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Response to de Armas

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Response

Nishad Avari

The novel *Don Quixote de La Mancha* has been variously described as “the first—and probably the greatest—modern novel,”¹ “the most relevant work of fiction in the world,”² and “inescapable for all writers who come after.”³ These words are not in vain. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra’s book is 400 years old, but still offers each of its readers a personal point of entry, a rich engagement, and something unique to take away from it. Let me give an example. When I read the book, which is 378 years older than I am, it surprised me that Cervantes’s farcical knight-errant, Don Quixote, would understand my life as a student in Minnesota. Yet he did, just as if he were standing here, right by my side! In Chapter 37 (Part I), he describes the all too familiar “rough and difficult road” that students have to navigate, overcoming obstacles like the cold, a lack of money, and hunger in their quest for an academic title. Especially close to home is his observation on the college phenomenon we call “free food,” when he noted “the relish with which [students] gorge themselves when fortune offers them a feast.” This, my friends, is just a trifling example of the universal dimensions and timeless, placeless appeal of *Don Quixote*.

It is a humbling experience to be reckoning with a book, its author, and their legacy, all so influential that they merit, among other marks of respect, their own scholarly society and journal in this country. I would also like to note just how honored I am to share this dais with Professor Frederick de Armas, current Vice President of this Society and regular contributor to its journal, *Cervantes*.

In my response to the essay, I will underline the unique contributions that its particular focus offers our discussion of “Quixotic Offspring and the Global Legacy of *Don Quixote*.” In doing so, I will ask what his claims are and how his argument is supported, finally suggesting what some of its limitations might be. Entwined in this review are my own perspectives on the implications of de Armas’s essay and also on the place of Cervantes’s celebrated novel in our contemporary world.

It is significant that de Armas begins his essay by alerting us to the fact that *Don Quixote de La Mancha* is not all farce. It is “more than just a funny book,” he affirms. I may have begun this response on a light note, but I fully agree with de Armas when he states that the novel we are considering today is “multifaceted, polyphonic,” and “generates countless readings.” Other scholars tend to agree as well. According to Robert Johnston, another contributor to the journal *Cervantes*, “*Don Quixote* played against almost any background seems unflinchingly to generate meaning.”⁴ I believe that the background and issues that de Armas has helped us link with the novel are particularly germane and provocative.

De Armas’s reading of *Don Quixote* is an historically grounded one. He suggests that in relating Don Quixote’s imaginary aspirations to the throne of Trebizond, and by extension to that of “World Emperor,” Cervantes cleverly uses satire to reflect upon and critique the political and theological philosophies of sixteenth-century Spain, especially its “anxieties over empire.” Given the sociopolitical environment of the Counter-Reformation in which Cervantes was immersed, this is no minor achievement. Literary freedom was practically unheard of, and critics of Catholicism and the regime were dealt with severely. Necessarily, then, such critique could not be openly stated but had to be concealed within various cultural products. It is of great importance to our understanding of the novel that de Armas helps us identify and navigate its highly political but hidden subtexts. Interestingly, his vehicles of choice in this analysis are the concepts of “mute speech” and “*ekphrasis*,” as well as three Italian Renaissance paintings—all of which I will address later.

Despite identifying the fact that there is an unspoken critique in the novel, Professor de Armas wonders whether its revelation exposes the text as extolling, satirically mimicking, or dismantling the idea of a religiously and culturally homogenous, univocal empire. The dream of a universal empire that the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V espoused may well be seen as something that Don Quixote seeks to serve. Yet, Cervantes bestows these aspirations on a madman or fool, conceivably mocking them. After all, it is the fool who is licensed (like Shakespeare’s jesters and porters) to “speak truth to power” and criticize this dream and the notion of “World Emperor” as pure fantasy.⁵ So which is it?

Primarily relying upon Titian's portrait of Charles V at Mühlberg, de Armas's essay draws a relationship between the actions and teleology of the Emperor in imperial Spain and those of Don Quixote, self-appointed knight-errant, in Cervantes's text. Professor de Armas thus offers a historical analysis of the text, interpreting Cervantes's intended meanings relative to the events and beliefs in Charles V's Spain. It is important to note, however, that Part I of *Don Quixote* was published in 1605 under Philip III, Charles's grandson, in a context very different from that of Charles V's reign. Financial hardship and religious intolerance were rampant, and freedom of thought and speech were brutally suppressed. It is easy to imagine, then, that Cervantes might have looked back longingly and praised the reign of Charles V, but also that he might have been critical of the entire imperial project, given the theory of *translatio imperii* and the eventual decline of empires that it foretold. De Armas seems to agree with the latter, concluding that the knight's weaknesses point to "the futility of an imperial mission" as, like the aged body of Don Quixote, all empires "are subject to decline."

Based on the same historical reading of the novel, however, I find that the subtext of *Don Quixote* offers us a third interpretational option that falls between these two, though de Armas doesn't mention it. Could it be that Cervantes offers his readers an alternative that would reinstate a strong Spanish empire (through a pragmatic critique of the sociopolitical pathologies of the period of imperial decline with which he was familiar)? In other words, hoping to restore Spain to its previous strength and glory, is Cervantes subtly infusing his novel with a tract of political theory?

