

# THE SEXUAL LANDSCAPE OF CELESTINA: SOME OBSERVATIONS

---

Joseph T. Snow  
Michigan State University

---

**C**elestina is near-universally acknowledged as a great, compelling work of literature; for many it is a masterpiece in the same league as Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. I endorse these claims. After all, it is a work that—like the *Quijote*—has been much copied and imitated, translated, rendered into verse, theatrical, musical, operatic and balletic adaptations, edited in many guises for distinct groups of readers (sometimes expurgated and sometimes bowdlerized) and, as well, illustrated in practically every popular format since its initial appearance in 1499, a little more now than half a millennium ago: woodcuts, oils, statuary, porcelain, pen and ink, copperplate, lithograph, watercolor, filmstrip, film and video. And I know this to be an incomplete summary of the forms which *Celestina's* survival as a classic have taken.<sup>1</sup>

*Celestina* was almost assuredly not conceived on a grand scale: it emerged from the seething crucible of criss-crossing ideas in the university town of Salamanca in the late 1490s. Its characters negotiate a confined urban space, busy with private affairs of no seeming transcendence. The lapsed time of its actions varies—according to the reading given it—from a mere three days (in the 16-act *Comedia* version) to somewhat longer than the month by which it was extended through later interpolations (re-baptized the *Tragicomedia*). Furthermore, its basic plot line—as narrated in the *Argumento*—is unremarkable. The work's stated didactic intention: "*compuesta en reprehensión de los locos enamorados que, vencidos en su desordenado apetito, a sus amigas llaman y dizen ser su dios . . . [y] de los engaños de las alcahuetas y malos y lisonjeros sirvientes*" (82), does little to prepare us for the extent of the corrupt and aimless world that the *Celestina* text so wittily dissects.

However, despite the presence of humor in the work and the not infrequent characterization of *Celestina* as a "funny book,"<sup>2</sup> the work is widely read as one which propels us headlong toward a fascinating and revealing face-to-face encounter with the dark side of our humanity. The world of *Celestina* and her hedonist band of prostitutes, corrupt servants, clerics and officials, swaggering pimps and ruffians, bibulous boon companions and numberless clients, all seeking her services in one or more of her semi-clandestine "*oficios*"<sup>3</sup> is—when all is seen and revealed by the

work's tragic close—not morally inferior to the behavior of the obviously more noble, opulent and material world of the families, say, of Calisto, Melibea and their kind. Indeed, through the reader's vivid involvement with the intimate lives—the thoughts and actions—of all the principals of *Celestina*, the reader comes away from the experience as much impressed by the senselessness of the actions that lead to the individual deaths that take place as by a sense of awe before the artistic achievement that invites us to witness up-close the smallness of spirit that shuts the door on acts of altruism, loyalty and grace. *Celestina's* characters are so successfully realized, so well-rounded and fully-dimensional that they succeed—in ways profound and permanent—to inscribe themselves upon our own conscious lives. The lessons they inadvertently teach us are, for that reason, immediate and deeply serious.

The overt didacticism readers and critics attribute to the work derives, for the most part—in my view, at least—from the medieval morality convincingly traced in the paratexts that wrap *Celestina's* twenty-one *auctos*, but is little seen in the *auctos* themselves.<sup>4</sup> The preliminary and postliminary paratexts are somber and prescriptive, while the lives that emerge from the *auctos* are guilt-free and conducted as if unaware that anyone is eavesdropping. What quite literally unfolds before the reader's inner eyes and ears, in dialogue and monologue, as often the result of calculation as it is of spontaneously and urgently improvised invention, and in ways that can leave the reader breathless and alive with the excitement and tensions of being summoned as a witness to these goings-on, are actions that spring from words as soon (or even before) they are uttered—as the *tú* and the *yo* battle for the upper hand in their pursuits of private agendas in eternal opposition to one another, or, as the *Prólogo* rehearses it: *omnia secundum litem fiunt*.<sup>5</sup> With the plotting (ostensibly) freed from any visible, predestined pattern of action-reaction, what might originally have been born as a playful Spanish calque on the Latin humanistic comedy—the popular genre of *lesedrama*, or closet drama, with its customary and eagerly-anticipated happy ending, could be diverted through more sinister channels for its readers.

In the starkness and ambition that suffuses the world of *Celestina*, it is impossible to locate actions motivated by the three theological virtues—faith, hope and charity—and their absence offers an eloquent testimony to the lack of a higher power, or deity, that might encourage individuals to place voluntary curbs on their ambition (see Rank). These three virtues are instead uprooted, supplanted and subverted by a more temporal trinity: egocentrism, cynicism and *cupiditas-concupiscentia*. The actions these ruling “virtues” provoke are a virtual showcase, in *Celestina*, of art and artifice and artificiality, of craft, guile, and deceit, of misdirection, false hopes and compromise, all in varying combinations. Trust, hope

and loyalty are vain for in *Celestina* they lead to betrayal, especially when the individual's personal agenda is at stake. And so it is that in *Celestina's* rudderless world—all order lacking—, its characters find themselves trapped in a labyrinth “sin orden ni concierto” (343), the only exit from which is death.

I, like many, have wondered why this dark view of a small number of egocentric personages who, for a small part of their fictional lives, unwittingly entertain us (we being voyeurs of their sordid dealings with each other), has commanded the attention and admiration of readers/spectators in so many languages and forms over the past five centuries. This is a difficult, if not impossible, question to come to terms with fully, and I do not pretend to accomplish this here. But I hope to shed more light on what I am dubbing the sexual landscape of *Celestina*, in part based on my conversations with Dan Heiple over a few summers in the Madrid of the late 1990s. We had spoken of the centrality to the reader's endless fascination with this work as having to do with the often subtle network of sexual relationships that at times emerge from the shadows and then fall again back into them, illuminating from within—as it were—obscure patterns of character formation and revelation that draw readers ever deeper into areas of human behavior they might not have wanted to explore.

