

**"... Y OTROS TREYNTA OFFICIOS":
THE DEFINITION OF A MEDIEVAL WOMAN'S WORK
IN CELESTINA**

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Celestina provides a remarkably fertile premise for the study of women's representation in medieval literature. In spite of the many stock labels attached to the character of the procuress in both literature and society, this particular literary manifestation forbids the application of simple moral judgements on her person or her profession. The discourse employed by the main characters of the work contributes significantly to the depiction of a complex social network as well as a range of seemingly contradictory attitudes towards her, thus problematizing the very notions of wrongdoing and guilt in relation to the old woman.

As many critics appear to acknowledge, *Celestina* generates an ambivalent and tense reaction in the community since she is at once needed and despised: her connections with the brothel, as well as with sorcery, love magic, and greed, figure among the reasons for which she inspires the community's moral condemnation and mistrust.¹ At the

¹ The studies on *Celestina*'s greed and dabblings in sorcery are numerous. Among these are P. E. Russell, "La magia como tema integral de la *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*," in *Studia philologica: Homenaje a Dámaso Alonso, III* (Madrid: Gredos, 1963), pp. 337-354; Olga Lucía Valbuena, "Sorceresses, Love Magic, and the Inquisition of Linguistic Sorcery in *Celestina*," *PMLA* 109 (1994), 207-223; Javier Herrero, "Celestina's Craft: The Devil in the Skein," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 61 (1984), 343-351; Ana Vian Herrero, "El pensamiento mágico en *Celestina*, 'instrumento de lid o contienda'," *Celestinesca* 14.2 (1990), 41-91; Mercedes Alcalá

same time, Rojas portrays a society which cannot deny a certain dependence on a working woman such as Celestina, given that many prominent members of her urban universe frequently make use of the commodity which she offers.² The clash of society's demands and its moral convictions is played out in the person of Celestina, whose simultaneous fear and arrogance in dealing with her clients' demands articulate a profound understanding of her paradoxical location in the urban setting.³

That the old bawd of Rojas generates complex feelings in those around her is not an original observation. Recent studies on prostitution, in particular, have shown that medieval society grappled with an irresolvable tension when it came to the function of sex as a commodity.⁴ However, the bawd's links with the brothel do not suffice in explaining the profoundly conflictual and even tragic aura which surrounds her until her death: to a large degree, the play's ambivalent relationship to Celestina also has to do with the old woman's involvement with medical knowledge. As an independent woman making her own living, Celestina is primarily identified with the prostibulary world. Yet her old age, her close contact with the sexual female body, her possible non-Christian roots, and her vast knowledge of herbs and incantations place her in the realm of those professional women for whom society could not offer a fixed definition, but to whom common people turned for medical attention. As recent studies on medieval women's occupations have begun to show, the social identity — and therefore, literary

Galán, "Voluntad de poder en *Celestina*," *Celestinesca* 20.1-2 (1996), 37-55.

² For society's complicated dependence on the bawd, see Francisco Márquez Villanueva, *Orígenes y sociología del tema celestinesco* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1993), pp. 119-165.

³ For Celestina's fear, see her speech at the very beginning of Act IV; on her arrogance and pride in her trade, see the speech beginning with "¿Trabajo, mi amor? Antes descanso y alivio" (235). This and all subsequent citations of the text come from D. S. Severin, ed. *La Celestina* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1990).

⁴ See Ruth Mazo Karras, "Sex, Money, and Prostitution in Medieval English Culture," in *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenblichler (Toronto: U Toronto P, 1996), 201-216; and "Prostitution in Medieval Europe," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 243-260; also *Poder y prostitucion en Sevilla (siglos XIV al XX)*, ed. F. Vazquez Garcia & Andres Moreno Mengibar (Sevilla: Universidad, 1995-1996).

representation — of medieval women who worked for a living can only be understood using a rigorously critical frame of reference which calls the very process of labelling into question.

