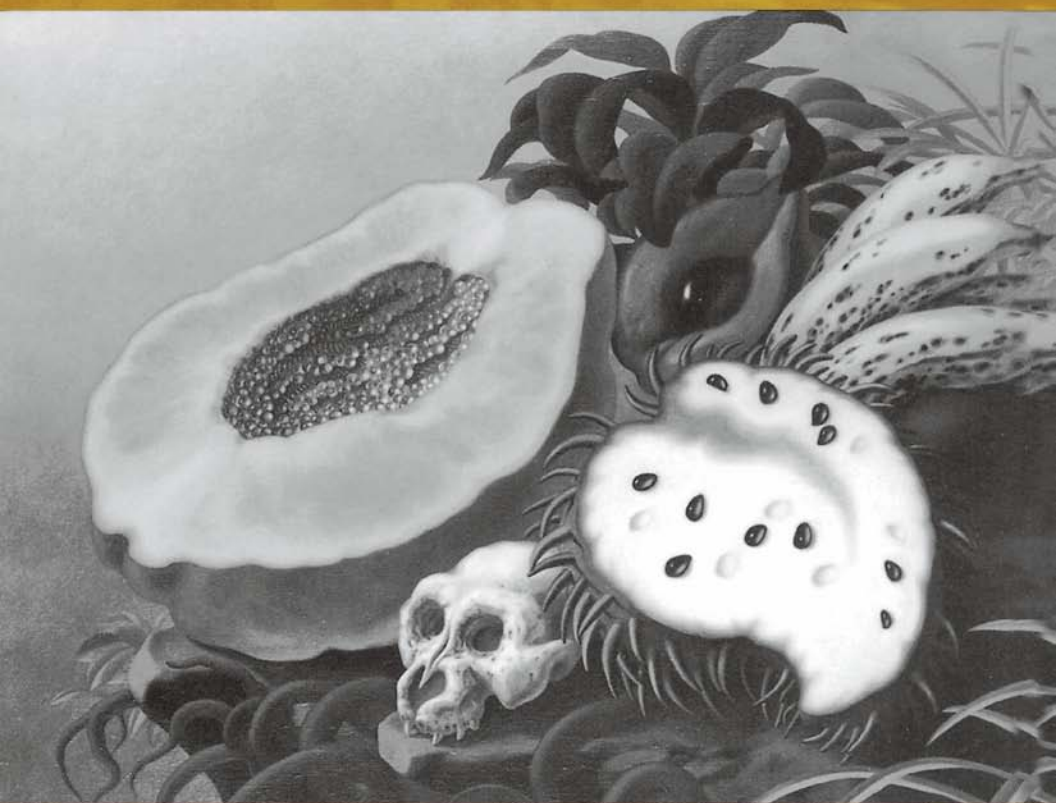


Celestina's Brood

*Continuities of the Baroque in
Spanish and Latin American
Literature*



Roberto González Echevarría



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Roberto González
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Roberto M. González González

(Cienfuegos, June 14, 1918 — Bradenton, April 4, 1986)

in memoriam

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We often forget that our work is done in close touch not only with texts, but also with people. If our profession is not quite a movable feast, it feels sometimes like a cruising conga line, with stops in very cool as well as very hot places and even in very cool hot places. I have very fond memories of people associated with each of the pieces included in this book, many of which, at one point or another, took the form of lectures or papers delivered at conferences or at various institutions by special invitation. The one on monsters in *La vida es sueño* dates back to my doctoral dissertation (Yale, 1970), which was directed by my now colleague Manuel Durán, to whom I also owe crucial clarifications while preparing other essays contained here. As if completing some sort of baroque figure, my doctoral dissertation inspired a piece by Severo Sarduy ("Un Art Monstre," *Baroque* 81, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1981), whose work I study in the last chapter of this book. My work on monsters also reminds me of the halcyon days of Structuralism and brings to mind a production of Calderón's play at Cornell, in which I was a special consultant, and which featured

Christopher Reeve as Segismundo. Segismundo to Superman does not seem like an illogical sequence. I remember carrying to Havana, in a memorable trip, Harry Sieber's book on *Lazarillo*, the review of which led to my piece on Cervantes. Reading it was a comfortable refuge from the hectic events around me, and the frenzied writing of an unpublished (and probably unpublishable) *cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. The essay on Lope evokes fun-filled trips to Yankee Stadium with Robert E. Kaske, one of the most uncompromising readers of difficult texts I have known and a man filled with a Rabelsian *joie de vivre*. His recent death adds a touch of melancholy to those memories. The essay on threats in Calderón evokes the bar at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, where a friend's (Juan Luis Hernández Girón) mock fulminations about another suddenly clarified lines of *La vida es sueño* that had always seemed superfluous and even somewhat ridiculous. The essay on *El siglo de las luces* is linked in my mind to wonderful, if very cold, evenings in New Hampshire in the company of my friends, and now *compadres*, Willy and Linda Luis. The piece on Guillén, which I had been planning for many years, was finished with the gentle but firm prodding of Vera Kutzinski, to whom it owes more than I could say. The essay on *Espejo de paciencia* arose from an invitation by Enrico Mario Santi to lecture at a symposium on the emergence of Cuban nationality at Cornell, which culminated, as all good conferences, with a great party at his house. The concluding essay on *Cobra*, which is part of my book *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*, makes me nostalgic for many a summer afternoon in Senlis, in the company of Severo Sarduy, a dear friend whose works have been a real challenge to me. The study of *Lunarejo* I wrote at the request of Mercedes López Baralt, of the University of Puerto Rico, who is also a very cherished and admired friend. I read a first version of it at a very convivial symposium (if the redundancy is allowed) of Peruvianists at the University of Wisconsin, invited by Margarita Zamora, once a student and now a prominent colleague. A fuller version was read later at the University of Seville, owing to an invitation by distinguished colonialist Carmen de Mora, a warm host. The opening essay on *Celestina* was finished while teaching a seminar on the topic at Yale, but I had been plotting it for over twenty years, during which time I must have bored my friend Giuseppe Mazzotta a hundred times talking about it in our walks around the Hamden reservoirs.

