose an act of pretension, and everything depends on how they are held together. The first is performance: the claim enacted, projected into the world as a gesture other can witness. The second is consciousness of performance: not the knowledge that the claim is false, but the awareness that the claim is being staged through a form whose authority is not yet guaranteed. The third is uptake: a term borrowed from Austin and extended here from speech to the staking of claims, naming the world’s answer — the granting or refusal that determines whether the performance acquires standing. Stated as a heuristic rather than a law: pretension is performance plus consciousness of performance, tested by uptake. The weight falls on that last clause. The first two terms belong to the actor and are largely within his gift; the third is not his to render. And this is no peculiarity of pretension but one visible version of the ordinary condition of knowing: a claim acquires standing as knowledge only when something beyond the claimant receives it as such. The pretender merely makes visible, and makes risky, what every knower relies on and most knowers forget.



A structure is also defined by what it is not, and pretension is hemmed on four sides by acts it closely resembles. Two of them fall short at the second term, consciousness of performance. It is not delusion: the deluded man performs and is convinced, but no longer registers that he is staging anything, the gap between claim and warrant having closed into certainty — the disappearance Larubia-Prado treats as the threshold of actual madness (2009, p. 337). Nor is it simply sincerity: the sincere person performs and means it, but sincerity need not register the avowal as performance. Its ideal remains the unbroken passage from inner truth to outer expression — though even here, as Trilling observes, “we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person” (1972, p. 11).

The other two retain consciousness of performance but refuse the wager differently. It is not irony: the ironist knows precisely that he is performing but declines to stake the claim, holding the gap open and signalling all the while that he does not mean it. And it is not imposture: the impostor shares all three terms — he performs, knows it, and stakes the claim — but stakes it as a screen, intending the gap to remain open and hidden. The pretender alone holds the gap in view and leans across it, hoping the world will help close it, whereas the impostor profits from its staying open.

Judith Butler’s performativity comes nearer than any other account engaged here, and the convergence is worth conceding before the difference is drawn. Performativity is among the most powerful modern accounts of how performed acts produce what they seem only to express: gender, on this view, is not a property the subject owns and then displays, but an identity constituted through repeated acts within a field of norms (Butler, 1990/1999, pp. 33, 43–44). Pretension grants the core of this and builds on it: both refuse to let the self precede its enactment; both make the doing prior to the being. They part on where the future of the act is lodged, and on who bears its risk. Performativity faces backward for its force, toward norms that precede the subject and exceed individual intention; its futures arrive as drift — variations accumulating across repetitions that no one, in particular, stakes. Pretension cites no less — Quixote’s vigil is nothing but citation — but it cites in order to claim: the materials face backward, the claim faces forward, and a claimant stands behind it, waiting on an answer he cannot compel.

The harder objection is that Butler already has an audience. The appearance of substance, she writes, is “a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 179); and this audience enforces, for we “regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (p. 178). Performativity turns on recognisability — on whether an act is legible within the regulatory field that lets it count as anything at all. Is uptake, then, only another name for recognition? It is not, and the difference is the whole point. Recognisability is a standing condition: the field is already in place, deciding in advance what can even be read as an act. Uptake is an event: a verdict rendered, in time, on a particular staked claim, and free to fall either way. The two can come apart. Quixote at the windmills is perfectly legible — his one witness knows exactly what he is doing, charging mills he has called giants — and uptake is



refused all the same. Legibility is not ratification. To be recognised is to be understood; to receive uptake is to be granted that the claim holds. Butler explains how a performance becomes intelligible within a field of norms; pretension asks whether a staked claim, once intelligible, is allowed to stand. And beneath the categorical difference lies a difference of belief. Butler's audience ratifies by believing — including the actors, who forget they are acting. The inn will show the circuit completing through a witness who believes nothing at all. The social conditions of uptake extend beyond legibility. Where Butler shows how norms structure a performance's intelligibility, Miranda Fricker (2007) shows how its reception is structured by the claimant's social position: identical testimony from witnesses of different standing does not reliably receive the same verdict — content constant, credibility variable, uptake shaped by who is asking as much as by what is claimed (pp. 1–7). Recognisability, Butler showed, is a standing condition; so, Fricker shows, is credibility — and neither is the claimant's to guarantee.

