

*CELESTINA* AND THE ENDS OF DESIRE

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E. MICHAEL GERLI

*Celestina* and  
the Ends of Desire

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*To the memory of C.B.J., who plumbed the depths and taught us to avoid  
the shallows.*

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## A Note on Citations and Translations

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Unless otherwise mentioned, all citations from *Celestina* in Castilian and their accompanying English translations are taken from Fernando de Rojas's *Celestina*, edited with an introduction and notes by Dorothy Sherman Severin (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1987). The latter edition contains a facing-page English translation from 1631 by James Mabbe. From time to time, however, when Mabbe's translation fails to interpret certain words accurately (for example, when it renders the Spanish word *Dios* [God] as *Providence*), I have taken the liberty to substitute the word for its more accurate English form. All other translations are my own. Mabbe's 1631 translation was first edited and published by James Fitzmaurice-Kelly in 1894 (rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1967). Severin's edition includes interpolations taken from Mabbe's earlier 1598 manuscript not included in the 1631 printing and in Fitzmaurice-Kelly's edition.

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# Acknowledgments

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This book is the product of several years of research, reflection, and teaching. During the course of its coming together, it was my privilege to share and discuss ideas about *Celestina* with my students at Georgetown University, the University of Virginia, and Emory and Duke universities, where I had the opportunity to offer seminars on Fernando de Rojas's work. The students' lively interest in the text, plus their spirited discussion, was what first convinced me that I should pursue the writing and completion of this study. I am grateful also to the colleagues who participated in my 2009 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar for College Teachers on *Celestina* and the Threshold of Modernity, and especially to my friends and colleagues in the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese at the University of Virginia for their observations, comments, good conversation, and fine fellowship. Among the latter, I am particularly indebted to Javier Herrero for his immense erudition, persistent good humour, unfailing goodwill, and wry irony. These are rare qualities indeed, which extend well beyond the scope of the present study and continue to play a part in our friendship and ongoing conversations. I am beholden as well to Alison Weber for her accommodating comments, her sharp insights into the representation of gender in early modern texts, and for restraining me from reading too much like a man. She reminded me pointedly that, although Melibea and the women in *Celestina* may be free to speak, 'freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,' as Janis Joplin sang in a much later, equally double-edged age of change and liberation. My gratitude also extends to my old friends and colleagues Julian Weiss and Robert Archer, whose kind invitation to present some of my work-in-progress at King's College and the Cortauld Institute in 2006 played a crucial role in

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Earlier versions of two chapters appeared as essays in books: chapter 4 under the title 'El placer de la mirada: Voyeurismo, fetichismo, y la configuración del deseo en *Celestina*' in *El mundo social y cultural de La Celestina* (Pamplona: Prensa Universitaria de la Universidad de Navarra, 2003); and chapter 7 as 'Dismembering the Body Politic: Vile Bodies and Sexual Underworlds in *Celestina*' in *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures and Crossings From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, edited by Josiah Blackmore and Gregory Hutcheson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.) An earlier variant of chapter 5 was published as 'Complicitous Laughter:

Hilarity and Seduction in *Celestina*' in the *Hispanic Review*. One has been translated into English, and all three have been recast as well as accommodated to the larger design and context of the present study. I am grateful to the Universidad de Navarra, Duke University Press, and the University of Pennsylvania Press for permission to publish material from these previously published items in a more current, and hopefully more desirable, form.

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## CELESTINA AND THE ENDS OF DESIRE

Longing, we say, because desire is full of endless distances.

Robert Hass, *Meditation at Lagunitas*

¡Qué esfuerzo!

¡Qué esfuerzo del caballo por ser perro!

¡Qué esfuerzo del perro por ser golondrina!

¡Qué esfuerzo de la golondrina por ser abeja!

¡Qué esfuerzo de la abeja por ser caballo!

Federico García Lorca, 'Muerte,' *Poeta en Nueva York*

'They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries ...'

Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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# Introduction

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This is a book about one of the most popular books of early modern Europe, Fernando de Rojas's *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, which has been commonly referred to as *Celestina*, the name of its chief female protagonist, since shortly after its initial publication at Burgos in 1499. *Celestina* the book, like the character whose name it ultimately adopted, traffics in desire, and when it was first published offered new, remarkable representations and expressions of it to an avid reading public more accustomed to witnessing desire's exaltation, interdiction, censure, or repression.

The present work argues that, while the control and policing of desire have been at the centre of human social formations since the beginning of civilization, but especially in early Christian and medieval times, its representation in *Celestina* took on new and unexpected immediacy and forms, and that the work's vivid portrayal of human desire is largely responsible for its fascination, popularity, and vast readership from the moment of its first appearance. To do this, this study examines the medieval theories and discourses of desire as epistemological categories, and their definition and representation in *Celestina* in relation to the latter's story of passionate love and prostitution played out against a background of class conflict and social transformation. It seeks to show how *Celestina*, situated at the bounds between the medieval and the early modern, has its own peculiar fascination, and clearly extended the notions of desire beyond their traditional medieval formulations directly into the social, economic, physiological, and psychological fields of human activity: to the transformation of *libido amandi* (lust for love) into *libido dominandi* (lust for power) and finally into *libido capiendi* (lust for knowledge). The final act of the work, which encompasses Pleberio's lament for Melibea,

I argue, exceeds even these new representations of desire, leading to the realization that desire itself is non-transcendental, and that it is always in excess of any thing or any capacity to contain or satisfy it. Desire in *Celestina* comes to its final, temporal, worldly end in Pleberio's soliloquy before the shattered body of his daughter, as Pleberio comes to grips with the futility of human ambition stripped of all illusion, provoking him to articulate a profound disenchantment with a fundamentally disenchanted universe. In this regard, Pleberio's lament, the subject of chapter 9, marks a crucial self-reflexive moment in the representation of the human subject in Spanish literature, a turn from consolation toward an understanding of ubiquitous desolation. It is in Pleberio's self-conscious awakening to the abyss at the ends of desire where I seek to locate the striking novelty and early modernity of *Celestina*, which doubtless accounts for the work's continued readership and popularity into our own time. What follows, then, makes up a study that examines key moments and ways in which *Celestina* conjures the images, figures, and boundaries of desire as it explores the ends, and discovers the ultimate end, of human ambition and motivation.

For all the words that are uttered by the characters in *Celestina* to express desire, however, their true intentions, the desires that drive them, are rarely explicit or fully known to them. Indeed, they must be revealed through irony and close reading, processes that require understanding beyond the face value of a word or an utterance. To be sure, the best indications of concealed human motives can at times rather best be found in other, involuntary forms of human expression beyond language in *Celestina*. They may be discovered, as we shall see, in things like the laughter that cuts through Pármeno's and Celestina's circumlocutions when the latter attempts to enlist the former in despoiling Calisto. 'Symbolic language in *Celestina*,' as Roberto González Echevarría has remarked, generally '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 ... In *Celestina* the symbolic or allegorical is still a shield, resistance to face the human, which is lodged in the literal' (15). Language in *Celestina* is moved in this way by a seemingly continuous falling away from its symbolic sense, gravitating always to its most immediate meaning, to the hyperliteral. It is thus the task of the reader to uncover the hidden resonances of the word, to see beyond it and expose its larger vibrancy.

In this regard, involuntary utterances and sounds made by a character in the work may often be better signifiers of intention than words themselves, which can be used by the characters both consciously and unconsciously to occlude purpose and meaning.

