

ARGUMENT IN THE *CELESTINA*, AND IN ITS PREDECESSORS

Rhetoric in the *Celestina* belongs primarily to the fictional characters, and only in a vague and global way to the authorial voice. This is the premise on which we will base our discussion of the play in the pages that follow. Starting from this basis we will try to show, trivially perhaps, that the rhetoric we speak of is employed not for decoration, but for argument; this important point in turn should allow us to judge, in one respect at least, what is distinctive about the great drama. Gilman long ago said in his own way that the *Celestina* was full of argument, that argument was one of its basic modes of discourse.¹ The *Art of the Celestina* in fact makes few references to the technical side of rhetoric, and that is quite as it should have been. But the gap is easy to fill. In a sense latter-day rhetoricians who read and savor the *Celestina* know in detail what Gilman speaks of generally: when the characters argue, they argue rhetorically. Take as obvious a figure of speech as the *sententia*, omnipresent in the *Celestina*. It is meant to produce conviction. In the Renaissance the fusion of this figure with the commonplace was complete: both, after all, express generalities. The commonplace was designed for argument. Its function was to allow the speaker to assimilate particular cases to general rules. The *sententiae* in the *Celestina* are thus nothing less than major premises of virtual syllogisms. "Aquel es rico que esta bien con Dios,"² says Celestina, trying to ingratiate herself with Melibea. Those at peace with God are rich, she implies that she is rich, ostensible poverty notwithstanding. The large number of *sententiae* in the *Celestina* is of course remarkable, but it is by no means the only rhetorical pattern to be repeated there frequently. Inductions and *exempla*, accumulations of many sorts, figures drawn from the topics of invention, dozens of others, all conspire to turn talk into persuasion. Calisto addressing Melibea at the very start of the play compares unequals, his bliss at seeing her with the bliss of the saints in heaven (to the advantage of the former). This is the first of a thousand *comparationes*, a figure which Quintilian explicitly assimilates to argument (VIII 4:12).

Let us examine briefly one of the great scenes in the *Celestina*, the

¹ Stephen Gilman, *The Art of the Celestina* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), p. 25.

² *Tragicomedia de Calixto y Melibea*, ed. M. Criado del Val and G.D. Trotter (Madrid, C.S.I.C., 1968), p. 87; page references henceforth to this edition.

passage in which the heroine brings Calisto news of her first interview with Melibea. This is, as we recall, a chaotic exchange made up of two conversations, between the old woman and her client, and between the two servants. The scene is replete with figures. In Celestina's first speech, in which she highlights the risks of her mission, she caps a string of rhetorical questions with a *comparatio*, "Mi vida diera por menos precio que agora daria por este manto raydo y viejo" (p. 112): the figure dramatizes the danger. The allusion to the mantle is also an instance of *emphasis* or *syllogismos*, indirection: she calls attention to its shabby state so Calisto will give her a new one. To Calisto's "o abreuia tu razon, o toma esta espada y matame" she answers, "¡Espada mala mate a tus enemigos y a quien mal te quiere!" (p. 112), and then announces her good news. The line quoted expresses a universal, "swords are meant to kill enemies," and so forms the major of a virtual syllogism; the minor is, of course, "you are fortunate and not your own enemy," and the conclusion, "I should not kill you with your sword." *Emphasis*, be it noted, is plainly Celestina's favorite medium—witness her remarkable and extensive use of the figure in her interviews with Melibea—and in the present scene she once again combines it with *comparatio* in a second allusion to her clothes: "antes me recibira ami con esta saya rota que a otra con seda y brocado" (p. 113). To Pármemo's sour reaction Sempronio answers that she has a right to beg: his proverb-*exemplum* "el abad de donde canta de alli se ianta" (p. 113) expresses a generality, "everyone has a right to earn a living in his own way." Pármemo's answer is yet another *comparatio*: for one simple errand she wants to be paid more than she has earned in fifty years. Even Sempronio's warning, "Calla, hombre desesperado, que te matara Calisto" (p. 112) could pass as a figure, *catalepsis*, a scheme drawn from the topic *consequents*. All of these figures occur in a space of some thirty-five lines. We could continue at pleasure. This density of rhetorical devices in this very passage is above all a paradox. The scene is in no obvious sense oratorical: the rapid exchange would in its nature seem to foreclose the possibility of eloquence and formal argument. The naïve reader, and perhaps many less naïve, would surely identify it as one of the least *rhetorical* of the play, one in which the dialogue seems closest to ordinary conversation. I would cautiously suggest that this invasion of rhetoric and argument into informal dialogue is precisely one of the distinctive triumphs of the *Tragícomedia*. The mixture is in any case not peculiar to this passage: it can be found in many more. Perhaps nothing is more symptomatic of this invasion than the presence of complicated bits of argument in some of the most trivial and peripheral turns of the discourse. In their first interview Melibea is about to dismiss Celestina when the latter makes it clear she has more to say. Melibea urges her to speak: "Di, madre, todas tus necessidades, que si yo las pudiere remediar, de muy buen grado lo hare, por el passado conoscimiento y vezindad, que pone obligacion a los buenos." (p. 89) This again is a hidden syllogism: neighborhood and acquaintance oblige the good, I am a neighbor, and acquaintance, and am

good, therefore I am obliged (to hear you out).

