

**ROJAS ON "LITERACY"**

**Jerry R. Rank**  
**University of Illinois - Chicago**

J. N. H. Lawrance, writing about lay literacy in late medieval Castile, reminds us that the Arcipreste de Talavera counters objections that his anecdotes about the 'vicios, tachas e malas condiciones' of women could contribute further to female vice by pointing out that women already know all about sex, having learned it from the books of Boccaccio which they have tucked away in their little jewel boxes (cofres). While the proper reading of a gentlewoman should consist of a Book of Hours, saints' lives, translations of the psaltery and other such religious, devotional readings, more often than not these were supplanted by a secret hoard of readings consisting of "canciones, dezires, coplas, cartas de enamoradas, e muchas otras locuras...;" that is, romantic and erotic trifles (Lawrance, p. 79). While women were not expected to read masculine literature, i.e., Latin or vernacular texts of the classics, it is obvious from the Archpriest's commentary that the expectation was that they should concern themselves with pious works of exemplary literature (which could be considered the feminine equivalent of the expected serious, "literate" reading for males).

Lawrance attempts, quite convincingly, to show that this relatively high level of literacy occurred earlier and was more widespread in Castile than normally thought, and that the level of literacy was determined by the acquisition and assimilation of Classics (either in Latin or in the vernacular) which were meant to provide "solace and consolation"—in contrast to the kinds of romances of chivalry and romantic drivel read by the Archpriest's feminine examples. As Lawrance demonstrates, the lists of the libraries of the great families of fifteenth-century Castile appear to support this premise. The libraries of the minor nobility present similar proof (Lawrance, 83-85). Citing O. D. Painter's introduction to the *Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century Now in the British Museum* (London: 1971), Lawrance points out that the most important and finest editions produced were of the classical texts of Caesar, Quintus Curtius, Josephus, Livy, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Seneca, Aristotle's *Ethics*, Aesop and Boethius (Lawrance, p. 87). This seems to have been true to a great extent in fifteenth-century Castile, as well. The Classics in Latin and their vernacular

translations, and the vernacular translations of classical histories followed by national chronicles and vernacular juridical texts, were the contents of the serious noble's library. The absence in these libraries of romances of chivalry is supported principally by Lawrance's reference to Mario Schiff's *La Bibliothèque du marquis de Santillane* (Paris, 1905). Lawrance's ideas on lay literacy in Castile at the end of the Middle Ages are important for understanding the prevailing attitudes on the subject of serious and literate readers during the period. Furthermore, they are significant for judging how authors such as Fernando de Rojas measured up with respect to the accepted canon.

According to his will, Rojas's library at the time of his death contained "libros de leyes" and "libros de Romance" and in each list there were a few books by classical authors, almost exclusively vernacular translations (Boethius, Seneca and a few others; see del Valle Lersundi, "Testamento"). Many of the authors that Rojas knew and used in LC were part of the supposed accepted canon of "literate" texts referred to above (especially Seneca; see Fothergill-Payne). But if we look carefully at the list of the contents of Rojas's library, we cannot fail to note the presence of the large number of romances of chivalry which Rojas left to his wife, no doubt read by the ladies of the household, but certainly not ignored by Rojas. By the same token one also notes important lacunae, especially in the area of classical and vernacular histories. Classical authors in general are represented, but certainly not to the degree that one might be led to believe from the classical authorities so prodigiously cited in LC. How Rojas brings his literacy (or lack of) to bear on LC is of interest here. Besides references in his prologue to the classical authors, Heraclitus (taken mostly from Petrarch), Aristotle and Pliny, it is illuminating to view both Pleberio's and Melibea's final monologues in light of Lawrance's ideas about literacy.

Pleberio's library, following Lawrance's criteria, would be the library of a literate man, which one might mistakenly assume reflected Rojas's own holdings. Instead, it appears that it may have reflected the generally accepted ideal of the literate man's library as Rojas perceived it. But the real test comes not necessarily and only from Pleberio's lips, but also—perhaps more convincingly—from Melibea's.

