

MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

How Don Quixote Became a Knight

Miguel de Cervantes was born in 1547 to a poor Spanish surgeon and his wife, the fourth of seven children. After some early general education, he embarked on a series of adventures that influenced his later writings. In 1571, he traveled to Italy, became a soldier, and fought in the Battle of Lepanto. There, while distinguishing himself on the battlefield, Cervantes permanently lost the use of his left hand. In 1575, as he was returning to Spain on a ship, it was captured by Barbary pirates. The pirates took Cervantes and his shipmates to Algiers in North Africa and sold them into slavery. He spent five years as a slave where, despite his handicap, he repeatedly tried daring escapes. Finally, his freedom was ransomed by admiring monks. Cervantes then returned home to Spain, married, and became a purchasing agent for the Navy. His adventures continued as he traveled the country in his job and was twice imprisoned for debt. He lived in poverty until 1605 when Part I of *Don Quixote* was published. Although Cervantes continued to write until the end of his life, publishing at least thirty plays and many short stories, it is because of *Don Quixote* that he is famous. This novel was an immediate success and has remained one of the most widely read works of western literature.

Hailed as the first modern novel and the most influential work ever written in Spanish, *Don Quixote* recounts the tale of a poor country gentleman who has immersed himself in reading romances (stories of knights and chivalry) for many years. Crazy by his obsession with knight-errantry, Don Quixote believes that it is his duty to leave his native province of La Mancha and travel the world to redress every wrong he encounters. The novel opens with the Don preparing for his departure. As his many adventures unfold, the Don guards his armor, chooses a lady love to whom he dedicates his battles, talks to his gallant steed, and hires a squire (a knight-in-training who waits on the Don). All these actions mimic those of a typical medieval knight in a romance. As Cervantes states in the novel's Prologue, "[this] is, from beginning to end, an attack upon the books of chivalry ... [and their] fanciful nonsense." Even so, it is a book filled with high adventure and great comic moments as the chapter that follows demonstrates. Appearing early in the novel soon after the Don leaves home, this chapter recounts the way in which Don Quixote is dubbed a knight at a roadside inn.

1547

Birth of Miguel de Cervantes

Roman Catholic Church burns books, establishes Inquisition

1563

1575

Captured by pirates and sold as slave

Spanish Armada defeated by England

1588

1589

1590

Franco-Spanish War begins

Shakespeare's plays performed in London

Part I, *Don Quixote* published

1605

Galileo told by Pope not to teach geocentric theory

Death of Miguel de Cervantes

1616

HARASSED BY this reflection, he wasted no time on the scanty supper always found in such inns, and when it was finished he called the landlord. Having shut himself up in the stable with him, Don Quixote fell on his knees before him. "From this spot I rise not, valiant knight," he declared, "until thy courtesy grant me the boon I seek, one that will redound to thy praise and the benefit of the human race." Seeing his guest at his feet and hearing speech of this kind, the landlord stood staring at him in bewilderment without knowing what to do or say. He entreated Don Quixote to rise, but all to no purpose, until he had agreed to grant the boon demanded.

"I looked for no less, my lord, from thy, High Magnificence," replied Don Quixote, "and I have to tell thee that the boon I have asked and which thy liberality has granted is that thou shalt dub me knight tomorrow morning. Tonight I shall watch my arms in the chapel of this thy castle and tomorrow, as I have said, what I so much desire will be accomplished. It will enable me lawfully to roam through all the four quarters of the world seeking adventures on behalf of those in distress, as is the duty of chivalry and of knights-errant like myself, whose ambition is directed to such deeds."

The landlord, as has been mentioned, was something of a wag. He had already some suspicion of his guest's lack of wits, and to hear talk of this kind quite convinced him. To provide sport for the night, he determined to humor Don Quixote. So he told him he was quite right in pursuing the object he had in view, and that such a motive was natural and becoming in cavaliers as distinguished as he seemed and his gallant bearing showed him to be. As for the landlord himself, in his younger days he had followed the same honorable calling,

roaming in quest of adventures in various parts of the world, among others the curing-grounds and Riarán suburbs of Málaga, the red light district of Seville, the Little Market of Segovia, Olivera Square in Valencia, Rondilla Lane in Granada, the Strand of San Lúcar, the Horse Fountain of Córdoba, the taverns of Toledo,¹ and sundry other localities. There he had proved the nimbleness of his feet and the lightness of his fingers, doing many wrongs, courting many widows, ruining a few maidens and swindling a few minors, and, in short, bringing himself under the notice of almost every tribunal and court of Justice in Spain. But at last he had retired to this castle of his, where he was living upon his property and upon that of others. Here he received all knights-errant of whatever rank or condition they might be, all for the great love he bore them and that they might share their substance with him in return for his benevolence.

