

**PLAYING TO THE MASSES: ECONOMIC RATIONALISM IN
LOPE DE VEGA'S *ARTE NUEVO DE HACER
COMEDIAS EN ESTE TIEMPO***

by Donald Gilbert

El *Arte nuevo* se nos aparece así como un escrito revolucionario que no produjo revolución alguna.

Montesinos, "La «paradoja» del *Arte nuevo*"

[The *Arte nuevo* appears to us thus as a revolutionary text that failed to produce a revolution.]

While commonly understood as an invention of the eighteenth century, the basic principles of classical economic theory may be traced back as far as classical antiquity, most notably to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, texts that influenced European economic thinking throughout the Renaissance. By the end of the Middle Ages, the ideas of supply and demand, market equilibrium, and even a rudimentary understanding of monetary theory were already under discussion throughout the intellectual centers of Europe, most notably in the universities.¹ More important, these same economic principles found a

¹“For the purposes of this study Plato and Aristotle overshadow all other Greek authors. Their importance for later theory can hardly be exaggerated. The first five chapters of the *Wealth of Nations* simply develop the line of reasoning laid down by Aristotle, and, even today textbooks of economic theory generally open by recapitulating the ideas that we are about to examine.” Marjorie Grice-Hutchinson, *Early Economic Thought in Spain, 1177–1740* (Oxford 1978) 61. Of particular importance in the present context will be the concept of exchange value, an idea that finds its earliest articulation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge 1934). As Barry J. Gordon points out, the problem of exchange becomes of particular importance later for the scholastics particularly in relation to questions of justice. Through their association with scholasticism, these ideas find their way into the late medieval universities. This is the trajectory that leads to the “Salamanca doctrine” as Grice-Hutchinson describes it: “Notable features of the ‘Salamanca’ doctrine were the adoption of a subjective or utility theory of value, inherited, it is true, from medieval times, but applied in a living and clear-sighted manner to contemporary events; the realization of the relation between the quantity of money in circulation and the price level; and the development of certain other ideas on money and banking, including a theory of foreign exchange based on quantity theory.” See Barry J. Gordon, *Economic Analysis before Adam Smith* (New York 1975) 81. Despite a sophisticated understanding of economic principles, the mercantilist mentality that was contributing to the economic development of other regions of Europe was, to a large degree, lacking in Spain in the century leading up to the birth of

practical expression in the lives of a rising mercantile class, particularly in the independent city-states of the Italian peninsula, and later in the more affluent regions of northern Europe where the merchant embodied a new way of looking at the world organized around a “rational search for profit.”² The new values of economic rationalism, while increasingly important to the material well-being of the mercantile class, particularly in the more economically developed regions of the continent, were nonetheless viewed with skepticism within the social context of what would become by the sixteenth century the dominant power in Europe: Spain under the Habsburgs. With its emphasis on religious orthodoxy and a social code that disdained productive labor, the “confessional absolutism” of the Spanish monarchy was ill-suited to absorb those economic innovations that were slowly altering the balance of power in western Europe.³

The growing influence of economic rationalism becomes particularly

Lope de Vega. Grice-Hutchinson, citing Luis Ortiz the comptroller of the royal finances under Philip II, reveals the extent to which this was already explicitly understood, even in Spain: “Spain, continues Ortiz, is a laughing-stock among nations, who indeed ‘treat us much worse than Indians, because in return for their gold and silver we do at least bring the Indians some more or less useful things,’ whereas foreigners take money out of Spain in exchange for worthless rubbish, and without even the trouble of having to mine it. The remedy for this state of affairs is to forbid the export of raw materials and the import of foreign manufactures” (127–128). With its lack of any manufacturing infrastructure, Spain thus present a classic example of an economy over dependent on primary goods, in this case gold and silver.

²The phrase is taken from Eugene F. Rice and Anthony Grafton: “Grown rich in commerce, banking, and industry, the sixteenth-century merchant-capitalist was a man of individuality and ambitious resource. His life was motivated by a rational search for profit. He operated, however, in a society whose ideals were overwhelmingly religious and aristocratic. He could justify his way of life only in opposition to a traditional clerical distrust and a traditional aristocratic disdain.” The economic rationalism of the merchant class is, thus, not confined to business practices but implies a philosophy of life that is inherently at odds with the dominant powers in society. This observation is perhaps only more true of the Spanish social milieu in which mercantilism was viewed with even greater suspicion by both the clergy and the aristocracy. See Eugene F. Rice and Anthony Grafton, *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460–1559* (New York 1994) 60.

³The term is borrowed from Manuel Fernández Álvarez for whom orthodoxy becomes an instrument of both internal repression and imperial expansion: “La nota confesional es una de las que primero han de destacarse. La vinculación de la Monarquía al catolicismo más acendrado venía ya marcado desde los fundadores de aquel Imperio nascente . . . Lo cual traería consigo la puesta en funcionamiento de un duro aparato represivo en el interior (la Inquisición) y un despliegue ofensivo en el exterior, para combatir a los considerados enemigos de la verdadera fe, tanto los de dentro como los de fuera.” See Manuel Fernández Álvarez, *Felipe II y su tiempo* (Madrid 1998) 39.

problematic for Spain in the latter part of the sixteenth century as the Catholic monarchy's inability to respond to the pressing needs of its own worsening economic predicament begin to contaminate the social life of the realm. As a result, the importance of such economic questions is not only registered on the stage of world events—in those great events of which narrative history is replete—but also in the very fabric of society itself and, as will be the focus of the present discussion, in the forms of cultural expression through which social experience is processed. More than a mere reflection of social experience, however, the cultural response to the problem of economic rationalism in early modern Spain is best understood as a dynamic process the effects of which are recognizable at different levels within the larger social milieu. At a formal level, it is evident in the emergence of new modes of mass culture—most notably in the rise of the public theater—and in the corresponding demand, in the economic sense of the word, to which these new forms respond. At a psychological level, it arises in a conceptual lack within the aesthetic discourse used to refer to these new forms of cultural production, a conceptual lack that is only problematically bridged by the notion of “taste” or *gusto*. At a political level, it accompanies a new discourse of social control *through* culture, either via the direct mechanism of propaganda or as a manifestation of Gramsci's more comprehensive notion of hegemony. And finally, at a historical level, the cultural expression of this tension reflects both a feeling of nostalgia toward an idealized Renaissance model of cultural production and apprehension toward a dimly-glimpsed future in which the mechanism of taste becomes, as Pierre Bourdieu describes it, the preferred means for bourgeois distinction.

The motive force behind each of these perspectives on the cultural expression of the tension created by economic rationalism lies in the powerful way in which the material conditions of cultural production define a new mode of consumption. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rise of the public theater at the end of the sixteenth century, a genre whose practice embodies the new logic of economic rationalism. As Lope de Vega—himself the most important practitioner of this new form—puts it in a passage from his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609), “I write according to the art invented by those who would attain vulgar applause. For, since the *vulgo* pays, it is only fair to speak to them in silliness in order to *please* them [para darle gusto]”

(lines 45–48).⁴ The economic basis of the relationship between the writer and the audience—which functions as a kind of *quid pro quo*—could not be more obvious; and yet that economic basis is ultimately translated into the vocabulary of a distinctly modern *aesthetic* discourse founded on the notion of taste: “. . . it is only fair to speak to them in silliness in order to please them.” Not only does the word *gusto* in Spanish convey a sense of pleasure, but more significantly, it also implicitly invokes the discriminating faculties of the observer, what Lope refers to elsewhere as the *gusto*, or “taste” of the *vulgo*. Here, then, Lope may be said to glimpse the new aesthetic principles of a mode of cultural production that is consumed according to the laws of supply and demand. The spectator, cash in hand, decides the fate of the cultural object and in doing so imposes his will on both the playwright and the creative process.

