

# Malnutrition and Psychosis in *Don Quixote*

**Jonathan Steffen**

Jonathan Steffen Limited, Cambridge, UK

The depiction of hunger in classic literature is a neglected subject. Yet it is a major theme and a key plot driver in many great works of fiction. From the cannibalism of Count Ugolino della Gherardesca in Dante's *Inferno*<sup>1</sup> to Oliver Twist's bewildered "Please, Sir, I want some more,"<sup>2</sup> the critical need for adequate nutrition has been powerfully articulated by many great writers. In the first of a new series on this subject, Jonathan Steffen examines the relationship between nutritional intake and mental health in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

From the appearance of the first edition of its first volume in 1605, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Don Quixote* has been considered one of the greatest and most enduringly popular works of literature ever penned.<sup>3</sup> It is at one and the same time an analysis of the economic and social malaises of sixteenth-century Spain, a commentary on the relationship between outmoded forms of literature and contemporary trends in writing, and a study in psychosis: *Don Quixote de La Mancha* is the greatest fantasist in fiction. But Cervantes' masterpiece is also a profound meditation of the relationship between food and health.

Comparison with Cervantes' English contemporary Shakespeare throws this into stark relief. While Hamlet broods memorably on the "funeral baked meats" which "coldly furnished forth the marriage tables" at his mother Gertrude's wedding to his uncle Claudius,<sup>4</sup> we know relatively little of what most of Shakespeare's characters ate. We do not automatically associate Romeo and Juliet, or Macbeth, or Lear, or Prospero with particular types of food, or particularly significant meals. We do make this association in respect of *Don Quixote*, however; and this is because the author himself makes it in the novel's opening paragraph: "Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I

do not care to remember, a gentleman lived not long ago, one of those who has a lance and ancient shield on a shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing. An occasional stew, beef more often than lamb, hash most nights, eggs and abstinence on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, sometimes squab as a treat on Sundays – these consumed three-fourths of his income."<sup>5</sup>

## From malnutrition to mental illness

In an extensive study of *Don Quixote's* diet,<sup>6</sup> Prof. Barry Ife of King's College, London, analyses the relationship between what *Don Quixote* consumes and his mental condition. "It seems clear that *Don Quixote's* diet is frugal, monotonous and unappetizing, and it is hardly surprising that with such meager fare *Don Quixote* is as thin as he is always portrayed. But *Quixote's* bad habits are not limited to diet. He also neglects his sleep: 'He spent his nights reading from dusk till dawn and his days reading from sunrise to sunset.' Here we have the classic syndrome of the single male," continues Ife: "the fatal combination of late nights and junk food. Most men go through this stage at some point in their lives, and most men grow out of it. But *Don Quixote* never does, and eventually he makes himself so ill that his brain dries up and he starts to lose his wits ... Cervantes did not need to be a qualified doctor to recognize the symptoms of sleep deprivation and malnutrition, or to know what the combined effect would be on his hero's behavior in the novel."

## "An intelligent man is pushed into an insane fantasy"

The combined effect is to push an essentially intelligent and educated man, a kindly, thoughtful and deep-thinking person, into an insane fantasy in which he views himself as a lone redeemer whose task is to set the world to rights single-handed. *Don Quixote* believes that it is incumbent upon him to sally forth onto the roads of Spain as a knight errant whose selfless



Don Quixote de La Mancha, dubbed the 'Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance'

deeds will summon back the bygone age of chivalry. In a series of encounters – most famously, the one with the windmills that he mistakes for giants – Don Quixote attacks a vast range of completely innocent people and objects, believing them to be wicked knights, sorcerers and enchanters. He literally beats up the world and gets soundly beaten up in return. As his perplexed housekeeper fumes after one of his sallies: “The first time they brought him back lying across a donkey, beaten and battered. The second time he came home in an oxcart, locked in a cage and claiming he was enchanted, and the poor man was in such a state that his own mother wouldn’t have recognized him: skinny, pale, his eyes sunk right into the top of his head; to bring him back to himself a little, I used more than six hundred eggs; God knows that, and so does everybody else, and my hens too, and they wouldn’t let me lie.”<sup>7</sup>

The detail of the eggs is telling. Cervantes, who struggled financially all his life, and who himself had required a full two years to recover from the wounds he sustained in the 1571 Battle of Lepanto,<sup>8</sup> knew all about the relationship between wealth, nutrition, and wellbeing.

#### Don Quixote’s diet

Don Quixote’s diet is indeed wretched. Prof. Ife analyses it as follows. “We might take the virtual contents of Don Quixote’s

virtual stomach and subject them to analysis. We know that his staple diet before the first sally consisted of five elements: ‘olla’ by which we may assume is meant the classic slow-cooked stew made with beans and sausages known as ‘olla podrida’, eaten as the main midday meal; ‘salpicón’ or cold meat sliced thinly with onions and vinegar for supper; ‘lantejas’ or lentils on Fridays; ‘duelos y quebrantos’, probably some form of omelet, on Saturdays; and the occasional pigeon on Sundays. We may assume also that, in real life, Alonso Quijano [Don Quixote’s real name] would have supplemented this diet with bread and wine, and he may possibly, but not necessarily, have also eaten some fruit and vegetables; the conventions of literary analysis, however, do not allow us to take into account what is not in the text.

