

IS *LA CELESTINA* THE FIRST MODERN NOVEL?

Don Quixote is the first modern novel, according to one of the favourite commonplaces of modern literary criticism. But if one applies the very same critical criteria to *La Celestina* that we use for this judgement of the *Quixote*, we must accord novelistic priority to the earlier work.

We call *Don Quixote* a modern novel primarily because Cervantes shows us that it is impossible to live the life of the world of chivalry, that is to say, the world of the medieval romance, in the world of the realistic novel. But this is precisely what Fernando de Rojas shows with the figure of Calisto in *La Celestina*. Calisto is a parodic courtly lover, as June Hall Martin has shown.¹ He tries to live the life of a courtly lover of sentimental romance in a world of dialogic realism, a world of prostitutes, servants, picaroons and go-betweens. And, like Quixote, Calisto fails in his attempt and finally dies. Obviously, this is a simplification. There is a great difference between the wise fool Quixote and the erotic egotist Calisto. But their cases are substantially the same. Both Rojas and Cervantes destroy the world of the medieval romance by showing that it is impossible to live like an idealized knight-errant or a courtly lover in a realistic world. In this, *Don Quixote* and *La Celestina* contrast with *Tirant lo Blanch*, where this fatal clash between the worlds of fantasy and reality does not exist, although, as Antonio Torres Alcalá has shown in his recent book on *Tirant*, both humor and parody do.²

What one finds most surprising is the relative absence of anachronism in *La Celestina*. While Don Quixote lives the imaginary life of yesteryear, Calisto arrives on the scene only a few years after the success of his model, Leriano of Diego de San Pedro's *Cárcel de Amor*. As E.C. Riley suggested in a recent article on *Don Quixote* and the romance, following Northrup Frye, perhaps the romance did not evolve towards realistic fiction; rather there was a deviation of romance towards realism.³ According to Riley the pure

¹ *Love's Fools: Aucassin, Troilus, Calisto and the parody of the courtly lover* (London: Tamesis, 1972), pp. 71-134.

² *El realismo del 'Tirant lo Blanch' y su influencia en el 'Quijote'* (Barcelona: Puvill, n.d.).

³ 'Cervantes: A question of genre', in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies on Spain and Portugal in Honour of P.E. Russell* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1981), pp. 69-85.

romance may represent the fictional genre in its purest state, while the modern novel could be seen as a realistic corrective. Between 1500 and 1900 fantasy in prose suffers a systematic devaluation at the hands of literary criticism, the realistic novel dominates the romance in critical opinion, although the romance never disappears. In the twentieth century we are witnessing the resurgence and critical reevaluation of the romance.

As Alan Deyermond has shown,⁴ the young Fernando de Rojas discovers an incomplete humanistic comedy with a courtly lover who has comic and parodic potential and decides to complete this humanistic comedy not as a comedy but as parodic sentimental romance in dialogue, which is at the same time both tragic and comic. As an example of this parody of courtly love we have Act VI, where Calisto bores his servants and Celestina with his rhetorical flights of fancy over Melibea's girdle, until Sempronio snaps, 'Señor, por holgar con el cordón, no querrás gozar de Melibea' (115).⁵ His talents as poet and troubadour are also mocked when Calisto sings a *cancionero* stanza by Diego de Quiñones in Act VIII:

En gran peligro me veo
en mi muerte no hay tardanza

and Sempronio exclaims '¡Oh hideputa, el trovador! El gran Antipater Sidonio, el gran poeta Ovidio, los cuales de improviso se les venían las razones metrificadas a la boca. ¡Sí, sí, de esos es!' (139). The stanza is neither original nor improvised in the orphic mode, and furthermore is a foreshadowing of the death of Calisto.

Rojas develops the potential picaresque world which he discovers in the first Act. Sempronio has his Elicia, and Pármeno will have his Areúsa. The servants are a grotesque realistic mirror held up to the love affair of Calisto and Melibea, a love which uses the highflown rhetoric of the sentimental romance to conceal a sexuality as realistic as any. As Alan Deyermond has shown,⁶ the love of Pármeno and Areúsa is a parody of the love of Calisto and Melibea; after their first night of love, Act VIII begins with a parodic alba, with the farewell of the lovers at dawn:

Párm: ¿Amanece o qué es esto, que tanta claridad está en esta cámara?

