

MULATA, MORISCO, AFRICAN SLAVE?

THOUGHTS ON AN ELUSIVE PROTAGONIST
IN A PAINTING BY VELÁZQUEZ

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ABSTRACT

When he was still very young, Diego Velázquez painted “Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus” (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin). From its first appearance in scholarly literature, the topic of the picture and the identity of the protagonist have been disputed and the painting has engendered a wide variety of interpretations. This article takes the shifting terms used to define, name, and categorize the painting’s protagonist as its starting point. It re-examines the painting’s multiple ambiguities and argues that the painter might have deliberately veiled the protagonist’s identity, refusing semantic transparency – just as he has left the condition of the central figure’s very seeing unclear. This interpretation gains some plausibility when we observe the work against the background of the expulsion of Spain’s Morisco population between 1609 and 1614. The topic of absence, which the different empty pots and vessels emphasize, and the instabilities upon which Velázquez seems to emphatically insist allow an attempt to interrogate this painting through the lens of the complex identity politics surrounding the literary as well as real-life figure of the Morisco.

KEYWORDS

Diego Velázquez; Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus; Expulsion of the Moriscos.

I. Titles and Designations

The canvas known as “La mulata” [Fig. 1] was painted by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) when he was still very young, in Seville, sometime around 1617 as he was establishing his own workshop.¹ Today it resides in the National Gallery of Ireland (Dublin). It shows a person wearing a white turban-like cap standing behind a wooden table upon which several kitchen utensils, pots, and pans are strewn. In the background, the Supper at Emmaus can be seen. This picture in the picture could be a painting, but could also be an actual opening into another room. A second version of the picture exists in the Chicago Art Institute; this version lacks the biblical scene in the background and is focused exclusively on the capped figure in the scullery.² On the homepage of the National Gallery of Ireland, Velázquez’s work is rather neutrally titled “Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus”. The accompanying text, however, indicates that the subject is a “Moorish servant” working in a kitchen.³ In 1987, art historian Barry Wind also described the painting’s subject as a “stolid kitchen maid”, an “oblivious Moorish servant”.⁴ Most often the figure is called “La criada mulata”, “a mulatto servant”, or simply “la mulata” or “The Mulattress”.⁵ Of late, the unnamed figure has been alternately characterized as a “female slave”, a “slave woman”, an “anonymous woman of colour”, a “mixed-race woman”, “una mujer mixta esclavizada”,⁶ a “young woman of Afri-

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The painting is not dated, but there is a general consensus that it was made between 1617 and 1623 in Seville. Most authors opt for the period between 1617 and 1620. Velázquez was granted a license to practice the art of painting on 14 March 1617 (Varia Velazqueña, vol. II, documento 10: Carta de examen de Velázquez como pintor). In April 1618 he married Juana Pacheco, his master’s daughter, he acquired rental properties and, already in 1620, he accepted his own apprentice. See Jonathan Brown, *Velázquez. Painter and Courtier*, New Haven, CT/London 1986, 7.

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The painting in Chicago is badly preserved, and it is hard to decide whether it is by Velázquez or a copy by someone else. See Rosemarie Mulcahy, *Spanish Paintings in The National Gallery of Ireland*, Dublin 1988, 81; *Velázquez in Seville* (exh. cat. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland), ed. by David Davies and Enriqueta Harris, Edinburgh 1996, 136; Jane Boyd and Philip F. Esler, *Visuality and Biblical Text. Interpreting Velázquez’ Christ with Martha and Mary as a Test Case*, Florence 2004, 54–59.

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<http://www.nationalgallery.ie/art-and-artists/highlights-collection/kitchen-maid-supper-emmaus-diego-velazquez-1599-1660> (30.09.2021).

4

Barry Wind, *Velázquez’s Bodegones. A Study in 17th-Century Spanish Genre Painting*, Fairfax, VA 1987, 32, 96.

5

Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, *Diego Velázquez*, Madrid ²1974, 20, diagnosed a “predilection for negros and mulatos” on the side of Velázquez who must have been impressed “por el grafismo de su raza”.

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Carmen Fracchia, (Lack of) Visual Representation of Black Slaves in Spanish Golden Age Painting, in: *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 10, 2004, 23–34, 25, 27, and 28; ead., Constructing the Black Slave in Spanish Golden Age Painting, in: Tom Nichols (ed.), *Others and Outcasts in Early Modern Europe. Picturing the Social Margins*, Aldershot 2007, 179–195, 184; ead., La mulata, de Velázquez, in: Aurelia Martín Casares and Rocio Periañez

can origins”, a “female African slave”, or more precisely a young woman “of Sub-Saharan African heritage”.⁷ The semantic slippages reflected by the shifting terms used to define, name, and categorize the painting’s protagonist – and the ways in which this slippage is embedded in Velázquez’s painting – are the subject of this essay, which re-examines the painting’s multiple ambiguities in light of the ongoing Spanish persecution of its non-Christian (or allegedly non-Christian) population in the early modern period.

In Velázquez’s time and society, a “mulato” was, according to the “Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española” written in 1611 by Sebastián de Cobarruvias Orozco, “one who is son of a black woman and a white man or the other way around: and because this is an extraordinary mixture they compare it to the nature of the mule”.⁸ The word derives, thus, from the infertile mule, which is a blend of two species, namely a horse and a donkey. The association between “mulato” and mule was common in 16th- and 17th-century Spain and, obviously, aimed to animalize and dehumanize the person it denoted.⁹

Very likely it was the 19th- or 20th-century owner of the painting who referred to the work by that name, or one of the first art historians who wrote about the picture. Since the painting only surfaced in 1913 and has not left any traces in earlier documentation,¹⁰ the title must have been given to it at the outset of the 20th century. Interestingly, it was not Aureliano de Beruete y Moret, who in 1913, published the first short article about the painting who codified the represented person’s designation.¹¹ He does not classify the painting’s protagonist according to their ethnicity or religious confession but simply calls the figure a “kitchen maid” and a “servant maid”. Remarkably, Beruete is convinced that Velázquez here painted the same female model as he did in his “Immaculate Conception” [Fig. 2], which “even though its author was little of an idealist, demonstrates that the same model served for both figures, and her phys-

Gómez (eds.), *Mujeres esclavas y abolicionistas en la España de los siglos XVI al XIX*, Vervuert 2014, 17–32, 18.

7

Tanya J. Tiffany, Light, Darkness, and African Salvation. Velázquez’s Supper at Emmaus, in: *Art History* 31, 2008, 33–56.

8

Sebastián de Cobarruvias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, Madrid 1611 (reprint Madrid: Ediciones Turner 1984, 819: Mulato: “El que es hijo de negra y de hombre blanco, o al revés: y por ser mezcla extraordinaria la compararon a la naturaleza del mulo”).

9

John K. Moore, *Mulatto, Outlaw, Pilgrim, Priest. The Legal Case of José Soller, Accused of Impersonating a Pastor and Other Crimes in Seventeenth-Century Spain*, Leiden/Boston 2020, 51–52: “The etymology accounts for the mental leap [...] from mulatto to slave: subhuman and therefore manacled, worked, controlled.”

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Mulcahy, *Spanish Paintings*, 79.

11

Aureliano de Beruete y Moret, A Hitherto Unknown Velázquez, in: *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 24, 1913, 126–128.



[Fig. 1]
Diego Velázquez, Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus, ca. 1617–1618, Oil on Canvas,
55 × 118 cm. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland © National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.