Indeed, one of the most significant insights into medieval women's lives and work is that exact definitions of professional activities such as midwifery, prostitution, healing, surgery, or sorcery rarely existed in the minds of the majority of urban dwellers. Whereas today, 'doctor,' 'prostitute,' or 'psychic' are defined according to strict and separate parameters, many professions of the medieval period, especially those undertaken by women, were essentially marked by the vagueness of boundaries and the overlap of several diverse activities. The overlap of different tasks was particularly rich in the area of healing and the many types of medieval medical practice, functions fulfilled by a remarkable variety of women, and obviously a part and parcel of Celestina's professional identity. Monica H. Green has illustrated the difficulty of "occupational labelling" with regards to medieval women who dabbled in medicine.⁵ Green shows that for economic and social reasons, "women tended, far more than men, to engage simultaneously in more than one trade" and yet "generally identified with none" (332). Too, women were "more commonly unlicensed than licensed, they often used ritual, magic and prayer, they often practiced medicine either simultaneously or alternately with other employments" (335).

The ailments addressed by those women who made a living practicing some type of medicine covered a wide range, from aches and pains to sexual and marital problems; similarly, depending on the nature of the problem, community members had a range of resources available to them for help, such as *vetulae* (old women), converted Jews, Muslims, widows of surgeons or barbers, fortune-tellers, and midwives. Until well into the late medieval period, the public sought as much help from these figures as from certified male physicians (Green 352).

In her speculations on the identities and tasks of women who made a living by offering medical help, Green emphasizes the "vagueness of professional identity" (348) time and again, and draws attention to the community's trust in figures who did not necessarily fulfill the official status of doctor, nor practiced medicine on a full-time basis. That the medieval populace "drew on a variety of resources for medical care"

⁵ Monica H. Green, "Documenting Medieval Women's Medical Practice," in *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death*, ed. Luis García Ballester et al., (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 322-352, the citation at 324.

(Green 352) is the main reason for which, according to Michael McVaugh, no uniform standard existed for the physician or healer's authority until the mid-fourteenth century.⁶ The lack of a uniform standard enhanced all the more the heterogeneous nature of tasks fulfilled by women, whose exact names and numbers remain unclear in the absence of sufficient documentation. McVaugh underscores the varied nature of help available to the community by pointing out the existence of a multitude of folk practices ostensibly far removed from the new, rational, learned medicine. They tended to be carried out by people who by religion or gender were excluded from the emerging profession: Muslims (...) or women (...). These healers were likely to have assimilated something of the new medicine to their own traditional practice. A line between "scientific medicine" and "superstitious magic" would be impossible to draw (McVaugh 162).

Focusing his investigation on fourteenth-century Aragon, McVaugh shows that neither the professional identity nor the authority of the physician/healer appear to have enjoyed fixed definitions for patients. The practitioners' religion, gender, or status might undermine their authority, yet at the same time, the very fact that they knew something of the medical arts would inspire a certain degree of respect and awe.⁷ From Green's valuable findings it can be inferred that women who undertook medical practice were identified at times as figures who hovered between spheres of legitimate and illegitimate activity due to the contrast they set up with learned doctors who held university certificates, as well as their own possibly marginal status. The cases which best describe people's unresolved attitudes towards these figures concern the medical practices of non-Christians: evidence suggests that in some instances, Christians did turn to non-Christians for medical help, only to

⁶ Michael R. McVaugh, *Medicine Before the Plague: Practitioners and their Patients in the Crown of Aragon (1285-1345)* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 166.

⁷ This is of course true of popular walks of life. In the learned world of medicine, where texts circulated in Latin, Arabic, and the vernacular, medical authority was a different notion altogether. The bibliography on medieval medicine is vast; for a useful point of reference, see Danielle Jacquard and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, translated by Matthew Adamson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988).

show their utmost readiness for the subsequent denouncement of the validity of that help.⁸

McVaugh's investigation of sources allows for the speculation that the medical practice of women often implied some connection with unethical and un-Christian behavior, and yet, this association diminished their aura of authority slowly, since their medical know-how did generate some respect from the public. For legal authorities as well as for the Inquisition, the connotations of misdemeanor, marginality, and even crime emerged, above all, in the area of the healer's involvement with the patient's sexual life. The association of women practitioners with the sexual complaints of their female patients created the opportunity for suspicions of illicit seduction, sorcery, commercial sex, and adultery, and old women in particular were suspect in that area;⁹ interestingly enough, these are precisely the areas in which valuable keys for the study of the status of working women can be found:

(...) the medical practice of *vetulae* (or perhaps *mulieres* more generally, since they may not all have been old) will undoubtedly prove to be the largest area of women's involvement with healing, and it poses the greatest challenge to our ability to assess the religious, magical, and physical modes of healing that were simultaneously operative in medical culture.¹⁰

⁸ "There is the case, for example, of Mahomet Peix, a carpenter of Zaragoza, who claimed a knowledge of medicine and surgery but was brought to trial in 1340 for having caused many deaths in his practice. Equally suggestive is the case of Hamet Acequia of Xátiva in Valencia, accused in 1342 of practicing medicine without undergoing a required examination; 'he has no knowledge of the medical art,' the king wrote, 'yea rather depends on necromancy and divination'" (McVaugh 54). The scholar concludes that "[h]ealers of some sort there still must have been" (55).