But a category earns its keep only in the reading it makes possible. If uptake is an event — a verdict rendered in time, on a particular claim, before particular witnesses — then it can be caught in the act, and there should be a way of reading that knows where to look: for the moment the claim is staked, the moment the verdict falls, and what survives it.

Reading Pretension: Frame, Uptake, Aftermath

A reading grammar, like the claims it reads, is better caught from the text than laid over it. Cervantes builds episode after episode on a recurring sequence — a claim staged, a verdict rendered, a consequence that outlives them both — and the critical vocabulary this paper draws on has named the first of these well, the second barely, and the third only in passing. The procedure here is hermeneutic in Gadamer's sense, meaning arrived at not from the text alone but from its encounter with a reader's question (Gadamer, 1960/2004, pp. 305, 362–371); but the sequence itself is Cervantes's — only the names are this paper's. Three terms hold it steady: frame, uptake, aftermath.

Frame names the threshold at which behaviour declares itself performance — the moment an actor marks what follows as belonging to what Schechner calls the subjunctive, the space of *as if*, where gestures are offered as conditional rather than given (Schechner, 1985, pp. 36–37). The term carries a lineage worth acknowledging: Goffman, crediting Bateson, used *frame* for the principles organizing what a stretch of experience is taken to be (Goffman, 1974, pp. 10–11), and named *keying* the conventions by which an activity “already meaningful in terms of some primary framework” is “transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else” (p. 44). The frame read for here is narrower than Goffman's and sharper-edged than a keying: it marks not any transformation of experience but the threshold at which a *claim* announces itself. The marking is concrete. In Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, it is done through ritual cue, linguistic register, and the recoding of space: an inn renamed a castle, a keeper raised to a lord, a courtyard cleared for ceremony. Nor is what happens inside the frame invented from nothing. It is restored behaviour — fragments of an inherited code re-enacted as though their authority still held (Schechner, 1985, p. 35). To read



for the frame is to fix the coordinates of the wager: when does the claim announce itself as a claim, and by what signals are others invited into the conditional space it constructs? The frame can do no more than this. It establishes the conditions under which uptake becomes possible. It cannot compel it.

Uptake is the grammar's centre of gravity, and it must be told apart from two neighbours that describe the weather around the verdict rather than the verdict itself. Goffman's working consensus names the tacit agreement that settles, for the duration of an encounter, "whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured" (Goffman, 1956, pp. 3–4) — an equilibrium that holds, not a verdict that falls. Turner's liminality names the suspended state of one who has left an old status and not yet been granted a new one — "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Uptake names neither the agreement nor the suspension but the decision: the moment at which the witnesses of a staked claim determine, deliberately or not, whether to let the act hold. And the difference from Turner is instructive: his liminal passenger moves through a rite that will, in the ordinary run, deliver him to reaggregation (1969, p. 94); the pretender's threshold has no scheduled exit. Uptake is the gate, and nothing obliges it to open. The term is Austin's: an illocutionary act is not complete until the hearer grasps what the utterance is doing — what Austin calls "the securing of uptake," the recognition that makes a warning count as a warning (Austin, 1962/1975, p. 117). The securing concerns force, not content: the hearer who grasps that a warning is being issued need not believe the danger is real. Extended from speech to the staking of claims, it is asked to do heavier work: the witness must register the wager and answer it — belief in what is claimed is neither its condition nor its measure. Austin's uptake completes an act; the uptake read for here renders judgment on a wager. (The performance reading reached for Austin too, but for the performative and its conventions — never for uptake; Larubia-Prado, 2009, p. 337.)

Austin himself glances at this novel in passing — the "unhappy story of Don Quixote" is his example of what happens when a whole code of procedure, like the duelling challenge one may simply shrug off, is no longer accepted (Austin, 1962/1975, p. 27). But that glance, followed out, breaks his own frame. By Austin's conditions the chivalric forms can only misfire: the procedure has no accepted standing, and every invocation of it should die in the shrug. What the inn will show is the form functioning anyway — not because the code recovered its authority, but because one witness decided to let it hold. That is why uptake, in this paper, cannot name a precondition the world either meets or fails to meet. The hearer of a warning either grasps it or does not; the witness of a pretension either honours the form or refuses it — and the honouring need not involve belief. Uptake is never neutral and never owed. It is a verdict rendered in time, and it is free to fall either way.

