

## ◆ Chapter 1

### **From Critical Reading to Collective Action: A Progressive Reading of Castillo and Egginton's Notion of Reality Literacy**

*Bradley J. Nelson*

Season 3 of Malcolm Gladwell's podcast *Revisionist History* features an episode called "The Satire Paradox," which begins with an interview of British comic Harry Enfield. Enfield is best known for a satirical Colbert-like caricature called Loadsamoney that he created and performed during Margaret Thatcher's term as prime minister of Great Britain in the 1980s. Although the character, which lampooned Thatcher's violently neoliberal policies in the form of a crass, Trump-like *bonvivant*, became what today we would call a viral meme in its saturation of British TV and press, the comic himself came to doubt the political efficacy of what was an undeniable media sensation. Indeed, subsequent research on Loadsamoney revealed that conservative viewers were way more enthusiastic about the loud, money-throwing cretin than liberals, who were more likely to cringe at the social excesses and political incorrectness of the oaf than laugh at the satire behind him. For Gladwell, Loadsamoney serves as a counter-intuitive introduction to his discussion of the political impact of satirical *infotainment* programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *The Colbert Report*. Several recent books celebrate the biting, news-based satire of Stewart, Samantha Bee, John Oliver, and others, but they take particular note of Colbert's embodiment of a barely exaggerated version of conservative radio and television political commentators like Bill O'Reilly and the recently deceased Rush Limbaugh. These critics celebrate Colbert's humor as some of the most important and politically effective "public pedagogy" of the twenty-first century, coining the term "satiractivism" to characterize the way Colbert, Bee, Stewart, and Oliver combine satirical humor and political activism.<sup>1</sup> In *Colbert's America*, Sophie McLennen argues that:

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[I]t seems clear that one of [Colbert's] goals is to reinvigorate the public sphere by 1) using satire to open up a space for debate and deliberation about the state of the nation and its practices, and 2) creating a sense of empowerment among his viewers by reaffirming their ability to shape public discourse and influence politics. (191)

Gladwell takes his study in a different direction by interviewing communications scholars and social psychologists of political satire who ask whether or not Colbert's satire actually does what we (liberals, in the main) intuitively think it is doing. Their studies largely confirm Aristotelian theorems of aesthetic reception by exposing wide divergences in audience interpretations of Colbert's humor. According to research by Heather Lamarre et al., although viewers of Stewart's and Colbert's infotainment programs are generally better informed about current events than audiences of network news programs, there are sharp differences in the reception of Colbert's satire influenced mainly by the ideological inclinations of audience members. Spectators who self-identified as more liberal or democratic-leaning tended to understand Colbert's satire as providing a critical, if humorous, perspective on conservative political and cultural commentators, as well as acerbic critiques of neoliberal political and legal policies, fear-inducing wedge issues steeped in misogyny and racism, and, importantly, the economic and political embeddedness of the infotainment industry. In other words, they understood *The Colbert Report* as a self-ironical satirical performance, whose words and gestures communicate the opposite of what the performer acts out on camera.

On the other end of the spectrum, self-identifying conservative and Republican-inclined viewers tended to interpret Colbert's performance as funny but ultimately directed against the liberal political figures, policies, and ideologies that Colbert exaggeratedly attacks in order to unveil the prevailing fundamentalism of conservative social and cultural commentators. In the words of Heather Lamarre et al.:

Individual-level ideology significantly predicted perceptions of Colbert's political ideology. Additionally, there was no significant difference between the groups in thinking Colbert was funny, but conservatives were more likely to report that Colbert only pretends to be joking and genuinely meant what he said while liberals were more likely to report that Colbert used satire and was not serious when offering political statements.

Conservatism also significantly predicted perceptions that Colbert disliked liberalism. (“The Irony of Satire” 212)

These findings would not surprise scholars of Classical and early modern satire and parody, as Margaret Rose explains in *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*: “the reception of parody by its external reader will depend upon the latter’s reading of the ‘signals’ given in the parody text which relate to or indicate the relationship between the parody and the parodied text and its associations” (41). Or, put much more succinctly by the social psychologists Emily Balcetis and David Dunning, “People only see what they are motivated to see” (614).

