



THREE CELESTINESQUE FIGURES OF COLONIAL SPANISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The success of *Celestina* in the New World is measured not only by the book dealers' demand for the masterpiece¹ but also by the appearance of characters resembling Rojas' colorful old bawd in works produced in the colonies. Among the first authors to portray celestinesque figures in American surroundings are Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1494-1585), Fernán González de Esclava (1534-1601), and Juan Rodríguez Freile (1566-1640).

Although *Celestina* possesses many universal qualities which may be found in any social setting, her transformation into a resident of the Indies is quite an appropriate one. The relaxed moral climate, created by the long absences of men from their wives during the conquest and colonization, and the atmosphere of superstition and evil associated with Indian and black cultures, provided ideal conditions for creation of a literary character whose many trades include pandering and sorcery.

In his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, Bernal Díaz narrates the incident in which Montezuma's envoys plan the annihilation of Hernán Cortés and his army during their march to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. The captain and his troops were saved, however, by doña Marina, a young Indian woman who served as Cortés' translator, who learned of the plot to ambush the Spaniards from an old Indian woman. The *cacica*, who came to Marina hoping to arrange an advantageous marriage for her son, warned her of the impending danger. Her meeting with Marina resembles Rojas' scene in which *Celestina* contacts Melibea for the first time:

Y una india vieja, mujer de un cacique, como sabía el concierto y trama que tenían ordenado, vino secretamente a doña Marina, nuestra lengua; como la vio moza y de buen parecer y rica, le dijo y aconsejó que se fuese con ella [a] su casa si quería escapar la vida, porque ciertamente aquella noche y otro día nos habían de matar a todos, ... y que allí la casaría con su hijo, hermano de otro mozo que traía la vieja, que la acompañaba. Y como lo entendió la doña Marina y en todo era muy avisada, la dijo, "¡Oh, madre, qué mucho tengo que agradeceros eso que me decís! Yo me fuera ahora con vos, sino que no tengo aquí de

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quién me fiar para llevar mis mantas y joyas de oro, que es mucho; por vuestra vida, madre, que aguardéis un poco vos y vuestro hijo, y esta noche nos iremos, que ahora ya veis que estos *teules* están velando y sentirnos han."²

In comparing the narrative of this encounter with the conversation between Celestina and Melibea, it would seem that Bernal Díaz has incorporated into his *cacica* several elements from Rojas' work.³ His characterization of the old woman as a deceptive and greedy go-between, his description of Marina as young and lovely, and her reference to the *india* as "madre" may have been inspired by the following passage from *Celestina*:

Melibea- Di, madre, todas sus necesidades, que si yo las pudiese remediar, de muy buen grado lo haré por el pasado conocimiento y vecindad, que pone obligación a los buenos.

Celestina- ¡Doncella graciosa y de alto linaje! Tu suave habla y alegre gesto, junto con el aparejo de liberalidad, que muestras con esta pobre vieja, me dan osadía a te lo decir.⁴

Although the old women are quite persuasive in presenting their proposals, both Marina and Melibea recognize their devious intention. However, while Pleberio's daughter ultimately succumbs to the temptation of being united with Calisto, Marina seizes upon this opportunity to prove her loyalty to the Spaniards and immediately reports the conspiracy to Cortés.

By patterning the treacherous Cholulan *cacica* on Celestina and by placing her in the same scene with Marina, Bernal Díaz creates a striking contrast between the two women which enhances the native interpreter's image of beneficence. This dissimilitude, which is carefully delineated by the author, is an important factor in his portrayal of Marina as a heroine of the Mexican conquest.

