Calderón’s *El gran teatro del mundo* (1630/1655), one of the two texts I will be dealing with in this paper, belongs to the core canon of world literature, a fact which is not least substantiated by its ongoing reception in modernity proper, the most important rewriting of the play being Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Das große Welttheater* (1922). For this reason, I will keep my remarks concerning this drama rather brief.

*El gran teatro del mundo* is a one-act play, a so-called *auto sacramental*. This genre emerged at the end of the sixteenth century and flourished in Spain until the end of the seventeenth. The plays were performed on the Feast of Corpus Christi in the streets of Madrid, and attendance was free in order to reach a maximum number of spectators.\(^1\) The intention of the plays was didactic: to propagate, once again, the basic truths of Catholicism as they had been reasserted by the Council of Trent (1545–1563). In a way, the *autos* constitute a continuation of the pan-European medieval tradition of religious drama—that is, morality plays and mystery plays—to which the Cervantine drama I will be dealing with in the second section of this paper is also linked, albeit in an oblique fashion. As to its generic form, one could characterize Calderón’s drama and the numerous *autos sacramentales* conceived by playwrights such as Lope de Vega and Tirso de Molina as attempts to adapt medieval Christian drama to the demands of an age whose ideas of what constitutes a well-wrought play had been informed by humanism—in this case, by the reception of the classical tradition of dramatic production. The crucial difference displayed by *autos sacramentales* with respect to their medieval predecessors lies in their concision: while a standard *auto* consists of about 1,000–1,500 lines, morality plays and mystery plays comprised up to 60,000 lines during their final stage of generic evolution, that is, in the fifteenth century. The main device for concentrating

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\(^1\) For a more detailed account of the genre and of Calderón’s oeuvre in general, see my *Discursive Renovatio in Lope de Vega and Calderón: Studies on Spanish Baroque Drama*. With an Excur sus on the Evolution of Discourse in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and Mannerism, Berlin and Boston, MA 2017, esp. chap. 3.
the teachings of Catholicism—the narrative of salvation history together with the axioms of moral theology—within no more than 1,500 lines (which means about 30 minutes of duration for the performance) was metaphor, namely in its extended version, the *metaphora continuata*, which is the standard definition of allegory in the contemporaneous manuals.2 The *metaphora continuata* is a very apt device when it comes to highly concentrating a dramatic work’s message; but, as demonstrated by the fifteenth-century morality plays—which had recourse to allegory but were nevertheless extremely long—such concentration is not the necessary consequence of the application of the device. Allegory functions as an enabling structure when it comes to the goal in question, and it is perhaps the most efficient one conceivable. But it is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition.

Calderón’s *El gran teatro del mundo* is presented here as a paradigm of the genre and even more so of the basic intention sustaining the genre. Thus, the interpretation of Cervantes’s play as an ironic rebuttal of what is given expression in Calderón’s *auto*—which might at first seem counterintuitive, given the respective dates of publication—is meant to convey that the former reacts to the general message and intention of the *auto* as genre.

Leaving aside any evaluation of its ideological profile, one has to say that Calderón’s version of the concept of theater as a metaphor for human life in general3 is ingeniously conceived. It displays a maximum transparency of the metaphorical level as to its intended meaning as well as an exploitation of the semantic potential of the basic image that is rich and multifaceted to a degree which can hardly be characterized as otherwise than amazing. Although extremely simple as to its message, the play matches the highest standards of contemporary *conceptismo*—it should be mentioned that the personage named *Autor*, meaning God, explicitly articulates a corresponding claim when, during an interaction with *Mundo*, a personage representing the stage director, he calls the metaphor sustaining the play within the play “un concepto mío / la ejecución a tus aplausos fío” (p. 41, vv. 37f.; my italics).4

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2 See, e.g., Emmanuele Tesauro, *Cannocchiale aristotelico*, Venice 1663, pp. 75 and 440.

3 As is well known, the metaphor as such has a long history, starting in pre-Christian antiquity; the main sources from classical times are Epictetus (*Encheiridion* § 17) and Plato (*Laws* 644D); all necessary details may be gathered from E. R. Curtius’s chapter “Theatrical Metaphors” in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W. Trask, Princeton, NJ 2013, pp. 138–144. Curtius has a tendency to neglect the reception of the metaphor under the auspices of the revival of Stoicism that is characteristic of pre-Counter-Reformation humanism (Erasmus of Rotterdam, Montaigne, Lipsius).

