

Don Quixote Today

Do we know a delusional old man who blunders about, claiming to help people while actually doing great damage, and then interpreting the resulting fiascos as burnishing his legend of unmatched glory. Yes we do.



Who did you think I was talking about?

But here's the difference: Don Quixote lived in but did not head of the most powerful nation on earth. He was delusional. He caused mayhem. Many of his ideas were anachronistic. But he wasn't malevolent. He was a creature of his time, and he all too often was inclined to settle things with violence, usually paying a price himself. He wanted to Make Spain Great Again. But his delusions favored a more humane and tolerant Spain at a time when it was moving sharply in the other direction. We will need to look at Spain's kings, not Quixote, to see Trump's prototypes. They were models of corruption, ruthlessness, cruelty, narcissism, and stupidity that for many years was the world record. We'll go there in a moment. But, first, let's return to 2015.

SPAIN PASSES LAW OF RETURN FOR SEPHARDIC JEWS

Move allows descendant of Jews expelled from Iberian country in 1492 to seek dual Spanish nationality.

This was a headline in the Jerusalem Post in June, 2015, more than five centuries after Ferdinand and Isabella decreed that all Jews in Spain were to be expelled or burned at the stake if they failed to convert to Catholicism. There were a quarter million Jews in Spain in 1492. About 6000 people have taken up the Spanish offer. If you are interested, it remains open until this October. There's still time.

What else was significant about 1492? No, no, no, not Columbus. The big news in 1492 was that after seven **centuries** of war, the *Reconquista*, finally ended Islamic rule in al Andalus.



The *Reconquista* was the longest war in history, but those seven centuries were also marked with long periods of religious tolerance. Muslim, Jewish and Catholic science, philosophy, and culture thrived and intertwined. al-Andalus was a beacon of learning, with major achievements in trigonometry, architecture, astronomy, surgery, pharmacology, [agronomy](#), and other fields. Córdoba, with a population of 500,000, overtook [Constantinople](#) as the largest and most prosperous city in Europe. Muslim engineers introduced windmills to Europe in al Andalus, and Spain introduced them to Holland, which they ruled at the time. They provided power at a scale that was previously unknown—enough to drain the swamps of Holland, dry that waterlogged country, and make it a world power that rivaled Spain. They were, metaphorically at least, giants.



The Andalusian inclination toward tolerance ended as Christian rule was restored on the peninsula. Jews were expelled in 1492. Muslims were briefly free to practice their religion. But the king forced their conversions to Christianity by 1526. Some adopted Christ genuinely, but most Moriscos clung to Islam in secret. The Inquisition busied itself investigating whether those conversions were genuine or insincere.



Given their techniques of inquiry, you can imagine what they found.

During the reign of King Philip II things went beyond the Inquisition.



Filipe II (1556-1598)

This was Spain's "Golden Age," financed, of course, by extraction of treasure and the exploitation of labor from its colonies, including Mexico. It was said then that "the sun never sets on the Spanish empire."



This bit of bling was found in a Spanish shipwreck only recently found near here, off the coast of Yucatan.

But Spain was not well-managed. Philip presided over numerous state bankruptcies, Spanish ships were looted by pirates, the Armada was humiliated in England, and Spain lost many colonies to European rivals. The Spanish empire was rotting from within, and Moriscos were a vulnerable and useful scapegoat for Spain's misfortunes. They were forced to conform to the cultural and linguistic norms of Christian Spain. Just as Franco banned Catalan in Spain, hundreds of years later, Philip banned the Arabic and Arab surnames.



Philip III

In 1609, Philip III finally took the last step and ordered the expulsion of all Moriscos. He called them an “evil sect,” accusing them all of collaborating with Barbary pirates who disrupted shipping on the Mediterranean and raided Spanish coastal towns. The royal treasury balanced its finances by seizing Moriscos’ assets. The scale of the expulsion was unprecedented.



Philip made it a policy to separate parents from their children under six, who were to remain in Spain and be raised at Christians by priests – often known for their kindness to the vulnerable.

There are many episodes in Don Quixote that offer Cervantes’ perspectives on his times. They are often oddball and contradictory. The expulsion came between the publication of book 1 and book 2. Spain was fundamentally reshaped. The new publishing industry was subject to full-on censorship, and Don Quixote was no exception. So it must be read with that in mind. But most scholars believe that Cervantes’ ideas of freedom and tolerance, especially religious freedom and the powerful love of one’s homeland, are reflected in the book, and particularly in Book II.

This occurs most notably in Book II through the character of Ricote the Morisco.



A portrait of a Morisco by Velazquez from about 1650.

Sancho is on the road when he encounters a group of pilgrims who are speaking a language he does not recognize. As he passes them, one grabs Sancho and, speaking Castilian says, “Is it possible that I have arms around my dear friend and neighbor, Sancho Panza? No doubt about it, because I am not asleep or drunk now!”



