

**CELESTINA "AS A FUNNY BOOK":  
A BAKHTINIAN READING**

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Literary criticism is no laughing matter. On the contrary, the more "classical" the text, the more serious the treatment it seems to deserve. This has of course been the case with most Medieval and Renaissance works, from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and Cervantes' *Don Quijote*. Thankfully, within the serious business of literary criticism, Peter Russell's plea to read "*Don Quijote* as a Funny Book" (1969) came as a refreshing reminder that laughter and literature are not mutually exclusive. The result is not to trivialize Cervantes' masterpiece nor, in Peter Russell's words, to deny it "either profundity as a work of art, or its own kind of seriousness." It is in this spirit that I have adapted the title of Peter Russell's article to head this essay.

Serious play, as Huizinga proposed as early as 1933 in his *Homo ludens* lectures, underlies all creative activity. Although Huizinga's analysis of the play elements in culture pays little attention to the specifically comic, it nevertheless fits in with a number of studies that, in the first half of this century, attempted to define the lighter side in life and letters. Sigmund Freud's classical study on *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) attempted to analyze the technique, motives and purpose of wordplay, double

entendre and "the species of the comic." In 1924, Bergson tackled the elusive question of what makes us laugh in his still valuable book *Le Rire*, concentrating on high and low comedy. Last but not least, Mikhail Bakhtin brought the world of play into the realm of carnival and liberating laughter in his 1941 doctoral thesis on Rabelais and popular culture. His study was not published until 1965, but the lateness of its arrival was made up for by the enormous popularity of its vision concerning the carnivalesque in literature.<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin has had a considerable influence in literary criticism, creating a network of followers who, more often than not, use Bakhtin's words as a platform for their own ideas. A certain skepticism is therefore called for when invoking Bakhtin in order to "prove" that *Celestina* is a funny book. But still, some of his ideas concerning language and communication are eminently applicable to the *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*.

*Celestina* studies have been comparatively slow to consider the lighter side of the *Tragicomedia* when we take into account the many excellent studies on the ludicu that have appeared in the first half of this century. Interestingly enough, it was again Peter Russell who, in 1957, called our attention to humour and laughter in *Celestina*. This was closely followed by Alan Deyermond's unmasking of the opening scene as a parody of courtly love (1961). Ten years later, June Hall Martin included Calisto in her book on *The Parody of the Courtly Lover* (1972), but only in the last few years has there been an overall revision in *Celestina* studies concerning the comic. This new direction was spearheaded by Dorothy Severin's papers and essays on irony, parody and satire now brought together under the heading of *Novelistic Discourse* (1989). The most recent plea to see the consistent humour in *Celestina* has, however, come from María Eugenia Lacarra

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<sup>1</sup> The first translation of this book appeared in English under the title *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1968). The French version, from which I cite, came out in 1970 entitled *L'oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance*, Paris: Gallimard. The Spanish translation *La cultura popular en la Edad Media y en el Renacimiento* followed in 1974, Barcelona: Seix Barral.

who, in her book *Cómo leer la Celestina*, urges us to consider the "laughing matter" of the story as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of these sporadic efforts, the *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* still stands as more a tragic than a comic testimony to the darker side of life and sex. This should not surprise us, considering that Proaza, the "corrector" of the *Comedia* in more senses than one expressly tells readers to bemoan "el trágico fin que todos hobieron." Most critic-readers have followed his advice and have constructed a whole world around Fernando de Rojas that reflects a pessimistic existentialism or a philosophy of life reminiscent of Unamuno's *sentido trágico de la vida*.

Defying the notion that laughter equates with trivialization, I would like here to amplify a conclusion I reached late in the writing of *Seneca and Celestina*, namely that the *Tragicomedia*, far from being a "Stoic" book, is in fact a parody of two cult-figures, Seneca and Petrarch. To extend my argument I include here the cult of courtly love and other venerable institutions and suggest that the parody of cults should be taken in a much wider context than that of texts alone. The target is not only the written word but also the society that created, practised and believed in the validity of such institutions and values.

At the end of a long process of stifling scholasticism, moralistic truisms and the conventions of courtly love, the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea* made its disturbing appearance. In fact, its irreverent references to religion, philosophy and the concept of love, make the book difficult to place. At the risk of seeming simplistic or, worse, of flattening the text, I would like to situate this work in what Bakhtin describes as "la joyeuse littérature récréative des écoliers" (158). After all, genius can be found in youth and students have been judged to be brilliant. Most importantly, being as yet on the margins of society, students can risk a laugh at its hallowed institutions with impunity.

According to Bakhtin, the "rise of laughter," still more or less spontaneous in the Middle Ages, had become an art ("conscience

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<sup>2</sup> In "Complicitous Laughter: Hilarity and Seduction in *Celestina*," Michael Gerli examines how the characters themselves find certain remarks and circumstances surprisingly laughable (*Hispanic Review*, in press).

artistique," 81) in the Renaissance and was in fact essential to achieve both the destruction and renewal of old forms and contexts. But, as Bakhtin is quick to point out, this laughter did not have the biting edge of satire nor the elitist double entendre of irony. Carnavalesque laughter is a "rire de fête," a shared joke and universal in that it mocks the whole world and its institutions.

