

Renaissance Medical Psychology in «Don Quijote»

Daniel L. Heiple
Tulane University

The monumental advances in medical science in the last century have rendered previous medical ideas both quaint and useless. Few today look for a revival of old medical practices, and yet their importance in the history of ideas cannot be overlooked. One such case is the use that Cervantes makes of medical theories in the presentation of the daily life of Alonso Quijano in the beginning of *Don Quijote*. The opening chapter has long been appreciated for its humor and insight into the human personality. The modern reader, however, far removed from sixteenth and seventeenth-century medical ideas does not suspect that behind the genial style of the introductory descriptions of the hero there lies an outline of medical theory which Cervantes used to structure this chapter. An analysis of Alonso Quijano's daily habits—his diet, his sleep, and others—in light of former medical theory will demonstrate that each of these elements had medical properties, and in this case, all of these properties contribute to the drying out of his brain and his resultant madness.

Past investigators, such as Rodríguez Marín and Otis Green,¹ have found traces of Renaissance medical theory in *Don Quijote*, but since their research in medicine was only piecemeal, the extent to which Cervantes made use of the medical ideas of his time is today unknown. Hernández Morejón, early nineteenth century doctor and historian of medicine, could still appreciate the medical background of the novel,² but to us, because we lack an understanding of antiquated medicine, his explanation sound more like excessive patriotism than wellfounded exposition. For these reasons, a brief description of Renaissance theories of sickness can provide the basis for appreciating unsuspected facets of Cervantes' realism.

The Western theory of medicine began, possibly in the sixth century B. C. with the Greek philosopher Alcmaeon of Crotona,³ and certainly with Hippocrates in the fifth century B. C., and it continued well into the nineteenth century in most European countries, and even into the twentieth century in some areas with strong Arabic influence. This medical theory was quite simple. It postulated that the body is healthy if its chemical composition is in balance and unhealthy if one of its humors—blood, choler, melancholy, or phlegm—predominates over the others. As a corollary, it ascribed humoral properties to those things that man must experience, such as air, food, sleep, etc., and in this way all health and sickness could be attributed to the patient's personal habits or his environment. This basic idea never changed, manly because it is rooted in the authoritative Greek writers Hippocrates

and Galen. The Arab theory is expanded and systematized Greek thought and were unquestionably accepted and taught in medieval schools. In the Renaissance, the Arabic incrustations of ideas and terminology were laboriously picked off by the scandalized humanists, interested in restoring classical thought. However, through all of these changes occurring over a period of 2500 years, the central idea of medicine remained the same. In spite of what histories of medicine and psychology tell us about superstitions and witchcraft, the theory of Western medicine has always maintained that sickness was caused by a chemical imbalance in the body.

To understand Cervantes' use of this theory it is not necessary to discuss the theoretical composition of the body, but rather go directly to the causes of good health and sickness. According to the Arabic theorists Haly Abbas and Hunain,⁴ and their European followers, there was a class of causes which they named «non-natural.» These «six things non-natural,» as Robert Burton still called them in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, must necessarily affect the health of the body, either by maintaining it in its present state or by changing it. «Non-natural» was a misnomer, however, since all of these are either the things of nature or natural body functions. These six unavoidable causes of good health and sickness are: (1) the air one breathes, (2) his food and drink, (3) sleep and wakefulness, (4) repletion and evacuation, (5) exercise and inactivity, and (6) the passions of the soul, that is, emotional disturbances. For Haly Abbas, these were only the headings for very large categories. Air referred to differences of climate, positions of the planets and stars, changes of season, winds, regions, types of soil, weather, and vapors. All of these were rigidly classified into the categories of hot, dry, cold and humid, etc., and hence corresponded to the humors. Distempered air was considered to be the main cause of sickness, and plagues and epidemics were thought to be caused by the arrival of putrid air. Food and drink were the most extensively classified, and hundreds of items were pigeon-holed according to their humors, as well as other effects, for example, according to Haly Abbas, the simple lemon is quite complex: the cortex is hot and dry in the third degree; the interior part of the peel is cold and humid; and the acidic part is cold and dry in the third degree. The next three non-naturals are paired «either/or» items: the body must either be asleep or awake, moving or at rest, replete or evacuated. Sleep, inactivity, and repletion cause humidity, while wakefulness, exercise, and evacuation were thought to dry out the body. It was also thought that the emotions had a chemical effect on the body, and they too were classified according to the humor they engendered, for example, sadness caused melancholy; anger caused cholera, etc.

