

Cervantes and Don Quixote de la Mancha

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SUMMARY

Miguel de Cervantes, the most influential writer in Spanish literature, created two of the most recognisable fictional characters, Don Quixote de la Mancha and Sancho Panza, in 1605. His novel *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* is regarded as the first modern novel and first international best seller. This article, in the 400th anniversary year of Cervantes' death, introduces Cervantes' biography, discusses the enduring features of his classic novel and explores the value and importance of the novel for psychiatry.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None

It is not an exaggeration to describe Miguel de Cervantes' book *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* (more simply, *Don Quixote*) as the first modern novel and the first international best seller as we understand both terms today. It is also true that this book, first published in 1605, at least within the Spanish-speaking world, has remained in publication for over 400 years. For the Spanish, Cervantes has the same status as Shakespeare in the English-speaking world.

The man

Early life

It is 400 years this year since Miguel de Cervantes died. He was born in 1547 in Alcalá de Henares to Rodrigo, a barber surgeon, and Leonor de Cortinas, daughter of rural landowners. He was the third surviving child of five siblings. The basic elements of his biography are well established. The family moved to Valladolid, which at the time was the capital of Spain, in 1552, in straitened circumstances. It is known that his father spent the years 1552–1553 in a debtors' prison. Cervantes was initially educated in Córdoba, probably at a Jesuit college, where he is thought to have developed his love of learning, the theatre and the picaresque novel. He moved with his family to Cabra and then Seville, where he probably attended another Jesuit college. Here it is thought he came

in contact with Father Acevedo, a playwright who taught rhetoric. The family moved to Madrid in 1566, where Cervantes came under the influence of another teacher, Juan López de Hoyos, a curate and humanist. De Hoyos was the royal chronicler and author of a work on the illness and death of Elisabeth of Valois, Queen of Spain. This book contained Cervantes' first published works, four poems commemorating the sudden death of the queen. Within 3 months of the publication of the poems, Cervantes had hurriedly left for Rome, in December 1569.

An adventurer in exile

Cervantes' departure for Rome was in direct response to a warrant for his arrest following a duel at which Antonio de Sigura was wounded. This was the start of Cervantes' exile from Spain. He worked as prelate to Giulio Acquaviva (who was himself prelate to the Pope) until 1570, when he left for Naples to join the Papal naval forces, serving first under Diego de Urbina and later under Álvaro de Bazán, the Marquis of Santa Cruz. It was in the Battle of Lepanto, in which the Spaniards faced off the Turks, that Cervantes won honour for valour and courage. He led 12 men in a skiff despite suffering from malaria, attacked the Turkish boats at great cost and peril to himself, and suffered 3 shots from a harquebus to his chest and left arm. He never recovered the use of his left arm and it took 6 months for the injury to his chest to heal. The benefit of this act of courage to Cervantes was commendation from Don John of Austria. The Battle of Lepanto was a triumph for the Spaniards. The list of Ottoman losses is immense – 110 ships destroyed or sunk and 130 captured, 30 000 men killed or wounded, nearly 15 000 slaves freed – and Cervantes' contribution to this triumph marked him out as a hero (Canavaggio 1986).

Incarceration in Algiers

The next significant event in Cervantes' life was his capture by Turkish pirates, off the North African coast, while he was returning home to Spain from Naples in 1575. He was held in Algiers

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for 5 years. He and his brother Rodrigo, who was captured at the same time, attempted to escape on three occasions. It is a matter of much speculation why Cervantes was not more severely punished for these failed attempts at escape and some authorities claim that he was treated with especial courtesy by Hasan Pasha, the Turkish governor of Algiers, because of their homosexual relationship. Whatever the case, the living conditions in Algiers were hardly pleasant and Cervantes' multiple attempts at escape attest to his determination to return home to Spain. Eventually in 1580 he was successfully ransomed and he returned to Spain.

