

MORALITY VS. TRAGEDY: LOPE REHABILITATES CELESTINA IN *EL CABALLERO DE OLMEDO*

TERESA ANN SEARS

University of North Carolina - Greensboro

¡Cuántas casas de nobles caballeros
han infamado hechizos y terceros!
Fabia, que puede trasponer un monte;
Fabia, que puede detener un río,
y en los negros ministros de Aqueronte
tiene, como en vasallos, señorío;
Fabia, que deste mar, deste horizonte,
al abrasado clima, al Norte frío
puede llevar un hombre por el aire, ... (III, 2318-26)

If we were to judge by Don Rodrigo's words in the third act of Lope's *El caballero de Olmedo*, we would have to conclude that Fabia, witch and go-between, is indeed fully the equal of her astonishing predecessor, Celestina. Drawing her powers from Hell itself, Fabia can, according to Rodrigo, perform incredible deeds both natural and unnatural. Lope, moreover, clearly intends his spectators to make the comparison with *Celestina*, work and character, as he includes such explicit clues as this exchange between the hero's servant Tello and Ana, a maid in the heroine's house:

Ana: ¿Quién es?
Tello: ¿Tan presto? Yo soy.
 ¿Está en casa Melibea?
 Que viene Calisto aquí.
Ana: Aguarda un poco, Sempronio. (II, 1003-05)¹

When we look more closely at the *comedia*, however, and at Fabia's role in it, we find that Don Rodrigo's jealousy has blinded him to the truth. Whether the dramatist realized it or not, Fabia is a pale imitation of her model, "but a shadow of Celestina" 976), as Friedman calls her, and what diminishes her is the nature of the

work in which she appears.²

Celestina, needless to say, is one of Spanish literature's greatest creations, but hers is a dark glory. Mercenary to her very soul, Celestina defines herself by greed, as when Sempronio proposes using Calisto's desire for Melibea for financial gain: "Digo que me alegro de estas nuevas, como los cirujanos de los descalabrados" (58). She is cold-hearted enough to laugh as she sends others to death and eternal damnation. Although presented as a *bruja*, Celestina is a witch whose foremost power lies in the force of her personality, not in her infernal skills. Although Melibea's first response to Celestina's request that she take pity on Calisto is as harsh as her reaction to Calisto himself (she declares: "Por cierto, si no mirase a mi honestidad y por no publicar su osadía de ese atrevido, yo te hiciera, malvada, que tu razón y vida acabaran en un tiempo." [95]), Celestina's feigned humility and description of Calisto's attractions and his suffering soon win the girl over. In the end, she cheerfully sacrifices even those for whom she professes some small amount of affection to her over-riding self-interest.³ This we can see in her treatment of Areúsa, whom she has promised to Pármeno as a reward for participating in the scam. The prostitute argues that "tengo a quien dar cuenta . . . y si soy sentida, matarme ha[.] Tengo vecinas envidiosas. Luego lo dirán" (129), but Celestina will not be denied and Areúsa inevitably capitulates, saying: "Que más quiero tener a ti contenta, que no a mí; antes me quebraré un ojo que enojarte" (132).

Celestina is, in a word, a monster, in the etymological sense of a warning. Her presence in the lives of two young nobles symbolizes their descent into immorality and crime. Rojas has no illusions about love, and none of his characters is either innocent or honorable. Whether it is for money or sex, they all lust, and they all barter their souls to acquire that for which they lust. In the relentless logic of Rojas's pitiless moral message, all of his characters get what they want, and they all get what they deserve. Each is responsible for his or her own fate and no one gets out alive. Even Melibea's parents are punished by the loss of their daughter for their carelessness in allowing a woman of Celestina's reputation into their respectable house, for failing to ward their daughter more carefully and to arrange a timely and appropriate marriage, and in the father's case, for his own amorous adventures as a young man.⁴

Lope de Vega's *El caballero de Olmedo* is something entirely different, a poetic minuet of a tragedy that cannot compare in terms of moral vision or dark grandeur with *Celestina's* sweeping disaster.⁵ When the *comedia* begins, the hero Don Alonso tells us that, in contrast to the harsh rejection that sends Calisto plunging into black despair, he has hope that his love may be requited:

No me miraron [i. e. los ojos] altivos;
antes, con dulce mudanza,
que, con poca diferencia,

pensando correspondencia,
engendra amor esperanza. (I, 15-20)

