Literary Shifts

On La Celestina and English Translations

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Abstract: This study begins by providing a general overview of the work known as La Celestina, which first appeared in print probably in 1499 and is attributed to Fernando de Rojas. After an outline of the context as well as the main debates surrounding the work, the focus moves to Celestina’s twentieth and twenty-first century English-language translations, paying particular attention to those made in the United States. Rather than present an analysis of translation choices and techniques, this study considers the introductions to these renditions to determine what has been highlighted for English-reading audiences, and how their reading has been guided.

Keywords: Celestina, English translations, Fernando de Rojas, 15th-century Spanish literature
1. General Overview

Sequels, paintings, songs, translations, film and stage adaptations, operas, high visibility in both popular and academic cultures: the Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea, widely known as La Celestina and often attributed to Fernando de Rojas (d. 1541), has had an enduring presence in Castilian letters since the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th centuries, when it began to appear in both manuscript and print. The work is entirely in dialogue and divided into acts, hence its initial title of Comedia de Calisto y Melibea, which was to become Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea and later established as La Celestina.

The manuscript and print history of the book begins some time before 1499 and is dizzyingly complex, as is the question of its authorship. The oft-repeated story—based on three preambles to the work—is the following: a young lawyer, Fernando de Rojas (often thought to have been of converso background), found Act I of this comedia. He was not sure of the author's identity: Juan de Mena (1411-1456) or Rodrigo de Cota (d. 1498?). Finding it worthy in many ways, especially as a warning to young men in love and the trust they put in procuresses and servants, he decided to continue the work, adding fifteen more acts. Later he expanded it into twenty-one acts in response to readers who wanted the central love affair to take longer. Today the most commonly read and studied version tends to be the twenty-one-act tale.

1 I am grateful to Dr. Elizabeth Spragins, whose expert knowledge provided important edits, useful suggestions, and much appreciated guidance for this essay. Any and all mistakes are mine alone.
But it is not that simple. Research on the manuscripts, print editions, publishing houses, editors, and possible authors of La Celestina now makes up a legitimate industry, and there is much evidence, offered by eminent scholars, to suggest that no-one by the name of Fernando de Rojas wrote this book. There are other equally eminent specialists who believe that the author of at least part of the work was, in fact, Fernando de Rojas, country lawyer. Then there are those who agree with the usual account that Act I was indeed by another, and that Rojas completed the work, while some have suggested more than two authors at work in creating different editions at different times. The jury is out on this. Of importance here is that when we casually say “La Celestina by Fernando de Rojas” we should remain aware that authorship is not that clear-cut for experts.

Likewise, there is no certainty about where and in what form the work first appeared, nor by whose hand the variations in the early (print and manuscript) versions occurred. It is entirely possible that it pre-circulated as a manuscript that contained some version of the story years before its publication in 1500. At some point, manuscripts and a printed edition might have been available at the same time; much research has gone into what came before the established printed edition that contains an acrostic poem (part of which spells out Fernando de Rojas' name), who put that poem there, what the role of the editors, proofreaders, printers would have been in shaping the text. In the words of José Luis Canet:

[...] Celestina probably has one of the most complex textual traditions we know. Because of this complexity, critics have proposed different stemmata, or genealogical charts, that trace the origins of the text back to a lost editio princeps (first edition). This lost edition is the cornerstone for the three surviving editions of the Comedia version and also for the near one hundred editions of the Tragicomedia published between 1499 (or 1500-1502) and 1633.

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These descendants also contain their own variants, attributable to the author(s), the copyists, and the typesetters in the form of additions and suppressions. (Canet, 2017, p. 25)

It is beyond this essay's scope to give a just account of the important hypotheses on the actual printed text, but it is necessary to keep in mind that the physical body of this text has lived several distinct lives, many of which are lost to us, and that a definite author and date of original composition are not confirmed.

In spite of the enormously complicated history of the text, its titles, and its authorship, it is now published and sold as La Celestina by Fernando de Rojas or attributed to Fernando de Rojas. Many scholars who do not specialize in print and manuscript culture, nor have had familiarity with the rigorous research that seriously questions the attribution of Rojas as author, easily use that name as author. Here we have a perfect example of complexity in the real world that finally is forced to surrender to neat categories. Luckily, research into the text's meanings and functions has focused overwhelmingly on the complexity of the work itself.

