

Representing the Unrepresentable: A One-Man Retelling of Cervantes's *Entremeses*

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Pa que luego no le digan, pa que luego no le cuenten
que se tratan de esto o se tratan de aquello,
aquí le traigo yo el original del mismo
Manco de Lepanto: *Los Entremeses* de Cervantes.
Porque haga de cuenta que de pronto la fiaca, la flojera,
la pereza nos aleja del elixir del vademécum...
(Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 1)¹

When Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra published his *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos, nunca representados* in 1615, he could not have imagined what a twenty-first-century Mexican theater company would be able to create out of his short interludes. Even with the great mind that brought us the *Quijote*, it would have been beyond his wildest dreams to see a one-man adaptation of three of his pieces² – *El viejo celoso*, *El retablo de las maravillas*, and *La cueva de Salamanca* – with every character played by a single Merolico, the archetype of a traveling salesman in Mexico.³ And yet, EFE TRES Teatro, a young company based in Mexico City and founded in 2012, has created a raucous romp in *El merolico*, moving through these *entremeses*, using only a few props and some minor costume changes, so that the actor, in this case Fernando Villa Proal, can play several characters at once. The paradoxical brilliance of this company is that they can take the most minimalist of ideas and create a spectacularly intricate performance, one that would make Cervantes himself proud. As will be discussed below, the company is able to take pieces that are supposedly “unrepresentable” and with their magical touch, turn them into a commentary on the very elements that fascinated Cervantes and continue to captivate those of us who work on Spanish classical theater even today: metatheatricality; the blurred lines between authorship and character; and the thin veil between reality and fiction. Although it is not the company’s desire to be prescriptive in their adaptations, ultimately the spectator is confronted with some of the most troubling questions of our time, namely the rampant dissemination of “fake news” via social media and the difficulty to distinguish between truth and lies.

Cervantes, the Baroque, and the Paradox of Fake News

Perhaps it is precisely the “unrepresentability” of his pieces that make them both the epitome of the Baroque and seemingly timeless. Some 400 years later, we cannot help but continue to comment on them. Even now, ten-plus years after William Egginton’s article “The

¹ I would like to thank EFE TRES Teatro for providing me with this unpublished version of the script, which we originally used to create subtitles for the performance of two of the *entremeses*, translated by my “Introduction to Translation Class,” taught at MacEwan University in March 2018.

² For a special digital performance produced for the AHCT Virtual Symposium 2020, the company added a fourth *entremés*, *Los habladores*, to the Merolico’s repertoire. I will be discussing this performance separately at the Renaissance Society of America’s 2021 annual conference in Dublin, Ireland.

³ The figure of the Merolico can be traced to one particular charlatan, Rafael Juan de Meraulyock, a man of either Swiss or Polish origin, who arrived in Mexico, claiming to be a doctor in the second half of the nineteenth century. He sold his wares on the streets of Mexico, promising miracle cures. His last name was difficult to pronounce for many Spanish-speaking Mexicans, which inspired the transition from Meraulyock to Merolico. For more information on this figure see Murillo-Godínez, “Dr. Rafael Juan de Meraulyock, el merolico original.”

Baroque as a Problem of Thought” laid out the major and minor strategies of the seventeenth century, we are still grappling with what writers like Cervantes were trying to tell their readers, and what, in turn, they can still impart to us in our current moment. Egginton rejects the idea of the ‘neobaroque,’ and the connotation that, like neoclassicism or neo-Gothicism before it, we are in a moment of recycling the tropes and motifs of the baroque period; rather, it “must be understood as the aesthetic counterpart to a problem of thought that is coterminous with that time in the West we have learned to call modernity, stretching from the sixteenth century to the present: the problem of appearances and the reality they purport to represent” (2009a, 143). In a sense, Cervantes and his counterparts have spent the last 400 years trying to warn us of the very trap that we now find ourselves in: the fake news paradox. Amy Zegart, a political scientist with the Freeman Spogli Institute at Stanford University, laid out the three paradoxes plaguing American politics in an article that appeared in *The Atlantic* less than a year after the 2016 US election.⁴ The first, which I would call the “fake news paradox,” she calls “more information, less credibility:”

Trump’s cries about fake news get receptive audiences in part because we live in the most complex information age in human history [...]. Information is everywhere, but good information is not. Why? Because the barriers to entry are so low. In the Middle Ages, when paper was a sign of wealth and books were locked up in monasteries, knowledge was considered valuable and creating it was costly. To be sure, there was some flat-earthly nonsense locked up in those tomes and religious and political rulers used their claims to knowledge as political weapons. Today the challenge is different. We now live at the opposite extreme, where anyone—from foreign adversaries to any crackpot with a conspiracy theory—can post original “research” online. And they do. Telling the difference between fact and fiction isn’t so easy. (2017)

The reason I call this the fake news paradox is that those who decry fake news are often the ones spreading disinformation themselves. Fake news is to today what *desengaño* was to Cervantes’s time. Now, however, the major strategy is using the minor to its advantage, and in large part, we, as a society, are falling for it. But minor companies, such as EFE TRES, are also able to employ their own strategies, ones that help us to see beyond Cervantes’s world, via the lens of the here and now.

