

## *La Celestina*: A Novel

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In this essay I want to present a case for *La Celestina* as a novel. I argue that it is not a play, a humanistic comedy, a work that is *sui generis*, the first work of the «género celestinesco,» that it has no genre, or any of the other options that have been proposed in previous criticism. It is best thought of as what we consider today a novel, in the full modern sense of that term. In addition to a discussion of specific novelistic aspects of *La Celestina*, it is necessary to justify the idea of a long prose work written entirely in the form of dialogue as a novel.

That a novel can be written entirely in the form of letters is widely accepted and is not controversial. Neither is the fact that a novel (or a romance) may contain a great deal of dialogue. And it is not questioned that within a novel there can be long (even very long) sections of pure dialogue, with or without explicit identification of the speakers, and with no narrative links of any kind between utterances. What has bothered many readers for a very long time, however, is the idea that a novel can be written entirely in the form of dialogue. No work poses this question more fundamentally than does *La Celestina*. As the single most popular work of Spanish Renaissance literature *La Celestina* titillated, scandalized, and entertained readers for a century and a half. It had more than 80 editions by the year 1644, but there is a considerable confusion about exactly how often it was actually published, and, in the end, it probably truly is «impossible to know how many editions were printed in Spanish, but one hundred for the sixteenth century alone is not unreasonable and may be on the low side» (Dunn 1975, 37).<sup>1</sup> Miguel Marciales makes the same point in the introduction to his critical edition of the novel:

Desde el año de 1499, en que salió la edición de Burgos, hasta 1633-34, fecha de la bilingüe de Ruán, tenemos registro cierto de 89 ediciones, de las cuales hay 15 de

1.—Dunn goes on to comment that the fact that there are usually so few copies of each of the known extant editions suggests that in very many cases the work «was literally read to pieces. Virtually everyone capable of reading must have read *La Celestina* (1975, 37). For an attempt to bring clarity to the early editions of *La Celestina*, see Infantes (2010, 11-103).

paradero desconocido o no asequibles por el momento. Fuera de éstas, ciertas y determinadas, debe admitirse la existencia de una veintena más, lo que llevaría el número de las ediciones castellanas a 109 en un lapso de 135 años. A eso cabe agregar cuatro ediciones en inglés, cinco en flamenco, 24 en francés, cuatro en alemán, 19 en italiano y una en latín. Ninguna obra literaria de período, ni siquiera la Biblia, tiene una prole editorial tan copiosa y ninguna obra en la Europa de este período tiene una elaboración tan compleja como la de la *Comedia o Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melíbea*. (1985, 1)<sup>2</sup>

Marciales is right: there may be nothing comparable in the history of European literary publication in the vernacular.<sup>3</sup>

Many, perhaps the majority of, scholars who deal with *La Celestina* maintain that the work is either a true drama (even if it cannot be performed as written) or —and this is much more common— a humanistic comedy. The great work by María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, *La originalidad artística de «La Celestina»* (1962, 29-78, especially 47-50), makes this argument at length.<sup>4</sup> First of all, *La Celestina* is clearly not a drama in the traditional sense of a work that can be acted out on a stage; virtually no one argues this point.<sup>5</sup> To begin with, it is far longer (some 60,000 words in its shorter 16-act *Comedia* version; about 64,500 in the 21-act *Tragicomedia* version) than any work of theater, either at the time in the late medieval/early Renaissance period, or afterward.<sup>6</sup> Primitive plays that were repre-

2.— Patrizia Botta speculates that there may have been as many as 200 editions before 1700 (2008, 269).

3.— If there is another work —written in verse, not prose fiction— that enjoyed comparable popularity it is Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which, according to Stefano Neri (2006, 257) may have had over 150 editions in Italian in the sixteenth century, plus translations.

4.— See the more recent, but comparably strong, argument by Peter E. Russell (2001, 40-47). Both Russell and Keith Whinnom have consistently held this position in their extensive and important writings on *La Celestina*. But Whinnom's assertion that «desde la aparición de la obra maestra de María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, nadie ha puesto seriamente en duda el que se trate de una imitación de la comedia humanística italiana» (1988, 119) is simply not accurate. As we will see, scholars of the stature of Alan Deyermond (1971) and others have indeed called this assertion into question. More recently than Whinnom wrote, Dorothy Severin (1989, 1995) has made an exceptionally strong case that *La Celestina* is not a humanistic comedy but a novel.

5.— One modern critic who still stubbornly maintains that *La Celestina* is a drama and nothing else is Emilio de Miguel Martínez (1993). More recently, he writes «mi antigua convicción de que *La Celestina* es obra teatral, y solo teatral» (2009, 15).

6.— Snow calculates that «una representación de la *Tragicomedia* duraría como mínimo siete horas y media (1997, 204 n10). That seems very accurate. When we held a marathon reading of *Don Quijote* at my university in 2004, the reading time was approximately 44 hours. I estimate the *Tragicomedia* to be about 18% as long as Cervantes's novel, so a reading or performance should take about 7.8 hours.

sented before an audience —usually with respect to the liturgy, or for nobility or royalty, or performed in the street for common people— in the early sixteenth century were very short, rarely longer than about 5,000 words. Gil Vicente's *Tragicomedia de Don Duardos*, one of the longest at the time, barely reaches 9,000. There was no such thing as a public theater at the time *La Celestina* was written. By the early seventeenth century, when the Spanish *Comedia* reached its maturity, the typical play by Lope, Tirso, or Calderón averaged about 15,800 words.<sup>7</sup> In other words, even the short version of *La Celestina* is nearly four times longer than an actable play. *La Celestina* is not a drama.