But even these details give us only a hint of the sophistication used in applying these theories. A more complete picture is seen in Juan de Aviñón's *Sevillana medicina*, written in Spanish in 1380 and published in 1545 by the famous pharmacist Nicolás Monardes.⁵ Given its late publication date, it is clearly a work that Cervantes would have known. Monardes published only the part of the treatise that deals with the specific nature of the non-naturals of Seville. The city is classified as hot and humid in the first degree. He says in addition that it is necessary to determine a beginning, middle, and end point within each degree; therefore, it is possible to distinguish variations of heat and humidity within Seville itself, and he carefully divides the city into sections according to these subgradations. In addition to noting the section of town, the doctor, when he arrives, should keep in mind whether the patient lives on the first or second floor, the position and number of windows, the amount of sun and wind they receive, the height of the bed, etc. The long section on food and drink not only treats the nature of each food, but the writer often includes a discussion of the regions that produce

the food, the grain that the cattle eat, the method of cooking, etc., all of this to determine the complexion of the food and its place within the four degrees as well as often determining if it is in the beginning, middle, or end of the degree. He then proceeds to the quantity of food, hour of eating (according to the month of the year), the size and height of the table and benches, washing, order of courses (which varies according to season), the complexion and age of the eater, etc. This treatise gives a brief, dazzling idea of the possibilities of utilizing medical theory in Cervantes' period. It is significant that Monardes found this treatise still valid in the sixteenth century (in fact it was still recommended in the nineteenth for its completeness). This appreciation is understood by remembering that the humanist attack occurred at the university level, and that the Arabic synthesis continued on the more popular level to be studied and used. These ideas must have been familiar to Cervantes from childhood since his father was a surgeon—that is, a practicing doctor with no training in Latin, a grade above the barber and one below the doctor. It was at this less sophisticated level of studies that the medieval and Arabic ideas had survived in their most pure form.

According to this theory, disease was an excess of some one humor which usually centralized and affected one organ; madness was an excess of melancholy in the brain or the region of the diaphragm. Since melancholy is cold and dry, the cure would consist of eliminating the excess humor through bleeding, purges, forced perspiration, etc. and of neutralizing its effect by rearranging the non-naturals and prescribing medicines with opposite humoral characteristics. The famous phrase of all doctors was «Contraria contrariis curantur,» contraries are cured with contraries.» And these are the words that the goat herd uses when giving Don Quijote advice about his wounded ear: «...puesto que es tal la medicina que se os ha puesto, que no hay que temer de contrario accidente»⁷. It is important to keep in mind that this theory is strictly physically based—one of the important legacies of Greek rationalism to Western culture.

When we turn again to the opening pages of *Don Quijote*, we see that the daily habits of Alonso Quijano contribute to the drying out of his brain and in fact the six non-natural causes served as an outline for the description of these habits. Cervantes tells his reader of the air, eating habits, exercise, sleeping, and emotional upsets of Alonso Quijano. The only cause that is not covered, perhaps for reason of decorum, is repletion and evacuation, although we are told later in the that the hero is a sparse eater, for example: «es honra de los caballeros andantes no comer en un mes» (101), and «No quiso desayunarse don Quijote» (84). These Spartan habits would serve to dry out his body even more.⁸

It is not surprising that Alonso Quijano's daily habits foreshadow his forthcoming madness. Regarding air, we are told that he is from La Mancha: «En un lugar de la Mancha» (35), which is one of the hottest and driest regions in Spain. It is probably not coincidental that he is defeated on the coast of Barcelona, a cooler and definitely more humid region of lower altitude. His diet is carefully detailed and not unexpectedly, all the items dry out the body:

Una olla de algo más vaca que carnero, salpicón las más noches, duelos y quebrantos los sábados, lentejas los viernes, algún palomino de añadidura los domingos. (35)