After all these caveats, it will help to reiterate some of the basics and to summarize how the book is presented today. The edition that is most printed and used today contains twenty-one acts. It begins with a letter to a friend, then an acrostic poem part of which spells “El bachiller Fernando de Rojas,” and a Prologue. The Prologue (after the acrostic poem) describes all existence as violent battle and conflict, offering several examples of aggression and discord in Nature. It then posits that the work, too, is sure to create dissent among readers and will lead to a wide range of conflicting reactions.

The main plot centers on the obsessive and decidedly physical love of a wealthy young man, Calisto, for the young unmarried Melibea, whom he has glimpsed in a garden and fallen for passionately. A dismissive response from her causes him to return home, collapsing sick with love. If we take the circumstances of each
character into account, there is in fact no obstacle to their marriage, so Calisto's mad yearning could be seen as a conscious or unconscious (and misplaced) performance of courtly and Classical models with which he is very familiar. After performing all the expected tropes of lovesickness, which he actually does seem to buy into, he accepts his manservant's advice to seek the assistance of an old bawd, Celestina. Marriage does not enter his expressions of desire, and his acceptance of the bawd's services makes clear that what he is after is a physical relationship outside marriage.

The old procuress is a celebrity in town; before we meet her, we learn from both manservants Sempronio and Pármeno that she is part brothel-keeper, part go-between, knowledgeable in medicinal herbs, magic potions, sex; we are told she is quite probably a sorceress, and that she has facilitated many illicit encounters between men and women of all social classes. She accepts Calisto's mission in return for payment, and gains access to Melibea's home where the young woman lives with her father Pleberio and her mother Alisa. Celestina enters by pretending to be selling cosmetics and running a seemingly innocent errand for Calisto. It takes more than one visit, but she slowly and masterfully entices the young woman with zigzagging talk of desire and passion until Melibea finds herself drawn uncontrollably to the young man, accepting him into her home's garden once Celestina's seduction is complete. Calisto and Melibea hold regular trysts over the span of a month. Their intense attraction is consummated, but all ends tragically: Celestina is murdered by Calisto's servants over their share of the payment, the servants are executed for her murder, Calisto falls to his death from a wall as he secretly leaves Melibea's garden one night. Melibea throws herself off the tower of her home in agony over this loss. The play ends with a long lament by her father, Pleberio, who unleashes his grief against fate, love and the world for making life a meaningless, arbitrary experience of cruelty and tragedy.
Of central importance to the flow of events are Celestina's interactions with members of all social classes as she facilitates physical connections between men and women. Her mastery of language is her most prized tool. She philosophizes on love and society, teaches lessons on pragmatism, paints lively and detailed portraits of former friends and townspeople; she reassures and interrogates and excites in everything that she says to her working girls or to her clients. She shows an uncanny ability to put herself in the place of her interlocutor regardless of gender or social class, empathizing with their anxieties and passions. The rhythm of her speech is mesmerizing: from colorful memories of a glorious past when the whole town used her services, to eloquent prescriptions for what ails young people in love, she spices her speech with a wealth of proverbs, metaphors, similes and allusions that grant her authority. On one occasion her invocation of the occult shows her command of incantations and spells. At the same time, Celestina is not without fear: far from it. Underlying most of her interactions is constant anxiety that she will be found out, punished, hurt, all along projecting skill and bravado as she speaks to her clients and colleagues.

The world painted by the author is a bleak one, and Celestina is not alone in walking a fine line between fear and desire. If there are humorous moments — most of them aside jabs by one character at the expense of another— every character perpetually grapples with the anxiety of failure or exposure. Every expression of desire, be it for pleasure or material gain, comes with the fear of failure alongside intense and violent greed for attainment. Trust is nowhere to be seen, suspicions abound, and violence lurks in everyone’s speech. Members of different social classes have nothing but disdain for one another in their struggle to obtain what they need, always anxious about exposure, dishonor, or punishment. Bookended by the Prologue and Pleberio’s distraught and intensely cynical lament against life’s cruelty, La Celestina emerges as a profoundly pessimistic work, though this by no means shuts the door to a rich range of possibilities for interpretation.
2. Debates and Scholarship

*La Celestina* is read —abridged or in full, modernized or not — in Spanish and Latin American high schools, and regularly assigned in University survey courses as well as specialized seminars in the USA, Latin America, Spain, the rest of Europe. In the U.S., a dedicated journal, *Celestinesca*, made its debut in 1977 under the founding editor Joseph T. Snow of Michigan State University. Professor Snow is a leading world authority on the text, and continues to contribute invaluable knowledge on the work to the field. Professor Enrique Fernández of the University of Manitoba runs a list serve called La-Celestina which regularly updates members on scholarship as well as the appearance of Celestina in popular lore, music, film, theatre, dance and all other modes of cultural production. Professor Fernández is also President of the *Círculo de Estudios de la Literatura Picaresca y Celestinesca* which offers numerous resources for the study of *La Celestina*. In North America therefore, the book enjoys a robust presence among academics.