Virginia Jewess was good to look up some information for me in Italy for the piece on "Threats in *La vida es sueño*."

Finally, I would like to thank my dear friend Harold Bloom for reading the entire manuscript.

Thanks are given to the editors of the journals and books in which the previously published essays appeared. These are: "On Cipión's Life and Adventures: Cervantes and the Picaresque," *Diacritics* 10, no. 3 (1980), pp. 15–26. Reprinted in Cervantes, ed. Harold Bloom (New Haven: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 99–114. "El 'monstruo de una especie y otra': *La vida es sueño* III, 2, 727," *Co-Textes* (Centre d'Etudes et Recherches Sociocritiques, Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier, France), no. 3, *Special Issue on Calderón: Calderón: Códigos, Monstruos, Icones*, ed. Javier Herrero (1982), pp. 27–58. "Poetry and Painting in Lope's *El castigo sin venganza*," *Magister Regis: Studies in Honor of Robert Earl Kaske*, ed. Arthur Groos, with Emerson Brown, Jr., Thomas D. Hill, Giuseppe Mazzotta, and Joseph S. Wittig (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), pp. 273–87. "Threats in the Theater of Calderón: *La vida es sueño*, I, 303–8," in *The Lesson of Paul de Man*, special issue of *Yale French Studies* ed. Peter Brooks, Shoshana Felman, and J. Hillis Miller, no. 69 (1985), pp. 180–91. "Reflections on *Espejo de paciencia*," *Cuban Studies* 16 (1986), special issue on "The Emergence of Cuban Nationality," ed. Enrico Mario Santi, pp. 101–22. "Reflexiones sobre *Espejo de paciencia*," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* (El Colegio de México), vol. 35, no. 3 (1987), pp. 571–90. "Poética y modernidad en el Lunarejo," to appear in a special issue of *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* (Puerto Rico), directed by Mercedes López Baralt. "Socrates Among the Weeds: Blacks and History in Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces*," *Massachusetts Review* 24, no. 3 (1984), pp. 545–61. Revised version in *Voices from Under: Black Narrative in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. William Luis (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 33–53. "Sócrates yerbero: Los negros y la historia en *El siglo de las luces*," *Filología* (Universidad de Buenos Aires), año 22, no. 2 (1987), pp. 75–99. "Guillén as Baroque," *Callaloo*, "Nicolás Guillén: A Special Issue," ed. Vera M. Kutzinski, vol. 10, no. 2 (1987), pp. 302–17. "Plain Song: Sarduy's *Cobra*," *Contemporary Literature* 28, no. 4 (1987), pp. 437–59; reprinted in *Modern Latin American Fiction*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), pp. 401–20.

Preamble

As I reread this book and inevitably become my own critic and historian, I see that a brief history of my critical education may help the reader understand how I came to work the way I do and what it is that unites the essays collected here.

Like nearly everyone of my generation I began studying literary history and philology in the traditional way. As an undergraduate in the 1960s my desire was to know as much as possible about literature, which meant learning literary history and reading as many of the major and minor works as time allowed. Knowing literature then was a largely unproblematic process, organized by the discipline of literary history. Shocked into bilingualism by exile, I had become enthralled with language and language learning and had picked up French and Italian in addition to my Spanish and English. These were the four traditions to which I devoted myself with unremitting passion. I thought it proper to cover the entire range of each of those literatures, which appeared to me like parallel buildings, with a foundation in the Middle Ages, rising up through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Modern Era. There was no question but that the moderns did not measure up to the classics, and less attention was devoted to them. Latin American literature barely entered into the picture then, and the most modern Spanish author we read was Federico García Lorca. I absorbed a good deal of Menéndez y Pelayo, sometimes diluted in other historians, and much Lanson, pressured by a French professor who thought his history of French literature should simply be known by rote. In Italian my professors harked back to even earlier eras of pedagogy. In their classes one read Dante word by word and was forced to memorize whole *cantiche*. The fare was heavy on Petrarch, Boccaccio, with some Manzoni. But no modern poetry. There was no question of engaging in much interpretation of the works by these authors, which were incommensurate monuments, to the understanding of which one made discrete contributions at best. It was

unthinkable to question the authority of someone like Menéndez y Pelayo.

