

HILADO-CORDÓN-CADENA: SYMBOLIC EQUIVALENCE IN LA CELESTINA

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to George and Pat Shipley

The interplay of metaphor and reality contributes notably to La Celestina's imaginative power.¹ Two justly famous cases are those of real and metaphorical falls, and of locus amoenus imagery as an alternately lyrical and sinister counterpart to Melibea's garden (which is at once a real place and an image for Melibea's body: Act XX, p. 230).² Of equal importance, though less often noticed, is the connection of three real (and, as I hope to show, equivalent) objects with a cluster of images. The objects are Celestina's skein of thread (Acts III-IV), Melibea's girdle (IV-VI), and Calisto's gold chain (XI-XII), and the images are those of hunting, trapping, and captivity. For example:

Pocas vírgenes, a Dios gracias, has tú visto en esta ciudad que hayan abierto tienda a vender, de quien yo no haya sido corredora de su primer hilado. En naciendo la mochacha, la hago escribir en mi registro, y esto para que yo sepa cuántas se me salen de la red. (III, 81. Celestina to Sempronio)³

Será de los nuestros; darnos ha lugar a tender las redes sin embarazo por aquellas doblas de Calisto. (III, 82. Celestina to Sempronio, about Pármeno)

¡En qué lazo me he metido! Que por me mostrar solícita y esforzada pongo mi persona al tablero. (IV, 86. Celestina, soliloquy)

Vender un poco de hilado, con que tengo cazadas más de treinta de su estado, si a Dios ha placido, en este mundo. (VI, 109. Celestina to Calisto, about Melibea)

Con éstas [arnas] mata y vence, con éstas me cautivó, con éstas me tiene ligado y puesto en dura cadena. (VI, 118. Calisto to Celestina, about Melibea)⁴

tus lazos, tus cadenas y redes, con que pescas nuestras flacas voluntades... Bien pensé que de tus lazos me había librado. (XXI, 235. Pleberio, soliloquy, referring first to the world and then to love)

And so on. The numerous images of hunting and trapping, which may derive from image-patterns in Jorge Manrique's Coplas and the Dança general de la Muerte,⁵ refer to the self-seeking activities of the characters: Calisto, Melibea, Celestina, and others are alternately or simultaneously hunter and quarry in the hunt of lust or avarice or power.⁶ They are thus central to the plot and the meaning of La Celestina. Moreover, as the above examples show, they are

CELESTINESCA

closely linked to the skein of thread, the girdle, and the gold chain.

Let us now consider the relation of these three objects to each other. Celestina conjures the Devil into a skein of thread anointed with the poison of vipers (III, 85),⁷ in order to use it as a weapon in the seduction of Melibea. She takes the skein to Melibea's house, and as soon as Alisa touches it she decides to go immediately to visit her sick sister, leaving Melibea alone with Celestina. Alisa is, of course, a very foolish woman, but to leave her closely-guarded daughter with such a woman, knowing what she does about her,⁸ goes far beyond mere folly. It is inexplicable in any normal terms, and Celestina's reaction shows us that the explanation must be sought on a different level: "Por aquí anda el diablo aparejando oportunidad" (IV, 90). It is not merely that Alisa's sister's illness has worsened ("que se le arreció desde un rato acá el mal"), though this is how Celestina formulates the Devil's intervention, since Alisa could perfectly well have taken Melibea with her. The only possible explanation-- in a work justly praised for the convincing motivation of its characters' actions-- is that the Devil was in the skein and that at the slightest contact he has taken possession of Alisa's judgment and will.

This is the one incident in La Celestina which can be accounted for only in terms of witchcraft and diabolic possession. Were it not for this, everything else-- Melibea's subversion, Calisto's frenzy, Celestina's sudden loss of control over the course of events-- could be satisfactorily explained on psychological grounds, but once we concede that Alisa's reckless negligence is the work of the Devil aided by a witch, we have to see the actions of other characters in a new light. This raises a problem for the appreciation of La Celestina, as a number of critics have pointed out.⁹ Melibea's subversion and some other parts of the work are motivated twice over, one of the motives being of a kind that modern readers are reluctant to take seriously. Furthermore, the double motivation may suggest that Rojas himself was uncertain about the role of witchcraft. Nevertheless, I believe that Alisa's sudden departure leaves us no choice.