Areú: ¿Qué amanecer? Duerme, señor, que aun agora nos acostamos. No he yo pegado bien los ojos ¿ya había de ser de día?

This is reflected in Act XIV when there is another idealized alba between Calisto and Melibea:

⁴ *A literary History of Spain: The Middle Ages* (London, N.Y.: Benn; Barnes & Noble, 1971), pp. 169-70.

⁵ The quotations are from my edition (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1969, 1971, etc.).

⁶ 'Lyric Traditions in Non-Lyrical Genres', in *Studies in Honor of Lloyd A. Kasten* (Madison, Wisc., 1975), pp. 39-52.

Cal: Ya quiere amanecer. ¿Qué es esto? No me parece que ha una hora que estamos aquí, y da el reloj las tres (192).

The incongruity between words and deed in Calisto and Melibea's love affair is at times frankly comic, for example when Melibea says:

Holguemos y burlemos de otros mil modos que yo te mostrare; no me destroces ni maltrates como sueles. ¿Qué provecho te trae dañar mis vestiduras?

and Calisto replies:

Señora, el que quiere comer el ave, quita primero las plumas (222-23).

Rather than a courtly lover, Calisto here strikes us as being a rapist.

Melibea, like Calisto, also models herself on previous literature, but Melibea sees herself as a heroine of a moorish ballad or the popular lyric of the unhappily married beauty, the 'bella malmaridada', when she says: 'Si pasar quisiere la mar, con él iré, si rodear el mundo, lléveme consigo, si venderme en tierra de enemigos, no rehuiré su querer... que más vale ser buena amiga que mala casada' (206). Melibea seems to be thinking of the well-known 'La bella malmaridada/de las más lindas que vi,/si habéis de tomar amores,/vida, no dejéis a mí'. Margit Frenk says of this song, 'su fama misma era proverbial' (*Estudios sobre lírica antigua*, pp. 167-68).⁷ Perhaps Melibea also knew the *endecha* 'Señor Gómez Arias', whose second stanza reads: 'Señor Gómez Arias/vos me trajistes/y en tierra de moros/vos me vendistes'. Besides this verbal coincidence, *La Celestina* contains another echo of this *endecha*:

Si mi triste madre
tal cosa supiese,
con sus mismas manos
la muerte se diese.

After losing her virginity in Act XIV, Melibea exclaims 'Oh pecadora de ti, mi madre, si del tal cosa fueses sabidora, como tomaría de grado tu muerte y me la darías a mí por fuerza' (p. 192).

In Act XVI Melibea rebels against her parents and contrasts herself with women of the Bible and of classical antiquity, citing monsters of nature and incest like Canace, Myrrha, Semiramis, Tamar. On the verge of suicide she again contrasts herself with genocides like Prusias, Ptolomy, Orestes, Nero, Medea. Why did Rojas, in these *Tragicomedia* additions and interpolations, have Melibea compare herself, even negatively, to such monsters?

⁷ The texts are in her *Lírica española de tipo popular* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1977): 'La bella malmaridada', No. 293, p. 148; 'Señor Gómez Arias', No. 324, p. 158. The commentary is in *Estudios sobre lírica antigua* (Madrid: Castalia, 1978), pp. 167-68. For the ballad 'La bella malmaridada', see Colin Smith, *Spanish Ballads* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1964), pp. 199-206.

Calisto makes the more expected comparison (VI, 117): 'Si hoy fuera viva Elena, por quien tanta muerte hobo de griegos y troyanos o la hermosa Pulicena, todas obedecerían a esta señora por quien yo peno', but even this comparison with Helen of the romance of Troy makes reference to genocide. Melibea, a young girl who sees herself as an exotic rebel from the ballads, in effect is a monster of nature who will contribute to death of her lover, and perhaps to that of her mother, and who will commit suicide. Her attitude of literary heroine does not fit into the world of dialogic realism of *La Celestina*; rather than being a rebel, she becomes a killer. 'Yo cubrí de luto y jergas en este día casi la mayor parte de la ciudadana caballería' (229) she says, and she is right. The lady of court poetry whose looks kill becomes a real basilisk. Pármeneo compares her to the siren, and further adds 'soy cierto que esta doncella ha de ser para él cebo de anzuelo o carne de buitrera' (170).

