



Errant Minds and Imperfect Bodies: Satire, Disability, and Social Difference in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso and Cervantes's Don Quixote

Allegra Benedetti*

Department of Family and Child Studies, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ 07043, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines how representations of madness function as a critical strategy. Both works parody the conventions of chivalric romance, yet their portrayals of mentally unstable knights also create a literary space from which broader political and cultural tensions can be explored. The study argues that Ariosto and Cervantes use chivalric madness to question emerging imperial ambitions and the continuing influence of ideals associated with conquest, heroism, and territorial rule. Their critiques engage, directly or indirectly, with European expansion into the Americas, memories and representations of conflict involving Muslim and Moorish societies in the Maghreb, and symbolic models of governance articulated through the motif of the island. By locating potentially controversial criticism within the actions and perceptions of figures identified as mad, these narratives allow political and sociocultural concerns to be expressed through parody and indirection. At the same time, this narrative strategy raises an important issue for disability and mad studies. When madness becomes a metaphorical instrument for communicating social critique, experiences associated with mental difference risk being subordinated to their symbolic usefulness. The article therefore considers the double function of madness in these texts: as a means of exposing the contradictions of chivalric and imperial ideology and as a literary convention with lasting implications for the representation of disability and mental difference.

KEYWORDS: Early Modern Europe; Disability Studies; Mad Studies; Madness; Chivalric Romance; Imperialism; Coloniality; Satire; Ariosto; Cervantes.

INTRODUCTION

The madness serves a purpose that extends beyond individual characterization. It becomes a narrative and critical mechanism through which the authors interrogate the continued influence of chivalric ideals during a period of major political, cultural, and intellectual change. Ariosto's work engages with a world shaped by the political and economic pressures surrounding the Hapsburg imperial order, whereas Cervantes's later narrative also reflects the changing epistemological environment of the Baroque period, particularly the increasing significance of rationalist and empirical approaches to knowledge. Against this historical background, the persistence and revival of chivalric ideals become subjects of sustained parody and criticism [1].

The exaggerated commitment of Orlando and Don Quijote to the values of chivalry exposes the contradictions inherent in preserving older social models within rapidly changing imperial societies. Their madness allows Ariosto and Cervantes to explore the consequences of pursuing inherited

ideals of heroism, honor, conquest, and social order beyond the limits of reason. At the same time, these representations create a protected space for criticism. By locating controversial observations within the words, perceptions, and actions of characters identified as mad, both narratives can redirect attention away from direct political commentary [2]. Madness consequently operates as a form of narrative displacement through which criticism of chivalric romance, social hierarchy, and expanding imperial structures can be expressed indirectly.

This literary strategy, however, raises important concerns regarding the representation of disability. When madness functions primarily as a symbolic device, a source of comedy, or a mechanism for advancing a broader ideological argument, the person experiencing mental difference can become secondary to the meanings imposed upon that difference. Disability studies scholar Michael Berube argues that more equitable literary representation becomes possible when disability is not treated simply as a means of

producing narrative consequences. Disability may remain an important aspect of a character's identity without being reduced to a device created solely to move the plot or communicate an external theme [3]. The representations of madness in *Orlando Furioso* and *Don Quijote*, however, depend substantially upon the narrative and symbolic functions assigned to the mad knight.

In these Early Modern works, madness frequently acquires meaning through metonymic and metaphorical structures that direct readers toward wider sociocultural concerns. Such indirection was particularly useful within environments shaped by political authority and censorship, where open criticism could carry significant consequences. Yet this strategy also produces a representational problem. When madness is repeatedly associated with social, political, or ideological disorder, negative values attached to those broader conflicts may become transferred to disability itself [4]. Readers may consequently interpret mental difference as the source or symbol of collective instability rather than recognize the political and social structures that the texts seek to question. The critique can therefore become partially obscured by the very metaphor used to communicate it, reinforcing harmful associations between disability and social dysfunction.

These concerns shape the principal questions addressed in this study. How do *Orlando Furioso* and *Don Quijote de la Mancha* construct and employ chivalric madness? What perspectives can critical disability scholarship, including Elizabeth Bearden's work in *Monstrous Kinds*, contribute to the interpretation of these Early Modern representations? How does the literary use of madness intersect with changing approaches to knowledge in Renaissance and Baroque Europe? Finally, how might the exceptional literary influence of Ariosto and Cervantes have affected subsequent representations and cultural perceptions of disability and mental difference?

