

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 *Livres dou tresor*, titled *The Medieval Castilian Bestiary from Latini's "Tesoro."* My thanks to Alan Deyermond for this information and his generous assistance.

<sup>2</sup> This claim will be withdrawn when Nestor Lugones' 1976 dissertation and Alan Deyermond's long-awaited survey of the fabulous zoo reach print.

the bestiaries themselves and not infrequently in modern studies of them), I will understand bestiary images here to be only those animal references derived somehow from the tradition of *Physiologus* and the *bestiarii* compiled (in whatever tongue) from the late twelfth through the fourteenth centuries and that demonstrate their relation to these models by maintaining traces of their sources' moralizing character and allegorizing techniques.<sup>3</sup> So defined, only a handful of such images are to be found in *La Celestina*, and the precise derivations of several of these are uncertain.<sup>4</sup> We will attend not to the origins of these images but to their ways of functioning for *La Celestina*'s creatures and for their creator.

The functions of bestiary references, like those of proverbs, are primarily hortatory and cautionary. The authority these images possess by virtue of their acceptance by the community is applied to moments of experience that stand in need of unequivocal interpretation. We can understand their way of working by viewing them as the goals and rewards of diminute quests for authority that carry their speakers out of their moment, where truth may be obscure or disputed, in search of the substantial support of accepted verities. The proverb seeks its persuasive evidence close by, between the speaker and the horizon of his every-day world. The bestiary preserve is vertically removed from the gross quotidian reality of experience and folklore. Their greater apparent refinement gives bestiary images a charge more conceptual and less emotional than the proverb's, and also an authority hard to counter, for not only are they traditional (that is, accepted by all, for ever), they are not subject to doubt or verification. One might try to teach an old dog new tricks, but how does one disprove the treachery of sirens, or question the beguiling effects that the sight of a virgin is said to have on the shy unicorn?

Given this ascensional, purifying thrust, conceptual clarity, and authority, bestiary images are naturals for inclusion among *Celestina*'s professional tools. And it is appropriate that the most extended example of this type of imagery in Rojas's work should occur in Act IV, the first meeting of procuress and maiden Melibea, in the extremely delicate moments immediately preceding the bawd's revelation of the true intent of

<sup>3</sup> Especially valuable guides to the tradition and its conventions are: Michael J. Curley, trans., *Physiologus* (Austin: Univ. of Texas, 1979); three books by Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World* (Kent, Ohio, 1971), *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1973), *Birds with Human Souls; A Guide to Bird Symbolism* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1978); T.H. White, trans., *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* (New York: Putnam's, 1954); Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, rev. ed., 1962).

<sup>4</sup> The Prologue mentions of the *vajarisco*, the *víbora*, and the Echeneis, and the Act VI reference to the bee derive from that most decisive influence on Rojas, the 1498 Basil edition of Petrarch's Latin works; see Alan D. Deyermond, *The Petrarchan Sources of "La Celestina"* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961, reprinted Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), especially pp. 41, 54-57. Quotations below from *La Celestina* are drawn from Dorothy Sherman Severin's edition (Madrid: Alianza, 1969 and later).

her mission. Celestina must turn Melibea's attention from her social role as high-born lady and dull her sense of the social proprieties that properly constrain her. This she attempts in a protracted preamble to the naming of Calisto, first by arousing the girl's fear of old age, death, and the transitoriness of youth and beauty, then by praising Melibea's physical excellences, which can only be visible proofs of comparable inherent virtues. Among these latter are certainly *misericordia* and *compasión*, to which Celestina directs this argument for charity:

...Sea cierto que no se puede decir nacido el que para sí solo nació. Porque sería semejante a los brutos animales, en los cuales aun hay algunos piadosos, como se dice del *unicornio*, que se humilla a cualquier doncella. El *perro* con todo su ímpetu y braveza, cuando viene a morder, si se echan en el suelo, no hace mal; esto de piedad. ¿Pues las aves? Ninguna cosa el *gallo* come, que no participe y llame las gallinas a comer dello. El *pelicano* rompe el pecho por dar a sus hijos a comer de sus entrañas. Las *cigüeñas* mantienen otro tanto tiempo a sus padres viejos en el nido, cuanto ellos les dieron cebo siendo pollitos. Pues tal conocimiento dio la natura a los animales y aves, ¿por qué los hombres habemos de ser más crueles? (IV, 94-5).