Argument in the *Celestina* is not by any means restricted to passages like the above: it takes patently oratorical forms as well. One such is the long speech, the sustained argument. It will shock no one to hear that there are fulsome speeches in the *Tragicomedia*, or that the large number of these is one of the characteristics of the work. What does need to be stressed is that many of these long pieces argue: Sempronio's parade of *sententiae* on liberality and honor is meant to assure Calisto that the "cient monedas" were well bestowed, and his long string of examples of transience is meant to warn Celestina that Calisto's love may fade, and to inform her that he is looking after his own interests. And so many others. There is a second, less obvious, mode of strictly and manifestly rhetorical discourse in the *Celestina*, the *controversia* or debate. The fictional *controversia* could be defined as a collection of arguments on opposite sides of a question, distributed respectively between two speakers. There are many *controversiae* in the play. Their presence is sometimes obscured by bits of dialogue that interrupt their flow, but their profile is none the less distinctive. Should or should not Calisto be in love? This is, of course, the subject of several pages of dialogue between him and Sempronio. The servant advances authorities and examples to dissuade Calisto, and he for his part, on topics of epideictic, to convince Sempronio of Melibea's excellence. Should Pármeno keep faith with his master? He and Celestina have this one out in an impressive exchange, replete with figures. "Provide for the future," says Celestina on another occasion to a recalcitrant Elicia who will not learn how to repair virgos. She argues from the topic consequents, threatening a wretched old age, and adds an appropriate *sententia*: "la mocedad ociosa acarrea la vejez arrepentida y trabajosa" (p. 149). Elicia answers several lines later with her own set of generalities: "Mientras oy touieremos de comer no pensemos en mañana. Tan bien se muere el que mucho allega como el que pobremente biue, y el doctor como el pastor, y el papa como el sacristan" etc. (p. 149). In Act Two Calisto asks Sempronio to see Celestina home, and even this unimportant decision is the subject of a debate. Sempronio on his way is to press his master's interests: men in love are inarticulate, a general principle, "you are not in love, and therefore will be able to speak effectively." Sempronio answers with an *aporia*: I would and I would not. I should obey, but your desperate state tells me I should stay. A list of the signs of that state follow, proof that he is distraught indeed. "Aliuia la pena llorar la causa," answers Calisto: a *sententia*-commonplace confirms his right to be alone. "Lee mas adelante, buelue la hoja," says Sempronio; "Hallaras que dizen que fiar en lo temporal, y buscar materia de tristeza, que es ygal genero de locura" (p. 64). This second *sententia* of opposite sense is bolstered by an appeal to an authority, a text, "dizen," "lee." The speech continues with an *exemplum*, the pitiful case of the desperate lover Macías.

Rhetoric in everyday life, deliberative oratory, *controversiae*, these are the three modalities of discourse in the *Celestina* we have chosen to discuss.

What does this triad of rhetorical styles tell us about the originality of our great text? How much of the rhetorical disposition of the *Tragicomedia* is inherited and how much is new? The answer is in no way simple. One striking parallel does, however, come to mind. In the *humanistic comedy*, a species and corpus long associated with the *Celestina*, the last two modes especially, deliberative oratory and debate, are absolutely normal. Indeed, few features of these Latin plays show more clearly their solidarity with the *Celestina* than the use they make of rhetoric. Consider the following debate scene in Vallata's *Poliodorus*. The young girl Clymestra feigns indifference towards the hero, but Calimacha, the *Celestina*-like character, urges her to yield to him. She argues from the universal nature of love: "res enim est innata nobis amor, et uetus non noua atque aliena; feras quoque que siluis habitant amoris tangit dulcedo."³ She then accuses the girl of lack of feeling. The young woman in turn justifies this insensibility "ne me delirare uoles ut id rei quod amorem appellas nobis una cum bestiis conueniat credam" etc. She adroitly turns the same universal-love argument against her opponent. A few lines further on she says "Non ille iustus est amor," and Calimacha answers:

Ita tibi videtur, Clymestra, quia amor quid sit non sentis. Ego, que aliquando sensi, testor nichil esse amore nobilius prestabiliusque adulescentie. Unde enim sumptuose uestes, unde ornamenta illa egregia nisi ab amore ipso orta sunt, que res iuuenilia magis exornat corpora? Illas omnes operas artesque sartorum, cerdonum, pellicariorum, aurifabrorum, nonne amor induxit? Quid plura? tu ne rem iniustam dicis quam dii probarunt? amarunt enim dii omnes, tu uero recusabis amare; sane non te putaram euismodi esse que quidem istis uerbis/non mulier sane sed lapis quidem uisa es.³

The speech is in good form. The old woman argues from experience, which is itself a figure, *martyria*, she produces an induction on the excellence of love, and continues with a *comparatio*, "the gods themselves love, but you do not deign to." Nothing here is strange to readers of the *Tragicomedia*, the arguments from generalities, the other figures. The accumulation, "unde enim sumptuose uestes" etc. might seem especially *Celestinesque*.