The one and only act is divided into three sections. This structure constitutes, on the one hand, a resumption of basic Aristotelian principles (the prehistory, the story proper, and the end), and, on the other, an allusion to the dogmatic concept of the triune, of the configuration of three-in-one. The prehistory establishes the basic metaphor: the Christian God is presented as a sort of playwright (El Autor), while the World (El Mundo) is at the same time the stage and the stage director. There are a number of personifications or types of humans who are the actors of the play within the play: the King (El Rey), the Wise Man (La Discreción), who turns out to be a man of the Church, Hermosura, (female) Beauty,5 the Rich Man (El Rico), the Peasant (El Labrador), the Poor Man (El Pobre), and, finally, a child (Un Niño), of whom spectators learn that it died in the process of being born or shortly after. In addition, Grace (La Ley de Gracia) plays a role—not that of an actor, however, but rather of a commentator. This is both a resumption of the classical concept of the chorus and an anticipation of devices familiar from modern, twentieth-century drama with its tendency towards the epic.

The actual stage is divided into two parts. On the upper part, God, the Autor, conceives the play within the play, which will take place on the “stage” below: he creates it, quite like a playwright, just by imagining it and subsequently articulating his imaginations, while emphasizing that the story it contains—that is, world history—is nothing but a short play,6 a fictional episode (embedded in a more comprehensive reality) whose performance he will take delight in viewing (p. 41). As soon as the allegory of the World, the first personage appearing on the lower stage, has thus been created, it presents a brief account of salvation history with its three sections: ante legem, sub lege, and sub gratia, including an anticipation of the Apocalypse. Next, the Autor hires actors and assigns them the various roles already mentioned, following nothing other

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5 Discreción as well as Hermosura seem to be “gendered” in the way made explicit above; but the religious person is also called “la religiosa” (p. 67, v. 845), and Hermosura, explicitly referred to as “la dama” at one point (p. 67, v. 841), represents, as the Autor says, La Hermosura humana (p. 51, v. 333f.)—that is, those humans (regardless of sex and gender) who take pride in their physical beauty.

6 The allegory of Mundo explicitly articulates this diagnosis (“¡Corta fue la comedia!”; p. 79, v. 1255); some lines later, the personage even makes use of the formulation “la farsa de la vida” (p. 80, v. 1290)—which might be considered an additional justification (if there is a need for one) of the comparison with the Cervantine entremés.
than his own discretion in the process of distribution. Those who ask for a “better” part, the actors hired to play the Peasant and the Poor Man, are told that the respective roles have to be filled in order for the play to be complete, and that there are no other parts available for them. It constitutes a slight breach of the perfectly devised allegory that these actors, in contrast to actors in the proper sense, do not have the liberty to turn down the offer of employment.7 Their complaints are countered by the Autor, who says that at the end of the play they will receive their pay (“el salario”; p. 53, v. 424) not according to the hierarchical status of their roles, as is common in theater performances proper, but according to the quality of their individual performances. The measure of this quality is the degree of compliance with what may be called a preexistent role script, the imperative of obrar bien, that is, to act in the right way, i.e., according to the Christian commandment of love for one’s neighbor. It needs to be emphasized that the play (“comedia”) to be performed in the following, that is, the play within the play, bears exactly this title: “¿cómo [...] esta comedia8 se llama?” / “what’s the title of this famous play?” asks Hermosura; the Autor answers: “Obrar bien, que Dios es Dios” / “Do good, for God is God” (p. 54, v. 436–348 / p. 240).

Not least because of the extreme metaphorical condensation here at work, there is only one scene in the strict sense; the individual actors’ compliance with the quality standard just mentioned is measured by way of this scene. It should be noted that the Autor emphasizes that all of the actors are endowed with free will (“[a]lbedrío”; p. 55, v. 482; liberum arbitrium), which enables them to perform well if they wish to do so. The actors’ task is further facilitated

7—a logical inconsistency that translates the difficulty (or, rather, the impossibility) of harmonizing the assumption of free will on the part of humans and the dogma of divine praescientia: the play (within the play, that is, human existence) will take place in the way God “foresaw” it, whatever humans may decide. Nevertheless, the individuals have freedom of choice, but only within the limits of the specific role God has assigned them. The question of whether they would have “performed” better or worse within a different role than the one they are actually assigned remains open.