In the observations and commentary to follow, I will be looking at both the implicit and explicit sensuality and sexuality on display in *Celestina* in its multiple forms. Some of the observations are not, of course, original, but I feel they need to be rehearsed here in order more completely to present the wider landscape of the *Celestina* text. The vocabulary in play derives from the terminology we associate with heteronormative behavior, and departures from it. That is, the attraction of male to female (and the reverse) as a ‘normal’ behavior, one leading to a conventional marriage and the formation of a family, *como Dios manda*, as one might phrase it.

We discover that examples of this ‘normal’ concept of matrimony in *Celestina* are the exception rather than the rule, and we may take our cues from that rather skewed, or *not normal*, representation of society. The medieval ideal of matrimony is held up throughout the text as old-fashioned, unexciting and exceptional, staid and stale. The only married pair that plays a role in *Celestina* is made up of the socially-powerful and much-feared Pleberio and Alisa, his ultra-conventional and duty bound spouse. If they represent the perfect grain that characterizes the image of a perfect social fabric, the rest of the work is dedicated to showcasing those members of society who devote their surreptitious activity to going against that grain. Of them, Sempronio, thinking he might remind *Celestina* (who knows them as former neighbors) what social space and

stature Pleberio and Alisa occupy, warns her thus: "Piensa en su padre [de Melibea], que es noble y esforçado, su madre celosa y brava " (145). However threatening their lofty position makes them seem to the outsider looking on (Sempronio), their private world is a very confined and narrow one. Never does the thought of sex attach itself to their circumspect notions of respectability. Indeed, so far are sexual matters from occupying their conscious thoughts that neither mother nor father seems capable of recognizing that their unmarried, twenty-year old daughter might actually be entertaining lubricious fantasies or be suffering from pangs of sexual desire (or the social guilt this sexual desire forces her to deal with).

I believe it entirely probable that Alisa was, at Melibea's age, the very image of the well-mannered and "guardada hija" (306)<sup>6</sup> that she credits Melibea with being now. If this falls within her characterization—and I feel that it surely does—then Alisa's sexual knowledge conforms fully with Catholic medieval orthodoxy: carnal intercourse is meant for procreation only, certainly not for pleasure. It follows, then—as an element of characterization—that her expectations of Melibea are consonant with her own code for living, and that Melibea will now have to confront this code. For when Melibea is overwhelmed by the reality and the force of Calisto's sexual urgency that invades her maidenly solitude in the opening scene of the work, and gains a firm foothold in her own private thoughts, it is keeping it a secret from her "querida madre" (330) that consumes Melibea and heightens her sense of wrongdoing. Not that it keeps her from the new course of action, once Celestina opens the door to the real possibility of physical union. But the secret knowledge she withholds from Alisa produces anguish for her, in Act 16, as she overhears anew (they have, she says, spoken of nothing but for the past month) the parental plan to provide her with a suitable husband: rather than soften Melibea's determination, it produces a passionate outburst that is the strongest acceptance of transgressive behavior in the work: "haga [Calisto] y ordene de mí a su voluntad . . . si [quisiere] venderme en tierra de enemigos, no rehuyré su querer . . . No tengo otra lástima sino por el tiempo que perdí de no gozarle . . . , no quiero marido" (304). The sexual rebel draws her own portrait, and a telling one it is! Indeed, it would not be easy to come up with more diametrically opposed views on marriage and sexuality than those of mother and daughter than are juxtaposed in this watershed scene.

Melibea, having lain with Calisto and tasted carnal delight, is energized by raw, new passion at this juncture, a sexual heat that is alien to the code by which Alisa and Pleberio live. An unbridgeable gap between parents and offspring has been expertly crafted by Celestina. Celestina is dead now, but we would do well to recall her prophetic words of Act 11

to Calisto: "que [Melibea] es más tuya que de sí mesma; más está a tu mandado y querer que de su padre Pleberio" (250). Celestina's art, combined with her experience of the deeper sexual proclivities hidden in the young, have enabled her to unleash the chain of events that will culminate in the sexually fueled outburst of Melibea in Act 16. Releasing the sexual being that this *poca guardada* and deceitful Melibea has been is, in effect, Celestina's class revenge on Pleberio, her way of *offending* him.<sup>7</sup>

Let us pick up the action in Act IV. When Celestina gains unexpectedly easy entry to the house she remembers so well, with a view to somehow arranging a private interview with Melibea, the social consciousness of Alisa surfaces. She, a woman of stature and prestige, acknowledges Celestina's underclass origins and assumes that she has come for charity: "algo me verná a pedir" (152). She is, however, sufficiently distracted by her sister's quickening infirmity and the waiting escort/page that other of Celestina's activities do not surface. It is facile, perhaps, but the presence of the yarn Celestina brings along to sell allows Alisa to accept the pretext as legitimate (Celestina of course assumes that the devil she had conjured for this purpose has smoothed her path thus far).<sup>8</sup> And although Alisa, in Act X, is surprised to see Celestina again at her house, uninvited, and now seems more aware that this former neighbor and "una buena pieça" (152) also can "mudar propósitos castos" (248), she is completely blinded to the sexual subtext of this second meeting of Melibea with Celestina, blinded, that is, by her own ingenuousness regarding her offspring. She can not, or will not, sense the sublimated desire her daughter is concealing from her.

Melibea's need for absolute discretion, or secrecy, was born at the conclusion of her first interview with Celestina in this same Act IV: "Y porque para screvir la oración [for Calisto] no avrá tiempo *sin que venga mi madre*, si esto no bastare, *ven mañana por ella muy secretamente*" (168, emphases added). That need has not lessened, but increased, by the time of the second interview that takes place in Act X. When Alisa intercepts the departing Celestina, all damage having been done, Melibea feigns innocence of Celestina's wiles: thus, a gullible Alisa remains unaware of any hint of the sensual storm that has just now passed through Melibea's body. It is easy for the *new* Melibea to hide her *torpe desseo* behind the deeply false appearance of *honestidad*, as she reacts—theatrically—to her mother's warnings about Celestina: "¿Dessas es? Nunca más; bien huelgo, señora, de ser avisada, *por saber de quién me tengo que guardar*" (248, emphasis added). The sexual irony is powerful; Melibea's escape from disaster averted. Alisa had been presented with two fibs as cover for the real business of this second interview, one by Celestina (to bring the balance of the yarn purchased the day before), the other by Melibea (Celestina was selling cosmetics). The mother, not surprisingly, casts her lot with

the daughter and thus becomes an unwitting collaborator in the forward progress of a sexual agenda that would, were it clear, be abhorrent to her (and to Pleberio).