This article argues that chivalric madness presents a central paradox in both narratives. Madness identifies the knight as socially liminal and separates him from the norms he attempts to embody, yet it is also essential to the literary expression of cultural and social criticism. This dual position becomes particularly significant when examined through Bearden's discussion of *sprezzatura* and practices of masking and concealment within early modern European society. From this perspective, disability occupies a contradictory position: it may be marginalized as a marker of difference while simultaneously becoming indispensable to the expression of ideas that remain central to European literary and cultural discourse. Madness thus exists both at the boundaries of accepted social order and within the mechanisms used to expose that order's contradictions [5].

The analysis begins by examining the relationship among disability, satire, and Early Modern epistemology. This

framework establishes how representations of mental difference may function as indirect vehicles for satire and political criticism, including criticism directed toward emerging systems of imperial power. It also contextualizes Bearden's connection between *sprezzatura* and disability masking in Early Modern courtly culture, providing a conceptual foundation for understanding how disability and concealment operate within the texts examined here [6].

The discussion then turns to Ariosto's literary influences and intertextual context before investigating the relationship between chivalric identity and madness in *Orlando Furioso*. Particular attention is given to the construction of Orlando's madness and to the explanations offered for its emergence within a religious and moral framework of disability. The study subsequently considers the effects of his madness on the broader social order, his eventual restoration, and the significance of his response to the consequences of pursuing chivalric expectations [7]. These elements are examined in relation to Bearden's concept of *sprezzatura* and the tension between social performance, concealment, and the visibility of difference.

The study next explores the literary and intercultural connections between Ariosto and Cervantes to explain why Cervantes adopts and transforms the figure of the mad knight. Cervantes inherits a recognizable chivalric convention but adapts it to address the particular political, intellectual, and imperial circumstances of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Spain [8]. In *Don Quijote*, madness similarly provides an indirect means of articulating social criticism and of positioning potentially controversial observations within a framework capable of evading straightforward censorship. This approach also raises questions about the continuing relevance of chivalric romance to Spanish imperial ambitions and the relationship between inherited ideals of conquest and contemporary systems of political authority.

The final part of the study examines the etiology of Don Quijote's madness and traces the consequences of his chivalric behavior for both the protagonist and the society in which he moves. Cervantes's representation is further considered through the novel's metafictional dimensions, which create another layer of criticism by questioning the authority, production, and cultural influence of literary narratives. Through the combined operations of parody, satire, and metafiction, chivalric madness becomes a powerful means of interrogating early imperial structures, their agents, and their underlying philosophical assumptions. At the same time, its use as a literary instrument reveals the paradox underlying these representations: madness enables the articulation of significant cultural criticism while risking the reduction of disability and mental difference to a metaphorical device serving other social and ideological purposes [9].

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Madness, Satire, and Early Modern Europe

Early Modern European life was deeply shaped by courtly institutions, political competition, and changing ideas about knowledge and social order. Within this setting, disability, satire, and emerging intellectual developments were closely connected to the strategies individuals and writers used to negotiate a rapidly transforming world. The relationship between imperial expansion and empiricism is particularly important for understanding the literary and epistemological conditions surrounding Ariosto and Cervantes. Equally significant is the role of satire as an indirect form of communication, especially where censorship restricted open criticism [10]. These concerns can be further understood through Elizabeth Bearden's discussion of *sprezzatura* as a practice through which individuals managed social appearance and perception. Viewed in this context, the mad knights created by Ariosto and Cervantes may be understood as literary expressions of *sprezzatura*, using apparent disorder and excess to expose tensions within the developing imperial logic of their societies.

The growing emphasis on observation, measurement, and the knowability of the material world encouraged new ideas about humanity's capacity to control nature. Such intellectual developments could also support hierarchical distinctions between those believed to have mastered the natural world and those perceived as lacking similar forms of knowledge or control. Human identity increasingly became associated with rationality and separation from animal or natural existence. Erasmus, for example, identified reason as the defining quality that distinguished human beings from animals and associated ignorance with a fundamental human failing [2]. This elevation of reason has important implications for the cultural construction of madness. Medieval and Christian traditions had already linked madness with animality and departures from an idealized human order [30]. Bearden's application of Gleeson's concept of geographical frameworks to the Early Modern period similarly draws attention to the historical association between monstrosity, disability, nature, and place [7].