Thus, *Celestina* comes to represent that "other life" in the world of letters, a world to which Bakhtin refers when he reminds us that, in parallel with serious cults of religion and scholarship, there existed in Medieval society a whole "world upside down" that parodied the same divinities so venerated in everyday life.<sup>3</sup> There are the *joca monachorum* of clerics, the goliardic poetry of students, the parody of the sacred embedded in literature of which the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Libro de buen amor* are such striking examples. In the sixteenth century, Bakhtin cites Erasmus' *Laus Stultitiae*, Rabelais' *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* and Cervantes' *Don Quijote*, to which we should add the whole picaresque genre, as typical examples of playful mockery and liberating laughter.

Outside literature, that is to say in daily life, there also existed a time and a place where a sustained mockery of the established order was accepted and these, Bakhtin believes, are to be found in the festive ambiance of carnival time: "la fête devenait en l'occurrence la forme que revêtait la seconde vie du peuple qui pénétrait temporairement dans le royaume utopique de l'universalité, de la liberté, de l'égalité et de l'abondance" (17).

Mindful of the fact that, on his own admission, Fernando de Rojas wrote the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea* during his holidays when a student at Salamanca, I would like to trace a parallel between student life and carnival time. There is no need here to apply a literalist interpretation of the circumstances surrounding the genesis of *Celestina*. What is important is the tone or, perhaps, the excuse adopted in the prefatory letter which places the *Comedia* in the doubly

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<sup>3</sup> Carlos Varo refers briefly to *Celestina* in his introduction to the *Carajicomedia* (1981): "A modo de anticipación declaramos que la *Carajicomedia* al igual que la *Celestina* ... pertenece a un cierto tipo de literatura protestataria, libertaria quizá, en sordo inconformismo con los valores sociales y éticos prevalectantes" (9-10). In a footnote he refers to "un futuro desarrollo en forma de libro" of an idea that is worth developing.

extraordinary span of student life and holiday time. Both signify a period in which restrictions of social hierarchy and dominant ideologies are temporarily suspended and where solidarity and mocking laughter reign supreme. In this ambiance of student pranks and freedom, until recently a hallmark of the more traditional universities, youth's rebellion against age and authority is accepted, albeit only temporarily.

Laughter and solidarity, whether in the extraordinary circumstance of carnival time or that of student life, give rise to an equally extraordinary type of communication. That is to say, what seems serious on the outside may well be comic on the inside and thus bring about a complete change that is comprehensible only to the initiated. For the purpose of this essay I will call attention only to three salient features of what Bakhtin calls "carnavalesque communication," a type of discourse that also seems to characterize the Celestinesque dialogue.

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Perhaps the most constant feature that carnivalesque communication and student discourse have in common is a certain mockery that comes to the surface as a smile, a wink, a grin or even a plain guffaw. This laughter brings all that is generally considered elevated, spiritual or abstract down to a material, corporal and concrete level. In turn, what is sacred or venerated becomes an object of mockery thus creating a parody of cults.

By far the most difficult component to analyze is laughter itself. For Peter Russell (1957), "laughter is one of the ways in which a man may self-consciously defy the attempt of circumstances, or fate, to crush him." There is no doubt about it, a pessimistic note hovers over his vision of humour in *Celestina*, as is evident from his remark that "a capacity to appreciate what is comical about human behaviour and utterance is not, of course, incompatible with a very pessimistic understanding of the ultimate human condition." This darker side of laughter has been the mood in most studies on irony in *Celestina* (Ayllón 1970, 1984; Severin 1989). However, like laughter, irony has two faces, one negative, the other positive, "depending on your taste, habits, training, politics, or whatever," as Linda Hutcheon (1992) puts it. In this article she contrasts some positive and negative functions of irony that might well be applicable to laughter as well. On an ever

increasing scale between the positive and the negative of the critical edge, she contrasts complex (positive) as against ambiguous (negative), playful (positive) as against trivializing (negative), corrective and transgressive (positive) as against offensive and defensive (negative) and, at the widest end of the gap between positive and negative positions, she puts inclusionary (positive) as opposed to exclusionary (negative). I would like to consider laughter in *Celestina* in this positive, inclusionary ambient, where the complex game of allusions and references is played out in a group and where the transgression of boundaries is permitted by student mores.

In an attempt to highlight the comic in *The Canterbury Tales*, Laura Kendrick (1988) considers laughter as "a metalinguistic sign," a framing "no" that reverses the meaning of the signs within its bounds. In its assertion that "this is not real," laughter is related to play of all sorts, including literary play or fiction, which denies everyday reality in order to replace it with "a deliberately distorting mimesis" (1). Her debt to Huizinga and Bakhtin is apparent in these words; but she goes further in stressing the necessity of laughter in life where "the strain of ordinary physical and mental labor needed to be relieved or balanced by relaxing pursuits, one of which might be the pleasure of listening to fictions" (41).<sup>4</sup>

Rojas' admission that writing fiction was "tan extraña labor y tan agena de mi facultad" (203) clearly puts his literary pursuits on a different level from his legal studies.<sup>5</sup> In fact, his choice of the words "extraña labor" brings to mind the otherness of legal studies where language is constrained by "the letter of the law," and speech is encoded in formulaic argumentation. In contrast to the world of fiction, jurisprudence requires proof that is demonstrated by evidence and substantiated by legal authorities in clear and unambiguous terms. To the student of law, the world of fiction must appear a "world upside down," where statements can be made without proof,

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<sup>4</sup> Her book deconstructs "a long tradition of censorship in Chaucer criticism [that] involves ignoring anything that does not seem sufficiently serious in Chaucer's writing, while demonstratively praising that which does" (22). It seems to me that *Celestina* studies still fall in that very critical tradition she is reassessing.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations are taken from Peter Russell's edition, Madrid: Castalia, 1991. References to his notes and introduction are shown as *Edición*.

relevance to the issue at hand is unnecessary, and where the goal is not Justice, but more often than not, indeterminacy.<sup>6</sup> In the Celestinesque world, reasoning is chaotic, facts are distorted, language is ambiguous, the *non sequitur* abounds, and authorities are abused. Compared to the practice of law, language and communication in the fictitious world of *Celestina* seem a relief from constrained speech and, as such, a relaxation of tensions in an ambiance of liberating laughter and fun.