[Fig. 2]
Diego Velázquez, The Immaculate Conception, 1618, Oil on Canvas,
135 × 101.6 cm. London, The National Gallery © The National Gallery, London.

iogonomy is preserved in both presentments”.¹² This statement is noteworthy because the Mary of the “Immaculate Conception” clearly has rosy-white skin, while the form of her face, the rounded full cheeks, and the shape of the mouth indeed reveal similarities with the protagonist of the “bodegón” in question.¹³ When Beruete saw the painting, there might have been a patina on the canvas’s surface, which was only cleaned in 1933. But even if this were the case, it is noteworthy that none of the art historians who looked at the painting after Beruete y Moret commented on his observation. While in 1913, it was still possible to compare the kitchen worker’s appearance to Velázquez’s representation of Mary, soon afterwards the view seems to have narrowed and subsequent scholars began to “other” the protagonist of the painting according to class, race, and religious affiliation.

It is also remarkable that not even the gender of the painted protagonist has always been as clear to art historians as it seems to be today. Some 20th-century art historians attentively read Antonio Palomino’s description of one of Velázquez’s early “bodegones” and considered the possibility of the kitchen maid being a kitchen boy.¹⁴ Palomino had described a composition strikingly similar to the painting in question here, but where the protagonist between the kitchen utensils was a boy with a cap (“escofieta”).¹⁵ The authors of an article on the painting’s Chicago version published in 2005 write that

it is difficult to come to a firm decision about gender if we look at this painting in isolation [...]. If we situate the painting in the pictorial tradition of the Netherlandish kitchen scene, the figure should be female, whereas if we consider written references to the staffing of kitchens in Spain at this time, the figure could be male,

¹²

Ibid., 128.

¹³

“Bodegón” is the term used for a group of naturalistically painted still-lives combined with genre scenes that appeared in Spain at the beginning of the 17th century. For the history, theory, and art-historical use of the term see Wind, Velázquez’s Bodegones, 1–20.

¹⁴

Antonio Palomino de Castro y Velasco, *El parnaso español pintoresco laureado*, vol. 3 of *El museo pictórico, y escala optica*, 1724, Madrid ²1796, 480; Martín S. Soria, An Unknown Early Painting by Velázquez, in: *Burlington Magazine* 91, 1949, 127–128: “We can take Palomino’s word for it that a boy is represented.” Julián Gállego et al. (eds.), *Velázquez*, Madrid 1990, 61: “El sexo de la supuesta mulata no está bien definido.” José López-Rey and Odile Delenda, *Velázquez. The Complete Works*, Cologne 2014, 336–337. Fracchia, *Visual Representation*, 29, also discusses this “bizarre gender confusion [...] [which] suggests that the representation of the mulata might have fallen into the categories of the freak show or one of the wonders of the world”.

¹⁵

Palomino, *El parnaso español pintoresco laureado*, 480.

one of the many “mozos de cocina” that are recorded for the time when this painting was made.¹⁶ The authors also argue that the costume could be suitable for either a male or a female servant and that “the opening in the jacket just above the waist, which allows the white shirt to peek through, is usually seen in costumes of males”.¹⁷ Even the “escofieta”, the cap, was worn by both men and women, they write. In spite of this particular uncertainty, most recent authors are sure that the painting’s protagonist is, in fact, a woman and have stopped questioning the figure’s gender as well as their being a “mulato” slave.

In the following, I want to introduce one idea into the discussions centering on the painting in question, namely that when we restrictively assign to a single possibility, a single and fixed identity for the painting’s protagonist, we might risk losing sight of the meaning of the work. I suggest that more is to be gained interpretively and contextually if we assume instead that the painter has deliberately veiled, or complicated, the protagonist’s identity. The painting, I will argue, refuses semantic transparency.

II. Layers of Ambiguity

Velázquez’s canvas is awash with tones of rich earthy brown. These are rhythmically interrupted by bright white accents strewn about the picture’s surface that draw the viewer’s eye to certain objects: a pitcher, the cuff of the central figure’s sleeve, a crumpled cloth on the table, a clove of garlic, a glimpse of the blouse, glints of reflection on Christ’s halo and tablecloth in the Emmaus scene behind. The somewhat hunched posture of the kitchen help seems to extend to the edges of the horizontal rectangle, which frames the figure and hems it in directly below the painting’s upper edge and right-hand side, the table upon which this person works, and the “tableau” of a table to the left. With one hand, the figure rests on the wooden working surface; the other hand holds a pitcher (a “jarro”). A crumpled white rag lies in the front, oddly spotless since it seems to be used for cleaning the table and the vessels, which include at left a copper bowl, whose empty center reflects light in the direction of the viewer. The empty bowl’s reflective center is tilted delicately for the viewer’s inspection, offering a glimpse into its void. It leans against a white, glazed vase with handles behind it (a “jarra”). At right, a dark brown ceramic pitcher stands upside-down next to a pile of plates and a bowl, all of which are also turned upside-down. At the right end of the table’s edge we find a metal mortar and pestle, in front of them a head of garlic. A wicker basket hangs on

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Gridley McKim Smith, Inge Fiedler, Rhona Macbeth, Richard Newman, and Frank Zuccari, Velázquez. *Painting from Life*, in: *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 40, 2005, 79–91, 82.

¹⁷
Ibid.

the unadorned wall above. Here too, a white cloth draped in the basket contrasts with the shadows cast on the wall, continuing the pattern of contrasting light and dark, black and white, right-side-up and upside-down objects that we find throughout the image.

It was only in 1933 that, during a restoration of the work, the scene of the Supper at Emmaus was revealed in the back. It is not known when the biblical scene had been overpainted. The painting appears to have been cut on this side, which explains why only one hand of the Emmaus disciple at left extends into the image where Jesus sits at the table with the other disciple leaning forward towards him. The half-lit face of the kitchen help seems to imply that the person is hearing or noticing something from the Emmaus scene, as if the two are somehow directly connected. One could assume that this is intended to indicate a moment of awareness, or recognition, as if the protagonist has realized something akin to what has been realized in the biblical Emmaus episode. The figure's gaze seems, indeed, to be directed inwards rather than outwards in a manner that mirrors the account from Luke 24 where we read that, "the eyes of the two disciples were held" ("oculi autem illorum tenebantur") and that then, when Christ broke the bread, their eyes were abruptly opened and they suddenly saw who was sitting in their midst ("aperti sunt oculi eorum"). The painted gaze of the kitchen help could be understood as being located between these two moments. Depending on which stage of vision one wants to recognize, the figure would appear as a negative or a positive example; eyes held, eyes opened.

The vessels strewn about the table are similarly inscrutable, poised like the protagonist in an in-between state with some upside-down, others right-side-up; some resist our gaze, others invite the viewer to visually inspect their interiors. They remain poised between states, as "devices of narrative suspense" in the words of one scholar.¹⁸ Velázquez's layering of multiple contrasting elements (pots that are upside-down and right-side-up, exposed and closed, dark and light) set up a scene that appears to be deliberately ambiguous.

This pictorial strategy has, predictably and perhaps deliberately, engendered a wide variety of interpretations of the work. Time and again, the work's quality as a "meta-painting" has been highlighted in art historical analyses that privilege Velázquez's manifest interest in exploring, and challenging, the status of the painted image.¹⁹ It has thus been interpreted as a painted contemplation of the crisis of the art of painting in Spain at the time. Iberian painters of the period had to reconcile two diametrically opposed

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Lorenzo Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative. Dislocating the Istorica in Early Modern Painting*, London/Turnhout 2010, 533. For the unstable character of the objects on the table see also Victor I. Stoichita, *Das selbstbewusste Bild. Vom Ursprung der Metamalerei*, Munich 1998, 28.