Of course, nothing with Cervantes is ever as it seems either, particularly in his prologues. It is there that he often lays out clues that can lead us to unravel his literary enigmas. Unlike many contemporary interludes, his are more structured, seem to have plots that are followed through from beginning to end, and, as he claims, provide the characters with a diction and manner of speaking suitable to their station in life. Although unpopular at the time, critics in the last one hundred years have begun to see these *entremeses* through Cervantes’s eyes: “Cuando se leen y se estudian estas deliciosas piezas no se explica como han podido ser desterrados de los teatros y substituidos por multitud de sainetes y piececillas insulsos, mal fraguados y peor escritos, cuando no soeces y escandalosos” (Cotarelo 1915, 68). In an interview with Glenda Nieto-Cuebas, EFE TRES co-founders Allan Flores and Fernando Villa Proal seem to concur with Cotarelo, saying that the bizarre endings and disjointed plots of other *entremeses* made the ostensible logic of Cervantes’s pieces all the more appealing. Of their choice to use short

⁴ Zegart is writing from within her own context, but we could argue that this is a common theme worldwide, as many politicians, particularly on the right wing, champion a return to an idealized past.

interludes for this one-man show, Villa Proal states:

Los entremeses de Cervantes me parecen muy buenos y también pensábamos que si íbamos a hacer obras [...] de una sola persona, queríamos que fueran cortos. En lugar de tener una obra completa por ser un terreno un poco más seguro, tanto para el intérprete como para la audiencia, porque si no se lo están pasando bien al menos el espectáculo se acaba rápido. Creo que era más seguro en formato corto con solo un actor y algunas amigas de la AHCT (*Association for Hispanic Classical Theater*) nos hicieron llegar muchos entremeses y algunos eran difíciles de entender, otros eran muy pesados. [...] Los finales a veces son muy raros, porque los entremeses tienen un formato muy peculiar. Pero los de Cervantes tenían una historia mucho más clara. (2019, 478)

Still, the pieces, particularly the *entremeses*, have long been considered difficult to interpret, from both artistic and literary perspectives. The fact that Cervantes had to publish the vast majority of his theatrical writings as “never represented,” and that they have remained, for the most part, in a dusty pile of the relatively few “unrepresentable” pieces of the Golden Age of Spanish theater, modern companies such as EFE TRES are left with an uphill battle as they work to revive these pieces.⁵ Although Cervantes employs his prologue to the *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses* to place himself directly in the center of the innovation that brought about the *comedia nueva* – “me atreví a reducir las comedias a tres jornadas, de cinco que tenían; mostré, o, por mejor decir, fui el primero que representase las imaginaciones y los pensamientos escondidos del alma, sacando figuras morales al teatro, con general y gustoso aplauso de los oyentes” (1615, Fol. IIIr)⁶ – he acknowledges that his time spent doing other things opened up the space for others to take the stage in different directions. In the intervening thirty years between his first theatrical pieces and the publication of the *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses*, something had changed: “no hallé pájaros en los nidos de antaño; quiero decir que no hallé autor que me las pidiese, puesto que sabían que las tenía; y así, las arrinconé en un cofre y las consagré y condené al perpetuo silencio” (1615, Fol. IIIv), but he is unable to pinpoint if it is he himself that is different, or if times, and presumably tastes, had simply moved on. Unable to find an *autor* to direct his pieces, he is forced to sell them for a reasonable sum, and is glad, at least, not to have to deal with the whims of artists. Finally, he tells us that his hope for these pieces was simple, albeit perhaps grandiose: “Querría que fuesen las mejores del mundo, o, a lo menos, razonables” (1615, Fol. IIIv), appealing to the reader, that should we find anything of value, to make sure the *autor* fixes his error, presumably so that the *comedias* and *entremeses* therein will find their way to the stage. He even offers up a *comedia* still in draft form, *El engaño a los ojos*,

