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Invisible enemies: the devastating effect of gossip in Castile at the end of the fifteenth century

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the content, examples, audience and aims of Hernando de Talavera's "Treatise on gossip". By locating the work in the overall context of the author's production and in its time-space coordinates, the objective is to emphasise the meaning and relevance of the treatise in the turbulent events of the last quarter of the century. Working on the effects of "slandorous rumours" on "publica fama", we will explore the consequences of gossip and distrust after the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in order to show how social practices reflected the cultural, religious and political debates and developments in the construction of the "monarquía católica" at the turn of the century.

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A neglected treatise

This paper aims at explaining the cultural context of Hernando de Talavera's *Breve y muy provechoso tratado contra el murmurar y decir mal de otro en su ausencia, que es muy gran pecado y muy usado*¹ to identify the political and religious features of the last two decades of fifteenth-century Castilian polity. The suggestion is that gossip became a devastating social activity in the general atmosphere of repression and fear in the last quarter of the century, at a time when there was a strong intellectual and popular debate about cultural minorities, conversion, religion and the constitution of the kingdom. It was in this moment that Talavera's treatise went to print and when it acquired its full socio-political meaning.

Unfortunately, we do not know when, where, or the reason why Hernando de Talavera (ca.1430–1507), a former Hieronymite monk and the prior of the monastery of Santa María de Prado of Valladolid (ca. 1470–1485), wrote this treatise. However, we know that when Granada was captured, Talavera, then the confessor of Queen Isabel I, became archbishop of the city in 1493 and, ca. 1496, he and his entourage became interested in printing and disseminating eight of his early writings, including the Treatise on gossip.

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¹This is the exact title of the treatise (hereafter Treatise on gossip) included in the *incunabula* held at the Biblioteca de la Real Academia de la Historia in Madrid (R.A.H.) and Biblioteca de El Escorial with the general title: *Breve e muy provechosa doctrina de lo que debe saber todo fiel cristiano, con otros tratados muy provechosos, compuestos por el Arzobispo de Granada, Hernando de Talavera*. Most of their content was published in an unreliable version edited by Miguel Mir in *Escritores místicos españoles* (Madrid: Nueva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1911).

This treatise has been neglected by current historiography to the point that it has not had any critical edition until very recently.² The reason is that it was probably considered to be a minor work of moral theology. However, it is our contention that Talavera attached great importance to it, as we believe that he sought to expose a major, but unnoticed, issue within his contemporary political culture: gossip. He could see that “an enemy without a face”, rumour, was becoming a widespread and rampant practice that could have dangerous consequences. In this sense, the dramatic change that took place in the Castilian polity in a short period of time highlights Talavera’s position in the political and cultural debates and his reasons to republish this intriguing treatise around 1496.³

De la garganta del murmurador ... sale gran hedor [From the throat of the gossip a great stench arises]

The content of the Treatise on gossip develops around four ideas: 1) that gossip is not a minor fault, but both a mortal and venial sin; 2) that it is the result of envy; 3) that those who listen and pay attention to rumours also commit a dangerous sin, and 4) that the person who speaks evil has the obligation to repay those whose reputation s/he has damaged. The manuscript consists of seven chapters, a symbolic number that could be a reference to the seven capital sins and the Biblical seven heads of the apocalyptic serpent.⁴

There are reasons to think that the text was originally written for Talavera’s fellow Hieronymite friars in order to instruct them and help them to preach.⁵ Later, the archbishop made some changes for its publication around 1496, widening the audience of the text as he states at the end of the manuscript that the instruction is “necessary for every Christian man and woman”.⁶ The tone of the treatise was carefully chosen to influence readers or listeners by using the style of sermons. Talavera conceived his treatise as a “manifesto for battle”, a text to persuade: he makes strong statements, uses powerful images and peppers his narrative with clear and easy examples taken from daily life. He writes as if preaching directly to the faithful from the pulpit with the intention to “shake the conscience”, indoctrinate, and to provoke emotions; mainly fear.

The author starts by emphasising that gossip is not a minor sin; in fact, precisely because it is regarded as a harmless and common practice, many more are in danger of falling prey to it. His expression and style is characterised by a religious and ecclesiastic language that employs examples from the Bible⁷ and from three conspicuous patristic and medieval authorities of the Church: Saint Jerome (5 mentions), Saint Augustin

²Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s Treatise on gossip and slander (1496)*. We will follow this edition of the vernacular text and the translations into English.

³It is not certain when the volume was printed. Pereda argued that it had to be done around 1496 when four German printers arrived in Granada from Seville, Pereda, *Las imágenes de la discordia*, 275–80. Only in 1505 there would be a printing press in the town again. Johnston sticks to the ca.1496 scenario, Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 5.

⁴Serpents and the Seven Capital Sins appear in the treatise at some other points. It is interesting that the serpent was a common figure used not only in theological texts, but also in the political satires critical with the state of the kingdom. This figure features in the contemporary ballad, *Abre, abre las orejas*. The poem describes the enraged seven serpents that reign in the fields where a shepherd lives and works with his flock (*las siete sierpes rabiosas*); with them, a gigantic dragon that possibly represents pride or envy, Ladero Quesada, “Las coplas de Hernando de Vera,” 375.

⁵Johnston argues to defend this hypothesis: a) frequent references to Saint Jerome, b) the numerous biblical and Patristic quotations and c) the insistence on the need to attend divine offices, Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 8.

⁶“E así tiene perfeccion y cabo la doctrina que por agora parecio al arçobispo de Granada que es necessaria para todo christiano y para toda christiana”, Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 8.

⁷53 references to the Old Testament (mainly Psalms), 9 to Ecclesiasticus and 36 to the New Testament (mainly John).

(2 mentions) and Saint Bernard (2 mentions). Talavera explains that they all condemned the “sin of gossip” for four reasons: 1) because it damages others’ reputation, which he considers the supreme good, 2) because it favoured feelings such as contempt and evil in the listener, 3) because its consequences are difficult to repair, as it is almost impossible to restore reputation, and 4) because gossip is a universal practice.

There was a long medieval tradition of literature against gossip and slandering. In the clerical mind of the Early Middle Ages, snooping and whispering were considered obscure acts, alien to Christian fraternity and compassion that, very inconveniently, used to develop beyond the local priests’ control. The genre of the *vitia linguae* had a wide range of topics, such as “cursing, mockery, obscenity, loquacity, fatuity, fraud, flattery, dissimulation, and hypocrisy”.⁸ Talking was a recurrent topic in penitentials and sermons and typically connected with women, due to their “insatiable curiosity” and “fragile understanding”.⁹ Nevertheless, Talavera intentionally narrowed his focus on slander.

Talavera presents three animals to explore the sin of gossip. Knowing the traditional material and scope of the genre, probably it is not a coincidence that the first of these is the serpent, a symbol particularly connected with Eve and the cause of the curse of God to the entire human race. He makes three powerful comparisons that deserve description: “Just as the serpent bites furtively and quietly, so does the gossip” [*Como la sierpiente muerde a hurto y en silencio, assi haze el que murmura*]¹⁰; “as the snake does not walk straight, but twisting and winding, so the gossip often mixes in his speech some good things regarding the one about whom he gossips, so that the bad will be heard and believed more easily” [*el murmurador muchas vezes mezcla en sus hablas algunos bienes de aquel de quien murmura porque mejor le sean oydos y creydos los males*]¹¹; and, finally, as the snake poisons the air with its breath, the gossip bites its victims and infecting its listeners [*muerde al absente de quien dice mal y enfecciona a los que le oyen*].¹² Talavera presents slander as an addiction that subdues the will of those who practice it and consequently he recommends fleeing from it, as we do from serpents. The intention to alarm the reader is clear: gossip is very dangerous because it destroys good reputation, deceives people, subjugates the sinner and infects others.

The other two examples that the author employs are the dog, which represents those who are always attentive to others’ business and “bark at all”, and the pig, which exemplifies people who live in the sludge and dung, those with the worst habits and vices, and those who stray far away from virtues.¹³

⁸Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 9.

⁹Since the twelfth century, the judicial construction of the term *publica fama* has been closely related to male public life. On the contrary, “idle talking” became associated with women. It is important to remember that the construction of formal legal norms in Western Europe left women out of its proceedings. With irony, Wickham defines *publica fama* as “male-dominated gossip”; and yet, men’s testimony was part of formal law in Italy, Wickham, “Fama and the Law in Twelfth-Century Tuscany,” 25. See for fourteenth-century Germany, Caviness and Nelson, “Silent Witnesses, Absent Women, and the Law Courts in Medieval Germany,” 47–8. In Late Medieval England, women were associated with inconsequential and lascivious talk, Bardsley, “Sin, Speech and Scolding in Late Medieval England,” 212.

¹⁰Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 24.

¹¹Ibid., 25. The allegory of the serpent connected to rumours is frequently used by the Fathers of the Church. Saint Isidore of Seville employs it in his *Etymologies*: “[reputation] creeps like a serpent through tongues and ears”, *Etymologies*, PL 82, col.213 in Bowman, “Infamy and Proof in Medieval Spain,” 117.

¹²Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 25.

¹³Ibid., 26. He speaks of the “foolish gossip” (“*loco murmurador*”) who, like a dog wounded by an arrow, runs and shakes its skin to get rid of it. Equally, he used the metaphor that murmurers talk about everything, like dogs which, having no other food, gnaw bones.

