

The Elusive Threshold: Textual and Sexual Transgression in the 1499(?) Edition of *Celestina*

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An aged witch and procuress in a Castilian medieval city, a dweller in the liminal spaces of society, *Celestina* embodies the margin. Despite being marginal, the centrality that this character has attained has come to usurp the very title of the work, commonly known as *Celestina*, which deserves a privileged position in the literary canon.¹ As the first known printing of the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, the 1499(?) illustrated edition places itself in a liminal position for different reasons. Controversy has surrounded the work since the very moment of its publication. Rojas himself felt obliged to carry out all types of adjustments to accommodate the work to the readers' and the printers' demands. Nowadays, even after extensive critical analysis, key aspects of the work remain open: its genre, its adscription to a certain literary or historical era, its didactic or subversive intent, and the identity of its author are all still subject to the readers' *contienda*. Editors, scholars, and readers have tried to resolve these controversies by imposing a specific interpretation and closing any open spaces in the text in an attempt to control and own it. For instance, the enigmatic woodcuts that illustrated most of the early printed editions of the work have been largely ignored or treated as decorative material. In this essay, however, I will argue that *Celestina* cannot be owned.

In his introduction to Peter Bush's translation of *Celestina* (2010), Juan Goytisolo praises Rojas's "unique, unrepeatable narrative, beyond concepts of model or genre" (IX). Subverting social and literary canons, Goytisolo declares that the book called *Celestina* is "clearly a work not susceptible to simple classification" (IX). This author also expresses his fascination toward the "intense modernity" of the work (X). I cannot but agree with

¹ The inclusion of the name of the go-between in the title proves her increasing importance in the reception and diffusion of the work that early in the sixteenth century became widely known by the name of the old matchmaker (Herriot v). The first time the name of *Celestina* appeared in the title was in the 1502 Seville edition of the *Tragicomedia*, printed by Stanislao Polono and entitled *Libro de Calisto y Melibea y de la puta vieja Celestina*. In some editions, such as Alcalá 1569, Cuenca 1571, or Leiden (?) 1595, the name of "Celestina" or "La Celestina" antecedes the title, which becomes in fact a subtitle: *(La) Celestina. Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*. In the 1633 Pamplona edition, the opposite takes place, attesting to the most popularly colloquial denomination: *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea, vulgarmente llamada Celestina*. A similar tendency can be noted in the translations. For example, the first known Flemish translation (1550) is entitled *Celestina. Ende is een Tragicomodie van Calisto en Melibea*. For a detailed inventory of the editions before 1635, see Penney 94-121. In addition to the official titles of the editions, the unofficial denomination of Rojas's work as *Celestina* or, to a lesser extent, *La Celestina*, can also be traced in other sources. The Inquisitorial records are a good source of data: in 1609, an act of the Holy Office denounces one of the passages of "un libro llamado *Celestina*"; a few months later there is another denunciation against the "librillo de *Celestina*." After getting away for almost three centuries with a few expurgated passages, the prohibition "in totum" of the *Tragicomedia de Celestina, o Calixto y Melibea* was petitioned by a secretary of the Inquisition in 1792. Listed on a 1542 inventory of a librarian is "un juego de las historias de *Celestina*." In another inventory, in this case in Mexico, Juan Cromberger (the son of the famous printer) lists 325 *Celestinas* among his books. There are a few exceptional cases in which the book is named after Calixto or Melibea but most of the time the book was referred to as *La Celestina* or simply *Celestina*. For a detailed account of the titles and designations of the work, see Snow, "Hacia una historia" 117-72.

these assertions. *Celestina*, as a book and a female character, is inherently elusive and escapes any attempt to be labeled or assigned into any category. On the contrary, it gives way to countless interpretations of the book as visual and written amalgam as well as the contradictory role of its main character.

Earlier in his introduction, however, Goytisolo's preface becomes, in my opinion, slightly less laudatory. While discussing the mystery of the "paternity" of the first *auto* he states with admiration, "Whoever fathered the literary embryo of the first chapter, we are at the beginning of a process that a century later climaxes in Cervantes's literary inventiveness" (Goytisolo VIII). Following this patrilineal metaphor, *Celestina* would not amount to much more than to the creative foreplay preceding Cervantes's literary orgasm. A textual embodiment of the *puta vieja*, the book *Celestina* would be relegated to the role of go-between in the lineage of the patriarchal literary canon by opening the door to Cervantes, who would later on admonish the book for its crudeness by calling it "libro, en mi opinión, divino/ si encubriera más lo humano." But *Celestina*, as a book and a woman, can be anything but contained. Dwelling in the margins, the underworld that this procuress governs is precisely the exaltation of the human--the "all too human," as Nietzsche will later say-- and the glorification of the most basic instincts in a nihilistic negation of the transcendence and the divine.