There is more to say about Melibea. We have witnessed the work's opening scene—to which Melibea's will turn time and again in monologue and dialogue—in which, presumably, we are intended to see the first cautious step of Melibea's sexual awakening. She may have, through her readings (see McPheeters), acquired a romantic and literary idea of love. Melibea tells us that her desires for Calisto were born at that point.<sup>9</sup> Accepting that, I would offer a more sexual reading of her outburst in Act IV, at least more so than I have hitherto encountered. It is this: the secret passion which is bedeviling her as secret knowledge has become a great emotional burden for one so cloistered and protected within the walls of the family home. Thus, as Celestina cleverly begins to skirt the issue of the yarn and payment for it, and draws ever nearer to the subject of Calisto—her real motive for this visit—she also produces tension in a conflicted Melibea who does and does not wish her innermost desire to be revealed. She knows her present passion is an illicit one—like Calisto's—a transgression of her good breeding. When the dreaded name is finally uttered, the sexual memory erupts with all its fiery intensity, taking the form of the anti-Celestina, anti-Calisto outpouring that critics refer to as *la furia de Melibea*.

I see this as reading as a plausible, perhaps necessary, one. Initially, the reader recalls, it was Melibea who first fed the flames of Calisto's desire when she promises/threatens—the ambiguity is unmistakable: “aun más ygual galardón te daré yo, si perseveras.” The intent to cancel Calisto's reading of her words takes the form of accusing him of an attack on her virtue with his insinuations of “ilícito amor” (87). Her intuitive reading of Calisto's deeper motive is clear enough. But her own backtracking is surely attributable to her remembering, at a dangerous emotional moment, just whose daughter she is. We next see Melibea in Act IV where she recognizes Celestina for what *she* is, even though she uses this knowledge only later, when the name of Calisto unnerves her: “alcahueta, falsa, hechizera, enemiga de honestidad, causadora de secretos yerros” (161). The reason Melibea, knowing all this, did not dismiss Celestina forthwith is also made clear by this sexual reading. Her desires are too urgent, too demanding, but her means of satisfying them are, since she remains under her father's roof, virtually non-existent. She needs and secretly wants a confidante, an enabler, someone who will perform exactly those roles, those *officios*, for which Melibea has just roundly condemned Celestina.

However, much remains of the “guardada hija” in Melibea. With the sharing of her secret with Celestina, this *old* Melibea becomes a role that

the *new* Melibea learns to perform, especially in her home.<sup>10</sup> The first stage of her "enablement" occurs when she is still comfortable with her traditional role. When Celestina improvises Calisto's toothache, and implores the newly-tranquil, post-*furia* Melibea to lend Calisto her famed *cordón*—or girdle—and she consents, the object is instantly sexualized. It is to be placed at the service of the libido of the man with whom Melibea desires to establish the most intimate of relationships, illicit though it be and however much it is a violation of her home-schooled values. Melibea is well aware of what she has committed herself to, and later confesses: "En mi cordón le llevaste embuelta la posesión de mi libertad" (245).

But it is Lucrecia who is the first—as a silent witness to this scene—to bring to the surface of the *Celestina* text the sexual nature of the transaction for the reader: "Más le querrá dar que lo dicho" (168). It is ironic that, later, Melibea assumes that Lucrecia is ingenuous in such sexual matters (Act X). She cannot know, of course, that Lucrecia has already become an ally of Celestina as a supporter of Melibea's break with her parent's sexually restricted, behavioral code.

The firm grip that Melibea's desire exerts on her is amply demonstrated by her brief fainting spell, occasioned by Celestina's extraction of her secret in Act X. The very tension and fear her desires create as they bubble up towards the surface provide the weakness: for when she sees—with Celestina's eyes—that Calisto is the cause (*pharmakon*) as well as the cure (*pharmakos*), the dam that is her line of resistance breaks, and she "dies" from the upsurge of emotion, a suggestive foreshadowing of future orgasmic "deaths." Now that her most secret reveries float free of their former moorings, she momentarily does as well, losing her consciousness and ending, finally, committed to providing a *lugar* for the willful realization of her (and Calisto's) passion. However, Celestina, fearing the worst in seeing Melibea overcome and unconscious, is clearly relieved when Melibea revives and commands silence, lest her scandal be heard elsewhere in her home. Melibea quickly declares Celestina (and Lucrecia, later) to be her "fiel secretaria" (245) or secret sharer. The resolution of this second interview shows that Melibea is an enthusiastic convert to a new way of life and she energetically embraces the new ways, as many converts do. Celestina is the conduit for this conversion and may be seen as this new Melibea's non-biological "mother" or, perhaps more in line with one of her *oficios*, midwife to the newborn, fully sexual and desiring woman.<sup>11</sup>

At this juncture, the next service that Celestina can provide is as messenger of the news, carrying to Calisto the assurance of a meeting and a firm meeting time. Melibea, without exactly throwing all caution to the winds, undertakes a thrilling risk by courting her lover so very close to the real threat to their relationship: the improvident discovery by any of

Pleberio's household of her treason. Melibea is secure in her new person: she becomes coquettish, her conversations with Calisto charged with eroticism, she is desiring and desired. She is thoroughly given over to losing her virginity, fulfilling those prophetic words of Lucrecia: "más querrá dar de lo dicho." Melibea senses it is futile to require of Calisto that he keep "hands off" but she teases him all the same. Such a kittenish attitude probably is responsible for her comparison to a "boz de cisne" (322) of her poignant and sensually themed singing (accompanied by Lucrecia) in Act XIX.<sup>12</sup>