One understands at the end of the work that Melibea was not the typical protected gentlewoman. Given the depth of her serious reading of the classics, she could not have devoted much time to reading romances of chivalry and if she had a "cofre" filled with little books of Boccaccian erotica, they do not enter into her intellectual field. Melibea was privileged to have been guided by her father in the reading of the Classics ("aquellos antiguos libros"), and in the end it is obvious that she attempts to use them to the purpose to which her father as a literate man had indoctrinated her. In Act XX she decides on her course of action and tells Pleberio that if it weren't for her distraught state and the sight of his tears, which have wiped her mind clean of the memory of these volumes, she would tell him "*Algunas consolatorias palabras ... antes de mi agradable fin; colegidas y sacadas de aquellos antiguos libros que [tú], por más aclarar mi ingenio, me mandabas leer...*" (Rojas/Severin, 231; italics are mine). In fact, she already has done so in the beginning of the monologue in which she lists the examples of patricide, matricide and infanticide drawn from her reading of the classics that were purportedly in Pleberio's library. (We should not forget that the text of these examples was added to Melibea's monologue when Rojas transformed the *Comedia* into the *Tragicomedia* and that the examples were drawn not from his reading of the classics, but from Petrarch's *De Remediis* [see Deyermond, 67-68]. Melibea's reference, however, to what she would have done had she not been so distraught was present in the original sixteen-act version and could have reasonably been relocated and changed when Rojas made his revisions and additions.)

## CELESTINESCA

Not only does Melibea excerpt from readings that were normally the province of the literate non-professional male reader, but all her examples of patricide and matricide are those in which the perpetrator is male. Melibea quotes the texts normally read by men seeking "solace and consolation." By contextualizing them to her situation, she appropriates them and makes them her own. In this way Melibea may be looked on as a unique feminine voice of authority in early Spanish literature. Pleberio in his grief in Act XXI matches Melibea's appropriation of masculine texts when he gives a corresponding series of examples from classical works of famous men who lose their *sons* to death: Pericles, Xenophon, Anaxagoras. Pleberio's loss of his *daughter* is, in his mind, no less a loss.

What is interesting about these two episodes where citations from classical works are central, is that they not only widen the field of possible beneficiaries of the authority of classical texts (Melibea as well as Pleberio), but they demonstrate their proper use according to the well-reasoned discussion of Lawrance to give "solace and consolation" just as the literate man of humanist persuasion understood that they should do. However, we may not only legitimately question, but even seriously doubt, that in the end they furnish any genuine "solace and consolation" to Pleberio (or to Melibea). Utterly disconsolate is Pleberio and unrelieved is the pessimism of the final pages of the work. Are we faced, then, with yet another irony in Rojas's seemingly unending array of ironies? Although most of his classical examples are taken from secondary sources—as Castro Guisasola, Deyermond, Fothergill-Payne and others have demonstrated—Rojas has, nonetheless, shown his awareness of the canon of texts that supposedly produced "literate" men (and now, women, through Melibea who has delved into Pleberio's fictional library). May we, then, theorize that Rojas purposely depicted Pleberio as a "literate" man who subscribed to a canon of classical texts to which he (Rojas) only superficially subscribed or did not believe in at all? Furthermore, did Fernando de Rojas, because of his skepticism, depict Pleberio as having read and collected the proper works which should provide him with "solace and consolation," but which would, in the final analysis, fail him—thus enhancing the ultimate disillusionment?

# LA CELESTINA

by Fernando De Rojas

**LA CELESTINA ALSO AVAILABLE ON  
SONY BETA or VHS Cassette**

Repertorio Español also includes an acting script, an English synopsis and a director's article about this production.

**\$55.00 (includes shipping)**

To place an order, write:

**REPERTORIO ESPAÑOL**

138 East 27th Street,

New York, N.Y. 10016

BIBLIOGRAPHY CITED AND CONSULTED

- Castro Guisasaola, F. *Observaciones sobre las fuentes literarias de 'La Celestina'*. Madrid: CSIC, 1973.
- Deyermond, Alan D. *The Petrarchan Sources of 'La Celestina'*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961.
- Fothergill-Payne, Louise. *Seneca and 'Celestina'*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988.
- Lawrance, J. N. H. "The Spread of Lay Literacy in Late Medieval Castile." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 63 (1983): 79-94.
- Lersundi, F. del Valle. "Testamento de Fernando de Rojas, autor de 'La Celestina'." *Revista de Filología Española* 16 (1929): 366-88.
- McPheeters, D. W. 1973. "Melibea and the New Learning." In *Historical and Literary Perspectives: Essays and Studies in Honor of Albert Douglas Menut*, ed. Sandro Sticca (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973): 65-81.
- Rojas, Fernando de. *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, ed. Dorothy S. Severin. Madrid: Alianza, 1969.



Pleberio y Alisa. Auto XVI. J. Segrelles [Ed. de Valencia 1946]