

THE *COMEDIA SERAFINA* AND ITS RELATIONSHIP
TO *LA CELESTINA*

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Amid the earliest progeny of *La Celestina* (=LC) are three anonymous comedias--the *Ypólita*, *Thebaida* and *Serafina*--considered by Menéndez y Pelayo to be among the most obscene works in the whole of Spanish literature.¹ In this brief essay I will examine the relationship of one of them, the *Comedia llamada Serafina* (Valencia: Jorge Costilla, 1521), with LC.²

Although the *Orígenes de la novela* includes the *Serafina* in the section entitled "Imitaciones de la *Celestina*," Menéndez y Pelayo writes of it: "Ni siquiera puede considerarse como imitación de la *Celestina*, con la cual no tiene más parentesco que el de su prosa."³ This denial is curious as he finds in its companion works, *Ypólita* and *Thebaida*, much to compare with LC. The *Ypólita*, for example, "plagia servilmente la fábula de la *Celestina*."⁴ Yet for many years all three compositions have been considered by many scholars (Menéndez y Pelayo among them) as by the same author because of their similarities. I suspect that Menéndez y Pelayo's distancing of the *Serafina* from LC reflects his horror at the sexual explicitness of the former ("El enredo de la *Serafina* apenas puede exponerse en términos honestos."); and at its blatant amorality ("... el crimen social que cometió [its author] y el daño que todavía puede causar su lectura").⁵

Lida de Malkiel likewise includes the *Serafina* among the celestinesque imitations in her *Originalidad artística*,⁶ and throughout this study compares it very unfavorably to LC as if they were works of the same nature. Whinnom has demonstrated the injustice of such comparisons with regard to the *Thebaida*:

But what the author of the *Thebaida* has borrowed from Rojas is primarily a form and technique. It is necessary to emphasize ... that the author of the *Thebaida* rejected ... some of the important and distinctive elements in the *Celestina*: there is no witchcraft; he has eliminated the tragedy; and he has discarded the unsavoury (if impressive) character of *Celestina* herself. ... But my main

point is that we should stop talking of the *Thebaida* (and the *Serafina*) as "imitations of the *Celestina*" and label them instead simply as "Spanish humanistic comedy."⁷

Whinnom's comments apply generally to the *Serafina*; which is, however, at the same time very similar to and yet quite different from the *Thebaida*.⁸ One of the differences is that there are in the *Serafina* certain elements, not the least of which is a *Celestina*-figure, that relate the work directly to its predecessor.

The *Serafina* is a dialogued prose and verse composition in six acts (or *cenos*) in fourteen folios. In brief the plot concerns the love affair between Evandro and Serafina, the complication being that she is already married to the impotent (and perhaps homosexual) Philipo. The husband is not the principal obstacle, however; it is Serafina's mother-in-law, the formidable Artemia.⁹ The bulk of the comedy has to do with Evandro's valet, Pinardo, and his schemes to arrange the lovers' tryst. Pinardo enters Artemia's house disguised as a young girl and during his stay (comprising the fourth and longest act of the work) engages in a series of ribald adventures. As a result he manages to introduce Evandro into Serafina's bedchamber. Faced with a *fait accompli* and compromised by her own sexual relations with Pinardo, Artemia gives her blessing to the affair and even joins in the cuckolding of her own son by getting him out of the way when he shows up unexpectedly as Serafina entertains Evandro.

There is no mistaking the celestinesque origins of Artemia even though the author has introduced some comic variations. There is no witchcraft, of course, because, like the murder and suicide of *LC*, it was considered a serious subject and did not lend itself to humorous treatment. Further, the bawd has been elevated from a low class *tercera* to supposedly a *dueña honrada*, a woman of considerable income and social standing. As such Artemia's duty is to uphold the family reputation and her inability or unwillingness to do so becomes a subject for comedy. Appearances notwithstanding, Artemia shows herself to be a hypocritical, lewd and hedonistic person who is, without a doubt, directly patterned after *Celestina*.

