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Chapter 1

Don Quixote*'s premises, structure and major themes*

Critical approaches; Background; Cervantes's motives

Don Quixote, in basic conception, is a parody of Spanish romances of chivalry. It concerns an *hidalgo*, a member of the minor gentry, from a village somewhere in La Mancha. His life-style, described on the memorable opening page, conforms to that of a familiar type, associated with threadbare frugality, hunting, the relics of honourable ancestry, parochial seclusion. In short, a very prosaic backdrop for the delusions of grandeur about to fill the stage. La Mancha is the vast, featureless plain, scorchingly hot in summer, which occupies the plateau of south-eastern Castile. This *hidalgo* was an addictive reader of chivalric romances; and they took such a grip on his fantasy that he came to believe that they were historically true and that he could become a knight errant such as they depict, with all the ensuing glory and perquisites. With Sancho Panza as his squire, he rides through the countryside in search of adventure, interpreting each commonplace encounter that befalls him as one of the marvellous adventures in chivalry books. From the resulting merry confusions Cervantes has built not just a great work of comedy – parody is too narrow a term – but a novel which would appear a quasi-sacred precursor to the German Romantics and the leading nineteenth-century novelists. For Spanish intellectuals since the mid-nineteenth century it has enshrined the essence of the national culture.

The modern era has tended to convert *Don Quixote* into myth, appropriating the myth's meaning to its immediate concerns (Close 1978). This has been as true of academic critics, despite

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their commitment to the recovery of historical context, as of novelists, poets, aestheticians, and philosophers, who feel that commitment less. The two most influential interpretations of *Don Quixote* in this century, by Ortega y Gasset (1914) and Américo Castro (1925), treat it as a supremely lucid and poised masterpiece, which anticipates the secularism, ambiguity, and relativity of the modern era, reflected in the modern novel. This approach was motivated by the tacit urge to salvage from the seemingly hidebound culture of Counter-Reformation Spain an outlook and set of values prophetic of a new Spain destined to emancipate itself from the traditions of the old. The approach continued a custom, established by the German Romantics, of regarding Cervantes as an artistic colossus, who serves as a bridge between one historic era and another. This notion has not lost its grip in recent times. Thus, for Foucault (1970), *Don Quixote* symbolises the collapse of the Renaissance world-order and its replacement by that of the Classical age. Spitzer, in a seminal essay clearly influenced by Romantic concepts of irony (1948), takes the novel as a glorification of the artist, who surveys the interplay of human 'perspectives' with God-like detachment. On the threshold of the modern era, it achieves a never-to-be-repeated balance of scepticism and faith. A long line of Spanish critics, from Menéndez Pelayo (1905) onwards, treats Cervantes as a sympathetic mediator between Spain's chivalric ethos and the modern age, mocking the former's excesses but finding a form in which to perpetuate its essence.

In attributing this forward-looking attitude to Cervantes, the critics have found difficulty in reconciling it with Cervantes's explicit ideology, which accords with the intellectual premises of his age. The lack of alignment tends to be explained away, with unsatisfactory circularity, as a symptom of his congenital ambiguity or 'perspectivist' cast of mind. The reverential attitude to Cervantes is responsible for a related falsification: it tends to veil *Don Quixote's* essential nature as a work of comedy; and this results in a lessening of understanding and, even more unfortunately, of enjoyment. Those who have resisted the tendency to

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More Information

update *Don Quixote's* meaning (e.g. Russell 1969; Close 1978) have tended to do so from the viewpoint of literary or intellectual history. There is thus a gap in Cervantine criticism waiting to be filled. To do so adequately in a brief book aimed at the general reader is beyond my aspirations; I simply intend to offer a succinct interpretation of some central features of Cervantes's narrative art in *Don Quixote*, which takes account of their complexity while avoiding the above-mentioned misalignment. In the two main chapters of this book I consider, first, the novel's organising themes and principles in general, and secondly, the development of Don Quixote's and Sancho's personalities.

Amadís de Gaula, published in 1508, is a late, sophisticated offshoot of the corpus of Medieval prose romances – most notably, the monumental *Lancelot* (France, early thirteenth century) – celebrating the deeds of King Arthur and his Round Table. Deservedly popular in Spain for over two centuries, it generated a wave of sequels and imitations. The addicts of this literature comprised all classes: illiterate reapers at harvest time (see *DQ* I, 32), hard-bitten *conquistadores* who remembered the romances when naming parts of America, the adolescent Teresa of Avila, the great dramatist Lope de Vega. It dressed up the medieval code and practice of chivalry in fabulous garb: unremittingly marvellous adventures in a largely lengendary setting of forests, palaces, castles, tourneys, with a cast of giants, enchanters, damsels-in-distress, dwarfs, princesses, and knights whose qualities of beauty , bloodthirstiness, chivalry and so forth are invariably superlative. The moral/religious symbolism which gave serious purpose to the *Lancelot* is largely lost. Supporters of the Spanish romances could claim that they offered a mirror of true chivalry; yet, as the innkeeper's family artlessly testifies (*DQ* I, 32), the escapist inducements of violence, sentimentality, and consummated passion were more potent reasons for their success.