*La Celestina* has never been performed on stage in its full, original form; all staged versions through the centuries have been abridged, adapted, or condensed versions. Near the end of her great book, Lida de Malkiel triumphantly writes, «¿Qué mejor mentís a cuantos han negado la virtualidad escénica de *La Celestina* que el éxito de estos últimos años al representarse, ya en su propia lengua, ya en traducciones, en la Argentina, Chile, España, Estados Unidos, Francia, Italia, México, Polonia, Uruguay?» (1962, 725). But then she goes on to discuss these adaptations, inadvertently illustrating the point that it is not *La Celestina* that is staged, it is always modern versions by modern writers who create their own versions of Rojas's great work, versions always simpler than, and far inferior to, the original. José María Ruano de la Haza, author of one of the most interesting and original adaptations of *La Celestina* has commented on the difference between real theater and a work like *La Celestina*:

Mientras que la gran mayoría de las obras de nuestro teatro clásico podrían ser hoy representadas tal y como fueron concebidas para la escena —y esto mucho mejor que las de Shakespeare (aunque se les respete menos)—, todo montaje de *Celestina*, tanto por la extensión de la tragicomedia como por su modo de expresión, ha de estar necesariamente basado en una adaptación. El problema que se plantea el adaptador es múltiple, e incluye, entre otros, el número de personajes, las diversas líneas argumentales, y el lenguaje. (2008, 151)

Ottavio Di Camillo (2005) speculates on the possibility that some sort of performance of *La Celestina* might have taken place in Italy in 1510, but it seems highly unlikely that such a performance, if it ever actually took

7.— I have calculated these word lengths by multiplying 1) the average number of words per line times 2) the number of lines per page times 3) the number of pages. Sometimes the calculations were more than a bit tricky, but overall I think the figures I cite are generally quite accurate. Lengths of plays were somewhat easier to calculate as it was usually only necessary to multiply the words per line times the number of lines.

place, was of the complete original work.<sup>8</sup> In this, it is like other novels adapted to the stage: you cannot perform *Don Quijote* as Cervantes wrote it in a theater, but hundreds of adaptations of *Don Quijote* have been written for performance; and the same is true of film, both for *Don Quijote* and *La Celestina*.<sup>9</sup>

José Luis Canet has commented on why *La Celestina* is never performed as written but must be brought to the stage only in the form of an adaptation:

Últimamente, la crítica ha vuelto a insistir sobre si la *Celestina* es una obra de teatro o no. Si entendemos *dramaturgia* en la acepción de la RAE: «Concepción escénica para la representación de un texto dramático» o bien con una de las definiciones que se da de *dramático*: «Género literario al que pertenecen las obras destinadas a la representación escénica, cuyo argumento se desarrolla de modo exclusivo mediante la acción y el lenguaje directo de los personajes, por lo común dialogado», la *Celestina* no es una obra teatral aunque posea un alto contenido dramático. (2008, 32).

But that a work contains a high dramatic content does not make it theater. *Don Quijote* has a high dramatic content, and in fact it has been adapted to the stage much more often than *La Celestina*, but that does not make *Don Quijote* theater.

Is *La Celestina* a humanistic comedy? The so-called humanistic comedy was a minor genre that enjoyed some popularity in Italian university contexts in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; manuscripts of about 50 such works remain. These are pieces written in Latin in an attempt by humanist scholars like Leon Battista Alberti and Eneas Silvio Piccolomini to approximate the old Latin comedies of Terence and Plautus. They were never performed on stage, but read, or recited, aloud in select university circles. The humanistic comedies range in length from about 5,000 to 18,000 words, with an average of about 8,000 (Arbea 2004). In other words, *La Celestina* is more than three times longer than the longest humanistic comedy and more than seven times longer than the average. There is no question that the open eroticism and many of the themes,

8.— For a bibliography of most twentieth-century adaptations, see Snow (1985, 71-87); for a brief survey of some more recent adaptations, see Snow (1997), Stern (1996, 195-96, n18), and Marie Bobes (2002).

9.— As I was writing the first draft of this essay, during my 2012 sabbatical leave in Madrid, both *La Celestina* and *Don Quixote* appeared in theatrical adaptations for the Madrid stage. There is always interest in bringing the classics to life for the general public, but these are always modern works —written, abridged, and adapted by contemporary writers— and are never the originals.

characters, and situations of the humanistic comedy (and in the older Latin comedies) are also found in *La Celestina*, but so is very much material that has nothing to do with that genre. Furthermore, the same kinds of themes, characters, and situations are found in other works—such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* and his *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* and Piccolomini's *Historia de duobus amantibus*—and it is not possible to say that *La Celestina* owes its existence directly and specifically to the humanistic comedy and not largely to the literary context in which that genre and others flourished.

Rojas almost certainly knew the humanistic comedy, and the anonymous first author obviously did, even though the genre was generally not well known in the context of the University of Salamanca. The Italian comedies of this sort were not published at the time of their writing. But a book called *Margarita poetica* (1472) by the German scholar Albrecht von Eyb was a manual of rhetoric and an anthology of excerpts of Latin works, and included three of these comedies; it went through more than a dozen editions by 1503. Rojas had a copy of the *Margarita* in his library, thus providing ample opportunity to know this extremely popular work.<sup>10</sup> This is not absolute proof that he was influenced by it at the time of the writing of *La Celestina*, but it certainly is highly suggestive. The only humanistic comedy published in Spanish translation was the 1490 edition of Alberti's *Philodoxus*. Russell's section on the humanistic comedy in his introduction to *La Celestina* is a good summary of the significance of this genre for Rojas's work (2001, 47-55). The assertion that «There is really no possible doubt that the shape of *Celestina* owes everything to humanistic comedy» (Whinnom 1993, 135) is, to say the least, an exaggeration.<sup>11</sup> The humanistic comedy is written in Latin; it is relatively short; it has a very limited range of characters and situations. *La Celestina* is written in the vernacular, it is extraordinarily long, it has a far wider range of characters and situations. *La Celestina* does not read like a humanistic comedy to me.