Beyond the specifically dedicated spaces just mentioned, *La Celestina* has been and continues to be the object of scholarship and debate for researchers at all stages of their careers. The vast range of linguistic, literary, social, and philosophical concepts that it contains guarantee the liveliness of debate, just as predicted in the work’s own Prologue. The excellent and ongoing *Documento bibliográfico* which regularly appears in *Celestinesca* and is currently overseen by Amaranta Saguar García and Devid Paolini is a meticulously annotated bibliography that contains, to date, around 3000 entries on topics related to this work.³ In a very thorough survey, Saguar García identifies recent trends in *Celestina* studies — from the year 2000 to 2016 —that show the vast range of continued research in socio-historical, editorial, and material cultures that surround the book as well as the trends that have ebbed.

³ My thanks to Dr. Amaranta Saguar García, who provided this information in private correspondence.
and flowed (Saguier García, 2017). One look at the bibliography shows that in the 20th and 21st centuries alone, scholars have been uncovering themes, linguistic features, intertextual currents and everything in between, while translators have been active in making the text available to non-Spanish speakers, and artists have been putting it on stage, screen, and sheet music. The centuries prior have also generated studies, translations, continuations.

There is, therefore, no shortage of debate about the work. Beyond the questions raised by authorship and editions, the nature of the poetic and intellectual universe that played a part in the creation of this text has been subject to vigorous discussion. There are those who argue that the author's *converso* background has led to the intensely cynical view of an unjust existence seen everywhere in the book. This view was proposed by Stephen Gilman, and has since found many adherents:

According to this view, *Celestina* can be understood only within the context of *converso* insecurity, alienation, and anguish. Indeed, much of the irony and skepticism permeating the work is explicable in terms of Rojas' own disenchantment with the world around him, a world poisoned by mutual suspicion and fear, a world in which even ostensibly innocuous acts could produce mortal consequences. (Carpenter, 1997, p. 269).

At the same time, an entire body of scholarship identifies the work's poetics as one that belongs firmly to the Western tradition with no need for explanations coming from the author's *converso* background; in this view, *La Celestina* has “generic ties to Terencian and Plautine construction as filtered through Italo-Latin humanistic comedy” that speak of the work's “deep medieval roots” (Snow, 2000, p. 2). Keeping in mind the work's plot, numerous Classical allusions, the restlessness and deep cynicism, we have not only some of the basic conventions of humanistic comedy but also clear reflections of an academic milieu. Convincing evidence suggests that the book was read actively by university students and professors from the late 16th century, reaching other audiences later to become part of the Spanish literary canon:
[...] a text intended as a tool for new educational methods that questioned scholasticism, the moral philosophy of stoicism, and the use and abuse of auctoritates. [...] I do not find traces of Jewish influence in the book, as is sustained by a group of critics who believe it was written by the converso Fernando de Rojas. The underlying philosophical assumptions are part of Christian reformism and the new spirituality that was taking hold of some circles of the Church. (Canet, 2017, p.40)

A word is due on arguments for the converso character of La Celestina or any pre-modern and early modern Castilian works. This attribution has often had much to do with the very meaning of Spanish identity in the twentieth century in particular. Under Franco, the suppression of regional languages and identities as well as the policing of definitions of Spanish identity led anti-Fascist literary scholars, consciously or unconsciously, to highlight what we would call today the multiculturalism of Spain in pre-modern and early modern eras. One of the most prominent of these scholars, Américo Castro, narrated — in exile — Spanish history against Franco's homogeneous views, arguing that to understand Spanish identity one must uncover its converso (be it Islamicate or Jewish) facets. Castro's disciples followed, and converso voices were attributed to numerous texts, among them La Celestina. This is by no means to say that the claim is invalid and stems only from a twentieth-century preoccupation with the meaning of Spain and being Spanish. But it would be one factor among many, because La Celestina displays such vast intertextual and existential concerns that it cannot be said to represent only one socio-literary voice. Thus, alongside the currents mentioned, the work has been read meaningfully from psychoanalytical, psychiatric, feminist, philological, and political angles. Often in dialogue with one another, these readings only serve to underscore the richness of a text that refuses to be stabilized generically or interpretively.

