

Celestina, heteroglossia, and theory of mind: The rise of the early-modern discourse

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An increasing interest for the human being, for the individual, is at the core of the birth of the Renaissance era and infiltrates the mentality of the Renaissance people. The human organism becomes the center of attention for scholars and scientists in search of medical and philosophical explanations. This interest is apparent in the development of the artistic and scientific endeavors of the epoch and surfaces as well in literature, gradually making its way into Renaissance literary manifestations. Characters begin to cut the strings that attach them to the narrator; they start walking on their own and their voice, not yet fully developed, becomes more independent and authentic. They are no longer worthless *pions* pushed around and at the mercy of the omniscient author. Their vicissitudes at times constitute the fabric of the narrative, thereby shifting away from the idealism that formerly prevailed. The realistic discourse of witches, thugs, even pages entrenches the dialogues and serves as a counterpoint to the highly stylized language of courtly lovers, pastoral poets, or chivalric heroes. Where the two languages collide arises the contrast which will permit the parody to blossom.

If the title “Early Modern Literature” is lately getting more traction in the academic fora, it is partly due to the fact that it more clearly encapsulates an era *à cheval* between the medieval and the Renaissance periods; an era that sees its literature mutate into a (proto)-modern literature, which Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin analyzed in *The Dialogic Imagination* and particularly in the essay, part of this volume, entitled “The Discourse in the Novel.” In said essay, Bakhtin argues for the distinction, though not clear-cut¹, of two lines in the development of the novel:

In the further history of the European novel we will continue to notice the same two fundamental lines of development. The Second Line, to which belong the greatest representatives of the novel as a genre (its greatest subgenres as well as the greatest individual examples), incorporates heteroglossia² into a novel’s composition, exploiting it to orchestrate its own

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¹ “It is very difficult to speak of a clear-cut genetic distinction between the two lines, especially in the early stages of their development” (Bakhtin 400).

² Heteroglossia is a key concept in Bakhtin’s theory of the novel. According to the editor of *The Dialogic Imagination*, it is defined as follows: “The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and

meaning and frequently resisting altogether any unmediated and pure authorial discourse. The First Line, which most strongly exhibits the influence of the Sophistic novel, leaves heteroglossia outside itself, that is, outside the language of novel; such language is stylized in a special way, a novelized way (375).

Bakhtin later further differentiates these two lines by adding that:

Novels of the First Stylistic Line approach heteroglossia from above, it is as if they *descend onto* it (the Sentimental novel occupies a special position here, somewhere between heteroglossia and the high genres). Novels of the Second Line, on the contrary, approach heteroglossia from below: out of heteroglot depths they rise to the highest spheres of literary language and overwhelm them (400).

For Bakhtin the greatest exemplar of this Second Line is *Don Quixote*. In this novel, as well as those that paved the way for Cervantes' masterpiece to come about, the language is authentic, free from the heavy pathos and all moribund and false accents. Down the genealogical tree of the Second Line could be found the picaresque novel, which for Bakhtin prepares the ground for the "orchestration," the culmination of the discursive innovations comprising the novel (Bakhtin, 408-409).

Nevertheless absent from Bakhtin's genealogy is the presence of a crucial text which, if not in the European, at least in the Spanish strand left an indelible trace, namely *Celestina*. This work by Fernando de Rojas first published in a 16-act version in 1499 could be considered the second most influential text of Spanish literature after *Don Quixote*³. It tells the story of a low nobleman, Calisto, who falls madly in love with a beautiful lady named Melibea, only daughter of Alisa and Pleberio, a noble and particularly affluent family of Salamanca, Spain. In order to see Melibea and eventually to consummate his love, Calisto will, with the help of his servants, contract the services of a go-between/bawd named Celestina⁴. The success of the adventures of the two lovers and Celestina will spark the publication of many continuations, imitations, and adaptations⁵ as well as numerous translations into English, French, Italian, German, Hebrew, and Latin (Britannica)⁶. By mid-seventeenth century, the book had been reprinted in Spanish more than a 100 times (Britannica). It was in Joseph Snow's words: "the sixteenth-century's premier 'best-seller' in Spain" (3).

