

## FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AND WITCHCRAFT IN 'CELESTINA'<sup>1</sup>

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Except for a couple of insertions and other minor changes, the first and third-and-final chapters of Dorothy Sherman Severin's latest monograph, *Witchcraft in "Celestina"* (1995), are pretty much the same as in "Celestina and the Magical Empowerment of Women," an article she had published previously (Severin 1993). The second chapter, "Witchcraft Themes in the Text of *Celestina*," offers much new material, however. This short monograph concludes with an extensive bibliography (49-55) and an analytical index (57-58). In essence, Severin weaves together ideas from Peter Russell's seminal article on magic in *Celestina* (1963 and 1978) and Alan Deyermond's two pieces (1977; 1978) on the relationship between Celestina's skein of yarn, Melibea's girdle, and Calisto's gold chain. To these ideas, she adds her own feminist interpretation of Rojas's work.

According to this feminist interpretation, "Celestina exchanges her female powerlessness for a power based on magic and lust" (22); "Witchcraft, sorcery, and bawdry empower Celestina in her society and make her the dominant character not just in the work but in her social milieu" (10). Melibea becomes empowered as well, for when she states that she will disobey her parents after overhearing their plans to marry her off, she is declaring "her freedom from conventional marriage" (39) in what amounts to a "declaration of independence" (40). Thanks to Celestina's mediation, Melibea too "has been empowered by the demonic

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<sup>1</sup> Review of Dorothy Sherman Severin, *Witchcraft in 'Celestina'*, Papers of the Medieval Hispanic Research Seminar 1, London: Dept. of Hispanic Studies — Queen Mary & Westfield College, 1995. Paper, 58 pp.

forces of lust that have entered her. She becomes the dominant partner in the love affair" (40). Melibea's powers are also associated with a fairy's, but she loses them at dawn, which leads to Calisto's death and her subsequent suicide: "This was in line with folk motifs, for example, the fairy who loses her powers at dawn after enchanting a lover and making love to him. Melibea's power fails with the dawn and the power of the Devil reasserts itself in the deaths" (38). Areúsa is "the other liberated woman of the work," for she has "her own space from which she manages to eject her pimp Centurio" (45).

According to Severin, Rojas created this "attractive alternate society of female industry and female sexual liberation" (46) because, being a *converso*, "a marginalized figure" (11), he probably identified "with these female characters who wish to overthrow the oppressive patriarchy of their society" (46). Thus, Rojas's creation of an alternate female society may have constituted a protest, an act of subversion. However, Rojas detests the empowerment that he has given his female characters. That is why "he condemns this usurpation of male prerogative and shows what happens if the social order is challenged by women" (10-11).

A feminist interpretation could shed important new light on our understanding of *Celestina*, but, as the preceding summary indicates, Severin's thesis has some shortcomings. Since *Celestina* is a literary creation rather than a real, historical character, it is difficult to see how she could be the dominant character in Rojas's work as well as in her social milieu, as claimed. There is no doubt that the old bawd is a very powerful figure, and that Areúsa, who lives in her own house, prizes her independence, but Melibea's impulsive, momentary rejection of her parent's plans to marry her off is not tantamount to a "declaration of independence." Melibea merely expresses her thoughts to her maid, Lucrecia; her parents have no idea of what is going on. Calisto spends most of his time in his room, thinking about Melibea, but this does not necessarily make Melibea the dominant partner in their relationship. In fact, the text seems to suggest otherwise. For example, Melibea asks Calisto, on the night before he dies, not to tear off her clothes as he usually does; rather than agreeing to her wishes, he replies: "Señora, el que quiere comer el ave, quita primero las plumas" (223; I refer to Severin's excellent Alianza edition).

The relationship established between Melibea's putative powers and the fairy who loses her powers at dawn is confusing. If the fairy loses her powers at dawn after making love to the lover whom she has enchanted, why is it that Calisto and Melibea do not perish after making

love for the first time? The alternate female society poses problems as well. What Rojas creates is an underclass that includes prostitutes (Celestina, Elicia, Areúsa), male and female servants (Pármemo, Sempronio, Sosia, Tristán, and Lucrecia), a pimp (Centurio), and the lame Traso and his companions. Celestina plays the most important role, but this alternate society is not exclusively female. Last but not least, to be cogent and complete, a feminist reading of *Celestina* would have to take into account the other women in the work—Alisa, Lucrecia, and Elicia. However, Severin does not study these from a feminist perspective.

