VINTAGE

DON QUIXOTE

CERVANTES

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About the Author

Miguel de Cervantes was born on 29 September 1547, in Alcala de Henares, Spain. At twenty-three he enlisted in the Spanish militia and in 1571 fought against the Turks in the battle of Lepanto, where a gunshot wound permanently crippled his left hand. He spent four more years at sea and then another five as a slave after being captured by Barbary pirates. Ransomed by his family, he returned to Madrid but his disability hampered him; it was in debtor's prison that he began to write *Don Quixote*. Cervantes wrote many other works, including poems and plays, but he remains best known as the author of *Don Quixote*. He died on 23 April 1616.

Edith Grossman is the award-winning translator of major works by many of Latin America's most important writers. Born in Philadelphia, she attended the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California at Berkeley before receiving her PhD from New York University. She lives in New York City.

MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

Don Quixote

TRANSLATED BY
Edith Grossman

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Harold Bloom

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Introduction: Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

BY HAROLD BLOOM

1

WHAT IS THE true object of Don Quixote's quest? I find that unanswerable. What are Hamlet's authentic motives? We are not permitted to know. Since Cervantes's magnificent Knight's quest has cosmological scope and reverberation, no object seems beyond reach. Hamlet's frustration is that he is allowed only Elsinore and revenge tragedy. Shakespeare composed a poem unlimited, in which only the protagonist is beyond all limits.

Cervantes and Shakespeare, who died almost simultaneously, are the central Western authors, at least since Dante, and no writer since has matched them, not Tolstoi or Goethe, Dickens, Proust, Joyce. Context cannot hold Cervantes and Shakespeare: the Spanish Golden Age and the Elizabethan-Jacobean era are secondary when we attempt a full appreciation of what we are given.

W. H. Auden found in Don Quixote a portrait of the Christian saint, as opposed to Hamlet, who "lacks faith in God and in himself." Though Auden *sounds* perversely ironic, he was quite serious and, I think, wrong-headed. Against Auden I set Miguel de Unamuno, my favorite critic of *Don Quixote*. For Unamuno, Alonso Quixano is the

Christian saint, while Don Quixote is the originator of the actual Spanish religion, Quixotism.

Herman Melville blended Don Quixote and Hamlet in Captain Ahab (with a touch of Milton's Satan added for seasoning). Ahab desires to avenge himself upon the white whale, while Satan would destroy God, if only he could. Hamlet is death's ambassador to us, according to G. Wilson Knight. Don Quixote says that his quest is to destroy injustice. The final injustice is death, the ultimate bondage. To set captives free is the knight's pragmatic way of battling against death.

Though there have been many valuable English translations of *Don Quixote*, I would commend Edith Grossman's version for the extraordinarily high quality of her prose. The Knight and Sancho are so eloquently rendered by Grossman that the vitality of their characterization is more clearly conveyed than ever before. There is also an astonishing contextualization of Don Quixote and Sancho in Grossman's translation that I believe has not been achieved before. The spiritual atmosphere of a Spain already in steep decline can be felt throughout, thanks to the heightened quality of her diction.

Grossman might be called the Glenn Gould of translators, because she, too, articulates every note. Reading her amazing mode of finding equivalents in English for Cervantes's darkening vision is an entrance into a further understanding of why this great book contains within itself all the novels that have followed in its sublime wake. Like Shakespeare, Cervantes is inescapable for all writers who have come after him. Dickens and Flaubert, Joyce and Proust reflect the narrative procedures of Cervantes, and their glories of characterization mingle strains of Shakespeare and Cervantes.

You cannot locate Shakespeare in his own works, not even in the sonnets. It is this near invisibility that encourages the zealots who believe that almost anyone wrote Shakespeare, except Shakespeare himself. As far as I know, the Hispanic world does not harbor covens who labor to prove that Lope de Vega or Calderón de la Barca composed *Don Quixote*. Cervantes inhabits his great book so pervasively that we need to see that it has three unique personalities: the Knight, Sancho, and Cervantes himself.