The death which Melibea inflicts is not the death of the sentimental romance, not the death of a Leriano who allows himself to pine away from unrequited love of Laureola. It is a more realistic and brutal death of the material world which Rojas creates around his lovers, who have their heads turned by the reading of sentimental romances. This is why Pleberio's condemnation at the end of *La Celestina* is principally directed not against death but against love, which becomes the equivalent of death: 'Dios te llamaron otros, no sé con qué error de su sentido traídos. Cata que Dios mata los que crió; tú matas los que te siguen. Enemigo do toda razón, a los que menos te sirven das mayores dones, hasta tenerlos metidos en tu congojosa danza' (325). Metaphorical death from love has become real death. The God Love leads the Dance of Death. The collision between the real life and the fantasy world of the so-called courtly lover Calisto and his lady, although initially comic, leads to the final tragedy of Calisto and Melibea.

To conclude, when he discovers the first act of *La Celestina*, an incomplete humanistic comedy, Rojas transforms it into a tragi-comic parody of the sentimental romance, much as Cervantes will write an anti-romance of chivalry a century later. In fact, despite its dialogue form, *La Celestina* is a modern novel which destroys the antecedent which it parodies. After *La Celestina*, sentimental romances will soon be abandoned. *La Celestina* opens the way for the picaresque genre. As María Rosa Lida de Malkiel has shown in her discarded chapter of *La originalidad artística de 'La Celestina'*, 'El ambiente concreto en *La Celestina*', and I also have tried to show in a book on memory in *La Celestina*,⁸ despite its lack of third-person narration, a whole exterior and interior world of realism is revealed in its dialogue form. The new element introduced by the *Quixote* is not so much

⁸ The Lida de Malkiel article is in *Estudios dedicados a James Homer Herroitt* (Madison, Wisc., 1966), pp. 145-64. Also see my *Memory in 'La Celestina'* (London: Tamesis, 1970).

the third-person narration, but, as Stephen Gilman points out in his book on Galdós, "the fictionality of fiction pretending to be nonfiction",⁹ that is to say, Cide Hamete Benengeli and the interplay of appearance and reality, between invented history and true history.

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BESTIARY IMAGERY IN *LA CELESTINA*

A thorough study of the presence of the bestiary in *La Celestina* would be a short study, little longer than this one. There are few bestiary images in Fernando de Rojas's work. An attempt to disguise this finding and to flesh out an inquiry with more general consideration of the bestiary in Spain might soon try a reader's patience, for the writer would have to acknowledge that there is no extant Medieval bestiary of Castilian provenance and no positive evidence that a vigorous Castilian textual tradition ever existed.¹ Secondary applications of bestiary lore—that is, materials derived somehow from European bestiary tradition and put to work in other kinds of literature and art—are found in Spain before and after Rojas's time. The functions of these and their modes of transmission deserve study, but there is no wealth of literary materials of these derivative sorts, and those revealed to date are not so arresting as to have drawn much scholarly attention.²

A problem modest in scope is not perforce insignificant or unrewarding. In the present instance a question that seems unpromising at the outset unfolds before the eyes of the curious reader to offer new, corroborative evidence concerning a great creator's habit of mind, that is, Fernando de Rojas's habit of reformulating in unconventional ways every conventional fund of language that finds its way into the dialogue of his creatures. The renovating and innovative genius of an author can be gauged partly by how much it comprehends. In these pages I shall show that Rojas's genius comprehended the possibilities represented in even so tenuous a stock of images as the emaciated menagerie of the Castilian bestiary.

Were we to take bestiary images in *La Celestina* to mean all references in the work to beasts, real and fanciful, that figure in European bestiaries, I would have several score images to discuss but nothing to say, in most instances, about their bestiary conventionality. Resisting the temptations of uncritical accretion and amplification (which are attested abundantly in

¹ Recently published (Exeter: Univ. of Exeter, 1982) is Spurgeon W. Baldwin's edition of the bestiary section of the Castilian translation of Brunetto Latini's *Li livres dou tresor*, titled *The Medieval Castilian Bestiary from Latini's "Tesoro"*. My thanks to Alan Deymanow for this information and his generous assistance.

⁹ *Galdós and the Art of the European Novel, 1867-1887* (Princeton, N.J.: University Press, 1981), pp. 185 ff.