

Fallen, Unrepentant, and Unforgiven: Calisto at *la Madalena*

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*For my graduate students
at Ohio University in
Spanish 522, Spring 2000.*

FERNANDO DE ROJAS makes few references to organized religion and to religious place names in *La Celestina* (1499). Consequently, the author draws attention to those that he does mention. With respect to organized religion, Calisto prefers, in his idolatrous worship of a mortal, to be a Melibeian rather than a Christian. Concerning religious place names, the one specific reference is to the church of *la Madalena* where Calisto goes to pray. The act of praying at *la Madalena* is repeated three times during the drama. While the naming of the church may appear to be gratuitous; in fact, Rojas is presenting the reader with yet another example of the irony that pervades his entire work. Although such distinguished critics as Stephen Gilman, María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, and Cándido Ayllón have written about the use of irony in *Celestina*, they do not comment on the subversive references to St. Mary Magdalene.¹ Dayle Seidenspinner-Núñez, however, does include a discussion of the «eloquently ironic counterpoint» (115) of the presence of Mary Magdalene in *Celestina*. Professor Seidenspinner-Núñez places the reference to the saint in the greater context of Rojas' subversion of the «topos of the harlot-saint» (115).² This essay will examine the story and the legends associated with St. Mary Magdalene, demonstrating how Rojas' purposeful references to this saint ironically comment upon Calisto's intent to make Melibea his mistress.

1. See Stephen Gilman, *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973), María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, *La originalidad artística de La Celestina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1962), Cándido Ayllón, *La perspectiva irónica de Fernando de Rojas* (Madrid: José Porrúa Turanzas, 1984).

2. I thank Joseph Snow who kindly referred me to Prof. Seidenspinner-Núñez' article.

In order to understand better Rojas' use of the church of *la Madalena*, one should consider the developing identity of Mary Magdalene. She becomes a paradoxical woman, an icon amplified in legends with various connotations, but with all their ambiguity: she is primarily sensual, forgiven, and forgiving. In the early Christian era and in hagiographical writings during the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene's story becomes expansively mysterious and full of multiple characterizations because the early evangelists, as well as later theologians, make allusive and often contradictory attempts to explain her role in Christianity. In the Bible, the four evangelists include Mary Magdalene in their accounts of the Crucifixion and Resurrection (Jansen 21). Luke and Mark name her as the woman from whom Christ must cast out seven evil demons. Matthew and Mark have her «stand afar» as a distant witness to the Crucifixion; John, however, places her nearer, stating that she «stood by the cross.» Mark writes that she accompanied Christ's body to the tomb. Matthew, Mark, and Luke name her as one of the three Marys who took spices to the tomb on Easter morning. John, on the other hand, writes that she went alone. Mark recounts that she was the first person to whom the risen Christ appeared and charged her with the duty of telling the disciples of his resurrection. However, John tells that some of the disciples left the tomb after seeing it empty while Mary Magdalene remained at the sepulcher and wept. Also, according to John, Jesus appeared to her, told her not to cry, and sent her to tell the other disciples that he had risen from the dead. In summary, after reading the Bible, one pictures Mary Magdalene either as Christ's closest most tender female friend, or as a fallen demonized outcast, or as a trusted emissary and witness to the Resurrection.

Over time, Mary Magdalene's story becomes even more confusing and interesting as she becomes associated with other women in Christ's ministry. Thanks principally to the efforts of Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century, the *persona* of Mary Magdalene absorbs the roles of several other unnamed women who appear in the gospels. In his sermon of 591 A.D., the pontiff articulates what soon becomes the saint's «official» biography (Haskins 95; Jansen 32). In addition to her roles as one person from whom the Savior cast out seven evil demons and tomb visitor on Easter, Mary Magdalene becomes (1) the penitent who washes Christ's feet with her tears and dries them with her hair at the house of Simon the Pharisee, (2) the Samaritan woman who offers Christ a drink of water at the well, (3) the woman taken in adultery, and finally (4) Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Haskins 96). Thus, by Pope Gregory's account, she becomes a three-dimensional and dramatic character, close to and trusted by Christ, yet at the same time holding a tinged reputation.

