

MIGUEL DE CERVANTES SAAVEDRA was born in Alcalá de Henares in Spain near Madrid in 1547. Nothing is certainly known about his education, but by the age of twenty-three, he enrolled in the army as a private soldier. He was maimed for life in the battle of Lepanto and was taken captive by the Moors on his way home in 1575. After five years of slavery, he was ransomed; and two or three years later, he returned to Spain. He settled in Madrid and began a moderately successful literary career, in which he wrote poetry, published a pastoral romance, *La Galatea* (1585), and had some twenty to thirty plays performed without, as he puts it, “offerings of cucumbers or other throwable matter.” Failing to attain financial success, he obtained an employment in the Government office as a commissioner of food supplies for the Armada expedition. He later became a tax collector, a position that he held until 1597, when he was imprisoned for a shortage in his accounts due to the dishonesty of an associate. The imprisonment on this occasion lasted until the end of the year, and, after a period of obscurity, he issued, in 1605, his masterpiece, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha* (*The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha*). Cervantes confesses to having ‘engendered’ *Don Quixote* in the prison. Its success was great and immediate, and its reputation soon spread beyond Spain. The enthusiastic reception of Part I spurred him to unchecked literary activity until his death- a gloriously creative old age in which he completed *Don Quixote* Part II (1615), his twelve *Exemplary Novels* (1613), a collection of comedies and farces (1615), and a long satiric fantasy in verse about contemporary poetry, *The Voyage to Parnassus* (1614). *Persiles and Sigismunda*, a Byzantine romance, was posthumously published in 1617. In this period, he lived in Madrid, widely admired in the literary circles. Towards the end, the patronage of the archbishop of Toledo and the Count of Lemos somewhat eased his chronic poverty. Cervantes died in 1616. The moving prologue to *Persiles*, written when Cervantes was in his deathbed, contains his farewell to life, and specifically, to laughter and friends.

In April, 2005 people all over the world will be celebrating the fourth centenary of the first publication of *Don Quixote*. Hailed as the first modern novel in world literature it has been translated into more than 60 languages and at the same time, owing to their widespread representation in art, drama, and film, the figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are probably familiar visually to more people than any other imaginary characters in world literature. *Don Quixote* has had a tremendous influence on the development of prose fiction. The book depicts the story of an idealistic Spanish nobleman from a village somewhere in La Mancha. As a result of reading many tales of chivalry, he comes to believe that they are historically true and that he is a knight who must combat the world's injustices. Mounted on bony Rozinante, clad in makeshift armor, and accompanied by Sancho Panza as his squire, this *hidalgo* goes through the countryside in search of adventure, interpreting the commonplace objects and travelers that he meets – windmills, flocks of sheep, a funeral procession, a chain of galley slaves- as perpetrators of some dreadful wrong that must be righted. Out of the resulting merry confusions, Cervantes has somehow created a great and complex novel which posterity has found to be profound, enigmatic and inspiring.

However, the novel was not given a classic status until the eighteenth century. The process began in England around 1740, and spread to France, Germany and Spain. Two of the greatest English novels of the century, Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* are heavily and explicitly indebted to Cervantes. In the age of Enlightenment Cervantes' novel was viewed as a burlesque, satiric and corrective work, admirable for its erudition, good taste, rationality and verisimilitude. In 1800, the German Romantic generation took it as a model for romantic genre per excellence. The Romantics admired it for its poetry, its bitter sweet attitude towards medieval chivalry, its profound irony, and its mythic universality, exemplified by its treatment of the theme of the opposition between ideal and real. They brought about a lasting change in the valuation of Cervantes' novel, whose effects maybe seen in the exploitation and expansion of the Quixote theme in many major novels of the nineteenth century: Dicken' *The Pickwick Papers*(1836-7), Melville's *Moby Dick*(1853), Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*(1856-7), Dostoevsk's *The Idiot*(1868), Mark Twain's *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*(1885), Galdós' *Fortunata and Jacinta*(1886-7). Its list of *aficionados* in the twentieth century include Unamuno, Gide, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Hašek, Nabokov, Italo Calvino, Borges, Carlos Fuentes, Milan Kundera, Graham Greene. The lesson that they tend to draw from *Don Quixote* are two fold. One concerns the self-reflexive and self questioning nature of art, in relation to its own premises. The other has been formulated thus in the epilogue to Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "When Don Quixote went out into the world, that world turned into a mystery before his eyes. That is the legacy of the first European novel to the entire subsequent history of the novel. The novelist teaches its reader to comprehend the world as a question."

*Don Quixote* was originally intended as a satire on medieval tales of chivalry. The completed work, however, presents a rich picture of Spanish life and contains many philosophical insights. Don Quixote's quest has been seen as an allegory of the eternal human quest for goodness and truth in the face of insurmountable obstacles. His idealism seems to be madness in a world that sometimes views heroism and love as forms of insanity, and this has led many readers to consider *Don Quixote* a tragedy despite its satirical style and many comical episodes. Feminist and gender studies have increasingly looked to Cervantes for his perceptive approach to portraying the women of 17th-century Spain. Unlike the majority of his contemporaries, Cervantes expressed great empathy towards women. Although he stops short of a 'feminist' position, the female characters such as Marcella and Dorothea in *Don Quixote* speak forcefully in defense of women's rights. Loose in structure and uneven in workmanship, it remains unsurpassed as a masterpiece of witty humor, as a picture of Spanish life, as a gallery of immortal portraits. It has in the highest degree the mark of all great art, the successful combination of the particular and the universal: it is true to the life of the country and age of its production, and true also to general human nature everywhere and always. With reference to the fiction of the Middle Ages, it is a triumphant satire; with reference to modern novels, it is the first and the most widely enjoyed. In its author's words: "It is so conspicuous and void of difficulty that children may handle it, youths may read it, men may understand it, and old men may celebrate it."