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Enrique IV of Castile's royal chronicler, Diego Enríquez del Castillo, wrote of the state of the kingdom in 1465:

Las muertes, robos, e males que se hazían por todas partes del reyno heran tales e tantos, tan disolutos e feos, sin temor a Dios por falta de justicia y secución de aquella, que ninguna gente osava caminar ni salir de poblada, de tal manera que apenas tenían seguridad en sus casas. (Enríquez del Castillo 1994: 259, cap. LXXXVII)

This image of a population cowering like rats from an all-encompassing violence is backed up by many contemporary eye-witness accounts. Accompanying the Bohemian pilgrim Lev z Rožmitála through Spain that same year, Václav Šašek and Gabriel Tetzl recorded a Castile denuded of inns, food, and fodder. In the towns they fell prey to violent assaults and robberies – Tetzl does not hesitate to call their hosts 'ein mordisch bos volk', heathen from whom 'wir uns leibs und lebens muosten weren' (Schmeller 1844: 167, 173); out in the countryside, where men lived 'worse than gypsies do in other lands', they were harried by bandits (Letts 1957: 78–79, 90–92/82–85, 96). In Galicia the hollow-eyed peasants lived in caves, starving on a diet of grass gleaned amid the ruins of burnt-out villages and castles. The Bohemians were again attacked and plundered, this time by ministers of the law, the fearsome Santa Hermandad. In Santiago they found the cathedral turned into a barracks (Letts 1957: 100–03/107–08, 115).

The most vivid chronicle of the age, Palencia's *Gesta Hispaniensi*, contributes countless further vignettes of casual horror. The king finds it amusing while hunting in the forest of El Pardo, to have his *caballerizo* Barrasa point out places where, in his former life as henchman of the outlaw Alfonso Prieto 'el Negro', he committed blood-curdling crimes:

'Here,' he said, 'we robbed a stray traveller. Fearing that if we let him go he would denounce us, we killed him; and then, in case some passer-by should recognize him and find a clue to bring us to justice, we skinned his face with our swords.' (Palencia 1998–99: 114–15, Lib.iii.9, my translation)

With men like these abroad, no one ventured outside the walled towns. Inside, they lived in fortified *barrios* or towers, fearful of the ever-present danger of *bandos*, violence between the noble mafias who disputed control, like the *civilis pugna* witnessed by Palencia in Sevilla in 1471:

Their assassins (*sicarii*) committed every kind of outrage on purpose to provoke the city to riot; they killed harmless men, raped girls, sacked the houses of widows in broad daylight, and invaded churches in armed squads. The coming fight incensed them with thoughts of plunder: 'Let's set the city ablaze', said one to another, 'and avenge ourselves in victory with atrocities against our enemies. No stone will be left standing; we'll cut off hands, ears, and noses, seize gold necklaces and rings, and rob everyone of their riches.' (Palencia forthcoming: 822, Lib.xv.4)

On 29 July a minor exchange of words unleashed the storm; the tocsin sounded and fighting broke out. Armed squadrons attacked the duke of Medina's tower, screaming threats of what they would do to his wife when they got their hands on her. Folk who took refuge in a church were burned alive. By evening the Ponce faction were in flight; their leader, the Marquis of Cádiz, ordered his fallen retainers, dead or alive, to be thrown into wells so the sight of them would not dishearten his rearguard (Palencia forthcoming: 822–25).

Such tumults were routine.¹ Violence became more spectacular when sanctioned by religion or the horrific rituals of justice – torture, gallows, *auto de fe*. Palencia approved the ferocity of the laws, but admitted that the cruel procedures of the Santa Hermandad showed 'immoderate savagery' ('immoderata sevitia [...] prorsus abhorrens ab omni humanitate', Palencia 1998–99: 357, Lib.viii.7). Šašek witnessed their best known practice, that of binding the accused (since, notoriously, prisoners were never tried) to a *picota* and using him for target practice (*asaetear*), with fines for misses and a prize to the bowman who hit the heart, the proceeds to be spent on a party (Letts 1957: 96–97; cf. Palencia 1998–99: 357). For crimes held to be specially detestable the *cuadrillas* reserved more exquisite savageries: 'por el dicho crimen de la sodomía sean cortadas sus varonías, e colgado en un palo las piernas arriba e la cabeça ayuso sea asaeteado fasta que realmente muera' (*Cuaderno* of Fuensalida 1466, Ley 23, in Bermejo 1988: 373). The fallen *valido* Álvaro de Luna was publicly beheaded in the Plaza Mayor of Valladolid; as a noble he was spared the hideous panoply of mutilations prescribed for common folk, but not the post-mortem degradations – his head was placed on a spike, and his body exposed to the dogs before being tossed into the common pit for criminals (Palencia 1998–99: 70, Lib.ii.7).