Yet how sly and subtle is the presence of Cervantes! At its most hilarious, *Don Quixote* is immensely somber. Shakespeare again is the illuminating analogue: Hamlet at his most melancholic will not cease his punning or his gallows humor, and Falstaff's boundless wit is tormented by intimations of rejection. Just as Shakespeare wrote in no genre, *Don Quixote* is tragedy as well as comedy. Though it stands forever as the birth of the novel out of the prose romance, and is still the best of all novels, I find its sadness augments each time I reread it and does make it "the Spanish Bible," as Unamuno termed this greatest of all narratives. Novels are written by George Eliot and Henry James, by Balzac and Flaubert, or by the Tolstoi of *Anna Karenina. Don Quixote* may not be a scripture, but it so contains us that, as with Shakespeare, we cannot get out of it, in order to achieve perspectivism. We are inside the vast book, privileged to hear the superb conversations between the Knight and his squire, Sancho Panza. Sometimes we are fused with Cervantes, but more often we are invisible wanderers who accompany the sublime pair in their adventures and debacles.

If there is a third Western author with universal appeal from the Renaissance on, it could only be Dickens. Yet Dickens purposely does not give us "man's final lore," which Melville found in Shakespeare and presumably in Cervantes also. *King Lear*'s first performance took place as part I of *Don Quixote* was published. Contra Auden,

Cervantes, like Shakespeare, gives us a secular transcendence. Don Quixote does regard himself as God's knight, but he continuously follows his own capricious will, which is gloriously idiosyncratic. King Lear appeals to the skyey heavens for aid, but on the personal grounds that they and he are old. Battered by realities that are even more violent than he is, Don Quixote resists yielding to the authority of church and state. When he ceases to assert his autonomy, there is nothing left except to be Alonso Quixano the Good again, and no action remaining except to die.

I return to my initial question: the Sorrowful Knight's object. He is at war with Freud's reality principle, which accepts the necessity of dying. But he is neither a fool nor a madman, and his vision always is at least double: he sees what we see, yet he sees something else also, a possible glory that he desires to appropriate or at least share. Unamuno names this transcendence as literary fame, the immortality of Cervantes and Shakespeare. Certainly that is part of the Knight's quest; much of part II turns upon his and Sancho's delightful apprehension that their adventures in part I are recognized everywhere. Perhaps Unamuno underestimated the complexities involved in so grand a disruption in the aesthetics of representation. *Hamlet* again is the best analogue: from the entrance of the players in act II through the close of the performance of *The Mousetrap* in act III, all the rules of normative representation are tossed away, and everything is theatricality. Part II of *Don Quixote* is similarly and bewilderingly advanced, since the Knight, Sancho, and everyone they encounter are acutely conscious that fiction has disrupted the order of reality.

3

We need to hold in mind as we read *Don Quixote* that we cannot condescend to the Knight and Sancho, since

together they know more than we do, just as we never can catch up to the amazing speed of Hamlet's cognitions. Do we know exactly who we are? The more urgently we quest for our authentic selves, the more they tend to recede. The Knight and Sancho, as the great work closes, know exactly who they are, not so much by their adventures as through their marvelous conversations, be they quarrels or exchanges of insights.

Poetry, particularly Shakespeare's, teaches us how to talk to ourselves, but not to others. Shakespeare's great figures are gorgeous solipsists: Shylock, Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, Lear, Cleopatra, with Rosalind the brilliant exception. Don Quixote and Sancho really listen to each other and change through this receptivity. Neither of them *overhears* himself, which is the Shakespearean mode. Cervantes or Shakespeare: they are rival teachers of how we change and why. Friendship in Shakespeare is ironic at best, treacherous more commonly. The friendship between Sancho Panza and his Knight surpasses any other in literary representation.

We do not have *Cardenio*, the play Shakespeare wrote, with John Fletcher, after reading Thomas Shelton's contemporaneous translation of *Don Quixote*. Therefore we cannot know what Shakespeare thought of Cervantes, though we can surmise his delight. Cervantes, an unsuccessful dramatist, presumably never heard of Shakespeare, but I doubt that he would have valued Falstaff and Hamlet, both of whom chose the self's freedom over obligations of any kind. Sancho, as Kafka remarked, is a free man, but Don Quixote is metaphysically and psychologically bound by his dedication to knight errantry. We can celebrate the Knight's endless valor, but not his literalization of the romance of chivalry.

