

## ABSTRACT

The Death of Celestina: “Othering” in Changing Times

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*La Celestina*, as the definitive literary work of its period, portrays in microcosm the destructive forces at work within a Spanish society which was successful on the exterior but unraveling at its core as it transitioned from medieval to modern times. The definitive and pivotal moment within the *tragicomedia* is the murder of its central character, perpetrated by two servants seeking their share of the loot extorted from their master. On the surface the murder can be viewed as a moralistic tale of greed, but upon closer observation we find a depiction of larger social forces at work and that Celestina’s death is something wholly new and unexpected which not only portrays a society losing its moral compass but announces the end of the medieval period and the advent of the modern.

The Death of Celestina: "Othering" in Changing Times

by

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A Thesis

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts

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May 2011

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank Dr. Paul Larson for first turning me on to this marvelous literary work and for the friendship we have cultivated over many cups of coffee and the fertile, intellectual ground of Celestina.

I would also like to thank two professors who are not on this thesis committee but who made a profound impression on me during my time at Baylor and challenged the way I look at myself and the world. To Dr. Marian Ortuño, I am eternally grateful for opening the door and ushering me into the world of *Don Quijote*. Your inspiration has been invaluable. And to Dr. Guillermo García-Corrales, whose unbelievable and incredible intellectual energy serves as a dynamo for ideas for everyone with whom he comes in contact. It has been a great honor and privilege studying with you.

Also to my fellow graduate students Melissa Carruth, Julie Cogburn, Sara Gottardi, April Trower and Amber Witt: Let's get together ten years from now and do this again!

Finally, a sincere thank you to my parents and children, who have ever urged me onward; and to my loving and supportive wife, Ann, who is still my wife after all of this.

## DEDICATION

For my dad

(Go Frogs!)

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Todorov, in discussing the massacre of the Mesoamerican Indians waged by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, makes the following observation:

Massacre ... reveals the weakness of this same social fabric, the desuetude of the moral principles that once assured the group's coherence; hence it should be performed in some remote place where the law is only vaguely acknowledged. ... Massacre is thus intimately linked to colonial wars waged far from the metropolitan country. The more remote and alien the victims, the better: they are exterminated without remorse, more or less identified with animals. The individual identity of the massacre victim is by definition irrelevant (otherwise his death would be a murder). ... Unlike sacrifices, massacres are generally not acknowledged or proclaimed, their very existence is kept secret and denied. ... If religious murder is a sacrifice, massacre is an atheistic murder, and the Spaniards appear to have invented precisely this type of violence. ... It is as though the conquistadors obeyed the rule of Ivan Karamazov: "everything is permitted." Far from the central government, far from royal law, all prohibitions give way, the social link, already loosened, snaps, revealing not a primitive nature, the beast sleeping in each of us, but a modern being, one with a great future in fact, restrained by no morality and inflicting death because and when he pleases. The "barbarity" of the Spaniards has nothing atavistic or bestial about it; it is quite human and heralds the advent of modern times (Todorov 144-145).

Scholars have long pondered what existed in Spanish society at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century which spawned such barbaric behavior in the Americas, and why it continued unabated until the native population was all but exterminated. *La Celestina*, as the definitive literary work of the period, portrays in microcosm those destructive forces at work within a Spanish society which was successful on the exterior but unraveling at its core as it transitioned from medieval to modern times. The definitive and pivotal moment within the *tragicomedia* is the murder of its central character, perpetrated by two servants seeking their share of the loot extorted from their master. On the surface the

murder can be viewed as a moralistic tale of greed, but upon closer observation we find the depiction of larger social forces at work, and Celestina's death is something wholly new and unexpected, portraying a society losing its moral compass, and announcing the end of the medieval period and the advent of the modern.

As Dorothy Severin points out in the prologue to her 1987 edition of the work, literary criticism of *La Celestina* falls into two camps: those who approach the work from an aspect of pessimistic Judaism, which encompasses the dirtier aspects of the work; and those who approach it as a work of optimistic Christianity, who view *La Celestina* as a moralistic story which rails against the dangers of courtly love. From either viewpoint, the book is a critique of its times and as such stands boldly across the chasm between medieval and modern times (Severin ref). As Roberto González Echevarría points out,

The critique of social stratification in *La Celestina* reflects the breakdown of the medieval cosmology within which the division of classes obeyed the same structuring system that governed the universe from top to bottom. This disintegration is manifested in the constant bickering among the characters, and, most importantly, through the prevailing irony in the work (xxv).

We can expand upon this view by considering that the actions of the murderers, two servants named Sempronio and Pármeno, are not only selfish acts of greed but illustrate a definitive and total disregard for the medieval structure to such a degree that effectively announces its obsolescence. Although Celestina is not a respected person within medieval society, she is an accepted one: she is known by all and greeted wherever she goes, even though it may be with an epithet. She represents the lowest rung of the ladder of accepted society and as an *alcahueta* performs a valuable function, and does so magnificently, for she succeeds in arranging the liaison between Calisto and Melibea within two days. To that end Celestina rightfully feels that she has earned a



degree of respect and deference with regards to her work and earnings, and she has enjoyed such throughout her long career.

Her ruthless murder represents a total disregard for her social standing, for it is perpetrated not by two hoodlums, but by two servants of a nobleman who, as servants technically have no right to judge her; and, as outsiders, have no right to her profit. Considering that they act totally outside of their station serves as an indicator of the underlying societal problem posed by the author: that despite the recent changes and successes on the top level of Spanish society as effected by the Catholic Kings, conditions on the bottom of society are becoming unstable. *La Celestina*, through its examination of the “ugly underneath” of the urban world, captures a changing society at a critical juncture, one in which unsettling trends have finally reached a “tipping point”, or a point of no return: Celestina’s death symbolizes the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the modern in that it depicts a definitive break with the medieval social structure and is motivated by a wholly modern impulse, that of individualism and personal gain, which is influenced by the climate of fear and oppression spawned by the *Reconquista*, the expulsion of the Jews, and the Inquisition. The message, in short, is this: the comfortable medieval structure in which everyone has a place and a function is now defunct; the modern reality in the new Spanish kingdom is that every man has to look out for himself.

Of course, it would be too much to attribute an excessive amount of sagacity to Rojas for predicting the modern era. History is full of critics claiming that society is on the brink of implosion, and we might place Rojas in that category because his *tragicomedia* certainly has the aspect of being a cautionary tale for those who act

selfishly in their own interest. There is an aspect of finality in Rojas' work, not only in the macabre realism in which the deaths of all the principle characters are portrayed, but in the death of Celestina, an iconic figure who not only embodies all things sexual but represents a grounding, earthy force within her culture akin to that of an earth mother or mother goddess. The death of this figure represents a regard of obsolescence by a society transitioning from a comfortable "known" to a dark "unknown." Rojas' contemporaries might have viewed him simply as a naysayer to progress, or simply the author of a bawdy tale; five hundred years after the fact, we can appreciate his insightful work as a cautionary tale of society in upheaval. Little did the author realize that his dire predictions of change would achieve accuracy in the following century.

To this end Rojas depicts an austere and dark work which takes place on the margins of society, and from that perspective the work is rife with irony, parody and bawdy humor. The work's genre defies categorization by virtue of this dual nature: for starters, is it a play or a novel? It is written as a dialogue but in such a way that it is doubtful that it was ever intended for the stage. Given its immense popularity in the sixteenth century it is more likely that it was intended to be read aloud in a group setting. From a critical literary standpoint, its lack of a narrator contributes to its multiplicity of meaning. As for its authorship, Rojas himself admitted to "finding" and co-opting the first chapter, which is strongly comedic, but his later twenty chapters follow an ironic and tragic path, so much so that Rojas himself called the work not a comedy or tragedy but a *tragicomedia*. There is a mixture of styles in *La Celestina* and a reversal of the classic comedy/tragedy paradigm with high concepts of honor and love applied to lower characters, and comedic, burlesque behavior to the higher class. Literary critic González

Echevarría notes, “*Celestina* is a serious, somber work, blending tragic and comic elements in ways never achieved before, and hardly accomplished ever since” (xiii). In this aspect the work heralds the later picaresque novel, but the “whorehouse gallery” in the work portrays comedy but without farce, which is a truly original and modern concept. For example, in the character of Calisto we have a nobleman acting completely outside of his social standing for the sake of “*loco amor*,” in the character of Pármeno, Calisto’s servant, we have the voice of reason and experience coming from a person of very low social stature; and in the character of Areúsa, we have the sagacity of an experienced businessman embodied in a *ramera* who carefully discerns and navigates the new economic condition and environment after the death of her *patrona*. All of these portrayals take place within the boundaries of the medieval concept of the *carnavalesque* (as defined by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin), which emphasized the bawdy, irreverent and permissive through a temporary suspension of the social structure and a “world turned upside-down”. In this aspect, *La Celestina* is not unique but draws upon many medieval precedents.

*La Celestina* differs in how the drama plays out to a somber, tragic end, precipitated by the death of Celestina and the execution of her two murderers. Suddenly, the “carnival” is over. In this story, however, people do not go back to their old roles but find themselves thrust into a new and unfamiliar reality in which the familiar medieval structures of *señor* and *vasallo* are no longer valid, and in which the individual must look out for himself. We can thus infer that Fernando de Rojas was aware of the novelty of his effort, and that he was creating something unique and without precedent, something that in the end defied categorization; the author’s overarching theme is a critique of his

own unsettling times which he recognizes as being in transition without a clear sense of its destination.

Rojas masterfully imbues his characters with a strong sense of individualism and self-determination within the carnivalesque dialogue of the work. Several noted critics, foremost among them José Antonio Maravall in his landmark study *El mundo social de La Celestina* (1964, 1986), have expounded upon the theme of the self-as-center-of-the-universe within the work, represented by a strong individualization of its characters acting within a society in which the traditional class ranks mean nothing and in which the exchange of capital is paramount. Says Maravall:

En un momento de arranque, *La Celestina* nos dibuja, en la cultura española, la imagen de una sociedad secularizada, pragmatista, cuyos individuos, moralmente distanciados unos de otros, actúan egoístamente. Este distanciamiento, originado de las posibilidades técnicas de la economía dineraria, en las circunstancias de la nueva época significaría libertad. Pero desde bases tradicionales pudo apreciarse quizá nada más que como un desorden radical de la existencia humana (185).

These factors suggest that the basis of Rojas' work comes from his issues with where he perceived his society was heading, which is away from a "correct" society in which everyone had a place within a *señor/vasallo* structure, toward a society where the individual has precedence and authority is not respected. This change is driven mostly by what we can now categorize as the beginnings of capitalism and a money-driven society within a burgeoning nation-state whose regents were intent on eliminating anyone opposed to their new policies. To represent the problems perceived in that emerging society Rojas chooses a character on the lowest end of the spectrum: an *alcahueta*, a person to whom all the "ugly" aspects of urban life are relegated, such as prostitution,

abortions and evil potions. Rojas boldly places Celestina at the center of his drama, and it is through her that the action develops.

Why imbue these qualities within a low character such as Celestina? She is not a modern invention coined by Rojas; she has been present in literature for centuries and has not only been allowed, but encouraged, to flourish. Several passages in the text indicate that many upstanding members of society – including (but not limited to) priests, mayors and noblemen – have discretely utilized her services as a sex trade worker. The job she is contracted to do for Calisto is, for all intents and purposes, an easy one.

She is a capitalist first and through her trade maintains good lifestyle for herself and her associates: “Ganemos todos, partamos todos, hoguemos todos” (119).<sup>1</sup>

Celestina’s only downfall is in failing to realize that times have changed, and that her sphere of her economic influence is shrinking. Throughout the narrative she repeatedly reminds us of “the good old days” in which she enjoyed the deference of all in her community; her trade is now experiencing something of an economic downturn. She is still extremely confident, excels at what she does, and uses a variety of persuasive techniques to accomplish her assignment for Calisto within two days. She has an well-developed business sense and easily resolves any staff dissention in order to achieve the business goal. She is the consummate capitalist.

*La Celestina* easily lends itself to a Marxist reading in which we can view the characters and the situations in the work as an interaction between commodities whose value has been assigned by Celestina. As defined by the literary critic Lois Tyson, “*Commodification* is the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of the exchange value or sign-exchange value. ... [One] commodifies human beings when [one]

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the work reference the 2008 *Catedra* edition edited by Dorothy S. Severin.

structures [one's] relations with them to promote [one's] own advancement financially or socially" (62). Clearly, Celestina's primary concern is with her own financial benefit, and while, as a superannuated prostitute, she may be too old to maintain the social status she once enjoyed; her constant bouts of nostalgia serve as a reminder that her age does not diminish her desire to be recognized as the best at what she does.

Utilizing this approach, we can observe how Celestina effectively commodifies the characters in the drama and manipulates them to her own end, drawing upon her experience and her strong skills of persuasion. For her, the primary goal is that symbolized by the ultimate reward of a gold chain; in her desire to reach that goal she converts every other character into a commodity for the purpose of bartering. She is the consummate capitalist, whose primary focus is to "make the sale", and she takes advantage of and runs over whoever she needs to in order to achieve that end. The most vivid example is the scene in Act VII (205-213) in which Celestina convinces Areúsa to take Pármeno as a lover, a situation in which she uses Areúsa's body as a commodity to satisfy Pármeno in order to gain his affiliation to her enterprise. In Marxist terms, Celestina seeks control over Pármeno's use value in terms of what he can do to help her gain access to Calisto. She has Areúsa at her disposal, whose use value in terms of sex generates income for her "company." In this instance the *patrona* chooses to waive the customary fee for the customer (which takes some convincing) and instead converts Areúsa's use value into an exchange value: she gains Pármeno's use value in exchange for that of Areúsa.

One interpretation of the preceding scene is an invective against the evils of capitalism and how it exploits the weak and underprivileged. Celestina, as a successful

businesswoman, brilliantly utilizes the commodities at her disposal to achieve her result, but in doing so she engages in a subtle but ruthless form of exploitation. The ultimate objective is the exploitation of Calisto (if it can be called that, since he is a willing participant), but she cannot do it alone; in order to achieve her goal she must exploit other people as well. The exploitation of Areúsa is a glaring example, but it is important to remember that Areúsa's profession is prostitution and her trade is in the selling of her body. The manner in which Celestina therefore exploits Areúsa is not bodily in forcing her to have sex with Pármeno, but monetarily in manipulating her into performing her services for free.

