

Miguel de CERVANTES (1547-1616): Life and Portrait

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Miguel de Cervantes, born in Alcalá de Henares in 1547, was the son of a surgeon who presented himself as a nobleman, although Cervantes's mother seems to have been a descendant of Jewish converts to Christianity. Little is known of his early years. Four poems published in Madrid by his teacher, the humanist López de Hoyos, mark his literary début, punctuated by his sudden departure for Rome, where he resided for several months. In 1571 he fought valiantly at Lepanto, where he was wounded in his left hand by a arquebus shot. The following year he took part in Juan of Austria's campaigns in Navarino, Corfu, and Tunis. Returning to Spain by sea, he fell into the hands of Algerian corsairs. After five years spent as a slave in Algiers, and four unsuccessful escape attempts, he was ransomed by the Trinitarians and returned to his family in Madrid. In 1585, a few months after his marriage to Catalina de Salazar, twenty-two years younger than he, Cervantes published a pastoral novel, *La Galatea*, at the same time that some of his plays, now lost except for *El trato de argel* and *El cerco de Numancia*, were playing on the stages of Madrid. Two years later he left for Andalusia, which he traversed for ten years, first as a purveyor for the Invencible Armada and later as a tax collector. As a result of money problems with the government, Cervantes was thrown into jail in Seville in 1597; but in 1605 he was in Valladolid, then seat of the government, just when the immediate success of the first part of his *Don Quixote*, published in Madrid, signaled his return to the literary world. In 1607, he settled in Madrid just after the return there of the monarch Philip III. During the last nine years of his life, in spite of deaths in the family and personal setbacks, Cervantes solidified his reputation as a writer. He published the *Novelas ejemplares* in 1613, the *Viaje del Parnaso* in 1614, and in 1615, the *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses* and the second part of *Don Quixote*, a year after the mysterious Avellaneda had published his apocryphal sequel to the novel. At the same time, Cervantes continued working on *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, which he completed three days before his death on April 22, 1616, and which appeared posthumously in January 1617.

What we know of Cervantes's life is the result of a long series of inquiries begun during the first three decades of the seventeenth century. But the most significant contributions have been those of scholars in the early part of this century, especially Cristóbal Pérez Pastor. The documents that have been published through their efforts come from public, parochial, and notarial archives, and they generally refer to Cervantes's captivity, the posts that he occupied in Andalusia, and certain other important events in his life. Few of these documents, however, cast any light on his life as a writer, much less on his personality. We need a methodical commentary on these documents to bring up to date the sketch which James Fitzmaurice Kelly published in Oxford in 1917: *Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra; reseña documentada de su vida*. We also need a critical biography worthy of the name. Luis Astrana Marín's big book *Vida ejemplar y heroica de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra* (Madrid, 1948-1958, 7 vols.) suffers from a less-than-solid methodology as well as a number of personal biases. Still it contains a considerable amount of information and so remains an essential work of reference. Rosa Rossi's essay *Escuchar a Cervantes* (Valladolid, 1988) attempts to do away with the idealized portrait of Cervantes by interpreting his life as the confluence of his supposed Jewish origins and his latent homosexual tendencies. Certain recent biographers--such as Andrés Trapiello (*Las vidas de Cervantes*, Barcelona, 1993) and, not without a hint of scandal, Fernando Arrabal (*Un esclavo llamado Cervantes*, Paris and Madrid, 1996)--have revived the tradition of romanticized biographies in which the biographer's personality obliterates that of the writer whose life is the supposed subject.

The biography written by the author of this note (Jean Canavaggio, *Cervantès*, revised and amplified edition, Paris: Fayard, 1997) differs from its predecessors in its pretensions. Unlike other works, it does not attempt to plumb the depths of the irrational in order to decipher the symbolism that Cervantes's fiction presumably contains. Rather than "explain" Cervantes, a man who disappeared almost four centuries ago and whose creation has taken on a life of its own, this biography aspires to "tell his story" better. We must first establish with all the necessary rigor what is actually known of Cervantes's actions and experiences, and we must exclude the legends, such as his having studied at the Jesuit school in Seville or his having composed the *Quixote* while in prison. Then Cervantes, who was an obscure participant in a heroic adventure, a lucid observer of a time of doubt and crisis, and a very personal interpreter of Spain at a crucial moment in its history, must be placed in his own milieu and his own time, better known now because of the work of recent historians. We must do our best to find that man. As we trace this life which has become a destiny that we attempt to render comprehensible, the book offers us a likely profile of a figure who is not the same individual that his friends and family knew, nor the "rare genius" whose profile Cervantes himself created, nor the figure which, since his death, has arisen from a series of myths which some day ought to be looked into. In other words, we are looking for the missing profile which we assign to the secret narrator hidden behind his masks, this absent one who is always present, whose voice is his alone and, through the magic of his writing, is always recognizable even among a thousand others.

Biography

Cervantes was born in Alcalá de Henares in 1547 and died in Madrid in 1616. His father Rodrigo de Cervantes was a doctor of few means. Nothing is known of his mother Leonor de Cortinas. It appears that Cervantes studied with the Jesuits in Córdoba or Seville and perhaps in Salamanca. It is fairly certain that he was a pupil of López de Hoyos in Madrid. In 1569 he went to Italy as part of Cardenal Acquaviva's retinue and after signing up as a soldier in 1570 fought in the battle of Lepanto aboard the galley *Marquesa*. For the rest of his life he would boast of the several wounds that he received in his hands and in his forehead. Subsequently, he fought in the Corfú, Navarino, and Tunis campaigns. On his way back to Spain in 1575, the galley *El Sol* was attacked by Turkish ships and Cervantes was taken captive to Algeria. During his five years of captivity he wrote the *Epístola a Mateo Vázquez*. Juan Gil obtained Cervantes's freedom in 1580 in exchange for 500 ducats. Once back in Spain, he became a tax collector for the Invincible Armada. He had one daughter, Isabel, from his liaison with Ana de Villafranca. He married Catalina de Salazar y Palacios in 1584. He was twice imprisoned for embezzlement and for not paying his debts. He went to jail in 1603 when the corpse of Gaspar de Ezpaleta was found on his doorstep, but he was released for lack of evidence. From 1613 one of his books will appear every year until the last one, *Persiles*, with its dedication in which he takes leave of his readers signed three days before his death, on April 23, 1616.