Return to Spain

The period 1580 to 1605, when *Don Quixote* was published, was precarious for Cervantes. For a time he was a spy, a commissioner for the provision of grain for the king's galleys and later a tax collector. His personal life was as complex as his public life. An affair with Ana Franca de Rojas resulted in an illegitimate daughter, Isabelle, and shortly afterwards, in 1584, he married Catalina de Salazar. There was to be no settled family or domestic life because in the period immediately following his marriage he travelled extensively, and within 3 years he had left his wife and would not return for another 15 years. Cervantes died on 22 April 1616. It is much remarked that he died on the same day as William Shakespeare, but in fact Shakespeare died 10 days earlier, as England was yet to adopt the Gregorian calendar.

The works

Cervantes' main works are listed as *La Galatea* (1585), *The Captive's Tale* (1590), *Don Quixote*, Part 1 (1602–05), *Exemplary Novels* (1613), *Don Quixote*, Part 2 (1614–1615), and *Persiles and Sigismunda* (published posthumously in 1617). Cervantes also wrote numerous plays (*The Fortunate Pimp*, *The Labyrinth of Love*, etc.) and poems (*Journey to Parnassus*). He was a contemporary of Lope de Vega, Spain's leading dramatist. Their relationship was complex, but ultimately one that was characterised by mutual respect and admiration. Cervantes' literary reputation rests almost exclusively on *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* Part 1.

Don Quixote and the novel form

Part 1 of *Don Quixote* was an immediate success following its publication in March 1605. Within months, a second edition was under preparation in Madrid. The first print run was for 1750 copies and the second 1800. By the end of 1607, no copy

was left in the publisher's shop (McCrary 2002). Permission for publication in the whole Iberian Peninsula, including Portugal, was granted in April 1605. Even more remarkably, *Don Quixote* and *Sancho Panza* were already being paraded at processions, ballets and masquerades. It took barely 3 months for *Don Quixote* to break all sales records. By February 1606, the reputation of the novel had crossed the Atlantic to Peru (Canavaggio 1986). The first reference to *Don Quixote* in the English language was in a play, a comedy, by George Wilkins in 1607.

As already mentioned, *Don Quixote* is often described as the first modern novel. At first glance this statement sounds odd, given that novels, as we understand them, are so prevalent now that it is difficult to imagine a time when they did not exist. The statement also raises questions about the nature of the novel as an art form. It is sometimes said that what distinguishes the modern novel from what had come before it is the implicit understanding between the writer and reader about the nature of the subject matter, namely that it is made up, that the reader has to suspend judgement but yet believe in the characters and their exploitation of the situation they are in. Also, the narrative account explicitly gives the novelistic characters interiority, an inner life, that speaks and visibly responds to real situations, and more importantly speaks to the inner life of the reader. The reader empathises with the characters, understands their motivations and their disappointments, and shares in their triumphs and vicissitudes. But there is more to this idea that *Don Quixote* was the first modern novel than I have described above.

Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) wrote that *Don Quixote* was a realistic novel (Borges 1964). This is at first surprising, given that this particular novel depends on the transformation of mundane situations, ordinary settings, into extraordinary and magical phenomena: 30 or 40 windmills become a pair of giants, sackcloth takes on the feel of the sheerest sendal, and so on. Borges's point is that Cervantes counterpoised 'a real prosaic world to an imaginary poetic world', that 'he opposes the dusty roads and sordid wayside inns of Castille' (Borges 1964: p. 228) to the vague intrigues and idealism of the romances of knight errantry. This insinuation of the fantastic, the magical into the realm of the real and objective is the basis of the 20th-century flowering of Spanish American writing, the so-called magical realism best exemplified in the works of Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014). In addition, there are other devices that Cervantes employed, if not invented.

In Part 1, Chapter 6, the priest and the barber inspect Don Quixote's library and find in it a copy of *Galatea*, a novel by Cervantes. The priest says:

'That fellow Cervantes has been a good friend of mine for years, and I know he's more conversant with adversity than with verse. His book's ingenious enough; it sets out to achieve something but doesn't bring anything to a conclusion' (p. 50).^a

There is a real Cervantes who is the author of *Galatea* and we are reading his other novel, *Don Quixote*, in which he (Cervantes) also appears as a character. This intertwining of the objective and subjective, the real and ideal, is explored to its acme in *Don Quixote* Part 2, wherein the protagonists, who are fictional characters, have themselves read Part 1 and comment on it and marvel at the recording of their own fictional exploits as if they were real people, raising that most modern of questions 'What is the nature of reality?'

