



BACK IN TIME

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Memories of La Mancha

The mere mention of La Mancha triggers a host of memories, the very earliest of which takes me back to my childhood. A popular game at the elementary school I attended was called “Mancha.” It was the Uruguayan version of “Tag” and involved chasing your little friends around the playground, trying to touch them and calling out “*mancha*, you’re it!” Every culture, it would seem, has a version of this simple child’s game.

It was not until many years later that I learned that our playground game shared its name (though not its etymology) with the site of one of the most famous stories ever told: *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, the 17th-century novel by the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes, whose fictional hero—the knight-errant of the book’s title—played a sort of tag of his own invention, tilting at windmills in the company of his loyal squire, Sancho Panza.

La Mancha is a high, dry, windswept region in central Spain, just southeast of Madrid. Though the rain in Spain does not fall mainly on this particular plain, the land is fertile and has long been used to grow wheat, oats, barley, olives and, of course, grapes. It is actually the country’s major wine region and produces about fifty percent of Spain’s wines. Those fortunate enough to have visited the area will surely have heard of the legendary *tempranillo* or *cencibel* grape, and will no doubt have pleasant memories of sitting in a tavern sipping a glass or two of sturdy, ripe, fruity red (with a nice balance of toasty oak). An afternoon can easily slip away in such a place, as one contemplates the fact that wine has been produced in this region for many centuries, all the way back to the Phoenicians who are said to have introduced winemaking to the Iberian Peninsula in the ninth century BC. History does not record whether the Phoenician traders, or the Roman conquerors who came after them, were aware that nothing goes better with a glass of the local red wine than a chunk of the local Manchego cheese and a few salty olives.

It is generally assumed that the name La Mancha is derived from *al-mansha*, the Arabic word for “wilderness” or “dry land.” Such a claim is hardly surprising given the environmental conditions of

the terrain and the fact that this part of Spain was under Moorish rule for centuries until King Alfonso VI brought it back into the Christian fold in 1085. The assumption is further bolstered by the fact that the Spanish word *mancha*—which means a mark, stain (on one’s character or clothing), blemish, spot, or “tag, you’re it!”—does not appear to be in any way connected to the name of the area.

I lived in Madrid in the mid-1960s and spent many pleasant weekends driving here and there in the surrounding countryside. The land was flat, and the fields were the colour of ripe grain. Grazing sheep dotted the landscape, working on their next batch of Manchego cheese. Small villages rushed towards me, crowding the windscreen, then vanishing behind me again, their houses huddled together in medieval proximity under corduroy roofs of terracotta tile. The late afternoon sunlight angled across the road from low in the west, picking out every detail with stunning clarity. Most beautifully of all, the light reflected off the whitewashed walls of the iconic windmills made famous by the “Ingenious Gentleman” who set out to restore chivalry, right all wrongs, and bring justice to the world some three-and-a-half centuries ago.

Don Quijote (with a *j* in Spanish) is considered the founding work of modern Western literature, and has been translated many times, into many languages. One of the recent English versions was translated by Edith Grossman as *Don Quixote* (with an *x*, which is the customary English spelling). In her “Translator’s Note to the Reader” Grossman explains that: “I hesitated over the spelling of the protagonist’s name, and finally opted for an *x*, not a *j*, in Quixote (I wanted the connection to the English ‘quixotic’ to be immediately apparent).”

In her book *Why Translation Matters*ⁱⁱ Grossman discusses “some of the fears that plagued” her as she embarked on this epic project. “It was a privilege, an honor, and a glorious opportunity—thrilling, overwhelming, and terrifying.” One can only imagine. Among her early concerns was how to go about translating “the opening phrase—probably the most famous words in Spanish, comparable to the opening lines of Hamlet’s ‘To be, or not to be’



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soliloquy in English.” She goes on to say: “The first part of the sentence in Spanish reads: ‘*En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme...*’ I recited those words to myself as if they were a mantra, until an English phrase materialized that seemed to have a comparable rhythm and drive, that played with the multiple meanings of the word *lugar* (both ‘place’ and ‘village’), and that echoed some of the sound of the original: ‘Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember....’ It felt right to me, and with a rush of euphoric satisfaction I told myself I might actually be able to translate this grand masterpiece of a book.”

Anyone who has spent any time somewhere in La Mancha will know that there is more to the region than *El Quijote*, windmills, and wine. As you drive south from Madrid on your way to the storied plain, you soon come to Aranjuez, the town that the Catholic Monarchs, Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon, once used as their spring residence. These two were married in 1469, over a century before *Don Quijote* was published, thus forming the union that laid the foundation for modern Spain. In later years, the Habsburg and Bourbon kings all retreated to Aranjuez in the summer, and Philip II built a magnificent royal palace and gardens there in the late sixteenth century.

In 1939, Joaquín Rodrigo composed his masterpiece, the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, inspired—it is said—by the gardens and fountains of the royal palace.

The *Concierto*, for classical guitar and orchestra, premiered in November 1940 in Barcelona and was a huge success. It has been immensely popular ever since and is in fact one of the best-known pieces of music ever written for the classical guitar. It has been performed by an eclectic assortment of musicians in a remarkable range of stylesⁱ. The work was actually composed in Paris, where Rodrigo and his wife were living at the time, and the original score was written in braille, because the composer was blind.

Just as a sudden fragrance can take us back—the scent of freesias on the evening air, for example, or the first thick drops of rain on a dusty road—certain sounds can sweep us away. Rhythms and melodies can transport us to other moods, other moments, sometimes to places we’ve never even been. That’s what happened the first time I heard the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, long before I set out to explore the region south of Madrid. In time I came to know La Mancha as an unforgettable place of haunting beauty, steeped in a timeless sense of chivalry and the pursuit of noble ideals.

ⁱ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), xviii.

ⁱⁱ Edith Grossman, *Why Translation Matters*, (Yale University Press), 2010, pp. 83-85.

ⁱⁱⁱ Click here to listen to Paco de Lucía playing the Adagio, the second movement of the *Concierto de Aranjuez*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9RS4biqyAc>

