CHAPTER 15

Jesus and Mary, Christian Prayer, and the Saints in Celestina

Manuel da Costa Fontes

The virtual absence of the names “Jesus” and “Mary” from a medieval and supposedly highly moral work like Celestina is very surprising since, after all, it was apparently written to warn young people against illicit love affairs, including the one that causes the deaths of its protagonists, Calisto and Melibea, as well as against evil procuresses and bad servants.1 Whereas the text mentions the name of God no less than 223 times throughout the twenty-one acts,2 there are only 3 overt references to the Blessed Mother, none of which reflect any genuine devotion, and the 5 occasions on which the name of Jesus is mentioned could be easily replaced with expletives.3 The manner in which prayers and scriptural materials are used is also surprising, for they are invariably proffered in hypocritical ways, as part of a strategy of corruption and deception. Some characters even pray to God for help to sin, and there is a definite lack of reverence for the saints. As Rojas himself says in his prologue, his work can be interpreted in many contradictory ways: “who will deny there won’t be arguments over something that can be interpreted so differently?” (¿quién negará que aya contienda en cosa que de tantas maneras se entienda?) (214; 81). An examination of these issues will surely enhance our understanding of his art.

---

1 The incipit of the title page is as follows: “Síguese la Comedia o Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea, compuesta en reprehensión de los locos enamorados que, vencidos en su desordenado apetito, a sus amigas llaman y dizen ser su dios. Assimismo hecha en aviso de los engaños de las alcahuetas y malos y lisonjeros sirvientes” (82). Quotes and references from the English translation by Peter Bush (New York: Penguin, 2009) are followed by Dorothy S. Severin’s edition of the Spanish original (Madrid: Cátedra, 1987). At times, I modify the translations, and provide my own as well.


Let us begin with prayer and material drawn from the Scriptures. As soon as she arrives in Melibea’s home, Celestina greets the maid, Lucrecia, with the words “Peace be on this house” (Paz sea en esta casa) (45; 151), thus echoing the advice of Jesus to the apostles (“As you enter the house, salute it. If then that house be worthy, your peace will come upon it” [Matt. 10:12–13]), but what the procuress is bringing into that home, of course, is precisely the opposite. When Melibea suggests that Celestina ought to leave because it seems that she has not yet eaten, the woman paraphrases the words used by Christ to reject the devil’s temptation to make him turn a stone into a loaf of bread: “And you know what God said against the tempter from hell, that we can’t live on bread alone?” (Y no sabes que por la divina boca fue dicho, contra aquel infernal tentador, que no de sólo pan biviriemos?) (51; 158). The procuress’s role here, however, is the opposite of Christ’s, for, like the devil, she also intends to tempt Melibea. When another of Calisto’s servants, Pármeno, begins to capitulate to Celestina, who wants him to be friends with Sempronio so as to extract as much as possible from their master, he says to himself in an aside: “You should never say no to peace. Blessed are the meek, because they shall be called the children of God” (La paz no se deve negar, que bienaventurados son los pacíficos, que hijos de Dios serán llamados) (27; 127). Thus, he misapplies the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of St. Matthew (5:9). When Celestina tells Pármeno how his mother, Claudina, had been punished as a witch, she states that the priest who came to comfort her had said: “Blessed are those persecuted by the law for they shall possess the kingdom of heaven” (bienaventurados eran los que padecían persecución por la justicia y que aquéllos poseerían el reyno de los cielos) (82; 199). In this instance, it is a priest who reportedly misapplies another Beatitude (Matt. 5:10). These Beatitudes are not really prayers, but they have been treated as such. Notwithstanding his implicit presence here, the name of Jesus is never mentioned.

In the examples that follow, Calisto and Melibea pray in order to sin. When Calisto tells Sempronio to fetch a procuress, Celestina, to ask her for help to get Melibea into bed, he begs God to lead his servant to her just as he guided the Three Wise Kings to Bethlehem with the star. Once again, the name of Jesus fails to come up: “Oh, almighty enduring God, who guides those who’ve lost their way, who guided the kings from the Orient by a star to Bethlehem and duly returned them home, I humbly beg You to guide my Sempronio so he can turn my pain into pleasure, and I can finally reach the goal I desire, not that I deserve to!” (¡O todopoderoso, perdurable Dios, tú que guías los perdidos, y los reyes orientales por el estrella precedente a Bethleén truxiste y en su patria los reduxiste, húmilmente te ruego que guíes a mi Sempronio, en manera que convierta mi pena y tristeza en gozo, y yo indigno meresca venir en el desseado