He told Don Quixote, moreover, that in this castle of his there was no chapel in which he could watch over his armor, as it had been pulled down in order to be rebuilt. Yet in a case of necessity it might, he knew, be watched anywhere, and vigil might be held that night in a courtyard of the castle. In the morning, God willing, the requisite ceremonies might be performed so as to have him dubbed a knight, and so thoroughly dubbed that nobody could be more so.

Then he asked if he had any money with him, to which Don Quixote replied that he had not a cent, as in the histories of knights-errant he had never read of any of them carrying any. On this point, the landlord told him he was mistaken, for,

though not recorded in the histories, because in the author's opinion there was no need to mention anything so obvious and necessary as money, and clean shirts, it was not to be supposed therefore that they did not carry them. He might regard it as certain and established that all knights-errant (about whom there were so many full and unimpeachable books) carried well-furnished purses in case of emergency, and likewise carried shirts and a little box of ointment to cure the wounds they received. For in those plains and deserts where they engaged in combat and came out wounded, there was not always someone to cure them, unless indeed they had for a friend some sage magician to aid them at once by fetching through the air on a cloud some damsel or dwarf with a vial of water of such power that by tasting one drop of it they were cured of their hurts and wounds in an instant and left as sound as if they had not received any harm whatever. In case this should not occur, the knights of old took care to see that their squires were provided with money and other requisites, such as bandages and ointments for healing purposes. And when it happened that knights had no squires (which was rarely and seldom the case), they themselves carried everything in very slim saddlebags that were hardly seen on the horse's croup, as if it were something else of more importance. Unless for some such reason, carrying saddlebags was not very favorably regarded among knights-errant. He therefore advised him (and, as his godson so soon to be, he might even command him) never from that time forth to travel without money and the usual requirements, and he would find how useful they were when he least expected it.

Don Quixote promised to follow his advice scrupulously, and it was arranged forthwith that he should

¹ The localities mentioned were famous meeting places for delinquents, prostitutes, itinerant workers, gamblers, etc.

watch over his armor in a large yard at one side of the inn. So, collecting it all together, Don Quixote placed it on a trough that stood by the side of a well, and putting his shield on his arm, he grasped his lance and began with a stately air to march up and down in front of the trough. As he began his march night began to fall.

The landlord told all the people in the inn about his guest's craziness, the watching of the armor, and the dubbing ceremony to come. Full of wonder at so strange a form of madness, they flocked to see it from a distance and observed with what composure he sometimes paced up and down, or sometimes, leaning on his lance, gazed on his armor without taking his eyes off it for ever so long. As the night closed in with a light from the moon so brilliant that it might vie with the source from which it was borrowed, everything the novice knight did was plainly seen by all.

Meanwhile, one of the mule drivers who were in the inn saw fit to water his team, making it necessary to remove Don Quixote's armor, as it lay on the trough. But the knight, seeing the other approach, hailed him in a loud voice.

"O thou," he said, "whoever thou art, rash knight that comest to lay hands on the armor of the most valourous errant that ever girt on sword, have a care what thou dost. Touch it not unless thou wouldst lay down thy life as the penalty of thy rashness." The mule driver gave no heed to these words, though for the sake of his health it would have been advisable to do so. He seized the armor by the straps and flung it some distance from him. At this, Don Quixote raised his eyes to heaven, and appeared to fix his thoughts upon his lady Dulcinea. "Aid me, lady mine," he entreated, "in this the first encounter that presents itself to this breast which thou holdest in subjection. Let

not thy favor and Protection fail me in this first jeopardy."

Having made these and similar declarations, he dropped his shield and lifted his lance with both hands. With it he dealt such a blow on the driver's head that he stretched him on the ground, so stunned that had he followed it up with a second, there would have been no need of a surgeon to cure the mule driver. This done, Don Quixote picked up his armor and began walking up and down with the same serenity as before.

Shortly after this another mule driver, unaware of what had happened (for the first one still lay senseless), came out with the same intention of watering his mules. He too was proceeding to remove the armor in order to clear the trough, when Don Quixote, without uttering a word or imploring aid from anyone, once more dropped his shield and once more lifted his lance. Without actually smashing the second driver's head to bits, he made more than three pieces of it, for he laid it open in four quarters. At the noise, all the people in the inn ran to the spot, and among them the landlord. Seeing this, Don Quixote braced his shield on his arm and laid his hand on his sword. "O Lady of Beauty," he exclaimed, "strength and support of my faint heart, it is time for thee to turn the eyes of thy greatness on this thy captive knight on the brink of so mighty an adventure."

By this time, he felt himself so inspired that he would not have flinched if all the carriers in the world assailed him. The comrades of the wounded, perceiving the plight they were in, began from a distance to shower stones on Don Quixote. He screened himself as best he could with his shield, for he did not dare to move away from the trough and leave his armor unprotected. The landlord shouted to them to leave him alone,

for he had already told them that the knight was mad and as a madman would not be accountable even if he killed them all. Still louder shouted Don Quixote, calling them knaves and traitors, and the lord of the castle, who allowed knights-errant to be treated in this fashion, a villain and a low-born knight whom, had he received the order of knighthood, he would call to account for his treachery. "But of you," he cried, "base and vile rabble, I make no account; fling, strike, come on, do all ye can against me, ye shall see what the reward of your folly and insolence will be." This he uttered with so much spirit and boldness that he filled his assailants with a terrible fear, and it is as much for this reason as at the persuasion of the landlord that they quit stoning him. He allowed them to carry off the wounded and then, with the same calmness and composure as before, resumed the watch over his armor.