A secular *madre superiora*, nothing is more perversely ambiguous than *Celestina*'s role as both the despoiler and fabricator of virgins in the city she inhabits. She breaks the law yet reinstates the patriarchal system to exploit it for her own benefit. There is a need for demarcation in *Celestina*'s transgressive world since, without boundaries to breach, her role as go between would prove unnecessary and her trade meaningless. Therefore, she must reconstruct what she damages -- as evidenced in her ability to both destroy and reconstruct virginity. In order to continue in her trade, she is obliged both to create and to satisfy the demand for maidenheads in the world in which she lives.

The book called *Celestina* reflects a similar ambiguity as it brings together a broad spectrum of opposing interpretations. One of these hermeneutical debates focuses on the role of the illustrations in the early editions of the work. It is my contention that in order to obtain a complete reading of the gendered representation of the character of *Celestina* as a *madre* and the book *Celestina* as a germinal work in the matrilineage of Spanish literary tradition we need to incorporate its visual discourse and particularly the portrait of the *alcahueta* as mediator and negotiator of thresholds. The liminal quality of the book and its most emblematic character is visually represented in the iconic of the threshold—a bidirectional means of passage between lust and chastity where *Celestina* creates space for and negotiates desire. Nowhere is this more starkly illustrated than in the 1499(?) edition of the *Comedia*.

Whether in its first known printed edition (a *Comedia* with sixteen acts first thought to have been published in Burgos in 1499 by Fadrique de Basilea) or in its later incarnation as the 1501 *Tragicomedia* with 21 acts, *Celestina* as text has been the subject of exhaustive scholarly analysis. At least until the middle of the sixteenth century, illustrations played an essential role in the dissemination of this work and were a key element in the aesthetic experience of its reception. According to Miguel Marciales's critical edition of the *Tragicomedia*, twenty-seven out of the twenty-nine early editions he lists before 1540 contained some sort of illustration, and twenty-four of those twenty-

seven were fully illustrated, carrying at least one woodcut per *auto*, following the pattern of the 1499(?) edition.²

As Clive Griffin points out, given the high price of paper at the time, there must have been a strong commercial reason behind the inclusion of so many illustrations. Regardless of the cost, once it became standard to illustrate *Celestina*, editors could not afford not to do so (Griffin 60). It is also clear how influential the 1499(?) edition was, since the following editions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries seem to have been modeled after it, to a greater or lesser extent (Griffin 2).³ Despite the historical relevance of these illustrations, only a minority of *Celestina* scholars has focused on them.⁴

Most of the scarce studies dedicated to examining the role of the illustrations of the 1499(?) edition conceive the images as a visual paraphrase of the words, therefore subordinated to them. Erna Berndt Kelley, for example, considers the woodcuts as ways of illustrating the *argumentos* found at the beginning of each chapter. She attempts to identify the elements of the verbal narrative ostensibly reproduced in the visual image to establish a linear sequence in which the illustrations reflect the contents of each chapter (193-227). In the same line, Isidro Rivera also considers the illustrations to be a visualization of the text, a secondary mimetic rendering of the written discourse, or “a dynamic actualization of the accompanying text” (“Visual Structures” 5).

In his study of early book illustration on Spain, James Lyell has noted the efficient quality of Spanish illustration, which in general is closely linked to the content of the text (361). In this light, Snow considers the illustrations of the 1499(?) edition as a visual reading of the written text that follows closely the narrative thread. Snow even regards this *Comedia* as the most perfect integration of written text and illustrations in the history of *Celestina*'s edition (“La iconografía” 260).

With respect to the supposed interdependence between words and images, Kelley firmly states, “the woodcuts cannot be understood without the text” (225). Illustrations, in her view, constitute “mute commentaries,” a visual gloss to the words (193). More moderate, Snow, while admiring the “superior compenetración de la imagen y el texto” (“Imágenes” 115) admits the possibility of an iconographic reading of the illustrations, parallel to that of the written text (“La iconografía” 256). Snow even speaks of a double reading carried out by the illustrator: first, the personal comprehension and assimilation of the written text, and then the reading performed at the moment of recalling and giving shape to the text on the woodcut (“La iconografía” 262-263; “Imágenes” 112). However,

² For a detailed list of early editions, see Marciales 9.

³ There is only one extant copy of the earliest known edition. In 1836, the 1499(?) *Comedia* appears in the auction catalogue of Sotheby's (London) sold by Richard Heber. After several auctions in France and England, the work ends up in the hands of the American art collector John Pierpont Morgan, who donated it to The Hispanic Society of America, in New York. This institution has elaborated a facsimile published by Archer M. Huntington in 1909 and reprinted in modern types by Raymond Foulché-Delbosc. For additional information on the itinerary of the 1499(?) edition, see Mota 45-46 and Penney 32.