The representation of the astonishing mobilizing and destructive force of the desire for sex, money, status, recognition, and fulfilment in *Celestina* moves beyond the bounds of traditional forms of reading satisfied only with decoding a series of sexual or material signs and situating Rojas's work within the context of an emerging bourgeoisie in the late fifteenth century. Rather, *Celestina* propels us toward a rereading of it in relation to other texts in such a way as to compare it to the earlier texts' potential for portraying and mobilizing human want. The result of this comparison inevitably forces us to see *Celestina* as something quite different and entirely new – in short, as a modern text – because it constitutes an instance of the transformation of the relationship between conceptually distinct, historically locatable notions of human ambition and desire and newly emerging forms of them. Whereas desire and ambition in the Middle Ages remained discourses always allied with transcendental subjects (e.g., the redemptive desire or love of God in the context of theology, religion, and metaphysics, or the exalted, transfigurative power of courtly love in a secular, courtly setting), in *Celestina* they produce only conflict, violence, and ultimately death, leaving us with a radical, non-transcendent disillusionment with the world. Rojas's work takes as its object the fierce, self-sacrificing forms of human ambition that produce only abjection and, in the end, self-annihilation without the prospect of redemption. Want, desire, and ambition in *Celestina* cannot be contained by the framework of human social and religious relations as they were known to exist in the late medieval imaginary. The objects of human aspirations in the world portrayed in *Celestina* are not simply exalted; they form part of a way of life that ultimately demands the destruction of the desiring subject who pursues them. The result is a text that on the surface might be taken as a cautionary tale but at a deeper level is overwhelmed by the very grim finality and exorbitance of the deadly example it portrays. If, as Jacques Lacan asserts when imagining the origins of human language, language emerged from the expression of a desire to transcend and make an absence present, to recall something intuited but lost or out of reach, it was not until the last century, with Freud, that the larger importance of the link between desire and language was given significant attention. While many of Freud's ideas about sexuality have been called into question both by modern medicine and feminist theory,

his overall perception of desire as the driving force of language and human existence remains intact. Freud also understood that not all desires could be expressed with the same facility; that the most difficult ones were frequently restricted or concealed, implicated in certain social taboos, like sex and death; and that the latter, especially, were often hidden or repressed in a region of the human imagination he called the unconscious. Hence, desires could be simultaneously present in individuals but absent from their immediate apprehension. Freud grasped that the hidden forces of repressed desire could often motivate significant events and changes in the lives of the subjects who possessed them. Yet in modern times Freud was responsible only for the systematic discovery, description, and theoretical formulation of the synergies of human desire and their effects on human conduct. The expression and representation of desire has, as Lacan rightly maintains, been part of the human condition since the very appearance of language, the most direct, audible manifestation of desire, and in the end comprises nothing more than the reflection of the human wish for something larger, namely, transcendence. Throughout *Celestina*, the problematic of desire arises in language, as we shall see, even when it seems invisible and its articulation remains incomplete, is blocked, or is incompatible with the notions that frame standards of social propriety and religious morality which seek to impede its articulation. In other words, although not often explicit, the stirrings of desire in *Celestina* can be discovered at every turn in the text, even in conflicts in which the enunciation of desire may at first seem difficult to discern, incomprehensible, illegible, or even inconceivable. The reading strategies employed in the pages that follow are, thus, fundamentally shaped by these convictions, recognizing that desire has always been with us as the driving force of language, and that *Celestina* serves as a testimonial to the materialization and transformation of certain forms of desire (sexual, social, political, even spatial, and, of course, metaphysical among them) at a critical juncture in the history of European culture, marking the subjective shift toward what we now refer to as early modernity.

