

'Amor imperuio' (*LC*, I, 48): What does it Mean?*

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"CELESTINA: Has de saber, Parmeno, que Calisto anda de amor quexoso. Y no lo juzgues por eso por flaco, que el amor imperuio todas las cosas vence." (I,48)¹

It is not easy to explain why this sentence and especially the unusual word 'imperuio', spoken by Celestina, have so long gone unnoticed. Celestina uses the word, and, although we do not know if it was given to her by the first, unknown author, or by Fernando de Rojas, it seems clear that we are not dealing with an adjective describing love which enjoyed widespread popular or literary diffusion. In all of Spanish literature, its sole documentation is found here in *LC*. It is not recorded in the dictionaries of Covarrubias and Alderete and, although it does figure in the *Diccionario de las Autoridades*, which cites it from *LC*, the etymology is not given and meanings are proposed for 'impervio' ('continuo' and 'constante') which it did not have in the sixteenth century, and never had at all in Latin. In the modern period it does not appear in Corominas' dictionary and perhaps the only one which does record it is Martin Alonso's.²

In the modern annotated editions of Rojas' work, the lack of agreement when dealing with this word and the sentence in which it appears is evident. There are authors like A. Prieto³ who equate it with 'constante', under the probable influence of the *Autoridades* which fosters this error. Fortunately we have the testimony of Nebrija, who offers us a definitive reading. In his *Lexicon*⁴ he lists the precise Castilian equivalent of the latinism: *cosa que no tiene camino*.

*This note comprises the first section of Professor Criado's article (in Spanish), "*LC*, tratado del 'amor impervio'." *Yelmo*, núm. 30 (oct.-dic., 1976), pp. 5-9. It has been translated by the editor and Eric W. Naylor (Univ. of the South), with some expansion of the bibliographical data of the original notes.

In the edition by Severin (introduction by Gilman)⁵, the meanings given it are 'impenetrable' and 'invulnerable', neither of which is entirely valid. The English word 'impervious' is given as an equivalent, but that was introduced in the seventeenth century with a very concrete physical sense: "impenetrable, impermeable, impassable", and only in the modern era does it acquire a personal or figurative meaning: "invulnerable to, etc."⁶

Julio Cejador,⁷ an accomplished latinist, provides the correct etymology, not a difficult one, to be sure, (*in-per-vius*/not-by-the-road), but fails in his interpretation of the passage. It is not the lovelorn Calisto who overcomes all obstacles; rather, it is the destructive force of an "amor impervio" which destroys him and all who seek to aid him. The sentence is quite clear: Calisto is not "flaco", but is conquered by a force which "todas las cosas vence".

The Latin origin of 'impervius' is relatively late and is, although not an exact duplicate, related to the Greek word 'adiabatos', whose meaning was very concrete: the impossibility of fording a river or of reaching an island from the mainland. It appears thus in Xenophon's *Anabasis* (2,1,11).⁸ The Latin documentation remits us to Ovid (*Metamorphosis* 1.106), where the reference to 'river' (*ammis*) is retained. Tacitus (*Annales* 3,31) broadens the meaning to "the stone which can not be penetrated by fire, which is incombustible," and Quintilian (*Inst.* 12-II.II) first introduces the reference to 'road'.⁹ In sum, the two fundamental meanings are clearly differentiated in Latin and well-documented: 1) "Qui transiri non potest, impenetrabilis"; 2) "Qui adiri non potest, inaccessibilis".¹⁰ The Latin adds to the Greek an important variation: the notion of the "lack of a way", complementary to but not the same as "impassable". However, in neither of the two classical languages does one encounter the least tendency to a semantic abstraction with the precise physical and concrete idea of 'impervius'. In *LC*, both Greek and Latin meanings are probably meant, but with a fundamental accretion which seems totally original: its figural application to "impracticable love" and to all of the powerful destructive force it wields.

How was it possible for this latinism to crop up in Rojas' work? It is possible, though not too probable, that he got it directly from readings in the appropriate classical authors. An easier explanation is through medieval Italian literature; in modern Italian the word 'impervio' exists with its own meaning: "said of a place which admits of no normal possibility of access or passage".¹¹ Nevertheless, this usage in Italian is recent. With the etymological meaning, the word appears in the writings of Sarti, an historian of the end of the seventeenth century. Today, its use appears reserved for poetry. But there is no documentation, so far as we know, of its presence in the everyday Italian of the sixteenth century, and less of its association with love. Neither have we found any trace of its use in the Latin works of Petrarch and Boccaccio, which are frequent sources of *LC*. There remains another possibility: that through a Latin-Spanish glossary (e.g., Nebrija's) this word had come to the notice of the original author, or of Rojas, and that it was deliberately selected as the centerpiece of the amorous theories projected in *LC*, as

the definition of the pessimistic idea of an "amor sin camino", a love with no practicable end, one which destroys both Calisto and Melibea. This could explain away the incongruency which results by supposing it used by such a low-life figure as the Celestina, in a dialogue between people who wouldn't have the least occasion to use or even to understand the word. It is certain that in the same scene Pármeno makes much ado of a false and pedantic philosophy which, in turn, motivates Celestina's parody of him. But the context of the "amor impervio" is too intimately related with the exposition and denouement of the work for us not to think that the author uses it as a planned key to the whole.

The presence today of 'impervio' in English, Italian, and Portuguese,¹² in contrast to its disappearance in Spanish and French, shows that we are not dealing with a "latinajo" as Cejador deprecatingly calls it. Given its precise meaning and the lack of synonyms in Spanish, it deserved to have been retained. As, likewise, 'pervio' ought to have been retained, at least in the way 'obvio' has been.¹³

In any case, and with etymological considerations aside, it seems evident that the concept as well as the form of "amor impervio" is the exclusive and universal property of *La Celestina*.

◆ NOTES ◆

¹Cited from the edition, *Tragicomedia de Calixto y Melibea, libro también llamado la Celestina*. Ed. de M. Criado de Val-G. D. Trotter. ("Clásicos Hispánicos", 3rd ed., Madrid: CSIC, 1970).

²*Enciclopedia del Idioma* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1958), II, 2350.

³LC ("Literatura año 2000", Madrid: Ed. La Muralla, 1967), introd. and notes by Antonio Prieto.

⁴*Lexicon seu dictionarium Nebrissensis* (Barcinona: Antoniv Oliver, 1587).

⁵LC. D. S. Severin, ed. Introduction by S. Gilman (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1976), note 82, p. 248.

⁶*The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. V (1961 ed.), p. 90.

⁷Cejador, in his picturesque style, says: "*Impervio*, otro latinajo, y eso en boca de la vieja. ¡Y así lo emplea la muy sabida!" (*Clásicos Castellanos* 20, Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1972, I, 94).

⁸*Dictionnaire grec-française*. M. A. Bally (Paris: Hachette, 1935).

⁹*The Oxford Latin Dictionary*. P. G. W. Glare, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), fasc. IV, p. 845.

¹⁰*Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, Vol. 7, part 1 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1900-), cols. 594-95.

¹¹"Di luogo che esclude ogni normale possibilità di accesso o di passaggio," *Dizionario della lingua italiana*, G. Devoto and G. C. Oli, eds. (Florence: Le Monnier, 1971), p. 1104.

¹²*Diccionario da lingua portuguesa*, Cândido de Figueiredo, ed. (14th ed., Lisbon: Livraria Bertrand, 1956), II, 78.

¹³The current use of this word customarily departs from its etymological meaning.



Tristán y Sosia con el cuerpo de su amo, Calisto.
Aucto XIX
Grabado de la traducción alemana de Wirsung, 1520.