Lope’s acknowledgement of the consumerist influences in his own work as a playwright for the public stage may be seen as a liminal moment in the *Arte nuevo*. For while comments about the need to satisfy a public that pays would seem to demonstrate an awareness of that which makes his own dramatic writings radically modern, the *Arte nuevo*, taken as a whole, presents a far more conservative image of the creative process. Indeed, having articulated in explicit terms the economic rationale informing the new demands of writing for the stage, Lope backs away from the brink of his discovery and thereby avoids grappling with some of its more troubling implications. The arguably bold pronouncement that Lope will satisfy the *vulgo* because the *vulgo* pays leads not to the elaboration of a new aesthetic theory that recognizes the foundational importance of the economic marketplace, but rather to a withdrawal into the preexisting claims of classical aesthetic precepts, most notably as expressed in Robortello’s commentaries on Aristotle’s *Poetics* and in the literary criticism of Donatus.⁵ Indeed, while the sec-

⁴All citations from the *Arte nuevo de hacer comedia* are from the edition by Juana de José Prades. Lope de Vega Carpio, *El arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*, ed. Juana de José Prades (Madrid 1971) 281–301.

⁵According to Lope’s modern editor, Juana de José Prades, “son constantes, en el largo preámbulo del *Arte nuevo*, los acatamientos a los viejos preceptos: a partir del verso 49 y hasta el 127, estudiaremos casi 80 versos en los que se evidencia cómo el respeto de Lope hacia la Preceptiva clásica le induce a parafrasear literalmente pasajes aristotélicos de la *Poética*, a través del comentarista italiano Robortello, e incluso las notas de Donato a Terencio.” *El arte nuevo* (n. 4 above) 43.

ond half of the *Arte nuevo* may be said to respond in certain ways to these classical authorities, that response does not involve anything resembling a serious reassessment of the preceptive mode of literary theory itself. Instead Lope merely substitutes the classical preceptive tradition with a new set of competing precepts designed to reflect the demands of the *vulgo*.⁶

Critics have long recognized the problematic status in the *Arte nuevo* of writing for a public that pays. The representation of the *vulgo*, including allusions to the classical polemic against that group, has been understood traditionally in terms of Lope's desire to establish a close relationship between aesthetic competence and social position.⁷ In this view, Lope's ambivalent attitude toward writing for a paying public is symptomatic both of the loss of prestige—particularly as derived from certain classicist habits of composition—associated with such an activity and of the inferior judgment of the newly empowered mass audience. Such commentaries, while accurate in their depiction of early seventeenth-century Spanish attitudes towards aesthetic competence and social position, are nonetheless limited by their tendency to accept uncritically certain underlying assumptions about the nature of aesthetic discourse. More specifically, the critical tradition, following Lope's lead in the *Arte nuevo*, tends to accept the notion that the aesthetic norms informing the *comedia* retain a strong sense of discursive

⁶Prades (n. 4 above) explains in her commentary: Lope “ha necesitado 156 versos—el *Arte nuevo* tiene un total de 389—entre explicaciones, justificaciones, alardes de ciencia antigua, etc., para atreverse a teorizar por cuenta propia. Ahora bien, en los versos que siguen encontraremos una maravillosa síntesis de los principios que regularon el arte dramático del revolucionario teatro español” (113). While the Spanish theater may be revolutionary, Lope's own theorizing is anything but that. First, the entire project is treated by Lope with a great deal of ambivalence. Lope consistently represents his own predicament in terms of the defective taste of the mass audience to which the *New Art* is designed to appeal, as if writing for the *vulgo* were a curse. Second, as I will argue at length later in this paper, Lope completely overlooks what is truly revolutionary about the *nueva comedia*, namely, that it is written according to principles that are in a fundamental sense determined by an economic market for cultural production.

⁷This point is made most eloquently by Díez Borque: “La crítica se ha mostrado excesivamente afanosa en liberar a Lope de todo cuanto pudiera empañar una imagen de valor, construida según los prejuicios estimativos de esa propia crítica, para la que los conceptos de escritor comercial, excesivamente atento a las necesidades y reacciones de un público que incluye al *vulgo* al que se somete el escritor por razones comerciales, son aspectos negativos que había que invalidar en nuestro dramaturgo.” José María Díez Borque, “Lope para el vulgo” in *Teoría y realidad en el teatro español del siglo XVII: la influencia italiana* (Rome 1981) 297.

autonomy despite the genre's *economic* dependence on the public that pays.⁸ Taste becomes, for both Lope and his modern critics, the marker of an independent discursive framework, one that is—as I will show more explicitly later in this discussion—only incidentally related to the economic forces that give it meaning in the first place. As a result, both Lope and these critics tend to overlook what is arguably the single most important implication of the *Arte nuevo*: that in a cultural space determined by market forces, the very notion of aesthetic value—whether defined by taste or the precepts of classical antiquity—becomes highly problematic. In fact, this unacknowledged implication of the *Arte nuevo* represents a radical potential within Lope's treatise, as the creation of a cultural mode—subject to the laws of supply and demand—shatters the autonomy of the preceptive tradition as a hermetic locus of signification. Beneath this facade of preceptive autonomy one discovers the very different concept of exchange value as constituted according to the economic principles of the market.⁹ In effect, while Lope may

⁸While many critics point to the commercial nature of the public theater, this fact is very rarely considered as compromising the independence of aesthetic discourse itself. Even Díez Borque tends to minimize the implications of Lope as a commercial writer: "Lope comercial, sí, para el vulgo, sí y quebrantando las reglas, pero con unos niveles de significación en su teatro, insisto, que pueden justificarle ante un sector de espectadores más cultos y ante sí y que no tiene que explicar en su *Arte nuevo*" ("Lope para el vulgo," [n. 7 above] 298). These "niveles de significación" do not include, significantly, the power of the market itself despite Díez Borque's interest in the *vulgo* as a locus of aesthetic judgement. Similarly, Orozco Díaz, while focusing on what he describes as the "esencial ley o regla dramática" by which the taste of the *vulgo* constitutes aesthetic dogma, never considers the implications of the process by which the "taste" of the *vulgo* comes to assert its aesthetic competence, that is, through the mechanism of the market. On the other hand, where the critical literature does depart from a purely aesthetic or rhetorical interest in the *nueva comedia*, it usually does so under the auspices of a structuralist reading of the entire period of one kind or another. Most representative of this tendency is the work of José Antonio Maravall: "El teatro español es, ante todo, un instrumento político y social [que] no responde a una preocupación o finalidad ética e incluso es mínima la parte que en él se ocupa de temas religiosos" (*Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca* [Madrid 1972] 31). Such sociological readings of the early modern period suffer from a somewhat different problem to the extent that they largely dismiss the aesthetic dimension of the theater as a literary genre in favor of a view that integrates cultural production into a structuralist view of history in which drama functions as a kind of propaganda. See José Antonio Maravall, *Cultura del barroco* (Barcelona 1983) and *Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca*.

⁹The idea of "exchange value" is central to classical economic theory and represents the equilibrium point between supply and demand at which the price of a given good is determined. It is precisely this economic concept, I argue, that preempts any independent assertion of aesthetic value for a commercialized cultural form like the public theater.

invoke terms such as “taste” and “discretion” in an attempt to engage the preceptive tradition of classical antiquity on its own terms and without the incursion of economic rationalism, the relentless logic of the market nonetheless seeps through Lope’s rhetoric in ways that he is unable to control completely.

Lope’s failure to recognize fully the importance of the economic dimension of his own creative accomplishments allows us to reflect back on the historical predicament of early seventeenth-century Spain. The inherent resistance to economic rationalism so characteristic of the period finds in Lope’s *Arte nuevo* an aesthetic corollary as the sacred domain of the artist is contaminated by the worldly preoccupations of the merchant. Yet the problem is not merely that the *comedia* requires the writer to *act* like a merchant, however distasteful that might be, but rather that his practical success, if examined too closely, leads to the theoretical heresy that the genre’s aesthetic and rhetorical norms might be inextricably bound up with the principles of economic rationalism.¹⁰ That Lope never fully explores this logical connection in his own musings in the *Arte nuevo* reflects not so much a lack of will as the powerful sway of inherited modes of thinking about both the formal divisions between discursive domains and the social function of the poet in the wake of the still influential experience of sixteenth-century Spanish humanism.¹¹ It is this epistemological rift between Lope’s

While it asserts the primacy of economic factors in attributing value to the cultural object, however, this argument does not make the kind of larger structuralist claims of a Marxist critical approach. Instead, as I will be arguing later, the process by which exchange value is allocated contains an internal logic of its own that is reflected in important ways in the aesthetic discourse of the *Arte nuevo* that are sufficient unto themselves and not, in this sense, symptomatic of any kind of historical dialectic.

