

“¿Está loca esta gente?” Social diseases and group dynamics in *El retablo de las maravillas*

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Like the fifth chapter of the *Lazarillo* —the episode of the *buldero* and *alguacil*— the *Retablo de las maravillas* is a stunning portrayal of the art of mass deception and of the workings of group dynamics. Characters in the work are clearly individualized, but as the play draws to a conclusion their thought and behavior become attributable to forces and dynamics that transcend them. The attitudes of villagers with regard to their supposed ‘purity of blood’ are of course the butt of the satire, and the work pokes fun at them throughout. However, the village leaders at the beginning of the play are shown to be hospitable to the strangers, in short ‘good folk’, yet through the brief experience of the *retablo* they *become* nothing less than single-minded fanatics. How is this radical transformation possible? How do the group dynamics work here? Why don’t any of the villagers question the rules of the game, i.e. the conditions for ‘seeing’ the *retablo*? What difference does it make that there are *two* distinct requirements for seeing its marvels, i.e. having ethnic-racial-religious purity of blood and being born within legitimate wedlock? How can people collectively be sure they were conceived in lawful marriage and from lineages of Old Christians, and what aspects of the play work against this? How do they, despite all self-doubts they may feel individually for having to perform according to the dictates of the *retablo* without seeing what they’re supposed to see, collectively assert their belonging to a superior ideological category, and what does this grouping consist of? How do they reinforce their shaky collective identity based on an invisible and unprovable essence? How do they exploit a character alien to their group to galvanize their collectivity? How does group hysteria override individual behavior? How does the original *embuste* eventually take on a life of its own so that the deceivers no longer need to intervene? As we’ll see, most of these questions are interrelated, bringing out aspects of this complex *entremés* as a whole.

Through its scenes, dialogues, suggestive names, motifs and themes, this interlude is rich in meanings that need to be pondered, yet there are elements and processes that seem to go *beyond meaning*. It seems to me that we can extend to *any* artistic work including literary texts the questions that picture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell asks of an image: not only what does it mean? but also what does it do? what does it want? and what is the secret of its vitality? (236-237). Within this framework, meaning is necessary but only part of the puzzle. It’s not enough to identify the theme of blood purity and laugh at the ridiculous country bumpkins, mere dupes of a *retablo* ‘engañabobos’, who are so presumptuous as to believe they’re superior to every other social category in this regard. Nor can we adequately account for what happens by interpreting and applying scriptural passages with regard to Samson, a raging bull, the mice of Noah’s ark, the waters of the river Jordan, lions and a bear, and the daughter of Herodias because neither these villagers nor Cervantes’ conceivable audiences would have been attuned to the fineries of Biblical exegesis even if almost no one would have failed to identify figures such as Samson and the daughter of Herodias as Jewish, the latter associated with seductive dancing and the head of John the Baptist. The play with its dark humor is so much more unsettling than this, and the targeted satire may extend far outside a particular class, reaching into an entire society and beyond. The interlude not only asks to be deciphered —a task that has set the parameters for most literary criticism of the work over the past half century— but also calls for our

involvement, in part as metatheatrical witnesses who see how the immediate witnesses of the *retablo* become its protagonists and collectively incarnate its false logic.

As we know, the primary ruse is Chanfalla's invention, a follow-up to the previous trick of 'the rainmaker', and is likewise intended as mass deception. Chanfalla knows how to exploit the vulnerabilities of his audience and la Chirinos fully understands how to carry out his plan. He and la Chirinos have talked it over before their arrival, and she assures him in terms mimicking the faculties of the soul that she'll be more than equal to the task. It is predicated, of course, on the widespread belief among rural villagers that they, unlike the nobility as well as urban populations, have the most authentic claim to purity of blood, whose symbolic capital is honor. Thus when they meet the village officials, honor is the key word: "este honrado pueblo" says Chanfalla addressing them, among whom the governor calls him "hombre honrado" which in turn elicits la Chirinos' botanical account of honor: "Honrados días viva vuestra merced, que así nos honra; en fin, la encina da bellotas, el pero peras, la parra uvas, y el honrado honra, sin poder hacer otra cosa" (89).¹ Thus the governor honors the strangers by asking them what they want, because honor can only reproduce itself, just like the plants mentioned reproduce their own kind. But reproductive honor is an entirely hollow concept tacked on to a sequence of examples from nature which produce their own fruits. Human reproduction in this play is fundamental because both conditions for seeing the *retablo*'s marvels depend on it, namely, having no "raza de confeso" and "no sea habido y procreado de sus padres de legítimo matrimonio", both of which Chanfalla alias Montiel describes as very common, contagious diseases: "y el que fuere contagiado de estas dos tan usadas enfermedades, despídase de ver las cosas, jamás vistas ni oídas, de mi retablo" (90).