“Table 1 gives a summary analysis of the likely nutritional value of this fictional diet, together with some of the principal nutrients expressed as a percentage of the recommended daily allowance (RDA).

“Several things about this analysis require comment. Firstly, such a diet would have left Don Quixote seriously deficient in energy; his calorie intake is only about a quarter of that required by a 50-year-old male with even a sedentary lifestyle. The consequences of long-term malnourishment of this order would be wasting of the flesh and loss of muscle tone. Secondly, he is below the recommended daily amount of all nutrients, but is especially deficient in calcium (8%), vitamin C (6%) and vitamin E (10%).”<sup>10</sup>

The poverty of this fare is intensified by Don Quixote’s deliberate neglect of his own physical needs. Viewing knight errantry



Don Quixote charges the windmills which he mistakes for giants in the novel’s most famous episode. Illustration by Gustave Doré (1832–83), first published in 1868. Note that even Sancho Panza’s ass Dapple protests against Don Quixote’s folly.

TABLE 1: Analysis of Don Quixote's diet<sup>9</sup>

Nutrient	Amount	Units
Cholesterol	72.2	mg
Carbohydrates	50.0	g
Dietary fiber	16.5	g
Energy	524.8	kcal
Fat	17.3	g
Saturated fat	5.6	g
Potassium	1100.0	mg
Sodium	661.6	mg
Unsaturated fat	10.0	g

Nutrient	Amount	Units	%RDA
Calcium	67.2	mg	8
Folate	357.7	µg	89
Iron	8.0	mg	82
Magnesium	96.6	mg	28
Niacin	8.0	mg	50
Phosphorus	570.8	mg	71
Protein	42.4	g	76
Riboflavin	0.38	mg	27
Thiamin	0.68	mg	57
Vitamin A	225.8	µg	23
Vitamin B <sub>6</sub>	0.79	mg	36
Vitamin C	3.6	mg	6

as a mystic calling, he practices a profound asceticism that subjugates the requirements of the flesh to the visions of the mind. On the road, he frequently fasts and watches all night long while his squire Sancho Panza contentedly snores beside him. Even in the midst of food, he often ignores his own need to eat. "Don Quixote gave this long discourse [on the subject of the fate of the contemporary sixteenth-century soldier] while the others were eating, and he forgot to bring a single mouthful of food to his lips, although Sancho Panza told him several times that he should eat and that later there would be time to say all he wanted to say. Those who listened to him were overwhelmed again with pity at seeing a man who apparently was intelligent and rational in all other matters could lose those faculties completely when it was a question of his accursed and bedeviled chivalry."<sup>11</sup>

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**“The poverty of this fare is intensified by Don Quixote’s deliberate neglect of his own physical needs”**

### Sancho Panza’s relationship with food

Don Quixote’s ‘squire’, the peasant Sancho Panza, has a very different attitude to food. While Don Quixote is a country gentleman of slender means with pretensions to the aristocracy of arms, Sancho Panza represents a peasantry that was oppressed by poverty at a time when Spain was flooded with new money. As William Egginton observes: “Spain’s economy in the second half of the seventeenth century was squeezing all but the wealthiest nobles, as the ceaseless war financed by silver from the New World drove prices higher and higher and made taxes more punitive, while the nobility and the Church were spared from fully sharing the burden.”<sup>12</sup> Sancho, who has left the hardships of a peasant’s existence behind him in search of gain and glory with Don Quixote, frequently laments the privations he is obliged to share with his master on the road: “I’m so poor and unlucky that all I have in my saddlebags is a little cheese, so hard you could break a giant’s skull with it, and to keep it company some four dozen carob beans and the same number of hazelnuts and other kinds of nuts, thanks to the poverty of my master and the idea he has and the rule he keeps that knights errant should not live and survive on anything but dried fruits and plants of the field.”<sup>13</sup>

Being well acquainted with hunger, Sancho takes every opportunity to feast when the occasion arises: “I’m going over to that brook with this meat pie, where I plan to eat enough for three days, because I’ve heard my master, Don Quixote, say that the squire of a knight errant has to eat whenever he can, and as much as he can, because they might go into the woods so deep they can’t find their way out for six days, and if the man isn’t full, or his saddlebags aren’t well-provisioned, he might stay there, as often happens, until his flesh wrinkles and dries like a mummy’s.”<sup>14</sup>

