



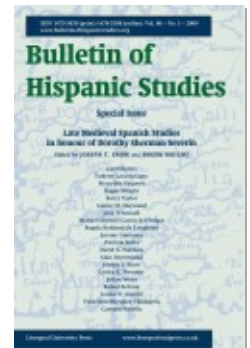
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Is *Celestina* a medieval work?

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A work like *Celestina*, published in its first version (*Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*) in 1499 and in its second (*Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*) in 1502(?) will always cause problems for those historians of literature (and others) who see their subject as divided into periods. The university in which I taught for almost forty years grouped the work, in an ‘early texts’ paper, with the *Poema de mio Cid* and the *Libro de buen amor* as clearly ‘medieval’. When I reviewed the edition produced by Sir Peter Russell in 1991 for the Clásicos Castalia series, I remarked in passing ‘this edition appears in the orange cover which, in Castalia’s scheme, corresponds to Renaissance texts, rather than the green of the Middle Ages [...] Although this small point was undoubtedly a decision of the publishers rather than of the editor, one wonders whether he approved’ (Pattison 1993: 101).¹ The imposition of such artificial boundaries as century limits to ‘periods of literature’ is, of course, bound to be arbitrary and may lead to the imposition of varied criteria: it is interesting to note that the Modern Humanities Research Association’s *Year’s Work in Modern Language Studies* rather idiosyncratically draws the boundaries of the Spanish Golden Age as 1470–1700 rather than making it correspond with the 16th and 17th centuries; and Peter Russell’s *Spain: A Companion to Spanish Studies* (1973) put the boundary between the Middle Ages and the Golden Age at 1474 (for both history and literature).

We can agree that all such boundaries, and all such categorization, are to some extent meaningless. Nevertheless, some criticism of *Celestina* has concentrated on its interesting, not to say emblematic position, poised on the cusp, as it were, of one possible demarcation line, however arbitrary, between the medieval and the modern world, that is, 1500. My purpose here is to look again at this question of literary historiography, while admitting that no definitive or sensible conclusion is wholly possible.²

1 Sir Peter later confirmed to me in a private communication that the decision was indeed one taken by the publishers rather than by him.

2 For Russell’s not entirely serious remarks on this subject, see Russell (2000: 3–4).

In the review article cited above I went on to point out that ‘his Introduction and notes put such stress on the debt of *La Celestina* to 14th- and 15th-century European works, as well as to the classical culture of Greece and Rome as perceived in the Middle Ages’ (Pattison 1993: 101; emphasis added). This question of the ‘medieval heritage’ drawn on by the author or authors³ is undoubtedly an interesting part of the whole subject; others are the matter of form or genre, and the question of the extent to which the author transforms medieval patterns of thought in the areas of moralizing, pessimism, and perhaps irony. At the end of this paper I shall touch on the question of whether there are any significant differences between the 16-act *Comedia* and 21-act *Tragicomedia* versions of the work in these respects, without of course suggesting that their chronological positioning on either side of the emblematic date of 1500 has any but coincidental or chance significance.

The use of dialogue is, on the surface at least, a thoroughly medieval feature of *Celestina*. One thinks of the use of the form in didactic works such as the 13th-century debates *Disputa del alma y el cuerpo*, *Razón de amor*, and *Elena y María*, continued into the 15th century in, for example, the anonymous *Tractado del cuerpo e de la ánima*, and Rodrigo Cota’s *Diálogo entre el Amor y un viejo* (see Deyermann 1971: 72–76 and 188–90). Stephen Gilman saw a crucial difference between these medieval examples, essentially didactic, and what we have in *Celestina*: ‘en la frontera entre las formas didácticas y alegóricas de la Edad Media y los géneros modernos, *La Celestina* es un triunfo del descubrimiento literario’ (Gilman 1969: 8), this discovery being, in the American critic’s view, the birth of ‘la novela y el teatro modernos’ (8). I have written elsewhere on this generic question (Pattison 1997), and it will suffice to quote a few words from my conclusions then: I referred to ‘the anachronism of using the term drama to refer to a work which was not and could not have been staged’ (317), while admitting that ‘the mixed or uncertain generic basis of the work [...] can be seen as a source of strength in that it allows its author to use the advantages of drama – among them lively dialogue, playful asides, and much more – but to free himself from its limitations with no great concern for representational realism when it suits him to do so’ (324). It can be argued that this last point – freedom from representational realism – is an important one and one worth stressing as a link with the medieval dialogic tradition referred to above.

