

'Don Quick-sottish, or so': Cervantic Ingredients in Aphra Behn's *The Emperor of the Moon* (Article)

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In a brief critical assessment of Aphra Behn's *The Emperor of the Moon* (1688), Jane Spencer pronounces it "a play that, in the best Quixotic tradition, enchants even as it mocks the victims of enchantment."¹ Behn's farce does precisely that, and much more, with the aid of Cervantes's hypotext. However, scholars have yet to study at length exactly how quixotism is invoked in *The Emperor of the Moon* and the ways in which it bears upon the satirical targets as well as the general humor and the larger implications of the piece.² In this short article, I explore some of the preeminent quixotic features deployed in Behn's remarkably successful farce, one that, after a long period of neglect, has recently reemerged amidst fanfare in academic and public radars. I argue that the Cervantic elements operating in this play go beyond the superficial uses of the quixotic motif to which many late seventeenth-century British writers resorted. Rather than serving as a mere expedient, the quixotic traits and the Cervantean mode that Behn employed in the play cut across the farce in various levels, furthering its continental connections, adding to the ostensible lesson, and, perhaps, introducing a degree of ambivalence to the criticism of the amateur scientist by endearing spectators to his madness while simultaneously deriding it.³ As I will show in due course, quixotic allusion begins in act one and ends in the final scene, thus providing a sense that *The Emperor of the Moon* is a Cervantine work through and through and should therefore occupy its rightful place in that canon.

The Emperor of the Moon is a farce in three acts, set in Naples, which was then part of the Spanish Empire. It deals with the domestic embroilments generated by Baliardo, a prudish scientific aficionado who, driven mad by his readings of astronomical books (fictional and factual), is convinced that the Moon is inhabited by pseudo human beings of a superior kind. Under Baliardo's custody live his daughter, Elaria, and his niece, Bellemante, whom he keeps behind closed doors to prevent them from establishing romantic links with sublunary men. His ultimate ambition is to marry them off beyond the earthly sphere. These women, however, are already courted by two noble earthlings: Don Cintho and Charmante,

1. Jane Spencer, "Introduction" to Aphra Behn, *The Rover and Other Plays*, ed. Jane Spencer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), xix.

2. Although the afterlife of Cervantes's master novel in Britain has been the focus of ample scholarship, the work of Aphra Behn has not been featured in most of these discussions. Partial exceptions are fleeting mentions, such as the one by Spencer, quoted earlier, and J. A. G. Ardila's observation that Behn "included a secondary plot based on Cervantes's story [of *El curioso impertinente*] in her *Amorous Prince; or, The Curious Husband* (1684)." J. A. G. Ardila, "The Influence and Reception of Cervantes in Britain, 1607–2005," in *The Cervantean Heritage: Reception and Influence of Cervantes in Britain*, ed. J. A. G. Ardila (New York: Legenda, 2009), 6. Behn's farce is not mentioned in Ardila's extensive survey of Cervantic fiction and theatre in English.

3. In differentiating "quixotic" from "Cervantean," I rely upon Ardila's distinction, whereby the first refers to content ("a narrative which relates the adventures of a Quixote—and a Quixote is an individual who, through excessive reading of a certain literary genre, has become a psychotic monomaniac and hence espouses the obsolete values which that genre proclaims"), and the second is concerned with presentation ("when its form has been influenced, in one way or another, by Cervantes's novelistic techniques as employed in *Don Quixote*"). Ardila, "Influence and Reception," 10, 13. Ardila also uses the term *Cervantic*, a broader label that comprises either, or both, quixotic and Cervantean elements.

nephews to the Spanish viceroy. In league with the servants Scaramouch and Harlequin, the two young couples devise a plan to cure Baliardo from his lunacy and to obtain his consent to marry. The scheme involves making use of the naturalist's delusion and amplifying it. Accordingly, they confirm his suspicions that there is an empire on the Moon and add to this fantasy that the emperor and his second-in-command—who are none other than Cinthio and Charmante in disguise—are in love with Elaria and Bellemante and will descend to Earth to marry them. The mirthful deception is to have its climax in “a Farce, which shall be called—*the World in the Moon*.”⁴ Meanwhile, the youngsters and servants are caught in hilarious entanglements and misunderstandings of their own, which orbit around the general theme of misperception.

The most conspicuous quixotic element evidenced in this plot outline is having a protagonist who is naively fixated on notions that are at odds with what society accepts as real and valid. As in Cervantes's novel, Baliardo's “infection,” as Scaramouch so terms it, has its origin in his excessive “reading [of] foolish Books, Lucian's *Dialogue of the Lofty Traveller*, who flew up to the Moon, and thence to Heaven in an heroick Business, call'd *The Man; in the Moon*, if you'll believe a *Spaniard*, who was carried thither, upon an Engine drawn by wild Geese; with another Philosophical Piece, *A Discourse of the World in the Moon*; with a thousand other ridiculous Volumes, too hard to name.”⁵ As the pallet of Baliardo's readings reveals, don Quijote's passion for knight errantry has been updated and substituted for a favorite late seventeenth-century passion: natural philosophy.⁶ Here, what we have is a mixture of fictional and philosophical speculations about outer space travel.

