



FERNANDO DE ROJAS AND *CELESTINA*: THE
 AUTHOR'S INTENTION FROM *COMEDIA* TO *TRAGICOMEDIA*
DE CALISTO Y MELIBEA

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When he remarked rather peevishly in his new prologue that everyone seemed to have a differing and contentious opinion about his *Celestina*, Rojas conspicuously failed to supply posterity with his own opinion, although he did criticize those readers whose view he thought superficial. Some are offended by the story and call it a traveller's tale, he complained, while others go to the opposite extreme and praise the jokes and proverbs, ignoring the meaning. Those who truly understand *Celestina* appreciate both the detail and the whole. But he gives us no indication of the meaning of his work in the prologue. We must turn to his introductory verses in the *Comedia* for a clue.

Si bien discernéis mi limpio motivo,
 a cuál se endereza de aquestos extremos,
 con cuál participa, quién rige sus remos,
 amor apacible o desamor esquivo,
 buscad bien el fin de aquesto que escribo,
 o del principio leed su argumento:
 leeldo y veréis que, aunque dulce cuento,
 amantes, que os muestra salir de cativo. (st. 4, p. 38)¹

The purpose of the *Comedia*, according to Rojas, is to show lovers how to escape from the captivity of love, and he recommends that we look at the *argumento de toda la obra* and at Pleberio's lament ("el fin de aquesto que escribo"). This stanza is corroborated by his introduction to his friend and patron; not only does the country need *Celestina*, but so does this friend, 'cuya juventud de amor ser presa se me representa haber visto y de él cruelmente lastimada, a causa de le faltar defensivas armas para resistir sus fuegos' (p. 36).

Unfortunately Rojas' stated purpose in the *Comedia* has been confused with the opinions of his editors who undoubtedly wrote the moralistic *incipit* as well as the individual *argumentos* of the sixteen acts, as

Stephen Gilman has shown,² and as Rojas tells us in his new prologue ("Que aun los impresores han dado sus punturas, poniendo rúbricas o sumarios al principio de cada auto") p. 43. According to his editors, the work was composed "en reprehensión de los locos enamorados, que, vencidos en su desordenado apetito, a sus amigas llaman y dicen ser su dios. Asimismo hecho en aviso de los engaños de las alcahuetas y malos y lisonjeros sirvientes" (p. 44).

In the *Tragicomedia* there is a marked change of emphasis in Rojas' tone, and he has added a final stanza to the introductory verses:

O damas, matronas, mancebos, casados,
notad bien la vida que aquéstos hicieron,
tened por espejo su fin cuál hobieron;
a otro que amores dad vuestros cuidados.
Limpiad ya los ojos, los ciegos errados,
virtudes sembrando con casto vivir,
a todo correr debéis de huir,
no os lance Cupido sus tiros dorados (st. 11, p. 40)

This is far more didactic in tone than the original stanza which it replaces, a general contemplation of the Crucifixion and a generalized exhortation to virtue:

Olvidemos los vicios que así nos prendieron;
no confiamos en vana esperanza;
temamos Aquel que espinas y lanza
azotes y clavos su sangre vertieron.
La su santa faz herida escupieron,
vinagre con hiel fue su potación;
a cada santo lado consintió un ladrón;
nos lleve, le ruego, con los que creyeron. (p. 258)

Rojas then transposes a much revised version of this replaced stanza to the end of the work as the new closing verses of the *Tragicomedia*; again the generalized contemplation is made specific and the reader is now exhorted to use the work as a negative example:

Pues aquí vemos cuán mal fenecieron
aquestos amantes, huigamos su danza,
amemos a Aquel que espinas y lanza,
azotes y clavos su sangre vertieron.
Los falsos judíos su haz escupieron,
vinagre con hiel fue su potación;
por que nos lleve con el buen ladrón,
de dos que a sus santos lados pusieron. (st. 1, pp. 236-7)

Rojas' last stanza before his voice falls silent forever has a distinctly nervous tone:

Y así no me juzgues por eso liviano,
mas antes celoso de limpio vivir;

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celoso de amar, temer y servir
al alto Señor y Dios soberano. (st. 3, p. 237)

Rojas seems to have altered his purpose in presenting his work; originally the *Comedia* was intended as a type of delicious personal armament against the pains and captivity of love; the *Tragicomedia* he sees more specifically as a didactic and moralistic negative example of the disasters which face those who succumb to lust. This seems strangely contradictory since in the new prologue Rojas tells us that he had extended the love affair because everyone enjoyed it as fiction and wanted it to last longer: "miré adonde la mayor parte acostaba, y hallé que querían que se alargase en el proceso de su deleite de estos amantes, sobre lo cual fui muy importunado" (pp. 43-44).

In short, Rojas changed his stated purpose in writing the work from an essentially aesthetic and didactic one: in the *Comedia* stanzas the sugared pill will both delight and at the same time cure the love-sick patient:

Como el doliente que píldora amarga
o huye o recela o no puede tragar,
métenla dentro de dulce manjar,
engañase el gusto, la salud se alarga:
de esta manera mi pluma se embarga,
imponiendo dichos lascivos, rientes,
atrae los oídos de penadas gentes;
de grado escarmientan y arrojan su carga. (st. 5, p. 38)

In the *Tragicomedia* he insists that his didactic purpose is a completely conventional one and he has told this story merely as a negative example of what not to do.

