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# Response to de Armas - 2

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## Response

Rogelio Miñana

I would like to thank Dean Ahmed Samatar for making the Twelfth Macalester International Roundtable a celebration of *Don Quixote's* global legacy on its 400th anniversary, and for inviting me to be part of the Quixotic offspring. Professor Frederick de Armas proposed a fascinating interpretation of Don Quixote as world emperor, linking the idea of Quixotism to that of empire. De Armas divides his essay into two sections. First, he provides textual evidence that Don Quixote may be a parody of King Charles I of Spain, also known as Charles V, emperor of Germany. Secondly, through a comparison of Don Quixote's attack on the merchants in Chapter 4 of Part I and Luca Cambiaso's fresco *The Emperor of Trebisonda*, de Armas sees a clash between a traditional empire based on "totalizing faith" and a mercantile empire represented by Jewish and Islamic trade in the novel and by the Genoese in the fresco. In sum, de Armas interprets Don Quixote's misfortunes and folly as a symbol of the futility and decline of the Spanish empire, and the triumph of another type of imperial activity: cultural influence. As de Armas suggests, Don Quixote could indeed be seen as world emperor and, consequently, a textbook example of "cultural imperialism": "a critical discourse which operates by representing the cultures whose autonomy it defends in its own (dominant) Western cultural terms."<sup>1</sup> *Don Quixote's* phenomenal influence in the literary, cultural, and political spheres runs throughout the last four centuries, and continues to endure today. As recently as 2002, the Nobel Institute polled 100 leading world authors, from Salman Rushdie to Nadine Gordimer, John le Carre to Milan Kundera, to find out the "best work of fiction ever written." Cervantes's *Don Quixote* came up first, with fifty percent more votes than any other book in the list.<sup>2</sup>

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So Don Quixote *is* a world emperor of some sort, or at least Cervantes portrays him as such, according to de Armas. I couldn't agree more with de Armas's conclusion that the novel questions "the fabrics and consequences" of empire, although some of his arguments may benefit from adding a few layers of complexity. One such example is de Armas's claim that Don Quixote embodies the "Old Christian *hidalgo*,"

whose “purity of blood” contrasts with that of the Jewish and Islamic merchants in Chapter 4 of Part I.<sup>3</sup> In fact, doubts about Don Quixote’s lineage and true faith are scattered throughout the novel. In opposition to Sancho Panza’s persistent references to his pure Christian ancestry (Chapter 20, p. 149; Chapter 21, p. 161; Chapter 47, p. 411, etc.), the narrator can only hypothesize, in Chapter 1, what the last name of the *hidalgo* really is (is it Quijada, Quesada, or Quijana?). Nor does the narrator remember the name of Don Quixote’s town of birth. In fact, he makes every effort to conceal the *hidalgo*’s identity in favor of his more flamboyant knight-errant alter ego. Lastly, let’s not forget that the nameless *hidalgo* bestows upon himself the God-like capacity to create a whole new world through his “sacred” word, naming and creating new characters, such as Dulcinea, Rocinante, and Don Quixote himself. By his use of chivalric literary codes, the *hidalgo* becomes Don Quixote and develops a heretic narrative of origin that, as Mary Gossy argues, is tied to “anxieties about paternity and power.” A product of his own genesis, Don Quixote clashes with the Church on numerous occasions throughout the novel, to the extent that he is excommunicated early on (Chapter 19, pp. 139–40) and several times referred to as a “devil” or “Satan” (Chapter 8, p. 63; Chapter 19, p. 137; Chapter 35, p. 306; Chapter 52, p. 440, etc.). De Armas himself recognizes Don Quixote’s paganism in his efforts to portray Dulcinea as a kind of goddess, so it seems appropriate to readdress the central issue of whether Don Quixote represents traditional empire or not.

As readers of a 400-year-old novel, we struggle with the passing of time and the changes in cultural, linguistic, and political contexts, but at the same time we benefit from an extraordinary source of information about Don Quixote’s imperial legacy: what we have called here the Quixotic offspring. Don Quixote is arguably among the most popular fictional characters employed by a wide variety of politicians, revolutionaries, businesspeople, and yes, imperialists and anti-imperialists.