⁵ There are some notable exceptions, such as the Festival Internacional Cervantino, founded in 1953 in Guanajuato, Mexico as a celebration of Cervantes’s *entremeses* by Enrique Ruelas, and is now nearing its forty-eighth year (“Sobre el Cervantino”). Likewise, in Spain, there was particular interest in the performance of Cervantes’s pieces in 2016, for the four-hundredth anniversary of his death. In that year at the annual Festival Internacional de Teatro Clásico in Almagro, Spain, there were two performances and three exhibitions based on the interludes. From 2017-2019 at the same festival, there were five more performances based on Cervantes’s short plays, albeit there were far more productions that adapted part of his most famous tome, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. More often than not, companies that wish to include Cervantes in their repertoire appear to be more comfortable with his non-theatrical work as a basis for their performances, as opposed to one of his plays or interludes (“Historia”).

⁶ I am using an electronic edition of the *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses*, but citing using the folio numbers, as provided by the editor, Sevilla Arroyo, as this version is based on the original 1615 print and includes links to a digitized version of each folio.

which he is sure will be satisfactory. Of course, this final work has never been found and is more likely “un guiño del autor que define así su concepto de teatralidad” (Ojeda Calvo 2016, 345), another clue to unlock his work, hidden in plain sight. In other words, Cervantes himself is reminding us that all of his work is a game in which the eyes can be deceived, but that if we keep that knowledge always in mind, we will be able to see beyond the ruse. He does this through the use of verisimilitude:

Verosimilitud que [...] le sirve para meter de lleno al espectador en el mundo de la ficción, aunque siendo consciente – y queriendo que el espectador también lo sea – de que el teatro es un engaño a los ojos, si bien un engaño que, sin duda, nos hace reflexionar sobre nuestra propia realidad al exponernos casos, extremos y extraordinarios, no sucedidos pero que podrían suceder. (Ojeda Calvo 2016, 348)

Cervantes succeeds, but in such a way that the mystery of exactly how this sleight of hand works has haunted us for 400 years, allowing for multiple interpretations, all with some legitimacy—even when they are contradictory.

Metatheatricality and Minimalism

El retablo de las maravillas, in particular, is an intricate and difficult piece to imagine on stage, even for the most adept of theater scholars and practitioners alike. With its imaginary characters and the need for all those actually on stage to pretend that they are witnessing the same thing at the same time – but also not, since no one is actually seeing anything – pulling off a realistic and convincing performance is made doubly hard. Once again, however, Cervantes’s own prologue reminds us that this very *entremés* is a wink towards the very beginnings of the early modern *comedia*, from the times of Lope de Rueda: “El adorno del teatro era una manta vieja, tirada con dos cordeles de una parte a otra, que hacía lo que llaman vestuario, detrás de la cual estaban los músicos, cantando sin guitarra algún romance antiguo” (1615, Fol. IIIr), and his successor Navarro:⁷ “sacó la música, que antes cantaba detrás de la manta, al teatro público” (1615, Fol. IIIr). The *retablo* that Chanfalla and Chirinos rely on to defraud the townspeople is a very basic set made up of the *repostero* and *manta* referred to throughout. The townspeople are clearly familiar with this type of rudimentary staging device; on more than one occasion Benito Repollo insists that the musician, Rabelín, be hidden behind the set – first in the *repostero*: “¿Músico es éste? Métnle también detrás del repostero; que, a trueco de no velle, daré por bien empleado el no oílle” (1615, Fol. 245v), and then later behind the *manta*: “¡Métete tras la manta; si no, por Dios que te arroje este banco” (1615, Fol. 246v). Both times Repollo seems incensed by the very notion of a musician, whom he believes would be better off neither seen nor even heard, suggesting that this *entremés* is set sometime between the two early masters Cervantes lauds in the prologue. It has long been understood that Cervantes critiques music and performance in all his works, not just the theatrical ones (see, for example, Charles Haywood 1948), although Anne Livermore considers this to be a sign of Cervantes’s humane side “putting in a friendly word in defence of the poor musician, when the showman pleads that he shall be allowed to remain on the stage and not be relegated behind the repostero as was the old fashion” (1944, 145). Looking beyond the surface, however, we find that this rejection of staging

⁷ Although a thesis submitted in 2016 by Predmore states that we know little about the identity of Navarro (3n), Navas Ruiz certifies that it is “Pedro Navarro de Toledo, muy encomiado por Cervantes por haber mejorado la presentación e introducido la tramoya” who succeeds Rueda (1991, 45).

innovation paints the townspeople as the backwards, uncultured masses who wish for things to stay as they were under Rueda, and the *autores* as forward-thinking stage designers, who use their knowledge and stage tricks to manipulate their audience in a way that anticipates the Baroque.