Within *Coloquio XVI* of his *Coloquios espirituales y sacramentales*, González de Eslava presents an *entrémes* in which two allegorical figures have a marital dispute. When the interlude begins, Espión is beating his wife, Ocasión, because of her alleged infidelity. Distraught at her husband's jealousy and rage, Ocasión consults an old squaw who is accustomed to counseling women in her predicament and who attempts to resolve her problem through witchcraft:

Fuime a que me remediase
mi Doña Murmuración,
dile basquiña y jubón,
no más de porque mudase
mi marido condición.
Y ella, con mucho secreto,
me dió un corazón de cera
con agujas por defuera,
y ha hecho en él tal efeto
como si no lo hiciera.⁵

Like her Spanish predecessor, doña Murmuración gets her strength from Pluto and practices her art in much the same way as Celestina.⁶ The remedy which she gives to Ocasión in order to transform her husband into a loving person is almost identical to the "corazones de cera, llenos de agujas quebradas" mentioned by Pármeno as a frequent fetish of his former employer. He also states that Celestina often accepted a garment in return for her services to customers much like Ocasión,⁷ who claims to be the "nieta de un conquistador."⁸

The failure of *hechicería* to change her husband's temperament forces Ocasión to confess what she has done to Voluntad and Templanza. They chide her for having considered such actions and, as a prelude to González de Eslava's dramatization of the sacrament of marriage, suggest that she pray, attend mass, and make pilgrimages to the Virgin of Guadalupe's shrine.

González de Eslava's reason for including a celestinesque character in his *coloquio* is a didactic one. While generally warning of the dangers of the occult arts, the dramatist conveys a particular concern over the vulnerability of some women to black magic and their dependence upon it to fulfill amorous desires, resolve marital problems, and alleviate other conditions related to womanhood.

According to Rodríguez Freile's *El camero*, one of the initial cases brought before New Granada's first bishop, who was also the chief inquisitor, was that of the black woman, Juana García, who was accused of being a witch. The charges were brought against her by the husband of a young and beautiful aristocrat who had engaged her services some years before.⁹

The testimony that was presented revealed that during one of the husband's lengthy business trips to Spain, the wife became pregnant. On hearing the news of the Spanish flotilla's arrival in Cartagena, the expectant mother, fearing that her spouse would learn of her condition, went to a local midwife, Juana García, for an abortion. The *comadreja*, uncertain that the husband was indeed on his way to Bogotá, did not perform the operation right away but decided to wait until the next day.

The following night, the wife, who was then in pain, pleaded with her friend to take some immediate action. At the wife's insistence, Juan conjured up the husband's image in a wash basin in order to learn of his whereabouts. Peering into the water, the two women could see a scene taking place on the island of Hispaniola in which her husband and his mistress were present, along with a tailor who was making a dress for the lady. After one of the sleeves was cut out, Juana García retrieved it and gave it to her young client for safekeeping. Assured that his appearance in the capital was not imminent, the *comadreja* remarked: "Ya habéis visto cuán despacio está vuestro marido, pues podéis despedir esa barriga, y aun hacer otra."¹⁰

Business kept the young merchant away from his home for some time, and when he finally returned, the child, no longer an infant, was being reared by his wife as an orphan. Although the couple seemed happy at

first, the wife began to hint that she had some knowledge of the amorous affairs he had had during his extended leave. When she produced the sleeve as proof of the illicit relationship and related the story of how she got it, this ultimately resulted in Juana's banishment from the territory. Little attention was paid to these proceedings at the time, however, as the conqueror of the Chibcha empire, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, wanted to protect the good name of the newly established Spanish domain.

The freed slave's visit to the wife's house is loosely based upon Act X of Rojas' *Tragicomedia*.¹¹ In both instances, the young women are in physical pain over the guilt of having lost their honor and depend upon the old *curanderas* for a quick remedy. The two practitioners of the occult arts not only readily accept their clients' promiscuity and immediately console them but encourage the continuance of their hedonistic life style as well.

