

CELESTINA'S AGE: IS SHE FORTY-EIGHT

Anne Esley
The Citadel

In Celestina, since there is no narration apart from the dialogue carried on by the characters themselves, the reader must accept the apparent arbitrariness of its subjectively oriented (i.e. presented) reality. Practically speaking, there must be some bonding of the reality implied in the text to the reality of the reader's own world. Celestina's dialogue structure produces, as it takes place, responses, comparisons and contrasts to similar structures in our own world.

It is tempting for the reader to accept that one character or another is telling the "truth," and to base conclusions on quotations from the text. Even intra-textually, however, characters display differing perspectives on what the "truth" is: Celestina's, Calisto's and Sempronio's remarks "verify" Melibea's beauty, but Elicia's and Areúsa's opinions contradict those remarks. Extra-textually, literary critics have raised questions concerning the location of the work's first scene and other ambiguities of place, time, characterization and genre. Interpretation inevitably enters into the intra- and extra-textual understanding of Celestina, with various criteria used as bases for establishing a reasonable estimate of what can be, should be, and necessarily is, the literal meaning of a passage in the work. I will raise the question of Celestina's age by asking: Is Celestina forty-eight?

Although no study of Celestina's true age exists, many studies depend either on Pármeno's estimate of her as seventy-two, or on Celestina's own claim to be sixty.¹ While not integral to a particular critical argument, her advanced age has become a convenient means to explain a momentary lapse in her logic, a temporary loss of memory or even a misapplication by Celestina of her own expertise in dealing with people. Celestina's old age, on all occasions, seems to accommodate changing perspectives or purposes. Pármeno, with his claim of six dozen years for Celestina (II, 126),² means to be scornful; Melibea calls her old, but is embarrassed to have done so (IV, 170-71); and Celestina blusters, at her death, that she is too (respectably) old at sixty to be the victim of murder (XII, 102). Both ages for Celestina are, I believe, incongruous, despite the fact that they are readings from the text. How old, then, is Celestina?

Pármeno is the first to suggest an age for Celestina: he is in the stable because Calisto has told him to make ready his horse, not one of the household duties which Pármeno is accustomed to performing. Upset,

Pármeno grumbles about the circumstance of this demeaning activity. He compares this unjust treatment by Calisto to what he imagines would be a more pleasant existence were he to ally himself with Celestina. Pármeno includes his own estimate of Celestina's advanced age as contributing to a greater potential for justice in the assigning of duties. Pármeno does not specify that Celestina is seventy-two, but rather alludes casually to her "seys dozenas de años." Pármeno is only speculating as to her age: she is for him a "puta vieja" and there is nothing particularly remarkable in an old bawd being about seventy-two.

How old, we may wonder, is Pármeno? To judge by his conversation with Celestina earlier in the action (I, 95-96) about his adolescent appearance, Pármeno, just emerging into physical maturity, must be at or close to the age of puberty; fourteen or fifteen--perhaps a little older, but surely not much younger--would be a likely age for him. For this reason, we can conclude that Pármeno is not in a position to judge accurately the age of a person who is considerably older. Pármeno, as a youth, would logically consider anyone even twenty years his senior as "old."³ His youth would perhaps also explain why Celestina can state to him: "tan puta vieja era tu madre como yo" (I, 98) without fear that Pármeno will take her to task for the comparison. Celestina has correctly relied on Pármeno's willingness to judge anyone a generation his senior as "old." Shortly after Celestina's reference to Claudina, cited above, Pármeno reminds Celestina of an incident which happened when he was a "niño:" by his own account, he had resisted Celestina's attempts to cuddle him because "olías a vieja" (I, 99). In any case, Pármeno's being older (by ten years, if we understand that "niño" is "young child") would not alter his concept of the generational difference between his mother and himself. Pármeno has previously not questioned that his mother was, according to Celestina, "tan puta vieja.. como yo," and if Pármeno has accepted the old age of his mother, we conclude that Celestina was (and is) "old" to him.

Other textual references support a younger real age for the old bawd. Celestina refers to Claudina, Pármeno's late mother, with the following personal references: "como dos hermanas" (III, 134), "leal amiga e buena compañera" (III, 135), "más que mi hermana e comadre" (VII, 238), "mi comadre" (VII, 239) and "la prima de nuestro oficio" (VII, 241), among others.⁴ These particular references suggest and actively support the idea that Claudina and Celestina were of the same generation; no textual reference suggests otherwise. If, then, Claudina and Celestina were of a similar age, the age difference between Pármeno and Celestina is very unlikely to be more than one generation. For Pármeno to have a mother who would be presently seventy-two (and thus fifty-seven at the time of his birth, if we consider Pármeno to be fifteen), is not reasonable. No other character refers to Celestina as more than one generation older--she is never referred to, for example, as "abuela," but rather always as "tía,"⁵ or "madre" (although "madre" admittedly has many other meanings).⁶ According to every internal source and reference, Celestina is no more than one generation older than the main characters of this text.⁷

