**Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra**

**The Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616) is the greatest novelist of the Spanish language. His masterpiece, "Don Quixote," is one of the most important and influential books in the history of the novel.**

Miguel de Cervantes was born in the university city of Alcalá de Henares in the old kingdom of Toledo. His baptismal record is preserved (he was christened on Oct. 9, 1547), but his birth date is unknown. It is generally surmised, however, because of the Christian name he was given, that he was born on Michaelmas (September 29). He was the second son and the fourth of seven children of the apothecary-surgeon Rodrigo de Cervantes and his wife, Leonor de Cortinas. On his father's side he was of Andalusian extraction, and Castilian on his mother's side. Rodrigo de Cervantes was not very successful in his profession, and he traveled quite frequently. In 1552 he was imprisoned in Valladolid for debts (a familiar lot, later on, for his most famous offspring), and in 1564 he was in Seville. It is possible, however, that the family had moved to Madrid in 1561, when Philip II made it the capital of his empire.

Nothing is known of Miguel's life until 1569. In that year the humanist Juan López de Hoyos brought out a commemorative volume to mark the death of Queen Isabel de Valois in 1568. Cervantes contributed three indifferent poems to this work, and López de Hoyos wrote of him as "nuestro caro y amado discípulo" (our dear and beloved pupil). López de Hoyos was a reader and admirer of the humanist Erasmus, and a connection has been drawn between this fact and some critical attitudes about religion later shown by his beloved pupil. This is all that is known about Cervantes' education. It is reasonable, however, to conjecture that he studied in Seville with the Jesuits, since some statements in El coloquio de los perros (one of the Novelas ejemplares, 1613) would bear this out.

Cervantes was in Rome by Dec. 22, 1569, (the date of a certificate made out by his father attesting to his son's legitimate birth and Christianity). In the dedication of his Galatea (1585), Cervantes states that he had been chamberlain to Cardinal Giulio Acquaviva. It has therefore been surmised that he traveled to Italy in 1569 in the cardinal's retinue, when Acquaviva returned to Italy from Spain, where he had been papal legate.

## Military Career

In 1570 Cervantes joined the company of Diego de Urbina in the Spanish forces at Naples. As a soldier, he participated in the great naval victory of Lepanto (Oct. 7, 1571), in which the armada commanded by John of Austria destroyed the Turkish fleet. Cervantes was aboard the Marquesa in the thick of the battle, and in spite of being ill he obtained permission to fight in the most dangerous spot. He was wounded three times, twice in the chest and once in the left hand; the last wound maimed his hand for life. With justifiable pride Cervantes often mentioned this momentous victory in his works.

The triumphant fleet returned to Messina, and there Cervantes convalesced. He saw action again in 1572, this time in the company of Don Lope de Figueroa (famous in Spanish literature as one of the protagonists of Calderón's El alcalde de Zalamea. With his younger brother Rodrigo he participated in a naval battle off Navarino (October 1572). In early 1573 he was on garrison duty in Naples, but later that year, again under the command of John of Austria, he took part in the capture of Tunis (October 8-10). Tunis was shortly after recaptured by the Turks, and Cervantes participated in the unsuccessful expedition of relief in autumn 1574. That November he was on garrison duty in Palermo. By this time he felt ready for a promotion to captain, and in order to negotiate in the Madrid court he got letters of recommendation from John of Austria and the Duke of Sessa, one of his generals, and obtained leave to sail back to Spain. With his brother Rodrigo he sailed from Naples on the Sol in September 1575.

## Five Years of Captivity

On September 26 the Sol was assailed by three Turkish galleys, in a place that has traditionally been identified as off the coast near Marseilles but which was more likely off the Costa Brava in Catalonia. The ship was captured with its crew and passengers, who were taken as captives to Algiers. Cervantes lived in slavery for 5 years; he was closely watched since his letters of recommendation suggested that he was a high-ranking person. In captivity he demonstrated an unbreakable will and exemplary courage, and he led an abortive escape attempt in 1576. In 1577 some priests of the Order of Mercy arrived in Algiers with 300 escudos sent by his family for his ransom, but this sum proved insufficient. Cervantes suggested that the money be used to rescue his brother, as was done on Aug. 24, 1577.

