“Fortune is arranging matters for us better than we could have shaped our desires ourselves, for look there, friend Sancho Panza, where thirty or more monstrous giants present themselves, all of whom I mean to engage in battle and slay, and with whose spoils we shall begin to make our fortunes; for this is righteous warfare, and it is God's good service to sweep so evil a breed from off the face of the earth.”

And so begins our most beloved incident in “The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha,” a mere two pages out of a thousand, drawn from another continent, another language, and another age, published just before the English landed at Jamestown. To review the entire story: A lowly Spanish noble, Alonso Quijano, looses his sanity while reading about knights and decides to become one. He romps, illusion-filled, through thousands of miles of early modern Spain, misconceiving adventures, wreaking havoc, listening to stories told at inns, and even imagining a love affair. We might call him psychotic. He returns home, and before his death, fantasizes about another adventure--as a pastor.

Don Quixote is, of course, one of the most celebrated literary works of all time. It was translated into French, German, Italian, and English within seven years of the original publication and is probably the most widely translated book in the world today after the bible. It may have been the first modern novel. We recognize it as universal literature, see ourselves and each other in Don Quixote, and pay endless regards to the knight of La Mancha with the word "quixotic"--quixote-like, foolishly idealistic, impulsive, impractically romantic. This is the face of the novel which confronted me here at William and Mary two years ago as I planned my Freshman Monroe project. I decided to search for the novel's other, uniquely Spanish, face.

13 1/2 months ago, I set out on my bicycle from the city of Toledo, in central Spain, to follow don Quixote's footseps and search for the Spain which, I believed, was reflected in the novel. The trip confirmed my thesis in a number of ways--first of all, my travel experience echoed don Quijote's. The novel is paticularly Spanish in its details. Second, I found that El Quijote is a manifesto against Spanish imperialism. Many of the novel's psychological and metaphorical elements address Spain's course in history. "El Quijote," as the novel is called there, is more than a universal novel; it is also a Spanish novel.
First I’ll describe my experience. Then I’ll describe the social context of the novel and the commentary Cervantes expresses about it.

I left Toledo with a bicycle and a backpack only a few days after landing in Madrid. I covered two hundred and thirty miles of mostly dirt roads in 12 days, fixed no fewer than seven flat tires, was often lost, and often changed plans. My experience, perhaps, was not so different from Quixote’s. The details in the novel can be used as a rudimentary travel guide. As the novel suggests, I had little difficulty with crime but did need to protect myself from the sun. Like don Quixote, I began my journey alone, and I wished I could have returned, as don Quixote does, to find a Sancho Panza and ward off the solitude. My experience with the hospitality—and, at times, strong accents—of strangers echoed those of don Quixote. As the novel suggested, the siesta was best spent sleeping, and sleeping itself was a hard task. There were not always hotels, or perhaps more precisely beds, to be found. Cervantes described the peculiar separation of the sexes, the desire for adventure, and the capacity for delusion. He introduced me to many of the sights I would see—sheep, windmills, and—more often—desolate fields.

These details echo the landscape of La Mancha, but they represent only a superficial reading of the novel. On a more profound level, these details and others of don Quixote’s misadventures serve as, I believe, an enthusiastic critique of Spain’s imperial self-image. When the first part of the novel was published, in 1605, Spain controlled one of the largest empires in world history, and had an ego to match. However, their rule was not without problems: in 1588 the Spanish Armada was defeated by the English, in 1596 the Spanish government declared bankruptcy, and, according to the novel itself, there was general concern in Spain about the turkish armada. From a historically critical perspective I should remark that Spanish power on the world stage did not really begin to decline until about the mid 17th century, but the situation at the beginning of that same century, when the novel was written, was anything but certain. Cervantes
attacks their expectations of success and their sense of an imperial "calling."

Cervantes's arguments are easy to miss because they come mostly through individual elements of the novel rather than the novel as a whole. The first such element is the life of San Panza. Sancho, Quixote's squire, is a peasant. Nonetheless, at Quixote's behest, he leaves his wife and children without an income, fooled by the knight's promise that his unpaid squireship will eventually be rewarded with the governorship of an island. He is a foolish, but otherwise typical, social climber. He converses with his master as if they were equal companions. He is eventually, as part of a joke, rewarded with a governorship, only to find that it doesn't suit him. He returns home to his wife, who had earlier warned him, "Quien te cubre te descubre"--"who covers you discovers you"--suggesting that social climbing is rarely permanent. In the same way, argues Cervantes, Spain's costly imperial adventures abroad may be based on unrealistic expectations of being able to hold onto a--perhaps undeserved--dominant global position.