Aftermath names what survives the verdict — the residue that outlives both the staging and the decision. The tradition has touched this ground only at its edges: Austin fenced off the consequences of an utterance under the name of perlocution and deferred its careful definition — "of course it needs it" — in favour of examples (Austin, 1962/1975, p. 101). For the staked



claim, the consequences are the point. Uptake granted leaves a deposit in the world: a designation in circulation, a story among witnesses, a claimant who behaves differently for carrying it. Uptake refused leaves its residue in the claimant: a claim thrown back, to be abandoned, or repaired and held privately, with no standing anywhere but in its keeper. And the residue is never inert. What Schechner calls restored behaviour is, read forward, aftermath awaiting its next frame (1985, p. 35) — which is why no wager after the first is staked clean. To read for aftermath is to trace what the verdict leaves into the scenes that follow it. When uptake is granted, the traces are worldly: the designation travels, the story circulates among those who witnessed the ceremony, and the claimant who carries the title rides out altered by carrying it. When uptake is refused, the traces are interior: the claimant performs whatever repair keeps the *as if* alive — minimal, defended, without standing — and that repair, not the refusal itself, is what conditions the next wager. The diptych of inn and windmill is not only a structural opposition, in this sense, but the minimum unit in which aftermath becomes legible. Two scenes from Part I put this grammar to work, chosen not for their fame but for their structural opposition; a third, taken up afterward, will complicate the binary they form. At the inn of Chapters II and III, the wager is staged and granted; on the windmill plain of Chapter VIII, the same wager is staged and refused. It would be too convenient to call the two scenes identical, and the argument does not need them to be: the claims differ in kind, the witnesses differ in what granting would cost them, and the second wager rides out already carrying the first one's aftermath. What the diptych isolates is not uptake as the only moving part but uptake as the decisive one — the term through which every other difference must pass before it can become a verdict. The differences between courtyard and plain explain why uptake fell as it did. They do not change what uptake, in falling, decided.

The Inn: Uptake Granted

The scene begins before Quixote opens his mouth. Riding toward the inn as evening falls, he sees not a roadside hostelry but a castle — four towers, pinnacles of shining silver, drawbridge and moat, all the appurtenances his books have taught him to expect (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 32). It is tempting to call this hallucination and close the case. Read as the first move of a wager, it is something else: an act of framing — the recoding of a space out of its functional identity and into one that can sustain the claim about to be staked in it.

The inn is renamed, the keeper raised to a lord capable of conferring honour, the courtyard cleared for ceremony. Everything that follows descends from this recoding: the armour laid on the water-trough, the vigil kept over it into the night, the formal request to be dubbed. None of it is invented. These are restored behaviours — fragments of a vanished chivalric code re-enacted as though their authority still held — and their familiarity is the point: a claim staged in a recognisable form is a claim others can be invited into.

The invitation is issued in language before anything else. When Quixote finally addresses the innkeeper — shutting himself up with his host after supper — he falls to his knees: “I shall ne’er, O valorous knight, arise from where I kneel, until your courtesy vouchsafes me a boon which I desire to beg of you and which will redound to your own praise and to the benefit of



humankind” (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 36). The archaic register, the conditional syntax, the staged supplication — this is the linguistic signature of the frame. Ordinary speech has become a ceremony; a request has become a rite. The wager is on the table. The question is whether anyone will pick it up.

The innkeeper’s answer is the analytical heart of the scene, and it has been misread by very good readers. Auerbach, whose account of the novel remains among the most influential, folds the innkeeper’s indulgence into the novel’s comedy of containment: reality is always right, Quixote always wrong, and the humour with which the world receives him is simply the form its verdict takes (Auerbach, 1946/1953, pp. 345–347). But this gets the direction of causality backwards. The innkeeper does not humour Quixote because reality has already won. Nothing has been decided when the knight kneels before him. The innkeeper faces a live choice — to refuse the form or to let it hold — and the novel is precise about both the suspicion and the decision: the host, “something of a wag,” who “had already suspected that his guest wasn’t in his right mind,” resolves, “to have something to laugh at that night,” to humour him (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 36). He assures Quixote that “such desires were natural and fitting in such a knight as he seemed to be,” improvises a knight-errant past of his own to keep the fiction fed, and directs the vigil to the yard beside the well.

