

CELESTINA'S *HILADO* AND RELATED SYMBOLS: A SUPPLEMENT

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The modern oral tradition can frequently shed "light upon the past, disclosing facts which might otherwise have remained shielded from knowledge."³⁰ It was partly due to a modern folk joke, a conundrum and a somewhat cryptic, burlesque version of the ballad *A Volta do Navegante* from the Azores that I was able to document Rosario Ferré's and Otis Handy's interpretation of *hilado* and some cognate symbols in LC.³¹ The abundant use of terms such as *aguja* (a needle but also a phallic symbol), *puntos* (stitches as well as a euphemism for coitus), *hilado* (thread and semen) rolled up in skeins (*madejas*, i. e., testicles),³² *llaga* (wound, suffering or love, vagina), and the frequent references to doctors, illnesses, remedies and cures (the medieval belief that unrequited love was a real illness with severe physical consequences plus the modern [?] concept of "playing doctor"), particularly during the interview that Handy has perceptively designated as "The Rhetorical and Psychological Defloration of Melibea," indicates that the heroine, rather than being a poor, innocent victim of Celestina's evil machinations, is "a willing, eager participant in *loco amor*" (Handy, 25)

³⁰ I am quoting from the conclusion to my forthcoming *Barca Bela in the Portuguese Oral Tradition* (*RPh*). The two stories on which the present note is based were recorded in Canada thanks to a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. They will be included in *O Conto Popular Português na América do Norte, III: Canada*, a collection of folktales that I am still editing (to be published in the *Acta Universitatis Conimbrigensis*).

³¹ Rosario Ferré, "Celestina en el tejido de la 'cupiditas'," *Celestinesca* 7:1 (1983), 3-16, Otis Handy, "The Rhetorical and Psychological Defloration of Melibea," *Celestinesca* 7:1 (1983), 17-27, y M. da Costa Fontes, "Celestina's *hilado* and Related Symbols," *Celestinesca* 8:1 (1984), 3-13 (further references to this article will be indicated in the text).

³² These skeins correspond to the *novelos* or yarn balls in the Portuguese joke and conundrum. Of course Celestina could not take the thread rolled up in such an obvious fashion (*ovillos*) into the homes of her prospective victims without giving her true intentions away from the very beginning. The symbolism would have been too transparent.

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and that Fernando de Rojas conceived the story of Calisto and Melibea especially "as a tale of mutual, unadulterated and undisguised passion, for lust is what attracts them to each other" (Costa Fontes, 10).

The fact that it was possible to document the symbolic value of some of these terms in other Spanish writers (Francisco Delicado, *La Lozana andaluza*, Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, Lopez Pinciano, *Philosophia antigua poética*, Gonzalo Correas, *Vocabulario de refranes y frases proverbiales*), as well as in England (Shakespeare, *Henry V*³³ and *The Passionate Pilgrim*), together with the folkloric evidence from China (Stith Thompson J86: *Rocks falling together and thread entering needle's eye suggest sexual intercourse: hence its beginning*, also indexed as Z186: *Symbolism: Needle and thread--sexual intercourse*) and the United States (Melissa Ludvigsen's colloquial American expression "to thread the needle"),³⁴ suggests that Fernando de Rojas and the other authors mentioned above were inspired by the widespread folkloric currency of these terms.

Unfortunately, modern Iberian evidence was restricted to the joke and conundrum from the conservative Azores, which, besides embodying portions of the motifs listed by Thompson (needle, thread, sexual intercourse), also refer to yarn balls. As I noted earlier, this scarcity should not be taken as indicative of their disappearance from modern oral tradition, for pan-Hispanic field investigators have been understandably reluctant to include materials that could be branded as obscene in their collections (Costa Fontes, 10). Now, thanks to recent field work in Toronto, Canada, I am able to provide two additional Portuguese versions from another archaic, lateral area, the province of Tras-os-Montes. They were told on June 11, 1984, by an excellent informant, the 53 year-old Albertina Esteves,³⁵ from Quinta de Garabatos, Duas Igrejas (Miranda do Douro). When I asked her if she knew any stories about "dois novelos e uma agulha" she replied that she remembered two, and proceeded to add them to the copious repertory that she had already recorded:

³³ Note, however, what I observed on p. 13, n. 27 of my previous article. Although Eric Partridge's reference is not exact, I mention *Henry V* because he would not have listed the expression concerning the "eye of the needle" unless he had found it somewhere in Shakespeare's works.

