

Smart-alecs scornful of Paxman show total ignorance

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Jeremy Paxman has been sneered at in the electronic media for his pronunciation of the names of the Spanish fictional characters Don Quixote and Don Juan. On University Challenge, he pronounced them Don Kwiks-ot and Don Jew-an. Twitter was immediately full of comments from know-alls who laughed at his ignorance of Spanish; and the national press quickly followed suit. But in fact it was the tweeters and the London journalists who were showing their lack of knowledge.

In all languages, there is a tradition of using names for famous countries, towns, rivers and people that differ from those names in the original language. For example, we call Deutschland Germany, Magyarország Hungary, Suomi Finland, and Österreich Austria. The city of Prague is Praha, Copenhagen is København, Naples Napoli, and Athens Athina. The rivers Donau, Rhein, Tevere and Wisla appear in English as the



■ Jeremy Paxman has been criticised by viewers of University Challenge for his pronunciation of Don Quixote and Don Juan.

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Danube, Rhine, Tiber and Vistula. And here we know the classical figures Aristotelis, Omiros, Vergilius and Ovidius as Aristotle, Homer, Virgil and Ovid. There is nothing ignorant about any of that. On the contrary, knowing the English versions of these names is part

of a good education.

The smart-alecs who were scornful about Paxman were demonstrating very clearly their own total ignorance about the centuries-long tradition in the English-speaking world of spelling the name of Cervantes' character as Quixote (in Spanish it's spelt Quijote) and of pronouncing it 'Kwixot' or 'Kwixoat'. This is what the man's name is in English. And we always pronounce the adjective quixotic as 'kwixotic'. You should only say 'Ki-hot-e' if you are speaking Spanish, which Jeremy Paxman was not. Likewise, in French the name is Quichotte, in Italian it is Chisciotte, and in Polish Kichot.

The same is true of the fictional character Don Juan. The Italian version is Don Giovanni, and in Catalan it's Don Joan. You can tell what the long-established traditional English name is by looking at Byron's epic poem Don Juan, which he began writing in 1818. It contains rhymes which depend on the correct English pronunciation of the name as 'Jew-an', such as "It is not clear that Adeline and Juan / Will fall; but if they do, 'twill be their ruin".

It's true that Paxman once mispronounced my own name when it was part of a University Challenge question, but he really does know how to pronounce better-known English names like Don Quixote and Don Juan.