In their recent book *What Would Cervantes Do?* David Castillo and William Egginton analyze a number of well-studied examples of politically-driven satire from Miguel de Cervantes’s oeuvre in their explanation and performance of reading and viewing strategies designed to equip modern and postmodern readers with powerful analytical and pedagogical tools for countering the medialogical saturation and informational overload of the current news cycle. These examples include Colbertian, satirical embodiments of ultra-conservative and racist prejudices by Morisco victims of the 1609 expulsion in *Don Quixote I* and *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*: “both speeches (Ricote’s in *Don Quixote* and *el jadraque*’s in *Persiles*) work exactly in the same way, by piling on the mythical imagery of Morisco otherness in the midst of passionate defenses of the ‘final solution’ that are incongruously attributed to the victims themselves” (146). E. Michael Gerli’s recent analysis of the *jadraque*’s harangue within the context of medieval and early modern prophecies of the New David strengthens Castillo and Egginton’s ironical interpretation, but it also outlines a number of divergent interpretations.<sup>2</sup> According to Gerli, some would have seen it as a “flashback” to the prophetic tradition, others as monarchical propaganda, others as a reference to the barely completed expulsion of the Moriscos; but “Cervantes’s most careful readers [ . . . ] would have seen and appreciated the prophecy as an example of the deepest Cervantine irony” (167). Gerli hammers this last point home through a linguistic-cultural analysis of the term *jadraque* that exposes the self-hating Morisco as a boastful zealot, “an augury of the wages of religious intolerance, chauvinism, xenophobia, economic failure, and the general discord that the expulsion of the Moriscos would eventually produce” (160). Basically, Cervantes erects a discursive mirror between the self-hating Morisco and hardline proponents of the expulsion in seventeenth-century Spain in a magisterial critique of racist gaslighting. The Colbertian parallels are hard to miss, minus the uncomfortable or celebratory laughter, depending how one interprets the harangue of course. If there is laughter in Cervantes’s covert satire it would be of

the darkest kind, more of a rueful smile or grimace that arises when we realize that nothing can be done in the face an intolerant situation other than laugh. Of particular note for this analysis are the divergent interpretive postures outlined by Gerli, which remind one of Lamarre's analysis of viewer reactions to *The Colbert Report*, not to mention the long history of positivistic and philological attempts to nail down the "real meaning" of Cervantes's self-consciously ironic narratives (Gerli; and Julio Baena in *Discordancias cervantinas*). There are few if any direct rhetorical signals that would keep a conservative reader from saying, *I told you so . . . it's a win-win scenario*.

Castillo and Egginton's antidote for such interpretive confusion—keeping in mind that we don't have much if any evidence of Cervantes's out-of-character explanations of what his rhetorical intentions were, unlike Colbert, who explains on many occasions the satirical intent behind his media persona—is a pedagogical and critical program centered on "reality literacy": "reality literacy entails [ . . . ] a hypersensitivity, trained by art and fiction, to the strategies deployed by today's medialogy that render invisible the exclusions and externalizations which lend reality its fantasy of coherence" (48). Their principal targets include the seemingly impenetrable social, cultural, and political divisions erected and exacerbated by social media through algorithmically-driven information conduits and bubbles, and, at the individual level, the fetishization of subjective authenticity, which leads to a sense of "*reality entitlement* . . . weaponized by the algorithms that run the most effective confirmation-bias machine in history" (157).