Indeed, what has fascinated the Hispanic criticism, and generated an enormous volume of scholarly works, has been, among other things, *Celestina*'s realism, its lack of a clear interpretation, and its portrayal of the characters and voices, especially when situated in the historic-social context in which it was written.

therefore impossible to resolve. Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualization as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide; as such, it is that which a systematic linguistics must always suppress" (Holquist, 428).

³ "In poll after literary poll taken in Spain about its outstanding literary achievements, *Celestina* consistently runs a close second to that country's abiding and internationally better-known Baroque-era masterpiece, *Don Quijote*" (Snow 2).

⁴ So as to not spoil the enjoyment of the story, I will not provide any more details about the tragic unfolding of the plot; indeed, one of my aims being to make known *Celestina* to the non-Hispanic scholarship.

⁵ Joseph Snow and Ivy Corfis define these terms as follows: 'Continuations,' works that directly use Rojas' characters; 'Imitations,' works which borrow [*Celestina*'s] structure; and 'Adaptations,' works whose connections to [*Celestina*], while clear, are looser and more free-form (xiv).

For a complete list of the continuations, imitations and adaptations of *Celestina*, please see Julien Simon's dissertation called: "A Neurocognitive Study of Literary Genres: The Case of the *Novela Dialogada*".

⁶ In Joseph Snow's opinion, perhaps more than the numerous (re)-printings, it is the flourishing of adaptations of *Celestina* in the XVI and XVII centuries in Spanish as well as in other languages, which guaranteed its initial success, or "first life" as he calls it in his essay, "*Celestina* (1499-1999) Medieval and Modern: Survival & Renewal of a Spanish Classic:"

"I feel certain that these works [*Celestina*'s adaptations], most of whose literary attainments rank far below those which scholarship accords to *Celestina*, were nonetheless enthusiastically read and appreciated in their day and, doubtless, played an important role in keeping the original in print (6)".

INTERPRETATIVE AFFORDANCES OF CELESTINA

Celestina has alternatively been interpreted as a moralizing and didactic fiction, showing in a rather crude way the tragic consequences of a love affair carried out in an un-Christian manner (see Bataillon's *La Célestine selon Fernando de Rojas*), or on the contrary as a self-indulgent piece of fiction, risqué at times, in which lovers disregard proprieties in matters of courtship and flimsily restraint their heart. Furthermore, it has been interpreted as a work of a Jewish *converso* [convert] expressing his deep criticism of a society prone to hypocrisy and corruption, or as a parody of courtly love, *el amor cortés*, and its novelistic expression, the sentimental novel in fashion in Spain at the end of XV century (see Severin).

REALISM

Celestina's success in the literary panorama of the time is also due to its realism, akin to the picaresque world of the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Several scholars (see Fothergill-Payne and especially Castells), using Bakhtin's concept of Grotesque Realism, underscored this trait. Indeed, the world described by Fernando de Rojas is that of lecherous wenches, Areúsa and Elicia, treacherous and greedy servants, Sempronio and Pármeno, and of an impecunious and covetous bawd who also engages in witchcraft, *Celestina*. In sum, the world of the lowly characters occupies a prominent place in Rojas' work. About *Celestina*'s world and characters Joseph Snow claims that:

In its surrendering pride of protagonism to *Celestina* and her rag-tag confederation of avaricious servants and lusty wenches, in its revealing of the decay of urbanized moral order by penetrating its poorly-veiled hypocrisy and corrupt value system, and in investing all of its characters, regardless of social-level, with fully-rounded personalities that must be judged without the intervention of any controlling narrative voice, [*Celestina*] clearly was striking out on its own path, illuminating a darker side of the Renaissance (2-3).

PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS

This last quote highlights another aspect of *Celestina*'s longevity, namely the portrayal of characters, which, as noted earlier, are cutting the strings that attached them to the author. Their voices are recognizably human and are the vehicle of evolving fictional minds as Dorothy Severin notes in the introduction to her book, *Tragicomedy and Novelistic Discourse in Celestina*: "The voices of *Celestina* are human beings in metamorphosis, as *Lazarillo* will be nearly half a century later. Even the cardboard Calisto emerges as the hero of imagination" (4). This characteristic led Stephen Gilman to ask, in a chapter entitled "The Art of Character" (in his book *The Art of La Celestina*): "How does Rojas make [the characters] humanly believable and knowable?" (57).