My first encounter with close reading and interpretation came in a class with Cambridge Hispanist Edward M. Wilson at Indiana University. One of a distinguished group of English *calderonistas*, Wilson dared to read plays like *La vida es sueño* [Life is a Dream] with minute attention to detail, oblivious or clearly set against received wisdom. Under his tutelage Calderón's plays, those old chestnuts from *bachillerato*, suddenly came alive as poems of magnificent beauty and subtlety. The wife-murder plays, which had so shocked Menéndez y Pelayo and others, suddenly appeared as critiques of the honor code, cast in a poetry of very precise symmetrical splendor. Although I had experienced much more in terms of criticism by the time I wrote them, the two pieces on Calderón contained in this book are a belated homage to the great teacher Wilson was. With him I learned to distrust the authoritative and authoritarian Spanish historians and critics.

At Yale's Spanish Department I was immersed again in *Romanisches philologie*, particularly in poetry courses with Gustavo Correa, who had been a student of Leo Spitzer, and José J. Arrom, a literary historian in the grand manner, who had devised a historical construct for the study of the whole sweep of Latin American literature. It would be disingenuous to claim that reading poetry with Correa was a pleasant experience, but it was a formative one for sure. With him I first encountered hermeneutics and read not only Spitzer, but Curtius, Auerbach, C. S. Lewis, and a great deal of *estilística*. Correa had been a pioneer in myth criticism, and his interest in theory was a good and timely example. But the way out of conventional Hispanism was through Manuel Durán, a student of Américo Castro who did not share the master's dogmatism, and whose linguistic and literary range are legendary. A Catalan by birth and conviction, Durán has a cosmopolitan view of culture that provided a bridge for what followed.

For it was at Yale, of course, in the late sixties that I, along with not a small number of others like me, experienced the arrival of Structuralism. Regardless of what happened later, criticism has never been the same in the American academy, and the change has been for the good (though not all that issued from Structuralism was good). The French influence injected philosophical specula-

tion into a tradition that, because of its strong ties to England, distrusted philosophy. In addition, the French *maîtres penseurs* were powerful writers all, from Lévi-Strauss to Derrida, and particularly in the case of Barthes. Suddenly, academic criticism seemed flat-footed, inelegant, unfashionable. This was more poignant on the Spanish side of things, for the so-called Boom of the Latin American novel took place in Paris at the same time as Structuralism and its aftermath were enjoying a Boom of their own on the same Left Bank. An abyss suddenly opened between what had been written, say, before 1965, and what came after, both in fiction and in criticism. Two Latin American writers of note participated in both movements: the poet Octavio Paz and the novelist Severo Sarduy, who was a full-fledged member of the *Tel Quel* group. Paz's view of Structuralism was more critical than Sarduy's, but he was still strongly influenced by Lévi-Strauss in particular. Sarduy rode the wave of Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, and finally the dispersal of the *Tel Quel* group as a kind of gadfly. My friendship with him, which dates from 1968, gave me access to all this activity on the Parisian side, while at Yale, and later at Cornell and then again at Yale, I lived the vortex of the American movement.

In the United States the Structuralist heyday was short-lived, to be replaced by Deconstruction and various branches of Marxism. The latter, particularly in the case of Latin American literature, spent itself looking for an authentic political arena and analyzing and vaunting ordinary works and minor new writers. Deconstruction intensified the speculative, philosophical element that Structuralism had brought to criticism. I was drawn to it mostly through Borges, rather than Paul de Man or Jacques Derrida, and in great measure because I had become tired of the scientific pretensions of semiotics and repelled by its cacophonous jargon. Deconstruction seemed to be working from within literature itself, and I practiced it before it had a name. Though I learned more than I probably know from de Man, Derrida, and others, I was drawn eventually to the work of Foucault because he seemed to be the only one who included literature in a larger discursive economy, one that allowed me to see the novel in a context that was not literary in the narrow sense, but that also allowed me to see nonliterary forms of narrative as literary. This path led to my *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) and to essays on the

likes of Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes. The essays contained here follow a different path and are concerned with somewhat different issues.

What Structuralism and its aftermath displaced from the Spanish scene was *estilística*, with which it had much in common through Saussure, their common source. But the difference in approach and style was fundamental. *Estilística* analyzed a text to celebrate the linguistic performance of a given subject whose dexterity determined his or her value as a writer. In the hands of Dámaso Alonso, this method had produced some valuable criticism, but its pathos and even bathos was insufferable. Structuralism and its sequels, all united by the notion of text, at the very least distanced poetic performance from individual self, displacing creativity to linguistic fact, psychoanalytic language, or the effects of difference. Even if some of this disguised a phantasmic subject who would not say his or her name, at least the critic did not appear as a mere eulogizer of a creative self, but as someone who set into motion literary language to allow it to reveal that which made it work. In Deconstruction this meant showing discrepancies and contradictions, rather than praising the continuity of intention and form. Those of us who have worked on living writers know that this is more often than not far from amusing to them. When applied to the classics in a tradition, it can and has irritated many people. The critical controversies of the past twenty years, as is well known, have shaken up the canon of various literatures. In the case of the Latin American countries, where the connection between the national literature and national ideology is very strong, there are huge battles still to be fought. Younger critics like Carlos J. Alonso, Anibal González Pérez, and Julio Ramos, from Puerto Rico, and Efraín Kristal, from Perú, are beginning to carry our very daring work in this direction. Ramos has been bold enough to deconstruct Martí.