³⁴ Although I am still unable to document this expression in any printed source, another member of my department, Robert Nocera, is also familiar with it.

³⁵ Albertina and her relatives had already contributed to my *Romanceiro Português do Canada*, Prefacio de Samuel G. Armistead e Joseph H. Silverman (Coimbra: Universidade, 1979) with a great number of ballads and other poems (see xxxii-xxxv, 513).

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Isso era duma vez um pai que tinha uma filha. O pai tinha uma filha e disse p'a ela, diz:

--Olha, Maria, eu tenho que dar uma voltinha, e tu, minha filha, tenho medo que perdas a honra.

--Não, meu pai, eu não perdo a honra--diz.

--Olha, tu foste criada com muita estima, muito inocente. Tu não sabes qu'o mundo é de marotos. Portanto eu saio, mas tu ficas em casa. Não saias com ninguém.

--'Tá bem pai. Não saio.

Mas ela tinha um primo que gostava dela. E diz-l'o primo, diz:

--O Maria! 'Tás a janela! Antão 'tás tanto tempo a janela! Antão teu pai não te chama p'a dentro? (Porqu'antes nunca ia p'a janela).

--O meu pai não 'tá em casa.

--Antão vem passear comigo.

--Ah, isso é que eu não vou.

--Mas porquê?

--Porque posso perder a honra.

--Não, Maria, não perdes. Olha, e antão, se tens assim tanto medo, eu arranjo isso. Olha, eu posso-te coser a honra, que, depois, ela já nunca se perde.

--Oh, então 'tá bem.

Pronto. Foram e coseram a honra.

Depois da honra estar cosida, passearam, passearam, até que calhou. Pronto.

Lá vem a noite p'ra casa. Quando veio p'ra casa, o pai já lá 'tava.

--Onde foste, Maria? O desgraçada, o que é que tu fizeste?

--O pai, não s'afflija, que eu não perdi a honra.

--Como é que tu dizes? Que não perdest'a honra?

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--Não perdi, pai--disse--, porqu'olha: o primo coseu-a bem cosida. E eu ainda queria que me desse mais *pontos*, mas ele não quis. Que disse que tinha acabado o *fio*. Mas não acabou, pai--disse, pondo as duas mãos fechadas juntas. Disse: --Porqu'ele ficou com dois *novelos* assim, e também vi a *agulha*.

* * *

--Não sabe a diferença que há, porque é que os homens são diferentes das mulheres? Porque toda a gente, Deus quando fez, foi co'a barriga rota. O homem e a mulhere.

Depois, antão o homem e a mulher viviam tristes, porque tinham qu'andar sempre a pegar das tripas co'as mãos.

E depois Nosso Senhor deu-l'antão um *novelo* e uma *agulha* para coserem a barriga.

A mulher, como era mais perfeita, deu o *ponto* mais miudinho, e acabou-l'ó *fio*. Acabou-s'ó *fio* antes d'acabá de coser a barriga. O homem era mais trapalhão, deu os *pontos* mais largos. Olha: segurou o *fio*, segurou o *novelo*, segurou a *agulha*, e ficou-le tudo por ali.

* * *

Albertina's first version differs from the Azorean joke (Costa Fontes, 3-4) only in minor details. The King's daughter is now a mere commoner, the cautious mother is substituted for by an equally concerned father, and the Portuguese Quevedo, Bocage, is replaced by a helpful cousin. Since the girl herself states that she saw the yarn balls and the needle, the suspicious boy who asks if the performer of the good deed also had two yarn balls like his clenched fists is eliminated. *Fio* is synonymous with *linhas*. Note that the equivalence of the girl's honor to her virginity could also parallel some passages in *LC*.³⁶ During the interview in Act X, Melibea mentions her honor in three successive replies to the old bawd, while referring to the remedy and cure that would destroy it. Her third statement is especially suggestive, for she capitulates while realizing that the remedy would taint her honor, wound her body, and tear her flesh:

³⁶ For English examples, see Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy: A Literary & Psychological Essay and a Comprehensive Glossary* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947; new popular edition [revised], 1955), p. 129.