But is it a novel? The concept of the novel in modern terms (as opposed to novella or romance) did not exist at the end of the fifteenth century. As Alan Deyermond has written, «We can be sure that neither Rojas nor his predecessor thought of the book as a novel; the term had not been introduced» (1971, 169). Then Deyermond goes on to note, «This, however, does not matter.» He is right: it does not matter what Rojas might have

10.— See Corfis (1984) and Whinnom (1993) on Eyb and the possible influence of his work on the writing of *La Celestina*.

11.— Whinnom's summary comments on the humanistic comedy (1993, 135-41) make a good introduction to this genre, but his list of «points of similarity» (137-39) between this genre and Rojas's work—use of prose, flexible structure, treatment of space and time, realism and lack of decorum, characters, mixture of styles—is very far from conclusive, as all of them are characteristic of very many other genres.

«thought» he was writing. Remember also that neither did the concept of the novel in modern terms exist at the beginning of the seventeenth century; Cervantes could not have thought that he was writing what today we know definitively to be a novel. In his classic book on *Cervantes's Theory of the Novel*, E. C. Riley begins by reminding us, «In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries there was, strictly speaking, no theory of the novel» (1992, 1). It is important to note that Ottavio Di Camillo, who argues strongly against reading *La Celestina* as a humanistic comedy—a genre little known and very little practiced in Spain—posits that even early in the sixteenth century the work was actually read as a novel: «Carente de modelos dramáticos análogos a los que dieron forma a *La Celestina*, el lector español, como luego el europeo, asoció la obra con el género literario que mejor conocía, en nuestro caso el relato narrativo, leyendo la comedia como si fuera efectivamente una novela» (2005, 65).<sup>12</sup>

It seems clear that as *La Celestina* was published over and over again throughout a century and a half—including in many cities where there was no circle of humanist scholars and students who would treat it as a humanistic comedy—it was not being read aloud as a humanistic comedy nearly as much as it was being read silently by individuals, or aloud in small informal groups, as any other romance or novel was read. As we know, sentimental romances like *Cárcel de amor* and chivalric romances like *Amadís de Gaula* were also read aloud some of the time; that does not make them humanistic comedies or anything other than romances primarily intended to be read silently and individually, and that is how for the most part they were received.<sup>13</sup> The works in this category, novels written in the form of dialogue, are «novels whose action is advanced and characterizations developed by dialogue between the persons involved» (Peyton 1973, 122). Deyermond concludes his consideration of the genre of *La Celestina* thus: «*La Celestina* has the qualities that we look for in a modern novel: complexity, the solidity of an imagined but real world, psychological penetration, a convincing interaction between plot, theme, and characters» (169-170). Exactly. Certainly *La Celestina* had more influ-

12.— See also Jerry R. Rank: «L. Fernández de Moratín and especially those who followed him in this century could easily observe that the lack of any record of performance and the extraordinary number of editions of *LC* in the sixteenth century certainly indicated a text that, in spite of the polemic about the title, was perceived in its time as a reading text and not a performance text. This simple observation was no doubt, in part, responsible for the denomination 'novela dramática'» (1986, 235).

13.— The act of reading works of fiction aloud in groups, mostly family groups, is still practiced today, but very rarely. What has replaced this practice, however, is the listening to audio-tapes of long fiction, especially when driving in an automobile. The oral performance of works of fiction was not limited to the pre-print oral culture, and it has never disappeared; see Frenk (1977).

ence—had much more resonance—in subsequent novels than it did in the theater.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, as Spanish writers developed the art of writing fiction in the form of dialogue, it became increasingly clear that these works had nothing to do with either the stage or the humanistic comedy. No one I know considers works written in dialogue like Francisco Delicado's *La lozana andaluza* (1528), Feliciano de Silva's *Segunda Celestina* (1534), Sebastián Fernández's *Tragedia Policiana* (1547), or *La Lena* (1602, also published as *El celoso*) to be anything but novels. Cervantes explicitly titled the last entry in his *Novelas ejemplares* (1613), a work written entirely in the form of a dialogue, «Novela y coloquio que pasó entre Cipión y Berganza, perros del Hospital de la Resurrección...» *La Celestina* fits perfectly in the same genre as these works: long prose fictions intended to be read silently, and since they are definitely not romances, they must be novels.<sup>15</sup> As Ensign Campuzano says to his friend Peralta when he hands him the text of the conversation between the two dogs that he says he faithfully copied down while in the hospital: «púselo en forma de coloquio por ahorrar de *dijo Cipión, respondió Berganza*, que suele alargar la escritura» (Cervantes 1983, II, 259). If Cervantes can tell us that he is writing a novel in the form of a dialogue, and explain to us why he did it that way, it cannot be more clear that a novel can be written exclusively in the form of a dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

It might be argued that *La Celestina* cannot be a novel because it has no narrator, that there can be no narration without a narrator. That is a

14.—Pérez Priego (1991) has traced the influence of *La Celestina* in the sixteenth theater of Juan del Encina, Pedro Manuel de Urrea, and Bartolomé de Torres Naharro, and mentions the obvious *Caballero de Olmedo* by Lope de Vega and Calderón's lost *La Celestina*. A minimal influence, to say the least. On the other hand, Ciriaco Morón Arroyo is more on target: «Por otra parte, si pensamos en el papel secundario o nulo que *La Celestina* jugó en el desarrollo posterior del teatro, conviene preguntarse por qué. ¿No será mas bien novela por su naturaleza?» (1974, 118). And he concludes by repeating this idea: «De esa manera podemos concluir: *La Celestina* fue pensada como comedia humanística; pero su desarrollo y contenido concreto la hicieron mucho más virtual en la evolución de la novela que en la evolución del teatro» (120).