During Celestina's first visit, Melibea contributes telling reasons for considering Celestina to have aged rapidly:

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Vieja te has parado. Bien dizen que los días no se van en balde. Assí goze de mí, no te conociera, sino por essa señaleja de la cara. Figúrasme que eras hermosa. Otra pareces, muy mudada estás. (IV, 170)

Lucrecia, nearby, cannot refrain from laughing a damaging aside, and then offering this motive for her laughter: "De cómo no conocías a la madre en tan poco tiempo en la filosofía de la cara" (IV, 171). At this point both Melibea and Celestina are defensive:

Melibea: No es tan poco tiempo dos años; e más que [la cara] la tiene arrugada.

Celestina: Señora, ten tú el tiempo que no ande; terné yo mi forma, que no se mude. ¿No has leydo que dizen: verná el día que en el espejo no te conozcas? Pero también yo encanecí temprano e parezco de doblada edad. Que assí goze desta alma pecadora e tú desse cuerpo gracioso, que de quatro hijas, que parió mi madre, yo fue la menor. Mira cómo no soy vieja, como me juzgan. (IV, 171-72)

By this recognition of others' opinions of her age, Celestina admits that she has a problem: she looks old, and she looks, I would argue from Celestina's statement, older than she really is.

Whereas Celestina admits on many occasions to being old, not until her death scene does she actually state anything specific. When Sempronio and Pármene threaten her, she appeals to their sense of justice:

¿Qué es esto? ¿Qué quieren dezir tales amenazas en mi casa? ¿Con una oveja mansa tenés vosotros manos e braueza? ¿Con vna gallina atada? ¿Con vna vieja de sesenta años? (XII, 102)

But there is reason to suspect that even here (especially here?) Celestina is not fully to be trusted. The number she mentions, sixty, is as handy a figure as "seys dozenas" and as much to be doubted. In this particular situation, losing the battle of wit and words to Sempronio and Pármene, Celestina may just be looking out for her own best interests by augmenting her age, emphasizing the cowardice of her young attackers. Could the age of sixty be just a bluff? Might, then, the measure of Celestina's bluff be roughly equal to the same twelve years between Pármene's estimate of seventy-two and her own "sixty"? Is Celestina not seventy-two, and not sixty, but possibly closer to forty-eight?

If the average length of a generation is twenty-five years, with a variation factor of, perhaps, five years younger (motherhood at age twenty) and ten years older (motherhood at age thirty-five), then forty-eight years as an age for Celestina or Claudina (motherhood at age thirty-three) fulfills the one-generation age difference between Pármene and her. Pármene at fifteen would have had a mother roughly between the ages of thirty-five and fifty. Reducing the speculative seventy-two

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estimate by two dozen years is a one-generation reduction, and makes Celestina one generation older than Pármeno. Pármeno's scornful attitude when he mentions "six dozen" years is still justified. Likewise, Melibea's embarrassment is realistic even when we consider her "old" Celestina to be no more than fifty. And Celestina, with her bluff of "sixty," may actually be torn between stating an exact figure (does she even know how old she really is?) and acting in her own interest at the time she--in desperation--enhances her age. While insisting on the figure of forty-eight as a specific age for Celestina is not necessary, that figure is certainly more reasonable when considered from these intra- and extra-textual perspectives.

What does the concept of a Celestina who is closer to fifty than to seventy do to the reader's perception of the character as she functions within the fiction? Celestina is not the super-human senior citizen she would be at seventy-plus, but rather a woman who looks old and wishes she did not; a woman still very active who pursues her many "oficios" with vigor; a bawd who performs well in a long-established career. It may be that Celestina considers it a convenience in her professional life to be thought older, wiser, more experienced.

All references to Celestina's age come from the speech of the characters themselves; each expresses himself/herself according to circumstances of the moment. The diversity of personal references made by the characters does not make impossible the matter of a "real" age estimate for Celestina. Rather, when isolated and regrouped, they yield up a different composite, as we have seen, which suggests a Celestina who is perhaps a generation younger than we have assumed from the often cited reference to her "seys dozenas de años" (II, 126).



Act I. Illustration by Jaime Azpelicueta. Ed. Juventud.

