

Teaching *Don Quijote*

The *Quijote* exemplifies all the contradictions of Baroque culture, arising within the epistemological crisis between the platonic worldview of the Renaissance and the mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment. I would draw on the work of Michel Foucault, Carlos Fuentes, Paul Hazard and José Antonio Maravall to describe this crisis of incipient modernity. I would also rely on J.H. Elliot's work, *Imperial Spain*, to illustrate for students the particular manifestation of this crisis within Spanish history. The decay of the Spanish empire, the reality behind the appearances of imperial glory, is certainly a force behind the creation of the *Quijote*. As Elliot notes, "What work could be more revealing of a nation that set out to crusade and found itself tilting at windmills?" As part of my effort to illustrate the quixotic nature of the Spanish imperial mission, I would show students Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre, Wrath of God*.

The breakdown of the religious epistemological edifice of the Middle Ages is also at the heart of the *Quijote*. I would present the students with Cervantes' Erasmian heritage. It was Erasmus, after all, who started this whole business of glorifying madmen in his *In Praise of Folly*. I would portray the ideological climate of Counterreformation Spain, highlighting the roles of the Inquisition, censorship, and of the persecution of converted Jews and the *moriscos*. I would also cite the history of St. Ignatius of Loyola, whose mission of founding an order of spiritual knight errantry was not irrelevant to Don Quijote's own quest. Finally, I would present the history of the rise of the "New Science" which Paolo Rossi and Marjorie Nicholson have so ably described, as an example of the worldview on the horizon that threatened the authority of the Church irrevocably.

The "loss of center" which characterized the breakdown of the medieval edifice of beliefs gives rise to enormous creativity in the arts. I would explore the *Quijote's* aesthetic context, its perspectivism,

its relativism, and its intertextuality and self-reference by studying its closest analogue in the visual arts: the paintings of Velázquez (e.g. *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* and *Las meninas*). I would present these paintings to students through film and art books, and if relevant and possible, in a trip to a museum.

The challenges in teaching a long, complex, and early work like the *Quijote* are many. Lectures will alternate between cultural materials and close readings of episodes from the text itself. As students progress through the work, opportunities for a more panoramic, integrated understanding of the text will arise. One such opportunity could be to focus on the character of Dulcinea as exemplary of the changes in the aesthetic, religious and social role of woman; the critique of an idealized Beatrice or Virgin Mary figure suggests the possibility of female freedom in the modern world. In the end I would hope to lay the basis for students to form their own opinion of the *Quijote* as the first modern novel.

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