But Lucrecia is aroused as well by the presence of Calisto and by the suggestive sensually-drenched garden ambience, to the point that Melibea's must remind her to behave, that she, Lucrecia keep her "hands off" her man, speaking thus: "Lucrecia, ¿qué sientes, amiga? ¿Tornaste loca de plazer? Déxamele, no me le despedaces, no le trabajes sus miembros con tus pesados abrazos, déxame gozar de lo que es mío, no me ocupes mi plazer (323, emphases added). But there is no *furia* here, for Melibea surely understands now that the pull desire exerts over her is also radiating its effect to Lucrecia. She exerts her claim to Calisto, certainly, but we might be tempted to sense a subtle excitement in Melibea as she witnesses the physical sexuality Calisto has produced in Lucrecia. It must be said, in Lucrecia's defense, that since the first coupling of the lovers in Act XIV, she has been sharing—as an onlooker—in their lovemaking. Calisto has wished it and Melibea allows it: (Calisto to Melibea) "Bien me huelgo que estén semejantes testigos de mi gloria" (285). The truth is that Lucrecia has had an avid interest in Melibea's transgressive behavior from Act IV on and, in the light of her reactions to the lovemaking in Act XIX ("Mala landre me mate si más lo escucho; ¿vida es ésta? Que me esté yo deshaziendo de dentera<sup>13</sup> y ella esquivándose por que la rueguen" [324]), we may be excused if we posit that her claim to have been sleeping while the lovemaking was taking place (Act XIV) is simply a delicate white lie. She has been invited to watch and it is unlikely that she would doze off, not after all the anticipation of and preparation for this moment.

While there is at least a hint in Act XIX of Lucrecia's onanism (this has been made visually graphic in some film and stage adaptations), there can be no doubt about the effect the scene she witness is having on her: "tanbién me lo haría yo si estos necios de sus criados me fablassen entre día, pero esperan que los tengo de yr a buscar" (324). Thus, Lucrecia has been keeping Calisto's servants in mind as potential lovers but so far has refrained from being the one to take the aggressor role, preferring, one assumes, that they—as men—should woo her.

It is perhaps the appropriate time now to speak of other instances of desire that crosses class lines. During Act XIV's tryst, listening just outside the walls are the servants, Tristán and Sosia, their own imagination

stirred by the sounds of the erotic coupling within. Servants in *Celestina* do fantasize of performing sexually with their masters or social "betters," thus further widening the sexual landscape of the work. As Lucrecia inside the garden is encouraged to be a witness to Calisto and Melibea's lovemaking, we simultaneously hear these words from Tristán, outside: "Oygo tanto que juzgo a mi amo por el más bienaventurado hombre que nasció; y por mi vida que *aunque soy mochacho, que diesse tan buena cuenta como mi amo*" (285, emphasis added).

The crossing of class boundaries is present elsewhere on the *Celestina* landscape. It is this exactly that so infuriates Elicia in Act IX when she hears her Sempronio allude to Calisto's beloved as "aquella graciosa y gentil Melibea" (226); it almost certainly lies behind Areúsa's spiteful words about Calisto's preference for Melibea: "No sé qué se ha visto Calisto porque *dexa de amar otras que más ligeramente podría aver y con quién más holgasse*, sino que el gusto dañado muchas vezes juzga por dulce lo amargo" (228, emphasis added). This is not merely a manifestation of a jealous nature; there is also a between-the-lines presumption that class lines are, in fact, a permeable boundary, at least from the point of view of those who either serve (Lucrecia, Tristán) or who, like Areúsa, ply a trade, an *oficio*. In the instance of Areúsa's allusive language here, it would follow that she either desires Calisto or she has known him carnally and now feels spurned by his attentions to Melibea: it would depend, I believe, upon the particular reading given to the words: "porque dexa de amar otras."<sup>14</sup>

Earlier as well, when Celestina in Act IV, fresh from her capture of Melibea's girdle, was stalling Sempronio until she could deliver her good news to Calisto first, uses words that also frame Sempronio in our crossover category: "Yo lo veo en ti que *querrías más estar al sabor que al olor deste negocio*" (175, emphasis added). Sempronio even assumes this role later, as he attempts to regain the good graces of an angry Elicia by treating her as a 'Melibea': (Act IX, to Celestina) "Señora, en todo concedo tu razón, que aquí está quien me causó algún tiempo andar fecho *otro Calisto*, perdido el sentido, cansado el cuerpo, la cabeza vana . . . saltando paredes . . . haziendo scala, vistiendo armas . . . y otros mil atos de enamorados" (231, emphasis added). We are left with the simple fact that Calisto's sexual heat is very contagious and affects almost everyone in sharpening the sensual aspects of their lives at this point in fictional time. The most outlandish or graphic example I can muster transcends even class boundaries: this is how Pármeno, doubly angered by Calisto's rejection of his anti-Celestina advice and, then, having to stoop to readying his master's horse—absent Sosia, the groom—speaks these words to the horse: "¿Relincháis, don caballo? ¿No basta un celoso en casa, o barruntas a Melibea?" (137).

Here, of course, Pármeno is confused and angry, and sees Melibea as the cause of the interruption in the household's domestic tranquility, with her power to affect Calisto's behavior. This young lad, yet a virgin, knows of animal *celo*, and is experiencing—thanks to the sexually charged interview<sup>15</sup> he has just had with Celestina at the close of Act I—*celo* of his own for Areúsa. His annoyance at Calisto's ill treatment is complicated by Celestina's sensual promises, echoing in his ears. In the end, his sexual coming-of-age (Act VII) will be more telling than his distrust of Melibea, but both factors sway him to accept Sempronio's friendship and join hands with him in helping Celestina achieve her goals.