Such butchery formed part of the essential spectacle, the drama (*auto*) of inscribing punishment on the body in order to make manifest the majesty of the

1 For a study of urban *bandidismo* see MacKay (1985), and on the best-known peasant revolt, Cabrera and Andrés (1991). Though modern scholars prefer ideological or social explanations, contemporary accounts invariably explain the violence in terms of *pundonor*. Thus, echoing Palencia's 'parva occasio levium verborum', Bernáldez says the Seville *motín* was started 'por indución de malos hombres de pie e rufianes que se arrimavan a sus casas llamándolas suyas, e otrosí por algunos pundonores de honrra' (1962: 15, cap. iv 'De los bandos e guerras').

law (Foucault 1991). The body, however, is too fragile a vessel, never equal to the excesses of righteous anger and revenge. Nowhere did this frustration become more apparent than in the repeated cycles of mob violence against minorities, where fervour exalted brutality to grotesque extremes. Palencia excels at such scenes, as, for example, in his account of an anti-Semitic riot during Holy Week in Córdoba in 1473. For three days the *converso* quarter was submitted to carnage:

They set about plundering and ransacking every object of value. They raped girls and cruelly stripped married women, inflicting horrible deaths upon them. One beautiful young girl, stripped of her clothes, was left only in her shift, which was richly fringed with fine lace, as is their custom when betrothed; to get it off her more quickly, one of them slit it from top to bottom with his sword, cutting the girl open from breast to belly and killing her on the spot. It is said that some men violated dead girls; the old had their throats cut, no kind of cruelty was spared that day. (Palencia forthcoming: 913, Lib.xvii.9)

Elements of this scene, such as the stripping and rape of corpses, are charged with symbolism; the aim was not merely to kill, but to inflict terror and humiliation. Such symbolic aspects were always paramount; their forms served to mark boundaries between the spontaneous machismo of *bandos*, the solemn awe of justice, or the righteous vengeance of war against enemies of the faith.

These testimonies reflected, no doubt, a pitiful reality. The collapsing medieval social system left a vacuum in which all power rested exclusively on force. No sane person would conclude from this that the 15th century was quantitatively more violent than our own; overall it was doubtless far less so, if only because the population of Spain was smaller than that of present-day London, and their weaponry pathetically ineffectual. Nevertheless, behind descriptions such as those cited above one senses a difference in kind that permits us to regard late-medieval Spanish society as, qualitatively, extremely violent, or at least as presenting special characteristics in regard to violence. The quotations hint at the most striking factors in this generic difference: the public character of judicial violence, the unreflective use of terror in the exercise of all forms of power, and the defencelessness of the unarmed majority assigned the role of victims – peasants and serfs, women, slaves, racial minorities, the poor.

What traumatic effects did these ubiquitous forms of institutionalized atrocity have on mentalities and individual psychology? It would seem natural to turn, for one sort of answer, to the literature of the age; this is the topic to be considered here, the reflection in 15th-century creative writing of the peculiar kinds of intense violence adumbrated above. The lead was given long ago by Huizinga's classic analysis (2004, e.g. 19–46; 's Levens felheid').

A starting point is suggested by the rhetoric of the descriptions. My opening citation from Enríquez del Castillo demonstrates two typical figures to be encountered again and again in these writings, hyperbole and accumulation. Fernando de Pulgar describes the violent state of the kingdom in the following remarkable period, where these figures are embossed by repetition and antithesis in balanced *clausulae* underscored by rhyme:

Se despertó la cobdicia e creció el avaricia, cayó la justicia e señoreó la fuerça, reinó la rapina e disolvióse la luxuria, e ovo mayor logar la cruel tentación de la sobervia que la humilde persuasión de la obediencia, e las costunbres por la mayor parte fueron corronpidas e disolutas de tal manera que [...], siguiendo sus intereses particulares, dexaron caer el bien general de tal forma que el general e el particular perescía. (Pulgar 2007: 86)

Pulgar's friend and rival Palencia was prodigal, as we have seen, with other favoured tropes: prosopopoeia, dialogue, metaphor. Both were inordinately fond of allegories of Fortune and her wheel, or of the body-politic infected by disease. Their predecessor as *cronista real*, Juan de Mena, achieved an emblematic synthesis of such metaphors by subsuming them in the poetic image of a labyrinth (Mena 1997).