Amusingly enough, U.S. politics continues to produce an endless supply of Quixotic offspring. Don Quixote is Ralph Nader, a politician-errant who, every four years, confronts with stubborn idealism enemies far beyond his financial means. Don Quixote is Howard Dean, chair of the Democratic National Committee, out to fight evil Republicans on Capitol Hill. But Don Quixote is also George W. Bush, our Republican President, in his undeterred efforts to keep freedom on the march everywhere: “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every

nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."<sup>4</sup> In the international arena, Don Quixote is no less of a superstar. In his October 29, 2002 lecture at the Complutense University in Madrid, the former president of Iran, moderate Islamist Mohammed Jatami, utilized Don Quixote as a metaphor for the current war on terror. For Jatami, "all those who see...a world dominated by the devil and articulated around an axis of evil follow Don Quixote's footsteps" (*todos aquellos que ven...un mundo dominado por el demonio y que gira alrededor de un eje del mal siguen la misma senda que don Quijote*).<sup>5</sup> An example of Western imperialism in Jatami's eyes, Don Quixote represents for Latin America's best-known revolutionaries just the opposite: the symbol *par excellence* of anti-imperialism ("*Hispanoamérica consideró El Quijote como un libro liberador*"). For instance, Subcomandante Marcos, the famous spokesperson for the Zapatista revolution in the Chiapas region of southern Mexico, proclaimed *Don Quixote* "the best book of political theory" ever written.<sup>6</sup> Recently, Hugo Chávez has handed out to the Venezuelan people one million free copies of *Don Quixote*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is clear that while some interpret Don Quixote as an icon of imperialism, many others see Cervantes's character as a symbol of resistance to empire and oppression. The novel's legacy is clearly complex, which is best demonstrated by the political turmoil that *Don Quixote's* 400th anniversary has stirred in its own home country, Spain.

Two major parties have dominated Spanish politics since the early 1980s: the Socialist Party, now led by President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, in power since the March 14, 2004 election; and the Popular Party, the center-right coalition that recently governed Spain for eight years under President José María Aznar. Besides these two major and a few minor national parties, the political panorama in Spain also includes what are commonly known as nationalist parties, present in almost all Spanish regions (Andalucía, Valencia, Galicia, Canarias, Baleares), but particularly powerful in the Basque Country and Catalunya. Ever since democracy was reinstated after dictator Francisco Franco's death in 1975, the Basque Country and Catalunya have been run by nationalist parties and/or coalitions. Two recent phenomena have further enriched the Spanish political mosaic. First, the major moderate nationalist parties in the Basque Country and Catalunya have lost some power after ruling for more than twenty years. They have had to form coalitions with more radical parties, which advocate complete independence from what they call the "Spanish state," framed as an imperial force that colonizes and occupies their territory.

E.T.A., the infamous Basque terrorist group that has killed more than 1,100 people during the last twenty-five years, is the armed faction of Basque separatists, although not all separatists support terrorist activities. The regional government, led by Juan José Ibarretxe, has recently presented a roadmap that advocates for Basque judiciary, diplomatic, intelligence, education, and tax-collection systems totally disengaged from the Spanish central government, thus creating a *de facto* independent state within Spain. Catalunya also had its own terrorist group, Terra Lliure, which in the early 1980s dissolved peacefully and integrated itself in Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, a separatist party now part of the ruling coalition. The second recent Spanish political phenomenon of note is that President Zapatero has only a relative majority, that is, his party alone, though a clear winner of the 2004 election, does not possess enough parliamentary seats to pass Zapatero's proposals. Thus, he needs the Catalan coalition's support to rule Spain. Paradoxically, this coalition includes a party, like Esquerra Republicana, whose ultimate goal is total independence from Spain.