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4 Canet also makes a solid case for multiple authorship, and highlights the importance of the printing process which would make the proofreader/editor a key element.
3. La Celestina in English

English-language translations and adaptations of La Celestina began to appear in the sixteenth century, though in highly altered forms and with cuts; already then, they reflect the interests and concerns of English-language translators in their engagement with the work. For the sixteenth-century life of La Celestina in English, the interested reader will find meticulous reconstructions and interpretations in the studies cited in this article's bibliography, particularly those of Ardila (1998) and Brault (1960). Suffice it to say here that the book was known to some extent in England shortly after its publication, and in the sixteenth century alone was translated (better said, adapted) a number of times in different forms with numerous variations. The vast variation in editions appears to have had to do with access to the original, translation from a third language, and concern about moral issues. For example, the 1530 The Interlude included some of the Prologue, the four first acts, and a few scenes from acts V and VI, while the tragic ending was replaced with a happy one, with moral sententiae added to the text.

A later English translator who deserves special mention is James Mabbe (1572-1642?), a Hispanophile who had also translated Guzmán de Alfarache as well as works by Cervantes and Fray Cristóbal Fonseca. Mabbe produced two versions of La Celestina: the first, done between 1603 and 1611, and somewhat abridged, was

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5 “Las primeras copias de La Celestina pudieron haber llegado a Inglaterra a principios del siglo XVI con el cortejo de Catalina de Aragón, esposa de Arturo, príncipe de Gales. John Rastell realizó la primera traducción, fechada hacia 1525 y conocida popularmente como Interlude. Después, parece que hubo al menos tres intentos de traducir La Celestina; William Aspley en 1598, J. Wolf en 1591, y Adam Islip en 1596.” (Catoira, 2012, p. 291). ["The first copies of La Celestina might have arrived in England at the beginning of the XVIth century with the retinue of Catherine of Aragon, wife of Arthur, Prince of Wales. John Rastell carried out the first translation, dated at around 1525 and commonly known as Interlude. Afterwards it would seem that there were at least three attempts at translating La Celestina; William Aspley in 1598, J. Wolf in 1591, and Adam Islip in 1596.” (Author’s translation)]

6 This information is seen in detail in Brault (1960) and Ardila (1998).
titled *Celestine*. The second, based on the version with twenty-one acts, came out in 1631 under the title *The Spanish Bawde* and was reprinted three years later, indicating its popularity. As Nicholas G. Round has shown, this version continued to be re-edited and re-issued in the 19th and 20th centuries by English readers, including several uses for stage adaptation as recently as 1993, even when other translations where available (Round, 2001).

That the book has remained interesting to English-language translators is not only evident in the many English-language versions that have followed those of Mabbe, but also the place given to the work in histories of Spanish literature. George Ticknor, considered the first American Hispanist, pays great attention to the work in his *History of Spanish Literature* first published in 1863. In Ticknor’s assessment, the work is of immense artistic and dramatic value, though the content is offensive: “large portions of it are foul with a shameless libertinism of thought and language” (Ticknor, 1871, p. 280). But this moral evaluation in no way overshadows Ticknor's assertion that the work is a masterpiece only surpassed by *Don Quijote*.

Continued interest in *Celestina* in the US is attested by the fact that most of its modern translations have come out of the US, prefaced or realized by North-American academics and coming out of university presses. Alongside *Celestinesca* and the *Círculo* mentioned above — which also have their original homes in North America — this indicates substantial curiosity about the book in US and Canadian academia and slightly beyond. It is not possible to interpret this fact further without delving deep into the history and context of each translator's relationship to the work, and that is beyond the scope of this essay. However, at the very least it is clear that there is a demand for a Spanish classic other than *Don Quijote*, and that US publishers and University presses must be responding to the inclusion of this work in

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7 See Round (2001). The scholar walks the reader through some comparisons between the two versions by Mabbe, offering helpful insights into what might have mattered to the 17th-century translator as he moved from Spanish to English.

The focus of this section is not the choices or techniques employed by the translators, but rather a metatextual examination: how are these translations presented to the reader? What has been considered important to show, and how is the reader's approach guided? For this, we turn to the introductions, which highlight what each translator (or the scholar who provides the introduction) has considered important to know for English readers. Equally important, however, are the implicit presuppositions that govern the prefaces. *Celestina* involves the prostibulary world, sex work, tensions between social classes, and suppositions on gender and age. How each introduction casts these reveals the value judgments that govern such concepts centuries later. Also at play in the introductions are concepts such as the ranking of the work as a 'masterpiece' and the notion of historical periodization, both of which raise important questions.