¹⁰This is arguably the central difficulty of earlier critical attempts to “save” Lope de Vega from contradiction or inconsistency. (See citation from Díaz Borque, n. 4 above.) To explain away the deep sense of ambivalence that inhabits the *Arte nuevo* is to overlook its significance as a marker of Lope’s participation within a larger historical process that he, like so many of his contemporaries, is unable to fully grasp.

¹¹A figure like Luis Vives comes to mind in this context. While he participates in the movement that emphasizes the creative potential of the moderns, the kinds of compromises that Lope is forced to make in the *Arte nuevo* would be, nonetheless, unthinkable for a humanist like Vives. “Falsa est enim atque inepta illa quorundam similitudo, quam multi tamquam acutissimam, atque appositissima excipiunt, nos ad priores collatos esse, ut nanos in humeris gigantum: non est ita, neque nos sumus nani, nec illi homines gigantes, sed omnes eiusdem staturae, et quidem nos altius euecti illorum beneficio: maneat modo in nobis, quod in illis studium, attentio animi, uigilantia, et amor veri” (“De disciplinis” 340). The moderns are equated with the ancients precisely because of

inherited way of thinking and the pressures of new modes of production that ultimately provides the psychological subtext for much of the *Arte nuevo*.

SPANISH BELATEDNESS

In the prologue to his epic, *Jerusalén conquistada* (1609), Lope de Vega frames the writer's predicament at the beginning of the seventeenth century in Spain in terms of a struggle against the defective tastes of an emerging mass culture. Writing to his benefactor and patron, the Conde de Saldaña, Lope laments the difficult publication of his epic account of the Spanish participation in the crusades under Alfonso VIII:

La afición que V. Excel. tiene a las letras, el amparo que haze a los que las professan, mayormente a las deste género, siendo su Mecenaz, y bienhechor, me obliga, y si lo puedo dezir, me fuerça, a dirigirle este Prólogo de mi Ierusalén, que como fundamento suyo, tiene necessidad de mayor protección. Tarde y esperada sale a luz, que por ocasión de algunos libros, sin dotrina, sustancia, y ingenio, escritos para el vulgo, se prohibió la impresión de todos generalmente.¹²

[The affection that your Excellency has for letters, the protection that you give to those who cultivate them, especially of this genre, you being their patron and defender, obliges me, and if I may say, forces me, to address this prologue from my *Jerusalén* to you as it has need of greater protection as its foundation. It appears late and with anticipation for, because of some books written for the *vulgo* without doctrine, substance, and *ingenio*, the publication of all are prohibited generally.]

The entire passage may be said to appeal to a classicist sensibility and, by extension, to a Renaissance obsession with classical authority. It begins with an invocation of a classical mode of literary composition and ends with the well-worn *topos* by which the writer distinguishes himself from the common *vulgus*. Invoking the "Mecenas y bienhechor" that will support his literary aspirations, Lope aligns his own work with a patronage system that is explicitly given a classical pedigree. Like a modern Virgil, Lope claims to recreate the conditions of an epic

their equal access to certain habits of living. Thus, even as sixteenth-century Spanish humanism moves away from its dependence on the ancients, that movement does not entail any fundamental change in humanist values. See Luis Vives, "De disciplinis," *Opera*, vol. 1 (Basileae 1555).

¹²Lope de Vega, *Jerusalén conquistada*, ed. Joaquín de Entrambasaguas (Madrid

discourse that, as becomes clear later in the prologue, might enshrine the historical legacy of Alfonso VIII. In this way, the first sentence of the passage cited above harks back to the cultural aspirations of the earlier Italian Renaissance with its commitment to the rediscovery of history and to the imitation of classical antecedents.¹³

This classicist interest carries through to the end of the passage with Lope's condemnation of popular taste. Lope's criticism of books "written for the *vulgo*, without doctrine, substance, and *ingenio*" serves to heighten the reader's awareness of the social distinction separating himself and his patron from the masses.¹⁴ Yet while the *topos* possesses a classical pedigree, Lope's use of it departs in important ways from the original classical context from which it is lifted. Where Horace's famous pronouncement *Odi profanum vulgus* serves to distinguish the poet from the rest of society almost as a matter of religious significance, Lope's own text introduces an entirely new mode of distinction based on taste.¹⁵ Furthermore, while the Horatian archetype for the *topos*

1951) 20.

¹³The predicament of the Spanish early modern writer is almost always in some way marked by a kind of double historical alienation, first from the prestige of classical antiquity and second, from the more recent legacy of the Italian Renaissance. Responding to this double alienation is one of the major themes of Spanish early modern cultural production. It is found both as a self-conscious aesthetic choice, as in Cervantes' rejection of classical imitation in the prologue to pt. 1 of the *Quijote*, and as the response to a new historical reality, which is, as I will be arguing in this article, the case with Lope de Vega and the *nueva comedia*. For a discussion of the Renaissance latecomer, see David Quint, *Origin and Originality in the Renaissance* (New Haven 1983).

¹⁴One classical archetype for this *topos* may be found in Horace's *Odes*: "Maecenas atavis edite regibus, / o et praesidium et dulce decus meum, / sunt quos curriculo pulverem olympicum / collegisse iuvat metaque fervidis / evitata rotis palmaque nobilis / terrarum dominos evehit ad deos; / hunc, si mobilium turba Quiritium / certat tergeminis tollere honoribus, / illum, si proprio condidit horreo / quicquid de Libycis verritur areis. / Gaudentem patrios findere sarculo / agros Attalicis condicionibus / numquam dimoveas, ut trabe Cypria / . . . Me doctarum hederæ præmia frontium / dis miscent superis, me gelidum nemus / Nympharumque leves cum Satyris chori / secernunt populo, si neque tibias / Euterpe cohibet nec Polyhymnia / Lesboum refugit tendere barbiton. / Quodsi me lyricis vatibus inseres, / sublimi feriam sidera vertice" (Book 1, Ode 1). The comparison between the poet and those with other occupations culminates in the apotheosis of the poet: "Me the ivy, the reward of poets' brow, links with the gods above . . . But if you rank me among lyric bards, I shall touch the stars with my exalted head." See Horace, *The Odes and Epodes*, trans. C. E. Bennett (Cambridge 1978).

¹⁵The reference is from bk. 3, Ode 1. In his notes, Garrison points out the religious connotation of *profanum* in which he identifies a coincidence between religious and political diction. See Horace, *Epodes and Odes: A New Annotated Latin Edition*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Norman 1991) 291.

focuses on the writer's relationship to the *vulgus* as embodied in various other kinds of occupations to which he compares his own vocation, Lope takes aim at the *vulgo* as a consumer of these mediocre books. The self-affirming discourse that would have the cultivated reader consider the poet as someone standing apart is here replaced with the defensive gesture of a writer confronted with what, in economic terms, might be described as new competitive pressures.

In the end, the conflict between these aspirations and the mundane reality of the publishing world of his own time lends a note of nostalgia to Lope's statement of his poetic aspirations. Having articulated his noble intent to his patron, Lope confronts the problem of an emerging mass culture: The prestige of a patronage system of shared aesthetic values to which he attaches his own epic poem is almost lost in the din of books "without doctrine, substance, or *ingenio*, written for the *vulgo*." What Lope laments is, in the end, the marginalization of his own work, the fact that in the "new" society of early seventeenth-century Spain the patronage system, still important even in the sixteenth century, has been overshadowed by the pressures of popular taste.¹⁶ The unspoken arbiter in this new publishing world is the Inquisition which, as in the famous book burning episode from the *Quijote*, assesses the value of literary texts in such a way that valuable works are often lost.¹⁷

¹⁶As Burke points out, the dichotomy between producing for the market and the patronage system is already in evidence in the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Starting in the late fifteenth century, the rise of printing leads to the slow decline of the literary patron "and to his replacement by the publisher and the anonymous reading public." In this sense, Lope's attitude towards the publishing world of his own day reflects a reality that had already existed for over century. The nostalgia of the prologue from the *Jerusalén conquistada* is primarily rhetorical as it accentuates Lope's historical disconnection from his own contemporary cultural milieu. Nonetheless, the paradigm takes on special significance in early modern Spain where, as has already been mentioned, the stigma of what Burke describes as "keeping shop" is even more acute than in the mercantilist culture of the Italian city-states. Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Princeton 1999) 118.