Talavera subtly uses three animals that are part of the daily life of peasants, clerics and urban dwellers, and found all over the place in farms, houses and orchards. He emphasises the proximity of the habit, which is the reason that people do not notice that it is stalking. He employs realistic examples, chooses animals whose behaviour is obvious to all to make clear that his argument is thorough, simple and true.

Two other images are also used that connect with the evil of gossip: the tomb of the cadaver that stinks, and the sharp knife that potentially wounds the three different people who are involved in the act of slandering: the speaker, the listener, and the victim.¹⁴

The examples used in the first chapter of the treatise do not justify a gender interpretation of it. On the contrary, it seems that Talavera seeks to target either a male audience or the general public; in fact most examples of slanderers refer to men: Pilate, Herod, knights, Satan, Jonathan, the Ammonites, Ham, Doeg the Edomite, the Pharisees; the disciples of Jesus are accused of talking unjustly against Mary Magdalene.¹⁵ The contrast with another treatise written in 1477 against the indulgence of pride in dress and food is clear. In the latter, Talavera explains that women are questioning the right of the Church to legislate on dressing, eating and drinking, and he argues that women, like Eve, have “weak understanding”, and hence they compensate this shortfall with a rapid need to know what is easy, rather than what is wise.¹⁶ There are no traces of such stereotypes in the Treatise on gossip.

We are fortunate that Talavera had a didactical spirit, because he takes the trouble to define the topic of his treatise and his terminology. The text begins by explaining that his objective is to condemn the sin of “*detráher*”: “Regarding the sin of detraction, commonly called gossip or gossiping, which is speaking ill of others in their absence” [“*Del peccado del detraher que vulgarmente es llamado murmurar o murmuracion, que es dezir mal de alguno en su ausencia*”].¹⁷ Analysis of the treatise reveals that he is concerned with the wide variety of social actions that comprises reputation, from snooping and spying to defaming and slandering. In fact, he employs the three words as synonyms throughout the text: “*murmurar*”, “*detráher*” and “*dezir mal*”. The most frequent term is “*murmurar*”, gossip; followed by the expression “*dezir mal*”, which is not “curse” (“*maldecir*”), but slandering. He employs many others words, showing the universe of meaning in his mind: *criminar*, *maldezir*, *susurrar*, *criminator*, *maldiciente*, *susurrón*, *pecador*, *murmurador*, *difamador* and even *homicida*.¹⁸ In our view, and we will come back to this later, the text should be placed in the context of the legal developments regarding the effects of the social and juridical category of “*publica fama*”.

To remove the doubts about Talavera’s concerns, it is helpful to note that he wrote another brief text on the topic of how to retribute the harm we cause.¹⁹ In this work, he argues that six different types of damage can be produced to others: to their soul, life, health, honour, reputation and property. Here we are interested in focusing on

¹⁴Ibid., 26. It is interesting to note the comparison between the darkness of the throat and the sepulcher, which is a common image of the Jewish conception of obscurity and the nothingness of the afterlife, until the arrival of the final judgement.

¹⁵Ibid., 28, 29, 30, 34, 35, 40, 42 and 43. Recognising that slander is a widespread practice, he warns particularly of the religious men (“*varones religiosos*”). We should remember here that he was probably writing for his friars, 24.

¹⁶de Talavera, “El tratado sobre el vestir, calzar y comer del arzobispo Hernando de Talavera,” 11–92.

¹⁷Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 22.

¹⁸The editor of the text consistently translates “*murmurar*” as gossip and “*dezir mal*” as slander. We agree that these are the best option.

¹⁹de Talavera, “Breve doctrina de la manera en que havemos de restituir o satisfacer cualesquier daños é mal que á otros hayamos hecho en cualquier manera,” Mir, *Escritores místicos españoles*, 32–5 and R.A.H., 152–66.

numbers four and five. He clarifies that reputation is damaged when we give false testimony about another person, whereas honour is hurt when we insult, humiliate, or disdain the social status, privilege or office of a person. No doubt, in the Treatise on gossip Talavera is dealing with the kind of gossip that impacts others' social name. Nevertheless, in the treatise, and this is very important for us, he closely relates *publica fama* and the tittle-tattle of the streets. Moreover, he deliberately mixes up two vices distinguished by Scholastic authorities.²⁰

In the second chapter of the treatise, Talavera clarifies the cases in which gossip is a venial sin and those in which it is mortal. He equates gossip with stealing, which pointedly is one of the Commandments. In his view, robbing is only venial if you take something in the belief that the owner will not care. Equally gossip is venial when we talk about another without bad intention or when we could repeat our words in front of him/her. In all other cases, gossip is a mortal sin. Further, Talavera warns the reader by explaining that the examples he is giving, are not entirely rigorous because when we steal we take material things, but when we cast slurs we steal reputation, which is worse.

Chapter three is dedicated to producing a classification of six degrees of evil related to gossip. His categories show great perception in understanding people's interactions and attitudes, as he describes with accuracy: 1) those who omit the positive things that everybody knows about someone; 2) those who mention someone's virtues, but diminish them; 3) those who emphasise the defects; 4) those who recognise others' virtues but attribute them to bad intentions or vices (generosity for vanity, patience for cowardice, austerity for meanness); 5) those who reveal negative information about others; and 6) those who spread false testimonies. There is a gradation between these categories, with the last being a sin and a judicial crime that could be punished by law. These disquisitions confirm that with gossip and slander, Talavera refers to the spreading of rumours that "disturb" the reputation of families or individuals. His critique addressed the practices that canonists distinguished in the thirteenth century as mechanisms to destroy social prestige ("*infamia facti*") and/or judicial "*fama*" ("*infamia juris*").²¹

In chapter four, Talavera deals with the causes of gossip. Using again both visual examples from daily life and biblical metaphors, the archbishop compares gossip with a weed growing from a bad seed. It is noteworthy that sin is placed at the centre of the argument and closely connected with personality characteristics. This is more important if we remember that the consideration of the *vitia linguae* as a capital sin by clerical tradition finished at the end of the thirteenth century.²² Talavera is making a very strong statement recovering the idea that gossip is the eighth capital sin. The sins of pride, avarice, lust, gluttony, wrath, sloth and envy again raise the spectre of the seven beasts of the Apocalypse of Saint John. At the core of them is envy, from which grows avarice and pride and all the rest.²³ "*Envy makes one whisper and gossip, enjoy the adversities of others, grieve at their prosperity, and even hate them*".²⁴ Talavera relates religious sins with vices, personality

²⁰Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera's*, 9. Perhaps it is useful to remember that the Latin word "*fama*" meant "rumour, tradition and report" all together, Hardie, *Humour and Renown*, 1–5.

²¹Two notions created in the twelfth century by Gratian and thirteenth-century commentators, who gave juridical content to the act of talking badly about others. Accepting "*fama*" as legal evidence, they connected legal actions and social life, although only if ecclesiastical judges recognised it, Théry, "Fama: la opinión pública como presunción legal," 227–8.

²²Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera's*, 2.

²³*Ibid.*, 31–4.

traits, and bad habits, as religious precepts governed social norms and behaviour, such as: unruliness, discord, treason, perjury, anger, disdain, and bitterness. This connection with the sins serves to define gossip as a major hazard not only for the individual soul but also for community life. For that reason, Talavera curses not only the talker, but also “the ear that listens”.

“Lexos sea de ti la boca del murmurador” [let the mouth of the gossip be far from you]

From the tongue to the ear; from the speaker to the listener. In chapter five Talavera develops the idea that the act of listening to rumours is also a sin, which is sometimes worse than gossip, because – he argues – if there is no listener, then there is no gossip. He urges good Christians to adopt one or more of seven possible attitudes if they do not want to involve themselves in this evil act: 1) reprimand the whisperer or stand up for the victim; 2) get away and interrupt the conversation; 3) maintain a scornful attitude to show rejection of the slanderer’s words as “no one wishes to say what he hears unwillingly or reluctantly” [*ninguno ha gana de dezir lo que de mala voluntad y de mala gana vee oyr*,”]²⁵; 4) disbelieve any rumours; 5) remember the occasions when falsehoods were said about us; 6) look critically at our own imperfect conduct; and 7) feel compassion for those slandered.

Hernando de Talavera was deeply concerned about the speed in which rumours travel, and their facility to be believed. Most certainly, the dissemination of rumours is a collective action. Hearsay cannot claim any proof of authenticity, therefore it is exclusively supported by the credibility of the narrative. Belief in a story is an act in which both speaker and listener need to share the same interpretative framework of what can be reckoned, guessed, imagined, and accepted as unassailable truth. This requires that they connect in certainties, emotions and fears.²⁶ If these conditions are met, gossip may have a multiplying effect and be shared by large parts of a community.

However, Hernando de Talavera is aware of the difficulty of avoiding rumours and in chapter six, he details three attitudes that human beings have when they are involved in these actions, and he also argues that there is a degree of responsibility for them: 1) when the listener feels fear or shame about defending the victim in public or when, due to negligence, he allows someone to talk without getting involved; 2) when the person receives “the chatter” with pleasure, which is worse in moral terms; and 3) when the listener encourages the slanderer to criticise someone, which is the most vile and condemnable behaviour.²⁷ Talavera draws on the life of Jesus Christ to provide examples of the cowardly attitude of his disciples, and argues that in his own time the situation is worse.