Bakhtin's heteroglossia, or the notion – paramount to the development of the novelistic discourse – that fictional voices are entrenched in the historic-social context in which they uttered and resist "the pure authorial discourse" (400), is a key element of Rojas' discourse. Consider the following passage from Act IV⁷:

Melibea (...) Dime, madre, ¿eres tú *Celestina*, la que solía morar a las tenerías, cabe el río?

Celestina Señora, hasta que Dios quiera.

Melibea Vieja te has parado. Bien dizen los días no se van en balde. Assí goze de mí, no te conociera sino por essa señaleja de la cara. Figúraseme que eras hermosa; otra pareces: muy mudada estás.

⁷ For this passage as well as in the remainder of the article I am quoting from Piñero's edition of *Celestina*.

- Lucrecia (¡Hi, hi, hi! ¡Mudada está el diablo! ¡Hermosa era con aquel su Dios os salve que traviessa la media cara!)
- Celestina ¿Qué hablas, loca? ¿Qué es lo que dizes? ¿De qué te ríes?
- Lucrecia De cómo no conocías a la madre en tan poco tiempo en la *filosomía* de la cara.
- Melibea No es tan poco tiempo dos años, y más que la tiene arrugada.
- Celestina Señora, ten tú el tiempo que no ande, terné yo mi forma que no se mude. ¿No has leýdo que dizen: verná el día que el espejo no te conozcas? Pero también yo encanecí temprano y parezco de doblada edad. Que assí goze desta alma pecadora, y tú desse cuerpo gracioso, que de quatro hijas que parió mi madre yo fuy la menor. Mira cómo no so vieja como me juzgan.
- Melibea Celestina, amiga, yo he holgado mucho en verte y conocerte; también hasme dado plazer con tus razones. Toma tu dinero y vete con Dios, que me parece que no debes haver comido. (159-60).
- Melibea (...) Tell me, Mother, are you Celestina that used to live near the tanneries, down by the river?
- Celestina I am, please God, for so long as he spares me.
- Melibea You've aged very much. They're right when they say time takes its toll. I swear I wouldn't have known you for the scar on your face. I seem to remember that you were a handsome woman. You don't look the same, you've changed very much.
- Lucrecia [aside] Ha, ha, ha! *The old devil has indeed changed*. Beautiful, you say, with that scar – excuse my mentioning – across half her face!
- Melibea *What are you saying, you mad thing? Why are you laughing?*
- Lucrecia *I was laughing because you did not recognize the phylosomy⁸ of Mother's face after such a short time.*
- Melibea *Two years is a long time; and besides she has grown wrinkled.*
- Celestina If you can make time stand still, madam, I'll keep my face just as it was. Haven't you read the saying, The day will come when you won't recognize yourself in the glass? All the same, I went grey early and look twice my age. But as sure as you're a young beauty and I'm an old sinner, I was the youngest of my mother's four daughters. So I'm not so old as I'm taken for.
- Melibea Celestina, my friend, I've been delighted to have seen you speak and made your acquaintance. And I've enjoyed your conversation too. Take your money now God be with you, for you can't have eaten yet⁹.

Besides the rather crude, or I shall say bakhtinianly grotesque, description of Celestina, the first thing that interests us in this exchange is the fact that Lucrecia, Melibea's maid, misspoke the word 'fisonomía' (physiognomy) and uttered 'filosomía,' a corruption of the language typical of farmers and common people (Piñero, 159n22). In doing so, Rojas differentiated the language of the characters on the basis of their social status and thus captured their heteroglot nature.