But neither the language of law nor that of fiction is "realistic" as both follow certain rules of the game. These, in the Celestinesque dialogue, are similar to what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism." This is how he designates the process by which all that is held in high esteem is "downed" to the level of the body.<sup>7</sup> Images of eating and drinking, bodily needs and sexual drives are all expressed in a festive grammar ("grammaire joyeuse") of exclusively physical and erotic categories. The life cycle of conception, pregnancy, birth, growing body, illness, old age, decrepitude and death constitute grotesque contrasts with the classical canon of human beauty and harmony. This festive grammar of body language was, according to Bakhtin, very much the hallmark of the world of scholars in the Middle Ages and lives on to this day in the oral tradition of schools and colleges.

*Celestina* offers countless examples of this "festive grammar." It should, however, be noted that the grotesque in the *Tragicomedia* is far less pronounced than in the stories of Gargantua and Pantagruel. In Spain, the caricaturesque celebration of the distasteful effects of overeating and other "unmentionable" body functions will have to wait until the advent of the picaresque and its greatest celebrant, Quevedo. The festive grammar in *Celestina* is more in the style of

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Simon Fothergill for clarifying for me a few points concerning the language and practice of Civil Law. See Peter E. Russell, "La *Celestina* y los estudios jurídicos de Fernando de Rojas" (*Temas*, 323-340) and his discussion of Rojas as a student at Salamanca, first in the Facultad de Artes and then in the Facultad de Derecho where he studied mainly Civil or Roman Law (*Edición*, 32-34).

<sup>7</sup> In "Bakhtin's Grotesque Realism and the Thematic Unity of *Celestina*, Act I," Ricardo Castells analyzes how Act I "progresses from the immaterial space of ideas and images to the physical space of the lower body and the senses"; but he omits any consideration of how humorous this might be.

"wink, wink, ... say no more," such as in Celestina's comparison of Pármeno's "punta de barriga" with the sting of the scorpion, which results in Pármeno's laughter (I, 253). In turn, the laughter during Pármeno's initiation into the delights of lovemaking in Act VII is ours. His polite greetings at the door of Areúsa's bedroom are a superb mimicry of the codified forms in use by the upper classes. But then, Pármeno's courteous "Señora, Dios salve tu graciosa presencia," countered by Areúsa's "Gentilhombre, buena sea tu venida," is rudely interrupted by Celestina's "¡Llégate acá, asno!" (VII, 378). Pármeno's appropriation of polite discourse is again deflated by Celestina when his offer to accompany her home triggers the sexual innuendo "Sería quitar a un sancto por poner en otro"<sup>8</sup> followed by the explicit "no he temor que me fuerçen en la calle" (VII, 381).

By constantly bringing down the conversation to a corporal and concrete level, Celestina is the true carnivalesque counterpart of polite discourse. She also provides the cheerful background for the encounter with her appreciation of Areúsa's body, touching and tickling her and making her giggle: "¡Passo, madre! No llegues a mí, que me fazes coxquillas y provócasme a reyr, y la risa acreciéntame el dolor" (VII, 372). With the mention of aches and pains we enter that other part of grotesque realism that highlights illness and dubious cures. Areúsa suffers from "la madre," a topic of conversation that triggers a long discussion on how to cure such an inconvenience. This, in turn, leads to the double entendre of Areúsa's wish to talk to Pármeno about it: "hablemos en mi mal" (VIII, 386), meaning to continue the lovemaking the following morning.<sup>9</sup> Here, Celestina plays a capital role in preparing the scene, from her praise of Areúsa's body to her enthusiasm for Pármeno's sexuality: "un putillo, galillo, barbiponiente, entiendo que en tres noches no se le demude la cresta" (VII, 379). Perhaps our Victorian inheritance is still too strong to enable us to laugh at the body but, "bien mirado," bodies are funny things when seen with a certain detachment. Even Erasmus who, like Rojas, took time off from serious work to write his *Laus Stultitiae*,

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<sup>8</sup> The obscure meaning of this proverb is that "Celestina insinúa irónicamente que, al acompañarla Pármeno, podría ella reemplazar a Areúsa como blanco de los deseos sexuales del joven (*Edición*, 381, n.100).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Russell clarifies that "el 'mal' persistente de la muchacha es eufemismo por deseo sexual" (*Edición*, 386, n.1). On the nature and implications of this mal see also James Burke's article in this volume.



makes Folly remind us right at the opening of her long speech, that what begets god or men is not "the head nor the face, nor breast, hand or ear, all thought of as respectable parts of the body," but "that part which is so foolish and absurd that it can't be named without raising a laugh" (76).<sup>10</sup>

The meal that Pármemo and Sempronio plan the day after the night before could well be termed the apotheosis of the body in that it combines abundance of food with uninhibited sex. Traditionally, a banquet has always been a joyous occasion to celebrate a victory or some other important event. In fact, Bakhtin dedicates a whole chapter of his book on Rabelais to this type of feast arguing that "Le banquet est une pièce nécessaire à toute réjouissance populaire. Aucun acte comique essentiel ne peut se passer de lui" (277). After all, what is here being celebrated is not the daily business of eating and drinking, but togetherness, abundance of food and wine and shared joy. In turn, images of food are intimately linked with the body's growth, its fertility and reproduction and are thus a jubilant confirmation of life. Victory, an essential element in the celebration of a banquet, is, in its broadest sense, a triumph of life over death and, in a more specific way, celebrates the victory over an enemy, the sealing of a pact or the return to peace.