⁴ A few notable examples are Joseph Snow, Erna Berndt Kelley, Manuel Abad, Isidro Rivera; and, more recently, Clive Griffin, David Rodríguez-Solás, Fernando Carmona-Ruiz, Carlos Alvar, John Cull, and Enrique Fernández-Rivera. Regarding the influences for the illustrations of the 1499 (?) *Comedia*, Kelley, Griffin, and Cull agree that the woodcuts used by Fadrique are closely inspired by Johann Grüninger's 1496 Strasbourg edition of the *Comedies* of Terence while Rodríguez-Solás credits the early Lyon illustrated edition of the works of Terence (1493) as the source for the illustrations in the Burgos edition. Most scholars acknowledge the superiority of the 1499 (?) *Comedia* among the early Spanish illustrated editions (Carmona 84; Penney 31; Snow, “Imágenes” 127).

in both cases, these readings would be collaborating toward a better understanding of the words (Snow "La iconografía" 263).⁵

In my opinion, however, the relation between visual and verbal texts is more complex than scholarly attention to the 1499(?) *Comedia* has commonly recognized. Following Stephen Nichols's idea of the "textual unconscious" I propose that these images be examined as a text in their own right, capable of conveying meanings and dimensions that are not necessarily apparent in the words (Nichols 12-13). As Nichols explains, sometimes illustrations can challenge or interrogate the meaning of the written text (19). In the 1499 (?) edition this transgressive potential of the images is manifest in the existing discrepancies between the written text and the illustrations.

The most emblematic example of the divergences between word and image is the inclusion of the figure of Alisa (Melibea's mother) in the illustrations of scenes where, according to the story, she is never present (*auto XV*). Kelley attributes this presence to a personal interpretation of the printer, who "must have felt that her imprudence in leaving her daughter with the old bawd and her distress at the news of Melibea's death deserved attention and had to be illustrated" (221). According to Snow, this and other deviations of the pictorial representation with respect to the script are just mistakes of the artist, simple errors in the reading of the narrative text ("La iconografía" 262). For Rivera, these gaps in the illustration of the written text are licenses that the artist takes "in order to control the reader's experience of the events" ("Visual Structures" 22-23). I argue that, in the case of the 1499 (?) edition, there is a discontinuity in the combination of text and image that unveils a new amplitude of possibilities where other forms of meaning reside, and where the images take on a life of their own. Ignoring this and considering the illustrations as mere mimetic renderings of the written text would mean missing some of the iconic elements of the *Comedia*, in its first known printed form.

One of the prominent features that most critical reception of the work has generally overlooked is the ubiquitous presence of the threshold. This liminal image is present throughout the Burgos 1499 (?) edition, verbally invoked in the text as well as depicted in the accompanying illustrations. As John Cull has noted, "The emphasis on doors and action at the threshold is a detail that strikes the readers of *Celestina* as curious and omnipresent" (146). All but one of the sixteen woodcuts of the Burgos *Comedia* depict at least one door or doorway (if not multiple). The only exception is the illustration to *auto XIV*, which portrays Calisto's fall to his death while climbing down the ladder to Melibea's room. Even in this case, I would argue that, if not a door, there is the presence of a passageway in the form of a window on the top right corner of the image; if not a threshold, there is a lintel that demarcates the public from the private and signals the passage to Melibea's body (figure 1).

⁵ In the same sense, see Alvar 97.



Figure 1. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto XIV, fol. 1 II v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

Kelley interprets the ubiquitous figure of the threshold as a visual narrative resource whose function is to divide each woodcut into temporally distinct scenes representing consecutive episodes (202-05). Certainly, one of the characteristics of woodcuts and medieval iconography in general is that they can express different events and temporalities simultaneously. As Michael Camille points out, the printing press brought about space constraints and compression of images into a single illustration. Architectural spaces were used to “divide up what had been the separate scenes in the manuscript” (Camille 275-76).

However, this narrative function does not fully explain the presence of the threshold in many of the illustrations of the *Comedia*. In the woodcuts corresponding to auto VI, (figure 2), for instance, the four characters are taking part in the same scene, though two simultaneous conversations are taking place in different levels.



Figure 2. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto VI, fol. e IV v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

One is the open conversation between Celestina and Calisto, with the occasional intervention of the servants, while the other is a clandestine dialogue between Pármeno and Sempronio. The threshold is not located in the middle of the woodcut, dividing both conversations; it is subtly placed at the right side of the picture, behind a column. In other

illustrations, such as the ones for *autos* XV and XVI (figures 3 and 4), there is also a threshold placed at one side of the woodcut, therefore not being used to divide up spaces and scenes.



Figure 3. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto XV, fol. 1 V r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 4. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto XVI, fol. 1 VIII r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

Furthermore, unlike other illustrated works of the period that present static representations of thresholds, in the *Comedia* the liminal spaces and doorways are endowed with a great mobility within the pictorial frame. In figure 5, for example, the threshold is located in the left corner, but in some cases it appears on the right (e.g., figure 4), or in the center of the page (e.g., figures 6 and 7).



