



## THE UNSEMLINESS OF CALISTO'S TOOTHACHE

Geoffrey West  
University College, Cardiff

Calisto's fictitious toothache in Act IV of *La Celestina* has always struck me as peculiarly suggestive. Celestina, having provoked Melibea's rage by informing her of Calisto's passion under the transparent guise of an illness, has recourse to the seemingly desperate excuse that his sufferings are caused by toothache. Thus, the symptoms of the original illness, which were totally congruent with those of love-sickness, are now transferred to the "dolor de muelas:"

Y el mayor remedio que tiene es tomar una vihuela y tañe tantas canciones y tan lastimeras, que no creo que fueron otras las que compuso aquel emperador y gran músico Adriano.<sup>1</sup>

Celestina claims that Melibea's girdle will have a potentially salutary effect on his *dolor*. A neat symmetry is thus established between Calisto's supposed toothache and his sexual frustration and the girdle's attributed powers and its patently symbolic ones. In spite of her outrage at the previous insinuation, Melibea accepts the notion of toothache as a basis for negotiation and allows Celestina to continue her business. The use of the trite imagery of sickness in the first part of the scene has been well studied by George A. Shipley who sees it as a convenient vehicle for meaningful communication between two interested parties one of whom refuses to hear the facts unadorned.<sup>2</sup> Since to aid its cure will not harm her reputation, Melibea considers toothache to be a respectable substitute for the previously unacceptable love-sickness which she has accurately diagnosed. As Shipley himself asserts (p. 327), Celestina's excuse is a preposterous one and it is unlikely to prompt Melibea to think that her actions were innocent and motivated by Christian charity. The even more blatant request for the girdle, to which the girl readily accedes, points to the conclusion that she understood and indeed wished to hear what Celestina had to say from the beginning and that her *furia* arose from the pressures of social conformity.<sup>3</sup> The only alternative to this can be that Melibea's abrupt change of mind was real and that it was produced by witchcraft.<sup>4</sup> Whichever of these interpretations is the correct one, it is clear that more needs to be said about the suggestive significance of the

## CELESTINESCA

toothache and about the audience's--and possibly Melibea's--appreciation of that significance.

In a footnote to his article (p. 329, n. 1), Shipley remarks that the choice of a toothache is especially apt because at an earlier period Guillaume de Lorris had compared the anguish of the unhappy lover with toothache. The common symptoms are linked further by the notion of sleeplessness:

Tu comenceras a fremir,  
A tressaillir, a demener;  
Sor costé t'estovera torner,  
Et puis envers, e puis adenz,  
Come ome qui a mal as denz.<sup>5</sup>

Other examples of this graphic comparison can be found in the same approximate period. The Provençal poet, Peire Vidal, is quite explicit:

D'autres afars es cortez' e chaudiza,  
Mas mal o fai, car a mon dan s'abriva,  
Que peitz me fai, e ges no s'en melhura,  
Que mals de dens, quan dol en la maissela;  
Que·l cor me bat e·m fier, que no·s refrena,  
S'amors ab leis et ab tota Proensa.<sup>6</sup>

In these two cases, toothache is used not as a euphemism, but as a straightforward, though startling, simile whose force would have been more readily appreciated by the medieval audience, unaccustomed to pain relievers and the triumphs of modern dentistry. The figure of the medieval tooth-puller, the barber, occurs too in this more detached, rather ironic, comparison from Renart's *Le Lai de l'Ombre*:

Or m'a Amors en tel point pris  
Qu'ele veut que son pooir sache,  
C'onques vilains cui barbiers sache  
Les denz ne fu si angoisseus.<sup>7</sup>

These three examples are all concerned with courtly love and result from the need to find ever more forceful means of conveying the pain and anguish of the frustrated lover. Not necessarily spiritual, the lover's longing is here checked and dignified by the rigours of the courtly code.

