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A Division of Character: From Fernando de Rojas's *Celestina* to Shakespearean Protagonists

Bir Karakter Bölünmesi: Fernando de Rojas'ın *Celestina*'sından Shakespeare Kahramanlarına

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Abstract

This article takes into account Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina* and compare some of the core features of the homonymous protagonist with some Shakespearean characters, examples mainly taken from *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Although a century divides the two authors and there is no recorded evidence of a connection between them, a comparative analysis is still feasible. While it may be impossible to establish a concrete link between Shakespeare and de Rojas, it may be beneficial to consider how certain core features of *Celestina* are portrayed within some Shakespearean protagonists. This has much more to do with the evolution of literature itself and how its boundaries are not only fluid but also how they intertwine in many occasions amongst themselves.

Keywords: Celestina, Comparative Studies, De Rojas, Shakespeare, Theatre

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Öz

Bu makale Fernando de Rojas'ın *La Celestina* adlı eserini ele almakta ve eserin aynı isimli kahramanının bazı temel özelliklerini, çoğunlukla *Fırtına* ve *Bir Yaz Gecesi Rüyası*'ndan alınan örneklerle, Shakespeare'in bazı karakterleriyle karşılaştırmaktadır. Her ne kadar iki yazar arasında bir yüzyıl fark olsa da ve aralarında bir bağlantı olduğuna dair kayıtlı bir kanıt bulunmasa da karşılaştırmalı bir analiz yine de mümkündür. Shakespeare ve de Rojas arasında somut bir bağlantı kurmak imkânsız olsa da *Celestina*'nın bazı temel özelliklerinin bazı Shakespeare kahramanlarında nasıl tasvir edildiğini ele almak faydalı olabilir. Bu, daha çok edebiyatın kendi evrimiyle ve sınırlarının sadece değişken olmasıyla kalmayıp aynı zamanda birçok durumda bu sınırların nasıl iç içe geçtiğiyle ilişkili bir durumdur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Celestina, Karşılaştırmalı Çalışmalar, De Rojas, Shakespeare, Tiyatro

Introduction

While the groundwork for comparative literature has been set more than a century ago, only in the more recent decades this discipline has been used for a more in-depth intertextual and intercultural analysis. Although the Spanish Golden Age of literature and Fernando de Rojas have been extensively studied and analysed and there is an inestimable number of articles, essays, and books written on Shakespeare, fewer are the studies that have combined and cross-referenced these two authors.

Within this article, the character and homonymous protagonist of *La Celestina*, written by Fernando de Rojas presumably in 1499, will be compared with several Shakespearean characters conceived almost a century later. The aim of this approach is to understand if certain traits of Shakespearean characters are traceable to a previous literary archetype. While the preliminary research does not indicate a clear link between the two authors, it is nonetheless possible to notice various analogies in their way of creating certain types of characters.

The first part will focus on giving a rudimentary explanation of the authors and their works. This part will attribute a more substantial portion to Fernando de Rojas mainly because the article takes for granted a general knowledge of William Shakespeare and his plays. The second part will analyse the traits and features of *Celestina*, the main protagonist of de Rojas's work. Lastly, these traits will be compared to the ones extrapolated from several Shakespearean characters.

De Rojas and Shakespeare – A Context

As already stated, this article will not expand excessively on Shakespeare. The following facts are assumed as common knowledge: not much is certain about his life or his identity and many theories surround it. Furthermore, few are the stage directions left behind from the original plays. For reference, two monographs are indicated for a more in-depth study: one that also tackles the plays, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* written by E. K. Chambers in 1930 (the editions of 1951, 1963, and 1989 have updated this work) and one that provides a more modern viewpoint, *William Shakespeare: A Literary Life* by Richard Dutton published in 1989.