¹⁷Indeed, in a strange mirroring of the much criticized capriciousness of the masses, Inquisitional censorship, as parodied in this episode from chapters six and seven, part I of the *Quijote*, is characterized by a lack of consistency: "Cansóse el cura de ver más libros, y así a carga cerrada, quiso que todos los demás se quemasen . . . y así, se cree que fueron al fuego, sin ser vistos ni oídos, *La Carolea y León de España*, con *Los Hechos del Emperador*, compuestos por don Luis de Ávila, que, sin duda, debían de estar entre los que quedaban, y quizá si el cura los viera, no pasaran por tan rigurosa sentencia." See Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quijote de La Mancha*, ed. Martín de Riquer, 12th ed. (Barcelona 1990) 75–76.

Yet that unspoken agent is not the ultimate object of Lope's scorn: The derisive remarks at the end of this passage are reserved exclusively for the *vulgo*, the public for a mass culture whose lack of discretion is identified as the source of a general cultural malaise.

Lope's discursive movement in this passage from his "Mecenas y bienhechor" to the defective tastes of the *vulgo* resides at the heart of his thinking about aesthetics. With a gesture of nostalgia—nostalgia for humanist aesthetic values and for a Golden Age *within* Spanish history itself—Lope faces the problem of writing in a world in which the masses, the *vulgo*, are seen as an obstacle to the high-minded aesthetic preoccupations of earlier generations. And while Lope frames his predicament in terms of aesthetic discourse, the difficulties that he describes are not isolated from surrounding historical circumstances. The new predicament of the writer in early seventeenth-century Spain is itself the product of complex interactions between aesthetics, political authority, and a changing demographic that reflects the growing influence of that mass culture which Lope finds so disturbing. Arguing that his book is delayed by the general tendency to prohibit all writings suggests a larger historical current within which the tension between an emerging mass culture and institutional attempts to control that culture effectively marginalize what Lope identifies in the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada* as the prestigious literary practices of a dying patronage system.¹⁸

Given these circumstances, the meeting between mass culture and the

¹⁸There is some debate about the extent to which the prohibition of books was truly a factor in the three-year delay in the publication of the *Jerusalén conquistada*. Responding to various attempts to explain this passage, the editor Joaquín de Entrambasaguas concludes that the pretext is an imaginary one: "Mis sospechas son, en fin, que acaso Lope, no considerando suficientemente corregida su obra, la sometió a una detenida revisión y enmienda, que le ocuparía ese espacio de tiempo. Y me fundo simplemente en que no existe otra causa admisible que se lo impidiera, desechado el pretexto, seguramente imaginario en tal sentido, de la prohibición de imprimir libros." Whatever one makes of the veracity of Lope's claims, they nonetheless reveal his investment in a particular view of the relationship between politics and aesthetics. In this context, one may still speak of Lope's desire—itself a kind of nostalgic gesture—to set apart his own poetic creation in terms of the social significance of its form, content, and the circumstances of its production. Unlike those who write books "sin doctrina, sustancia, y ingenio" catering to the *vulgo*, Lope subscribes to the more prestigious literary procedures of a Renaissance master: patronage by a wealthy noble, epic form, and a preoccupation with history. See Lope de Vega Carpio, *Jerusalén Conquistada*, ed. Joaquín de Entrambasaguas (Madrid 1951) 41.

lingering values of Renaissance high culture in this passage from the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada* must be understood as a meeting between two historically determined visions of cultural production. The first of these two visions emerges in a tension between the *vulgo* and the authority of the Inquisition that is itself symptomatic of the rigid social hierarchy of the Spanish early modern period, a hierarchy in which social control is exerted through the invasive mechanism of state censorship. For those authorities empowered to monitor the publishing scene, cultural production is assessed in terms of its adherence to a preestablished orthodoxy that represents the interests of the dominant powers within society. Within this oppressive context, the idea of popular taste finds itself subject to a form of regulation that is not so much about aesthetic judgment as about the political and social consequences of certain modes of thought. Hence, while Lope attacks the *vulgo* in the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada* for its lack of discretion, the underlying political motivations for Inquisitional censorship are securely rooted in the contemporary political predicament of a hierarchical social system that is inherently resistant to change.¹⁹

It is against this backdrop of defective taste and social control that Lope reacts in the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada* and offers in the process a second vision of cultural production that reflects his own nostalgic attachments. Lope distinguishes himself in the prologue from the cultural struggles of his own time through an appeal to an earlier, more prestigious mode of aesthetic production, one that is, above all, historically removed from the social milieu informing both the defective tastes of the *vulgo* and the political interests of the Inquisitional censors. Viewed from this perspective, the nostalgia of the passage cited above—and, indeed, of so much of Lope's writing—may be said to reflect a fundamental historical disarticulation between Lope's contemporary social context and the somewhat idealized, implicitly more prestigious past embodied in the classicizing interests of the early Renaissance. While this prestigious past, like most objects of nostalgia, is

¹⁹This idea has become increasingly important in contemporary scholarship on Spanish early modern cultural production, particularly since Américo Castro first formulated his notion of the caste system earlier in this century, in works like *La realidad histórica de España*. For a more recent exploration of the relationship between cultural production and social control in the Spanish sixteenth and seventeenth centuries see *Cultural Authority in Golden Age Spain*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee and Jans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Baltimore 1995) and Maravall (n. 8 above).

as much imagined as real, it nonetheless retains historical significance in its evocation of many of the essential elements of Renaissance humanist aesthetic and rhetorical discourse. Not only does Lope find his own *Mecenas*, but that figure of both Renaissance and classical significance assists in the production of a text that has as its object of inquiry the domain of history, beloved of the humanists. Yet the link between Lope and the prestigious Renaissance tradition is not merely a matter of formal or thematic principles; indeed, it may be said to inhabit the literal content of the *Jerusalén conquistada*, a text that was itself composed in direct imitation of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*.²⁰

If the Renaissance takes as its central metaphor the "resurrection" of classical antiquity, Lope would have us understand that his publication of the *Jerusalén conquistada* provides a momentary respite from the ever more strident struggle between orthodoxy and mass appeal that would eventually supplant the impulse behind that resurrection.²¹ In the end, Lope's invocations of the Inquisitional censors and the mediocrity of books "written for the *vulgo*" must be understood in terms of a diachronic clash between two modes of cultural production, one yearning for a prestigious past of discreet patrons and preceptive aesthetics, the other locked in a contemporary struggle for ideological dominance.

There is, of course, another side to this story. As is well known, Lope de Vega's reputation as a writer derives not so much from works in the

²⁰In addition to connecting Lope directly with his Renaissance predecessor, imitation is itself a dominant theme of humanist rhetorical theory. Lope thus establishes his position within the humanist tradition both in terms of the content of his poem as well as in his chosen mode of composition. Yet this self-conscious attempt at drawing connections with the Italian Renaissance is itself a bittersweet experience, for it also marks Lope's historical position as what Quint describes as that of the Renaissance "latecomer" (see n. 11 above). In effect, to imitate is also to meditate on a kind of historical loss and displacement.

²¹I refer to the notion of resurrecting antiquity more specifically in the sense that Thomas Greene uses it: "The Renaissance, if it did nothing else that was new, chose to open a polemic against what it called the Dark Ages. The ubiquitous imagery of disinterment, resurrection, and renascence needed a death and a burial to justify itself; without the myth of medieval entombment, its imagery, which is to say its self-understanding had no force. The creation of this myth was not a superficial occurrence. It expressed a belief in change and loss, change from the immediate past and loss of a remote prestigious past that might nonetheless be resuscitated." While the resurrection of antiquity is the driving metaphor behind much of Renaissance humanism, the prologue from the *Jerusalén conquistada* reveals the extent to which those classicist values were already under siege in Spain by the beginning of the seventeenth century. See Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven 1982) 3.

high style of epic like the *Jerusalén conquistada*, but rather from his extraordinary output as a playwright. With the establishment of the first public theaters in Spain at the end of the sixteenth century, drama becomes the popular literary genre nonpareil, a fact that Lope himself acknowledges repeatedly in his own comments on the theater both in his plays and in the *Arte nuevo*.²² As the most successful dramatist of his time, Lope is implicated in the creation of a modern mode of literary expression, one that depends, by definition, upon the taste of the masses for its very existence. As Lope explains in the *Arte nuevo*, “I am writing you an *arte de comedias* that will be received in the style of the *vulgo*” (lines 45–46). By participating in this new literary form, indeed, by effectively inventing it, the Lope of the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada* shifts from the margins of the tension between institutional authority and mass appeal to its very center. Nostalgia for a disappearing cultural past gives way to active participation in the cultural struggles of a tumultuous present.

