



THE "CALISTO AND MELIBEA" OF EDWIN HONIG

Joseph Snow
University of Georgia

Elsewhere in this issue is Reed ANDERSON's thoughtful essay on the staged verse opera whose libretto is the subject of these notes. If any preliminary orientation can be given to the following summarization, it would be that in the hearts of many literate English speakers, *Celestina* has become the archetypal go-between, even when few of these English speakers have little or no familiarity with the Spanish original. Better known figures from Spanish literature are Don Juan and Don Quijote and, in some quarters, the Cid. But in the twentieth century, with the witness of so many translations into English, the emergence of wider-ranging studies in comparative literature, and the staging (more or less successful) of varied adaptations, the major figure of *La Celestina* has become much better known. *Celestina*, richly drawn, exuberant, cut of universal cloth and deeply human, has a justly enthusiastic--and growing--following of her own. She is capable of being at one and the same time real and mythic and her name has become a signword for a whole field of human activity. These adaptations and comparative studies are to be welcomed, for they will ultimately lead back to even greater focus on the original Rojas character creation and the literary masterpiece whose world she so completely dominates.

In Honig's work, "suggested by Fernando de Rojas' *LC* (1499) and by James Mabbe's translation (1631)," the links with the original are admittedly weak.¹ Some of the fidelity to the original characterizations seemed to Honig a necessary sacrifice in his reduction of a text meant to be set to music. The characters with speaking roles in *LC* number fourteen: Honig gives us "seven composite figures drawn from other characters . . . and also from one another."² All seven of them die by the final curtain, in accord with Honig's belief that it "seemed appropriate to opera and to the spirit of overriding sensuality which makes the word 'die' the most indulged pun of the time, at least in English."³ We are thus dealing only with the central threads of the story of uncontrolled romantic passion contained in *LC*. Stage center is still very much filled by *Celestina*, *Melibea* and *Calisto*. *Sempronio* is a composite of his namesake and of *Parmeno*; *Elicia*'s speeches and actions absorb many that were *Areusa*'s; *Tristan* is a fusing of *Tristan-Sosia-Centurio*. *Lucrecia* makes a seventh. These all participate in a tale of passion fashioned after Rojas' although Honig means for this *Calisto and Melibea* to be "something new in English" rather than a close imitation of the Spanish. It is this assertion that the following synopsis will attempt to assess.

The text of the libretto consulted was copyright in 1966 and 1972; my printing is of the latter year, the work of the Hellcoal Press and The Brown University Printer.⁴ It runs to 57 pages in its single-column format, and is mostly all dialogue with few stage directions. Already in *Calisto and Melibea*'s opening scene we may begin to appreciate the simi-

larities and differences it exhibits with regard to Rojas' original. We are in Melibea's garden.

Calisto: In your beauty I see
the greatness of God!
In your sweet form
my heart serves Him,
warming my blood,
aching my bones.
Joy to the world newmade,
pleasuring all things born!

Melibea: I fear you lie
or else blaspheme.

Calisto: Your fear stops my ears.
What says your heart?

Melibea: Away! How can a man
speak so to me
of lewd delights?
Who are you?
O do not tell. Be gone!

Calisto: I am Calisto.
I go, I go.
Do not add
to fear your anger
for then I stand
in danger
of your hatred.
And you are sacred.
I go, I go.
Forget me not.
I am Calisto. [1] 5

The familiar themes of the encounter are here, although the characterization of Calisto as courtly lover suffering from a "secreto dolor" is sacrificed (and so throughout). Melibea is seeing Calisto genuinely for the first time and, although rejecting him, shows her confusion (see her second speech above). The handling of the name game is cleverly manoeuvred. Honig capitalizes here, and throughout, on one of Rojas' major touches: the accentuation of the idolatrous nature of the passion.