We might say they are hereditary diseases, born of contaminated or illicit procreation, and are inevitably transmitted from one generation to the next. What's more, in an epoch that finally attributed the spread of disease more to contagion than to divine punishment, he implies that these supposed diseases are contagious—in this respect like the plague perhaps, or syphilis, among other diseases. It serves the tricksters' purposes to metaphorically identify 'impurity of blood' and procreative 'illegitimacy' as widespread diseases. What kinds of diseases would they be and what consequences would they have? Anyone suspected of either of these chronic, incurable maladies could be socially stigmatized, embodying an infection whose invisible and intangible symptoms would be undetectable to everyone including the 'diseased' unless anyone might have knowledge or suspicions in this regard. It was of course much in the interest of those who were knowingly afflicted by either of these 'diseases' to silence it where possible like a shameful debt to maintain social credit. By default, the *retablo* can diagnose anyone who doesn't see its marvels as having one or the other of the two diseases, or both. Understandably, however, no one who knows the rules of exclusion beforehand will admit they can't see the marvels. Thus those who stake much of their individual and collective worth on legitimacy and purity of blood can take advantage of the *retablo* whose figures they can't see to finally affirm among each other their superior status. This requires a collective effort in which no one can slip up, because if anyone does so they all fail. Tacitly or explicitly, all the villagers have to collaborate in playing the same game for a communally beneficial purpose. What's more, the wonder show not only makes the villagers protagonists, as has often been observed, but it also invites them to improvise far beyond la Chirino's ekphrastic evocation of the apparitions. Whether the villagers suspect this or not, this is in effect an ekphrasis ex nihilo akin to the *nemo* paradox and other such negative paradoxes where nobody or nothing or nowhere is presented as present and existent. For

¹ References to the *Retablo* are from Alfredo Baras Escolá's edition of Cervantes' *Entremeses*.

the tricksters ‘there’s no *there* there’ (to adapt Gertrude Stein’s phrase), so it’s up to the interactive audience to imagine and materialize the empty ekphrasis by whatever associations they can make, thus performatively embodying the words so that they take on a guise of reality in which the bull becomes a bull, and so on, as everything takes on the properties of what its name represents.

Aware though the villagers are of the high stakes of this test, they more easily stand to gain than to lose, and the two tricksters do all they can to enable them *not* to fail, even if every blind viewer may undergo self-doubt as we see most explicitly in the case of the governor. For his part, the scribe Capacho affirms that they all *intend* to see the marvels of the *retablo*, “Todos le *pensamos* ver” (92, emphasis mine), and towards the end when Repollo refers to the creatures *he* has seen, Capacho modifies his statement by averring that everyone has seen them, “Todos las hemos visto” (99). Juana Castrada, too, warns her cousin Teresa Repolla: “y pues sabes las condiciones que han de tener los miradores del retablo, no te descuides, que sería una gran desgracia” (94), and Teresa’s response shows she’s acutely aware of the dangers. From beginning to end, all such statements confirm that the villagers know what the risks are and that, if necessary, they must all fake their way through the show to protect themselves and their community.

