The *Tragicomedia* of Celestina:
Deception as Structural Critique

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Fernando de Rojas' 1499 Celestina is a deceptive classic, a many-layered work full of dishonest characters, deceitful structures, and duplicitous plots. In its form as much as its content, it is an exercise in strategic dissimulation: disjoists of knowledge and intent are deployed to diverse effect throughout the text. The novel's love of ruse is the origin of both its humor and its sorrow, an ambivalent engine which powers a deeper subversive core—and no character is as central to this system as Celestina, the narrative's eponymous protagonist. It is this aged procress who structures the tale, who facilitates and reveals the chicanery of nobles and commoners alike. Celestina is the compositional force that uncovers the subterfuge of the novel's lovers, servants, and johns; she is the actor, too, who lays bare the mores which enable them. And it is in the unveiling of these structural woes that Celestina pulls back the curtain on a final level of dissimulation and dissent: that of the text, the book, the author himself.¹

1.

Rojas's mobilization of uncertainty or obscurity is most immediately evident in the dialogic structure of Celestina's plot. The novel's first 'act', which follows an initial meeting of its secondary protagonists (a pair of ill-fated Shakespearean lovers), marks the introduction of one such technique: [apart] dialogue, comments spoken by one character without the knowledge of another. [apart] dialogue allows one actor to voice opinions that are heard or understood by only one or two of those persons present in a given scene—or, indeed, by the reader alone.

This tactic is deployed to great effect in the volume's inaugural chapter. Although there is as yet no plot-related dissimulation evident in this early episode, deception—albeit on a smaller scale—abounds. After an unhappy encounter with his love object, the noblewoman Melibea, Calisto (Rojas' parodic Romeo figure) demands a remedy for his amorous affliction. "Sempronio!", he calls to his servant: "Bring me my lute!"² When Sempronio obeys, Calisto launches into a warbling lament which bemoans the reticence of his beloved. "What pain", he sings, "can be so great / as that dealt to me by my fate?" Sempronio almost immediately intervenes, satirizing Calisto's song with a ditto about Nero,³ but his most pointed comment is reserved for the reader's eye. "I do not deceive myself," he says. "[T]his master of mine is mad".⁴

When Calisto waxes poetic on the topic of Melibea's hair—

Have you seen the skeins of fine gold they spin in Arabia? More beautiful are these threads of hers, and they gleam no less brightly. Their ripples fall to her heels; then, combed and bound with a fine ribbon, as she wears it, it takes no more to turn men to stone...'

—Sempronio responds with "To asses, you mean!"⁵ Here, the deception is incomplete; Calisto overhears Sempronio's interjection and questions him about the contents of his muttered comment. But this half-ruse is the site of yet more humor. In response to Calisto's questioning, Sempronio dissembles once again,

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¹ It is through analysis of Celestina's character as it interacts with Celestina's features (comedic, tragic, subversive) that this study seeks to understand the novel and its world. Celestina's concern with its own fictional microcosm speaks to its author's context; a brief consideration of contemporaneous texts will, accordingly, comprise the final focus of inquiry.
³ "Nero of Tarpeï looks / down upon a Rome aflame; / screams from young and old alike / but that man feels no pain."
⁴ Rojas, Celestina, 9.
⁵ Ibid., 16.
telling his master that he "said [...] her locks are very different from an ass's tail." "What an idiot you are", retorts Calisto; to which Sempronio responds—[aside]—"And you are not?"6

Deception and its attendant humor are not limited to master-servant dialog. A similar pattern of structural subterfuge is also to be found in the miniature summaries Rojas places before each 'act',7 the interpersonal ploys essayed by the novel's other characters, and the larger narrative arcs which define Celestina's plot. The small-scale dissimulation between Calisto and Sempronio is, at its core, caused by Calisto's loony lust, but the nobleman's ardor is also responsible for the introduction of a much wider and more consequential deception. It is the resulting scheme to unite Calisto with his reluctant Melibea which occupies the bulk of the book.