These affective devices of language were, to be sure, prescribed in classical manuals of rhetoric as means of arousing pity and horror. To understand their role in 15th-century texts, however, we should begin not from the poetics of violence, the techniques for representing it, but with its aesthetics. To portray artistically a scene of violence so systemic and endemic presented a major imaginative challenge, but to attribute it to the labyrinthine machinations of an imaginary goddess was already to admit a failure of explanation, a sense of aporia in the face of disorder. Andrés Bernáldez, reflecting upon *bandidismo*, frankly admitted defeat: 'es imposible el poderse escrevir de aquel tiempo' (1962: 15, cap. iv). Pulgar expressed a similar sense of frustration in a luminous *letra mensajera* of 1473:

Ya, señor, está cansado de os escrevir generalmente. Algunas veces, però, me he asentado con propósito de escrevir particularmente las muertes, robos, quemas, injurias, asonadas, desafíos, fuerças, juntamientos de gentes, roturas que cada día se facen *abundanter* en diversas partes del reino; y son por nuestros pecados de tan mala calidad e tantas en cantidad que Trogo Pompeo ternía asaz que facer en recontar solamente las acaescidas en un mes. (Pulgar 1949: 117–24, Letra XXV 'Para el obispo de Coria, deán [Francisco Álvarez] de Toledo', at 117)

'Escrevir particularmente': the phrase points to an aesthetic of kaleidoscopic multiple viewpoints that parallels the notorious lack of perspective in pre-Renaissance visual art, and so provides a poetic rationale for the Gothic rhetoric of accumulation exemplified by Pulgar's sentence. But the problem, as both writers lament, was to reduce the vivid, crocketed mosaic of tones and colours to a congruent structure. The resulting sense of incoherence assumes a primordial role in our late-medieval texts, which display an unmistakable penchant not only for hyperbolic excess and exaggeration, but also (as for example in their representations of death) for the gargoyles of the grotesque.² In short, the response to the challenge of representing violence accounts for many characteristic features of 15th-century style and sensibility. In this sense, violence was one key to their aesthetic.

2 I further explore the sensibility of the Dances of Death and *artes moriendi* and its relation to this late Gothic literary aesthetic in Lawrance (1998, 1999).

A place where we clearly catch a palpitation of this fact is a text that, on the face of it, appears only marginally to be a work of creative art. Alfonso Martínez de Toledo's antierotic tract *Arcipreste de Talavera* of 1434 is crammed with humdrum scenes of domestic violence that are by no means specific to his age; what is typically Gothic is the Archpriest's style in describing them, and the morals he draws, which betray a kind of moral anaesthesia, an atmosphere of shocking insensitivity and cynicism in personal relations. At a picnic one day a husband and wife argue about whether the blade he carries in his belt is a knife or scissors:

Respondió la muger: – ¡Yuy, amigo, dónde estáis? ¡Que no es cañivete, que tiseras son, tiseras!

Dixo el marido: – ¿Ahora en mal punto del cañivete me fazes tijeras?

La muger dixo: – ¿Amigo, qué es de vós? ¡Que tiseras son, tiseras!

Desde que el marido vido que su muger porfiaba e que su porfía era por demás, dixo: – Libreme Dios desta mala fembra, aun en mi solaz porfía conmigo –. Diole del pie y echóla en el río.

(Martínez 1979: 178, Parte II, cap. vii)

Friends rush to save her, but the husband stops them: '¡Amigos, tornad, tornad! ¿Dónde vais? ¿E cómo no pensáis que, como es porfiada, aun con el río porfiará?' The last we see of the drowning woman are her two fingers raised above the water, 'meneándolos a manera de tiseras, dando a entender que aún eran tiseras' ('¡Muerta sí, mas no vencida!'). And the moral, declares the Archpriest with satisfaction, is that 'la porfiada con su negra porfía porfiando mal acabó'.