8 For non-Hispanicist readers of this essay, it should be mentioned that the term comedia is the general term for drama in Spanish Golden age usage. Comedias comprised tragedies, tragico comedies, and comedies (the latter in the Aristotelian sense of the term); as is apparent from the above quote, contemporary authors also subsumed the autos sacramentales under this generic term. Modern research, starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century, has introduced a strict differentiation between comedias and autos that seems not to have existed in the period of origin of the texts. This striking shift may be due to the fact that the degree of attention paid to issues of form in comparison to content and message is much greater in the case of modern literary studies than in the case of pre-nineteenth-century, esp. medieval and Baroque literature.
by the fact that the performance takes place under the auspices of La Ley de Gracia, who appears as a personage onstage. La Ley puts her auxiliary function into practice by repeating time and again, in a chorus-like fashion, the formula “Obrar bien, que Dios es Dios” (p. 65, v. 790; see also v. 808 and v. 942), that is, by reminding the actors what the play is about9; some amongst them, above all El Rico, consider this admonition to be boring (“¡Oh, cómo cansa esta voz!” / “Oh, how it tires me out!”; p. 66, v. 810 / p. 248).

At one point, the Poor Man asks the other actors to give him alms (“Dadme, por Dios, limosna”; p. 67, v. 860f.). The man of the Church immediately complies with this request, while all the others give nothing. Shortly afterwards, a voice (Voz) announces that the play is already approaching its end (pp. 71f.). The stage director divests the actors of their props (the King’s crown, the Rich Man’s gold and silver, etc.), and the latter leave the stage “desnud[os]” (p. 80, v. 1290), naked—which would not literally have been the case in contemporaneous performances.10 The lower stage, governed by El Mundo, is closed, while the upper stage is opened once again. The Autor is having supper. He invites the Wise Man (the cleric) and El Pobre to join him, that is, to have wine and bread together with him. The King and Hermosura, the beautiful woman, who both performed badly, but apologized to the Autor—that is, repented before being divested of their roles11—are told that they will have to wait for a while, specifically in purgatory (p. 87, v. 1480), before they will be invited to participate in the meal. El Labrador also receives a finally benign verdict because he was in principle willing to give alms, but felt that charity might have a negative effect on the Poor Man’s own efforts to escape from his misery by work—an argument that the Autor, that is God, seems neither to endorse nor unconditionally to reject. The rather benign treatment of the King, of Beauty, and of the Peasant is enhanced by the cleric’s intervention, who asks the Autor for their waiting time to be reduced.

There is only one actor who receives an unqualifiedly negative evaluation: the Rich Man is not invited to supper, and the Autor states clearly that he will

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9 At one point, the formula is expanded by adding an explicit reference to the Christian imperative of love for one’s neighbor: “Ama al otro como a ti, y obrar bien, que Dios es Dios” (p. 70, vv. 947f.).

10 On the page specified above, the metaphorical usage of the term is even made explicit.

11 The King’s last words are: “Si ya acabó mi papel, / supremo y divino Autor, / dad a mis yerros disculpa, / pues arrepentido estoy”; / “If my part’s over, / Supreme and divine Author, please forgive / My errors, because I’m truly repentant” (p. 72, vv. 1003–1006 / p. 252). The last words uttered by Hermosura before she exits the lower stage are: “Mucho me pesa no haber / hecho mi papel mejor” / “It grieves me greatly / That I didn’t play my part more perfectly” (p. 74, vv. 1079f. / p. 253).
not be invited in the future. Instead of being paid, he will be punished by way of endless pains for having performed badly. In addition, the child who did not have any chance to perform either well or badly is denied access to the table, though without being punished; this harsh verdict is justified by the Autor, who tells him “en fin naces del pecado” (p. 87, v. 1507), a reference to original sin, which forms a crucial component of Christian dogma. The relation between the two stages is specified in precise meta-language at the end of the auto: the comedia that took place on the stage of El Mundo was “el teatro [...] de las ficciones”, while what takes place after its end, either the eternal supper with God or eternal damnation, is the “teatro [...] de las verdades” (p. 84, vv. 1387f.).