A month later Cervantes once more led a group in an attempt to escape but again met with no success. He remained undaunted by punishments and threats, and the captives looked to him for inspiration. While in captivity Cervantes reached near-legendary stature, as is attested by the narrative of his exploits written by Fray Diego de Haedo, Archbishop of Palermo. By 1579-1580 his family had raised a new sum of money for his ransom, and they entrusted it to two Trinitarian monks. The sum fell short of the 500 escudos demanded by his master, the viceroy of Algiers, Hassan Pasha, but Christian merchants in that city supplied the difference. On Sept. 19, 1580, Cervantes was rescued on board the ship that was to take him to Constantinople, his master's new destination. On October 10, before leaving Algiers, Cervantes wrote his Información, which described his conduct while in captivity. He sailed for Spain at the end of that month, and on December 18 in Madrid, he signed a statement about his release. He had proved himself to be a true Christian soldier, equally heroic in battle and in captivity.

## Early Works

In 1581 Cervantes was in Portugal, which had been annexed to Spain the year before. On May 21, 1581, in Tomar, he was advanced 50 ducats to accomplish a royal mission to Oran. This he did, but the royal service, whatever its nature, was not very rewarding. In an autograph letter, addressed to the royal secretary and dated Madrid, Feb. 17, 1582, Cervantes tells of his misfortunes in trying to obtain a post in the Peninsula and states that he is ready to apply for some post in the Indies. He also reports some progress in the composition of the Galatea. This pastoral novel was to be his first published book, but it did not appear until 1585. The novel is somewhat experimental in tone; Cervantes' attachment to it is attested by the fact that on his deathbed he still promised its continuation. Furthermore, the importance of the pastoral theme in his works is undeniable.

About this same time, Cervantes turned to writing for the theater, an activity that guaranteed a certain income if the plays were successful. In the Adjunta to his Viaje del Parnaso (1614) and in the prologue to his Ocho comedias yocho entremeses (1615), he tells of his dramatic successes and his eventual downfall, caused by Lope de Vega's increasing popularity. Of these early plays only two have survived, in a manuscript discovered in 1784: Los tratos de Argel and La Numancia.

On Dec. 12, 1584, Cervantes married Doña Catalina de Palacios Salazar y Vozmediano, from the wine-making town of Esquivias, in the old kingdom of Toledo. She brought him a modest dowry, and being 18 years his junior, she survived the novelist (she died in 1626). The marriage had no issue. But it was probably a year or two before his wedding that Cervantes had an affair with Ana Franca de Rojas, with whom he had a daughter, Isabel de Saavedra, who figured prominently in his later years. His daughter died in 1652, the last of his line.

## Royal Service

In 1587 Cervantes was in Seville. The preparation of the Armada for its disastrous expedition against England was going on in a grand scale, and Cervantes had come to help in the enterprise. But his new post as commissary to the navy brought him only grief, shame, and discomfort. He was excommunicated by the dean and chapter of the Cathedral of Seville for requisitioning their grain in Ecija. He traveled considerably in Andalusia, but his finances went from bad to worse. On May 21, 1590, he petitioned the King for one of four vacant posts in the Indies. The petition was denied with the note, "Let him look around here for a job." As once before, he turned for financial help to the theater, and on Sept. 5, 1592, he signed a contract in Seville with the producer Rodrigo Osorio. Cervantes agreed to write six plays at 50 ducats each, but payment would be withheld if Osorio did not find each of the plays to be "one of the best ever produced in Spain." Nothing is known of the outcome of this extraordinary contract. Shortly after, Cervantes was jailed in Castro del Río, again for overzealous requisitioning. He was by now in dire financial straits, a situation considerably complicated by his unhappy handling of official accounts and by dealings with fradulent bankers. Thus he landed back in jail in September 1597 in Seville. He was released in December. In 1598 he seems to have remained in Seville, but his government employment seems to have come to an end, although the officials in Madrid summoned him twice (1599 and 1601) to clear up his accounts. The summonses were not obeyed.

