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Diana de Armas Wilson. *Cervantes, the Novel, and the New World*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. xvi + 254 pp.

To use the sort of language and argument the author does, this is an imperialist book. It is imperialist, first, because it deals with the Spanish empire, and tries to relate that enterprise with both Cervantes and the novel. It is imperialist in another sense as well, in that it is attempting an intellectual conquest of the fertile terrain that Cervantes inhabits. Wilson wishes to lay claim to him, and the novel as well, in the name of American studies, Latin America, postmodernity, feminist and gender studies, and political correctness. Like the conquest and “civilization” of the New World itself, this campaign is taken without question as being beneficial to the colonized and subjected. Her book will presumably be simplified into a demonstration that the modern novel, and Cervantes, are “American” in some important sense. Alas, I am the Las Casas who must disagree.

In Wilson's language again, there is another book with which this one “resonates.” That predecessor is Irving Leonard's *Books of the Brave*. In his classic study and prior doctoral thesis, Leonard established the link between the *conquistadores* and the *libros de caballerías*—a link that was, before him, either unknown or only the subject of generalities. Wilson would clearly like to do the same for *Don Quixote*, so that we would inevitably think of America when we think of Cervantes.

The difference between Leonard's book and Wilson's is that Leonard spent long periods in [p. 131] the Archivo de Indias, and later in other archives, assembling documentary evidence on the shipment and reading of *libros de caballerías* in America. There is little such evidence available for Cervantes and America. The now-famous document in which Cervantes requested one of four vacant positions in the Indies has been known for a long time. “Cervantes americanista” has been the object of several studies, going back at least as far as José Toribio Medina, and these have identified all the overt references to America in Cervantes' works. Wilson does shed light on some “grains of rice” (p. 1) in the text, some episodes or references which can be more adequately explained because scholarship on the works themselves has progressed. Chief among these are Cervantes' complex relationship with the *Araucana* and the *Comentarios reales*, two works which have had their complexities and ambiguities explored over the past generation.

Without new evidentiary grounding for Cervantes' engagement

with America, the book is full of historical errors, undocumented and unlikely assertions, strained or forced parallels, and occasional mistranslations. To take the sale by the schoolboys in “El coloquio de los perros” of their copies of Nebrija’s grammar as a “devastating critique of imperialism” (p. 9) is to go far beyond what the text says. It is shading the truth significantly to claim that Cervantes “tried several times to emigrate to the New World” (p. 20), and it is flat-out wrong that he was “refused a passage to the Indies” (p. 20). The *auto* of “Las cortes de la muerte” of *Don Quijote* II, 11, in which there are significantly no *indios*, may still be a “devious” allusion to Indians’ exploitation, despite the contrary opinions of Allen, Murillo, and Rico (22-23). The descent into the Cave of Montesinos, and Sancho’s fall into the *sima*, remind Wilson of the mines of Potosí (93), the relevance of which recollection to Cervantes is unexplored.

To claim that Cervantes’ “novels are engaged in a dialogue with...Spanish colonialism” (12-13) is true only to the extent one identifies Spanish chivalric literature as itself a part of Spanish colonialism, finds chivalry as “alive and well” in the conquest of America (p. 133), and sees Cervantes’ attack on it as “an intention to destroy the chivalric props of his age’s waning chivalric culture” (p. 138). The dialogue does surely exist, but one needs to keep it in perspective, to assess its significance compared with Cervantes’ dialogues with the war in Flanders, with Spanish policy towards North Africa, with the Catholic church, with the purity of blood laws, and with the female gender.

“Ingenio lego” is mistranslated as “untutored wit” (19), the rebellion or civil war of the Alpujarras becomes a single battle (191), Sefarad is a Christian name for Spain (19), and the Inca Garcilaso discusses cocaine (197). As purchasing agent for the Armada, Cervantes bought from the villagers wheat, olive oil, and *fodder* (p. 38, emphasis added). The Inca Garcilaso is described as “an American Indian historian,” and Arrabal is treated as a serious, though theatrical, scholar (20, 116-7). And so on. Yet I quite agree with Wilson about the almost certain meeting, somewhere in the province of Córdoba, of Cervantes and Gómez Suárez de Figueroa, the Inca Garcilaso. Their friendship, though undocumented, is possible and even plausible. One of the things Wilson has taught me, in this book, is the extent to which the Inca Garcilaso was an outsider, a half-breed, a bastard, a person, like Cervantes, whose intellectual accomplishments and perspectives were largely rejected by the Spanish society in which he lived. Surely he and Cervantes had a lot to talk about, including the theorizing on love of Leo the Jew, the damage done by *libros de caballerías*, and Spanish colonial and foreign policy.

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