Another element is a comparison brought up by don Quixote himself: Castilla, Valencia, Andalucía, Extremadura, Jerez, Toledo and Seville are all known for their heroes, but La Mancha doesn't have one--or at least it didn't until don Quixote came along. In this narrative, La Mancha is the missing piece to the puzzle of a glorious imperial Spain. However, while don Quixote might be satisfied, Cervantes is suggesting that the missing piece doesn't fit. Don Quixote is certainly not the like of el Cid or the other legitimate heroes listed. He reminds the reader of La Mancha, neither glorious nor imperial but rather backwards and in decline, and hopes that this acknowledgement will be the first step in rooting out the imperial hubris.

To further his point, he enters a discussion of what it means to ignore the heartland in another, more familiar, element: that of don Quixote's delusions. Don Quixote often approaches a mundane situation with the illusion of a great adventure and causes damage in the process. He liberates criminals, believing them to be wrongly imprisoned; he slaughters sheep, believing them to form part of an enemy army. He damages an inn when he confuses wineskins with a giant and, as we most vividly remember, breaks his lance and stuns himself by charging at a windmill. In the same way, suggests Cervantes, the seventeenth century reader encounters a mundane Spain and tries, through delusions, to spice it up. The target audience ignores the reality of Spain's declining
empire in favor of delusional appeals for glory and causes itself harm in the process.

I came across this castle, and quite a few others, while biking. La Mancha and much of Spain were host to centuries of wars between Muslim and Christian kingdoms. These wars ended with the conquest of Granada in 1492--the same year in which another frontier opened for the Spanish in the New World. By 1605, Spain had spent the last 900 years as a feudal society in military expansion. However, as Cervantes puts it, the age of iron is coming to an end. Roberto Gonzales Echevarría, in his book "Love and the Law in Cervantes," shows that a number of stylistic and plot elements in the novel reveal an increasingly beaurocratic society--which may not be able to support the teetering empire. Readers should acknowledge the paradigm shift and lower their imperial expectations.

In this vein, don Quixote is a counterexample; we are meant to avoid his example as to how we perceive Spain, beginning with his choice to become a knight. He is a throwback to a chivalric age in which empires were held up by glory rather than reason. Don Quixote, himself in his fifties, may even be in "midlife crisis" representing a Spain which perceives, but refuses to accept, its change and decline. Cervantes declares, we no longer live in an age of glory, in the age of Spanish empire. Don Quixote expresses this directly on his deathbed, declaring, "...ya en los nidos de antaño no hay pájaros hogaño."--"in last year's nests there are no birds this year." That is to say, the times have changed.

A further lesson or story employed by Cervantes illustrates one consequence of these changes using the motif of the fool who makes enemies for the sake of illusory greatness. Don Quixote declares, at various points, that his greatness is proved by the calamities which he suffers. Sancho, at one point, refers to his master's enemies "que deben ser muchos y malos"--who ought to be many and wicked, as if their existence and characteristics were in direct proportion to, and thus could be determined by, don Quixote's greatness. Don Quixote seems to agree, constantly inventing enemies as part of his delusions. To re-emphasize this story, Cervantes tells of a young
man off to join the army who pauses to chat with don Quixote. The young man explains that he is signing up to make money, and don Quixote--unconvincingly--argues that glory should be reason enough, that is, that one should make enemies merely for the sake of greatness. Cervantes suggests--and complains--that Spanish foreign policy is based on the same mistaken principle.

The final "story" which I'll touch upon is an allegory read to Don Quixote by a priest at an inn. One of the main characters, Anselmo, ends the story with the written confession: "A foolish and ill-advised desire has robbed me of life." This desire corresponds to the Spanish desire for glory. He continues, "...she was not bound to perform miracles, nor ought I to have required her to perform them," explaining allegorically that his contemporaries' expectations for Spain, particularly for La Mancha, should be different and lower. Finally, Anselmo commits suicide; the reader may hope to procure a better fate by keeping his expectations reasonable--and also, perhaps, by altering his ideals.

Cervantes suggests new ideals for his reader with a comic juxtaposition. Quixote refers to his imagined girlfriend Dulcinea, a peasant, as the empress of La Mancha. This might simply be a delusion but it may also be a revolutionary statement in which the lowly, the rural and boring are raised to the level of imperial, and to the top thereof. Later, after hearing a farsical prophecy, don Quixote believes that Dulcinea will bear him children "for the perpetual glory of La Mancha", once again honoring the ignored and transferring the trappings of global empire to region whose name, literally, means "the stain."

Cervantes ultimately hopes that his readers will take his suggestion and change their expectations for Spain. In this novel, he includes a number of elements addressing Spain's imperial position and, more importantly, imperial ego. Don Quixote is much more than an international, universal novel. While it does address universal psychological themes, it also repeatedly addresses issues particular to the era--and country--within which it was written. Cervante's famous novel, replete with details about La Mancha, should also be read as a Spanish novel.