Artemia is the only character of the *Serafina* described in any detail. This is due to the fact that she is the main comic figure. While her portrait is ridiculously exaggerated we can clearly see its celestinesque filiation. One of Evandro's servants speaks of her in these terms:

La verdad, hablando contigo, señora Artemia es una mala bestia--envidiosa, ranzillosa, soberbia, avarienta, mintrrosa, desonesta, perezosa, enojosa, enemiga en conclusión de toda bondad, enemiga de todo sosiego. Y aun se ha picado un poquito de andar de dígame en dígame. Y después en cada colada a querido echar sus manteles.
(folio 11r)

In addition, Artemia, it seems, has led a rather sexually active life before, during and after her marriage and lately has specialized in the clergy (as had Celestina):

Que ni se contentó de que donzella ir al tálamo virgen como el portal de Quarte, sino que aun después con mill autos y hechos desonestos ensuzió el lecho del noble marido ... Pues después que enorabuena enbibdó [no] a emendado ell avieso, qual sea su negra vida qual ella lo ha hecho antes. Y después que ni se contenta con tener en su casa por huesped de que viene a visitar al provisor dell obispo, ni se contenta con la demasiada conversación del vicario, ni con la continua visita del guardián de "ya sabeís" ... sino que aora de nueva a tomado al que pide para las ánimas de purgatorio. (folio 11v)

The description of her personal appearance is also unflattering and, taken with a grain of salt, produces a picture similar to that of the Celestina's:

Porque vella es como la cínbara del Corpus Christi--y de hechura de almario larga y desvaída, el color y gesto como máxcara mal pintada, el talle como rozinazo de molinero, la vista como ídolo del tiempo antiguo, ell andar y visión de estantigua y fantasma de la noche. En verdad, que tanto temiese encontralla de noche como ver una mandrágula. (folio 11v)

The *Serafina* focuses on *ingenio* and *burla* rather than love and Pinardo is the trickster. In his dealings with Artemia he combines aspects of both Pármemo and Sempronio. Like Sempronio he is motivated by a strong desire to make money out of his master's blind passion, he is terribly cynical about women, and he is disdainful about his master's helplessness. Both Sempronio and Pinardo are rather proud of their abilities to solve their masters' problems. Sempronio's solution, of course, is less ingenious; he will bring in Celestina. Pinardo will act on his own.

One of the elements of comedy being exaggeration and repetition, Pinardo's sexual athletics become a principal source of the humor of the *Serafina*. "Mal sosegadilla debes tener la punta de la barriga,"¹⁰ says Celestina to Pármemo, an observation even more pertinent in Pinardo's case. As Pármemo lusts after Areusa, Pinardo repeatedly enjoys the favors of the maid, Violante. But the strongest remembrance of the Pármemo-Celestina relationship reflected in the *Serafina* concerns Celestina's sexual interest in Pármemo: "¡Mala ravia me mate, si te llevo á mí avnque vieja!"¹¹ A few lines later when she learns that Pármemo is the son of her *comadre*, Claudina, there is the following interchange:

Cel. ¿Acuerdaste, quando dormías a mis pies, loquito?

Parm. Sí, en buena fe. E algunas vezes, avnque era niño, me subías a la cabeçera e me apretauas contigo, e porque olías a vieja, me fuya de ti.¹²

In Act VIII when Sempronio upbraids Pármeno for his tardiness he makes a reference along the same lines: "No sé que crea de tu tardança sino que te quedaste a escallentar la vieja esta noche o a rascarle los pies, como quando chiquito."¹³

The *Serafina's* author apparently noted the comic potential in Celestina's sexual overtures to Pármeno and developed the idea in his fourth act.¹⁴ Pinardo, disguised as an ill-treated, orphan girl is bedded down at Artemia's feet. During the night he initiates sexual activities that come as a pleasant surprise to Artemia. In the morning when Artemia wishes "otra vuelta" she communicates her desire by complaining of a swollen womb and asks Pinardo to massage it. This scene evokes Celestina's encounter with Areusa (Act VII) and her prescription for the latter's "mal de madre": sexual relations with Pármeno.

All in all, we find in the *Serafina* a light-hearted reversal of the Pármeno-Celestina relationship that, at least for its contemporary audience, must have made the work all the more humorous.