Lope’s success as a dramatist is, in the first instance, of economic significance.²³ Despite continued protestations of poverty, the *nueva comedia* was nonetheless a source of significant income not just for Lope himself, but for an entire sub-culture that had grown up around the new public theaters of the early seventeenth century.²⁴ These public

²²Many of the essential elements of Lope’s aesthetic surface in the plays themselves. Luis C. Pérez and Federico Sánchez Escribano have compiled an extensive collection of such references in *Afirmaciones sobre preceptiva dramática a base de cien comedias* (Madrid 1961).

²³Diez Borque describes the financial situation of Lope de Vega in the following terms: “Parece claro que la fama de Lope de Vega no está de acuerdo con sus continuas quejas de pobreza y la no infrecuente pedigüeñería al Duque de Sessa. Resulta difícil de comprender que, en la misma época en que circulaba como ponderativo máximo la expresión *es de Lope*—más aun—iban los hombres tras él, cuando lo encontraban en la calle, nuestro autor pasara auténticas «necesidades» . . . Ocasión tendremos de ver que los ingresos de Lope fueron—comparativamente—muy superiores a lo que él parece reconocer y la comedia, considerada como fuente de ingresos, le produjo buena cantidad de dinero.” See *Sociedad y teatro español del siglo XVII* (Barcelona 1978) 93. For more on the biographical details of Lope’s life, see also Hugo Albert Rennert’s classic biography of the poet, *The Life of Lope de Vega (1562–1635)* (New York 1968).

²⁴In this respect, the public theater comes to function as a kind of industry in and of itself. This is important to keep in mind as one proceeds to consider the aesthetic discourse informing the plays themselves. For a discussion of the significant infrastructure underlying the public theaters in Spain in the early seventeenth century, see especially Diez Borque, *Sociedad y teatro* (n. 23 above); and N. D. Shergold, *A History of the Spanish Stage from the Medieval Times until the End of the Seventeenth Century*

theaters provided access to wide audiences from which the playwright could hope to reap economic rewards for his work not as the protégé of a wealthy patron, but, as I have already indicated, through a direct appeal to the economic resources of the public at large. The new circumstances of writing for the public theater were not lost on Lope, who makes explicit reference to them in a passage from the *Arte nuevo* that I have already cited:

Y escriuo por el arte que inuentaron
 Los que el vulgar aplauso prete[n]diero[n].
 Por[que], como las paga el vulgo, es justo
 Hablarle en necio para darle gusto.²⁵ (lines 45–48)

[I write according to the art invented by those would attain the vulgar applause, for since the *vulgo* pays, it is fair to speak to them in silliness in order to please them.]

In place of the patronage system that informs Lope's appeal to the Conde de Saldaña in the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada*, one discovers an economic transaction between consumer and producer. Unlike the Conde de Saldaña, whose relationship to Lope is construed in terms of what might be described as a kind of class solidarity, the audience of the *nueva comedia* is identified explicitly in terms of its participation in an economic transaction. Indeed, it is this economic function of the audience—that is, the fact that the “*vulgo* pays”—that defines in exclusive terms the relationship between the audience and the writer.

With this new emphasis on economic dependence comes a new role for the audience in the creative process. Thus, it is impossible to understand the nature of this new cultural phenomenon without understanding something about the audience that supported it. The *vulgo* that Lope

(Oxford 1967).

²⁵As Prades points out in her commentary, the reference to “los que el vulgar aplauso pretendieron” includes figures like Lope de Rueda who is mentioned explicitly later in the *Arte nuevo*. According to Prades, “Rueda era para Lope de Vega un ‘primitivo’ del teatro español, un ‘primer inventor, algo ya totalmente pretérito, como se deduce de otros textos lopianos” (*El arte nuevo* [n. 4 above] 71). Despite the generic link with earlier playwrights like Lope de Rueda and Torres Naharro, the ultimate responsibility for a market-based theatrical work still lies with Lope de Vega, whose career, as I argue elsewhere, corresponds with the invention of the first public theaters. Rhetorically, however, the displacement of responsibility for the corrupted form onto earlier writers may be seen as another manifestation of Lope's ambivalent relationship to his own success.

derides in the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada* becomes in his life as a playwright the defining force in the creation of what Lope would have his reader take to be a new aesthetic.

PLAYING TO THE MASSES

Much of the critical literature on the *nueva comedia* has identified the figure of the *vulgo* as the key to understanding the genre and its aesthetic. One important interpretative tradition has located the central aesthetic importance of the *Arte nuevo* in its identification of the taste of the *vulgo* with what Emilio Orozco Díaz has described as the “ley del nuevo arte dramático barroco,” or “law of the new baroque dramatic art.”²⁶ For Orozco, this dramatic law is captured most succinctly in the repetition of the rhyme *gusto/justo* within the *Arte nuevo*, and in the eventual equation of these two terms as its defining argument: “lo *justo*, esto es lo que constituye ley, es lo que responde al *gusto* [the just is that which constitutes the law; it is that which responds to taste].”²⁷ As I have already suggested, the taste of the *vulgo* is often at odds with the aesthetic principles of classical antiquity so that the elevation of the *gusto* of the *vulgo* to the status of ultimate arbiter in matters of dramatic aesthetics ends up marginalizing the authority of the ancients. As Díez Borque puts it, “el gusto, como decía [Orozco] al comienzo, hace justo lo que a los ojos de los preceptistas es injusto [taste, as Orozco says at the beginning, renders just what in the eyes of the preceptive authorities is unjust].”²⁸

Yet at the same time that he embraces the necessity of writing to satisfy the tastes of the *vulgo*, Lope nonetheless remains deeply attached to the prestige of the classical tradition, introducing a tension into the *Arte nuevo* that is never fully resolved. Throughout the *Arte nuevo*, the new dramatic law of popular taste, while supplanting the classical precepts in practical terms, never attains anything resembling the same level of authority. Perhaps the most famous passage from the *Arte nuevo* that demonstrates this asymmetry between the classical precepts and the new dramatic law of the *vulgo* arises in Lope’s discussion

²⁶Emilio Orozco Díaz, *¿Qué es el «Arte nuevo» de Lope de Vega?* (Salamanca 1978)

²⁷Díaz (n. 26 above) 23.

²⁸José María Díez Borque, *Teoría forma y función del teatro español del siglo XVII* (Barcelona 1996) 43.

of the Aristotelian unity of time. Having acknowledged the Aristotelian principle that all action should “pase en el período de un sol [take place in the period of one day],” he proceeds to explicate the *practical* obstacles to this precept in his own writing through an appeal to the demands of his audience:

Porque, considerando que la cólera
De un Español sentado no se templa,
Si no le representan, en dos horas,
Hasta el final jüycio desde el Génesis
Yo hallo que, si allí se ha de dar gusto,
Co[n] lo que se consigue es lo más justo (lines 205–210)

[Because, considering that the cholera of a seated Spaniard cannot be tempered unless one presents in two hours from Genesis to the final Judgment, I find that, if one has to please, that which achieves it is most just.]

The economic rationalism implicit in Lope’s claim that it is only fair—*justo*—to satisfy the *gusto* of an audience that pays is here expressed as a negation of the Aristotelian unity of time, a negation that never challenges the legitimacy of classical authority itself. Classical order gives way to a contemporary dramatic practice that caters to “la cólera de un español sentado.” On the one hand, the claims of the seated Spaniard, while motivated by cholera would seem to offer the possibility for a new aesthetic framework, one that finds expression in the allusion to providential history as a new temporal standard for theatrical production. Unlike the classical precepts, which return to the source itself of poetic authority in Aristotle, however, the temporal imperative suggested by the seated Spaniard’s insistence on seeing all of history in a single performance lacks a similar source of legitimacy. In the end, the potential for a new temporal standard based on Scriptural authority is undermined—indeed, even mocked—by its dependence on the cholera of a seated Spaniard, that is, on its origin in the taste of the *vulgo*.