Some of the foods were specifically associated with melancholic mental disturbances, such as the beef, salted meat, and especially the lentils he eats on Fridays. Galen, commenting on Hippocrates' treatise on diet, included a digression on mental upsets when he dealt with lentils. All the treatises on melancholy give a list of prohibited

foods. The Arabic doctor Rhazes began his list «especially lentils.»¹⁰ This was repeated by many doctors, including Pedro Mercado in 1558, who finished his list: «y sobre todo lentejas.»¹¹ Andrés Laguna in his commentary on Dioscorides makes the same point about lentils, but goes on to add:

Las lentejas hazen soñar cosas turbulentas y horribles, a causa del humor melancólico y vapores negros que engendran, los quales, quando suben a la cabeza, domicilio y templo del ánima, perturban el entendimiento y sentido, y nos representan cosas tristes y formidables.¹²

Don Quijote himself mentions the fame of the herbal in Part One, Chapter 18.

An anecdote attributed to Juan de Arguijo makes the same point about *lentejas*. A student, concerned about his health, for students and scholars were thought to be especially susceptible to melancholy because they read so much, complained about eating every Friday, saying to his servant: «Mira que estas lentejas son la misma melancolía. Dame en vez un potaje de alguna cosa que me alegre.» The next Friday when he tasted his soup «...halló que era todo de cascabeles.» «¿Qué es esto?» Respondió [el criado]: «Señor, garbanzos de las Indias y son alegres por extremo.»¹³ All of the other items of Alonso Quijano's diet dry out the body, and some are also found in the lists of «don't foods,» such as beef and salted meats, although none were as famous as lentils.

The list of foods has been variously interpreted by commentators and critics of *Don Quijote*. In his commentaries, Rodríguez Marín, so versed in Golden Age writings of all types, actually quoted some of the medical sources of foods and recognized the possible significance of lentils. He concluded «bien pudieron ser concausa». However, he was not acquainted with the prevailing theory, or at least he did not bring it to bear on this passage. In addition, he seemed to work from the conviction that Cervantes' overriding purpose in these descriptions was a kind of *costumbrismo*.

Martín de Riquer states in his notes that that all of these foods are typical of the poor and humble people of small towns, and the emphasis he places on these points leads us to the conclusion that the list of foods and clothes were included mainly to place the *hidalgo* in his social class. This is the specific conclusion of a recent study by José Luis Peset and Manuel Almela Navarro, who further show a class difference between Don Quijote's and Sancho's tastes.¹⁴ My arguments are not intended to contradict these interpretation, nor do I find the foods inappropriate to the station or class of the hero. But I maintain that Cervantes selected from the common foods and customs those that have dry characteristics in order to present in a very realistic and scientific way the predisposition to the madness that overtakes his hero.

Lack of sleep was also thought to dry out the body, and it is also one of Quijano's habits:

En resolución, él se enfrascó tanto en su lectura, que se le pasaban las noches leyendo de claro en claro y los días de turbio en turbio; y así, del poco dormir y del mucho leer se le secó el cerebro, de manera que vino a perder el juicio. (37)

Toda aquella noche no durmió don Quijote... (84)

...y todo lo más de la noche se le pasó en memorias de su señora Dulcinea... (115)

In addition, excessive study was thought to be a cause of dryness in the body. Scholars were continually warned against melancholy since it was thought that all

geniuses had a propensity for depression, and in extreme cases, madness, as expressed in the common saying: «No hay gran ingenio sin su ramo de locura.» Thus, Alonso Quijano is quite imprudent in staying up all night, and by spending that time reading, he only aggravates the tendency to dry out his body. One is reminded of Ribera's portrait, titled «Jerónimo, filósofo,» in the Hospital de Tavera in Toledo. The philosopher is sitting reading, and behind him stands a boy with a water jug, ready to moisten his head.