By the twelfth century the figure of Mary Magdalene reaches mythic and legendary dimensions. An early medieval French legend tells that a

few years after the Resurrection, Mary along with her siblings Martha and Lazarus and other companions were set adrift from the Holy Land in a rudderless boat to die. Angels miraculously guided the boat to Provence in France where Mary preached, evangelized, and converted many pagans to Christianity. This same legend states that she subsequently became a hermit, who received divine nourishment from ministering angels. In the eleventh century her supposed relics were transferred from Provence to Vézelay in eastern France where a cult devoted to the saint arose in the twelfth century (Jansen 38-9). The church in Vézelay became one of the centers from which pilgrims set out for Santiago de Compostela. In the thirteenth century, Jacobus de Voragine includes Mary Magdalene in his collection of saints' lives, the *Legenda aurea* (Voragine 1:374). He mentions that among the apocryphal legends that abound about Mary Magdalene, one names her as the bride at the marriage in Cana where Christ performed his first miracle. According to this story, the groom was John the Evangelist, who deserted his new bride to follow Christ. As a result of her husband's disappearance, the distraught Mary turns to prostitution. Thus by the thirteenth century, Mary Magdalene's multiple roles make her into a legendary, captivating woman. Ultimately, what makes her attractive is her seductive beauty.

To this day, because of her polymorphous, accepting nature, St. Mary Magdalene continues to hold an important place in the panoply of saints. On the liturgical calendar, her feast day is July 22nd (Haskins 100). Her presence is not limited to the religious realm alone. Her name contributes to the English language: the English adjective «maudlin» means overly emotional and sentimental. She plays a role in twentieth-century pop culture though her presence on stage and screen. In the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, she sings about her relationship to Jesus in «I Don't Know How to Love Him». In a recent novel, *Mary, Called Magdalene* (2002), the author, Margaret F. George, treats Mary as a rejected and outcast wife and mother because she chooses to follow Christ after he has cast out the evil demons from her body. In the book *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (1994), Susan Haskins sums up our current perception of this saint, a perception that increases Mary's mysterious and mesmerizing identity:

We know very little about Mary Magdalen. The predominant image we have of her is of a beautiful woman with long golden hair, weeping for her sins, the very incarnation of the age-old equation between feminine beauty, sexuality and sin. ...Her very name evokes images of beauty and sensuality, yet when we look for this creature in the New Testament, we look for her in vain (Haskins 3).

By the fifteenth century, during Rojas' lifetime and the writing of *La Celestina*, Mary Magdalene was recognized as an important saint: the patron of fallen women, of repentant prostitutes, and of all repentant sinners. Any reference to her in the Middle Ages would have been perceived immediately as a reference to a once tarnished woman becoming a saint. Thus, in *La Celestina*, when Fernando de Rojas makes four references to the church of *la Madalena*, he purposefully cues his audience to the well known context of the repentant saint.

His first reference occurs in Act Eight. Pármeno, having spent the night with Areusa, returns to his master's home with Sempronio. Calisto tells his two servants:

...que tañen a missa. Dacá mis ropas; yré a la Madalena; rogaré a Dios aderece a Celestina y ponga en corazón a Melibea mi remedio, o dé fin en breve a mis tristes días (219).³

Calisto senses that Celestina's efforts have not worked for his desired effect, since Melibea has not given herself to him. He now tries another tack: he will pray. Calisto clearly misuses and misappropriates religion by going to church to pray that a virtuous woman should fall into sin. This misappropriation of faith and prayer is made all the more evident when the church he chooses is one dedicated to and bearing the name of Mary Magdalene, the patron of repentant sinners and fallen women. Rojas masterfully juxtaposes Calisto's actions with the name of the church. Rojas' use of irony becomes evident when one considers the objective of Calisto's prayers: to seek divine favor for Celestina, *la puta vieja*, and to cause Melibea unconditionally to become his mistress.

Calisto believes that with God and the saints on his side, Celestina surely cannot fail him. Calisto, moved by an all-consuming and uncontrolled sexual appetite for Melibea, never cares that the young woman will lose her virtue and become a fallen woman, thus damning her socially and morally. His motives are selfish and far from spiritual. He thinks only of himself and of his illicit desire to possess Melibea sexually. In Act One, Calisto declares: «Melibea só, y a Melibea adoro, y en Melibea creo, y a Melibea amo» (93). He replaces his Christian faith with the deification of Melibea. Thus, the decision by Calisto to go to church smacks of heresy and hypocrisy.