Similar to Shakespeare's life, it is equally complex to outline Fernando de Rojas as a writer, not only because he lived almost a century before Shakespeare, but also because he is less known on the global literary scene. It is also important to stress the fact that the author himself was unwilling to share personal and precise information. Just as Gilman (1972) points out in *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas – The intellectual and social landscape of La Celestina*, "Rojas offers us nothing at all – not even the few playful hints of a Cervantes! [...] He is even reluctant to indicate in any way the name of the city which is the scene of his tragicomic argument" (p. 7). In other words, because of different circumstances, a veil of mystery shrouds the personal lives of the two examined authors.

Other difficulties arise when dealing with the different editions of *La Celestina* – the first one presumably published in 1499, while other known versions include the 1507 one (Zaragoza) and the 1514 one (Valencia) – and the subsequent additions and interpolations made by the author. Further problems emerge when considering that the paternity of *La Celestina*, de Rojas's only work, is questioned (just as with some of Shakespeare's plays) in the very prologue where the author explains how during a two-week vacation, he had found the beginning of the manuscript and had decided to complete it.

Critics have with good reason generally suspected that the information provided by the prologue material taken as a whole was designed more to mislead than to inform them about the intentions and the reality of the man who wrote *La Celestina*. (Gilman, p. 51)

Even though Gilman seems to be inclined to side more with the theory that the prologue was a simple ruse, there are also scholars, such as Marcel Bataillon, who for instance considers de Rojas to be just a talented imitator of the “primitive *Celestina*” (as cited in Gilman, p. 9).

A first parallelism between the two authors becomes more and more evident if we consider what has been said not only concerning their life but also about their works. It is nevertheless important to be mindful not only of the historical and cultural background of said authors but also of how a core theme such as magic, which will be later on discussed, was perceived at the beginning and the end of the 16th century and how certain medical practices either collided or coincided with it.

Lastly, before analysing the character of *Celestina*, it is important to specify which translation will be used for the purpose of this article. One of the first versions of *La Celestina* was actually more akin to an adaptation, marked by a clear genre shift. John Rastell's *Calisto and Melebea* or *A New Commodity in English in Maner of an Enterlude* (ca. 1525) was a textual hybridisation that made it become an interlude, just as the title suggests. As Ruiz Moneva (2010) explains, “in contrast to the original, the Interlude has to be seen as a work meant primarily to be represented” (p. 115). Given the rearrangements, the fact that it was written in royal stanzas – which very widely used in English Renaissance literature – and the fact that several elements and subplots were eliminated altogether to adjust to the interlude genre, this version will not be considered. The translation that will hence be employed is the one produced by James Mabbe, described as the first English Hispanist; the quoted paragraphs and words within this article refer to the version edited by Pérez Fernández and entitled *James Mabbe, The Spanish Bawd* (2013) published by Modern Humanities Research Association. *The Spanish Bawd*, the title given to Mabbe's 1631 translation of de Rojas's work, appeared eight years after the *First Folio* in which he also contributed to with a poem.

James Mabbe was indeed an exceptional agent of cultural exchange who displayed a unique critical acumen in his choice of texts, many of them produced by foundational authors in the Spanish canon of prose fiction: Fernando de Rojas, Mateo Alemán, and Miguel de Cervantes. (Pérez Fernández, 2013, p. 5)

Mabbe's translation thus represents the closest connection to the reality of Shakespeare's time and seems the most adequate for this article. Furthermore, as

Yamamoto-Wilson (2012) points out, “it is also possible that Mabbe knew Shakespeare personally, and may even have influenced him, although definitive proof remains tantalizingly elusive” (p. 320). A useful clarification is that Mabbe’s translation was based on the Italian version of Alfonso Ordoñez, one of *La Celestina*’s first renderings in a foreign language, written in 1506. For this reason, quotations should be approached with a critical and cautious perspective in mind, mainly because some minor changes in the language of *The Spanish Bawd* could be misleading.

