

**SERAGELDIN CERVANTES SPEECH**

**THE GREATNESS OF  
DON QUIXOTE**

**By**

**Ismail Serageldin**

A lecture delivered in 2016 in homage to

Miguel de Cervantes

On the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death

(Repeated at the Library of Alexandria in January 2017)

## **Bibliotheca Alexandrina Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Serageldin, Ismail, 1944-

The greatness of Don Quixote / by Ismail Serageldin. – Alexandria, Egypt: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2017.

p. cm

ISBN 978-977-452-425-5

1. Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, 1547-1616. Don Quixote. 2. Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, 1547-1616 -- Criticism and interpretation. 3. Quixote, Don (Fictitious character) 4. Spanish literature -- History and criticism. I. Alikšāndrīnā (Library) II. Title.

863.3--dc22

2017842061

© 2017, Bibliotheca Alexandrina. All rights reserved.

### **NON-COMMERCIAL REPRODUCTION**

Information in this publication has been produced with the intent that it be readily available for personal and public non-commercial use; and may be reproduced, in part or in whole and by any means, without charge or further permission from the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. We ask only that:

- Users exercise due diligence in ensuring the accuracy of the materials reproduced;
- Bibliotheca Alexandrina be identified as the source; and
- The reproduction is not represented as an official version of the materials reproduced, nor as having been made in affiliation with or with the endorsement of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

### **COMMERCIAL REPRODUCTION**

Reproduction of multiple copies of materials in this publication, in whole or in part, for the purposes of commercial redistribution is prohibited except with written permission from the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. To obtain permission to reproduce materials in this publication for commercial purposes, please contact the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, P.O. Box 138, Chatby 21526, Alexandria, Egypt.

E-mail: [secretariat@bibalex.org](mailto:secretariat@bibalex.org)

## INTRODUCTION

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is great pleasure to be here today, to discuss the importance of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra<sup>1</sup> (1547-1616) whose death, 400 years ago, deprived the world of one its greatest geniuses. Like his awesome contemporary, William Shakespeare, who also died 400 years ago, he would dominate the literary canon in his language.

So who was Cervantes? Actually we do know a lot about the life of Miguel de Cervantes.

Born in 1547 in Alcalá de Henares, in Habsburg Spain, his life would coincide with the reigns of Charles V and Phillip II when the power of Spain was at its Zenith, and he would die during the reign of Phillip III, a somewhat less distinguished monarch, but with Spain still considered the most powerful nation on earth. Cervantes left for Rome at the age of 22, and worked as an assistant to a cardinal. Shortly after, he enlisted in the Spanish Navy, then considered the strongest in the world, but his military career ended five years

later when he was captured and imprisoned by Barbary pirates in 1575. Cervantes would remain a captive for five years until he was ransomed by his parents and a Catholic order called the Trinitarians. He subsequently returned to his family in Madrid.

He then worked as a purchasing agent for the Spanish Armada, which would be famously destroyed in its attempted invasion of England. Cervantes also worked as a tax collector for the government, but in 1597 he was jailed in the Crown prison in Seville for discrepancies in his accounts for the previous three years. After his release, he lived in Valladolid and returned to writing, and in 1607, he settled in Madrid, where he lived and worked until his death. He is buried in Madrid, in the Convent of the Barefoot Trinitarians.

Cervantes had lived in the period where Spanish power was at its peak, but had also witnessed its greatest defeat, when the Spanish Armada was destroyed in 1588. He had moved about a lot, and had been a servant to a cardinal of the Catholic Church in Rome, a soldier, an accountant, and twice a prisoner. But he was also a novelist, poet, and playwright. And it is in those latter capacities that he is remembered today as the greatest writer in the Spanish language, to the point where Spanish is referred to as “the language of Cervantes”.

Cervantes has produced a body of work that includes poems, plays and novels. His output spans a lifetime of productive work. He started with a pastoral novel named *La Galatea* (1585); then came *Don Quixote* (part 1) in 1605; the *Novelas ejemplares* (Exemplary Novels) in 1613, the *Viaje al Parnaso* (Journey to Parnassus) in 1614, and the *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses* and the second part of *Don Quixote* in 1615. His last work, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (The Works of Persiles and Sigismunda), was published posthumously in 1617.