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In the midst of this frenzied political puzzle, the rhetoric of empire has made a powerful comeback in Spanish politics. Spanish imperial colonies are now said to be not overseas, but in the peninsula. The two major regional governments of Spain, the Basque and the Catalan, are tilting towards separatism. Some politicians and public figures in those regions argue that they have been occupied and oppressed by Spanish imperialism for centuries. Indeed, there is historical basis for these claims, since Castille, in central Spain, took a predominant role early in the formation of the Spanish state (late in the 15th century), and slowly but surely imposed Castilian—known nowadays as Spanish—as the only official language of the empire. With the 1978 Constitution, however, the Spanish central government finally recognized the right of Spanish regions to significant autonomy in areas such as education (which includes language of instruction), tax collection, health, and even security. As a result, Spain now has four official languages: Spanish (or Castilian), Galician, Basque or Euskera, and Catalan or Valencian. At the same time, however, Article 8 of the 1978 Constitution bestows upon the military the responsibility to maintain territorial unity. Under the Constitution, therefore, a separatist declaration by a regional government could trigger an armed conflict.

On June 26, 2001, then Parliament minority leader Zapatero, in his response to President Aznar's State of the Union address, outlined an alternative proposal to the President's. It was his first major public appearance as leader of the opposition party. Zapatero articulated his program with five basic points, ranging from employment to international relations. The fifth proposal was, to everybody's amazement, the celebration of *Don Quixote's* anniversary in 2005.<sup>8</sup> House members of the ruling party could hardly contain their laughter, and the Minister of the Presidency (a sort of public relations figure at the cabinet level) compared *Don Quixote's* place in Spain's cultural history to that of the Harlem Globe Trotters in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The Basque nationalists were also wary of what sounded like an imperialist celebration of *Don Quixote* coming from a leftist leader. Let's not forget that only a few decades earlier, Franco's dictatorship had borrowed heavily from the long-gone Spanish empire in the construction of its own regime: the imperial eagle as the national insignia, the Fascist arrows and bow emblem in reference to the Catholic Monarchs, Isabel and Fernando, who unified Spain under Christianity following the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, and the "one language, one empire" motto. Despite these unwelcome connections between *Don Quixote's* celebration and fascist imperialism, Zapatero stayed the course, and after winning the 2004 election dedicated a good deal of his inaugural speech to—you guessed it—*Don Quixote*. This time, however, he was more cautious. The massive, state-sponsored 400th anniversary celebrations would aim at, in Zapatero's words, "promoting the cultures, the histories and the languages of Spain" (*promover las culturas, las historias y las lenguas de España*).<sup>10</sup> And so, on June 11, 2004, the Government issued a Royal Decree creating a special commission for the celebration of the 400 years of *Don Quixote*, endowed with 30 million Euros (some 40 million U.S. dollars) and presided over by no less than the King and Queen of Spain, Juan Carlos I and his wife Sofía.<sup>11</sup>

What is the political agenda underlying Zapatero's *Don Quixote* craze? A careful analysis of his statements ultimately renders contradictory arguments. In a special issue of the cultural magazine *Leer* (*Reading*), Zapatero explains how he intends to use the celebrations to launch an international public relations campaign of a new idealistic, yet modern and efficient Spain. But his interpretation of *Don Quixote* has a domestic dimension as well. In Zapatero's view, "the other languages of Spain, the cultures of the different nationalities [within Spain, such as the Basque and the Catalan], the different nationalisms,

are merely drops in a great ocean, the Spanish culture, 'what is Spanish' [lo español]." Ultimately, "2005 will represent the Spain of a total culture [*de la cultura total*]" because "the strength of the Spanish language, of 'what is Spanish' [*lo español*], is enormous."<sup>12</sup>