Just like Chanfalla and Chirinos in *El retablo de las maravillas*, Villa Proal must convince his spectators that what they are (not) seeing is real. As Egginton and David Castillo point out, the *retablo* is a game: “[...] and the rules the participants are expected to accept are an exact parallel to those conventions governing the understanding of any play of the baroque theatrical institution, and, implicitly, are shown to be imposed by that institution, not the result of an interaction between it and the public” (1944, 447). In the case of *El merolico*, our postmodern sensibilities allow us to understand the metatheatricality of a one-man show in which both the on-stage audience-characters and the always-already invisible characters of the *retablo* are miraculously visible in our mind’s eye. Rather than relying on imposed social conventions to trick his viewers into seeing – or pretending to see – something that is not there, the Merolico deconstructs characters into everyday objects, synecdochally representing that which he wishes us to see. Likewise, the Merolico as a construct – that is, the traveling salesman who wishes to sell us Cervantes’s stories to cure our aches and pains – is employed by EFE TRES as a metatheatrical strategy to weave the stories together and create theatrical identification with the audience, who in turn is willing to suspend disbelief momentarily and follow along.

The elements of metatheatricality that can be found in most of Cervantes’s writing, and particularly in his *entremeses*, are best exemplified by *El retablo*. EFE TRES picks up on this concept and creates an entire methodology around which the performance of *El merolico* is based. If the internal audience of *El retablo* can see, hear, and fear the imaginary characters thrown at them by Chanfalla and Chirinos – to the point that they can no longer trust their own senses at the end of the play – then why would it be inconceivable that one Merolico can play eighteen different characters (six per *entremés*) in little more than an hour without us losing the plot? As he tells his audience from the very start:

Éste es producto original el que le traigo, el que le vengo a contar, el que le vengo a relatar, el que le vengo interpretar. Va calado, va garantizado. Lleva cuatrocientos años de probado y hasta ahora nunca de los nuncas ha fallado. No se preocupe, damita, no se preocupe caballero, que una vez que se lo lleve lo tendrá con usted pa toda la vida. Y este no es como el marido que dizque pa toda la vida y a la mera hora puro pájaro nalgón. No. Éste sí se queda con usted. (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 1)

Using a vernacular at once formal (the use of the Usted to address individual audience members) and informal (the shortening of words and the thinly-veiled double entendre), the Merolico promises a spectacle that will stay loyally with them for the rest of their lives. He invokes Chanfalla, who claims: “Hanme enviado a llamar de la Corte los señores cofrades de los hospitales, porque no hay autor de comedias en ella, y perecen los hospitales, y con mi ida se remediará todo” (1615, Fol. 244r) with his own promise of a cure-all: “Estos entremeses a usted le quitarán la depresión, le quitarán el enojo, le quitarán el desgano y en una de esas hasta la cara de baboso” (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 2). He continues, explaining how he, as their humble servant, will transform himself into each of the characters of each of the stories: “Se sorprenderá al ver que solo basta un hombre para hacer todo lo que ante sus ojos acontecerá” (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 2). And, surprising as it is, that is precisely what EFE TRES

delivers. Villa Proal jumps in and out of various characters, back and forth between the frame Merolico character and those of the individual stories. To avoid confusion, he uses minor costume props, such as the aprons on sticks of *La cueva de Salamanca* (which he also performs entirely within a one-and-a-half-meter square box drawn on the ground)⁸ that differentiate between the various female characters, or the hats that represent each of the characters of *Retablo*. He also steps out of character to introduce each, so that the audience is made fully aware of the subtle characterizations he uses to indicate who is who. To illustrate this, we need to consider the beginning of the first of the three *entremeses* performed by the Merolico: *El viejo celoso*.