Scene ii introduces Sempronio who siezes the opportunity for future gain instantly he gets wind of Calisto's malady: Unrequited love. Even as Calisto declares himself to be a Melibeian, the churlish Sempronio has his plan well in hand. The cure is in the power of a lady he knows, "one who eases fortune, one who'd bring a Helen to your bed"[3]. Calisto bids him produce this "lady with a beard . . . subtle as the devil" and, as the servant leaves, prays God he succeeds in finding him a remedy for his great pain. In scene iii, Sempronio and Celestina come quickly to terms and Honig wastes no time in establishing the importance of greed in the

plotting of Calisto and Melibea. In the first aside of the work, Sempronio declares:

This beardy old bawd
shall get the gold,
but go to her reward
by this, my fist!
She'll not be missed,
while secretly
all the city
honors me
for ridding it of stench! [5]

Scene iii ends with Celestina's delivering over to Sempronio the favor of Elicia (played by Parmeno-Areusa in LC). Although the action of LC is much condensed, Honig preserves for the operatic stage the greed, passion and idolatrous lust that motivate the action of the Rojas original. One important difference is their manner of presentation. The psychological growth Rojas permits these base animal passions is missing, lost in the practical sacrifice to streamlining of the carefully-orchestrated and counterpointed situations of LC that Honig has deemed necessary.

Scene iv places us in Calisto's house. Calisto does not need to tell the bawd what her mission is. He scarcely has time to bestow on Celestina (his "bringer to me of life out of this death"[7]) the gold chain and bid her Godspeed before she is off to the task. Sempronio's words are portentous for others but shortsighted regarding himself as this scene ends:

My master's mad
he'll die in pain.
I'll beat the crone
and get the chain,
live high forever
on the treasure. [7]

Scene v opens with expository dialogue that tells us that Celestina has a thriving business going at home. This is cut short, however, as she sends Elicia off for "bat blood, wing of dragon, hair of goat and serpent oil" so that the Devil may be invoked. Celestina has been from the outset clearly associated with the Devil and the maleficent influences of that underworld figure seem specifically to bear the blame for the sad fates of all the characters. It satisfies the operatic conventions but replaces, of course, the more subtly psychological insights provided by Rojas. The conjuration itself is a bit of brilliance and I will cite its final lines only:

Hear me,
I conjure thee,
be thou my instrument,
fulfill my wish exactly:
once! and twice! and thrice!
Now all is done,
the future throbs
here in my purse
to be born.

I go to seek her,
thyself wrapped tightly
in my yarn. [9]

The yarn, once invested with magical, diabolic power, becomes a most potent force in the unravelling of the actions of the Honig adaptation. It leads immediately now into scene vi in which Lucrecia informs Celestina that Melibea has need of red yarn. This detail of the color is an inspiration: it alerts the audience to Melibea's desire and makes Celestina's task less overwhelming. The transfer of the yarn is made with great despatch and is fraught with presentiment. When Melibea inquires what will Celestina wish for her yarn, the bawd replies: "I wish, madam? I wish nothing but to serve others" [11]. The damsel's reply catches us unprepared in its directness: "Ask for thyself or for another." The highly-touted persuasive skills of Celestina are not much called for here.

When Celestina then mentions her young master by name, and the object of Melibea's secret passion is revealed, anger is the result. The compression of the action has been such that this naming recalls the emphasis placed on it in the opening scene ("I go, I go. / Forget me not. I am Calisto."). Melibea's fury is tranquilized through the ruse of the imaginary toothache Calisto is said to be suffering from. She surrenders her girdle with these words of humility, which will be later used against her: "To cure the sick is holy work"[13]. The remainder of the act, although briefly played, informs the public of Melibea's gradual weakening, Lucrecia's fears for her mistress' chastity and the treachery of the go-between. Melibea's final words, and their impossible hope, are lost on no one, not least on Melibea herself:

She goes, whose coming hither
did me little good.
I pray her going hence
will do me no harm. [13]

ACT II. The greed of Sempronio sets the mood now, as he claims from Celestina both knowledge of the interview with Melibea and his share of the spoils. The bawd's aside, "I'll share him [the gain] with the devil," extends the image chain whose links are Satanic power, a chain which Honig is carefully working out. This motif is reinforced in the next scene when, in another aside, Sempronio opines that the bawd's knavery was taught her by the devils. Again in Calisto's house, Celestina crows her triumphs in taurine terms ("I was your shield and support, your red cape and sharp sword"[15]) and exults in her satisfaction before the lusty and impatient swain. But Calisto refuses to let her depart before the tale is told in full. Celestina teases: "First reward me for the news"[18]. And Calisto, with unwitting irony: "You may have . . . my life." Now the girdle is produced and Calisto sinks into a rapture, but not for long. Celestina reclaims the girdle for she has yet to "distill its magic" for Calisto's benefit. The finale to the scene is rampant with foreshadowing:

Cel. Tomorrow and anon. Good sir,
think on other things,
and ease your mind on them.