The exploitation of Pármeno is more subtle, for Celestina, who excels at preying on the weaknesses of others, uses Pármeno's sexual urges to draw him into a more sinister trap: a false sense of social security and belonging. She baits him with sexual favors in order to gain his loyalty to her "company." As we have seen, Celestina's enterprise has only one purpose: to enhance her pocketbook and status. This is not a happy 20<sup>th</sup> century consulting firm where workers get promotions and vacation days, it is a sadistic arrangement engineered by Celestina solely for her own profit. Calisto willingly gives himself over to "*loco amor*", but Pármeno acts foolishly and without boundaries in bartering away his livelihood (in his allegiance to Calisto) and his personal integrity: "Ofrécele quanto mi padre te dexó para mi" (211). In return he receives a sexual encounter with Areúsa but pledges his allegiance to false company with short-term benefits headed by a bawd. He soon finds himself to be extremely unsatisfied with this arrangement.

The ease with which Celestina achieves her goal implies that this kind of business transaction is commonplace for her, that this is her *modus operandi*, and that she is successful with this arrangement over the long term. In a carnivalesque sense, her business acumen represents a parody of “real” businessmen in contemporary society. What, then, goes wrong in this particular business venture, and why do Celestina’s “partners” run her through with their swords? Why does Celestina, the consummate capitalist, fail to anticipate this? From a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, the motives seem clear: Sempronio and Pármeno demand their share of a gold chain, a partial payment to Celestina from Calisto, and when Celestina fails to produce it, they take her life. It seems inconceivable to the modern audience to think that Sempronio and Pármeno would not be angry with this, but we have the perspective of living within a well-regulated capitalist economy. Capitalism, while not new, is certainly not well-formed at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and, as we shall see, there are tremendous social forces at play as the rising *bourgeois* class seeks its place alongside traditional nobility in Spanish society. Celestina, however, is operating within a medieval paradigm where capitalistic enterprises like hers are relegated to the margins; she has not realized that recent trends are moving capitalism from the margin to the mainstream and that these “boys” she is dealing with have aspirations of their own. Her undoing comes from feeling confident in her social position (even that the local constabulary will come to her aid!) merited by her age, experience, social connections and longevity. From this posture she defiantly attempts to put the boys in their place:

¿Quién só yo, Sempronio? ¿Quitáste me de la putería? Calla tu lengua; no amengües mis canas, que soy una vieja qual Dios me hizo, no peor que todas. Bivo de me officio como cada qual official del suyo, muy limpiamente. A quien no me quiere, no le busco; de mi casa me vienen a



sacar, en mi casa me ruegan. Si bien o mal bivo, Dios es el testigo de mi corazón. Y no pienses con tu yra maltratarme, que justicia ay para todos, a todos es yqual. También seré oýda, aunque mujer, como vosotros muy peynados. Déxame en mi casa con mi fortuna (277).

Celestina never realizes that Sempronio and Pármeno no longer respect the old order: they are capitalists, too. She is consumed by the shifting social forces which have transformed her, in the eyes of her killers, from a person of respect to an “other” whose life has no value.

This paper examines how Celestina’s death acts as an ill omen for a society in flux. In proving this thesis we first, in Chapter Two, analyze the top-down changes on the societal level affected by the Catholic Kings and consider how they create an environment of “othering”. In Chapter Three we focus on the character of Celestina and, by linking her with Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, show how she embodies the earthy and bodily aspects of medieval society and as such stands in parodic contrast to the changes going on from the top-down, as affected by the Catholic Kings. In Chapter Four we will examine how the “top-down” changes described in Chapter Two impinge even upon those living on the margins, causing changes to the social fabric which has been present throughout the Middle Ages and how this upheaval results in the death of a character who is the embodiment of medieval society, Celestina. In the concluding chapter we consider how the death of Celestina and other major characters announces the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern.

## CHAPTER TWO

### On the Cusp of Modernity

To fully appreciate Rojas' portrait of this "other" figure on the margins of Spanish society at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we must first examine the historical and cultural forces at work within that society. Taking a general view of Spanish history during the time period, what we are generally offered is a picture of an up-and-coming nation-state with a bright future. Spain in 1499 is a new country in its defining period, and *La Celestina* offers us a glimpse into the "real life" of this time period, underneath the veneer of nationalism and imperialism, one which offers us an "insider's view" of the culture and the social forces at work. In order to gain a better grasp of this perspective, we will first examine the historical era and the reign of the Catholic Kings.

When examining the time period one naturally gravitates to the *anno mirabilis*, 1492, as a watershed year, but the events of that year are only indicators of larger forces at work, initiated in 1469 by the uniting of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon through the marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand. As historian J. H. Elliott points out, the major changes in Spanish society primarily relate to the new sense of nationalism and the agenda of the Catholic Kings to reorganize the government and consolidate their power. In many ways we can consider the new country called Spain to be the first modern state, for it entailed the union of two unique and independent kingdoms in Castile and Aragon which, when merged together, would set the stage for Spain to become a world force. That the two regents would share power was a novel idea, and over the period of their reign they affected changes within the country which would allow the Spanish Crown to

effectively manage its internal affairs and the affairs of a far-flung empire for over 300 years. The major initiatives of Ferdinand and Isabella can be summed up in three ways: the consolidation of power by the reduction in importance of the nobility and the church and the formation of bureaucratic systems which de-emphasized patronage and rewarded loyalty to the Crown and personal ability; the full-on commitment to finish the *Reconquista* of the Moorish territories, whose spirit carried over to a rapid exploration and annexation of newly discovered territories in the Western Hemisphere; and the consolidation of religious and social influence by the expulsion of the Jews, reinforced by the Inquisition. Coupled with the influx of riches from the New World conquests, Spain's meteoric rise to power would culminate a scant 70 years later in the reign of Charles V.

As Elliot points out, concealed beneath the beautiful exterior of the creation of a powerful new nation-state, critical social inequities festered which, unresolved and untreated, would eventually contribute to its downfall and the loss of its empire. Also glossed over in many historical summations are the ruthless policies employed by the Catholic Kings which fostered the betterment and advancement of Spain—especially Castile—to the detriment of other ethnic groups including Moors, Jews, *moriscos*, *conversos*, and people on the margins, especially women. The harsh reality is that these political initiatives produced positive short-term results but masked long-term problems. First, while the political reorganization did much to contribute to a sense of nationalism, at the same time it reinforced an unequal system in which 98 percent of the wealth of the country was concentrated in 2 percent of the population. Specifically, the peasant class, who previously enjoyed a measure of protection from a feudalistic lord/vassal

arrangement, now found itself further disenfranchised. In many cases peasants had no choice but to migrate to the cities and this would create a homeless problem which would continue throughout the sixteenth century. In addition to economic problems was the political reality that, despite Ferdinand's dynamic diplomatic influence, the new empire was largely a Castilian invention which ignored and neglected its Aragonese partners. Secondly, regarding the *Reconquista*, even though the war was successful it was also expensive. It furthermore fostered a "conquest" mentality among the Spanish populace and contributed to a sense of xenophobia and a strong tendency of "othering" in which the Castilian population saw themselves as crusaders and liberators on the side of the Christian God against a population of infidels, heretics, and later, New World savages. Thirdly, the policies regarding the religious purity of the *converso* population (in the form of harassment by the Inquisition and a forced exodus) resulted in economic chaos in the space voided by Jewish and *converso* merchants and professionals. An influx of outsiders comprised largely of Flemings, Genoese and Germans rushed to fill that space, but they ironically had even less loyalty to the Crown than the Jews and *conversos* and exploited Spain for their own benefit. From our modern historical perspective we can perceive this last point as being economic suicide, in that it effectively amputated a functioning arm of a previously pluralistic society and emphasized the needless persecution of an ethnic group for no other reason than religious unity (Elliott 110).

#### *Ferdinand and Isabella's Consolidation of Power in the Reconquista*

Let us first examine the details of the union between Castile and Aragon and sketch a brief profile of the two partners. Although they were close neighbors, the

political and historical characteristics of the newly united kingdoms were very different. Castile occupied about two-thirds of the total area of the Iberian Peninsula, its area was roughly three times that of the Crown of Aragon, and its population was also considerably larger. While the peripheral areas of the peninsula have been the most densely populated regions since the eighteenth century, in the fifteenth and sixteenth the core population was concentrated in the central part of the region. According to Elliott, “The Union was therefore a union of essentially dissimilar partners, and – still more important – of partners markedly divergent in size and strength” (24). Additionally, the political reality of the union itself was not a true merging; it was “a union of equals, each preserving its own institutions and its own way of life” (24). Elliott continues:

Other than the fact that henceforth Castile and Aragon would share the same monarchs, there would, in theory, be no change either in their status or in the form of their government. It was true that, in the person of Ferdinand, their foreign policies were likely to be fused, but in other respects they would continue to lead the lives they had led before the Union. The only difference was that now they would be partners, not rivals (24).

The Kingdom of Aragon was largely maritime and had developed an outward-looking merchant culture based on trade and conquests in the Mediterranean. “The Catalan-Aragonese empire of the late Middle Ages was primarily a commercial empire whose prosperity was founded on the export of textiles” (Elliott 27). During that time period they created a political system which guaranteed the rights of the merchants and promoted trade, as Elliott explains:

Dominating the country’s economic life, the *bourgeoisie* was able to hammer out, both in co-operation and in conflict with the Crown, a distinctive constitutional system which faithfully mirrored its aspirations and ideals. At the heart of this constitutional system was the idea of contract. Between ruler and ruled there should exist a mutual trust and confidence, based on a recognition by each of the contracting parties of

the extent of its obligations and the limits to its powers. In this way alone could government effectively function, while at the same time the liberties of the subject were duly preserved (28).

.....  
The medieval Crown of Aragon, therefore, with its rich and energetic urban patriciate, was deeply influenced by its overseas commercial interests. It was imbued with a contractual concept of the relationship between king and subjects, which has been effectively realized in institutional form, and it was well experienced in the administration of empire. In all these respects it contrasted strikingly with medieval Castile (31).

With regards to our thesis it is sufficient to note here that the rise of the merchant class has created new economic sensibilities which previously did not exist in Spain and which had begun to replace the traditional “lord/vassal” arrangement. Within the *tragicomedia* we see a representation of this in the portrayal of the servants of Calisto, Sempronio and Pármeno, who derive a certain amount of entitlement from the deal they strike with Celestina for a share of Calisto’s largesse. It is this concept of a “contractual relationship between king and subjects” that Rojas portrays as having filtered down to the level of the servants, who in their dealings with Celestina do not act as servants looking out for the wishes of their master, but consider themselves as equals in a business enterprise.

In contrast to the cosmopolitan, mercantile and outwardly-looking Crown of Aragon, contemporary Castile in the early fourteenth century tended to look inwards rather than outwards and was oriented less toward trade than toward war:

Fundamentally, Castile was a pastoral and nomadic society, whose habits and attitudes had been shaped by constant warfare – by the protracted process of the *Reconquista*, still awaiting completion long after it was finished in the Crown of Aragon (Elliott 31).

Castile was largely landlocked, nomadic, had no overseas holdings and was without an empire. With the ascent of Isabella to its throne, the Crown principally concerned itself with consolidating power, ending civil war, and finishing the *Reconquista*. “This very

demographic superiority of the arid central regions,” says Elliott, “may itself represent one of the essential clues to the dynamic expansionist tendencies of Castile at the end of the Middle Ages” (25). It is these tendencies that manifested themselves in a sense of entitlement and feeling of superiority, and which were embodied in the *Reconquista*, and, later, the New World. As portrayed in *La Celestina*, it is this attitude of a “thirst for booty” (Elliott 32) which Rojas represents as having trickled down to Sempronio and Pármeno and which impel them to act outside of their station as servants in their dealings with Celestina.

Although Ferdinand was able to enjoy a good deal of success through his diplomatic talents, it was the re-initiated crusade against the Kingdom of Granada which defined the new national identity. With it came overarching social tendencies in which personal valor and courage were esteemed. In short, the *Reconquista* spawned a warlike attitude among its people:

[The] highest admiration came to be reserved for the military virtues of courage and honor. In this way was established the concept of the perfect *hidalgo*, as a man who lived for war, who could do the impossible through sheer physical courage and a constant effort of the will, who considered his relations with others according to a strictly regulated code of honor, and who reserved his respect for the man who had won riches by force of arms rather than by the sweat of manual labor. The ideal of *hidalguía* was essentially aristocratic, but circumstances conspired to diffuse it throughout Castilian society, for the very character of the *Reconquista* as a southwards migration in the wake of the conquering armies encouraged a popular contempt for sedentary life and fixed wealth, and thus imbued the populace with ideals similar to those of the aristocracy (Elliott 32).

Furthermore these warlike attitudes were encouraged and reinforced from the top and had the effect of “trickling down” to every level of Castilian society:

It had been the practice [during the *Reconquista*] for the Crown to make contracts with leaders of military expeditions against the Moors. It seems probable that these contracts inspired the document known as the

*capitulación*, which later became the customary form of agreement between the Spanish Crown and the *conquistadores* of America. The purpose of *capitulaciones* was to reserve certain rights to the Crown in the newly conquered territories, while also guaranteeing to the leader of the expedition due *mercedes* or rewards for his services (Elliott 59).

In an effort to set *La Celestina* within its historical milieu it is useful, as we highlight certain events in Spain during the time period, to consider some of the characters and events in the novel within this context. As we shall further explore in Chapter Four, this sort of “conquest and reward” mentality can be applied directly to the attitudes of the servants Sempronio and Pármemo in their business dealings with Celestina. These servants start out loyal and with the best interests of their master in mind, but after Celestina enters the picture we see hints of their considering themselves *hidalgos* in their own right, at least in the individualistic sense of seeking to win a portion of the fortune through the “conquest of love” undertaken by their master. Once they have committed to Celestina’s plan, it is clear from the outset that they expect their *mercedes* at its conclusion.

In an example of pre-capitalistic economics, Sempronio and Pármemo pay very close attention to the monetary exchange between Calisto and Celestina; the servants have a vested interest in the outcome of Celestina’s arrangements because they initiate it and are working hand-in-hand with Celestina to bring it to its fruition. To them it is a contractual arrangement, not unlike a *capitulación*, from which they expect to profit.

#### *Queen Isabella’s Fervor in the Re-Organization of Power*

In order to fully appreciate Isabela’s “fervent, mystical, and intense” faith (Elliott 103) in her institution of the Inquisition and other social reforms which affect the cultural



backdrop of *La Celestina*, we must first consider the events of how she became queen and how she overcame the problems which beset the early years of her reign. From the outset of her being declared heir to the throne in 1468 at the age of 17 by her half-brother Henry IV of Castile, she had been at the center of controversy. One historian declares the decision of Henry to appoint Isabella over his own daughter, Juana (also known as *La Beltraneja* for her supposedly questionable parentage), as an “astounding folly” (Amadó). Isabella immediately displayed her decisive and independent nature in defying the wishes of the King, who had promised her hand to Alfonso V of Portugal. In 1469, instead of choosing to align Castile’s fortunes with that of the Atlantic seaboard, she instead turned her affections towards the kingdom which controlled the Mediterranean and married the Aragonese prince Ferdinand:

But Isabella, highly strung by temperament, was a woman of great character and determination. She knew her own mind and she made a choice which, both personally and politically, must have seemed the most desirable in the circumstances. Alfonso of Portugal was a widower, much older than herself, and quite without the many personal attractions generally ascribed to Ferdinand. Added to this was the fact that, since John II [King of Aragon] and Ferdinand [his son, the Prince,] were in no position to bargain, she could expect to dictate a settlement virtually on her own terms. The very form of the marriage contract ... showed the overwhelming strength of her position (Elliott 21-22).