It is hardly surprising, in view of Rojas' change of orientation and the intrusion of his editors' opinions as well, that critics are bitterly divided over the meaning of *Celestina*. The two main schools of thought on the subject may be roughly categorized as the judeo-pessimistic school and the Christian-didactic school.³ The judeo-pessimistic school focuses on Rojas' semitic ancestry and *converso* upbringing, and points out that he must have felt alienated and threatened by his hostile surroundings. They see his outlook as a pessimistic, even nihilistic one, and point out that he turns proverbs and old saws to ironic purpose, criticising and undercutting the society which is portrayed. Pleberio's lament is often analyzed to prove their point.

The Christian-didactic school bases itself on Rojas' claims in the later stanzas, and draws on characterization for support. Calisto is seen as an obvious criticism of the courtly lover (either as a parodic or a tragic figure), and Rojas conveys his moral purpose through a series of familiar medieval *topoi* and conventions.

I should like to propose a return to the text for another consideration of what Rojas tells us about his own work. Essentially, in his prose and verse introduction to the *Comedia* he emphasizes two points;

first that the story will cure the lovesick, and secondly that it will do this through its beautiful presentation. This sounds like the medieval commonplace about delighting while teaching, and Rojas does in fact refer to the almost-compulsory sugared pill. But it is the delightful quality of the tale which is emphasized: "aunque dulce cuento, / amantes, que os muestra salir de cativo," "imponiendo dichos lascivos, rientes, / atrae los oídos de penadas gentes; / de grado escarmientan y arrojan su carga." In other words, the story itself will be so delightful and funny to the listeners that they will willingly turn away from the lure of love. In short, Rojas' main emphasis is aesthetic; the sheer delight of listening will cure the listener of his love sickness. Rojas' story in the new verses to the *Tragicomedia* is a very different one. If the listener heeds the dreadful story and the terrible fate of the lovers he will not make the same mistake; no one should accuse Rojas of writing a loose and filthy tale: "Y así no me juzgues por eso liviano, / mas antes celoso de limpio vivir."

One must agree with Stephen Gilman's assertion that Rojas seems to have got the wind up between the first and second editions of his work;⁴ "Unos les roen los huesos que no tienen virtud" (p. 43). Rojas' social position was certainly not secure enough to withstand accusations that his work was bawdy and less than edifying in tone, and the expanded edition gave him the opportunity to silence these criticisms. This does not stop him, however, from adding a considerable amount of new erotic material to his *Tragicomedia*.

On the basis of the author's own statements, I would therefore like to propose that Rojas' original intentions in completing the *Comedia* were primarily artistic and aesthetic, and that he wished to write a story which would both delight and disenchant suffering lovers. He would accomplish this with two chief artistic weapons, comedy and tragedy. In carrying out these rather uncomplicated intentions Rojas also happens to have composed one of the masterpieces of world literature, rich in imagery, characterization, and in the interweaving of the universal themes of love, fortune, and death.



Sempronio (a Celestina): "Calisto arde en amores de Melibea. De ti y de mí tiene necesidad" (auto I).

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NOTES

¹ I quote from my edition (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1969 etc.) Subsequent references to it will appear as page numbers in parentheses.

² Rojas wrote the *argumentos* to the additional acts in the *Tragicomedia* and the *argumento* to the whole work; the editors supplied *argumentos* for the individual sixteen acts of the *Comedia*. See Stephen Gilman, *The Art of 'La Celestina'* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956, repr. New Jersey: Greenwood Press, 1976, pp. 212-16; trans. as '*La Celestina*': *Arte y estructura*, Madrid: Taurus, 1974, pp. 327-35). Rojas writes a new *argumento* for Act XIV of the *Tragicomedia*.

³ For the former category see Gilman's *Art* and his *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas: the intellectual and social landscape of 'La Celestina'*, (Princeton: University Press, 1972, trans. as *La España de Fernando de Rojas: panorama intelectual y social de 'La Celestina'*, Colección Persiles, 102, Madrid: Taurus, 1978). Marcel Bataillon's '*La Cêlestine*' *selon Fernando de Rojas* (Paris: Didier, 1961) typifies the latter, along with the work of Otis Green and his disciples such as Ciriaco Morón Arroyo, whose *Sentido y forma de 'La Celestina'* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1974) purports to summarize the main streams of *Celestina* criticism. Vicente Cantarino summarizes previous viewpoints and concludes that the work is moral in a generalized ethical sense, "Didacticismo y moralidad de *LC*," '*LC*' *y su contorno social* (Barcelona: Borrás, 1977), 103-09.

⁴ Gilman, *The Spain*, pp. 51-64.



Celestina (hablando entre dientes):

"¡Esfuerça, esfuerça, Celestina! ¡No desmayes! . . . Todos los agujeros se adereçan favorables" (auto IV).

La figura de Celestina fue medelada y vestipor Kathryn W. Wolfe, Athens, GA, en marzo de 1981.

Foto: J. T. Snow



La muerte de Calisto. Ilustración a la edición [1979]
húngara. Artista: Gyula FELEDY.