Repetitive figures of polyptoton and epanalepsis (*porfía*, *porfiar*, twelve forms; *tiseras* seven times) here turn our tropes of exaggeration to comic effect; the point of the tale is to make us laugh at the 'vicios, tachas, e malas condiciones' of women (1979: 145, Tít.). However, its gratuitous cruelty is not to be explained merely by misogyny. In another passage the Archpriest makes general mock of the sentimentality that averts its eyes from the inescapable necessity of violence, the cowardice of the 'ombre misericordioso que ama justicia, mas non por sus manos fazerla':

Es tanta la piedad que en su corazón reina que le non plaze ver execución de ninguno que biva, antes ha duelo de qualquier animal irracional que vea morir o penar.

(207, Parte III, cap. ii)

Alfonso Martínez suffered no such qualms. He describes many executions, always with equanimity and even satisfaction, as, for example, the woman he sees burned alive in Tortosa (1979: 71, Parte I, cap. xxxiv), or the 70-year old *alcahueta* he watches being first hung from a door by her arms, then from another by her neck, and finally burnt ('dignas de todas bivas ser quemadas', 198, Parte II, cap. xiii). Most chilling is the hanging of La Argentera, 'una de las hermosas mugeres de aquella çibdad', accused of strangling her father in order to take a lover, though when the Archpriest visits her in prison to administer confession she denies the crime. The judicial butchery of such a beauty no doubt offered

a pornographic feast for the male public, but the Archpriest picks out only one sadistic detail: 'aun en postremo el verdugo, quando la descolgó, se echó con ella' (117–18, Parte I, cap. xxiv). Publicly raping corpses (or a near-corpse; the woman had yet to be disembowelled) could pass off with impunity in some situations, but not in this one; the fellow is duly whipped, allowing the Archpriest to draw a sententious moral on the dead woman's lack of chastity:

aun después de muerta fue causa de la desonra del verdugo, que ay personas que en vida e en muerte siempre fazen mal o son causa de todo mal. (1979: 118)

Few studies of the Archpriest's book remark explicitly the omnipresence of violence in his text or – what is more significant – the extreme violence of his language. His style is often called exuberant and vivid, but this is superficial. When speaking of what he regards as rational matters, Toledo's discourse is pedantic, forced, and Latinate; when his emotions are in play – that is, when railing against women, sodomites, heretics – his voice becomes furious, possessed, boiling over with words like 'reventar', 'quemar vivo', 'rabia'. The familiar tropes of hyperbole and accumulation pile up, revealing a pathology on the razor's edge of paranoia. Here he is, for instance, cursing women for their ability to move men to violence by their tears:

E esto se les viene de cada día por estas lágrimas negras, malditas, malaventuradas, ravisas e emponçoñadas, veninosas, crueles e desmesuradas. ¡Ay Dios, quién pudiese pesar una lágrima de mujer! (220, Parte III, Cap. viii)

Faced with the multiple guises of violent death he sees about him ('fines [...] estrañas e de diversos e de infinidos casos e inopinadas muertes, segund veemos de cada día por espirencia', 244, Parte IV, cap. i), the Archpriest's pessimism takes on the contours of a frankly pagan fatalism, despite the rationalist mask of his long arguments against superstitious belief in *hados* and witchcraft. God scourges us, he protests, 'por nuestros pecados e bestiedades' – but with what incommensurable violence! His image of a world upside down draws to this apocalyptic close:

Segund la su grand benignidad nos castiga por mortandades, malos tiempos, adversidades, sequedades de pocas aguas, guerras, enfermedades, pasiones, tribulaçiones, dolores de cada día, e afanes; que ya los tiempos non vienen como solían, porque los ombres e criaturas non biven como bivían; que agora en el verano faze invierno, e en el invierno verano. En el invierno truena e relampaguea con rayos contra natural curso, e en verano serena e non llueve sinon piedra e granizo. [...] Quando verás el árbol verde que non le fallestçe umidad nin agua, e se seca, señal es de non llevar ya fruto, e que el fuego con deseo lo espera. (256, Parte IV, Cap. i)

The Archpriest's style epitomizes that 'sense of incoherence' that I characterized as a leading note in 15th-century sensibility. The literary problem he confronts is that of finding an adequate formula for representing violence.

Of course, this is not how 15th-century writers would have described the matter. Few even of those more intelligent than Alfonso Martínez really believed the world was chaotic; their culture induced them, rather, to take for granted

a transcendent supernatural order. It would be wrong, then, to read the melancholy devices of their style as existential *angst*; the role played by humour in the Archpriest's text gives a clue to how wide of the mark any such reading would be. Only in our sublunary world was Fortune given leave to run riot; late-Gothic fatalism was worldly, escapist, and often little more than a fashionable pose.³ Men wrote in this style not because they were in anguish, but primarily because they and their audiences enjoyed and savoured it. Nevertheless, the garish, spiky, strident poetic described here and shared by such diverse works as *Arcipreste de Talavera*, *La danza general de la Muerte*, *El laberinto de Fortuna*, and *Gesta Hispaniensi*a evidently represented a genuine sensibility, a shared common outlook; as such, it must have embodied recognizable modes of experience. I have argued that violence was one such mode – one that provides a key to the unity and particularity of the concomitant sensibility.

