SYMBOLIC EQUIVALENCE IN *LA CELESTINA*: A POSTSCRIPT

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In *Celestinesca*, 1, no. 1 (May, 1977), I discussed three visually equivalent objects which play major parts in the action: Celestina's skein of thread, Melibea's girdle, and Calisto's gold chain. I suggested that these objects, which form a series of exchanges, almost merge into one another, and that the Devil, conjured into the skein by Celestina, seems to pass from one to the other. Other images are associated with these at various points, and in the present article I discuss one on which I touched briefly. I commented (pp. 7-8) on Melibea's use of snake imagery in her second meeting with Celestina; describing the violence and pain of her love for Calisto, she says: "comen este corazón serpientes dentro de mi cuerpo" (X, 154).[1] As P. E. Russell says (no. 302, p. 351), her choice of this image shows that the magic power of the skein of thread, ancinted with the poison of vipers, has passed into the victim's body. The image has other connections of some interest, notably with the *Prólogo*'s account of the viper's mating:

> La víbora, reptilia o serpiente enconada, al tiempo del concebir, por la boca de la hembra metida la cabeza del macho y ella con el gran dulzor apriétale tanto que le mata y, quedando preñada, el primer hijo rompe las ijares de la madre, por do todos salen y ella muerta queda y él casi como vengador de la paterna muerte. ¿Qué mayor lid, qué mayor conquista ni guerra que engendrar en su cuerpo sus entrañas? (41)

This is, as is well known, a borrowing from Petrarch: it is taken from the Preface to Book II of *De remediis utriusque fortunae*,[2] but the ultimate source is the bestiary. Different versions of the bestiary vary considerably in their treatment of this story; thus, in the text known to most American and British readers because of its translation by T. H. White, the male's head is actually bitten off, and the fatal reaction is one of disgust, not, as in *La Celestina*, of climactic pleasure:

> The viper (*vipera*) is called this because it brings forth in violence (*vi*). The reason is that when its belly is

> yearning for delivery, the young snakes, not waiting for the timely discharge of birth, gnaw through the mother's sides and burst out to her destruction.
>
> It is said, moreover, that the male puts its head into the female's mouth and spits the semen into it. Then she, angered by his lust, bites off his head when he tries to take it out again.
>
> Thus both parents perish, the male when he copulates, and the female when she gives birth.[3]

Different treatments are summarized by Florence McCulloch.[4] The constant features are, however, that copulation proves fatal to the male, and that the young break out through the mother's side, killing her. Egla Morales Blouin links this passage to the murder of Celestina by Pármeno and Sempronio:

> El hijo que mata a la Madre Terrible simboliza la lucha del ego por liberarse del recipiente elemental, en busca del desarrollo positivo y transformación. En *La Celestina*, este acto se cumple por manos de Sempronio y Pármeno.[5]

I find that this, like most of Blouin's Jungian interpretation, falls short of conviction, even if one strengthens it by recalling that Sempronio had earlier described Celestina as a viper: "Más seguro me fuera huir de esta venenosa víbora, que tomalla" (V, 104).[6] However, even though the bestiary account of the viper does not seem to have any clear connection with Celestina's murder in Act XII, it does appear to have exercised a powerful influence on Act X: although it is not explicitly referred to, a series of images depends on it.

While awaiting Celestina's arrival, Melibea asks herself: "¿Cómo lo [disguising the nature of her pain] podré hacer, lastimándome tan cruelmente el ponzoñoso bocado, que la vista de su presencia de aquel caballero me dio?" (X, 154). Although the primary allusion is clearly to the taking of poison, the words "ponzoñoso bocado" could also, in a period of familiarity with bestiary material, be a reminiscence of the male viper's putting his head into the female's mouth.[7] This possibility is greatly strengthened by what follows. A few lines later, in answer to Celestina's question, "¿Qué es, señora, tu mal?", Melibea makes the already-quoted remark, "Madre mía, que comen este corazón serpientes dentro de mi cuerpo," and stronger reminiscences of the female viper's fate follow:

> Agora toque en mi honra, agora dañe mi fama, agora lastime mi cuerpo; aunque sea romper mis carnes para sacar mi dolorido corazón . . . Más agradable me sería que rasgases mis carnes y sacases mi corazón, que no traer esas palabras aquí. (X, 157-58)

At the third mention of Calisto's name, Melibea faints, and Celestina fears that she (like the female viper?) may have died. However, the girl

recovers and explains--in terms that continue the implied image of the young vipers breaking out through their mother's side--"Quebróse mi honestidad, quebróse mi empacho" (X, 159).