There is a baseline layer of situational irony evident in the difficulty of the Calisto-Melibea pairing,8 and this foundational fact meshes well with the gratuitous hijinks that follow. By the end of the novel's fourth scene, Calisto has decided that only the most cunning plan can save him from his lonely fate. It is, as expected, a plot which operates upon the presumption of secrecy. Calisto sends Sempronio to visit a "bearded old crone", a "witch" who lives at the outskirts of the city and "calls herself Celestina".9 "If she puts her mind to it," vouches Sempronio, she can "move rocks and stones to lust."10

Shortly after her character's narrative introduction, Celestina's home becomes the site of both dissimulation and levity. The procuress and one of her prostitutes play host to Sempronio, whose affections have been captured by the consort Elicia. Elicia has been entertaining another patron, Crito, whom Celestina instructs to hide "in the little closet for brooms" lest Sempronio see. Sempronio himself has failed to visit for three days, and Celestina pretends to take the servant for her own.11 "A curse upon you, traitor!" is Elicia's response. "May boils and tumors eat you," she fumes, "or may you die at the hands of your enemies".12 This verbal attack alone is enough to inspire laughter in Sempronio, but the reader's knowledge of that intricate and improbable comedy of error which lies behind lends a larger ludicrousness to the scene. Elicia complains about the unfaithfulness of Sempronio while hiding another lover in a broom closet; Celestina implies her own innocence; and Sempronio himself, despite his apparent loyalty, has failed to notice anything seriously awry.13 Only Celestina emerges emotionally unscathed, for it is the witch's wiles—her supplying of a setting, her role in bringing this cast of characters into contact—which drive the deception. Here, the procuress acts as a purveyor of levity.

'Enabler of comedy' is not the full extent of Celestina's structural role.14 The 'old bawd' invoked and involved by Sempronio functions at the very core of the novel's narrative.15 Celestina is the mastermind of Calisto and Melibea's affair, the engine of the story's primary plotline, and the underground conductor of

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6 Ibid., 16. It is here that Calisto is transformed from an irritant into a joke. The enamored nobleman is entirely capable of proving himself an idiot, but it is the contrast (unknown to Calisto) between the sanity of Sempronio's lines and the character of Calisto's which renders his buffoonery truly laughable.

7 I.e., précis which reveal to the reader what the characters refuse to reveal to each other.

8 As Roberto González Echevarría notes in his introduction to the text, there is no formal social boundary which would prevent the two from marrying.

9 Ibid., 17-8.

10 Ibid. The intended object of Celestina’s magical attentions is Melibea, she who (as Calisto notes) can turn lustful men into stone!

11 Ibid., 19.

12 Ibid., 19.

13 See also pages 20 and 21.

14 Nor is the above example the only instance of specific, Celestina-enabled comedy. (See Rojas, Celestina, page 69 for [apart] dialog in the mouth of the procuress. Page 31 also contains a solid set of dry, biting comments. And the list is by no means exhaustive.)

15 Acting as a disseminator, as it were, of dissimulation.
the seedy city which is its immediate setting. She lies at the heart not only of *Celestina*’s tone, its humor, but also of the society which forms its fundamental framework. Celestina is the force behind the deception which underlies the text's progression as much as the deception which characterizes its context. She drives the city and drives the plot, masterminding both layers of operation. No character is a better faker than Celestina, she who makes duplicity her trade; and no character is, ironically, as revealing.

Sempronio's social introduction can provide us with a representative summary of Celestina's contemporaneous reputation. According to the servant, the witch is "astute, wise in every wickedness that exists. [...] In this city, over five thousand maidenheads have been restored and undone by her hand." Pármeno, Calisto's second attendant, adds even more earthiness to this picture: according to him, even stones call Celestina 'old whore.' "She had six trades," Pármeno claims, a list which includes the titles of "seamstress, perfumer, [...] concocter of plants and powders, [...] restorer of maidenheads, procuress, and, on occasion, witch". The core of Celestina's operation is the creation of ersatz virgins; in order to sell them, she engages and enables yet another level of deception.

But the extent of Celestina's influence does not end with individual appointments. The procuress is indeed a "friend" to many poor "students, and stewards, and servants", but her salacious services are also engaged by clerics, high clergy, and civil officers. "When the French ambassador was here," Pármeno reports, "[Celestina] three times sold him one of her servants as a virgin". The procuress' connections with working-class customers are mobilized to access the rich and powerful. Her patrons number among the high and mighty of both secular and religious realms, and it is from her knowledge of this aristocratic debauchery that the witch's leverage derives. Untamed passions "run the city, with Celestina as the agent who uncovers the submission to them by prominent members of the nobility and the church."  