¹⁹

Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, London 1990, 154.

imperatives: on the one hand, representing the deeds of extraordinary, idealized individuals and on the other, quotidian life in all of its banality. In light of the Spanish preoccupation with the latter, it has also been suggested that even the human figure in this picture has been transformed into an everyday object, one placed between other simple objects like the pots and pans. The protagonist is “the truly overlooked”, as are the surrounding objects, which submit themselves on the low surface of the table to the slightly elevated viewer’s gaze.²⁰ The protagonist has also been interpreted as a figure painted to induce laughter or distract the viewer from the more serious business taking place in the small-scale Emmaus scene to her right.²¹

The picture has also been construed as a representation of a stereotypically lazy Moor, who stares blankly at the scattered bowls, not even able to muster up enough energy to move the pitcher in their hand.²² In this manner, the simple ceramic vessels appear to be connected to the spiritual blindness then ascribed to Muslims. In his “Tesoro de la lengua Castellana”, Sebastián de Covarrubias draws a division between Christian liturgical dishes of “honor” and those used at home, impure vessels that were not worthy of being filled with Divine presence during mass.²³

Adopting a different tack, other art historians have suggested that the painting is, on the contrary, about the presence of Christ in everyday life. As Saint Teresa of Avila claimed, God walks also between kitchen pots (“entre los pucheros anda el Señor”).²⁴ The painting, such interpretations claim, might point to the possibility of Christian salvation for all members of society regardless of their social or ethnic affiliation.²⁵ The painting could have functioned as an admonition to its owner not to forget that even the lowliest servants had a right to Christian salvation: it might have served as

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Ibid., 155. See also Fracchia, *Visual Representation*, 28: “Velázquez’s slave in the kitchen was a commodity and as such economic investment was the primary issue at stake rather than her salvation.”

²¹

Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, 532: “It can be argued that, despite her prominent position in the painting, Velázquez’s mulata remains a modest walk-on, an essentially comic figure in accordance with seventeenth-century aesthetics: she induces laughter, raises a smile or, at best, distracts the viewer.”

²²

Wind, *Velázquez’s Bodegones*, 96: “Because of the Hispanic antipathy towards Moors, who were considered lazy, lubricious, and figuratively subhuman, it is fair to say that the painting may be at least a document of Spanish prejudice. [...] Velázquez [...] seems to create a paradigm of the lazy black.”

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Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana*, 995, s. v. “vaso”.

²⁴

Mulcahy, *Spanish Paintings*, 80. “Cuando [...] empleadas en cosas exteriores, entendido, que si ese n la cocina entre los pucheros anda el Señor, ayudándonos en lo interior y exterior.” Santa Teresa de Avila, *Libro de fundaciones*, chapter 5, v. 7; Teresa de Avila, *Obras completas*, Madrid 1982, 532. See Stoichita, *Ursprung der Metamalerei*, 28.

²⁵

Davies and Harris, *Velázquez in Seville*, 134.

a reminder to save African souls.²⁶ This argument is persuasive as long as one does not question the identity of the person we behold: it is predicated upon the assumption of the protagonist's African, Sub-Saharan origins.²⁷ Only the clarity of this identification enables a binary reading of the "evolving relationship between European Self and African Other".²⁸ Such a reading is supported formally by the contrasts detailed above, between dark and light, for instance, or closure and openness. Yet the painting's ambiguities suggest that such a reading perhaps ignores the instabilities which Velázquez's work also exhibits.

There is one source that, to my knowledge, has not yet been linked to this painting, but that might very well provide a clue for understanding at least the most prominent instability in the painting, which is the precarious position of the copper bowl and its close contact with the glazed vase in the left foreground: an emblem dealing with a conversation between a metal and a clay pot might have somehow found its way into this painting. Emblem 58 in Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum liber* bears the *inscriptio* "Aliquid mali propter vicinum malum" ("Bad comes from a bad neighbor") and its *pictura* shows two pots carried along by a torrent.²⁹ The *subscriptio* recounts as follows:

A stream was carrying along two pots, one of which was made of metal, the other formed by the potter's hand of clay. The metal pot asked the clay one whether it would like to float along close beside it, so that each of them, by uniting with the other, could resist the rushing waters. The clay pot replied: The arrangement you propose does not appeal to me. I am afraid that such proximity will bring many misfortunes upon me. For whether the wave washes you against me or me against you, I only, being breakable, will be shattered, while you remain unharmed.³⁰

Thus, the weaker neighbor must be alert to not being used, cheated and broken by the stronger one who asks for mutual assistance in a time of danger. In the Spanish commentary of Alciato's emblem [Fig. 3], published in 1615, the *subscriptio* elaborates thoroughly on

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Tiffany, Light, Darkness, and African Salvation, 50.

²⁷

Ibid., 35.

²⁸

Ibid.

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It is emblem no. 164 in Diego Lopez, *Declaracion magistral sobre las Emblemas de Andres Alciato con todas las Historias, Antiguedades, Moralidad, y Doctrina tocante a las buenas costumbres*, Najera: Juan de Mongaston 1615, 380v.

³⁰

Translation taken from <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A56a058>.

Emblemas de Alciato.

ALIQVID MALI PROPTER VICINUM MALUM.

Emblema 164.



*Raptabat torrens ollas, quarum vnamet allo.
 Altera erat figuliterrea facta manu.
 Hanc igitur rogat illa: velit sibi proxima ferri,
 Iuncta ut precipites utraq; sistat aquas.
 Cui lutea, haud nobis tua sunt commercia cura,
 Nemibi proximitas hac mala multa ferat.
 Nam seute nobis, seu nos tibi conferat vnda,
 Ipsa ego te fragilis sossbite solaterar.*

Elti-

[Fig. 3]

Aliquid mali propter vicinum malum, emblem 164, in: Diego Lopez, *Declaracion magistral sobre las Emblemas de Andres Alciato con todas las Historias, Antiguedades, Moralidad, y Doctrina tocante a las buenas costumbres*, Najera: Juan de Mongaston 1615, 380v.

what this fable (derived from Plautus and Aesop) means. Alciato, we are informed, wants to intimate that one must neither join forces with those who are more powerful nor with those who are vicious, because if any damage occurs, it will always be the weaker party who has to pay for it.³¹ In our painting, the copper bowl comes alarmingly close to the earthen one – it literally seems to force itself onto the weaker vase. However, while in the emblem's *pictura*, the metal pot is “chasing” and endangering the earthen one, in Velázquez's painting it is the intrusive copper bowl that threatens to fall down at any moment while the *jarra* stands upright and stable, posing with its “arms” on its “hips”: yet another inversion in this painting so full of inversions.

It has been suggested for other paintings, too, that Velázquez inserted *picturae* from Alciato's book.³² While in the Alciato emblem about the bad neighborhood the two dissimilarly break-proof pots symbolize asymmetric power relationships, clay pots also appear in another emblem book [Fig. 4]. Here, they are associated with resistance to conversion: in Georgette de Montenay's *Emblemes ou devises chrestiennes* (1571) the emblem in question bears the motto “Hoc sermo Veritatis est reprobis” (“This is the message of truth for the reprobate”).³³ The *pictura* shows several clay pots with handles in a hilly landscape, two large ones closest to the beholder, a kindly-faced sun shining brightly upon them. In the *subscriptio* we read:

Just like the pots are dried by the sun, / also the hearts of the
pervert harden, / when they hear the voice and Divine coun-
sel / of God who wants that they convert to him. / He calls
them and they break / And so in them there is the truth of
God. / They thus confess now that they perish / very justly
because of their incredulity.

Here, the clay pots are paralleled with non-Christian people who do not follow the call to convert to Christendom and are thus damned and broken.

Should one or both of these emblems in fact have served as inspiration for Velázquez's painting, the discourse that they brought with them would thus have been the imbalance of power between people living next to each other and the resistance of the non-Chris-

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The text also suggests that one should not buy property next to a bad neighbor as there are neighbors next to whom it is impossible to live. And we also learn that often the rich exploit the poor harassing them so badly that the poor in the end consent in selling their profitable properties to their cruel and acquisitive neighbor. Declaracion magistral, 381v.