The vigil complicates the grant without revoking it, and the complication should be kept in view rather than smoothed away. Quixote, guarding his armour at the water-trough, breaks the head of one muleteer who disturbs it, then of a second; stones follow; and the innkeeper — who has meanwhile “told everyone in the hostelry about his guest’s insanity, his vigil and the knighting he awaited” (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 38) — moves to end the affair, deciding to give him “his wretched order of chivalry before any further calamities occurred” (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 40). The uptake begun as entertainment is completed as crisis management: the rite is abridged, two hours of vigil declared quite enough against the four already kept, the missing chapel waved away. And so he carries the ceremony through at top speed — his ledger of straw-and-barley accounts standing in for a missal, read as though it were a devout prayer; a cuff on the neck and a thwack on the shoulder with Quixote’s own sword for a benediction; the inn’s two maidens for noble ladies, girding on sword and spurs while biting back their laughter. He believes not a word of it. And he honours, to the letter, the form he has just finished abridging.

This is the scene’s payoff, and it should be stated exactly: what the innkeeper grants is sanction without belief. Not credence — he has none to give — but form: the completion of the rite, in front of witnesses, according to its own requirements. The epistemic circuit, it turns out, does not need the witness to believe. It needs the witness to act as though the form holds. This is “rule-following” in Wittgenstein’s sense — a public practice, not a private conviction; a rule obeyed only inwardly, he argues, would be no rule at all (Wittgenstein, 1953, §202) — and the chivalric code is honoured here exactly so, by a man who believes none of it. By Austin’s conditions, this dubbing is void: the code is dead, and the man conferring knighthood has no power to confer it. It works anyway. What the form could not guarantee, the witness chose to



grant. The innkeeper's part is a cynical co-performance, indulgent and privately mocking, and it completes the circuit as effectively as faith would have. Sanction, not sincerity, is what the dubbing confers. The text even supplies the limit case: shouting over the stone-throwing, the innkeeper defends his guest "as a madman who would go scot-free even if he killed the lot of them" (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 39). His private verdict, that is, has already been rendered, and it is the verdict of madness — yet within the hour his public performance confers knighthood. The two never touch. What fixes Quixote's standing is not what the innkeeper concludes in his own head but what he carries out in front of witnesses; private diagnosis and public uptake run on separate rails, and only the second leaves a record.

Performance theory has a spectrum for placing such acts, and the inn defeats it instructively. Schechner braids all performance between two poles: efficacy, the ritual that genuinely transforms — the initiate emerges an adult, the couple emerges married — and entertainment, the theatre that only represents, where the actor who plays a king goes home uncrowned (Schechner, 1988, pp. 116–120). The dubbing is structurally ritual: vigil, formal supplication, the touch of the blade. It is contextually theatre, and worse — parody: every adult present is in on the joke. By the logic of the braid, it should sit at the entertainment pole and transform nothing — Schechner's own table places "audience believes" on the side of efficacy, "audience appreciates" on the side of entertainment (1988, p. 116), and this courtyard's audience believes nothing and appreciates everything. Yet something is transformed. Quixote enters the courtyard a petitioner and leaves it a knight — not in the eyes of God or the law, but in the only register the novel cares about: a designation now exists, witnessed and conferred, that did not exist the day before. The scene requires a name that the spectrum does not supply. Call it efficacious parody: a parody that does the work of the ritual it mocks. The precision matters. This is not a joke that accidentally produced consequences. The parody is efficacious because the form was honoured — completed, witnessed, carried through — and the effect flows through the completed form, not around the mockery. The cuff lands where the benediction would have. What Schechner's braid holds apart, the innkeeper's courtyard holds together: derision and transformation in a single act.

It is here, too, that what the performance reading left untheorised — the audience's power to grant or refuse a claim's standing — comes due. Quixote's double consciousness is no less present in this courtyard as it will be on the windmill plain. What the dubbing will alter is his confidence, not the structure of his knowing; the consciousness that stages the wager holds constant, even as the man who carries it rides out emboldened. What varies is the answer. Consciousness can stage the wager and sustain it; it cannot complete the circuit. At the inn, the world answers — cynically, ironically, but it answers.