Understanding the locus, focus, and origin of *Celestina*’s internal momentum is a helpful hermeneutic exercise, but humor and power are not the extent of the meaning this inquiry may reveal. While Celestina's actions are indeed the origin of much levity, her status as driver and revealer functions as a spotlight shone on a wide array of darker functions.

Most of the ground-level comedy apparent in Rojas' work is driven by dissimulation. Juxtapositions of knowledge and intent are responsible, in large part, for its potency. But this humor's farcical status is also heightened by contrasts of tone; disjuncts in emotional tenor function to highlight the distance between affective poles. The gratuitous, frivolous nature of Calisto and Melibea's baroque beguilement—to pick one example—is rendered ever more laughable by the sorrow which is its humor's inverse. The lovers' situation is barefacedly ridiculous, but (as with Sempronio's responses to Calisto) it is only the

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16 Ibid., 24.
17 Ibid., 24.
18 As with the above-addressed [apart] dialog, a clear-cut mismatch of knowledge is at play. The true status of Celestina's 'virgins' must be obscured in order to effect their economic success; the true status of Celestina's occupation must be concealed in order to keep her safe; and the desires of her customers must be disguised so that they might continue in their own deceit.
19 Ibid., 25.
20 Ibid., xxiii. See also ibid., xxiii: "Men from the upper classes, clergymen among them, hover around Celestina's brothel, showering gifts on the old whore. One priest cannot keep his mind on celebrating the mass when he sees her at church."
21 See note 5. Sempronio's context may not be 'solemn', but his interjections provide a source of startling sanity.
solemnity of its enabler's context which lays bare the buffoonery. For Celestina's dissimulation, so superficially similar to Calisto's, has a radically different character: it is birthed of need.

Celestina is a powerful force, but her livelihood's liminality leaves her on the literal edge of economic affairs. In his own introduction, Pármeno relates that "this fine mistress lives at the [outskirts] of the city, out by the tanneries, on the slope of the river-bank; it is an isolated house, half fallen down, poorly constructed and even more poorly finished." Celestina herself remarks upon her poverty in a pithy, pointed phrase, asking if Pármeno thinks she "live[s] on air? That I inherited an estate? [...] Do you know of any wealth other than what this profession provides me, my food and drink, my gowns and shoes?"

Celestina is the genesis, the gatherer of both deception and levity. But while she operates at the center of the novel's comedic systems, her character is never farcical. She is, indeed, the serious eye of the humorous hurricane. Her practices and plots are not pursued for frivolous reasons, and behind her actions are basic human requirements. Celestina the individual is not amusing; it is the context she creates that is the farce. And the context that created her is not funny at all.

The contrast between the novel's two major modalities of deception is best illustrated by an investigation into Celestina's trade. Rojas' mastermind of romantic deceit has access to an undercurrent of darkness, and through her work she reveals an underground market for unholy deeds. Hers is a world in which impoverished women and girls are sold (thrice) to diplomats and friars, a culture that permits brothers and bankers to break their vows. There is a lurid sort of ludicrousness apparent in these impious images, but the light humor of Calisto and Melibea's early misadventures is nowhere to be found. Here, dissimulation is dark alone.

Nor it is only her own deviance that Celestina understands. The witch who is "wise in every wickedness that exists" is truly so because of the customers she serves. Both the misery she abides and the venality she reveals function as an anatomy of injustice. It is not, after all, a law of nature that Celestina be poor and marginal. It is not preordained—except by context—that her 'daughters' be sold. It is likewise untrue that the clergymen who crowd her brothel do so in a vacuum; however discreet her movements may be, the 'old bawd's operation would collapse without the aid of a societal blind eye. There is indeed a necessity to Celestina's actions, a forced nature to her trade. But while this compulsion is compelling, it is not a cosmic truth.