He meets Fabia immediately, tells her his problem, and when she comments "Alto has picado" (71), responds: "Es deseo de su honor" (72). In this way, *Caballero* establishes its principal underlying difference from *Celestina*: Don Alonso's love never desires anything but marriage to the lady, Inés. Fabia, moreover, believes him ("Así lo creo" [73]), and agrees with his assessment of Inés, whose festival disguise could not obscure "el ser tan hermosa y bella" (66), in Fabia's words. Absent is Celestina's persistent cynicism, which expresses itself, for example, in her plans for Pármeno: "Haréle haber a Areúsa. Será de los nuestros; darnos ha lugar a tender las redes sin embarazo por aquellas doblas de Calisto" (82). Instead, Fabia responds with apparent sincerity, moved by the story of Alonso's love:

Tello, con industria igual
pondré el papel en su mano,
aunque me cueste la vida,
sin interés, porque entiendas
que, donde hay tan altas prendas,
sola yo fuera atrevida. (I, 189-94)

Moreover, when Alonso launches into the story of how he came to fall in love, his description of Inés conforms to Neoplatonic ideals, in contrast to Calisto's rapid descent into intimate particulars concerning Melibea's body. The most erotic thing that Alonso mentions is the ribbon that ties Inés's shoes:

No pensaron las chinelas
llevar de cuantos la miran
los ojos en los listones,
las almas en las virillas. (I, 107-10).

In the place of Calisto's sexual obsession, Alonso twice insists on his honorable intentions. First, following Inés and her sister into a chapel, he says "entré imaginando bodas" (153). Then, although he promises Fabia the same "cadena rica" (180) that Calisto gives to Celestina,⁶ Alonso sets for her a very different task for which it will serve as a reward:

(...) si quieres
ser dichosa y atrevida
hasta ponerle [i. e. una carta] en sus manos,
para que mi fe consiga
esperanzas de casarme
(tan en esto amor me inclina) ... (I, 173-78)

Although Lope gestures in the direction of darkness, the references consist largely of Tello's rather comic fear of Fabia's supposedly supernatural powers, as when she insists that he accompany her to fetch a molar from a hanged man to use in her magic. Declaring that she "enseñada está[] / a hablar al diablo" (I, 608-9), Tello asserts:

Mándame a diez hombres juntos
temerario acuchillar,
y no me mandes tratar
en materia de difuntos. (610-14)

Such references, however, cannot negate the essential innocuousness of the situation: a wholly admirable and profoundly *nice* young man wants to marry a beautiful girl.

When the *comedia* changes its focus to Inés, the play reveals another element that softens Fabia's character compared to Celestina. For whereas Calisto hires Celestina to effect the seduction that he was unable to carry out before Melibea tossed him out of her garden, Inés's first words reveal that she has already fallen in love with Alonso:

(...) en el instante que vi
este galán forastero
me dijo el alma "éste quiero",
y yo le dije "sea así". (I, 223-26)

Thus, in spite of Lope's care in establishing Fabia's credentials in witchcraft (in fact, we see more of the mechanics in the *comedia* than in *Celestina*⁷), she never has to *use* any of her more unsavory skills in her role as go-between. In fact, that is all Fabia does: she goes between Alonso and Inés, carrying messages of mutual love, admiration, and respect. She does *not* convince, persuade, or seduce, as Rojas portrays Celestina doing.⁸ Although Fabia does employ the rather transparent ruse of claiming that the letter is for another lady, to whom she is too frightened to deliver it, she deceives no one, as Inés says:

Sospecho
que es invención que se ha hecho,
para probarme a rendir,
de parte del forastero. (I, 496-99)

Her sister Leonor also sees through the deception: "Yo también lo imaginé" (500). The love between Alonso and Inés, then, becomes the natural feeling that both name it at various times during the play, and not the unnatural, febrile desire called forth by Celestina's masterful voice. Alonso and Inés seem to be speaking

directly to one another, even when they are not face to face, and Fabia's office is less a necessity than a convention.