Her succession to the throne was not a foregone conclusion; the death of Henry IV in 1474 sparked an open civil war, largely prompted by the claims of Juana, which were abetted by her marriage to Alfonso V of Portugal. In May 1475, Portuguese troops crossed the frontier into Castile, and Juana initially enjoyed the support of some towns in Old Castile, Andalusia, and New Castile, as well as military support from the Portuguese (Elliott 22-23). It was Ferdinand, however, who stepped into the role of commander of the Isabelline forces and led the campaign to restore order and unity to Castile:

Ferdinand's military experts, imported from Aragon, instructed Isabella's troops in new military techniques. Ferdinand himself was a skillful negotiator, bargaining with magnates and towns for support of Isabella's cause. He could count already on the aid of the three most powerful families of north Castile, ... and his own energy and resourcefulness seemed to hold out promise of order and reformation to all those Castilians grown weary of civil war (Elliott 23).

After Alfonso was defeated in the Battle of Toro in 1476, his weakened forces finally succumbed in 1479. Juana was relegated to a convent, and, with the death of John II of Aragon, the Catholic Kings consolidated their grip on the new Kingdom of Spain.

In the chaotic conditions following the civil war, the Crown sought to bring Castile under control by curbing the abusive power of the nobility and "restor[ing] these kingdoms and rescu[ing] them from the tyrannical government to which they have been for so long subjected" (Diego de Valera, quoted in Elliott, 86). As historian Henry Kamen suggests,

They were threatened on all sides by continuing conflicts at local level, threats by dissident nobles and clergy, and a breakdown of law and order everywhere. With no civil service or permanent army at their command, they were unable to control events in the way they might have wished, and were obliged to make compromises with the political elites that ran the country (44).

The principal action taken by the Crown to watch over its interest and preserve the peace was to revive a medieval institution, the *Santa Hermandad*, which was comprised of local *hermandades*, or brotherhoods. The new twist was that these *hermandades* took their direction from the Crown and specifically excluded existing magnates from being appointed to judicial posts (Elliott 87). Kamen continues:

At the same time they attempted, through the civil governors (*corregidores*), to enforce the peace, punish and execute criminals and thieves, and in general restore public confidence in the Crown (44).

The *Hermandad* enjoyed complete jurisdiction over a specific class of crimes: “robbery, murder and arson committed in the open countryside ... together with rape, housebreaking, and acts of rebellion against the central government” (Elliott 87).

Punishment by the tribunals of the *Hermandad* were often swift and severe, presided over by locally chosen *alcaldes* who had the authority to review the case, pronounce judgment, and quickly mete out savage penalties regardless of the perpetrator’s social standing or familial connections (Elliott 87). Within the *tragicomedia*, it is this type of authority which is represented in the quick punishment of Sempronio and Pármemo after they murder Celestina, as we shall see.

Isabella also sought to unify Spain under one religion. We shall discuss the expulsion of the Jews and the persecution of the *moriscos*, but prior to those events came a consolidation of church power under the Crown and a reform of church policies. Says Elliott:

Isabella’s faith was fervent, mystical, and intense, and she viewed the present state of the Church with grave concern. It suffered in Spain from the abuses commonly ascribed to it throughout fifteenth-century Europe: pluralism, absenteeism, and low standards of morality and learning in secular and regular clergy alike. Concubinage in particular was accepted as a matter of course, and was no doubt further encouraged by a practice apparently unique to Castile, whereby the child of a cleric could inherit if his father dies intestate. ... [T]he Queen devoted herself wholeheartedly to the work of raising the moral and intellectual standards of her clergy (103).

Religious reforms instituted by the Crown would later take on an oppressive dimension in the Inquisition. In terms of political control, however, by personally sponsoring church reforms in their own lands, Ferdinand and Isabella headed off the calls for ecclesiastical reform that would later sweep the rest of Europe in the Protestant Reformation (Elliott 105). This is an external view; internally the motivation behind instituting church

reforms in Spain were much more energized by the need to restore order, consolidate power, and establish the reign of the new monarchs. The decision to establish the Inquisition within Spain had less to do with religious purity than it did with power and economics.

Within the context of church reforms, the ability of the Catholic Kings to anticipate problems and act proactively paid off not only in keeping the peace and maintaining power but also in monetary gain:

By the exercise of diplomatic pressure they ensured that Spanish benefices were no longer given to foreigners and that the Papacy agreed to appoint the Crown's own nominees to bishoprics. ... Above all, they obtained for the Crown in perpetuity a sufficient degree of control over the wealth of the Church to deprive their successors of any financial inducement to follow the example of a Gustavus Vasa or a Henry VIII and break violently with Rome. Contributions by or through the Church came, in fact, to constitute an extremely important part of the Crown's income during the sixteenth century (Elliott 102-103).

To this end, standards of morals and learning were henceforth no longer regarded as "irrelevant" but superseded social rank as the primary qualifications for an ecclesiastical post. "As a result the standard of the Spanish episcopate rose markedly under the Catholic Kings" (Elliott 104). Gaining control over the clergy and insisting on qualified men who played by the rules – *their* rules – was a win-win situation for Ferdinand and Isabella: it allowed them to curb the power of the nobility by selectively excluding them from positions within the church, and, additionally, allowed them to divert directly to the Crown's treasury payments by the church normally paid to the local nobles, to Rome or to the religious orders.

While we are discussing economic and moral reform under Ferdinand and Isabella we should also mention the changes going on outside of the church with regards

to Celestina's profession, prostitution. María Eugenia Lacarra Lanz details the plight of sex workers under the Catholic Kings:

Los Reyes Católicos, además de dictar estas normativas impositivas y represivas, cambian drásticamente la política del reino en lo que al control de la prostitución se refiere. Pienso que la influencia del rey Fernando en este cambio es fundamental, pues se va a imponer en Castilla el mismo sistema que se extendía desde hacía un siglo en las ciudades de la Corona de Aragón. La concesión de mercedes reales para la explotación de mancebías públicas, bien a municipios bien a particulares, se agiliza extraordinariamente a partir del último tercio del siglo XV. Así se documentan mancebías a lo largo y ancho del reino, como atestiguó en su día Rodríguez Solís, y confirman los estudios más recientes (*La evolución* 40).

We will discuss in Chapter Four how these changes directly affect Celestina and her business, but it is sufficient to note here that at the same time that the Catholic Kings are consolidating their power over the nobility and over ecclesiastical excesses, they are also extending their reach to the activities and livelihoods of people on the margins of the society, represented here by those who engage in prostitution. From the standpoint of placing *La Celestina* within its cultural and historical setting, it is important to realize that the reforms instigated by Ferdinand and Isabella extended to every level of Spanish society, even to servants and those virtually without social standing and on the margins, such as Celestina and her household. It is significant that Rojas, in depicting the societal upheaval at the end of the fifteenth century, chooses to place at the center of his work not a *duque* grappling with new limitations on his political power, nor a cardinal trying to manage the changes within the church, but a figure who is the embodiment of all cultural and clandestine things on the very extremities of the reach of Ferdinand and Isabella, an *alcahueta* called Celestina.

*The Consolidation of a National Identity Through the Expulsion of the Jews and the Rise of the Inquisition*

For centuries, Christians, Jews and Muslims had lived side-by-side in Spain in a spirit of mutual tolerance and co-existence. In the traditional structure of Spain, “the Christian population made war and tilled the soil, the Moor built the houses, and the Jew presided over the enterprise as a fiscal agent and skillful technician” (cited in Kamen 3). Henry Kamen, in his excellent book on the Spanish Inquisition, paints an intriguing portrait of the spirit of *convivencia* in Spain in the late Middle Ages:

We can be certain of one thing. Spain was not, as often imagined, a society dominated exclusively by zealots. In the Mediterranean the confrontation of cultures was more constant than in northern Europe, but the certainty of faith was no stronger. Jews had the advantage of community solidarity, but under pressure from other cultures they also suffered the disadvantage of internal dissent over belief. The three faiths had coexisted long enough for many people to accept the validity of all three. ‘Who knows which is the better religion’, a Christian of Castile asked in 1501, ‘ours or those of the Muslims and the Jews?’ (5)

Kamen makes a strong case that not only was there a mutual tolerance among the three religions, but the spirit of *convivencia* extended also to non-believers and those who would be persecuted as outright heretics in other parts of Europe. The Christian population of Spain, even into the 1500s, says Kamen, was far from being a “society of convinced believers”:

In the mid-sixteenth century a friar lamented the ignorance and unbelief he had found throughout Castile, ‘not only in small hamlets and villages but even in cities and populous towns’. ‘Out of three hundred residents’, he affirmed, ‘you will find barely thirty who know what any ordinary Christian is obliged to know’. Religious practice among Christians was a free mixture of community traditions, superstitious folklore and imprecise dogmatic beliefs. Some writers went so far as to categorize popular religious practices as diabolic magic. It was a situation that Church leaders did very little to remedy (5).

As this relates to *La Celestina* we see the embodiment of these characteristics of tolerance in the work's central character. The figure of Celestina has existed for centuries and a contemporary reader would need no introduction or background information in order to recognize her. Additionally, regarding prostitution, social mores in medieval Spain tended to be tolerant:

Mientras que algunos clérigos consideraban que los pecados carnales, por venir de la naturaleza, eran menos graves, y que el acto carnal de mutuo consenso entre dos personas libres era pecado venial, otros llegaban a la conclusión de que la mujer que se prostituía, no por placer físico sino para ganar dinero, realizaba un trabajo que se debía valorar como tal. ... Los moralistas de finales del siglo XII y principios del XIII, a pesar de las condenas contra el sexo y las mujeres que vendían su cuerpo, llegaron a admitir que las prostitutas tenían derecho a quedarse con el dinero que ganaban con su ilícito oficio (Molina Molina 9-10).

Molina Molina also suggests that one of the reasons for the toleration of prostitution was the Biblical connection between Mary Magdelene and *la ramera*, and that her approbation and conversion by Christ contributed to the prostitute's social standing. Significantly, in the thirteenth century the church in Spain started accepting *limosnas* from prostitutes (Molina Molina 10). All of this combines to suggest that, within the novel, the character of Celestina, while wry and manipulative, was not necessarily considered inherently evil by a contemporary audience. To furthermore categorize her inclusion within *tragicomedia* as merely a device to make a moralistic point (as is the tendency of some critics) further diminishes her importance as a pivotal character embodying the spirit of the tolerant Middle Ages in Spain. It is this symbolic embodiment that makes her death significant as a marker of the changing times, as we shall discuss, and as Molina Molina succinctly summarizes:

El diálogo entre prostitución y autoridad pública experimenta una evolución a través de los siglos medievales: en la Plena Edad Media se

acepta como algo inevitable, en la Baja Edad Media se institucionaliza, y en el siglo XVI se trata de acabar con ella prohibiéndola (8).

In the latter part of the fifteenth century, it is the spirit of *convivencia* that the Catholic Kings inherit and which characterizes the early years of their reign, during which they display surprising tolerance toward their Jewish population. Ferdinand had Jewish blood in his veins, and in the royal court were *conversos* as well as practicing Jews, like the treasurer of the *Santa Hermandad*, Abraham Seneor, who was “a prototype ‘court Jew’, [who] had been a striking example of the way in which some Jews had rendered faithful service to the Crown and in the process had managed to protect their community” (Kamen 21). Says Elliott:

During the Middle Ages the Jewish community had played an outstanding part in the cultural and economic life of both Castile and the Crown of Aragon. Where other west European states had expelled their Jews, they continued to be tolerated in Spain, partly because they were indispensable, and partly because the existence of a tolerant Moorish kingdom on Spanish soil would have reduced the effectiveness of any general measure of expulsion. During the plague-stricken and insecure years of the mid-fourteenth century, however, their position began to grow difficult. Popular hatred of them was fanned by preachers, and mounted to a terrible climax in anti-Jewish riots which swept Castile, Catalonia, and Aragon, in 1391. To save their lives, many submitted to baptism; and, at the end of the fourteenth century, these converted Jews – known as *conversos* or *marranos*—equaled and perhaps outnumbered those of their brethren who had survived the massacres and remained true to the faith of their fathers (106).

Isabella gave her personal protection to threatened Jewish minorities and in 1477 declared, in defending the community in Trujillo, “All the Jews in my realms are mine and under my care and protection and it belongs to me to defend and aid them and keep justice” (quoted in Kamen 16).

Rising social tensions soon compromised this tolerant policy. Anti-Jewish groups in some cities began enacting local laws restricting the movement and activity of their



Jewish communities. These actions were a follow-on to anti-Semitic riots a hundred earlier, which had prompted a mass conversion of many Jews. As a direct result in the early part of the fifteenth century these New Christians gained an entry into the royal court and the aristocracy, and some of the more influential families even intermarried into the Castilian nobility. Elliott describes the backlash that followed in later years:

[T]heir power and influence as financiers, administrators, or members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, naturally tended to breed resentment and suspicion, for the rise of a rich *converso* class seemed to threaten the whole social order of Castile, based on hereditary status and on the possession of landed wealth. While churchmen questioned the sincerity of their conversion, aristocrats expressed resentment at finding themselves dependent on the loans of wealthy *conversos*; and the populace at large ... hated them for their activities as tax-collectors or as fiscal agents of the nobility (106-107).

Despite their intentions to maintain the tradition of a pluralistic Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella inherited a set of social tensions that had been simmering for a hundred years. The tipping point between tolerance and intolerance came in 1478 when popular sentiment began to suspect that these New Christians were not Christians at all:

A growing number of *conversos*, however, were now reverting to the faith of their fathers, and their defections were a source of deep concern to the genuine converts, who were afraid that their own position would be jeopardized by the back-sliding of their bretheren. It may therefore have been influential *conversos* at Court and in the ecclesiastical hierarchy who first pressed for the establishment of a tribunal of the Inquisition in Castile (Elliott 107).

The Inquisition was placed under the direct control of the Crown and was tasked not with dealing with the Jews or with the *moriscos*, “but with New Christians who were suspected of having covertly returned to their old beliefs” (Elliott 107).

