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**THE  
EGYPTIANS**



**1977-78  
YEAR BOOK**

## DON QUIXOTE AND THE WORLD TODAY

Peyton N. Rhodes

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Read before The Egyptians, March 16, 1978

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“Inexhaustible fountain of profound philosophy and model of linguistic style, exact symbolic representation of humanity, the book most true and idealistic, gladdest and yet saddest of all the books ever written is Don Quixote De La Mancha; on its pages appear the most perfect picture of a human being with his vices and his virtues; in its different characterizations are seen photographed the typical states of mind and mode of life of all those who surround us; to these qualities is due the universal success of Cervantes’ book.”

This quotation, somewhat freely translated from the first paragraph of a one hundred page article on Don Quixote to be found in the *Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada* may represent, at first thought, an overstatement due to national pride. On the other hand when we get from Thomas Carlyle the following, we may conclude perhaps that the Enciclopedia is not too far out of line. Carlyle said, “A certain strong man fought stoutly at Lepanto, worked stoutly as an Algerine slave; with stout cheerfulness endured famine and nakedness and the world’s ingratitude; and sitting in gaol, with one hand left him (a slight overstatement as to the extent of the injury!), wrote our joyfulest, and all but our deepest, modern book, and named it Don Quixote.”

What, indeed, is there about this first modern novel, — it may be this *greatest* of novels, that makes it appeal to all classes and conditions of men, from the youngest to the oldest so that, to use the words of Cervantes himself, “Children turn its leaves, young people read it, grown men understand it, old folk praise it.” Why have there been over 1400 editions, including more than 250 in English, three in Chinese, and one in Sanskrit? With reference to the Chinese, Cervantes had jested in the dedication of Part II of his book that Part I had been so well received that a special messenger had come to him from the Emperor of China imploring that he, Cervantes, should become the rector of a Castilian college in China in which the curriculum would consist

largely of the study of Don Quixote. Another case of an almost true word uttered in jest!

And further, what is it that this book and its author can teach you and me right now, tonight, in the last quarter of the 20th century, in an age characterized by political and social unrest, economic uncertainty, high taxes, inflation, military preparations and cold wars between un-united nations waiting to be heated up by atomic energy? What can we appropriate, if anything, as useful in helping build a good life?

Well, what were the *times like* when Cervantes was using his lame arm to keep the scarce paper straight under his pen along towards the close of the 16th century?

A generation before the birth of Cervantes, Luther had nailed his theses to the church door in Wittenburg and had split Europe into two bitterly hostile camps, one of which was led first by Charles V and then by Philip II to raise Spain to the position of being the foremost European power. In order to carry out the Counter-Reformation, that is the mission of saving what the Spaniards considered to be "the true faith," there was set up under Philip a system of rigid autocracy with a censorship of ideas behind an iron curtain that was to isolate Spain intellectually from the rest of the world. There was then, as there is now in some quarters, an "official opinion" about everything, and those who ventured to overstep the bounds of the prescribed patterns paid swiftly and dearly for their rashness. The effect of this censorship helps us to understand some of Cervantes' work as well as that of other Spanish writers of the age. It is easy to see that an intelligent man like Cervantes, who had learned the lessons of life by hard experience, must have felt stifled by ill-defined restrictions as to what could be said about the state or policies or doctrines, and he must have found it difficult, as well as dangerous, to give expression to liberal ideas. It should be remembered too that Cervantes was not young when he wrote the Quixote and he was worn out with a life of struggle and almost unremitting misfortune.

In other respects too, besides censorship in many quarters, the world of Cervantes that produced the Quixote and the *Novelas Exemplares* (Exemplary Novels) was much like our present world, upset by new and revolutionary geographic and scientific discoveries, confused philosophically because of the impact of reborn science on theology with a resulting moral

relaxation. Catholic Spain, seemingly enthusiastic for the "true faith," had no *really* deep-rooted beliefs and was becoming increasingly pessimistic as international events accelerated her loss of power and prestige. All of this is reflected in Cervantes' works, as was the exhaustion caused by the excessive wars of the 16th century, — in which Cervantes had served, as we have seen, with some distinction, part of the time under the captaincy of Ponce de Leon of Fountain of Youth Fame. England and France were dueling for dominance, at first in much the same way as the democracies are now dueling with Russia. Spain, typified by Don Quixote, was tilting with the irresistible flow of Protestantism in the lists of the world. Possibly our own idealism with Marshall Plans, UNRA, The Great Society, detente, human values, etc. are as noble and as seemingly crazy and as badly directed at times as was that of Don Quixote, and we may suffer as many defeats as he did before we win out, as *he* finally did.