This brings us to a key point that distinguishes *El caballero de Olmedo* from *Celestina*: the attitude that the work expresses toward love. Love in *Celestina* is sexual desire—lust—and it is nothing else. The story means to warn readers against love, as the opening and closing verses declare:

O damas, matronas, mancebos, casados,
 Notad bien la vida que aquéstos hicieron,
 Tened por espejo su fin cuál hobieron:
 A otros que amores dad vuestros cuidados.
 Limpiad ya los ojos, los ciegos errados,
 Virtudes sembrando con casto vivir,
 A todo correr debéis de huir,
 No os lance Cupido sus tiros dorados. (*Celestina* 40)

Written for readers who may have been entranced by the *novela sentimental*,⁹ *Celestina* strips the illusions from idealized love in order to show what lies behind them, as well as the ruin that results when men and women surrender to love. *El caballero de Olmedo*, on the other hand, exalts love, endorsing the Neoplatonic idealization of "true" love. Although some might argue that Alonso sins in that he employs a witch to further his love,¹⁰ the emotion itself as he feels it is never questioned or criticized. Instead, it is shown as a force that takes root only in the noblest of souls. Fabia tells Inés that Alonso is:

¶el más noble, ¶el más cuerdo
 caballero de Castilla,
 lindo talle, lindo ingenio.
 El Rey en Valladolid
 grandes mercedes le ha hecho,
 porque él solo honró las fiestas
 de su real casamiento. (I, 848-54)

Although *Celestina* similarly eulogizes Calisto to Melibea, she never mentions either the opinion that others in society have of him or his intelligence, which suggests yet again that the play sees love as something that is consistent with, rather than a radical subversion of, the hero's character. Alonso's idealized love also further ennobles him, as we see in his gallant rescue of Don Rodrigo, his rival for Inés's hand, during the third-act festivities.

True love, in addition, only seeks honor for the beloved. Compared to Calisto's relentless momentum towards sexual intercourse, one which cannot entirely avoid the charge of rape, Alonso is content to write to Inés and speak with her

through the *reja*. Even Melibea's *cordón* which carries such a powerful sexual message in *Celestina* becomes a ribbon that, divided in two, loses all connection with Inés when Rodrigo and Fernando come upon it. Unable to decide whether Inés left it for Rodrigo or her sister Leonor left it for Fernando, each takes half: "A que las dos nos le vean, / y sabrán con esta traza / que habemos venido juntos" (I, 659-61). Since the audience knows that it was really left for Alonso, the sight of Rodrigo and Fernando marching off displaying the love token of they do not know whom provides comic relief in a play that insistently warns of the tragedy to come.¹¹ When Alonso ends up with Rodrigo's cloak after an encounter in the dark, it symbolically confirms what everyone knows, and what Rodrigo will not accept: the gallant outsider has taken the place in Inés's heart that Rodrigo had hoped to win for himself.

The presence of Rodrigo and Fernando, furthermore, also contributes to Fabia's lack of malevolent influence in the *comedia*. While the *Celestina* portrays Calisto's desire as something singular, isolated, culpable and therefore subject to punishment by implacable divine justice, Alonso's love is one in a world of love. His love does not outrage the universe; it only outrages Rodrigo, who kills out of frustrated, jealous self-interest. In fact, Rodrigo's act—and its motivation—are much more similar to the attack on Celestina by Calisto's servants, Sempronio and Pármeno, who want a piece of the gold chain paid to Celestina by Calisto. Rodrigo hates Alonso because he has earned a prize that Rodrigo himself could not, and because no one doubts that Alonso has earned it fairly and deserves it. He himself admits:

Su dueño es don Alonso, aquel de Olmedo,
alanceador galán y cortesano,
de quien hombres y toros tienen miedo.
Pues si éste sirve a Inés, ¿qué intento en vano?
O ¿cómo quiero yo, si ya le adora,
que Inés me mire que semblante humano? (II, 1351-56)

Even Inés's father, once he finds out that her feigned intention to become a nun arose out of her love for Alonso, exclaims "Albricias hubiera dado" (III, 2565) and quickly repudiates his choice of Rodrigo:

Desde agora es tu marido;
que me tendré por honrado
de un yerno tan estimado,
tan rico y tan bien nacido. (2581-84)

In spite of Alonso's guilty remorse as he dies, and in spite of critics who have tried to find a flaw in Alonso,¹² there is no similarity between Calisto's death and Alonso's, except that both are ugly. Calisto perishes, broken and unshriven, in a stupid accident. Alonso falls victim to a vicious murder plot planned by a jealous rival, but his death nevertheless further ennobles him, as Tello tells the king:

Cubrió de luto su casa
 y su patria, cuyo entierro
 será el del fénix, señor,
 después de muerto viviendo
 en las lenguas de la fama (III, 2701-05)

He lives long enough, that is, to confess and take leave of his parents and loyal servant Tello. And to tell the story of his death.