The enactment of new anti-Semitic laws in the latter part of the fifteenth century, while unjust, did not cause the situation of Jews to deteriorate significantly. It was the

appearance of a *fourth* class of Spaniards, the *conversos*, which upset the social balance, for they were neither Christian nor Jew and drew the ire of both groups:

When the great conversions took place at the end of the fourteenth century, Jews may have felt that the neophytes were still their bretheren. A century later, the perspective was somewhat different. Jewish dignitaries, scholars and leaders had, not always under active persecution, voluntarily embraced the Catholic faith. ... Some converts, especially those who became clergy, became bitter persecutors of the Jews. ... A visible gap opened up in some communities between Jews and ex-Jews. In the early fifteenth century rabbis were still expressing the view that most of the *conversos* were unwilling converts (*anusim*). By mid-century they took the view that most were *meshumadim* (renegades), real and voluntary Christians (Kamen 17).

The request for an Inquisition by the Spanish monarchs was in direct response to what Kamen refers to as “the *converso* problem”:

The monarchs became firmly convinced that a separation of Jews from Christians was the most effective answer to the situation, and in 1480 they set in motion a body whose entire concern was with judiazers: the Inquisition (17).

While strong parallels can be drawn between the *converso* population and Pleberio’s household within the context of *La Celestina*, it is not central to our thesis to discuss the specific fate of the Jews, their consequent expulsion and exodus from Spain, and the devastating economic results. What is important in this discussion is the identification of the “tipping point” in Spanish society from a tradition of tolerance to a new era of intolerance:

(B)y the fourteenth century ‘it was no longer possible for Christians, Moors and Jews to live under the same roof, because the Christian now felt himself strong enough to break down the traditional custom(s) of Spain (Kamen 3).

The efforts of the Catholic Kings to create a national identity from the disparate pieces of their diverse realm would solidify in 1492 with the fall of Granada and the

expulsion of the Jews. Kamen refers to these events as the rebirth of “the militant Reconquest spirit” and a heralding back to the chivalric age of the Cid. From an external standpoint, however, criticism of the barbarities of Spanish soldiers increased, both in the wars in Italy and in the harsh treatment of the Moors in which a large population of Málaga was enslaved after the city’s fall in 1487 (Kamen 3). As indicated by Todorov, these barbarities would carry over to the New World a few decades later and result in the enslavement and near extermination of an entire race of people.

The significance of these events within the context of Rojas’ masterpiece is in his perception of these trends and tendencies in his own city, though they were barely evident at the time of the writing of *La Celestina*. Rojas recognizes that once the spirit of *convivencia* and tolerance was abandoned, the Inquisition and militant spirit of the Spanish people would continue unabated. Says Kamen:

It appears that the rulers, seeking to stabilize their power in both Castile and Aragon, where civil wars had created disorder in the 1470s, accepted an alliance with social forces that prepared the way for the elimination of a plural, open society. The Crown accepted this policy because it seemed to ensure stability, but the new developments failed to bring about social unity, and the machinery of the Inquisition served only to intensify and deepen the shadow of conflict over Spain (7).

Some indications suggest that in the beginning the regents, especially Ferdinand, only viewed the Inquisition as a “crisis instrument” and an emergency measure that was never intended to be permanent. When the approach proved ineffective, however, the new rulers of Spain remained firm in their resolve to root out the *conversos* and were willing to continue the intolerant policy and to stimulate a feeling of crisis regardless of its economic consequences. Isabella’s financial advisors warned her that pressure exerted upon the Jews and the *mudéjares* would result in economic disruption, but her church

advisors, specifically Archbishop Cisneros and other hard-liners, would convince her to steel her resolve. In a significant statement to the Counsellors of Barcelona in 1486, Ferdinand, responding to protests, maintained that spiritual ideals were more important than material considerations regarding the economy, and that the Inquisition must be accepted everywhere regardless of the consequences (Kamen 4, 68):

Before we decided on introducing this Inquisition into any of the cities of our realms, we carefully considered and looked at all the harm and ill that could follow from it and that could affect our taxes and revenue. But because our firm intention and concern is to prefer the service of God to our own, we wish the Inquisition to be established regardless, putting all other interests aside (quoted in Kamen 68).

As Kamen concludes, by the late 1400s a strong “crusading spirit” based on exclusivism had replaced the traditional spirit of *convivencia* and tolerance in Spain (4). As we shall see further, this cultural reality would manifest itself through individualism and “othering” within the pages of *La Celestina*. This reality is placed in direct opposition to the “conventional picture of a glorious spring-time under Ferdinand and Isabella” (Elliott 126) which forms the basis for the modern Spanish state. Prior to the publication of J. H. Elliott’s groundbreaking historical revision of imperial Spain (from which we have borrowed heavily), many historians had glossed over this period of Spanish history and had described the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella it only in terms the *anno mirabilis* and its glorious conquests, “a picture which is often painted excessively bright” (Elliott 126). It is the “ugly underneath” and the reality of the harsh changes that forced upon the Spanish people that is missing from this portrayal. As the reign of the Catholic Kings progressed and the Inquisition intensified, Spain became more oppressive until it reached a point of “rule by fear.” The result among the common people was a de-stabilization of the lower part of the economic system, a breaking-down of the familiar social structure of

the Middle Ages, and the advent of a new, unknown reality, which forced common people to resort to a lifestyle of looking out for one's self as an adaptive measure. It is within this context that we can appreciate and understand the underlying negative social tendencies which *La Celestina* so acutely depicts.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A Portrait of Celestina: The Anti-Isabella

Mikhail Bakhtin, in the introduction to his book *Rabelais and his World*, defines as his goal as an analysis of the culture of folk humor in the Middle Ages and Renaissance and comments on its lack of analysis by modern critics. Says Bakhtin:

And yet the scope and the importance of this culture were immense in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody—all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor (4).

Bakhtin goes on to describe carnival rituals as being intrinsically based in laughter, which frees people from “all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety” (7). Carnival spectacles, therefore, represent a healthy outlet because they do not distinguish between actors and spectators and represent a “world turned upside down” in which the participants—monk, cleric and scholar—renounce their positions and experience the world in its laughing aspect (13):

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part (7).

With regards to the works of Rabelais, the essence of the carnival, or “carnavalesque”, is represented in images of the human body with its food, drink,

defecation and sexual life playing a predominant role. Bakhtin calls this type of folk humor “grotesque realism” (18):

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthly, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. . . . The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance (19).

Using the theories of Bakhtin as a guide, we shall, in this chapter, examine the character of Celestina within the framework of the carnival which operates as a uniting and unifying force within the context of its medieval antecedents. We will also consider some passages in the text which point to her as a social connector and “queen” of the sexual activity in her city. To conclude, we will contrast the earthy aspect of Celestina with that of the contemporary changes going on in her society and demonstrate how she stands in parodic opposition to the real queen, Isabella.

### *Celestina as a Comic Figure*

We have already noted several examples of the dark, ironic nature of *La Celestina* and its depiction of the “ugly underneath,” but we have not considered its comic elements. Several noted critics have written on the humorous aspect of the work, among them Dorothy Severin, who devotes an entire article to Celestina as a comic dramatic figure, giving an example of the work containing “good old-fashioned farce” (“Comic”

165). Fothergill-Payne further connects *La Celestina* to grotesque realism by contrasting the formulaic argumentation used in the legal studies of Rojas in his role as a lawyer, and a “world upside down” (34):

In the Celestinesque world, reasoning is chaotic, facts are distorted, language is ambiguous, *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 a constrained speech and, as such, a relaxation of tensions in an ambiance of liberating laughter and fun (35).

This is not a raw humor, says Fothergill-Payne, with no rules or structure; it is a specific type of humor that is represented in the Celestinesque dialogue, that of grotesque realism, where “all that is held in high esteem is ‘downed’ to the level of the body. . . . 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” (35). Ricardo Castells reinforces the Bakhtinian concept of grotesque realism by pointing out how Act I “progresses from the immaterial space of ideas and images to the physical space of the lower body and the senses” (19). Within this carnivalesque space, *Celestina* is the queen.

*Celestina* is, first and foremost, a sexual being. Her livelihood, her social dealings, her home and her personal interests all revolve around sex and the sex trade in its most vulgar aspects: *trotaconventos*, prostitute, pimp, repairer of lost virginal hymens, and procurer of both women and boys for sexual purposes. We will now examine this activity, focusing mainly on its economic and social aspects and defining her place and function within the society of her city. *Celestina*’s attributes as a social “connector” contribute to her status and identity as a carnivalesque figure that fits nicely within Bakhtin’s the definition of grotesque realism. We will then discuss how this figure



parodies and stands in stark contrast to that of Queen Isabella and the new social agenda of the Crown, making her the ideal target for “othering”.

Throughout the narrative Celestina again and again displays her zest for life and all things sexual. A vivid example of the “grandiose, exaggerated, [and] immeasurable” bodily images as per the grotesque realism of Bakhtin is the banquet scene in Act IX. As to the location, Celestina’s house, Foghergill-Payne comments, “The place is a bawdy house, the interlocutors are servants and prostitutes—we have entered the core of the world of prostitution” (39). In this scene Celestina flippantly refers to herself as the “king” and acts as master of ceremonies over the salacious activity:

Besaos y abraços, que a mí no me queda otra cosa sino gozarme de vello. Mientras a la mesa estáys, de la cinta arriba todo se perdona; quando seáys aparte, no quiero poner tassa, pues que el rey no la pone, que yo sé por las mochas que nunca de importunos os acusen, y la vieja Celestina maxcará de dentera con sus botas enzías las migajas de los manteles. ¡Bendígaos Dios como lo reys y holgáis, putillos, loquillos, traviessos; en esto avía de parar el nublado de las cuestioncillas que avés tenido; mira no derribés la mesa! (236).

In true carnivalesque comic fashion, at the behest of the regent and with the blessing of God, Celestina directs her subjects to partake of the sexual feast, only charging them not to upset the table. Applying Bakhtin’s theories, we associate this scene with the examples of grotesque realism within the banquet scenes he examines in the novels of Rabelais:

This is no commonplace, privately consumed food and drink, partaken of by individuals. This is a popular feast, a “banquet for all the world.” The mighty aspiration to abundance and to a universal spirit is evident in each of these images. It determines their forms, their positive hyperbolism, their gay and triumphant tone. The aspiration is like yeast added to the images. They rise, grow, swell with this leaven until they reach exaggerated dimensions. They resemble the gigantic sausages and buns that were solemnly carried in carnival processions (278).

In the same spirit of the grotesque sexual imagery of gigantic sausages and buns, Celestina convenes a sexually charged hedonistic banquet with an air of triumph which appeals to a sense of human commonality:

The meal that Pármeno 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. . . . 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 (Fothergill-Payne 37).

The “abundance” of food and sex provides the link between Celestina and the all-encompassing exaggeration of the carnivalesque. Fothergill-Payne's terminology has nothing to do with the sin of excess; this banquet is all about “togetherness, abundance of food and wine and shared joy.” This corresponds to Bakhtin's emphasis on eating and drinking as the most significant manifestation of grotesque realism:

The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself. Man's awakening consciousness could not but concentrate on this moment, could not help borrowing from it a number of substantial images determining its interrelation with the world. Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage (281).

The banquet scene in Act IX, in its depictions of sexual images and hedonistic excesses, also represents a parodic portrayal of the Catholic kings: the seedy underworld

is Celestina's kingdom and sex is her earthy and worldly "religion." These images are incongruent with the cultural revolution going on in the Kingdom of Spain, where the new rulers are beginning to influence behavior based on more "heavenly" or idealistic mores, that of the Church. At Celestina's banqueting table all consume and imbibe to their satisfaction; this also begs the question as to whether the same feeling of joy and satisfaction was being experienced by the subjects of Ferdinand and Isabella, whose new emphasis on Catholic purity also infers a similar comparison between Celestina's feast and the Eucharist.

Celestina is not only the reigning monarch of the hedonistic celebration around her own dining table, she is the undisputed queen of the sex trade in her town. According to Pármeno, she is more commonly identified as "Putá vieja." When Calisto takes offense at hearing this pseudonym, Pármeno asserts that he is not insulting her but pronouncing her royal status. We see in this monologue an over-the-top, excessive description of the parodic "Queen of the Realm" in a world turned upside down:

*¿Por qué, señor, te matas? ¿Por qué, señor, te congoxas? ¿Y tú piensas que es vituperio en las orejas desta el nombre que la llamé? No lo creas, que así se glorifica en lo oír, como tú quando dizen: "Diestro caballero es Calisto." Y demás desto es nombrada, y por tal título conocida. Si entre cient mujeres va y alguno dize "¡Putá vieja!", sin ningún empacho luego buelve la cabeça y responde con alegre cara. En los combites, en las fiestas, en las bodas, en las confradías, en los mortuorios, en todos los ayuntamientos de gentes, con ella pasan tiempo. Si passa por los perros, aquello suena su ladrido; si está cerca las aves, otra cosa no cantan; si cerca los ganados, balando o pregonan; si cerca las bestias, rebuznando dizen: "¡Putá vieja!"; las ranas de los charcos otra cosa no suelen mentar. Si va entre los herreros, aquello dizen sus martillos; carpinteros y armeros, herradores, caldereros, arcadores, todo officio de instrumento forma en el ayre su nombre. Cántanla los carpinteros, péynanla los peynadores, texedores; labradores en las huertas, en las aradas, en las viñas, en las segadas con ella pasan el afán cotidiano; al perder en los tableros, luego suenan sus loores. Todas cosas que son hazen, a doquiera que ella está, el tal nombre representan. ¡O qué comedor de huevos assados era su*

marido! Qué quieres más sino que, si una piedra topa con otra, luego suena “¡Putá vieja!” (112-113).

In this passage Pármeno goes to great lengths to exaggerate not only Celestina’s fame, but to proclaim her status as the undisputed queen of the carnival who is hailed in all public gatherings, including weddings and funerals. These natural and mostly unorganized settings stand in carnivalesque contrast to the new emphasis on order and civility imposed by the Catholic Kings. In examining her character, the natural tendency is to concentrate on the bawdy and salacious and overlook another of her aspects, her association with the *business* of sex. As the above passage indicates, she has well-established herself not only as a sexual figure, but one who can reliably deliver her product to her customers. As a businesswoman, she also stands in parodic contrast to the up-and-coming *converso* businessman, who is the center of the growing economic sector in Spain. The following passage in which Celestina emphasizes that she makes a decent living demonstrates why she is so successful:

Pocas virgines, a Dios gracias, has tu visto en esta ciudad que hayan abierto tienda a vender, de quien yo no haya sido corredora de su primer hilado. En nasciendo la mochacha, la hago scrivir en mi registro, y esto para que yo sepa cuántas se me salen de la red. ¿Qué pensavas, Sempronio? ¿Havíame de mantener del viento? ¿Heredé otra herencia? ¿Tengo otra casa o viña? ¿Conósceme otra hazienda, más deste officio de que como y bevo, de que visto y calço? En esta ciudad nascida, en ella criada, manteniendo honrra, como todo el mundo sabe, ¿conocida, pues, no soy? Quien no supiere mi nombre y mi casa, tenle por estrangero (145-146).