⁹ Green, 336. For the Inquisition's attitudes to women and healing, see Julio Caro Baroja, *Las brujas y su mundo* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1961); and *Vidas mágicas e Inquisición*, 2 vols (Madrid: Taurus, 1962); also L. García Ballester, *Historia social de la medicina en España de los siglos XIII y XIV* (Madrid: Akal, 1975).

¹⁰ Green, 337. For Celestina's non-Christian roots, see Stephen Gilman, *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972); for her knowledge of herbs and medicine, see J. M. de Aynat, "La botica de la Celestina," *Medicamenta: Edición para el farmacéutico* V, núm. 44 (1951), 3-8.

The construction of Celestina's identity draws on all the issues summarized above, and offers invaluable clues on the perception of the shifting and indeterminate space inhabited by women with some medical authority.

The text of the play offers numerous instances of characters' shifting attitudes towards Celestina, and presents the old woman in ways which — while condemnatory at first sight — ultimately reveal her to possess a number of different connotations in the eyes of those around her. Thus, for example, the very first reference to the bawd comes from Sempronio who mentions her in an attempt to find a solution for his lovesick master, presenting her as "una vieja barbuda" (103); this appears to be a denigrating way of portraying old age and ugliness, but as Jacobo Sanz Hermida has shown, the adjective 'barbuda' connotes a series of meanings, one of which is an indication that the woman in question has distanced herself from the sphere of female common sense and has approached, instead, the world of masculine virtue and intelligence.¹¹ Sanz Hermida concludes that the adjective, when understood in its codified form as indicated by medical sources, in fact endows the bawd with the admirable qualities of male intelligence (32). The first utterance used to describe Celestina, then, already covers a wide semantic range which alerts the reader to the co-existence of ugliness and intelligence in the old woman's person. Subsequent (and radical) changes of attitude towards the old woman corroborate the first adjective's paradoxical function: both Calisto and Melibea turn to her in almost child-like fashion, only to lash out in moments of anger, claiming they have no faith in her at all; Pármeno modifies his approach to her in the extreme; Sempronio attempts to maintain an uneasy relationship with her based on a series of contradictory feelings oscillating between faith in the old woman, and intense contempt for her being.¹²

Naturally, and as scholars have shown, the shifting attitudes of the characters have to do with a wide range of factors, not the least of

¹¹ Jacobo Sanz Hermida, "Una vieja barbuda que se dice Celestina," *Celestinesca* 18.1 (1994), 17-33, citation at p. 31.

¹² Thus, for example, Calisto and Melibea's shifting emotions in Acts I, IV, X, and Pármeno's confused attitudes until well into Act IV. As for Sempronio, throughout the play he fully understands the old woman's power, yet engages in several contradictory conversations with her, ranging from the respectful to the contemptuous.

which are the turn of events as well as each character's internal changes of heart brought about by the manipulations of discourse. But the changing attitudes do have, at least in part, to do with the characters' implicit knowledge that Celestina's authority and power derive from a variety of sources which cannot be reduced solely to *alcahuetería*. The use of the term 'oficio' vis-à-vis the old woman best exemplifies the community's latent acknowledgement of her unidentifiable place in society: Pármeneo presents the old woman to Calisto by stating that "Ella tenía seys officios, conviene [a] saber: labranderá, perfumera, maestra de hazer afeytes y de hazer virgos, alcahueta, y un poco hechizera" (110).