The pranks his guest was indulging in were not at all to the landlord's liking. So he determined to cut matters short and confer upon him at once the accursed order of knighthood before any further misadventure could happen. Going up to him, he apologized for the rudeness which without his knowledge had been shown by these low people, who, however, had been well punished for their audacity. As he had already explained, he said, there was no chapel in the castle, nor was it needed for what remained to be done. As he understood the ceremonial of the order, the whole point of being dubbed a knight lay in the accolade and in the slap on the shoulder, and that could be administered in the middle of a field. Don Quixote had now done all that was needful as to watching the armor, for all requirements were satisfied by a watch of two hours only, while he had been it more than four. Don Quixote believed it all, telling the landlord that

he stood there ready to obey and that the matter should be concluded as rapidly as possible. For, if he were again attacked, and felt himself to be dubbed knight, he would not, he thought, leave a soul alive in the castle, except such as out of respect he might spare at the landlord's bidding.

Thus warned and menaced, the castellan forthwith brought out a book in which he entered the amounts of straw, and barley sold to the mule drivers. With a lad carrying a candle-stump, and the two damsels already mentioned, he returned to where Don Quixote stood and ordered him to kneel down. Then he read from his account book as if he were repeating some devout prayer. In the middle of his delivery he raised his hand and gave Don Quixote a sturdy blow on the neck, and then, with the knight's own sword, a smart slap on the shoulder, all the while muttering between his teeth as if he were saying his prayers. Having done this, he directed one of the ladies to gird on the sword, which she did with great self-possession and gravity. Of both of these a plentiful supply was needed, lest a burst of laughter should signal each stage of the ceremony, but what they had already seen of the novice knight's prowess kept their laughter within bounds.

"May God make your worship a very fortunate knight and grant you success in battle," said the worthy lady, as she girded him with the sword. Don Quixote asked her name so that he might from that time forward know to whom he was indebted for the favor he had received, he meant to confer upon her some share of the honor the might of his arm would bring. She answered with great humility that she was called La Tolosa, and that she was the daughter of a cobbler of Toledo who lived in the stalls of Sancho Bienaya Square and that wherever she might be, she

would serve and esteem him as her lord. Don Quixote replied that she would do him a favor by henceforward assuming the "Don" and calling herself Doña Tolosa. She promised she would, the other damsel buckled on his spur, and there followed almost the same conversation as with the lady of the sword. He asked her name, and she said it was La Molinera and that she was the daughter of a respectable miller of Antequera, Don Quixote asked her also to adopt the "Don" and call herself Doña Molinera, offering her further services and favors.²

Having thus, with hot haste and speed, brought to a conclusion these unprecedented ceremonies, Don Quixote was on tenterhooks until he could see himself on horseback sallying forth in quest of adventures. Saddling and mounting Rocinante, he embraced his host and thanked him for his kindness in knighting him. The language he employed was so extraordinary that it is impossible to convey an idea of it. The landlord, to get him out of the inn, replied with no less rhetoric though with shorter words, and without asking him to pay the bill, let him go with a "Godspeed."

THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to Don Quixote, what are the duties of a knight? How does the duty of the watching of the armor lead Don Quixote into trouble?
2. Describe the dubbing ceremony. Why do the landlord and the ladies treat Don Quixote as if he is a knight?

² Prostitutes did in fact use the title doña ("lady" or "madam").

TALK ABOUT IT

3. In Cervantes's time, the desire to be a knight was thought of as a "romantic" aspiration — one that was not a realistic profession to pursue. What professions are considered "romantic" in our culture? In other cultures?
4. The character Don Quixote has been widely applauded for his strong belief in himself. Do you think that Don Quixote sets a good example for believing in one's self? Why or why not?

WRITE ABOUT IT

5. When Don Quixote was first published, romantic novels of chivalry were widely read. It was believed that people portrayed in these stories possessed more praise-worthy traits such as honesty, bravery, and courtesy than did people of their own era. What stories that are popular today and based in another time portray characters that are widely praised? List the admirable traits that these characters possess.
6. If you could pursue any interest or career you wanted, without any constraints, what would you choose? How would this pursuit change your sense of "Identity"?

READ MORE ABOUT IT

- Cervantes, Miguel de. *Don Quixote*. Editors: Jones, Joseph R, and Douglas, Kenneth. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981.
- Close, Anthony. *The Romantic Approach to Don Quixote*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Fuentes, Carlos. *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992.