32

See for example Jonathan M. Brown, On the Origins of “Las Lanzas” by Velázquez, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 27, 1964, 240–245, 244; Walter A. Liedtke and John F. Moffitt, Velázquez, Olivares and the Baroque Equestrian Portrait, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 123, 1981, 528–537, 533–535; John F. Moffitt, The “Euhemeristic” Mythologies of Velázquez, in: *Artibus et Historiae* 10, 1989, 157–175, 158–161.

33

Georgette de Montenay, *Emblemes ou devises chrestiennes*, Lyons: Jean Marcorelle 1571, 15.
Translation of the *subscriptio* into English by me.



Comme les pots se sechent au soleil,
 Aussi les cœurs des peruers s'endurcissent,
 Oyans la voix & le diuin conseil
 De Dieu, qui veut qu'à luy se conuertissent.
 Il les appelle, & ils aneantissent
 Tant qu'en eux est, de Dieu la verité.
 Confessent donc maintenant qu'ils perissent
 Tresiusstement par incredulité.

La

[Fig. 4]

Hoc sermo Veritatis est reprobis, in: Georgette de Montenay,
Emblemes ou devises chrestiennes, Lyons: Jean Marcocelle 1571, 15.

tian population to convert to the Christian faith. Both topics would fit well into the recent research on this painting that has elaborated on slavery and missionary practices in Seville.

One important feature of the painting which has hitherto been undervalued is the topic of absence, which the empty pots and vessels so tantalizingly (and paradoxically) speak to through their very presence. The painter seems to deliberately draw attention to what is not in the image. Absence becomes a figured presence in the work, absence that looms like a gaping hole, a very present emptiness, over the “Kitchen Maid”. The work, I suggest, can be understood as an articulation, or mediation of the ambiguous status of Seville’s Moriscos, that is, the large group of Spanish Muslims who had been forced to convert to Christendom in 1502 to be able to stay in Spain, but who were nevertheless expelled from Spain between 1609 and 1614.³⁴ Unlike binary readings of the work as mediating the relationship between clearly identifiable “Africans” and “Europeans”, white and black, Christians or Muslims, object and subject, an interrogation of Velázquez’s work through the lens of the complex identity politics surrounding the figure of the Morisco opens up a new perspective on the work. This is one that engages with the ambiguities staged by the artist. Instead of clarifying the painting’s meaning, the following thus aims to complicate it by bringing “absence” into focus.

III. Inverting Opulence

Both of Velázquez’s “bodegones a lo divino” are assumed to have made use of models devised by the Antwerp painter Pieter Aertsen and his disciple Joachim Beuckelaer, starting in the 1550s. These paintings, featuring kitchen scenes in the foreground and biblical narratives in the background, were most widely disseminated through a four-part print series first published in 1603 after works by Aertsen. One of the prints specifically features a representation of the Supper at Emmaus in the back of a kitchen [Fig. 5]. In all likelihood, this print served as the model for Velázquez’s “Kitchen Maid”.³⁵ In it, we find a female cook busy preparing fish of various sizes and types. She turns her head in order to interact with a boy who hands her a small fish. Between the two figures is a metal bowl filled with water. A clay container for salt or herbs rests on a small table in front of the boy. The right foreground is dominated by a large table on which various large fish are piled. A lobster lies on a

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Michel Boeglin, *Entre la Cruz y el Corán. Los moriscos en Sevilla (1570–1613)*, Seville 2010, 105–131. For the “obscure” emergence of the term “morisco” see José María Perceval, *Todos son uno. Arquetipos, xenofobia y racismo. La imagen del morisco en la Monarquía Española durante los siglos XVI y XVII*, Almería 1997, 18–20.

³⁵

Brown, Painter and Courtier, 16; Aidan Weston-Lewis, Jacob Matham, Four Engravings after Paintings by Pieter Aertsen, cat. 17–20, in: Davies and Harris, *Velázquez in Seville*, 130–131.



[Fig. 5]
Jacob Matham after Pieter Aertsen, Kitchen Scene with the
Supper at Emmaus, 1603, Engraving, 24.3 × 32.4 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Creative Commons (CC0 1.0 Universal).

plate, and there is a plate with sliced salmon placed on top of a basket that supports a tilted, empty metal bowl with handles. The middle ground, the tiled kitchen floor, is populated with more figures. At right, a woman stokes a fire in a fireplace, where a cauldron is heating. Another woman brings something into the room at left, stopping next to a man who stands on a box and pulls back a curtain, an action that conveniently opens up our view onto the square room – or picture of a room – in the back. There, Jesus is seated with a gleaming nimbus between the two Emmaus disciples. Christ is blessing the bread – in the following moment, he will be recognized by the two men – and then he will disappear in front of their eyes. The print is captioned: “IESUS in fractione panis agnoscitur”, through the breaking of the bread, Christ is recognized, he is “seen”, and revealed, his divinity affirmed somewhat paradoxically by his subsequent sudden absence. The fish are depicted here not simply as a generic symbol of Christ, as is often said, but are concretely connected to Luke’s narrative. After Christ has vanished, both of the Emmaus disciples depart for Jerusalem to rejoin his other followers. Christ, resurrected, appears before the collected believers and in order to prove to them that he is not a ghost, he eats cooked fish.³⁶ In Aertsen’s print, we see, thus, the two meals which Christ ate between his resurrection and ascension.

A comparison of the print with the painting is illuminating. “Velázquez’s reductive approach to the Aertsen prototype” has been noted.³⁷ The Spanish painter reduces an “almost obscene pile of food” to simple ingredients and utensils, like those one could find in every kitchen in Seville.³⁸ This observation is plausible. We should specify, however, that in the case of Velázquez’s adaptation, we cannot speak simply of a “reduction” of figures and food. The painter has here in fact eradicated food, as well as all figures except for one and thereby staged a veritable inversion of his Flemish model. Instead of Aertsen’s interrogation of plenty, Velázquez here appears to make emptiness the dominant trope, or theme of the painting. Instead of sociability and interpersonal interaction, it is the figure’s isolation and loneliness that come to the fore. The lone garlic bulb further highlights the emptiness of the setting: garlic is seldom eaten by itself; its flavor is meant to merge with and enhance other food stuffs; but here it lies alone, in solitude. Likewise, all of the plates, pitchers, and bowls are ostentatiously empty. They are either turned upside-down, or their empty interior is demonstratively displayed to the beholder. This emptiness can, of course, on one interpretative level be connected to the disappearance of Christ

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“And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, ‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.” Luke 24:36–49.

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Weston-Lewis and Matham, *Four Engravings*, 130.

³⁸

Ibid.

in the Emmaus scene in the back: emptiness is what remains at the table at Emmaus once Christ has dissolved into thin air, just as emptiness is the dominant visual trope in the foreground scene. The artist has used the inter-pictorial reference to the Flemish kitchen scenes bursting with abundance of food and human interactions in order to visualize disappearance – something obviously difficult to picture. Beholders acquainted with Flemish market and kitchen paintings would have certainly noticed the absence of food, sociability, and general business and stuff in Velázquez's (in)version of his model. The loss of plenty, riches, diversity, and confident opulence is rendered palpable.