Furthermore, the ironic distance that separates Lope from the new dramatic law of popular taste in passages like this finds a complement in oblique statements in the *Arte nuevo* that reveal a lingering attachment to the classicist tradition, an attachment that persists despite the practical requirements of writing for a paying audience:

Y quando he de escribir una comedia

Encierro los preceptos co[n] seis llaves,
 Saco a Tere[n]cio y Plauto de mi estudio
 Para que no me den voces, que suele
 Dar gritos la verdad en libros mudos (lines 40–44)

[And when I have to write a *comedia* I lock up the precepts with six keys, I take Terence and Plautus out of my study so that they don't call out to me, for it is usual for the truth to call out from mute books.]

In light of the earlier text from the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada*, there is a certain irony in Lope's depiction of himself in this passage as the censor who must squelch the "truth" of the ancients lest they interfere with his new literary projects. The passage, if anything, underlines the success of Renaissance humanism, the sense in which, even in the face of a radically new mode of cultural expression like that of writing for the public theater, Lope remains haunted by the influence of the ancients, not merely as the locus of a competing source of aesthetic legitimacy, but indeed, as the fount of some kind of transcendent "truth" that must be actively suppressed.²⁹

Despite Orozco's new dramatic law of the *vulgo*, the force of this classical "truth" is never fully overcome by the new aesthetic of mass appeal in the *Arte nuevo*; the "taste of the masses" never attains in the *Arte nuevo* the kind of objective power of truth that Lope identifies with the ancient playwrights and precepts. Whereas the taste of the *vulgo* is linked to the specific contemporary context of the new public theaters of seventeenth-century Spain, the power of the classical preceptive vision of literary composition lies precisely in its pretension to transcend the historical moment, in its intrinsic claim that literary precepts are universally applicable to writers in all ages. The discovery of history that is so often associated with the Renaissance here finds an odd corollary as the historical dimension of the new art of writing for the public stage becomes precisely that which undermines its ability to compete with the more prestigious "truth" of the ancients. With historical distance, one might surmise, comes a certain quality of untouchability that itself constitutes a kind of universalist argument.³⁰

²⁹It is worth noting here the rhetorical value of Terence and Plautus in this passage: they become symbols of a cultural legacy that, as Shergold suggests (see n. 30 below), possesses a prestige which the *comedia*, because of its association with the *vulgo*, necessarily lacks.

³⁰The *Arte nuevo* would appear to offer, in this context, a variation on David Quint's

Furthermore, this contrast between the “dramatic law” of the *vulgo* and the more transcendent claims of the classical precepts is only partially, and in an important sense superficially, understood as a contrast between two aesthetic visions. The “truth” that Lope must suppress in order to write his *comedias* lays claim to what he construes as an autonomous discourse of aesthetic value founded on classical precepts. The universalist tendencies inherent in this view tend to isolate the work from the particular circumstances of its creation as it is subject to the absolute authority—the “truth” of mute books—of the classical tradition. The *new* law of the *vulgo*, by way of comparison, represents a dispersion of aesthetic value from its previous home within the cultural object itself. No longer defined by a set of internal characteristics, aesthetic value comes to reside in a multitude of dynamic relationships between the cultural object and the various publics to whom it is offered. These relationships, which are by their very nature subject to change, embody a new site at which aesthetic value is created, yielding in the process a concept of aesthetic value that is subject to constant revision through the ever-changing flow of public opinion. Unlike Lope’s view of the classical preceptive tradition, however, this dramatic law of the *vulgo* does not contain the means for its own justification. The enormous prestige of the ancients that legitimates the possibility of an independent aesthetic gives way in this new system to the logic of popular taste, a logic that is marked above all, by a lack of anything resembling a transcendental aesthetic authority.

As a replacement for the weighty authority of the ancients, the fickle taste of the *vulgo* would seem somewhat inadequate. But the problem is not merely a question of authority guaranteed by social prestige. Rather, for some critics, the very notion of the *vulgo* as an independent source of judgment—aesthetic or otherwise—is itself already intrinsically flawed. For José Antonio Maravall, the notion of popular taste functions as a kind of mask behind which may be discovered a set of social relations that are clearly aligned with institutional power in one

thesis with respect to the question of history and Renaissance literary production. If, as Quint argues, the survival of history confers a measure of universality on the literary text after the Renaissance, the lack of historical distance would appear to have the opposite effect. Indeed, it is the *comparison* between the historical immediate practices of the *comedia* and the ancient preceptive tradition that defines for Lope de Vega in the *Arte nuevo* the relative prestige of the latter to the detriment of the former.

form or another. From this perspective, Orozco's new dramatic law is rewritten in terms of a complex set of social interactions that effectively subsume the agency of the *vulgo* to a powerful mechanism of ideological control. As Maravall puts it "the Spanish theater tries to impose or maintain the pressure of a power system, and, in turn, of a stratification and hierarchy of groups, in a country that, because of the developments of the previous two centuries, was moving beyond the confines of the traditional social order, or at least, was threatening to do so."³¹ For Maravall, the notion of individual taste is recontained within a much more insidious process of ideological control in which the *comedia* functions as a form of propaganda.

While Maravall's reading helps explain the ideological interests of the Spanish early modern theater, it gives little insight into the mechanism through which a mode of cultural expression dependent on the taste of the public might also serve as a means of ideological indoctrination for that same group. In other words, Maravall provides little in the way of an answer to the question: How is it that the *vulgo* comes to prefer those forms of expression that are the source of its own continued domination? One possible answer to this question is, in a sense, already implicit in the Marxist subtext of much of Maravall's writing. In effect, a structuralist reading of the *comedia* and of Baroque culture in general would have us take the preferences of the *vulgo* as the expression of a convenient fiction—a species of false consciousness, one might argue—behind which lie the forces of a social order within which the very possibility of autonomous agency is thrown into question. One example of this kind of thinking is provided by Raymond Williams. Invoking the Gramscian notion of hegemony, Williams argues that "relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness" are seen "as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living."³² In this view, the autonomy of the *vulgo* as an arbiter of literary judgment is already contained by the hegemonic processes of social existence itself.

³¹The English translation is mine. "El teatro español trata de imponer o de mantener la presión de un sistema de poder, y, por consiguiente, una estratificación y jerarquía de grupos, sobre un pueblo que, en virtud del amplio desarrollo de su vida durante casi dos siglos anteriores, se salía de los cuadros tradicionales del orden social, o por lo menos, parecía amenazar seriamente con ello" (Maravall [n. 8 above] 29).

³²Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977) 110.

A somewhat different take on the problem of agency in the audience for the *comedia* is provided by Anthony Cascardi. Distinguishing his own perspective from “the progressive Marxist vision that would regard the social changes at work in early modern Europe as in some way instrumental to the ultimate transformation of society,” Cascardi argues that the *comedia*, while admitting “a vision of ‘new,’ ‘modern’ modes of social awareness,” nonetheless “sacrifices that vision in favor of the stability to be achieved by the dominance of the ‘old.’” Here, the same traditional social order that makes Lope’s relationship to the economic basis of his own function in the public theater so problematic is replicated in the ideological tendencies underlying the content of the *comedia* itself. More importantly, the conservative social function of the *comedia* as represented by Cascardi has implications for our understanding of the audience, Lope’s *vulgo*. For Cascardi, the *nueva comedia*’s resistance to social change leads to a paradoxical situation in which “modern tastes” are “marshaled in support of traditional forms of social recognition . . . that leave little room for the autonomy of the self.” Cascardi concludes: “And the motives that elsewhere in Europe were placed in the service of progressive political, economic, and philosophical individualism are made subservient to what Ortega y Gasset described as the ‘psychology of the masses’ and to their desire for recognition within a hierarchical social order.”³³

Whether we follow the Marxist subtext of Maravall’s reading or Cascardi’s alternative interpretation of the Spanish early modern theater, one central characteristic of the *vulgo* stands out: its limited autonomy. In either case, the very act of creating a cultural form that depends explicitly on the taste of the *vulgo* would appear to undermine the autonomy of precisely that group upon whose judgment that cultural form’s aesthetic depends. Where Lope merely complains of the defective taste of the *vulgo* and its implications for the *nueva comedia*, both Maravall and Cascardi point to the far more serious problem of the *vulgo*’s defective agency, a problem that, as will become apparent, is itself the key to understanding the deeper forces at work in Lope’s *Arte nuevo*.