The unicorn, dog, cock, pelican, and stork singled out here exhibit that partial and selective humanization characteristic of bestiary creatures. In truth the speaker takes liberties with the inherited lore, attributing to the dog conduct that is conventionally the lion's and to the cock a generosity not attested in the bestiaries I have seen. A bit of deceit matters not at all to Celestina; what does matter here is that Melibea take note that the actions attributed to all five creatures represent kinds of natural virtue that humans should strive to imitate. Must not we take care to demonstrate regularly in our conduct the moral excellences we are told operate customarily and exemplarily in creatures inferior to us in the great scheme of things? Virtues and their animal symbols are in this way identified, and the latter, elevated by the purity of the former, draw the listener's attention away from the noisy and messy realities of our flat world to the more pacific spheres of abstract virtue. Through the brazen manipulation of commonplaces Celestina has led Melibea to associate consciousness of her fleeting youth and her physical attractiveness with a moral, and natural, imperative to act generously. The rationale behind Celestina's inclusion of bestiary mentions is evident. Melibea is encouraged by them to turn in on herself, to regard her perfections and to associate them, as in the animal images, with potential for compassionate action. Any concrete proposition following from such an argument will necessarily be dignified by it and, in the case of a base proposal, will be elevated by association with analogies that are natural and moral, and at least apparently conventional.

This use of bestiary references is of course a perverse parody of the preacher's use of such material to urge Christian conduct. A few other references just as twisted follow this one, as do instances of a second type of recasting of bestiary lore that does even more violence to tradition. As

elevated treatment can raise base considerations, so can the gross debase the pure. Typical of Rojas's artistry is his utilization of both of these possibilities, the subjection of bestiary commonplaces to cynical simulation on one hand and to direct debasement on the other.

Fortunately for the sake of my exposition, there are in *La Celestina* two instances of repeated mention of a common bestiary creature maltreated by both of these deforming and renovating techniques. The first features a favored subject of the bestiarist, the bee, to which Celestina, exhilarated by the success of her visit to Melibea and eager to impress Calisto with her efficiency, compares herself:

La mayor gloria que al secreto oficio de la abeja se da, a la cual los discretos deben imitar, es que todas las cosas por ella tocadas convierte en mejor de lo que son. Desta manera me he habido con las zahareñas razones y esquivas de Melibea. Todo su rigor traigo convertido en miel, su ira en mansedumbre... (VI, 108)

What is bestiary-like here is not the specific power Celestina claims for the bee, but her claim that the bee's natural activity is both somehow glorious and a model for the prudent to imitate. The image is directed to Calisto, but the reader and at least one character present in the scene find it incongruous. Is it suitable for Celestina to be the tenor to which such a dutiful and sociable and cooperative vehicle is linked? No, according to Pármeno, who takes up the image in an aside a few moments later. He reshapes the material to stress its aggressive and hostile aspect, the poisonous sting that appeals to the moral satirist more than to the compassionate bestiarist: "¡Así, así! A la vieja todo, porque venga cargada de mentiras como abeja..." (VI, 113).<sup>5</sup>

Sirens, eternal symbols of irresistible allurements, are similarly focussed from two opposed perspectives.<sup>6</sup> Celestina is again the first to invoke them, when in an assault on Areúsa's defensive modesty she orders: "...Acuéstate, métete debajo de la ropa, que pareces serena" (VII, 126). The reference is in this case first of all a device for flattery; characters and readers alike accept it as an elevating visual image and an allusion to Areúsa's attractive charms. But the author's caustic irony is at work even in this passing compliment, for subsequent action proves the image more deeply allusive. Under Celestina's supervision the girl plays out the siren's role, luring Pármeno into her

<sup>5</sup> Pármeno's barb is reminiscent of Reason's attack on Sensuality in a poem by Fray Iñigo de Mendoza included in Julio Rodríguez-Puértolas' edition of Fray Iñigo's *Cancionero*, Clásicos Castellanos, 163 (Madrid, 1968), at p. 269. See too María Rosa Lida de Malkiel's "La abeja: historia de un motivo poético," *RPh*, 17 (1963), 75-86.

<sup>6</sup> "The SIRENAE...are deadly creatures who are made like human beings from the head to the navel, while their lower parts...are winged. They give forth musical songs in a melodious manner, which songs are very lovely, and thus they charm...sailors and allure them to themselves. They entice [them]...by a wonderful sweetness of rhythm, and put them to sleep. At last, when they see that the sailors are deeply slumbering, they pounce upon them and tear them to bits" (White, pp. 134-5). According to Rowland (*Animals*, pp. 139-41) "medieval theologians thought [the sirens] 'stout whores,' serving as deterrent examples of sexual enticement."

embrace and the bawd's control, ensuring his eventual destruction.

The treachery of the siren, hidden below the surface intention in this instance, is made explicit in a later image. There it is Pármemo, regretting his involvement in the conspiracy against the highborn lovers, who worries:

...El *canto* de la *serena* engaña los simples marineros con su *dulzor*. Así ésta [Melibea] con su mansedumbre y concesión presta querrá tomar una manada de nosotros a su salvo.... (XI, 166)

Again there is deeper truth to the words than the speaker, in his fright, can intend or know. The splendid verses that grace the lovers, last meeting, in Act XIX, prove to all her audience that Melibea (who is in a limited sense responsible for the series of deaths) indeed also has the sweet voice of a siren and sings alluringly: "Vencido me tiene el *dulzor* de tu suave *canto*," says Calisto (XIX, 221) as he moves towards his last embrace.