Bewildered at first, Sancho recognizes Ricote, a successful Morisco businessman from his village. Ricote explains that he had seen the writing on the wall before the expulsion decree. He left his wife and daughter in Spain to find a safe place that would welcome them. He buried a sizable treasure outside town, and now, post-expulsion, he is on his way back to dig it up, hoping to reunite with his wife and daughter in Algiers, where they were sent, and to bring them with him to Germany. But he misses Spain badly. This is what he says about expulsion:

“Those proclamations were just and reasonable laws because it is not a good idea to nurture a snake in your bosom or shelter enemies in your house. But the punishment of exile for us was the most terrible. No matter where we are, we weep for Spain, for, after all, we were born here and it is our native country. The greatest desire in all of us is to return to Spain.” He fears for his wife and daughter in Algiers, where the Moriscos are now suspected of hiding their Christianity, and he offers Sancho money to help him recover his treasure. Sancho refuses saying, “I’m not a greedy man, and it would be treason against the king if I helped his enemies. Be satisfied that I don’t betray you, and go on your way in peace.”

But he tells Ricote that he saw his daughter at her expulsion. “I can tell you that your daughter looked so beautiful that everyone in the village said she was the fairest creature in the world. She was crying and embracing all her friends and asking them to commend her to God with so much feeling it made me cry, though I’m not usually much of a weeper. There were many who wanted to hide her, but fear of defying the king’s order stopped them.”

Sancho has a deep empathy with the cruel ordeal of the Moriscos. But Sancho, and Ricote too, are not prepared to challenge the king’s authority and denounce the policy. Perhaps there’s a kind of code switching going on – with Ricote playing the part of a loyal and respectful subject while secretly seething about his personal loss and the gross injustice of the expulsion. Or perhaps Cervantes was writing so that his book got past the censors for publication.



Several chapters later, in Barcelona, Quixote and Panza are on a Spanish ship that seizes a pirate vessel off the coast. The pirate captain, about to be hanged, is asked, “Are you of Turkish nationality or a Moor, or a renegade?” The pirate responds in Castilian, “I am not of Turkish nationality, or a Moor, or a renegade. I am a Christian woman.” The crossdresser, it turns out, is Ricote’s daughter, Ana Felix. Having heard of her beauty and wealth, the king had sent for her in Algiers. Fearing that she would be raped, she explains that she conned the king, telling him that she would recover her treasure if he sends her to Spain. She also tells him that the man she loves, Don Gaspar, who is in an Algerian prison, is, like her, a beautiful woman. The king has Don Gaspar released to live in a home with “wellborn” Moorish women, and the king sends Ana Felix to Spain, under guard, to recover the treasure, just as she’d hoped.

The noose is removed from her neck, and an ancient pilgrim on board the galley reveals himself. It is Ricote. Father and daughter are reunited. They make a plan to rescue Don Gaspar, and the episode ends.

One of the things about great art is that it can invite a multitude of possible readings, some of them contradictory. For all of Ricote’s acceptance of the expulsion, he is a resister. For all of Ana Felix’ devotion to Christianity, she is its victim. And for all of Sancho’s simplicity, naiveté and his un-heroism, he is moved by Ana Felix and Ricote.

We choose how we read Don Quixote, what meaning we can make of it. That’s what Franco did when he used it to make Spain great again. That’s what Picasso did to resist Franco. Castro distributed millions of free copies after the Cuban revolution. So did Chavez in Venezuela.

In an environment that reeks of the same hatreds, fears, and policies that Jews and Moriscos endured 500 years ago, some immigrant children, mostly from Mexico and Ecuador, in a Brooklyn program called Still Waters in a Storm, are reading Don Quixote in Spanish and English. On Monday and Tuesday evenings a group of about 15, ages 7 to 15, meet to talk about what they’ve read and collaboratively translate some passages in their own words. The idea is for Don Quixote to become a source of collective identity for the children. With their artist/teacher, Stephen Haff, they weave stories from their own lives into a theater and song version Don Quixote of their own. Their songs are inspired by moments or ideas that the kids feel are part of their own lives. Edith Grossman, the Quixote translator, visited Still Waters to talk with the children about *Quixote*. Afterward she declared the novel has “never been in better hands.” Other visitors have included William Egginton, the author of *The Man Who Invented Fiction*, Mexican

novelist Alvaro Enrigue, Canadian author Michael Ondaatje, and on the non-literary side of things, an expert in wind turbines to explain the physics of windmills.

Their first song, about rescuing, was inspired by incidents in chapters four and five of book I, when Quixote tries to free a shepherd boy from a whipping by his master, and a subsequent scene in which a farmer comes upon Don Quixote lying on the ground after being badly beaten by a muleteer. The farmer, “wiped the fallen man’s face, which was covered in dust, and lifted him onto his own donkey.” To the kids at Still Waters, who are living daily with the anxiety of living with Trump policies that recreate some of the same terrors that Philip visited on the Moriscos (and Ferdinand and Isabella visited on the Jews), that moment of kindness to a needy stranger became a foundation stone to the building of their song. It was inspired by the challenge and meaning of rescue *right now*.

Let’s end with a little video that will show you how Still Waters kids are using Don Quixote today. They work with text in much the same way that we have here at Habla. They workshopped ideas: “I will help you.” “I will protect you.” “They don’t have a voice.” “Feel deep in your heart.” “Can we help?” “Can we help?” “We will make you feel you belong here.”

The children wrote monologues about what they would tell Cervantes about their lives if he came to visit. It took the kids eleven weeks to work through the difficult ideas and emotions that went into Rescuing Song – emotions and ideas that are hard enough for sophisticated adults to sort out. But the song took shape. It had a first line: “I beg you to understand me, to listen to my voice.” They brainstormed a second and third. The fourth in Spanish. Then the kids needed to match the structure of rhyme and rhythm they’d made. Take a look at what they did.

<https://vimeo.com/275953638>