In Spanish literature, I have not been able to find any parallel examples to the French and Provençal ones just cited. However, literal and symbolic references to the teeth and to oral sensations in fifteenth-century and Golden Age verse indicate a clear association between the teeth and physical desire. The phrase *dar dentera* refers frequently to sexual arousal, as in one of Sebastián de Horozco's *canciones de burlas* whose meaning rests on the symbolic significance given to the imagery of the joust:

CELESTINESCA

Rehusando la carrera  
y no pudiendo enristrar  
se quedó la lança entera,  
poniéndoo a vos dentera,  
y más gana de encontrar.<sup>8</sup>

The phrase occurs also in a *romance nuevo* entitled "Redondillas a una dama vieja vestida de verde" which compares the lady to a fruit:

Viendo os tan madura, hallamos  
que no causareys dentera           9  
por mas que verde os comamos.

*Dentera* here signifies both the feeling of the teeth being set on edge by the unripe fruit and the sensations anticipating sexual pleasure. Several similar examples might be cited.<sup>10</sup> The phrase need not, of course, have sexual or even physical overtones, but in these contexts its meaning is self-apparent.

Teeth in the Middle Ages were a desirable sign of feminine beauty when they were shite, even in size and close together, while slightly spaced teeth, especially the front teeth of the upper jaw, hinted at lasciviousness.<sup>11</sup> Large teeth were a mark of ugliness, but also of rampant sexuality if we judge by those of the fourth *serrana* in the *Libro de buen amor*, who had "dientes anchos e luengos, cavallunos, moxmordos."<sup>12</sup> Absence of teeth was naturally a sign of old age and of ailing strength and physical powers. Sometimes, such a reference carries no specifically sexual overtones, but in the *obras de burlas* this particular meaning is usually unmistakable. Fairly specific is a late fifteenth-century poem which tells of an old woman who:

Sospira como moçuela,  
dice que amor le desvela;  
non tiene diente ni muela,  
rumia'l comer como oveja.<sup>13</sup>

As in the *Roman de la Rose*, frustration is characterised by sleeplessness and, although the toothache analogy is lacking, the crone's fading sexual desirability is indicated by her toothlessness. The most blatant equation of impotence with toothlessness occurs in a scurrilous poem about an old man soon to marry an indignant young girl. The latter's parents console her with the thought that she will not have to suffer his physical advances: "aunque le falten dientes, / así no te morderá."<sup>14</sup> Less certain is a reference in a poem by Francia y Acosta:

Dices, oh vieja sin dientes  
Que eres moza; y no ves, loca,  
Que cuando se abre tu boca  
Para mentir, te desmientes.<sup>15</sup>

However, in the light of the references in the other poems, it is quite

possible that a sexual meaning is indeed intended.

The more obviously sexual references occur in the *obras de burlas* but in serious or didactic works the degree of suggestiveness is debatable. In Rodrigo Cota's *Diálogo entre al Amor y un Viejo*, Amor twice mentions the old man's teeth, or lack of them, as a sign of total physical unattractiveness. It is not clear whether the poet is hinting at impotence when Amor declares: "contrahago nuevos dientes / do natura los desecha."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, a subsequent assertion does point to the suggestive link between oral references and those to other parts of the body: "aprieto los miembros floxos / y do carne en las enzías" (ll. 300-01). This lack of explicitness is in contrast to the straightforward comparisons observed in the Old French texts, but in the latter the degree of sensuality is much less than in most of the Castilian poems.

Quite the most graphic use of tooth imagery occurs in poems where the extraction of teeth is used as a euphemism for sexual satisfaction. A *romance nuevo*, "Al son del rumor sabroso," contains these difficult, but suggestive, lines in an exchange between lover and mistress in which the lover alludes to his tardy performance:

Si, cuando en el juego estamos,  
de otro engaño te recelas,  
sacarte puedes tres muelas  
mientras que a Francia llegamos.<sup>17</sup>

The meaning of the phrase *sacar(se) una muela* is easier to perceive in a seventeenth-century *villancico* in dialogue form, "Comadre, la de Tortuera," where two women each hope for a day of pleasure when their husbands are away. One suggests summoning the barber:

Pues llamemos al barbero  
que nos saque sendas muelas,  
y arrimalle las espuelas  
si no anduviere ligero.<sup>18</sup>

These two poems indicate the close euphemistic association at a popular, scurrilous, level between teeth and sexual matters. The unlikely equivalence between a dental extraction and sexual gratification points to the existence of an equivalence between toothache and unsatisfied desire.<sup>19</sup>

One final area of interest is witchcraft. Celestina, her literary successors and her real-life counterparts generally had in their possession the teeth of hanged men. More interesting, however, are the conjurations that point to the power that the teeth of some mischievous or evil person--usually Barrabas, but sometimes Lucifer himself--possessed to arouse passion in a recalcitrant male. Such spells took the form:

Tres varas de niervo negro me traeréis,  
por las muelas de Barrabás las afiléis,  
por las calderas de Pedro Botero las pasaréis,

## CELESTINESCA

una la hincaréis por el sentido,  
que no me eche en olvido;  
otra por el corazón,  
que venga a mi afición.<sup>20</sup>

Presumably, the witches used teeth in the concoction of the *philocaptio*.<sup>21</sup>

What evidence is there in *LC* that Rojse was aware of associations of the kind discussed? Certainly, he uses the phrase *dar dentera* with its sexual connotations. In Act VII, after she has brought Pármeno and Areúsa together, Celestina leaves partly because she is envious, but primarily because she can no longer bear the anticipatory sensations: "Quedaos a Dios, que voyme solo porque me hacéis dentera con vuestro besar y retozar. Que aun el sabor en las encías me quedó; no le perdí con las muelas" (p. 132). An identical remark is made by Lucrecia in Act XIX as she listens to her mistress trying to fend off Calisto's more lascivious embraces: "¡Vida es ésta?! ¡Que me esté yo deshaciendo de dentera y ella esquivándose porque la rueguen!" (p. 223). Here again, envy is accompanied by a tantalising physical sensation that is orally experienced.

These are not the only references to teeth in the work, however. Earlier, Celestina had mentioned her much lamented teeth when Areúsa was unwilling to receive Pármeno: "de éstos me mandaban a mí comer en mi tiempo los médicos de mi tierra, cuando tenía mejores dientes" (p. 131). In this case, teeth are specifically linked to the sexual prowess of the female, rather than of the male. An example of this latter equivalence occurs in the first scene between Pármeno and Celestina in Act I where the first author made use of a proverb, adding an obviously sexual overtone. Pármeno is hesitant when the bawd mentions Areúsa for the first time, so she upbraids him with the remark: "da Dios habas a quien no tiene qui-jadas" (p. 70). The context of this jibe again makes clear the association implicit in the reference to the teeth.

In the light of this evidence, it is clear that Rojas was aware of the double meaning implied in Celestina's toothache ruse and would have expected his readers to share in the joke. It is heavily ironical that Melibea, who has just rejected Celestina's first overtures, should be ready to accept the excuse of the toothache. On the bawd's evidence, Calisto's love-sickness might have been quite seemly, even spiritual in nature, but the associations conjured up by the reference to the teeth make it plain that his *dolor* was predominantly physical.

If Rojas' contemporaries grasped the true meaning of Calisto's toothache, doubts remain about the level of Melibea's awareness. However, if the significance of the *dolor* escaped her, the implications of the handing over of the *cordón* could surely not have. A girl such as Melibea would have known popular songs or verses like the *estribillo*: "Por mi mal me lo tomastes, / caballero, el mi cordón."<sup>22</sup> The mention of the relics touched by the *cordón* is preposterous, for the only "relic" with which it has come into contact is Melibea's own body. The request for the prayer of St. Apollonia alone is without indecent associations. Even so, the

