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978-0-521-12283-2 - Tragicomedy and Novelistic Discourse in *Celestina*

Dorothy Sherman Severin

Excerpt

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I

Introduction: *Celestina* and novelistic
discourse

The characters of *Celestina* essentially occupy inner space, rather than living outdoors in linear space.¹ The scenes of *Celestina* take place in people's houses and gardens and not on the open road, in contrast with the chivalric romance, or the later picaresque genre, or *Don Quixote*, where interiors exist but are not the rule. This may be explained by *Celestina*'s genesis in the humanistic comedy and the sentimental romance. Arnalte's 'triste morada' [sad dwelling] in the *Tratado de amores de Arnalte y Lucenda*, or Leriano's jail of love in *Cárcel de Amor*, prefigure *Celestina*, although the later book's houses are only incidentally allegorical or symbolic. *Celestina* shows in its use of inner space a curious parallel with the nineteenth-century novel which occurs indoors, though we might equally cite the initial requirements of stagecraft (the humanistic comedy which influences the author of Act 1) as predisposing the book to interiors. *Celestina*'s brothel and laboratory, Pleberio's mansion and Melibea's garden, Calisto's house and stable, are the background against which the voices of *Celestina* meet and speak. The anti-heroic *Celestina* herself is seen sallying forth on the open road, occasionally with her picaresque Sancho, Sempronio, but she leaves her own house to proceed to Melibea's and then back again, or to Calisto's to report her success. Pármemo and Calisto also travel to and from their assignations with

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their respective women, but the boudoir or garden is their goal.

As I shall show in this monograph, the voices of *Celestina* are parodic, satiric, ironic, and occasionally tragic, and it is in their discourse, which Bakhtin calls, rather obscurely, double-voiced and internally dialogized discourse, that the dialogic world of the modern novel is created:²

The fundamental condition, that which makes a novel a novel, that which is responsible for its stylistic uniqueness, is the speaking person and his discourse. (332)

Examples of this would be comic, ironic or parodic discourse, the refracting discourse of a narrator, refracting discourse in the language of a character, and finally the discourse of a whole incorporated genre. (324)

Looking briefly at our *dramatis personae*, we will see that Calisto parodies the courtly lover, Melibea lives through classical example and popular song, Sempronio and Pármeno parody students' lore and knowledge,³ *Celestina* deals a blow to the world of aphorism and wisdom literature, and even Pleberio gives his own gloss on the lament. We also have a fatal clash of two literary worlds, that of the self-styled courtly lover (the fool) and the prototype picaresque world of the Spanish Bawd and her minions (the rogues).

Celestina is a generic hybrid: neither humanistic comedy nor sentimental romance, it creates its own new dialogic and novelistic genre which prefigures the world of both *Lazarillo* and *Don Quixote*. The narrator, omniscient or otherwise, is not, it is true, present in *Celestina*; but the narrator is not an essential ingredient of the novel. For Bakhtin, it is dialogue which defines the genre: 'Thus even where . . . there is no narrator, no posited author or narrating character, speech diversity and language stratification still serve as the basis for style in the novel' (315).

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Bakhtin's distinction between what he calls 'First Stylistic Line' and 'Second Stylistic Line' novels can also be helpful to us here: for our purposes the chivalric romances represent the First Line, while *Lazarillo* and *Don Quixote* represent the Second Line.

Novels of the Second Stylistic Line, transform this already organized and ennobled everyday and literary language [from First Line Novels] into essential material for its own orchestration, and into people for whom this language is appropriate, that is, into 'literary' people with their literary way of thinking and their literary ways of doing things – that is, such a novel transforms them into authentic characters. (383)

Furthermore we have the testing-of-the-hero device which Bakhtin claims is characteristic of the early novel in particular:

Already in *Don Quixote* we have a literary, novelistic discourse being tested by life, by reality. And in its further developments, the novel of the Second Line remains in large measure a novel that tests literary discourse [and] concentrates the critique and trial of literary discourse around the hero – a 'literary man' who looks at life through the eyes of literature and who tries to live according to literature. (412)