Those critics who have appointed themselves to analyze the character, motives, and temper of Cervantes and the supposed purposes which he had in mind when writing Don Quixote, have discovered for themselves all sorts of actuating forces in his mind and have readily found them exemplified in the natures of the characters that populate the book, in the way incidents are elaborated and in his commentaries on the worthiness or the unworthiness of this or that phase of life. Since we will never know certainly about these matters, each serious student is free to exercise himself to any extent he pleases, and with his best scholarship, to establish any thesis he proposes. 1947, the 400th anniversary of Cervantes' birth, was a fitting year for the appearance of a number of learned volumes about him and several are extremely interesting. For the life of me, however, I cannot agree with one Cervantophile who insisted that everyone should read everything Cervantes ever wrote and in Spanish. Some of Cervantes' works were so poor that no one would want to read them in any language — and this is the case with some works of most great writers.

In spite of what I have just said, there is general agreement that Cervantes began Don Quixote with the idea of writing a short tale, perhaps an exemplary novel, which would hold up to ridicule the world's prize fool — a man who still believed in the old prose chivalric romances. These had flourished all too long in Spain and had, by their exaltation of *hidalgoism*, en-

couraged simple-minded folk to live in a world of fantastic and dangerous unreality, indifferent to the onward and downward march, so far as Spain was concerned, of human affairs within, and also outside of, their own peninsula. It is further generally agreed that the book grew out of its original scope, for after a few chapters Cervantes evidently began to glimpse a vision — to see that in this poor knight of the mournful aspect (*de la triste figura*) (melancholy appearance) (sorrowful countenance), he was creating an instrument with which he could explore the soul of man as it stands confronting life with all of its hard realities. To complete this instrument he needed a contrasting figure — so he created Sancho. By the time the beginning of the Second Part is reached, the grotesque and pixillated individual of the first few chapters of Part I has become the inspired madman, touched by the finger of God, and speaking with divine wisdom. The laughter that the book provokes becomes a laughter that springs from the ironical pity for men of seeming good sense and good will who are trapped into folly by their all-too-human propensity to fall into error.

Cervantes himself had his own share of this human weakness and his own failings bring him into a sort of kinship with ourselves. These failings make him seem more real, more interesting, more sympathetic, and help explain his forbearance in a critical age when tolerance of the rights and opinions of others was as rare as it is now in many quarters. So there was finally produced in the words of J.D.M. Ford of Harvard “as efficacious a social document as this terrestrial orb of ours has ever seen, a document in which the never-ending conflict between idealism and realism in human experience is depicted in a diverting and ever-engrossing manner, and one which conveys its moral without pedantic enforcement.”

A point of possible interest here is that Cervantes' use of the idea of insanity or madness in connection with Don Quixote is entirely different from the notion of mental derangement then prevalent in western Europe. Undoubtedly one held captive by the Moors for over five years, but permitted a measure of freedom in conversation and contacts, was able to absorb many new ideas. The Mohammedans of that time believed that a madman had been touched by the finger of Allah, and that when he spoke, God was speaking. If others did not understand what the madman was saying, their failure was due to the limitations

of their human minds and to the dullness of their spiritual apprehension. This Moorish influence may have influenced Cervantes' conception of the personality of Don Quixote and, if this is kept in mind, many otherwise obscure passages become meaningful.

In addition to discovering hidden purposes and urges in Don Quixote, nothing is simpler than to find *hidden allegories* in it. Many pages of the article from which I translated a short passage as I began are given over to learned discussions of these. However, I think Ernest Merimee, the French Literary Historian, has stated the matter with considerable finality when he said, “Nothing is more idle and even more stupid than the various interpretations of a supposed mystery hidden in the novel (satire against Philip II, against the Church, against the Virgin Mary, against one or another politician, etc.). It cannot be stated too strongly that the book holds no esoteric meaning, no riddle to be solved. It is simply a diverting and marvelously merry story of human foibles . . . A story written by a wise and experienced man, who invites us to distrust ‘the fool in the house’ (which is a Spanish phrase that means, simply enough, the imagination straying into fancy). It is a story that urges us to take things for what they are, men for what they are worth, and life for what it holds. “There is no need,” Merimee says, “to crack the bones of Don Quixote to extract his marrow.”

