

An Introduction to *Don Quixote*

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616) was born in the Spanish university town of Alcalá de Henares. Relatively little is known of the author's early life and formal education. His father was a surgeon who suffered a string of financial reversals, and the family was forced to make several moves. Cervantes spent some years in Seville, a particularly exciting city at the time, and in Madrid, the new capital. He seems to have been involved in a duel in Madrid in 1569, which caused him to abandon his first ventures into the literary domain and to take refuge in Italy. Settling in Rome, he entered the service of Giulio Acquaviva, who would soon be named cardinal. In 1571, Cervantes took part in the Battle of Lepanto, where a Catholic alliance defeated the Turkish enemy in an impressive show of naval force. He was seriously wounded in the conflict and lost the use of his left hand, a sacrifice that he bore with unmistakable pride. Four years later, in 1575, Cervantes embarked for Spain with letters of recommendation for a civil appointment. Unfortunately, Barbary pirates intercepted the galley and transported its Christian captives to Algiers, where Cervantes remained a prisoner for five years. He made a name for himself by virtue of repeated and daring escape attempts. Finally ransomed, he returned to Madrid, where few opportunities awaited him. In 1584, he married Catalina de Salazar, nineteen years his junior. The marriage was not successful, and the couple regularly lived apart. Cervantes resumed his writing career, accepted a number of less-than-distinguished positions in various parts of Spain, and probably served time in jail for accounting irregularities during his service as a tax collector. He never achieved the professional success to which he aspired, but he finally attained recognition as a writer. Cervantes was fifty-eight years old when Part I of *Don Quixote* appeared. The novel would make him famous, but not rich, for his publisher would be the primary beneficiary of the sale of the book.

Although his literary reputation rests primarily on the enormous impact of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes cultivated many genres. He initiated his artistic career as a poet, and in 1585 he published the pastoral novel, *La Galatea*. His *Novelas ejemplares*, twelve “exemplary” novellas published in 1613 and highly admired by scholars, cover a broad range of topics and conventions, some tending toward the idealistic and others toward the realistic. Among the most well known of the short novels are *El licenciado Vidriera* (The Lawyer Made of Glass), an exploration of madness and human nature; *El coloquio de los perros* (The Dogs’ Colloquy), a satirical and psychologically fascinating dialogue featuring canine protagonists; *La gitanilla* (The Little Gypsy Girl), a shrewd commentary on class consciousness and literary norms; and *Rinconete y Cortadillo* (Rinconete and Cortadillo), a response to the roguish antiheroes of picaresque narrative and a portrait of the lower depths of Sevillian society. Cervantes’s most sustained poetic composition is the *Viaje del Parnaso* (Journey to Parnassus), a view of poetry and poets rendered in a decidedly parodic tone and published in 1614. A frustrated dramatist who never remotely threatened the success of his rival Lope de Vega, Cervantes published, in 1615, eight full-length plays and eight dramatic interludes, or *entremeses*, that had not been presented on stage. Literary history has saved one early play, *La Numancia*, and the *entremeses* from oblivion. Cervantes’s final work, a prose epic entitled *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda), which the writer considered to be his masterpiece, was published posthumously in 1617. Based on Greek romance of classical antiquity, *Persiles* is an ambitious interweaving of lovers’ separations, infinite tribulations, travels to exotic locales, episodic digressions, and baroque contrasts and complications. *Persiles* re-creates the past through the recourses of the day. *Don Quixote* is equally reliant on the past, but ends by determining the future of the novel.

Don Quixote belongs to the classical period of Spanish literature, often called the Golden Age, which corresponds roughly to the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in England. The century and a half from 1550 to 1700 witnessed a tremendous flourishing of the arts in Spain, from early narrative realism to the most ornate baroque poetry, painting, and architecture. Shakespeare and his contemporaries have counterparts in Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, among other playwrights, who originated a national theater that has never been equaled. In political terms, Spain under the Habsburg monarchs was the supreme imperial power, the protagonist of the New World encounters, of territorial expansion, and of wars waged against Moslem and Protestant enemies. Religious fervor produced not only holy wars, but a powerful Inquisition aimed at identifying and punishing professed converts to Catholicism (“New Christians”) who secretly practiced their former faiths. The growth of urban centers and an early form of capitalism contrasted with the agricultural economy of Spain’s large rural areas, which had their own traditions and social structures. This was a time of discovery, rediscovery, and radical change, with a powerful State—at the service of God and of its own interests—as the dominant authority. For the artist, it was a contradictory age, of unlimited opportunities and strict censorship, of reverence for the past and fierce competition to surpass all predecessors. In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes manages to incorporate the broad cultural, social, and historical panorama into a work of fiction.