Figure 5. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto IX, fol. g VIII v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 4. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto XVI, fol. l VIII r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 6. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto XII, fol. i VII r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 7. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto VII, fol. f III v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

Sometimes the passageway doubles itself (figure 8) and even manages to constitute a kind of frame within the frame, as in figures 9 and 10, where thresholds surround Celestina and Calisto respectively, focusing the viewer's attention on them.



Figure 8. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto XI, fol. l IV r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 9. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto II, fol. c II r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 10. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto VIII, fol. g IV r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

More than a mere dividing line at the service of the narrative, the representation of the portal achieves its own symbolic meaning. The image of the threshold may be taken not only as a narrative device but also as a visual representation of the presence of Celestina and her matchmaking activities.

Liminal spaces were connected to the female sexuality and the patriarchal necessity to contain it. At the time of the *Comedia*, architectural openings (windows, gates, doors) marked the limits between the feminine space (the home, the realm of the private) and masculine space (the open space, the public domain). House entrances and exits symbolized the bodily orifices and the patriarchal anxiety to control them.⁶ According to Peter Stallybrass, a closed mouth represented not only verbal but also sexual containment. This continence was also extended to the enclosed space of the house (Stallybrass 127). In the case of *Celestina*, Pleberio's home would be the enclosed space that contained Melibea's virtue within its walls. On the other hand, open and uncontrolled spaces signified an open mouth and a penetrable vagina. Celestina's verbosity and her open house would represent the sexual availability of the women that she markets for masculine consumption. In these transitional spaces, let alone in open public areas, women were vulnerable. Only "common women" wandered the streets or stood in the liminal areas displaying their sexuality for trade. In *auto IX Areúsa*, a freelance prostitute living in her own house, describes the hardships endured by those who "andan callejeras, de dueña en dueña, con su mensajes acuestas" (233). In contrast, Melibea is enclosed and immobilized in her father's residence. Pleberio builds as a fortress to preserve his daughter's virginity and, thus, his honorable genealogy. As Celestina points out, "su mucho encerramiento le impide el gozo de su mocedad" (231). But the go between Celestina—as a liminal figure—can breach these walls as well as the social, legal, and sexual rules that they attempt to embody.

This sexual negotiation of the margins is visually reenacted in the illustrations of the 1499 (?) edition, in which many of the characters are portrayed in the transitional act of crossing the threshold, occupying the zone of the in-between. I agree with Cull's comment that these are the most intriguing illustrations (146). The image used to

⁶ See, for instance, Stallybrass 123-42; Salisbury 87; Eliade 121-24; and Hallissy 90.

illustrate *autos* I and V (figure 11) shows Pármeno walking through Calisto's door to meet Celestina in the street.



Figure 11. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrigue de Basilea, 1499(?), autos I and V, fols. a I v and e II r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

This visual representation is meaningful from the point of view of the storyline since Pármeno happens to be the son of Celestina's best friend Claudina, also a go-between, who was publicly executed at the hands of the law for her illicit activities. By being portrayed lingering in the threshold, the images show Pármeno's liminal situation (conflicted between his loyalty to his master and his debt to the woman who raised him). In the woodcut for *auto* X (figure 12) Lucrecia, is similarly portrayed passing through the doorway, while in *auto* IV (figure 13) she appears wrapped around the threshold, holding it with her right arm.



Figure 12. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrigue de Basilea, 1499(?), auto X, fol. h VII r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 13. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto IV, fol. d I v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

Again, these transitional portrayals bear witness to Lucrecia's past and present loyalties. Now Melibea's maid in Pleberio's mansion, Lucrecia used to work as a prostitute in Celestina's house. Lastly, in *auto IX* (figure 5), as Celestina herself crosses through the door, she physically actualizes her role as a go-between, as the mediator between two spaces: the civic domain of the law and the furtive underworld of desire.



Figure 5. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto IX, fol. g VIII v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

The threshold is not only a space for circulation but also for immobilization. When not crossing the doorway, the portrayal of women framed by the threshold in a static display suggests the commodification of the female body. The illustration in *auto VII* (figure 7), for instance, depicts Elicia standing in the entrance to Celestina's house, thereby signifying her availability as an object of sexual exchange.



Figure 7. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto VII, fol. F. III v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

In *auto* IV (figure 13) Melibea is standing at the doorway, which suggests that she is now a good for sale; in the hands of Celestina and Calisto's servants her hymen has been torn from the private space of her father's house to become a trade product exhibited for public consumption.



Figure 13. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto IV, fol. d I v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

Interestingly, in the intriguing woodcut for *auto* XV (figure 3) her mother Alisa is also at the threshold in what may seem a representation of her effort to protect Melibea's virtue.



Figure 3. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto XV, fol. I V r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

However, as we know from the plot, Alisa's protection comes too late (her daughter is no longer a virgin). This futile attempt in the part of the mother is visually represented in the illustration as a series of dark openings (other thresholds) lurking behind her. As previously discussed, Alisa is not mentioned in the written storyline of this auto. Therefore, this illustration cannot be a linear translation of the contents of the chapter but must be perceived as a larger symbolic reading of the text.