And Calisto: what of Calisto? Well-born he may be, but he is not always seen as well-bred. His father was important in their community (as per Calisto's monologue in Act XIV): later (Act XX), Melibea will remind Pleberio of Calisto's "claro linaje" (333). All the same, we know there were some sexual hijinks in the preceding generation. Sempronio makes us aware of them in his Act I rejoinder to Calisto: "Lo de tu abuela con el simio, ¿hablilla fue? Testigo es el cuchillo de tu abuelo" (96).<sup>16</sup> The simian image is one traditionally that evokes a strong sexual appetite. So, if Pleberio and Alisa knew Calisto's parents to be upstanding citizens, Sempronio here suggests that this moral character did not always attach itself to the family, but has skipped a generation and reappeared in the grandson, whose sexual appetite, as we have seen, unleashes a contagion among those he consorts with.

The context for Sempronio's banter highlights sexual desire across species boundaries: men with animals and men with angels (Calisto has just expressed a desire for a human 'angel,' and thus the timing of this jibe is plausible and appropriate). Calisto's words have jarred Sempronio's memory. In reality, Sempronio well knows—he is a quick study—which way the winds are blowing ("bien sé de qué pie coxqueas; yo te sanaré" [93]) and sees the route to easy profit from his connections to Celestina through Elicia. As soon as Calisto is made aware of this connection and Sempronio's eagerness to intervene, his impatient query, "¿Y tardas?" (104), demolishes any notion we might have entertained that his high-flying language was the result of courtly praise of a noble lover with noble intentions: with those words the mask is off, and so is the pretense. The thinly concealed lust that energizes Calisto to act through Celestina now begins to affect others as well. The increasing tension in his loins becomes a matter of some urgency, in fact. Not content with Celestina's promises of action, Calisto sends Sempronio out to dog her heels and stimulate her to bring to a speedy conclusion his true objective: the *posesión* of Melibea.

Celestina gets caught up in Calisto's sexual sport for gain, yes, but also for the playing of the game, the proximity to lusting youths, the thrill

of its covertness and secrecy, and the vicarious pleasures it brings. Think of her pleasure in implying that a little breath freshener and hair dye would do wonders for Lucrecia, recall the tactile *seduction* of Areúsa, the metaphorical *puntos* she expertly applied to cure Melibea's suffering, her encouragement of the voluptuousness of the at-table foreplay in the banquet scene, and in all this we see a Celestina who is happy again, back in harness, short-lived though that happiness may be.<sup>17</sup> It is Celestina who carries the message of sensuality to Melibea and Lucrecia, then taunts Calisto as he fondles the *cordón*, arouses Areúsa by passing her rough hands over her body as she celebrates her physical perfection in words, calms anger and proposes passion in Elicia and Areúsa (Act IX) and teases Melibea as no other kind of physician would. This is the Celestina of the twenty hands, with her hands appearing everywhere and in every affair, helping to overcome puritanical scruples and urging one and all to join in the pleasure dance she orchestrates so well. The scorn she casts on the besotted Calisto because he treats the talismanic *cordón* fetishistically arises from her sense of his misplaced attentions: his erotic petting and stroking of the girdle could diminish his sexual urge for Melibea,<sup>18</sup> and threaten her profits.

But Calisto's treatment of the flesh-and-blood Melibea, when it comes to that, is no less aggressive or tactile than it was with the *cordón*. When it seems to him that Melibea is getting cold feet and would like to postpone her initial surrender, Calisto turns up the sexual pressure ("no me pides tal covardía" [285]), his passion now at a fever pitch, stretched to a bursting point by the interval of impatient waiting, the excitement engendered by the substitute *cordón*, and the frustration of the all-too-solid solid door of Act XII which prevents them from touching each other, though they are but inches apart. Melibea, fearful now that the longed-for moment is here, conquers her fear and accedes to the advances of this impetuous lover. She even experiences a real-life sensation of disillusion (post-coital depression), although it proves to be, as the reader recalls, momentary only: "¡O mi vida y señor! ¿Cómo has quesido que pierda el nombre y corona de virgen por tan breve deleyte?" (286, emphasis added). Only moments later, Melibea's full commitment to the affair resurfaces: "Mas las noches que ordenares, sea tu venida por este secreto logar a la mesma hora, por que siempre te spere *aperçibida del gozo con que quedo, sperando las venidas noches*" (287, emphasis added).

As Calisto is aggressive in his lovemaking, so Melibea will be his equal. Their conversations are richly erotic, occasionally banal, but the two together form a perfect union that, despite its brevity, knows no contretemps. There is a strong element of game playing, of delaying the first embraces. Thus may we read the scene in Act XIX when Melibea complains—coquettishly, in my view: "dexa estar mis ropas en su lugar" (323)

and Calisto coyly rejoins with: "Señora, el que quiere comer el ave, quita primero las plumas" (324). His statement has been termed gross but I would propose another reading that seems more consistent with their (now) month-long affair.

I would posit that the linguistic foreplay, properly contextualized, is a way to heighten the sexual excitement of what both know is coming next. This sensual lovers' banter is but an erotic prelude to their lovemaking. It has become an integral part of its (nearly) nightly renewal. It is their private form of titillation and it succeeds. It is at this juncture that Lucrecia's aside about Melibea wanting to be begged is placed. Melibea's reaction to Calisto's private language is to see if she can get Calisto to send Lucrecia away, to prepare a light repast: she makes no objection to her lover's metaphor. And Calisto's even more graphic reply, "No ay otra colación para mí sino tener tu cuerpo y belleza en mi poder" (324) is in the same culinary vein as the earlier remark about the consumption of "el ave." And such is the feverish pitch of their desire—greatly heightened by these erotic exchanges—that they indulge themselves sensually with a kind of abandon that is reflected in Lucrecia's commentary to herself: "Ya me duele a mí escuchar y no a ellos de hablar ni los brazos de retoçar ni las bocas de besar; andar, ya callen; *a tres me parece que va la vencida*" (324).