Don Quixote is first and foremost a book about books. Although one probably will tend to think of *Don Quixote* as a single novel, it was published in two parts, with ten years between them, in 1605 and 1615. In 1614, a writer using the pseudonym Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda wrote a sequel to Cervantes’s Part I, and this sequel makes its way into the “real” Part II. Another factor that the reader should bear in mind is that in the early seventeenth century, when Cervantes was creating his masterpiece, there was really no such thing as the novel as we now know it. The novel essentially

was being invented at this time, and Cervantes himself was a key player in the game of creation. Through *Don Quixote*, Cervantes establishes a model for the novel by writing a novel and by bringing the writing process, and the gamut of fictional forms of his day, into the narrative scheme. In effect, *Don Quixote* tells two interrelated but very different stories: the story of the misadventures of a man who tries to function as a knight errant when society has moved beyond its chivalric past and the story of the composition of Don Quixote's story. Cervantes does not simply write a novel to entertain the reader with an intriguing plot, but he uses the occasion to make the reader think seriously about the act of writing and the act of reading.

What are the first stages of these simultaneously-told tales? For the man who was to transform himself into the knight Don Quixote, the first stage is an obsession with books. The lesser nobleman, or *hidalgo*, Alonso Quijano el Bueno is an avid reader. He spends all his spare time in his library, reading an assortment of books, but with an overwhelming emphasis on the books of chivalry. These *libros de caballerías* recounted the adventures of valorous knights who dedicated themselves to lofty goals and to beautiful damsels for whom they were willing to risk everything. These knights went out on the road to face their enemies. Everything about the books of chivalry was exaggerated: the battles were intense, the adversaries were monstrous and disproportionately large, and the course of true love was difficult, filled with years of rejection that deferred the inevitable happy endings. As might be imagined, the language of these episodes was figurative, flowery, and idealistic. The unexceptional landowner from La Mancha in south-central Spain, with little to do but read and dream, fancies himself a knight. When his brain ultimately "dries up" from so much reading, he decides to initiate a journey as the self-fashioned knight errant Don Quixote de la Mancha, in order to fight for justice, to protect the defenseless, and to win fame. Thus the action is set into motion.

What about the other level, which relates to the composition of the story? The novel begins with a prologue in which the fictionalized author laments the trouble that he is having in writing a prologue for his manuscript. A friend enters and advises him to write whatever he wants—to make up things and pretend that they come from important sources—and we realize that this discussion of how to write a prologue is itself the prologue, and we also realize that we as readers are going to be very much involved in the process. We will be active—not passive—readers, just as Don Quixote will be an active rather than a passive participant in knightly exploits.

Take into account a visual analogue of this phenomenon. Arguably, the most famous painting of the period is *Las Meninas*, or *The Maids of Honor*, by Diego Velázquez. In the painting, the apparent center is the young princess Margarita. But what happens when we look more closely at the painting? We notice to the left the presence of an artist—Velázquez himself—and his easel. The painter is at work, and he is facing his subjects, who do not fit into the frame. Or do they? We can notice in the true center of the painting what seems to be a mirror, which contains a reflection of the faces of two people, who happen to be the king and queen of Spain. Velázquez is painting their portrait, and the princess, her ladies-in-waiting, and the other figures are not subjects but spectators. The artist does not hide himself, nor does he forget the observers, who are equivalent to readers. They are in the picture. On the walls of the room are hanging paintings. Like the mirror, the open doorway at the back right with a standing figure and the open window at the front right also suggest framed works of art. Finally, if the mirror in the painting were a real mirror, who would be reflected in it? The spectators, including ourselves when we visit the Prado Museum in Madrid. Velázquez does not want us to forget our role in the process, nor does he want us to forget his role in the process. Without the creator and the consumer, there is no art object. And people look at art in different ways. They give meaning to what they see, but this meaning is not necessarily uniform,

consistent, or definitive. Interpretation is, like the door in *Las Meninas*, open. Art that is self-conscious—that is, mindful of its place as art—can help us to analyze what the work of art, those who create art, and those who enjoy looking at art, or who read, are doing.