But does Don Quixote altogether believe in the reality of his own vision? Evidently he does not, particularly when he (and Sancho) is surrendered by Cervantes to the sadomasochistic practical jokes—indeed, the vicious and humiliating cruelties—that afflict the Knight and squire in part II. Nabokov is very illuminating on this in his *Lectures on Don Quixote*, published posthumously in 1983:

> Both parts of *Don Quixote* form a veritable encyclopedia of cruelty. From that viewpoint it is one of the most bitter and barbarous books ever penned. And its cruelty is artistic.

To find a Shakespearean equivalent to this aspect of *Don Quixote*, you would have to fuse *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* into one work, a grim prospect because they are, to me, Shakespeare's weakest plays. Falstaff's dreadful humiliation by the merry wives is unacceptable enough (even if it formed the basis for Verdi's sublime *Falstaff*). Why does Cervantes subject Don Quixote to the physical abuse of part I and the psychic tortures of part II? Nabokov's answer is aesthetic: The cruelty is vitalized by Cervantes's characteristic artistry. That seems to me something of an evasion. *Twelfth Night* is comedy unsurpassable, and on the stage we are consumed by hilarity at Malvolio's terrible humiliations. When we reread the play, we become uneasy, because Malvolio's socioerotic fantasies echo in virtually all of us. Why are we not made at least a little dubious by the torments, bodily and socially, suffered by Don Quixote and Sancho Panza?

Cervantes himself, as a constant if disguised presence in the text, is the answer. He was the most battered of eminent writers. At the great naval battle of Lepanto, he was wounded and so at twenty-four permanently lost the use of his left hand. In 1575, he was captured by Barbary pirates and spent five years as a slave in Algiers. Ransomed

in 1580, he served Spain as a spy in Portugal and Oran and then returned to Madrid, where he attempted a career as a dramatist, almost invariably failing after writing at least twenty plays. Somewhat desperately, he became a tax collector, only to be indicted and imprisoned for supposed malfeasance in 1597. A fresh imprisonment came in 1605; there is a tradition that he began to compose *Don Quixote* in jail. Part I, written at incredible speed, was published in 1605. Part II, spurred by a false continuation of *Don Quixote* by one Avellaneda, was published in 1615.

Fleeced of all royalties of part I by the publisher, Cervantes would have died in poverty except for the belated patronage of a discerning nobleman, in the last three years of his life. Though Shakespeare died at just fifty-two (why, we do not know), he was an immensely successful dramatist and became quite prosperous by shareholding in the actors' company that played at the Globe Theater. Circumspect, and only too aware of the government-inspired murder of Christopher Marlowe, and their torture of Thomas Kyd, and branding of Ben Jonson, Shakespeare kept himself nearly anonymous, in spite of being the reigning dramatist of London. Violence, slavery, and imprisonment were the staples of Cervantes's life. Shakespeare, wary to the end, had an existence almost without a memorable incident, as far as we can tell.

The physical and mental torments suffered by Don Quixote and Sancho Panza had been central to Cervantes's endless struggle to stay alive and free. Yet Nabokov's observations are accurate: cruelty is extreme throughout *Don Quixote*. The aesthetic wonder is that this enormity fades when we stand back from the huge book and ponder its shape and endless range of meaning. No critic's account of Cervantes's masterpiece agrees with, or even resembles, any other critic's impressions. *Don Quixote* is a mirror held up not to nature, but to the reader. How can this bashed

and mocked knight errant be, as he is, a universal paradigm?