15.—There is also the modern tradition of writing novels in dialogue form in Spain. José Cadalso's *Noches lúgubres* (1789-90) is a short novel written in dialogue form. Beginning in the 1880s Benito Pérez Galdós wrote some six dialogue novels; see Antonio Rey Hazas (2011, 306), who makes the same point about Galdós. Early in the twentieth century Pío Baroja and Ramón María del Valle Inclán each wrote some novels in this format. Other examples could be cited, but if the dialogue is an acceptable novel form for Pérez Galdós, Baroja, and Valle Inclán, there can be no question about the genre's legitimacy. Examples from French literature at about the same time are Henri Lavedan's *Vieux marcheur, roman dialogué* (1899) and *Le nouveau jeu, roman dialogué* (1900). Many other novels written in dialogue could be added to this list. We see the same technique in many short stories by, for example, Ernest Hemmingway, Camilo José Cela, and a host of others. These are not brief plays, but fictional narratives.

16.—Perhaps one reason why the Renaissance novel in dialogue has not been recognized as a genre is that there is virtually no tradition of this sort of fiction in early French or English literature.

strong argument, but in the end it cannot hold. Modern epistolary novels —Richardson's *Clarissa*, Choderlos de Laclos's *Les liaisons dangereuses*— have no narrator, yet they are unanimously considered novels. If *La Celestina* cannot be a novel because it lacks a narrator, then the important works Richardson, Rousseau, Goethe, and hundreds of other works by many of the world's acknowledged masters of the epistolary novel must also be disqualified.<sup>17</sup> That will not do. The reason a work written entirely in the form of letters, with no explicit narrative links between them, must properly be understood as a novel is simply that the narrator is clearly implied: «First she wrote the following letter ... Then he responded ...» and so forth. Phrases such as these are simply eliminated for the sake of economy. This is exactly the same issue that Cervantes addressed when he wrote that he suppressed «Berganza said... Cipión responded...». In works of fiction, all readers clearly and effortlessly understand the implied narrative links. The same is true of long monologues and asides in fiction. Monologues are a characteristic of the theater, but in all kinds of fictions, both romance and novel, one can find lengthy monologues by the characters. The fictional aside, another staple of theater, is usually introduced in a novel by phrases like «And then he thought ...» or «Upon hearing this she reflected that ...». In works of fiction, all readers clearly and effortlessly understand the implied narrative links. Both epistolary and dialogue novels present characters who directly address the reader (as side participants; see below) without the mediation of a narrator.

Furthermore, the presence or absence of a narrator is not a distinguishing characteristic of novel in opposition to drama or film. There are plays with narrators who are not characters in the work, the exact equivalent of a third person narrator in a novel. One of the best-known examples is Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* where the «Stage Manager» provides information directly to the audience, precisely as a narrator does in fiction; this does not make *Our Town* a novel. In film, the common technique of *voice-over* is the same kind of narrative commentary that is not part of the ongoing plot. We can consider theatrical asides —a staple in theater from

17.— In her book on epistolary fiction in eighteenth-century France Elizabeth J. MacArthur addresses briefly the absence of a narrator in novels written entirely in letters (1990, 3-15). She is most concerned about the fact that such novels «lack the central, organizing authority a narrator provides» (9). This can lead to an apparently worrying lack of closure: «Without the univocal authority of a narrator to guarantee that the final pages do in fact constitute the end of the story, or even to certify that the collection of letters tells a story, with an ending, readers may suspect that the story continued, or feel that it has not been properly closed off. The epistolary form makes it more difficult then, to provide the kind of closure that fixes the shape and meaning of a text's individual moments» (10-11). The problem with this position is that the presence of a narrator never really «fixes the shape and meaning» of a fictional narrative. The presence of a narrator has never kept anyone from writing sequels to romances or chivalry, picaresque novels, works like *Don Quijote*, and so forth. Furthermore, readers often speculate about what happens to the characters after a novel ends. Narrator = closure is simply not the case—in epistolary novels, in dialogue novels, or in any other kind of fictional narrative.

the very beginning— as narrative addressed to the audience, not to the other characters. And, of course, stage directions often include narration, but such narrative is directed to the directors and actors, not the audience. When a play is read, however, such directions are the exact equivalent of narrative commentary. Besides these examples, there are times when a character in a play or film turns directly to the audience, sometimes speaking at somewhat more length, in order to explain what has happened, what he or she is thinking, and so forth.<sup>18</sup> The classic case in Spanish theater is when the *gracioso* or another character addresses the audience directly at the end of a performance of a *comedia*. If the presence of a narrator in drama and film is so common, then, by definition, such presence cannot be a distinguishing characteristic of fiction in opposition to performance media. Narration *tends* to be more common in fiction than in theater and film, but it can be present in both. Pure dialogue *tends* to be more common in theater and film than in fiction, but it can be present in both.