Severin's study of witchcraft in *Celestina*, which she undertakes act by act in chapter 2, is much more convincing. Celestina is not just a sorceress, but a witch, for she makes "a pact with the Devil on at least one occasion" (12). After conjuring the devil, whom she encloses in a skein of yarn with a snake poison, Celestina takes the skein to Melibea's house. Once Celestina is inside the house, Melibea's mother Alisa, imprudently decides to visit her sick sister, leaving her daughter with the procuress: Celestina thanks the devil for providing her with this opportunity. Melibea becomes extremely angry with her for daring to mention Calisto's name, however, and the old bawd feels obliged to turn to the devil for his assistance. Her request seems to work, for Melibea calms down upon hearing the story that Celestina invents about Calisto's toothache. The girl then allows Celestina to borrow her girdle as a remedy; it was believed to have touched all the holy relics in Rome and Jerusalem. Melibea also instructs Celestina to return secretly the day after, so that she can let her have the prayer of Saint Appolonia, a spell against toothaches for which the old bawd had asked. Celestina certainly believes in the power of her own conjuration, for, on the way back, she thanks the devil for his help (16-22). As soon as he touches the girdle, Calisto's fetishism with it is so exaggerated that, as Deyermond suggested, the devil probably passed from the skein to Melibea, and from Melibea to the girdle, infecting Calisto as well (24-25). When Celestina finally brings Calisto the news that Melibea has agreed to see him, Calisto is so happy that he rewards her with a valuable gold chain. Following Deyermond once again, Severin hypothesizes that the devil passed to the chain and then to Celestina. Blinded by the devil, Celestina refuses to divide the chain with Pármemo and Sempronio, and they kill her (33-37). Celestina's death, in turn, leads to the deaths of Pármemo, Sempronio, Calisto, and Melibea. Thus, the devil seems to have done his work.

Unfortunately, this satisfactory examination of witchcraft and the role of the devil in *Celestina* is marred by errors. According to Severin, since witchcraft was punishable by death, it is "little wonder that

Celestina would insist that she practiced only the white arts and not the black ones" (12). As the author later indicates while discussing Claudina, who was a witch, Celestina portrays herself as her apprentice, however, and admits that she does not have as much power over the devils as her former teacher used to (25). This would seem to constitute an admission of witchcraft. In the passage that Severin quotes at this point, Celestina also says that Claudina could enter into a circle much better than she ever did: "Pues entrar en un cerco, mejor que yo y con más esfuerzo" (123). Rather than denying consistently that she is a witch, Celestina admits it, at least to Pármemo.

Throughout her analysis of witchcraft in *Celestina*, Severin often reads too much into the text, seeing the devil at work whenever his name is mentioned in the text. For example, Sempronio sees Celestina returning from her first interview with Melibea, and exclaims: "¡Válala el diablo, haldear que trae!" (103). Noticing how nervously Calisto awaits the news that Celestina brings him, Pármemo observes: "Temblando está el diablo como azogado" (107). Shortly after, Sempronio warns Pármemo about his imprudent asides: "¡Callarás, par Dios, o te echaré dende con el diablo!" (107). Seeing that Pármemo complains when he tells him to fetch the tailor in order to make some clothes for Celestina, Calisto remarks: "¡De qué gana va el diablo!" (113). When Celestina comes to her house in the middle of the night, Areúsa exclaims in an aside: "¡Válala el diablo a esta vieja, con qué viene como huestantigua a tal hora!" (126). Wondering whether the dog is barking because Celestina, who is out late, is finally coming home, Elicia wonders: "¿Si viene este diablo de vieja?" (132). Sempronio and Pármemo agree to become friends, and Sempronio says: "Abrazarte quiero. Seamos como hermanos, ¡vaya el diablo para ruin!" (138). Overhearing his master sing, Sempronio tells Pármemo: "¡Trovará el diablo!" (139). As Calisto eats a slice of candied citron, Sempronio remarks to his companion: "Verás que engullir hace el diablo" (141). Sempronio warns Pármemo, once again, that Calisto will overhear what he is saying, and Pármemo fires back: "Oirá el diablo!" (164). Suspecting that Celestina will refuse to share the gold chain that Calisto has given her, Sempronio warns: "¡Pues guárdese del diablo, que sobre el partir no le saquemos el alma!" (167). Elicia wonders whether she ought to keep on mourning Celestina's and Sempronio's deaths as follows: "El diablo me da tener dolor por quien no sé si, yo muerta, lo tuviera" (208).