Here Celestina boasts not only of her success but of her “rightful place” among the citizens of her city, so much so that only a stranger would not know who she is. As an experienced businesswoman she also wastes no time detecting a new opportunity and taking advantage of it:

Melibea es hermosa, Calisto loco y franco; ni a él penará gastar, ni a mí andar. Bulla moneda y dure el pleyto lo que durare. Todo lo puede el dinero; las peñas quebranta, los ríos passa en seco; no ay lugar tan alto que un asno cargado de oro no le suba. Su desatino y ardor bastar perder a sí y ganar a nosotros. Esto he sentido; esto he calado; esto sé dél y della; esto es lo que no á de aprovechar. A casa voy de Pleberio; quédate a Dios (147-148).

The profile of a successful businesswoman—one who knows her trade, her customers and her territory—hides behind the bawdy and licentious. Here we see the genius of Rojas in applying the parodic carnivalesque not only to traditional nobility and clergy but also to the new class of *converso* businessman. As noted in Chapter Two, the new prominence of the *converso* merchant class, who owed loyalty neither to the Crown nor to the existing nobility, was the main impetus behind the decision to bring the Inquisition to Spain.

Through Pármemo's monologue, Rojas presents a parody of this new class of businessmen in the character of Celestina the sex merchant, over whom the Crown has no control.

#### *Celestina as a "Bee," or Social Connector*

Although Celestina is a seedy, reprehensible character on the margins of society, she is also an integral part of the social structure in her town and thus perfectly fits the profile of the carnivalesque figure whose purpose is to parody and mock the powers-that-be, political or economic. As noted previously in Pármemo's monologue, when Celestina walks down the street she is known and greeted by all, and it is surprising, if not disingenuous, that Calisto seems to have no knowledge of her. Emerging from a medieval reality, her activities in the town are hardly a secret, for Celestina proudly

recounts her exploits on many occasions and likens her movements about the city to that of a bee:

La mayor gloria que al secreto officio del abeja se da, a la qual los discretos deven ymitar, es que todas las cosas por ella tocadas convierte en mejor de lo que son. Desta manera me he avido con las çahareñas razones y esquivas de Melibea; todo su rigor traygo convertido en miel, su yra en mansedumbre, su aceleramiento en sossiego. (183).

Celestina confidently boasts of her ability to turn Melibea's resistance into love.

According to Castro Guisasola, this passage's most probable source is two passages from Petrarch's *Index* which state "Apes in inventionibus sunt imitandae [Bees are to be imitated in inventiveness]" and "Apibus nulla esset Gloria nisi in aliud et in melius inventa converterent [There would be no glory for the bees if they did not transform those things they find into something else or something better]" (Guardiola 150, note 4).

Guardiola takes the bee analogy a step further and applies the characteristic of the "ideal flower" to Melibea and that of "ideal culler" to Calisto. This analogy is reinforced by a passage from Seneca's *Epistulae morales*, which was referenced by the anonymous

*Celestina comentada*:

Apes ut aiunt debemus imitari quae vagantur et flores ad mel faciendum idoneos carpunt, deinde quicquid attulere disponunt [ac] per favos digerunt [84.3; qtd. in Cel. comentada 249].

[We should follow, men say, the example of the bees, that flit about and cull the flowers suitable for producing honey, and then arrange and assort in their honeycomb cells all that they have brought in] (quoted in Guardiola 151).

Extending the metaphor of the bee we can apply the image of honey as the "product" of Celestina's sexual marketing. The *alcahueta*, in beelike fashion, expertly arranges lovers' trysts, and the sweet result is the pleasure of love. We again have a

connection here to the grotesque and seedy, for this passage does not imply love in the idealistic, courtly sense, but in the obscene, earthy and natural sense. This imagery also presents us with and parody and critique of courtly love, especially when we consider that the eventual liaison between Calisto and Melibea amounts to little more than a date rape scene. Celestina's beelike activities portray a comic "mundo en revez" that Guardiola emphasizes as worthy of emulation in a carnivalesque sense:

As indicated in the aforementioned epistle, the qualities exhibited by the bee are worthy of imitation, and one may then see who she is and what she does: both honorable and good. If the prudent should imitate her, as Celestina claims in the prior quote, one must see the bawd as an object of emulation, a walking *speculum principis*, a prince among people. It would not be implausible to suggest that she thinks herself a queen bee (151-152).

The notion of Celestina as a social *abeja* is further reinforced by Elicia in her lament of the "hive queen" after Celestina's death:

¡O Celestina, sabia, honrrada y autorizada, cuántas faltas me encobrías con tu buen saber! Tú trabajavas, yo holgava; tú salías fuera, yo estava encerrada; tú rota, yo vestida; tú entravas contino como abeja por casa, yo destruía, que otra cosa no sabía hazer. ¡O bien y gozo mundano, que mientras eres posseído eres menospreciado, y jamás te consientes conocer hasta que te perdemos! (302)

The hyper-sexualized, carnivalesque kingdom regulated by the queen bee also encompasses the garden of Melibea. Guardiola's conclusion emphasizes an important point:

The power of the magistrate gives way to the power of the prostitute, and all are laid low by money. In the *Celestina*, the *alcahueta's* upside-down world seemingly has encompassed the entire town (155).

Guardiola links this space with images from *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, an illustrated Latin manuscript from the twelfth century in which "gardens of flowers" are enjoyed by amorous young people:

Their devotion is such that no bees dare leave their living areas in search of food, unless the king has gone first and has claimed his place at the head of the flight. Their flight takes them over a scented landscape, where there are gardens of flowers, where a stream flows through meadows, where there are pleasant places on its banks. There, young people play lively games, there men exercise in the fields, there you find release from care (63v–64r).

As the regent bee Celestina is free to move about her realm at will without regards to social class distinctions or property lines in her activity of pollinating and collecting honey. Guardiola suggests a direct link between the manuscript and the garden of Melibea:

The space is shared by young people, wherein lively games and lack of care may be tinged with the hue of sensuality. It is a garden of pleasure, and calls to mind the garden of colored lilies and roses that is Melibea's *huerta*. Having led Calisto to the garden's sweet delights and its nighttime diversions, Celestina has provided her devoted and enamored client with the ideal amorous repast (152).

We shall examine shortly the brusque and unrefined manner in which this “amorous repast” is enjoyed, but first let us examine the evidence of the “garden of pleasure” in the text as detailed explicitly in a song sung by Melibea's servant, Lucrecia, as they wait for Calisto's arrival:

O quién fuese la ortelana  
de aquestas viciosas flores  
por prender cada mañana  
al partir a tus amores;

vístanse nuevas colores  
los lirios y el açucena;  
derramen frescos olores  
quando entre por estrana.

.....

Alegre es la fuente clara  
a quien con gran sed la vea,  
mas muy más dulce es la cara



de Calisto a Melibea.

Saltos de gozo infinitos  
da el lobo viendo ganado;  
con las tetas, los cabritos;  
Melibea con su amado.

Nunca fue más desseado  
amador de su amiga,  
ni huerto más visitado,  
ni noche más sin fatiga. (324-325)

This passage defies the concept of courtly love in linking the images of flowers and blossoms not to an idealistic kind of love, but to sexual desire. As mentioned previously the parodic tie-in with courtly love lies in the commonality between this scene and that of an idealized love: sex is sex no matter how you portray it. Celestina's business is that of the salacious and bawdy, but by the same token the sex she is selling and arranging is no different than the sex that is enjoyed in a "legitimate" relationship, or in a marriage such as that of Ferdinand and Isabella. We can then appreciate in this scene the reduction of the idealistic "amorous repast" mentioned by Guardiola to a trite, animalistic urge or basic necessity, akin to eating lunch. The next scene, in which Melibea sings of a cerebral love, clearly contrasts her concept of an idealized relationship with "real" love represented by the carnal thoughts of Calisto. In this scene Melibea continues the song begun by Lucrecia (quoted above) and, in dramatic fashion, Calisto brings the thought full circle after appearing over the wall:

MELIBEA. Papagayos, ruyseñores  
que cantáys al alborada;  
llevad nueva a mis amores  
cómo espero aquí assentada.

La media noche es pasada  
y no viene;

sabedme si ay otra amada  
que lo detiene.

.....  
MELIBEA. ¿Qué quieres que cante, amor mío? ¿Cómo cantaré, que tu desseo era el que regía mi son y hazía sonar mis canto? Pues, conseguida tu venida, desaparecióse el deseo; destémplase el tono de mi boz. Y pues tú, señor, eres el dechado de cortesía y buena criança, ¿cómo mandas a mi lengua hablar y no a tus manos que estén quedas? ¿Por qué no olvidas estas mañas? Mándalas estar sossegadas y dexar su enojoso uso y conversación incomportable. Cata, ángel mío, que así como me es agradable tu vista sossegada, me es enojoso tu riguroso trato; tus honestas burlas me dan placer, tus deshonestas manos me fatigan quando pasan de la razón. Dexa estar mis ropas en su lugar, y si quieres ver si es hábito de encima de seda o de paño ¿para qué me tocas en la camisa? pues cierto es de lienço. Holguemos y burlemos de otros mil modos que yo te mostraré; no me destroces ni maltrates como sueles. ¿Qué provecho te trae dañar mis vestiduras?

CALISTO. Señora, el que quiere comer el ave, quita primero las plumas.

.....  
MELIBEA. Señor mío, ¿quieres que mande a Lucrecia traer alguna collación?

CALISTO. No ay otra colación para mí sino tener tu cuerpo y belleza en mi poder; comer y beber dondequiera se da por dinero y cada tiempo se puede aver y qualquiera lo puede alcançar, pero lo no vendible, lo que en toda la tierra no ay ygual que en este huerto, ¿cómo mandas que se me pase ningún momento que no goze? (326-328)

In contrast to Melibea, Calisto behaves in a base, vulgar, coarse and unrefined manner in his rough handling of his “beloved,” seeking only to own and dominate her. In the context of the carnivalesque, however, we see a two-way street in the almost conjugal interaction of the couple. Despite how the relationship started out (which also vaguely alludes to the negotiated political marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella), by Act XIX there has already been several meetings between the couple and Melibea is now a willing participant.<sup>2</sup> In order to fully appreciate the depiction of sex in this scene as unrefined,

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<sup>2</sup> In the light of modern psychotherapy, Calisto’s behavior falls neatly within a paradigm that Dr. Gary Brooks calls “the Centerfold Syndrome,” which deals with “how men are taught to suppress their needs for intimacy and sensuality, and come to invest too much emotional and psychological power in some women’s bodies” (36). As this relates to our thesis, it is interesting to note how the couple’s interaction in this scene has a universal quality to it, in the sense that it represents the eternal dance between

wholly un-idealized and completely human we must look beyond the modern idea of pornography and recognize the depiction of something falling almost prototypically within the genre of grotesque realism. Recalling Bakhtin,

We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. . . . The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance (19).

The depiction of sex in *La Celestina* within the framework of the carnivalesque and a "world upside down" is not negative but represents an overwhelming positive force which breaks down social barriers and reduces every person to the level of the grotesque and unclean human body in its sweat, feces, semen, and menstrual blood. In a further ironic and grotesque twist, the pleasure that Calisto enjoys in this scene is short-lived, as he falls to his death in the next scene. While Calisto's death, and the death of the other characters, represents a tragic ending to what had started out as good fun, the representation of death is contained within the definition of the carnivalesque. As Bakhtin notes, death, as part of grotesque realism, represents a downward movement which is positive in the sense of sowing and renewal:

Down, inside out, vice versa, upside down, such is the direction of all these movements. All of them thrust down, turn over, push headfirst, transfer top to bottom, and bottom to top, both in the literal sense of space, and in the metaphorical meaning of the image.

We also see the downward movement in fights, beatings, and blows; they throw the adversary to the ground, trample him into the earth. They bury their victim. But at the same time they are creative; they sow and harvest.

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the sexes, coined in one particular postcard as, "Women have sex with men so they will talk to them; men talk to women so they will have sex with them."

The downward movement is also expressed in curses and abuses. They, too, dig a grave, but this is a bodily, creative grave.

Debasement and interment are reflected in carnival uncrownings, related to blows and abuse. The king's attributes are turned upside down in the clown; he is king of a world "turned inside out."

Finally, debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images. We spoke of the grotesque swing, which brings together heaven and earth. But the accent is placed not on the upward movement but on the descent.

The downward movements, scattered throughout the forms and images of popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism, are reassembled by Rabelais; they are understood anew and merged in one single movement directed into the depths of the earth, the depths of the body, in which "the treasures and most wonderful things lie hidden" (never described by the ancient philosophers) (370-371).

Sempronio and Pármeno participate in this cycle when they jump to their deaths trying to escape the authorities after murdering Celestina. Complete debasement occurs when their bodies are beheaded after they have lain in a moribund state. Calisto suffers a similar ignominious death in his fall, which not only symbolically represents his descent from cerebral thoughts to the impulses of the lower body but a total debasement of his social standing from the height of his nobility to that of a dead creature with his brains splattered all over the pavement. These images serve to reinforce the natural order of the medieval mentality, of which death is the great equalizer and the bottom end of a cycle that is continued with rebirth and renewal.

### *The Comic vs. the Moralistic*

The fruition of Celestina's beelike activity is Celestina's sexual "bee hive" where all of the activity revolves around her, the Queen, as suggested by Guardiola. By applying the theories of Bakhtin we have shown that these activities are positive in a carnivalesque sense because they represent grounding and equalizing forces which reduce

all persons involved to the level of the body and as such represent an equalizing force.

Guardiola comes to a different conclusion, however, in stating that Celestina's bee-like activity, instead of constructive, is in the end self-defeating and destructive:

Yet the construction of Celestina's organized and productive honeycomb was founded on the destruction of the beehive of medieval society. In damaging the honor of young women, she destroyed the honeycombed fabric of her community. ... The "viciosas flores" of their garden turn black in [Elisia's] curse and will no longer produce either honey or money. Oddly enough, it is perhaps through Elicia's curse that the social ills Celestina carried out are punished. The demise of the lovers ... as well as the deaths of false servants and bawd carry out the moral lesson and allow for the return of the social order (154).

Guardiola's stance reflects a pre-supposed moralistic conclusion influenced by modern sentiments seen later in drama of the *Siglo de Oro* where death, especially in the honor plays, represents a restoration of order. While some critics prefer to categorize *La Celestina* as a modern work, it is, at best, "early" modern. Guardiola does not share this interpretation, demonstrated by the first paragraph of her essay:

The *Celestina* lays bare its social and moralistic message by exposing the corruption of social and moral values prevalent in this late fifteenth century work. Bringing together the aristocratic world of courtly love (already brought low through the Calisto's crass treatment of waspish Melibea) and the bawdy world of the whorehouse, Rojas debases the people and passions therein. Connecting both worlds through her comings and goings is Celestina. Characterized as *abeja*, a political animal used in the Middle Ages and early modern period that informs the ideal structure of society, Celestina exposes a satire of society and its corruption of moral values (147).