The last chapter of the treatise is crucial because it focuses on the need to ask for forgiveness in various ways in order to restore the victim’s good *fama*. The whisperer should clarify the truth, if what s/he said was a lie, or acknowledge her/his indiscretion or negligence, if it was true. S/he should apologise directly or indirectly to the person blamed and

²⁴“*La inuidia faze al ombre susurrar y murmurar, gozarse de las aduersidades de otros, y dolerse de sus prosperidades y finalmente aborrescer a muchos*”, Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 33.

²⁵Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 36.

²⁶Sánchez Pérez. “El rumor. Renacimiento, Contrarreforma y noticia,” 772.

²⁷Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 39–44.

from then on, “spread good words” to compensate the victim.²⁸ At the beginning of his treatise Talavera recognises that reputation is almost impossible to restore; however he finishes his text with a positive note on the importance of courage and sincerity and on the obligation of the gossip to restore the slandered person’s public reputation in the community, as God did with Job. In the treatise on how to retribute mentioned above, Talavera explicitly affirms that repentance, confession and penance are insufficient because they do not help the victim.²⁹ It is necessary to redeem the wrong done. This locates the treatise on gossip in the widest clerical tradition of *vitia linguae*, but specifically in the thirteenth-century canonical developments that forged the concept of “*fama communis*”.³⁰

The treatise in Talavera’s intellectual universe

Talavera was a leading figure in the reformist currents of thought of the fifteenth century and he wrote catechetical literature, treatises on morality, liturgy, doctrine and religious obligations.³¹ From a Jewish-convert family, the main objective of this charismatic and rigorist preacher was instructing Christians in general, and his fellow brethren, nuns, women, children, and convert Jews and Muslims, in particular. In this line, all of his texts were brief, written in a vernacular style, direct in expression and simple in structure. Talavera belonged to the elite of the intellectuals of the late fifteenth century. He studied and taught in the University of Salamanca and he became a professor in moral philosophy between 1463 and 1466.³² He was a tireless reader and he kept up to date with the main intellectual currents, including works by Jewish and Arabic philosophers, as the books listed in his testamentary provision show.³³ He reached the highest offices and living in the court, he was well aware of the diplomatic affairs, the finances of the kingdom and the main religious and ecclesiastic debates of the time.

However, as a committed reformist and a responsible person, he dedicated most of his spare time to instruction of his friars first and to the pastoral care and management of his diocese later. Despite the fact that most of his works have arrived to us in one volume, the diversity of the topics, the autonomy of each treatise and the context of some suggest that they were written for specific purposes as independent pieces at different moments.³⁴ The characteristics of the *incunabula* support this argument.³⁵

²⁸Ibid., 44.

²⁹de Talavera, “Breve doctrina de la manera,” 32 and R.A.H., 152–66.

³⁰Théry, “Fama,” 201–43. The author argues that Innocent III set up the modalities of canonical proceedings in ecclesiastical conflicts and general inquiries (*inquisitiones, pesquisas*) in the Fourth Lateran Council. Since then, reputation became a favourite topic of the work of jurists and canonists, 204–5.

³¹Sánchez Herrero, “La literatura catequética en la Península Ibérica, 1236–1553,” 1054.

³²Vega, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 28.

³³Quintín Aldea Vaquero, “Hernando de Talavera, su testamento y su biblioteca,” 513–47, 530–41.

³⁴The two *incunabula* in the R.A.H. and the three exemplars in the library of El Escorial (two of them mutilated) include 8 treatises not all listed in the table of content: “Breve y muy provechosa doctrina de lo que deue saber todo christiano” (RAH, 21–36), “Confessional o auisación de todas las maneras en que podemos pecar contra los diez mandamientos” (RAH 39–151), “Breve tractado de como auemos de restituyr y satisfazer de todas maneras de cargo que son seis” (RAH 152–166), “Breve e muy provechoso tratado: de como habemos de comulgar” (RAH, 167–211), “Muy provechoso tratado contra el murmurar y decir mal de otro en su ausencia que es gran pecado y muy vsado” (RAH, 212–250), “Deuoto tractado de lo que representan y nos dan a entender las ceremonias de la missa” (RAH, 254–310), “Solazoso y provechoso tractado contra la demasia de vestir y de calçar y de comer y de beuer” (RAH, 314–414) and “Provechoso tractado de como deueamos auer mucho cuydado de espender muy bien el tiempo y en que manera lo auemos de espender para que no se pierda momento” (RAH, 419–462). The volume contains other texts as well.

³⁵Typographical errors, lack of coincidence between the titles on the table of content and the organization and titles of the individual texts, and several analytical tables suggest additions, changes in the plan of the volume and copies distributed to Talavera’s clergy, Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera’s*, 6–7.

His first translation of Petrarch was written in 1450 and commissioned by his guardian Fernando II Álvarez de Toledo. His letter about the best way to use time responded to a question raised by the countess of Benavente, María Pacheco, in 1475. In 1477, he wrote a critique on conspicuous dressing and eating in the context of a debate in Valladolid, where he was prior of Santa María de Prado.³⁶ His work dedicated to the Bernard nuns of the convent of Santa María de Ávila—equally an answer to a query of the female house to its bishop—, was written between 1485 and 1492. Queen Isabel, in 1481, commissioned the bishop to write his *Católica Impugnación* and Talavera issued an instruction to respond to the heads of the Muslim Albaicín community about the need to learn Christian doctrine in 1501.

These examples demonstrate that his work served specific purposes and was frequently written under request. They also show that Talavera was primarily concerned with teaching and disseminating the meaning of the main Christian doctrines and practices of the Church to a diversified audience of ecclesiastics, noble dames, and the general public since the late seventies.

Talavera wrote mainly during his time as the Prior of Santa María de Prado and when he was administrator and later bishop of Ávila, specifically from the late fourteen-seventies onwards.³⁷ It seems reasonable, and we will come back to this point later, to think that Talavera might write on gossip and slander as part of his pastoral duties as prior and bishop³⁸, and aware of the rising tensions with Jewish communities and conversos in the period between 1449 and 1480.

The turning point of 1480

The rebellion of Toledo in 1449 and the attack against the converso community of the town had lasting consequences. Among others, it triggered a profound controversy in Castilian society about “faith or blood” as a requirement to being a good Christian. The leading intellectuals of the kingdom, such as Juan de Torquemada, Lope de Barrientos, Alonso de Cartagena, Alonso de Oropesa, actively engaged in the debate. At stake were crucial political and theological issues, mainly the universal capacity of the sacrament of baptism to make all Christians equal brothers and children of a single Father and ultimately to make new converts of different appearance and customs, members with full rights of the Christian community, the Kingdom. Recent historiography has identified the existence in the Andalusian region of new Christians who had a particular understanding and practice, even though they were within the orthodox margins of Catholicism. Their cultural features and global religious conception made them different in the eyes of Old Christians.³⁹ The controversy took place in a period troubled by war among

³⁶de Talavera, “*El tratado sobre el vestir*,” 57–78.

³⁷Vega García-Ferrer, *Fray Hernando de Talavera y Granada*, 35; Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra en el siglo XV*, 139.

³⁸Johnston, *Hernando de Talavera's*, 8: He draws attention to the fact that there are no references “to gossip or slander against Jews, Muslims, conversos, and moriscos, or to Granada”.

³⁹Bruce Rosenstock, *New Men*, 9 and 72 argues that actually these new Christians were different in their habits and beliefs. Their self-identity made them “Judaizers” in the increasingly rigid eyes of the Inquisition and the monolithic politics of the Crown. Rosenstock’s interpretation undermines the binarist historiographical perspective of orthodoxy/heresy and sincerity/insincerity of the new convert, that Rosenstock refers to as the “essentializing pigeonhole”, Rosenstock, *New Men*, 6–12. For the converso political theology as a new horizon defined to include the converts of Jewish blood in the Castilian polity represented as a New Israel, see Villacañas Berlanga, *La monarquía hispánica*, 16.

royal pretenders, lordly factions determined to assault the throne and towns torn apart by recurrent constitutional crises.⁴⁰

Around 1460s, two different positions to deal with the tensions between old Christians and conversos were outlined. On the one hand, there was the rhetoric, mainly represented by the Observant Franciscans, in favour of watching the “new men”, because they did not look like orthodox Christians and therefore they could be suspect of crypto-Judaism. These groups understood that the problem was religious, a matter of heterodoxy and stubbornness, and therefore it was necessary to isolate the Jews and expurgate the false conversos. The most radical expression of these ideas was the inflammatory “*Fortalitiium Fidei*” written by the Franciscan Alonso del Espina in 1458 that portrayed Castile withdrawing under the attack of infidels.