The Devil, it seems, remains in the skein of thread after Alisa leaves the house with words full of dramatic irony: "Pues, Melibea, contenta a la vecina en todo lo que razón fuere darle por el hilado" (90). In the conjuration scene, Celestina had instructed the Devil that "vengas sin tardanza a obedecer mi voluntad y en ello [el hilado] te envuelvas y con ello estés sin un momento te partir, hasta que Melibea con aparejada oportunidad que haya lo compre y con ello de tal manera quede enredada" (III, 85; my italics). And this instruction appears to be carried out: the opportunity is created (and the words "aparejada oportunidad" echoed, 90), and the thread is unnaturally strong ("recio como cuerdas de vihuela," 89)-- strong enough to make a net to trap Melibea.¹⁰ The Devil has been told to remain in the skein until Melibea has bought it, the implication being that he can then leave it; and this is what he seems to do. He takes possession of Melibea's will, inflaming her with desire for Calisto (the "crudo y fuerte amor" which Celestina had stated as her objective, 85). As Russell points out, "Es evidente que el poder mágico del bote de aceite serpentino en que fue empapado el hilado se ha transferido al cuerpo de la víctima" (no. 302, p. 351): Melibea complains,

CELESTINESCA

when she next meets Celestina, that "comen este corazón serpientes dentro de mi cuerpo" (X, 154).

Melibea surrenders her will to Celestina (and her soul to the Devil, in the eyes of most contemporary readers); the surrender of her body to Calisto is inevitable. The symbol of this surrender is the handing over of her girdle to Celestina, and both parties realize it whether consciously or subconsciously. Celestina, addressing the girdle on her way to Calisto's house, says: "Yo te haré traer por fuerza, si vivo, a la que no quiso darme su buena habla de grado" (V, 103). Melibea later admits: "En mi cordón le llevaste envuelta la posesión de mi libertad" (X, 160).

Two observations are appropriate here, and both will be found relevant to later stages of the plot. First, the Devil gains entry because the skein of thread appeals to a weak point in Alisa: her concept of herself as a careful housewife. Secondly, the skein is visually similar to the girdle: Celestina goes to Melibea's house carrying an object into which she has conjured the Devil, the Devil seems to leave the object when he has done his work, and Melibea gives to Celestina a visual equivalent which she carries away with her. Skein has been exchanged for girdle ("contenta a la vecina en todo lo que razón fuere darle por el hilado"), and it is possible that the Devil has passed from one to the other.

What may seem today a far-fetched suggestion would, I think, have been less strange to Rojas's contemporaries, and it is supported by Calisto's words and actions when Celestina hands him the girdle. He is trapped by it: "¡O bienaventurado cordón, que tanto poder y merecimiento tuviste de ceñir aquel cuerpo, que yo no soy digno de servir! ¡O nudos de mi pasión, vosotros enlazasteis mis deseos!" (VI, 114). He rapidly comes to identify the girdle with the body which it had encircled, caressing it as well as talking to it in terms appropriate to Melibea herself ("¡O mi gloria!", 115). His sensual frenzy alarms both Celestina and Sempronio, both of whom hope to profit from the eclipse of his reason by his passions, and who would therefore not be easily worried by his symptoms. Yet when Celestina sees him pawing violently at the girdle ("Cesa ya, señor, ese devanear, que me tienes cansada de escucharte y al cordón, roto de tratarlo," 115), and when Sempronio realizes that this is a substitute gratification which will divert him from the real object of his desires ("Señor, por holgar con el cordón, no querrás gozar de Melibea," 115), they know that things have gone too far. And Calisto confirms this: Sempronio's attempt to direct his master's sexual energies away from the girdle and towards Melibea earns him the reproach of "atajasolaces" (115).¹¹ This extraordinary scene has rightly attracted the attention of critics. Weinberg speaks of Celestina's inability to stomach this fetishism, and Peter N. Dunn of the disgust felt by Celestina and the servants at this spectacle.¹² Both are right, but I think that we can, and should, go further. Celestina and Sempronio are seriously worried, because Calisto's behaviour is, even by the standards that he has previously established, extreme and inexplicable. If, however, we accept that the Devil entered Calisto's body as soon as he touched the girdle, just as he had done with Alisa and Melibea on contact with the skein of thread, then his frenzy becomes explicable as part of a pattern.