It has become generally accepted that the true generic model or label to be applied to *Celestina* is that of humanistic comedy (Lawrance 1993; Russell 2001: 40–54); the more distant classical models can be shown to be principally Terence and secondarily Plautus. Russell states that ‘*La Celestina* [...] tiene hondas raíces directas en [la *comoedia* latina] y en la mutación cuatrocentista de ésta que se ha designado como “Comedia Humanística”’ and Gilman’s summary is worth quoting: ‘El modelo formal para el diálogo de *La Celestina* fue la comedia romana, un género que estaba ‘renaciendo’ – es decir, siendo releído de una manera en

3 I shall not here be concerned with the question of authorship; for my views, see Pattison (2000a: 7–8).

cierto modo inapropiada – en la segunda mitad del siglo xv’ (Gilman 1969: 12). The word ‘humanística’ deserves a little consideration. We now tend to think of humanism as essentially a Renaissance phenomenon, but Russell’s mention of the 14th century ought to give us pause. One of the earliest Castilian contexts in which the notion of humanistic comedy becomes relevant is, after all, that most medieval of texts, the *Libro de buen amor*, in which the episode of Don Melón and Doña Endrina has long been recognized as owing its storyline, if not its form, to the humanistic comedy *Pamphilus de amore* (Gybbon-Monypenny 1970). It can therefore be argued that in drawing on the tradition of the humanistic comedy Rojas or his predecessor were not so much taking a step into the ‘modern’ world as using literary models which had been available to their predecessors for a century or more.

Another aspect of the medieval heritage prominent in the work is courtly love. This has been much studied: see the overview provided by Russell (2001: 56–61) and studies such as those by Aguirre (1962), Berndt (1963), Deyermond (1961b), and Hall Martin (1972). C. S. Lewis sums up the concept as follows: ‘The sentiment [...] is love, but love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love’ (1936: 2). As I have argued elsewhere (Pattison 2007), both Calisto and Melibea pay lip service to these conventions, although in the former case he is ‘soon tempted by Sempronio’s self-serving plan to profit from his master’s obsession’ and he ‘increasingly sees his pursuit of Melibea not in courtly terms (though he may continue to use the appropriate rhetoric), but essentially on a carnal basis’ (550). As for Melibea, although, as Russell remarks, she maintains her ‘actitud de desdén y repugnancia para con Calisto’ until the point of her seduction, she then ‘no hace caso alguno del papel que el amor cortés atribuía a la dama’ (2001: 60). In one detail, though, she remains faithful to the archetype of the courtly beloved, in her refusal to contemplate the ‘happy ending’ of marriage, even when Rojas has Pleberio apparently open the door to this possibility (Pattison 2007, esp. 550–51). Courtly love, then, despite the parodic treatment it receives for much of the work, remains an important force and is yet another link between this work and its medieval heritage.⁴

When one turns from general traditions like humanistic comedy and courtly love to specific literary sources of *Celestina*, one equally finds the work to be firmly rooted in the past. The influence of Seneca (or rather of the pseudo-Senecan tradition) has been traced in detail by Fothergill-Payne (1988);⁵ that of Petrarch by Alan Deyermond (1961a); and that of other 14th- and 15th-century Italian writers such as Boccaccio and Piccolomini by Lida de Malkiel (1962), Berndt (1963) and Russell (2001: 115–16). Finally, 15th-century Castilian works such as

4 See also Parker (1985: 31–34), where it is stated that the work is ‘a powerful counterweight to the Religion of Love’ (31), and that the latter is ‘confronted with the world of sordid reality’ (32). For the importance of other aspects of the medieval view of love (as madness, as sexuality) see Russell (2001: 61–68).

5 On neo-Stoicism in general see also Round (1981).

Alfonso Martínez de Talavera's *Corbacho* and, above all, *Cárcel de amor* by Diego de San Pedro, have been seen as important sources, the first both for its misogynistic attitude to 'loco amor' and, stylistically, for its vivid use of dialogue, the second as an archetypal work of courtly love, the story of 'las peripecias de dos amantes enmarañados en la dialéctica del amor cortés y de la honra caballeresca y familiar' (Russell 2001: 121). This same critic, however, makes an important point in going on to say: 'Nada más lejos [...] del mundo cerrado y uniforme de la *Cárcel* que [*La Celestina*] con su estructura abierta y experimental, la multiplicidad de sus perspectivas, la variedad de sus fuentes doctrinales, su culto de la ambigüedad...' (2001: 121), and this is a point to which I shall return in due course.

The moralizing aspect of the work is another which relates it explicitly to the medieval tradition and at the same time causes one to seek to shade oversimplistic categorizations of it. One such appeared in the magisterial work of Marcel Bataillon, '*La Célestine*' selon Fernando de Rojas, with its unambivalent statement that 'le lecteur aurait été, depuis que *La Célestine* existe, invité à lire cette *Comédie* comme une moralité' (1961: 15). As Bataillon himself pointed out, this invitation is made explicit in extra-textual prefatory material like the 'Argumento de toda la obra' and the epistle-preface 'El autor a un su amigo'; it can hardly be said to be stressed – or even made implicitly – within the action of the work itself. Indeed, one by-product of Rojas's decision to use the pseudo-theatrical mode for the work is to make difficult the addition of an authorial voice which might be used to give a moralizing commentary on the action, were this to have been the author's intention. And the only character who seems to be put in a position to provide such a commentary – Pleberio in his final-act lament – signally fails to do so.⁶

One feature akin to moralizing is the use of exempla and other sententious material, and it is certainly true that this abounds in a way which would have been wholly familiar to a medieval public. Russell has drawn detailed attention to the use of 'sentencias y refranes' in the work (2001: 121–30); other critics like Deyermond (1961a) and Fothergill-Payne (1988) emphasize the role in late medieval literature of florilegia or compendia of exempla and sayings of the authors with whose influence they deal (Petrarch and Seneca respectively). However, it is once again Russell who provides an important qualification in this area, reminding us that 'con gran frecuencia la sentencia, cuya función es recordar las aceptadas normas de la buena conducta ético-social, está puesta en boca de un personaje cuyo carácter e intenciones son totalmente contrarios a la doctrina contenida en el dicho que profiere' (2001: 128), a procedure which is characterized as both ironic and subversive.