IV. An Emptied Spain

In the case of this painting, emptiness can and ought to be further interpreted in connection to the local political context.³⁹ Specifically, Spain had been emptied, for its Morisco population had vanished. Between 1609 and 1614, Spain witnessed the large-scale expulsion of its Morisco minority.⁴⁰ The Moriscos were the descendants of the peninsula's Muslim population who, after the capture of Granada in 1492, had to choose between expulsion and conversion to Christendom. Those who were baptized and stayed in Spain were called Moriscos. More than one hundred years later, a new claim was launched that propelled the complete expulsion of the Moriscos; this claim was that they had not converted in good faith. On the contrary, they were seen as heretics and renegades.⁴¹ Philip III's 1609 edict ordered the expulsion of all Moriscos from Spain, and historians estimate that approximately between 300,000 and 350,000 people were expelled from Iberia.⁴² Considering that the total population of Spain in the period was about eight-and-a-half million, the disappearance of so many people must have been tangible. For certain regions and specific professions, the expulsion had catastrophic effects. In the region of Valencia, nearly 33 percent of the population vanished; certain parts of northern Spain (like the region today known as Alicante) were almost completely depopula-

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Peter Cherry, *Arte y naturaleza. El Bodegón Español en el Siglo de Oro*, Madrid 1999, 126, confines himself to arguing theologically that the pronounced absence of food in this painting might invoke the concept of devoted Christians being able to live on the consecrated host alone.

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Louis Cardaillac, *Moriscos y cristianos. Un enfrentamiento polémico (1492–1640)*, Madrid 1979; Antonio Domínguez Ortiz and Bernard Vincent, *Historia de los moriscos. Vida y tragedia de una minoría*, Madrid 1984; Luis F. Bernabé Pons, *Los moriscos. Conflicto, expulsión y diáspora*, Madrid 2009.

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Jaime Bleda, *Corónica de los moros de España*, Valencia 1618.

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Domínguez Ortiz and Vincent, *Historia de los moriscos*, 200; Bernabé Pons, *Los moriscos*, 141.

ted.⁴³ The exiled population migrated, for the most part, to North Africa and parts of the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁴

Besides the many apologetic and propagandist writings in favor of the expulsions, there can be found at least some reports of shock and dismay on the part of the old-Christian population in response to the banishment of people who had lived with them for generations. This is particularly the case for Castile and Andalusia, where Velázquez lived and worked.⁴⁵ In Seville, not only were long assimilated neighbors, friends, and colleagues exiled, but also conversos who held offices in churches and monasteries. This socio-political substrate perhaps allows us to think through Velázquez's painting in new ways, placing it within the psychologically charged context of the "emptying" of the contemporary urban landscape. Spain and Velázquez's Seville were turned upside-down, in a sense. In this vein, the painting might register an artistic response, or reaction, to the expulsion of a very significant part of the city's population.

At the outset of the 17th century, Seville, a city of 120,000 inhabitants, was particularly diverse.⁴⁶ Its social body was composed of people of numerous ethnicities, including approximately 30,000 slaves and 7,500 Moriscos, or more.⁴⁷ Velázquez himself grew up in the "barrio morisco",⁴⁸ and many of the people around

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Domínguez Ortiz and Vincent, *Historia de los moriscos*, 201–223; Mary Elizabeth Perry, *The Handless Maiden. Moriscos and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Spain*, Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2005, 178.

44

Houssem Eddine Chachia, *The Moment of Choice. The Moriscos on the Border of Christianity and Islam*, in: Claire Norton (ed.), *Conversion and Islam in the Early Modern Mediterranean. The Lure of the Other*, New York 2017, 129–154.

45

Juan Luis de Rojas, *Relaciones de algunos sucesos prostreptos de Berberia. Salida de los moriscos de España y entrega de Alarache*, Lisbon 1613, 24r–24v: "Miserabile por cierto y dolorosa hera la faz de Sevilla en aqlllos dias unos de justo pessar y otros de piadosa co(m)passion todos lloravan y no huviera coracon q no enter nediera cver arra(n)car ta(n)tas cassas y desterrar ta(n)tos cuytados co(n) la consideracion q yban muchos inocentes como el tiempo à mostrado que iban muchos." For historical overviews of the Morisco expulsion especially in Seville, see Boeglin, *Entre la Cruz y el Corán*; id., *La expulsión de los moriscos de Andalucía y sus límites. El caso de Sevilla (1610–1613)*, in: *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna* 36, 2011, 89–107; id., *Demografía y sociedad moriscas en Sevilla. El padrón de 1589*, in: *Chronica Nova* 33, 2007, 195–221. For the ambiguous stance of old-Christian Sevilleans towards the Moriscos see Manuel F. Fernández Chaves and Rafael M. Pérez García, *The Morisco Problem and Seville (1480–1610)*, in: Kevin Ingram (ed.), *The Conversos and Moriscos in Late Medieval Spain and Beyond*, Leiden/Boston 2012, 75–102, 101–102.

46

John H. Elliott, *The Seville of Velázquez*, in: Davies and Harris, *Velázquez in Seville*, 15–21; Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *Sevilla en la época de Velázquez*, in: *Velázquez y Sevilla*, Seville 1999, 19–31.

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For numbers see Fernández Chaves and Pérez García, *The Morisco Problem and Seville*, 89–91.

48

Kevin Ingram, *Diego Velázquez's Secret History. The Family Background the Painter Was at Pains to Hide in His Application for Entry into the Military Order of Santiago*, in: *Boletín del Museo del Prado* 17, 1999, 69–85, 77: "It was in the mudéjar church of San Pedro that [...] Diego was baptized on 6 June 1599." Already in 1599, Diego Velázquez's family moved to the district of San Vicente, one of the quarters with the largest Morisco population within the city walls. See Boeglin, *Demografía y sociedad moriscas en Sevilla*, 198. Rafael Cómez,

him would have been expelled from the city and the country. As an adolescent, he would have witnessed the terrorization of the Morisco population. Since they were excluded from the guilds, Moriscos tended to work as shopkeepers, gardeners, small retailers, and transporters. They also were enslaved: of the approximately 6,000 slaves working in private homes in Seville, many were Moriscos. There thus existed a broad range of Morisco positions within society: they could be slaves, but could also be slave owners or hold church offices.⁴⁹ Society in Andalusia was not divided into strict binary categories, but rather was layered in a locally highly complex manner. Moriscos in Castile and Andalusia were comparatively well integrated into society, and Christians in these regions were more likely to resist orders to expel their neighbors than elsewhere in Spain. Local sympathy for Moriscos meant that attempts to identify and expel them were often half-hearted. This was the reason why the Inquisition process lasted longer and proceeded with much less rigor than in Aragon, or Valencia. In Seville, it continued until 1614.

V. Velázquez and the Moriscos

If we consider the emptiness in the painting in relation to the disappearance of Spain's or Seville's Moriscos, the question arises whether the painted kitchen worker could in fact be a Morisca or Morisco. Posing this question leads to a panoply of contradictory information, something complicated by the scarcity of documentation, which can be read in various ways. Contemporary descriptions of the Moriscos' physical appearance, for instance, depend entirely on the respective authors' political standpoint. Advocates of the expulsion tend to stress physical differences between old Christians and Moriscos while writers with an integrative approach see no physiognomic and color differences between them at all. In a recent monograph on the Moriscos in early modern visual culture, it has been posited that around 1600, in Spain, there existed nearly the same number of "brown and white individuals with few distinctive features that would have allowed to differentiate with the naked eye between converts and old Christians".⁵⁰ A series of seven canvasses painted in 1612 by order of Philipp III employs a specific strategy to visualize the expelled. These paintings depict the Morisco revolts that happened prior to the decision to expel them, the Moriscos assembling for embarkment at the principal ports of Spain, and

La parentela de Velázquez, in: *Laboratorio de Arte* 15, 2002, 383–388, has even argued for a possible Morisco descentance of Velázquez on his mother's side.

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Fernández Chaves and Pérez García, *The Morisco Problem and Seville*, 84.