To return to our first question then, what are at least *some* of the factors which give Don Quixote such a universal pre-eminence and appeal? It is freely admitted that other novels show a greater perfection of technique and characterization, more polished style, deeper philosophy and more profound and intriguing plots. To this I would say that these very deficiencies contribute much to Don Quixote's universality and expand a national character into an international personality, understandable to all people. Professor Northup of the University of Chicago once said “It taps the well-springs of human nature, and human nature is (much) the same everywhere. Cervantes knew humanity and loved it, and with all its failings viewed it optimistically.” In consequence the world loves Cervantes and the creatures of his fancy. “It is impossible to estimate the benefit to civilization wrought by this new note of *kindliness* in literature. The book in time began to affect politics and sociology. Its influence can never be traced even approximately,

but one can confidently say that no other novel has so served to make the world better. Don Quixote everywhere evidences the *democratic spirit* of Spanish society. Its philosophy, like that of Poor Richard, is homely, of the people, quite frequently embodied in the form of proverbs". Among the most familiar of these may be cited:

The road is always better than the inn.

He that loses wealth loses much; but he that loses courage loses all.

If a jar strikes a stone or if a stone strikes a jar, it's too bad for the jar.

There are no birds this year in last year's nests.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

There are but two families in the world . . . the Haves and the Havenots.

The phrase "praying to God while hurling the mace" which is probably the 16th century version of "Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition."

Although he lived in a hard and brutal age, Cervantes seems incapable of either sustained hatred or petty meanness and he manifested a strong opposition to the false and shallow code of honor of his day. He apparently believed that Christian forbearance and forgiveness was the only remedy for human ills. He reflected the world of men with a precision and crystalline clearness nowhere equalled earlier and rarely equalled since. This, plus a greatness of heart, not to be expected in those times, resulted in producing Don Quixote, probably the world's greatest novel. Blasco-Ibanez, a novelist of major proportions himself, had this to say, "The great secret of *genius* is the power of *synthesis* and *condensation*, the faculty of producing a work which may be the perfect symbol and expression of a *phase* of life or of the *whole* life. In this respect Cervantes stands above all other literary geniuses. His book is simply the synthesis of the whole of life. He created Don Quixote, he created Sancho Panza; after this we may say: 'There is nothing left to be done'."

What additional lessons can we learn and what applications can we make to the present day? We certainly have an iron curtain to combat just as was the case in the day of Cervantes and even as the East then was attempting to engulf the West, being turned back at Lepanto by the forces of Christendom, so again there is that threat, and we may well need a decisive leader like

Don Juan of Austria under whom, some ranks removed, Cervantes served. The late Robert M. Hutchins, formerly president of the University of Chicago, takes a very pessimistic view when he says, "It is easy to laugh at the 'Knight of the Woeful Countenance' as he jousts with sheep and windmills. But our age cannot afford that laughter. The folly of the Knight is our folly. And the myopia of Sancho Panza is our own unreflecting realism . . . The armies today are not flocks of sheep, and the weapons are more final than lances or swords. Laughter, even thoughtful laughter, is no longer permissible." Men in groups wreck civilizations, not men as individuals even though they be insane, or polarized, as physicists say. Nietzsche once made a remark to the effect that if one goes about really observing *individuals*, he seldom encounters an insane person; but cities, communities, and nations appear to be insane most of the time.

The present-day instability and anxiety in almost every sphere of activity parallels that which Cervantes could observe at first-hand long before he died in 1616.

It would seem then that to secure and preserve an unspoiled personality nowadays, we should strive for the unfailing cheerfulness of the spirit of Cervantes as it emanated from his creation, Don Quixote. A *simple* philosophy, not belonging to any sect, school, or dogma, but just human; that is, a philosophy of human *courage* runs through the pages of the book. A serenity which transcends all pessimism and despair, a sort of "peace of God which passeth all understanding," pervades the whole atmosphere of the work; incidents ending in misfortune invariably lead to sage counsel on patience and continued steadfast courage. One of the last pages Cervantes penned (in *Persiles y Segismunda*, I, 9), sums it up this way, "We cannot call that hope which may be resisted and overthrown by adversity, for as light shines most in the darkness, even so hope must remain unshaken in the midst of toil; for to despair is the act of cowardly hearts, and there is no greater pusillanimity or baseness than to allow the spirit, no matter how beset by difficulties it may be, to yield to discouragement." "*Don Quixote*, which embodies this sentiment, is thus by the great simplicity of its thought, by the ease with which it may be comprehended, a book for the average person, and so for every man. It voices those qualities from which humanity draws its noblest inspirations, an unclouded faith in God and His world, spiritual poise, and the triumphant heroism that greets the unseen with a cheer."(Rudolph Schevill)