On the other hand, the Hieronymites argued, in Saint Paul’s and Saint Augustine’s traditions, that it was necessary to educate, instruct, organise and catechise the newcomers in the main principles of Catholicism. It was necessary to give time to the converts to learn the new doctrine, to abandon their old customs and beliefs, rebuild new social networks and embrace Christian habits. The Hieronymite prior, Alonso de Oropesa, had already written in his work “*Lumen ad relationem gentium*” that the problem was social and cultural rather than doctrinal.⁴¹ Converts did not want to return to their old religion, but they did not know how to properly profess the new one. He contended that it would be wrong to reject and discriminate against the new converts on the basis of their forebearer’s blood and sins, as they had become full members of the Catholic creed.⁴²

These two different groups were reformists and both found it necessary to reinforce strong monarchical power to keep the recalcitrant nobility and the turbulent towns under control. Nevertheless, they competed to influence the royal court on the matter of the pace and methods of conversion and lead the ecclesiastical discourse.

In the late 1470s rapidly moving events in internal and external politics sharpened the debate and led to a desire among some to launch a general inquisition in the kingdom under the supervision of the king and queen.⁴³ After the monarchs’ trip to Seville in 1477–1478, Isabel commissioned Hernando de Talavera, Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, then archbishop of Seville, and don Alonso Solis, bishop of Cádiz, to implement a campaign of catechisation of the conversos. It seems that Talavera’s opinion that “persuasion required diplomacy and tact” with the converso community of Andalucia prevailed in the entourage of the queen.

The ecclesiastics had to work under enormous pressure, considering their enemies in the court, Church and towns, the urgency that the monarchs expressed, the time that

⁴⁰Herrero del Collado, “El proceso inquisitorial por delito de herejía contra Hernando de Talavera,” 675.

⁴¹Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 57–9 and 320–30; for a comparison of the life trajectories of Oropesa and Talavera, see Coussemaker, *Fray Alonso de Oropesa et Fray Hernando de Talavera, deux hieronymites du XVème siècle au service de l’État*; Giltitz, *La religión de los criptojudíos*. The main proponent of what Rosenstock has called “a distinctive converso theology” was Alonso de Cartagena. He put forward the idea of building a new collective identity that through baptism could surmount the cleavage between the new and the old Christians to forge the nation, and to establish it in the service of the Pope and the King; Rosenstock, *New Men*.

⁴²Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 142–3. On the use of images, see Pereda, “El debate sobre la imagen en la España del siglo XV,” 59–79.

⁴³Our purpose is not to discuss a process that has been described in detail by the abundant historiography dedicated to the causes of the Inquisition in Castile, a process that put at its centre the Catholic sovereigns’ strategies to take control of the nobility and Castilian church, and foster their prestige with the Pontificate. See Kamen, *La Inquisición española*; Edwards, *La Inquisición española*; Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 29, 153–64; Contreras Contreras, “Judíos, judaizantes y conversos en la península Ibérica en tiempos de la expulsión,” 467–77.

the task required and the complexity of the situation. Only two years later, in the autumn of 1480, an anonymous libel appeared in Seville that criticised the orthodoxy of Christian doctrines and practices and argued for the legitimacy of conversos' practices. The author, probably a Jew from Seville, expressed in his text the rejection of some sectors of the Andalusian Jews and converts of Mendoza-Talavera's policy.

It is not a coincidence that Isabel commissioned Talavera to refute point by point the author's tenets. We should note that Talavera was dealing with an anonymous writer, who was attacking their policies, expressing objections to the orthodox faith, conveying the feelings and rumours of part of the population of the town and touching on the burning issue of the coexistence of religious communities. The anonymous leaflet led the radical parties of the court to call for immediate actions and the royal decision to change the policy towards minorities and conversos and to intervene in towns' governance.⁴⁴

The setback to Talavera's ambitious scheme to persuade the Jews and the new men of Seville of the virtues of orthodox Castilian religious understanding may have led the monarchs to perceive how explosive the situation was and the urgent need for more time and resources to complete the process of fostering cultural reconciliation. On the contrary, political interests triggered the development of the merciless Inquisitorial repression of the 1480s, which opened up a traumatic campaign of anonymous denunciations, calumnies, and unproven charges without precedent in the medieval judicial system.⁴⁵ The priest of the parish of Palacios, Andrés Bernáldez, celebrated the sudden trials, arrests, exiles, expropriations and executions of Jews and conversos in Seville in the "iron years" of the Inquisition between 1480 and 1488.⁴⁶

From 1474 to 1481, Talavera carried out intense activity in his order. At that time, the issue of whether or not to allow conversos to join the Hieronymites became a harsh internal debate. The controversy was long and ended up with the inquisition of Guadalupe monastery in 1486 that prohibited the "new men" to profess, an opinion quite the opposite of Talavera's.⁴⁷ In this challenging environment, he was writing another brief treatise against the indulgence of pride in dressing, eating and drinking that casts some light on the text that interests us. This treatise was written in 1477. Lords, middle range nobility, jurists and lawyers of Valladolid reacted against the ecclesiastic attempt to control habits and norms in the excommunication bull issued by the bishop in Valladolid in that year. Talavera entered the debate to argue that wise and honest judges and ecclesiastics could legislate on issues such as dressing, eating and drinking as they were considered to be the supreme authority of Christians.⁴⁸ As a consequence, his treatise took the form not of a discussion on doctrine and canonical law, but an argument in favour of what was

⁴⁴Talavera dedicated long paragraphs to discussing habits and customs that fed the calumny against the conversos and wrote a complete chapter, number XXXI, against those who insult them, who he described as "bad Christians" who "offer reasons to the dissenters", Márquez Villanueva, "Ideas de la "Católica Impugnación" de fray Hernando de Talavera," 231–44.

⁴⁵Kamen, *La Inquisición española*, 108.

⁴⁶Andrés Bernáldez, *Memorias del reinado de los Reyes Católicos*, 99–102. Seville was the first town that expelled the Jews from its province.

⁴⁷Coussemaker, *Fray Alonso de Oropesa*, 108.

⁴⁸Talavera was giving particular importance to the ministers of the church as mediators, contrary to the pre-Erasmist opinion of Pedro Martínez de Osma who was condemned for his defense of the capacity of the faithful to understand the divine message directly without the intercession of the Church, Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 371.

presented as an evident problem of public morality and ecclesiastical jurisdiction that should be settled by sensible judges.⁴⁹

His point is that these topics belonged to the area of sins, to moral matters of honesty and shame.⁵⁰ External appearance characterised the good Christian, who should dress and behave with modesty and discretion. Despite some specific derogatory opinions about women, again the gender issue does not look to be the main concern of the bishop. Rather, it seems that his argument highlights the extreme importance that external appearance was gaining in order to judge people. That might explain his intriguing praise for the moment in which Jews, conversos and Christians will be one community with the same style of dress and beliefs.⁵¹

By 1480, dressing, eating, and fasting had become a crucial social and political matter at the centre of the discussions that affected the “*respublica*”.⁵² This was not an anecdotal topic, but one issue around which the socio-political and religious-intellectual positions polarised by the end of that century. The language and the broader debate had moved on a great deal if we remember that for Alfonso de Madrigal a good Christian should be first a good subject, while 20 years later, a good subject had to be first a good Christian.⁵³

Since the thirteenth century, canonical law had promoted the idea that ecclesiastical judges and general inquisitions could interfere in people’s daily habits, and even penetrate the internal space of each household. The Church advanced their definition of the internal *forum* of the conscience as an exclusive sphere of its actions to limit the monopoly of secular courts in each kingdom.⁵⁴ The obsession with hidden crimes (*crimen occultum*), the “unheard word” – what is not said, but is thought (*peccatum cordis, peccatum occultum versus manifestum*)⁵⁵ – points to the significance that daily routines and ways of dressing were gaining for the entire community.

⁴⁹Talavera, “*El tratado sobre el vestir*,” 12–13. The harsh misogyny in fifteenth-century Castilian satire was produced in a context of increasing interest in the ways of dressing and living as related to negative ideas about women’s infidelity and promiscuity and the requirement of discretion, Hodgart, *La sátira* (Madrid: Biblioteca para el hombre actual), 81–2. Talavera probably took part in the writing of the sumptuary laws of 30 September 1499 and 1500. The treatise makes a distinction between the normal diversity of diets and dresses, and the self-indulgence of women, and men. de Talavera, “*El tratado sobre el vestir*,” 19 and 29–38; Ladero Quesada, “Fray Hernando de Talavera en 1492,” 258.

⁵⁰The judge and the ecclesiastics had the power to define what justice and truth were and, therefore, people were bound to obey them [“*el que tiene en la republica officio e auctoridad de regir e de gouernar ca no es otra cosa el juez o el prelado eclesiastico o seglar sino ley que tiene anima para decir e declarar la justicia e la verdad y por eso manda nuestro Señor que los oyamos y los obedezcamos ...*”], de Talavera, “*El tratado sobre el vestir*,” 60 and 62.

⁵¹“And we can see that daily in the union of Christians and Jews, who were previously enemies like cats and dogs, like wolves and lambs. And mainly, we can see that in the monotheistic religions where they are all equal in dress and in many other respects, the stronger and the weaker, the good and the better” [“*mas vemoslo complido e de cumplir de cada día quanto a la spiritual inteligencia en el pueblo christiano de gentiles e judíos ayuntado, que eran primero contrarios como gatos e perros e como lobos e corderos. Y especialmente se cumple en las sanctas religiones donde todos son yguales en vestido y en mantenimiento y en otras muchas cosas, los grandes y los menores, los buenos e los mejores*”], de Talavera, “*El tratado sobre el vestir*,” 38.