As in the case of Velázquez, Cervantes has many tricks up his sleeve, and we note that fact from the beginning of the novel. In chapter 1 of Part I, the narrator makes the point that this is the “true history,” “*la verdadera historia*,” of Don Quixote, but it is not clear what the protagonist’s real name is, what village he is from, how old he is, and so forth. Cervantes is starting his story, but he is, at the same time, asking the reader to ponder how stories (and histories, for the Spanish *historia* means both story and history) are made, what truth is, and how perceptions can vary from person to person. There is always a link between Don Quixote the reader and ourselves as readers.

When Don Quixote embarks on his first sally, he is alone, and the narrator tells us what he is thinking and what is really there. For example, what Don Quixote sees as a castle is, in fact, an inn. It seems that Cervantes had the inspiration to change this format early on, and he sends Don Quixote back home, where he picks up a squire, Sancho Panza. Sancho is not only a humorous character, famous for his proverbs, malapropisms, and comic actions, but he is Don Quixote’s foil and partner in dialogue. We no longer need the narrator to interpret for us, for Sancho Panza can argue that the giants are windmills, that the enemy hordes are flocks of sheep, and so on.

Consider the presentation of Sancho Panza. Sancho is a rustic character, a poor farmer who can neither read nor write. He is separated from Don Quixote, then, not only by class but by vocation. One man is driven by books, while the other is illiterate. Cervantes appears to be allegorizing the confrontation of the newly developed printing press—and an emerging print culture—with oral tradition and a very different literary past. More importantly, perhaps, Cervantes shows how Don Quixote and Sancho Panza interact with each other, how each man is affected by

contact with the other. Sancho especially learns from the experience. He becomes wiser, craftier, and more assertive as the novel progresses, and in Part II he is very much in control of the situation. It is commonly noted that Don Quixote represents idealism (the abstract) and that Sancho Panza represents realism (the practical, the concrete), but the novel may stress even more the interdependence and mutual attraction of the two characters, which the noted Spanish critic Salvador de Madariaga called the Sanchification—*sanchificación*—of Don Quixote and the Quixotization—*quijotización*— of Sancho Panza.

In sum, the reader of *Don Quixote* must make a commitment of sorts to become part of the artistic process. One has to work hard to read Cervantes's novel, but most readers find the effort worth their while. Why is this? In part, perhaps, because the situation remains new, novel in its original sense. No other book is quite like *Don Quixote*. Another significant point is that as readers we enter the story—we come to care about Don Quixote, despite his ridiculous enterprise—while, conversely, we distance ourselves to think about art, historiography, perspective, perception, human nature, sanity and madness, absolute and relative truths, and other fundamental matters. We can relate, as well, to Don Quixote's dreams, exemplified in his transformation of the peasant girl Aldonza Lorenzo into the lady Dulcinea de Toboso, who becomes a symbol not only of idealized love but of humankind's highest aspirations and of the power of the imagination. And we also can enjoy—and marvel at—the beauty, ingenuity, and variety of Cervantes's language.

The language of *Don Quixote* is playful, clever, ironic, poetic, satirical, and profound. Right after Don Quixote leaves his home—before he has “officially” been knighted and before he has even one adventure, much less a conquest—he envisions himself as the subject of an illustrious history: “Who doubts but that in future ages, when the true story of my famous deeds is brought to light, the wise man who writes it will describe my first sally in the morning as follows: ‘Scarcely had the

rubicund Apollo spread over the face of the vast and spacious earth the golden tresses of his beautiful hair, and scarcely had the little painted birds with their tuneful tongues saluted in sweet and melodious harmony the coming of rosy Aurora, who, leaving the soft couch of her jealous husband, revealed herself to mortals through the gates and balconies of the Manchegan horizon, when the famous knight Don Quixote of La Mancha, quitting his downy bed of ease, mounted his renowned steed, Rozinante, and began to ride over the ancient and memorable plain of Montiel.” Don Quixote exalts his mission and the books that inspire his endeavor, whereas Cervantes’s narrator exposes and takes satirical aim at the inflated goals and the inflated language.