But whatever the merits of the other works, Cervantes is primarily remembered for a single work, towering above all his other creations, fully titled, in Spanish: *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* (The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha), popularly shortened to the name of its protagonist “Don Quixote”. One great work... Ah, but what a magnificent work it is....

- It remains in the eyes of many the greatest novel ever written, indeed Dostoevsky is alleged to have called it “the ultimate and most sublime work of human thinking”.
- It has influenced the development of European literature generally and the novel in particular,

way beyond Spanish literature into many other languages including French and English

- It has inspired countless studies and theses around the world
- It remains incredibly multi-layered and defies a simple interpretation
- It combines genres ranging from tragedy to comedy, from fantasy to realism, and from the picaresque to the profoundly human
- It defies classification
- It is a unique gem of human ingenuity, insight and imagination
- It infinitely repays reflection into the philosophical issues it raises within the conventions that it establishes for itself...

And I could go on and on, for indeed, Don Quixote transcends genres and generations. And we owe it all to the genius of Cervantes.

### *DON QUIXOTE*

Published in two volumes, in 1605 and 1615, *Don Quixote* is considered the most influential work in the entire Spanish literary canon, a founding element of all

of modern Western literature and one of the greatest literary works ever written.

Although it is now mostly published as one volume, the original *Don Quixote* was published in two volumes, ten years apart. The appearance of the first volume in 1605 was a great commercial success. An unknown writer who called himself Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda seeking to capitalize on the popularity of the novel published an unauthorized sequel in 1614. But in 1615 Cervantes produced his own continuation, or the second part, of *Don Quixote*.

*Don Quixote* has been considered as a determined effort to use satire to discredit the chivalric romances which had been very popular at that time, but it is much more than that, and can be read on many levels, as I will try to demonstrate in this lecture.

*Don Quixote* is so well known, that only the briefest of summaries is required as a reminder.

Alonso Quixano is a hidalgo who is fascinated by the tales of chivalry that he reads in many books. Soon, he decides that he is really a knight, Don Quixote de La Mancha, and through his fevered imagination, he constructs such a persona, takes up a steed, the poor Rocinante, employs a local peasant as squire, Sancho Panza, and decides that his lady will be the beautiful

Dulcinea, another creature of his imagination, which he bases on a local girl called Aldonza Lorenzo. He embarks on many adventures, almost invariably ending in his being ridiculed or roughed up, because of the total mismatch between the values that the code of Knight errant represents when compared with the mundane reality of early 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish society. But that mismatch only encourages Don Quixote to hold ever more firmly to his dreams and ideals, until in the end of the second and last volume, he is brought back home to his friends and neighbors, broken and exhausted, and falls into a deep sleep, and awakens, apparently cured of his “Madness”, recognizing that he is Alonso Quixano and not a knight in shining armor, and then dies.

The various adventures that befall the knight and his squire are so well known that they have become iconic parts of western literature: The burning of his books, the fight with the windmills, the barber and his basin, the flock of sheep etc., all contribute to that unfolding of a tapestry-like background that we retain from our early reading of the adventures of Don Quixote. But the novel is much richer and deeper than that, and beyond the slapstick or burlesque satire there is a brilliance of dialogue, a contrast in styles between the learned Don Quixote and the earthy Sancho Panza,

an evolution of characters, and the constant interplay between reality and idealized imagination. In addition, the novel gives a role to the reader in the construction of the text, so that the reader is not just the passive recipient of a linear narrative of the heroic deeds of a particular knight, but an intimate participant, invited to think and take positions vis-à-vis the development of the story and its protagonists. And the novel is rich in artistic and literary devices, from providing a meta-fictional context, to interplay of genres, intertextuality, and much more.

### A META-FICTIONAL CONTEXT

Cervantes pretends that the story he is about to tell is based on true events, a device still in use to this day. He tells us that he is basing the story on documents he came about from “The Archive of La Mancha”, and the novel is supposedly based on materials translated from Arabic by the Moorish author Cide Hamete Benengeli, (who never existed). He specifically returns to this fictional Cide Hamete in the concluding paragraphs of the great work.

This meta-fictional trick appears intended to give greater credibility to the story, but it is one more way of mocking the common practice in that era of fictional

works pretending to be true accounts. He gives a wink at such an explanation in his preface to the work.