So eager is Sancho to stuff his belly at every opportunity that a trick is practiced on him in Part II of the novel to encourage him to mend his ways. Believing that he has come into the governorship of the ‘island’ (*ínsula*) that Don Quixote has repeatedly promised him as a reward for his service, Sancho is made the victim of an elaborate hoax whereby a number of mouthwatering dishes are placed before him, only to be whisked away on the orders of his physician: “I Señor, am a physician, and on this *ínsula* I am paid to tend to its governors, and I care for their health much more than I do my own, studying day and night, and observing the governor’s constitution and temperament in order to successfully cure him if he should fall ill; and the principal thing I do is to be present at his dinners and suppers, and allow him to eat what seems appropriate to me, and to take away what I imagine will do him harm and be injurious to his stomach; and so I ordered the dish of fruit removed because it was too damp, and the other dish as well because it too hot and had a good number of spices, which increase thirst, and if one





Statue in Madrid, Spain, of Don Quixote on his horse Rocinante and Sancho Panza on his ass Dapple, with their creator Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547–1605) in the background

drinks too much, one destroys and consumes the radical humor, which is to say, life.’

“So that means that the dish of roasted partridges over there, nicely seasoned, it seems to me, won’t do me any harm.”

“To which the physician responded:

“The governor will not eat them as long as I am alive.”<sup>15</sup>

So traumatized is Sancho by this experience that he eventually begs to return to his old peasant status: “Look, Señor Doctor, from now on don’t bother about giving me delicate or exquisite things to eat, because that will drive my stomach out of its mind: it’s used to goat, beef, bacon, dried meat, turnips, and onions, and if by some chance it’s given palace dishes, it gets finicky, and sometimes even sick. What the butler can do is bring me what are called *ollas podridas*, and the more rotten they are, the better they smell, and he can pack them and fill them with anything he likes as long as it’s food, and I’ll thank him for it and repay him someday; but don’t let anybody try to trick me, because we either are or we aren’t: let’s all live and eat in peace and good friendship, because when God sends the dawn, it’s dawn for everybody.”

### Sanity, community and wellbeing

In a supreme stroke of irony in a book minutely attentive to the dangers of hunger on the one hand and gluttony on the other,

Cervantes locates an ideal relationship with food not among his Spanish contemporaries but among a group of *Moriscos* – persons of Muslim descent living in Christian territory who had been forcibly converted to Christianity. “They stretched out on the ground, and with the grass as their tablecloth, they set out bread, salt, knives, nuts, pieces of cheese, and bare ham-bones that could not be gnawed but could still be sucked. They also set out a black food called caviar that is made of fish eggs and is a great awakener of thirst. There was no lack of olives, dried without any brine but good-tasting and flavorful. What stood out most on the field of that banquet, however, were six wineskins, for each of them took one out of his bag ...

“They began to eat with great pleasure, savoring each mouthful slowly, just a little of each thing, which they picked up with the tip of a knife, and then all at once, and all at the same time, they raised their arms and the wineskins went into the air, their mouths pressed against the mouths of the wineskins and their eyes fixed on heaven, as if they were taking aim; they stayed this way for a long time, emptying the innermost contents of the skins into their stomachs, and moving their heads from one side to the other, signs that attested to the pleasure they were receiving.

“Sancho watched everything, and not one thing caused him sorrow; rather, in order to comply with a proverb that he knew very well – *When in Rome, do as the Romans do* – he asked Ricote for his wineskin and took aim along with the rest with no less pleasure than they enjoyed.”<sup>16</sup>

## “Cervantes locates an ideal relationship with food among ‘the enemy’”

The Catholic Spanish soldier Cervantes, who had been kept in slavery by Muslims in Algiers for five years,<sup>17</sup> presents peregrinating *Moriscos* as a model of temperance and good social organization. Their food is simple but nevertheless appetizing, and is enjoyed slowly. When they drink – adapting, it will be noted, to Christian ways by drinking alcohol – they drink together. They are at peace with themselves and each other – a peace which comes not just from the food and drink they consume but from the communal experience of sharing a meal. This observation is remarkable not just in the light of Cervantes’ own experience – he had been beaten and kept in chains in Algiers, and had seen people tortured to death before his eyes<sup>18</sup> – but because *Don Quixote* was published in an age when all books were censored by the Spanish Inquisition. He places sanity not in his fantastic hero Don Quixote, nor in Quixote’s wily peasant sidekick Sancho Panza, but in a group of ‘enemy aliens’ who travel in disguise

through the land from which they have been forever exiled, and which they still love with an aching passion. And he shows that sanity not just by what they say or do, but by their relationship with nutrition. Even a bone with no meat on it can be sucked. Cervantes was the inventor of the novel. He was also – as he probably very well knew himself – a nutritionist *avant la lettre*.

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**Correspondence: Jonathan Steffen,**

*Jonathan Steffen Limited, Suite C, 135 St Neots Road,  
 Hardwick, Cambridge CB23 7QJ, UK*

**Email:** *jonathan.steffen@corporatestory.co.uk*  
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