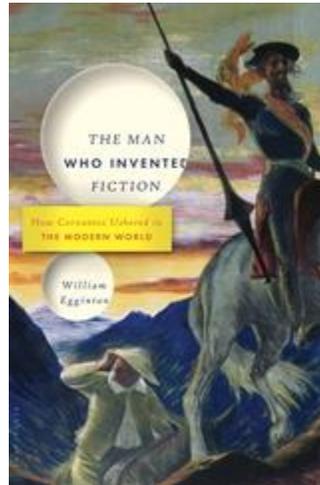


William Egginton. *The Man Who Invented Fiction: How Cervantes Ushered in the Modern World*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. ISBN: 978-16-2040-176-7. 272 pgs.

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William Egginton's *The Man Who Invented Fiction* arrives aptly timed for the quadricentennial of Cervantes' death. The author, who covers immense conceptual terrain in the book, analyzes key moments in Cervantes' biography and literary corpus in order to explain the inception of fiction as a characteristic development of nascent modernity during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In fact, the book is as much about Cervantes as it is a description of the way we as moderns conceptualize and engage with literary and dramatic fiction. While many of those questions have been addressed by scholars of Cervantes and literary scholars in general, Egginton's narrative style makes complex ideas about social and political history, literature, and psychology accessible to a wider audience than is typical of literary scholarship. This aspect of the book is perhaps its greatest success. By explaining Cervantes' penchant for writing fiction that was both socially conscious and that challenged the status quo, Egginton's book has the potential to uncover—or more aptly, recover—the power of fiction to a large target audience.

In each chapter, Egginton demonstrates how Cervantes' literary responses to particular episodes in his life uniquely situate his writing at the threshold of modernity. Chapter 1 ("Poetry and History") outlines the two modes of literary expression out of which fiction would take shape. Handed down from classical tradition through Aristotle's *Poetics*, the difference between these modes—history and poetry—was more than a formal question of prose or verse. Egginton argues that fiction as conceived in the works of Cervantes moves past the distinction between the particular truths of history and the universal ones of poetry; rather, fiction has the capacity to present subjective truths that penetrate the surface of human action to reveal the motives behind them. This opened up a new space to display social interaction as performance, to highlight distinct points of view, and uncover the pervasive roles of perception and misperception that define all human understanding.

Chapters 2 through 4 ("Open and Closed", "Soldier of Misfortune", and "A Captive Imagination") recount Cervantes' early professional life and his travails as a soldier at the Battle

of Lepanto, followed by years of captivity rowing in the galleys and later imprisoned in Algiers. In his narration of these formative years, Egginton introduces a claim he develops throughout the book, namely that Cervantes experienced an increasing disenchantment with a homeland that made little effort to rescue him from captivity and failed to reward his dutiful service to the crown upon his return. Nevertheless, as Egginton illustrates through meticulously selected examples from Cervantes' writing, these hardships fueled the author's creative genius and provided a context for him to innovate the mode of literary expression now taken for granted as fiction. Forged out of a life of unmet expectations, this invention uncovered a uniquely modern awareness of the discrepancy between "how *I* see the world and how that world *really* is" (84), which Cervantes exploited to its full ironic potential to leverage the force of his social criticism.

Chapter 5 ("All the World's Stage"), Chapter 6 ("Of Shepherds, Knights, and Ladies"), and Chapter 7 ("A Rogue's Gallery") narrate Cervantes' disappointing endeavors as a playwright and rural landowner that were accompanied by multiple stints in prison. Like in previous chapters, these episodes in the author's life serve as the backdrop for Egginton to continue to address the question of ideology and the manner in which literary production provides revealing information about a particular socio-political and historical period. The author evinces Cervantes' personal deception at the hands of the honor code glorified in Iberian theater and the hollow ideals offered by popular literary genres such as the pastoral and the picaresque. After establishing this context, Egginton proceeds to examine how the metafictional elements of Cervantes' writing undermine these axiomatic social ideologies that prevailed on the Spanish page and stage at the turn of the seventeenth century. If there is a criticism of Egginton's book, it is the implication evident in these chapters that all literary production—excluding that of Cervantes—in Renaissance and Baroque Spain reflected a repressive ideological conservatism, as Maravall notably contended. Even though Egginton has persuasively defended this position in other venues, his matter-of-fact presentation of the enterprise of cultural production during the period obscures the long-standing scholarly debate on the topic. Moreover, it tacitly rejects *a priori* the existence of socially conscious irony in texts written by Cervantes' contemporaries.

Any such criticism, however, is overshadowed by the merits of Egginton's argument regarding Cervantes' impact on the modern world, which culminates marvelously in his concluding chapter ("The Fictional World"). Whereas he tackles particular elements of the multifaceted question of modernity in each chapter, in the conclusion Egginton unveils the greater puzzle he constructs piece-by-piece throughout the book while also providing a noteworthy addendum to the canonical narrative of the history or ideas. Chiefly, he places Cervantes in conversation with Descartes by identifying a conceptualization of the modern worldview in the Spanish author's work that was ultimately attributed to the French philosopher and mathematician.

The numerous applications of Egginton's book point to the significance of its potential impact. His newest offering would make a stellar companion text to courses on Cervantes at the collegiate level, but also to any course in the Humanities that seeks for students to explore the topic of modernity. But it is also a book that deserves attention outside the university classroom. By narrating Cervantes' life through the lens of his literary production, Egginton creates a clear, reader-friendly overview of the major themes and characteristics that define the modern worldview as it singularly developed in Cervantes' corpus. Moreover, Egginton launches a compelling defense for the value of literature today. More than page-turning entertainment or source material for the literature classroom, the author reminds us that Cervantes—and fiction itself—continues to offer readers the opportunity to become more socially conscious amid a reality in which ideology continues to be passed off as inalienable truth. Pausing to remember Cervantes' life 400 years on,

Egginton's book entreats readers to recognize the existence of fiction as a definitively modern development that shapes how we understand ourselves and the social institutions that mold the world we live in.