### MIXING OF GENRES AND INTERTEXTUALITY

*Don Quixote* shows a virtuoso ability for mixing literary genres, without becoming discordant. Cervantes manages to combine realism in his descriptions of the society that Don Quixote moves in, with a very deliberate artificial creation. But that is not all, for among the literary devices used in *Don Quixote* is intertextuality.

In discussing intertextuality in *Don Quixote*, Sarah Harris states that the great novel:

...contributes to the literary canon in at least three major ways. First, it recapitulates and borrows from nearly all literatures of its own time. Second, it reworks these literatures into something entirely new that strikes even contemporary readers as remarkably modern. Third, the resulting novel is a nearly omnipresent subtext in the canon of Spanish (if not world) literature from 1605 on. One example of this subtext lies in Carmen Martín Gaité's *El cuarto de atrás* (1978), which exhibits

a clear intertextual dialogue with the seventeenth century masterpiece<sup>2</sup>.

Another example of this omnipresent influence of Cervantes is found in Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote"<sup>3</sup>, and one could cite many more.

These many subtleties plus the fact that the hero is partly a figure of derision, partly a figure to be admired, is what has made so many critics see in *Don Quixote* not just a truly great novel, but also the beginning of the modern novel.

### DON QUIXOTE AND LOVE

A knight errant doing deeds of courage to impress a lady and to serve and protect her honor was part of the image of chivalrous knights that was given in the accounts of the time. So the ideal of womanhood is something of great purity coupled with great beauty that inspires, but remains distant. To approach the beloved, the knight has to prove worthy of her by doing great deeds. There is a strong element of unrequited love that has parallels in particular genres of medieval Arabic poetry, which even has a touch of masochism in it.

It results in Don Quixote creating “Dulcinea del Toboso”, his love interest, out of a woman he had never formally met (Aldonza Lorenzo). He wants to perform great deeds so he can impress her. In Volume II, many of the battles he engages in are to break a curse that has supposedly befallen his beloved.

But “Dulcinea del Toboso” is a fictional character who is unseen in the novel, for she lives only in Don Quixote’s imagination. He describes her appearance in the following manner:

... her name is Dulcinea, her country El Toboso, a village of La Mancha, her rank must be at least that of a princess, since she is my queen and lady, and her beauty superhuman, since all the impossible and fanciful attributes of beauty which the poets apply to their ladies are verified in her; for her hairs are gold, her forehead Elysian fields, her eyebrows rainbows, her eyes suns, her cheeks roses, her lips coral, her teeth pearls, her neck alabaster, her bosom marble, her hands ivory, her fairness snow, and what modesty conceals from sight such, I think and imagine, as rational reflection can only extol, not compare. (Volume 1, Chapter XIII)

Aldonza Lorenzo is a real woman, a common woman, who lives in the town of Toboso. Don Quixote sees her and decides to call her Dulcinea del Toboso. Dulcinea means “sweetness”, and Don Quixote imagines Dulcinea to be his Lady. Don Quixote, the knight errant pursues his deeds in her name, though she never appears in the novel.

But look at the stratagem from another angle. Don Quixote is able to construct nobility and beauty where there is nothing but ordinariness and maybe even ugliness. Elsewhere, he treats two prostitutes as ladies. Is that madness or is that a rebuke to the way men have treated women as sex-objects throughout history and in many civilizations? Perhaps it tells us that we should look for the potential best in people, and not judge them by their appearance or current societal limitations.

### **WAS DON QUIXOTE MAD?**

So was Don Quixote mad? Are all his foolish adventures to be dismissed as simply the burlesque satire of a bygone genre? I do not think so, at least in the clinical sense of madness.

I believe that Cervantes uses the presumed madness as a device, a way of showing that idealism is unrealistic, and that those who firmly believe in their dreams and

ideals, have a difficult time adjusting to the ugliness and injustice of the world, and the touch of cruelty that we find in many of the adventures, is reminiscent of how social reality treats many of the dreamers in our midst. That does not make society right or the dreamers wrong.

It is clear that he hallucinates and that he sees things not as they are (giants in lieu of windmills), and that his febrile imagination sees ladies in prostitutes, spirits in herds of sheep, and an Inn can as a castle etc.

The real tension is not between his madness and others' normality, it is between the nobility of his vision of what should be versus the mundane reality, with its injustices and its inequities and its materialism and absence of ideals.