If I am right in identifying these remarks by Melibea as reflections of the bestiary story of the viper, which would be recognized--whether at a fully conscious level or subliminally--by Rojas's readers, two points must be considered: the function of these references within *La Celestina*, and their relation to the explicit description, in the *Prólogo*, of the viper's mating.

One function is, as I have already noted, to draw attention to the link between the Melibea-Celestina meeting in Act X and the conjuration scene of Act III: the Devil's power, conjured into the skein of thread, has passed into Melibea's body. Moreover, it appears that because the skein was anointed with viper's poison, some of the qualities of the viper have also entered her body (a process analogous to that by which, according to widespread and persistent folk belief, one takes on the qualities of what one eats). It is possible, but not, I think, very probable, that we are intended to see a connection between these bestiary images and the description of Celestina by Sempronio as "esta venenosa víbora" (V, 104).[8] It is true that Celestina is shown in Act X as taking control of Melibea, but I doubt--despite Weiner's useful analysis--whether the coincidence of images is significant. There is, however, one other important function of these images: they foreshadow disaster. The mating of vipers leads to the death of the male, and then of the female. The mating of Calisto and Melibea leads first to his death, and then to hers, by an ineluctable sequence of cause and effect.[9] Melibea has an anguished awareness that she is the cause of Calisto's death:

> Bien ves y oyes este triste y doloroso sentimiento que toda la ciudad hace. Bien oyes este clamor de campanas, este alarido de gentes, este aullido de canes, este grande estrépito de armas. De todo esto fui yo la causa. (XX, 229)

--though of course in a less direct way than the female viper.[10] The viper images are very far from being the only method used by Rojas to foreshadow the final calamity: such indications are frequent throughout the work.[11] By his use of the images, however, Rojas reinforces, subtly and effectively, the impression of doom surrounding the major characters.

The other point which merits discussion is the relation between the images of Act X and the *Prólogo* description. Readers of the *Tragicomedia* from 1502 onwards (if 1502 is indeed the date of the lost first edition) have, one supposes, generally read the *Prólogo* and then the main text. They have, in other words, encountered the explicit description of the viper's fatal passion before reaching the images of Act X. Readers and hearers of the *Comedia*, however, could not have done this. For them, the *Prólogo* did not exist. Rojas, of course, knew *De remediis* extremely well when he wrote the *Comedia*, and even if he had not, his knowledge of the

bestiary, shown in other parts of *La Celestina*,[12] would probably have made him familiar with the viper story. It may be relevant that a similarly implicit allusion to the fatal consequences of the viper's mating is to be found in another late medieval Spanish writer, Florencia Pinar.[13] These may not be the only cases: at a time when love was widely regarded as an illness with potentially fatal consequences,[14] and when material from the bestiary seems to have been widely known, it is natural that those writing about unhappy love, whether in prose or in verse, should make use of a story which so strikingly represents both the power of sexual passion and its fatal outcome.[15]

◆◆*NOTES*◆◆

[1] As before, I refer to books and articles on *LC* by their numbers in the Snow-Schneider-Lee bibliography and its supplements published in *Celestinesca*. References to the text of *LC* are to the Severin edition (no. 176), since this is the only edition based on recent textual discoveries--its placing in the bibliography among "Ediciones estudiantiles y popularizantes," rather than among "Críticas," does it somewhat less than justice.

[2] See no. 47, p. 55.

[3] *The Book of Beasts, being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 170. This bestiary provides a long and confused moralization, but this is based not on the fatal consequences of the viper's mating but on the male viper's adultery with the eel.

[4] *Mediæval Latin and French Bestiaries*, University of North Carolina Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures, 33, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill, [1970]), pp. 183-84.

[5] No. S90, p. 25. This article offers a predominantly Jungian interpretation of *La Celestina*. I regret not having seen it before publishing my own article (I learned of its existence only when the author kindly sent me a copy in September, 1977), since it would have been appropriate to take it into account in presenting my rather different interpretation. Blouin discusses the symbolic significance of the skein and the girdle, referring also to such associated images as net and chain (pp. 32-35). The points she makes include the crossing of threads as a symbol of sexual union, and the interpretation of Alisa's weaving ("Pero mi señora la vieja urdió una tela," IV, 88) as Melibea herself (p. 33). I have reservations about these views, but at other points Blouin coincides with parts of my article: for example, she says that "El hilado lleno del poder numínico de Celestina, portador del mal, se trueca y se alarga en el cordón de Melibea" (p. 34--she does not mention the subsequent merging of girdle into chain), and, like a number of critics, she comments on the scene in which Calisto treats the girdle as a symbol of Melibea's body (p. 34). (There are many analogues for such symbolism. For an interesting recent