In Act IV, the servant girl Lucrecia finds herself almost incapable of naming Celestina when the latter asks for admission into Melibea's house; the servant resorts instead to a series of descriptions of the old woman's known skills, while Melibea's mother, unable to guess the old woman's identity, attempts to extract specific names from the girl. Instead, Lucrecia offers the following introductions in answer to her mistress' query: "aquella vieja de la cuchillada que solía vivir aquí en las tenerías a la cuesta del río[:]" "¡Jesú, señora, más conocida es esta vieja que la ruda!, no sé cómo no tienes memoria de la que empicotaron por hechizera, que vendía las moças a los abades y descasava mil casados." At this point, Melibea's mother Alicia asks for a name for the old woman's profession: "¿Qué officio tiene? Quiça por aquí la conoceré mejor." Lucrecia, unable to pin down a single 'oficio,' replies: "Señora, perfuma tocas, haze solimán, y otros treynta officios; conosce mucho en yervas, cura niños, y aun algunos la llaman la vieja lapidaria" (142).

Lucrecia remains unwilling to offer any more specific information involving one name, because, by her own admission, she is ashamed to pronounce it. In fact, even when Alisa recognizes the old woman from all the descriptions, the words 'Celestina' and 'alcahueta' remain unuttered, as though in a tacit pact by mistress and servant to associate shame with the articulation of those words.¹³ More importantly though, in her presentation of the old woman, Lucrecia has articulated the multi-layered and elusive nature of the signifier 'alcahueta' by assigning Celestina no less than thirty occupations. While no doubt can remain as to the exact purpose of Celestina in this particular encounter, it is

¹³ As Michael Harney has shown, this shame hides a series of complex motivations, and does not stop Alisa from welcoming the old woman to her home and granting a free audience with her daughter, in spite of the common knowledge that Celestina trades in sex. Michael Harney, "Melibea's Mother and Celestina," *Celestinesca* 17.1 (1993), 33-46.

nonetheless significant that in the minds of people such as the uneducated servant girl, Pármeno, and Alisa, the old woman represents a myriad of professional skills, many of which touch directly on the sciences of healing.

The signifier 'officio,' then, assumes an elusive and dynamic quality in the discourse of these characters, confirming the absence of fixed definitions and the existence of an undercurrent which fully acknowledges the old woman's many professional skills, among them medical ones. This is not to suggest, by any means, that the characters themselves reveal a heightened consciousness of their own inability to pin down the bawd's 'officio'; on the contrary, Sempronio, Pármeno, and others know exactly what they mean when they refer to *Celestina's* dubious activities. Yet their descriptions of the old woman indicate an unwillingness to attribute a single task to her and reveal their own latent understanding regarding the complex nature of the old woman's role in their community.

This unexpressed understanding has to do with the transitions occurring in the urban world depicted by Rojas. As mentioned earlier, for many medieval people, various assignations and identities conjured up the notion of some medical knowledge and authority until the end of the fourteenth century (McVaugh 166-171). Around the time of *Celestina's* publication however, a change began to occur: official attitudes now displayed increasing anxiety concerning the shifting and essentially flexible definitions of professional authority, particularly with regards to women's work. The tensions inherent in this transition are subtly recorded by Rojas's play, and affect the old woman's representation in significant ways.

In late medieval and early modern Spain, attempts were made to define fixed boundaries which separated physician from healer, Christian from non-Christian, and scientific from non-scientific, among many other oppositions. These attempts relied on the processes of naming and labelling, which, in the eyes of the Inquisition above all, would facilitate the clearer categorization of legitimate versus non-legitimate activities. Naming an activity or a profession, and designating it as legal or illegal, constituted the attempt by authorities to slowly modify the perceptions of certain types of activity in people's minds. Naturally, one cannot determine the exact effects of such attempts, for they concern those areas of society for which documentation is scant. Yet, the attempts

themselves offer useful insights into the anxieties of legislative powers regarding people's perceptions of healing and medical authority.¹⁴

In her study of women in early modern Seville, Mary Elizabeth Perry chronicles the slow collapse of unclear boundaries and shows that legislation focused on tracing certain activities to designated groups.¹⁵ Perry's findings indicate that judicial and municipal authorities in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Seville made attempts to designate a division between holy — and therefore divinely-inspired — healing carried out by women, and the type which indicated practical experience. The latter concerned "the wise woman or empiric who followed a long tradition of healing. Learning to heal by experience and from the advice of older wise women, these healers were noted especially for their knowledge of the healing properties of herbs. They used a medical tradition much older than that taught by doctors with a university degree" (Perry 26).