It has been claimed that one great feature of an epistolary novel like Richardson's *Pamela* is that it gives the reader immediate access to the characters' thoughts. Jane Smiley, for instance, attempts to make this point by way of a comparison:

Modern readers might find the idea that Pamela could retire to her closet and write at length about her adventures, her feelings, and her ideas even in the midst of being pursued entirely unbelievable, but Richardson's contemporaries were willing to suspend disbelief for the sake of enjoying Pamela's spirited resistance. In some sense, an epistolary novel is like a movie—we seem to be watching it while it is happening, and it therefore gains an extra degree of unpredictability and suspense. (2005, 79)

Similarly, Elizabeth Bergen Brophy claims that Samuel Richardson's technique of «writing to the moment» (1987, 20) was something new in the history of the novel. But nothing could be further from the truth. There is little immediacy about someone who sits down hours after the events and describes what happened or what she was feeling earlier in the day. If nothing else, this raises questions about the nature of memory and the possibility of self-serving presentation. A letter can be carefully crafted, revised, rewritten, and edited in order to achieve a certain rhe-

18.— One of the classic examples is found in Federico Fellini's 1973 *Amarcord*, in which there are two narrators: the protagonist Titta whose voice-over is important, and an academic-type character who frequently looks at the audience and talks about the town's history. It is a technique also used by Woody Allen in films such as *Annie Hall* (1977). Probably my favorite example is the 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, in which the protagonist, Ferris, often looks at the audience and tells us what he is thinking and what is going on.

torical effect; a good letter (the type Richardson's characters write) is the product of careful thought, rehearsal, and preparation. It is not in any way a spontaneous act; it is not in any way anything like actual spoken dialogue. Actual conversation is the most immediate of all forms of presentation; you can't erase or cross out a phrase already spoken; you can't tear up the sheet and start again. The fictional technique that provides most immediacy is that of the dialogue novel, such as *La Celestina*.

The scholar who struggles most with the term *dialogue novel* is Stephen Gilman; he calls terms like *novela dialogada* «absurdas» (1945, 147) and, further, that «llamar a la *Celestina* 'novela dialogada' significa menos que nada» (148). He also argues that the work «is without genre precisely because it is so profoundly and so uniquely dialogic» (1956, 195).<sup>19</sup> But, it seems to me, to call a work «ageneric» is to avoid the fact that we always draw boundaries, or group things, and in this case there is a group of works that share structural and thematic aspects of Rojas's work, and thus that form a genre. Boundaries drawn by human beings may be artificial, but we cannot do without such boundaries (Zerubavel 1991).

In dialogue we actually are present as things happen, listening in to the discussion as it takes place; there is no delay in time or filter in narration. Herbert H. Clark, in his important book *Using Language* (1996), has explored the concept of *side participants*, persons who are «taking part in the conversation but not currently being addressed,» and *overhearers*, who «have no rights or responsibilities» in the conversation (1996, 14). Overhearers can be further divided into *bystanders*, who «are openly present but not part of the conversation,» and *eavesdroppers*, who «are those who listen in without the speaker's awareness,» as well as some positions in between these categories (14). The role of these other participants is in many contexts important for how language is used. These categories can be particularly important in understanding how people read literary texts. For example, according to psychologist Richard J. Gerrig, who draws on Clark's work, «Authors and readers most often behave as if readers are side-participants; in that role, authors intend readers to be genuinely informed by narrative utterances» (1993, 110). The reader's side-participation is most vivid during dialogue, more than with a reflexive third- or first-person retelling of what has previously happened.

Some critics say that *La Celestina* must have been received by its contemporaries as a humanistic comedy, so that settles it: they knew better than we do what it was and if they understood it as a humanistic comedy then it was and will forever be a humanistic comedy.<sup>20</sup> But the

19.— See his final chapter on the question of genre (194-206), where he discusses some of the issues involved in this difficult question.

20.— Marcel Bataillon (1961), the most literal-minded of the great modern Hispanic critics, argued strenuously that if we read the book according to Rojas's explicit guidelines, it is a

reasoning here is fallacious; it is the same as if we said that since in the Renaissance the reigning medical theory was that of the bodily humors, that illness and madness were caused by an imbalance of such humors, so by definition that was a complete and adequate description of human biology. The mere fact that modern medicine has proven that the theory of bodily humors is not —and never was— an accurate scientific description of biology should then not change our opinion, and we should today believe that in the sixteenth century people's bodies truly functioned according to the best medical theories of that day. In other words, for the mode of thinking that privileges a work's contemporary understanding, modern knowledge should not trump a past age's understanding —of medicine, literary genre, theories of the origins of mankind, the shape of the earth, or anything else. Since we in fact do not hesitate to apply modern science to past days, we should not hesitate to apply modern literary theory and criticism to past days. This point was first made, I believe, with respect to *Don Quixote* by E. C. Riley: «To deny twentieth-century critics the use of tools of their trade because they were not invented at the time of the work under discussion seems to me very like restricting any discussion of Don Quixote as a character to terminology based on the theory of the humours and seventeenth-century social and philosophical concepts» (1989, 248 n28).