Severin attaches great weight to all of these references to the devil (22-24, 28-30, 33, 35, 41), but his name is being used as an expletive, as still is often the case today. In order for these references to have additional significance, it is necessary to show a clear, meaningful pattern. The author does not. Her preoccupation with the devil also

causes Severin to see his presence even before Celestina conjures him. In her opinion, "Calisto opens the door to the Devil's interference with the first words of *Celestina*" (13), when he sees Melibea in her garden and says: "En esto veo, Melibea, la grandeza de Dios" (46). If that were an example of opening the door to the devil, every courtly lover would have been in great trouble, for the lover's *endiosamiento* of the beloved is one of the main characteristics of courtly love.

Severin also sees the devil at work as a result of the prayer in which Calisto asks God to guide Sempronio to Celestina's house as He had guided the Wise Kings to Bethlehem with the star: "This impious prayer will be heard and answered, not just by God but by the Devil" (14). Curiously, she sees both God and the devil answering the same prayer. The devil may well have answered it, but there is no textual evidence to support such a deduction.

Besides reading too much into the text, at times Severin does not explain it sufficiently. Commenting on Celestina's invention of Calisto's toothache and request for Melibea's girdle and the prayer of Saint Appolonia, the author explains that the toothache is "a typical courtly lover's malady" (20), and that the girdle is "an article of clothing needed to complete the *philocaptio* enchantment" (20). "Toothaches" were not restricted to courtly lovers, however. The word was used as a euphemism for sexual arousal (see Herrero 1986: 134-41 and West 1979: 7; Severin cites the second author). Celestina probably needed the girdle to complete her evil work, but the girdle that Melibea wore around her waist also represents her chastity (see West 1979: 136; Dunn 1975: 414; Fontes 1990-91: 23). The request for the prayer of Saint Appolonia is ironical, for it is a folk spell for real, not metaphorical toothaches.<sup>2</sup> With

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<sup>2</sup> It still exists in the modern oral tradition. The 66-year old Augusta dos Santos recorded the following Portuguese version in Seixas, Vinhais (Bragança), on August 14, 1980:

Senhora Santa Apolónia  
 Estava sentadinha  
 nas pedrinhas do Oriente.  
 Passou ali S[ão] Clemente.  
 — Que faz aqui, Santa Apolónia?  
 — Dói-me as minhas mãos e os meus dentes.  
 — Queres que tos sare?  
 — Meu senhor, de boa mente.  
 Em louvor de Deus e da Virgem Maria,  
 um pai-nosso e ùa avé-maria.

(Fontes 1987: no. 1526)

such veiled language, Celestina is in fact telling Melibea the truth, and Melibea understands it perfectly well. That is why she asks Celestina to return for the prayer "muy secretamente" (100) the next day.<sup>3</sup> Though apparently aware of this telling request for secrecy (20-21), Severin fails to explain the passage properly.

There are several curious readings or interpretations. Whereas it is true that, at one time, Celestina "ran an extensive prostitution ring and bawdy house for the entire community" (21), it is wrong to surmise that she did this "especially for the clergy, including the nuns" (21). In the quotation used to substantiate this assertion (22), Celestina merely states that

in her glory days, when business was booming, thanks to the great number of girls that worked for her, she had many "servidores" (i.e., "customers") including abbots, bishops, and sextons: "Pues servidores, ¿no tenía por su causa de ellas? Caballeros viejos y mozos, abades de todas dignidades, desde obispos hasta sacristanes" (151). This does not suggest that the majority of Celestina's customers are clergymen, and there is nothing about nuns here. As I have shown elsewhere, the probable reference to the nuns appears much earlier, when Pármemo describes Celestina's house to Calisto, as he remembered it from the days when he used to live with her as a child: "Muchas *encubiertas* vi entrar en su casa; tras ellas hombres descalzos, contritos y rebozados, desatacados, que entraban allí a llorar sus pecados" (61; emphasis mine; for a fuller explanation of this passage, see Fontes 1990-91: 13-14).

Celestina's boast about the great number of customers that she used to have is part of the parodic *misa de amor* (Castro 1965: 96-98) in which she describes the commotion that she used to provoke as she entered church. In Severin's opinion, "a pact with the Devil is inferred from the circumstances" (22). Returning to this scene, she later comments that Celestina "paints a picture of demonic impiety in which the clerics

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According to the *Golden Legend*, when Saint Appolonia was martyred during the reign of the emperor Decius, in Alexandria, her executioners first beat out all of her teeth (de Voragine 1993, 1: 268).