Since Freud's first exploration of Shakespeare, medieval and early modern studies have increasingly turned to psychoanalysis as a heuristic tool, noting, in the words of Valeria Finucci and Regina M. Schwartz, how 'the writers of Renaissance literature were preoccupied with their versions of the inner life' and with the representation of 'the dynamics of sexual identity, gender definition, doubling, identification, voyeurism, memory, melancholy, the uncanny, even the unconscious,' and how

these were ‘concerns that arose, not in the context of nineteenth-century Vienna, but were already evident in the social, political, religious upheavals of the early modern period (as they were in the classical world)’ (3). The power of psychoanalytical theory to illuminate the convoluted processes of language and identity in early modern texts is thus well recognized and established, confirmed by the work of contemporary early modern scholars, in addition to Schwartz and Finucci, like Margaret Ferguson (1983), Jonathan Dollimore (1991), Joel Fineman (1986), Marjorie Garber (1987), Stephen Greenblatt (1986), Valerie Traub (1992), Barbara Freedman (1991), Patricia Parker and David Quint (1986), Carroll B. Johnson (1983), and Ruth El Saffar and Diana de Armas Wilson (1993), to name but a few.

Likewise, the current challenges posed by post-structuralism to the traditional periodization of the medieval and the modern are equally consonant with the significance and utility of psychoanalysis to the understanding of medieval and early modern texts, especially in light of the now debunked but still lingering notion of Spain’s cultural belatedness and the idea of its presumed lack of a Renaissance, propagated across the humanities mainly by German, French, and English scholars from the nineteenth century forward. As Jennifer Summit and David Wallace argue in the 2007 issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* they edited entitled *Rethinking Periodization*, these temporal taxonomies and geographical demarcations forced upon cultural history have become increasingly vexed, and are often arbitrarily used, in the words of Margreta de Grazia, one of their contributors, simply to determine ‘what matters and what does not’ (3). The editors and the contributors to *Rethinking Periodization* all persuasively maintain that the idea of the modern itself, according to de Grazia, ‘misrepresents the historical consciousness of the very “early modern” period that is drafted to inaugurate it, a period that characterized itself not through its novelty – then used as a term of suspicion – but through its backward-looking identification with the antique past’ (3). Similarly, in addition to the contributors to the issue of JMEMS edited by Summit and Wallace, the work of colleagues like Moshe Sluhovsky (2006), Kathleen Davis (2006), and Judith M. Bennett (1992) has examined and challenged these categories, calling into question the existence of what Bennett calls ‘the great divide’ that supposedly separates the medieval from the early modern.

While no single theory or methodology guides the present study, one persistent belief shapes the interpretive and critical strategies employed here. In tune with the general principles of psychoanalysis as laid down

by Freud and Lacan, it defies the conviction that all of the characters' behaviour portrayed in *Celestina* comes from conscious intentions, suggesting that the aims and values uttered by them do not direct their behaviour as much as we might wish to believe. For this reason, language is the principal focus of this book, as I seek to gain insight into the linguistic and mental operations that lead the characters' behaviour astray of their professed goals, exploring these processes as preconditions for predicting and understanding their implicit values. As Freud and Lacan have taught us, much of human behaviour is governed by mental synergies that exist outside of conscious awareness and conscious control, and these synergies are best approached through an understanding of their mediation through language, physical gesture, and other signs.

In connection with this, then, the present study examines the way desire is enunciated and mediated in *Celestina*, or the manner in which the work represents, mobilizes, translates, and communicates desire in and through language (chapters 1, 2, 3, and 6), as well as by other means: via the body (chapter 7); in the representation of physical space (chapter 8); through sight, hearing, and other significant material vehicles for the conveyance and discovery of human want (chapters 4 and 5). All of this culminates in the total breakdown of desire, the collapse of meaning in the face of a yearning for something metaphysical; in the failure of language and of interpretation, in the end of a desire for an object beyond desire itself, which at its conclusion produces an understanding of life as being something only of the material world (chapter 9).