Great novels use the device to highlight the imperfections in our world, and the inability of normal society to accommodate those who dream of a different world. But clearly, Cervantes thought that Don Quixote would be recognized a hero, and that many will – in the future – want to adopt him as one of their own. Indeed, in the last paragraph of the second volume he compares him to Homer!

There remains another point worthy of discussion, namely the location of the village mentioned in the

beginning of Don Quixote and which is still unidentified 400 years later. That was intentional. Cervantes gives a powerful explanation the final chapter and imputes it to his fictional translator Cide Hamete Benengeli:

Such was the end of the Ingenious Gentleman of La Mancha, whose village Cide Hamete would not indicate precisely, in order to leave all the towns and villages of La Mancha to contend among themselves for the right to adopt him and claim him as a son, as the seven cities of Greece contended for Homer.

— Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Volume II, Chapter 74

### **A MULTI-LAYERED CREATION**

The book is a multi-layered creation, and there is so much to be said about reading every scene and every line of Cervantes' masterpiece on many levels, for example, in the first volume, early on, there is a scene where his family and friends burn his books, in an effort to "cure" him. The book burning does not work, and he proceeds to all the adventures in both volumes. It says much about those who believe in censorship and in limiting the free range of human expression.

The whole novel clearly shows that the power of ideas, and the power of dreams are far stronger than destroying books and censoring the expression of ideas. In fact, it goes much further, as I see in *Don Quixote* the powerful paean to the importance of dreams and idealism in our life, for dreaming of that which never was is how all progress is achieved, and it is what makes us human. Without our dreams we cannot live.

At the end of volume II, when tired and exhausted, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza arrive home, Don Quixote with his spirit apparently broken, is put to bed. The long desired outcome by the “normal” people among his family and friends, namely to have him abandon his quest and accept his normal status, is finally at hand. He wakes, and having seemingly “regained his sanity,” he acknowledges that he is only Alonso Quixano.

Ah! But stripped of his dreams, and having been forced to denounce ideals such as chivalry and knighthood, he dies among the lamentation of his “normal” friends. I read that as an extremely powerful condemnation of those who would force the dreamers among us to give up their dreams and accept society as it is.

**BOOKS AND IDEAS**

It is part of the genius of Cervantes that throughout the *Don Quixote* novel he mixes lucid intellectual points hidden amidst the ramblings, the farce and the burlesque of particular episodes. He upholds the importance of ideals, books and ideas, even as he makes fun of the knight who wants to carry them to their extreme, and satirizes the inability of “normal” society to cope with dreams and ideals. He goes further, by making fun of those who try to be excessively snooty intellectuals, who verge on nonsense.

Cervantes uses an imagined discussion with a friend about the preface to the book, to make fun of the pseudo intellectuals and the appearance of phony intellectualism, as his friend suggests that to make the work appear scholarly he should insert random Latin phrases among his sentences and provide footnotes phrased in glib, pseudo-scientific language, and plagiarize a bibliography. The power of Cervantes is that he uses the device of “reporting the conversation” as the actual preface.

So no phony appendages of scholarship and scholasticism will spoil the great narrative of *Don Quixote*. But it is not a simple tale of adventure or a funny fable that Cervantes produces, it is an extremely

rich and multi-faceted creation that has influenced all of world literature, and to which almost every novel that follows in its wake will owe something.

So here you have it, a philosophical novel hidden in the guise of a picaresque adventure novel, making fun of, and satirizing, the chivalry tales of the Middle Ages. That is why the comedy in *Don Quixote* is imbued with a certain sadness and a profound critique of society, like the silent films of Charlie Chaplin, where you laugh, yes, but you are not far from crying, and you also see the issues of injustice and poverty in society.

### DON QUIXOTE IN THE BALANCE

It is part of the unique genius of Cervantes, that he will succeed with Don Quixote to achieve a number of incredible things:

**First:** After his parody of these chivalric romances, he will succeed in destroying that genre of ill-contrived romances, which the broad public (still) loves but that the discriminating and the judicious have long transcended. The future will belong to far more serious novels. But beyond that, some see a parallel between the book's sarcastic transformation of the rituals of knighthood into ad-hoc dysfunctional material equivalents and the desacralizing of European civilization that started at

that time in Europe, and would later develop into the Humanism of the Enlightenment.