The intrusion of the real into the fictional and the role of illusion and the ideal in literature are already prefigured in Cervantes' prologue to *Don Quixote* Part 1, as is Cervantes' method, his poetics:

'It can happen that a man has an ugly, charmless son, and his love blindfolds him to prevent him from seeing the child's defects: on the contrary, he regards them as gifts and graces, and describes them to his friends as examples of wit and cleverness [...] All that has to be done is to make the best use of imitation in what one writes; and the more perfect the imitation the better the writing [...] using expressive, decorous and well-ordered words in a straightforward way, to write sentences that are both harmonious and witty, depicting what is in your mind to the very best of your ability, setting out your ideas without complicating or obscuring them' (Part 1, Prologue).

Here Cervantes is responding to the possibility that our perceptions can be distorted versions of what is out there. In other words that our subjective experiences may be at variance with the objective world and ultimately that the objective world may be unknowable yet we inhabit it and write stories about it. And that the task of the writer is to describe these subjective experiences as accurately but also as 'harmoniously' as possible. This is also the task of phenomenological psychiatry – the accurate description of subjective experience and the suspension of prior theoretical explanations.

Cervantes did away with footnotes, excessive references to the classics, and studiously aimed at dislodging the extant model for novels of chivalry that described the exploits of Amadis of Gaul, Bernardo del Carpio and Renaud de Montauban among others. He made a point of hinting at the Arabic roots of Spanish literature: *Don Quixote* is

an Arabic work of Cide Hamete Benengeli, and Cervantes had found the manuscript in a market and had it translated by a *morisco*, a Moor who had converted to Christianity. This device allowed Cervantes to sufficiently distance himself from the novel as to be able to comment on it. It also allows the reader to witness the creative process of the book's origins. Finally, the structure of the novel, especially of Part 1, borrows from the style of *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which stories within stories effortlessly proceed.

Don Quixote and psychiatry

Don Quixote is a novel that has as its central figure a madman. It deals with the manifestations of madness, the responses of individuals and communities to explicit signs of madness, while at the same time it presents a person who is endearing and always intriguing. The humanity of the character of Don Quixote is the very basis of the success of the novel and of the continuing and undiminished power of this unusual fictional character, a most unheroic hero, to arouse our empathy and understanding.

Observing madness

Quite early in the novel, Cervantes introduced the notion of observing the characteristics of Quixote that denoted his insanity and from then on, in asides and commentaries, he presents Don Quixote to us, his behaviours, his bodily language and his attire. Quixote's speeches are presented for their grandiloquence and illogicalities. The reader takes note of his illusions and sometimes delusions.

Cervantes wrote:

'The innkeeper told everyone in the hostelry about his guest's insanity, his vigil and knighting that he awaited. They pondered at such a *strange kind of madness* [my italics] and went to watch him from a distance, and saw that, with a composed air, he sometimes paced to and fro and, at other times, leaning on his lance, gazed at his armour without looking away for some while' (Part 1, Chapter 3).

This passage introduces the notion that there is an accepted version of madness, but that Don Quixote's version is distinctive. In another episode, Cervantes wrote:

'By the time they reached Don Quixote's room he was out of bed, shouting and raving, laying about him with his sword in all directions with slashes and backstrokes, as wide awake as if he'd never slept. They wrestled him back to bed' (Part 1, Chapter 7).

Aside from these instances where Don Quixote's behaviour and talk are exposed to an audience,

a. All extracts from *Don Quixote* in this article are taken from: Cervantes (2003) *Don Quixote* (trans. J. Rutherford). Penguin Books.

who then question what manner of madness he was afflicted with, Cervantes also leaves us, the readers, to judge the nature and quality of Don Quixote's affliction. The windmill incident is an example of this:

“It is perfectly clear [...] that you are but a raw novice in this matter of adventures. They are giants; and if you are frightened, you can take yourself away and say your prayers while I engage them in fierce and arduous combat.” And in so saying he set spurs to his steed Rocinante, not paying any attention to his squire Sancho Panza, who was shouting that what he was charging at were definitely windmills not giants. But Don Quixote was so convinced that they were giants that he neither heard his squire Sancho's shouts nor saw what stood in front of him, even though he was by now upon them; instead he cried: “Flee not, O vile and cowardly creatures, for it is but one solitary knight who attacks you.” (Part 1, Chapter 8).