Even if Chanfalla and la Chirinos are extremely adept in verbally evoking the different figures that appear, there is no evidence to suggest that the villagers actually ‘see’ what they hear and pretend to see. They have the capacity to imagine so as to perform an interaction with the phantasms, but this by no means implies that they actually believe they see what they’re prompted to see. Syllogism and enthymeme override sight and predetermine that the villagers *will say they see and interact* with whatever they need to see to protect themselves and their group. *Because* Benito Repollo has four solid trunks of Old Christian lineage, everyone can be ‘damn sure’ he *will* see the Retablo: “Cuatro dedos de envidia de cristiano viejo rancioso tengo sobre los cuatro costados de mi linaje. ¡Miren si veré el tal Retablo!” (91). Juan Castrado’s claim to be son of Antón Castrado and Juana Macha are definitive premises proving he *will* see the *retablo*, “Y no digo más” (92). Similarly, Teresa Repolla’s proof that she *will* see what the *retablo* has to show is that she is Juana Castrada’s cousin, “Ya sabes, Juana Castrada, que soy tu prima, y no digo más. ¡Tan cierto tuviera yo el Cielo como tengo cierto ver todo aquello que el retablo mostrare!” (94). The prevailing mood just before the show begins is an emotional mixture of fear of disgrace, anxiety, brazen defiance, impatient curiosity, and an attitude of ‘come what may’.

This raises the question as to whether these villagers could knowingly be Jewish conversos, as has sometimes been presumed at the outset. Given overwhelming evidence that conversos, with their characteristic forms of livelihood, were strongly drawn to urban centers as well as major towns, it’s highly unlikely that Cervantes would signal a small agricultural village of conversos, let alone some hypothetical prototype of agricultural converso villages in Castile, as the object of his satire. Moreover, to assume that these villagers are conversos also presupposes that they *know* they’re conversos and have to hide their family secrets as the *retablo* ushers forth its series of affronts intended to expose them. Such an approach is capable of spinning vast cobwebs of groundless meaning in support of its assumptions. Far more likely to me, and probably to most readers, is that Cervantes is satirizing the vain presumptuousness of villagers who consider themselves Old Christians though they find themselves wondering individually whether they are what they presume to be. Their continual apprehension would not come from a fear of revealing who they know they really are but rather from finding themselves

in situations in which they can't validate who they thought they were, i.e. the premise upon which they believed themselves more honorable and thus worth more than any other social category with regard to 'blood purity'.

The names of the village characters imply comically perverse associations in their relations to nature through animal husbandry and agriculture, all of them somehow casting suspicion over their procreation. Thus on the animal side we have Juan Castrado, proud son of Antón Castrado and Juana Macha and putative father of Juana Castrada, who is getting betrothed that very day. Similarly, it has been plausibly proposed that the scribe Pedro Capacho's surname not only designates a kind of basket but also suggests the notion of *capar* and *capado*. On the vegetable side we have the unflattering surnames of Benito Repollo and his daughter Teresa Repolla. Numerous critics have followed Maurice Molho's analysis of characters' names such that the men are assumed to be either castrated or stupid, or both, and the women hypersexualized (177-213). To the extent that these interpretations may be valid, they point primarily to only one of the two conditions for seeing the *retablo*, that of marital illegitimacy, not that other more dreadful disease, impurity of blood.

More broadly, this interlude reverberates with sexual and erotic language as it relates to the two conditions for seeing the *retablo* as well as the series of apparitions —Samson, a raging bull, mice, the waters of the River Jordan's source, lions and bears, 'Herodias'— none of which is sexually neutral, as numerous critics have shown. The reinvigorated long-haired Samson necessarily evokes Delilah's prior 'castrating' act within their mixed Jewish-Gentile marriage. Juan Castrado's remark about the bull's ferocity prompts Juana Castrada to respond: "Y ¡cómo, padre! No pienso volver en mí en tres días; ya me vi en sus cuernos, que los tiene agudos como una lesna" —to which Juan Castrado equivocally responds: "No fueras tú mi hija y no lo vieras," begging the question as to whether this lineage of Castrados and Castradas is biologically kin. These mice, descended directly from those of Noah's ark, are likewise sexualized as they assault the young women's legs. The waters of the Jordan River would rejuvenate the two young women in particular, but the fact that the men need to cover themselves implies that they would be 'feminized', as scholars have affirmed. When Juan Castrado and Benito Repollo complain about the dreadfulness of lions and bears, Juana Castrada responds for herself and her cousin: "deje salir ese oso y leones, siquiera por nosotras, y recibiremos mucho contento," adding "Todo lo nuevo aplice, señor padre" (98). These two young women, one of them the bride, are by this time undoubtedly enjoying themselves at the expense of their fathers. The most sensuous and erotic figure of all is Herodias (alias Salome), whose dancing was rewarded with the head of John the Baptist; Repollo's nephew, possibly the groom (as critics have assumed), dances with this enchanting Jewish dancer, much to his uncle's vicarious delight. All of these erotic associations resonate with the two conditions for being able to 'see' the *retablo*'s marvels, both of which are imbued with sexual implications.