power of Celestina's magic could still have dulled her wits, just as it must have done Alisa's when she left Melibea and Celestina together. Nonetheless, her change of behaviour can be attributed with equal conviction to the discovery of an apparently proper course of action that can lead to the satisfaction of her desires. If one is inclined to accept this latter interpretation, i.e. that the *furia* was prompted by the blatancy of Celestina's hints, rather than by their actual content, it is for two reasons. First, Rojas shows that generally there is a human explanation behind many of the abstractions or malefic forces, such as fortune, that man chooses to blame for his failings and for the disasters that befall him. Secondly, from her own confession in Act X we know that Melibea had been attracted to Calisto from the beginning and that her first inclinations were not therefore induced by witchcraft.<sup>23</sup>

☪ NOTES ☪

<sup>1</sup> Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina: Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, ed. Dorothy S. Severin, p. 99. This is no. 176 in the Snow-Schneider-Lee bibliography of *LC* published in *Hispania*, 59 (1976), 610-60. Whenever possible, books and articles will be referred to by their number in this bibliography and its supplements, which appear in *Celestinesca*.

<sup>2</sup> "Concerting Through Conceit: Unconventional Uses of Sickness Imagery in *LC*," (no. 306).

<sup>3</sup> On the role of language and the mechanisation of social behaviour, see M. K. Read, "Fernando de Rojas' Vision of the Birth and Death of Language," (S145).

<sup>4</sup> See P. E. Russell, "La magia como tema integral de la *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*," (302). A. D. Deyermond also discusses the psychological effect of witchcraft in his analysis of image patterns; see "Hilado-Cordón-Cadena: Symbolic Equivalence in *LC*," (S100) and "Symbolic Equivalence in *LC*: A Postscript" (S211).

<sup>5</sup> *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Ernest Langlois, SATF (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1920), II, ll. 2428-32.

<sup>6</sup> "S'eu fos en cort on hom tengues dreitura," ll. 13-18, in *Les Poésies de Peire Vidal*, ed. Joseph Anglade, CFMA (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1913), pp. 16-19. I take this example from M. Dominica Legge, "Toothache and Courtly Love," *French Studies*, 4 (1950), 50-54.

<sup>7</sup> Jehan Renart, *Le Lai de l'Ombre*, ed. John Orr (Edinburgh: University Press, 1948), ll. 158-61. Again, I am drawing on M. Dominica Legge's article.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastián de Horozco, *El Cancionero*, ed. Jack Weiner. *Utah Studies in Language and Literature*, 3. Bern/Frankfurt am M.: H. Lang, 1975, p. 69 (poem no. 64).

<sup>9</sup> *Las series valencianas del romancero nuevo y los cancionerillos de Munich (1589-1602): noticias bibliográficas*, ed. Antonio Rodríguez-Moñino (Valencia: Diputación Provincial de Valencia, Institución Alfonso el Magnánimo, 1963), p. 292a.

<sup>10</sup> One of the more graphic occurs in a sonnet, "Primero es el besalla y abrazalla," once mistakenly attributed to Quevedo, which contains the lines:

Más de llegar y hallarla aparejada  
De puro dulce, creo, da dentera.

See *Cancionero de obras de burla provocantes a risa*, ed. Eduardo de Lustonó (Madrid: Victoriano Suárez, 1872), p. 134, also *Floresta de poetas eróticas del siglo de oro*, ed. Pierre Alzieu, Yvan Lissorgues and Robert Jammes (Toulouse-Le Mirail: France-Ibérie Recherche, 1975), pp. 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> See Dámaso Alonso, "La bella de Juan Ruiz, toda problemas," in *De los siglos oscuros al de oro* (Madrid: Gredos, 1958), pp. 86-99. On the significance of gaps between the teeth (Chaucer's "gat-toothed"), see also Raymond E. Barbera, "Juan Ruiz and 'Los dientes . . . un poco apartadillos,'" *HR* 36 (1968), 262-63.

<sup>12</sup> Juan Ruiz, *Libro de buen amor*, ed. Jacques Joset, Clásicos Castellanos, 17 (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1974), line 1014G.