In recent decades, theoretical discussions revolving around the concepts of metaphor and more specifically of allegory have highlighted the arbitrariness characterizing the relation between proprium and figuratum. Such assumptions, based partly on certain highly abstract insights of Saussurian and post-Saussurian linguistics, partly on notoriously extreme statements by Nietzsche, follow a rhetorical logic—in this case, the attempt at gaining attention by way of sensationalizing—much more than they constitute a sober assessment of basic semiotic mechanisms. Calderón did not have the power to impose metaphors constructed by him on the public according to his own discretion only; in order to be successful as a playwright, he had to convince his audience, that is, to persuade them to “buy” his conceptualizing. The specifically Christian variant of the metaphor of the world as a stage which Calderón develops in the auto briefly analyzed gains its consistency by elaborating on two basic concepts.

12 If it were not the case that every human being is marred by sin, there would not have been a reason for God’s self-sacrifice; it would have sufficed to propagate the idea of imitating morally exemplary individuals. Casting every human being as subject to sin leads by necessity to the postulate—somewhat absurd from an external perspective—that newborn children are sinners. Since they are endowed with a soul created by God in His likeness, they are full human beings, even already in their mothers’ womb. A conceptualization that protects them against being killed before birth (abortion) or immediately afterwards, as is current practice within other cultural/religious contexts, also implies that they will never be able to access Paradise if they die before baptism. The problems caused by this dogmatically cogent clause became attenuated by the imperative practice to baptize newborn children immediately after birth (a sacramental act that frees them from the “stains” of original sin), and, in addition, by postulating a sort of neutral antechamber of hell, the limbus, which is certainly not a particularly pleasant place, but a place whose inmates are not subjected to pains. The limbus is the destiny assigned to those children (actually born or aborted, be it naturally or by human intervention) who died before baptism.

13 I am thinking, of course, of Nietzsche’s famous equation of truth and metaphor in On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense (1873).
preexisting in the world-view of this religion, that is, concepts that were well-known to any spectator. The rhetorical impact of the play might not least be based on these external points of reference that secured—within the rather hermetic ideological context mentioned—a more than arbitrary dimension for what it presents: within a Christian frame, there is, indeed, an answer to the question that remains in suspense within the secular variants of the metaphor of the world as a stage (prominent since antiquity and present in Calderón’s times in Shakespeare, amongst others), namely the question of where the corresponding concept: the non-stage, or, in other terms: reality, is to be sought. As to content, the answer—in a world beyond this one—is nothing but dogma. But as to dramaturgical structure, there is, in Calderón, a contrasting “place” to “the world as a stage”, whereas the secular variants exhibit nothing but a void.

No less than the one first mentioned, the second component that secures a highly compelling profile for Calderón’s concepto has both a structural and a dogmatic dimension. Actors on a stage are not free to do what they want to do; they have to comply with what is called a script. Seen from this perspective, the metaphor of “the world as a stage” seems at first sight to be in contradiction to the doxa of “real life” as granting (free) choice to the individual, as well as to the dogma of albedrío (liberum arbitrium). In this auto sacramental, Calderón exploits to the fullest the meaning of “freedom of will” from a Christian, specifically Counter-Reformation Catholic perspective: it consists in the decision to comply or not to comply with a preexisting role script that, as such, is by no means subject to human discretion. The “essence” of the life of a good Christian is basically imitatio (mimesis), specifically imitatio Christi—not necessarily to the extent of being ready to suffer martyrdom, but in any case to the extent of being prepared to deprive oneself of one’s property, status, or well-being in order to “save” one’s neighbor.

The Cervantine drama I will be dealing with is much less well known than Calderón’s auto. It bears the title Entremés del retablo de las maravillas and was first published in 1615. As is the case with all of the products of the author’s attempt to gain access to the lucrative market of stage performances, the play was not very successful—for various reasons, Cervantes’s theatrical

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14 The structure of the play, based on the device of the play-within-a-play, makes it possible to also present the cosmos of the “verdades” explicitly as “teatro”, which allows the author to avoid attempts at spiriting away what is obvious, namely, that the “show” in its entirety is theater. The “teatro [...] de las ficciones” is, consequently, cast as an embedded episode within a stage performance representing “real reality”.

15 This part of my paper reproduces an analysis contained in my book The Cultural Net: Early Modern Drama as a Paradigm, Berlin and Boston, MA 2018.
oeuvre never attained to the immense success of his novels and novellas. As to this entremés in particular, it may also be that the author’s ideological non-conformism, carefully veiled in the Quijote and the Novelas ejemplares, became all too obvious here for stage directors to be ready to risk a conflict with the Inquisition.