Throughout the sixteenth century, moralists and divines condemned the romances for their immorality, inplausibility, lack of elegance and learning; and in the second half of it, the combined

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influence of the Council of Trent and neo-Aristotelian poetic theory gave this criticism a sharper edge. The assembly of bishops and theologians who met at Trent to formulate Catholic doctrine in response to Protestantism, and to launch the Roman Church's own reform, called on the collaboration of literature and the arts. Simultaneously, the Renaissance literary theories based on Aristotle's *Poetics* offered literature an intellectual stiffening and status which complemented its newly acquired moral commitment. Cervantes's opposition to the romances is grounded on neo-classical principles and an ideal of what a long prose romance should be; they are formulated by his spokesman, the Canon of Toledo, in Part I, Chapter 47. Towards the end of his career he fulfilled the ideal by writing *Persiles y Sigismunda*, an epic tale of pilgrimage to Rome by two chaste, faithful lovers. It is piteous, grave, and lofty in tone, ingeniously labyrinthine in plot, deeply religious, exemplary of man's relation to Providence, written according to Aristotelian epic theory and modelled on Heliodorus's *Aethiopic History* (c. AD 250). Cervantes probably judged it his masterpiece. The interpolated tales in *Don Quixote* Part I are somewhat similar to *Persiles* in character. They represent the literary species – the romantic *novela* or episode – that Cervantes cultivates assiduously throughout his career. Integral to it are peripeties and crises which imperil or save love, life and honour: capture by pirates, shipwrecks, escapes; compromising flights from home by girls pursuing or pursued; providential reunions and wondrous recognitions. The tone is sentimental and decorous, the status of the principals genteel, the discourse courtly and rhetorical; the appeal to pathos is reinforced by the focus on women's experience of the sweet agonies of pre-marital love. The exemplary dénouements, brought about by reasoned goodwill rather than violence, feature family reconciliations, contrite villains, the prospect of marriage: in short, a middle-class ethic for middle-class characters.

The cornerstone of Cervantes's literary theory is the idea that aesthetic pleasure depends on the beauty and harmony of the object perceived; in fiction, these qualities are equivalent to veri-

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More Information

similitude – what is deemed reasonably possible. The two key statements in the Canon of Toledo's discourse, mentioned above, are these:

> What beauty can there be, or what proportion betwen parts and whole and vice-versa, in a book or fable where a lad of sixteen stabs a giant as big as a tower and splits him in two as if he were made of sugar paste? (i, 565)

and

> Fictitious fables must be wedded to the intelligence of their readers and be so written that, by making the impossible seem easy and prodigies seem plain, and by keeping the reader's spirit in suspense, they arouse wonderment, suspense, joy, and pleasure. . . and none of these things can be achieved by him who flees verisimilitude and imitation, in which literary perfection consists. (*ibid.*)

From the second statement it is evident that Cervantes's notions of verisimilitude or imitation of nature are very different from notions of realism based, say, on the nineteenth-century novel (Riley 1962, chapter 5). He takes for granted that the writer of heroic romance – the genre to which he is referring – will aim at effects such as wonderment, suspense, and joy, and will depict things extraordinary yet possible, rather than the routine stuff of everyday experience. That saving phrase 'yet possible' marks a crucial distinction for Cervantes: all the difference between the idea of a lad of sixteen splitting a giant in half and the extraordinary coincidences of the Captive's story (*DQ* I, 39–42), which occur in a recognisably contemporary and historical world, *could* happen, and therefore merit the description *verdaderas* ('true', i.e. as if true). Thus, Cervantes's basic motive in attacking the romances is his sense that demolition must precede re-construction; as a professional writer of entertainment drawn to this general kind of fiction, he felt indignant about the massive proliferation of an inferior species of it which had perverted public taste and queered his own pitch.

