CHAPTER 5

Theater Without a Stage: *Celestina* and the Humanistic Comedy

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One of the great influences on *Celestina* is the humanistic comedy, a genre of mostly Latin works, in prose or verse, written in Italy during the fifteenth century and meant not to be performed but to be either recited or read aloud. *Celestina*, however, exceeds the limited scope of the humanistic comedy as a genre. As Alan D. Deyermond has pointed out, the relation between the book and the drama tradition can be directly drawn from the title of the Spanish masterpiece. In fact, before being known as *Celestina* (named for its most salient character), the book was originally called *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea* and later *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*.¹

*Celestina* is written exclusively in dialogue but its plot structure clearly shows techniques that typically belong to dramatic texts, demonstrating its connection to the humanistic comedy in its effort to recreate ancient Latin plays as part of the general trend in its rebirth of classical culture. Yet, the dramatic origins of *Celestina* were mostly overlooked as modern critics came to consider the work as the beginning of the modern novel. To fully understand this widespread interpretation and before analyzing the evident relationship between *Celestina* and the comedy tradition and *Celestina* as a humanistic comedy, we must first examine the state of theater, spectacle, and dramatic representation at the time that the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, as it was initially called, first appeared in the Castilian literary life. Equally important is to take into account the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence and the elegiac

comedy of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for their role in the rebirth of dramatic literature throughout the fifteenth century.

Theater and Spectacle in the Middle Ages

In the last decades, scholars such as Luigi Allegri and Johann Drumbl, among others, have radically modified our conception of medieval theater.² Their studies argue that it is anachronistic to seek the same features of early Renaissance theater in previous medieval centuries and that there is no line of evolution between the two periods.

The flourishing theatrical culture at the height of the Roman empire, including the architectural structures in which comedies were performed, had slowly fallen in disuse and totally disappeared by the fifth century. Of the past glory, all that remained were new forms of humble performances by street entertainers and mimes that seem to have survived through the following centuries of the Middle Ages. What was left of the buildings where plays had been performed was now turned into spaces for shows in which semi-naked women were displayed. Due to such lewd content that originated among pagans and continued to be practiced among Christians, the Fathers of the Church, beginning with Tertulian, Lactantius, and many others, condemned not only any form of spectacle but also the actors and spectators.³ Consequently, the Middle Ages lost all notion of what constituted classical theater and, more importantly, the awareness that dramatic texts were intended to be performed on conventional stages by actors. It was only toward the end of the fifteenth century, after recovering a sizable corpus of Latin comedies, that a few humanists who had mastered classical Greek and Roman philology rediscovered that these complex dialogical writings were meant to be memorized and enacted on stage by actors.

These early scholars who studied the language and the cultural context of Plautus’s and Terence’s surviving works struggled to decipher their form, substance, and function. When they finally understood that the objective of the texts under examination was a reenactment of their plot through stage performances, they were misled as to how they were represented. A misinterpretation

³ Allegri, Teatro, pp. 15–33.