The historical and cultural backdrop for this questioning of metaphysical presence at the conclusion of *Celestina* reflects a period in Iberian, but especially Castilian, life of acute crisis and vertiginous human change. The events of the social and political panorama of the second half of the fifteenth century leading to 1499, the date of the work's first publication, produced nothing short of a series of tectonic shifts in the civic and psychic landscape of Castile. With the accession of Enrique IV, known to history as El Impotente, to the throne of Castile in 1454, there erupted a series of controversies regarding the king's fitness to govern centring on his character and personality that culminated in a carnassial struggle over monarchical succession lasting more than a decade. The struggle was profoundly implicated in issues of gender, sexual potency, and paternity, terminating in a civil war that pitted the king and his supporters against his half-sister, Isabel, and her consort, Fernando de Aragon, that would eventually result in Isabel's accession to the throne and produce no few cultural and political anxieties concerning female monarchy,



religious zeal, and the consolidation of all power in the newly centralized state. At the same time, daily life resounded with rumours and recriminations regarding apostasy and the sincerity of the staggering number of *conversos*, or *nuevos cristianos* (Jews who had converted from Christianity and their descendants), in the kingdom (estimated by some scholars to be upwards of 350,000); statutes on blood purity promulgated by their 'Old Christian' co-religionists designed to contain the converts' social advancement; and the establishment of the Holy Office of the Inquisition for the Purity of the Faith (1477), to examine and deal with the religious, cultural, and social disorder produced by mass conversion, doctrinal and spiritual confusion, and ethnic and political discord.

The very decade in which Fernando de Rojas published *Celestina* saw striking events that shook the kingdom of Castile to its foundations and held profound consequences for the rest of Europe and, indeed, the world. These encompassed no less than the Christian conquest of Granada (the last Muslim kingdom in Europe), the expulsion of the Jews, renewed mass conversions now in the form of converts both from Judaism and Islam to Christianity, the discovery of America, the Castilian-Aragonese intervention in Italy, and, finally, the promulgation of a divinely ordained Catholic state whose security, purity, and orthodoxy were ensured by the vigilance of the firmly establish Santa Hermandad (rural militias) and the Inquisition. As Fernando and Isabel, who are known to history as the Catholic Monarchs, sought to forge an empire through the extirpation or suppression of all signs of difference in their realms, the entire cultural spectrum of Castilian life during the last decade of the fifteenth century was distinguished by persistent strain and focused on questions of order and orthodoxy, status and identity, power and legitimacy, truancy and transformation – circumstances that racked every boundary of belief, all notions of possibility, and every category of human existence.

*Celestina*, which inscribes these tensions, is a book that provides dramatic proof not only of the presence and the power of the desire for transcendence and fulfilment in all human utterances and actions, but a crucial recognition of it at the threshold of early modernity as an all-embracing force of the human subject. Crossing all boundaries of class and gender, desire in *Celestina* is ubiquitous, uttered openly in dialogue and in asides by prostitutes and lackeys as well by the high born, embedded in discourses both lofty and low minded, in gestures, in signs of and on the body, and inscribed in the very spaces that those bodies transit and inhabit. By the work's end, however, in Pleberio's final soliloquy,

desire points only to its radically non-transcendent, physical constitution, and hence ultimately to death. The progression of desire released from the opening words of *Celestina* follows a desacralization of it, of love and passion and yearning, and gives emphasis to the materiality of existence that points to a human subjectivity rooted exclusively in the body, defined by its demands and haunted by its limitations. In *Celestina*, Fernando de Rojas and his fellow authors (it was begun by an anonymous author and completed by Rojas in 1499, just to be amplified and rewritten later by Rojas himself at the request of his first readers), found and inculcated intransitive yearning in all the characters of their literary universe. Quite simply, none of them ever ceases to express their desire. At every step, the characters' yearnings are shown as inconvenient, often difficult to recognize and voice, or completely hidden even though menacingly deadly, but ever necessary and as the main cause and consequence of their ongoing existence. It is the representation of the lives of the characters in *Celestina* as continuing performances of ceaseless want acted out in dramatic dialogue before the reader that makes these characters memorable and stand out, projecting the illusion that, more than abstractions, they resonate with living forms of need and serve as mirrors that reflect the reader's own desire in the process of the plot's unfolding. However notable all the characters are, among them the old whore Celestina stands apart; not because her desires are more shocking, disgraceful, or diabolical than those of the others who share her world, but because Celestina dares to incarnate and speak her own desires unabashedly, as well as to reveal and actualize desire in everyone she encounters, including, as we shall see, the very authors and readers of the work.