Bearden further observes that premodern portrayals of monstrosity often depended on assumptions about climate, environment, and the capacity of particular spaces to civilize or render people savage. Her discussion demonstrates how historical and geographical systems of interpretation contributed to changing constructions of disability across different periods and locations [11]. From this perspective, monstrosity cannot be separated from the cultural meanings assigned to bodies and the environments in which those bodies are imagined to exist.

This framework also helps explain Bearden's description of the Renaissance. Narratives characterized by disrupted

temporal sequences, inaccessible spaces, nonlinear developments, or unstable geographies may resemble what disability studies identifies as *crip time* and *crip space* [12]. Both *Orlando Furioso* and *Don Quijote* display narrative movements that complicate ordinary assumptions about order, progress, and stability. The opposition between the natural and the unnatural therefore becomes particularly relevant to the epistemological transformations of early modern Europe.

The developing separation of mind and body associated with Cartesian thought, together with the cultural authority of Christianity, contributed to a model in which the European rational subject occupied a privileged position while nature was imagined as an external realm to be controlled or mastered [13-24]. Such distinctions could also reinforce the ideal of compulsory able-bodiedness. Within an imperial context, the elevation of a supposedly rational and self-governing European subject encouraged forms of Eurocentrism that dismissed alternative ways of knowing, living, and relating to the world. This hierarchy facilitated the dehumanization of populations in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, particularly when European systems of knowledge were treated as universal measures of human value. The encounters with Moors represented in both works considered here should therefore be read in relation to the broader convergence of imperial expansion and empirical thinking in early modern Europe.

As these intellectual and political transformations unfolded, the regulation of knowledge became increasingly important. Censorship enabled imperial states to monitor the circulation of ideas, making indirect expression an essential strategy for writers and other cultural figures. Under such circumstances, *sprezzatura* may be understood as a useful model for examining concealment and self-presentation. Bearden characterizes *sprezzatura* as the ability to make a difficult accomplishment appear effortless and as a means through which courtiers could compensate for an apparent absence of natural *grazia*, or grace [7]. Her interpretation also resembles practices now described as disability masking, in which traits considered socially deviant are minimized or concealed in order to conform more closely to accepted norms [15].

In literary terms, a related process can be observed when madness is used temporarily and subsequently removed. The mad figure can perform forms of social criticism that the restored or socially normative character cannot openly sustain. Once the condition is resolved, the character may return to a more acceptable identity. In this sense, *sprezzatura* functions almost prosthetically, enabling the individual to appear in command of a body or identity that society might otherwise classify as deficient. Yet its more significant function lies in its challenge to the authority of supposedly natural standards. Bearden's discussion of Guidobaldo Montefeltro, particularly his refusal to allow his

impairments to define the value of his identity, demonstrates how Renaissance conventions concerning bodily norms could themselves be questioned [25]. A comparable strategy operates in the works of Ariosto and Cervantes, where madness and satire create opportunities to challenge dominant empirical and imperial paradigms without presenting criticism in an entirely direct form.

Although chivalry had a long cultural history, the two works examined here are better understood as questioning the usefulness of chivalric romance and its associated value system for the Early Modern elite rather than rejecting chivalry in every form. *Don Quijote*, together with contemporary satirical traditions such as *Carajicomedia*, addresses a literate and socially powerful audience by turning critical attention toward aristocratic behavior. Domínguez describes this strategy as a concealed criticism of the nobility for failing to fulfill the ideals associated with chivalry [16]. Chivalry thus operates as a cultural sign through which aristocratic identity and elite practices can be examined. At a time when members of the nobility were becoming increasingly connected to imperial economies while also confronting questions about monarchical authority, the chivalric tradition provided a language through which those contradictions could be explored.

Satire was particularly well suited to this task. In the first half of the sixteenth century, satirical exchange reflected both the intellectual preparation of the aristocracy and the existence of shared systems of signs through which writers could criticize one another and comment on changing social conditions [18]. The arrival of unfamiliar commodities, ideas, and forms of knowledge associated with expanding imperial networks created further opportunities for satire to address cultural uncertainty.