⁵⁰

Borja Franco Llopis, *Etnicità e conversione. I moriscos nella cultura visual dell'età moderna*, Ancona 2020, 27–56, 34. See also Borja Franco Llopis and Francisco J. Moreno Díaz del Campo, *Pintando al converso. La imagen del Morisco en la Península Ibérica (1492–1614)*, Madrid 2019, especially 205–231.

their arrival at Oran, Algeria.⁵¹ The canvasses bespeak a concerted effort of “ethnicization” of the Moriscos, or, as Javier Irigoyen-García calls it, the “post-expulsion Moorification of the Moriscos”, inasmuch as the painters have not only blurred the faces of the expelled, apparently to depersonalize them, but also rendered them much darker than those of the old Christians.⁵²

In another context, and approximately ten years after he painted the bodegón analyzed here, Velázquez was involved in a major project of visualizing Spain’s lost Moriscos. In 1627, when the painter had been at the court in Madrid for five years, Philipp IV launched an artistic competition.⁵³ Several artists were asked to submit designs for paintings depicting the expulsion of the Moriscos – spearheaded by the king’s father Philip III – for the Salón Nuevo in Madrid’s Alcázar. Alongside Velázquez, Vicente Carducho and Eugenio Cajés took part. Velázquez won and as a reward was appointed Usher of the Chamber by King Philip IV. His painting, which was presumably destroyed in a fire in 1734, was fortunately described by Antonio Palomino.⁵⁴ A drawing now attributed to Carducho (that was previously attributed to Velázquez) is, alongside Palomino’s description, the sole relic of the competition [Fig. 6].⁵⁵ It depicts the forced emigration of the Moriscos at a Spanish harbor. In the image, a crowd of people being escorted by cavalry onto a waiting ship snake from the left background into the center. A soldier emphatically points the way out of the country. At right, more armed soldiers monitor the action. Though we can easily identify the soldiers thanks to their costumes, it is difficult to use clothing or facial features as a means of identifying the Moriscos. A bearded man who looks back over his shoulder, for instance, seems to resemble a Laocoon more than anyone else – and the clothing and facial expressions of the other displaced persons are only indicated with vague marks. One single face appears more individualized than the others and stands out with more clarity amongst the crowd

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Llopis, *Etnicità e conversione*, 158–187; Franco Llopis and Moreno Diaz del Campo, *Pin-tando al converso*, 331–361.

52

Javier Irigoyen-García, “*Moors Dressed as Moors*”. *Clothing, Social Distinction, and Ethnicity in Early Modern Iberia*, Toronto 2017, 183; Llopis, *Etnicità e conversione*, 173: “Lo stereotipo morisco è uno e dalla pelle scura. In effetti, il colore di questi mori prima di partire per il Nord Africa è identico a quello usato per rappresentare i mori nomadi che li ricevono a Orano. Essi sono assimilate per dimostrare che, sebbene i convertiti abbiano vissuto per decenni tra i cristiani, la loro fisionomia doveva essere, per forza, come quella dei nordafricani, infedeli e nemici.”

53

William B. Jordan, *Velázquez’s Lost Expulsion of the Moriscos*, in: idem (ed.), *Velázquez’s Philip III*, Madrid 2017, 7–22.

54

Palomino, *Museo pictórico*, vol. 2, 327. Antonio Feros, *Rhetorics of the Expulsion*, in: Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard A. Wieggers (eds.), *The Expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain. A Mediterranean Diaspora*, Leiden/Boston 2014, 60–101, 88.

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Diego Angulo and Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez, *A Corpus of Spanish Drawings. Madrid 1600–1650*, London 1977, 44, no. 229; Jordan, *Lost Expulsion*.



[Fig. 6]

Vicente Carducho, Expulsion of the Moriscos, ca. 1627, Drawing, 39.3 × 29 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado © Photographic Archive, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



[Fig. 7]

Vicente Carducho, Expulsion of the Moriscos (Detail from Fig. 6).

[Fig. 7]. This woman's facial features and also headgear resemble those of Velázquez's capped figure. This does, of course, not mean that contemporaries looking at Velázquez's bodegón painting knew what and who it showed: namely a member of the Morisco minority. On the contrary: Carducho's drawing indicates that there did not exist one generally valid way of representing Morisco persons. In this drawing, the artist refrains from consistently using physiological markers of alterity that would help his beholders to recognize those who were expelled from the country as a homogenous group.

It is perhaps illuminating to know that Juan de Pareja, Velázquez's slave and apprentice, might have been a Morisco. Velázquez painted his portrait [Fig. 8] in 1650 when in Rome, and shortly afterwards he freed Pareja. Pareja's first biographer, Antonio Palomino, described him as "de generación mestiza y de color extraño".⁵⁶ *Mestizo*, again according to the *Tesoro* of 1611, means "El que es engendrado de diversas especies de animales; del verbo misceo, es, por mezclarse".⁵⁷ Palomino, for his part, did not refer to Pareja with the term "mulatto". What is known about Pareja's origins, namely that he came from Málaga, could point to his being a descendant of the "Málaga Moors", who were captured as prisoners at the siege of Granada by Castilian troops in 1487 and afterwards led into slavery in big numbers or forced to convert to Christianity. Nearly a century later, their descendants fought in the Rebellion of the Alpujarras (also called the Morisco Revolt) between 1568 and 1571 against their oppressors. They lost, and "the most profitable business that issued from this brutal war was the enslavement of the Granada Moriscos".⁵⁸

However, the search for identification based on external signs will probably never allow one to come closer to "revealing" the descent of the painter Pareja or the identity of the painted person in

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Palomino, *Museo pictórico*, vol. 3, 960. For an in-depth discussion of this "timid" description of Pareja's skin color see Victor Stoichita, *The Image of the Black in Spanish Art. Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, in: David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Karen C. C. Dalton (eds.), *The Image of the Black in Western Art. From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition. Artists of the Renaissance and Baroque*, Cambridge, MA/London 2010, 191–234, 231–232. Carmen Fracchia, "Black but Human". *Slavery and Visual Art in Hapsburg Spain, 1480–1700*, Oxford 2019, 158, calls Pareja an "enslaved Afro-Hispanic man", "a non-European subject" (169), "a mestizo/mulatto slave" (177). In the manumission document dating November 23, 1650, no comment on his ethnicity or his skin pigmentation is made. He is simply named "Joannes de Parecha filium quondam altris Joannis de Parecha de Antequera Maleghens diocesis" – "Juan de Pareja, the son of another Juan de Pareja de Antequera, in the diocese of Málaga". For the manumission document see Jennifer Montagu, *Velázquez Marginalia. His Slave Juan de Pareja and His Illegitimate Son Antonio*, in: *Burlington Magazine* 125, 1983, 683–685, and Fracchia, "Black but Human", 174.

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Cobarruvias, *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana*, 802. Luis Méndez Rodríguez, *Esclavos en la pintura sevillana de los Siglos de Oro*, Seville 2001, 137–138, discusses the probability that Juan de Pareja might have been "de descendencia musulmana".

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Fernández Chaves and Pérez García, *The Morisco Problem and Seville*, 79, 88. Boeglin, *Entre la Cruz y el Corán*, 29–41. See also Jonas Schirmacher, *Die Politik der Sklaverei. Praxis und Konflikt in Kastilien und Spanisch-Amerika im 16. Jahrhundert*, Paderborn 2018, 97–208.



[Fig. 8]
Diego Velázquez, Juan de Pareja, 1650, Oil on Canvas,
81.3 × 69.9 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
© Open Access Policy, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Velázquez's early "bodegón". On the contrary, the search to typologize and categorize identity based on visual signification replicates the actions of the Spanish inquisitors, who sought to shore up fixed, binary identities and stake truth claims based on these identities that simultaneously rejected external "signs" (the professed faith of the conversos, which was suspect) while affirming claims of racialized, religious difference in spite of the obvious fact that in early modern Iberia identities were fluid and defied easy classification.⁵⁹ We will now turn to the relationship between external sign and the search to "unveil" the true identity of the Morisco.