CELESTINESCA

The workings of the Devil through witchcraft may remain speculative, but two points can be made with some confidence: the girdle appeals to Calisto's cherished view of himself as a lover, just as the skein appealed to Alisa's concept of herself; and girdle is exchanged for gold chain, just as skein had been exchanged for girdle. The exchange is not as immediate as with skein and girdle, since Celestina takes the girdle away from Calisto's house (118), and in Act IX she is apparently returning it to Melibea (LUCR.--Madre, que vamos presto y me des el cordón. CEL.--Vamos, que yo le llevo. 153), though we do not actually witness its return.¹³ The gold chain is not handed over until Act XI ("toma esta cadenilla, ponla al cuello," 164). Nevertheless, it is clear that Dunn is right to speak of "two gifts which, together, constitute an exchange" ("Pleberio's World," p. 144).¹⁴

We have seen the skein's effect on Alisa and Melibea, and the girdle's on Calisto. What of the chain and Celestina? As soon as she has received it as a reward for bringing the girdle to Calisto, she too starts to behave uncharacteristically. The great manipulator, the expert in psychological domination of others, becomes maladroit. Her reward is so great that it inflames her avarice, and whereas she might have been willing to share a small reward with Sempronio and Pármeneo, she insists on keeping her new treasure to herself. She insists even when, in Act XII, it should be clear that she is running a great risk by so doing, but she has been so pushed off balance that her sureness of touch deserts her, and she fatally misjudges the mood of her accomplices. The scene of her murder has been discussed by a number of critics, and there is no need to go over the ground again. What matters here is that she, like Alisa, Melibea, and Calisto, has lost control. Alisa's behaviour cannot be explained unless we take witchcraft into account, but what the other characters do is, though extreme, explicable in terms of observed human behaviour. However, there are common factors which make it unwise to leave the question there. In each case, the uncharacteristic behaviour follows immediately on contact with one of three objects which are visually equivalent, which are closely linked by textual references, and which form a series of exchanges. It is almost as if they merge into one another, so that skein becomes girdle, and girdle, chain. The Devil is in the first of them, and in the light of the evidence surveyed above, I do not think it fanciful to suggest that he passes into the second and the third, appealing to a victim's weak point (the point in which he or she takes greatest pride, as housewife, as lover, and in Celestina's case as shrewd businesswoman), and wreaking havoc. The correspondence is not perfect, since, as we have seen, the exchange of girdle for chain is less immediate than that of skein for girdle, and the skein has two victims, Alisa and Melibea, of whom only the first is attracted through her favourite image of herself. Nevertheless, if we reject the idea of a purposeful series, we are left with an uncomfortably large number of loose ends. Design seems to me to fit the evidence much better than coincidence.

There is one other point to be considered. The Devil was introduced into the skein of thread, and into the action, by Celestina, who, like all witches, thought she was in control, and, thus, able to threaten: "Si no lo haces con presto movimiento, ternásme por capital enemiga; heriré con luz tus cárceles tristes y oscuras..." (III, 85). But, like all witches, she was deceived: the Church taught that the effects thought by witches to be their

CELESTINESCA

own achievement were really due to the independent action of devils, and that the witches were mere dupes (Russell, no. 302, p. 347). And, as Russell points out, Pármeno's famous statement that "toda era burla y mentira" probably refers to the deception practised on witches by the devils who controlled them. The series skein-girdle-chain is a specially appropriate vehicle for the Devil, since it was the custom to conjure him into a magic circle,¹⁵ and the circular skein of thread clearly serves this purpose. The beginning of the process thus conforms to the beliefs about witchcraft current in Rojas's day, and so does its end. When Celestina has served the devil's purpose, she is ruthlessly discarded; the witch always comes to a bad end (Russell, p. 352). Sempronio is in no doubt as to her fate: "Esperad, doña hechicera, que yo te haré ir al infierno con cartas" (XII, 184), he says as he stabs her. With her disappears the protean skein-girdle-chain. The chain is mentioned once more, by Sosia when reporting the deaths of Celestina, Sempronio, and Pármeno to his master (XIII, 188), but it seems never to have been seen again after the murder. The action of La Celestina is still far from its end (we have not even reached the deflowering of Melibea), but the end is now inevitable. Most of this is, let us not forget, explicable in merely human terms of psychological cause and effect, but Rojas chose not to limit himself to those terms. Instead, he shows the Devil going about his work with the help of a witch, and operating through the material agency of three equivalent objects which are linked to an important segment of La Celestina's imagery.¹⁶



Alisa mira el hilo de Celestina, estando Melibea con ellas.

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CELESTINESCA

NOTES

¹For this point, as for many others, the classic treatment is George A. Shipley's Harvard dissertation, "Functions of Imagery in La Celestina" (1968), whose publication in revised form is eagerly awaited. Four articles and a conference paper (nos 303-06 and 331 of the Snow bibliography) embody material from the dissertation, together with the products of later research by Shipley. In order to save space, references in these notes will be by author and Snow number only, except for items too recent to be included in that bibliography.

²I use the Severin edition (Snow no. 176), since this is the only critical edition based on recent discoveries about the printing history of La Celestina. For Melibea's garden, see Shipley (no. 303) and F. M. Weinberg (no. 312), pp. 137-9.