Notes

¹A sampling of critical references to Celestina's age as close to sixty or seventy-two includes Dorothy Clotelle Clarke's Allegory, Decalogue, and Deadly Sins in "La Celestina" (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968): 57: "Celestina, laden with all her seventy years...;" and 116; "Celestina... spent the better part of seventy years in wickedness." Carlos Rico-Avelló appears undecided between the two claims in his "Perfil psicobiográfico de La Celestina" ("La Celestina" y su contorno social, ed., M. Criado de Val, Barcelona: Hispam, 1977: 155), "Celestina contaba, a la sazón, y según sus confesiones, sesenta años..." and "...Pármeno, convencido, cree '... que llevaba seis docenas de años a costas....'" Kathleen Kish, in her article "The Wages of Sin Is Life--for a Sixteenth-Century Best Seller or the Anatomy of a Classic," (Theoria 47 [1976]:30), refers to "sixty-odd years of self-indulgence," favoring Celestina's rendering of sixty years as her age. George Shipley states that Celestina bears "the weight of her seventy years" (in "'Non erat hic locus': The Disconcerted Reader in Melibea's Garden," Romance Philology 27 [1974]: 294).

Dorothy Sherman Severin, in her Memory in "La Celestina" (London: Tamesis Books Limited, 1970), refers, rightly, only to "Celestina's various mentions of years passed," and calls her reader's attention to "conflicting opinions of her [Celestina's] age" (p. 55; footnote). Likewise, María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, in La originalidad artística de "La Celestina" (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1962), discusses in a detailed footnote (p. 509) the various textual estimates of Celestina's age, supplying more reason to consider Celestina's age as only speculative.

²I have used the edition of Julio Cejador y Frauca for all reference to Celestina (Fernando de Rojas, La Celestina, Madrid: Clásicos Castellanos, rpt. 1968). References will be to act and page number (e.g., I, 49). Accents have been added and suppressed following modern usage.

³Areúsa, most likely near the same age as Pármeno, considers fifty as an unattractively old age, as when she exclaims to her dinner companions about Melibea: "...le tiene tan floxo [el vientre], como vieja de cincuenta años" (IX, 33).

⁴Celestina also refers to Claudina in such phrases as "tu madre" (three times; I, 99; VII, 241; VII, 242), "tus padres" (twice; I, 101), "su madre" (III, 134), "ña e carne" (III, 134), "juntas... juntas... juntas" (III, 134), "no loca, no fantástica ni presumptuosa" (III, 135), "Señora Claudina" (III, 135), "otra tal amiga" (VII, 237), "otra tal compañera" (VII, 237), "tal aliuiadora de mis trabajos e fatigas" (VII, 237), "todo mi bien e descanso" (VII, 238), "qué madre" (VII, 239), "conocida e querida" (VII, 241), "finada" (VII, 241), "juntas" (four times; VII, 241-42), "bruxa" (VII, 243), "tu buena madre" (VII, 245), "buen testigo su madre de Pármeno" (XII, 99) and "la desdichada de tu madre" (XII, 102).

⁵Other characters who indicate a generational age difference in their personal references to Celestina are Calisto ("tía," I, 67; and "madre," I, 93; II, 113); Pármeno ("madre," I, 103; "mi madre," I, 109; and "madrina," VIII, 15); Sempronio "madre," I, 63, 111; and "padrino," VIII, 15); Sosia ("madre [de Elicia]," XIV, 130); Lucrecia ("madre," IV, 171); Elicia ("madre," XII, 104; XV, 135, 138; XVII, 154; and "tía," XV, 136); and Areúsa ("tía," VII, 259). Although Melibea, Pleberio and Alisa refer to Celestina using nouns and adjectives, none indicates a generational difference.

⁶See Jane Hawking's "Madre Celestina" (Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale: Sezione Romanza 9 [1967]: 177-90); and Eglá M. Blouin's "Proceso de individuación y arquetipo de La Gran Madre en La Celestina" (The Analysis of Hispanic Texts: Current Trends in Methodology, Mary Ann Beck et al., eds., New York: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1976, 16-48).

⁷Pleberio refers often to his advanced age (XX, 189-90; XXI, 203, 205, 209 [twice] and 212), in contrast to the youth of Melibea. He also refers, less vaguely, to "mis sesenta años" (XXI, 202) during his lament for his recently deceased daughter. Here too, however, we may doubt the exactitude of the suggested age. His "sixty" is just as much a rounded-off number as Celestina's "sixty," and, similar to the old woman's situation, Pleberio's interest here is to exaggerate his age. Even if we accept sixty as an accurate age for Pleberio, we need not therefore find Celestina's "sixty" more credible. Fatherhood is not so biologically restricted by age as motherhood; Pleberio nowhere alludes to the age of his wife, Alisa.



Act 2. Illustration by Jaime Azpelicueta. Ed. Juventud.