Regarding the confusion on authorship and manuscripts, introductions vary greatly in the information they give. From the firm conviction that after Act I, Fernando de Rojas is the author and that the work is a product of *converso* poetics (Juan Goytisolo's "Introduction" to the 2009 translation by Peter Bush), to a fast dismissal of the debate on authorship altogether (Lesley Byrd Simpson in his own 1955 translation), to a literal acceptance of what the letter to the friend says at the beginning of the book as well as Rojas' Jewish background (Patricia S. Finch, 2003),

\(^8\) Of these, J.M. Cohen and Peter Bush represent translators from the United Kingdom. These are included since the renditions are easily available to and read by US readers.
few if any of the translations highlight the in-depth research on the controversy of one Fernando de Rojas as author.9

If the complex history of the text and the identity of the author are not overemphasized for English-speaking readers, value judgments on the universe of the text do appear more prominently. Naturally, each era has its own descriptors for the assumptions it makes. Thus, for Lesley Byrd Simpson, writing in 1955, Calisto never thinks of marriage to Melibea because he is “sex-ridden egotist” (Simpson, 2019, p.viii).10 Melibea is a “conventional, gullible and innocent girl, haughty and hasty, who catches fire from the maniac frenzy of Calisto” (Simpson, 2019, p. vii). The summaries of each act at the beginning are “dull,” “unnecessary piece[s] of cluttering” (Simpson, 2019, p. ix). “The two lovers are as stiff as the brocaded figures of an ancient tapestry or an old woodcut” (Simpson, 2019, p. vii). In addition, for Simpson, James Mabbe's “command of Spanish was far from perfect and his rendition suffers from many strange interpretations” (Simpson, 2019, p. vi). For Cohen, Celestina has a “satanic character,” takes “delight in lechery,” and is “infinitely guileful and in the end almost lovable if only for her abounding zest” (Cohen, 1966, pp. 12-13).11 These comments hardly require unpacking; they reveal convictions such as the clearly unethical nature of any sex drive outside marriage, as well as easily gendered judgments on characters in fiction, where to be “almost likeable” is possible in spite of “lechery” or guile.

Fifty-four years after Simpson and forty-five after Cohen, the “Introduction” by Roberto González Echevarría to the rendition by Margaret Sayers Peden (2009) re-frames and casts ideas on sex work and gender in ways that are worth noticing. This

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9 It is worth mentioning that the Penguin 2009 translation by Peter Bush, for which Juan Goytisolo provides an Introduction that unequivocally sees Rojas as the main author, contains this sentence in the publication information: “Originally published in Spain in 1499 as La Comedia de Calisto y Melibea by an anonymous author. Fernando de Rojas is named as the writer in the 1500 and subsequent editions” (Bush, 2009, front matter).
10 Simpson's translation is from 1955 but the page numbers here are from the 2019 re-issue.
11 Cohen's translation is from 1964 but in this essay I use the 1966 re-issue.
“Introduction” is thorough, filled with textual and contextual analyses that illuminate important facets of the work. Of value are González Echevarría’s justified emphases on the hardships, vulnerabilities, and social injustice that command the lives of Celestina and those who work for her. The scholar clarifies not only the intellectual and humanistic currents that inform the works’ cynicism, but also its reflection of a viciously unjust society where exploitation is rampant. Here, as he rightly argues, we see the beginnings of a reformist manner of thinking that responds to the suffering of characters from lower classes.

At the same time, a number of important assertions in this “Introduction” rely on the assumption that the evaluation of certain human identities is in no need of further examination, because these identities are, clearly, not desirable: “There are ‘Cervantes Institutes’ all over the world, but one could hardly conceive of a Celestina Institute, or imagine the likeness of the old bawd gracing a square in the Spanish capital” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xiv). Why not? What would be wrong, exactly, with a Celestina Institute? As meaningfully as the scholar sheds light on the work’s critique of injustice, there appears to be a conviction that being an old woman who deals in sex work is unquestionably a negative thing. Calling the book “fresh and relevant,” the “Introduction” begins:

Its most scandalous innovation is that its protagonist is an old whore and procuress who runs a brothel, restores virgins, arranges for clandestine sexual encounters, and corrupts young men and women. Yet, for all these unsavory characteristics and immoral activities, Celestina is a self-possessed, willful, and courageous character whom the reader cannot but admire. She is a modern tragic heroine, perhaps the first, and surely the only one whose misfortunes are not the result of a love affair of her own. (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xiii)

As the “Introduction” continues, the word ‘whore’ is used several times to describe either the women who work for Celestina, herself, or an old friend of hers, while Celestina’s workplace, in addition to “brothel”, is called a “whorehouse” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xxii, quoted from Marcel Bataillon). The depiction of sex is said
to “stray into outright obscenity and even pornography” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xiv). The question is asked: “But how can an old whore and procurress become a myth? How can her perverted sense of mission, her perseverance in immorality, and her will to live be deemed heroic enough to raise her to the realm of myth?” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xvi). As for Melibea, she surprisingly turns out to be a more complex character than Calisto. At first she appears to be an innocent young beauty corrupted by Celestina, but [...] she discloses a burning passion for Calisto [...] She is no passive courtly damsel with an ardent suitor, but a woman lusting for her lover. [...] Her best moment, however, comes at the end, when she learns of Calisto's catastrophic fall. Instead of swooning or going mad, she faces her fate with unflinching courage and determination [...]. Like Celestina, Melibea perseveres in her depravity, and this makes her a modern tragic heroine[.] (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xxi)

The sentences and passage I have quoted above rely on the idea that prostitution is fundamentally wrong, that any sex drive outside marriage is immoral, and that being an old woman sex worker is a depraved situation that does not merit representation, much less celebration. Likewise, to call a woman character's suicide her “finest moment” can be construed as misogyny, for it assumes that the best thing a woman can do is to remove herself from the scenario, for she is narrowly defined as only a creature of depraved desire. Now, one could argue that these are the values that govern the world of the text, that the text portrays both prostitution and an old woman's enjoyment of sex as problematic, and that Melibea’s desire is to be frowned upon. The argument can be made that González Echevarría is only replicating the text's moral compass for us. However, such rhetorical choices as the constant repetitions of ‘whore’ as a legitimate and unexamined description, the labeling of sexual passion as “depravity,” and the conviction that an old woman simply cannot be celebrated the way a Don Quijote can be, suggest an alignment with that moral compass, especially as far as women and sex are concerned. Today, when we talk about El Cid or Don Quijote, we usually take care to contextualize words such as ‘Moor,’ ‘Morisco,’ ‘insane,’ ‘deluded’; we hope to convey the racial and ethical
presuppositions of that time through a filter that would allow critical distance for newcomers to our field. In light of González Echevarría’s apt emphasis throughout the “Introduction” on the dire, unjust, and harsh conditions that rule the lives of Celestina’s employees, it would make sense to offer the same critical distance and not repeat the word ‘whore’ so easily and often as though it were ‘policeman’ or ‘dentist.’ ‘Whore,’ in most registers, is a pejorative word, frequently used as an insult. It ignores and harshly judges the conditions and circumstances of sex work. Its use unbalances all the thoughtful contextualization of this “Introduction”.

The word ‘whore’ appears also in Robert S. Rudder’s “Introduction” to his own rendition (2015). To describe Celestina, Rudder begins by quoting the servant Pármeno: “As the servant, Pármeno, puts it, she is a seamstress, perfume maker, manufacturer of cosmetics, repairer of virgins, a go-between, and a bit of a witch.” The translator continues, now in his own words: “The truth is, she is a whore and a madam who has had a bevy of young prostitutes in her care” (Rudder, 2015, p. 2). It is not only an odd leap, given that Celestina actually does have numerous skills, but again the word is used with no critical distance, passing a standard moral judgment on Celestina before the reader has begun the book. It should be said, at least in passing, that with the arrival of the sixteenth century and the increased professionalization of medicine, women who exercised medical tasks — particularly within what we call obstetrics and gynecology today — were consistently cut out from such practices; Celestina clearly has such skills, and in the world she inhabits they are not yet overshadowed by her activities as procuress: “exact definitions of professional activities such as midwifery, prostitution, healing, surgery or sorcery rarely existed in the minds of the majority of urban dwellers” (Rouhi, 1998, p. 3).