The essays in this book are concerned with two general issues: modernity in the Hispanic literary tradition and the Baroque as the expression of the modern. *Celestina* is not baroque, to be sure, but the fact that some of the most daring Latin American works today have gone back to it signals that Rojas's work is the point at which what they consider akin to them began. The book ranges from the dawn of modernity in *Celestina* (1499) to the most experimental recent fiction in Spanish: Sarduy's *Cobra* (1972) and Fuentes' *Terra Nostra*

(1975). In the Baroque the essays attempt to come to grips with what several influential Latin American writers have pronounced to be the first Latin American artistic movement. This concern is articulated most explicitly in the pieces on Silvestre de Balboa, Juan de Espinosa Medrano, Alejo Carpentier, and Nicolás Guillén. Recourse to the Baroque, the so-called *Neobarroco*, is the recovery of that which appeared farthest from the modern, more aligned with the most retrograde elements of Spanish culture. But the Latin Americans were able to focus on the bizarre elements of baroque aesthetics and discover in them a source as well as a tradition. Picking up on their interests, I deal ultimately with the issue of monstrosity as identity, with the recognition of self as a reflexive perception of difference, and with the broader question of Latin American uniqueness and originality as reflected in literature. In Espinosa Medrano the *lunar*, the birthmark, is the difference; in Guillén it is his blackness. In Sarduy it is the question of sexual role and takes the form of tattoos and castration. In Calderón it is the ambiguity of the young characters. In *Celestina* the mark is the scar on the bawd's face. Monstrosity appears in the Baroque as a form of generalized catachresis, one that affects language as well as the image of self and that includes the sense of belatedness inherent in Latin American literature. In my own case the monstrosity lies perhaps in the very use of English, a language that I continue to feel like a familiar medium not quite my own, the way I imagine the Baroque felt about poetic language. One of the topics I engage here is precisely the relationship between language and self in the Baroque, which turns out to be language as self, meaning that there is no hidden residue of being after the linguistic display of baroque poetics. Another, related topic, is the constitution of characters in baroque theater and poetry.

I hope, of course, that the essays I offer here are judged by how they illuminate a given text or movement, not by how faithfully they adhere to this or that school of criticism. The essays cover about twenty years of work, from my doctoral dissertation in 1970 to the fall semester of 1991, when I finally wrote my article on *Celestina* after much procrastination. As a collection, this volume is perhaps more like a map or itinerary of interests and obsessions than an integral book. I still rejoice in some of the insights and also recoil before the obvious weaknesses. They all seem mine, how-

ever, and I own up to them with both pride and humility. Although I do not go as far as my very dear friend Harold Bloom in this, I have come to believe that he is right and that one's method has to be oneself; however, I believe this to be true because in doing so one inevitably joins anyway a more general flow beyond the I. This collection, therefore, is like a one-man show, united by the thread of a life, more than thirty years of which have already been devoted to the study of language and literature.

1. Celestina's Brood



1

[T]he wit with which racy words and concepts are strung together in this book is almost a national catastrophe, because it does not allow one to handle without caution one of our greatest classics.

—Ramiro de Maeztu

Fernando de Rojas's *Celestina* (1499) is the most suppressed classic in Spanish literary history, and one of the least known outside Hispanic letters. An account of the readings to which this disturbing work has not been subjected in the past hundred years could of itself constitute a monograph. A book in which perverse desire drives the characters, *Celestina* still awaits a Freudian analysis, as well as an interpretation according to Bataille's theories linking eros, evil, and literature. A story in which lower-class characters bring about the downfall of their masters, *Celestina* has yet to be subjected to a rigorous Marxist reading.¹ A text in which rhetoric figures so prominently, *Celestina* has still to undergo a deconstructive dismantling. While it is true that there has been some incisive commentary recently from what could be loosely termed a post-structuralist perspective, what have prevailed in *Celestina* studies, beyond the ordinary fact-finding and source-hunting scholarship, have been existentialist interpretations, inquiries dependent on Américo Castro's propositions about the role converted Jews played in Spanish cultural history, debates about the sincerity of Rojas's pious intentions as stated in the prologue, and many discussions about the work's genre.²

None of the major statements of the century about the origins and nature of the novel deals with *Celestina*, though Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo included a study of Rojas's work in his *Orígenes de la novela* and Hispanists see it as a precursor to the picaresque.³ But Georg Lukacs, Erich Auerbach, Michail Bakhtin, and Northrop Frye ignore it altogether, as do others, like Ian Watt and Julia Kristeva. As

a literary model, *Celestina* has suffered a similar neglect. While Cervantes has an infinite number of imitators in and out of the Hispanic tradition, and Tirso's *Don Juan* spawned a rich literary and musical following, there are few obvious heirs to *Celestina* after the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁴ In fact, one could say that the last truly worthy follower of Rojas was Cervantes himself in two of his *Novelas ejemplares* [Exemplary Stories], published in 1613 (see chapter 2 of this book).