The Figure of Celestina

La Celestina is a tragicomedy that was not meant to be portrayed as a theatrical play, although it was written as one. To summarise the main plot points, the nobleman Calisto falls in love with Lady Melibea but initially she does not seem to reciprocate his feelings; as such, Celestina is hired by Calisto to mediate their love. She accepts, more for personal gain, and accomplishes her part of the bargain. The lovers end up dying tragically and after that, Celestina is killed by Calisto’s pages because she had not given them part of the money she had earned for services rendered, as she had previously promised. The tragicomedy is read more as an ironic take on the courtly love genre dealing with themes such as rhetorics and human whims and desires.

As Juan Goytisolo (2009) notes in the introduction of a recent publication of *La Celestina*, “five centuries after its first edition, Celestina portrays with disturbing lucidity and precision the fast approaching universe of chaos and strife that we now endure” (pp. VII-XVI). One of the reasons behind this assertive remark is possibly due to the complexity of its homonymous character. Celestina is referred to by many different names or epithets during the tragicomedy, the most important ones being either procuress (*alcahueta* in the original) – a ruffian of sorts – or simply witch (*hechizera* in Spanish). Through a process of antonomasia, the name Celestina became the correspondent of a sexual facilitator, a female counterpart to the figure of Pandarus. It is important to emphasise that her ever-changing nature is based on the perception of the other characters who interact with her; it is either their predisposition or their resentment that also dictate their behaviour and the words they use to address her. Furthermore, these sentiments change and react based on circumstances. For example, Melibea initially refers to her as *mother* (p. 156), which in turn becomes *thou false witch, thou enemy of honesty, thou causeress of secret errors* (p. 160) when

Celestina reveals Calisto's love and then again it reverts to *thou wise matron* (p. 251) once she falls in love.

This good honest whore, this grave matron, forsooth, had at the very end of the city, there where the tanners dwell, close by the waterside, a lone house, somewhat far from neighbours, half of it fallen down, ill contrived and worse furnished. Now, for to get her living, you must understand, she had six several trades: she was a laundress, a perfumers, a former of faces, a mender of cracked maidenheads, and had some smatch of a witch. Her first trade was a cloak to all rest, under colour whereof being withal a piece of a seamstress, many young wenches that were of your ordinary sorts of servants, came to her house to work: some on smocks, some on gorgets and many other things. (*James Mabbe, The Spanish Bawd*, p. 103)

These are some of the first things said about the character of Celestina, in a hefty monologue delivered in a semi-comical way by Parmeno, one of Calisto's pages, almost anticipating the typical listing style of Rabelais. This is a first step towards understanding the complex character that is enacted by Celestina, a protagonist that continually deals in many different affairs. Even though the English version treats the protagonist with a greater harshness by saying she is an 'honest whore' instead of the milder Spanish *buena dueña* – a 'good woman' – her presence and importance are already evident even considering that by this point in the tragicomedy she still has to make her appearance.

Here in this pocket of mine, I carry a little parcel of yarn, and other such like trinkets, which I always bear about me; that I may have some pretence at first to make my easier entrance and free access, where I am not thoroughly known: as gorgets, coifs, fringers, rolls, fillets, hair-laces, nippers, antimony ceruse, and sublime mercury, needles and pins. (*James Mabbe, The Spanish Bawd*, p. 142)

In this passage, uttered by Celestina herself, it is possible to see not only some of the tools she uses for her trade but also what purpose they serve: they are merely a pretext to gain access in places she is not well known. In a certain sense, this passage may even imply that Celestina does not believe in magic; she is not the witch that others perceive, rather her art relies on understanding and talking to people. These trinkets serve to conceal her real motives, which ultimately represent personal gain. The use of objects is combined with her gestures; as Bados-Ciria (1996) points out Celestina's body language plays a fundamental role in manipulating the characters she interacts with; her hands physically touch the ones she addresses and it is this contact that

constitutes the purest form of Celestina's manipulations. It is important to note that this ability to manipulate through the use of body language is also linked to a certain degree to a diabolic quality; since witchcraft was linked to carnality, it is also fair to assume that this physicality was perceived as a direct resultant. "Focusing on the materiality of Celestina's language allows for an examination rather than a description of her discursive practice and provides an alternative to ascribing Celestina's prowess to external sources – diabolical power and intervention" (Valbuena, 1994, p. 208). This wickedness remains however more subtle, while the ways Celestina gains a gradually higher degree of familiarity with the other characters is more relevant. Through physical connection, she establishes the intimacy needed to mould the opinions of others according to her own will.