study in another area of medieval literature, see Paul Salmon, "Sîvrit's Oath of Innocence," *MLR*, 71 [1976], 315-27.) She also coincides to a certain extent with the ideas developed by Michael Harland in the unpublished paper referred to in note 16 of my article. On chain imagery, see also Stephen Reckert (no. 327). Reckert is principally concerned with seven groups of positive and negative words, their distribution in the text, and their reinforcement or neutralization by their contexts. He also devotes one page to some occurrences of *cadena* (pp. 164-65). He does not discuss the connections of *cadena* with *hilado* and *cordón*, but he does associate its metaphorical use with one of the hunting and trapping images, that of the "anzuelo cebado" (cf. my article, p. 6).

[6] I am inclined to think that Freud may be of greater interest than Jung to students of the viper story: the fate of the male, decapitated by his mate after he has discharged his semen, suggests the fear of castration which, Freud tells us, is deeply rooted in the male psyche (in particular, it recalls the widely-diffused motif of the *vagina dentata*); and the fate of the female also seems to correspond to some of the fears documented by Freud in his case-studies. Sempronio's remark is associated with the *Prólogo* passage in a different way by Jack Weiner, no. 313, pp. 393-94. He observes, on the basis of these and other references (including the mention of "lengua de víbora" among Celestina's ingredients, I, 62), that "a relationship is early established between Celestina, the serpent, and the extreme sexual desire which leads to death for the characters of *La Celestina*" (p. 394). This is a useful and illuminating comment, though I do not think that we should necessarily extend it to the Act X images, whose force seems to derive from the bestiary account rather than from the image of Celestina as viper.

[7] George A. Shipley, who read a first draft of this article, comments: "Rojas is not here alluding to a bestiary tale (i.e. pointing out from text to source); rather he has absorbed the bestiary lore into his mental repertory of animal images where the beast is free to associate with others. The resultant image is not learned but part of an associational cluster in Rojas's psyche" (letter of March 3, 1978).

[8] George Shipley comments: "I would say: it doesn't matter whether it is intended. It is there; it is functional, and part of a coherent symbol-system."

[9] Some critics believe that Calisto's death is arbitrary, but it seems to me--and to others, such as Erna Berndt [Kelley], no. 39--to display a very careful pattern of causation: see no. 47, p. 114.

[10] George Shipley comments: "Also, less directly, does she not 'kill' her parents? Is she not conscious of doing just that, and is this not corroborated by Pleberio in his sense of emptiness and dissolved values?

[11] Some examples chosen at random: foreshadowing by proverbial phrase ("Por uno, que comes con tiempo, cortas mil en agraz," III, 81); by direct statement ("Melibea es única a ellos: faltándoles ella, fáltales todo el bien," II, 84); by classical allusion ("Por fe tengo que no era tan hermoso aquel gentil Narciso, que se enamoró de su propia figura, cuando se vido en las aguas de la fuente," IV, 99). In all of these cases, the foreshadowing is explicit, but in other classical allusions it is implicit (see no. 47, p. 112), as it is with the viper images. Many examples of Rojas's foreshadowing technique are interestingly discussed by Katharine K. Phillips, no. 293.

[12] This knowledge is discussed in an important but as yet unpublished conference paper by George A. Shipley, no. 304, and the forthcoming book on the bestiary in medieval Spanish by Néstor A. Lugones is likely to add still more to our knowledge.

[13] In her poem, "Ell amor ha tales mañas," whose earliest appearance is in the fifteenth-century *Cancionero del British Museum.* See my article, "Spain's First Women Writers," in *Images: Women in Hispanic Literature*, edited by Beth Miller, to be published by University of California Press. This is only one of a number of coincidences between *La Celestina* and *cancionero* poetry. The others have been pointed out by several critics, most recently and most comprehensively by Theodore L. Kassier, no. S47. It is probable that Rojas's use of the viper story is independent of Pinar's.

[14] See Keith Whinnom's introduction to his edition of Diego de San Pedro, *Obras completas*, II. *Cárcel de Amor* (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1972), pp. 13-15; and Shipley, no. 305.

[15] My debt to George Shipley is already apparent. I am also very grateful to Joseph T. Snow and Ronald Surtz, who read and commented on a first draft of this article.

Celestina entra en casa de Pleberio. Aucto IV°.
De la traducción alemana de C. Wirsung, 1520.