Except for the work of Menéndez y Pelayo, and a few other academics, it was not until the Spanish Generation of '98, which did so much to explore and exploit Spanish literary myths, that *Celestina* was taken up as a force to contend with. Even then, the extent of the reappraisal was limited. There is a beautiful rewriting in Azorín's *Castilla* (1912), where Calisto and Melibea appear as a very domestic married couple with a daughter named Alisa, after her maternal grandmother, and a nice estate. As is characteristic of Azorín, the emphasis is not on drama or tragedy, but on the tranquil banality of life and the quiet passage of time. After a loving description of the house and garden, Calisto appears and watches as a hawk enters the latter, pursued by a young man who meets the daughter. The story told by Rojas in dramatic, even tragic terms, will be repeated as part of nature's plan to replenish the species.⁵ In Azorín the disquieting elements at the core of Rojas's work are neutralized. Ramiro de Maeztu, on the other hand, writes a powerful essay that emphasizes the most disturbing aspects of *Celestina*, particularly what appear to be its radical immorality and lack of a Christian sentiment, a conception of the world so fatalistic as to be post-Shakespearian. Rojas, according to Maeztu, is a man who has abandoned the faith of his elders, Judaism, but has not accepted that of his nation, Catholicism. At a point in history when he must decide between the two because of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, he writes a work that challenges both religions and exudes despair as well as a complete moral relativism.⁶ But that was the extent of the reappraisal of *Celestina* by the Generation of '98 and the thinkers and writers that followed. Azorín never wrote a whole book on *Celestina* like his *La ruta de don Quijote*. Miguel de Unamuno did not feel compelled to write anything resembling his *Vida de don Quijote y Sancho* about Rojas's masterpiece, and José Ortega y Gasset wrote no book comparable to his *Meditaciones del Quijote* about *Celestina*.

It is indeed an ironic paradox that a culture that has produced writers like Juan Ruiz, Rojas, Mateo Alemán, Cervantes, Quevedo, Caviedes, Valle Inclán, and Cela, and that in painting boasts of the likes of Velázquez and Goya, has had precious few critics willing to take on the most radical features in those artists's works. Spanish can boast of a Juan Ruiz, a Rojas, and a Quevedo, but there is no Nietzsche, Freud, or Bataille. It is not simply a question of prudishness. The repression of *Celestina* is due to its possessing a quality that Cervantes was the first to note, in the most-often quoted statement about the work: "Libro, en mi opinión, divi-[no] Si encubriera más lo huma-[no]" ["would be a divine book, in my view, if it concealed more the human"].⁷ I take human in its broadest and most caustic Nietzschean sense to mean a congenital immorality, a depravity so deep-seated that only through careful suppression or sublimation can social life endure. Hence, at the origin of modern Spanish literature, in the beginning of what is a rich novelistic tradition, there lies such a shocking, unadorned vision of humankind and of literature itself that it cannot be easily imitated. In fact, except for the many minor works cited by Menéndez y Pelayo and others, which tend to wind up as pornography, *Celestina* is more often than not averted. This is the reason for *Celestina*'s paltry brood, and perhaps why the figure only reappears in the most recent and experimental Latin American fiction, particularly in four works: *Aura* (1962) and *Terra Nostra* (1975) by the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, "La increíble y triste historia de la Cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada" ["The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother"] (1972) by the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, and *Cobra* (1972) by the Cuban Severo Sarduy.

My title is a pun that plays precisely on the dialectics of infertility and dissemination present in *Celestina*. It alludes to the bawd's array of potions, ointments, cosmetics, and other drugs with which she brews the philters that will incite others to passion, the paraphernalia to restore hymens and change the appearance of bodies in general, as well as the trappings of her witches' craft. These are skills, substances, and objects that do not lead to reproduction, however, but only to love and pleasure. Though *Celestina* is often referred to as Mother by her charges, she is childless. She is, at best an aunt, as others call her. *Celestina*'s role is maieutic, rather than maternal, but what she helps bring about is only pleasure or pain or

both and ultimately death, never life. A mistress of love, *Celestina* is hardly the agent of social restoration and continuity. She is the enabler in a commerce of bodies, desires, and reputations that is the opposite and sometimes the parody of the rituals through which society renews itself: courtship and marriage. *Celestina's* brew works against the brood. In fact, her brew may very well be intended to heighten our awareness and see through the concert of lies that would make up the foundation of those rituals. *Celestina's* brew is meant to let loose the demons. Her lack of reproduction is also a most powerful critique or representation. There is no faithful mimesis obtained with the brew. In fact, the brew beclouds the mirror and distorts all reflections. The bawd creates an impasse in transmission, an interruption in reproduction, because she is concerned only with the process, not with the result. This impasse is one of the main themes of the work; an impasse within the work that may account for the work's own impasse in literary history, for the scarcity of its brood. What really is *Celestina's* brood?