³Red is here associated not only with hilado but also with the imagery of commerce (tienda). This association will recur in Pleberio's lament. I dealt with the interlocking of image clusters in a paper read in 1974 (no. 274); an expanded version of that paper will form part of a volume of Celestina essays by Dorothy S. Severin and myself, to be published in Barcelona by Ediciones Albir.

⁴Melibea's girdle is mentioned in the same passage.

⁵A study of hunting and other imagery in the Dança is to be published in Medium Aevum by David Hook and Jennifer Williamson.

⁶Calisto's falcon, whose significance has been discussed by a number of critics, is also, of course, a hunting image: "la caza de amor es de altanería," as several Golden Age poets observe.

⁷There is an interesting series of poison and serpent images, and this too reaches a climax in Pleberio's lament.

⁸The next time Alisa sees Celestina, and without having any additional reason to distrust her, she warns Melibea against her in the strongest terms (X, 162).

⁹See, for instance, P. E. Russell, no. 302, p. 352. This can, however, be seen as an enrichment of the work, as Francisco Rico argues: "Brujería y literatura," in Brujología [Primer Congreso Español de Brujología, San Sebastián, 1972] (Madrid: Seminarios y Ediciones, 1975), pp. 97-117, at pp. 98-100.

¹⁰As we have already seen, hilado and red are explicitly associated on p. 81. The point is made by Weinberg, no. 312, p. 152.

¹¹If further evidence be needed, it is provided by the following exchange of words between Celestina and Calisto:

CEL.-- ...debes, señor,...tratar al cordón como cordón, por que sepas hacer diferencia de habla, cuando con Melibea te veas....

CELESTINESCA

CAL.-- ¡O mi señora, mi madre, mi consoladora! Déjame gozar con este mensajero de mi gloria.... ¡O mis manos, con qué atrevimiento, con cuán poco acatamiento tenéis y tratáis la triaca de mi llaga! (116; my italics)

¹²Weinberg, no. 312, p. 146; Dunn, no. 49, p. 113. A different interpretation of the scene, emphasizing despair rather than transferred lust, is given by María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, no. 60, pp. 354-55. Weinberg makes the interesting point that Calisto tries to conjure the girdle ("Conjúrote me respondas," 115), echoing Celestina's conjuration in Act III (no. 312, pp. 145-46). Could he be subconsciously aware of the Devil's presence?

¹³Dunn says that it is never returned, and cannot be ("Pleberio's World," PMLA, 91 [1976], 406-19, at p.414). I think it likely that he is mistaken, but the point is not crucial, since the girdle has served its purpose, and, as Dunn says, "ceases to be a symbol and is merely an object."

¹⁴It is worth noting another exchange, this time of metaphor for reality. Calisto complains that Melibea "me tiene ligado y puesto en dura cadena" (VI, 118)-- the chain of love familiar to readers of the cancioneros and of Cárcel de Amor--, and Celestina promises to free him: "Que más aguda es la lima, que yo tengo, que fuerte esa cadena, que te atormenta," (118). She is in fact binding him with chains stronger than those of sexual desire, but he does not know that. To him, the promise of release from the metaphorical chain of desire through sexual union with the beloved is good reason to reward Celestina with a real chain.

¹⁵See, for example, Juan de Mena, Laberinto de Fortuna, stanza 245, or Celestina's account of her collaboration with Claudina: "Pues entrar en un cerco mejor que yo y con más esfuerzo" (VII, 123).

¹⁶It is possible to develop other aspects of this subject. Frederick A. de Armas points to resemblances between Melibea's girdle and Celestina's rosary (no. 269, p. 12). Michael Harland, in an important paper which I hope will soon be published, deals with some of the matters covered in the present article, but links them to images of spinning and of the weaving of webs. Weinberg, no. 312, pp. 144-47, is as far as I know the only other critic to have discussed the skein-girdle-chain connection in any detail. She seems on the verge of making the point on which I have concentrated, but in fact stops short of it. Nevertheless, her article is essential reading for anyone interested in these matters.

I dealt with the subject of the present article briefly in my 1974 paper, and at greater length in a paper to the Medieval Hispanic Research Seminar at Westfield College in 1975. I have taken into account comments made on both occasions, and also suggestions made more recently by Dr. Dorothy S. Severin and Professor Joseph T. Snow, for whose help I am very grateful. I should also like to acknowledge the help received from the Concordance to the Celestina (1499), by Lloyd Kasten and Jean Anderson (Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies and Hispanic Society of America, 1976), which makes the locating of half-remembered words infinitely easier.

