



## FOUR INSTANCES OF "¡CONFESSION!" IN *CELESTINA*

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The theme of death is interwoven with nearly every other topic found in *Celestina*. It is treated alternately as an object of immediate and of distant concern, as a part of reality to be respected and scorned, as a fact of life to be feared and welcomed. Death can also be (and in *Celestina* is) related to traditional folk humor. This humor may be considered ironic, although perhaps the irony is more visible to a twentieth-century reader/critic, who benefits from modern data-gathering processes, than to a reader contemporary to *Celestina*'s first publication. Death in *Celestina* is not presented to be laughed at, but one death, that of *Celestina*, can be seen to be closely related to this humorous folkloric motif recorded in Stith Thompson's collection (X315): Dying lawyer says, "I appeal."<sup>1</sup>

When the prospect of imminent death is not present, humor can help to communicate it without horror. Centurio takes advantage of this potential of humor in Act 18 when he is entrusted with killing Calisto: he continually quips about his role as assassin, despite the grim reality of murder. The planned murder of Calisto, although ultimately not carried out, can be compared with the spontaneous murder of *Celestina*. Motivated by greed, Sempronio and Parmeno apply rough treatment when engaged in their final interview with *Celestina*, but the decision to kill her is made spontaneously when she refuses to share her payment from Calisto. She makes a last, desperate attempt to save herself:

*Celestina*: ¡Justicia! ¡justicia! ¡señores . . . vezinos!  
¡Justicia! ¡que me matan en mi casa estos rufi-  
anes!

*Sempronio*: ¿Rufianes o qué? Espera, doña hechizera, que  
yo te haré yr al infierno con cartas.

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 2nd ed., 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955-1958).

*Celestina:* ¡Ay, que me ha muerto! ¡Ay, ay! ¡Confesión, confesión! (cf. Motif X315, Dying lawyer says: "I appeal.")

*Pármemo :* Dale, dale, acábala, pues començaste. ¡Que nos sentirán! ¡Muera! ¡muera! De los enemigos los menos.

*Celestina:* ¡Confesión!<sup>2</sup>

These three one-word pleas of "¡Confesión!" are what, under happier circumstances, would have been the punchline for the humor.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, they are not funny as uttered here by Celestina. She, for the first time in the text, finds herself in a state of hysterical despair. Never before has she had to admit a serious defeat. There is no choice now in the matter of her death--it is manifestly unavoidable. Unlike her previous performance (i. e., Act 3, p. 148), Celestina here directs her spiritual outcry both to the devil and to God. The devil is, in effect, spat at, while God receives a last appeal for forgiveness. Preparation for her final reward is necessarily short but is, for all that, remarkably expressive. Unexpectedly, when she is on the verge of a totally unknown experience, Celestina rejects her longtime professional companion, the devil, not finding in him a source of strength in her hour of need.

The question of whether or not Celestina goes to heaven is purely academic. Theoretically, her dying words are sufficient to guarantee the celestial repose of her soul which would, in passing, fulfill Motifs D1715.1 (Magic last wish at death becomes a reality--reincarnation) and V21 (Confession brings forgiveness of sin). Nevertheless, there are several additional aspects of this situation to be considered. Was Celestina sincere? Did she speak from fear of the devil or from love of God? What did the author intend? How did Rojas' public react?

Calisto's death is of special interest here as a parallel. Like Celestina's, Calisto's death is sudden, but not to the extent that he does not realize its imminence. He does have time to utter a final "¡Confesión!" (Act 19, p. 184). The odd thing about this fourth incidence of "¡Confesión!" is to be found not in the exclamation itself but, rather, in the reactions of other characters to it. Naturally, Calisto's death is a tragedy and is treated as such by all concerned. But what of Tristán's

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<sup>2</sup> I cite from Julio Cejador y Frauca's edition: *La Celestina* (Madrid: Clásicos Castellanos, 1913; rpt. 1968), vol. 2, pp. 103-104 (Act 12). All of the textual references will henceforth be included in my text by act and page number. Accents have been added and suppressed following modern usage.

<sup>3</sup> Although I have treated this episode only from the point of view of its relationship to folk humor, it is also possible to interpret Celestina's plea as a realistic detail, "¡Confesión!" being a normal last cry for almost anyone at the point of sudden, imminent death.

commentary afterwards? "¡O triste muerte sin confesión!" (Act 19, p. 184) and later, "Sin confesión pereció." This, too, is Melibea's interpretation of events: "Cortaron las hadas sus hilos, cortáronle sin confesión su vida . . ." (Act 20, p. 197). Death without confession means a sure descent into hell, and these curious reactions to Calisto's fall and death seem to conclude that Calisto is thus condemned, given his lack of repentance for the mortal sin of fornication.

There is no such comment made after Celestina's death, and her moral sins were numerous. Her death is treated more as a cessation of life than as a continuum with another more enduring one. Rojas' intent in the presentations of these two deaths seems, on the surface, confusing. One personage declares her penitence with three loud cries of "¡Confesión!" and is not explicitly condemned, while another seems condemned even though he has uttered also a final plea for "¡Confesión!"

In the *Comedia*, Calisto's plea is absent; it was added in the *Tragicomedia*. Tristán's and Melibea's remarks are both part of the original *Comedia* and serve to emphasize Calisto's failure to call for confession. On the other hand, all of Celestina's lines quoted here appear in the *Comedia*. Thus, for the pre-*Tragicomedia* public, only Celestina made a final appeal for salvation. The change resulting in ambiguity, in the matter of the two deaths, is introduced in the *Tragicomedia*.<sup>4</sup>

What does this signify about Rojas' religious preoccupations? Has he changed his thinking about the nature of Christian death between the printing of the two versions of *Celestina*? A definitive answer can never be known, of course. However, the work had enjoyed great popular success upon its appearance in *Comedia* form. Might not public discussion and opinion have stimulated a Rojas for whom religious orthodoxy was a serious concern to condemn also Celestina in the later reworking? (as he had Calisto in the earlier version)? Apparently it did not have that effect. The evidence of the *Tragicomedia*, with its cry of "¡Confesión!" from Calisto, and the continued assumption of condemnation in the reactions of Tristán and Melibea (and no such "additions" to accompany the demise of the bawd), only serves to underscore the essential ambiguity thus achieved in the *Tragicomedia*: that a wish for salvation of one's soul, uttered at the last, is no guarantee that such a wish will be fulfilled.



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<sup>4</sup> Calisto's cry reflects, I feel, a deliberate alteration by Rojas of the text of the *Comedia* in the matter of the death of the young protagonist, and it may be a conscious artistic touch intended to dramatize the difference between it and Celestina's.