5

Hamlet does not need or want our admiration and affection, but Don Quixote does, and he receives it, as Hamlet generally does also. Sancho, like Falstaff, is replete with self-delight, though Sancho does not rouse moralizing critics to wrath and disapproval, as the sublime Falstaff does. Much more has been written about the Halmet/Don Quixote contrast than about Sancho/Falstaff, two vitalists in aesthetic contention as masters of reality. But no critic has called Don Quixote a murderer or Sancho an immoralist. Hamlet is responsible for eight deaths, his own included, and Falstaff is a highwayman, a warrior averse to battle, and a fleecer of everyone he encounters. Yet Hamlet and Falstaff are victimizers, not victims, even if Hamlet dies properly fearing a wounded name and Falstaff is destroyed by Hal/Henry V's rejection. It does not matter. The fascination of Hamlet's intellect and of Falstaff's wit is what endures. Don Quixote and Sancho are victims, but both are extraordinarily resilient, until the Knight's final defeat and dying into the identity of Quixano the Good, whom Sancho vainly implores to take to the road again. The fascination of Don Quixote's endurance and of Sancho's loyal wisdom always remains.

Cervantes plays upon the human need to withstand suffering, which is one reason the Knight awes us. However good a Catholic he may (or may not) have been, Cervantes is interested in heroism and not in sainthood. Shakespeare, I think, was not interested in either, since none of his heroes can endure close scrutiny: Hamlet, Othello, Antony, Coriolanus. Only Edgar, the recalcitrant survivor who inherits the nation, most unwillingly, in *King Lear*, abides

our skepticism, and at least one prominent Shakespeare critic weirdly has called Edgar “weak and murderous.” The heroism of Don Quixote is by no means constant: he is perfectly capable of flight, abandoning poor Sancho to be beaten up by an entire village. Cervantes, a hero at Lepanto, wants Don Quixote to be a new kind of hero, neither ironic nor mindless, but one who wills to be himself, as José Ortega y Gasset accurately phrased it.

Hamlet subverts the will, while Falstaff satirizes it. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza both exalt the will, though the Knight transcendentalizes it, and Sancho, the first postpragmatic, wants to keep it within limits. It is the transcendent element in Don Quixote that ultimately persuades us of his greatness, partly because it is set against the deliberately coarse, frequently sordid context of the panoramic book. And again it is important to note that this transcendence is secular and literary, and not Catholic. The Quixotic quest is erotic, yet even the eros is literary. Crazed by reading (as so many of us still are), the Knight is in quest of a new self, one that can overgo the erotic madness of Orlando (Roland) in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* or of the mythic Amadís of Gaul. Unlike Orlando’s or Amadís’s, Don Quixote’s madness is deliberate, self-inflicted, a traditional poetic strategy. Still, there is a clear sublimation of the sexual drive in the Knight’s desperate courage. Lucidity keeps breaking in, reminding him that Dulcinea is his own supreme fiction, transcending an honest lust for the peasant girl Aldonza Lorenzo. A fiction, believed in even though you know it is a fiction, can be validated only by sheer will.

Erich Auerbach argued for the book’s “continuous gaiety,” which is not at all my own experience as a reader. But *Don Quixote*, like the best of Shakespeare, will sustain any theory you bring to it, as well or as badly as any other. The Sorrowful Knight is more than an enigma: he seeks an undying name, literary immortality, and finds it, but only

through being all but dismantled in part I and all but teased into real madness in part II: Cervantes performs the miracle, nobly Dante-like, of presiding over his creation like a Providence, but also subjecting himself to the subtle changes brought about both in the Knight and in Sancho Panza by their wonderful conversations, in which a shared love manifests itself by equality and grumpy disputes. They are brothers, rather than father and son. To describe the precise way that Cervantes regards them, whether with ironic love or loving irony, is an impossible critical task.

6

Harry Levin shrewdly phrased what he called “Cervantes’ formula”:

> This is nothing more nor less than a recognition of the difference between verses and reverses, between words and deeds, *palabras* and *hechos*—in short, between literary artifice and that real thing which is life itself. But literary artifice is the only means that a writer has at his disposal. How else can he convey his impression of life? Precisely by discrediting those means, by repudiating that air of bookishness in which any book is inevitably wrapped. When Pascal observed that the true eloquence makes fun of eloquence, he succinctly formulated the principle that could look to Cervantes as its recent and striking exemplar. It remained for La Rochefoucauld to restate the other side of the paradox: some people would never have loved if they had not heard of love.

It is true that I cannot think of any other work in which the relations between words and deeds are as ambiguous as in *Don Quixote*, except (once again) for *Hamlet*.