Another area in which introductions raise questions is national identity. González Echevarría delves into the latter with a caveat: “Although it is no longer fashionable to speak of national characteristics in reference to art,” he goes on to state that “it seems to me that Celestina, with its sarcasm, sacrilegiousness,
cruteness, unmitigated mocking of humanity, and disregard for generic conventions, could not be but Spanish” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xxvii). Offering examples from Lope de Vega, Quevedo, Cervantes, as well as Latin-American writers whose familiarity with La Celestina is clear, the scholar ends the “Introduction” with these words: “I cannot conceive that Celestina could have been by a Frenchman or an Italian, much less by an Englishman or a German. Perhaps there is something, after all, uniquely Spanish in Rojas’ masterpiece” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xxvii).

As unfashionable as it may have become, the notion that a work is essentially of one nationality or another continues to be attractive to many of us. However, it is also elusive and ultimately circular; it rests on vast generalizations about entire cultures as well as the presupposition that the job of art is to act as ambassador for its country. It also promotes a sense of exceptionalism. This is an artefact of the 19th century during which ‘unique Spanish characteristics’ and a ‘glorious Golden Age’ were actively constructed in projects of national identity formation, one prominent case of which can be seen in the work of George Ticknor, who intended to reflect specific characteristics of “the Spanish people” in his History. The qualities singled out as Spanish are easily found in numerous other national literatures; more importantly, for the curious reader who buys this book or the student to whom it has been assigned for class, such essential identifications of Spain risk an invitation to reductionism and over-simplification. This ease with which the markers of national identity link up with other evaluative concepts are worth scrutiny: historical periods and their attached worth, the idea that a pre-twentieth century work is valuable because it is somehow modern, and the ranking of a work as the first to have done something.

In the introductions, La Celestina is at times characterized as a work that hails the Renaissance as it says goodbye to the Middle Ages: “Rojas, who stood at the threshold between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, dressed his work in medieval garb half in jest […] But Celestina was hardly medieval in form or content”
(González Echevarría, 2009, p. xviii). In it we “find the influence of the Renaissance in names taken from Greek and Roman tradition” (Rudder, 2015, p. 2); it was written “in the full flood of the Renaissance,” (Simpson, 2019, p. vi); “La Celestina is a pivotal transitional work from medieval to Renaissance Spanish literature” (Finch, 2003, p. xi). In these descriptions, implicitly or explicitly, Renaissance means more sophistication than medieval; however, these attributes require an uncontested acceptance of a rather tidy periodization with clear boundaries between eras. Studies of historiography have for some time challenged periodizations along these lines. The remarks of historian Francis Oakley are well worth quoting at some length here:

We ourselves, of course, tend to take altogether for granted the hallowed practice of dividing European history into ‘ancient,’ ‘medieval,’ and ‘modern,’ to accept it even as almost a deliverance of nature. It is far from being anything of the sort. It postdated the centuries we are accustomed to calling ‘medieval’ and it was spawned, in fact, by the love affair of Renaissance humanists with the great achievements of the classical past. After a lapse of more than a thousand years shadowed by “the triumph of barbarism and religion,” they congratulated themselves as having succeeded at long last in emulating those achievements. But that way of conceptualizing the unfolding of European history has the distorting effect of lumping together in a single, long-drawn-out period, and in incongruous and dismissive juxtaposition, the distinctive (and shifting) political, economic, intellectual, cultural, and religious formations of more than a thousand years. (Oakley, 2006)

Oakley’s words remind us that the artificial construct of a neat border between medieval/Renaissance is laden with problems and needs to be re-examined. Of the scholars who introduce La Celestina, Dorothy S. Severin is one who points out the same divide though acknowledges its openness to critique: “it has been said to foreshadow a new renaissance sensibility, although there are those who would object to the medieval/renaissance division” (Severin, 1998, p. xii).

This takes us directly to the next issue which is the ‘modernity’ of Celestina. We read in one “Introduction” that character development in the book is a “remarkably modern feature of Celestina” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xviii). The modernity of
La Celestina is highlighted several times also by Juan Goytisolo, who writes the “Introduction” to Peter Bush’s version (2009). Goytisolo subscribes fully to the thesis of one main author, Fernando de Rojas (as mentioned in note 8 above), and unequivocally stresses the converso poetics of the work. Periodization does not come into play for him as much as the modernity of the novel in dialogue; Goytisolo qualifies the text as an “astonishingly modern work,” (Goytisolo, 2010, p. vii), seeing this modernity in its “inner disharmony and subversive social and artistic forces” just as today we too endure a “universe of chaos and strife” (Goytisolo, 2010, p. x).