## "Don Quixote"

The documentation for the years from 1600 to 1603 is scanty. It is very probable that Cervantes was jailed again in Seville in 1602, once more for financial reasons. But most of his time must have been taken up by the composition of Don Quixote. In 1603 he was in Valladolid, where the new king, Philip III, had moved the capital. There Cervantes started negotiations for the publication of his manuscript, and the license was granted on Sept. 26, 1604. In January 1605 Don Quixote was published in Madrid; it was an immediate success, receiving the dubious honor of having three pirated editions appear in Lisbon in that same year. In the words of the German philosopher F. W. J. von Schelling, Don Quixote is "the most universal, the most profound and the most picturesque portrait of life itself."

But Cervantes did not bask in his success for long; on June 27, 1605, a Navarrese gentleman, Don Gaspar de Ezpeleta, was killed outside Cervantes' house in Valladolid. The novelist and his family were taken to jail on suspicion of murder but were soon released. The extant criminal proceedings show that Cervantes' financial difficulties were far from over.

There follows another documentary hiatus, from 1605 to 1608, when Cervantes reappears in Madrid, once again the capital of the kingdom. At this time his illegitimate daughter, Isabel de Saavedra, entangled him in a series of lawsuits having to do with financial matters. Once more Cervantes sought escape from Spain, and in 1610 he tried to go to Naples in the retinue of its newly appointed viceroy, the Count of Lemos. He was turned down, but nevertheless he displayed a lifelong affection for the Count of Lemos, to whom he dedicated five books, including the second Quixote.

## Later Works

About this time Cervantes entered a period of extraordinary literary creativity, all the more admirable because he was close to 65 years of age. His Novelas ejemplares were published in Madrid in 1613. They are 12 little masterpieces, with which Cervantes created the art of shortstory writing in Spain, as he readily admitted in the prologue. Even if Cervantes had not written Don Quixote, the Novelas ejemplares would suffice to give him a prominent place in the history of fiction.

The year 1614 saw the publication in Madrid of Cervantes' burlesque poem Viaje del Parnaso, a lively satire of the literary life of his time. But that year also saw the publication in Tarragona of a spurious continuation of Don Quixote, signed with the pseudonym Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. The identity of this author remains the greatest riddle of Spanish literature. Cervantes' rhythm of composition was unaffected by the insults Avellaneda piled on him, and in 1615 he published in Madrid his Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses, concrete proof of his early and lasting devotion to the theater. Some of the plays are from his early period, but he polished them for publication. He added eight one-act humorous plays (entremeses). Later in 1615 Cervantes published in Madrid his own second part of Don Quixote. The only fitting praise of the authentic second part of Don Quixote is to say that it is even better than the first part.

Cervantes then put all his energy into finishing Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, a novel of adventures along the lines of the Byzantine novel. He had probably begun it at the turn of the century; he signed the dedication to the Count of Lemos (dated Apr. 19, 1616) on his deathbed. He died 4 days later in Madrid. It was left to his widow to publish his last work, and the book appeared in Madrid in 1617. Cervantes' unmarked grave is in the Trinitarian convent of the old Calle de Cantarranas, now called Calle de Lope de Vega.

## Further Reading

Luis Astrana Marin wrote an exhaustive biography of Cervantes in Spanish. In English there is no really good, up-to-date biography. The standard work is James Fitzmaurice-Kelly's outdated Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra: A Memoir (1913). See also A. F. Calvert, The Life of Cervantes (1905), and Rudolph Schevill, Cervantes (1919). Two interpretative studies are William J. Entwis tle, Cervantes (1940), and Aubrey F. G. Bell, Cervantes (1947). For an appreciation of Cervantes' art, Edward C. Riley, Cervantes' Theory of the Novel (1962), is indispensable. For the literary background see Ernest Mérimée, A History of Spanish Literature (trans. 1930), and Richard E. Chandler and Kessel Schwartz, A New History of Spanish Literature (1961). □

"[Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra.](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404701211.html)" Encyclopedia of World Biography. 2004. *Encyclopedia.com.* 25 Feb. 2016 <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.