Nonetheless, beyond the purely linguistic level of the exchange what emerges here is the mind of Celestina, a human-being hurt in her feelings. She gets angry at Lucrecia's giggling – she knows her quite well –, and wounded in her vanity¹⁰ by Melibea's words but still maintaining her composure, she respectfully responds to her in an attempt to restore her honor and blames her grey hair for her changed appearance. This deep psychologization of the characters, this delving into their

⁸ Neologism I created to show how Lucrecia misspoke herself.

⁹ In italics, it is Mack Singleton's translation. Otherwise, it is J. M. Cohen's translation.

¹⁰ Dorothy Severin, in her edition of *Celestina*, noted this "unexpected" vanity, which Celestina exhibits here.

psychology, represents a different plane in their portrayal. They are becoming human-like entities with conscious intentions.

THEORY OF MIND

The ability to read, understand, and manipulate other minds has been, for the past three decades, a crucial and ever-growing field of inquiry in the cognitive sciences. Theory of Mind (or ToM), as this field is known, can indeed help us examine the mechanics of the literary minds at play. The concept of Theory of Mind (also referred as mindreading) started, in the field of primatology, with the publication of a paper in 1978, by Premack and Woodruff, entitled “Does a chimpanzee have a theory of mind?” in which the authors were wondering if chimpanzees could recognize the intentions of a human being. Two theories grew out of this research: ‘Theory-Theory’ and the ‘Simulation-Theory.’ Theory-Theory postulates that we possess and employ a conceptual knowledge about other people’s mental states. We theorize about other minds. Simulation-Theory suggests that when interacting with other people (i.e., other minds), we behave as if we were them. In other words, we mentally put ourselves in the shoes of the other person. We pretend to be them to know how they feel or what they think. This latter theory is logically tied to the notion of empathy. Both theories will be crucial in the episode of *Celestina* that I will analyze here.

After Melibea’s last line in the passage above, the conversation takes a different turn. Celestina’s real *empresa* [undertaking] will finally begin, thus demonstrating the full breadth of her agency or ability to understand Melibea’s state of mind and respond accordingly.

CELESTINA’S THEORY OF MIND

Her *empresa* is definitely not complete. Therefore, upon Melibea’s polite dismissal, not without affirming first her benevolence¹¹ followed by her disinterest for monetary reward, since she has always had something to eat¹², she admits that she had come to speak to her on behalf of a ‘Christian in pain.’ The thought of a person in pain, furthermore a Christian, could have only been meant to provoke in Melibea some sort of empathetic response. Celestina’s careful and apologetic discourse is now longer and is punctuated with emphatic expressions such as: “¡O angélica imagen!” [“*Oh my angelic vision!*”], “¡O perla preciosa!” [“*Oh precious pearl!*”], or “¡Donzella graciosa y de alto linaje!” [“*Oh gracious maiden of noble lineage!*”]. She seems to be mentally preparing Melibea so that she does not get too upset upon revealing the true purpose of her visit. Indeed, she drops in the middle of one these long speeches that: “Assí, que donde no ay varón todo bien fallestce; con mal está el huso, quando la barba no anda de suso.” (161) [“*Where there is no man, all good things are lacking. With no beard around, the spindle slows down, as the old fellow says.*”]; insisting again that it is about “agenas necessidades” [somebody else’s needs].

Her strategy appears to be successful when after indicating that she only needs a word from her to cure him (the ‘Christian in pain’)¹³, Melibea says that “[p]or una parte, me alteras y provocas a

¹¹ “Esto tuve siempre, querer más trabajar sirviendo a otros, que holgar contentando a mí” (160) [“I’ve always put service to others before my own pleasures.”].

¹² “Que con mi pobreza jamás me faltó, a Dios gracias, una blanca para pan y un quarto para vino (...). Jamás me acosté sin comer una tostada en vino y dos docenas de sorvos, por amor de la madre, tras cada copa” (160) [“For though I’m poor, never (...) have I been short of a penny for bread and four-pence for wine I never went to bed without a sop, and a couple of dozen sips after each bite for the good of my stomach.”].