Ironically, the banquet in the *Tragicomedia*, at roughly the midpoint of the story, signals not life but death, in that at its end, Lucrecia comes in with the message that Melibea has capitulated. In other respects though, the meal enjoyed in Celestina's house has all the characteristics of the feast analyzed by Bakhtin. It celebrates not only Pármemo's sexual victory but also the reconciliation between the two servants, to judge by Sempronio's words "no dudo ya tu confederación con nosotros ser la que deve ... y así paz para todo el año ... Comamos y holguemos, que nuestro amo ayunará por todos" (VIII, 392-93). A new alignment has taken place as, moments before entering Areúsa's bed, Pármemo was made to promise "de aquí adelante ser muy amigo de Sempronio y venir en todo lo que quisiere contra su amo en un negocio que traemos entre manos" (VII, 379). Thus, the Celestinesque banquet fits perfectly into Bakhtin's definition

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<sup>10</sup> I quote from *Praise of Folly*, translated by Betty Radice with an introduction and notes by A. H. T. Levi (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971).

of an "encadrement adéquat de toute une série d'événements capitaux" (282).

But there is the reversal of the medallion, one that shows the carnivalesque face of laughter turning hallowed institutions and values upside down. In Celestina's house, a banquet traditionally celebrated by the upper classes is enjoyed by servants and prostitutes. The occasion for it is not a peace treaty at the highest political level but "un negocio que traemos entre manos." Conversation is not marked by polite discourse but by flaring tempers and silly jealousies concerning the female body. In fact, Areúsa's grotesque realism in the description of Melibea's physical flaws are a clear counterpoint to Calisto's high-sounding praise of her perfections in Act I. To Areúsa, Melibea's nipples look "como si tres vezes hoviesse parido: no parecen sino dos grandes calabças" and "El vientre, no se le [he] visto, pero juzgando por lo otro, creo que le tiene tan floxo como vieja de cincuenta años" (IX, 408). This is a conscious reverse of Calisto's lengthy, but no less exaggerated, praise of Melibea's bodily excellence. He too mentions her nipples: "la redondeza y forma de las pequeñas tetas, ¿quién te las podrá figurar? ¿que se despereza el hombre quando las mira!" He too refers to the hidden parts of her body: "Aquella proporción que veer yo no pude, sin duda, por el bullo de fuera, juzgo incomparablemente ser mejor que la que París juzgó entre las tres deesas" (I, 231-32). In the end, Celestina manages to redirect their attention with the words "Gozá vuestras frescas mocedades" (IX, 413), and as usual, she supplies the sexual background with her explicit comments on the guests' table manners: "Bendígaos Dios ¡cómo lo reys y holgáys, putillos, loquillos, traviesos! ... ¡Mirá no derribés la mesa!" (IX, 414). Finally, the banquet ends with Sempronio's impatient exhortation, "Alcese la mesa. Yrnos hemos a holgar," which is a clear indication of how food, wine and sex are interrelated needs of the body.

In this respect, it is not entirely out of the question that Rojas might have had a parodic allusion to Plato's *Symposium* in mind, a banquet where love and beauty are discussed in terms of philosophy and aesthetics. Indeed Nicholas Round (1993) has briefly considered such a possibility but rejected the parallel on the grounds that it would have been remarkable that Rojas could have read the *Symposium* before 1500 and even more so that his readers would have recognized the spoof (106).

Where we might be on safer ground would be in taking a closer look at the banquet's space and the characters' occupations. The place is a bawdy house, the interlocutors are servants and prostitutes—we have entered the core of the world of prostitution. To understand the tensions and conflicts surrounding this institution María Eugenia Lacarra (1993) has rendered us an invaluable service with her study on the laws and ordinances regulating prostitution in Salamanca at the time of *Celestina's* appearance.

At exactly that time, prostitution and its revenues came under the control of the Concejo de Salamanca which put an end to the free enterprise that had previously been so profitable for Celestina. At the banquet, Celestina reminisces nostalgically about her private bawdy house when she had nine girls between 14 and 18 years of age and a clientele that comprised "cavalleros, viejos y moços, abades de todas dignidades, desde obispos hasta sacristanes" (IX, 419). Best of all, while the girls worked hard, the profit fell to her: "mío era el provecho, suyo el afán." However, financial and administrative control exercised by the Municipality put an end to all that easy profit. But instead of eradicating the now illegal practice of prostitution, it fostered a network of clandestine operations represented by Celestina, Elicia, and especially Areúsa.