Medical satire provides a particularly revealing example of this process. Debates concerning empiricism, Galenic medicine, health, and imported substances brought literary invention into direct contact with the changing material world. In her study of guaiac, a medicinal product associated with Spain's early colonial encounters, Ivana Bičák explains that satire incorporates contemporary events into its literary structure and responds to developments within the empirical world [19]. She further demonstrates the importance of literary works that combine imaginative representation with contemporary medical and material realities [20]. Satire therefore provided a medium through which epistemological questions could be explored alongside current political and social developments.

Bičák also emphasizes the close relationship between satire and medicine, noting that satirical discourse frequently relies on medical language and imagery to diagnose the perceived illnesses of society [26]. Her examination of Cristóbal de Castillejo's *En alabança del palo de las Indias, estando el la*

cura dél illustrates how medical themes, colonial novelties, and contentious intellectual debates could be brought together without requiring direct political confrontation. This relationship suggests a useful framework for interpreting Ariosto and Cervantes. Their use of madness, a condition already associated with medical and philosophical discourse, allows chivalry to be reconsidered within the changing realities of the Early Modern imperial world. The mad knight consequently exposes the tension between inherited chivalric ideals and the political, intellectual, and imperial conditions in which those ideals were being reinterpreted. In this sense, both narratives engage with *sprezzatura*, or with its failure, as their chivalric figures become mad when the expectations of an older social order no longer correspond to the world around them.

Ariosto's Chivalric Romance and the Consequences for Representing Madness

A central question raised by *Orlando Furioso* concerns the manner in which madness is represented and the consequences such representation may have had for later understandings of mental difference. Ariosto develops a close association between chivalric identity and madness in order to extend the satirical possibilities already present within the romance tradition. Chivalry is presented as an increasingly inadequate basis for organizing social values and hierarchies, while Orlando's madness reveals the destructive consequences of an excessive commitment to its expectations. Because the poem so effectively joins the signs of knighthood and mental disorder, these categories become difficult to separate [27]. The literary success of this association also carries a longer-term consequence: madness becomes available as a powerful negative and liminal position from which subsequent writers can address social problems unrelated to disability itself.

Ariosto's poem draws upon important literary predecessors. One of these is *La Chanson de Roland*, a foundational narrative associated with French national identity, in which Roland—known as Orlando in the Italian tradition—leads a small force against Moorish invaders while awaiting Charlemagne's army [28]. Another important predecessor is Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*. Rather than simply reproducing the conventions of heroic chivalric romance, Boiardo's work transforms the tradition through satire and through Orlando's experience of love [11]. The movement from heroic legend toward increasingly self-conscious and satirical treatments of the chivalric narrative reflects changing attitudes toward the cultural authority of chivalry. Ariosto develops this tendency further, particularly through the consequences of unfulfilled and unreciprocated desire.

The literary background of *Orlando Furioso* extends beyond these two sources. Studies of literary madness also identify significant connections with Dante's *La Divina Commedia*.

Bartoli argues that Ariosto's representation of madness possesses a distinctly metaliterary quality, linking the poem to Dante through its interpretive and self-reflective dimensions [5]. Recognizing this broader tradition is important because it prevents *Orlando Furioso* from being treated as the origin of literary madness. Instead, Ariosto inherits and reshapes earlier representational practices, allowing Orlando's condition to carry meanings produced through an extensive intertextual history [29].

The poem announces its relationship to literary tradition from its opening. Echoing the beginning of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ariosto introduces his subject through ladies, knights, love, war, courtesy, and heroic action [2]. The emphasis on social figures rather than solely on abstract ideals directs attention toward the people whose lives are governed by the cultural structures of chivalry. The placement of ladies before cavaliers may also signal the poem's interest in the gendered inequalities embedded within those structures. Significantly, madness is absent from this initial declaration of themes. Its later emergence therefore gives the condition a distinct narrative function, one that can be understood through the concept of narrative prosthesis: disability is introduced in relation to other themes and becomes a device through which those themes are developed and exposed [30].

Angelica's encounter with the enchanted fountains initiates one of the poem's most important departures from conventional romance expectations. Rinaldo drinks from a fountain that intensifies love, whereas Angelica drinks from another that diminishes it. Freed from reciprocal affection, Angelica chooses to leave Rinaldo [2]. Her subsequent flight is followed by several knights, including Orlando, whose pursuit reflects the chivalric assumption that a woman's affection may be pursued, possessed, or won as though it were an object of masculine achievement [23].