VI. Moriscos Disguised as Pilgrims

Moriscos appeared frequently in books and plays in early modern Spain. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when they appear, they tend to be linked to a discourse of disguise; the status of the Morisco appears to have been deeply bound up with questions about representation and signification, the status of visual images, and the nature of evidence. Often, these questions were explored through the intertwining of the Morisco with another character: the pilgrim. Let us recall why the two men at Emmaus do not recognize Christ: they think he is a stranger because he looks like a pilgrim. In Spanish cultural imagination and reality, Moriscos, too, appear dressed as pilgrims. Jaime Bleda, the Dominican inquisitor from Valencia, reported for example in 1608 – a year before the expulsion decree – that on his way back from Rome, he had encountered Moriscos from Seville in the south of France. They had disguised themselves as Christian pilgrims in order to cross the border.⁶⁰ The Crown was informed about this fact that numerous Moriscos in pilgrim costumes had arrived in Marseilles, claiming that they were on their way to Rome. In order to evade detection, Bleda wrote, these Moriscos were very discrete when they interacted with other Spaniards, but it was clear to him that their ultimate goal was to reach North Africa, or "Barbary".⁶¹

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Moore, Mulatto, Outlaw, Pilgrim, Priest.

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Gerard Wiegers, Managing Disaster. Networks of the Moriscos during the Process of the Expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula around 1609, in: *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 36, 2010, 141–168, 143.

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Bleda, *Corónica de los moros de España*, 1042. Bleda's report is supported by archival sources. See Archivo General de Simancas, Estado 2025 (unfol.): "Lo que adbierte Juan de Castro, natural de Cordoua que a venido a una tartana desde el puerto de Marsella y desembarco en los Alfaques Martes 11 de 9 1608 / Que haviendose detenido en aquella ciudad algunos días tubo noticia de que siete o ocho meses a esta parte hauian llegado a ella mucha cantidad de moriscos de España y que actualmente hauia algunos con quien ablo de la Andaluzia y que estos le dijeron y entendio que guardaban passaje para Berberia y que destos auia dos de Baeza y que los demas dellos aportan [...] allí en auito de peregrinos con sus mugeres y hijos diziendo que uan a Roma que no pudo entender otra particularidad ninguna porque ellos se guardaban y los de la tierra no se la quisieron dezir que entiende que en las tartanas bienen algunas cartas de particulares [...]." Other sources report the same difficulties of recognizing the Moriscos. For example, Maximilià Cerdà de Tallada, *Relació verdadera molt en particular de tot lo que ha pasat en la extracció dels moriscos*

In Cervantes's "Don Quixote", the expulsion of the Moriscos is also a recurring theme.⁶² The second volume of the story of the "Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha" was published in 1615, a year after the last Moriscos had been expelled from Seville. In the 54th chapter of Cervantes's book, the character of Ricote appears, a Morisco who is trying to return to Spain following his exile, as many did.⁶³ Before his expulsion, Ricote was a neighbor of Sancho Panza. Now they meet again, and it is not easy for Sancho to recognize Ricote. The latter is in disguise and hiding with a traveling group of Christian pilgrims from Germany (these companions inebriate themselves during the encounter). Just like the Sevillian Moriscos that the Inquisitor Bleda had come across in France, Ricote, here, is dressed as a pilgrim. He wears a cloak and holds a pilgrim's staff. The passage reads as a pastiche, or parody, of the Emmaus scene:

Sancho was surprised to hear himself called by his name and find himself embraced by a foreign pilgrim, and after regarding him steadily without speaking he was still unable to recognize him; but the pilgrim perceiving his perplexity cried: 'What! and is it possible, Sancho Panza, that thou dost not know thy neighbor Ricote, the Morisco Shopkeeper of thy village?' Sancho upon this looking at him more carefully began to recall his features, and at last recognized him perfectly.

Ricote then tells Sancho Panza about how great his longing was to return to Spain, and how it ultimately brought him back, emphasizing,

for, in the end, Sancho, I know well that the Ricota, my daughter, and Francisca Ricota, my wife, are Catholic Christians; and though I am not so much so, still I am more of a Christian than a Moor, and it is always my prayer to God that he will open the eyes of my understanding and show me how I am to serve him.⁶⁴

del present Regne de València y depopulació de aquell (RAPV. Mss 77–39), states that the soldiers who were ordered to group the Moriscos before embarkment, at first believed that they were Christians and only knew that they were Moriscos when they heard them invoke Mohammed: "Cregueren que eren crestians, I quant foren més prop conegueren ser moriscos, perquè invocaven a Maoma". See Llopis, *Etnicitat e conversione*, 172, with literature.

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Miguel de Cervantes, *Segunda parte del ingenioso caballero don Quixote de la Mancha*, Madrid 1615; Richard Hitchcock, Cervantes, Ricote, and the Expulsion of the Moriscos, in: *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 81, 2004, 175–185.

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James B. Tueller, The Moriscos Who Stayed Behind or Returned. Post-1609, in: García-Arenal and Wiegers, *Expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain*, 197–215.

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Cervantes, *Segunda parte*, 208: "[...] y ruego siempre a Dios me abra los ojos del entendimiento y me dé a conocer cómo le tengo de servir."

The reference to Luke's recounting of Emmaus could not be more obvious. Later, in chapter 63, Ricote's daughter Ana Felix also makes an appearance. She is a figure imbued with a high dose of ambiguity: she is dressed as a man. She is also dressed as a "Turk" – she even commands a Turkish galley – but simultaneously claims to be a "mujer Cristiana" (a Christian woman). Her Christian fiancé, who wants to protect himself from the Ottomans, dresses in turn as a Moorish woman, mirroring his cross-dressing fiancée.⁶⁵

The literary figures of the Morisco and Morisca were key cultural touchpoints at the time Velázquez painted the Emmaus kitchen scene specifically because they prompted questions of discernment.⁶⁶ They embody figures that are not "transparent", which is what makes it difficult to link faculties of "sight" with "insight" when Christian characters are confronted with them. What, and who, deceives? These themes seem to have pervaded not only literature, but also the lived culture of Seville after 2,000 Moriscos returned to the city.⁶⁷ Already at the beginning of the expulsions, those Moriscos who managed to return to Spain were impossible to trace. One of Philip III's officials reported (from another town, namely Málaga) that the Moriscos who had secretly returned to this town "reside in any place where they are not known": they blended in with the local population.⁶⁸

The secret return of the Moriscos further increased the difficulty the inquisitors (and everybody else) had in recognizing them.⁶⁹ Now, the question was not only whether they were true Christians or if they were secretly upholding their Muslim faith but also whether the "old" Moriscos, who returned to Spain from North Africa could be differentiated from African slaves who had been

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Deborah Compte, Zoraida and Zelima. Cultural Cross-Dressing in Cervantes and Zayas, in: *Hispanic Journal* 32, 2011, 27–40.

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Irigoyen-García, "Moors Dressed as Moors", 99–124; Mar Martínez-Góngora, El vestido del morisco como signo de la diferencia en la "Expulsión de los moros de España" de Gaspar Aguilar, in: *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 34, 2010, 497–515; Llopis and Moreno Díaz del Campo, Pintando al converso, 205–303.

67

Already in 1613, more than 800 Moriscos are reported to have returned to Spain. See Perry, The Handless Maiden, 163; Mercedes García Arenal, *Los moriscos*, Madrid 1975, 269–271.