In this example, Don Quixote seems to be suffering from an illusion – the windmills that he saw did indeed exist but he misidentified them as a race of giants. Illusions, in our current model of mental disorder, usually approximate to delirium and would rarely persist for the extensive (narrative) duration of Don Quixote's experiences. Cervantes deals with the manner and content of Don Quixote's illusions by asserting ‘he [Don Quixote] was so ready to accommodate everything he saw to his delirious chivalry and his errant thoughts’ (Part 1, Chapter 21). This precocious explanation by Cervantes has the same structure as our modern description of the relationship of primary delusions to the secondary delusions that follow, in that the primary erroneous belief colours and distorts all subsequent thoughts and beliefs. The content of delusional beliefs is influenced by the cultural motifs that are readily available to express particular signature beliefs such as persecutory beliefs. This is another way of saying that prior beliefs, whether normal or abnormal, determine and significantly influence the content of our experiences. Our experiences are accommodated within the sphere of our beliefs.

There is an example of Capgras syndrome that demonstrates the relationship between insight, rationality and the explanatory mechanisms for self-understanding:

“And as regards what you said about those two men riding hither and thither being the priest and the barber, our friends from the village, it may well be that they look like them; but you should not believe by any manner of means that they really are them. What you should believe and understand is that they look like our friends, as you say they do, what must have happened is that those who have enchanted me have assumed their likenesses, because it is easy for enchanters to take on whatever appearances they please” (Part 2, Chapter 48).

It is also remarkable that Cervantes recognised that some maladies are circumscribed. He wrote of Don Quixote:

“And there's something else, too [...] If we leave aside the absurdities that the good *hidalgo* comes out with concerning his mania, in conversations on other subjects he talks great good sense, and shows himself to have a clear and balanced judgment. So long as you don't get him going on chivalry, nobody would say that he wasn't a man of excellent understanding” (Part 1, Chapter 30).

The discrete nature of some maladies raised questions about whether an individual was insane or not. Cervantes recounts such a story:

‘In the Seville madhouse there was a man whose relations had sent him there because he was out of his mind. He was a graduate in canon law from Osuna University; but, in many people's opinion, even if he'd studied at Salamanca itself he'd still have been a madman. After a few years of confinement, this graduate persuaded himself that he'd recovered and was sane, and in this belief he wrote to the archbishop begging him in measured and well-chosen words to have him released from the wretched situation in which he was living, because God in his infinite mercy had restored his lost wits, although his relations were keeping him there so as to continue using the income from his property and, regardless of the truth, were determined that he'd stay mad until his dying day. The archbishop, impressed by so many well-reasoned, intelligent letters, told one of his chaplains to find out from the madhouse governor whether what the graduate claimed was true, to talk to the madman and, if he seemed to be sane, to have him released’ (Part 2, Chapter 1).

It is not only Don Quixote who is mad in the novel. In Part 1, Chapter 27 we hear the story of Cardenio and Luscinda. In this story, Cardenio has intermittent madness by his own account:

“I've realized that I'm not often in full possession of it [my reason], but so deranged at times that I perform a thousand mad actions, tearing my clothes, bellowing in these solitudes, cursing my fortune and vainly repeating my beloved enemy's name, with no other thought or plan than to end my life in screams; and then when I come back to my senses I feel so weak and exhausted that I can hardly move” (Part 1, Chapter 27).

For Cervantes, the relationship between reason and madness is intricate and complex. It is not merely a matter of madness being an absence of reason, but that reason and unreason can be so intertwined that it is often surprising how both can coincide and/or alternate. For example, in a passage where Don Quixote was arguing about the relative merits of letters over arms, the authorial voice says:

‘Don Quixote was developing his arguments in such an orderly and lucid way that for the time being none of those listening to him could believe that he was a madman’ (Part 1, Chapter 37).