- Cal. Nay, that would be heresy
to love, worship of idleness.
- Sem. You call your love not idle?
(Aside) Worse, 'tis death or madness.
Misfortune and the devil
only follow this.
(Aloud) Come, mother, I lead the way. [19]

At this juncture, all the maleficent forces are loose and death and the Devil are fully equated.

The scene that follows presents short versions of LC's act IX banquet scene, Celestina's praise of wine, and Elicia's rantings against the unsullied lips of Melibea (praised by Sempronio). Lucrecia appears to ask Celestina's attendance upon Melibea just as Tristan appears to ask her attendance upon Calisto. Tristan is put off and Celestina hies off with Lucrecia to administer the healing balm that will ease Melibea's pain.

In Melibea's chamber, we hear her soliloquy. She despairs of ever winning Calisto for her own, but plans still to dissemble "lest my gilded chastity / lose its shining leaf"[25]. As Celestina enters, the serpent writhing in the maiden's heart strikes and here the bawd quotes her the very words used in surrendering the girdle: "To cure the sick is holy work." The midnight tryst is expeditiously arranged and the web the Devil weaves is finished. Honig has Celestina say, prophetically, at the end of this scene:

Farewell. He shall be here.
He shall be woven in thy web,
thy strongest yarn of red. [26]

Celestina's good news, reported to Calisto, gains her a pearl and a gold ring with a jewel from the bedazzled gallant. Lurking nearby, and eavesdropping, is Sempronio, whose greed is now razor-sharp. Calisto's transport of joy is expressed in typically blasphemous, ambiguous terms: "How can I be so greatly blessed? / Can I, Calisto, bear such glory?"(28) In the opera, as in LC, the only answer is "no," for Calisto, we recall, has already offered his life for this "glory."

The midnight interview then takes place and the fever pitch of the aroused lovers brooks no delays. The language is zesty while portals do divide them but becomes overtly risqué (Calisto's hands become ships that roam the seas of Melibea's body in search of a safe port) when they are close enough to grasp between the bars. Below, Sempronio and Tristan are playing the cowards as four hours of garden bliss transpire before watching eyes (Lucrecia, voyeur, stands nearby in the shrubbery). On such a high wave of passion, and having made further assignations, Melibea and her lover part and Act II comes to an end.

ACT III. The final act opens with a rattling good scene twixt a very irate Sempronio and a cagy Celestina, with the division of the gain at issue. Sempronio will, he cries, have his half

or stand thee on a scaffold
 with a high paper hat
 and devils painted on it
 and thy name writ
 large, thou witch! [37]

Celestina's refusal to part with anything further incites an already dangerously angered Sempronio; her offer (subsequently withdrawn) of a pair of scarlet breeches a final mis-step. The sword is irrevocably drawn and Elicia, arriving too late, is a witness to the murder. Sempronio flees but trips over a bundle he himself placed by the door upon entering, and thus engineers his own undoing. This bundle is the mantle and kirtle for Celestina which he maliciously withheld. His greed of heart and of deed have indeed laid him low. Elicia's plaint, "all life is a lie"[40], is a theme of LC which receives in this scene one of its fullest illustrations in Honig's Calisto and Melibea.

Sharp contrast follows on the heels of this scene as we share in the vainglorious peacockeries Calisto unleashes as part of his morning-after rhetoric. He bids Tristan seek out Sempronio as he intends to be this midnight again in Melibea's bower. Honig puts in a nice touch here, in consonance with the demonic theme he is exploiting, in allowing Calisto to wonder if Melibea is not some sort of succubus conjured up by Celestina "who is a known familiar of the devil"[42]. Tristan returns with the tale of Sempronio's deeds and fate. He mentions that Elicia is broadcasting, even as she mourns, that Calisto's gifts to the bawd, are the source of the falling-out. Calisto's urgent need to indulge his desire, however, is only increased by this threat of exposure:

