

## 9. Cervantes's *Don Quixote*



Francisco J. Torrome : *Don Quixote and the Windmill*

IN A VILLAGE somewhere in La Mancha, a remote province south of Madrid, there lives a member of the lowest order of the Spanish nobility, a *hidalgo*, whose name is Alonso Quixano, Quixada, or Quexana – the narrator is not sure which. A solemn, lanky man with a crooked nose, gaps in his teeth and a big mustache, he is ‘bordering on fifty’ and lives with his niece and housekeeper. He has a lance on a rack and an ancient shield and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for coursing. When he has nothing else to do, “which was mostly all the year round”, he reads books of chivalry and romance, and it becomes an obsession. In fact, he even sells much of his land to build up his library. In the end, his head is turned and, wanting to live the books he has read, he decides that nothing will satisfy him but that he must make a knight-errant of himself and ride out to rid the world of injustice.

His first step is to clean a suit of armour that had belonged to his ancestors and had been standing forgotten in a corner for centuries. He scours it and mends it as best he can but realises that the headpiece is not a proper helmet, so he makes one of cardboard. To test its strength, he draws his sword and deals it two blows, shattering it completely. He reconstructs it with a few iron strips on the inside but decides not to tempt fate with any further tests and instead pronounces it a ‘most excellent visored helmet’.

Then he goes to his nag, which has more corns than a barleyfield, although it seems to him that neither Alexander’s Bucephalus nor El Cid’s Babieca was its equal. He had never given it a name before, but since it is now a knight’s horse it needs a title of eminence. After musing for four days, he decides on Rocinante (‘rocin’, hack, and ‘ante’, foremost), a name that befits the first and foremost of all the hacks in the world.

Next, he spends eight whole days devising a name for himself. He finally hits on Don Quixote (‘Don’, equivalent to ‘Sir’ and ‘Quijote’, a word for thigh armour), and then adds the name of his kingdom, thus becoming Don Quixote (Sir Thighpiece) de La Mancha.

Now that he has armour, steed and heroic name, only one thing is necessary to complete the requirements of a

chivalric hero: a lady to be in love with. For a knight-errant without a lady-love is a tree without leaves or fruit, a body without a soul. In a nearby village called El Toboso there lives a good-looking peasant girl, with whom it is generally believed he had once been in love, called Aldonza Lorenzo. He decides that a suitable variant on her name would be Dulcinea, so she becomes Dulcinea del Toboso, a name that is musical and magical and meaningful, like all the others he has bestowed on himself and his possessions.

That, in summary, is the first chapter of *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*, the first modern novel and, according to many writers, the greatest of all. The scenario of this opening heralds an avalanche of disasters and misfortunes in most of the remaining 51 chapters of part I and 74 chapters of part 2. The two volumes were published 10 years apart in 1605 and 1615 but are now normally published as a single work.

The author was Miguel de Cervantes, no stranger to misfortune himself. He was born in Alcalá de Henares, near Madrid, to a barber-surgeon. We should note that in his early twenties he wrote poetry and studied with the Humanist teacher Juan López de Hoyos, a follower of the Dutch Humanist Erasmus. Then, suddenly, Cervantes left Spain, perhaps to escape arrest and the loss of his right hand for wounding another man in a fight. He went to Italy and joined a Spanish infantry regiment. He fought against the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto (1571), where he lost part of his left hand. Four years later, he was captured by Algerian corsairs and made a slave in Africa for five years, repeatedly trying to escape until he was ransomed by his family and friends. He was forced by poverty to earn a living as a tax collector but, after the discovery of financial discrepancies, he was imprisoned for several months in 1597-8 in Seville. As he tells us in the prologue, it was while in prison that he conceived the idea for *Don Quixote*.

Cervantes had already been writing intermittently for many years: plays, poems and a prose romance called *La Galatea*. None of it made any impact, unlike *Don Quixote*, which was an immediate success. Although it did not make him rich, it brought him international fame as a man of letters. Its popularity led to the publication of an unauthorised sequel by an unknown writer who masqueraded under the name of Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. Cervantes ridicules it repeatedly in his own part 2.

What was Cervantes aiming to achieve in *Don Quixote*? Well, he says in the Prologue that, according to a friend, “from beginning to end it is an invective against books of chivalry”. But note that this is the friend’s verdict on the basis of the author’s outline. It is not necessarily the author’s own view. It may indeed be the case that Cervantes set out to write a long short story parodying the cheap romances of knightly adventure and chivalry that were popular in his day but that his creative imagination ran

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away with him, and he ultimately produced instead a complex and multi-layered masterpiece.

If we return to the story, we might discover some clues. Certainly, the early chapters are a satire on chivalry and romantic literature. One sweltering July day Don Quixote sallies forth on Rocinante in full armour and ill-devised visor, taking the way his horse chooses and planning to have himself knighted by the first person he meets. There is a constant mocking tone as, for example, when we are told that the sun was becoming so hot that "his brains would have melted, if he'd had any". He comes to an inn which he mistakes as a splendid castle. The innkeeper, sensing a troublemaker, decides to humour his folly and, after allowing him an overnight stay, mimics the ceremony of dubbing him a knight and sends him on his way.