Contrary to Celestina (who dies in Act XIII) Artemia is the *buñlada* until the last scene. But Artemia's weakness is not greed; if anything she is foolishly liberal in her presents to the clerics that frequent her house. Artemia's downfall results from her hypocrisy. As with all the other females of the *Serafina* she disguises her lascivious nature under a cloak of modesty and piety. Worse, she wished to deny Serafina the pleasures that she so amply partook of in her youth and which she still desires in old age. Once she realizes the folly of running counter to nature she recovers her famed astuteness and joins forces with the others:

Y pues que así es, démonos de buen tiempo, qu'este mundo no a de durar para siempre. Y esta vez pase, pero de aquí en adelante todo quiero que pase por mi mano y anden todas. Y así lo digo a Evandro. Que de oy más seamos buenos amigos y que se quede Pedro en casa y el diablo vaya para ruin. Y si mi hijo es bobo, que lo sea enbuenora, que esotra pecadora no a de estar hecha camaleón deseando lo que sobra a sus vezinas. (folio 13r)

These are sentiments truly more reminiscent of Celestina than a *dueña honrada*. After her "anagnorisis" she shamelessly but humorously tricks her own son so that Serafina and Evandro can enjoy their new-found love. We recall that Celestina was no less unscrupulous with her "son" Pármeno.

Because the author has turned a celestinesque situation into a comedy, the end result for the characters of the *Serafina* is the fulfillment of their desires. The boys get the girls and vice versa; there are even

handsome rewards for Pinardo and the other servants. And, above all, for Artemia and the others there is the promise of a life of certain ease and pleasure that Celestina longed for and lost.

In closing I wish to make clear that the *Comedia Serafina* is no mere imitation of Rojas' masterpiece. Although I have here emphasized the celestinesque elements that inspired its composition, they are not plagiarized; rather they are adapted with considerable talent to produce a delightful comedy that can stand on its own merits.

● NOTES ◆

¹M. Menéndez y Pelayo, *Orígenes de la novela* (Madrid: CSIC, 1961), IV, 28. He counts the three *comedias* as one work since they appeared together. The other "libro deshonesto" is a contemporary of these *comedias*, the *Cancionero de obras de burlas provocantes a risa* (Valencia: Juan Vinão, 1519).

²The *Serafina* was reprinted once more in the sixteenth century together with the *Thebaida* (Seville: Andrés de Burgos, 1546). In the nineteenth century the *Serafina* appeared as Vol. V of the *Colección de libros raros o curiosos* (Madrid: Imprenta y estereotipia de M. Rivadeneyra, 1873); and separately the following year (Madrid: Imprenta y estereotipia de Aribau, Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1874). I have forthcoming a new edition of the *Serafina* from Southern Illinois University Press.

³Menéndez y Pelayo, p. 32.

⁴Ibid., p. 31.

⁵Ibid., pp. 33,34.

⁶M. R. Lida de Malkiel, *La originalidad artística de "La Celestina"* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria, 1962; 2nd ed., 1970).

⁷G. D. Trotter and Keith Whinnom, *La Comedia Thebaida* (London: Tamesis, 1968), pp. xxxi-xxxii.

⁸My article, "Concerning the Authorship of the *Comedias Tebaida* and *Serafina*" (forthcoming in No. 3 of the *Journal of Hispanic Philology*), discusses the differences and similarities of these two works.

⁹To make the situation even more grotesque, Artemia is perhaps at once the *suegra* and *madrastra* of Serafina.

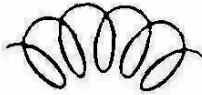
¹⁰Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina* (Madrid: Clásicos Castellanos, 1965), I, 95.

¹¹Ibid., I, 95.

¹²Ibid., I, 98-99.

¹³Ibid., II, 9.

¹⁴The older person smitten by passionate sensual love has been since Greek comedy a ridiculous figure. The *Repetición de amores* of Luis de Lucena states: "Esta enfermedad [love] ... tanto mas peligrosa y aun digna de escarnio quanto la persona es en edad o en sciencia mas noble." Ed. J. Ornstein (Chapel Hill, 1954; *UNCSRL* 23), 11. 1321-25.



El IX^o aucto. La cena en casa de Celestina.
Celestina, Elicia, Pármeno, Areúsa, Sempronio.
De la traducción alemana de Wirsung,
1520.