At this point his motives for writing *Don Quixote* shade from the aesthetic into the personal, and reflect cultural and social

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influences other than those mentioned. What is known of his biography (McKendrick 1980) suggests that he may have been, by contrast with some famous literary contemporaries, a somewhat marginal and unfortunate figure. The grievances imputed to him have unduly if understandably influenced the interpretation of his attitude to the society around him. The son of a poor surgeon, he was born in 1547, finished his education at a humanist academy in Madrid (not a university), and suddenly left Spain for Italy in 1569. His probable involvement in a duel may explain this departure; it would also provide the motive for his insistent repudiation of revenge in his writings. By 1570, he had enlisted in the Spanish army in Italy. Now begins the heroic period recalled in the Captive's story; it includes his participation in the sea-battle of Lepanto (1571) and the five years of his captivity in Algiers. Ransomed in 1580, he returned to Spain, settled in Madrid, and began a moderately successful literary career as dramatist and author of a pastoral romance, *La Galatea* (1585). Then, in 1587, he quit literature for more humdrum and aggravating occupations, including that of tax-collector, which brought him a spell of imprisonment in 1597 for a shortfall in the revenues due to the Spanish Treasury. This was not due to his dishonesty, but to the bankruptcy of a Sevillian banker. *Don Quixote* was supposedly 'engendered' (*DQ* I, Prologue) in this three-month internment.

When, about 1600, he resumed his leisure and his pen, he must already have become aware of the enormous success of the New Comedy, led by Lope de Vega; this made the actor-managers reluctant to buy his plays. The New Comedy's formula was avowedly popular and unclassical: it drew on national traditions; it triumphally expressed the prevailing social ethos – patriotic, devout, obsessed with honour; it cultivated speed and variety of action, sensationalism, the mixing of genres. There now occurs a relative redirection of Cervantes's creative energies, from 'poetry' (including drama) to prose-fiction; to attribute it chiefly to the above-mentioned circumstances would be simplistic, yet they undoubtedly help to explain it. Though he acknowledged

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Excerpt
More Information

Lope de Vega's supreme talent, he regarded some of his and his followers' success as due to unscrupulous pandering to vulgar taste. In *DQ* I, 48 he equates the New Comedy's violations of the classical rules with the aberrations of chivalric romances. Some of the polemical bite of Part I, and much of the witty malice of its prologue, issue from a general resentful sense of artistic standards cheapened, outlets blocked, and opportunities lost to luckier rivals.

After the enthusiastic reception of Part I, both in Spain and abroad, Cervantes mellowed. Until his death in 1616, he lived chiefly in Madrid. Towards the end, the patronage of the Archbishop of Toledo and the Count of Lemos somewhat alleviated his chronic poverty; he was now famous, and had achieved some social recognition. In a glorious Indian summer of creativity, which, if we include the composition of Part I, lasted from his early fifties to his sixty-ninth year, he completed the two Parts of *Don Quixote* (1605; 1615), his twelve *Exemplary Novellas* (1613), the poem *Voyage to Parnassus* (1614), a collection of comedies and farces (1615), and *Persiles* (posthumously published, 1617), not to mention work unpublished or unfinished. Two factors help to explain this prodigious output. First, the success of *Don Quixote* Part I primed the pump of reader demand. Secondly, in Madrid Cervantes was surrounded by writers of talent or genius: rivalry, emulation, and intimacy with their writings primed *his* pump. In particular, the climate of early seventeenth-century Spain – golden zenith of its Golden Age – was propitious for the writing of works in a satiric vein: Quevedo's *Sueños* or visions of hell; Góngora's and Quevedo's humorous poetry; the picaresque; *Don Quixote*; some of Cervantes's short stories. Historical reasons help to explain this.

The Spain of Philip II (1556–98), despite setbacks, was still a confident nation, proud of its leadership of Catholic Christendom. The Spain of Philip III, that of Cervantes's Indian summer, was more passive and introspective. It had to cope with the financial exhaustion to which Philip II had brought it; hence it curbed military adventures abroad. The court, based in Madrid

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from 1606, belied this retrenchment and indulged in conspicuous extravagance. Powerful court-favourites ran the country for the colourless monarch, and their influence reflected the ascendancy and wealth of the aristocracy, which paralleled those of the Church, and contrasted with the poverty of the rest of the nation. Madrid became a centre of leisure, opportunity, and smart residence; swarms of people came to it from the impoverished provinces to seek preferment at court or service in noble households. Art – theatre, lyric poetry, painting, fiction – flourished; the Inquisition's censorship may have checked intellectual enquiry, yet it did not curb creativity. By its policy of enforced religious unity, Spain avoided the religious conflicts that shook its European neighbours. At the same time, it lost some of the accompanying intellectual ferment. It also experienced a different kind of internal dissension, originating from the socially stigmatised, hence disaffected descendants of converted Jews and Moors. The latter, the *moriscos*, were expelled from Spain between 1609 and 1614 (see *DQ* II, 54). This was a society hyper-conscious of honour, status, and caste. The gentry pursued a life of dignified idleness; those lower down the social pyramid sought unscrupulously to scramble up. Widespread religious fervour, propagated by the Catholic Counter-Reformation, was matched by the dissolution and violence of *mores*. The comic writers of the age gleefully catalogue and ridicule the teeming human fauna around them and, not infrequently, each other. Quevedo, from his Stoic, aristocratic, and conservative viewpoint, was cynically convinced of living in a society corrupted by money and the loss of ancestral moral fibre and sense of hierarchy; *desengaño*, disenchantment with worldly vanity, is his insistent theme.