In a similarly quixotic vein, Baliardo is not characterized as generally insane; he is plagued by a single obsession, the mention of which detonates a hyperbolic reaction and a series of extravagant behaviors and absurd reasoning. As with Cervantes's protagonist, who according to his friend the priest, “leaving apart the simplicities which . . . [he] speaks concerning his frensie . . . he talks rationally [about other matters] and shows a clear, calm understanding in everything,” Behn's character seems perfectly ordinary unless his discourse touches upon the mysteries of the cosmos.⁷ This resort to monomania as a comic characterization device prefigures the hobbyhorses of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), where this quixotic motif found its fullest and most memorable expression. As will be discussed later, Behn's farce also foreshadows Sterne's rare amalgamation of Cervantean and Shakespearean allusion.

Besides the general characterization of Baliardo as quixotic, the entire initial scene of *The Emperor of the Moon* comprises Elaria and the servant Scaramouche dissecting the naturalist's personality for the benefit of the audience. This scene mirrors and, in keeping with the dramatic mode, abbreviates the various disquisitions between don Quijote's niece, the duenna, the priest, and the barber that take place in the early volumes of *Don Quixote* (1605). It is in that opening passage of Behn's farce that Cervantes's character is explicitly referenced: Scaramouch observes that Baliardo is “a little Whimsical, Romantick, or Don Quick-sottish, or so,”⁸ a description that Elaria amends to “or rather Mad.”⁹ By introducing a

4. Aphra Behn, *The Emperor of the Moon*, in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, vol. 7, *The Plays, 1682–1696*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Routledge, 2016), act 1, scene 1, lines 103–4.

5. Behn, *The Emperor of the Moon*, l.i.92–97.

6. In this article, I opt for using the original name of the character rather than the English variant, as to do otherwise sounds utterly alien to my native Spanish ears. To avoid any potential confusion, however, I resort to the standard translation when referring to the book's title.

7. Miguel de Cervantes, *The History of the Valorous and Wittie Knight-Errant, Don-Quixote of the Mancha*. Translated out of the Spanish, trans. Thomas Shelton (London: Printed by William Stansby for Ed. Blount, 1612), 324–25.

8. Behn, *The Emperor of the Moon*, l.i.81–82.

9. Behn, *The Emperor of the Moon*, l.i.83.

pun that plays on a comic misspelling (and, on the stage, a mispronunciation) of the name of Cervantes's famous protagonist, it is at once suggested that Baliardo's delusion is perhaps little different from that of a regular drunkard (or "sot") while also revealing Scaramouch's lack of sophistication. At the same time, the farce is intellectually enriched by capitalizing from a reference to the most enduringly popular foreign text.¹⁰

From this scene onward, Behn employs other quixotic motifs to move the plot ahead. Sporting attitudes that synthesize those of the well-meaning friends of don Quijote in the first part of the novel (that of 1605) and of the malicious pranksters of the second (that of 1615), Baliardo's family and members of his extended network manipulate him by appropriating the codes of his madness. Not only do they follow the rules of his game adeptly, but they do so with relish, thus partaking of his delusion and luring the audience into that same fantasy for the duration of the play. Charmante, for instance, poses as a Rosicrucian cabalist who mingles ancient astrological lore with modern technology (a telescope turned into a magic lantern), a gesture that replicates the various impersonations of fictitious knights undertaken by Sansón Carrasco in Cervantes's novel. Scaramouch performs as an apothecary who has travelled far and wide and has some cosmic maps hidden among his wares. Baliardo's physician and a Neapolitan nobleman masquerade as Kepler and Galileo, real but deceased scientists (and therefore part of history), something that recalls don Quijote's intermixture of historical persons, such as Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, Ronald of Roncevaux, and Mahomet in his fictional world picture. As in *Don Quixote*, the ease and pleasure with which the madman's entourage deal in the essentials of his chimeras reveal the extent to which such obsessions (knight errantry in Cervantes and astronomical speculation in Behn) infused everyone's mindset. In advancing such a suggestion, *The Emperor of the Moon* emerges not only as a quixotic work but also as a Cervantean one. Through metaliterary reflection, in which the object of mockery is reproduced with a twist, the play invites critical self-examination on the side of readers and spectators.

Relatedly, by explicitly categorizing the monomania of the would-be scientist as quixotic, Behn capitalizes on the audience's familiarity with the fundamentals of Cervantes's book to furnish a kind of logic to her farce. In connecting Baliardo with don Quijote, audiences are prompted to recognize him as a literary type, which speeds up the willing suspension of disbelief demanded by a theatrical performance. Once spectators see Baliardo as a Quijote of science, they immediately buy into his overblown lunar obsession, his having developed madness through simple reading, and perhaps more importantly, his willingness to be deluded in the face of ill-contrived ploys, such as the living tapestry counterfeited at the last minute in act two. Baliardo's self-delusion and the ease with which he is imposed upon, moreover, invite audiences to reflect on their own gullibility and their own readiness to be enthralled by (and pay good money to attend) a theatrical spectacle that is falsity itself.