**Second:** But Cervantes also lays the groundwork for all these serious novels to come by giving us a profound meditation on the meaning of idealism and ideas in a world that seems to have no use for such things. There is in *Don Quixote* nothing less than a long and thoughtful discussion of what is and what could be, and perhaps what should be. That is, after all, what the writing of the Enlightenment was all about. From Voltaire's *Candide* to Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, one can find traces of Cervantes' creation in their DNA! Indeed, the work also influenced the development of the western novel in both France and England, and there are direct references to it in the text of such great novels as Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (1844), Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897).

**Third:** The device of giving the protagonist a "companion" providing a contrast and a foil to the hero. This device would be so successful, that it has echoed in literary and film creations through time and continues to be used to this day. It allows for many asides, and enriches the narrative profoundly. One cannot think of Don Quixote de la Mancha on his steed Rocinante without thinking of Sancho Panza and

his donkey Dapple. The physical appearance is also described in contrasts, with Don Quixote tall and thin and Sancho short and fat, and the idealism and dreams of Don Quixote play off the earthly ordinary tastes, ideas and aspirations of Sancho Panza, who hopes to become a governor!

Sancho Panza dreams of the good life in physical terms, and is quick to take advantage of every possibility that the home of the Duke and Duchess offers. Panza is a reasonable governor in his 10 days in office arranged by the Duke.

But to Don Quixote a good life has a purpose even if the purpose of a knight errant is to redress injustices and fight for the honor of his damsel, it is a purpose that adds nobility since it is unselfish and is not just crass consumerism. But the two characters rub off on each other.

Thus, for me, an important scene in the first volume (Volume 1, Chapter 20) is the scene of the noise of the six fulling-mill hammers pounding out the cloth in the night. This scene marks the transformation of Sancho Panza from doubtful companion to devoted squire. He learns to respect and admire Don Quixote for retaining his courage in the face of the unknown, while he, like most common men, fears the threats that

cannot be immediately grasped – the origin of much of superstition. The fact that daylight shows there were no real threats does not change the fact of who retained his courage, and who was afraid in the dark of the night.

**Fourth:** So great is the influence of the novel, that the name of the main character, Don Quixote, has given us a word in English: “quixotic”, which means to be idealistic, romantic, visionary, utopian, and perhaps slightly less positively: unrealistic or unworldly. On the whole very nice qualities, and none of them imply the sense of “Mad” or “Demented”.

Indeed, so powerful is the imagery of that great novel, that its scenes have also entered the common language: “tilting at windmills” is now used to describe “attacking imaginary enemies”, or misperceived confrontations unlikely to produce effective results. Furthermore, he has given us some expressions such as “the proof of the pudding is in the eating” and others, which are widely used in English today.

**Fifth:** The importance of following your beliefs and your dreams is present throughout the book, and that people who do so are strong, courageous and to be admired.

Don Quixote is a real hero, not because he mistakes the windmills for giants, but because he can call on his ideals to confront whatever destiny throws at him. Heroes and

leaders are those who manage to bend reality to their dreams and fashion the future out of their ideas, while ordinary people simply try to accommodate themselves to the reality that surrounds them.

### ENVOI

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The great Cervantes has left us an enormous legacy that inspired subsequent works in many languages and has left us a cautionary philosophical reflection on the importance of values and ideals in society. In a sense the Novel is a complex creation that forces us to confront the immortal words:

There are those who look at the world as it is and ask “why?”

And there are those who look at the world as it could be and ask “why not?”

That is a lasting contribution to humanity, and the real reason that even for those who – like myself – cannot speak the language of Cervantes, we all recognize the genius in his creations, and feel that these creations still speak to us with an amazing intensity though we live in a totally different world. That is why both Cervantes and his Don Quixote have truly joined the immortals.

Thank you.

## NOTES

- 1 The use of the name Saavedra is unusual, as the patronymic of his mother was Cortinas. Saavedra is a name he adopted as an adult, and that he used officially in matters related to his marriage to Catalina de Salazar in 1586–1587. It is said that it was the surname of a distant relative.
- 2 See: Sarah Harris, “Who Is in the Back Room? The Intertextuality of Don Quixote and El cuarto de atrás”, (Published in *Mester* XXXV (2006): 128-146)
- 3 See Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” (original Spanish title: “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”) which originally appeared in Spanish in the Argentine journal *Sur* in May 1939. It was published in book form in Borges’s 1941 collection *El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (The Garden of Forking Paths), which was also included in his *Ficciones* (1944).