For *El viejo celoso*, the only prop used is a square piece of maroon-colored fabric. The three principal female characters, Cristina, Lorenza, and the señora Ortigoza are each identified by a different placement of the cloth and their posture as they move about the stage. Cristina, the young servant girl, wears the cloth like an apron, flitting about the stage, playing with birds and arranging flowers. Lorenza, the unfortunate wife of the titular *viejo celoso*, holds the cloth between her hands to demonstrate that she never lifts a finger around the house, sighing loudly and often. Ortigoza, the nosey, elderly neighbor, wears the cloth like a babushka around her head, and is slow-moving, bent over with age. After introducing each through posture, movement, and scarf-placement, Villa Proal stops, pulls the cloth away with a flourish and announces their name and an amusing description of each of them, then quickly spins back into place and continues the performance. In the climactic scene, the cloth represents at least five characters and two inanimate objects: the headscarf representing Ortigoza, the handkerchief for Lorenza, the apron for Cristina, the scarf of the titular character, and the jacket of a young man thrown lazily over his shoulder, plus a *lienzo* – a painting on canvas of a handsome man which Ortigoza and the old man fight over; an ekphrastic reflection of the young man with whom Lorenza is concurrently unfaithful to her husband – and, finally, water thrown from a jug into the face of the old man who becomes too suspicious of the strange noises coming out of his young wife’s room. In some respects, it takes a great actor to pull off anything remotely understandable in these conditions, but the attention to detail, the facility with which Villa Proal converts himself from a stooped-over, old woman to a young servant girl without missing a beat, creates an environment in which the audience cannot help but be pulled along. As the Merolico’s version of *El viejo celoso* comes to a close, EFE TRES also gives the audience a more satisfying ending than that of the original. In the original the Alguacil has one line, after which he accepts without question Cañizares’s explanation that it is nothing more than the usual marital strife between husband and wife, and everyone seems to be fine with ignoring the problem at hand. Stanislav Zimic considers Cervantes’s ending to be poetic justice:

Según nosotros, en *El viejo celoso* se manifiesta un caso de justicia poética en que el castigo corresponde de manera absolutamente simétrica a la transgresión, además de representar, de modo fundamental, la inevitable consecuencia desastrosa de un matrimonio impropio, según conocidos conceptos neoplatónicos que informan

⁸ The choice to minimize the space is something that this company does regularly, as a sort of challenge for themselves. In their first production, *El príncipe ynocente*, this was done in two ways: first, because they used a chain to mark off the part of the stage in which they would move around, to delineate the space of a prison; second, in both opening and denouement, when the two actors would sit in cramped cages, stooped over on their stools, in order to explain the frame story to their audience. For more on this first production, see my chapter “A Social Justice Framing of the *Comedia*: EFE TRES Teatro’s *El príncipe ynocente* Adaptation.” I’ll expand upon this particular use of minimized space later in this essay.

situaciones semejantes también en otras obras cervantinas. (1984, 445).

For the time, the desire to keep quiet a wife's unfaithfulness, to protect the familial *honra*, was a well-known theatrical trope; in the *entremeses*, however, it was much more likely for a couple's dirty laundry to be aired, once again demonstrating the difference between Cervantes's *entremeses* and those of his contemporaries. In the EFE TRES version, however, the Alguacil insists that it is ridiculous to try and cover this up, as everyone in town is privy to what is happening in Lorenza's boudoir: "Los males los provocamos, casi todos, las mismas personas que los tememos. Lorenza temía por su honra y ahora todos hemos visto al joven salir por su ventana. Cañizares temía por ser cornudo y ahora carga la ornamenta sobre su cabeza" (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 8). While Cervantes's audience might have accepted as convention the covering-up of a *deshonra*, it would seem ridiculous for those of us living in the twenty-first century to believe that an officer of the law would be turned away so quickly and easily, and thus add this final soliloquy to remind us not only that our actions have consequences, but that sometimes we create our own worst nightmares.

El Cide Merolico: Or, Whose Characters are Whose?

Cervantes is also known for his masterful blurring of the line between author, translator, character, and reader, primarily from the prologue and subsequent chapters of the first part of the *Quijote*, but these same games are also played throughout the *entremeses*. EFE TRES picks up on this thread and carries it throughout their adaptation, and not just in *Retablo*, where it is most obvious, but also in the other two interludes and the Merolico's explanation of his wares, calling it first a "producto original" and then "el original del mismo Manco de Lepanto" (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 1), already blurring whether this product is original to the Merolico or Cervantes himself. Later, he states that "el producto que le ofrezco le encenderá la pasión y de aquí usted sale con ánimos y valor para tomar un tomo o dos de Cervantes o de Lope, inclusive de Calvino, ya de perdis de Coello" (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 1), thus amplifying the potential authorship to which the audience will be exposed. Like all adaptations, authorship has been blurred by EFE TRES; there are moments that would be untenable to perform in a one-man show, and others that are subsumed as less important to the plot,⁹ allowing the company to create a show that is both representative of Cervantes's texts and their own theatrical vision. Likewise, adding the frame character opens up a space for the actor to create theatrical identification with the audience, who in turn is primed to follow him along the blurring of lines between Cervantes and the Merolico, and the sixteenth- and twenty-first centuries' understandings of truth and fiction.