Where else to close an investigation of this last proposition than with the text to which Dorothy Severin has devoted such illuminating attention, Fernando de Rojas's *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*? To read his representations of the nocturnal dangers of the streets and murder of Celestina (Rojas 1987: 256–59, 263–65, 272–75, Acto XII), the executions of Pármeno and Sempronio (277–81, Acto XIII), or the ominous noise that greets the death of Calisto ('este clamor de campanas, este alarido de gentes, este aullido de canes, este grande strépito de armas', Auto XX, 333), is to be reminded that Rojas did no more than show the violent realities familiar to us from Palencia and other sources. But the role of violence in his play goes deeper than verisimilitude. To grasp his affinity with the aesthetic of violence we need only cite his proem on what Celestina elsewhere calls the 'litigioso caos' of the diabolic world (147, Acto III):

Los adversos elementos unos con otros rompen pelea; treman las tierras, ondean los mares, el aire se sacude, suenan las llamas, los vientos entre sí traen perpetua guerra. [...] ¿Pues qué diremos entre los hombres, a quien todo lo sobredicho es sujeto? ¿Quién explanará sus guerras, sus enemistades, sus embidias, sus aceleramientos y movimientos y descontentamientos? (78–80 [Prólogo])

Everyone knows that these clichés were borrowed from Petrarch (*De remediis utriusque Fortunae*, Lib. II, Praefatio). They remain singularly significant, nonetheless, because Rojas added this proem to the second version of his *Tragicomedia* precisely to justify the shocking novelty of combining comedy with tragedy in a single action (Lawrance 1993). No moment in 15th-century Spanish letters better exemplifies the violent sense of incoherence of the late-Gothic aesthetic than Rojas's decision to deflect the *primer autor*'s erotic farce into the shambles of death in his denouement; no style captures the associated poetic of hyperbole and accumulation better than his.

In so brief an exposition my hypothesis on the role of representations of

3 This is Huizinga's thesis (2004: 47–78), based in particular on the comically lachrymose works of Eustache Deschamps (1346–1406), who surrounded himself with a group of like-minded poets called *fumeurs* because they delighted to 'fume' at the world ('Fumeux fume par fume | fumeuse speculation', in the words of Solage's famous rondeau).

violence in late-medieval sensibility is bound to look simplistic. Let us dwell, then, only on the main theme. When Menéndez y Pelayo (1943) described the culture of the reigns of Juan II and Enrique IV as the product of a ‘descomposición malsana’ of morals, or Maravall (1964) interpreted Rojas’s work as reflecting the social conflict of feudalism giving way to capitalism, they were confronting – from different standpoints – the same problem. Castro (1965) is closer to my approach when he opines that the generic ‘contienda’ of the *Tragicomedia* reflected the ‘mundo conflictivo’ that produced it, though I cannot follow him in his racist interpretation of the author’s subjectivity. Literature has its own history, which proceeds from an interplay of internal factors such as taste, influence, sources, memory, and semiotics; the 15th-century delight in violent linguistic tropes and hybrid genres was primarily a question of aesthetic sensibility, not social conditioning. It seems licit, however, to draw a connection between the pathology of a culture traumatized by certain special forms of violence, and certain characteristic tropes and ruptures in its literary representations. In the long seesaw of classicism and anticlassicism there have been moments in which irony, monstrosity, violence, and volatility have been more appreciated than elegance, balance, stability, and reason. Later would come the Renaissance, replacing diatribe with dialogue, and the anxiety of tragicomedy with the repose of pastoral. The 15th century preferred more grotesque and distorted forms.⁴

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4 Versions of this paper were delivered at the IX Congreso Internacional de la Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval, A Coruña, 18–22 September 2001, at the University of Toulouse in November 2001, and to the Oxford Medieval Society in Exeter College, Oxford, in February 2003. I thank Carmen Parrilla, Amaya Arizaleta, and Ian Michael most warmly for their invitations and sage comments on these occasions.

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