In this light, Areúsa's impassioned speech against servitude is as much a Stoic confirmation of self control and freedom as an accusation against the powers that be. Thus, her final words, "Por esto, madre, he querido más vivir en mi pequeña casa, esenta y señora, que no en sus ricos palacios, sojuzgada y cativa" (IX, 416-17) can be read on more than one level. The irony is that Areúsa's conclusion comes straight from Seneca's *De Vita Beata*, a reference that might not have escaped readers and listeners of the *Tragicomedia*. That in itself is already a comic contrast coming as it does from the mouth of a prostitute. But when we then link the "vita beata" to the happy life of illegal prostitution, the joke is on us. Who does not enjoy an anti-government poke or like to side with the victims of state control?

In Act IX, the official world is turned upside down, Church and State are unmasked as great partners in the world of prostitution, and the upper classes, part of that very network, are derided for their oppression and cruelty to those that serve them. The banquet, that venerated institution of officialdom and propriety, is deflated to its crudest form of abundant food and wine, sex and corruption. With its

denunciation of the powers that be, the hidden meaning of this parody might be that at least the prostitutes' trade is more frank and straightforward than the official world. Moreover, the representatives of the unofficial world in *Celestina* are full of a *joie de vivre* sadly lacking in Pleberio's world.<sup>11</sup>

The bringing down of all that is held in high esteem to a corporal and concrete level is apparent in every turn of phrase in the Celestinesque discourse. All interlocutors, including the impatient lovers, deflate spiritual values by giving them a concrete, corporal meaning. We see such a transference of meaning in Sempronio's quotation of the Aristotelian maxim "Assí como la materia apetece a la forma, así la muger al varón" (I, 232), to which Calisto immediately gives a literal twist when he sighs "Y cuándo veré yo eso entre mí y Melibea." When he is finally about to experience "eso," he uses the metaphor "el que quiere comer el ave, quita primero las plumas" (XIX, 571), a remark that puts an end to the romantic prelude of sweet songs which greeted his arrival. Throughout the novel, metaphor regains its literal level: such as in the proverb "quien torpemente sube a lo alto, más aína cae que subió," a Senecan *sententia* quoted by both the male servants (Act I and V) and which comes literally true when both fall to their deaths. The abstract meaning of the *sententia* of course also applies to Calisto who, in his hasty retreat from Melibea's garden, falls off the ladder and literally loses his head, judging by Tristán's comment, "Coge, Sosia, esos sesos de essoè cantos; júntalos con la cabeça del desdichado amo nuestro" (XIX, 575).

As many critics have noted how proverb and metaphor literally come true as the story develops, there is no need to elaborate this point here. However, there is one example not touched on before, that corresponds particularly well to the change of direction from abstract to concrete: and that is the concept of *seso*.<sup>12</sup> "Perder el seso," "estar en" or "fuera de seso" are frequently used metaphors to denote a state of mind which is then brought down to a "state of the body." Interestingly, Areúsa is the only one not to end up losing her head in a figurative and literal sense thanks to her "Stoic" decision

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<sup>11</sup> See Deyermond (1993) where he makes the same contrast between Sempronio's male macro-society and *Celestina*'s female micro-society (10).

<sup>12</sup> I have dealt with this concept in its Stoic connotation in *Seneca and Celestina* (51, 72, 86, 104, 114, 141).

to go independent, a detachment that merits Celestina's comment "En tu seso has estado. Bien sabes lo que hazes" (IX, 416-17).

By contrast, Pármeno's sexual victory immediately puts him among the ranks of doomed lovers; as Sempronio puts it: "¿Ya todos amamos? ¡El mundo se va a perder! Calisto a Melibea, yo a Elicia; tú, de embidia, has buscado con quien perder esse poco de seso que tienes" (VIII, 388). But Sempronio does not keep his head either, as moments before his death he comes to Celestina's house in a rage and bursts out "Por Dios, sin seso vengo, desesperado" (XII, 477). Calisto's sudden infatuation with Melibea had already been described by Sempronio in Act I as "tan contrario acontecimiento que así tan presto robó el alegría deste hombre, y lo que peor es, junto con ella el seso" (I, 216). This state of mind is matched by Melibea's, for she is frequently described as being "fuera de seso," as when Celestina mentions the name Calisto, which on Melibea's own admission "era bastante para me sacar de seso" (IV, 321). Finally, as we hear from Lucrecia, she loses all her senses during Celestina's second visit: "El seso tiene perdido mi señora. Gran mal es éste" (X, 432). Like Calisto, Sempronio and Pármeno, Melibea ends up "hecha pedaços" (XXI, 595).

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So much for "el trágico fin que todos hubieron" and Calisto and Melibea's stumbling appropriation of the outmoded code of courtly love.<sup>13</sup> But the cult of love is only one of many that is deflated with a liberating laughter in the *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Another cult to come tumbling down from Olympus is the reverence rendered to Seneca and Petrarch, and through these "auctoritates" to that whole literature of moralizing anthologies, *sententiae* and proverbs that characterizes the taste of the fifteenth-century "new reader."

Interestingly, the discourse of all interlocutors in *Celestina* reflects and imitates the content of these short-cuts to learning that I like to call the *Readers' Digest* of the age. The student authors of the

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<sup>13</sup> Proaza's pessimistic admonition contained in the strophe "Toco cómo se devía la obra llamar tragicomedia y no comedia" seems to have been an afterthought as it appears for the first time in the Valencia 1514 edition of the *Tragicomedia* (Edición, 615, n. 19).