Other statements by Zapatero support his view of a Spanish supremacy over the other peninsular languages and political nationalisms. First, he has used the same expression to describe Don Quixote's and the King of Spain's public roles: for him, both constitute "the best ambassador of Spain in the world."<sup>13</sup> Should this be true, Don Quixote and King Juan Carlos represent a very defined model of state: a parliamentary monarchy under the current Constitution, with a sheer predominance of Spanish language and culture (i.e., Castilian) over peripheral/regional languages and cultures, such as Basque and Catalan. Secondly, Zapatero interprets *Don Quixote* as "the Constitution of life,"<sup>14</sup> a basic law of life articulated in the novel around the central theme of freedom. The reference to the Constitution is not superfluous. Basque and Catalan nationalists (and definitely their more radical coalition partners, the separatists) dismiss the Spanish Constitution on the basis of its mandate to preserve territorial unity through military force (Article 8). In contrast, while the Basque and Catalan regional governments have demanded a Constitutional amendment to open the door to a peaceful future independence from Spain, President Zapatero celebrates the virtues of the Constitution *vis à vis* his exaltation of *Don Quixote*. As he pointed out in the speech proposing the state-sponsored celebrations of *Don Quixote*, "living with passion the Constitution implies defending its highest values: freedom, equality and tolerance" (*vivir con pasión la Constitución supone trabajar por sus mejores valores, la libertad, la igualdad y la tolerancia*).<sup>15</sup> Lastly, Zapatero sees in *Don Quixote* a symbol of what unites Spain and Latin America: Spanish as a common language (a very concrete instrument of empire) and a common quest for freedom and justice (a more abstract and empty statement). On October 27, 2004, President Zapatero met in Madrid with the Ministers of Culture of nineteen Latin American countries and asked them to join in the celebration of what is in his words "a universal literary masterpiece and the culmination of a language [Spanish]" (*una cima literaria universal y de un concreto idioma*).<sup>16</sup> Echoing President Zapatero's remarks, Spain's best known sociologist, Amando de Miguel, recently described *Don Quixote* as "the book which Spanish-speakers around the world identify with,"<sup>17</sup> rendering Cervantes's novel the unifying symbol of a linguistic and cultural Spanish empire. Notably, Zapatero,



seemingly aware of the pseudo-imperial connotation of such remarks, has since been careful to point out that Cervantes's masterpiece, though the culmination of the Spanish language, ultimately reflects "the creative wealth of a variety of peoples" and promotes "dialogue and exchange" among cultures.<sup>18</sup>

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Within Spain, many have demonstrated strong reservations about the delicate balance between celebrating a literary masterpiece and endorsing empire. Both internationally and domestically, Zapatero has perhaps unknowingly resorted to the tactics of what John Tolinson calls "cultural imperialism." As early as July 7, 2001, Gregorio Morán published an article critiquing Zapatero's response to then President Aznar's State of the Union address—the speech in which Zapatero first proposed making *Don Quixote's* anniversary a celebration of "what is Spanish" (*lo español*). Morán's article bears an expressive title: "Let Don Quixote Be" (*Dejemos al Quijote en paz*). Morán complains that celebrations of Don Quixote and Sancho are a recurrent theme in recent Spanish history, traditionally linked to a national identity crisis of some sort. Most notably, the 300th anniversary of *Don Quixote* was celebrated in Spain amidst the worst national crisis in its imperial history, the very end of the empire itself. Following the loss of the 1898 Spanish-American war, Spain was forced to relinquish Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, its last colonies. Shattered by its military defeats and economic and political chaos, the Spanish empire crumbled, prompting a movement led by the so-called "Generation of '98" intellectuals, such as Joaquín Costa, Ángel Ganivet, Ramiro de Maeztu, Miguel de Unamuno, and José Ortega y Gasset. During the 1905 *Don Quixote* commemoration, they portrayed the knight of La Mancha as a national hero whose indomitable idealism represented a new beginning of an old imperial dream.<sup>19</sup> By considering *Don Quixote* the very essence of what Spain is really about, the same Generation of '98 intellectuals who demanded change in national politics called for a "regeneration" of Spain's imperial aspirations.

History seems to repeat itself. Not very skillfully, Zapatero proposed in 2001 to use *Don Quixote's* anniversary, "as the Generation of '98 intended a century ago...as a cultural platform to strengthen Cervantes's language [i.e., Spanish]" (*que el centenario, como lo intentaron los de la generación del 98 hace un siglo...nos sirviera de plataforma*