In addition, Quijano reads novels that serve to stimulate and overexcite his emotions, which was the sixth cause of humoral imbalance:

Con estas razones perdió el pobre caballero el juicio, y desvelábase por entenderlas y desentrañarles el sentido... (37)

...del poco dormir y mucho leer se le secó el cerebro... (37)

Sepa, señor maese Nicolás, ...que muchas veces le aconteció a mi señor tío estar leyendo en estos desalmados libros de aventuras dos días con sus noches, al cabo de los cuales arrojaba el libro de las manos, y ponía mano a la espada, y andaba a cuchilladas con las paredes, y cuando estaba muy cansado decía que había muerto a cuatro gigantes como cuatro torres, y el sudor que sudaba del cansancio decía que ser sangre de las heridas que había recibido en la batalla, y bebíase luego un gran jarro de agua fría, y quedaba sano y sosegado... (64)

The only element that does not dry out his body is the fact that he gives up hunting, for inactivity was thought to increase the moisture in the body, but perhaps Cervantes was thinking here more of the dangers of sudden changes than of the specific effect. Noting the language, we see it is written in medical terminology, carefully contrasting exercise and idleness: «...los ratos que estaba ocioso—que eran los más del año—, se daba a leer libros de caballerías con tanta afición y gusto, que olvidó casi de todo punto el ejercicio de la caza...» (36) At any rate it is more than coincidental that at the outset the details of the non-natural causes are presented and that nearly all of them, some famously so, were thought to have a drying effect on the body. It seems likely that Cervantes had in mind the list of non-naturals and he used it as an outline for the presentation of the daily life of the hero.

Cervantes does not stop with the clinical outline, but at various times in the novel he uses the details of humoral medicine as a predisposition for the hero's actions. Unforgettable are those scenes in which Don Quijote spends the night without sleep, or his refusal of food, in contrast to Sancho who so enjoys his sleep and supper, or the times they dine on a few scraps of bread and old cheese, another item from the «don't list.» There are several notable scenes in Part One in which Don Quijote is affected by humoral considerations. He delivers two discourses, one on the Golden Age and another on arms and letters, both of which show a great deal of lucidity and rationality. Before the first discourse, he had lost half his ear in battle with the Viscayan and spent the afternoon bleeding from the head, one of the most often prescribed cures of the period. Sancho emphasizes that he is bleeding copiously when he says: «...que le va mucha sangre de esa oreja...» (98), and later that evening he speaks on the Golden Age, his madness having been alleviated. Later in the First Part, in the inn, he spends the time sleeping while the priest reads *El curioso impertinente*, and he has a dream with terrible visions, caused by the vapors rising to the head, as described by Doctor Laguna. He then sleeps again, awakens, and delivers the discourse on arms and letters, surprising everyone by his lucidity. Clearly Cervantes meant to show both the

bleeding, a removal of the damaging humors, and the long sleep, a restoration of the humidity, as predispositions for a return to rationality.

This elaboration of the patient's medical history follows very clearly Cervantes' conception of realism in this novel. Criticizing the chivalric novel for its lack of realism, Cervantes set out to correct such abuses and he based his hero's madness and actions on the firmest scientific knowledge that was known. When the priest and the barber go through Don Quijote's library, the priest says of *Tirante el Blanco*:

por su estilo, es éste el mejor libro del mundo: aquí comen los caballeros, y duermen y mueren en sus camas, y hacen testamento antes de su muerte, con estas cosas de que todos los demás libros deste género carecen. (72)

Not only does Don Quijote eat and sleep, and we know what he eats, but, in addition, his foods have humoral properties that affect his behavior. Cervantes, in his reaction against the inverosimilitude of the chivalric novel, has carried realism a step further.

It is important to note that this scientific realism grows out of the reaction against the style of the chivalric novel. Cervantes' other famous portrayal of a madman, that of Tomás Rodaja in *El licenciado Vidriera*, does not use this kind of scientific background. It is true that he mentions the diet and eating habits of the mad *licenciado*, but they are not introduced for their humoral characteristics, but to underline the strangeness of the hero's insanity. Only in reaction to the unrealistic chivalric novel does he have recourse to scientific theories.

Needless to say, this elaboration of a character's personality and actions based on his bodily functions was original and new to literature. It may come as a surprise, however, that it was also new to medical writings. Doctors had always maintained that mental disturbances were within their province, and Pedro Mercado's dialogue on melancholy, in Spanish, 1558, unequivocally reiterated this point. But this claim was only partial, either because the physical concepts of medicine did not allow for a study of personality or because the control of the emotional make-up of man had been ceded to the priests. The writings on mental illness follow the same pattern as those on all other diseases, with the result that the medical theory which had been elaborated in such detail had no relationship to personality or human emotions and medical treatises shed no light whatsoever on the personality of the insane. Even the Italian books of case studies are disappointing in this respect. Giovanni Battista Monte's *Consilia medica*¹⁵ includes several cases of insanity and many of melancholy and dedicates several folio pages to each case. In only of these cases does he tell us why the patient was considered insane, for chemical considerations make up the rest. One finds only discussions of the color of the eyes and the hardness of the liver, but no studies of personality or emotions. This was Greek rationalism carried to a stifling point, and it is interesting to note that it is not until the work of Freud that opposite point of view is reached; whereas, modern psychological research in glandular secretions and hormones is moving back to the somatic position.