As he rides away from the inn, Don Quixote sees a farmer flogging his young shepherd, Andrés, who is tied to a tree. Our knight calls the farmer a coward and challenges him to combat. The farmer tries to explain that he is beating him for not minding his sheep properly but, terrified by the strange apparition in front of him, he frees the youth and promises to pay him in full his arrears of wages. Don Quixote rides away, well pleased with his work. But no sooner has he left than the farmer grabs the boy by the arm, ties him up again, and flogs him half dead.

Later, Don Quixote meets a mule train of Toledo merchants and blocks the highway: they will not advance unless they confess there is no maiden more beautiful than the peerless Dulcinea del Toboso. One of them says they need to see her first, but he insists that they must believe, or else face him in battle. When the merchant suggests that he show them a portrait, he decides he's had enough and charges at them. But Rocinante trips, and he falls off, and a muleteer beats him up so badly that he can't get up. Eventually, a farmer from his own village happens along, hoists him up on his donkey and takes him home.

That ends the first adventure and the first five chapters of the book, which are a burlesque of the chivalric romances and Quixote is clearly a figure of fun. If the novel had simply continued in that vein, it would have been just another satire and would not have achieved mythic status as one of the world's greatest literary creations. Cervantes, however, does two things which transform the work. Firstly, he ensures that in future adventures Quixote is not always the loser. In his *Lectures on Don Quixote*, Vladimir Nabokov lists the 40 encounters throughout the work and concludes that there are 20 victories, perfectly balanced by 20 defeats (he's stretching it a bit; e.g. he counts the above knighting and farm boy incidents as victories).

Secondly, Cervantes introduces a sidekick in the shape of Sancho Panza. Quixote realises that he has failed to provide himself with one essential appendage of a knight, a trusty squire. So, before his second sally, he enlists a neighbouring peasant, an honourable man 'but a little short of salt in the brain-pan', promising him governorship of an island won by his sword as reward for his services.

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza thus become the precursors of all the great comic double acts. Initially, Quixote is the dreamer, the fantasist, the man of faith, whereas Sancho is the practical man of common sense, the sceptic, the voice of reason. We see this contrast immediately in their first encounter together, when Don Quixote sees windmills on the plain of Montiel and is certain that they

are "thirty or more monstrous giants with whom I intend to fight a battle and whose lives I intend to take; and with the booty we shall begin to prosper. For this is a just war, and it is a great service to God to wipe such a wicked breed from the face of the earth". Sancho argues with him that they are only windmills. After Quixote has charged and been knocked off Rocinante by one of the sails, Sancho exclaims: "Didn't I tell you they were only windmills? And only someone with windmills on the brain could have failed to see that". Quixote replies that a sorcerer who stole his books has clearly turned the giants into windmills in order to rob him of the glory of his victory.

The incident highlights the fact that traditional chivalry mistook its own violence, pride, egotism and greed for goodness. It was in fact part and parcel of a world dominated by these failings. Yet at the same time nothing in the sane real world has the grandeur of Quixote's delusions, a truth which Sancho comes to realise and, as their adventures continue, the knight and the squire develop a growing attachment and mutual admiration.

In many ways, they are part of the dualities of humanity as a whole: introversion and extroversion, noble folly and base wisdom, heroism and cowardice, idealism and realism, faith and reason. Yet these dualities interact and adopt each other's traits. One of the many ironies in the novel is that Sancho's scepticism ultimately helps to disillusion Quixote, while he himself becomes seduced by Quixote's imagination. When the knight finally returns home, goes to bed and recovers his reason as he lies dying, Sancho pleads unsuccessfully with Quixote to get up and go with him to the countryside dressed up as shepherds, and perhaps behind some bush they'll find the lady Dulcinea.

Many critics have detected the apotheosis of Quixote as the novel and time progresses. Nabokov, who thought it was a cruel book, complained that over 350 years the parody had become a paragon: he stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, pure, unselfish and gallant. Dostoevsky identified Quixote's battered, sorrowful countenance with Christ himself, despised and rejected of men. Auden, too, found in the Don a portrait of the Christian saint, and the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, who termed the work 'the Spanish Bible', considered it a 'profoundly Christian epic'. Quixote is for him the crystallisation of our wish to overcome our destiny. With his unyielding will to create new spiritual values in the world of materialism, Quixote finally solves his existentialist quest.

Perhaps the Humanist key to *Don Quixote* lies in *The Praise of Folly* by Erasmus, whom Cervantes almost certainly admired. *Folly* is partly an attack on the Catholic Church and its superstitions in favour of the individual quest based on both reason and faith. Like Erasmus, Cervantes believes that humanity needs its fantasies and illusions but it also needs reason to question and control them. Our personal dreams and visions, sooner or later, have to be accommodated to the facts of life.

What makes *Don Quixote* a Humanist masterpiece is that what begins as a savage satire on chivalrous myths metamorphoses into a satire on the cruel world's lack of real chivalry and a testament to man's unquenchable spirit.