Although *Celestina* is not centred on a single hero or anti-hero but several, a full century before *Don Quixote* we have in *Celestina* characters who try to live life through literature; for one, courtly literature, for another, classical literature and ballads, for a third, aphoristic literature. What we lack is the playful persona of the narrator pretending not to be the narrator, who enters the novelistic world as an intermediary between the alleged author, Cide Hamete, and the reader: the non-omniscient narrator, living from instalment to instalment. Instead we have the absent narrator, Rojas, who hides in a letter and a prologue, then behind Petrarch, then behind the voices of his characters, and finally behind across-

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tics. The voices of *Celestina* are human beings in metamorphosis, as Lazarillo will be nearly half a century later. Even the cardboard Calisto finally emerges as the hero of imagination.⁴ The transformations of Melibea and Pármeno (our pseudo-Aristotelian scholar), have been studied by Gilman in his seminal masterpiece, *The Art of 'La Celestina'*. Although *Celestina* develops least of the characters, since she is already at the end of the road of her life, her memories hint at a lifetime of metamorphosis and mutability, as I tried to show in *Memory in 'La Celestina'*. The prostitutes (who seem to have been admirers of the Archpriest of Talavera's female creations) change so dramatically that María Rosa Lida de Malkiel claimed that they swap characters between the *Comedia* and the *Tragicomedia*.⁵ And Pleberio's sheltered edifice against Fortuna's vicissitudes (and undoubtedly he was trying to live through Boethius and Petrarch) lies in ruins at the end of the work.

Jerry Rank, in a recent article,⁶ has written of narrativity in *Celestina*, relating it to ideas proposed by Genette and Barthes, and developing the notion of narrativity in memory which I first proposed in *Memory in 'La Celestina'*:

In conclusion, I do not claim that *La Celestina* represents a developed novelistic narrative style, but that there does seem to be a process peculiar to later narrative forms embedded in its text, which sporadically surfaces. It is . . . triggered by preoccupation with a past which infringes on the dialogic present of the work and stretches the frame to include it. It is a process which blends the present with the past and establishes a personal narrative by complexity and depth. (245)

Finally, I would also like to invoke the aid of Alastair Fowler and his landmark contribution to generic theory, *Kinds of Literature: an Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*.⁷ He points out, not only that 'when we try to decide the genres of a work, then, our aim is to discover its meaning'

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(38), but even more essentially that ‘Every literary work changes the genres it relates to . . . Consequently all genres are continuously undergoing metamorphosis. This, indeed, is the principal way in which literature itself changes’ (23).

In this monograph I will try to demonstrate that *Celestina*, despite the absence of a third-person narrator, is the first work in world literature which can qualify for the title ‘novel’ rather than ‘romance’. I agree with Edwin Williamson that of the other possible contenders, neither *Orlando Furioso* nor *Tirant lo Blanc* is a novel despite parodic elements: For all their misgivings about the idealized world of chivalry, Ariosto and Martorell are ultimately trapped by genre: the conventions of romance determine the structure of their narratives and shape the experience of their characters. In the *Quixote*, however, the entire world of chivalric romance exists nowhere other than inside the mad hero’s head. (81)⁸

I develop my arguments first through an examination of the author’s own statements in the prologues, the prologue poetry and the epilogue poetry (‘the intentional fallacy’ as it is now called). I then move on to an examination of courtly parody, of the uses of satire, and of the movement in the work from comedy to tragedy. Rojas’ uses of other genres, generic experimentations, and distortions of genre will be paramount in these considerations. By challenging and redefining previous genres, Rojas forges a new generic hybrid which becomes the first modern novel.

This conclusion may seem merely to be a return to the position adopted by Menéndez y Pelayo when he discussed *Celestina* in his *Orígenes de la novela*,⁹ although he insisted on the novel’s dramatic qualities as well and called it a precursor of both novel and drama in Spain. He also studied *Celestina*’s dramatic antecedents, particularly the Italian humanistic comedy in Latin, an approach adopted by María Rosa Lida de Malkiel as well in *La originalidad artística*

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de 'La *Celestina*'.¹⁰ Although I agree with her that whereas the first authors set out to write a humanistic comedy, as Alan Deyermond¹¹ has pointed out, Rojas seems rather to have moved in the direction of the tragic sentimental romance when he took up the pen of his predecessor. But it is not just length or new seriousness of purpose which leads me to my conclusion, but the examination of Rojas' critical attitudes to his sources and his parodic, satiric and ironic treatment of them which leads him to forge a new genre.