Guardiola misses two salient points in her analysis. First, although she claims that the work "exposes a satire of society and a corruption of moral values," she bases her claim on a modern moralistic stance which does not fully incorporate and appreciate the parodic content of the work and its role as a humorous, irreverent portrayal of mainstream society within a medieval context, of which death is naturally a part. Failing

to consider this aspect totally precludes any consideration of a carnivalesque interpretation characteristic of works from the Middle Ages and exemplified by Bakhtin in the works of Rabelais. Secondly, Guardiola fails to take into consideration the fact that the activity of Celestina, though immoral in the eyes of the church, has been going on for centuries. Celestina has been allowed to exist and her business, while not officially sanctioned, has been allowed to flourish throughout the Middle Ages as long as she remains discreet. We need no other indication than the competence and expertise demonstrated by Celestina in completing Calisto's business within two days. As an established--even "respected"--*alcahueta*, she performs a function within the medieval structure of her society: a discreet purveyor of sex. Judging the activity to be moral or exploitative by modern standards is irrelevant, and, for the purposes of this thesis, distracts us from our major theme: society is in upheaval and the changes are occurring even at the lowest level, among the people living on the margins who make their livelihood through the sex trade. Furthermore this upheaval of the social mores of the underworld represents, in a carnivalesque sense, an attack on personal freedoms and the function of what heretofore has been considered a natural occurrence with the normal working of society.

Our purpose here is not to critique Guardiola's essay; in support of our thesis, however, it is helpful to point out how her stance is representative of a popular interpretation, especially from a contemporary moralistic standpoint, which is short-sighted in terms of its failure to consider some of the broader aspects of the work, especially in the context of its medieval antecedents. Reducing *La Celestina* to a moralistic caveat is reductive of the more complex aspects of the work. Rojas, after all,

did not call it a tragedy or a comedy, but a *tragicomedia*. As such it begins as a comedy and ends in a tragedy. This, in microcosm, is indicative of the age in which Celestina lives and operates: what was once fun is now forbidden.

The more important question we have to ask is not whether the conduct depicted in the *tragicomedia* is morally correct, but why the story ends the way it does. In short, what goes wrong in the negotiations which results in Celestina's death? More specifically, within the cultural context of the work, what is different between this business transaction and all those that have preceded it? Guardiola, from her moralistic stance, states, "Most of the characters in the work live their lives as transgression; their disorderly conduct leads inevitably to their death and destruction" (147). If we attribute her death to the dedication of her life to the sex industry, then to what do we attribute her longevity? Her status as a *alcahueta*, procuress and repairer of virgins should have afforded her at least some degree of protection, as long as she maintained discretion.

The bigger question suggested to us by our approach is, what is happening in society at this time that empowers two servants to take her life? In the next chapter we will examine specific details, but here let us recap some of the more macro aspects that we have considered so far. We have discussed the social changes going on with regards to religion and the Inquisition, which, while they must be taken into account as a backdrop, seemingly have no direct bearing on the work. What we do see within the *tragicomedia* is tangible evidence of the economic squeeze being put on those of Celestina's profession from the state-owned brothels, as noted in Chapter Two. Rank suggests:

It would not be necessary or even desirable to spend much ink trying to make explicit through the text to Rojas's contemporaries that civil

appointments were heavily beholden to and connected with the true wielders of power in the towns any more than it would have been necessary or desirable to explicate the probability that these same wielders of power had certain dependencies on, or at least understandings with, those who managed the semi-legitimate, or grey-area legitimacy of the world of *alcahuetas*, prostitutes, contraband, and bribery (Rank 159).

What we can conclude, then, is that Celestina is an anachronism, a hold-over from an earlier time period. Her influence persists, but in a reduced state due to the new restrictions imposed by the Catholic Kings. Her age, experience and discretion has allowed her to keep working under an old paradigm where she is queen of the sexual hive, but it is evident from the many references in the text that her business is not what it used to be:

Celestina pursues Calisto in search of money, which at this particular moment in history was slipping through the hands of her real-life counterparts and into those of state-appointed brothel keepers. As Lacarra notes, the granting of royal mercedes for the incomes derived from prostitution to royal towns or notable persons became prevalent during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabel. One must imagine women such as Celestina doubly feeling the pinch from this seemingly “catholic” imposition. Income from the *alcahueta* livelihood from all of Castile certainly must have been dwindling. At the same time, the *alcahueta*'s dishonest way of living was being usurped by speciously honorable citizens who no doubt maligned the prostitutes on whom their wealth was gained. Despite the growing danger of her increasingly clandestine profession, Celestina shows little shame or fear (Guardiola 148).

It is for this reason that Rojas' choice of an *alcahueta* as his central character is so compelling in its depiction of a society in upheaval. Celestina represents Everyman because she is the embodiment of the carnivalesque. She is a uniting, all-encompassing figure that brings everyone together in the grotesque images of the body: of eating, of sex, and of death. As such her grand, exaggerated image of degradation inspires hope and renewal to society:



Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving (Bakhtin 21).

In conclusion to this chapter, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand are attempting, through governmental and religious reform and through conquest, to unite the country from the top down into a united Spain. In their efforts to do so they have begun to extend the tentacles of their power and influence to the lowest stratum of society: those on the margins. *Celestina* stands in direct opposition to these societal changes in that she unites the community from the bottom up through the commonality of humanity and images of the carnival and grotesque realism.

The changes being forced upon the people from the very top have now started to affect their private, personal lives. This is why the images of the body and the carnivalesque are so important and large in this context: because inherent in the discussion of eating, drinking and sex is a dialogue which deals with the daily lives of people on every level. It is this degree of invasion that we will see in the next chapter in the creation and identification of the “other”.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The End of Tolerance

One of the reasons for Spain's meteoric rise to power in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was its being at the right place at the right time in terms of conquest. The rise of *Christian* Spain, more specifically, benefitted from being presented with several groups of people who they could easily conquer. As noted in Chapter Two, Christians, Jews and Muslims had lived in relative peace for centuries; it was only when the Christian population felt itself strong enough that the balance of power tipped in their favor (Kamen 3). The Catholic Kings made it their first order of business to finish off the *Reconquista* in a war against the Moors and further extended their crusade against the Jews and Jewish converts, even though the latter comprised a critical economic faction of their empire. Also in 1492 the colonization of America began, in which Spain would eventually consume an entire continent and completely subjugate Meso-American civilizations. The mental state necessary which empowers one people to completely de-humanize and conquer another class or race of people has been identified by modern critics such as Edward Said and Tvetan Todorov as "othering,"

A succinct definition of the concept of the "other" can be found in literary critic Lois Tyson's chapter on postcolonial criticism:

This practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human ... divides the world between "us" (the "civilized") and "them" (the "others" or "savages"). The "savage" is usually considered evil as well as inferior (the *demonic other*). But sometimes the "savage" is perceived as possessing a "primitive" beauty or nobility born of a closeness to nature (the *exotic other*). In either case, however, the "savage" remains other and, therefore, not fully human (420).

It is precisely through the consolidation of power that the Christian majority in late 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain validated a belief in their own superiority, which they contrasted with the “alleged inferiority” of those they were trying to conquer or colonize. This activity is consistent with Tyson’s definition: “Therefore, native peoples were defined as savage, backward, and undeveloped. . . . So the colonizers saw themselves at the center of the world; the colonized were at the margins” (419).

In the previous chapter we profiled the character of Celestina, an iconic character living on the margins of Spanish society in this time period representing the unifying medieval archetype of the carnivalesque. We also investigated how her existence stands in defiance to the changes being affected from the top down by the Catholic Kings in their consolidation of power through the creation of a society of fear. Furthermore we have begun to analyze how this overarching national attitude has started to affect even those living on the margins and the personal lives of every Spanish subject. In this chapter we will now consider how this othering trend takes shape, affects everyone in Spanish society—especially Celestina—and how the trend is tipping in favor of the Crown. We will first examine the hostile climate towards women in general, typified by Calisto’s objectification of Melibea and Sempronio’s speech to his master in the first act. Second, we will investigate the character of Calisto and show how his *ocioso* mentality abandons medieval principles or responsibility honor in favor of a modern individualism which is based on his own narcissism. In an ironic twist, we will also observe how Calisto himself becomes a subject of othering. Third, we will examine the events leading up to the murder of Celestina in Act XII, concentrating on the motives and attitudes of

the murderers and also the mindset of the victim in her inability to recognize the changing social trends and adapt to them, which could have prevented her murder.

*Sempronio and his Misogyny : “Que sometes la dignidad del hombre a la imperfección de la flaca mujer”*

A case can be made for the story of Calisto’s lust as a parody of courtly love. Many modern critics have pointed out the misogynistic aspect of courtly love, especially as represented in *comedias* of the Golden Age. Even Cervantes, in *Don Quijote*, has a good deal to say about the absurdity of such an arrangement, especially as portrayed in the episode of Marcela and Grisóstomo (Cervantes, I.XII – I.XIV). These critics and literary examples have arrived at the conclusion that the idea of courtly love is nothing more than a vehicle for the exploitation and objectification of women. More than 100 years before *Don Quijote* we see in the comedic aspects of the *La Celestina* a carnivalesque portrayal of the noble Calisto, in the throes of *loco amor*, being reduced to nothing more than a man controlled by lust. It is in this activity that Rojas, in an appropriate role reversal, depicts a straightforward objectification of women. This is the background and premise of the story, and the setting in which the story opens.

Prior to the first scene, the reader is already familiar with the romantic novels in which lustful men worship and adore women from afar. We can consider this a form of othering, in which women are objectified. Referring again to Tyson, we see strong parallels between postcolonial criticism and feminist criticism:

[T]he resultant devaluation of women and colonized peoples poses very similar problems for both groups in terms of achieving an independent personal and group identity; gaining access to political power and economic opportunities; and finding ways to think, speak and create that are not dominated by the ideology of the oppressor (423).

While it is not the primary goal of this paper to examine *La Celestina* from a feminist angle, we can apply the concepts of “woman as the other” as espoused by many feminist critics and examine how it applies to the relationship between Calisto and Melibea (Tyson 91-92). In that aspect we see in Rojas’ work a very strong sense of objectification which is evident from the outset, as evidenced by Calisto’s statement to Melibea in the first scene:

El dar poder a natura que de tan perfecta hermosura te dotasse, y hazer a mí, inmérito, tanta merced que verte alcançasse, y en tan conveniente lugar, que mi secreto dolor manifestarte pudiesse. Sin duda, incomparablemente es mayor tal galardón que el servicio, sacrificio, devoción y obras pías que por este lugar alcançar yo tengo a Dios ofrecido. ¿Quién vido en esta vida cuerpo glorificado de ningún hombre como agora el mío? Por cierto, los gloriosos santos que se deleytan en la visión divina no gozan más que yo agora en el acatamiento tuyo. Mas, o triste, que en esto deferimos, que ellos puramente se glorifican sin temor de caer de tal bienaventurança y yo, misto, me alegro con recelo del esquivo tormento que tu ausencia me ha de causar (90).

The concept of the “exotic othering” can be applied directly to this unattainable view of Melibea as a creation of perfect beauty. The banter between Sempronio and his master succinctly sums up this attitude when Sempronio says of Calisto’s lovesickness, “Que sometes la dignidad del hombre a la imperfección de la flaca mujer.” Calisto flatly responds, “¿Mujer? ¡O grossero! ¡Dios! ¡Dios!” (98-99), which solidifies Calisto’s view of Melibea as something inhuman: a goddess.

Calisto’s final words to Melibea at his departure in the first scene suggest a distance between him and Melibea, one which can be understood in the sense of the “civilized” and the “savage beauty”: “Yré como aquel contra quien solamente la adversa Fortuna pone su studio con odio cruel” (91). Present, too, are the metaphors of the

“hunt” in the use of the falcon and in the eventual capture and conquering of Melibea, which amounts to little more than date rape:

Ni tú, señora, me lo mandarás, ni yo podría acabarlo conmigo. No me pides tal covardia; no es hazer tal cosa de ninguno que hombre sea, mayormente amando como yo, nadando por este huego de tu desseo toda mi vida. ¿No quieres que me arrime al dulce puerto a descansar de mis pasados trabajos? (289).

Among the elements of othering in the narcissistic attitude of Calisto, he has the gall to ask permission of his date before taking advantage of her.

After meeting Melibea Calisto decides to dedicate his life to the worship of her beauty (“Melibea só, y a Melibea adoro, y en Melibea creo, y a Melibea amo” (97)), in which attitude we can see as the objectification of an ideal and not the reality of a relationship with the person to whom the beauty is attributed. The reaction by his servant Sempronio begins as cautionary advice against the perils of love, but quickly progresses to outright vilification of the opposite sex, even including an epithet against Calisto’s own grandmother and an invective against his grandfather:

SEMPRONIO. Dixe que tú, que tienes más coraçón que Nembrot ni Alexandre, desesperas de alcanzar una mujer, muchas de las quales en grandes estados constituýdas se sometieron a los pechos y resollos de viles azemileros, y otras a bruto animales. ¿No has leýdo de Pasife con el toro, de Minerva con el can?

CALISTO. No lo creo, habillas son.

SEMPRONIO. Lo de tu abuela con el ximio, ¿hablilla fue? Testigo es el cuchillo de tu abuelo (100).

Sempronio continues with a rant against the evils of women which is comparative in its vitriol to the *Malleus Maleficarum*:

SEMPRONIO. ¿Escozióte? Lee los yestoriales, estudia los filósofos, mira los poetas. Llenos están los libros de sus viles y malos enxemplos, y de las caýdas que levaron los quen en algo, como tú, las reputaron. Oye a Salomón do dize que las mujeres y el vino hacen a los hombres renegar. Conséjate con Séneca y verás en qué las tiene. Escucha al

Aristóteles, mira a Bernardo. Gentiles, judíos, christianos y moros, todos en esta concordia están. Pero lo dicho y lo que dellas dixiere no te contezca error de tomarlo en común; que muchas ovo y ay santas, virtuosas y notables cuya resplandesciente corona quita el general vituperio. Pero destas otras, ¿quién te contaría sus mentiras, sus tráfgos, sus cambios, su liviandad, sus lagrimillas, sus alteraciones, sus osadías? Que todo lo que piensan osan sin deliberar: sus dessimulaciones, su lengua, su engaño, su olvido, su desamor, su ingratitud, su inconstancia, su testimoniar, su negar, su rebolver, su presunción, su vangloria, su abatimiento, su locura, su desdén, su sobervia, su subjeción, su parlería, su golosina, luxuria y suziedad, su miedo, su atrevimiento, sus hechizerías, sus embaymientos, sus escarnios, sus deslenguamiento, su desvergüença, su alcahuetería. Considera qué sesito está debaxo de aquellas grandes y delgadas tocas, qué pensamientos so aquellas gorgueras, so aquel Fausto, so aquellas largas y autorizantes ropas, qué imperfición, qué alvañares debaxo de templos pintados. Por ellas es dicho: arma del diablo, cabeça de peccado, destrución de paraíso. ¿No, has rezado en la festividad de San Juan, do dize [las mujeres y el vino hacen (a) los hombres renegar do dize:] ésta es la mujer, antigua malicia que a Adam echó de los deleytes de paraíso, ésta el linaje humano metió en el infierno; a ésta menospreció Helías propheta, etc.?