It should be obvious, as my epigraph from Maeztu indicates, that a work as salacious as *Celestina* could not easily become a national literary monument, particularly at the time (Romanticism) when nation-building led to the creation of literary canons. If, according to Maeztu, *Celestina* is a work that taught Spaniards "how to live without ideals" (p. 145)—one, according to Menéndez y Pelayo, redolent with an "Epicurean pessimism" (3:385)—it could hardly be touted as the expression of national identity, as was *Don Quijote*. One could hardly expect statues of the old bawd to spring up in Madrid's plazas, alongside those of the mad knight and his squire. Yet, it is clear evidence of *Celestina's* powerful appeal that the work endures, even as a kind of subterranean classic, condemned to the nether regions of academic specialization. My hardly original point of departure here is that *Celestina* inaugurates literary modernity in the Spanish-speaking world, or to use Menéndez y Pelayo's revealing metaphor, that it is the "seed" of modern literature, particularly of the novel, that most modern of genres. But I would add that *Celestina* inaugurates modernity by taking at once to its very limits the radical critique of all values subtending modern works. *Celestina's* brood is, in that sense, all literature written in the West since 1499. The scarcity of the obvious brood is due to the totality and finality of *Celestina's* inaugural gesture: a work that has not only

opened the dark abyss of modernity, but appears to have filled it all with its gloom, can have no heritage. Even the most recent imitators of Rojas flinch, as shall be seen.

2

It bears repeating unambiguously that Rojas produced an essentially secular, pessimistic, and drastically negative work at the height of the reign of the Catholic Kings. It is a work that deals with sex, corruption, violence, and general human depravation explicitly, and in which the conventional gestures of acquiescence to the generally accepted morality and religious doctrine are so perfunctory that only the naive or pious could not see their disingenuousness. It is also a work that eschews genres and styles, an amalgam of traditions, a hybrid of comedy, classical dialogue, tragedy, and sentimental romance, in which characters who represent the nobility, or at least the ruling commercial bourgeoisie, commingle not merely with lower-class types (such as peasants) but with the dregs of society: whores, pimps, thieves, and thugs. These characters speak untrammelled by modesty or decorum. The protagonist, whose perseverance in evil and essential humanity, in the sense mentioned, is such as to elicit admiration, is an old whore and go-between, who runs a brothel and arranges for the illicit sexual dealings of people from all ranks of society, including the church.⁸ Previously, tragic characters, or characters with Celestina's elevated sense of self, were male and noble. It is impossible to exaggerate how innovative it was to have Celestina be the protagonist of this work and not be simply a comic figure. This is the enduring and indisputable breakthrough of *Celestina*: that tragedy, or as close to tragedy as can be expected in a world no longer meaningful or heroic, is embodied in an old whore and go-between. Celestina's is the only grandeur in the work, even if sullied by her evil doings and the tawdriness of her world.

In that world, as Dunn has observed, the exchanges between people that constitute human society are largely ruled by greed.⁹ All characters ultimately engage in this commerce, in which it is not only goods, but as Mary M. Gaylord has rightly seen, words, that are the most coveted commodity: "Celestina's genius lies not only in

her acute sensitivity to the desires of her fellow human beings, but in her recognition of the fact that human desire—physical, sexual, metaphysical—is in large part a *hunger for words*, a hunger which seeks not only to *express* itself, but also to *satisfy* itself verbally.”¹⁰ From this comes Gaylord’s most remarkable insight that Celestina stands for language, the quintessential mediator: “In the *Tragicomedia*, language is the *means* by which a beginning reaches an end—for Celestina, the *manto* and *cadena*; for the servants, sex and money; for Calisto, the possession of Melibea—, but it is also that which fills the space of the play’s entertainment (*entretenimiento*, literally a *holding between*) and of life. In this sense, Celestina—as the means, the medium, the *medianera*—is language” (p. 8). But is Celestina truly a vehicle, a relay in that commerce of goods, bodies, and words? What is her true role in the practice of that commerce, and what are its consequences? If commerce rules *Celestina*, and that commerce is ultimately one of words, conveyors of pleasure and value, then the skein, the girdle, and the chain, those often-discussed objects of exchange in the work, are primarily related to language. They are its emblem. Let us see what they reveal about mediation, exchange, and desire in *Celestina*.

Much has been written about the three objects, which evidently perform functions beyond their ostensible use. The skein is Celestina’s pretext to enter into Melibea’s house; the girdle is the article of clothing Melibea agrees to send Calisto to relieve his toothache; and the gold chain is the final gift Calisto gives Celestina in payment for her services. Of the three, the girdle is the one that most obviously acquires significance beyond its primary use, as it becomes the object of Calisto’s enraptured adoration in a memorable scene. But the chain, over whose possession Celestina eventually dies, is equally important. And there can be little doubt as to the skein’s relevance the moment one sees it in relation to the other two and takes into account the rest of Celestina’s activities, namely mending virginities, in which thread, and other instruments associated with sewing are used.