The tale of Alonso's murder becomes the final element that reduces Fabia to little more than an amusing flourish in *El caballero de Olmedo*. Alonso's love comes into being, flowers, and is cruelly cut off in a well-delineated social structure completely absent in *Celestina*. Calisto's isolation, however we explain it,¹³ allows in part the dangerous solipsism of his desire. Alonso, in contrast, although he is an "outsider," according to the song that informs Lope's play,¹⁴ is a recognized member of aristocratic society. The king, we find out early on, knows him and honors him. His skills as a nobleman and his personal integrity are universally acknowledged. He has *parents*, and it is his concern for their peace of mind that leads to his death. Most significantly, the structures of authority that such a social system implies come together to pass judgement on Alonso's murderers. When Tello identifies Rodrigo and Fernando as the guilty parties, the king declares: "Prendedlos, / y en un teatro mañana / cortad sus infames cuellos" (III, 2728-30). The same society, the values of which Alonso upheld in his chaste courtship of Inés, allow her, as well, a fate that, while certainly sad and ironic, is far more seemly than that allotted to Melibea in *Celestina*. Instead of a sloppy, unsanctified suicide, Inés retires to a convent, converting her ruse into truth.

When we look at the elements that we have identified as those which work to reduce Fabia's role in the *comedia* when it is compared to that of *Celestina*—mutual love; true, idealized love meant to end in marriage; the displacement of the culpability for the hero's death onto a jealous rival; and the presence and judgement of society—we find that we have the contributing aspects of tragedy. Whereas *Celestina* exists to teach a moral lesson, tragedy, as Mason has argued, "lies *beyond* good and evil" (24). In tragedy, as in *El caballero de Olmedo*, we find "the impossibility of distinguishing the guilt from the innocence of the tragic hero" (83), while in *Celestina* it is made clear that *everyone* is guilty and so all are punished. All of the warnings that Alonso receives, the uneasy dreams and mysterious apparitions, cannot turn him from his path because, in the first place, that path is part of his everyday life, which he cannot believe could hold something fatal to him.¹⁵ At the same time, they contribute to the tragedy, in which "the final event seems to have been *inevitable*" (96).¹⁶ Indeed, as Dollimore argues in his recent *Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture* (1998), tragedy plays out the "paradox" that "even as we are driven forward by a secular fear of failure, we resort to the metaphysical reassurance that

such failure is ultimately inevitable" (xviii). Celestina and those whose lives intersect fatally with hers gain their just rewards for the immoral choices that they make, and not because destiny caught them on the wrong road at the wrong time. Finally, tragedy always involves the bonds that hold society together, and the hero's death must move the society that surrounds him.¹⁷ Not only Inés mourns Alonso; not only Tello feels his lack. Alonso's parents, his beloved's father, his king and the king's *condestable*, eventually, with the executions of the murderers, all of society will be affected by the hero's death in ways that confirm the values which he exemplified.

Although *Caballero* is considered a major work in the canon of Lope's *comedias*, it is not the strongest of his plays, or even of his tragedies. Part of the problem no doubt lies with its source; although the use of popular ballads as the basis for *comedias* was common and could produce admirable results (only consider *Peribáñez y el Comendador de Ocaña*), in this case the results are unsatisfying. The characters remain largely opaque, and the attempt to "open" them up fails, just as so many efforts to move theatrical pieces to film in our own day do. The play does not manage to make the characters' motivations credible, creating such anomalies as a worthy nobleman, whose only sin is to follow the appropriate channels for courtship and marriage, who becomes, by Act III, a vicious and dishonorable highway murderer.¹⁸ It also reduces Celestina to a standard busybody whose references to witchcraft are no more convincing than the hero's commitment to his family, which supposedly sets him on the road to Olmedo so that his rival can eliminate him. When fate is the enemy of love, and love is seen as good and desirable, then it is fate, not love, which destroys the hero. A Celestina allied with the good becomes a Celestina rehabilitated, which is to say, no Celestina at all. The *Caballero de Olmedo* would meet his fate, with or without his Celestina. Without *his*, Calisto stays in bed, Melibea remains a virgin, and literature loses a powerful metaphor for moral ruin.

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NOTES

¹ Other clues are rhetorical. Rodrigo's description of Fabia's supposed powers echoes those that Sempronio and Pármeneo give in *Celestina*, albeit significantly edited to eliminate the references to the sexual. Alonso's own greeting of Fabia in Act I ("¡Oh Fabia, oh retrato, oh copia /de cuanto naturaleza / puso en ingenio mortal!") deliberately recalls Calisto's similar effusions upon meeting Celestina: "¡Oh vejez virtuosa! ¡Oh gloriosa esperanza de mi deseado fin! ¡Oh fin de mi deleitosa esperanza! ¡Oh salud de mi pasión, reparo de mi tormento, regeneración mía, vivificación de mi vida, resurrección de mi muerte!" (64).