One final word about the authorship problem before we move on to a closer reading of the text of *Celestina*. Miguel Marciales in his newly published edition of *Celestina*¹² has made some startling suggestions about the authorship of the work: that the original author must have been Rodrigo Cota, and that the additional *Tragicomedia* acts x, xv, xvii and xviii (the 'Tratado de Centurio') were not written by Rojas but possibly by Sanabria, the author of the 'Auto de Traso' (xviii b), which appears in some late editions of the *Celestina*. I have tried to refute these arguments elsewhere¹³ and shall not rehearse my opinions again here, other than to say that I will still refer to the author of Act I as an anonymous 'primitive' author, and that I still accept Rojas' authorship of the 'Tratado de Centurio', despite agreeing with Marciales that Act xviii in particular is rather inferior to Rojas' usual standards. María Rosa Lida de Malkiel may have been closer to the mark when she postulated some sort of group composition – Rojas with the help of his friends – at least for the 'Tratado de Centurio'.

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The prefatory material: the author's
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Pármeno opens the door to let Sempronio and Celestina into Calisto's house.

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The prefatory material: the author's ambivalent intentions

The comic aspect of *Celestina* has been given short shrift in twentieth-century criticism.¹ Its ironies have been studied, but principally its tragic ironies and not its comic ones.² The relation of the work to its classical and Italian humorous antecedents has also been scrutinized, but mainly from the perspective of literary sources.³ Only parody has been studied from the humorous angle.⁴ Yet Rojas himself tells us that he began his work by finding a funny book. He decided to continue it in the same vein, although his own tragic ending altered the character of the work enough to force him to change the title into a hybrid form so that the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea* became the *Tragicomedia* in its expanded version:

Otros han litigado sobre el nombre, diciendo que no se había de llamar comedia, pues acababa en tristeza, sino que se llamase tragedia. El primer autor quiso darle denominación del principio, que fue placer, y llamóla comedia. Yo viendo estas discordias, entre estos extremos partí agora por medio la porfía, y llaméla tragicomedia.⁵ (43)

[Others have contended about the name, saying that it ought not to be called a comedy, because it ends in sorrow and mourning, but rather termed it a tragedy. The author himself would have it take its denomination from its beginning, which treats of pleasure, and therefore called it a comedy. So that I, seeing these differences,

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between their extremes have parted this quarrel by dividing it in the midst, and call it a tragi-comedy.]

In fact, there is little that is inherently more tragic in the additional acts, which are by their nature primarily comic. Thus Rojas' friends, he tells us, were quibbling about the nature of the original *Comedia*. Some of them called it a tragedy but Rojas disagreed and renamed it a tragicomedy. Nor was he the first author to have this problem of terminology. When Plautus wrote his comic *Amphitryon* about the gods, he admitted that because it concerned the gods it should be called a tragedy, and so he would have to compromise, just as Mercury tells us in the Prologue: 'I shall mix things up: Let it be tragicomedy.'⁶ One might point out that for Rojas 'comedy' implied not only dialogue form but comic content as well. And Plautus had supplied him with a useful tag, tragicomedy, perhaps (as F. Castro Guisasola suggests) via Verardo's *Fernandus Servatus*,⁷ although Plautus' problem was entirely different from Rojas' one. Plautus had a comedy which dealt with serious figures; Rojas had a comic work with a tragic ending.

Besides correcting those readers who wanted to designate the work a tragedy, on numerous occasions in his prefatory material Rojas reiterates the fact that there is a comic and even lewd side to the work, using the 'sugared pill' metaphor so popular in didactic literature of the period. He is careful to point out the humour in the work and to warn the reader not to be totally distracted by it from his more serious purpose. Thus in the letter from the author to a friend which appeared in the original sixteen-act *Comedia*, he praises Act 1 for its humour and its serious purpose alike:

Vi, no sólo ser dulce en su principal historia o ficción toda junta, pero aun de algunas de sus particularidades salían deleitables fontecicas de filosofía, de otros agradables donaires, de otros avisos