⁵²Because otherwise, the republic would suffer a great damage [“*porque en otra manera a la respublica vernia grand daño*”] de Talavera, “*El tratado sobre el vestir*,” 64.

⁵³In Talavera’s Treatise on dressing and diet he draws a clear distinction between the internal and external *fora* of the Christians, between sin and crime, between beliefs and acts. He argues that the fact that there is social peace and order does not mean that people might secretly commit sins in their hearts. The aim should be to prevent the faithful from committing sins: “*ni aun por eso serían los cibdadanos buenos, ca podrían ocultamente y en si mesmos cometer muchos pecados, como cada día se cometen é no son sabidos, ó aunque lo sean no son castigados. Pues la verdad es la que dejamos, que el officio principal de los rectores é prelados es y ha de ser procurar con toda diligencia que sean justos, virtuosos é buenos los súbditos é cibdadanos. Para lo cual es primeramente necesario que se quiten las causas é ocasiones de los pecados*”, de Talavera, “*El tratado sobre el vestir*,” 71.

⁵⁴Prodi, *Una historia de la justicia*; Berman, *La formación de la tradición jurídica*.

⁵⁵Kelly, “Inquisitorial Due Process and the Status of Secret Crimes,” 418; Prosperi, “L’inquisitore come confessore,” 187–93; Prodi, *Una historia de la justicia*, 15–25; Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 184–7. The Foucaultian concept of “offender

The Treatise on dressing presents some similarities with the Treatise on gossip. In both Talavera describes the context in which the sin is venial or mortal and in both all sins come together to explain the evil of the habit. Furthermore, his argument against people who tell lies in the first and to people who get involved in gossip in the second treatise is identical. Talavera enters into a disquisition on deceit that in fact is marginal to the topic of indulgence in dressing and eating, but central to our point, because it shows that he already had the idea that if the person lies to make evil to others, his sin is mortal.⁵⁶ This makes this treatise an interesting precedent of the Treatise on gossip, probably written in the following years.

Nearly twenty years later

On 23 January 1493, Talavera became the archbishop of the newly conquered city of Granada, predominantly of Muslim population, which was in the process of repopulating and reorganising civil and religious life. He signed the capitulations that ensured that Muslims could keep their language, customs and religion and that Christians who had converted to Islam previous to the conquest of the city would also be respected.⁵⁷ Once more, he felt that his main concern ought to be to evangelise, translate and disseminate Christian doctrine, this time, among the local Islamic population.

Talavera brought a printing press from Seville to Granada in 1496 to publish his manuscripts. He had used print since his time in the monastery of Santa María de Prado and he understood its power to communicate. In 1496, he published the *incunabulum* and the Treatise on gossip was included in the volume.⁵⁸

As a talented follower of the ideas of the convert Pablo de Santamaría, his son bishop Alonso de Cartagena, and his fellow friar Alonso de Oropesa, and given the difficult context, Talavera's plan was to persuade Muslims to convert to Christianity and to promote a harmonious relationship between Christian settlers and Muslims.⁵⁹ It was necessary to reduce distance among cultural communities, to make the new converts look, as much as possible, like old Christians. Seville had taught him that the moderation of external differences (ranging from language to forms of burying the dead) were important issues that helped keep peace and concord, as minorities' and conversos' idiosyncrasies were increasingly regarded as a reflection of heretic beliefs.

The path for Talavera to surmount what many liked to present as the "conversos' confusion", was education, persuasion and evangelisation, along with a change in Muslims'

subject" in Prendergast, *Reading, Writing and Errant Subjects in Inquisitorial Spain*, 65–87; Delumeau, *La confesión y el pecado*, 147.

⁵⁶*Uerdad es que como quier que toda mentira sea peccado, pero no es siempre peccado mortal, ca si el ombre miente liuianamente por burlar y auer plazer sin dañas a ninguno no pecca mortalmente; ni aun si por hazer algund profecho syn hazer daño a ninguno miente, tanpoco pecca mortalmente. Mas si miente reziamente en daño o en perjuizio de alguno entonces la tal mentira es peccado mortal y grand culpa, mayor o menor segund la qualidad del daño que dello resulta*, de Talavera, "El tratado sobre el vestir," 34, 47 and 67.

⁵⁷Vega García-Ferrer, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 28.

⁵⁸He edited with some small variations his treaties written some decades previously. In the case of the Treatise on dressing and diet, he removed the section about his motivation for writing the text, added some thoughts on the harm of conspicuous dressing and revised various chapters, de Talavera, "El tratado sobre el vestir," 16. Despite his efforts, it seems that his work, due to the changing political context, was not widely disseminated, Márquez Villanueva, *Investigaciones sobre Juan Álvarez Gato*, 111.

⁵⁹Cousse-maker, *Fray Alonso de Oropesa*.

daily habits.⁶⁰ He suffered first-hand the shocking experience with the Jews and new Christians in Seville in 1480, and the terms of discussion and institutional persecution had since then become more radical, narrowing the scope for action in Granada.⁶¹

The biography of Talavera, written some twenty years after his death,⁶² confirms his enthusiasm to teach his clerics and novices, as well as prostitutes and children, and his interest in learning Arabic. The chronicle explains that there were many Muslims in Granada who “needed to be helped and taught” to abandon their old customs and adopt new ones.⁶³ The biography’s emphasis on these controversial points highlights the explicit ideas of Talavera on this matter.⁶⁴ The archbishop taught the new converts to sit and dress like Christians; he bestowed on them Christian objects for the liturgy, showed them different prayers and instructed them on new norms.⁶⁵

In the same line of seeking and achieving, first integration, and afterwards baptism, he developed other strategies such as the commissioning of a manual to teach the Arabic language, an Arabic/Castilian dictionary, and a catechism written by the *morisco* and Hieronymite friar Pedro de Alcalá in 1501.⁶⁶

After Talavera published his compendium, time appeared to speed up to fulfil a historical paradox. From March to December 1499, the Muslims of the Albaicín neighbourhood rebelled, as they were aggrieved by the actions of the new authorities. In January 1500, Cisneros suspended the capitulations and started to systematically baptise the population; while in October 1501 he burnt thousands of Arabic books in Granada; and in February 1502, he threatened Muslims with baptism or exile.⁶⁷ It is symptomatic of the times that Talavera recommended to Muslim community leaders, who had asked him in a letter how to live like good Christians, that they abandon their idiosyncratic cultural characters, mainly their *morisco* customs and language, and follow Christian manners in dressing, eating, shaving and way of walking.⁶⁸

⁶⁰Márquez Villanueva, *Investigaciones*, 111–2; for paradigmatic examples of people who were arrested by the Inquisition, despite not making a religious statement about the way they lived, see the story of the orphan Juan del Hoyo who received a life sentence because he was brought up by a converso family and did not know the basic principles of the Catholic doctrine; the case of Aldonza Lorenzo of Toledo, who declared that she could not see any difference between Christian and Jewish rites and habits, and Luis Fernández from Toledo who could not eat pork because it made him feel ill, Rábade Obradó, “Los judeoconversos en tiempos de Isabel la Católica,” 207 and 213–5.

⁶¹Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 337–51.

⁶²Written ca.1530, the compiler could be Jerónimo de la Madrid, but most probably his brother Alonso Fernández de Madrid, prior of the monastery of Santa Fe de Granada and Talavera’s testamentary executor, or even Juan Álvarez Gato, García-Ferrer, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 20; Fernández de Madrid, *Vida de Fray Hernando de Talavera, primer Arzobispo de Granada*.

⁶³... it was necessary to work towards Muslims abandoning their habits and taking up new ones” [“*por eso fue necesario trabajar para que dejasen las costumbres que tenían tomando otras nuevas ...*”], Medina, Javier, and Biersack, *Fray Hernando de Talavera, primer arzobispo de Granada*, 371; Márquez Villanueva, *Investigaciones*, 117.

⁶⁴Martínez Medina, and Biersack, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 374; Talavera’s target to convert Muslims led him to praise some of their customs and to incorporate several of their musical pieces and rituals into the Christian celebrations.

⁶⁵The archbishop argued that Muslims needed to be taught as if they were children, treated with great respect and regaled with milk rather than with hardship, Martínez Medina and Biersack, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 374; Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 398–400.

⁶⁶Ladero Quesada, “Fray Hernando de Talavera,” 259; Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 461.

⁶⁷Kamen, *La Inquisición española*, 210.

⁶⁸“*Mas para que vuestra conversación sea syn escándalo a los christianos de nación y non piensen que aun teneys la seta de Mahomad en el corazón, es menester que vos conformeys en todo y por todo a la buena y honesta conversación de los buenos y honestos christianos y christianas en vestir y calçar y afeytar, y en comer y en mesas y viandas guisadas como comunmente las guisan, y en vuestro andar y en vuestro dar y tomar y mucho y más que mucho en vuestro hablar, olvidando quanto pudieredes la lengua arábiga y faziéndola olvidar y que nunca se hable en vuestras casas.*”, Ladero Quesada, “Fray Hernando de Talavera,” 276; Sánchez Herrero, “La literatura catequética,” 1090.