<sup>3</sup> Javier Herrero explains this clearly: "At another level, the recourse to postpone the writing of the prayer for another day and, above all, the request for great secrecy ('mui secretamente') in her next visit clearly show that such innocent respectability is a game, and that she is agreeing to establish, through a 'tercera' (a go-between), an illicit and dangerous relationship with Calisto" (1986: 136).

and lovers worship her instead of God in a sort of Black Mass" (30). It is true that here Celestina becomes the center of attention, "displacing God in His own house" (Fontes 1990-91: 16). Although this elevates her "into the category of a divine, anti-Christian figure" of sorts (Fontes 1990-91: 16), there is no textual evidence regarding a pact with the devil or a black mass at this point. The purpose of a black mass is to invoke the devil, making him present. There is such a mass in *Celestina*, but it is performed earlier, when Celestina, in her role as high priestess, uses "la sangre del cabrón" (85), an animal that represents the devil, in order to conjure and place the devil in the yarn that she takes to Melibea's house. The goat's blood parallels the wine that, through transubstantiation, is transformed into the blood of Christ in the Catholic mass (for a fuller analysis, see Barrick 1977 and Fontes 1990-91: 21-22).

While still commenting on the parodic *misa de amor* that she conflates with the black mass, Severin goes on to say that the clerics have their servants follow Celestina home, and "a procession of foodstuffs marches through her door, seemingly unaided. Penniless curates even send the communion bread flying in through her door" (30). What the text says is this: "Y enviaban sus escuderos y mozos a que me acompañasen, y apenas era llegada a mi casa, cuando entraban por mi puerta muchos pollos y gallinas, ansarones, anadones, perdices, tórtolas, pernils de tocino, tortas de trigo, lechones.... Pues otros curas sin renta, no era ofrecido el bodigo, cuando, en besando el feligrés la estola, era del primero voleo en mi casa. Espesos, como piedras a tablado, entraban mochachos cargados de provisiones por mi puerta" (151-52). Foodstuffs flying by themselves into Celestina's house would make a tantalizing image, testifying even further to her powers as a witch, but nothing of the sort happens here. Everything is carried in, and there is no communion bread involved. As Severin herself explains in her edition of *Celestina*, a "bodigo" is a loaf of bread that is taken to church as an offering: "panecillo hecho de la flor de la harina, que se suele llevar a la iglesia por ofrenda" (253, n. 243).

Severin interprets the text curiously on at least another four occasions. Embarrassed because of Celestina's bad reputation, Lucrecia does not want to tell Alisa even her name when the old bawd calls at the door. Alisa insists, and the girl replies: "¡He vergüenza!" (89). According to Severin's interpretation, Lucrecia "is afraid to mention Celestina's name, presumably because of its demonic power" (19). Melibea, who has not seen Celestina for some time, fails to recognize her right away, and thinks that the latter has lost her former beauty: "Figúraseme que eras hermosa. Otra pareces, muy mudada estás" (92). Singleton renders this passage accurately as: "Yet, despite the changes I observe, I easily fancy

that you once were lovely too" (1958: 76). Severin believes Melibea to be saying that Celestina "had seemed more attractive when she was a little child" (19). Although this is plausible — Melibea is still young, after all — the text does not authorize such a reading. While boasting about the havoc that her entry in church provoked in earlier days, Celestina states that "he who had the fewest dealings with me thought himself the worst off" (Singleton 1975: 150-51): "El que menos había de negociar conmigo, por más ruin se tenía" (151). Severin takes these words to mean that "anyone who didn't know her would be ashamed to admit it" (22). While waiting for Celestina, for whom she had sent for help because of the lovesickness that she felt, Melibea asks God to help her to hide the true cause of her malady, and to pretend that something else ails her: "a ti, el cual todas las cosas a los hombres sojuzgaste, humildemente suplico: des a mi herido corazón sufrimiento y paciencia, con que mi terrible pasión pueda disimular! No se desdore aquella hoja de castidad que tengo asentada sobre este amoroso deseo, publicando ser otro mi dolor, que no el que me atormenta" (154). According to Severin's interpretation, Melibea "prays to God to guard her chastity against temptation" (31).

I would add that Severin missed an important point by failing to mention the relationship between Melibea's garden and the Garden of Eden. It is in Melibea's garden that Calisto and Melibea fall to their deaths. This corresponds to the Biblical fall. Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise because the devil tempted Eve, disguised as a snake. Celestina put the devil into the skein with snake's oil, taking it to Melibea's house afterwards, so that he would help her to tempt Melibea. This additional detail would have enriched the relationship that the author establishes among Melibea's and Calisto's deaths, Celestina's witchcraft, and the work of the devil (see Weiner 1969: 392-96; Fontes 1990-91, 23-27).