When the knight suffers the wounds—physical and mental—of his altercation with the windmills, he insists that an evil enchanter is responsible for the mix-up: “‘Hold your peace, good Sancho,’ replied Don Quixote. ‘The affairs of war are, above all others, subject to continual change. Moreover, I am convinced, and that is the truth, that the magician Frestón, the one who robbed me of my study and books, has changed those giants into windmills to deprive me of the glory of victory; such is the enmity he bears against me. But in the end his evil arts will be of little avail against my doughty sword.’” The continual presence of the enchanter (which, interestingly, is the brainchild of Don Quixote’s niece) comes in handy. The delusional yet crafty knight has a ready-made excuse for all his misperceptions—his misreadings—of reality. And the author forces us to examine and re-examine our concepts of what constitutes reality.

At the end of chapter 8 of Part I, something quite strange happens. Don Quixote is immersed in battle with a competitor from Biscay, a province located on the northern coast of Spain, when all of a sudden the narrator finds himself with no more story to tell: “. . . at this critical moment the author of this history leaves the battle in mid air, with the excuse that he could find no more exploits of Don Quixote than those related here. It is true that the second author of this work refused to

believe that so curious a history could have been consigned to oblivion or that the wits of La Mancha could have been so lacking in curiosity as not to possess in their archives or in their registries some documents referring to this famous knight. Relying on this belief, he did not lose hope of discovering the conclusion of this delectable history, and by the favor of Heaven he did find it, as we shall tell in the [following] part.” What the narrator does discover is a manuscript, written in Arabic, by the chronicler Cide Hamete Benengeli. Since he cannot read Arabic, the narrator must hire a translator, so what we are reading from chapter 9 onward is the edited translation of a document by an Arab historian—a document that insists that it is a true and objective account when, at his historical moment, Christians regarded Moslems as great liars (and vice versa). And, of course, it is inevitable that some things get lost in translation, farther and farther removed from the time of experience.

Don Quixote’s chivalric quest allows him to meet many people, each of whom adds to the panoramic vision of the novel. A beautiful young country girl named Marcela, for example, seems to step out of the pages of a pastoral romance, a genre that projects a view of the countryside in which shepherds and shepherdesses speak more like men and women of the court than authentic country people. Marcela is no stereotype, however. She is a woman with a mind of her own. When she is pursued by a lovesick gentleman, who eventually dies as a result of her rejection, she adamantly vows to protect her freedom, and she sounds like a precocious feminist: “Now, if modesty is one of the virtues and the fairest ornament of the body and soul, why must the woman who is loved for her beauty lose it to gratify the desires of a man who, for his pleasure alone, tries with all his strength and ingenuity to rob her of it? I was born free, and to live free I chose the solitude of the fields. The trees of those mountains are my companions; the clear waters of these brooks are my mirrors; with the trees and the brooks I share my thoughts and my beauty. I am the hidden fire and the distant

sword. Those whom my looks have captivated, my words have undeceived.”

What about the most consequential woman in *Don Quixote*, the lady Dulcinea del Toboso? The immediate response would be that, despite her importance in the narrative, she never appears, since she is a fiction, but neither does her alter ego, Aldonza Lorenzo. (It is worthy of note that in the musical comedy *Man of La Mancha* the character of Aldonza plays a major role.) Don Quixote does describe Dulcinea’s breathtaking beauty, and at one point he observes that she is more real because she is a mental image. Sancho, who knows Aldonza, provides a more earthy description of the farmgirl: ““I know her well, and I assure you that she can pitch the iron bar as well as the strongest lad in our village, God save us! Why, she’s a lusty lass, tall and straight, with hair on her chest, who can pull the chestnuts out of the fire for any knight-errant now or to come who has her for his lady.”