It is, however, a tragedy attached to the ordering of the world. At stake is not just the fate of a pimp or a prostitute or a lover, but the possibility of dignified life for all members of the book. It is true that the most explicit tragedy of Celestina is ultimately expressed through the unhappy fates of individual characters: Pármeno, Sempronio, Calisto, Melibea, and even Celestina herself. But even these events,
discrete as they appear, speak to a systemic woe. The demise of the servants is the ancillary result of Celestina's surreptitious scheme, and the witch's death is due to dissimulation as well. In thematic terms, these events are the expected outgrowths of Rojas' composition; in light of the systems unveiled by Celestina, they are an ultimate expression of structural tragedy. That Celestina is killed over a fundamentally economic squabble—a fight over payment from Calisto—is especially apt.

3. Celestina, who is caught in webs of deceit woven by her and the world, is not permitted to narrate the tragedy that caps the tale. The witch's end is emblematic indeed, but the full implications of her muckraking role are ultimately expressed by another's tongue.

The novel's final death is lamented by a character hitherto unknown. After the deaths of the servants, Celestina, and Calisto, the fate of Melibea awaits. Calisto has fallen to his death, the grief of his beloved is overwhelming, and there is nothing left for Melibea but to crash down upon the "hard stones" of the city's streets. Pleberio, Melibea's father, is given almost the entirety of Celestina's final chapter to voice the sorrow of this tragic event.

Although Pleberio's speech can appear jarring, introduced as it is as an abrupt sort of deus ex machina, it is intimately interwoven into the weft of Celestina's unraveling. Pleberio is the novel's final revealer, the mouthpiece for a last and most dramatic revelation. Like Celestina, it is Pleberio's fate to face a set of individual tragedies. But unlike Celestina, it is for the world that Pleberio mourns.

"O a father's [...] heart!", begins the second section of the father's planctus. "How do you not break with grief, now that you are left without your beloved heir? [...] For whom did I erect towers? For whom did I acquire honors?" The trajectory of this familial sorrow moves rapidly outward, eventually expanding to include the "cruel earth" entire. "O world!", Pleberio cries. "I thought, in my most tender years, that you and your deeds were governed by some sort of order". But "[y]ou entice us, false world, with your dish of delights". I do not weep saddened for the loss of my daughter, Pleberio adds, "but at the monstrous cause of her dying". The fact of Melibea's death is tragic enough; why must its roots reside in this web of lies? "So, obsequious world, what remedy do you offer my exhausted years? How can you command me to continue on earth knowing your deceits?"
Pleberio's lament is deeply personal, but its emotional framework invokes the same structures that Celestina's role has brought to light.\(^{39}\) In Pleberio's eyes, Melibea's death is a discrete event caused by a continuous context: it is not a single factor but the whole 'obsequious world' and its 'dish of delights' which is to blame. Like Celestina, Pleberio recognizes the framework of causality attached to his daughter's fate. And it is through this understanding—this speech—that the facile comedy and farcical tragedy of Calisto and Melibea's affair are integrated into the city's darker systems.\(^{40}\) What humor is apparent in the novel's early acts is subsumed into its underlying cause: a net of deception wide enough to encompass the globe.

4.

Like its characters and their world, the book dissembles. It is not, as its preface claims, merely a "caution to [...] lovers" or "a warning of the deception and tricks of procures and of bad and fawning servants". As the title—changed from the Comedia de Calisto y Melibea to the Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea and again to La Celestina in 1518—indicates, its object of interest is not laughter, lust, or even the travails of its erstwhile protagonists.\(^{41}\)

Rojas' work, written under the eye of the Spanish Inquisition, deployed a veil of dissimulation as necessary as Celestina's. Given the state of his nation, it would have been all but unimaginable for Celestina's author to have composed a tale with clearly condemnatory qualities.\(^{42}\) No matter how it is viewed, the novel leaves itself a way out: Celestina's situation is of her own creation, one might contend, and everything else is a "caution to crazed lovers". The darkness revealed by the witch and her 'daughters' is an undeniable presence, but the bulk of its contents can be to some extent 'explained away' by the deaths of Calisto and Melibea.\(^{43}\) The ends of Celestina's lovers are positioned such that they might act as markers of conventional ethical condemnation.\(^{44}\)