Unlike, for example, the kinds of honor based on the perceived sexual conduct of the women in a family, or on someone's perceived valor and achievements, the kinds of honor arising from perceived purity of blood or being born within wedlock come from one or more generations past, and by definition people can't be sure that they haven't descended from some dishonorable union. When the French travel writer Paul Bourget declared in 1895 that "the average American did not know who his grandfather was [...] Mark Twain made the famous retort that the American was still better off than the average Frenchman, who was not sure who his *father* was" (Twain 10, original emphasis). In the *Retablo* we have the governor wondering in asides whether he is a bastard and an Old Christian. These are logical doubts because he can't

see the marvels of the *retablo* yet accepts the conditions for seeing them. In relation to early modern Spain, more and more cases of mixed unions between Old Christians and Jewish conversos or Moriscos have been emerging in archives. Even in a rural village with no known New Christians in the vicinity, no one could be sure. The *retablo* spectacle is interrupted by an order from the *furrier*/quartermaster that the village has to provide immediate lodging for 30 mounted soldiers. In this respect we might recall Teresa Panza's letter to Sancho, where she tells him: "Por aquí pasó una compañía de soldados: lleváronse de camino tres mozas deste pueblo; no te quiero decir quién son: quizá volverán y no faltará quien las tome por mujeres, con sus tachas buenas o malas" (II, 52, 1060).

As we know, 'blood purity' has a long and complicated history in the Iberian Peninsula. I hesitate to read a modern sense of 'race' into the relations between Christians, Jews and Muslims or their early modern descendants just as I find that race is mostly absent in relations within the early modern Mediterranean world except when it refers to slaves from sub-Saharan Africa. As Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us in his book *The Lies That Bind*, fully developed race consciousness with all its ills took shape especially in nineteenth-century Europe and America (105-134). Though such a consciousness is only apparent in certain contexts within early modern Spain, some elements of it do emerge, particularly in attitudes toward 'blood purity', which involved essentializing that invisible and unprovable quality that people like these villagers of the *Retablo* believe they have and share with each other over and above other sectors of the population. Contrary to what various critics have assumed, I would hasten to add that there seems to be little indication that these village officials occupy a social status significantly above that of the rest of the village. When Pedro Capacho corrects Repollo's individualism by saying that everybody will see the *retablo*'s marvels, Juan Castrado alludes to the whole village when he says, "No nacimos acá en las malvas, señor Pedro Capacho" (92). For the *furrier*, they are all "villanos" (101). Despite being close to the bottom of the larger social hierarchy, their claims to blood purity give them the illusion of being superior to other classes and urban populations owing to their possessing the invisible and unprovable currency of blood honor. They all seem to believe that they have it and that they therefore occupy an exceptional social category endowed with a higher worth that upends other criteria of social hierarchy. Albeit hilarious, this is a disturbing precedent to certain forms of racism that we are all too familiar with, e.g. white supremacy.

Yet before the wonder show is put on for them, these villagers show no signs as such of fanaticism. Indeed, they welcome the traveling strangers in a village that would have been a nucleus of roads for traffic in and out. My impression is that they simply assume their blood purity without needing to assert it to anyone. Even the stated conditions for seeing the *retablo* don't seem to trouble them because they're confident that they meet those conditions and will thus pass the test or at least endure it as spectators watching a show that won't affect them. Undoubtedly they're very curious about it, but without suspecting that it will put them all through a grueling trial.