¹³ “(...) con sola una palabra de tu noble boca salida que le lleve metida en mi seno, tiene por fe que sanará, según la mucha devoción tiene en tu gentileza” (161) [“That a single word from your noble lips – wich I shall bring him concealed in my brast – will cure him. Such is his regard for your courtesy.”].

enojo; por otra, me mueves a compasión” (161) [“*On the one hand you trouble me and vex me; on the other you move me to tears*”], and later adds: “Que yo soy dichosa si de mi palabra ay necesidad para salud de algún christiano. Porque hazer beneficio es semejar a Dios (...)” (161) [“If one word from me is enough to save a Christian’s soul, I’m a fortunate woman, for to do kindnesses is to resemble God (...)”]. However, after another speech complementing Melibea’s beauty and good-nature, Celestina mentions Calisto’s name¹⁴. Melibea is deeply offended:

¡Ya, ya, ya! Buena vieja, no me digas más, no pases adelante. ¿Ésse es el doliente por quien as fecho tantas premissas en tu demanda, por quien has venido a buscar la muerte para ti, por quien has dado tan dañosos passos, desvergonçada barvuda? (...) ¡Quemada seas, alcahueta falsa, hechizera, enemiga de onestidad, causadora de secretos yerros! ¡Jesú, Jesú! (161)

Stop, stop! That’s enough, my good woman. Don’t go on. So this is the sufferer for whom you’ve been making this long-winded request, for whom you’ve undertaken this perilous errand, for whom you’ve come to court your death? You shameless old hag! (...) You evil bawd! You witch! You enemy of all virtue and plotter of secret sins, you shall burn for this! Sweet Jesus!

And indeed, right after Melibea’s extended and unequivocal response Celestina acknowledges in an aside that she is probably heading in the wrong direction: “¡En hora mala acá vine si me falta mi conjuro! (...) ¡Ce, hermano que se va a todo perder!” (163) [“If my spell fails, this will have been an unlucky visit indeed. Come here, brother devil, or all is lost.”]. Now Melibea’s discourse, because of her anger, is longer. Repeating that she cannot believe Celestina dared suggest such a petition and provides some background regarding the circumstances of her encounter with Calisto. Perhaps it is this fact that makes Celestina regain confidence. In another aside, she says: “¡Más fuerte estava Troya, y aun otra más bravas he yo amansado! Ninguna tempestad mucho dura” (164) [“Troy was stronger, and I’ve tamed fiercer ones than this. No storm lasts for ever.”]. In spite of Melibea’s anger, Celestina appears to be in control of the conversation, now she even asks Melibea for another favor (besides the few words she requested earlier). She’s asking for a prayer and a *cordón* [girdle/cord]:

Una oración, señora, que le dixeron que sabías de sancta Polonia para el dolor de las muelas; assí mismo tu cordón, que es fama que ha tocado todas las reliquias que ay en Roma y Jerusalem. Aquel cavallero que dixे pena y muere dellas. (165)

A prayer to St Apollonia against the toothache, which he has been told you know, madam, and your girdle that they say has touched all the relics in Rome and Jerusalem.

Melibea is trapped, all along she assumed that the pain the Christian was feeling was of a sentimental pain. Indeed, she responds: “Si esso querías, ¿por qué luego no me lo espresaste? ¿Por qué me lo dixiste por tales palabras?” (165) [“If that was all you wanted, why didn’t you say so at once? *Why did you not make your request more explicit?*”]. What ensues then is a long ‘false’ apology by Celestina in which she explains why she omitted to mention Calisto’s name sooner.

Señora, porque mi limpio motivo me hizo creer que, aunque en otras cualesquier lo propusiera, no se havía de sospechar mal. Que si faltó el devido preámbulo, fue porque la verdad no es necessario abundar en colores. Compasión de su dolor, confianza de tu magnificencia ahogaron en mi boca al principio la expresión de la causa (...). (165)

Because the purity of my motives, madam, made me believe that whatever language I used no one would suspect me of evil. If I didn’t make the right introduction, it’s because the truth doesn’t need much embellishment. *Pity for his pain and the confidence your magnanimity inspired in me, stifled in my mouth the proper exposition of my plea (...).*

¹⁴ “(...) Si pensara, señora, que tan de ligero havías de conjeturar de lo passado hablar en cosa que a Calisto ni a otro hombre tocasse” (164) [“If I had though, madam, that you would so easily suspect me of wicked intentions, your permission would not have been enough to embolden me to speak in a matter concerning Calisto or any other man.”].