In order to facilitate audience understanding, minimal props and costume changes are used throughout as a guide. The author/character of the Merolico also darts in and out, giving explanation where necessary, then fading into the background to let the characters take center stage. Generally, once the individual *entremés* has started, the Merolico remains hidden in plain sight; he is both there and not, thinly veiled behind an object that represents the character-skin¹⁰

⁹ EFE TRES is not afraid to comment on these difficulties on stage, either. Although they are not as explicit with the audience about these choices in *El Merolico*, they do specifically discuss the complexities of playing multiple characters at once in their first adaptation, *El príncipe ynocente*.

¹⁰ By "skin" I am comparing this use of clothing items or props to the way that gamers can acquire files that change the appearance of the avatars by which they are known in computer programs. For more information, see Rouse's definition of "Skin" as posted on *WhatIs.com*.

he now wears. In each of the *entremeses* he uses a slightly different object or piece of clothing to transform himself from one character to the next: in *El viejo celoso*, he uses a single square piece of cloth, as discussed previously; in *El retablo* the characters are represented by hats sitting on posts, much like audience members who can only see the back of each other's heads; and in *La cueva* he dons a jacket that holds bits and pieces of costumes, such as aprons on sticks, a hood, and other miscellaneous parts of outfits.

These bits and pieces, which together do not make a whole, represent enough of each part that he can contain multiple characters within a long trench coat and a one-and-a-half-meter square box, taped off during the middle of his performance. Paradoxically, the limitation of space and objects under his control requires the audience in turn to expand their understanding and imagination in order to see the performance as a whole. Again, it is not a feat that many artists would be able to pull off, but Villa Proal is able to create an entire world out of a coat, a hood, and a few aprons. In reality, these are simple symbols or signs that Villa Proal uses to remind the audience of each of the characters, but that have been developed over the course of the play as a whole into a newly shared vocabulary that allows him to communicate in a much more sophisticated manner. This feeling of shared knowledge creates an intimacy with the audience that carries them along with Villa Proal's actions; when we feel that amount of theatrical identification with the person on stage, we are not only willing to suspend disbelief, but to make what we (do not) see into reality. In an interview with the Artist Studio Project, Villa Proal tells the story of a spectator who, during a post-show Q&A session, mentioned that watching their work felt more like reading a book. He then explains that this was precisely what the company hoped the audience would experience: "Nosotros proponemos lo que está sucediendo, pero el público tiene que completarlo desde su imaginación [...] cada quien va completando mucho a la manera de como cuando lees un libro" (crecelatino 2018, 6:34-6:57). Granted, these are not signs that would correspond to Cervantes's time, but rather ours – yes, a woman or female servant would have used an apron regularly, but not of the variety that is used here – so that their current audience can create that connection with what they are seeing on stage. The hoodie, in particular, as the sign for 'student' is a garment more indicative of the early twenty-first century than the seventeenth, and certainly not one that the *mosqueteros* would have recognized. Still, this is in line with both the Baroque and EFE TRES's reimaginings of Cervantes's theater. As Yunning Zhang reminds us, "the Baroque language is essentially the dramatization of signifiers" (2019, 234). Thus Cervantes, via Chanfalla and Chirinos, and EFE TRES's Merolico are speaking the same language, even when the signs vary. The outcomes, however, are slightly different: Chanfalla and Chirinos are triumphant over their audience of backwater rustics; el Merolico does win himself his daily bread, but his intention is not to fool his audience: "Yo no le vengo a engañar, no le vengo a mentir, no todo lo que traigo contaré, ni contaré todo lo que traigo" (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 2). He does not fool us, but he does create a spectacle that allows us to feel a collective connection with the actions on stage, internalizing what we do and do not see. It is not until we walk away that we can consider its connections to ourselves, and our time and space.

The twenty-first-century audience knows, logically, that the Merolico is the one representing each of the characters – or rather, that Villa Proal, performing the Merolico, is in turn behind each of the individual characterizations – and yet the actor's deft skill allows our imaginations to take over and avoid any confusion that one might expect from such a rapid-fire performance. When the Merolico does reappear within an *entremés*, it is in order to dispel any misunderstandings that might arise. In this way he is both a character, within the frame story of

the traveling salesman just trying to “ganar[se] el pan de cada día” (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 2), and the author, perhaps better understood in the definition of Cervantes’s time of *autor* as the director of the play, whose hand is literally inside the characterization and performance of every single appearance on stage. Once again, the Merolico takes his cue from Chanfalla, who conjures up the images that his internal audience supposedly sees. The metatheatricality of *El merolico*’s version of *Retablo*, however, is threefold: the Merolico invokes Chanfalla, who in turn summons the invisible actors who play Sansón, Herodías, and the bears, lions, and mice that plague their spectators, here, again, all played by a single actor who embodies all of the above.