While the text's tone does deviate from the genre of chivalric romance of which the novel is a nominal part, Rojas always leaves enough traces in the text to claim plausible deniability.\(^{45}\) The language of Catholic morality is conspicuously evident in the novel's explicitly stated intentions,\(^{46}\) as is the case for a set of capitulations to genre conventions.\(^{47}\) Likewise for comedy: in spite of its many ties to the dissimulation which centers the novel, it is true that the humor of Celestina applies primarily to the bad

\(^{39}\) Pleberio's speech is a voicing of all that is implicit in Celestina's character. And, like Celestina herself, Pleberio is also a decidedly non-comical actor who is forced to confront a ludicrous tableaux of gratuitous tragedy.

\(^{40}\) Melibea's death may have been capricious, caused as it was by forces of unreason and deceit, but Pleberio's reaction to that loss is as inevitable as the procress's trade.

\(^{41}\) I.e., Calisto and Melibea. Cf. Echevarría's page xv.

\(^{42}\) Despite its compositional caution, the Celestina was eventually censored by the Inquisition in 1640. (Ibid., xviii)

\(^{43}\) For comparable (nonfiction) approaches to Inquisition-era dissent, see Evonne Anita Levy and Kenneth Mills, Lexikon of the Hispanic Baroque: Transatlantic Exchange and Transformation (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 165 for "the art of writing in times of persecution".

\(^{44}\) The protagonists' calls for confession are once again relevant. See note 29. See also pp. 179, 180, 232, and 241.

\(^{45}\) For the text's ties with traditional literary forms, see Rojas, Celestina, xvi-xii. Celestina was a 'reprobatio amoris', a "warning against reckless love in the medieval tradition: an example of reprehensible behavior written to caution young lovers." Indebtedness to Roman comedy is also apparent (ibid., xviii).

\(^{46}\) The reference here is to Celestina's prologue.

\(^{47}\) The prologue, the condemnation of fornication, etc. In the words of the edition's editor, Rojas "dressed his work in medieval garb half in jest, half to comply with the conventional pieties of the time" (ibid., xviii).
behavior of 'corrupt' characters (cf. Calisto). Sempronio's [apart] dialog is again important; in some central sense, his comments function as a voice of reason and convention.48

It is in the attempt to resolve this frustrating question of surface and subterfuge that Rojas' context becomes relevant. As is true of its characters, the book's deception is a mirror of its surrounding structures. Rojas' writing does essay a set of contemporary compositional forms, but the real core of La Celestina is a reflection—however indirect—of darkness. The documents with which the novel shares an affinity are not limited to plays and stories. Indeed, it is in the records of the Spanish Inquisition that its tactics find their match.

Celestina's careful use of genre convention is paralleled in the attempts of Inquisitorial defendants to cloak their actions and beliefs in the terms of Catholic custom. Heterodox practices were defended as efforts to bolster faith with devotion, and deviant behavior was blamed upon an ignorance of current Church teachings. These approaches to legitimation, evident in a wide swath of institutional documentation, are particularly visible in the trial of María de Cazalla, a Toledan converso who was arraigned in 1532 on suspicion of alumbradismo (a mystical heresy associated with Protestantism).

Cazalla's defense made repeated recourse to mitigating factors, essaying a deceptive strategy deployed in much the same manner as Celestina's.49 When questioned about her association with a convicted alumbrada, Cazalla claimed that "I could not make myself believe the things that were said about her until I saw her condemned. After she was condemned," however, "I then held her as the Church denounced her . . ."50 Pressed further about her unconventional opinions, Cazalla responded that she "simply repeated what [she] heard [her] brother say, and [she] never had, nor [does she] have, any other opinion except what the Catholic Church has".51 The defendant not only excused her lapses by invoking ignorance (think again of Celestina's final deception; see note 33) but implied that her opinions, once informed, never deviated from Church doctrine.

These parallels are not only or merely literary. The intertextuality apparent between Cazalla's trial and Rojas' writing has a commonality of strategy to thank—as well as an affinity of risk. In balancing the interests of self and Inquisition, Cazalla placed her life on the line, and the situation (though less immediate) was similar for Rojas. The author himself avoided the attentions of the Inquisition, but the institution did not leave his family unscathed. His converso parents were subject to posthumous capital punishment,52 and his father-in-law was tried on charges of Judaizing in 1525.53 For Cazalla, Rojas, and Rojas' characters alike, the ability to present a personal portrait palatable to the moral forces of Catholic hegemony was a matter of the utmost seriousness.