In a characteristic display of Behn's structuring genius, the final act of *The Emperor of the Moon* neatly closes the Cervantic dramatic arch featuring thematic and technical allusions to *Don Quixote* with various degrees of transparency. The valedictory scene consists in the enactment of the farce announced by Scaramouche in act one—a *mise en abyme* (like the fictions-within-fiction characteristic of *Don Quixote*)—with which the family intends to effect Baliardo's cure. In the farce within the farce, the pretended inhabitants of the Moon descend on a flying chariot crafted with ropes and pulleys, an action that visually evokes the Clavileño episode in the second part of *Don Quixote*, which involves the contrivance of a flying horse mounted by a blindfolded Quijote and Sancho. This visual connection is reinforced in the play's closing speech, in which Baliardo, newly shocked

10. In doing so, Behn enhances the cosmopolitanism of a farce that was a reworking of a French pantomime, originally performed by Italian players: *Arlequin, empereur dans la lune* (1684), by Anne Mauduit, "Nolant" de Fatouville.

awake from his madness, implores to his family: “Burn all my Books, and let my Study Blaze. . . . Come all and see my happy Recantation of all the Follies Fables have inspire’d till now.”¹¹ Baliardo’s repudiation of his favorite reading materials mirrors don Quijote’s declaration, just before his death: “Now are all the prophane histories of Errant Chivalry hateful unto me; I now acknowledge my folly, and perceive the danger whereinto the reading of them hath brought me. But now, by the meere mercy of my God, become wise, at my own proper cost and charges, I utterly abhorre them.”¹² Furthermore, Baliardo’s plea for a bookish conflagration, hearkens back to one of the most memorable episodes of *Don Quixote*, the burning of the hidalgo’s library at the hands of the priest and the barber.¹³ Among the implications of these quixotic echoes are the introduction of a degree of ambiguity to the negative characterization of Baliardo rehearsed throughout the play. After having been mocked for his absurd pretension to erudition (intrinsically linked with his obstinacy to control the bodies of his female wards), Baliardo vows to burn his books with uncharacteristic humility. He subsequently assures (via a quotation from Socrates) that “he knew only this—that he knew nothing yet,” which invites some departing sympathy for him as a helplessly deluded romantic, who, perhaps, meant well.¹⁴ In this scene, *The Emperor of the Moon* can be read not only as a quixotic story but also as a Cervantean piece.¹⁵

At the same time, given the thematic atmosphere of *The Emperor of the Moon* in general (magic, science, courtship, colonial imperialism), Baliardo’s concluding remarks also establish an intertextual connection with Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611). His final words are reminiscent not only of Prospero’s vow to renounce his magic with the assertion “I’ll drown my book”¹⁶ but also of Caliban’s reiterated advice to his coconspirators earlier in the play to “seize [Prospero’s] books. . . . possess his books; . . . Burn but his books.”¹⁷ As I mentioned earlier, the nimble synthesis of Cervantic and Shakespearean allusion was to become a signature strategy of Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*, with parson Yorick embodying at once a kind of Quijote and a metaliterary offshoot of *Hamlet*’s dead jester. But Behn, as I hope this teasing of an argument has shown, arrived there first.¹⁸

Crucial differences with *Don Quixote*, including the absence of a Sancho figure, Baliardo’s self-interest as opposed to don Quijote’s general altruism, and an ending that tends to the bathetic rather than the pathetic, are significant in what they contribute to the (mostly negative) characterization of Baliardo as a representative of the scientific aficionado. A coherent account of these, however, is the ambition of a different (and longer) piece. The purpose of this article has been to delineate and call attention to the relevance of the Cervantic hypotext in Behn’s farce. As I have endeavored to demonstrate, the abundance and significance of the quixotic content form that populates *The Emperor of the Moon*, and the Cervantean elements that shape it, overrule any sense of mere practicality behind Behn’s use of the Spanish hypotext. Rather than an extensive exploration—which I will rehearse elsewhere in due course—this “quick-xotic” (but not quick-*sottish*) article is offered as a first sally on the subject, intended to pique the curiosity and tickle the brains of the hordes of don

11. Behn, *The Emperor of the Moon*, Scene the Last, lines 661–67.

12. Miguel de Cervantes, *The Second Part of the History of the Valorous and Witty Knight-Errant, Don Quixote of the Mancha. Written in Spanish by Michael Cervantes: and Now Translated into English*, trans. Thomas Shelton (London: printed for Edward Blount, 1640), 497.

13. De Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, part 1, chapter 4.

14. Behn, *The Emperor of the Moon*, Scene the Last, line 672.

15. For the terminological distinction, see footnote 4 in this paper.

16. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 5.1.64.

17. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 3.2.98–104.

18. The intertextual crossroads between Cervantes and Shakespeare in this play belong to a fascinating (and extensive) topic impossible to tackle in this short essay, but I will shortly return to a fuller exploration in a future article.

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