CHAPTER 3

The Poetics of Voice, the Performance, and the Meaning of Celestina

Gustavo Illades Aguiar

While many literary masterpieces were groundbreaking when first published, we cannot now fully perceive how innovative they were then. To experience again their originality is to reconstruct how initial readers experienced in them what they had never read before. With such surprise, readers experienced the first edition of Celestina (Burgos, 1499). They were unsure how to read and, more significantly, since common practice at the time was to read this kind of text aloud in front of an audience, how to perform the text. The printed text they confronted was a complex “score” with a new type of dialogue inspired by a Latin model unknown to audiences outside university circles. Yet in spite of its erudite origins at the University of Salamanca, Celestina included the words and actions of characters of a wide range of social groups, from wealthy masters to servants and prostitutes. Most conspicuously, it gave voice to a protagonist of the lowest rank, the procurress Celestina, an expert in the manipulation of language. Celestina innovated also in its numerous references to the acts of speaking and listening (verba dicendi and verba audiendi), referencing mouth, tongue, ears, word, voice, and the acoustic qualities of people—even of animals and objects, such as bells and clocks. Many of these allusions, not surprisingly, implied a reference to the actio or delivery of the text by the reader-performer, whose voice had to bring to life thirteen characters together with their feelings, hidden intentions, intonations, and accents.¹ Given how innovative the text was, many readers probably failed to follow the subtle

¹ In the Prologue to the extended version of the Comedia, known as the Tragicomedia, Fernando de Rojas mentions the vocalized reading and the number of listeners he had in mind: “So when ten people get together to listen to this comedy being read” (Assí que, quando diez personas se juntieren a oyr esta comedia) (214; 201). The English quotes from Celestina are by page number from the translation by Peter Bush (New York: Penguin, 2009), followed by the original Spanish text taken from Fernando de Rojas, Comedia o Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea, ed. Peter E. Russell (Madrid: Castalia, 1991), and followed by their respective page numbers between parentheses. Occasionally, I provide my own translation when a literal rendering of the original is required.
instructions embedded in the dialogue for how to read some passages, such as the asides, which were to be uttered so softly other characters couldn't hear. The innate difficulty in reading the text properly may explain why the second edition (Toledo, 1500) included paratexts with specific instructions on how to read the book aloud.² The editor, Alonso de Proaza, included a stanza entitled “Description of the Way to Read this Comedy” (Dize el modo que se ha de tener leyendo esta comedia). Significantly, the first recommendation affects the asides, where Proaza's advice is intended for the potential readers-reciters but not the audience: “Ensure you can do it in whispers” (cumple que sepas hablar entre dientes) (208; 626). In other words, read it so the audience, but not the interlocutor, can hear.

_Celestina's_ innovations help produce its complexity and affect three interconnected aspects of the masterpiece debated even today: authorship, genre, and meaning. The studies I will explore touch upon these issues to help evaluate the presence and the function of the voice in _Celestina_. I will begin with the critics who consider the work a dramatic text meant for a performance on stage. Probably, the first hint in this regard appeared in Pedro Ximénez de Urrea's _Égloga de la Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea_ (1514), a versified version of part of Act 1 of _Celestina_. Speaking of _Celestina’s_ genre, Urrea wrote in his introduction: “This way of writing about love matters is very common in letters and in dramatic form, as in Terence, and what is written here is in the style of Terence” (Esta arte de amores está ya muy usada en esta manera por cartas y por cenas que dize el Terencio, y naturalmente es estylo del Terencio lo que hablan en ayuntamiento).³ More than a century later, Kaspar Barth, who translated _Celestina_ into Latin with the title _Pornoboscodidascalus Latinus_ (1623), called the book a _ludus_, i.e., a theatrical or dramatic piece, therefore distinguishing it from essays written in dialogue, pastoral novels, and short stories or _novellas_. Lope de Vega indicated similarly when, in _Las fortunas de Diana_ (1621), he called _Celestina_ “The famous tragedy of Celestina” (la tragedia famosa de Celestina).⁴ Three centuries later, the renowned scholar Marcelino

---

² The reason why this edition included instructions on how to read is alluded to in the stanzas in _octavas_. Fernando de Rojas added: “My quill is attacked and they [my critics] are destroying me / with criticism, complaints and corrections” (Ella [mi pluma] es comida y a mi están cortando / reproches, revistas [‘escrutinios’] y tachas) (my translation; 189). See Françoise Maurizi, “‘Dize el modo que se ha de tener leyendo esta (tragi) comedia’: Breve aproximación al paratexto de _La Celestina_,” _Bulletin of Hispanic Studies_ 74, no. 2 (1997): 151–57.


⁴ For Kaspar Barth’s conception of _Celestina_, see María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, _La originalidad artística de La Celestina_ (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1970), p. 55. Lope de Vega’s quotation is from