Celestina herself is constantly depicted at the threshold; either standing at the threshold (figure 9), crossing thresholds (figure 5), or surrounded by them (figure 14).



Figure 9. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto II, fol. c II r. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 5. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto IX, fol. g VIII v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.



Figure 14. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, Burgos, Fadrique de Basilea, 1499(?), auto III, fol. c V v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

Placed at the margins by features such as her social status, age, gender, and trade, she inhabits the limit and encourages its transgression. Like the boundaries she tries to negotiate, by means of the threshold she is graphically re-marked, showing and concealing herself in the same movement.

In contrast to the other female characters, who are compelled to contend with the portal as a matter of duty or circumstance, Celestina embraces it, becomes one with it. She is ultimately the vehicle or conductive element that allows communication between the two spheres to take place. All the other women mentioned in the work deal with the threshold at one point or another, but their involvement is transitory. Celestina's, however, is permanent, for she inhabits the doorway and lives on the limen. The old bawd challenges patriarchal order but also collaborates to maintain it as she controls both sides of the economy of desire; not only the supply of female of virgins but also the demand coming from the men in town. If women are the objects of exchange, men must submit to the rules of Celestina's trade and cross the threshold of her house in order to get what they want. In auto I, when Calisto is waiting for Celestina after falling in lust with Melibea, he refers to the old panderer as "llave de mi vida" (116). As a go between and

negociator of thresholds, Celestina is, indeed, the key to access Melibea's body and the passageway to forbidden pleasure.

Her control of the passage is not like that of Cerberus, imposingly preventing the violation of her precincts. She is rather like the enterprising Charon who, in exchange for the proverbial two oboli, facilitates the navigation of bodies and souls across the river Styx, and so into the illicit underworld and ultimately to death. By virtue of her presence in the passageway she is able to circumvent social order, but she is also placed, literally framed, on the spot of marginality, thereby exposing and drawing potentially dangerous attention to herself.

In auto III (figure 14), the old procuress appears surrounded by openings, completely exposed to public scrutiny, in accordance with her characterization as a wandering woman. She is free from the constraints of any physical or symbolic boundary but also lacking any male protection: in other words, as a penetrable body. In this sense, both Celestina and the threshold are in a transitional and hence vulnerable state.⁷



Figure 14. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, Burgos, Fadrige de Basilea, 1499(?), auto III, fol. c V v. With permission of The Hispanic Society of America.

It is interesting to consider the relationships among the women in the net of the cunning panderer. Celestina exploits the nature of the relationship between Calisto and Melibea by marketing as a public commodity the most private and sacred treasure of familial patrimony—the virginity of daughters and sisters. After her sexual encounters with Calisto and the increasingly public association with the infamous go between, Melibea wanders through social classes and gender labels, until she joins Elicia and Areusa in becoming one of the sister-daughters of Celestina's matriarchal, maladjusted family.

Roberto González Echevarría has remarked on the fundamental paradox of Celestina as a “childless mother” (9). Thinking of medieval sexuality, one may see this “dialectics of infertility and dissemination,” in González Echevarría’s words, as a distortion of the paradox inherent in the Christian ideal of the virgin mother: how to

⁷ According to Yolanda Iglesias's study on prostitution during the time of the *Comedia*, prostitutes resorted to working for clandestine alcahuetas because the municipal brothels were too dangerous due to being “abierto por muchas partes” (195).

follow the biblical commandment to grow and multiply while preserving the ideal state of chastity and celibacy.

Similar to what happened to Melibea's body when she enters, the sexual market, the commodification of *Celestina* as a book brings about a new immobilization: Celestina's textual body becomes an object of consumption. Celestina, who starts out being the trader, ends up being the object of that trade, as reflected in the eventual title of the work, i.e., *Celestina*. Indeed, after the death of its protagonist at the hands of Calisto's servants *Celestina*, like the phoenix, will rise to fill the literary panorama with sequels and imitations. In this case, infertility may be a way to a fecund re-production, given that *Celestina*'s editions were blossoming all over since the first known edition.

In a counter-fictive move, Celestina, the hymen mender, sutures a gap that is meant to be reopened. By disfiguring and refiguring, she exposes the fiction of patriarchal sexuality (González Echeverría 25).⁸ Pleberio's lament for the end of an era seems to be an urgent call for a new time to come. *Celestina*, with its secular and proto-capitalist vision of the world, inaugurates a new era, while closing an old regime.

In her role as a go-between, Celestina crosses but also demarcates the limit between social and sexual barriers. As a book, *Celestina* also transgresses boundaries as a textual artifact that transcends, using Gerard Genette's terminology, both the immanence of the book and, in this case, the traditional limits between written and pictorial text.⁹ Images exceed their containment by the frame that seeks to enclose them, as the written words spill over into the illustrations to elaborate upon, complete, or alter their meaning.