To understand my proposal fully, it is vital to note that Cervantes was no pacifist, having served in the Spanish army on more than one occasion. It isn't very likely, then, that he would label the imperial mission as futile. Still, he *was* aware of changing situations and their consequences on the ambitions of his rulers. The most evident of these were Spain's economic troubles and the subsequent defeat (in 1588) of the under-financed Spanish Armada at the hands of the English. Such events only added to the perceived illegitimacy and real weaknesses of the regime. Cervantes, then, was not convinced that Spain was approaching empire and conquest in a fashion appropriate to the

times. His opposition to irrational violence, corruption, and greed, and his reflections on the “just war” in the novel seem to support this claim.

De Armas continues his argument by drawing our attention to the potentially fatal disconnects between the Spanish Empire and its subjects. Don Quixote’s defeat at the hands of the *morisco* merchants in Chapter 4 is one of the events he analyzes. De Armas sees this event as symbolic of the victory of an emergent multicultural mercantilism over the traditional religious, universalizing Hapsburg Empire that Don Quixote represents. What I would like to append here is that rather than acquiescence to the futility of *all* imperial missions, Cervantes might only have wanted this defeat to symbolize the futility of *current* or *traditional* imperial missions.

Similarly, Don Quixote’s early encounters with the innkeeper (who knights him) and the Basque (who battles him) emphasize another difficulty that has become apparent in the traditional consolidation of empire. This is the forced amalgamation of different peoples and regions under the umbrella of a common language and culture. Breeding discontent, this tool of empire seemed counterproductive to Cervantes, given the diversity of the Iberian Peninsula, not to mention of the Hapsburg Empire. To him, such regional, linguistic, religious, and even social differences, if not handled with care, could prove divisive, further weakening the Spanish Empire. I believe Cervantes argues in *Don Quixote* that it is reason, rather than the knight-errant’s book learning or “revealed truth,” that needs to inform imperial ventures if they are to be successful and durable.

As de Armas points out, in each of these events, we see the imperial anxieties of Spain. If we listen carefully, however, I believe we also hear Cervantes’s mute warning that even “old Christians” must compromise and adapt if they are to be successful in their imperial endeavours. More importantly, according to de Armas’s essay, such compromise necessarily means an abandonment of the “totalizing faith” of empire builders in favor of “multicultural and tolerant” leadership. This clearly ties into his earlier suggestion that the implications of Cervantes’s critical reflections in *Don Quixote* are not limited to the sixteenth century or to Spain. They are, in fact, highly relevant to our world today, where the theory of *translatio imperii* seems to have crossed the Atlantic in its westward advance, and discussions of American imperialism abound.

I hold that the contemporary lens that de Armas offers us is one of his essay's greatest strengths, lodging Cervantes and his 400-year-old novel firmly in the current discourse of global power and new empires. It was at this very Roundtable in 2004 that Niall Ferguson, whom de Armas quotes, spoke to us about the westward spread of empire and its implications, and it seems only appropriate that we acknowledge this important conversation here, albeit in new and interesting ways.

Expanding on de Armas's suggestion, I believe that there is an important lesson for today's so-called imperialists in the prudent leadership that Cervantes favors. It is my belief that the Spanish author makes a case for "legitimate hegemony" or the accepted, broadminded, and beneficial leadership of one state of a union over the others—perhaps one of the most practical options to ease the tensions that mark today's global politics.

I think that Cervantes, much like Antonio Gramsci, was foregrounding for his readers the consensual dimension of political power rather than the coercive one.⁶ Understanding empire as leadership—a public service in the interests of the leader as well as the led—Cervantes thus offered a hegemony theory of political stability, predating by several centuries the hegemony theory of international economic stability that Kindleberger suggested.⁷

Based on the instability of the global economy in the 1920s and early 1930s, Charles Kindleberger hypothesized that an open and stable world economy depended on a dominant power or hegemon that was able to coordinate and regulate other countries such that they all felt secure enough to open and connect their markets. Conversely, without such leadership or hegemony, the global economy would be characterized by divisiveness, protectionism, and instability.⁸

I believe it is this instability, brought on by a lack of leadership in which the people had faith, that Cervantes saw in Philip III's Spain, and subtly alerts his readers to in *Don Quixote*. If Spain and its leaders could step up to the role of hegemon, then stability, wealth, and glory might once again be theirs.

De Armas's focus on Cervantes's mute speech, along with his parallel historical and contemporary illumination of the text's relevance, gives his essay a unique, germane, and powerful voice. It skillfully draws our attention to the methods and mainstays of Cervantes's silent

critique of sixteenth-century Spain, as well as to the ways in which his celebrated novel transcends its time and location to inform current transnational political discourse. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of his argument that I see as somewhat problematic, requiring a closer examination.