This sense of entitlement often takes the form of unhinged expressions of individual freedom that, in effect, place us in a very vulnerable position where ideological and medialogical manipulation are concerned. Trapped in an isolating hyperreality, it becomes almost impossible to recognize and validate the experiences of others, let alone work toward a collective understanding of humanity. In his recent book *Dividuals*, Julio Baena likewise speaks to the effects of social media on reflections of identity:

[W]hen the reflection offers itself in the form of the revindication of oppressed collectivities such as Latinxs or African Americans, for whom [collective] identity is the antidote to the damage that individuality has done to them, a new reality distorts that reflection; that is when individuality assumes command of the process of identity in the form of the social media with its virtual regroupings of people in terms of 'likes' and the algorithmic engine [ . . . ] [i]ndividuality takes over any and all the weapons that identity offered to the collective. (2)

What Baena elaborates in Castillo and Egginton's paradigm, in other words, are the ways in which twenty-first-century media, and especially social media, obstruct the formation of collective political identities by focusing so intently on seeding, cultivating, and harvesting the attention of the individual (*The Social Dilemma*). While I wholeheartedly embrace both of these theoretical, analytical, and pedagogical approaches, when we dig a bit deeper into the cognitive processes of discursive and mediological reception and interpretation, we find that the pedagogical project of reality literacy and/or embrace of *dividuality* are important parts, or moments, of a broader and collective cognitive- and values-driven project. In this essay I will treat the identification and critical interpretation of satire and irony as one stage in the formation of new alliances and collective identities; alliances and identities that are hopefully more resistant to mediological manipulation as well as more potentially empowering in the political sense. As we will see in the studies on cognition included here, reality literacy should not be seen necessarily as a *first* step but rather as part and parcel of what social psychologists call *social identity*.

To begin, Lamarre et al. cite recent work in social psychology that “demonstrates that individuals process information in ways that personally benefit them and that people tend to see what they want to see when information is ambiguous” (“The Irony of Satire” 213). Not surprisingly, much of the problem stems from the fact that “individuals with strong political ideologies may be motivated by their *social self*,” a self that strives to maintain group membership in ways that also underline their individuality (“The Irony of Satire” 214 my emphasis). In other words, individuals strive to be exemplary and/or unique members of the social group to which they belong, or desire to belong. According to Marilyn Brewer, “social identity derives from a fundamental tension between human needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a counter-vailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other)” (477). Cervantes brilliantly displays this dynamic throughout his theatrical *entremeses*, particularly in *El retablo de las maravillas*, where, in Stanislav Zimic's reading, “there is extensive textual evidence that the characters are not suffering from any sort of delusion, but are, rather, *consciously* denying the truth of what they all fail to see” (Castillo and Egginton 65 my emphasis). The social group they are striving to affirm membership in, of course, circulates around the mythical existence of “old Christian” purity, and Brewer's study helps explain the increasingly outrageous attempts by the spectators to embody and perform the ideological persona invoked by Chanfalla before the performance. Zimic's notion of *conscious* self-deception, however, would be questioned by social psychologists, who have shown that “biased processing concerns itself

with a type of precognitive, unintentional information processing that occurs as a means of creating self-enhancing benefits” (Lamarre et al. “The Irony of Satire” 215). Such an observation would surely be useful in analyzing something as complex as Don Quixote’s sanity. I am also reminded of an observation by the narrator of *Persiles* from the second book:

Efetos vemos en la naturaleza de quien ignoramos las causas; adormécense o entorpecense a uno los dientes de ver cortar con un cuchillo un paño; tiembla tal vez un hombre de un ratón, y yo le he visto temblar de ver cortar un rábano, y a otro he visto levantarse de una mesa de respeto por ver poner unas aceitunas (II 5.302)

(We see effects in nature whose causes we do not know; one person’s teeth fall asleep or go numb when he sees a knife cut through cloth; a man perhaps trembles upon seeing a rat, and I have seen another tremble at the slicing of a radish, and another get up from the table out of respect for putting out a plate of olives)

Here, Cervantes seems to identify unconscious cognitive and emotional triggers—*inclinations*, in Counter Reformation scientific terms—which makes his works even more powerful, and useful, for understanding media reception in our own time. There is evidence in early modern scholarship that this notion of unconscious cognitive processes was already understood, in addition to the continuing importance of Galenic notions such as the influence of bodily humors on an individual’s disposition (López-Terrada and Pardo-Tomás).