The aftermath confirms what the ceremony conferred. Quixote departs a novice knight, and the designation, however hollow its origin, has currency: the whole hostelry had been told of the vigil and the knighting and had watched the wager play out, and the man who carries the title away behaves differently for carrying it — more assured, more committed, more dangerous. The innkeeper's substitutions were parodic, but parody does not void the record. Something



has happened; a story is in circulation among the witnesses who watched it made; the world is slightly altered for having entertained the fiction. Nor does the designation stop at the hostelry gates: it travels through Quixote's conviction, through Sancho's uncertainty, into the scepticism of every witness the novel interposes — and if the novel has outlasted its century it is partly because so many readers have found themselves in the innkeeper's position, holding a form they do not believe, unsure whether to let it stand. Belief is not the condition of consequence. Uptake is.

The same wager, staged with the same conviction on an open plain, will shortly meet a different answer — and the answer, as before, will not be his to render.

The Windmills: Uptake Refused

The windmill encounter of Chapter VIII is the novel's most famous scene, and its fame has obscured its precision. What makes it decisive is not the comedy of a man charging mills — that much is available to any realist reading — but the rigour with which Cervantes restages the inn's wager, grammar intact, before a witness who answers differently. Surveying the plain, Quixote announces: "you can see over there, good friend Sancho Panza, a place where stand thirty or more monstrous giants with whom I intend to fight a battle and whose lives I intend to take" (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 63). The deictic gesture does what the castle-seeing did at dusk: it draws a boundary, converting open country into a stage. Naming the mills as giants is not presented as a perceptual report awaiting correction; it is a framing act — the proposal of a world, extended to a listener who is invited to inhabit it. Quixote even furnishes the giants with anatomy borrowed from his books — "long arms," some "almost six miles long" — folding the empirical objects into a mythological vocabulary. The frame is built with full deliberateness, spoken aloud this time, to a named witness. What is about to be tested is the answer.

It arrives in a single breath. "Those over there aren't giants, they're windmills, and what look to you like arms are sails — when the wind turns them they make the millstones go round" (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 64). It is easy to read Sancho's reply as common sense puncturing delusion, and the realist tradition has read it exactly so. But within the grammar of the scene, it is something more decisive: a refusal. Where the innkeeper chose to honour a form he did not believe, Sancho refuses to enter it: he remains Quixote's interlocutor but declines to become his audience. The reasons he gives are real reasons — sails, wind, millstones — but they are reasons of a different grammar: they engage the objects and decline the wager. He does not play along ironically; he does not complete the circuit cynically; he closes the conditional space before the claim can take up residence in it. The language of function expels the language of enchantment, and the frame collapses with no one inside it but its maker.

Why does the verdict differ? Not because Sancho is a realist and the innkeeper a dupe — the innkeeper believed less than Sancho ever did. The difference is what the granting would have cost, for uptake is never free-floating; it is priced, and the price is paid by the witness. The innkeeper was asked for an evening's bounded ceremony, at no risk to himself, with amusement as its dividend — and, by the time the rite was actually conferred, with peace as its dividend



too. Sancho is asked for something else entirely: to ratify a claim whose immediate entailment is his master charging large rotating machinery — to co-sign a wager that will be settled on another man's bones. The innkeeper's uptake cost him nothing and bought him quiet; Sancho's would have cost a body and bought him nothing. His refusal is not only the voice of the real; it is the arithmetic of care, and the text confirms the care: he is still shouting his correction as the charge begins, and the moment knight meets sail he is hurrying to his master "at his donkey's fastest trot" (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 64). The diptych's lesson sharpens accordingly: uptake is distributed neither by truth nor by whim — here, it is priced, and the price falls on the witness.

What kind of act, then, is Sancho's sentence? Foucault supplies a frame for its severest reading. The classical age, he argues, did not discover madness; it produced it — by erecting a regime of reason that defined itself through the exclusion of unreason, rendering the mad not wrong but mute, their performances unintelligible by the withdrawal of recognition. What remains once the exchange is broken is, in Foucault's words, "a monologue of reason about madness," established "only on the basis of such a silence" (Foucault, 1961/1965, pp. ix–x). The madman, on this account, is not refuted; he is excluded from the dialogue in which refutation could occur. Sancho's correction echoes that structure in miniature, though gently, without the institution, and without the cruelty: he does not argue from inside the chivalric world, where giants might be debated; he answers from outside it, in a vocabulary the wager cannot survive. He is no regime — the scolding that follows the fall keeps him in dialogue with his master, and over the long novel he will prove the most corruptible of realists. But in this scene, at the moment of the staking, his sentence does what exclusion does: it declines to let the claim be wrong in its own terms, and so denies it the standing even of an error.