The greatest distinction between Cervantes’s invocation of honor – “la negra honrilla” as the governor calls it (1615, Fol. 246r) – and that of other early modern plays is that his is “a command, an order to participate in the hypocrisy, to accept as real what one neither sees nor understands” (Egginton and Castillo 1994, 448). The directives of Baroque society require conformity, at least on a surface level, which is what the *Retablo* appears to do as the audience-characters proclaim that they see things that are clearly not there. And yet Cervantes is able to turn this conformity on its head by having those same audience-characters then use it to their advantage, first by banding together to proclaim the Furrier nothing more than another character of the *retablo*, and then, when he refuses to play by the rules of Chanfalla’s game, an outsider, who cannot access the show because of his supposed lack – one that they in fact all share, given that none of them can actually see the internal characters of the *retablo*. The viewing public, even in Cervantes’s time, would understand that the Furrier exists on the same plane as the audience-characters, as would those same characters, who are not so duped as to no longer know the difference between what they actually see and what they are told they should see. If not, they would not have been able to make the cognitive leap to claim the Furrier as both internal character to the *retablo* and “*¡de ex illis es!*” (1615, Fol. 247v) – when he is unwilling to bend to the collective consciousness. Bruce Wardropper reminds us that this is also a direct reference to “the Biblical literature of treachery” (1984, 31), but the treachery that the Furrier demonstrates is not actually due to his lack of Old Christian blood, but rather that he has the potential to unmask them all for their hypocrisy, even Chanfalla and Chirinos. As the *entremés* draws to a close, Chirinos laments the interruption caused by the arrival of the Furrier even as Chanfalla proclaims their success. There’s just one problem: their success might not have been so triumphant without the unexpected appearance of the Furrier and his men at arms. However, metatheatrical performances such as those portrayed in *El retablo* employ the minor strategy (as originally theorized by Egginton 2009): “The theatrical order is constantly improvised and questioned by the fictitious actors. The audience is left to wonder not only about the representational devices, but also about the theatricality of the world that they live in – here we see the metatheater’s consonance with the strategies of Baroque esthetics” (Zhang 2019, 235). By proclaiming their success and his intent to repeat an unrepeatable performance the next day, Chanfalla has fallen victim to the very trap that he himself has laid. *El retablo*, in fact, is a play about the un-performability of the play within the play. In other words, Chanfalla’s *retablo* is a baroque fold, which, once performed, folds in on itself and cannot be un/redone.¹¹ The Furrier is not going to appear in the same way at the same moment ever again; since we are not privy to the actual ending of the play-within-the-play, we cannot assume that it would be nearly as effective as the intersection of the lines of reality and fiction that the audience members themselves blur when they proclaim the Furrier to be both character and outsider.

¹¹ For more on baroque folds see Egginton, “Of Baroque Holes and Baroque Folds.”

Social Media, Postmodern Spectators, and Breaking Through the Veil of Fiction

EFE TRES's version does not require us to suspend our belief in what we see – as postmodern subjects we are already well aware of the lines that theater crosses – but it does force us to question the faith we put in what we are told. We know that we are not seeing eighteen different characters, but we are willing to put our skepticism aside. Allan Flores, one of the co-founders of the company, recently spoke about how we are seeing theater transformed, particularly during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Quoting Segismundo's famous "¿Qué es la vida?" monologue at the end of act two of *La vida es sueño*, Flores notes that even when we're watching digitized theater, we have to question what we are seeing on our social networks: "Lo que resulta interesante [...] nos pone en esa disyuntiva de qué estamos viendo en realidad a través de nuestras redes sociales, y cómo, con mucha facilidad, podemos hacer estos falsos en vivo y que la gente piensa que es realidad pero no lo son" (2020). Since Cervantes's time, theater has walked the fine line between reality and fiction, attempting to remind us that what we see is not always as it appears. Even EFE TRES, who claims their primary motive to be the captivation of new audiences (Nieto-Cuebas 2019, 476), recognizes that they are expanding upon Cervantes's concepts:

Lo otro sería exponer los temas que por sí mismo los entremeses de Cervantes tocan: las apariencias y de aparentar lo que no eres, manipular el entorno y manipular la situación a tu favor, o los celos... Creo que al final son temas que ponemos sobre una charola para que cada cuál decida platicar sobre ellos de la manera en que quiera. (Nieto-Cuebas 2019, 477)

They are quick, however, to note that "Tampoco queremos hacer propaganda" (Nieto-Cuebas 2019, 477); unlike the major strategy of the Baroque period, they are not interested in manipulating people into thinking a certain way. Rather, they wish for their work to open up points of discussion, and move people to think critically about what they have seen and what it means for them, instead of shutting them down through a propagandistic machine. They want the conversation to continue long after the curtain has closed, and specifically talk about the act of bringing someone to the theater, the discussion about what was seen over a post-show coffee or drink, and that the lines of communication are opened far beyond what was seen on stage (Nieto-Cuebas 2019, 477). Such lofty hopes are particularly important now, especially – and ironically – that we are more connected than ever. Zegart calls this phenomenon "more connectivity, less civility" – we are in contact with far more people, but the veil of social media permits us to remain completely anonymous at the same time, allowing us to distance ourselves from the other and act in ways we might not face-to-face (2017).