Leaving aside the great assumption we all make about there being some kind of Cervantine logic behind the madness of the Knight of the Sorrowful Face, it is the specific premises upon which de Armas rests his essay that raise concern. Given their breadth, these hypotheses lead me to wonder whether there is a limit to the *decir sin decir* or mute speech that de Armas believes we can read into the text, and also whether the *ekphrases* that he describes are the only or most significant tools that Cervantes used to achieve this “simulated self-censorship.” I must stress here that I respect and have learned a lot from the argument de Armas makes, and do not mean to undermine it in any way. Rather, my purpose is to tease out its subtleties and nuances, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the essay and the novel.

The first conjecture that de Armas ventures in his essay is that Cervantes learned to commit to memory the paintings he “gazed upon” as a youth traveling in Italy. The second is that Cervantes recalled his memories of these paintings and embedded them in his writing to grant his readers access to the “divine mysteries” they revealed, without having to reveal them himself. These are both big assumptions to make, though to his credit, de Armas explicitly states them. I personally do not think we can ever be certain that Cervantes intended to invoke Titian’s painting *Charles V on Horseback at Mühlberg*, when he had the barber and the priest consign Don Luis de Avila’s volume, *The Deeds of the Emperor*, to the fire without second thought. Unfortunately, apart from this weak link between Cervantes’s novel and Titian’s painting, de Armas’s essay offers no connection between the two physical texts, focusing instead on building associations to relate their respective imagery. It is the same with the other Italian Renaissance paintings that de Armas mentions, including Luca Cambiaso’s Genoese fresco.

Nevertheless, I believe it is entirely possible and even likely that Cervantes intended Don Quixote’s rusty old armour, his lance, his “service in the name of God,” and even his name (Quijada) to allude to Charles V in some way, all of which de Armas helps identify. But the notion that all these connections are mediated by a single painting, which Cervantes may or may not have seen, let alone committed to memory, is simply unconvincing. Unlike Virgil in the *Aeneid* or Auden

in “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Cervantes does not clearly identify any “signified” or referent in *Don Quixote*. This makes it easy to draw connections between his text and various works of art, but hard to justify these linkages as intentional *ekphrases*.

The three paintings, however, do serve two important functions in the essay. Firstly, they draw together under one analytical framework all the aspects of the association that de Armas sees between the knight-errant, Don Quixote, and the Spanish Empire, Charles V in particular. Secondly and more importantly, as de Armas notes, they reveal the humanity and corporality of the text. For instance, it is only against the artistic “decorum” that Titian observes in his imperial portrait that we see Cervantes’s representation, in *imitatio*, of the ordinary and familiar character of Don Quixote. Even as the Emperor’s glowing countenance and determinedly set jaw in the portrait mask his true appearance in the interests of royal propriety, Quixote’s aged, gaunt, and yellowed figure breaks these “molds of imperious society” that threaten its very existence by distancing the leaders from the led. Correspondingly, Quixote’s beaten body, broken dreams, and eventual death challenge the necessity and effectiveness of current imperial practices and undertakings in general, and support Cervantes’s hegemony theory of political stability.

In his historical meditation “Don Quixote as World Emperor,” Professor de Armas asks us to challenge “the world’s first modern novel,” using the tools he provides to understand why Cervantes wrote it and what makes it relevant today, 400 years later. In addition to de Armas’s own understanding and interpretation of *Don Quixote*, his essay reveals the beginnings of a path for each of us to navigate as we formulate our own approaches to Cervantes and the novel. This response, then, is my first step down that path. It is a journey that has just begun, and one which can never be completed. It will involve several years and readings of the novel, for which there is no space in this essay. I will leave you, instead, with three simple questions that will help you take your own initial steps down this path. First, what does literature mean to you? Second, how does *Don Quixote*, part of a different time, place, and civilization, speak to you? Finally, what is the place of this conversation in the specific moment of history that you and I inhabit?

De Armas concludes his essay by stating that as we contemplate the ideas that Cervantes conveys in *Don Quixote*, we necessarily encounter “threads that can bind us together in a complex tapestry of difference.” This poignant observation pithily sums up my encounter with his essay, and through it, with Cervantes’s “museum of words.”

Notes

1. Edith Grossman, “Translator’s Note to the Reader,” *Don Quixote* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).
2. In 2002, one hundred major writers from 54 countries voted *Don Quixote* the world’s best work of fiction. See Edith Grossman, “Translator’s Note to the Reader,” *Don Quixote*.
3. Harold Bloom, “Introduction: Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra,” *Don Quixote* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).
4. Robert M. Johnston, “Review of Henry Higuera’s *Eros and Empire: Politics and Christianity in Don Quixote*,” *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 17, no. 1 (1997): 181–85.
5. Andrew Latham, “*Don Quixote* as Political Satire and Political Theory.” Speech at Macalester College, October 1, 2005.
6. For more on Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, see Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method,” *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*, edited by Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 49–66.
7. Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).
8. Helen V. Milner, “International Political Economy: Beyond Hegemonic Stability,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 110 (Spring 1998).