Entremés is a generic term. The French equivalent, farce, which is also used in English and German, may be more familiar, with the literal meaning of the terms being exactly the same: something that is placed between two other items. The original field of application of the term farce (deriving from the verb farcir) is the culinary sphere. It designates a mixture of meat and spices inserted into a larger piece of meat, usually poultry, in order to enhance the taste of the entire roast. In the case of drama, this whole into which the farce is inserted is a “serious” play divided into several acts, often with a didactic (in the age in question: religious) content. In the High Middle Ages, such didactic plays—mystery plays referring to Biblical history, mainly to Christ’s birth or to the Passion; morality plays presenting allegories of virtues and vices fighting against each other—reached a length that caused their performances to last longer than one or two days. In order to provide some relief from such enormous quantities of doctrinal and moralizing material, dramatists inserted brief one-act plays, entremeses or farces, in between acts. The plots of these one-act plays were independent from those of the main plays, and their content was intended to be entertaining—that is, it was always comic, and in many cases also obscene. The reaction of contemporary audiences to these interludes seems to have been so positive that, from the thirteenth century onward, they developed into independent plays, typically performed by itinerant troupes on occasions such as festivals and fairs. The genre may be considered a paramount example of what M. Bakhtin calls the “carnivalesque”, and its development is a no less paramount example of what he calls the evolution of the carnivalesque, taking place during the Renaissance, from a restricted to an emancipated cultural practice.16

The title proper of the Cervantine entremés is intentionally ambiguous: a “retablo” is primarily an altarpiece presenting religious paintings, including depictions of maravillas, meaning miracles (Christ’s Ascension, for instance, or the descent of the Holy Spirit). But in Golden Age usage, “retablo” might also refer to a stage on which a show is performed.

The plot of the piece I will be discussing might be summarized as follows: a troupe of itinerant actors enters a village, sets up its stage (the retablo), and then performs various short scenes in order to entertain those villagers who are

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ready to pay a (modest) fee. We are thus dealing, once again, with a play within
the play. The only link between these scenes is their sensational content: the
biblical Samson tearing down the columns of a temple dedicated to an idol; a
huge number of mice appearing on the stage and frightening in particular the
female contingent of the audience; wild and dangerous beasts—such as bears
and lions, or a bull who is said to have killed a man in Salamanca—running
around on stage (etc.). However, there is in fact nothing to be seen on the stage.
The actors behave and talk to each other as if the scenes mentioned were being
performed, and the villagers enthusiastically agree, to the point of being seized
by fear when the lions are allegedly prowling around on the stage. The reason
for their readiness to accept the actors’ pretentions as true is conveyed in a
scene that takes place before the (non-)performances within the performance.
The stage director tells the villagers that the contraption set up is named “the
stage of miracles” because only people of legitimate birth (stemming from a cou-
ple who is united by the bond of sacramental marriage) and who are, in addi-
tion, so-called “old Christians” (cristianos viejos), that is, who are free from the
suspicion of having Jewish ancestors, are able to perceive what is presented
onstage.

The striking peculiarity of the Cervantine functionalization of a well-known
motif (I shall come back to this point) is encoded in the ending. A quartermaster
of the royal army suddenly appears. He announces that there are some dozen
military men to be hosted, and asks the villagers to make the necessary prepara-
tions. These, however, or the bigger part of them, believe the quartermaster to
be part of the stage action. They ask the stage director to present more entertain-
ing scenes, and start hitting the quartermaster, as the latter does not show any
readiness to leave the “stage”. In those times, hosting military men from one’s
own country on their demand was, indeed, a legal obligation. If there was resis-
tance to this law, the soldiers were entitled to take by physical force what was
not conceded to them voluntarily. The military man reacts accordingly: he draws
his sword and stabs a great number of the villagers. The play thus ends in a
bloody disaster.