La Celestina shows that language and its rhetorical operations, far from informing a virtuous self and providing cohesion to social life, could be put to spurious ends. [...] Celestina is an immoral and self-serving Protagoras who exposes the underside of this civic rhetorical ideal. She is a humanist's nightmare: she transgresses sexual and family morals, turns to witchcraft instead of socially acceptable religious practices, and uses eloquence for all the wrong purposes. (Pérez Fernández, 2013, p. 28)

Pérez Fernández is underlying not only the true art of Celestina; it is not as much witchcraft as it is rhetoric and eloquence. Her understanding of human behaviour enables her manipulative ways for personal gain. It is even more visible if we consider her own words: *Melibea is fair, Calisto fond and frank, he cares not to spare his purse, nor I my pains* (James Mabbe, *The Spanish Bawd*, p. 141). Here Celestina states that she is aware of the situation and already hints at the fact that she knows how to turn a profit. It could be argued that her most diabolical quality is the awareness of her own actions; she fully understands the consequences of what might happen to Melibea and Calisto and decides to take advantage of it regardless. Her needs, especially the monetary ones, outweigh the value of human life. The concept of personal gain is also partly explained by Joseph Snow (2000):

Celestina gets caught up in Calisto's sexual sport for gain, yes, but also for the playing of the game, the proximity to lusting youths, the thrill of its covertness and secrecy, and the vicarious pleasures it brings. [...]. It is Celestina who carries the message of sensuality to Melibea and Lucrecia, then taunts Calisto as he fondles the cordon, arouses Areusa by passing her rough hands over her body as she

celebrates her physical perfection in words, calms anger and proposes passion in Elicia and Areusa (Act LX) and teases Melibea as no other kind of physician would. This is the *Celestina* of the twenty hands, with her hands appearing everywhere and in every affair, helping to overcome puritanical scruples and urging one and all to join in the pleasure dance she orchestrates so well. (pp. 158-159)

This so-called 'Celestina of the twenty hands' is the one that this article aims to emphasise. Her shifting attitudes, frequent manipulations and monstrously humane features have been portrayed continuously in literature and in a variety of ways, and it is exactly this humanity that Shakespeare explores in his works. The 'roundness' frequently attributed to the Shakespearean characters stems from the playwright's ability of understanding and recreating these exact dimensions.

Celestinian Traits within Shakespearean Characters

As previously stated, a concrete link between Fernando de Rojas and William Shakespeare is purely speculative as there is a lack of definite evidence. Even though at the time two French versions of *La Celestina* were in circulation, as well as Rastell's *Interlude*, connecting them to what Shakespeare might have read is mere conjecture. It is true nevertheless that the playwright frequently used to his advantage plot points and themes that derived from various sources; he borrowed from Ovid, Livius and Plutarch, just to give some examples. That being said, it would not seem farfetched to imagine that in some manner Shakespeare might have at least heard a fragment of *La Celestina*. This way of thinking however comes with a risk attached just as Nicholas Round (1997) warns off:

There is almost a fatal attraction for any British Hispanist in the prospect of establishing a link between Rojas and Shakespeare. With deceptive neatness, the two can be made to stand as boundary-marks at the beginning and at the end of a century of profound cultural change. [...] As long as we insist on valuing one author in terms deriving from the achievements of the other, there is not much to be learned from bringing the two great names into conjunction. (pp. 93-94)

For this very same reason, the inclination of the article is to rather point towards a comparison between the thematic characterisation of *Celestina* and several other Shakespearean protagonists rather than trying to link the two writers.