*Don Quijote* was perceived by almost all of its contemporaries as a funny book, a comic satire of the romances of chivalry and little more —and a few modern scholars still hold tenaciously to that opinion (e.g., Russell 1969; Close 1978, 2000), just as there is a strain of *Celestina* criticism that holds tenaciously to the opinion that it is a humanistic comedy. But today we know that while Cervantes's novel is indeed a funny book, a literary satire, and all that, it is also much, very much, more. It is a prototype of the modern novel, it explores the human mind in extraordinary depth, it is a pioneering metafiction, it presents realistic characters in realistic settings doing realistic things, it is a profound examination of human psychology, and it is many other things at the same time. We judge the genre of *Don Quijote* by today's standards, not by those of its contemporaries.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and virtually all the rest of his fictions were thought by its contemporary readers to be authentic first-person non-fictional narratives; they were not known to be works of fiction until nearly a century later (see Mayer 1997). We now read Defoe's book as a novel, not as his contemporaries read it. It is simply foolish not to take advantage of the perspective that time provides. Today we read *La Celestina* as a novel, because that is what it is. As M. M. Bakhtin has writ-

heavily didactic work, stern warning to young lovers to follow the rules of conventional reality. Almost no one buys that argument to day.

ten, «Works break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in *great time* and frequently (with great works, always) their lives there are more intense and fuller than are their lives within their own time» (1986, 4). Works like *La Celestina*, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and *Don Quijote* live in such great time, and their lives today are indeed fuller than they were at their own time. We cannot restrict them to what they were in their original context; they have far exceeded that. If *La Celestina* must be understood to be a humanistic comedy, then it is a dead work. No one today reads aloud, or recites, Rojas's work before a restricted university audience. We read *La Celestina* as a novel, because it is, according to our way of thinking today, a novel.

The case for *La Celestina* as a novel has been made before. It is a tradition that goes as far back as 1738 when the French Neoclassic critic Du Perron de Castera first used the term in this context (Heugas 1981, 161). The modern scholar who has most forcefully argued in favor of seeing the work as a novel is Dorothy Sherman Severin, who bases her argument on the dialogic concept of novel developed by Bakhtin: «the voices of *Celestina* are parodic, satiric, ironic, and occasionally tragic, and it is in their discourse, which Bakhtin calls, rather obscurely, double-voiced and internally dialogized discourse, that the dialogic world of the modern novel is created» (1989, 2). Severin's argument is that «*Celestina*, despite the absence of a third-person narrator, is the first work in world literature which can qualify for the title 'novel' rather than 'romance'» (5). She builds much of her case on this very novel-romance distinction and the fact that in writing a parody of *Amadís* and other chivalric romances, Cervantes wrote what we all call a novel. She pursues this argument productively: «*Don Quijote* is the first modern novel, according to one of the favourite commonplaces of modern literary criticism. But if one applies to *Celestina* similar criteria to those that we use for this judgement of *Don Quijote*, we must accord novelistic priority to the earlier work» (23). In other words, Severin assesses the genre of *La Celestina* in terms of the intellectual, aesthetic, and stylistic feel of the work, and in modern critical terms, rather than on simple formal characteristics.<sup>21</sup> *La Celestina* has the spirit of something radically different from either the stilted humanistic comedy or the conventional sentimental romance; it has the spirit of a novel.

In an important article that supplements Severin's Bakhtinian argument, Carlos Moreno Hernández (1994) shows that in 1910 Ortega y Gasset argued for a concept of the novel based in dialogue, anticipating the essence of the approach to the novel that Bakhtin would later develop at greater length. He does not, however, go so far as to classify *La Celestina* as a novel. In fact, he asserts absolutely that *Celestina* «no es,

21.— In the introduction to her edition of the work, Severin (1995, 25-39) repeats and elaborates on this basic position.

ni puede ser, una novela, ni antigua ni moderna» (10). Rather, he calls it a hybrid work that anticipates the modern novel (6, 10). He concludes by linking *La Celestina* and *Don Quijote*:

Es claro que *Celestina* puede inscribirse en esta tradición dialógica, con lo que la polémica sobre sus características genéricas puede despejarse considerablemente si la incluimos, igual que el *Quijote*, como eslabón hacia la novela tal como se constituye propiamente después, pero sin considerar la novela un género al mismo nivel que los clásicos o canónicos. (27-28).

One serious flaw in Moreno Hernández's argument is that —unlike the vast majority of Hispanic critics— he is familiar with and seems to buy into Ian Watt's theory (1957) that the novel «rose» in eighteenth-century England for the first time (28). Like Anglo-American critics, he apparently assumes that if the novel did not rise until the eighteenth century, then by definition works like *La Celestina* or *Don Quijote* could not be novels; at best, then, they must be extraordinary precursors of the modern novel proper. The history of Spanish fiction in the sixteenth and seventeenth proves that this position is not tenable.

One more point of critical debate to consider: Is *La Celestina* a medieval or a Renaissance work? In most histories of literature it is slotted into the Middle Ages; it is often described as the culmination of Spanish medieval literature.<sup>22</sup> Certainly the emphasis on sententiousness and example; the direct address of the popular medieval themes of love, fortune, and death; some of the rhetorical style; and so forth, reflect much earlier literature. But at the same time the work is set in an (unnamed) urban context,<sup>23</sup> rather than in courts and castles. It possesses all those characteristics of the modern novel; it is ironic, ambiguous, and subversive. It is, I believe, overall more Renaissance than medieval in tone. In spite of its sometimes obvious misogyny, it is the women of the work—Celestina, Melibea, Elisa, and Areúsa, who have more agency and intellectual capability, whose discourse is self-confident and assertive, and who are empowered more than any of the men. These women are the most interesting characters, the stars of the work. What is perhaps more important, *La Celestina* was read throughout the Renaissance and not in the Middle Ages. It was sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers of all walks of life, not medieval monks and nobles, who enjoyed the work, who saw it

22.— It is interesting, however, that P. E. Russell's Castalia edition (2001) of *La Celestina* has a yellow cover, the code used for Renaissance, rather than the green used for the Middle Ages.

