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A Study of
Don Quixote
by

DANIEL EISENBERG
Florida State University

Preface by RICHARD BJORNSON
The Ohio State University

Juan de la Cuesta
Newark, Delaware

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*For Sarah Clark, Anita Hart,
and Bertha Junquera,
students in my Cervantes seminar*

Horas alegres que pasáis volando . . .

Gutierre de Cetina

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¡Felice ingenio y venturosa mano,
quel deleite y provecho puso junto
en juego alegre, en dulce y claro estilo!*

Tu sabio autor, al mundo único y solo.**

* From Cervantes' prefatory sonnet to Alonso de Barros' *Philosophía cortesana moralizada*, *Poesías sueltas* (*Comedias y entremeses*, VI), 47, 15-17. For the edition, numbering, and orthography of citations from Cervantes' works, see "A Note on the Texts."

** From the prefatory sonnet of Amadís de Gaula, *Don Quixote*, I, 41, 27.

PREFACE

LITERARY MASTERPIECES have the capacity to generate a multitude of critical commentaries, even quite contradictory ones. The case of *Don Quixote*, however, is surely unique: it has been counted among the masterpieces of world literature for over two hundred years, yet intelligent people continue to disagree about the meaning of the book, the reasons for its greatness, and the sorts of information one needs to experience a full reading of the text. Eisenberg suggests that behind such disagreements lies a problem of literary genre, compounded by a general lack of historical information and a somewhat distorted perspective on the birth of the novel.

All readers make sense of texts by placing them into a field of generic expectations. Modern readers assume that *Don Quixote* is a novel; indeed, it has often been called the first and best of all novels. When reading what one regards as a novel, one expects it to follow certain conventions, including the attempt to create an illusion of plausibility in the concatenation of events, motivation of characters, and description of scenes. Novels may of course thwart or subvert such expectations, but their effects upon readers remain dependent upon an implicit knowledge (shared with the author) about precisely which rules are being broken. Yet the novel, as a genre, did not exist in Cervantes' day; he did not and could not have set out to write one, nor did seventeenth-century readers approach *Don Quixote* with the expectation of reading one.

To identify the genre of Cervantes' masterpiece, Eisenberg strips away centuries of retrospective interpretation and asks an *a priori* question: "What did Cervantes think he was doing when he wrote *Don Quixote*, and what did seventeenth-century Spaniards believe they were reading when they picked it up?" Eisenberg suggests that the answer to these questions was clearly articulated by Cervantes himself, so clearly, in fact, that most critics regard it as a banal commonplace and proceed to ignore it. Everyone knows that *Don Quixote* was purportedly written to chase another sort of literature—*libros de caballerías*—from the field; Cervantes' text even tells us why he wanted to do this: according to him, such books were offensive because they presented fiction under the guise of historical truth. Eisenberg, who often refers to Cervantes' literal-mindedness, takes Cervantes' statements in this matter at face value; books of chivalry were still popular in Cervantes' day, he argues on the basis of historical evidence, and Cervantes' opposition to them was sincere. Eisenberg resurrects and gives new substance to the old conjecture that Cervantes, like the canon of Toledo in *Don Quixote*, actually wrote an

uncompleted *libro de caballerías*. He identifies this work as the lost and apparently unfinished *Bernardo*, which would thus be a narrative of genuine chivalric deeds. Whether or not one accepts Eisenberg's reconstruction in its entirety, the underlying argument is undoubtedly sound: the defects of the existing *libros de caballerías* were a very serious matter indeed for Cervantes.

According to Eisenberg, Cervantes achieved his goal (banishing these fictional or falsely historical works from the realm) by creating a mock or burlesque *libro de caballerías*; such a work would be properly understood by readers whose generic expectations had been formed by a familiarity with existing *libros de caballerías*. Because characters and events in *Don Quixote* disappoint these expectations, or satisfy them only in the most surprising ways, the book itself was universally perceived by Cervantes' contemporaries as just what Cervantes believed and wanted it to be: a funny book.

Several years ago, I was asked to edit a volume of essays on the teaching of *Don Quixote*.^{*} At that time, I was so impressed by Eisenberg's description of how he presented Cervantes' masterpiece as a funny book that I invited him to contribute an essay to the volume. I assumed that he would adopt what has come to be known as the "hard" approach to *Don Quixote*, and I challenged him to demonstrate that it was not only taken to be and could be taught as a funny book, but that it actually was one. Obviously the task exceeded the limits of a brief essay on teaching, but Eisenberg was unable to let the project drop. The present volume represents in part his response to that initial challenge.

However, he never completely succeeded in fulfilling the task he had set for himself. Following a process of discovery that has some affinity with the narrative method of Cervantes, Eisenberg ultimately guides his readers to the conclusion that the humor of the book is undermined. For this, he suggests several explanations. However attractive the appeal of truth in literature may be for an author, it presents him with almost insuperable obstacles. Eisenberg speculates that Cervantes found it distressingly difficult, and ultimately impossible, to distinguish between appearance and reality, and thus to identify what might even constitute truth in literature. Indeed, fiction, which is by definition untruthful, was not only preferred by the *vulgo*, it was highly enjoyable to Cervantes himself.

As a result of these difficulties and ambiguities, *Don Quixote* took on an extraordinary complexity and comprehensiveness such that subsequent generations of readers have been endlessly puzzled by its paradoxical nature, just as they continue to be puzzled by the paradoxical nature of life itself. In a sense, as Eisenberg argues toward the end of his book, the mind of Cervantes became woven into the narrative fabric of his work, and for that reason, our abiding interest in *Don Quixote* is quite legitimately based on considerations that transcend the generic expectations by means of which Cervantes and his contemporaries understood it. Because Cervantes' mind was so richly furnished, modern readers have the opportunity to gain far more than he ever intended to give them.

This opportunity for a fuller reading of *Don Quixote* does not, of course, absolve twentieth-century readers from the need to know about the complex relationships that link Cervantes' avowed intentions, the existing body of chivalric literature, and the masterpiece he fashioned from his readings and his experience of life. Only in the dialectical interplay between our knowledge of such matters and our awareness of the text (including the enormous body of commentary and critical insight that has subsequently attached itself to the Cervantine canon) can we begin to glimpse the magnitude of his accomplishment. By enabling us to recognize Cervantes' goals within the context of generic expectations based on the *libros de caballerías*, Eisenberg enriches our experience of this great work and contributes significantly to our understanding of why it is so great. With a detailed knowledge of the chivalric tradition, a textual scholar's detective-like ingenuity, and a remarkable sensitivity toward nuances of Cervantes' language, he confidently defends a hypothesis which is as crucial for the future of Cervantine studies as Lord and Parry's work on oral composition has been for our understanding of the Homeric epics.

RICHARD BJORNSON

* *Approaches to Teaching Cervantes' "Don Quixote"* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1984).