*Tragicomedia* clearly liked to poke fun at precisely that pseudo-knowledge of the fifteenth-century *Readers' Digest* consumer whose wisdom was based on spouting maxims and famous sayings. Thus, the nouveau-riche of learning comes to be an ideal target for parody with his or her excessive quoting (and misquoting) of *auctoritates*, *non-sequitur* in discourse, and ill-remembered maxims, which cause those in the know to exchange a conspiratorial wink.

*Celestina* is full of such commonplaces drawn in the main from the Index to Petrarch's works or the pseudo-Senecan *Proverbs*. For example, during her first visit to Melibea Celestina stacks up four *sententiae* culled from the Index: "no es vencido sino el que se cree serlo" (IV, 316), "ninguna tempestad mucho dura" (IV, 317), "la verdad no es necesario abundar de muchas colores" (IV, 318), and "a la firme verdad el viento del vulgo no la empece" (IV, 320). All these truisms are paired with the most common proverbs and Senecan *sententiae*, a "coincidence" that shows how much of a commonplace some of these sayings were at the time. More interestingly though, it also shows what company Seneca and Petrarch were keeping when it came to wisdom and philosophy. The most pedestrian *sententiae* are, however, to be found in Act X during Celestina's second visit to Melibea. We find these Petrarchan quotations drawn from the Index: "Lo duro con duro se ablanda más eficazmente," "nunca peligro sin peligro se vence," and "pocas veces lo molesto sin molestia se cura y un clavo con otro se espele" (X, 434). Part of the humour resides, to be sure, in the quick succession of these platitudes proffered in one and the same breath.

In contrast to these pedestrian commonplaces, the interlocutors also indulge in extreme flights of fancy in their speech. Their verbal affectation consists not only in verbosity and excessive use of *sententiae* but also in a certain artificiality or plain nonsense.<sup>14</sup> Calisto especially is prone to this verbal excess, as when he is the proud possessor of Melibea's sash. Overcome by emotion he cites in quick succession the *exemplum* of Adelecta (VI, 345), a prophetess from Petrarch's *De rebus memorandis*, the mal à propos of Alcibiades "que se veyá embuelto en el manto de su amiga, y otro día

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<sup>14</sup> For the relation between affectation and the Stoic concept of *affectus* see my "Afecto, afeción y afectación en *Celestina*," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 15 (1990-91), 401-10.

matáronle" (VI, 348), of classical and mythological figures such as Dido and Aeneas, Venus, Helen of Troy, Polixena, one of Achilles girlfriends, and so on. Again, the quick succession of these *exempla* coupled with the sheer pedantry of the catalogue would add to the general merriment.

Melibea's verbal affectation is equally ridiculous when, for instance, she compares Celestina's power with the words "quando vio en sueños aquel grande Alexandre, rey de Macedonia, en la boca del dragón la saludable rayz con que sanó a su criado Tolomeo del bocado de la bívora" (X, 428-9), or when to justify her suicide she cites *exempla* of those who inflicted pain on their family and relations, and crowns her long list of evil-doers with what almost sounds like an afterthought: "Finalmente, me ocurre aquella gran crueldad de Phrates, rey de los parthos, que, por que no quedasse sucesor después dél, mató a Orode[s], su viejo padre, y a su único hijo y treynta hermanos suyos" (XX, 584).<sup>15</sup> Readers and listeners should by now be in stitches, but curiously enough, critics anticipating Melibea's imminent suicide and mindful of her poor father who has helplessly to endure her long speech before witnessing his only daughter fall to her death, have not been able to spot how ridiculous her speech nor the situation are. But then, how could they? The death of a child, the bereavement of a father, solitude and nothingness are no laughing matter.

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This brings us to Pleberio's lament and, inevitably, the question of whether Pleberio could be a comic figure as well. Of the characters whose revision was long overdue, Melibea and even Celestina have been the latest to be unmasked for what they are: Melibea has had to relinquish her status as tragic victim of circumstances (Lacarra, 1989) and Celestina as a sinister figure endowed with diabolic powers (Severin 1993). When it comes to Pleberio, however, most critics draw the line, hearing in his lament an overwhelmingly sad note which would explain the deep pessimism of the *Tragicomedia* as a whole. But María Eugenia Lacarra (1990) sums up the view of a

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<sup>15</sup> For a serious, but not therefore less valid, analysis of Melibea's inappropriate catalogue and other *auctoritates* in *Celestina* see George Shipley, "Authority and Experience in *La Celestina*," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 62 (1985), 95-111.

growing number of critics when she says that Pleberio is hardly the person to explain the world to us and least of all to be the spokesman for universal truths. As she puts it in her inimitable style, "La visión fatalista que presenta es una verdad de perogrullo" (103).

It seems to me that the amount of empathy we bring to our reading is a deciding factor in whether we interpret Pleberio's long speech as tragic or comic. Bakhtin has some very pertinent thoughts on the act of reading, that precarious balancing act of entering into a text while still "maintaining one's own place" outside it. "In empathy," he says, "one tries to merge totally with the suffering other and to experience the world entirely from the other's place. But even if such 'pure in-dwelling' were possible, it would in any case be unproductive because total identification precludes the capacity to contribute something new: 'in someone else's place I am as without meaning as I am in my own place'" (quoted from Morson & Emerson 1989, 95). Later on, he again stresses the importance of creative understanding as against passive understanding or empathy, because the latter "simply reproduces what is already there." Total identification with the grieving father would of course make any lighthearted reading impossible and would almost impose a tragic interpretation. However, contrary to prevailing opinion, I would argue that Pleberio's lament is consistent with the preceding Acts and should in fact make us laugh and not cry.