Angelica's independence consequently challenges the gendered expectations of the romance tradition. Her later decision to love Medoro, a Moorish man rather than a Christian knight, intensifies this challenge. The choice unsettles several of the binary distinctions upon which chivalric ideology depends, including Christian and Muslim, conqueror and conquered, and masculine authority and feminine submission. Because Angelica is associated with Cathay or India, her position also complicates European representations of non-European peoples within expanding imperial systems. Her selection of Medoro gives her a degree of subjectivity that resists the conventional treatment of women and foreign territories as objects awaiting conquest [24,25].

These tensions become even more significant when considered alongside Early Modern representations of North Africa. In Spanish and Italian visual and political discourse, *Africa Devicta* commonly represented Africa as a defeated woman mourning both military conquest and the possibility

that her people would be brought into Catholic rule [13,14]. Conquest and conversion were connected through an imperial ambition to restore what was understood as religious truth and unity across the Mediterranean and beyond [6]. Angelica's relationship with Medoro therefore challenges more than a conventional love triangle. Her decision resists the symbolic expectation that feminized foreignness should submit to Christian and European authority. It also presents an unconverted Moorish man as worthy of her affection, thereby disturbing the hierarchy through which Christian Europe claimed superiority over North African and Asian Muslim populations.

The circumstances surrounding Angelica's choice further complicate these assumptions. Since the enchanted potion has diminished her previous emotional attachment, her decision can be interpreted as one made outside the conventional logic of romantic compulsion [26]. This possibility destabilizes the presumed opposition between European rationality and the supposed irrationality or inferiority attributed to religious and cultural others. By exposing the fragility of chivalric conventions when confronted with female agency, religious difference, and resistance to domination, *Orlando Furioso* prepares the conditions for the knight's descent into madness. Orlando's breakdown occurs at precisely the point where the world required by chivalric romance can no longer be sustained. When social and romantic expectations fail to conform to inherited ideals, madness becomes the form through which the resulting contradiction is made visible (Table 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The representation of madness is central to the critical strategy of *Don Quixote*. By locating social and political criticism within the perspective and behavior of a character regarded as mad, Cervantes creates a degree of distance between the text and the ideas it questions. This narrative arrangement enables the novel to examine the relationship between chivalric romance and imperial practice without always presenting its critique in a direct form that might invite censorship. Madness therefore functions as a protective literary medium, allowing controversial concerns to be displaced into the experiences of the mad knight. At the same time, this strategy reveals the socially marginal position historically assigned to madness and disability. What is treated as undesirable, excessive, or out of step with accepted norms can nevertheless become a powerful means of exposing equally outdated or harmful values and encouraging new ways of thinking [18].

This contradiction helps explain the long-standing relationship between disability and literary representation. The use of madness in *Don Quixote* reflects what disability scholarship has described through concepts such as aesthetic nervousness and narrative prosthesis. Disability can generate

Table 1: Comparative Representation of Chivalric Madness in Orlando Furioso and Don Quixote.