Put in a nutshell, one might say that there is a skeptical tenor—skeptical in
the sense of the philosophical school—sustaining the entire construction. It is
provided by the fact that the villagers really believe to be seeing what is only
recounted to them; sensory perception might be biased by ideological commit-
ments or societal constraints. The basic motif of the play is not unknown in
European literary history. It cannot be excluded that Hans Christian Andersen
based his fairytale The Emperor’s New Clothes (1837) on a reading of Cervantes’s
entremés; but it may as well be the case that the two authors drew independ-
dently from corresponding material already available prior to Cervantes. The
motif as such can be found in the *ejemplo 32* of the *Conde Lucanor* (1330–1335), a collection, written in Spanish, of entertaining as well as instructive short narratives that derive from the medieval oral tradition and may go back to autochthonous and/or to exogenous sources (Arab, Oriental). There is, however, a unique feature of Cervantes’s usage of this motif. In the instances preceding and following it, the audience acquiesces to the veracity of what they have been told in order to avoid censure by the authorities. In Cervantes, by contrast, the bloody ending shows that many audience members really believe to see what, according to the deceivers, is “represented” onstage. What might be considered, in the case of the other texts that make use of the motif, an incrimination of conformism by way of ridicule, assumes in Cervantes the rank of a quasi-epistemological speculation: conformism might block cognition to the point of leading to disaster.

There is another point of divergence to be addressed. Of the two prerequisites for seeing what is allegedly happening onstage according to the tricksters of Cervantes’s play, one finds only the first one in the *Conde Lucanor*, namely, the criterion of legitimate birth. The motif belongs to the traditional repertoire of the comic, since it refers to the body and its permanent resistance to the superimposition of those restrictive norms and laws we call civilizational, societal, or religious. As to what is known about the realities in premodern rural Europe, legitimate birth (as opposed to births out of wedlock) was more the exception than the rule—which is not astonishing, since such legitimacy is of relevance only in case there is something to inherit. For the lower classes, it is without any functionality. It is one of those many patterns of behavior that are constantly reasserted verbally while being more or less ignored practically.

Cervantes adds to this traditional comic motif an item he draws from a completely different discursive strand, the contemporary controversies revolving around the “right” religion and the “right” way to practice it. Highly intricate questions of orthodoxy in the literal sense are introduced into comedy and thematized in a way that would have been inconceivable in pragmatic and non-comic texts at that time. The concept of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) refers to the first stages of racism in European history. Pressured by the increasingly successful Christian re-conquerors of the peninsula, many Spanish Jews had converted to Christianity in the fourteenth century. As delighted as the Iberian Christians might have been at first that so many Jews gave up their “stubborn”\(^\text{17}\) resistance to

\(^{17}\) “Stubbornness” (*obstinatio*), the willful rejection of what one is able to recognize as true but not ready to acknowledge, is the main “vice” ascribed by medieval Christian polemics to the “Synagogue” (the common metonymy for all people of Jewish faith).
acknowledging that Jesus was the Messiah announced in Scripture, they soon had to face the fact that these “new Christians” (cristianos nuevos) were not only sisters and brothers in Christ, but also became, on the grounds of the act of conversion, serious competitors in the worldly sphere. As Jews, they had been excluded from all of military and civil service, including the clergy and higher education. After baptism, these social spheres became accessible to them on equal grounds. With the skills and the adaptability their ancestors had to acquire during a long history of persecution, the cristianos nuevos performed well in these sectors formerly reserved for the “old Christians”. The reaction to this evolution was a series of pogroms which exceeded in their violence what was known from previous European history. In order to cool the overheated atmosphere, the authorities promulgated the first statutes of limpieza de sangre in 1449, that is, rules that made all the aforementioned professions accessible only to those who were able to produce evidence that they were so-called cristianos viejos, that is, of non-Jewish lineage. Even without going into the details, one might be able to imagine what the—perhaps even unintentional—consequences of these statutes were, namely, the general atmosphere of a witch-hunt that degenerated into a sort of proto-totalitarian racism in the year 1492, when all non-converted Jews and Muslims were exiled from Spain, and even more so in the course of and after the Counter-Reformation and the reinforcement of the Inquisition going along with the Catholic Church’s attempt at regaining ideological control in the West. Being accused of illegitimate birth was nothing that would have had serious real-world consequences in the rural Spain of that time. Being suspected of not being a cristiano viejo,

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18 The seminal publication on the scenario briefly characterized above is D. Nirenberg’s Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages, Princeton, NJ 1996.