Daniel T. Gilbert observes that Spinoza, in opposition to Descartes, understands “the temporary acceptance of a proposition [as] part of the nonvoluntary process of comprehension itself” (116). In the nineteenth century, William James puts it this way: “All propositions, whether attributive or existential, are believed through the very fact of being conceived” (cited in Gilbert 108). And L.R. Horn has concluded, still following Spinoza, that “[e]very negative statement presupposes a corresponding affirmative . . . but not vice versa. Negation is consequently a second-order affirmation. Negative statements are about positive statements, while affirmatives are directly about the world” (cited in Gilbert 113). Castillo and Egginton develop this point when they talk about how difficult it is to counteract disinformation, since even a false affirmation is taken as being directly about the world (*What*

*Would Cervantes Do?* 150). Consider two current examples: Vladimir Putin's accusations that the Ukrainian government is run by neo-Nazis and drug addicts; and what has come to be known as Donald Trump's Big Lie about the 2019 US presidential elections. By the time we learn that Ukrainian President Zelensky is not only Jewish but lost much of his family in the Holocaust, or that there is no factual evidence supporting the Big Lie, much of the damage has been done because human cognition privileges affirmations as being, in the words of Spinoza, *directly about the world* (Gillian Brockell; Jane Mayer). In addition, the more stressed an organism is, the more likely it is to revert back to first-order cognition processes; in the words of Daniel Kahneman, "Contrary to the rules of philosophers of science, who advise testing hypotheses by trying to refute them, people (and scientists, quite often) seek data that are likely to be compatible with the beliefs they current hold" (81).

Spinoza thus identifies a number of particularly vexing problems in human communication that have a direct bearing on the use and comprehension of satire and parody, not the least being the multi-modal nature of satire's ironical structures and timing as well as its tacitly communicated intent. To summarize Spinoza's position from the point of view of satire: satire is a second-order proposition, being an attempted negation of a first-order proposition, i.e., the parodied text, which is believed, albeit temporarily, in the very act of its conception. In addition, the fact that the parodied text is presented as a first-order affirmation places it in direct contact with the world while the parody attempts to break that contact through irony and humor. There is, in other words, a kind of unconscious cognitive logic that supports affirmative statements consisting of dis- and mis-information, especially when it supports the biases of exclusive social groups. Although the use of irony and humor would seem to be powerful tools for interrupting these unconscious processes, they can also be volatile and unpredictable in their performance and reception, as we have already seen.

In his study "The Privileged Role of the Late-Night Joke," Dannagal Young concludes that irony and humor complicate comprehension in a number of ways that make it difficult to gauge audience responses, and they do this by triggering two different cognitive processes. In addition to simply identifying satire's comedic frame, spectators and readers are rhetorically invited to recognize and assess "competing scripts" by comparing the satirized model (an affirmation) with its ironic performance (a negation), assuming, of course, that there are sufficient signals, as Rose puts it, to recognize that the satire is indeed a satire. This last item is a major issue with Colbert, whose performances provide few if any explicit cues to their ironic intent. This is also the case with Ricote's and the *jadraque*'s curious laments, as the still-divided critical opinions on their meaning and interpretation show. Returning



to Young, the cognitive load of processing humor negatively affects the second instance of processing, *argument scrutiny*, which “involves critically challenging the underlying premise of the message arguments presented in a given text” (122). In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman puts it like this: “People who are *cognitively busy* are also more likely to make selfish choices [ . . . ] and [ . . . ] superficial judgments in social situations” (41). Kahneman’s conclusion links Young’s claim that “depletion in cognitive resources will thereby reduce the message recipient’s ability to scrutinize the underlying message arguments in the text” (122) to the sociological analysis of the importance of the social self to medialogical interpretation. These studies help explain the conservative reception of Colbert’s humor in two ways: on the one hand, the cognitive effort involved in recognizing the faux commentator’s humor as such acts as an obstacle to perceiving his ironical intent and the intended targets of his irony; on the other, the emphatic naiveté of the in-character Colbert is seen to reinforce pre-existing conservative ideological assumptions. Conversely, liberal viewers are also seeing their pre-existing ideological and social assumptions confirmed by the out-of-character intent behind Colbert’s satirical performance of the O’Reilly caricature. In the end, Colbert’s and possibly Cervantes’s humor push opposing political and ideological ideologies to their breaking point, a kind of point of no return, since there appears to be no way to reconcile the opposing fields of reception. This unintentional confirmation of pre-existing biases is what Lamarre calls the “paradox of satire.”