The legislation that applied to midwives (for which the most comprehensive documentation exists) articulated the apprehension concerning the inevitable connections of practical experience with deviant behavior. The increasingly urgent need to separate the evil aspects of midwifery from its good ones extended to all areas of female authority and occupational activity. From studies on the status of women in early modern Spain, one can infer that for officials of the Inquisition in particular, the only ways in which women's occupations lent themselves to regulation and punishment were to sub-divide, fragment and name the components of their professional identity, thereby identifying clearer targets for persecution.

Designations such as *hechicera*, *alumbrada*, *alcahueta*, *curandera* appeared alongside descriptions of activities ranging from the preparation of herbal pain-killers to assistance with sexual matters, all in the effort to locate a specific evil. It was no longer acceptable to leave a

¹⁴ The status of healer as represented by Spanish medieval go-betweens is addressed in Jean Dangler's doctoral dissertation, "Mediating Fictions: Women Healers and the Go-Between in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia" (Emory Univ., 1997). Her conclusions in the third chapter regarding the specific case of *Celestina* are markedly different from mine in the present essay, for she discerns a fundamentally misogynist project in *Celestina's* representation of the healer.

¹⁵ Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990.

signifier to evoke a flexible set of wide-ranging meanings: rather, it became necessary to determine whether a woman was acting in the capacity of saint or sorceress when she administered to a patient, a neighbor, or a friend (Perry 32). Another area which for officialdom required clearer definitions was prostitution, which included several categories. As of the year 1500, city ordinances accommodated a regulated prostitution, but warned of "'false monasteries' that purported to enclose women in orderly piety while actually selling their sexual services" (Perry 47). This indicates the level of anxiety felt by municipal authorities regarding the lack of a single meaning for the term 'prostitute,' and reveals their attempts to regulate the associated activity by first labelling it, and then designating various spaces for it. In her study on fifteenth-century prostitution in Salamanca, María Eugenia Lacarra states:

Es extraordinaria la riqueza de términos utilizados para describir a las prostitutas según su grado de dedicación, exclusivo, frecuente, u ocasional: los lugares donde la ejercen, calle, tabernas, mesones, casa de la alcahueta o rufián, casa propia; los clientes a quienes atienden, casados, solteros, clérigos; el nivel de dependencia o independencia de alcahuetas o rufianes.¹⁶

This variety revealed the difficulty of identifying a name with a specific task, and subsequently led to the anxious need to further label and designate (and therefore regulate) so as to control such activities.

No doubt can remain as to the nature of services offered by Celestina in terms of the basic plotline of the work: she is an expert at trading in sex, and she delivers the commodity to Calisto. It would be futile to attempt to show that Celestina is not an *alcahueta*. It is important, however, to bear in mind that the perception of the old woman undergoes continual shifts in the eyes of those around her, and that while they are fully aware of her trading in sex, they also attribute several other occupations to her, and this multi-faceted perception accounts partially for the ambivalent moral and emotional stance of the characters when confronted with the old woman.

¹⁶ María Eugenia Lacarra, "La evolución de la prostitución en la Castilla del siglo XV y la mancebía de Salamanca en tiempos de Fernando de Rojas," in *Fernando de Rojas and 'Celestina': Approaching the Fifth Centenary*, edited by I. A. Corfis and J. T. Snow (Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1993), 33-78, citation at p. 45.

Rojas' play reflects the transitions of urban society and its legislation in late fifteenth-century Spain: the characters recognize *Celestina* according to the contours and terms pointed out by Lacarra, Green, and MacVaugh, and this provides the essential background to their response to her. At the same time, they reveal the transitions of the sixteenth century in their discourse by going back and forth between calling her 'alcahueta' on one occasion, and refusing to name her profession on another, offering a tense parallel to the official need for labelling and targeting. The characters' undecided approach to the term 'oficio' informs their convictions about her, and each time they confront *Celestina* they appear — among the other reactions brought about by her presence — to reassess the meaning of the term privately. As such, this reassessment reflects the precarious definition of women's work in the medieval period, and turns *Celestina* into an indispensable part of the "broader body of documentation on women" (Green 342) which, as historians continue to demonstrate, is becoming increasingly necessary for the meaningful evaluation of women's multi-professional activity in the Middle Ages.



Acto XIV. De la traducción
rusa (1959)



Grabado (Acto I). Burgos 1499?



Grabado que adorna la portada del pliego *Cartas y coplas para requerir nuevos amores*, editado en el año 1535,