Everything gets debated in the humanistic comedy. Two characters in the *Cauteraria* argue about the virtues of wine.⁴ On the first page of the *Philogenia* of Ugolino da Pisa the hero's love itself is the issue (pp. 174ff.). The seduction scene in the same work is a splendid verbal set-to: should she or should she not (pp. 183ff.). Vice and its consequences, temperance, the delights of love are subjects of talk in a later act (pp. 206-210). In the *Electoral Comedy* two candidates for an academic vacancy argue with each other about their respective merits (pp. 430ff.). In Vergerio's *Paulus* the wastrel student and his servant argue about whether the former should

³ Johannes de Vallata, *Poliodorus*, ed. J.M. Casas Homs (Madrid, C.S.I.C., 1953), pp. 207-8.

⁴ *Teatro goliardico del umanesimo*, ed. V. Pandolfi and E. Artese (Milan, Lerici, 1965), p. 478; page references henceforth to this text.

abandon his foolish ways and get back to work (pp. 54ff.). Some characters in the dialogue argue points by themselves. The wife in the *Cauteraria* argues that no amount of force can oblige a wife to remain faithful (p. 482). In Piccolomini's *Chrysis* one speaker makes a case for the natural promiscuity of women. In these and in many similar passages much the same arsenal of rhetorical devices is drawn upon as in the *Celestina*. Braco, the aged husband in the *Cauteraria*, uses a fine logic-chopping *climax* in pressing the virtues of wine: "Aiunt enim verum esse... bene bibentem bene dormire, et bene dormientem non peccare, non peccantes autem in divino illo summo sempiternoque domicilio recipi manifestum esse" (p. 478). No character from the *Tragicomedia* could do better. Not a few of the utterances cited above are long and fulsome: some are inductions, strings of *exempla*, accumulations of some sort, others are mixed-media events with a variety of figures. The *Philogenia*, the Latin play most like the *Celestina*, resembles it in great part because of its processions of long speeches. The very first lines of Ugolino's great comedy, which starts a notable *exemplum* and a *comparatio*, brings us close to home:

Vere hoc possum dicere, mi Nicomi, in amore me perditum et miserum atque omnem etatem meam contrivisse, dum amor operam dedit: atque uno verbo expediam. Amavi frustra: dii boni, tanta ne duritia affectum quemquam ut amor non respondeat? Id profecto vitium ingratum virginum tanquam perniciosum legibus Persarum gravissimis merito plecti solent. Et enim apud eos exploratissimum est quem alteri debere non suppuerit, omnibus in rebus boni viri semper officium relinquere. Sed severius et durius, me Hercule, pena affici debent qui sinceri amoris, quam qui pecunie debitores effecti sunt, si nihil verantur debitores naturae agnoscere quot debeant. (p. 174)

This piece of eloquence is not an isolated case. Perhaps nothing tells us better how conventional rhetoric and persuasion in the humanistic comedy were, or became, than some amusing lines in the late *Advocatus*, in which the art of discourse is actually alluded to. In a lurid triangle scene Racilia is attempting to justify her behavior to her husband. The lover remarks, "O quam pŭlchŕe utitur institutione rhetoricae!" The married couple continue arguing and the lover comments further, pointing out the commonplaces in their discourse, nothing less: "Quam similibus locis/Vtuntur hi, velut parati convenerint/Huc ad recriminationem."⁵

The argumentative mode in the *Celestina* is assuredly an inheritance from the humanistic comedy. Considering the character of the genre globally, it is hard to think of another model. Neither Terence nor Plautus will do. The rhetorical argument commentators found in Terence is at best virtual: the *set pieces* we have spoken of are surely not a part of the text itself. The elegiac comedies are certainly off the track; the Senecan model once proposed by Spitzer⁶ is by no means as close as the humanistic. So much for

⁵ *Veterinator' und 'advocatus'*, ed. J. Bolte (Berlin, Max Hermann, 1902), pp. 117-8.

⁶ L. Spitzer, "A New Book on the *Celestina*," *HR*, 25 (1957), 10.

oratory and debate. What about the mixture of the rhetorical and the colloquial? This issue is vague: it is hard to draw boundaries. Ordinarily, when the Latin plays drop high eloquence, they fall into quite informal talk, but the mixture can be found, if rarely. One of the closest parallels I have found is in one of the plays of Frulovisi, a dialogue between a prostitute and her penniless lover which is argumentative, but not quite debate.⁷ Perhaps more generally the novelty of the *Celestina* lies in the penetration of rhetoric there into so many places normally inhospitable to it. Not only do the great issues of the play get argued, but also points that arise very incidentally, whether Elicia should repair virgos, whether Sempronio should see Celestina home. Perhaps the scene we cited, Celestina's return to Calisto's house, in which the ups and downs of the dialogue always seem to slip into argument, is the normal and exemplary text here, an index to the profound invention and independence of the *Tragicomedia's* two authors.

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⁷ *Titii Livii de Frulovisiis de Ferraria opera hactenus inedita*, ed. C.W. Previt -Orton (Cambridge, University Press, 1932), pp. 71-3.