Then Quixote charges, the wind turns the sail, and the lance is smashed "into pieces," dragging "the horse and his rider with it, and Don Quixote went rolling over the plain in a very sore predicament" (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 64). It is tempting to say that the mill refuses the role as Sancho refused it — that the world delivers the same verdict in its own language. But a mill cannot refuse; refusal requires the freedom to do otherwise, and the sail turns for knight and miller alike. What matter delivers is not a verdict but an outcome, and the distinction is the scene's deepest lesson. The fall breaks Quixote's lance; it does not make him mad — sane men fall from horses every day in La Mancha. What converts the outcome into a verdict is the witness: Sancho, arriving at his donkey's fastest trot, armed with the one sentence no bruise could deliver — "didn't I tell you they were only windmills?" (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 64). Matter supplies the evidence; only an audience renders the judgment. The plain is not a place where the world refused uptake twice, social and material at once. It is a place where the world could refuse it only once — and did.

The scene's most instructive moment, though, is not the fall. It is what Quixote does on the ground. He does not concede; he renarrates, and the renarration arrives as his direct reply to the scolding: "the same sage Frestón who stole my library and my books has just turned these giants into windmills, to deprive me of the glory of my victory" (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003,



pp. 64–65). The standard reading treats this as the self-sealing logic of delusion, the mind that converts every refutation into confirmation; the performance reading, meeting the same move over Mambrino's helmet, hears a player adjusting his rules so that the game can continue (Larubia-Prado, 2009, p. 340). One hears pathology, the other play; neither hears the cost. But attend to the structure of the repair. Quixote does not deny the evidence — the windmills remain windmills in his own account, their transformation openly acknowledged. What he refuses is the verdict that the transformation constitutes his failure. By making Frestón the agent of the change, he preserves the logical shape of the original claim — there were giants; they have been changed — while absorbing the refusal without contradiction. It is the minimum narrative repair required to keep the *as if* alive, and it is built to absorb exactly the objection it answers: within the repair's own fiction, the enchanter is the author of the very appearance Sancho cites, so the scolding arrives pre-incorporated, holding up as evidence what the repair has already explained.

The wager survives. But it survives privately, in a defended form, with no standing anywhere in the world. The inn's lesson returns here inverted: there, sanction without belief; here, belief without sanction. The two prove independent, and the distance between them is just what uptake decides. Belief was always the claimant's to keep; standing was never his to confer. This is aftermath in its refused form: not a deposit in the world, but a residue in the claimant — a repair performed, a framework of enchantment installed where a verdict had fallen. The repair is not inert. The apparatus the plain's aftermath built does not dissolve when the scene closes — the enchanter is now installed, the grammar of transformation in place, and the next wager will be staked from within it.

Set the inn and the windmill side by side, and the diptych yields its result. The frame grammar is the same; the restored code is the same; the conviction, and the consciousness sustaining it, are — so far as the text shows them — the same. What moved between the courtyard and the plain: the kind of claim, the cost of granting it, the confidence the second wager carried over from the first. And every one of those differences had to pass through a single term before it could become a verdict — the world's answer. At the inn: sanction without belief — a designation conferred, a story in circulation. On the plain: refusal — ridicule, and a man under a broken lance. Sanction, not content or conviction alone, is what turns the act into a verdict. Madness and genius, the diptych suggests, are not only conditions to be diagnosed in the actor; they are also verdicts rendered by the audience — and the long history of reversals, the visionary deluded in one century and canonised in the next, is a history of uptake changing while content stands still. Nor does the verdict stop at standing. Knight and madman are, on their surface, designations; but each is the visible form of a staked claim about how the world is and how one may act in it — and for the class of knowledge this paper set out from, the kind that does not exist until it is performed, every claim to know carries exactly this exposure. What uptake decides on the plain is not only what Quixote is. It is what he can be said to know.