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¿De licencia tienes tú necesidad para me dar la salud? ¿Cuál médico jamás pidió tal seguro para curar al paciente? Di, di, que siempre la tienes de mí, tal que mi honra no dañes con tus palabras.³⁷

¡O tus *melecinas* son de polvos de infamia y licor de corrupción, confaccionados con otro mas crudo dolor que el que de parte del paciente se siente, o no es ninguno tu saber! Porque si uno o lo otro no te impidiese, cualquiera *remedio* otro darías sin temor, pues te pido le muestres, quedando libre mi honra. (156)

¡Oh, cómo me muero con tu dilatar! Di, por Dios, lo que quisieres, haz lo que supieres, que no podrá ser tu *remedio* tan áspero que iguale con mi pena y tormento. Agora toque en mi honra, agora dañe mi fama, agora *lastime mi cuerpo*, aunque sea *romper mis carnes* para sacar mi dolorido corazón, te doy mi fe ser segura y, si siento alivio, bien galardonada. (157)

Albertina's second version recalls the Azorean conundrum (the baby is made with two yarn balls and a needle, (Costa Fontes 4), because it begins like a riddle with the initial "What's the difference?" that characterizes spooneristic conundrums. Had Albertina waited for a reply, her query would have become a riddling or clever question, for it would have been difficult to come up with the precise solution expected.³⁸ The explanation places the text within the realm of an etiological joke, recalling the Chinese motif. Whereas Thompson J86 purports to trace the origins of sexual intercourse, Albertina's story attempts to explain certain fundamental differences between the male and female anatomies. The slant given to her joke attests to a feminist point of view (men are portrayed as being clumsier than the other half of the species) rarely found in an oral tradition that seems to perpetuate the misogynism of medieval *exempla*.³⁹

Despite hairsplitting problems of classification, the widespread geographical distribution of the texts from two lateral areas within the con-

³⁷ I am quoting from the 10th printing of Dorothy S. Severin's edition of Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1983), p. 156.

³⁸ See Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 52-53.

³⁹ I have recorded several tales in this vein. While taping one of them, Albertina stated that she ought to keep it to herself. In her opinion, most stories depicted women in a poor light because they were invented by men, and women did not have the right to say anything against them in the old days: "Mas eu sou bruta a contar isto. Havia de contá vice-versa, porqu'as histórias, em geral, era os homens que as faziam. As mulheres antigamente não tinham o direito de falá nada contra os homens, por isso é qu'as histórias são todas contra as mulheres" (June 11, 1984).

servative Portuguese tradition.⁴⁰ --the isolated Azores and Tras-os-Montes--would already be enough in itself to testify to their probable antiquity in the Iberian peninsula. Since Albertina's village, *Duas Igrejas*, is only a few kilometers from the Leonese border, and many of its inhabitants are trilingual (Portuguese, Mirandes, Castilian), chances are that her stories have also been handed down in Spain, in some form or another, to the present day. If they have not yet been collected and subsequently withheld from print, perhaps someone will record and publish them one of these days. As Azorin once said, "vivir es volver."⁴¹



AUCTO VIII

José Segrelles (1948)

Sempronio, Parmeno

⁴⁰ See Samuel G. Armistead, "The Portuguese *Romanceiro* in its European Context," in *Portuguese and Brazilian Oral Traditions in Verse Form*, ed. Joanne B. Purcell, Samuel G. Armistead, Eduardo Mayone Dias, and Joanne E. March (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1976), 178-200.

⁴¹ José Martínez Ruiz ("Azorín"), *Castilla*, 9th ed. (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1969), 117.