A minor conflict, illustrative of the ordinary abrasive texture of social relations in Rojas's imagined world, provides a last, droll example of the devaluation bestiary images suffer there. Sempronio, irked when his fellow servant distracts him from Celestina's titillating account of her meeting with Melibea, curses Pármemo using a rancorous figure derived from the bestiarists' description of the asp: "¡Oh maldiciente venenoso! ¡Por qué cierras las orejas a lo que todos los del mundo las aguzan, hecho serpiente que huye la voz del encantador?" (VI, 110). The allegory is skewed away grotesquely from the edifying gloss we would find in the source-books: the sinner's deafness to the pleas of the Lord, that he set aside material goods and become His servant, is in this recontextualization a deceitful lackey's refusal to hear out an old whore's lying account of her pandering to his master's ideal love object.<sup>7</sup> Celestina, in this distortion, displaces Christ, and her words inherit His authority.

Bestiary images in *La Celestina*, we see from these transformations, do not maintain that purity and elevation that is traditionally theirs. When they are consciously controlled and subordinated as means towards ends—when they flatter or enhance—they appear to show the expected ascensional movement; but the circumstances of their use are earthy and the intentions of their evokers, perverse. When calculated speech is put aside and bestiary creatures enter into more self-revealing and spontaneous expression, they are further depressed and devalued. The conceptual clarity and moral point of the traditional nuclei are crowded by negative, base sentiments: hostility, fear, cowardice, suspicion. This depression is not surprising. We take for granted that in life and literature humans reveal themselves in their spontaneous speech. Our customary expectations are then satisfied in *La Celes-*

<sup>7</sup> For a typical description of the asp and edifying gloss, see White, pp. 173-4.

*tina* when we observe the consistency with which both the unguarded language and the spontaneous actions of Celestina and her cronies express their same essential selfishness, greed, and aggressive hostility.

Celestina's argument in the Act IV passage examined above is specious. Her use of pelican, unicorn, and the rest is an instance of exceedingly cynical redirection. Certainly she does not believe these creatures are exceptional and exemplary teachers of a metaphysical imperative. Rather she knows them to be practically persuasive for inducing recalcitrant maidens to participate in the physical rhythms of our lower nature. It is not the bawd's apparent intention to insist on the animality of man, but the point is made. It is immediately useful to Celestina in plying her trade; and it is richly corroborated by the evidence of what these creatures do and say to each other. In their self-interest all of them confirm their brute animality. They belong naturally to the comprehensive class of unreasoning *brutos animales* Celestina herself defined in that same quotation from Act IV.

The human beings we come to know in the course of *La Celestina* show what nowadays might be called a "lower level of awareness" than the bestiary convention requires. True to the first assumption of the bestiarist, Pármeno and the others are indeed attracted by these animal forms in speech. But they do not entertain at all seriously the bestiarist's allied assumptions. Rather than allow their attention to be further deflected up and away from the here and now, they wrest the purified forms down from their heights. Whatever imaginative authority remains adhered to the images on their descent is redirected to achieve persuasive and self-expressive effects radically inconsistent with the convention. The bestiary creatures, this is to say, are drawn back rudely into nature, the fallen world, and history.

Beyond the text, in that Prologue buffer zone where the imagined world and the world of the author and his readers meet (and where Rojas might have spoken forthrightly to his public, but chose not to), lie three additional images that have some claim to our attention here. They are Petrarchan, directly or indirectly (see my note 4), and so only remotely bestiary; but they preserve typical bestiary attributes and they function as parts of an apparently conventional argument set firmly on highest Authority. That argument, attributed to Heraclitus and buttressed by Petrarch, holds that all is created out of conflict, and it seeks proof in the evidence of the warring elements, among the contentious creatures that inhabit those elements, in the generality of man's disputatious ways, and finally in the treatment of Rojas's own text, abused by readers and printers.<sup>8</sup> A "pequeño pece llamado Echeneis" (p. 42), a sometime bestiary dweller with a propensity for arresting the progress of ships, exemplifies watery dissension; the stated authorities for this claim are Aristotle, Pliny, and Lucan.

<sup>8</sup> I study some parts of this argument in an article forthcoming in *BHS*.