Moving theater – and in truth, all aspects of life, both artistic and otherwise – online during a pandemic, as we have had to do, allows creators and critics alike a fifth wall, the lens of the social network, which mediates our access for better and worse.¹² This lens has existed for years, but now, more than ever, it has become the predominant and, in some cases, only manner

¹² The 'fifth wall' is a concept that has been employed by a variety of theater scholars over the past thirty years to discuss a disconnect or extra layer of distance between either audience and practitioner or practitioner and scholar. Here I employ it to discuss the ways in which theater that has been televised or digitized has the possibility to both alienate or, upon breaking through this fifth wall, connect more deeply with its audience. Esther Fernández and I are working on a forthcoming article that elaborates on this concept from a theoretical standpoint for televised and digitized theatrical pieces.

through which we are able to mediate the world. It is the lens that brought ‘fake news’ to the forefront and has forced us to reckon with the world around us. But perhaps the move to digitization has also brought us closer to the problem that has plagued us for over 400 years, and whose latest manifestation in the form of fake news is still one that we must grapple with, in order to understand the world we live in. Zegart’s final paradox warns us that “[...] not all crowds are wise, or even real. The wisdom of crowds can be transformed into the duplicity of crowds. Deception is going viral” (2017). We need a new lens through which to see the inconsistencies in the information we are fed, as well as who the providers of information are. Unless we can start to distinguish between reality and fiction online and in real life, we are doomed to repeat the patterns of the past.

The Merolico recognizes, and reminds us, that we have allowed him to manipulate us, but not in a malicious way. Originally, the adaptation would have had the Merolico take his leave of us with the following words, as a sort of initiation into an exclusive club: “Sin embargo, se llevan una parte de mí y aun así mañana solo seré un extraño que cruza su camino. Espero que el día que nos encontremos, crucemos miradas y construyamos un instante que aunque pequeño sea nuestro” (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 16). In the performed version, he returns to the same tune from the beginning, singing “Damitas, caballeros, gracias por estar. Aunque yo quisiera poder continuar, todo lo que empieza tiene que acabar. Por sus risas muchas y su imaginar, damitas, caballeros, gracias por estar” (Garee 2018, 1.11.03-1.11.22). EFE TRES is explicit, in that in either version the spectator is reminded that what they have seen is not real, but that what matters is what we take away from it. The Merolico reminds us that fake news is not going to announce itself as such; it will not strip off its mask and invite us into the inner circle of knowledge-holders, as the Merolico does here. Either way, the spectator is admitted here into a special club, one that does not rely on the wisdom of crowds, but rather shows, as Zegart warns us, that “one person can masquerade as hundreds, even thousands, with fake personas” (2017). The difference here is that the one person has demonstrated that the mask is thin, and the veil can be lifted. The idea of disruption is one that has been co-opted by technological companies to talk about how they have changed a pre-existing economic sector.¹³ Without an antidote, the unintended consequences of disruption, “shrinking credibility, eroding civility, and empowering the duplicity of crowds” (Zegart 2017), will continue to affect us even after we have a vaccine and can lift the restrictions of the 2020 pandemic. EFE TRES is clear: their intention is not to tell the audience what to think, and yet, the Merolico promises a cure: “Si es usted de los que sufre la pesadumbre del alma, la melancolía en la mirada, el mal de amores y el mal de ojo váyase tranquilizando que nomás de verme, ya se está curando” (Flores, Villa Proal & Memije 2018, 1). The cure cannot be given, it must be discovered by each of us, individually, through critical thinking. Thus, their public has experienced a magic trick, a cure for a disease they were unaware they had. At the same time, the spectator is made aware of the sleight of hand that took place in their own imagination and have gained an understanding of the world precisely as Cervantes would want it: *desengañado*.

¹³ Uber, for example, is seen as a “disruptor” of the taxi industry. See Michael B. Horn, “Uber, Disruptive Innovation and Regulated Markets” (2016).

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