Irony and ambiguity are perhaps the elements in *Celestina* which are hardest to reconcile with a view of the work as essentially medieval. They lie behind views such as those expressed by Russell about sententious material (in the previous paragraph) and the basis of the comparison with the work of Diego de San Pedro

6 See, for instance, Fraker (1966), Severin (1989), Pattison (1997 and 2000b), and Russell (2001: 85–87).

(see above); equally, when Gilman remarks apropos of the use of dialogue in *Celestina*, ‘Los escritores medievales [...] no podían producir [...] un intercambio continuado entre individuos, cada uno hablando al otro desde su propio punto de vista y desde su propia vida. *La Celestina* cambió todo esto de un golpe. [...] Por primera vez podemos oír a unas vidas que se rozan, conviven y luchan entre sí en un continuo intercambio oral’ (1969: 10), he is, like the series editors of *Clásicos Castalia* (see above), placing the work unequivocally at the start of the ‘modern’, as opposed to the ‘medieval’, period. Yet even granting the appositeness of some of these observations, one should not undervalue the medieval nature of a work born out of elements all of which were familiar to its author’s contemporaries: in terms of genre, literary sources, and moralizing intention this is a work with deep roots in the medieval past, even if its author’s (or authors’) treatment of the material was in tune with a world which was changing rapidly.

As a postscript, let me return to the differences which can be perceived between the two versions of the work, *Comedia* and *Tragicomedia*. As has often been remarked, the reworking of material (let us assume at the hands of Rojas) operates on two levels, which we can call stylistic and structural. The former often involves not much more than accumulation of exemplary or rhetorical material,⁷ in a way which, it must be admitted, is frankly medieval. It is, however, in the area of structural expansion – the so-called five interpolated acts – that we see the greater and more significant differences between the two versions. In previous analyses of this material (Pattison 2000a and 2007) I concentrated on a marked increase in irony. In part this is brought about by the introduction of the sub-plot involving Elicia’s and Areúsa’s desire to avenge the death of their lovers Sempronio and Pármeno: this affects the circumstances of Calisto’s own death (no longer a matter of a mere chance fall, but a result of his new-found concern for his servants’ welfare and his paradoxical lack of confidence in their ability to protect him); and in part by the introduction in *aucto* xvi of the possibility of Melibea’s marriage and the consequences of this notion for a possible ‘happy ending’.

In the first of these instances, it can be seen that a simple sequence of events, the fall of Calisto from the garden wall – whether seen as moralistic (fornication punished) or as evidence of the blind hand of fate or fortune – is replaced by an altogether subtler interplay of ironic elements. In the second, I have argued that a key element of the medieval topos of courtly love – the incompatibility of that love and a conventional or social view of matrimony – which is never even brought up in the *Comedia* is, in the longer version, placed before us in a way which emphasizes starkly the corrosive effects of the convention: ‘[Melibea] is so

7 One example among many is to be seen in *aucto* iii, in *Celestina*’s conjuration speech, where the formal address to ‘Plutón’ is expanded with the classical allusions contained in ‘regidor de las tres furias, Tesífone, Megera, y Aleto, administrador de todas las cosas negras del regno de Stigie y Dite, con todas sus lagunas y sombras infernales y litigioso caos, mantenedor de las bolantes harpías, con toda la otra compañía de espantables y pavorosas ydras’ (Severin 1988: 147). Similarly, Melibea’s suicide speech in *aucto* xx contains a long addition citing additional instances of the cruelty of children towards parents (Severin 1988: 331–32).

steeped in courtly literature that she cannot conceive of marriage with Calisto being a happy ending' (2007: 551).

It is, as I have surmised above, tempting to say that the additions made after 1500 exemplify ways in which the *Tragicomedia* is more firmly situated in the modern world than its predecessor of 1499. Quite apart from the inherent absurdity of giving such weight to an arbitrary date as dividing the medieval and the modern worlds, what one is pointing to is probably simply the commonplace that the entire evolution of this subtle and fascinating work bears witness to its author's capacity to take a literary world based firmly in the past and to carry it forward in ways which, as he himself remarked in his 1502 'Prólogo', have given rise to all manner of diverse interpretations and judgements.⁸

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8 'Assí que, quando diez personas se juntaren a oír esta comedia, [...] ¿quien negará que aya contienda en cosa que de tantas maneras se entienda?' (Severin 1988: 80–81).

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