What kind of group are they? Theatrically the village leaders appear together, and a few family members add to their number for the wonder show. The tricksters group them together in a private event to the exclusion of the rest of the village. They are also a group of people who work together as village officials. Moreover, they are neighbors with close-knit families, where the (unmarried) governor is godfather to the *regidor*'s daughter and has enough familiarity to propose that she be betrothed that very day in her home and that the *retablo* be part of the festivities, to which Juan Castrado readily agrees. The two young women, Juana Castrada and

Teresa Repolla, are cousins, which may well imply that the mother of one of them would be the aunt and father's sister of the other. As said, Repollo's unnamed nephew ("sobrino Repollo") may well be the groom in this ceremony, and this too might involve one degree or another of endogamy. All of this, from being neighbors, working together, celebrating a betrothal together and having a network of close kinship ties suggests an intimate and multi-faceted grouping of these characters. But they also form a group more like a category in the sense that they assume they share that essence of blood purity that sets them above other categories and endows them with a transcendent kind of honor, and this they would share with other people geographically dispersed who are like them in this respect. Their supposed 'group', then, extends across various types of relations from intimate ties to a widely dispersed category of people imagined to have that essence in common, above multitudes of people who don't have it. Endogamy helps to keep the blood pure even if, for example, the patriline of Castrados would onomastically imply illegitimacy from one generation to the next. Suggestive as this is, particularly in view of family procreation, Cervantine names are only partial indicators of who characters are, and it seems to me that they don't automatically authorize us to jump to conclusions that the text won't otherwise corroborate. Rather than emulating the simplistic logic of the villagers though in reverse, e.g. by assuming that anyone called Castrado is *therefore* not the father of his 'son' or 'daughter', we can adopt more closely the perspectives of the tricksters, or better yet, perhaps those of their author.

Even as it invites the villagers into an improvisatory terrain, the *retablo* itself puts them all through an emotional wringer, particularly in the first several apparitions. All of these come *out* of the *Retablo*, as it were, invading the audience's comfort zone as each character pretends to see what's happening and convey this to everyone else. All are forced to feign extreme emotions as the dangers and pleasures of the surprisingly interactive *retablo* engage them directly. Perhaps with the exception of the two young women who start to welcome the apparitions, the *retablo*'s audience finds itself trapped with no escape, captive to whatever comes out to them, and begs Montiel and la Chirinos to intervene in their favor if they can. At the same time, the villagers do indeed appropriate the apparitions, stage their intervention and describe or narrativize them, thus taking a measure of control over whatever comes out at them. The sequence leaves the men emotionally frazzled and highly apprehensive, all with the hope that they won't let on to everyone else that they're faking it. The deliberately rapid succession of specters leaves them anxious with no time to recover or regroup from one to the next, though the appearance of Salome turns this into a festive scene of imagined erotic dancing. What's more, individual loss of honor would also redound on other characters and in fact on the whole group, which shares blood purity as an essence they have in common. David Castillo and William Egginton generalize the lesson of this interlude to the kinds of contexts we can readily recognize nowadays:

The real danger comes not when we fail to see, but when we stop pretending to see. And of course daring to show our disbelief would be the truly subversive act, which is why any public demonstration of disbelief is preemptively defined as the mark of radical otherness. Who are the puppets in Chanfalla's tableau if not the spectators who are forced to blindly perform the community's mythical beliefs in order to secure their social identity? (*Medialogies* 32-33)

Masterfully orchestrated by the tricksters, this is how the group dynamics functions, but until the *furrier* appears and soon reappears, there's no sense of how the tricksters will bring this

to a successful close or how the villagers will react to so much mortification even if they've all maintained outward appearances.