Down every street
 my honor and my reputation
 go on broken feet.
 I pray my secrets
 do not follow them
 from mouth to mouth.
 Come, Tristan,
 'tis near midnight. [43]

And off they go, Calisto to show that the heart is mightier than death. Honig's timing of the plot turnings is clever and hastens the end, foreseen in the closing lines: "The midnight bell / has almost struck. To glory! [44]

The end represents perhaps the freest invention or rearrangements of Rojas. Honig's denouement is new in its unfolding of how the final actions are motivated. Tristan is seen outside, awaiting Elicia. He has hopes of replacing Sempronio in her bed and heart. But he also desires an end to all this nighttime scuttling about. Inside are Elicia and Lucrecia who plan to take advantage of the "mooncalf fellow" without. They engage him to frighten Calisto [this scene borrows heavily from the Centurio acts of LC] and the plan is that he make off with the ladder, once Calisto is well within the garden. Calisto will need to wake the watch and thus publicize his disgrace and his shameless lust. Being rich and

noble, he will only suffer a fine. The sexually-eager Tristan is quick to promise all this and the innuendo at scene's end is rich and humorous: "Thou shalt be satisfied by me / in every way thou canst conceive. / Farewell" [50].

The fifth and last-but-one scene opens with Lucrecia singing songs to Melibea as they await the arrival of Calisto. Then, when the youth is safe within the bower, a noise frightens Tristan who scampers off without removing the ladder. Elicia appears and kicks the ladder down and then disappears quickly into the garden. [I wonder if Honig pondered whether such ease of access to the garden logically ruins his--or Calisto's--need of any ladder?] Tristan, remiss, returns and sets the ladder aright but tears his arm on a protruding nail. In his haste to seek aid for stanching the blood, he then knocks the ladder over!

Lucrecia is sent to find Calisto and meets him in the shadows of the shrubbery. His animal passion stirs her own and she is sent off a distance by the intuitive Melibea whose eagerness permits her to see only half of what hangs above them all. It is Lucrecia that Honig permits to perceive the truth:

Methinks the smell of love
streams over him like honey,
but spiced and sharpened
by another smell
catching up my breath.
I know it well.
It is the smell of death. [52]

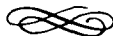
Even Calisto, hearing Tristan's cry, knows he has heard "the cry of one about to die"[53], but is insensitive to any consequences that might have for him. Honig is knitting up the threads of love, lust, greed, compassion steam-rolled by passion, and at the end of the pattern is only the grinning mask of Death.

At this crossing of themes, Elicia creeps up on her conspirator, Lucrecia, and relates Tristan's death at the teeth of dogs attracted by his flowing blood. Both women then turn to the embracing lovers and Elicia spits out with spite that Sempronio, Celestina, Tristan, all are a "sauce for [Melibea's] hot repast"[54]. The darkness of evil closes in. Elicia dares disguise her voice as a man's and shouts a challenge to the lovers from her place in the shadows. Calisto rushes in, sword at the ready, and fatally stabs Lucrecia. He will not stop at Melibea's call and, hearing the voice again, thrusts and runs Elicia through. Melibea stares, and delivers these words of justification: "Thou wert driven mad / for too jealously regarding / thine own happiness. / Now flee, thyself, / else Justice takes thee" [55]. These seem pretty stern words for one whose participation in the scenes of passion was only too willing. Does a concern for his safety soften them? Calisto, at the top of the wall, sees too late that the ladder is fallen and manages to call on Our Lady of Mercy even as he breathes his last: "I am low fallen, dead without confession" [55].

The final scene is Melibea's alone. At the top of her tower, she is able to see that her wish to die is only "the latest fire / of my desire" [56]. And so it is. This devouring passion, she realizes at last, "did consume the world," although that is a bit grandiose for the actions we have seen (but within the operatic conventions?). We may allow that she thinks so, but we do not agree. And what was it? she asks. "Nothing." "Deep in the skein / of the web I wrought / so joyously / Calisto lies" [56]. And then she imagines that the web beckons her, "dark and deeply," to approach. Commending her soul to God, she throws herself down to join the broken body of Calisto. The final curtain falls.