One way that Cervantes appears to work through this deadlock is by making the impasse itself a possible target of satire. In the “resolution” of the ongoing gag in the *baciyelmo* episodes in *Don Quixote I*, the barber’s legitimate complaint is overwhelmed by the false consensus forged by Don Fernando, a privileged, sophisticated, and cynical aristocrat (chapter 45). Although the scene is uproariously chaotic and filled with satirical barbs aimed at knight and barber alike, I would argue that this is a different kind of humor, which I would like to briefly comment on before plotting a course out of the seemingly hopeless situation presented by social psychologists concerning the interpretation of satire. At the end of this episode there is a loss of reality through the assemblage and social acceptance of a lie, i.e., that the barber’s basin is, in fact, the magical Helmet of Mambrino. The power of fiction to create a reality that violates and overwhelms the social materiality of the basin, especially in the hands of a nobleman, is darkly shaded by the social contract forged at the inn and the use of aristocratic power to bend the will of the other participants in its acceptance. Henry Sullivan’s identification of the implicit and explicit sadism of the duke and duchess in *Don Quixote II* is a useful analog here (56–60; 147–49). This realization can turn the supposed



laughter arising from the collision of incompatible schemas inward, producing a melancholic and dour aftershock in some readers, not unlike the final scene in *El retablo de las maravillas* in which the *furrier* is accused by the townspeople of being a Jew. Both barber and *furrier* are excluded from social groups holding to delusional beliefs based on the inability or refusal to disconnect their desire from partisan and exclusionary fictional consensuses, in spite of convincing evidence that they are caught in social and identity traps, or feedback loops. This oblique perspective opens onto a broader and more inclusive mindset, which is where Cervantes's ideal reader would be located, as Gerli and Castillo and Egginton have all argued. It is this potentially broader community of interpretation of *lectores avisados* that I would like to focus on in the rest of this essay (Spadaccini 57–73). There are, of course, other potential readers—we see them in the text—but I don't think that we are supposed to understand the diverse social identities presented and performed in these scenarios as more or less out of touch with something out there called *reality*. The powerlessness of the barber and the *furrier* to challenge fabricated definitions and accusations is every bit as real as the Moriscos' powerlessness to counteract the racist accusations against them or, for that matter, the socially re-constructed function of a barber's basin. If we resort to reality versus fiction oppositions, we start to practice what Castillo and Egginton call *the baroque major strategy*:

We have referred to the manipulation of the dominant medialogy by powerful elites as the major strategy, the hallmark which is to establish a privileged interpretation of the reality contained by that medialogy, and exchange ostensible access to that reality for the material investment and allegiance to the established power structure. (Castillo and Egginton *Medialogies* 165)

Any attempt to establish the permanent ontological status of the *baciyelmo* becomes a reflection of the search of the townspeople for objective confirmation of their identities as old Christians above and beyond the theatrical context invoked by Chanfalla. This does not mean that the basin does not have a more valid, socially constructed use and value, but part of the game here is to show that this use and value are also contingent on the barber's profession and economic practices of early modern Spain. Cervantes's point, and the source of his dark humor, is that reality is bound to (fictional) social identities of individuals who are not entirely conscious of their contingency and cognition. Thus, the abyss that opens up underneath the barber's and the *furrier's* (and reader's) previously solid grasp on reality is the important aspect to

focus on here: not only does reality lose its *out-there-ness*, its metaphysical permanence; just as importantly, our grasp of our own identity slides from individuality to what Baena has called *dividuality*, as we start to recognize the intrinsically social nature of individual identity. The scenarios involving the *baciyelmo* and townspeople in *El retablo* can be seen as preparatory exercises for the more obscure and pathos-filled speeches of Ricote and the *jadraque*. Finding humor—and hope—in these instances, rather than tragedy, is perhaps Cervantes’s most important contribution to irony.