Comparable to the black thresholds in the illustrations, Celestina represents that which cannot be seen, even if it is blatantly there, because of the ultimate refusal of the subject to accept its presence. Jacques Derrida analyzes this subliminal presence that insinuates itself in the text as "a presence both perceived and not perceived" (211), and designates it as the hymen. This hymen indicates a medium, a space in-between and implies a double play: the connotation of union, as in sexual intercourse (etymologically, *hymeneo* was the Greek god of marriage), and separation, as the membrane that protects virginity, sealing it from penetration. This hymen dwells in the virtual liminal space between desire and consummation, difference and identity. Derrida traces the hymen back to textile etymology, like *suere* (sew), *hyphos* (tissue), *uphainō* (weave, spin), etc. (213). Assuming that the textile and the text have the same lexical origin, *textus*, we can see the hymen related to the text.¹⁰

⁸ In the same vein, see Mary Gossy 43-56.

⁹ In his introduction to *The Work of Art*, Genette points out that "the mode of manifestation of works is not restricted to 'consisting' in an object. They have at least one other mode of existence, which is to transcend this 'consistence', either because they are embodied in several objects, or because their reception can extend far beyond the presence of this/these object(s), and, in a certain way, survive its (or their) disappearance" (10-11).

¹⁰ Derrida uses the vaginal metaphor, focused on the hymen, as a representation of textual deconstruction. However, feminist theory has challenged the use of this terminology since "having deconstructed gender oppositions inadvertently reconstructs them in the same movement that reconstructs the inside/ outside opposition" (Rabine 22). In the same sense, Gayatri Spivak questions Derrida's phallogocentric discourse and his appropriation of female desire (172-79). While I agree with these criticisms, I use Derridean terminology because it conveys perfectly Celestina's contradictory role of both subverting and reinstating the patriarchal system by tearing and restoring the *virgos*.

Resuming the architectural reading of the woodcuts of the 1499 (?) edition and the iconic figure of the threshold, this textual hymen would be visually represented as a sort of invisible veil that marks simultaneously an *entre* or space-in-between—that may as well indicate an *entrée* or entrance—and an *antré* or cave, a concavity and a convexity, the possibility to enter and the hollow grotto. In hermeneutical terms, this potentiality for penetration opens a space, a point of entrance in the text; but also represents a limit and an impossibility of meaning, because the cave is a profound and inauspicious dark hole where there is no place to dwell. In the end, this hollowed-out retreat, instead of a shelter or a passage to another dimension, may turn out to be a trap or even the excavation of a grave.

Mary Gossy explores this Derridean reading of the hymen in Rojas's work. As the paradigmatic hymen restorer, *Celestina* (both as book and as character) is very suitable to illustrate Derrida's theoretical insights about textual and anatomical gaps. Since *Celestina*'s publication, critics have tried unsuccessfully to fill in its unfathomable holes, imposing a univocal reading upon undefined or indeterminate aspects such as genre, authorship, and moral intention (20-21).¹¹ Nevertheless, the *elasticity* or elusiveness of this work has resisted hermeneutical penetration.

Building on Derrida's reading of the hymen, Gossy points to the identity between the text and the female body, since both are uncontrollable gaps that authority (scholarly or patriarchal) tries to penetrate (22-23). Melibea's body, for instance, becomes Calisto's space of desire. But in order to enter that enclosed territory, he needs a mediator that opens up some space, otherwise he would be unable to fill in the gaps of his desired body. As Gossy notes, "Celestina becomes the motive force of the story," relegating—even in the title—Calisto and Melibea to a secondary role (30). Celestina is the engine that moves the force of carnal desire. Without her intercession, the two lovers would have never been able to consummate their sexual passion. From her marginal position Celestina opens the floodgate for the contained narrative, enabling it to flow over the dam that critical interpretation attempts to build around the text(s).

A threshold marks an opening, bringing together, but also a separation, tearing apart. To mend the gap between the visual and the written, like Celestina's stitching of hymens, does not mean to return to an original state since there is always a trace or a scar of this uniting of elements. As Linde Brocato notes, "Celestina's *punturas* can't restore Melibea's virginity or put her back together again. Nor can Celestina restore herself to wholeness once dismembered" (126). In a similar fashion, we can see the *puncturas* of the editors leave an indelible mark: "Each edition is a reading, an attempt to reveal *Celestina*'s truth(s), to fill out and fix its lexical and textual references" (Brocato 125).