68

Matthew Carr, *Blood and Faith. The Purging of Muslim Spain*, London 2009, 298. Boeglin, La expulsión de los moriscos, 106: "Es indudable que, a semejanza del morisco Ricote en El Quijote, muchos habían vuelto con falsas identidades a las tierras de sus antepasados." Antonio Domínguez Ortiz and Francisco Aguilar Piñal, *El Barroco y la Ilustración. Historia de Sevilla IV*, Seville 1976, 46: "Aquellos pobres restos de lo que había sido una numerosa minoría acabaron fundiéndose con las clases más pobres y marginadas: negros, esclavos y gitanos."

69

Benjamin Ehlers, Violence and Religious Identity in Early Modern Valencia, in: Ingram, The Conversos and Moriscos, 103–119, 115–117: "An official in the southern town of Orihuela questioned a Morisco he observed conducting business in the town square, simply because he did not recognize the man. The Morisco first claimed to have a wife in Orihuela, though when she denied this he claimed to be a widower with a family in nearby Murcia. Either scenario would have been less likely to raise suspicion than his subsequent confession that he was North African by birth."

brought to Iberia more recently. One finds numerous sources in which returning Moriscos disguised themselves as “Moors” and, like North Africans, found positions as slaves in Spanish homes. Today, it is thought that about 40 percent of the Moriscos who returned to Seville entered into slavery in order to stay in Spain. One could see this as a continuation of the concept of “taqiyya”, or dissimulation, which Spanish Moriscos, according to the sources, practiced after their forced conversion.⁷⁰ It allowed them to continue to observe their true faith in secret in order to avoid condemnation by the Christians and consisted of praying in front of Christian images while maintaining Islamic faith.

VII. The Critique of Transparency

A contextualization of the painting in relation to the Inquisition introduces further layers of complexity to the frequently remarked upon ambiguities of Velázquez’s work. Not only is the “*bodegón a lo divino*” an ambiguous, or impure genre (mixing narrative biblical elements with still life), but Velázquez’s inversions in this painting provoke a further surplus of ambiguities. The painter has inverted generic modes of viewing upside-down on multiple levels. On one hand, following in Aertsen’s footsteps, he has demoted the biblical narrative to a marginalized sideshow taking place in the background. The center – and literally three quarters of the painting – are occupied by the “obscene” or prosaic part of the image. The painter has also staged an inversion of decorum as to the conventions of “*historia*” and still life painting: he has paid much attention to detailing with extreme care all of the kitchen utensils with their insistent materialities and contrasted it with the way in which the biblical scene is rendered in simple, quick, seemingly inattentive flicks of the brush.

These carefully composed recalibrations must have aimed to confound received notions of viewing when the artist painted it. Its potentially confusing formal characteristics would have demanded heightened attention, as well as questions about why the image was inverted in these ways. In accordance with the imperative to interrogate the image, Velázquez has also left the condition of the protagonist’s very “seeing” unclear: we cannot know whether this person’s eyes are metaphorically closed or “held” like those of the Emmaus protagonists at the outset of the biblical story, or open and infused with insight like their eyes at the end of the biblical account. The central figure’s eyes may be open, but do they “see”? More to the point, can the viewer “see” the person, who is in plain sight? The painting withholds an answer to the first question in a

⁷⁰

Cardaillac, *Moriscos y cristianos*, 85–97; Karoline P. Cook, *Navigating Identities. The Case of a Morisco Slave in Seventeenth-Century New Spain*, in: *The Americas* 65, 2008, 63–79, 70: “Meaning precaution in Arabic, *taqiyya* referred to the permission for Muslims living under adverse conditions to perform the exterior acts of religion being imposed on them, as long as they remained faithful to Islam in their hearts.”

way that implies a negative answer to the second. The viewer can only rely on appearances while trying to place the central figure and discern whether the person has gained insight into the banal world graced by Christ. Yet the contemporary cultural conditions – and the painting itself – suggest that a reliance on appearances was risky. The painting's protagonist may or may not be a "mulata", they may or may not be a Morisca – who may or may not be dressing as a Sub-Saharan African slave – or even cross-dressing. The beholder can neither say whether the kitchen worker is being enlightened by true Christian belief nor say with any certainty who this person is. This applies both to today and, as I have suggested, for the particular moment when the painting was made.

These ambiguities are perhaps set into even more striking relief by the manner in which Velázquez's work appeals so directly to the senses, each of which is actively stimulated. Though it is tempting to focus on the sense of sight, the artist has addressed hearing (through the apparently listening woman), smell and taste (the garlic), and touch. The latter manifests itself in the extreme care devoted to the pots, pans, pitchers, and baskets that invite our eyes to probe them, as if to feel the tactile realities of cold metal, the worked clay, or the woven wicker. The white cleaning rag, placed so deliberately within reach of the beholder, triggers our impulse to reach into the picture space and take it into our own hands, as if to polish and thereby feel the empty vessels with our hands.

Velázquez thereby points to the epistemic role of sensory perception. Only, however, in order to frustrate the observers' desire to know more about the elusive protagonist's identity and internal life. This painting succeeds in not committing itself by beckoning so physically to all of our sensuous modes of ascertaining information. It is a noncommittal picture. It grants opacity to its protagonist, cloaking the figure in it while it freezes the temporality of the precise moment described in the Emmaus scene: the disciples walk, talk and sit with a stranger and simply do not know who he is. He remains unrecognized and disappears when recognized, while the kitchen worker maintains a certain amount of autonomy even when attracting the viewer's attention. This characteristic integrates the painting into a contemporary discourse centering on disguise and the readability of identities as well as the praise of opacity. The shining through of the figure's blouse beneath the small opening in the garb captures the beholder's eye and awakens associations of concealment and detection. The same may be said of the pitcher the figure holds and whose rough core substance of burned clay is only partially covered by the glaze that has run down its outer and inner shell.

Cervantes, again, is the best example of a writer who articulates the power of dissimulation and discretion, a call that, I would argue, is inherent in Velázquez's painting, too, even in this early work. In his last novel, "Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda" (The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda) of 1617, Cervantes waits to reveal his

protagonists' identities until the final chapter.⁷¹ The story refuses to comply with the reader's urge to know. The "ostensible subject matter is [...] disguised, as are the actual subjects of the narrative", writes Barbara Fuchs who has pointed out the author's deployment of a narrative strategy that consists in challenging the reader's attempt to unmask the "elusive protagonists" and make them fully legible: "Their opacity is precisely the point – an oblique but powerful counter to any discriminatory impulse."⁷² Cervantes had already applied this technique in "La gran sultana" (1600), in "La española inglesa" (1613), and, as we have seen, in his "Don Quijote" (1605 and 1615).⁷³ Barbara Fuchs calls "Persiles y Sigismunda" an "antidetec-tive novel" and she sees in it a "sustained critique of the inquisitorial investigation of lineage and blood in Counter-Reformation Spain". Cervantes's romance suggests that "assumed and deracinated selves are as valid as 'authentic', well-documented ones".⁷⁴ Dissimulation and discreet oversight are valorized while close scrutiny is explicitly condemned.

We cannot know what Velázquez personally thought about the repressive measures directed against his Morisco neighbors, but his painting maybe indicates an imperative (indeed a moral one) to resist the impulse to classify, and categorize; it appears to resist the 17th-century impulse to order the world according to a grand table of signs, as Foucault wrote in "Les Mots et Les Choses", a book that begins with a work by the painter from Seville. Here, the kitchen worker's table is filled only with empty signs that offer no information outside of their physicality. They are, in their way, obstinate and withdrawn, either flagrantly flaunting emptiness, or refusing visual access to an "interior core" that might reveal something their exterior contains.

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⁷¹
Miguel de Cervantes, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, Madrid 1617, chapter 12 of book IV.

⁷²
Barbara Fuchs, *Passing for Spain. Cervantes and the Fiction of Identity*, Urbana, IL/Chicago 2003, 87–110, 88.

⁷³
Ibid., 87.

⁷⁴
Ibid.

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