For Gladwell, this kind of humor is more powerful than Colbert’s because of how biting and “courageous” it is. To demonstrate he introduces an episode from an Israeli political satire program called “A Wonderful Country” in which a short mockumentary poses as an informational newsreel from the Israeli Ministry of Education. In it a teacher sits in front of a group of twenty or so kindergarten students and asks them questions about peace in the Middle East and the two-state solution in particular. The students proceed to mouth what Gladwell calls the “absurd and deadened” arguments of the political right in Israel, including the belief that what plagues the Israelis is simply a PR, or media, problem. The skit reaches its climax when the teacher begins a lesson on geography by holding up a globe and asking the students what surrounds the tiny state of Israel on all sides. The children unanimously call out “Anti-semites.” She continues by calling out the names of different countries. When she mentions Italy, the students respond “they helped the Nazis”: to France, they respond “the Vichy regime”; Norway is greeted with “they killed all the salmon.” At the end the children chant together “No one gets to preach to us about morality” in the kind of “reality entitlement” celebrated by demagogues of all stripes. Here, what I would describe as astonished and incredulous laughter is quickly followed by the melancholic realization that the children are mimicking the absurd behavior and corrosive values of hard right politicians and news commentators. The sense of alienation produced by the mimetic performance of discourses of victimization and self-justification is analogous to Ricote’s and the *jadraque*’s self-indicting laments in Cervantes, although it may hit even closer to home due to the fact that these are supposedly children in the act of learning the hateful ideology they will ostensibly exercise in the future as Israeli citizens, as opposed to the victims of said political violence. What they *are* victims of is a perverse epistemological exercise designed to strengthen racist ontological definitions and identities; in this sense, they provide a mirror image of the *jadraque* in the way their earnestness opens up a trapdoor beneath them. But does it produce enough disgust in the viewer to produce political change?

This is an important question because, as Lamarre and Kristen D. Landreville point out:

[R]esearch in both emotion psychology [ . . . ] and political science [ . . . ] has shown that negative affect leads to stronger behavioral and action tendencies (e.g., learning about issues) than positive affect[ . . . ] Both disgust and enthusiasm incite the desire to do something; in particular, for disgust, we want to take action to deflect, undermine, or destroy the aversive target” (“When is Fiction as Good as Fact?” 540–41)

Humor, on the other hand, and in particular satirical humor tends to be less forceful in its motivational effects on the viewer or reader. This coincides with humanistic scholarship on satire, which tends to see satire as a conservative mode used for pointing out aberrations from collectively held values, which carries some interesting implications for Colbert’s humor as well as for what conservative and liberal mean in today’s hyperreal medialogy. To wit, according to the traditional understanding of satire, Colbert’s comedic enterprise implicitly embraces a conservative consensus derived from traditional views on American democracy which places the so-called conservatives he is lampooning in the role of radical extremists who threaten long held democratic values. Conversely, perhaps conservatives who “misread” Colbert’s character really do identify themselves as radical extremists attempting to overthrow what they consider to be an aberration of what “true American democracy” stands for. If this is so—and there is convincing evidence as we commemorate the anniversary of the January 6, 2021 attempted insurrection that this is indeed the case—then Colbert’s humor would have to be seen as a polarizing influence.