As a matchmaker and hymen mender Celestina keeps careful tabs on the virgins of the town. A cynical representative of an incipient capitalism, Celestina monopolizes the supply and demand of virginity in the local economy. As she brags to Sempronio in *auto III*:

Pocas vírgenes, a Dios gracias, has visto tu en esta ciudad que hayan abierto tienda a vender, de quien yo no haya sido corredora de su primer hilado. En

¹¹ The lack of a *princeps* manuscript may be considered as the original gap (see Gossy 20). However, the discovery of the Palacio Manuscript—a handwritten fragment of the beginning of the first *auto* found by Charles Faulhaber in 1989 at the Biblioteca de Palacio (Madrid)—has suggested at least some theories about the origin of the work (Faulhaber 3-39).

naciendo la mochacha la hago escribir en mi registro, y esto para que yo sepa cuántas se me salen de la red. (96-97)¹²

Celestina boasts of her craft using the expression *correr hilado* [trading spun thread], a euphemism which in Spanish still carries not only the literal meaning of sewing but also the connotation of penetration and tearing of the hymen through the metaphorical association of piercing cloth and other membranes with a needle.¹³ Regrettably, Bush's 2010 edition of *Celestina* ignores this double entendre by translating "de quien yo no haya sido corredora de su primer hilado" as "who didn't get their first or second flowering to me" (37).

The book *Celestina* reflects the same ambiguity as its main character since it draws together divergent, if not conflicting, scholarly approaches to the work. This openness makes the textual body of *Celestina* susceptible to critical and editorial attempts, like Goytisolo's, to *father* it—to own it and give it a fixed meaning, or in the literary tradition of *penmanship*.

Derrida has referred to the critical analysis of a text in terms of a penetration into the nubile page. In the 1499 (?) *Comedia*, we could argue that the dark holes of the illustrations symbolize the book opening itself to audiences for such penetration. This attempted defloration, unveiling the real meaning hidden in the obscure nooks of the text, turns out to be fruitless because of its disseminatory quality and unlimited possibilities of signification (*Dissemination* esp. 208-21).

In this sense, the prologue added to the *Tragicomedia* in 21 *autos* deserves further attention. In it Rojas elaborates on Heraclitus's conception of the world as a *contienda* and comments on the controversy that the *Comedia* has generated among the readers, who held the most diverse opinions about it: "unos decían que era prolija, otros breve, otros agradable, otros escura" (18-19). Conscious of the polysemic quality of the text, Rojas explains, based on the diverse conditions of every single reader in a specific time and space, that "cuando diez personas se juntaren a oír esta comedia . . . ¿quién negará que haya contienda en cosa que de tantas maneras se entienda?" (18-19). Rojas admitted the existence of a limitless variety of readings (as many as there are readers), represented in the *contienda* or controversy created after the successful publication of the *Comedia*.

While acknowledging this plurality of interpretations, Rojas complains about the editorial imposition upon the work of a concrete interpretation that printers, as privileged partakers in the literary debate, made by the addition of rubrics and *argumentos*: "Que aun los impresores han dado sus punturas, poniendo rúbricas o sumarios al principio de cada auto . . . una cosa bien escusada según lo que los antiguos escritores usaron" (18-19).

The very interpretation of one of the words in the prologue, *punturas*, may be a source of *contienda*. In James Mabbe's 1631 English translation, *punturas* is translated as "punctures" (piercing, perforation). In her 1954 edition and study of *Celestina* for the Hispanic Society, Clara Penney uses the more charged translation of "wounds" ["wounds inflicted by printers and the summaries foisted by them upon the *Comedia*" (7)].

¹² Fernando de Rojas, *Celestina*, trans. James Mabbe (1631), bilingual edition by Dorothy Sherman Severin. Quotations of *Celestina* henceforth will be from this edition unless otherwise stated.

¹³ Manuel da Costa Fontes has noticed the widespread dissemination of the word *hilar* and the imagery of sewing (pins, needles, stitches), related to sex and prostitution during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Spanish and Portuguese folk tradition. See Costa Fontes 86-89.

According to the *Diccionario de Autoridades*, one of the meanings of *puntura* is a wound made with a piercing instrument, such as a small lance, thorn, or bee's sting (763). The term is also used in manuscript culture. The manuscript was punctured at the margins to allow for line demarcation. From there it became synonymous with punctuation. The author, therefore, would be complaining about the hermeneutical violence of editorial policies and printing mechanisms, which attempted to fix or contain the disseminatory quality of the text.

Related to *puntura*, the term *punto* (*punctum* in Latin) means stitch, in both the sewing craft performed by the seamstress and in surgical suturing: "llaman los cirujanos a las puntadas que dan, pasando la aguja por los labios de la herida, para que se unan y pueda curarle" (*Diccionario de Autoridades* 435). This last definition inevitably evokes the role of *Celestina*. The old sorceress/healer also uses a needle to suture the wound, in this case the physical wound that the loss of virginity inflicted on women in the medieval world. By sewing the "lips" not only did she close the physical opening in the female body, but also the "lips" symbolizing social defamation, the biggest threat that hung over women's reputation. In the prologue, Rojas also acknowledges the diverse opinions that readers had expressed about his work. After some years of unprecedented editorial success, *Celestina* is on everyone's lips. In early modern inquisitorial society, those lips can tear open and even tear up the body of the text, indirectly lacerating the author himself (especially Rojas who, as a convert, was particularly vulnerable). Maybe with the insertion of the prefaces, conclusions, and other textual intermediaries, the cautious author is attempting not to close but to cauterize the wound and prevent the infection that controversy may have caused.