The normative issued by the archbishop in those years is illustrative of the severe pressure exerted by Francisco de Cisneros and the Catholic king and queen. Talavera made compulsory: listening to mass for the whole population over eight years old, baptism of all the newborns, killing animals in the Christian manner, rest on Sunday, informing the priest when people felt ill, being buried like Christians. On the other hand he banned: any Muslim ritual in weddings (*ceremonia mahometica*), employing Muslims as midwives, selling wine to Muslims, using old jewels or henna to beautify the bodies, buying *halaal* food, adopting Muslims names, swearing in Arabic, performing ritual bathing, possessing Christian images and attending the public baths during Ramadan.⁶⁹

None of the aforementioned measures refers to any content related to Christian heretical doctrines, but to external features and habits. The rapid and radical association between Jewish or Muslim appearance and heretical and outcast communities obliged Talavera to give up his own strategy of slow integration. His diagnosis was not misguided, if we consider that the Pragmatics of 17 November 1566, read throughout the entire Kingdom of Granada, specifically banned Islamic uses and the speaking of Arabic.

Social distrust: the menace at your back

Gossip has probably been universal in all cultures and throughout time, but this fact should not imply that it is studied as a “pre-discursive element” that has always played the same role in social life. Gossip acquires sociological and historical meaning when it is analysed as part of the network of social representations, concepts, ideas and vocabulary of a particular society.⁷⁰ The historical contextualisation of gossip is normative to understand its causes, protagonists, mechanisms of transmission, cultural meaning, and consequences in various societies and periods.⁷¹ Recent research has shown that gossip can provide a means of integration or, on the contrary, it can dislocate communities; it can help or destroy people’s reputation.⁷²

In general terms, rumour, whether or not it transmits true knowledge or false information, is elusive and resilient to the action of formal institutions. It is anonymous, difficult to disprove and, if it connects with social and emotional concerns and sensitivities, it may spread rapidly. Obviously, gossip can also be used by the powerful to disseminate news, exacerbate conflicts, act upon opinions and police the social order.⁷³

Historical and anthropological research has shown that in medieval rural or urban communities, where the written word was confined to specific groups of the population or documents, information circulated through constant hearsay. This talk served as an informal way to monitor individual behaviour, allocate social status, disseminate good

⁶⁹Martínez Medina, and Biersack, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 352–57; de Talavera, “*El tratado sobre el vestir*,” 15; Pereda, “*El debate sobre la imagen*,” 68–9.

⁷⁰Allport and Postman, *Psicología del rumor*; Kessler, *El sentimiento de inseguridad*.

⁷¹Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs, “Gossip as Cultural Learning,” 111–21; Rosnow and Fine, *Rumor and Gossip*.

⁷²A classical view on the multidimensional facets of slandering can be found in Gluckman, “Gossip and Scandal,” 307–16. Dunbar on the other hand considers gossip to be a mechanism for bonding social groups and policing “free riders”, Dunbar, “Gossip in Evolutionary Perspective,” 105–8. Rumor and noise in the production of social reputation in literary models in thirteenth-century Castile in Pinet, “Rumor and Noise,” 26–45.

⁷³Pizarroso, *Información y poder*; Sánchez Pérez, “El rumor,” 771–3; Gluckman, “Gossip and Scandal,” 314–6; Fensler and Smail, “Introduction,” 1–9.

or bad reputation, and negotiate the identity of the group.⁷⁴ Legal studies have proved that gossip had a specific function in medieval law, being frequently a tool in lay or ecclesiastic powers' service to play a role in the constitution of communities. In the fifteenth century, worries about the effects of gossip became pervasive throughout Europe.⁷⁵ In late medieval England, concerns about dangerous speech, the "sin of the tongue", is repeated in treaties and ballads and "hellmouth images" filled the iconography of many churches of Western Europe.⁷⁶

Talavera had seen some of his colleagues in Salamanca and fellow bishops fall from grace and into disrepute from the 1480s onwards. It began with the ostracism of the Humanist Alonso de Madrigal "El Tostado", and the trial against Pedro Martínez de Osma in 1479, who was denounced by a university teacher, whose identity he never knew. This was followed by the judgement of the dead parents of the bishop Juan Arias Dávila between 1485 and 1490, and finally the trial against Pedro de Aranda, bishop of Calahorra, from 1487 to 1497.⁷⁷ The monarchs' secretary, the converso Fernando del Pulgar, was accused by an anonymous person, who alleged that those who defended the "new men" with deceptive authority do not deserve honour, and less so to be allowed to take communion.⁷⁸

In the nineties, the Catholic king and queen definitively decided to launch, with the support of the most antisemitic sectors of the Church, a policy that would make them the champions of Christendom in Europe, and raise their status among the Pope and other kings. Similarly, they increasingly sought to control the leading forces in the kingdom and intervene in municipalities. This policy was accompanied by a discourse that was bound to build up a religious narrative of the providentialist reign of Isabel and Fernando and subsequently the idea that Jews, Muslims and converts were a real threat to the Christian body.⁷⁹ Not only people of the highest ranks, bishops and intellectuals were affected by the increase in anonymous gossip, but the whole of society; and mainly those who "looked different".

Talavera was surely well aware of the miscellaneous traditions about *vitia linguae* when he wrote his text about the topic, but he was concerned only about the critical consequences that it could have in a specific context of religious and cultural persecution. An attack on the social credit of an individual, a family or a group could bring terrible misfortune to their lives, but also to the constitution of the political communities of the kingdom, by undermining any attempt to define a corporate body that might eventually

⁷⁴Wickham, "Gossip and Resistance Among the Medieval Peasantry," 2–24; Godsall-Myers, ed., *Speaking in the Medieval World (Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions)*.

⁷⁵Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature*.

⁷⁶Bardsley, "Sin, Speech and Scolding," 146–8. The diffusion of expressions such as: "tongue breaks bone though itself has none", "tongue of an evil man is worse than a spear", "tongues are worse than swords" are collected in Sheneman, "The Tongue as a Sword: Psalms 56 and 63 and the Pardoner," 396–400; Veldhuizen, *Sins of the Tongue in the Medieval West*.

⁷⁷Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 77, 353–60 and 365–72.

⁷⁸"que los que [...] se esfuerzan defendiendo los combertidos con engañosa avtoridad, ni meresçen honrra, ni menos comunión", del Pulgar, *Letras*, letter XXXIV; Kamen, *La Inquisición española*, 106–8.

⁷⁹See the letter sent by Isabel to Pope Innocent VIII on the 24 January 1491, warning him of the seriousness of heresy in Castile and the need to punish it by the king and queen, in de Azcona, "Relaciones de Inocencio VIII con los Reyes Católicos, según el fondo Podocátaro de Venecia," 924–25; the expulsion enacted in 1492 argued that there were multiple offences against the Catholic faith by Jews, due to the simple fact that they lived and talked ["porque cada día se halla e parece que los dichos judíos creçen en continuar su malo y dañado propósito donde viben e conversan"], Rábade Obradó, "Los judeoconversos," 217. The king and queen were granted the title of "Catholic Monarchs" by Alexander VI on 19 December 1496 in the bull *Si Convenit*.

incorporate minorities and converts. This was particularly vital for Talavera's diocese, the Kingdom of Granada, where the physical proximity of Muslims could increase pathological fear, and promote radical measures of religious repression and the policies of denouncement that were already being applied across the rest of the kingdom.⁸⁰

"Invisible enemies": the devastating consequences of gossip

At this point, we are in a better position to understand why the Treatise on gossip was included in the *incunabulum* of 1496. In Seville, with the help of Cardinal Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, Talavera won a deferment of the activities of the Inquisition until 1481. As bishop of Ávila, he was against the instauration of the Inquisition in his diocese. He managed to postpone the arrival of the court of Inquisition to the Dominican convent of Santo Tomas in Ávila until 1490.⁸¹ In that year, he had to accept under heavy pressure that the trial of El Niño de la Guardia against Jews and converts took place in his own town from 17 December 1490 to 16 November 1491, but he made his stance clear by not attending the public "auto de fe".⁸²

If the Treatise on gossip was written in the period around the implementation of the Inquisition in Castile, and in the middle of the debate about public policies towards conversos in the Andalusian region, it was sent to print in a much more radical episode of colonisation first and of confrontation later with the Muslims of Granada. The harsh intellectual and political debate was not only around the integration or rejection of religious minorities and conversos, but around Castile's entire constitutional model. At the height of his power in the region, Talavera might have seen the chance of developing a diocese where different creeds could live together, and where conversos, even with distinctive cultural features, could be respected.

Only five years later the most intransigent groups were gaining ground and influence around the king and queen. Talavera clashed with the ideas of the Inquisitors from Cordoba, who arrived in Granada in December 1498 accompanied by the rigorist Franciscan Jiménez de Cisneros. Specifically, the new confessor of the queen was not prepared to honour the pacts signed with the Muslim communities of Granada.⁸³ He represented those who argued that it was imperative to rapidly advance the process of "castilianisation" of the diocese, and he had the full support of the royal court. The monarchs' confessional policy, developed mainly through the Inquisition, disseminated the idea – in diplomatic letters at the highest level and in religious speeches in the streets – that it was necessary to have a strong policy to defend the kingdom, to combat the Turks, Jewish heresy and cultural pollution.⁸⁴

The anxiety and fear that spread in towns where the Tribunal of the Inquisition arrived created a threatening atmosphere. The royal Order of Medina del Campo on 27 December 1480 required all subjects of the Crown to help the inquisitors when they came to their village, town or city.⁸⁵ The accusation of "obstructing the surveys of the Inquisition"

⁸⁰To demonstrate the long-lasting consequences of this systematic persecution and fear that led to self-censorship in the writings and readings of the Siglo de Oro, see Prendergast, *Reading, Writing*, 4–32.