19 As to the attitude of the Church, fornicatio (extra-marital intercourse with a view to gaining pleasure) was considered sinful; but, as questionable as the Church’s positions may have been in those times in many other respects, the “products” of such sinful behavior, if there were any, that is, “illegitimate” children, were always accepted as equal members of the congregation. Within society at large, the patriarchal norms whose function is to guarantee the transmission of accumulated wealth from one generation to the next initially apply in the aristocratic milieu only. As early as in the late Middle Ages, the “new” class of the bourgeoisie adopted this code of conduct, called in Spanish honor, exactly for the reasons just mentioned: bourgeois people began casting themselves as “honorable” as soon as there was a relevant material possession they could leave to their (but not just any) children. In the countryside of all of Europe, sexual practices seem to have been quite promiscuous in premodern times. The Church tried to reconcile the realities with its dogma by creating the concept of matrimonium in facie Dei, which was nothing but a makeshift legitimization of a previous relationship between partners not united by marriage. The Council of Trent interdicted this practice. Only “regular” marriage in a church and in the presence of a priest legitimized by ordination to practice what was, from that time onward, a sacrament, was accepted. Innumerable Spanish Golden age texts from the period after the Council exploited the previous
in contrast, would, sooner or later, lead to a trial by the Inquisition. In case of a first trial, acquittal was the statistically prevalent outcome; in case of a second trial, the opposite was the case. In those days, being accused twice of not being of *sangre limpia*—the chief symptom being the secret abidance by Jewish ritualistic rules (avoiding the consumption of pork; taking a bath on Fridays rather than on Saturdays)—meant being subjected to torture in almost all cases and then burnt at the stake following upon an extorted confession.

It is thus extremely sensitive material that Cervantes touches upon in his *entremés*. By decidedly integrating comic material with highly intricate material revolving around the question of orthodoxy and, ultimately, of life and (violent) death, he re-functionalizes a genre whose task had been nothing more than to provide comic relief into an instrument of anti-totalitarian reflection. The pressure exerted by the *limpieza de sangre* statutes and the ensuing atmosphere of all-encompassing conformism is leading Spain into “seeing what is not there and not seeing what is there”, into a complete loss of touch with reality—that is the message conveyed by this at first sight so harmless interlude.

An additional, albeit minor aspect which should be mentioned is that Cervantes made use of another ideologically relevant discursive material when he produced the play in question. The first noun of the title, “*retablo*”, has, as already mentioned, two different semantic dimensions. Its primary meaning referred to in this specific context is: “a stage for puppet (or else dumb) shows”. Its well-known secondary meaning—well-known because it is the standard meaning—is “decorative altarpiece”. And there is a second word in the title referring to religion, namely, “*maravillas*”. The primary reference of the term is the content of the play within the play, the “miraculous” onstage appearance of wild beasts from other continents. The secondary meaning—which, in this case as well, is the standard meaning—refers to supernatural phenomena that are supposed to be real.

The discussion revolving around the question of whether there are indeed miracles or whether these are delusions produced by the will to see them, or by deceivers who profit from making the populace believe that they are real—in this case: by God’s ministers—belongs to the fiercest ideological controversies of early modern Europe. Protestantism as well as the more “enlightened” strands of Catholicism (Erasmanism) held that the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the concomitant supernatural events that occurred in that context were the last miracles before the end times, when there may be further ones.

(and, as one may assume, ongoing practice) of *matrimonium in facie Dei* in order to obliquely thematize practices which were considered to be sinful within the “official” discourse at that time.
Traditional Catholic dogma, and even more so the Church’s ritual practices, were, however, firmly linked to the idea that miracles were an integral part of *contemporary* reality. Pilgrimages, devotion to saints, miracles occurring in such contexts, and the system of money collection linked to these practices were vital for Catholicism. During the deliberations at Trent, these practices, as well as the claim linked to them—namely, that they might help transgress the limits of regular, empirical reality—had been vigorously reasserted. Neither certain texts by Erasmus of Rotterdam (*Colloquia familiaria* [1518]), nor a literary text like the *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1552/1554), with its famous *buldero* chapter, would have been conceivable after the Council. But Cervantes ingeniously synthesizes this anti-Tridentine material with comic material of an—as it seems—completely harmless profile.

Erasmus’ critique of miracles, as well as that of the anonymous author of the *Lazarillo*, also had recourse to comic devices (parody, satire) in order to treat a question which would not have been treatable on the peninsula in a “serious” way in those days. In his play, Cervantes reactivates this technique of “re-functionalization through assembly of the diverse” and thus succeeds at producing a decidedly anti-Tridentine text despite his status as an “official” and honored author of contemporary Spain. But his text is not an imitation of the precursors mentioned. What Cervantes introduces in order to secure this discursive and ideological margin in more difficult times than those of Erasmus and the *Lazarillo* is a change of register and an ensuing discursive diversity that is hardly conceivable for non-literary texts. It is not satire or parody—comic genres that have always been linked with more serious forms of ideological critique—but the, generically speaking, “lowest” variant of comedy, farce, that is here chosen in order to veil the ideological subversion conveyed by the text.