This view attests to the belief in Cervantes' day that madness by its nature excluded reason, lucidity and order. Nonetheless, we have Don Quixote, evidently mad, but lucid and coherent on complex philosophical matters. The recurring question is what manner of madness was this that escaped definition, yet was eloquent and goal-driven, knew the chivalric literature off by heart, and was humane and compassionate.

Causation

In Cardenio's case, the cause of his madness was lost love: he was pining for his lover, who he assumed had married another man, Fernando. In Don Quixote's case, his madness was attributed to the excessive reading of books of chivalry:

'“And let me tell you this, Master Nicolás,” (for that was the barber's name). “My uncle would often read those evil books of misadventure for two whole days and nights on end, and he'd throw his books down, grab his sword and slash the walls of his room, and once he was exhausted he'd say that he'd killed four giants as big as four towers, and that the sweat pouring from him was blood from the wounds he received in battle, and then he'd drink a pitcher of cold water and feel calm and well again, claiming that the water was a most precious draught brought by the famous Squiffy, a great enchanter and friend of his. But I'm the one to blame for it all, not telling you gentlemen about my uncle's madness so you could have done something about it and burned those unchristian books of his before it came to all; he's got lots and lots of them, and they do deserve to be put to the flames, like heretics”' (Part 1, Chapter 5).

This claim that Don Quixote's madness was occasioned by excessive reading of books of chivalry was an excuse for the exploration of what counted as a good book. Cervantes was attempting to overturn the formulaic and worn structure of books of chivalry and to replace these narratives with something new. Hence these books that had metaphorically turned Don Quixote's mind were burned, save for a few, including Cervantes' own novel *Galatea*. What Cervantes did was to set up a new poetics, a definition of what ought to count as good writing:

'the more a lie looks like the truth the better a lie it is, and the more feasible it is the more it pleases us. Fictional stories should suit their readers' understanding and be written in such a way that, by making impossibilities seem easy and marvels seem straightforward and by entrancing the mind, they amaze and astonish, gladden and entertain, so that

wonder and pleasure go hand in hand; and none of this can be achieved by the writer who forsakes verisimilitude and imitation, because the perfection of all writing consists in these two qualities' (Part 2, Chapter 47).

Cervantes' through his characters explored the very nature of good writing, how to judge a writer's qualities, what the balance of features are that determine harmony and perfection in poetry or oratory. For Cervantes, a book ought to be:

'a broad and spacious canvas on which the pen could wander unhindered, describing shipwrecks, storms, skirmishes and battles; portraying an exemplary captain with all the necessary characteristics – prudent in anticipating his enemies' tricks, an eloquent orator in persuading or dissuading his soldiers, mature in his decisions, quick to act, courageous both in awaiting an attack and in launching one; depicting now a lamentable and tragic event, now a happy and unexpected one, there a lovely lady, virtuous, intelligent and demure' (Part 2, Chapter 47).

Conclusions

The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha died in bed surrounded by Sancho Panza, his niece and friends, having received the last sacrament and expressing in powerful words his loathing for books of chivalry. Cervantes' alter ego, Cide Hamete Benengeli, wrote:

'For me alone was Don Quixote born and I for him; it was for him to act. For me to write; we two as one' (Part 2, Chapter 64).

But who was this Don Quixote? I leave the last words to him:

'“I was born, by the will of heaven, in this iron age of ours, to revive in it the age of gold, or golden age, as it is often called. I am the man for whom dangers, great exploits, valiant deeds are reserved. I am, I repeat the man who will revive the Knights of the Round Table, the Twelve Peers of France and the Nine Worthies, and who will consign to oblivion the Platirs, the Tablantes, the Olivantes and Tirantes, the Phoebuses and Belianises, together with the whole crowd of illustrious knights errant of olden times, by performing in this age in which I live such prodigies, such wonders, such feats of arms as to eclipse the most brilliant deeds that they ever accomplished”' (Part 1, Chapter 20).

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