⁸¹Actually he advised queen Isabel against its introduction in 1478, Márquez Villanueva, *Investigaciones*, 129.

⁸²Iannuzzi, *El poder de la palabra*, 287–92.

⁸³Ibid., 430–4. Herrero del Collado, *Talavera y Cisneros*.

⁸⁴Carrasco Manchado, "Discurso político y propaganda en la corte de los Reyes Católicos: resultados de una primera investigación (1474–1486)," 342.

⁸⁵Herrero del Collado, "El proceso inquisitorial," 679.

was severe and led people to overreact in public and private in order to prove they were committed members of the Christian body and to show their uncompromising support for the orthodoxy.⁸⁶ The Inquisition maintained informant networks in many different places; it carried out investigations in order to judge the reputation of individuals; to find out what inhabitants considered “odd”; and it sought witnesses to gather evidence. All these practices required “good Christians” to testify, accuse and slander others, if necessary.⁸⁷ Bennassar spoke of a “pedagogy of fear”, which referred to the inquisitors promoting this feeling in the social body – as a sixteenth-century inquisitor explicitly admitted – by employing systematic death sentences and brutally abusing prisoners in public ceremonies.⁸⁸

Since its origins in 1230, the Roman ecclesiastical inquisitorial process against heresy was characterised by the suppression of most, or all, elements in favour of the defense.⁸⁹ As it dealt with extreme and exceptional matters relating to investigating “the soul of the convict”, inquisitorial justice suspended legal guarantees. It gave priority to suspicion over facts, sin over crime and results over procedures, and consequently accepted that denunciations were anonymous, that the charges were not revealed to the indicted and systematically applied torture to the prisoners.⁹⁰

Neighbouring Christians, some of them out of naivety, others out of malice, or with specific interests – in the context of a spiral of spying on others– undermined community relations.⁹¹ The allegations of Isabel Ruiz against Catalina Sánchez, for example, who admitted that her only reason to denounce her neighbour was that she thought that converts were all bad Christians [*“en su pensamiento tenia concepto que ella e todos los otros conversos no eran buenos christianos”*]⁹² is demonstrative of how much stereotypes, friars’ sermons, and prejudice, were structuring realities. The rapid and brutal expansion of cultural rigidity was magnificently expressed in the chronicle of Andrés Bernáldez who openly advocated putting people on bonfires and leaving the wood burning until all the judaisers and their sons, even those under twenty, if touched by the same “leprosy”, were dead.⁹³

⁸⁶The bishopric of Osma’s inquisitorial documents from 1490 to 1502 shows that when the Santo Oficio visited the area, Christians and Muslims had to declare any suspicious behaviour that they had observed. The 338 suspects, 74 women, were accused of a variety of crimes ranging from judaic fast, prayers or rites, to magical and superstitious practices or ideas and disrespectful outbursts, Monsalvo Antón, “Herejía conversa y contestación religiosa a fines de la Edad Media,” 112–9.

⁸⁷The proceedings of accusation as a legal innovation of the twelfth century and the how the civilists gave rumor (“*inquisitio fame*”) and disrepute (“*sinister rumor*”) force of law in Théry, “Fama,” 212 and 227–8. Llorente, *Historia crítica de la Inquisición en España*, “De la Inquisición moderna en España,” 132–7, where the author affirms that customs and practices were denounced as Judaic heresy; Kamen, *La Inquisición española*, 105.

⁸⁸Bennassar, *Inquisición española*; Bennassar, “Modelos de la mentalidad inquisitorial,” 175–6; about the “Autos de fe” as a theatre of law and fear, Prendergast, *Reading, Writing*, 89–116; Kelly calls attention to the difficult relationship between the occult nature of heresy and a trial procedure that depended on *publica fama*, Kelly, “Inquisitorial Due Process and the Status of Secret Crimes,” 414; Bowman, “Infamy and Proof.”

⁸⁹Llorente, *Discursos sobre el orden de procesar en los tribunales de la Inquisición*, especially: “De las defensas y de los delatores”, 168–175.

⁹⁰Gacto Fernández, “Consideraciones sobre el secreto del proceso inquisitorial,” 207 and 225; Llorente, *Historia crítica*, especially the chapter “Gobierno de la Inquisición antigua,” 97–123, 100. Chiffolleau, “Ecclesia de occultis non iudica?,” 359–481.

⁹¹Márquez Villanueva, “Introducción,” 12.

⁹²Rábade Obradó, “Los judeoconversos,” 215.

⁹³“... que será necesario arder hasta que sean desgastados e muertos todos los que judaizaron, que non quede ninguno, e aun sus hijos, los que eran de veinte años arriba; e si fueron tocados de la misma lepra, aunque tuviessen menos.” Bernáldez, *Memorias del reinado*, 103.

The enemies of Christendom were usually portrayed in the polemic religious literature of the period against cultural minorities as hidden, obscure, lurking, omnipresent and elusive. For Hernando de Talavera, there was indeed an “invisible enemy” that was hidden and slippery: slander. He presents gossip as a disease that undermined the social fabric and was a dangerous weapon for a society that was suffering the same illness that could be detected at the political level. The rigid inquisitorial culture, through the use of propaganda and repression, was increasingly pervading moral, social and political doctrines, creating an ideational framework and episteme that was blurring the terms of the debates.⁹⁴

Talavera was not alone in his beliefs and, despite the difficulty of expressing dissent, there continued to be a tradition of critical thought represented by well-known intellectuals of the time. Fernando del Pulgar (1430–1492) became one among others who dared to highlight the excluding and repressive trends of Castilian politics, the excessive punishment of prisoners, the property expropriations and death sentences.⁹⁵ In chapter XCVI of his *Cronicle of the Catholic Monarchs*, he suggested that there were political and economic reasons, rather than religious, for the measures taken since 1478, and he reported the lack of justice of the Inquisitorial court in Seville in the 1480s and the absurdity of the idea of “cleanliness of blood”.⁹⁶

“...*fue este señor murmurado*” affirms Talavera’s sixteenth-century biographer, perhaps echoing the established legal canonical expression “*publice diffamatus*”.⁹⁷ Of course, there were some who frowned at his contravention of orthodox practices, his familiarity with Muslims, and his respect for their culture and books. His chronicler expresses that Talavera despised slanderers and compared their barks – referencing the dogs in the *Treatise on gossip* – with little insects’ bites.⁹⁸ However, be that as it may, all these concerns fell into the shadows as changes at national and local levels allowed Cisneros to begin a policy of confrontation with Muslims without ambiguities.

Talavera’s relatives suffered persecution by the Inquisition of Córdoba. They were arrested in the spring of 1506 on ridiculous charges that are illustrative of the escalation of violence and repression in Castile at the end of the century.⁹⁹ The conspiracy against the archbishop was led by ecclesiastics such as Diego Rodríguez Lucero and Diego de Deza, archbishop of Seville, who established a regime of terror, while King Fernando remained

⁹⁴Herrero del Collado, “El Proceso Inquisitorial,” 671–2; Prendergast, *Reading, Writing*, 2. Foucault explains the persecution of differences as a language emanating from the institutions of power, but also as a feeling and perception shared by large parts of the population, Foucault, *Microfísica del poder*, 175–89.

⁹⁵This was in line with the accusations of anticanonical proceedings that compelled the Pontificate to reverse the privilege given to the king and queen in the bull “*Nunquam dubitavimus*” of 1482, Herrero del Collado, “El Proceso Inquisitorial,” 675–80; a full description of the differing voices at the end of the century in Kamen, *La Inquisición española*, 105; the social and legal “construction” of the category of “converts” in Márquez Villanueva “Introducción,” 11.

⁹⁶del Pulgar, *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, Chapters XCVI and CXX; Gerli, “Social Crisis and Conversion,” 155–63.

⁹⁷This is the expression used by the author of the *Vita* either Jerónimo de la Madrid or Alonso Fernández de Madrid, Martínez Medina and Biersack, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 373. The juridical condition of *diffamatus* or *infamatus* justified since the thirteenth century the suspension of episcopal offices.

⁹⁸[el arzobispo] *tenía estos ladridos por picada de moscas y por saetas echadas por manos de niños y no miraba de sus dichos y murmuraciones*”, Martínez Medina and Biersack, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 373.