More significant are the two flame-inhabiting serpents, the *vajarisco* and the *víbora*, both of which Rojas evaluates in terms that are, we would say, socio-political. His terms raise the possibility that both are prudently-disguised social analogies, easily overlooked by us who are far-removed from Rojas's generation, from their significant punning on *generación* and *nación*, and their experience of the association of kings with conquest, with fire, with such destructive power of word and deed that frightened subjects fled to exile and whole communities were scattered. The basilisk, primate among serpents and called *Regulus* in Latin, was created "tan ponzoñoso y conquistador de todas las otras [serpientes, i.e., of its own "kingdom"], que con su silbo las asombra y con su venida las ahuyenta y desparce, con su vista las mata" (p. 41).<sup>9</sup> (Is this kind of analogizing of beast lore and current events really done in Rojas's day? Clearly it is: Isaac Abramavel wrote of King Ferdinand that "like a deaf viper he stopped up his ears and would not change his mind.")<sup>10</sup>

The prologue viper image's intricate relation to the action of *La Celestina* has been analyzed very ably by Alan Deyermond.<sup>11</sup> The other dimension of the image (which like so many in Rojas's prefatory materials is double-directed both into the fictional world and towards the reader) is similar to that of the basilisk, which it follows immediately. The information Rojas passes on to us is entirely commonplace but also, in its exotic fusion of sexual pleasure and family murder, enduringly fascinating: during intercourse the female viper bites off the male's head, she is simultaneously impregnated, the new generation breaks forth out of the mother's side before its time, killing her and avenging the father. It is Rojas's rhetorical reaction to his example that signals his analogizing to the human realm and, I believe, more specifically to Spain: "¿Qué mayor *lid*, qué mayor *conquista* ni *guerra* que engendrar en su cuerpo quien coma sus entrañas?" (p. 41). What more than this needed to be said to readers of Rojas's generation to remind them of the terrible perfection with which this cycle of self-destructive violence mirrored the intestine warfare (*guerra intestina; bellum intestinum* in the Latin formulation Rojas must have encountered in his Salamanca readings) that for more than a century, since 1391 or so, had rent the body politic of their own realm?<sup>12</sup>

The relative infrequency of bestiary images and the distorted appear-

<sup>9</sup> The potential of the basilisk for social allusion was seized upon and exploited energetically by Mateo Alemán; see in Francisco Rico's edition of *Guzmán de Alfarache*, included in *La novela picaresca española*, I (Barcelona: Planeta, 1967), pp. 89, 91, 234, and 734.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by John E. Longhurst, *The Age of Torquemada* (Lawrence, Kan.: Coronado Press, 1964), p. 129.

<sup>11</sup> "Symbolic Equivalence in *La Celestina*: A Postscript," *Celestinesca*, 2, No. 1 (1978), 25-30.

<sup>12</sup> In dismayingly analogous circumstances more than a century later a close reader of Rojas, by the name of Cervantes, twice appropriates the viper image (appropriately ironized) to speak of the expulsion of the moriscos. See *Don Quixote*, Part II, Ch. 54, and *El casamiento engañoso y el coloquio de los perros*, in *Novelas ejemplares*, II, ed. Francisco Rodríguez Marín, Clásicos Castellanos, 36 (Madrid, 1957), p. 319.

ance of those that do surface in *La Celestina* are related consequences of an incongruity between the normal, conventional functions of such images and the vital interests of the speakers who employ them in Rojas's work. The upward movement from immediate accidentals to timeless and settled forms that is characteristic of the traditional uses of this material is an invitation to meditation, moral, ethical, and esthetic. But the characters in *La Celestina* are not given to reflecting on what lies beyond themselves, their desires, and their experience. Bestiary images are impersonal and eternal; Celestina and her followers live in the present (and its restricted prolongations into personal past and future), and they live for themselves. When they do employ such distracting imagery, the use is at odds with the tradition. Celestina undermines the moral authority of bestiary images, manipulating it for her advantage with cunning and hypocrisy; Sempronio and Pármemo project their own extreme emotions into their images, in effect restoring the base animality that tradition had refined out.

In this deformation and devaluation the distorters—and we must include Rojas the prologuist among them—offer examples of that vigorous and systematic attack on literary conventions that Américo Castro found central in the art of Fernando de Rojas, where “los marcos típicos aparecen con contenidos incongruentes e inesperados....” Perfected and beautiful models of all sorts “son despojados en el artístico taller de Rojas de su lejana e inalterable realidad....” Bringing down lofty exemplars, not deliberately but habitually, Rojas's creatures realize their author's undeclared strategy, which is nevertheless certainly deliberate: a very aggressive and symbolic upsetting of ideal literary structures “a fin de que lo de arriba apareciera abajo, y viceversa.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “*La Celestina*” como contienda literaria; (*castas y casticismos*) (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1965), pp. 151, 154, 156. I am happy to acknowledge my great debt, in this study and elsewhere, to my splendid teacher Stephen Gilman, to whom I dedicate this essay.