23.— But it might have been perceived as the city of Salamanca itself; there was around 1520 in that university city where Rojas had been a student a location called «la casa de Celestina» (Russell 2001, 88). But the building might have been given that name after *La Celestina* was published, and may not be the source for the idea.

as a reflection of their own times and their own values. If it is the invention of the printing press that makes possible the modern novel, then *La Celestina* lives in the age of print, as a modern work, as a novel.

One powerful testimony that Rojas's work was read as a prose fiction comes from a figure of no less stature than Juan Luis Vives. In his 1524 *De Institutione feminae christianae* (1996, 44-47), he identifies six Spanish fictions that corrupt the minds of women readers: four romances of chivalry (*Amadísus*, *Splandianus*, *Florisandus*, and *Tirantus*), one sentimental romance (*Carcer Amorum*), and *La Celestina* (*Coelestina*). It is not the university students who read humanistic comedies aloud to each other, but young women who sit alone and read of the romantic, sexually active, and impulsive Melibea who are susceptible to this corruption.

The work is clearly a parody of the conventions of courtly love and especially of the sentimental romances, particularly San Pedro's *Cárcel de amor*.<sup>24</sup> It is at the same time, a celebration of life, with its exuberant comedy, overt sexuality, hedonism, and human warmth. The cynicism about the noble concept of love expressed by the servants and prostitutes reveals multiple individual perspectives on a single situation.<sup>25</sup> *La Celestina* exhibits in full measure almost all of what Bakhtin means when he writes about those things that, for him, are most characteristic of the novel—multiple voices and multiple consciousnesses, heteroglossia, and dialogism. Stephen Gilman, who wrote with no knowledge of Bakhtin's profound inquiry into the subject, realized that what mattered to Rojas «was dialogue conceived of as the interaction of consciousness, which is to say consciousnesses involved with each other and changing with every change of interlocutor» (1972, 13). *La Celestina* is as close to what we mean when we talk about a modern novel as any work ever written. *La Celestina* is the very first work in European literature to make a complete break with the matter and manner of previous fiction.<sup>26</sup>

*Celestina* is the figure who completely dominates the work on all levels. She is the only character with a past about which we know a good deal. *Celestina* loves wine, food, friends, and sex. Too old now to participate in the pleasures of the flesh, as she did in her prime, when she was admired and respected by clients like prominent priests and others, she is content to watch and comment on the sexual acts of the other characters. Pármeno recalls her fame in a lyrical passage in Act I when he describes how in every sort of social setting, persons from all walks of life, and

24.—For studies on the parodic aspects of the work see Devlin (1971), Severin (1984, 1989), Russell (2001, 56-63), and Iglesias (2009).

25.—Américo Castro has proposed that «Fernando de Rojas ha iniciado la técnica de perspectivismo literario» (1965, 150).

26.—This last sentence is a paraphrase of one by Ian Watt (1957, 58-59). Where I write «*La Celestina*», he writes «The novel in England.» What he says is fine, it is just said about the wrong writers and is off by a little over two centuries.

even the animals and the very stones of the street would, when she passes by, echo in her honor the words «puta vieja» (1995, 108-9).<sup>27</sup> Celestina dabbles in witchcraft, actually going through the rituals of conjuring up the devil in Act I; she sells perfumes and cloth from house to house in order to gain access; she keeps at least one prostitute, Elisa, in her house and at the right price makes arrangements for others to have illicit affairs, as she does with Calisto and Melibea; she is skilled in the arts of restoring the virginity in women who have lost it, perhaps several times.

And one more very important thing to recognize about Celestina is that she is smart, very smart. She thinks quickly and often knows what others are thinking, sometimes even before they themselves do. She can shift gears in the middle of a conversation in order to manipulate the thought, words, and actions of other characters; she is a master manipulator. In short, she possesses excellent skills in the areas of Theory of Mind and Machiavellian Intelligence, two hallmarks of prose fiction.

The various skills of mindreading —Theory of Mind— and putting other people's beliefs to use for your own ends —Machiavellian Intelligence— are characteristics of human beings in real life, and also of characters in literature. A large and growing area of theory in cognitive psychology deals with these abilities.<sup>28</sup> The concept has also profitably been transferred to literary studies, above all to the study of the novel, with great success.<sup>29</sup> Although some Anglo-American literary critics claim that presentation of literary characters' subtle ability to know what other characters are thinking came into being at about the time of Jane Austen, this has been refuted with examples from Spanish literature.<sup>30</sup> As Peter N. Dunn has commented: «*La Celestina* is a work that goes much further than anything previously achieved in Spanish in exploring the inner world of feelings, and particularly those feelings that are not already a commonplace of the erotic novel: anger, betrayal, corrupt conscience» (1993, 164). I would make the case even stronger: this statement is as true of the literature of the rest of Europe as it is of works written in Spanish. As Dunn further notes, «In *La Celestina*, in summary, something new has

27.— Louise Fothergill-Payne makes the interesting observation that Pármeno's long and detailed description is characteristic of the novel and not the theater: «el autor de novelas, recreándose en detalles aparentemente triviales, logra un mayor 'realismo' en el retrato de su personaje, mientras que el dramaturgo, forzado a destacar sólo lo esencial, crearía más bien un tipo y no un carácter» (1986, 153).

28.— See, for example, Byrne and Whiten (1988), Baron-Cohen (1995), and O'Connell (1997).

29.— See Zunshine (2006), Vermuele (2010), and Leverage et al. (2011) for some of the best examples of the value of Theory of Mind in the study of literature.