It is instructive to compare Cervantes' version of the story with the only source in oral and written traditions that he was sure to have had access to, that of don Juan Manuel's *El conde Lucanor* (exemplo 32) in the *princeps* version edited by Gonzalo de Argote y Molina and published (as chapter 7) in 1575. Scholars have signaled fundamental differences such as the fact that Cervantes offers the first theatricalized version of the story, that he of course radicalizes the story by adding blood purity as a condition for seeing the *retablo*, and that a *retablo de maravillas* functions very distinctly from the king's invisible clothes (and besides, why would a king go out in public on a festive occasion if he knew that every bastard would see him naked?). I would like to point to a few other differences, and will draw from the *princeps* edition because, for my purposes, the original text and the 1575 edition are virtually identical, and Cervantes would only have known the latter. In the story in *El conde Lucanor*, there are no women at all — no wives, no mothers, no daughters, no women lovers, no women among the festive public— nor is there any hint that women might somehow be significant with regard to the legal legitimacy of their sons. The one condition for 'seeing' the clothes is that every man be his father's son, the father-son relationship being the most difficult to prove until the three itinerant 'cloth-makers' claim that only the legitimately begotten will be able to see their cloth.

Furthermore, the story is set in Muslim territory in which (father-son) legitimacy is not only a matter of honor or dishonor but, more importantly, determines whether the son's inheritance is legally his or not ("ca los moros no heredan cosa de lo de su padre sino verdaderamente sus hijos," 20v), and it is suggested that the king has the ulterior motive of enriching himself by dispossessing those who are revealed to be illegitimate. This plan begins to fail when the king himself can't 'see' the clothes and fears he may lose the kingdom he inherited from his father. Thus, as the story rather monotonously narrates, everybody (i.e. every man entrusted by the king), knowing what the one condition is for seeing the cloth, claims to see it, as does the king himself, until the black groom of the king's horse, who has nothing to lose, tells the king that he doesn't care what his master thinks about who his father might be, but that he knows that the king himself is naked:

fasta que un negro que guardava el cavallo del rey, que non avía que perder pudiesse, llegó al rey y díxole: "Señor, a mí no me empece que me tengades por fijo de aquel que yo digo nin de otro, e por ende digo vos que soy cierto que vos desnudo ydes." (21v)

This is overheard by someone else, and very soon everyone (every man) says that the king is naked and all realize that this has been an act of deception by swindlers who have already absconded. Thus the person who reveals the truth is a relative outsider (a black, a servant or slave, one whose paternal legitimacy is irrelevant in this context) who has nothing to lose by doing so. The king, who doesn't seem disturbed by his nakedness in public, realizes he has been duped and the truth prevails.

Cervantes' theatrical version could hardly be more different. To begin with, women are important throughout in every way imaginable —as a compelling trickster partner, as nubile villagers full of *picardía*, as strong mothers, as the cause of Samson's weakness, as the voluptuous imagined figure of Salome "cuyo baile alcanzó en premio la cabeza del Precursor de la vida" (as la Chirinos notes almost parenthetically)— and their role in sexual and procreational honor or dishonor is potentially decisive. While the legal theme of father-son inheritance drops

out of sight, Cervantes' village men, as their names imply, may be less than virile, and this too would represent a sort of humorous inversion of expectations for that epoch.

Moreover, the relation to truth is also inverted. In *El conde Lucanor*, the movement is from deception to truth, which then prevails with complacent clarity through all the layers and sectors of a community. *El retablo de las maravillas*, in contrast, begins with deception and ends up confirming the lie more strongly than ever for the inner audience of villagers, thanks in large part to the *furrier's* opportune entrance at the moment when, ignorant of the rules of the game, he fails to see the invisible dancer so vividly imagined by the villagers. This in turn reveals to Cervantes' audiences—as opposed to that of the tricksters within the wonder show—how the deepest ideological falsehoods are contrived, propagated and upheld. It reveals to us the truths that the villagers deny, and not only that, it shows us how and why their lies arise, how they are communicated and how they prevail against all appearances—and it thus shows the workings of the most unfounded and sinister kinds of ideology from latency to performance and violence.

