



The Possessive of *Cervantes* is *Cervantes'*

(Este ensayo trata de un punto debatido de la ortografía del inglés: si el posesivo de Cervantes es *Cervantes'* o *Cervantes's*.)



ow to form the possessive of polysyllabic personal names ending with the sound of *s* or *z* probably occasions more dissension among writers and editors than any other orthographic matter open to disagreement" (§ 6.30). Thus opines the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the most authoritative guide we have to academic English. This dissension can easily be seen in the titles of Cervantine books, even those published by university presses. If we have *Cervantes's Exemplary Novels and the Adventure of Writing* (Prisma Institute, distributed by U Minnesota Press), we also find *Cervantes' Exemplary Fictions* (U Kentucky Press). The same university press (Princeton) published both *Cervantes' Christian Romance* and *Allegories of Love: Cervantes's Persiles and Sigismunda*. The *MLA Style Manual* is unequivocal: "to form the possessive of any singular proper noun, add an apostrophe and an *s*" (§ 3.4.7.e). Yet the MLA's authority on this point is, to me, much reduced by its own usage: it published *Approaches to Teaching Cervantes' Don Quixote*.

Both *Cervantes'* and *Cervantes's* forms have also appeared in this journal. The ambiguity bothers me, and I cannot imagine a more appropriate forum than the pages of *Cervantes* to examine this question.

The origins of the problem are in one of English's shortcomings. The same sound, unvoiced *s*, serves to mark both the plural and the possessive: *cats* and *cat's* are pronounced identically. Given this fact, it is possible, in speech, for the possessive to be unmarked: no one would pronounce *Joneses'*, as in *the Joneses' dog*, with three syllables. That the dog belongs to the Joneses is indicated by word order. The apostrophe represents the "missing" possessive marker.

This ability to determine possession by position operates in the case of Cervantes, as well as other words such as *Herodotus'* or *Rabelais'*. Perhaps I will be deluged with letters, but it is my observation that *Cervantes'*, as in "*Cervantes' Persiles*" or "*Cervantes' characters*" is pronounced with three syllables, not four. Given this, a final *s* has no role to play. It is even misleading, suggesting a sound that is not present, and moves spelling further from pronunciation.

For all of these reasons, then, my preference and recommendation is that the possessive of Cervantes be *Cervantes'*.

Those sharp-eyed may wonder whether, according to MLA style, the ' of *Cervantes'* should not follow the period in the previous sentence. The answer is *no*: it is a quotation mark that is placed outside commas and periods, not an apostrophe (§ 3.9.7).

WORKS CITED

- The Chicago Manual of Style*. 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*. 2nd ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1998.