Javier Herrero has unveiled the historical and cultural sources and connotations of the skein and the girdle, linking them to the language of carnal love and witchcraft. He sees Melibea’s girdle as “simply one more case of this magical binding which was a commonplace of popular witchcraft in the Spanish Renaissance and

Golden Age.”¹¹ A. D. Deyermond has taken the case a bit further by showing that there is a significant sequence or pattern of exchange: “girdle is exchanged for gold chain, just as skein had been exchanged for girdle.”¹² This pattern would explain for the critic the behavior of the characters, who upon coming into contact with the bewitched object, begin to act in ways that are apparently atypical. Melibea surrenders soon after she touches the skein, Calisto goes berserk when he comes into contact with the girdle, and Celestina relaxes her wariness when she gets the chain. To Deyermond this pattern accounts for the odd actions of the characters, which are caused by the pact Celestina makes with the Devil: “If . . . we accept that the Devil entered Calisto’s body as soon as he touched the girdle, just as he had done with Alisa and Melibea on contact with the skein of thread, then his frenzy becomes explicable as part of a pattern” (p. 8). And “What of the chain and Celestina? As soon as she has received it as a reward for bringing the girdle to Calisto, she too starts to behave uncharacteristically” (p. 9).

Herrero’s illuminating observations provide excellent contextual material and philological commentary, while Deyermond’s show the sequence of an undeniable pattern of exchange, perhaps even a teleology. But the contextual material on witchcraft and the philological clarification concerning the contemporary meanings of words cannot fully explain how these elements function once inside the text of *Celestina*. A literary work is not the sum of its sources, nor the total of its linguistic debt, but more often the balance of how those sources and debts perform once taken outside their original context. To my mind, the witchcraft hypothesis is weak because it withdraws autonomy from the characters and thus detracts from the meaningfulness of their actions. If Melibea, Calisto, and Celestina are under some sort of spell that overcomes their will and judgment, then the story is not one of human action, but a kind of fairy tale, no matter how tawdry. Besides, Calisto did not need the girdle to rage madly; he does that on his own even before Celestina appears on the scene. And there is no evidence to suppose that Melibea, before Celestina knocks at her door (not for the first time by the way), was a demure virgin whose resistance is weakened by a magic spell. Celestina herself does not have to be bedeviled by the gold chain to act imprudently. Her refusal to part with the chain is simply the culmination of a series of selfish acts

that lead her accomplices to slay her. They had planned all along to take the goods from her by force if necessary: "que de grado o por fuerza nos dará de lo que [Calisto] le diere" (p. 143) ["Who by her will or by force will give us our part of her earnings"].¹³

I understand that by my reluctance to accept the witchcraft theory I am leaving open the question of the meaning of Celestina's witchcraft, particularly in the scene in which she invokes the Devil's powers, as well as the instances in which she speaks to him *sotto voce*. It seems to me that the function of the Devil and of witchcraft in *Celestina* is similar to that of the *encantadores* and the romances of chivalry in *Don Quijote*. Don Quijote fails once and again to force the world around him to conform to his chivalric notions of how people and reality ought to behave. His code would remove the rough edges from the objective world and make everything conform to an ideal and abstract conception based on positive values such as valor, selflessness, and restraint. Celestina's belief in the powers of the Devil is like Calisto's mad adherence to the rules of courtly love: it is a false doctrine and system of behavior that purports to channel, organize, and give meaning to action. Now, this system does not pretend to be based on positive values, as in the case of Don Quijote or the courtly sources of Calisto's behavior; love's labor does not lead here to human perfection. On the contrary, Celestina's witchcraft is an antisystem of values and practices that would claim to induce the real world, particularly people, to act according to how they really are, not as they pretend to be. Witchcraft would regulate human exchange according to a truer chart of valences, one in which selfishness, lust, and aggressiveness prevail. Everything else is the false appearance of things as transformed by the accumulation of fear and sanctimoniousness, a genealogy of morals. Witchcraft provides the recipe as well as the ingredients for the brew. And it is this brew that ultimately rules the traffic of symbols and values in *Celestina*.

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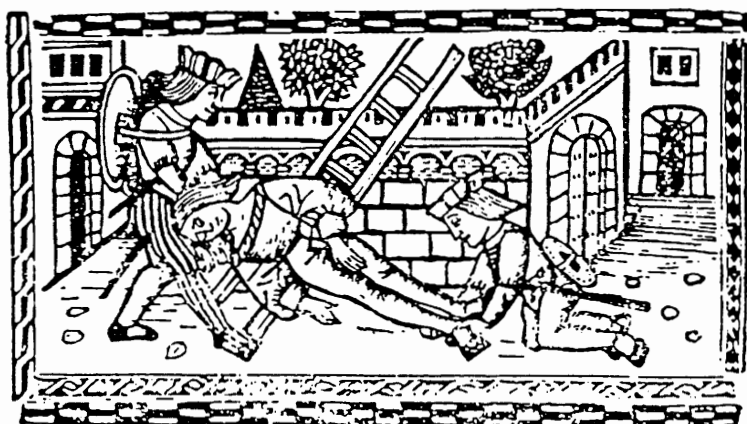
It is clear in the scene of Calisto's ravings with the girdle that he has taken the symbol for what it symbolizes. His madness is such that Sempronio warns him: "Señor, por holgar con el cordón,

