CHAPTER 19

Early Responses to Celestina: Translations and Commentary

Kathleen V. Kish

After making its publishing debut in Spain at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea, also known as Celestina, produced a long chain of spin-offs, many of which were intended to attract readers elsewhere in Europe. Taking the form of translations keyed primarily to local audiences, they sold well enough that they sometimes warranted reprinting or even completely revised editions. Together, along with the rare occurrence of an early commentary on the Spanish archetype, they helped to account for the work’s heralded standing as a bona fide European best seller.

The first link in this chain of responses to Fernando de Rojas’s masterpiece, written in Italian, appeared in Rome in 1506, followed closely by a Hebrew version (now lost); the last translation that we shall discuss, in Neo-Latin, appeared in Frankfurt in 1624. In addition there were three different renditions in French; two distinct versions by the same author in German; dual renderings by a single translator in English, not to mention a partial translation-adaptation in the form of a theatrical interlude, also in English; and a version in Dutch, popular enough that it was republished three times.

This multilingual panoply of reactions to Rojas’s work clamors for attention, not only from Celestina specialists, but also from scholars interested in cultural history, comparative literature, translation studies, and the history of the book. The discussion that follows will touch on these factors while taking notice of some of the most interesting sidelights to be found in the individual cases under scrutiny. Whereas the bulk of this study will deal with the early translations of Celestina, there will also be a brief consideration of the work commonly referred to as Celestina comentada, which, although written in Spanish, is an apt topic here because, like its foreign language cousins, it attests to the broad reception of Celestina early on; also like them, it provides clues to ways the work might have been understood by readers at the time.

In Celestina scholarship the Italian translation holds unique importance, and not simply because it came first. It also can lay claim to being “the oldest
surviving form” of the *Tragicomedia*.1 Written at the behest of Federico di Montefeltro’s illegitimate daughter Gentile Feltria de Campo Fregoso, it was dedicated to her and published in Rome in 1506.2 Its author, Alfonso Ordóñez (written “Alphonso Hordognez” in the subtitle of this edition), calls himself a “familiare” of Pope Julius II.3 The suggestion is that the translator was attached to the papal household in some capacity. It is plausible that he was the Alphonsus Ordognes who succeeded Alonso de Proaza as Professor of Rhetoric at Valencia.4 Ordóñez might have been in the Spanish retinue of the Borgia Pope Alexander VI and have stayed at the papal court afterward.

Scholars attempting to establish the stemma of the *Tragicomedia*, despite reaching different overall conclusions, generally agree that the Rome 1506 Italian translation belongs toward the top of the work’s family tree.5 This is far from a mere curiosity, given that the translator was intent upon producing a faithful rendition of his model, as he announced in the dedicatory letter

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1 This was the conclusion reached by F. J. Norton in *Printing in Spain 1501–1520 with a Note on the Early Editions of the Celestina* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 155. His scrutiny of printers’ marks and techniques led him to posit that the six extant editions in Spanish bearing the date 1502 were printed after 1510. For his part, Ottavio Di Camillo finds reasons to venture that “the copy that Ordóñez used for his translation may well have been the princeps of the *Tragicomedia*” (el ejemplar que utilizó Ordóñez para su traducción bien pudo haber sido la *princeps* de la *Tragicomedia*). See his “Hacia el origen de la *Tragicomedia*,” in *Actas del Simposio Internacional 1502–2002: Five Hundred Years of Fernando de Rojas’ Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (18–19 de octubre de 2002, Departamento de Español y Portugués, Indiana University, Bloomington), ed. Juan Carlos Conde (New York: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 2007), 115–45, p. 145. In this same article Di Camillo suggests that the translator might first have produced an Italian version of the *Comedia*, using an early text in Spanish belonging to an unknown family of the *Comedia*, one that would have included “la carta prefacio” (pp. 136–37). Then, once the twenty-one act form had appeared in Spanish, he would have updated this first translation, transforming it into the *Tragicomedia* (p. 137). All English translations throughout are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

2 This illustrious lady moved in the most refined cultural circles, among “some of the most spirited individuals of Italian letters” (alcuni tra gli spiriti più vivi delle lettere italiane), according to Emma Scoles, “Note sulla prima traduzione italiana della Celestina,” *Studj Romanzi*, no. 33 (1961): 155–217, p. 168n3. Hereafter cited in text.


5 Di Camillo identifies the positions of half a dozen of these researchers (pp. 117–23), concluding that “no one has called into question the privileged location that the Italian version continues to have in the top part of the *stemma*” (nadie ha puesto en duda el lugar privilegiado que la version [sic] italiana continúa ocupando en la parte alta del *stemma*”) (p. 123). Hereafter cited in text.