Rodríguez Freile's adaptation of Rojas' *Celestina* is only one example of his use of a female character to reveal the scandal caused by women during New Granada's early history. Although several factors contributed to the degenerate social climate of Bogotá and neighboring towns, the author holds women and their deceptive nature primarily responsible for the pattern of misconduct which unfolds over a one hundred year period beginning in 1538. Referring to women as "sabandijas" or "víboras," he writes: "La mujer es arma del diablo, cabeza de pecado y destrucción del paraíso." His criticism, in this case, has been borrowed directly from a speech by Sempronio.¹²

Although the Cholulan mother, doña Murmuración, and Juana García all possess certain characteristics displayed by Rojas' *Celestina*, each author has carefully tied his character to Spanish American history and culture. By including these figures, Bernal Díaz reveals the nature of the treachery perpetrated against Cortés and his men by American natives, and Rodríguez Freile alludes to the growing practice of the occult arts brought by African immigrants to the South American mainland. Even González de Eslava incorporates *nahautlismos* in his allegorical figure's speech and has her worship a devil who resides in the volcano, Popocatepetl. While Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Fernán González de Eslava, and Juan Rodríguez Freile emulate only single aspects of Rojas' multi-faceted character, they show a degree of originality in their interpretations and demonstrate the adaptability of *Celestina* to works of early colonial drama and histories containing novelistic elements.



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NOTES

¹ Juan Cromberger, the son of Jacob Cromberger who had printed the 1502 edition of *Celestina*, enjoyed a monopoly over the lucrative colonial book trade. At his death in 1540, an inventory of his stock destined for New Spain included 325 copies of Rojas' work. If this represents the standing order shipped there, quite a few of these volumes must have been circulating in the viceroyalty in the middle of the century.

The popularity of *Celestina* in Peru was confirmed by the discovery of a 1538 book order written by Juan Jiménez del Río, a dealer living in Lima (Irving A. Leonard, *Books of the Brave* [New York: Gordian Press, 1965], pp. 96-98, 222-23.

² Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Mexico: Porrúa, 1970), LXXXIII, 146-47.

³ Stephen Gilman, "Bernal Díaz del Castillo and 'Amadís de Gaula'," in *Studia Philologica, Homenaje a Dámaso Alonso* (Madrid: Gredos, 1961), 102-04.

⁴ Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina*, ed. Bruno Mario Damiani (Madrid: Cátedra, 1976), pp. 119-20.

⁵ Fernán González de Eslava, *Coloquios espirituales y sacramentales* (Mexico: Porrúa, 1976), II, 257-58. Doña Murmuración appears as a character throughout *Coloquio XVI*; however, this passage provides the clearest example of Rojas' influence upon her. On page 217, she makes her first speech and mentions her ties to the underworld.

⁶ According to Frida Weber de Kurlat, the influence of *Celestina*, one of the factors used by González de Eslava in his formulation of doña Murmuración's character, extends into his other *coloquios* as well and may be seen in his combination of serious and comic elements, his use of certain situations, and his presentation of several secondary characters. She also notes other aspects of the dramatist's work which show his low regard for women. Frida Weber de Kurlat, *Lo cómico en el teatro de Fernán González de Eslava* (Buenos Aires: La Imprenta de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1963), pp. 163-64, 171, 217-18.

⁷ Rojas, p. 77.

⁸ González de Eslava, II, 255.

⁹ Juan Rodríguez Freire, *El carnero*, ed. Miguel Aguilera (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1963), pp. 132-139.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹¹ Rojas, pp. 196-206.

¹²Rodríguez Freile, p. 296. Rojas, p. 63. Gabriel Giraldo Jaramillo, "Don Juan Rodríguez Freyle y 'La Celestina,'" *Boletín de Historia y Antigüedades*, 27, Núms. 308-309 (1940), 585-86.



L Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea: en la qual se cõtiene de mas de su agradable z dulce estilo: muchas sentencias filosofales: z avisos muy necesarios para mãcchos: mostrãndoles los engaños que estan circerrados en seruietes z alcobuctos: z nuevamente añãdo el tratado de Lyncurto.

Grabado. Portada de la edición
de Sevilla de 1523.