Analytical Dimension	<i>Orlando Furioso</i> – Ludovico Ariosto	<i>Don Quixote</i> – Miguel de Cervantes	Critical Significance
Central mad figure	Orlando's descent into madness follows emotional loss and the collapse of his expectations regarding love and chivalric identity.	Don Quixote's madness emerges from his excessive immersion in chivalric literature and his attempt to recreate its ideals in contemporary society.	Madness reveals the conflict between inherited chivalric ideals and changing social realities.
Relationship to chivalry	Chivalric values are exposed as unstable when confronted with desire, individual agency, and changing cultural conditions.	Chivalric conventions appear increasingly anachronistic when imposed on the social and political world of Early Modern Spain.	Both texts question the continued authority and practical relevance of traditional chivalric ideology.
Function of madness	Madness intensifies the poem's satirical treatment of honor, masculinity, love, and heroic identity.	Madness creates a narrative space for parody, irony, and criticism of social and cultural conventions.	Mental difference becomes a literary mechanism for exposing contradictions within dominant systems.
Satirical strategy	Excessive emotional and heroic behavior reveals the limitations of idealized chivalric conduct.	The contrast between Don Quixote's perceptions and external reality generates sustained parody and social satire.	Satire permits criticism of established values through exaggeration, displacement, and irony.
Political and imperial context	The narrative engages with conquest, religious conflict, and cultural encounters within a wider Mediterranean and imperial environment.	The novel questions inherited ideals of conquest and authority within the changing circumstances of the Spanish imperial world.	Chivalric madness provides an indirect means of engaging political and imperial tensions.
Religious and intercultural difference	Angelica's relationship with Medoro challenges oppositions involving Christian and Muslim identity and European assumptions of cultural superiority.	Encounters with religious and cultural difference complicate the relationship between idealized chivalric identity and lived social reality.	Madness intersects with broader constructions of alterity, hierarchy, and belonging.
Gender and social order	Angelica's agency disrupts expectations concerning masculine control, romantic possession, and feminine submission.	The idealized image of Dulcinea demonstrates the gap between imagined feminine perfection and social reality.	The beloved woman becomes a site through which the limits of chivalric and patriarchal ideals are exposed.
Madness and disability representation	Orlando's condition is essential to the development of narrative conflict and symbolic meaning.	Don Quixote's mental difference supports the novel's parody, metafiction, and social critique.	Both works illustrate the problem of narrative prosthesis , in which disability acquires significance through its usefulness to literary structure.
Marginality and critical power	Orlando's departure from social and psychological norms enables the consequences of chivalric excess to become visible.	Don Quixote's position outside accepted reason enables him to reveal contradictions that normative characters may overlook.	Madness is simultaneously marginalized and placed at the center of cultural criticism.
Connection with sprezzatura	The tension between Orlando's social identity and his visible loss of control exposes the instability of performed ideals.	Don Quixote's repeated performance of a chivalric identity demonstrates the gap between social appearance and reality.	Performance, concealment, and identity complicate distinctions between normality and difference.
Narrative consequence	The eventual resolution of madness permits reflection on the costs of pursuing unattainable social and romantic ideals.	The novel's treatment of madness ultimately questions both the authority of literary conventions and the assumptions of social normality.	Madness structures narrative development while also enabling reflection on the relationship between fiction and reality.
Central paradox	The mad knight is separated from the social ideal but becomes essential for criticizing the values that produce that ideal.	The irrational figure challenges supposedly rational social structures from a position of exclusion.	Chivalric madness represents a fundamental paradox: disability is socially marginalized but aesthetically and intellectually central to critique.

representational tension while also becoming a structural support on which literary narratives depend for expressive force, disruption, and interpretive significance [27,29]. In this sense, the social critique developed through *Don Quijote* depends partly on the aesthetic and symbolic possibilities attached to disability. The novel's anti-imperial and anti-chivalric implications are strengthened through a form of disability aesthetics in which mental difference becomes the site from which dominant assumptions may be unsettled.

Michael Berube's discussion of intellectual disability further clarifies the complexity of this literary function. He observes that literary narratives may employ intellectual disability without necessarily becoming entangled in unusual temporal or metafictional structures. Yet when disability becomes closely involved with these disruptions of time, space, and narrative form, it can open interpretive possibilities that exceed ordinary modes of understanding [9]. His argument highlights the paradoxical status of mental difference in literature. Madness may be positioned at the margins because it is associated with social structures regarded as obsolete, irrational, or unacceptable. Nevertheless, the same marginal position can place madness at the center of literary innovation and cultural criticism. What is excluded from the normative center may, paradoxically, provide the perspective from which that center becomes visible and open to challenge [12].

The broader history of disability representation demonstrates a similar contradiction. Disability has frequently been used within social criticism to expose inequalities and to question how power is distributed among different groups. Such representations can appear to support social transformation by drawing attention to those who possess less authority or occupy marginal positions. However, the symbolic use of disability does not necessarily improve the position of disabled people themselves. In the early modern European context, disability could remain excluded from the dominant image of the ideal human even when it served as an important means of criticizing the society that produced that ideal. Thus, disability could contribute to discussions of social change while the embodied experiences of disabled individuals continued to be subordinated to cultural and literary purposes.