At this moment of heightened sensuality, Traso *el cojo* and his men—substituting for Centurio—arrive and create the scuffle heard by those within the walled earthly paradise. Calisto, expressing a never-before-uttered concern for his servants, rushes to aid them, unarmed, and falls from the ladder in his haste, and dies, his head shattered in pieces, "descalabrado." Most critics have not seen a sexual subtext here. I believe there is a plausible reading with clear sexual undertones. It is this: Calisto, having just made love three times, and exultant in his display of manly prowess, wishes to show himself to Melibea (and Lucrecia?) as a hero with compassion for his servants.<sup>19</sup> Calisto's strenuous lovemaking has doubtless placed serious limits on his energy and clear thinking; it has, in short, left him drained and temporarily at reduced strength. In his rush to play the role of noble lord and master and *valerle a Sospia*, Calisto refuses to take time for donning his armor: (to Melibea) "Señora, lo que no haze capa y spada y capa y corazón, no lo hazen coraças y capacete y covardía" (326). Weakened but in a state of exaltation, Calisto misses his step on the ladder (why, after a month of practice?) and falls to a senseless death (Traso and his cronies had already dispersed: Tristán's word goes unheeded: "Tente, señor, no baxes, que ydos son" [326]).

Areúsa, in planning this skirmish with Centurio, did wish Calisto to die. The irony is that Calisto does die, but not in the way in which it was planned to come about. There are no swords flashing, no personal en-

counters, no retribution achieved, as sought by Areúsa. Centurio has deceived her, Traso is ineffectual. Calisto dies, it is true, but I believe it is best, more logical and meaningful, to correlate the cause and manner of his death with his own character failings and his final, unnecessary and empty gesture of bravado. And in this display of bravado, as I hope to have shown, his sexual being plays a not insignificant role.

Calisto's death is also Melibea's ("No es tiempo de yo bivar" [328]). She has transgressed the social norms, behaved irresponsibly, besmirched her parents' good name and violated the protective sanctity of Pleberio's home by allowing its penetration (and her loss of virginity) by Calisto: the *hortus conclusus* defiled. All is, from where she sits, in ruins, and there is no thought given to turning back. When Calisto dies, so, too does the sham of the *guardada hija*, a role she cannot, or will not, play any longer. She chooses death so as to be able to rejoin Calisto. She chooses a death (leaping from a tower) that will imitate his death. Thus are they both consumed, their "life" together a brief but intense flame. Desire—not love—consumes them, and the reader is left, like Pleberio, to question *why* and *to what purpose?*<sup>20</sup>

Elicia and Areúsa are sellers of sex, professionals, as was Celestina in her halcyon days when she and Claudina were the best around. However, Elicia, Celestina's last *pupila*, is the final remnant of a dwindling stable of girls (mentioned in Act IX) whose decline reminds Celestina of her decline: she is old and her indigence (her clothes are ragged; she cannot afford her usual quantity of wine) wears on her. She is keenly aware that her urban world is now populated with "nuevas maestras de [su] officio" (172). She wishes for Elicia to become such a *maestra*, but is disappointed in her *pupila's* apprenticeship. Elicia is a good worker (the short episode with Crito is one proof of this) but never gives a thought to her tomorrows, as did her own grandmother, another of Celestina's role models: (Celestina to Elicia) "Y quando seas de mi edad, llorarás la holgura de agora, que la mocedad ociosa acarrea la vejez arrepentida y trabajosa. Hazíalo yo mejor quando tu abuela, que Dios haya, me mostrava este officio, que a cabo de un año sabía más que ella" (210). The death knell for Celestina's house is tolled on two occasions. The first is in Elicia's confirming reply to Celestina: "Yo le tengo a este officio odio; tú mueres tras ello" (210). The second comes when, after the death of Celestina, Elicia learns to her detriment that no one cares to visit the house anymore. Elicia is no longer an attraction there and, sadly, has not learned any of the *officios* that would extend her reputation in other, collateral ways. It is left to Areúsa to carry on Celestina's craft.

Areúsa lives apart, has her own home, plies her trade quietly, and is kept from having to have numerous sexual partners by a series of well-heeled protectors. She is, a "mujer enamorada" rather than a "ramera"

and, thereby, of a different class of sexual professional, working women (Lacarra 1993). One assumes that Centurio was a former *keeper*, her current one a soldier off to see to his martial duties. She is very much the accomplished seductress and, although her beauty and guile easily extract desired information from the gullible Sosia (Act XVIII), she fairly gloats to her cousin, Elicia, who had heard the whole affair from a hiding place, of her talents as a persuasive seller of sex on many levels: "Assí sé yo tratar a los tales, assí salen de mis manos los asnos apaleados como éste . . . y los devotos alterados y los castos encendidos. Pues prima, aprende, *que otra arte es ésta que la de Celestina, aunque ella me tenía por boba porque me quería yo serlo*" (312-13, emphasis added).

This last statement will send us back to Act VII, when Pármeno was introduced into Areúsa's bed. Was Areúsa overcome by Celestina's fondling and sex talk? Was she really so averse to welcoming Pármeno as she initially appeared to be? Or was she, perhaps, playing to Celestina, assuming the role of the *boba* because that was her expected role? Or was Areúsa more astute than critics often give her credit for being? Was she, too, playing a game, as her words of Act XVIII seem to suggest? Is she, in sum, behaving one way while Celestina is near, but is—apart from her sphere of influence—refining and honing a way of seduction that is different from Celestina's, this *otra arte* of which, with Celestina dead, she seems so proudly to boast?

With this suggestion of a tension between Areúsa and Celestina, I will conclude this series of observations. Space limits me to these; each one produces others and I do not know where an end might exist. The *Celestina* text, we know, is fleshed out purely with dialogue, and that makes it a dangerous minefield to negotiate. After all, we have words and only words, and no serviceable didascalia other than our own readerly perceptions to bring to their more perfect understanding. These words, of course, sometimes conceal and sometimes reveal: they are susceptible always of multiple readings, of ambiguities, of ironies newly perceived. I have wanted here to go inside the text to see if I might piece together from ideas that cannot always be seen on the textual surface, or that lurk in between the spoken words (as though between lines on a page) to see if there emerged any pattern that would allow me to make new associations and see other patterns and link them to—and even revise—old patterns, earlier readings.