The remaining three instances when the characters mention the church of *la Madalena* further enhance the irony surrounding the initial reference to St. Mary Magdalene. In Act Nine, Pármeno and Sempronio dine with Celestina and the two quarrelsome prostitutes, Areusa and Elicia. Elicia

3. All references to the text of *La Celestina* come from the edition made by Dorothy S. Severin for Cátedra.

first, and then Areusa, argue with Sempronio about Melibea's beauty. Celestina, in an effort to get the obstreperous harlots back to the dinner table, interrupts and changes the prostitutes' conversation. She asks Pármeno about Calisto's state of mind, to which the young servant responds that Calisto has gone:

...echando huego, desesperado, perdido, medio loco, a missa a la Madalena a rogar a Dios que te dé gracia, que puedas roer los huessos destos pollos, y protestando de no bolver a casa hasta oír que eres venida con Melibea en tu arremango. (230)

The discourse and the presence of Elicia and Areusa suggest two points: (1) their social inferiority to Melibea, and (2) that should Melibea fall under Celestina's magic and guidance, she too could become like these prostitutes. The reference to the church of *la Madalena* is not arbitrary. By the thirteenth century, Mary Magdalene is known as a reformed prostitute and one of Christ's most devoted followers. Thus, when Pármeno mentions the church in front of the prostitutes, the audience cannot fail to understand the implied comparison between these two harlots and Mary Magdalene. The words and actions of Elicia and Areusa demonstrate they are the moral and spiritual opposites of St. Mary Magdalene.

In Act Eleven, Celestina reports to Calisto that she has been successful in convincing Melibea; however, the old hag Celestina states that she will give him the «good news,» but only at a distance from the church: «Salgamos, señor, de la yglesia y de aquí a la casa te contaré algo con que te alegres de verdad» (249). Celestina intends to keep the sacred and the profane separate. In so doing, she implies that Calisto was inappropriate in requesting God's aid in the very building dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene. Celestina respects the sanctity of the sacred place by not speaking of her impious mission inside the building. While Mary Magdalene was a repentant sinner, Celestina, the *puta vieja*, is unrepentant. Unlike Calisto, she recognizes the boundary between the sacred and the profane, on which side she unrepentantly stands, and she does not cross it. Calisto, on the other hand, does not understand his inappropriate behavior in beseeching God and St. Mary Magdalene to help him in his affair.

The last reference to the church of *la Madalena* occurs in Act Twelve. In response to Melibea's insistence that their meeting is sinful, Calisto attributes his success with her to the prayers he had offered at the altar in *la Madalena*. «...¿por qué llamas yerro a aquello que por los santos de Dios fue concedido? Rezando hoy ante el altar de la Madalena me vino con tu mensaje...» (263). Once again Calisto misuses and misunderstands the role of religion. A follower of an orthodox faith does not invoke the saints for help in committing a sin or in asking that another person sin. In reality, counter to Calisto's beliefs, God and the saints are not responsible

for bringing him to Melibea's door. Calisto has succeeded through Celestina's aid, through her manipulation of Melibea, and through Melibea's own free will. The saints are, in truth, remarkably absent and forgotten when Calisto and Melibea consume their lust.

In *La Celestina*, many characters commit a variety of sins that range from coveting, to stealing, to committing adultery, and finally to murdering. Their actions culminate in a series of falls, both metaphorical and literal, especially in the case of Calisto. By highlighting the references to Mary Magdalene in *La Celestina*, Rojas reinforces the ever present irony of unrepentant sinners relying on a repentant sinner, who just happens to be a saint.

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BURTON, David, «Fallen, Unrepentant, and Unforgiven: Calisto at *la Madalena*», *Celestinesca* 27 (2003), pp. 35-42

RESUMEN

FERNANDO DE ROJAS en *La Celestina* hace pocas referencias a la religión y a espacios sacros. La única alusión específica a tales lugares es la iglesia de la *Madalena*. Allí se dirige Calisto a pedir para que los empeños de Celestina con respecto a Melibea resulten positivos. El acto de ir a la *Madalena* se repite tres veces durante el transcurso de la obra. Así, Rojas le presenta al lector otro ejemplo más de la ironía que permea toda la obra. Este ensayo trata sobre la historia y las leyendas de Santa María Magdalena y demuestra cómo las referencias a esta santa acentúan la ironía del esfuerzo de Calisto por hacer de Melibea su amada.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *La Celestina*, ironía, St. María Magdalena, la Madalena.

ABSTRACT

FERNANDO DE ROJAS makes few references to organized religion and to religious place names in *La Celestina* (1499). Concerning religious place names, the one specific reference is to the church of la Madalena where Calisto goes to pray. The act of praying at la Madalena is then repeated three times during the drama. Thus, Rojas presents the reader with yet another example of the irony that pervades his entire work. This essay examines the story and the legends associated with St. Mary Magdalene, demonstrating how Rojas' purposeful references to this saint ironically comment upon Calisto's intent to make Melibea his mistress.

KEY WORDS: *La Celestina*, irony, St. Mary Magdalene, la Madalena.





Ilustración L. Goñi, *Celestina*, Auto IX (1959)