Let us consider hence *The Tempest* since it partly deals with magic and sorceries, and analyse the similarities between *Celestina* and both Prospero and

Caliban. Whereas Celestina is described as a witch who supposedly stipulated a contract with a devil, Prospero is a sorcerer who draws his power from the force of Nature; the main divergent point between the two is not only the difference in the sources of their art but also how they manifest it. Prospero tends to use spirits, such as Ariel, through subjugation and within the final scenes ends up renouncing his power; Celestina on the other hand tends to be frightful of the demonic power she is using. Celestina will not follow through with the typical Shakespearean metamorphosis through which Prospero will become a positive character. At the end of *The Tempest*, he will use his spirits to bless the union between Miranda and Ferdinand:

Come, temperate nymphs, and help to celebrate

A contract of true love. Be not too late. (*The Tempest*, IV.1.132-133)

Celestina, as already explained, will instead think only about personal gain and will not share this view towards the importance of true love. The link between her and Prospero is to be found in the fact that they dabble in forbidden or forgotten arts; the different impressions of the approach to mentioned sorcery or witchery may be the result of the time span that separates the writers.

On the other hand, a more interesting comparison can be made between Caliban and Celestina. In this case, it is the perception of the other characters that should be taken into account. Both are deformed in their way, Celestina by her age and Caliban by nature. Throughout the plays, they are both slandered, besmirched and ill-spoken of: Celestina is referred to as a *false witch* (p. 160), *old filth* (p. 287) and *covetous crib* (p. 288) while Caliban becomes an *abhorred slave* (I. 2. 350), *ridiculous monster* (II. 2. 159) and *demi-devil* (V.1.272). Another important aspect that should be at least mentioned regards the different interpretations in more recent years that have been attributed to Caliban, especially the ones that study the character as a representation of Otherness. The dynamics between Prospero and Caliban have even been examined through an eco-critical lens as well, as recapitulated by David Gray (2020), which more than the postcolonial discourse that emphasises the culture against culture debate, focuses on Caliban's closeness to nature. Since these nuances, however important they may be, stray from the main focus of this article will only be mentioned in passing.

One of the most contrasting points concerning the presence of magic and spirits between de Rojas and Shakespeare is their approach to the subject. While, as stated previously, it is theorised that de Rojas used witchery as an ironic device, Shakespeare's plays acknowledge the presence of magic directly. Shakespeare in various instances employs the idea of either shadows that are portrayed by spirits or actors that are merely shadows. This is exemplified through the words of both Puck and Prospero with their ending monologues:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.1.401–404)

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air.
[...] We are such stuff
As dreams are made on: and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (*The Tempest* IV.1.148–158)

The existence of magic in the Shakespearean world is emphasised for instance even in *The Tragedy of Macbeth* where the three witches may represent the unavoidable course of destiny; it is the paradox of premonition with which by doing everything to avoid said destiny, the character ends up making it come to pass. Here the manifestation of magic is intertwined with human fate. Shakespeare is more meta-theatrical than de Rojas; his concept of a play being a dream and life being a play is undoubtedly a more mature product of his craftsmanship, but the century that divides the two writers should also represent an important accountable point.

Other core features of *Celestina*, as previously mentioned, are her rhetoric, her manipulative nature and her being a procuress, traces of which can be found individually in the figure of Iago from *Othello* and the Nurse from *Romeo and Juliet*. While the veiled directness of the Nurse's wordplays may lack within *Celestina*, the fact

that she manipulates Parmeno in servility after providing for him the sexual favours of Areusa constitutes nevertheless an interesting comparison. Iago, on the other hand, is perceived until the end as ‘honest Iago’, in spite of his wickedness, whereas Celestina is frequently denigrated by the other characters as being a *false witch*. Just as Round (1997) points out when considering how Celestina encompasses traits from both Iago and the Nurse:

The Nurse is the indispensable go-between, facilitating a forbidden love; she even seems to display a certain human spontaneity, by contrast with the rigid codes of family honour. Iago has at his command a Celestina-like rhetoric of temptation and moral disorientation, and the self-interest from which he operates merges, like hers, into an almost disinterestedly destructive malice. But Celestina's own pattern of activity subsumes both sets of attributes. She is at one and the same time indispensable and destructive, profoundly human and radically monstrous. (p. 98)

It is this monstrous humanity and humane monstrosity that characterises the complexity of Celestina. It is this same complexity and roundness that a century later will be divided into individual traits and amplified within exceptional characters throughout the Shakespearean plays.

Conclusions

Jorge Luis Borges (1964), in one of his short stories *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, wrote that “there is no plagiarism because it has been established that all works are the creation of one author, who is atemporal and anonymous” (p. 26). This referred to a fictitious civilisation that he invented, but the concept of literature as a boundless art form was a constant that echoed within his writings. In a certain poetical way, this is one of the approaches used in comparative literature; it is not interested in plagiarism as its purpose is not verifying if an author used the same literary components of another, but rather how they achieved so and what was their personal take. Comparative literature thrives on the simple principle of curiosity, the same one that started this article.

The century that chronologically divides the Fernando de Rojas and William Shakespeare, as well as their geographic collocations, are important factors when considering the comparative approach that was used. It is obvious and self-evident that there is a drastic literary shift between these two authors, but it also seems relevant

that certain thematic points marginally intertwine. *Celestina*, to an extent, seems an exaggerated protagonist because of the simple fact that various dimensions and functions coincide within her. Contrarily, in Shakespeare, the various traits that compose *Celestina*'s complexity are extrapolated and individually embodied by single characters; this way of exploring a particular nuance paradoxically increases their dimension and brings them closer to our perception of a real human being. This is one of the reasons we perceive them as 'round' or complete characters.

Magic is a thematic element that had a great impact on the Renaissance literary production but it also evolved differently based on its chronological and geographical contexts. As previously mentioned, part of *Celestina*'s abilities come from her physicality, which in turn is akin to magic. As Valbuena (1994) points out, "*Celestina*'s 'linguistic sorcery' overlaps and extends a particular type of popular sorcery called love magic" (p. 208). While we might expect a progressively diminishing importance attributed to magic from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, it is worth noting that it was not an immediate process (p. 378) as Helen Cooper (2004) points out. It is however possible to notice these changes, especially when considering the interpretation of Prospero's final act in *The Tempest*. His decision to renounce his magic may also represent, in a sense, the awareness that the so-called 'old world' is coming to an end and a new way of perceiving contemporaneity is about to come; within this framework, the importance of magic also begins to dwindle and slowly fade.

Although this article has considered only several minor nuances and examples to indicate some of the leitmotifs within the two authors, many more could be the pursuable case studies. It could be possible to analyse for instance the similarities between Romeo and Calisto and their encounter with Juliet and Melibea. In both cases, as we might expect, a great importance is given to eyesight for the first encounter of the lovers, a sense that was predominant during the Renaissance because of the perception that love stemmed initially from the eyes. Literary works and narratological elements have a way of constantly intertwining based on a plethora of criteria and variables. Themes are continuously re-elaborated, characters change throughout time and human features are depicted differently with each style of each passing author. This becomes even more evident in theatre where the same script can be interpreted differently by the various companies of actors portraying the same plays. In Barbera's (1965) words, theatre "exists to arouse and discharge emotions in the audience (or the

reader) and does it by concentrating its eloquence on the dramatic moment. This is certainly true in Rojas as it was to be later, supremely so, in the theatre of Shakespeare” (p. 792). These types of emotions are perpetuated throughout literature in general and this article attempted to demonstrate how they are not limited by spatial or temporal boundaries.

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