The dialogue continues on for some time. Melibea will first justify her *alteración* [agitation] and inquiry about Calisto's toothache, then Celestina will astutely praise Calisto, and finally Melibea will say:

¡O, cuánto me pesa con la falta de mi paciencia! Porque siendo él ignorante y tú ynocente, havés padecido las alteraciones de mi ayrada lengua. Pero la mucha razón me relieva de culpa, la qual tu habla sospecha causó. En pago de tu buen sofrimiento, quiero cumplir tu demanda y darte luego mi cordón. E porque para escribir la oración no havrá tiempo sin que venga mi madre, si esto no bastare, ven mañana por ella muy secretamente. (169)

Oh, how I regret having lost my temper! I see now that he had no evil intention and that you were innocent too. And yet I made you suffer the outbursts of my evil tongue. But you will acknowledge that I was justified in assuming what I did and that such an assumption would excuse my error – of which your suspect words were the cause. However, as payment for your forbearance with me, I will indeed accede to your request and immediately give you the girdle. But, alas! – there is not sufficient time to write the prayer down before my mother's return. Well, if the girdle does not heal him, then return tomorrow for the prayer – and very secretly.

To which Lucrecia, who has been listening to the entire exchange, responds in an aside: “¡Ya, ya, perdida es mi ama! ¿Secretamente quiere que venga Celestina? ¡Fraude ay! ¡Más le querrá dar que lo dicho!” (169) [“*Ah ha! My mistress is lost! Is she proposing to Celestina to come secretly? There's some trick in all this. She may want to give her something more than she has said.*”]. And she adds later on in another aside: “No miento yo, que mal va este fecho” (169) [“I wasn't mistaken. This business will lead to trouble.”]. The success of Celestina's *empresa* is complete. Melibea asks her to come back the following day to pick up the *oración* [prayer] and surrenders her *cordón*. Celestina's ability to read and manipulate Melibea's mind has been flawless.

What we recognize in Celestina is the capacity to read the intentions of her counterparts and to respond to them in a 'human-like' fashion. In this scene, which serves as a case study of her mindreading abilities, Rojas' mastery is patent. He not only creates a character but also, an individualized mind. Scholars have long noticed and praised his talent in creating well-defined personalities and Celestina is perhaps the author's most successful creation. The title of the first edition, *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea* [Comedy of Calisto and Melibea], suggested at first that the two lovers constituted the central plot of the story. However, its literary offspring – that is, the many continuations that surfaced during the first half of the sixteenth century¹⁵ – converted Celestina into the nexus of the fictional fabric the emulators were sewing. She eventually imposed herself and modern publications now bear her name¹⁶.

The emergence of the 'literary Theory of Mind' that the characters exhibit denotes the interest of Rojas in their psychological development. This awareness and concern for human psychology goes hand in hand with the increasing interest in the mind that Spain witnesses during the Renaissance period, as attested by medical and philosophical works such as Juan Luis Vives's *Treatise on the Soul*. *Celestina* constitutes an important example of this 'psychologization' process, which soon begins to transpire in the literary works of Rojas' time and which is indeed an important piece in the puzzle of the rise of the early modern discourse. A piece that both Bakhtin's heteroglossia and the Theory of Mind concept can help us interpret in the context of early modern expressions of mind development. These two theories complement each other in that they help shed light on the inner workings and the evolution of the discursive phenomenon as related to human psychology.

¹⁵ Below is a list of some of the continuations:

- Feliciano de Silva's *Segunda Comedia de Celestina* (1534).
- Gaspar Gómez's *Tercera parte de la tragicomedia de Celestina* (1536).
- Sancho de Muñón's *Tragicomedia de Lysandro y Roselia, llamada Elicia y por otro nombre quarta obra y tercera Celestina* (1542).

¹⁶ The first edition to do so was published in Alcalá in 1569 (Piñero 14).

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