Though leaving out important points such as this, Severin includes passages that are not germane to her arguments. Most of the quotations that punctuate every page of the textual analysis are too long, and some of them are pointless, often having little or nothing to do with the her two subjects: female empowerment and witchcraft. The text is cited profusely in order to show how Celestina tries to cheat Pármeno and Sempronio of their share of the gold chain just before they kill her (35-37) when a summary would have served. The lengthy monologue in which Calisto reacts to the execution of his two servants (37-38) could have been omitted as well.

The lengthy bibliography (49-55), which Severin precedes with the statement that "This bibliography includes all the studies on the topic of witchcraft in *Celestina*, whether or not they are cited above" (49), is certainly useful, even though, as a general rule, such bibliographies consist of works cited. In any case, the author might have made a greater effort to refer to more of those works, as this would have enriched her study considerably. A case in point is the sketchy introductory chapter. As its title indicates, it purports to undertake a survey of "Witchcraft in Late Medieval Spain and Europe," thus providing background for "The Case of *Celestina*." The author refers to the *Malleus maleficarum* in the second and third lines of the opening paragraph, summarizes Christine Lerner's distinction between witchcraft and sorcery in another paragraph (8; Maravall, whose name is not even included in the final bibliography, could also have been cited here [1972: 150]), and then dedicates only one additional, brief paragraph to the subject (8-9).

This introductory chapter also raises some interesting questions that, unfortunately, are left unanswered. After pointing out that Rojas was a *converso* "whose skepticism about redemption and the afterlife has been recognized by some critics" (7), Severin states: "However, the possibility that he believed in God, the Devil, and evil from a basically Jewish point of view has not been adequately studied. Modern critics have tended to categorize him either as a conventional Christian or as an atheist. The possibility that he was neither of these has not been seriously considered" (7). Since the author raises these questions in her introduction, the reader has every right to expect further discussion, but there is hardly any. Still in the introduction, Severin refers to Rojas as a "believer (even if not a whole-hearted Christian)" (10), and quotes the Old Testament in order to show that, since "Mosaic law expressly forbids witchcraft" (11), "final proof of Rojas's belief in the perniciousness of witches can be adduced from the Bible" (11). Severin drops the subject after this, as if she had already investigated it sufficiently, answering her own questions in the process. It seems clear to me that she has not done so.

On a more positive note, I have profited considerably from Severin's commentary on Calisto's and Melibea's conversation during their last night in the garden. Calisto says to Melibea: "Jamás querría, señora, que amaneciese, según la gloria y descanso que mi sentido recibe de la noble conversación de tus delicados miembros" (223). To which Melibea replies: "Señor, yo soy la que gozo, yo la que gano; tú, señor, el que me haces con tu *visitación* incomparable *merced*" (223; emphasis mine). Citing Shipley (1973-74), the author observes that this passage

"features angelic imagery. Calisto now becomes Melibea's god, an angel who visits her in her garden" (42). Severin's reference to Calisto as both an angel and god whom Melibea thanks for visiting her brings to mind the Annunciation of the angel who tells the Virgin Mary that she will conceive and bear a Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1.26-38). Melibea's gratitude for the "incomparable merced" that she has received also brings to mind the *Magnificat* (Luke 1.46-55), the beautiful prayer that the Blessed Mother proffers to thank the Lord for having chosen her during her Visitation to St. Elizabeth. Note that St. Luke places this episode right after the Annunciation. Given the context — Calisto and Melibea had been making love all night long — the use of this imagery is unquestionably sacrilegious, and even more so on the part of a *converso* whose Jewish ancestors viewed the Annunciation and the Incarnation of Christ in human rather than in supernatural terms. Some *conversos* were dragged before the Inquisition for imprudently expressing such opinions.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps because she has always firmly set her face "against any notion that there is a secret message about *conversos* concealed in the work" (46), thus apparently dismissing, *a priori*, any new evidence that might come to light, Severin fails to see any further significance in her important insight.



Ilustración acto XX. Traducción rusa (1959).

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<sup>4</sup> See Fontes 1990-1991: 33-36; id., 1993: 202; id., 1994: 258-60; I further develop these ideas in the forthcoming "Adam and Eve Imagery in *Celestina*: A Reinterpretation."

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