CALISTO: Di, pues, ese Adam, ese Salomón, ese David, ese Aristóteles, ese Vergilio, esso que dizes, como se sometieron a ellas, ¿soy más que ellos?

SEMPRONIO: A los que las vencieron querría que remedases, que no a los que dellas fueron vencidos. Huye de sus engaños. ¿Sabes qué hacen? Cosas, que es difícil entenderlas. No tienen modo, no razón, no intención. Por rigor encomiençan el ofrecimiento que de sí quieren hazer. A los que meten por los agujeros, denuestan en la calle; convidan, despiden, llaman, niegan, señalan amor, pronuncian enemiga, ensañanse presto, apazíguanse luego, quieren que adevinen lo que quieren. ¡O qué plaga, o qué enojo, o qué fastío es conferir con ellas, más de aquel breve tiempo, que aparejadas son a deleyte! (100-102)

It is Sempronio who sets the tenor for the work at the outset as an environment in which there is an increasing amount of hostility and distrust towards the female sex. Of particular Inquisitorial interest in this passage is the linking of women to Satan, outright evil, and the reason for the fall of man:

Por ellas es dicho: arma del Diablo, cabeça de peccado, destruction de paraíso. ... ésta es la mujer, antigua malicia que a Adam echó de los deleytes de paraíso, ésta el linaje humano metió en el infierno (102).

As Joseph Klait points out, the sentiment displayed by Sempronio is representative of a growing trend throughout Europe during the period. Nowhere is this sentiment better depicted than in the works of the artist Hans Baldung Grien, whose many paintings and woodcuts on the theme of “Death and the Maiden” seems to have been influenced by the *Malleus* and other demonologists, and who contributed to the popular development of the evil nature of women. Says Klait:

In [Baldung Grien’s] several treatments of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, Eve usually plays the active part. She is depicted as the temptress who brings a passive Adam to sin, and this sin is explicitly associated with death. Baldung Grien was the first artist to represent the fall as an overtly erotic act. He interprets Adam and Eve’s sinning as a surrender to lust, and in her body language Eve makes it clear that she is a lewd and sensual creature (74).

Of specific interest is Baldung Grien’s work “Adam and Eve” (*Der Sudenfall*) (1511), which is portrayed in an iconic fashion on the soft-cover edition of Klait’s 1985 book, *Servants of Satan*. The portrait depicts the hapless couple, under the supervision of the Serpent, on the precipice of the Fall, but it is not the apple in Eve’s hand that is the focus of Adam’s attention (See Appendix).

Interestingly enough it is Melibea herself who reinforces the presence of biological essentialism in the patriarchal and misogynistic attitude in the work.

According to Tyson:

Patriarchy is thus, by definition, *sexist*, which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form of what is called *biological essentialism* because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women. A striking illustration is the word *hysteria*, which derives from the Greek word for



womb (*hystera*) and refers to psychological disorders deemed peculiar to women and characterized by overemotional, extremely irrational behavior (85-86).

It is in Melibea's hysterical monologue preceding her suicide at the end of the work in which the author brings full-circle the thought of "woman as the other". In the monologue, Melibea reveals to her father her indiscretions with Calisto's and validates Calisto's sexist attitude by assuming a passive attitude within a patriarchal structure:

Yo fui ocasión que los muertos toviessen compañía del más acabado hombre que en gracias nació. Yo quite a los vivos el dechado de gentileza, de invenciones galanas, de atavíos y bordaduras, de habla, de andar, de cortesía, de virtud. Yo fui causa que la tierra goze sin tiempo el más noble cuerpo y más fresca juventud que al mundo era en nuestra edad criada (337).

After this desperate declaration Melibea ostentatiously kills herself, resolving the problems of the violation of honor and chastity in the only way that she perceives possible. In one aspect her suicide can be viewed as a selfish act, a last-resort exercise of power over the only thing she still controls: her death. The theme of the work has therefore come full circle which starts with her objectification by Calisto and ending with her ultimate affirmation which drives home the theme of woman as cruel and manipulative. Even her father, Pleberio, echoes the sentiment:

O mi compañera buena y [o] me hija despedaçada, ¿por qué no quesiste que estorvasse tu muerte? ¿Por qué no oviste lástima de tu querida y amada madre? ¿Por qué te mostraste tan cruel con tu viejo padre? ¿Por qué me dexaste, quando yo te había de dexar? ¿Por qué me dexaste penado? ¿Por qué me dexaste triste y solo *in hac lacrimarum valle*? (347)

Pleberio declares that he erected towers, acquired honors, planted arbors and built ships for his daughter. But in this sense Melibea is again being objectified, not as a participant in the mercantile activity, but as the focus and the purpose of material gain. In the end, however it is the passive acceptance of Melibea to an activity spawned by patriarchal

society, one in which she is not a participant. We therefore see here, in the tragedy of the death of the heroine of the novel, a reinforcement of the theme of the “othering”, in the exclusion and manipulation of women by men.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the identification of an “other” was critical in the expansion of the Spanish Empire and had previously been directed against Jews and Muslims. The Inquisition, in its efforts to consolidate power and stem the tide of the Reformation, invented the concept of witchcraft in the publication of the *Malleus Mallificarum* and began to redirect its efforts towards the non-Catholic practices of people on the margins, especially single, elderly women on the lower end of the social scale who acted in the capacity of midwife, sorceress, medicine woman, procuress and *alcahueta*. According to Klaitz the tendency of the Inquisition was to redirect the social tensions of the times towards the scapegoating of these types of women, which at the time of the writing of *La Celestina* was just beginning to be manifested in the concept of witchcraft:

Elderly females were represented among the dependent poor in disproportionately high numbers, for the old woman was the member of society least likely to be self-supporting. Such poor, old women were the prime targets for witchcraft allegations ... In the psychology of witchcraft accusations, the old, impoverished woman was a stock suspect because she seemed entirely helpless, lacking even the physical strength a man might use to avenge himself on his enemies. It appeared plausible that she would resort to supernatural assistance as her only source of power. Aged single women were especially vulnerable and ran a greater risk of witch charges than did their married neighbors, partly because the widow or spinster was more likely to fall into poverty and thus fit the stereotype of the witch. ... [T]he woman who lived alone and independent of male control could be a threatening figure in a patriarchal society. ... When we find prostitutes, procurers, and tavern keepers identified as witches, we can see a reflection of the threats to family and community stability that were most feared in early modern Europe (94-95).

Although Celestina is not persecuted and killed for being a witch *per se*, a case can be made that the portrayal of Celestina as a witch, albeit a secret one, in effect moves her from being simply undesirable and smarmy to being outright evil and worshipping Satan. When taken as a whole we can easily project the degradation of the humanity of a character like Celestina to the point of being sub-human and therefore expendable. It is this “othering” tendency in the objectification of women that sets the tone of the work and becomes a major factor in Celestina’s eventual death:

As witchcraft became identified with sexual trespasses in the minds of the reforming witch hunters, its sex-linked status was greatly reinforced. This association may well be indicative of a psychological process by which women, as agents of Satan, were held responsible for male sexual inadequacy and transgressions. Symptoms of what can be termed early modern machismo include a highly patriarchal family structure, an obsession with codes of sexual honor, and the curious stress on the genital-emphasizing codpiece in dress and literary expression. All of these may betray considerable male insecurity. The purifiers’ preachments about the close relationship of sin and sex surely encouraged in their audiences a sense of guile about sexual feelings. If inability to adhere to newly generalized standards of Christian sexual behavior could be blamed on women as a consequence of satanic intervention, the male sense of guile would be greatly reduced (Klairs 77).

We can therefore list as a contributing factor in Celestina’s death the fact that her status has been diminished due to a tendency of “othering.” Despite her previous successes and recognition, she has been reduced through this principle to an expendable “savage” living outside of the boundaries of accepted society.

#### *Calisto’s Modern Predicament*

According to Maravall, *La Celestina* presents us with a society embroiled in a crisis of disorder. The world, as presented to the medieval man, was, no matter what, ordered and in perfect unity. This symmetry was traditionally understood through the

unity of God, the unity of the universe, the unity of moral values, and the unity between classes and the individuals in society. In his portrayal of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century Rojas presents us with a clear sense of a crisis in the breakdown of this pre-supposed order, in which the traditional ideas of harmony and unity are sharply attacked by a sense of variety and contraposition.

By the latter half of the 1490s, in the wake of the completed *Reconquista*, Spain had become relatively quiet and its nobles, who would ordinarily be involved in any kind of military expedition, were idle. It is during this quiescence that we see the gestation of some of the societal changes occurring at this critical phase in history. In its most general aspect, it is the rich *burgeiose* that propel these changes, in their imitation of the lifestyle of the nobility, which has the effect of transforming the styles and conduct of the distinguished class. The mentality of this new *ocioso* (“idle”) class, in its lust for profit, sense of liberality, the enjoyment of life and love, the experience of death, and the idea of fortune; affect the beliefs and customs of society in their basis on conditional human relationships that are social and not founded upon a determined class structure. This new class is guided by a money-driven economy and urban culture (Maravall 29). Says Maravall:

A través de un problema elegido con gran acierto, *La Celestina* nos presenta el drama de la crisis y transmutación de los valores sociales y morales que se desarrolla en la fase de crecimiento de la economía, de la cultura y de la vida entera, en la sociedad del siglo XV (22).

The first disturbing trend we are presented with in *La Celestina* is the instigator of the action, an idle nobleman named Calisto. According to Jerry R. Rank, even though the narrative does not inform us on Calisto’s public activities (only his private ones), we can infer certain things about him, his family, and his “urban network” from his monologue

in Act XIV (156). As is evident from his rant in the following passage against the “cruel judge” who sentenced his servants to execution, Calisto presupposes a certain amount of deference due to his familial connections:

O cruel juez, y qué mal pago me as dado del pan que de mi padre comiste. Yo pensaba que pudiera con tu favor matar mil hombres sin temor de castigo, iniquo falsario, perseguidor de verdad, hombre de baxo suelo; bien dirán por ti que hizo alcalde mengua de los hombres buenos. Miraras que tú y los que mataste en servir a mis pasados y a mí, érades compañeros. Mas guando el vil está rico, ni tiene pariente ni amigo. ¿Quién pensara que tú me havías de destruyr? No hay, cierto, cosa más empecible que el incogitado enemigo. ¿Por qué quesiste que dixiessen del monte sale con que se arde, y que crié cuervo que me sacasse el ojo? Tú eres público delinquente y mataste a los que son privados, y pues sabe que menor delicto es el privado que el público, menor su utilidad, según las leyes de Atenas disponen (293).

As Rank indicates, there is a good deal of historical research detailing the social hierarchy within the northern provinces of Spain which is oligarchic and whose membership was “flexible and inclusive, permitting a good deal of upward mobility” (MacKay 159). Rank suggests that Calisto’s father was a part of that ruling oligarchy of the lesser nobility and that his rank was at least that of *caballero de cuantía* and more likely a *caballero de privilegio*, the latter of which contained many *caballeros hidalgos*, or men of noble birth who later became knights (Rank 160, MacKay 167). Implicit in that network of lesser nobility in a town were close-knit power groups called *bandos*, which contained friends as well as relatives. Says Rank, “The probable social and familial basis for Rojas’s aristocrats in the social and political realities described by MacKay in his full account of the Castilian town are unavoidable” (161). Calisto therefore reminds the judge (*in absentia*) that the servants he ordered executed were within the same *bando* and had equal status and certain expectations of mutual protection within that extended family. These implicit connections did not need to be overtly

detailed by Rojas but were part of a daily reality that would readily be understood by his audience through “a few deft strokes of the author’s pen”:

Calisto’s father has no role within the dialogic structure of the work, but the text informs the knowledgeable reader—that is to say, the reader who lived the urban life which surrounded Calisto—through Calisto about his father’s role within the urban network. That this reader probably knew Calisto from these few deft strokes of the author’s pen and could no doubt establish a uniform, informed idea of him is indicative once again of Rojas’s skill in manipulating his sense of the importance of memory and the past, combined with the circumstances of the present, to create figures of striking individuality which at first may seem trite and stereotypical to the uninformed reader (Rank 162).

Rank provides valuable evidence and historical background as to the wealth and status of Calisto, for we see nothing of that in the progression of the work itself: as readers we are only privileged to his secret, personal activity and he is an anonymous, stereotypical figure. We cannot even be sure that “Calisto” is his real name. His lack of identity emphasizes his representation of what Maravall calls the *ocioso*, or “idle,” class: the “new rich” that long to be recognized as new lords by way of an ostentatious liberality in which one spends much and works little. He is not only rich: he flaunts it:

Calixto responde fielmente a la figura del joven miembro de la clase ociosa, en ese último estadio de carácter económico que hemos definido. No hay en el texto de la obra ninguna alusión militar que le afecte, y en sustitución de ello, demuestra ostensiblemente su ocio, practicando actividades o deportes meramente gratuitos—la caza, el paseo a caballo, el juego, el amor—. No sólo es rico, sino que lo ostenta (Maravall 37).

Calisto’s servant Sempronio realizes this aspect of his master’s personality when he says, in order to stimulate his generosity, “Sin dubda te digo que es mejor el uso de las riquezas que la posesión dellas” (134), and hopes that this sentiment will strike a resonant chord with his young master. Maravall sums up the attitude as follows:

La ostentación, esto es, la manifestación pública o social de todo lo bueno y rico que se posee o de que se goza, es ley en el mundo de *La Celestina*:

‘de ninguna prosperidad es buena la posesión sin compañía. El placer no comunicado no es placer’ (38).

Calisto, then, is portrayed as an irresponsible *ocioso* with no sense of honor or responsibility who lives only for the carnal pleasures of life and willingly gives himself over to *loco amor*:

En los ricos de reciente elevación se dan faltas sociales con frecuencia. Su comportamiento ofrece fallos notorios, porque su fe en las cláusulas del código del honor estamental es débil. Hay en Calixto ... una falta del sentido del honor” (Maravall 51).