Indeed, it is the research cited here by social psychologists and communications scholars on the complexity of reception of satire together with the vital role played by social identity in producing unconscious interpretive inclinations that has led me to ask whether satire is the most powerful rhetorical tool in Cervantes’s repertoire. I do not discount the importance of educating readers and students on the complexity of reality literacy, but if we are going to address these unconscious cognitive structures and impulses, then pedagogy on critical reading must also lead toward the reorganization of social identities. Returning to Cervantes, when Ricote and the *jadraque* mouth systemically racist and politically violent mythologies, laughter is not the best way to characterize the rhetorical effect of Cervantes’s irony here. By removing laughter from these scenes and constructing more communal and amicable diegetic contexts that cross ethnic, linguistic, and religious borders, as happens in both works, Cervantes opens up new and reformed social spaces based on the empathic recognition of the injustices and systemic violence in the laments and harangues of the Morisco characters. As Alban Forcione concludes in his analysis of *El licenciado vidriera*:

Perhaps Cervantes's concern to redeem the glass licentiate and his refusal to leave him in the traditional abode of the misanthrope [ . . . ] is an indication of [his] determination to redeem satire itself, to follow his somber disclosure of all its destructive possibilities with a more positive form in which the emphasis on mending the disintegrating world it portrays is more pronounced. (292)

And perhaps this is why Cervantes deemed the *Persiles* to be his greatest achievement. Unlike *Don Quixote*, laughter is not the central rhetorical effect and emotive force. Rather, the movement of the protagonists into and through distinct social, cultural, and ethnic landscapes is what holds our attention. The formation and dissolution of what the ritual theorist Victor Turner has called *communitas* seems to be the central concern of the work; and the most commonly used force for achieving the constantly evolving social identities and alliances at play in the work is beauty.<sup>3</sup>

This process begins with the novel itself or, actually, in the prologue, with Cervantes's invitation to the *estudiante pardal* to accompany him on his last journey to Toledo. It continues in the textual birth of the novel with the physical *dar a luz* of Periandro from the bowels of the earth. After removing the youth from the *mazmorra* where they had been holding him captive:

[Los bárbaros] le sacudieron los cabellos, que como infinitos anillos de puro oro, la cabeza le cubrían. Limpiáronle el rostro, que cubierto de polvo tenía, y descubrió una tan maravillosa hermosura que suspendió y enterneció los pechos de aquellos que para ser sus verdugos le llevaban. (*The Trials* I, 1.17; *Los trabajos* I, 11.128)

([The barbarians] shook out his hair, which covered his head with countless rings of pure gold. When they had cleaned his face, which was covered with dust, such marvelous beauty was revealed that it amazed and softened the hearts of those who were to be his executioners.)

Upon being freed from his prison, Periandro looks to the sky and vociferously thanks the heavens that he is alive in a classic hagiographical pose. The barbarians, who do not understand this unexpected speech, respond to his utterance by closing off the dungeon with a big rock and threatening the youth

with a “desmesurada flecha” (enormous arrow). The allusion to St. Sebastian is clear here, from the beauty of the youth to the threatened violence of the arrow. What happens next is even more surprising, as the barbarian Corsicurbo is overcome by the beauty of the boy and throws away his bow:

[E]l bárbaro flechero [ . . . ] hallando la belleza del mozo piedad en la dureza de su corazón [ . . . ] arrojó de sí el arco y, llegándose a él, por señas como mejor pudo, le dio a entender que no quería matarle. (*The Trials* I, 1.18; *Los trabajos* I, 1.130–1)

([T]he barbarous archer, whose hardness of heart had been softened by the youth’s beauty, chose not to prolong the threat of death by keeping the arrow aimed at his chest. He threw the bow aside and approached the youth, making it known as best he could by signs that he didn’t wish to kill him.)

In marked contrast to the fate of St. Sebastian, the beauty of the boy successfully short-circuits the relationship and function of power and potentially opens a new social identity that includes both Periandro and the barbarians, Christian saint and pagan executioner. In a previous article, I stated that the goal of such linguistic and visual play is the deconstruction of the tendency in the Baroque to allegorically emblemize the meaning of iconic images (“Una crítica cervantina de la alegoresis” 46–47); but I now see that Cervantes goes even further by modeling social identities that cross the barriers erected by these same allegories. In the words of Castillo, “The constant appearance of hybrid characters described as Spanish or Italian and simultaneously barbarians (‘el bárbaro español,’ ‘el bárbaro italiano’) deconstructs culturally-based distinctions of Self vs. Other” (*JAWry Views* 109).

