

# Miguel de Cervantes to His Readers

Toward the end of the first part of *Don Quixote*, using the voice of one of his novel's characters (a clergyman who is speaking to the priest escorting the caged (!) **Don Quixote** back to his home village), **Cervantes** seems to reveal to his readers the difference which his novel is bringing to the art of writing fiction:

" ... the priest asked the canon to ride ahead with him, and he would explain the mystery of the caged man and tell him other things that he would find amusing. The canon did so, and moving ahead with his servants and with the priest, he listened attentively to everything the priest wished to tell him regarding the condition, life, madness, and customs of Don Quixote, which was a brief account of the origin and cause of his delusions and the series of events that had brought him to that cage, and the scheme they had devised to bring him home to see if they somehow could find a cure for his madness. The canon and his servants were astonished a second time when they heard Don Quixote's remarkable story, and when it was ended, the canon said:

"Truly, Señor Priest, it seems to me that the books called novels of chivalry are prejudicial to the nation, and though I, moved by a false and idle taste, have read the beginning of almost every one that has ever been published, I have never been able to read any from beginning to end, because it seems to me they are all essentially the same, and one is no different from another. In my opinion, this kind of writing and composition belongs to the genre called Milesian tales, which are foolish stories meant only to delight and not to teach, unlike moral tales, which delight and teach at the same time. Although the principal aim of these books is to delight, I do not know how they can, being so full of so many excessively foolish elements; for delight conceived in the soul must arise from the beauty and harmony it sees or contemplates in the things that the eyes or the imagination place before it, and nothing that possesses ugliness and disorder can please us. What beauty, what proportion between parts and the whole, or the whole and its parts, can there be in a book or tale in which a boy of sixteen, with one thrust of his sword, fells a giant as big as a tower and splits him in two as if he were marzipan, and, when a battle is depicted, after saying that there are more than a million combatants on the side of the enemy, if the hero of the book fights them, whether we like it or not, of necessity we must believe that this knight achieves victory only through the valor of his mighty arm? What shall we say of the ease with which a hereditary queen or empress falls into the arms of an errant and unknown knight? What mind, unless it is completely barbaric or untutored, can be pleased to read that a great tower filled with knights sails the seas like a ship before a favorable wind, and is in Lombardy at nightfall, and by dawn the next day it is in the lands of Prester John of the Indies, or in others never described by Ptolemy or seen by Marco Polo? If one were to reply that those who compose these books write them as fictions, and therefore are not obliged to consider the fine points of truth, I should respond that the more truthful the fiction, the better it is, and the more probable and possible, the more pleasing.

Fictional tales must engage the minds of those who read them, and by restraining exaggeration and moderating impossibility, they enthrall the spirit and thereby astonish, captivate, delight, and entertain, allowing wonder and joy to move together at the same pace; none of these things can be accomplished by fleeing verisimilitude and mimesis, which together constitute perfection in writing. I have seen no book of chivalry that creates a complete tale, a body with all its members intact, so that the middle corresponds to the beginning, and the end to the beginning and the middle; instead, they are composed with so many members that the intention seems to be to shape a chimera or a monster rather than to create a well-proportioned figure. Furthermore, the style is fatiguing, the action incredible, the love lascivious, the courtesies clumsy, the battles long, the language foolish, the journeys nonsensical, and, finally, since they are totally lacking in intelligent artifice, they deserve to be banished, like unproductive people, from Christian nations.”

The priest listened with great attention and thought the canon a man of fine understanding who was correct in everything he said, and so he told him that since he held the same opinion and felt a good deal of animosity toward books of chivalry, he had burned all of Don Quixote's, of which there were many. He recounted the examination he had made of them, those he had condemned to the flames and those he had saved, and at this the canon laughed more than a little and said that despite all the bad things he had said about those books, he found one good thing in them, which was the opportunity for display that they offered a good mind, providing a broad and spacious field where one's pen could write unhindered, describing shipwrecks, storms, skirmishes, and battles; depicting a valiant captain with all the traits needed to be one, showing him to be a wise predictor of his enemy's clever moves, an eloquent orator in persuading or dissuading his soldiers, mature in counsel, unhesitating in resolve, as valiant in waiting as in the attack; portraying a tragic, lamentable incident or a joyful, unexpected event, a most beautiful lady who is virtuous, discreet, and modest or a Christian knight who is courageous and kind, an insolent barbarian braggart or a prince who is courteous, valiant, and astute; and representing the goodness and loyalty of vassals and the greatness and generosity of lords. The writer can show his conversance with astrology, his excellence as a cosmographer, his knowledge of music, his intelligence in matters of state, and perhaps he will have the opportunity to demonstrate his talents as a necromancer, if he should wish to. He can display the guile of Ulysses, the piety of Aeneas, the valor of Achilles, the misfortunes of Hector, the treachery of Sinon, the friendship of Euryalus, the liberality of Alexander, the valor of Caesar, the clemency and truthfulness of Trajan, the fidelity of Zopyrus, the prudence of Cato, in short, all of those characteristics that make a noble man perfect, sometimes placing them all in one individual, sometimes dividing them among several.

“And if this is done in a pleasing style and with ingenious invention, and is drawn as close as possible to the truth, it no doubt will weave a cloth composed of many different and beautiful threads, and when it is finished, it will display such perfection and beauty that it will achieve the greatest goal of any writing, which, as I have said, is to teach and delight at the same time. Because the free writing style of these books allows the author to show his skills as an epic, lyric, tragic, and comic writer, with all the characteristics contained in the sweet and pleasing sciences of poetry and rhetoric; for the epic can be written in prose as well as in verse.”