In projecting this reading of *Celestina*, linked as it is to intersecting pursuits that have—or could have—a sexual basis, I want only to add these observations to the many others that have been made over the past century, but not to diminish any other readings. In theory, all readings are partial. Or, put another way, no one reads the same book twice, and no two readers read the same book. In sum, it may be that the real work

(and pleasure) of literature is not in the reading, but in the re-reading. If so, it is in this spirit of re-reading that I offer these observations.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I have attempted elsewhere to track some specifics of *Celestina's* survival as a classic in "*Celestina* (1499-1999), Medieval and Modern: Survival & Renewal of a Spanish Classic." See also Steven Gilman's "Rebirth of a Classic" (of which a Spanish version can be consulted as the preliminary essay in Dorothy S. Severin's Alianza edition of *Celestina*, printed many times since 1969).

<sup>2</sup>Important contributions to this line of interpretative readings of *Celestina* include: Severin, "Humour in *La Celestina*"; Louise Fothergill-Payne, "*Celestina* as a Funny Book: A Bakhtinian Reading"; and María E. Lacarra, "Sobre los 'dichos lascivos y rientes' en *Celestina*."

<sup>3</sup>An illuminating exploration of *Celestina's* many trades and their borderline legality is Lelya Rouhi's recent "... y otros treynta officios": The Definition of a Medieval Woman's Work in *Celestina*."

<sup>4</sup>It is, in part, against this backdrop that Marcel Bataillon approached the reception of the work in his *'La Celestine' selon Fernando de Rojas*. The moral high road is much in evidence in these paratexts and can be illustrated by one example from the tenth stanza of the Versos Acrósticos: "Vosotros, los que amáys, tomad este enxemplo, / este fino arnés con que os defendáys; / bolved ya las riendas por que n'os perdáys; / load siempre a Dios visitando su templo" (75).

<sup>5</sup>The concept was formally presented by Gilman in his *The Art of 'La Celestina'*, later translated into Spanish as *'La Celestina': Arte y estructura*, by Margit Frenk.

<sup>6</sup>The reader delights in the intense ironies that Alisa's defense of her daughter occasions as we listen to her in Act XVI, shortly after her *guardada hija* has lost her "corona de virgen": (to Pleberio) "¿Cómo, y piensas que sabe ella qué cosa sean hombres ...? ¿Piensas que su virginidad simple le acarrea torpe desseo de lo que no conoce ni ha entendido jamás? ¿Piensas que sabe errar aun con el pensamiento?" (306). In the opening scene of Act I, Melibea also uses the word *torpe* (the context is also illicit love, as it is here) against Calisto, but has long since abandoned that notion, unlike Alisa, for whom the idea remains eternally repugnant.

<sup>7</sup>This is a theme marked earlier on in *Celestina's* affirmation in Act IV: "Más quiero offender a Pleberio que enojar a Calisto" (150), and which is explored more fully in a plenary address I gave at the Medievalia conference in Mexico City (September 1998): "Quinientos años de animadversión entre *Celestina* y Pleberio: posturas y perspectivas."

<sup>8</sup>There are many views on just why Alisa leaves Melibea to deal with *Celestina* at this juncture. I rehearse many of them and offer my own reading in "Alisa, Melibea, *Celestina* y la magia." Views contrary to mine, that express the notion that the conjured devil causes Alisa's *lapse*, are represented in writings of P. E. Russell, Severin, A. Deyermond and others. Here I cite only one, Deyermond's "Hilado-Cordón-Cadena: Symbolic Equivalence in *La Celestina*."

<sup>9</sup>For example, from Act IV, we have Melibea's statement (to *Celestina*): "Este es el quel otro día me vido y començó a desvariar conmigo en razones, haziendo mucho

del galán" (162-163), an accurate description of the scene we have witnessed as Act 1 began. And in Act XX, to what else could Melibea be referring but her rejection of Calisto, and his loss of further access to her, when she says the following about Calisto to Pleberio: "Era tanta su pena y *tan poco el lugar para hablarme*, que descubrió su pasión a una astuta y sagaz mujer que lamavan Celestina" (333, emphasis added)? Recently both M. Garci-Gómez and Ricardo Castells have written extensively about their shared belief in this same opening scene of Act I being a dream or vision that Calisto experiences, and that the real encounter between the lovers must have occurred in a pre-textual time. My own problem with these arguments, which are extensively supported using other texts both in and out of the *celestinesque* tradition, is that they posit that the central plot-generating moment is anterior to the onset of the fictional history of the text. I do not find it all difficult to accept the idea that Calisto is portrayed as a dreamer since there is ample textual proof for this. What is difficult to accept is that the crucial encounter-rejection which initiates all the subsequent action lies outside the text and before it, when that scene is, I believe, frequently referred to within the text, as seen in the two samples I have given above.

<sup>10</sup>Some of these psychological byways were explored more fully in my "Two Melibeas."

<sup>11</sup>Even if this is but a metaphoric act of midwifery, Celestina *was* the real midwife to Calisto. She says to Melibea in Act IV: "aquí está Celestina que le vido nacer y le tomó a los pies de su madre" (167).

<sup>12</sup>Alphonse Vermeulen sees this "swan song" moment as an ironic foreshadowing of Melibea's imminent death in "Melibea y su 'voz de cisne'."

<sup>13</sup>For the sexual meaning of teeth and gums as indicators of sexual arousal, there are two basic articles to consult: Geoffrey West, "The Unseemliness of Calisto's Toothache," and Javier Herrero, "The StubbornText: Calisto's Toothache and Melibea's Girdle."