Cervantes antecedents are philosophical rather than experiential. The fifteenth-century Neo-Platonists had revived the association of genius and madness. Their idea of depression as an aberration of genius led to a more human, rather than chemical, view of mental disorders. And Huarte de San Juan in his *Examen de ingenios* provided a further step with the association of humors and aptitude. His contribution to psychology is important. Starting from a medical tradition whose writings on psychology were completely sterile and taking one of the most

rationalistic ideas of that tradition, that of biological determinism, he posited that the humors of the body can be known by studying the aptitudes and personality of men. This meant that not only insanity was the result of some predominant humor, but that all human activity has its basis in the humors. Therefore, the approach to knowing a man's humors need not be only physical as it had been in previous medical treatises, but it could also use the personality as an indication of the humoral composition precisely because the personality was one of its results. This idea found immediate fruition in the brilliant psychological study of *Don Quijote*. Cervantes was not only originating a new narrative technique based on realism that would have a tremendous influence on future writers, but in addition he was interpreting the effect of humoral imbalances upon the human personality, a new idea in medicine that gives us the first glimpse of modern psychology. Seen in its historical setting, Cervantes' satire of the novel of chivalry was innovative in more than one respect. It is unfortunate that the venerable medical theory which he knew and used did not have the longevity of his novel, for, were the theory still valid today, undoubtedly his art would be held in higher esteem.

¹ Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, I, ed. Francisco Rodríguez Marín (Madrid, 1947), and Otis H. Green, «El ingenioso hidalgo», *Hispanic Review*, 25 (1957), 175-181.

² Antonio Hernández Morejón, *Historia bibliográfica de la medicina española*, II (Madrid, 1842), 170.

³ Pedro Lain Entralgo, *La medicina hipocrática* (Madrid, 1970), 33-4.

⁴ There were two medieval translations of Haly Abbas's comprehensive treatise on medicine, the first by Constantine the African in the eleventh century and published in Isaac, *Opera omnia* (Lyon: Bartholomeus Trot, 1515), and the second by Stephen of Antioch in the early twelfth century; called *Liber regalis dispositionis* (Lyon: Jacopus Myt, 1523). The edition published by Henricus Petrus (Basil, 1539) in Constantine's complete works has undergone a severe revision (like many of the editions of that publisher) in order to improve the Latin, thus making it useless for philological studies. Hunain Ibn Is-haq al-Ibadi, known in the Middle Ages as Joannitius, *Isagoge*, published in *Articella* (Lyon: Jacopus Myt, 1527).

⁵ Juan de Aviñón, *Sevillana medicina* (Sevilla: Andrés de Burgos, 1545).

⁶ R. L. Predmore, *Cervantes* (New York, 1973), 27-8.

⁷ Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. Martín de Riquer (Barcelona, 1974), 115. All further references are to this edition.

⁸ It is also possible that the types of clothing he wore were of a loose weave, permitting a drying out of the body: «...sayo de velarde, calzas de velludo para las fiestas con sus pantuflas de lo mesmo, y los días de entre semana se honraba con su vellorí de lo más fino» (35-6). Clothing is often discussed under this heading, but no Spanish text mentions these fabrics and the Latin terminology is difficult to decipher.

⁹ It may seem rash to proclaim the existence of a widely known theory of which the details were never written down; however isolated references, such as considerations of the health of the royal families in their travels, suggest that the regions of Spain had been classified as to their humoral properties. Also, the learned humanists were reluctant to write anything that was not supported by the authority of written sources. One can find discussions of the climate of the regions of Greece and isolated references to other European cities, but no comprehensive presentation. Unlike the other points in this paper, this interpretation is based on a supposition of what was thought, rather than on specific information.