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48 See (again) pp. 8-11, especially in connection with Calisto's more religiously inflected comments. (In response to the noble's assertion that his illicit love is divine, Sempronio calls Calisto not only mad but "a heretic" [ibid., 10].)

49 See especially pp. 174-80, in which descriptions of ignorance, necessity, and an honest mistake are mobilized to excuse unsavory behavior.


51 Homza, Spanish Inquisition, 133.

52 I.e., the exhumation and burning of their bones. See note 58. For a primary Inquisitorial example cf. Lu Ann Homza, Spanish Inquisition, 264, which includes a list of so-labeled 'Judaizers' who were "[r]elaxed in effigy with the burning of their bones".

In the novel, dissimulation's darkness has a definite end. Cazalla escaped her Inquisitorial entanglement with a sentence of public penance, but Celestina and her fellow schemers cannot claim this fate. Despite its appearance, his disjoint is both productive and revealing: it is in both the parallels and the divergences of Cazalla's trial from Celestina's contents that the significance of Rojas' dissimulation is once again underlined. Cazalla could well have shared Celestina's destiny; Rojas' life likewise could have followed the pattern of his characters'. There are certain aspects of Cazalla's trial that could be read as a form of dissent—her gormless variations on 'I follow the Church' may be understood, however anachronistically, as both a lampooning of doctrine and an effective defense strategy—but nothing in this document approaches the bitterness of La Celestina. In Cazalla's trial, the light sentence retroactively modifies the confession's contents, lending legitimacy to what might otherwise appear subversive. Celestina has no such luxury: for its characters, the cost of deception is inescapable. And it is in the novel's ultimate tragedy that its critique becomes clear.

Despite its lukewarm end, there is both a sorrow and an indignity to Cazalla's case. Whatever her internal beliefs may have been, it is clear that the supposed alumbrada was required to deviate from her preferred devotional practices (and renounce former friends, no less) on account of the Inquisition's actions. This affective aspect is mirrored and elaborated in Celestina. But the injustice of a world in which dissimulation is both necessary and insufficient is, in the end, made more evident in the novel than the trial. Celestina's plight is both unsavory and deeply sorrowful; unlike Cazalla, her power as procuress of humor and deceit cannot save her. And the systemic injustice uncovered by both Celestina and Cazalla is ultimately expressed in Rojas' reckoning of that tragedy: Pleberio's speech.

If Celestina were a simple book, the father's lament would be the capstone to a mainstream message, a capitulation to Catholic dogma as delicately wrought as Cazalla's. The humor of Calisto's conduct would be just that; its enabling agent would be roundly condemned, a character without a sympathetic plight. Melibea's father would lament her death and decry the deception it demanded. Father would mourn for daughter, and the matter—the book—would end there.

But Pleberio's speech, instead of focusing on the particular or the moralistic, grows to encircle its world. Celestina's closing words are absent the humor that is so evident in its early pages, absent the expected individual focus, absent the manifold games of subterfuge. Pleberio cannot hide the duplicity he confronts; like Cazalla and Celestina, he is a revealer—albeit one who does not deceive.

"Why", the father asks on the novel's final page, "did you [Melibea] leave me in such pain?" What reason was there for this unreasoned end? I thought, "in my most tender years, that you [the world] and your deeds were governed by some form of order; now, having seen the pro and con of your prosperity, you seem to me a labyrinth of errors, a fearsome desert, a den of wild beasts, [...] a mud-filled lake, a region filled with thorns, a high mountain, a stony field, a meadow of serpents, a flowering orchard without fruit, a fountain of cares, a river of tears, a sea of miseries, labor without benefit, sweet poison, vain hope, false happiness, true grief."56

It is here, in the end, that the dissimulation finally disappears.

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54 See Homza, Spanish Inquisition, 151-2 for Cazalla's sentence.
55 See above. See also Rojas, Celestina, 132-3.
56 Ibid., 248, 244.
References