The diptych yields a clean opposition, and the cleanness should not be mistaken for the whole. Grant and refusal are its poles, not its only outcomes; most claims are settled at neither, and a



third scene marks the ground between. When Quixote encounters a travelling barber in Chapter XXI, riding in the rain with a shining basin on his head, the wager that follows is neither granted nor refused clean: Quixote names the basin Mambrino's helmet; Sancho calls it a basin; neither brings the other to his verdict. The claim circulates without settling — which is itself a form of survival. When the same object surfaces in the novel's inn debates, the distribution widens: witnesses take sides, the verdict fractures across the company, and what emerges is not uptake granted or refused but uptake suspended in contest. Between the inn's clean grant and the plain's clean refusal, Mambrino's helmet occupies the space that most knowledge actually inhabits: disputed, distributed, surviving not by a single verdict but by the failure of the witnesses to agree on a refusal. And if the verdict is social and never intrinsic — granted, refused, or held forever in dispute — it cannot be confined to Quixote. It must also fall on whoever stakes a claim about him, which is to say on the scholar now making one.

The Scholar Professes

Before any scholar professed anything about Don Quixote, its author had already performed the move the novel anatomises. Cervantes opens his prologue with a staged disclaimer — he is, he says, not Don Quixote's father but his stepfather (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003, p. 11) — claiming a translator's distance from a book he is in the act of writing. A friend, possibly real and possibly another invention, then advises him to fabricate the apparatus a serious work requires: commendatory sonnets, Latin tags, citations from authorities he has not read. Cervantes, by his own account, obliges: he opens the novel with mock commendations signed by fictional notables, and, from its ninth chapter onward, attributes the history to Cide Hamete Benengeli, an Arabic chronicler whose manuscript — conveniently in a language most of his readers cannot check — he says he merely found and had translated. The novel about a pretender is introduced by an act of pretension: authority performed before it is possessed, the form of scholarship honoured in the absence of its substance. And pretension, not imposture — the gap is flaunted rather than hidden, the fabrication confessed in the act of performing it, and the wager beneath the apparatus meant entirely: that readers will grant the claim its standing. They did. Four centuries of them.

The gesture is not Cervantes's alone; it may be the founding gesture of scholarship itself. Montaigne, writing his *Essais* a generation earlier, did not write up what he had already concluded — he wrote to discover what he thought: "If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial" (Montaigne, 1580–1592/1958, III.2). He named the genre after the attempt: *essai*, a trial – a wager. Derrida, four centuries later, says the quiet part formally. To profess, he argues in "The University Without Condition," is not to report a body of knowledge but to perform a pledge — "a pledge, a commitment, a promise, an act of faith... that in an original way ties faith to knowledge in the university" (Derrida, 2002, p. 24). The professor professes: declares publicly a commitment to truth that cannot be verified at the moment of declaration, and produces knowledge under the cover of that declared faith. This is the pretension schema wearing academic dress. The lecture, the article, the thesis — each is a claim staked through a form that



cannot, of itself, guarantee the claim's standing — by a claimant conscious of the staging, before an audience free to grant or refuse. The scholar pretends in the full *prae-tendere* sense: stretching forward into an argument in the directed confidence that the stretch might be met. The institution, for its part, has never hidden the theatrical machinery of the granting. Salman Rushdie, addressing a graduating class at Bard College in 1996, recalled his own ceremony at Cambridge: required to kneel at the Vice-Chancellor's feet, hold up his hands in supplication, and beg in Latin — 'in a dead language,' as he later put it — for a degree he had already earned by three years of work and considerable family expense. He complied; he knelt; and looking back, he judged himself wrong to have done so — "kneel before no man" was the lesson he offered the graduates (Rushdie, 1996). The structural rhyme with the inn is exact: the vigil kept, the form honoured, the standing conferred, and what travels afterwards is not anyone's belief but the credential. Yet Rushdie's defiance should not be smoothed into agreement with the present argument, because it cuts against it in a way worth keeping. His instinct says the kneeling was beneath the knowledge; the schema says the kneeling was its condition — a condition the institution itself enforces. Both are true, and the tension between them is the ethical residue of pretension: one may have to perform the rite to receive the standing, and one may still owe it to oneself to know exactly what the rite is, and to answer afterwards for the claim rather than for the costume. Uptake can be sought without being worshipped.