Nowhere is this more evident than in his monologue just after hearing the news of Sempronio and Pármeno’s death, in which he displays an occupation with his own status and social standing and callously dismisses the death of his servants as a simple “adversity”. Instead of deriving some sense of warning or danger from the incident, he instead re-focuses himself on his self-centered enterprise:

¡O fortuna, cuánto y por cuántas partes me as combatido! Pues por más que sigas mi morada y seas contraria a me persona, las adversidades con yguar ánimo se han de sufrir y en ellas se prueba el corazón rezio o flaco. No ay mejor toque para conocer qué quilates de virtud o esfuerço tiene el hombre. Pues por más mal y daño que me venga, no dexaré de cumplir el mandado de aquella por quien todo esto se ha causado. Que más me va en conseguir la ganancia de la gloria que spero, que en la pérdida de morir los que murieron. Ellos eran sobrados y esforçados, agora o en otro tiempo de pagar havían (285).

After this statement, Calisto enjoys his first tryst with Melibea in the very next scene.

In addition to Calisto’s objectification of and disregard for the person of Melibea, we also see here another aspect of his narcissism in considering the lives of his servants, who are also his friends, not as a tragedy but merely as a test of his virtue and strength in his pursuit of the “ganancia de la gloria.” We can infer here another example of parodic carnivalistic excess in his selfish sexual needs taking paramount importance over all other

things. Although this monologue occurs after Celestina, Sempronio and Pármeno are dead, we can perceive from it a certain attitude which we will observe in the next section as having “trickled down” from the lord to the vassals: a callous, narcissistic individualism.

This scene, coupled with monologue from Act XIV previously discussed, also allows us to project a sense of Calisto being the victim of the changing times, in concert with the overall theme of the book and the thesis of this paper. To repeat, *La Celestina* represents the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the modern, in that it depicts a definitive break with the hierarchical medieval structure of *señor* and *vasallo*, which is not a negotiable arrangement. The societal changes forced by the Catholic Kings have caused this familiar structure to be overtaken by a wholly modern impulse, an individualistic sense of personal responsibility based on relative and negotiable relationships. To complicate matters, the Catholic Kings have made it their specific stated goals to reduce the importance of the nobility and appoint public servants on the basis of their ability and loyalty to the Crown. Additionally the Crown has invested heavily in the establishment and maintenance of the *Santa Hermandad*, whose job it is to maintain public order and curb the abuses of the nobility.

In the case of Calisto, he depends on his father’s status as a noble as a license to engage in his clandestine activities. Implicit in that dependency is a reliance on his family connections—which are a holdover from the medieval structure—to protect his wealth, his household, his person and his honor. Ironically it is this sense of anonymous individualism which eventually dooms Calisto to discover, too late, that any kind of protection garnered by membership in the *bando* no can no longer be taken for granted.



In the end Calisto finds himself alone, without trustworthy servants, without a social support structure, and even without a true female companion. He falls victim to the societal and economic changes of the times being driven by Ferdinand and Isabella Inquisition and he is unable to adapt, which ultimately leads to his ignominious death, in the same manner of his servants and much like Celestina herself.

### *Celestina's Final Act of Defiance*

As we have already noted, the Crown was cracking down on illicit activity and beginning to control all aspects of Spanish society, including social mores. They had begun to “nationalize” the sex industry in the running of brothels and in the restriction of concubinage within the clergy. Celestina still existed, but as a hold-over or remnant from a previous age who survived only because of her past successes and because she had cultivated an enigmatic persona that led people to believe that she had been there forever.

While one goal of Rojas may well have been to write a salacious and bawdy tale (which must certainly have contributed to the novel's immense popularity in the following century), imbedded in his representation of a “whorehouse gallery” and “ugly underneath” is a portrayal of uncertainty in changing times. In linking Celestina with the carnivalesque, a universal motif which bring all people together through bodily imagery, the work moves beyond the obscene to a depiction of how these societal changes affect the private lives of everyday citizens, not just those engaging in illicit activities. In Celestina's case, she chooses to make her living as a *puta vieja* and this choice has allowed her to make a good living for herself through “the oldest profession,” a business for which there is a constant demand. Even though the details of the business never

change, the economics do. It is these economic changes that Celestina fails to incorporate and make adjustments for and which lead to her eventual demise.

Since it is originally Sempronio's idea to bring Celestina into the picture to help his master, Sempronio believes and maintains that he has entered into a business partnership with Celestina:

SEMPRONIO. Assí es. Calisto arde en amores de Melibea; de ti y de mí tiene necesidad. Pues juntos nos ha menester, juntos nos aprovechamos, que conocer el tiempo y usar el hombre de la oportunidad haze los hombres prósperos.

CELESTINA. Bien has dicho; al cabo estoy; basta para mí mecer el ojo. (111).

Celestina in her response does not agree to a business venture with Sempronio but only indicates that she will "keep an eye out" for the opportunity presented. In their dealings with Calisto in Act XI Sempronio plays a key role in urging Calisto to give her a *mercedes*, and Calisto takes a "little" gold chain from his neck and gives it to her, which prompts Pármeneo to respond: "¿Cadenilla la llama? ¿No lo oyes, Sempronio? No estima el gasto. Pues yo te certifico no diesse mi parte por medio marco de oro, por mal que la vieja la reparta" (254). Clearly, Sempronio and Pármeneo view themselves as partners in the manipulation of their master and expect to share in the financial gain.

Celestina, however, never sees the situation this way and views their participation as recreation on their part: "Esto trabajé yo; a vosotros se os debe essotro. Esto tengo yo por officio y trabajo, vosotros por recreación y deleyte. Pues así no avés vosotros de aver yqual gualardón de holgar, que yo de penar" (275). This is consistent with her attitude throughout the narrative, for she never explicitly agrees to share any financial remuneration, and instead continually strings them along: "Ganemos todos, partamos todos, hoguemos todos" (119). In her view she is the carnival worker who derives her

livelihood from the carnival itself, and Sempronio and Pármemo are only carnival attendees who are only there to have fun. At the end of the show the patrons go back to their normal lives and let the “carneys” pocket their fees.

Celestina’s mistake is failing to realize that for Sempronio and Pármemo this is not fun anymore, it is a business deal. Several factors contribute to this attitude. They have been motivated to better look out for themselves because of the *laissez faire* attitude of their *ocioso* master who relies on the influence of his family, which, as we have seen, is losing its clout. They have also been inspired by Ferdinand’s fiscal changes and the contractual attitude which he imported from Aragon. Furthermore, because of the success of Spain’s conquests and the *mercedes* given to the *hidalguería*, they transfer this “thirst for booty” (Elliott 32) sentiment to their condition and expect a reward for their “conquest” of Calisto. Finally, because of their close association with Celestina Sempronio and Pármemo view her as an inferior “other” and they do not respect her age, her experience, her social standing, her business ability nor her person as a woman.

Whatever the case, it is not necessarily surprising that Sempronio and Pármemo show up at Celestina’s house for their share of the loot. What is new is their attitude and their unwillingness to back down. Given her experience, it is surprising that Celestina does not anticipate this eventuality, for surely she overheard their banter in Act XI with regards to the “little chain.” An easy resolution to the problem would be to take the chain down to the jeweler, have it divided into three parts, and equally distributed. It is surprising to consider that Celestina did not think of this.

It is also possible that she *chose* death over the option of compromising her business, and that her dying act was in defiance of the new social and economic trends.

Caught in the intersectionality of changing business practices of modern mercantilism, shifting morals and ethics of a centralizing oligarchic monarchy, and a growing anti-feminist, misogynistic movement; in her final scene Celestina contends with two greedy thugs who respect neither her role as *trotaconventos* nor her status as a discreet and successful madame. She represents a medieval anachronism in an early modern world that has no regard for her the rules and practices inculcated by her life's work. Given Celestina's intelligence, longevity and resilience, it is unreasonable to presume that she was completely unaware of the changes going on around her. Celestina acutely perceives that Sempronio and Pármeno, as part of this new social order, have completely abandoned their roles as servants and are acting by their own motivations and for their own personal gain. In the end, however, she is robbed of her status and left helpless against their violent attack, which is indicative of an othering process that has reduced her to meaninglessness. Celestina, in her final act, refuses to accept this new reality and in her defiant death sends the message that she would rather die than change and adapt.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Meaningless Death

As a concluding thought we return the questions suggested Todorov and elucidated by Kamen in the final paragraph of his book on the Inquisition:

Even when all explanations have been offered, the questions remain. How could a society as apparently tolerant as Castile, in which the three great faiths of the West had coexisted for centuries and into which the mediaeval Inquisition had never penetrated, change its ideology in the fifteenth century, against the instincts of many great men in both Church and state? How could a clergy and population that had never lusted for blood except in war (Queen Isabella thought even bullfighting too gory), gaze placidly upon the burning alive of scores of their fellow Spaniards for an offence –prevarication in religion—that had never hitherto been a crime? How could the Spanish people—who were the first Europeans to broaden their vision by travelling the oceans and opening up the New World—accept without serious opposition the mental restrictions proposed by the Inquisition? (320)

The purpose of this essay is not to answer these questions but to attempt to identify the social changes at work within this time period. Within the context of *La Celestina* we perceive an artistic eloquence by Fernando de Rojas in the manner in which he depicts his changing times. With luxury of modern hindsight we are able to examine the subsequent violent history of Spain and the Inquisition and it is somewhat surprising to discover that Rojas “predicted,” or better, “diagnosed” the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern through the *tragicomedia*.

What distinguishes *La Celestina* is not its prognosticative qualities nor its rendition of death; it is its irony in its unique combination of comedic and tragic elements in *beginning* with comedy and *concluding* with tragedy. We have examined the development of the work against the backdrop of its cultural milieu and we have

concluded that Rojas had an acute perception of the cultural changes in Spain at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In his literary work he chose Celestina as its central character, a persona that embodies all of the elements and spirit of the medieval mindset, and he builds a case that she *cannot* transition and adapt to the new cultural and economic realities: she is obsolete and therefore must die.

Integral to our analysis has been the inclusion of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and the application of grotesque realism to the work. Within that context we can appreciate Rojas' use of parody and comedy in the first part of the work, especially Act I. For example, Calisto's *loco amor* can be interpreted as an entertaining pastime which would normally have no consequences. Celestina reinforces this thought when she reminds Sempronio and Pármeno that they should have only been in it for the fun of it: "Esto tengo yo por officio y trabajo, vosotros por recreación y deleyte" (275). Placed within the modern context of a "carnival", we can project onto her the harsh economical realities of the sex trade, or of anyone who provides goods and services to people spending money in the participation of a leisure activity: although the providers may enjoy their work, what is recreation for the clients is all business for the providers, even if the business is lewd and illegal.

From a twenty-first century viewpoint it is easy to judge Celestina by moralistic standards. Celestina, however, has been allowed to exist for centuries; both in a literal sense in her capacity as a sex worker, and in a metaphorical sense, in her capacity as a representative of the carnivalesque. Rojas' ultimate statement in *La Celestina* is that times have changed and she must either adapt or die. In an act of defiance, she invariably chooses the latter.

In defining the binary conflict of the work we observe on one side the tolerant, pluralistic society of the Middle Ages with a healthy attitude towards mocking and parody, and on the other a new rigid and intolerant attitude typified by the *Reconquista* and the Inquisition:

La Celestina no es obra ni medieval ni renacentista, porque no responde a ningún tipo literario con el cual medirla en lo que ella es esencial ... Si la Tragicomedia excede en irradiación problemática a cualquier obra de su tiempo, esto se debe a ese su expresar la irreductible angustia del existir español, un entrelace de cristianos, moros y judíos (Marquez 204).

The scope of Celestina's death is broad and affects everyone within the narrative. While Rojas might have stopped there, he continued by depicting a "ripple effect" on the other characters:

- Sempronio and Pármeno: The two murderers are executed shortly after the crime. Ironically their motive cannot be specifically attributed to greed, for although they came for their share of a gold chain they did not leave with it. Furthermore, their standing as servants of a well-known nobleman carries no weight with the judge, as evidenced by their quick executions and reflected in Calisto's monologue in Act XIV.
- Areúsa and Elicia: the heirs of Celestina's business attempt to pick up where she left off but they quickly discover that the business environment has changed. Elicia initially opts to go back to live at Celestina's house (since the rent is paid for a year) but she soon returns to Areúsa's place after finding that no one visits her any longer. Their future business dealings are pushed further to the margins and must now resort to dealing

with even more objectionable characters such as the destitute and despicable Centurio.

- Calisto: His harshest realization is not that he has abandoned all of his morals and principles for the short-term pleasures of a sexual encounter, but that his support structure—that due to a nobleman of his family patronage—is non-functional, both in terms of his inept servants and his “urban network”. The rules have changed for him as well, and without his familiar structure he falls helplessly to his death.
- Melibea: While it is tempting to categorize Melibea as innocent victim, we must take into account the fact that she allowed Celestina in her house in the first place and was complicit in the tryst with Calisto. We can, however, attribute to her an ignorance of the societal changes affecting everyone else, like her servant Lucrecia, and being unable to anticipate the broader consequences of her actions. From her viewpoint a lot of things happen that she does not understand or have any control over, so she naturally blames herself.

In conclusion, Rojas’ artistry lies in his handling of the medieval motif of the carnivalesque and putting a modern spin on it. Bakhtin credits Cervantes with this innovation, which occurs a hundred years after *La Celestina*:

A second aspect appears, under Cervantes’ pen, as bodies and objects begin to acquire a private, individual nature; they are rendered petty and homely and become immovable parts of private life, the goal of egotistic lust and possession. This is no longer the positive, regenerating and renewing lower stratum, but a blunt and deathly obstacle to ideal aspirations. In the private sphere of isolated individuals the images of the bodily lower stratum preserve the element of negation while losing almost entirely their positive regenerating force. Their link with life and with the



cosmos is broken, they are narrowed down to naturalistic erotic images. ... This second aspect of the material bodily image mingles with the first to form a complex and contradictory combination. Precisely in this double, tense, and contradictory life lies the power and the realism of these images. Such is the peculiar drama of the material bodily principle in Renaissance literature—the drama that leads to the breaking away of the body from the single procreating earth, the breaking away from the collective, growing and continually renewed body of the people with which it had been linked in folk culture. (23)

The harsh reality of the Modern Ages is that individualistic impulses render death as no longer a part of a reproductive and regenerating cycle, but merely a tragic, meaningless end. It is precisely this type of death that concludes *La Celestina* and becomes the new modern reality.

## APPENDIX

*Adam and Eve (Der Sudenfall)* (1511) by Hans Baldung Grien



(Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans\\_Baldung\\_Grien\\_Adam\\_and\\_Eve.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Baldung_Grien_Adam_and_Eve.jpg).)

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