In *El conde Lucanor*, groups dynamics are virtually absent as every man looks out for himself, making sure he doesn't get caught in the snare of this test and can thus hold on to his property and social standing. Likewise, when the truth comes out it passes from one man to another without stirring up any collective behavior. In *El retablo*, on the contrary, the quartermaster's unwitting intrusion into the sphere of illusion enables the villagers to scapegoat him and to let group behavior take over completely so as to assert their perhaps shaken collective honor and exteriorize the trial they have been undergoing onto someone who doesn't know the rules and therefore fails to see the invisible Salome and is ipso facto one of 'them'. It is of course at this moment when the we/they divide appears in all its intensity. Of course the villagers are irked by his presence from the start as someone who imposes on them the imperative of providing lodging for His Majesty's troops. Curiously, it is the two most literate characters, Capacho and the governor, measured in their statements early in the play, who initiate the spellbinding chant in Latin, *ex illis es*, immediately corrupted by the regidor and alcalde in Spanish as *dellos es*. These individuals are no longer themselves but rather the voice of a frenzied collectivity bent on reaffirming itself right into a violent ending.

Without having any idea of what's going on, the *furrier* in fact asks the most relevant question conceivable: "Está loca esta gente?" The answer, of course, is yes. We might recall here Nietzsche's observation in an aphorism: "Madness is rare in individuals—but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule" (*Beyond Good and Evil* #156). This might be an insightful starting point for an analysis of any age including our own. Early modern Spain was by no means lacking in forms of madness, and Cervantes in the *Retablo de las maravillas* not only identifies a primary form of madness in the purity of blood ideology but also shows how it takes on a single-minded tribal inertia transcending quasi-rational individuals. Much of Spain suffered from this contagious, wide-spread ideological disease, which begs the question as to whether the object of satire isn't much wider than the class of *labradores*, who have no alternative than to offer themselves as dupes that signal a more endemic madness.

One of the most telling moments in the interlude is perhaps the apparition of mice, as announced by Chirinos: "Esa manada de ratones que allá va deciendo por línea recta de aquellos que se criaron en el Arca de Noé. Dellos son blancos, dellos albarazados, dellos jaspeados y dellos azules, y finalmente, todos son ratones" (96). The two young women are assailed up their skirts with Teresa Repolla exclaiming, "Un ratón morenico me tiene asida de una rodilla" (97), a detail whose racial eroticism scholars have been quick to point out. What we have here is a wide array of mice with different colors and designs, yet all of them *mice*—"finalmente, todos son

ratones”— descended directly from those (presumably two) in Noah’s ark. In order to do away with all discriminatory logic regarding races, castes, religious affiliations and the like, all that Cervantes’ external audience needs to do is transfer to humans this principle of visual multiplicity within a single species, i.e. a transition from mice to men. These mice would be quite immune to the *retablo*’s exclusionary principles of legitimacy and blood purity, and yet they would all be mice.

As of the late nineteenth century, social scientists from different disciplines began to inquire more fully into group behavior over and above individual behavior. To mention only a few of the most influential names in this emerging field, we could point to Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 study of crowd behavior, Sigmund Freud’s later work such as *Totem and Taboo* (1912-1913) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), among other later works of his acknowledging that group psychology often superseded individual psychology, and sociologist (and social psychologist) Kurt Lewin, who coined the term ‘group dynamics’ in 1947 after decades of research into group behavior. Lewin’s ‘equation’ $B = f(P, E)$, novel in its time, expresses the currently obvious idea, in part thanks to Lewin’s own work, that ‘Behavior is a function of the Person in his/her Environment’ —an environment largely constituted by collective thought and behavior and affecting individuals not just retrospectively but *while* they are engaged in particular events or processes (Lewin 253-291).²