What conclusions may we draw? One, that this is, while not really a faithful adaptation of Rojas, certainly one which indeed owes its being to the original. The links with it do not seem, in the light of the exposition given for the libretto, to be nearly as weak as Honig wants to claim. In part, this may be attributable to Honig's desire to fend off anticipated criticisms. But in the end, more than the plot outline of LC survives. Surviving, even though modified or reworked--often to very great effect--are the themes and the central image chains: love-as-illness, the demonic entry into the yarn (which is then developed in ways Rojas did not prepare us for), the blasphemy conceits, and so on. The compression and the conflation of plot and character have taken their toll on the richness and subtleties of Rojas' (Mabbe's?) verbal model but these could, in a well-acted and sung version, be partially supplemented.

Two, the black end in Honig is blacker than in Rojas. The unrelenting gloom of the opera is partly the result of the need to put the story on the stage. In painting with broad strokes, fine points of motive are lost in the rush of concatenated actions flowing to an implacable finale. Yet, we must be careful to limit such observations to the appreciable differences which have arisen in Honig's attempts to create something new in English inspired by La Celestina. In this, I think he has succeeded. The characters are types, pushed about less by Fate than by the requirements of the romantic conventions of opera. We do not come to feel for them as we might for the originals they descend from. Honig nevertheless has made them all articulate puppets of evil desires, cunning, and the fine art of murder and of double-cross. He has produced a literate poetic text, notably free of jingles and facile rhymes and unconstrained by a metrical yoke, one which with few exceptions moves us in a straight line from a beginning to an end with purpose there to be met. Good examples abound of construction of plot, use of language, symbols, and more. For his poet's care, we can be grateful. Finally, the focus on sensual pleasure as a path to death is sustained throughout: for Honig, the metaphorical equation of death with the ultimate physical gratification is, perhaps ironically so, transformed into reality in Calisto and Melibea. This single underlying conceptualization gives the adaptation a unity and a coherence of its own. The work can, I think, stand apart and on its own merits. Even as libretto to a musical score I have not yet heard, it is an unusual piece of work within the celestinesque family. I hope, therefore, that the opera is revived. I would be most curious to see how this text works with music.



NOTES

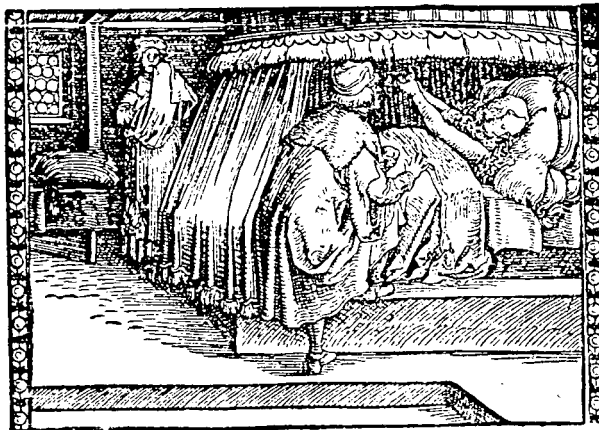
¹The quoted words appear on the title page. I think what Honig wants is to be judged by how well integrated his story of Calisto and Melibea is, as a creation not dependent on the identical ground rules that might apply to a "straight" stage adaptation based on Rojas' text directly (or exclusively). I suspect he feels that "weak" lets him off the hook for some radical restructuring he performs in Act III. In his introductory or prefatory note, Honig defends himself against precisely this kind of undesired criticism: "To convert a 170-page prose fiction, rippling with 14 full-bodied characters in sixteen-closely written acts or chapters, into a swiftly actable, perhaps singable text in verse, one had to create a dramatic poem bearing almost no relation to the original except the story idea."

²Quoted from the author's prefatory note to the text.

³Ibid.

⁴I am indebted to Professor William Bryant of Oakland University, in Michigan, for the first notice of the existence of this libretto (see, in the 2nd supplement to "La Celestina: documento bibliográfico," Celestinesca, I, ii [1977], at s87). To him also I owe my copy of the text.

⁵Page numbers will be given in square brackets and will correspond to the Hellcoal Press edition of 1972.



Acto XXI. Pleberio consuela a Alisa, estando allí Alicia. De la traducción alemana de C. Wirsung (1520).