In conclusion, I will present some thoughts linked to the relation of the two dramas here discussed to the general topic of the conference from which the present volume emerged: theater as metaphor. I will not comment further on the specific aspect highlighted in the title of my paper, since it is evident from what I have said that the two plays stand in a relation of an assertion and its ironization. Cervantes does not try to convey that the Christian dogma is nonsensical or absurd. He just poses the question of whether an all too compliant, completely unreflecting, quasi-automatic stance towards this dogma and the ethical requirements linked to it might perhaps lead believers to fall prey to swindlers and deceivers. As is consistently the case in Cervantes’s works, there is no thematization in the *entremés* of the dimension that Calderón refers to as the “teatro de las verdades”—that is, the dimension of life after death. Thus, from a logical perspective, one cannot exclude the possibility that the naïve
villagers of Cervantes’s play immediately go to paradise after being stabbed by
the quartermaster—that is, if any such paradise exists. If there is nothing of the
kind, however, the only “pay” the villagers receive for their ideological con-
formism is not an invitation to eternal supper in the presence of the Godhead,
but, rather, ridicule and, finally, violent death. Is it all too speculative to as-
sume that there is probably not much eleos (pity) to be expected of readers or
viewers of the play or its performance when they are witnessing the final
scene?

As to literary devices, the main difference between the Calderonian and the
Cervantine versions of the basic motif consists in that there is an explicit allego-
rization of the motif in the auto, while there is none in the entremés. In
Calderón, the stage (on the stage) is the world; the play (“comedia”) performed
on it is life; the actors are, in proper terms, real-world humans or types of
humans; the playwright is God, who is in charge of the entire arrangement,
while the actors have the liberty to perform well or badly, and are rewarded
accordingly once the play is over; the reward consists in the most solid reality
there is, at least from a Christian perspective: either hell or paradise.

In Cervantes, by contrast, the scenario in its entirety is mimetic in the Aristo-
telian sense. Although the statistical probability of such a scenario to be or
become real is not very high, it is possible (dynaton) that similar events might
have happened in sixteenth- or seventeenth-century rural Spain. The intention,
however, is not documentary. On Cervantes’s part, there is no ambition involved
to provide a novella-like report on hardly believable but nonetheless “real”
ocurrences. The scenario on stage is, here no less than in Calderón’s auto, a
metaphor whose meaning refers to a sense (sensus) that differs from the proper
meaning of the words (the verba, according to Quintilian’s famous definition),20
that is, from the text.

I would like to suggest conceiving of Cervantes’s usage of the device of the-
ter as metaphor as symbolic, whereas Calderón’s usage is allegorical in the clas-
sical sense of the term. It does not make sense to assign a discrete metaphorical
meaning to every single detail in Cervantes’s play; by contrast, such a decoding
does make sense in the case of Calderón’s play. The Cervantine entremés is rather
to be taken as a semioticized configuration that conveys a highly complex and
comprehensive thesis concerning the interplay between the human mind and
preestablished patterns of interpretation—preestablished, that is, by routine, cus-
tom, belief, or conformism. Ultimately, it is a thesis pertaining to the unreliability
of the mind’s assessment of sensorial perceptions.

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20 See Institutionis oratoriae libri XII, here: 6:44.
The basic device at play in both texts—theater as metaphor—is accordingly to be seen as extremely versatile as to its semiotic functionalization. Its essence, or, to put it more modestly, the common denominator of its concrete instantiations—observable not only in the cases examined here, but also beyond—may reside in its engagement with a difficult question already raised in Aristotle’s *Poetics*: what is play, imitation (*mimesis*), and what is real action (*pragmata*)?²¹ And are there any strict criteria upon which we can rely in order to make a judgment in particular cases? Aristotle’s answer to this latter question is, finally, negative: what is “theater” and what is “reality” depends on our personal attitude towards what occurs before our eyes. It is this attitude which determines whether we treat the corresponding scenes as bare facticity or as metaphor, meaning: as referring to something else which is not there, at least not *pro omaton*,²² to quote the Stagirite.

²¹ See chaps. 1–4, spec. 4.
²² See *Poetics*, chap. 17.