*cultural para dar más fuerza a la lengua de Cervantes*).<sup>20</sup> As one would expect, Zapatero's comments have renewed the 1905 controversy that arose between those who were nostalgic for the days of empire and the Catalan nationalists, who were trying to break free from what they saw as a disastrous Spanish imperialism. Despite Zapatero's erratic attempts to dissociate the 300th and 400th anniversaries of Cervantes's masterpiece, academics and political commentators have recognized the disturbing similarities between the 1905 and 2005 commemorations. Carme Riera has just published a book in which she examines how various Catalan leaders reacted to the 1905 celebration of *Don Quixote*. While moderate nationalists like Joan Maragall and Bonaventura Carles Aribau did recognize Cervantes's contribution to universal literature, other Catalan political figures saw in *Don Quixote* the ultimate symbol of Spain's catastrophic imperialism both abroad and in the peninsula. For Valentí Almirall, "arrogance" makes *Don Quixote* a "stereotype of the Castilian race," and for Pompeu Janer there certainly exists a "Quixotic race" (for "Castilian race") that oppresses what he sees as a "superior culture," the Catalan people. For Joaquim Rubió i Ors, "Catalunya cannot aspire to political independence, but it can aspire to literary independence" (*Cataluña no puede aspirar a la independencia política, pero sí a la literaria*).<sup>21</sup> The Catalan magazine *La Veu de Catalunya* captured in a 1905 editorial the nationalist attitude towards *Don Quixote* in 1905: "There is no symbol like *Don Quixote* for the race that has taken Spain to its ruin" (*No hay símbolo como el don Quijote para la raza que ha llevado a España a la actual ruina*).<sup>22</sup>

Between these two dissonant readings of *Don Quixote*—a symbol of the language and ideals that unite Spanish speakers around the world on the one hand, and of Spanish imperialism and oppression on the other—I imagine Cervantes himself looking at us with awe and quite a bit of despair. Is *Don Quixote* a world emperor or is he not? Does he criticize or embody imperialism?

Could Cervantes send us a message from beyond, I believe he would simply throw his very book at us, opened to Chapter 44 of Part I. In this episode, *Don Quixote* and Sancho encounter the same barber who *Don Quixote* attacked in Chapter 21 to take his basin, as the knight mistook it for the famous helmet of Mambrino. Outraged, the barber demands his basin back. *Don Quixote* insists that the basin is in fact a helmet. In the midst of verbal chaos and imminent physical violence, Sancho comes up with the ultimate answer to the eternal conflict between extreme opposites: the basin is certainly not a splendid

helmet, nor a vulgar basin. It is a "basihelm" (*baciyelmo* in the original Spanish), a new creation that Don Quixote wore in the battle to free the galley slaves in Chapter 22. As Sancho recounts, "if it wasn't for this basihelm, things wouldn't have gone too well for him [Don Quixote] because there was a lot of stone-throwing in that fight" (390). Thus, in Don Quixote's delusional world, ambivalence predominates and interpretation is a natural life occurrence. In other words, truth is in the eye of the beholder. In the novel's conflicting realities, things (to paraphrase Michel Foucault) are the result of a clash of interpretations at odds with one another, an explosion of contradictory meanings. So are things in our contemporary world. For global figures today, for politicians and political commentators in Spain, even for Professor Frederick de Armas, Don Quixote *is* a world emperor...and he *is not*.

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## Notes

Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

1. Tolimson, p. 2.
2. "*Don Quixote* gets authors' votes."
3. I will be referring to Part I of *Don Quixote* in all the following citations.
4. "Inauguration 2005"; see also Ali Khan.
5. Jatami.
6. "The Punch Card and the Hourglass."
7. "Free Quixotes Big Pull in Caracas."
8. "Discurso sobre el Estado de la Nación"; "El Quijote en el Congreso."
9. "El PIB, Don Quijote y Zapatero."
10. Ibid.
11. "La Presidencia de Honor."
12. "El Quijote es la Constitución de la vida."
13. "Don Quijote y Don Juan Carlos."
14. "*El Quijote* es la Constitución de la vida."
15. "Discurso sobre el Estado de la Nación."
16. "Zapatero invita a los ministros."
17. Amando de Miguel, "Especialistas de distintas areas," p. 5.
18. "Zapatero invita a los ministros."
19. Britt-Arredondo; Storm.
20. "El Quijote en el Congreso."
21. "El Quijote es el gran emblema nacional."
22. Moa.

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