

## RESEÑAS

Dorothy Sherman Severin. *Tragicomedy and Novelistic discourse in 'Celestina'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. 145 pp.

*Celestina* is perhaps the least isolated, or insulated, of Spanish texts. Before one can begin to scrutinize the literary object proper, there are questions to be considered or, even in the strictest formalist environment, to be acknowledged: issues related to authorship and the process of composition, genre, the reading public or audience, the self and circumstance of Fernando de Rojas. The prefatory materials occupy a significant middle ground between the text and the extratextual, the site of an arguably fallacious yet justifiable preoccupation with intention. The interplay of Act I and the addenda is engagingly mystifying, as are the analytical implications of direct and indirect borrowing from other texts. What *Celestina* "means" is dependent on a number of factors which direct and determine a particular reading; that is true of all readings, but in this case the mediating elements are especially notable. The history of the *Celestina* makes its way into the text while the "real" Fernando de Rojas maintains a paradoxical distance. Present-day readers must consider their options while bearing in mind the response of the original public. From certain perspectives, the preparatory exercises and the theoretical problems which inform them are as fascinating as the master work.

Dorothy Sherman Severin, author of *Memory in 'La Celestina'* (London: Tamesis, 1970), among other studies; and editor of a recent edition of the *Celestina* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1987) focuses here on the "inner space" of the text in light of genre, satire, irony, and humor. Severin sees *Celestina* as a generic hybrid, which moves away from humanistic comedy and sentimental romance to become the first novel. The mode of presentation—the *novelistic discourse* of the title—alienates the characters from the forms they seek to imitate: "Calisto parodies the courtly lover, Melibea lives through classical example and popular song, Sempronio and Pármeno parody students' lore and knowledge, Celestina deals a blow to the world of aphorism and wisdom literature, and even Pleberio gives his own gloss on the lament" (2). The dramatic personae substitute literature for God, and all of them fail. Logic, rhetoric, and literary models are deceptive, inadequate, but Rojas provides no alternatives. The transition from comedy to tragicomedy manifests itself in an ambivalence of purpose which Rojas' statements within the text may help to resolve. In the final analysis, Rojas' most laudable achievement may be the creation of "literary" figures, whose actions and diction are motivated by the conventions of art.

This brief volume is an important study by a distinguished scholar. It raises precisely the right questions, and Severin shows consistently sound critical judgment. One could perhaps argue, with no disrespect intended, that the book does more to foster the polemic surrounding *Celestina* than to reduce the mysteries of the text. If there is a weakness in the study, it may be that the central theses—all of which are provocative and some of which have been introduced in previous essays by the author—are not elaborated as fully as might have been expected. An exception is the treatment of Rojas' parody of the intertext. Every character has ties to the cultural past (and future), and the concept of an ironic rewriting of models, in particular the courtly love tradition, provides a comprehensive frame for readings of *Celestina*. Other questions of genre and authorial aims, not surprisingly, may be a bit more problematical.

If one is to call a text a novel—the first novel—it is necessary to define the term. Severin's guide in this regard is Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*. The choice stems in part from Bakhtin's emphasis on dialogue and his idea that speech diversity and language stratification may operate in the novel without the presence of a narrator. When Severin alludes to "the dialogic world of the modern novel," however, prominent among the Bakhtinian examples is "the refracting discourse of the narrator" (2). While Bakhtin is certainly an authoritative model, Severin does not include commentary from *the Dialogic Imagination* which would differentiate novelistic discourse from poetic or dramatic discourse. Trotaconventos in the *Libro de buen amor* and Don Alonso in *El caballero de Olmedo*, for example, refashion or parody aphoristic and courtly language, and the two works have a range of voices, but few would classify them as novels. The case of *Celestina* calls for a distinction between the dialogic nature of the novel and other forms of dialogue. Characters who "live" through literature are found in a variety of genres. The six-page introductory chapter on novelistic discourse is crucial to the discussion which follows, but the chapter deals with only a part of Bakhtin's system and rarely refers to narrative theory of the past twenty years. I believe that Severin could develop an argument based on the "absent narrator, Rojas," but that the present text does not support completely the contention that the novel is born in *Celestina*.

The general exclusion of narratology and other branches of recent theory from the study may be a conscious omission. In the preface, Severin alludes to "the relation of *Celestina* with its sources—what we now, unfortunately, call intertextuality." The statement suggests that source studies and the construct of the intertext are one and the same, although the distinction seems to be vital to her view of parody. She compromises the primary model and her own premises, perhaps, in the description of a type of language "which Bakhtin calls, rather obscurely, double-voiced and internally dialogized discourse" (2). She makes reference to her "examination of the author's own statements in the prologue poetry and the epilogue poetry ('the intentional fallacy' as it is now called)" (5), when such an examination based on textual evidence would not be an example of the intentional fallacy, a term associated with North American New Criticism of the 1950s.

Analysis of the prefatory materials of *Celestina* as a means of discovering Rojas' intentions (Chapter 2) underscores an ambivalence on the part of the author. Modification of the stated purpose of the text and the intrusion of editors affect message production. Severin's commentary is admirable as a close reading and as a search for the implied presence of the author. Nonetheless, the conclusions seem a bit confusing. The critic affirms at one point, "In short, Rojas changed his stated purpose in writing the work from an essentially aesthetic and didactic one in the *Comedia* to an exclusively didactic one in the *Tragicomedia*" (15). Several pages later, she summarizes, "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" (20-21). A sense of process and alteration seems lost in the concluding remarks. Chapters 6 and 7, on ironic foreshadowing and tragic aspects of Melibea's character, respectively, end somewhat abruptly. While both chapters contain valid points, neither advances the critical corpus.

In *Tragicomedy and Novelistic Discourse in Celestina*, Severin demonstrates how the text manipulates and ultimately inverts the premises of its precedents. The characters reject religious models in favor of literary models. Their behavior and their discourse reflect and become parodies of the forms they imitate. The multiple voices of *Celestina* are commentaries on literature and on life. The enigmatic Fernando de Rojas, who appears only

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briefly and then with alarming subtlety, opens the text by sealing his position, his unique perspective. Severin sets forth a discursive structure which unites character and speech and which respects the openness of the text. In so doing, she reveals an impressive grasp of *Celestina* and of early Spanish literature. The study may be less convincing in its attempt to fit *Celestina* into a definition of the novel which stresses linguistic variation and self-consciousness. There seem to be two major oversights on the level of genre definition. Severin needs to account more fully for the absent narrator, and, while she may prove that Rojas' work "fulfils the requirements of novelistic discourse" (115), she does not show how this novelistic discourse is peculiar to the novel. The volume is an exemplary display of intertextual criticism (whether its author would consider that praise or folly) and an inspired addition to *Celestina* studies.

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