no querrás gozar de Melibea" (p. 115) ["Sir, you take so much pleasure on the girdle that you won't want to enjoy Melibea"] (p. 73). And Celestina, more specifically tells him to treat the girdle as such: "debes, señor, cesar tu razón, dar fin a tus luengas querellas, tratar al cordón como cordón, porque sepas hacer diferencia de habla, cuando con Melibea te veas: no haga tu lengua iguales la persona y el vestido" (p. 116) ["you should, Sir, put an end to your long laments, and treat the girdle as a girdle, so that you will be able to tell the difference when you meet with Melibea. Don't let your tongue make person and garment into one"] (p. 74). Celestina, as Dunn and others have seen, has a similar fetishistic relationship with the gold chain. In both cases the person (Melibea) or the thing (gold, value, power) desired is taken for that for which it stands. Symbolic language in *Celestina* is undone by both the appearance of an obstinate and excessive referentiality as well as by an appeal to the literal. To Calisto the girdle is Melibea's body; to Celestina the girdle is a girdle. The work invites either to allow desire to read through language to the object coveted or to read literally, putting aside the figurative meanings that a term may have acquired. What if we follow Celestina's advise and take the girdle for a girdle?

In *Celestina* the symbolic or allegorical is still a shield, a resistance to face the human, which is lodged in the literal. Sempronio warns Calisto in act 8 to abandon circumlocutions and poetry because very few understand them: "Deja, señor, esos rodeos, deja esas poesías, que no es habla conveniente la que a todos no es común" (p. 141) ["Leave off these high-flown phrases, sir, this poetizing. Speech that's not common to all, or shared by all, or understood by all, is not good speech"] (p. 101). Language in *Celestina* has a perverse, almost dumb literality that wipes away the accretions of meaning left by delusions, such as courtly love or even religion. But the literal, needless to say, is also a trope, a system of figures that invokes the accuracy of the letter, a lack of embellishment, and a freedom of expression, as Sempronio would claim. The literal pretends to be the opposite of figurative language. A literal reading takes words in their supposed natural or customary meaning and adheres to the ordinary rules of grammar. To interpret literally is, presumably, to follow the words in the strict sense or in an unimaginative way. To be literal is to be matter-of-fact, prosaic, and focus on the primary meaning of the word or words. Literal may also

mean giving the original or earlier meaning of a word. The literal can be the etymological. Figuratively, then, the literal appeals to the real; it is a call for not going beyond the actual or material facts. It purports to represent reality accurately and in an unvarnished way. Hence the literal is taken to be truer. But, of course, only figuratively, for the literal is also a figure.

In *Celestina* words mean too much what they say because the metaphors in the foundation of each are exploded to reach a deeper core of the object itself. The most egregious examples of this process involve, as it often does in Rojas, a rather repulsive literalization of the body. A literalization that reacquires an allegorical dimension when the body is shattered and fragmented, like the metaphors that hold it together and cover it. In *Celestina* the body, stripped of any meaning, is reduced to its most elemental feature: its gravity. Gravity is the most basic and common quality of things. Objects have weight, whatever their shape, be they beautiful or ugly, useless or functional, beneficial or harmful. There are throughout *Celestina* repeated allusions to falling used in a metaphoric sense: for instance, to loose one's status or to be duped by some ruse. Pármeneo says that "quien más torpemente sube a lo alto, más aina cae que subió" (p. 69) ["he who most awkwardly climbs on high, falls faster than he climbed"]. Later Sepronio echoes this by saying that "quien con modo torpe sube en alto, más presto cae que sube" (p. 104) ["he who in an awkward way climbs on high, falls quicker than he climbed"]. Remembering her formerly "high" position, *Celestina* laments "No sé cómo puedo vivir, cayendo de tal estado" (p. 152) ["I don't know how I can endure life, having fallen from such a state"]. Sosia reminds Calisto that if he does not look after his own, that is Sempronio and Pármeneo, "de caída vamos" (p. 186) ["we are on our way down"]. And Calisto, upon hearing of the death of his servants, exclaims: "Proverbio es antiguo, que de muy alto grandes caídas se dan" (p. 188) ["It's an old saying, that the higher one climbs the greater will be his fall"] (p. 147). As we know, at the end of *Celestina* nearly all the major characters fall to their deaths.¹⁴ Calisto slips and falls off a wall, Melibea hurls herself from a tower, and before they are executed, Sempronio and Pármeneo jump off a window and nearly kill themselves. There is, of course, an element of tragic irony in the fact that the words the characters use foretell their end, meaning literally more than they understood when they



Calisto climbs the wall of Melibea's garden with Tristán and Sosia watching; the servants pick up Calisto's body after his fall. (From *Celestina*, 1514 Valencia edition)

used them. But it is also significant that they mean more by dropping (as it were) their metaphorical clothing and coming too close to referentiality, in the sense that they seem to literally conjure the action itself: the effect of gravity on bodies. Here the unexpected referentiality of language is closer to comedy than to tragedy.

Calisto's case is the most grotesque and revealing in this regard. In the scene where he raves while caressing Melibea's girdle, Sempronio warns him that "perderás la vida o el seso" (p. 115) ["you will lose your life or your mind"] (p. 73). In the Spanish original, how-