CONSUMING INTERESTS

³³Anthony J. Cascardi, *Ideologies of History* (University Park, PA 1997) 22–23.

As Cascardi has suggested, the temptation to subsume the cultural phenomenon of the commercial theater to the discourse of a Marxist critique must be balanced against the specific historical conditions informing that phenomenon. The Marxist propensity to subsume cultural activity within what Jameson describes as “master narratives,” particularly as expressed in the historically-determined transition from feudalism to capitalism, when applied to specific cultural practices, risks a kind of reductionism that fails to register the complexity of the economic circumstances within which those cultural activities take place. In the case of Spain at the end of the sixteenth century, a thorough reading of economic history reveals a complex evolution in not only the modes of production, but more importantly, in the societal response to that evolution. In fact, the resistance in Spanish society to the economic rationalism of the mercantile class derives from social habits that are rooted far more in religious and political practices than in any underlying material dialectic. As the historian Manuel Fernández Álvarez has argued, the peculiar nature of the Spanish monarchy and the society it engendered may be traced to the formative historical experience of the *reconquista*, the crucible out of which emerges an imperialist mentality punctuated by religious fanaticism that was logically extended to the continuing struggles of the Spanish monarchy under the Habsburgs throughout the sixteenth century. In this view, it is not so much the feudal nature of economic relations that constitutes the defining argument in Spanish historical evolution in the century leading up to Lope’s life, but rather what Fernández Álvarez describes as “la exigencia de todo imperio en gestación [the exigencies of all nascent empires].”³⁴

The resistance to economic rationalism inherent in Spanish imperialism is mirrored to a large extent in Lope’s depiction of the public theater in the *Arte nuevo*. Reluctant to acknowledge the new economic logic informing his work, Lope asserts the primacy of the dialectic between taste and the classical precepts in a way that plays into the hands of the ideological conservatism that Cascardi identifies with the *comedia*’s content. Hence, one discovers that discussions of the *vulgo*’s

³⁴“El español del Imperio siente el vértigo de la distancia, avanza con el ímpetu del que está seguro de sí mismo y que dondequiera que pone su planta impone su voluntad, la norma de su grupo, la ley de su pueblo (read: religious orthodoxy).” (Fernández Álvarez, *Felipe II y su tiempo* [n. 3 above] 299).

participation in the creative process are limited in the *Arte nuevo* to a consideration of taste as it enters into a binary opposition with discretion. Evidence for this view has been supplied by Díez Borque, who concludes after a detailed examination of much of Lope's *oeuvre* that the term *vulgo* is identified by Lope almost exclusively with a lack of discretion.³⁵ Furthermore, this lack of discretion is consistently represented as inhibiting the *vulgo's* ability to make correct judgments in matters relating to taste.

Taken in its most superficial sense, this emphasis on the *vulgo's* lack of discretion provides the writer with a degree of insulation from negative criticism, especially in the context of the public theater, a mode of cultural production that exposed the writer to an unprecedented degree of public scrutiny. More importantly, however, the identification of the *vulgo* with a lack of discretion effectively assures that group's participation in a process that would be considered, first and foremost, to take place exclusively within that discursive space defined by that dialectic between taste and the classical precepts mentioned earlier. By focusing on the defective taste of the masses, Lope implicitly—one might even argue unconsciously—wrests importance away from the economic relationship that gives weight to the *vulgo's* claim to arbitrate in matters of taste in order to contain the entire discussion within the domain of a purely literary criticism.

The significance of this point is underscored by Díez Borque who, in another study, has questioned Lope's use of the term *vulgo* to describe the audience for his plays. In contrast to Lope's statements in the *Arte nuevo*, Díez Borque has argued that the audience for Lope's plays was, in fact, quite heterogeneous, drawing from many strata of society and catering to those different audiences in a variety of ways.³⁶ Díez

³⁵“Los atributos de *discreto* en oposición a *vulgo* responden, en general, a las definiciones que dan Covarrubias y el *Diccionario de Autoridades* en las que destacan el sentido de ponderación en el razonamiento, cordura y buen juicio, pero también la agudeza, elocuencia, prudencia y oportunidad. Aunque haya no poco de maniqueísmo tópico en esta postura valorativa, hay que decir que exactamente lo contrario significa *vulgo* en la mente de Lope y no cabe pensar que cuando emplea el término *vulgo* lo haga confusamente o con un valor polisémico. . . . Lope tiene muy claras las ideas, insisto, de la capacidad del *vulgo* frente al *discreto*. El *vulgo* es desigual y cambiante de opinión, sometida a la veledad más que al discernimiento y con juicios inconstantes porque no se apoyan en la razón” (Díez Borque [n. 7 above] 302).

³⁶Díez Borque is especially attentive to the problem of taste in the audience for the *nueva comedias* as they were performed: “Frente al «vulgo fiero» del *patio* y a la po-

Borque's observations reveal the extent to which the term *vulgo* is not meaningful as a sociological category; it does not correspond in any intelligible way to the demographics of the theater-going public of the early-seventeenth century. Yet while the term *vulgo* may lack coherence as a social category, it does possess a certain coherence within the horizon of classical economic theory. The implicit homogeneity of the *vulgo* that Lope identifies with an "audience that pays" for the pleasure of seeing his plays may be practically understood as the homogeneity of an economic agent, expressed categorically, and in contemporary jargon, as the consumer. From this alternative perspective, what establishes the *vulgo* as a coherent social category is not any intrinsic characteristic of the group, but rather its role in an economic transaction. In effect, the *vulgo* is defined in the very act of paying to participate in the spectacle of the public theater.

For Lope, however, the practical homogeneity of the *vulgo* as a consumer—in the economic sense of the word—of his theatrical works is not only inconsistent with his ideological proclivities as evidenced in the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada*; it is, in a very real sense, alien to the epistemological framework that informs his understanding of cultural production. As an entirely new phenomenon, the economic basis of the public theater of the early seventeenth century does not fit with the established models for evaluating high cultural production. Furthermore, while the *comedia* itself was primarily an imported genre from Italy, the native antecedents for the public theater were found in religious ceremonies and courtly festivities, neither of which involved the kind of market-based public participation that becomes the defining mark of Lope's theatrical career.³⁷

blación de mercaderes y artesanos, etc., de las *gradas y bancos*, en los dos corrales fijos de Madrid existía una localidad reservada al público culto: ese público capaz de entender, entre otras, las referencias mitológicas y clásicas que el *poeta*—teniéndolos presentes—introducía en la comedia. . . . Un público al que no había que conquistar ni hacer callar con una loa laudatoria, pero que Lope, en contra de lo que quiere demostrar en su *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*, tiene muy presente al escribir su teatro" (150). Díez Borque's implicit distinction between the theory of the *Arte nuevo* and Lope's practice serves to underline the rhetorical significance of Lope's criticism of the defective taste of the *vulgo*: it aims not so much to capture the reality of his work as a playwright so much as to create a categorical identity which can then be set up against the precepts of classical antiquity. See Díez Borque (n. 23 above) 140–167.