Deprived of the *paratexts* that will frame the subsequent editions of the book, the 1499(?) edition was bare, lacking the layers of protective tissue that the prologues provided. Coincidence or not, this edition happens to be the most illustrated. Inserted in several parts of the textual body, the "wood-cuts" slice open the continuity of the written text. At the same time, those illustrations operate as pieces of surgical gauze to prevent the eventual exsanguination that uncontrolled dissemination may cause in the work.

The controversy included not only the moral intention underlying the work, but its very designation as *Comedia* (since the ending was so tragic). This debate led Rojas to change the title. In the prologue to the 1502 edition, he acknowledges "Yo, viendo estas discordias, entre estos extremos partí agora por medio la porfía, y llaméla *tragicomedia*" (18-9).

Thus, the adoption of this label seemed to be in conformity with what the audience had perceived as a combination of tragic and comic elements. But this was not a merely nominal change. This enhanced version added five new chapters, the so-called "Tratado de Centurio." The accretions involved the inclusion of a new character, the humorous Centurio, Areúsa's pimp (insisting on the comic part of the work, perhaps too dark to be called a comedy) and, again due to the readers' insistence, one more night of pleasure was added to the explicit recounting of Calisto and Melibea's sexual experiences.¹⁴ Succumbing to the pressure of readers and editors Rojas concedes:

¹⁴ In the foreword to his work, *Towards a Critical Edition of the Celestina*, Herriot notes, "when the book was published some critics were of the opinion that the love affair it recounted moved forward too rapidly" (v).

Así que viendo estas conquistas, estos disonos y varios juicios, miré a donde la mayor parte acostaba, y hallé que querían que se alargase el proceso de su deleite de estos amantes, sobre lo cual fui muy importunado; de manera que acordé, aunque contra mi voluntad, meter segunda vez la pluma en tan extraña labor y tan ajena a mi facultad . . . (18-19)

Referring to the way he chooses to formulate the undertaking of his second writing on this work, Rojas uses the expression “meter segunda vez la pluma.” There is no need to explain the obvious phallic implications of this metaphor, which becomes even more intricate if we consider that this new accretion will also imply a second sexual stand for the lovers, i.e., a second act of penetration of Melibea’s body.

In his study of the reception of *Celestina* during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Emilio Blanco points out that the printers can be counted among the first readers of Rojas’s work and certainly some of the most influential (28-31). Rojas complained of the *punturas* that the printers had inflicted on his work by inserting the *argumentos*. There is also a certain resemblance between the aforementioned act of *meter la pluma*, which can be graphically envisioned as a puncture or perforation in the material body of the text, and the *puntura* of the iron hinges of the printing press, symbolizing the violence that the printers exerted on the text to adapt it to their commercial needs.

Rojas’s complaint that he was compelled by the public, against his will, to embark on this second alteration of the anonymous text he had originally found could lead us to believe in a tyranny of commercial interests acting upon Rojas and his work. However, and in light of the circumstances of censorship, we should be extremely cautious when interpreting his words, because he may very well allude to the readers’ will as a way to exempt himself from any eventual accusation of obscenity.

It is highly significant that the supplementary pages expanded—by popular demand—the description of the erotic joy of the lovers. This attests to the relevance of the representation of sexuality in the work. With these adjustments, made to react to the audience’s reception, new illustrations were added. This suggests a possible linkage between the visual and written transmission of the work, since the printer was possibly trying to secure the success of the new version by enhancing the visual dimension, therefore implicitly acknowledging the role of the illustrations in the initial success of the work.¹⁵

Returning to the most recent translation of *Celestina*, Peter Bush—who interestingly places Rojas’s prologue at the end of the book with the rest of the “postscripts”—translates *punturas* simply as “points” when he writes, “For even printers have added their points” (214). This reductionist translation ignores the rich connotations of the word *puntura* and is paradoxically another *puntura* in the editorial history of the book, fixing it in place and ignoring its elusiveness. By the same token, there is no mention of the illustrations anywhere in Bush’s edition. Neither Goytisolo’s introduction nor the translator’s afterword make any reference to the role of the woodcuts in the transmission of the early printed editions. To ignore the rich possibilities of interpretation

¹⁵ For example, Cromberger’s edition of the *Tragicomedia* (Seville 1518) is illustrated with composite woodblocks depicting individual characters, trees, or houses. However, for the illustration of the new *autos*, he used page-width blocks, similar to the 1499(?) edition of the *Comedia*. See Joseph Snow, “La iconografía” 260.

that the images provide and to immobilize the disseminatory play that the words create is to shut the door of interpretation that *Celestina* leaves ajar at her threshold.

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