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**Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de (1546-1616).** Cervantes' sexual orientation was never even considered as a topic until late in the twentieth century. He was married, and fathered an illegitimate daughter. Male-female love, leading up to marriage, is the theme of most of his works. His final work, *Persiles y Sigismunda*, has the route to marriage as its central topic. In *Don Quijote* woman is the subject of veneration. How could such an author be anything but completely heterosexual?

Our understanding of Golden Age Spain has deepened greatly over the last fifty years. Thanks to Américo Castro and the line of research he started, we know that most Christian authors of the time, even Saint Teresa, came from Jewish backgrounds. This was certainly the case of Cervantes. Also—the two trends are related—we are starting to perceive the sexual currents and undertows hidden beneath the surface of a stultifying orthodoxy.

**LIFE.** Cervantes' sexuality has been the subject of scholarly (Combet, Rossi) and unscholarly (Arrabal) examination in recent years. Attention has focused in particular on his five years' captivity in Algiers, but there is much to examine [p. 47] in his earlier life. The documented part of his education is the early years he spent in the "Estudio de Madrid" with the professor Juan López de Hoyos, whose homosexual orientation is implied by his lifestyle and, perhaps, by his profession as a schoolmaster. He referred in print to Cervantes as "my dear beloved disciple" ("mi caro y amado discípulo"), a term suggesting an intimate relationship (see "Beloved Disciple").

Following an unexplained street altercation, Cervantes had to flee Castile. He chose to go to Italy, constantly perceived by Spaniards as a land of sexual freedom, and homosexuality in particular. He served

Cardinal Acquaviva in Rome; in Italy, the association of cardinals with homosexuality was commonplace. Later references in his works, and in his documented, unsuccessful attempt to return to Italy, reveal that Italy pleased him.

After enlisting in the Navy, Cervantes served with distinction in the crucial battle of Lepanto. During his return to Spain, his ship was captured by pirates, and he was taken to Algiers. There he remained, awaiting ransom, for some five years.

Algiers was at the time, and up to its colonization by the French in the early nineteenth century, the most libertine city in the Western world. The *History of Algiers* published in 1611 under the name of Fray Diego de Haedo is our main source for the period, and refers to Cervantes (Eisenberg, "Cervantes, autor"). The work describes in detail "marriages" between adult men and boys, and the freedom that allowed one, if one wished, to have homosexual sex in public, in the street.

Whether Cervantes did or did not engage in homosexual acts while in Algiers has been the central question of the debate on his sexual identity. He was befriended in Algiers by a known homosexual, a Christian convert to Islam, who kept a male harem. In his drama Cervantes portrays captured Christian boys who, to the chagrin of the adult captives, were eager to adopt the Muslim religion and the lifestyle that went with it. On his return to Spain Cervantes was accused by another Spanish captive of having practiced unspecified unchaste acts, and Cervantes prepared a large dossier of testimony documenting his "proper" behavior. What all this adds up to, as far as his activities, is unclear. It is certain, however, that he was exposed to homosexual behavior of a scale and openness unknown anywhere in Christian Europe. From the references in his works, it is also clear that he thought about love, physical and nonphysical, between adult males, between adult male and youth, and between male and female.

Cervantes chose to return to Spain. He could have stayed in Algiers and enjoyed a comfortable life, filled with licentious amusements. Since Miguel had no close ties in Spain, from which he had been absent for ten years, this reflects a conscious decision.

Within four years after his return he had an illegitimate daughter, married, and wrote his fictional treatise on love, *La Galatea*, whose content is totally heterosexual. All of this suggests a rejection of homosexuality as seen in Algiers, based on coercion and abuse. (For more on Cervantes' attitude toward Algiers, see Eisenberg, "¿Por qué?")

Yet Cervantes' heterosexual experiences were also disappointing. His marriage in [p. 48] 1584, to a young woman half his age, was a disappointment, Cervantine scholars agree. Within two years he left his wife's house in Esquivias for extended travels throughout Andalucía. While divorce was of course prohibited under Catholicism, Cervantes is the first Spanish author to write openly on the topic.

What we have with Cervantes, then, is a complex man. His experiences were confusing even to him. Marriage did not give him the companionship he expected. A real woman could not live up to the ideal that he portrays in such figures as Preciosa (of "La gitani-lla"). Surely his young bride had no interest in the theoretical side of love, examined by Cervantes in *La Galatea*.

There is no evidence of homosexual activity by Cervantes after his return to Spain. Opportunities, however, were plentiful. Cervantes lived for extended periods in Seville, full of males coming and going to the Indies. He was frequently on the road, and at times associated with actors, criminals, and other lower-class sorts. No wife or family members monitored his activities.

Throughout his adult life, Cervantes was marginalized, excluded from positions of authority and status. While his Jewish ancestry would perhaps be sufficient to explain this, rumors of sexual irregularities could also have been a part. The popular mind in Spain associated sexual and religious unorthodoxy as a matter of course. In a famous sonnet of attack, Cervantes' and Don Quijote's religion and sexuality are both mocked (Eisenberg, *Estudios*, p. 121).

**WORKS.** Cervantes, like many authors of fiction, used literature to examine problems that interested him. It is surely significant that the

use of pairs of male friends is typical of his fiction; he is known today as the author of “the two friends” (*los dos amigos*). We find such pairs in “Rinconete y Cortadillo,” “La ilustre fregona” (“The Illustrious Scullery-Maid”), “El coloquio de los perros” (“The Dialogue of the Dogs”), and of course in *Don Quijote*, as well as other works. A true meeting of the minds, a lifelong friendship seems possible in Cervantes’ world only between men. There is in his works no exploration of meaningful male-female friendship, only couples heading for marriage and superficial references to a few happily-married couples. The means for sexual satisfaction, however, was through heterosexual marriage, the legal contract necessary to assure protection for the woman and the children after the male’s ardor had been satisfied.

*Don Quijote* is the work in which this position is best seen. The title character has much of the homosexual about him. He is near fifty, but is still a virgin, perhaps impotent with women. He has never been married, nor does marriage or reproduction interest him. Don Quijote prefers the all-male world of his beloved chivalric books, in which the adult knight is served by a boy squire. Prostitutes are repulsive, although he did spy on one; an eligible, respectable woman, like Doña Rodríguez, he rejects. Don Quijote cherishes the female ideal or archetype (Dulcinea), but real women do not interest him. Significantly, in the first chapter of the book, Don Quijote has in his employ a *mozo* or boy, who is mentioned only once and never appears again.

Instead, Cervantes has Don Quijote accompanied by an unhappily married man, Sancho Panza. Sancho is fat and middle-aged, [p. 49] anything but sexually desirable. When he lowers his pants and exposes his *valientes posaderas* (“valiant buttocks”), it is to relieve himself. The stink that follows no doubt is to discourage readers from seeking this kind of experience.

Yet the relationship between the two grows so deep and emotional that it is without parallel in literature. It is no distortion to call it “love,” and their bond grows to be as permanent as marriage itself. This lifelong, intense male friendship, which Cervantes was never to

achieve in his life, is the greatest emotional satisfaction one can achieve in this world.

*Don Quijote*, however, for all its instruction to the reader, does not teach him how to achieve this union. Instead, the novel, like much of his other fiction, is full of teachings and fictional examples on marriage. True heterosexual lovers seek marriage; it is necessary for human reproduction. Carnal appetite is intended by nature to lead to these goals. The celibate, emotional goal of Don Quijote is only for the special few.

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