In book 1, the initial crossing of ethnic and linguistic barriers ultimately ends with the Barbarian Isle in flames after another barbarian, Bradamiro, attempts to keep Periandro and Auristela for himself. This may be because the social reorganizations undertaken by Bradamiro and his killer are framed as the acts of willful individuals who simply attempt to place new and beautiful objects under their own power. Over and again, we will see how individuals who attempt to take sole possession of Auristela, or Persiles, set off catastrophic series of events that endanger their social identities and environs, whether it is Policarpo or Hipólita. I would suggest that the

point we are supposed to take here is that beauty, not reason, is the force that ultimately invites individuals to reconsider their social identities. Both Corsicurbo, the original barbarian who pulls Periandro from the dungeon, and Bradamiro incite subversions of their social identities before structure reasserts its dominance with catastrophic results for their home and society; but let us not forget that it is beauty which upsets the rigid ethnic divisions and social hierarchies that characterize the opening chapters of the *Persiles*. In these scenes, Cervantes demonstrates how art and, by extension, literature, not reason, are the prime movers of social identity. Moreover, he is under no illusions with respect to the potential violence and damage that such reorganizations imply. In addition, the insistent contrast between the violence encountered in cities and kingdoms compared with the relative openness and sense of community among the pilgrims as they move through diverse spaces suggests that the model of life as an open pilgrimage with an uncertain end, versus an arrival at a stationary stronghold, offers the potential for a more open-minded approach to knowledge and expanded communities on the human plane. As such, satire may function to subvert and/or reassert established social identities on opposing extremes of the ideological spectrum, but beauty and pathos and the empathy they incite can move individuals out of their social and identity siloes and initiate the articulation and elaboration of new or reformed social identities with more flexible and open attitudes toward the other and the world. In their own advocacy of the relevance and power of the humanities to meet the political, medialogical, and environmental challenges of our current moment, Castillo and Egginton offer a citation from a scientist:

If it is true—as Albert Einstein famously stated—that ‘imagination is more important than knowledge,’ in that it allows us to transcend the limits of what we know or think we know, then art and literature can surely help as much as history, philosophy, and the other humanistic disciplines. (152).

In conclusion, my own experience watching Colbert in action is uncomfortable, and my laughter is often mixed with incredulity and or disgust at how quickly mis- and disinformation proliferate and how they are so hungrily consumed by such large segments of the population. On the other hand, I find Cervantes’s works and those of countless other artists moving and inspiring in their beauty, pathos, and humor. Like Castillo and Egginton, Baena, and before them Amy Williamsen, Ruth El Saffar, and others, these embodied and largely unconscious reactions have led me to change the way I do research and

teach early modern literature and culture. These changes include moving into new and unfamiliar arenas as well as unfamiliar topics and periods, all of which have resulted in the formation of new alliances and different collectivities. If social identity is a major player in interpreting satire, as Lamarre points out, then migrating into these new social spaces has most likely had salubrious effects on my unconscious interpretive frameworks. I also think it is what Cervantes would do.

## Notes

1. In *Satire as the Comic Sphere*, James E. Caron writes, “*Satiractivism* names those instances of satire that go beyond the implicit exhortation to experience metanoia within the poetics of the comic public sphere and make an explicit call to direct action in the public sphere” (27).
2. In *Cervantes: Displacements, Inflections, and Transcendence*, E. Michael Gerli writes, “This tradition, influenced profoundly during the Middle Ages by the ideas and prophecies of the Franciscan visionary Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), which Joachim himself had attributed to St. Isidore of Seville (known to scholars as the prophecies of Pseudo-Isidore) . . . produced the legend of the Spanish messianic king and world-emperor known variously as the El Encubierto, El Encapuchado, El Murciélago, Dominus Vespertilio, and the New David” (146–47).
3. Turner writes, “*Communitas* breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy,’ possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency” (128).

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