Which brings this paper to the place where its own wager must be declared. It began as a thesis submitted to Pokhara University in 2025, written by a scholar who was teaching undergraduates theory he was still learning — citing thinkers he did not yet fully possess, performing intellectual authority in the directed confidence that the performance might produce what it pretended to have. That is not a confession of fraudulence, and it is not offered as one. It is a description of how knowledge is made — the very epistemic condition that this paper has worked throughout to name. The seminar taught before the theory is mastered, the argument written before it is fully commanded, the claim staked before the field has answered: these are not deviations from scholarship but its method, visible. The thesis was the wager. This article is what the wager produced — and it now waits, as every staked claim waits, on a verdict that is not its author's to render. I too am Quixote. And I suspect you are too.

Conclusion: The Wager and Its Verdict

Pretension, this paper has argued, is not what its moral history says it is. It is not vanity, not fraudulence, not the rill mistaking itself for a river. Recovered through its root, *prae-tendere*, to stretch forth, to reach before the grasp, it names a structure: performance, joined to consciousness of performance, tested by uptake. The diptych at the paper's centre showed the structure at work and isolated its decisive term. Between the inn and the plain, much else moved — the kind of claim, the price of granting it — but every difference had to pass through the world's answer before it could become a verdict: knight in one scene, madman in the other. Madness and genius are not conditions the actor carries into the performance. They are verdicts the audience carries out of it, and the verdict is social, never only intrinsic.



Nor does the structure stay in La Mancha. Consider the witness in a courtroom, testifying to what she saw before any court has ratified it. Here the credibility deficit named earlier — what Fricker (2007) calls testimonial injustice — does its work in the open: the same testimony, weighed by the standing of whoever offers it, is granted or refused on grounds the witness cannot reach. Her concern is the injustice; the present point is the mechanism beneath it — credibility was never the claimant's to fix. Or consider the scholar writing from the margins of a discipline, theorising within a tradition whose terms were set elsewhere, performing membership in a conversation that was not built with her in mind. What such a scholar is told to call impostor syndrome (a private deficiency, a failure of nerve) is often not deficiency but epistemology — and not imposture either, by this paper's own test: the gap held in view, the hope always to close it — the ordinary structure of pretension, lived as a standing condition rather than a single wager. In both cases the grammar holds — frame, uptake, aftermath — and in both cases the question is never whether the claimant believes, but whether the world will complete the circuit.

What these cases expose, and what Don Quixote dramatises with rare clarity, is that the need for uptake is not a weakness in the claimant. It is the social structure of knowledge itself. The rule-following met at the inn was Wittgenstein's larger point about language: meaning is not something a private mind secures but something a community holds. Hegel reached the same conclusion from consciousness: the self cannot know itself except through the recognition of another (Hegel, 1807/1977, §178). Quixote at the inn was not performing an aberration of knowing; he was performing knowing itself, with the dependence on others that all knowers carry made suddenly, embarrassingly visible. We are all waiting for the innkeeper to play along. The wager, meanwhile, has acquired a new and pressing variant: what becomes of pretension when fluent, authoritative text can be produced with no one behind it — performance without a subject holding the gap, claims staked with no claimant to answer for them? That question exceeds this paper's scope, and the framework built here is intended as a beginning of its answer; it is the subject of work in progress.

Four centuries after the night in the courtyard, Don Quixote has not stopped travelling. Every translation, every adaptation, every reading — the realists' fool, the Romantics' martyr, this paper's pretender — is a fresh act of uptake: a new decision about whether to let the form hold. And it is here, not in any property of the knight, that genius is made. The inn was genius in miniature: uptake granted at the lowest possible stakes — one cynical witness, one evening, one story let loose within the walls of an inn. Canonisation is the same circuit run at scale: more witnesses, more time, the decision to let the form hold repeated across languages and centuries until the designation hardens into inheritance. Genius, on this reading, is not a different mechanism from the innkeeper's indulgence; it is the innkeeper's indulgence, sustained. The verdict has migrated, it is true, from the character to the book that carries him — it is Cervantes whom the centuries have canonised, and the knight rides inside that judgment rather than receiving his own — but the mechanism is unchanged. The content of the wager never altered; the uptake did; and that is the greater part of the difference. Cervantes seems to have known it.



He staged the wager from both of its sides, granted and refused, and left the verdict where it has always belonged — with whoever is watching. He was pretending in the fullest sense: stretching a claim four centuries forward, toward a reader who might complete the circuit.

Dear Pretentive Reader: the circuit now waits on you.

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