English 108 (World Literature: The Middle Period), Winter 2018  
Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, MWF 1-1:50, 260 Condon

English 108 is the second quarter of a year-long survey of World Literature, between antiquity and the modern period. In European literature, this period includes the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Rather than sample a smattering of various texts from this period, we will read a single great text, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*.

*Don Quixote*, written by Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), is the first truly modern novel in the Western tradition. Cervantes’ protagonist Don Quixote is so enthralled by the heroic exploits of the knights he reads about in his beloved tales of chivalry that he loses possession of his rational faculties and devotes himself to saving those around him from what he imagines are mortal dangers. We will focus on three aspects of Cervantes’ novel: ethics, religion, and literature.

What does Cervantes’ novel say about ethics, about my responsible for the other in front of me? Don Quixote is an idealist, someone who is absolutely devoted to doing good in the world, but he is also apparently mad. Is Don Quixote a saint or is he a deluded fool who harms rather than helps others? Or is he both a saint and a fool? Is Cervantes suggesting that it is crazy to be good, and that it may well be good to be crazy in the sense that the world considers it a little bit crazy to care for others at the expense of one’s own self-interest?

What is Cervantes telling us about the relation of ethics to the reading of literature? Is Cervantes saying that getting lost in a powerfully imaginative work of fiction is a form of madness that diverts us from our responsibilities to others? Or does Cervantes believe that reading, that books, can inspire us to be good?

Cervantes writes *Don Quixote* in the wake of religious absolutism in Spain. In the Golden Age of religious tolerance in Spain (particularly in the 12th century), Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in relative harmony. In 1492, the Jews were expelled from Spain. Between 1609 and 1614 (just before Cervantes published Part II of *Don Quixote* in 1615) the Muslims were then expelled from Spain. Spain was then filled with so-called New Christians, many of whom had converted to Christianity for convenience and survival but who continued to practice Judaism or Islam. We will look for the traces of these converts from Judaism (called *conversos*) and from Islam (called *moriscos*) in Cervantes’ text.

We will consider the view that Cervantes himself may have been a convert from Judaism (a *converso*), and that his bookishness Don Quixote's madness bears witness to a senseless kindness inspired by his devotion to reading, by his bookishness. Could it be that the book that stands behind, or for, the books of chivalry Don Quixote so adores is
none other than the book of books, i.e. the Bible, the sum of which, according to the rabbinic commentators, is the commandment that I love and serve my neighbor? And that Cervantes, a suspected *converso*, writes *Don Quixote* (Part I, published 1605; Part II published 1615) as an *ethical* response to the narrowly doctrinal focus of the Counter-Reformation, which began with the Council of Trent (1545-1563)?

**Text:** Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (HarperCollins)

**Requirements:**
Students must keep up with the reading assignments, regularly attend class, and participate in class discussions. *More than two unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your grade by five points per missed class.*

Written work will consist of three in-class writing assignments (identification and explication of passages from the reading assigned for that particular day).

Your grades for the course will be based on the following criteria:
class participation: **10%**
in-class written assignments: **90%** (30% each)

**Assignments:**
II. Jan. 15: Martin Luther King Day (No Class); Jan. 17: *DQ* 53-75; Jan. 19: 75-94
IV. Jan. 29: *DQ* 163-190; Jan. 31: *DQ* 190-212; Feb. 2: In-Class Writing Assignment #1 (on *DQ* 213-239)
V. Feb. 5: *DQ* 239-258 Feb. 7: *DQ* 258-288; Feb. 9: *DQ* 288-305
VII. Feb. 19: *DQ* 374-397; Feb. 21: *DQ* 398-421; Feb. 23: In-Class Writing Assignment #2 (on *DQ* 421-449 [end of Part I])
VIII. Feb. 26: *DQ* 453-473; Feb. 28: *DQ* 473-495; March 2: *DQ* 496-521
IX. March 5: *DQ* 521-548; March 7: *DQ* 548-567; March 9: *DQ* 567-591
X. March 12: *DQ* 597-614; 653-657; March 14: *DQ* 713-727; 746-752; March 16: In-Class Writing Assignment #3 (on *DQ* 924-940 [end of Part II])