In literature one finds representations of group dynamics at least from Homer to the present, though scholarship has paid rather scant attention to this. An examination of such representations could well reveal a great deal about writers and the worlds they lived in. For most of his life Cervantes would have observed the workings of group dynamics in a vast number of different situations and contexts, in addition to his wide readings. His novels and plays are in fact populated by a broad range of collectivities in which group dynamics are at work in the most diverse ways, ranging from the collective suicide in *La Numancia* to the pastoralized love madness in *Don Quixote* I, 51, where the hills and valleys echo the name Leandra with adoration and complaint sung by innumerable shepherds. One might also recall groupings of characters in many of the episodes of the *Novelas ejemplares* (Gypsies, the house of Monipodio, street crowds surrounding the Glass Licentiate Rueda, the household of Carrizales, among others), *Don Quixote* (to name a few examples would unfairly eclipse many others), and the *Persiles* (from the hordes of barbarians to the urban masses in Rome, and much in between). Perhaps no writer has explored such a varied range of collectivities and group dynamics as Cervantes has, where some kind of ‘group-think’ supersedes the powers of individual characters within the group or —often— outside it (e.g. don Quixote and the yangüeses, or the muleteers and Santa Hermandad at the inn of Juan Palomeque, or the enchanted in the Cave of Montesinos, or the orchestrated groups in the “bodas de Camacho,” or the villages involved in the adventure of the “rebuznos,” or Roque Guinart’s bandits, and so on). To suggest that Cervantes anticipates the study of collectivities and group dynamics would be a gross understatement.

Undoubtedly one of Cervantes’ most incisive probes into group dynamics is exemplified in the *Retablo*, centered most poignantly on the toxic ideology of blood purity. The interlude reveals the workings of this ideology: how baseless it is, how it takes hold of those who presume to have blood purity to the detriment of those they consider impure, how it corrupts the system of values and particularly notions of ‘honor’, and how it becomes self-propagating after being set in

² Note that this idea diverges considerably from the famous formula of José Ortega y Gasset in *Meditaciones del ‘Quijote’* (1914), as is evident in the second half of the sentence, which does not allude to any kind of group dynamics: “Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia, y si no la salvo a ella no me salvo yo.”

motion, adversely affecting social praxis in multiple ways. For those who take advantage of it following their ‘herd instinct’, it is a self-evident and self-sustaining ideology that offers no explanation and admits no questioning. By the time Salome and the furrier enter the *retablo*’s space—and then re-enter it after leaving it—the villagers have taken sufficient control of the game to render Chanfalla and la Chirinos almost superfluous, turning them into amazed bystanders as the show goes on and dissipates into a fight. It would not interest the villagers to know that the biblical utterance “de ex illis es” actually accuses Peter of being a follower of Jesus rather than a practicing Jew, since what matters to them is their gut sense of how this we/they dichotomy can serve their purposes by reinforcing the superiority of ‘we’. (Curiously, the two young women, who have already distanced themselves from their fathers by welcoming the *retablo*’s fearful marvels, don’t seem to take part in this subhuman behavior.)

It is striking how often scholars have rated the *Retablo*—this little play belonging to a humble genre—not only as *the* masterpiece of the brilliant collection of *Entremeses* but also the best of Cervantes’ theatre, and occasionally the best play of early modern Spain, which is no doubt an audacious and disputable assessment though not entirely devoid of criteria. There are obviously many other contenders in this last regard, and I have no reason to advocate for one play or another. Where the *Retablo* stands out is in its metatheatrical depth, its ingenious setup, its creating so much out of nothing via negative ekphrasis, its combination of phantoms and realities, its openness to improvisation on the part of all characters, its multiple sources of humor from slapstick to profound, its lively characterization of a village community, its inversion of commonplaces from Lope’s new theatre, its intrepid satire of a still hallowed ideology, its intrinsic portrayal of an entire society in so few pages, and, I would add, its luminous portrayal of the workings of a socially and culturally pathological ideology—as Cervantes does with so many other themes. All of these aspects, among others, may well be secrets of this brief work’s extraordinary vitality that make it stand almost alone, not only in what it means but also in what it does and what it wants. The *Retablo* refers, of course, to a particular ideology of the early modern age, but it lays bare the logic of the early modern ‘blood purity’ ideology in ways that could be transferred to other pernicious, ideologically-driven forms of group dynamics that existed then or have widely appeared over the past centuries, including our own times. The *Retablo* provides multiple paradigms that can be appropriated by different ages and cultures, and this is perhaps the prime secret of its vitality.

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