³⁷For an extensive discussion of the indigenous and foreign antecedents for the Spanish early modern public theater, see N. D. Shergold, *A History of the Spanish Stage from*

The epistemological, as opposed to merely ideological, basis for Lope's failure to recognize the economic basis of the *vulgo* as a consumer of theatrical works is powerfully captured as an interpretative *lack* in the *Arte nuevo*. While economic factors are acknowledged in Lope's account—"for since the *vulgo* pays, it is only fair to speak to them in their own silliness"—these economic factors are presented as merely the mechanism through which the defective taste of the *vulgo* expresses itself. For Lope, the fact that the *vulgo* pays, while accounting for *why* that group's opinion matters, has nothing to do with the content of its judgment. Hence, while Lope argues that he must satisfy the *vulgo* because the *vulgo* pays for the privilege of seeing his plays, his criticisms of that group are developed exclusively in terms of the quality—and *not* the source—of its authority. In the end, by separating the judgment of the *vulgo* from the economic forces that give it legitimacy, Lope overlooks precisely that which makes the *Arte nuevo* a *potentially* revolutionary work, namely, its articulation of a new mode of cultural production in which aesthetic judgment is already integrated into the world of an exchange economy, an economy that fundamentally challenges inherited notions of aesthetic value and meaning.

It is here, then, that the resonances of a Marxist critique come into contact with something quite distinct. The notion of taste as a marker of social distinction has been identified by Pierre Bourdieu as the model of bourgeois aesthetic consumption. And it is, in fact, precisely this new emphasis on taste that renders Lope's commentary, in a strange way, radically modern. Yet given the peculiar contours of Lope's own

the Medieval Times until the End of the Seventeenth Century (Oxford 1967) chaps. 1–6. Before the rise of the public theaters in the 1570s, most dramatic works in Spain were sponsored by the church, the aristocracy, or the universities. For example, Shergold writes that "the statutes of the University of Salamanca in 1530 say that two Latin plays should be performed, one by Terence and one by Plautus, fifteen days before or after St. John's Day" (169). This example, at the very least, illustrates the huge gulf between these earlier theatrical productions and Lope's own work for the public stage, in preparation for which, as I have already discussed, he must "take Terence and Plautus out of [his] study so that they don't call out to me, for it is usual for the truth to call out from mute books." Similarly, Shergold describes Lope de Rueda—the playwright whom Lope describes as one of the first inventors of the *nueva comedia*—as "producing autos at Corpus Christi, and secular plays for the amusement of the people, or wherever an audience could be got together; but he was also employed to entertain the nobility" (154). In Lope de Rueda, one thus discovers a transitional figure for whom writing plays is a kind of hybrid activity that depends as much on the patronage of the church or the aristocracy as on the income from a paying public.

historical moment, this invocation of taste as a marker of social distinction must be understood as responding more immediately to a perceived loss of another kind of prestige, that is, a prestige derived from the authority of the classicist tradition of the Renaissance. In effect, Lope uses the aesthetic category of taste to compensate for the prestige that had been guaranteed earlier generations through their participation in the humanist project of resurrecting classical antiquity. Furthermore, given the false homogeneity of Lope's audience, the class distinction so central to any Marxist critique runs aground. In its place, one discovers the trace of Lope's own sense of historical displacement as he looks back with nostalgia to the authority of the classicist preoccupations of the early humanists. What matters is not the class identity of the *vulgo*, but rather the fact of the incursion of economic rationalism into the sacred domain of aesthetics.

But the evocation of the defective taste of the *vulgo* is not just a useful coping mechanism for dealing with Lope's sense of historical displacement. It is also a symptom of the extent to which Lope is incapable of conceptualizing the full impact of writing for an audience that pays and, in this respect, points to the problematic status of economic categories in the Spanish early modern period, particularly in areas of social life that already possessed an autonomous mode of signification. Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of high culture where the power of Renaissance ideals continued to dominate discussions of aesthetic value, as in the case of Lope's prologue from the *Jerusalén conquistada*.

For the classicist tradition as Lope presents it in the *Arte nuevo*, aesthetic value derives, as I have already suggested, from a work's fidelity to certain norms that transcend any given historical moment. Lope's identification of classical precepts with a certain universalist aesthetic—the "truth of mute books"—preempts the claims of taste so that a work's aesthetic value is defined through a kind of Platonic projection of classical criteria onto the specific instance of creative activity. The question of judgment—to the extent that it comes up at all—only arises as a kind of perceptual exercise in which the particular work is measured against an ideal that is embodied, albeit indirectly, in the classical precepts themselves. The emergence of an economic market for cultural production would thus appear to taint or corrupt the purity of this preceptive tradition. It is not only that the *vulgo* lacks discre-

tion—a complaint that is commonplace in the period—but that in catering to the *vulgo*, Lope must necessarily give up the universalist pretensions that, in the wake of Renaissance humanism, have become ever more firmly attached to the classical tradition. Yet the dialectic between taste and classical authority should not be understood simply as a process through which one system of aesthetic value supplants another. The “taste” of the *vulgo* cannot be seen as a mere substitute for the authority of classical precepts. Rather, the new dramatic law of popular taste and the accompanying incursion of economic logic into the realm of literary production raises new questions about the very nature of aesthetic value for a genre like the *comedia*. In place of what Lope would have us take as the intrinsic merit of a work composed according to the precepts of classical antiquity, the logic of economic rationalism creates a new mechanism for ascribing value to the cultural object according to its participation in a system of exchange that functions according to the laws of classical economic theory. With its exchange value determined by the laws of supply and demand as executed by the arbiter of popular taste, the *comedia* loses its classical moorings to the new logic of the economic market.

Furthermore, as the only logic that is fully accounted for in the “dramatic law” of the public theater, the logic of the economic market confirms the *vulgo*’s lack of agency according to its own mode of functioning. The *vulgo*’s lack of agency in the reception of the *nueva comedia* here finds an alternative explanation in the market’s tendency to depersonalize the individual, to homogenize social distinctions through the creation of new categories that only have meaning in the logic of the market. The mass psychology to which Cascardi refers finds its most modern expression in the numbing effects of cultural consumerism in which the concept of “taste” is only allowed to operate in ways that affirm the implicit assumptions of economic rationalism itself.

Here, then, one discovers a deeper meaning in Lope’s own conflicted attitude towards this new mode of cultural production with its dependence on the defective taste of the *vulgo*. Through his attachment to the declining values of the patronage system—as evidenced in the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada*—Lope is able to posit a position that is, in an important sense, not already co-opted by the values im-

PLICIT in writing for the public that pays.³⁸ Thus, not only is his disparaging attitude towards the defective taste of the *vulgo* a consequence of his own lingering attachment to the cultural norms of an earlier humanism, it also points to the barriers to his incorporation into the value system of the consumerist culture that he helps to create.

Moreover, there is also a strange continuity between the lack of autonomy that Cascardi identifies in the values of the old social hierarchy and the social homogenization implicit in the new order inaugurated, at least in part, by the advent of economic rationalism in the sphere of cultural production. The ultimate impact of the public theater and its theoretical summary in the *Arte nuevo* is finally registered in a rather pessimistic way as the individual—who for Burckhardt emerges in the wake of Renaissance humanism—is reappropriated within a system of signification that negates any sense of independent identity.³⁹ The *economic* modernity of the theater, while operating according to a new logic, nonetheless effects the same effacement of individual autonomy that was already implicit in the traditional social hierarchy as ideological control gives way to the machinations of Adam Smith's invisible hand.

Lope's failure to recognize the full implications of his own contribution to the development of a new mode of cultural expression is thus only vaguely recognized in the Marxist categories of ideology or hegemony. In the end, it is the specific dynamic of economic rationalism as defined by a market for cultural goods that Lope is least prepared to understand and that most powerfully influences the process through which the public theater is integrated into the social space of early modern Spain. It is, furthermore, in this same sense, that Lope himself may be said to become a liminal figure, his own humanist sympathies providing a momentary respite from the turbulent transformations af-

³⁸This is, I would argue, also the ultimate significance of Lope's continued protestations of poverty. At the very least, such protestations negate the economic import of his own work as a playwright, as if that were something with which he would rather *not* identify.

³⁹Burckhardt's thesis is largely out of fashion in contemporary debates about early modern subjectivity. My own discussion suggests that even if such an individuality did emerge, it was quickly reappropriated by the new economic logic of the market which was extended to incorporate more and more of civic life. See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore, vol. 1 (New York 1958).

fecting his own social context. Indeed, the final significance of the prologue to the *Jerusalén conquistada* emerges in just this sense, as Lope posits an idealized patronage system as the only place where the individual is not somehow appropriated by either the forces of traditional institutional ideologies or, alternatively, by the impersonal mechanism of the market as expressed in the so-called “taste” of the *vulgo*.

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