To produce laughter, Bergson says, three conditions must be met: first, the object must be a human being, as one does not laugh at inanimate objects or animals unless these have somehow been invested with human traits, and second, the object should not evoke our sympathy, insensibility at the time of laughing being crucial: "Le rire n'a pas de plus grand ennemi que l'émotion ... il faudra oublier cette affection, faire taire cette pitié." In fact, he urges us to detach ourselves: "détachez-vous ... assistez à la vie en spectateur indifférent: bien des drames tourneront à la comédie" (5). This is exactly the point made by Alonso López Pinciano, quoted by Peter Russell in his article on "Don Quixote as a Funny Book." Speaking of comedy, Pinciano states in his *Philosophia antiqua poetica*, III, 24 and 26: "aunque en los actores aya turbaciones y quexas, no passan, como he dicho, en los oyentes, sino que de la perturbación del actor se fina el oyente de risa." An important detail here is that Pinciano talks about "oyentes," which points to a group of listeners and not the solitary reader who is free to follow his or her own associations.



And this brings us to Bergson's third condition for producing laughter, and that is the importance of the group: "votre rire est toujours le rire d'un groupe," he says; "le rire cache une arrière-pensée d'entente, je dirais presque de complicité, avec d'autres rieurs, réels ou imaginaires" (7). Laughter thus becomes a social condition: "Le rire doit répondre à certaines exigences de la vie en commun. Le rire doit avoir une signification sociale" (6-8).

Reading in the fifteenth century was indeed a social activity, involving one reader who read aloud to a circle of friends. The importance of hearing rather than reading a text has been illustrated by Dorothy Severin in her paper on "Celestina as a Comic Figure" (1993) which, being read aloud at the *Celestina* Conference where it was given, had all the persuasive intonations to make her audience agree that Celestina is indeed very funny. Similarly, Proaza recommended "mill artes y modos" while reading the *Tragicomedia* to the hearers ("oyentes"), "llorando y riendo en tiempo y sazón" (614). We will never know whether Pleberio's lament constituted "tiempo y sazón" for laughter or tears, but for those who are prepared to see Pleberio as a comic figure there seems ample scope to bring out not the sublime but the ridiculous of his lament.

How to make people look comic has been studied by Freud in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. "The principal means," he says, is "to put them in situations in which a person becomes comic as result of human dependence on external events, particularly on social factors, without regard to the personal characteristics of the individual concerned" (199). In the case of Pleberio, we have had very little opportunity to know his "personal characteristics"; in fact he strikes us rather as an automaton who cites on cue the most blatant truisms and fallacies concerning external events such as fortune and the world (Fothergill-Payne 1988, 91-95; 115). This sort of rigidity is what makes one laugh, according to Bergson. In fact, such a person ceases to be a character and becomes "un mécanisme superposé à la vie" (46). The comic, then, as described in *Le rire*, is that aspect of a person that makes him or her resemble a puppet on a string that voices "une imperfection individuelle ou collective qui appelle la correction immédiate. Le rire est cette correction" (88). How to give voice to such a person is of course a matter of acting the role, and mimicry would be the indicated mode.

Mimicry, according to Freud, "gives quite extraordinary pleasure to the hearer and makes its object comic even if it is still far from the exaggeration of a caricature" (200). This middle road between the sublime and the ridiculous achieved by mimicry is indeed the way in which I would like to read Pleberio's lament.

Mimicry is imitation in performances, but not all imitation is successful. What distinguishes a good from a bad imitation is the capacity to add something new. Simply copying the model word for word would amount to "theft" or plagiarism. On the other hand, the model should not be disguised to the extent that it is no longer recognizable (D.A. Russell 1981, 112). Good imitation then should contain an element of novelty while still leaving room to appreciate a skillful *imitatio*, and this I would suggest is the literary invention or as María Lida de Malkiel would call it, the "originality" of the concluding Act. This invention or novelty then engages the readers and listeners in an active play of spotting references rather than "passive" empathy with the speaker.

As critics have pointed out, Pleberio's lament imitates the prescribed rules of the *planctus* but he derives no solace from it. He imitates Stoic philosophy but gets it all wrong; he asks a number of rhetorical questions which, by their very nature, need no answer. Apart from imitating a number of "models" such as Seneca's philosophy on grieving, Petrarchan *exempla* and the *planctus* genre in general, the most recognizable literary model is the *Cárcel de amor*, recently studied in detail by Luis Miguel Vicente (1988) and Dorothy Severin (1989). But while Severin records only the similarities between the speeches in the *Cárcel de amor* and *Celestina*, Vicente brings out the differences. And here to my mind lies the value of source study and intertextuality: it is not just a question of pointing to textual references but rather to bringing out the discrepancies between model and imitation, all the while keeping the source in mind.