Don Quixote, with its literary theme, part-idealised rural settings, and holiday atmosphere, seems at first to say little about all this. On closer inspection it proves to say much by implication: e.g. in its portrayal of a counterfeit *caballero* or the life of pleasure-seeking aristocrats. Yet Cervantes's forte as a comic writer consists in showing the warts on man's private rather than his public face and perceiving a universal representativeness in them.

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The social (as distinct from literary) satire in *Don Quixote* is indirect and sublimated in this comic vision. While Cervantes offers a grandly sweeping representation of his society and epoch, its tone is harmonious, mellow, and picturesque, rather than caustic. One reason for this is that his novel, though an attack on heroic literature, conserves a partly heroic or romantic tone. Another is its creator's conception of the comic.

The prologues to Cervantes's works, similar in tone to Horace's *Satires*, let the reader into his intimacy. They show him affably conversing with friends, including the reader in this category; the tone is self-deprecating, anecdotal, disarming, jocular. The prologue to *Don Quixote* Part I portrays him, unforgettably, in a dithering quandary, cheek on hand, elbow on desk, not knowing how to proceed until rescued by his facetious counsellor; in the prologue to Part II, similarly bantering, he sends the reader off as an emissary to Avellaneda – the man who, under this pseudonym, published a continuation of Part I a year before the publication of Cervantes's Part II – with a couple of jokes about madmen and dogs, the second one cheerfully vulgar. Both have disparaging implications about his rival's leaden wit. Prefatory matters are not extraneous to *Don Quixote* since much of it, notably Part II, might be considered a continuation of its prologues, and since its humour is stamped with authorial personality. The moving prologue to *Persiles*, written when Cervantes was on his death-bed, contains his farewell to life, and specifically to laughter and friends. His priorities are revealing. When, in Chapter 4 of *Viaje del Parnaso*, he sums up his achievement in *Don Quixote*, he claims: 'I have given a means of diversion to the melancholy and downcast spirit in any time or season.' Thus, he shares the Renaissance's belief in laughter's therapeutic powers, attested by Rabelais's *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and diverges from the aggressive coarseness of Spanish humour of the age – perhaps a safety-value for its sense of decorum. Hence the ethos of *Don Quixote* is marked by conviviality, a festival spirit, levelling irony, and a kind of innocence. This is a world,

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More Information

like that of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, where care has been banished in a mood of civilised, communal fun. If *Don Quixote* attacks chivalric romances with such vigorous merriment, this is because they represent human folly in an impersonal form: the extravagances of a now somewhat outworn genre. Since Cervantes's emphasis falls on 'merriment' rather than 'attacks', he would probably have conceived of it as comedy rather than as satire.

The basic burlesque formula

Though Cervantes does not classify his novel generically, he implies that it has a basically parodic or satiric aim by playing variants on the idea of demolishing chivalric romances: e.g. 'inveighing against', 'undoing the authority and sway', 'knocking down the ill-founded machine' (Prologue to Part I). 'Demolition' is certainly *le mot juste* for the battering-ram comedy of the hero's adventures in Part I.

The novel's opening shows him imaginatively creating for himself, out of his unpromising circumstances, a suitable title, a steed, armour, a mistress, and – in Chapter 7 – a squire. This Edenic process of naming is revealing: an unworthy word-stem is grotesquely made to bear an idealistic flower. 'Quijote' is the name of a thigh-piece of a suit of armour; it rhymes with heroic 'Lanzarote' (Lancelot) and plays on the hero's surname, eventually said to be 'Quijano' Yet the suffix '-ote' is pejorative in Spanish; and the linking of the name with the province (*cf.* Amadís de Gaula) has a comically homely effect. Dulcinea is a treacly enhancement of the plain Jane rusticity of Aldonza, derived from 'dulce' (sweet). The Spanish proverb says: 'If you haven't a wench, Aldonza will do.' The Aldonza in question is a country lass whom Don Quixote had once fancied. The name 'Rocinante' is an attempt to bestow dignity on the bony nag in Don Quixote's stable: i.e., 'rocín (nag), 'antes' (before), but now a steed. Only the squire's name is unchanged. 'Sancho' is proverbially rustic; Panza means belly; and the character of the man is basically that of the clowns of sixteenth-century comedy: lazy,

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