Likewise, the “Introduction” to the Sayers Peden translation treats the “obscenities” and “raunchiness” as “truly original and modern” because these features are not presented as farce: “such raunchiness existed earlier in Roman comedy, Petronious’ Satyricon, the fabliaux, Chaucer, the Libro de buen amor, Boccaccio and other authors and works” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xxii). If the implication here is that “raunchiness” in these ‘medieval’ authors and works is presented only in a farcical context, that is not entirely the case. For one thing, the texts and authors listed have much more that sets them apart than they have in common; the fact that they existed during what is called the Middle Ages does not bind them thematically or formally. For another, in most of these, what the scholar refers to as “raunchiness” and “obscenities” actually do produce comic effect as well as insight, and it is not all farce. Effects such as non-farcical comedy, subversiveness, acknowledgment of disharmony, exist in many ‘medieval’ works. The 14th-century El libro de buen amor and The Canterbury Tales as well as The Decameron display tremendous complexity of theme and rhetoric as well as hard looks at societal norms. We might thus wonder why an insistence on modernity as attribute should make a work more outstanding and worthy? It appears to suggest not just better quality as art, but also relevance and relatability. Marketing may well have a role in this. Are people more likely to buy and read a sixteenth-century work that is “astonishingly modern”? Perhaps, but not all, surely.
The impulse to plug the book in such terms is understandable. In the history of Castilian literature, *Don Quijote* looms so large that to draw people’s attention to other works is not only difficult but important. Here we come to our next concept, which is ranking of this work vis-à-vis *Don Quijote* or as a masterpiece in its own right, a first of a kind: for Simpson, *Celestina* as a work of art “deserves a place alongside Cervantes’ masterpiece [..] It is even superior to *Don Quixote* in its close-knit fabric and sustained tension” (Simpson, 2019, p. v). It is also “the first true novel to appear in the West” (Simpson, 2019, p.viii). It “is considered by virtually all students of Spanish literature to follow immediately after *Don Quijote* on the roll of Spanish literary masterpieces” (Singleton, 1958, p. v). Cohen begins his “Introduction” by quoting both Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo and Gerald Brenan’s statements on *La Celestina* as the first European novel and equal to *Don Quijote* (Cohen, 1964, p. 7). “It is recognized by scholars and critics as being second only to the Quijote as a work of prose fiction in the Spanish language” (González Echevarría, 2009, p. xiv). For Goytisolo, it would not be an exaggeration “to equate the artistic originality and conquests of Rojas with the achievements of Cervantes, Velázquez or Goya” (Goytisolo, 2009, p. xiv). We have become so used to such rankings and comparisons that we may forget that ultimately, they are a symptom of the corporatization of literature. “Masterpiece,” “first,” “superior,” suggest not only canonization, which has its own problems, but also competition. The value of a literary work is assessed in economic and transactional terms. Now, with so much literature available on the market, and so many choices for students, it makes sense that prologues to translations use such notions. Any criticism here is not of the scholars or translators: it is of the much broader culture that compels us to talk about all human production in the same value-assessed manner, a discourse in which the writer of these lines has also participated more than once. Let us hope that the more *La Celestina* becomes available thanks to the admirable work of scholars and translators, the more we will question the reasons for which such rankings are used as interpretive tools.
4. Conclusion

There are several ways in which the study of _La Celestina_ is of interest to English-language readers. The elaborate print and authorship history of this work, its intertextual dialogues with so many genres and philosophies, its depiction of a bleak urban landscape in early modern Spain, all make it a document that reveals a great deal about its time. The history of its physical production and circulation provides insight into 16th-century material culture, while its lively representation of human relations begs interpretation from both aesthetic and ethical viewpoints. Equally importantly, our contemporary debates on ageing, sex work, gender roles, and class prejudice gain more focus if we have an understanding of how such issues were represented centuries ago. _La Celestina_ offers ample information on these topics. Masterpiece or not, as good as _Don Quijote_ or not, it is a work that deserves to be known in other languages for multiple reasons.

Both research on and translation of _La Celestina_ are overwhelming tasks, and to bring this book and its context to more readers is an achievement worthy of immense praise. In the survey of the translations above, the questions raised aim — in the spirit of collegiality and respect — to continue the dialogue on the terms and presuppositions that we bring to the introduction of a cultural artefact that is so far removed from contemporary audiences, yet represents issues that ring familiar to us. Without the hard work of translators, such discussions could not take shape nor grow further. These English-language translations make a deeply complex and compelling text available to more readers, and for this — which, after all is the main part of the task — the translators and their colleagues must always have our gratitude.
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