

## MIGUEL DE CERVANTES (1547-1616)

### 1. Spanish Golden Age (*Siglo de Oro*).

- a. During this age, Spain was the most powerful country in the world.
- b. It coincided with the rise of the Spanish Empire under the Catholic Monarchs of Spain and the Spanish Habsburgs.
- c. Its start was 1492, with the end of the *Reconquista*, the voyages of Christopher Columbus, and the publication of Antonio de Nebrija's *Grammar of the Castilian Language*.
- d. The greatest patron of Spanish art and culture was Philip II (1556-98), whose royal palace, El Escorial, attracted Europe's greatest architects and painters.
- e. It ended with the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659 that ended the Franco-Spanish War (1635 to 1659). Some extend the golden age up to 1681 with the death of the Pedro Calderón de la Barca, the last great writer of the age.
- f. Painters: El Greco, Diego Velázquez.
- g. Writers: Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Garcilaso, Góngora, Quevedo, Aleman, La Celestina, Calderon.
- h. Musicians: Tomás Luis de Victoria, Cristóbal de Morales, Francisco Guerrero, Luis de Milán, and Alonso Lobo.



### 2. Cervantes' Life.

- a. Early years.
  - (1) Much of his life was spent in poverty and obscurity.
  - (2) He was the second son of barber-surgeon Rodrigo de Cervantes and his wife, Leonor de Cortinas (1520-93). Rodrigo came from Córdoba, Andalusia, where his father Juan de Cervantes was an influential lawyer.
  - (3) Cervantes's parents may have been New Christians. They were almost certainly of *converso* origin, that is, Jewish converts to Catholicism. In the Spain of Cervantes's days, this meant living under clouds of official suspicion and social mistrust.
- b. Military service and captivity.
  - (1) In 1570, he enlisted in a Spanish Navy infantry regiment, and was badly wounded at the Battle of Lepanto in October 1571.
  - (2) He received three wounds, two in the chest, and another that rendered his left arm useless. He was later called "the one-handed man of Lepanto."
  - (3) In 1575, he was captured by Barbary pirates and sold into slavery in Algiers.
  - (4) After five years, he was ransomed by the Trinitarians, a religious charity, and returned to Madrid.
- c. Later years.
  - (1) Cervantes married in 1584. Shortly before this, his illegitimate daughter Isabel was born. Her mother was the wife of a Madrid innkeeper
  - (2) In 1587, Cervantes was appointed as a government purchasing agent, then became a tax collector in 1592.

- (3) From 1596 to 1600, he lived primarily in Seville, then returned to Madrid in 1606, where he remained for the rest of his life.
  - (4) In July 1613, he joined the Third Order Franciscans, then a common way for Catholics to gain spiritual merit.
  - (5) He died on 22 April 1616 and was buried in the Convent of the Barefoot Trinitarians, in central Madrid.
- d. Literary career.
- (1) He was influenced by *Lancelot*; *Amadis de Gaul*; Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*; and Rabelais (d. 1553), *Gargantua*.
  - (2) His first significant novel, *La Galatea*, was published in 1585.
  - (3) Other works include the twelve *Novelas ejemplares* (*Exemplary Novels*); a long poem, the *Viaje del Parnaso* (*Journey to Parnassus*); and *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses* (*Eight Plays and Eight Interludes*). *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (*The Travails of Persiles and Sigismunda*), was published posthumously in 1616.

### 3. *Don Quixote*.

- a. Part One of *Don Quixote* was published in 1605, and Part Two in 1615.
- b. It is among the best and most central works in world literature and considered by many “the first modern novel.”
- c. It was popular from the moment it appeared, in Spain, France, England, and Germany.
- d. Since the first half of the 18th century, it has exercised a greater impact on Western culture than any any other literary classic.
- e. It is one of the most-translated books in the world and the best-selling novel of all time.
- f. The plot revolves around the adventures of *Don Quixote de la Mancha* and his farmer sidekick, Sancho Panza.
- g. The novel's structure is episodic in form. It takes place over a long period of time, including many adventures united by common themes.
- h. Interpretation.
  - (1) The contrasts between the tall, thin, idealistic Quixote and the fat, squat, world-weary Panza is a motif echoed ever since.
  - (2) Don Quixote represents the idealism and the medieval world, theism, order, purity, absolutism, orthodoxy, nationalism, the ought; Sancho Panza represents the realism and the modern world atheism, chaos, impurity, relativism, the is.
- i. See especially chs. 47-48.

### 4. Legacy.

- a. Cervantes is regarded as the greatest writer in the Spanish language. Spanish is often referred to as “the language of Cervantes.”
- b. The word *quixotic* has been adopted by many languages.
- c. Its characters, such as Quixote's horse Rocinante, are emblems of Western literary culture.
- d. The phrase “tilting at windmills” derives from the book.

- e. Cervantes was rediscovered by English writers in the mid-18th century. The literary editor John Bowle argued that Cervantes was as significant as any of the Greek and Roman authors then popular, and published an annotated edition in 1781.
- f. Carlos Fuentes suggested Cervantes and William Shakespeare form part of a narrative tradition that includes Homer, Dante, Defoe, Dickens, Balzac, and Joyce.
- g. *Man of La Mancha*, the popular musical play of 1965, was based on *Don Quixote*.
- h. He influenced: Fielding, *Tom Jones*; Sterne; Wieland, *The Adventures of Don Sylvio von Rosalva* (1764); Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister* (1794); Jane Austen; Honore de Balzac, *Comedie humaine* (1842); Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*; Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1853); Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (1868); Kafka, *The Castle*; Thomas Mann; Proust; Joyce, *Ulysses*; Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927); Faulkner; Carlos Fuentes; Garcia Marquez; Salman Rushdie; Umberto Eco; Milan Kundera.
- i. Fans were John Locke, Pablo Picasso, and Richard Strauss.
- j. He has been discussed by literary critics: Turgenev, *Hamlet and Don Quixote* (1860); Henry James, *The Art of Fiction* (1888); Lukacs; and Mikhail Bakhtin.

## 5. Evaluation.

- a. Don Quixote represents the uppers story. Sancho Panza represents the lower story.
- b. “Christianity is the perfect blend of reason and romance.”<sup>1</sup> It solves the problem of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.
- c. The messianic kingdom is not merely a quixotic wish.

## *Bibliography*

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## *Film*

[Man of La Mancha \(1972\)](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gould.