² Friedman also calls her "a sinister consort and marker of Don Alonso's dark side," but this contradicts her actual role in the play.

³ It is curious that even Celestina's fans seem compelled to lessen her grandeur in

the interest of making her more “user friendly.” Gerstinger is an example. He claims that Rojas made her “not only the chief character of the work but actually its heroine. (...) But *Celestina* is only relatively wicked. She is a solicitous housemother to her prostitutes. To Calisto she is a light in his despair, a resurrection from death” (71). To believe this is to be totally impervious to Rojas’s corrosive irony and his moral purpose.

⁴ I am grateful for Patricia Kenworthy’s question on this point, which led me to clarify the parents’ culpability. It is interesting to note that Fabia herself comments on the father’s responsibility to arrange his daughters’ marriage: “Padre que se duerme en esto, / mucho a sí mismo se agravia” (I, 313-14).

⁵ McKendrick paints the play in darker terms: “Lope conceived of passion as an irresistible force which carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Here he allows those seeds to flower” (103). She concludes that it is “tragic poetic drama” (104-105).

⁶ Another sign of the lower profile of moral culpability in the drama is the chain’s destiny. It simply disappears as the fated tragedy gathers momentum, instead of becoming a major player in the elaboration of the disaster, as it does in *Celestina*.

⁷ For example, as mentioned above, Fabia compels Tello to accompany her to fetch “una muela (...) del salteador que ahorcaron / ayer” (Acto I).

⁸ Friedman makes this point as well: “Fabia has little need for the rhetorical skills of *Trotaconventos* or *Celestina*” (75).

⁹ These include works such as Diego de San Pedro’s *Cárcel de amor*.

¹⁰ McKendrick comments: “he guiltily protests that his love was directed towards marriage but he has not, alas, behaved as if it were” (103). Fox recalls: “A. A. Parker blames the sad conclusion on the imprudence of the two lovers” (9); while Friedman asserts: “While their love is genuine, they resort to posturing and to role-playing, and this eventually costs them a happy ending” (75).

¹¹ Friedman calls the play “the text most obviously concerned with signs” (74), but passes over the ribbon as serving merely to “set the stage” for Rodrigo “to act upon his jealousy and rage” (76).

¹² McKendrick argues: “Alonso dies in a sense because he is an anachronism, at once too reckless and too guileless to survive in a world that no longer conducts itself (...) in accord with the chivalric code of honourable conduct” (103). For Friedman, Alonso is “a dehumanized—that is, ‘poeticized’—character, dashing, articulate, and heroic in a literary sense” (78). Other believe that he is intellectually arrogant, in that “he ignores signs and warnings of trouble and insists on proceeding home to Olmedo despite the danger” (Fox 9). For Hesse, “Aunque sabe que puede tomar las medidas apropiadas para contrarrestar la situación explosiva, el temor bajo el influjo de una imaginación ingobernable le ha vuelto inmóvil” (31).

¹³ While it seems most likely that Calisto’s desire itself is what causes him to withdraw from society, other explanations have included the assertion that his isolation is a reflection of the status of the upper caste *conversos* who were being progressively shut out of the influential positions that they had held in government by the policies of Isabella and Fernando.

¹⁴ This is perhaps the least convincing element of the story when it is extended from popular ballad to drama. Medina and Olmedo are only 20 kilometers apart, which even in the late Middle Ages did not represent an isolating or insurmountable distance.

¹⁵See Mason: "For the incommensurable to erupt with tragic intensity there must exist a peaceful mode of life in which the hero was managing quite nicely, thank you" (66).

¹⁶This is, in part, what Friedman means when he declares: "Don Alonso lives in order to die. Don Rodrigo lives in order to kill" (76).

¹⁷Mason explains that in Greek tragedy, such as *Antigone*, "Time (...) is (...) a relational or situational word. It tells you about the rights and duties of all people in a bond. Each man looked to obtain it from his fellow-men. The gods exacted it from mortals and occasionally paid it to mortals. Time was always known to be present by some external act. It could therefore be measured both by the givers and by the receivers, and society could look on and estimate whether it was being justly exacted and paid" (55).

¹⁸Friedman argues that it is possible to regard Rodrigo as "the most 'human' of the characters, the very personification of ardor, jealousy, and fury" (78). He can certainly be considered the most modern of the play's main characters, with an almost neurotic insecurity from the very beginning that may explain Inés's lack of interest.

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