<sup>14</sup>I would suggest on this point a reading of Deyermond's perceptive study, "Divisiones socio-económicas, nexos sexuales: la sociedad de *Celestina*."

<sup>15</sup>A famous erotic metaphor brings Pármeno's sexuality to the surface, teased out by Celestina, who first tells him: "Que la boz tienes ronca, las barvas te apuntan; mal sosegadilla debes tener la punta de la barriga." To which Pármeno's reply ("¡Como cola de alacrán!") is met with sly humor by the astute go-between: "Y aún peor, que la otra muerde sin hinchar, y la tuya hincha por nueve meses" (118). Pármeno's laugh confirms the sexual level of the conversation and a willing disposition to continue it.

<sup>16</sup>Henry Bershas dealt with this perverse affair (or gossip) in "'Testigo es el cuchillo de tu abuela' (*Celestina* I)." The insinuation is that the grandmother favored a series of suitors in her youth (receiving from them a sword as payment; one of these men was the one she eventually married) and, when past child-bearing years, attracted younger lovers by paying them with the trove of swords she had earlier accumulated.

<sup>17</sup>The deeper reality is that Celestina senses that her end is near, her days of glory long gone, a mood which surfaces only in Act IX, 234-35.

<sup>18</sup>It is Sempronio who verbalizes this (to Calisto): "Señor, por holgar con el cordón, no querrás gozar de Melibea" (188).

<sup>19</sup>The truth lies far from this "compassion": recall the "concern" Calisto expresses for Sempronio, Pármeno, and Celestina when he learns of their deaths: For appearances sake and because accompanied, he begins with, "O mis leales criados, o mis grandes servidores" (278), but the genuine Calisto is heard moments later, when he is at last alone: "Ellos [Sempronio and Pármeno] eran sobrados y esforçados, agora o en otro tiempo de pagar havían. La vieja era mala y falsa, según parece hazía trato con ellos, y assí que riñeron sobre la capa del justo" (281-82).

<sup>20</sup>The answer to these questions is, to me, not at all evident in the twenty-one acts of *Celestina* where conflict and opposition provide the momentum of the varied actions it encompasses. I will leave to others a defense of the paratexts as sufficient (or insufficient) to address the multiple concerns raised by the *Celestina* text.

### Works Cited

- Bataillon, Marcel. *'La Celestine' selon Fernando de Rojas*. Paris: Didier, 1961.
- Bershas, Henry. "'Testigo es el cuchillo de tu abuela' (*Celestina* I)." *Celestinesca* 2.1 (1978): 7-11.
- Castells, R. *Calisto's Dream and the Celestinesque Tradition: A Rereading of 'Celestina.'* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1995.
- Deyermond, A. D. "Divisiones socio-económicas, nexos sexuales: la sociedad de *Celestina*." *Celestinesca* 8.2 ((1984): 3-10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Hilado-Cordón-Cadena: Symbolic Equivalence in *La Celestina*." *Celestinesca* 1.1 (1977): 6-12.
- Fothergill-Payne, Louise. "*Celestina* as a Funny Book: A Bakhtinian Reading." *Celestinesca* 17.2 (1993): 29-51.
- Garci-Gómez, M. *Calisto soñador y altanero*. Kassel: Reichenberger, 1994.
- Gilman, Steven. *The Art of 'La Celestina.'* Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1956.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *'La Celestina': Arte y estructura*. Trans. Margit Frenk. Madrid: Taurus, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Rebirth of a Classic." *Varieties of Literary Experience*. Ed. S. Burnshaw. New York: NYU P, 1962. 283-305.
- Herrero, Javier. "The Stubborn Text: Calisto's Toothache and Melibea's Girdle." *Literature Among Discourses: The Spanish Golden Age*. Eds. W. Godzich & N. Spadaccini. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. 132-47, 166-68.
- Lacarra, M. E. "La evolución de la prostitución en la Castilla del siglo XV y la mancebía de Salamanca en tiempos de Fernando de Rojas." *Fernando de Rojas and Celestina: Approaching the Fifth Centenary*. Eds. Ivy Corfis and Joseph T. Snow. Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies. 1993. 33-78.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sobre los 'dichos lascivos y rientes' en *Celestina*." *'Nunca fue pena mayor': Estudios de literatura española en homenaje a Brian Dutton*. Cuenca: Univ. de Castilla-La Mancha, 1996. 419-33.
- McPheeters, D. W. "Melibea and the New Learning." *Historical and Literary Perspectives: Essays and Studies in Honor of Douglas Menut*. Ed. S. Sticca. LawrenceKA: Cornado, 1973. 65-81.
- Rank, Jerry R. "The Uses of 'Dios' and the Concept of God in *Celestina*." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 5 (1980-81): 75-91.

- Rojas, Fernando de. *La Celestina*. Ed. Dorothy S. Severin. Madrid: Cátedra, 1987.
- Rouhi, Lelya. "'... y otros treynta officios': The Definition of a Medieval Woman's Work in *Celestina*." *Celestinesca* 22.2 (1998): 21-31.
- Severin, Dorothy S. "Humour in *La Celestina*." *Romance Philology* 32 (1978-79): 274-91.
- Snow, Joseph T. "Alisa, Melibea, Celestina y la magia." *Insula* 633 (1999): 15-17.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "*Celestina* (1499-1999), Medieval and Modern: Survival & Renewal of a Spanish Classic." *Medieval Perspectives* 15 (2000): 1-11.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Quinientos años de animadversión entre Celestina y Pleberio: posturas y perspectivas." In press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Two Melibeas. 'Nunca fue pena mayor': *Estudios de literatura española en homenaje a Brian Dutton*. Cuenca: Univ. de Castilla-La Mancha, 1996. 655-62.
- Vermeulen, Alphonse. "Melibea y su 'voz de cisne'." *Incipit* 10 (1990): 103-11.
- West, Geoffrey. "The Unseemliness of Calisto's Toothache." *Celestinesca* 3.1 (1979): 3-10.