Around the middle of Part I, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza find themselves in the Sierra Morena mountain range, where they meet a number of fascinating characters, who have stories of their own to tell. One is Cardenio, a gentleman who has gone crazy over what he thinks is the treason of his lady and best friend. A highlight of the section is a conversation between Don Quixote and Sancho on the theme of madness, and Cervantes seems to relish having the pot call the kettle black, so to speak. Don Quixote is moved to imitate the penitence of the most famous of the knights errant, Amadís de Gaula—Amadís of Gaul—and by doing so he becomes a madman who has discussed madness and who consciously emulates another madman. Don Quixote returns home from his second excursion in a cage, but there will be more adventures to follow—one month later, according to the novel, and ten years later, according to the publication record.

A prominent feature of the first part of *Don Quixote* is the entry of other characters into Don Quixote’s fictional world. Innkeepers take on the role of castle owners, while their wives and

employees become grand ladies. On several occasions, Sancho Panza the pragmatist loses his focus as he contemplates the governorship that Don Quixote has promised him as a reward for his service. This theme is intensified in Part II—the 1615 *Quixote*—when it becomes clear that numerous characters have read Part I and can react to Don Quixote even before he has the chance to act.

Cervantes juxtaposes story and history in a striking manner. The scrutiny of Don Quixote's library in chapter 6 is a brilliant exercise in literary criticism and an allegory of the Inquisition, which condemned both books and souls. The criminal and galley slave Ginés de Pasamonte in chapter 22 is a recognizable social type and the author of an autobiography that resembles picaresque narrative. In chapter 32, the characters assembled at the inn engage in a debate on the respective values of fiction and history. The captive's account, which begins in chapter 39, is a suspenseful tale of rescue, with parallels to the author's imprisonment in Algiers. In chapter 48, disparaging comments on the state of theater in Spain—made by a canon from Toledo, whom Don Quixote and Sancho meet on the road—appear to be inflected by the failed playwright Cervantes. Some scholars contend that the author of the false sequel wrote the continuation for the specific purpose of chastising Cervantes for having defamed Lope de Vega and his followers.

In contrast to the prologue to Part I, the prologue to Part II is not about prologues, but rather about the false sequel. Cervantes has the chance to condemn the intrusion of the author of the continuation into his literary space. He promises to kill off Don Quixote at the end of his own second part, in order to ensure that no one else will enter this private territory. The early chapters of Part II deal with the reception of the published history. How did people respond to the history? Which components did they like best, and which least? On hearing of the Moslem historian who documented his adventures, Don Quixote becomes worried about the accuracy of the record. He anticipates contemporary authors (and politicians) in recognizing that he is at the mercy of a writer

who can put whatever “spin” he wishes on the events. Cervantes introduces a new character, the educated jokester Sansón Carrasco, who is the first person in the text to have read Part I and who devises several plans to cure Don Quixote of his illusions.

Back on the road for his third sally, Don Quixote decides that he would like to pay his respects to Dulcinea in her hometown of El Toboso. Sancho attempts to keep him away from the town, since he earlier had lied to his master about bearing a message to Dulcinea. At this point, we see how Sancho Panza gains control of the situation. He stops three farmgirls riding along on their mounts and announces to Don Quixote that they are Dulcinea and two of her handmaidens. Don Quixote, the creator of his own reality based on fiction, is reduced to replying, “I see nothing, Sancho, but three peasant girls on three asses.”

The sly Sancho Panza puts forth the argument that Dulcinea must be enchanted, and Don Quixote declares that his principal mission will be to “disenchant” her. This episode signals a change in Don Quixote, who is increasingly at the mercy of the plots of others. While these plots are based on Don Quixote’s previous words and deeds, they ironically cut into his authority within the narrative. He does have his moments, however. One of them is when he is challenged by the mysterious Knight of the Mirrors, whom he defeats. It turns out that the knight is Sansón Carrasco in disguise, and Sansón’s generous interest in curing Don Quixote of his madness turns into vengeance for the ignoble loss on the battlefield. Shortly afterwards, Don Quixote opens the cage of a real lion to do battle, but the lion is too sleepy to do any harm, and what could have been a catastrophe turns into a moral victory.