⁹⁹As described in the correspondence of Pedro Mártir de Anglería, the charges against Talavera and his entourage were that they had turned the archbishop’s palace into a synagogue, where bacchanals, drunkenness, and bestiality with male-goats took place; the classical topoi of the inquisitorial accusation against heretics and Jews, Herrero del Collado, “El proceso inquisitorial,” 691–2; a detailed narrative in Márquez Villanueva, *Investigaciones*, 132–48.

passive.¹⁰⁰ Rodríguez Lucero was the Inquisitor in the town of Jerez in 1495, a man who was accused of false testimony in the cases he assessed.¹⁰¹

As bishop Diego Arias Dávila and others had had to appeal to the Pope in Rome to defend their causes 15 years earlier, Talavera had to take his case to the Roman court.¹⁰² His situation was extremely volatile, as a consequence of the complex political position of King Fernando in the dynastic crisis, which involved his heir Juana and her husband, Philip of Habsburg. They had arrived in the peninsula in June 1506 and immediately stalled Rodríguez Lucero's sentences and deposed Diego de Deza.¹⁰³ Pope Julius II acquitted the archbishop of Granada of all charges and it is known that Rome only gave this kind of sentences in proven cases of false testimony.¹⁰⁴ It is ironic that Talavera himself became a victim of rumours in a cultural context of mistrust and fear that was employing disrepute as a political and religious weapon.¹⁰⁵

Talavera's Treatise on gossip makes new sense in this scenario of inquisitorial practices and judicial protocols: anonymous accusations, torture, suspicion, persecution, and the promotion of spying and slandering. The judicial practices were blurring the distinction that medieval law had made between *fama* as certified evidence and *vana vox populi*, gossip and slander.¹⁰⁶ These actions were presented in the official discourse of the time as necessary and vital for the survival of an assailed Christian kingdom, and were shared by large sections of society.

Talavera experienced first hand that the worst enemies were not those who acted openly, but rather those who disseminated gossip anonymously. He could see that behind the visible enemy, hides an invisible enemy without a face: social practices that inspired and promoted a political culture of distrust and fear. In the case of minorities and conversos, gossip meant not just the spread of *mala fama* or staining someone's honour but persecution, detention, torture, expropriation and, sometimes, death.

It is tempting to imagine the old and toothless archbishop rereading his printed treatise, ten years later in Granada. His description of the consequences of gossip and slander had become a reality in his dioceses and his own house. He had warned against what seemed to be an innocuous practice but nevertheless a habit that could

¹⁰⁰See the letter written on the 1 January 1507 by the archbishop to the king accusing him of protecting his enemies and the accusations about Rodríguez Lucero and Deza in a letter sent by Gonzalo de Ayora, royal chronicler, to the royal secretary Pérez de Almazán on the 16 July 1507 describing the despicable behaviour of these men in 1504. Even if the author overstated (it argues that Rodríguez Lucero stole the convicts and raped their wives), the constant arbitrariness of the Inquisitorial court led Cordoba to open rebellion in 1506, Herrero del Collado, "El proceso inquisitorial," 682–97; Kamen, *La Inquisición española*, 110; Martínez Medina and Biersack, *Fray Hernando de Talavera*, 384.

¹⁰¹Pedro Mártir de Anglería, prior of the cathedral of Granada, nicknamed him "el Tenebrero" ["the tenebrous"]. He finally fled the town on the 6 October 1506, but was never punished for his actions, Herrero del Collado, "El Proceso Inquisitorial," 685 and 697.

¹⁰²Julius II in his bull on 30 November 1506 refers to Talavera's claims that he had been slandered and falsely accused, Herrero del Collado, "El Proceso Inquisitorial," 696.

¹⁰³Herrero del Collado, "El Proceso Inquisitorial," 694–96.

¹⁰⁴Herrero del Collado, "El Proceso Inquisitorial," note 55. Canon 8 of the IV Lateran Council, gave the pope the faculty to suspend trials based on false or malicious incriminations ("*false, sed etiam maligne criminatione*"), Théry, "fama," footnote 31, 219.

¹⁰⁵At the end of April 1507, the papal sentence absolving Talavera and his family of the Inquisition's charges had arrived at the royal court from Rome. On 1 May, Pedro Mártir de Anglería, a friend of Talavera who was staying at the royal court, wrote to the Count of Tendilla in Granada and on the 21st of the same month to his archbishop to communicate the news, but the archbishop had died on 14 May 1507.

¹⁰⁶The classification of proof provided by the Lombard jurist Alberto Gandino is: *omnino occultum*, *pene occultum*, *rumor* (an anonymous statement), *fama* (neighbours' statement), *manifestum* (a wise and qualified statement), and *notorium* (well known).

destroy the most important asset that a person has: his/her reputation. For twenty years, the practice was promoted by the Inquisition and particular religious orders. He had warned that gossip could infect the entire social fabric, and then had to watch how religious co-existence was undermined. He had argued that anybody might have been a potential victim of gossip no matter what the truth was, and then he saw his own relatives taken to prison in parallel circumstances. He designed his treatise as an intellectual battle that he was prepared to fight, but he lost it.

Sixteenth-century Castilian “rumourology” was as ubiquitous as snakes, dogs and pigs, and the *Católica Impugnación* would appear in the *Lista de Libros Prohibidos* of 1559.¹⁰⁷ Gruesome stories, crimes, divine punishments, martyrdoms, bloody tales – some of popular origin, some related to the hegemonic discourse – were widely circulated in the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁸

Final remarks

In the last twenty years of the fifteenth century Castile’s socio-political and religious landscape had rapidly changed. Talavera’s brief texts on liturgy, dressing, gossip, confession, communion, restitution and the use of time could be written in very specific contexts for particular aims, but they all acquired new tenor in Granada in 1496.

Hernando de Talavera’s work shows that in Castile at the end of the Middle Ages there were contending ideas about how to deal with cultural minorities and conversos. For almost 50 years heated debates on public policies towards religion and conversion, and the nature of the crown and the kingdom, had been taking place. Of course, contemporaries shared common cultural references, problems and tensions, languages and social representations. However, their views diverged over the threats that afflicted the Christian body, the appropriateness of the Inquisition, the pace of conversions, the association between external features, blood and religious beliefs, the possibility of co-existence between cultures, and the advisability of expelling minorities. This indicates that there were many alternative paths in the transition to the so-called “Modern State”.

The fact that the way of dressing, eating, talking, fasting, resting or burying the dead came to express one’s inner beliefs and that rumours were accepted by Inquisitors as evidence that led to expropriation, persecution and execution was not the consequence of the irrational outburst of violent common people, nor of their manipulation by the powerful, or the outcome of the inveterate hatred for Jews or Muslims. The persecution of conversos and cultural minorities, the implementation of policies of ethnic uniformity and religious and cultural exclusion, characterised a very specific time in the history of Castilian clerical and secular institutions, that led to the confrontation between the leading figures and institutions of the kingdom.

Talavera’s compendium of 1496 certainly aimed to educate and rise morality among new Christian settlers, his clergy of the cathedral, and to teach converted Muslims. In addition to this, it shows that Talavera was trying to prevent eventual religious tensions in his diocese, and overall he was taking a stance about a central issue of the “political arena”, the foundations of community life.

¹⁰⁷Kamen, *La Inquisición española*, 112.

¹⁰⁸Sánchez Pérez, “El rumor,” 773–4.

For the 1496 edition of his work, it can be inferred from his own words that these texts might have been related in his mind. In effect, at the end of the second chapter, the *Confessional* about the sins against the Ten Commandments, he explains that it follows another useful treatise on communion.¹⁰⁹ At the end of this one on communion we can find a text on the obligation to give satisfaction for the injury we have caused to other people, and the last paragraph of this section reads: “and for those who want to know more on how we fall in this sin of gossip and the way to restitute and other precautions against this sin, there is a brief treatise that we wrote about it”.¹¹⁰ Equally in chapter 4 of the Treatise on Gossip he states that some vices “are mentioned above in the treatise on confession”. These internal references show Talavera’s deep concern to connect confession, communion and slander. He was questioning gossip as a legitimate social practice and as a resource for judicial actions. Being a dangerous threat for social co-existence, in a context in which external appearance and habits were considered the expression of inner beliefs, heresy and potentially a threat to the law and order of the kingdom, Talavera did not regard confession and communion as a sufficient compensation or restitution for slandering.

Talavera’s and others’ ideas about the Castilian polity became outdated for a Catholic monarchy that, caught in a double bind of domestic and international tension, opted for specific policies.¹¹¹ The radical “confessionalisation” of society was undertaken by turning old Christians against minorities and conversos, a traumatic process that led to theological racism and the imposition of brutal procedures and apparatuses of punishment.¹¹² At the root of Castilian modernity were the timeworn elements of religion, blood, and the crown as the exclusive representative of the political body.¹¹³ While in most parts of Western Europe in the fifteenth century *publica fama* was losing force as legal evidence, in Castile – where people felt gradually strangled by the suffocating political culture – only rumours flew free.

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¹⁰⁹Mir, *Escritores místicos españoles*, 35.

¹¹⁰“E los que mas cumplidamente quisieran saber en cuantas maneras se comete este pecado de difamar, y en qué manera se ha de hacer la satisfacción y aun algunas cautelas para nos guardar deste grave pecado, ha un brevecito tractado que dello compusimos” Mir, *Escritores místicos españoles*, 35.

¹¹¹See the definition in the reign of Isabel and Fernando of a new concept of “we” based on ethnic and religious elements, and the Christianisation of the population as the only means of creating a uniform identity and law, in Villacañas Berlanga, *Monarquía hispánica*, 15 and 30; Pardos, “Virtud complicada,” 83; Rosenstock, *New Men*, 200.

¹¹²Boase, “The Morisco Expulsion and Diaspora: An Example of Racial and Religious Intolerance,” .

¹¹³Pardos, “Virtud complicada,” 84.

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