The *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*'s early change in name to *Celestina* is important in this regard. It serves as an indicator of how the work was perceived, received, and interpreted by its early modern reading public since this appellation gave primacy to the old bawd and registered a shift in interest away from Calisto and Melibea, the two aristocratic protagonist lovers of the original title, *Comedia* (later *Tragicomedia*) *de Calisto y Melibea*. It was clearly the go-between and the industry she practises – the manipulation and increase of desire – that fascinated, held the attention, and marked the memory not only of the work's first readers but all its subsequent readers as well, to the point where the very book singularly held on to the old bawd's name and continued to incite readers through the ages to speak about it and ask for it simply by invoking Celestina.

The personage whom all in the work refer to as *la puta vieja* (the old whore) embodies desire, she is the subject who seemingly has mastered

it and seeks to bring it to fruition both in herself and in all others. The revelation and realization of desire are at once the reasons for *Celestina's* vibrant popularity across the centuries (it remains the only widely read work of the sixteenth century in Spain that is still popular today; see Whinnom 1980), but at the same time desire serves as the springboard for the action and conflict of the *Tragicomedia*. In the latter desire circulates and motivates, yet few without the assistance of Celestina can recognize, understand, or seek to make it transitive.

On the one hand, Celestina helps unfold the range of meanings and propositions of desire in the world in which she moves; and on the other, she uncovers and makes comprehensible a whole chain of interconnected, partial meanings – a synthesis – in any single act where she encounters human yearning. The process that mediates Celestina's interaction with all the characters in the work is thus essentially a hermeneutical one; it is a process in which her chief role is to reveal and then interpret the meanings of their desire, as she creates a network of interconnected meanings necessary for their comprehension through the threads she weaves between all their lives.

*Celestina* as book and Celestina as character stage agonies of desire in everyone they encounter – characters and readers alike. At the time the work was initially circulated in its sixteen-act version, Fernando de Rojas tells us that he was moved to amplify it at the behest of his readers, all of whom yearned for more. Although the ancient cultural prohibitions that shape the laws and rules by which society lived were acutely felt, considered inviolate by the Roman Catholic Church and the public standards of morality and rules of propriety, there was doubtless titillation in reading this work, a sense of excitement at encountering human passion and ambition expressed in such a conspicuously earthbound fashion. At every turn, readers sought to discover more of the world in which the characters moved as they transgressed every standard of propriety and showed resistance to the repression of desire through their every action. It is for this reason that works like *Celestina* probably still matter and continue to hold the interest of the contemporary reading public, as readers discover a material understanding of the world, an unembellished encounter with the effects of ambition on the human spirit, and their own interest in learning about the private lives of other people (both high and low). *Celestina* is a work that continues to appeal to a reading public's desire for bold, racy narratives that test the limits of propriety, often under the very guise of claims to moral exemplarity.

What follows, then, is an exploration of the way desire manifests itself, materializes, and is ultimately blocked in *Celestina*. It does not, however, constitute a description of how desire simply makes itself evident in the work, but rather an examination of the way desire shapes *Celestina's* fundamental epistemology: how desire becomes knowledge, action, moral life, experience, and above all, political, social, and urban experience in the world it portrays. The following chapters seek to provide not just a textual but also a theoretical exploration of the radical transformation and new understanding of the ends of desire at the threshold of early modernity. Additionally, they constitute an attempt to locate just what in *Celestina* is responsible for its continued appeal, and for the disturbing sense of amazement and revelation readers still feel after their first encounter with it.