Another well-known episode of Part II is Don Quixote’s descent into the Cave of Montesinos, where he spends about an hour and a half and returns to tell the story of three days of knightly adventures and visions. Sancho can hardly control his laughter when Don Quixote reports

having seen the “enchanted” Dulcinea and her maids of honor, together with noted figures of myth and legend, in the cave. The darkness of the cave obviously arouses Don Quixote’s mental juices. Similarly, when he sits in the audience of a puppet show on a chivalric topic, Don Quixote runs on stage to attack the villain and thus to protect the damsel in distress. He ends up paying for the damage to the puppets and the scenery.

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza meet the Duke and Duchess, avid readers of Part I, who invite the knight and squire to their palace and treat Don Quixote with feigned respect. The knight is elated, since “for the first time he felt thoroughly convinced that he was a knight-errant in fact and not in imagination, for he saw himself treated in the same way as he had read that such knights were treated in past ages.” The Duke and Duchess are connoisseurs of chivalric literature, but even more they are tricksters, and Don Quixote and Sancho become the objects of their mockery and of their elaborate games. The aristocratic couple is willing to spend time and money—and to employ a cast of thousands—to trifle with the mad knight and his uneducated squire. Their most comprehensive plot is to create an “island” for Sancho to govern, a prize that Don Quixote had promised him for faithful service. Before Sancho commences this undertaking, Don Quixote offers him words of wisdom, which in no way hint of madness: “Show pride, Sancho, in your humble origins, and do not scorn to say that you spring from laboring men, for when men see that you are not ashamed, none will try to make you so; and consider it more deserving to be humble and virtuous than proud and sinful. . . . Remember, Sancho, that if you make virtue your rule in life and if you pride yourself on acting always in accordance with such a precept, you will have no cause to envy princes and lords, for blood is inherited, but virtue is acquired, and virtue in itself is worth more than noble birth.”

Sancho is successful in his judgments—he is called “a new Solomon” by his subjects—and his combination of intuition and common sense serves him well. Nonetheless, the Duke and Duchess

have arranged for a series of misfortunes to beset the governor (among them, no food, for fear of poisoning), and Sancho leaves his island in disgust. He meets Ricote, a former neighbor and converted Moslem, and history again mediates the fiction. Sancho and Don Quixote, who has suffered trials of his own in the palace, resume their chivalric itinerary. At an inn, Don Quixote meets two gentlemen who have a copy of the Avellaneda continuation of *Don Quixote*, and Cervantes has the opportunity to malign his imitator. The knight and the squire spend some time with a group of highwaymen, and then make their way to Barcelona, where they once again find the false sequel in a printing establishment. Later Cervantes introduces a character from the spurious text who will assert, and will certify before a notary public, that the Don Quixote before him—and not the other—is the genuine knight. The scenes in which Don Quixote preoccupies himself with the illegitimate chronicle of the other Don Quixote calls attention to the interplay of process and product—of story and storytelling—that marks Cervantes’s bold approach to narrative.

Don Quixote’s nemesis Sansón Carrasco—now the Knight of the White Moon—reappears and challenges him to battle. This time, Sansón triumphs, and he forces Don Quixote to return home and to refrain from knightly adventures for a period of one year. Don Quixote undergoes a type of conversion—presented somewhat ambiguously—and reassumes his former identity: “I am no longer Don Quixote of La Mancha, but Alonso Quixano, the man whom the world formerly called the Good. . . . I now abhor all profane stories of knight-errantry, for I know only too well, through Heaven’s mercy and through my own personal experience, the great danger of reading them.” Is the death of the protagonist a spiritual conversion or a means of preventing other writers from keeping him alive? Readers’ opinions vary greatly. But even though Don Quixote’s death is a contested issue, his life—including his literary afterlife—is not. In every sense, *Don Quixote* and its influence are very much alive. In four hundred years, the novel and the theory of the novel have moved in

diverse directions, but *Don Quixote* seems to prophesy and to inform all that is new. Cervantes's novel is amusing, audacious, stimulating, and multi-layered. It is self-referential and evocative, pointing inward to literature and outward to the world at large. By blending the comic and the serious, it tests the limits of reading and writing, and it asks readers to reassess their assumptions about art and life. Targeting the romances of chivalry, Cervantes crosses the threshold of the modern. Ostensibly rehearsing models of the past, he provides a template for the future.

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