The metonymic use of disability in Early Modern literature is especially significant because it provides a means of addressing anxieties surrounding race, gender, embodiment, and political authority through indirect representation. Such literary strategies could engage questions of Islamic alterity during the Hapsburg period while simultaneously drawing attention to the colonial and imperial practices that increasingly shaped European societies. The association between chivalry and imperial power consequently becomes an important target of satire. In both Ariosto's and Cervantes's narratives, the unattainable, resistant, or

deceptive ideal of the beloved woman further destabilizes the assumptions underlying the mad knight's pursuit. These encounters expose a broader mismatch between inherited chivalric expectations and the changing social realities of the Early Modern world.

The paradox of chivalric madness ultimately lies in this double function. Ariosto and Cervantes employ madness to satirize the revival or persistence of chivalric values at a time when imperial expansion was increasingly supported by developing empirical and rationalist approaches to knowledge. Madness provides an indirect language through which these emerging political and epistemological structures can be questioned. Yet the effectiveness of this strategy depends on positioning mental difference as a literary device. The mad body and mind become central to satire precisely because they can represent disorder, deviation, excess, and resistance to accepted norms [27,29].

This representational practice carries consequences beyond the immediate historical contexts of *Orlando Furioso* and *Don Quijote*. Once madness is repeatedly established as a useful symbolic instrument, it can contribute to a wider literary tradition in which disabled and mad embodiments are valued primarily for the meanings they generate for non-disabled social concerns. Disability then risks becoming a metaphorical resource rather than an experience with its own social and human significance. In later European cultural frameworks, such patterns may also reinforce distinctions between the supposedly rational, measurable, and normative body and those bodies identified as deviant from that standard. The literary colonization of madness, in other words, can parallel broader efforts to regulate, classify, and control bodies according to dominant ideals of human value.

The critical significance of these texts therefore rests on a persistent tension. Chivalric madness creates space for satire, permits indirect engagement with imperial and epistemological change, and expands the capacity of literature to challenge dominant cultural assumptions.

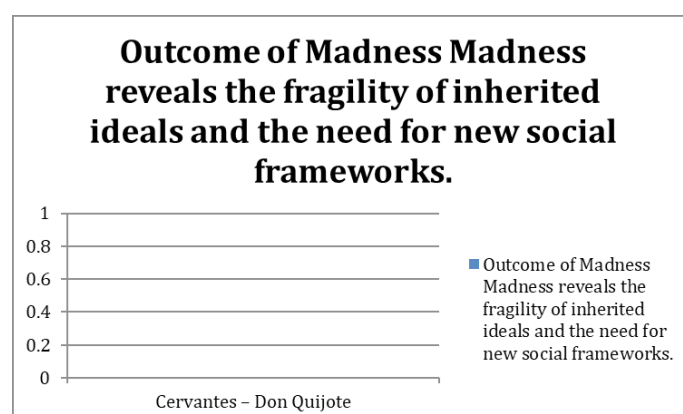


Figure 1: Madness, Satire, and Empire: A Comparative Study of Ariosto and Cervantes.

At the same time, its reliance on disability as a vehicle for these critiques can further marginalize the very forms of embodiment it places at the center of the narrative. Madness is simultaneously excluded from the social ideal and made indispensable to the criticism of that ideal. This unresolved contradiction constitutes the central paradox of chivalric madness: disability occupies a marginal social position while serving as a powerful literary mechanism through which the political, intellectual, and cultural center can be questioned and reimagined (Figure 1) [9,27,29].

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that chivalric madness in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote* functions as both a powerful instrument of satire and a problematic mode of disability representation. Through the figure of the mad knight, both authors question inherited ideals of honor, conquest, hierarchy, and social identity amid imperial expansion and changing intellectual conditions. Madness also enables indirect criticism, creating narrative distance from politically sensitive concerns. However, its symbolic usefulness creates a central paradox: mental difference is socially marginalized while remaining essential to literary and cultural critique. Concepts of narrative prosthesis, aesthetic nervousness, and *sprezzatura* illuminate how disability becomes embedded in questions of representation, social performance, and power. The treatment of religious and cultural differences further connects chivalric satire with imperial and colonial structures [6,16]. Ultimately, these works reveal that madness can challenge dominant systems while simultaneously risking the reduction of disability to metaphor, a tension that continues to shape discussions of literature, difference, and representation.

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Citation: Benedetti A. "Errant Minds and Imperfect Bodies: Satire, Disability, and Social Difference in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso and Cervantes's Don Quixote", *American Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol 11, no. 3, 2025, pp. 59-67.

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