<sup>13</sup> "Allá irás, doña vieja," in José María Alín, *El cancionero español de tipo tradicional* (Madrid: Taurus, 1968), p. 332.

<sup>14</sup> "Viejo malo en la mi cama," in Alín, *Cancionero*, pp. 406-407. Sebastián de Horozco (n. 8) has a poem which "reprehende . . . a un viejo porque se casó con una mochacha" (Poem no. 8, *El cancionero*, p. 50). This poem also symbolises the male's impotence by his lack of "diente ni "muela (stanza 3).

<sup>15</sup> *Cancionero*, ed. Lustonó, p. 246.

<sup>16</sup> Rodrigo Cota, *Diálogo entre el Amor y un viejo*, ed. Elisa Aragone (Florence, 1961), ll. 296-97.

<sup>17</sup> *Las series valencianas*, p. 135b. For an interpretation of the poem and of these lines in particular, see *Floresta*, ed. Alzieu etc., pp. 198-201.

<sup>18</sup> Edited by Julio Cejador y Frauca in *La verdadera poesía castellana. Floresta de la antigua lírica popular*, IV (Madrid: Imprenta de la RABM, 1923), pp. 281-82. See also *Floresta*, ed. Alzieu etc., pp. 170-74.

<sup>19</sup> Sigmund Freud makes some interesting remarks about the significance of the pulling of teeth in dream symbolism, as noted by Shipley ("Concerting Through Conceit," p. 329, n. 1). Freud states that tooth-pulling usually denotes a fear of castration as a punishment for onanism.

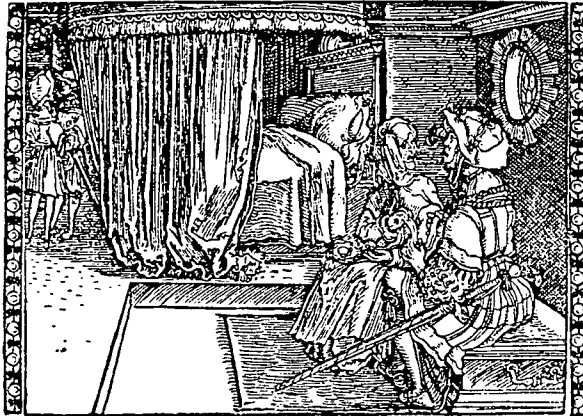
In some cases, however, the actual moment of extraction does suggest sexual gratification or release. See *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated and edited by James Strachey, Pelican Freud Library, 4 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 507-16.

20 Quotation taken from Sebastián Cirac Estopañán, *Los procesos de hechicerías en la Inquisición de Castilla la Nueva (Tribunales de Toledo y Cuenca)*, (Madrid: CSIC, 1942), pp. 110-11.

21 It is possible to adduce further evidence of a link between the teeth and a violent emotion or strong (sexual) desire. M. Dominica Legge ("Toothache," p. 54, n. 1) notes that Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* includes (s.v. dent) a *locution familière*: "Mal de dents--amour passionné." Similarly, Salvatore Battaglia's *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (s.v. dente) records that "Dolere a qualcuno qualche dente" means "provare vivo interesse, amore, desiderio (por lo più non corrisposto)." I take this latter item from the otherwise rather disappointing article of Joaquín Casaldueiro, "La señora de Cremes y el dolor de muelas de Calisto," (S148), pp. 78-79. Examples occur even today. In the television adaptation of Sara Davidson's novel, *Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties* (1977), one character remarks of her feelings for her boy-friend: "I love him so much, it makes my teeth hurt."

22 Alin, *El cancionero español*, no. 229, p. 449. See also nos. 47 and 866, at pp. 332 and 712.

23 I am grateful to Professors A. D. Deyermund and Joseph Snow for their helpful comments on the first draft of this article.



Celestina le entrega a Calisto el cordón y le narra su invención del dolor de muelas. Aucto 6°. De la traducción alemana de C. Wirsung-1520.