30.— George Butte (2004) has proposed that what Austen did represented something absolutely new in the history of fiction. Zunshine (2007) basically agrees, but she takes Butte to task for his lack of familiarity with essential concepts from cognitive psychology. See the rebuttal by Mancing (2011).

been achieved beyond the rhetorical projection of states of mind and emotion that was extensively practiced in other fictional forms; it is the representation of *change* in psychic orientation, the *process* of self-persuasion as a manifestation of the economy of desire» (164). *La Celestina* is less the culmination of the old and more the beginning of the new.

It is difficult to understate the accomplishments of Francisco de Rojas (and his anonymous predecessor) in *La Celestina*. Characters like his, the presentation of the reality of life, the degree of psychological penetration: all this is profound and well ahead of the time when such accomplishments are more generally recognized. In addition, while the style of the work is at times stilted, rhetorical, and conventional, the language of the text also impresses with its naturalness, maturity, and elegance. In yet another testimony, like those provided by *Cárcel de amor* and *Amadís de Gaula*, to the maturity of the Spanish language at the end of the fifteenth century, demanding humanist scholar Juan de Valdés, otherwise a severe critic of previous literature, praised the style of *La Celestina* by writing «soy de opinión que ningún libro ay escrito en castellano donde la lengua sté más natural, más propia ni más elegante» (1969, 176). It is almost criminal that outside of the Hispanic world, Rojas is rarely even acknowledged, let alone appreciated for what he accomplished. As Stephen Gilman, who locates *La Celestina* «at the headwaters of a genre, the novel» (1972, 6) has commented, «Fernando de Rojas from the very beginning has been surely the least recognized of the major authors of the Western world» (8).<sup>31</sup>

And now, for a final irony: after this discussion of the legitimacy of considering *La Celestina* a novel rather than a humanistic comedy and claiming that Rojas's work initiated a tradition of writing novels in dialogue form, it must be admitted that, overall, what followed in the wake of *La Celestina* is, with a few notable exceptions, rather disappointing. No other work of dialogue fiction attained anything even remotely approaching the stature of *La Celestina*. Rojas's novel may have begun a new genre, but it was not a strong one in the Spanish Renaissance and Baroque periods, and it was completely dominated by its founding document. The only other truly major fiction written in dialogue form is Cervantes's «Coloquio de los perros,» and these two works are those that best establish the place of the dialogue novel in literary history.<sup>32</sup>

31.— Pressing this idea, Gilman writes further «that not only that he is a peer of Shakespeare, but also that it is impossible to overestimate the unconventionality of his art» (1972, 357). John Devlin (1971) also reports that he asked all his friends and colleagues who are scholars and teachers of English literature if they ever heard of *La Celestina*. Only one replied affirmatively, but he added that he thought it was also called *The Book of Good Love*.

32.— Francisco Delicado's *Lozana andaluza* (1528) is a sometimes brilliant and innovative metafictional novel written almost entirely in dialogue, but it simply is not in the same category as *La Celestina*. Feliciano de Silva's *Segunda Celestina* (1534) is the best of the explicit

*La Celestina* is a novel —perhaps the very first of its kind in the history of European literature. But I am not at all interested in triumphantly bestowing the honorific title of «first» on Rojas’s work. What matters most, it seems to me, is the acknowledgment that our whole modern concept of the novel as a literary genre emerged in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries with works like *La Celestina*, *Lazarillo de Tormes* and the picaresque novel, *Don Quijote* and others —including Rabelais’s great comic works and the (much later) refined fictions of Madame de Lafayette in France. These works are fundamentally and profoundly different from ancient Greek and Roman romances or the great sentimental, chivalric, pastoral, and adventure romances of the Renaissance. They are, instead, very much like the works of the great novelists of the eighteenth century and after. The novel does not «rise» majestically as something absolutely unprecedented in eighteenth century England, but that emerges, as Mikhail Bakhtin has so beautifully argued, in the Renaissance.<sup>33</sup>

sequels, but it falls very far short of Rojas’s masterpiece. Lope de Vega’s *La Dorotea* (1632) has been called the «culminating accomplishment of the tradition» (Gerli 2004, 180). But it is a work of sometimes ponderous prose, where there is very little action, and characterized by the author’s inability to constrain his displays of irrelevant erudition; it is no *Celestina*.

33.— I would like to thank my good friend and colleague Charles Ganelin, who read and made valuable suggestions on the content and style of this essay.

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#### RESUMEN

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En este ensayo propongo que *La Celestina* debe leerse como una novela. La obra es imposible de representar en el teatro: no es un drama. Tampoco es una comedia humanística ni en su forma ni en su espíritu. Que una novela puede escribirse en la forma de una serie de cartas no es controvertido, a pesar de que carece de narrador. De igual modo hay —como ha explicado Cervantes en la introducción al «Coloquio de los perros»— un lazo implícito narrativo entre los segmentos de diálogo. *La Celestina* es una obra renacentista (y no medieval) y se ha leído siempre como novela. Es, en efecto, la primera gran novela de la edad de la imprenta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Celestina*, comedia humanística, novela, novela epistolar, novela dialogada.

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#### ABSTRACT

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In this essay I argue that *La Celestina* should be read as a novel. The work is impossible to perform in a theater: it is not a drama. Neither is it a humanistic comedy, either in form or spirit. That a novel can be written in the form of a series of letters is not controversial, even though there is no narrator. In a similar way, there is —as Cervantes explained in his introduction to his «Coloquio de los perros»— an implicit narrative link between the segments of dialogue in his work. *La Celestina* is a work of the Renaissance (not the Middle Ages), and it has always been read as a novel. It is the first great novel of the print age.

KEY WORDS: *Celestina*, humanistic comedy, novel, epistolary novel, dialogue novel.

