

A Play Within a Play
A Synopsis of "Man of LaMancha"

In 1505, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra wrote Don Quixote, generally accepted as the first modern novel. It is from this voluminous work (in excess of 2000 pages in its English translation) that the story of "Man of la Mancha" is taken. The play is a story within a story.

It begins with Cervantes, a tax collector during the Spanish Inquisition, entering prison pending trial for an offense against the Church. While in prison, he is tried by the other prisoners (their way of seizing the goods of the newly imprisoned, including Cervantes' incomplete manuscript, Don Quixote) on a charge of "being a bad poet". Cervantes' defense of this charge is to stage a "charade" with the prisoners playing the parts, and it is this play that constitutes the story within the story.

Cervantes and the prisoners now take on the characters of the participants in the tale of Alonso Quijana, a minor nobleman driven mad by his dreams of the days of chivalry. He and his manservant, taking on the persona Sancho Panza, play out the fantasies of Quijana, who imagines himself to be a knight errant named Don Quixote de la Mancha.

In the first trial by combat, Quixote challenges a giant to battle. Unfortunately, the giant is only in his imagination. It is in reality a very large windmill that severely vanquishes Quixote in battle. Following this ignominious defeat, Quixote and Sancho come upon a "castle" (in reality an inn) where they are welcomed by the "King" (the innkeeper), and where Quixote finds the woman of his dreams, the lady Dulcinea of Toboso. She is really a kitchen maid and prostitute named Aldonza. Also in residence is a group of muleteers that Quixote perceives to be villains and that he will later challenge in combat.

Another of Quixote's delusions appears when he encounters a Barber who is in possession of the fabled golden helmet of the mythical Moorish king Mambrino. In Spanish tradition King Mambrino's helmet made the wearer invincible. The helmet is, of course, only the barber's shaving basin.

While Quixote pursues his noble quest, his housekeeper and niece are concerned about the way his delusions will affect their standing in the community, and with the help of the parish priest and the niece's fiancé, Dr. Carrasco, they set out to cure him of his madness. Dr. Carrasco, in the guise of The Knight of the Mirrors, causes Quixote to see things as they are. Dispirited, Quixote abandons his dreams and becomes again the simple yet aged squire, Alonso Quijana. The shock of this transformation is fatal to the old man.

Back in Cervantes' dungeon the prisoners, dregs of humanity though they are, have been deeply affected by his story and restore to him his precious manuscript. At that moment, the Inquisition summons Cervantes to his real trial. As he ascends the stairs to his certain death, the prisoners unite to sing *The Impossible Dream*.

The conflicting perceptions of Quixote, Aldonza, Muleteers and Innkeeper, relatives, and the Priest provide the action in the play. It is a tale of nobility and degradation, of hope and despair, of the conflict between dreams and reality.