As Vicente reminds us, Pleberio contravenes the rules of an authentic lament by omitting half the prescribed elements of the elegiac form: the *laus* and the *consolatio*. But then, how could Pleberio have praised Melibea's virtues as she had just informed him that she was neither innocent nor good? Melibea's only value in Pleberio's eyes is that of heiress to his accumulated goods and companion in his old age. By the very impossibility of adhering to the *laus* and the

*consolatio*, Rojas may well have wanted to bring out the inappropriateness of the *planctus* model and ridicule its *imitatio*. Another discrepancy between model and imitation is "la causa de morir" of the two deaths. In Vicente's words, Melibea is "una suicida por amor carnal" while "Leriano muere en servicio de la fama de Laureola." Yet another difference brought out in this excellent article is that in *Cárcel de amor* there is no antagonism between God and the World, "sencillamente no hay mundo." By contrast, in Pleberio's lament the World is the great wrongdoer and the formidable enemy which he addresses in person, the unreliable spoilsport of all his expectations. The greatest contrast is, however, the one between the speakers themselves: while the lament in *Cárcel de amor* is pronounced by a woman, Pleberio is a man. What can we deduce of such a crossover? Would the imitation of a well-known female complaint have coloured the "mimicry" of Pleberio's "voice"? And what about Melibea's mother? Could there not also be an implied contrast between Alisa and the grieving mother in *Cárcel de Amor*? As is often the case, the consideration of absences is as important as that of presences in the game of intertextuality. Indeed, the absence of Alisa's voice in Pleberio's lament may well point to "her unspoken complicity in the seduction of Melibea" (Gerli, in press).

*Cárcel de amor* may have been a model for imitation, but Fernando de Rojas' re-fashioning of the "llanto" is, at first glance, cruel. But then, so is the concept of love in the sentimental romance. As Keith Whinnom points out in his introduction to *Cárcel de amor*, courtly love with its belief in perfect love and the perfect lover was an impossible concept. Values like chastity, eternal love and constancy, self sacrifice for an impossible ideal are not values but fallacies. *Celestina* could well have been a corrective to all the psychological tension and agony presented in the sentimental romance, showing, as it does, the role of sex and the body in this fascinating process we call "falling in love."

In a Bakhtinian sense then, Pleberio's lament brings all that is abstract and spiritual in the sentimental romance down to the concrete and corporal level. Consequently, one could extend the parody in Pleberio's lament to the whole of the *Tragicomedia*, where the cult of courtly chastity and suffering is juxtaposed with a grotesque realism that emphasizes sex and pure joy in the body. Seen this way, laughter in *Celestina* is both destructive and liberating: it destroys the notion of courtly love as a model for courting and

liberates the readers and listeners from believing in a stifling code of behaviour perpetuated by the poets as true and valuable. Poets should, however, not be blamed for presenting these beliefs as moral truths. More likely, the butt of mockery in Rojas' parody were students of literature and more especially those readers of the sentimental romance who were unable to separate fiction from reality. In this respect, Fernando de Rojas was not very different from Cervantes in that he did not so much criticize a genre but rather the readers' "empathy" with its heroes.

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Parody and laughter in *Celestina* can thus be seen as a corrective to a number of literary fallacies that were "doing the rounds" at the end of the fifteenth century. In an excellent article on "Parody, History and Metaparody," Gary Saul Morson speaks of the parodic genre as an "anti-genre which can be identified by the membership of its works in a tradition of similar works and the existence (or readers' assumption of the existence) of a set of conventions governing the interpretation of those works" (75). Parody may not always be apparent to twentieth-century readers because it implies currency; or, in Morson's words, "Parody locates a text in its compromising context, we tend not to engage in parody when that context is either unfamiliar or uninteresting" (75). But students at the University of Salamanca in the last decade of the fifteenth century would have been able to spot this network of allusions and references to the sentimental romances, the works of Petrarch, and the Senecan translations and anthologies, which were *auctoritates* highly valued by students of literature and which, for that very reason, might have provoked the mockery of a student of law. The very excess or inappropriateness of the literary references that colour the *argumento* of the *Tragicomedia* should also alert literary critics to its parodic use. But then, we may have lost some part of what Huizinga calls our "facultas ludendi," that is to say, the ability to see life, literature and art as a game to be played in various ways and on various levels.

When the first readers of the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea* sat together to hear the work, they were actively engaged in a serious form of play, spotting references and allusions in competition with one another, agreeing and disagreeing because of their varying understanding of the book. Indeed, Rojas alludes to this competitive game of reading when he says in the Prologue: "quando diez

personas se juntaren a oyr esta comedia, en quien quepa esta diferencia de condiciones, como suele acaescer, ¿quién negará que aya contienda en cosa que de tantas maneras se entienda?" (201). This element of "contienda" or contest is one of the many aspects of play that Huizinga detects in culture and particularly in the academic milieu. Other elements present in literature are cult, entertainment, artistry, enigma, persuasion, and wisdom (148).

Interestingly, some of these characteristics coincide with Bakhtin's approach to the literary text, particularly where ceremonies, festive occasions, social functions, artistry, and wisdom are concerned. Both also agree that playing means a temporary suspension of the normal world, that play is bound by limitations of time and space but is infinitely repeatable, which is to say each time carnival comes around for Bakhtin, and for Huizinga each time a text is read and re-read. Contest and opposition, the most basic characteristics of play, are as essential for change and renewal as are gentle mockery and liberating laughter. For an understanding of "how to read *Celestina*," it might be wise to combine Huizinga's list of the more serious play elements with Bakhtin's carnivalesque vision of a world upside down.

Finally, we have only to point to Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, "the best known work of the greatest of the renaissance humanists" (Levi 7), to realize that laughter does not exclude a moral lesson. Better still, let Erasmus have the final word: "Jokes can be handled in such a way that any reader who is not altogether lacking in discernment can scent something far more rewarding in them than in the crabbed and specious arguments of some people we know" (59).

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