

“The Carnival in Rojas’ *Celestina*: Destroying Hierarchies and the Subversive Side of Laughter”

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Carnival laughter is the laughter of all people.

*Second it is universal in scope; it is directed at all
and everyone, including the carnival’s participants.*

Rabelais and His world. Mikhail Bakhtin

Fernando de Rojas’ *La Celestina* offers us a violent and powerful vision of obsessive carnal love, ending in death, suicide and loneliness. These are hardly the elements of a work that will keep its readers turning the pages in fits of laughter. And yet to ignore the primary function of the comical elements that shape this text would do very little justice to this Spanish masterpiece, which gives birth to one of the most attractive and simultaneously hideous characters of western literature: Celestina.¹ As a point of departure we will examine Rojas’ text from a Bakhtinian perspective in terms of the carnival,² emphasizing the subversive aspects of the laughter provoked by the carnival, which serves to undermine the dominant culture in the medieval³ world. It is Celestina’s carnivalesque spirit that makes her an attractive character. Her laughter at the institutions that govern her society allows her to playfully transgress official boundaries in true carnival essence and in turn expose the hypocrisy that controls the dominant order of her world. This critical reading of the *La Celestina* will enable us to explore how Rojas questions the dominant patriarchal culture, craftily presenting an alternative vision of the medieval world by providing a space of expression and freedom in the form of the carnival for the typically marginalized subjects of this society.

Whether or not *La Celestina* is a comical text has received some critical attention; however, as Dorothy Severin points out, modern readers and critics have paid considerable attention to the tragic dimensions of the text, while ignoring the significant comic aspects that both enrich and are fundamental components of Rojas’ work. As Severin affirms, “the redeeming feature of the characters in the *Celestina* is their sense of humour” (291 1978). Despite the one-sided nature of celestinesque criticism, there are some critics who have ventured to go against the trends in order to discover the “lighter” side of Rojas’ text.

Critics like E. Michael Gerli, Louise Fothergill-Payne, and Severin have all explored Rojas’ text for its comic elements.

¹ Dorothy Severin in her “The Magical Empowerment of Women” makes reference to this unique and ambivalent status that Celestina is given in the text when she states: “Rojas paints a very ambivalent picture of Celestina, and she seems, at times both hero and Villain of the piece” (9).

² Louise Fothergill-Payne in her article “Celestina “As a Funny Book:” A Bakhtinian Reading” examines Rojas’ text in order to highlight the carnivalesque aspects of it. We will use her article as a point of departure; however, we wish to call attention to the subversive nature of laughter in this text, which liberates its characters (in particular its female characters) from a rigid and dominant patriarchal society.

³ The *Celestina* can be classified as a Medieval or Renaissance text. For the sake of this argument I have chosen to consider it as a late Medieval text. Rojas recreates the rigidity of the Medieval world and its hierarchies in order to examine and challenge the forces that structure this world with his creation of the character Celestina, who exists outside of this hierarchy and ultimately serves to undermine it.

In her article “La Celestina, ¿una obra para la postmodernidad? Parodia religiosa, humor, ‘nihilismo,’ ” Laura Puerto proposes a provocative argument and examines the text within a postmodern paradigm, arguing that Rojas’ text contains all of the characteristics of a postmodern world.⁴ In her defense of the comedic elements within the text, Puerto maintains that the majority of the characters provoke laughter and ridicule even in their deaths.⁵ While she provides us with an innovative analysis of Rojas’ text, her interpretation of laughter in the *La Celestina* defines it as a mocking gesture used to laugh at miserable and ridiculous characters (252). Gerli’s article offers a distinctively engaging analysis of the semantic qualities that laughter takes on in the text, which serve to expose the characters’ hidden desires. According to Gerli, it is Pármeno’s giggle that betrays him and enables Celestina to eventually win him over: “laughter allows Celestina to see how Pármeno’s words fail him to represent his inner essence, and that there is a discord between his concealed opinions [...] and his public resistance to her [...] His laughter is, she discerns, an unerring sign of his anxious delight at obscenity” (22-23 1995). Severin’s discussion of the comic elements revolves around the language and the verbal materialization of the comic aspects that manifest in the text in the form “of *sententiae* and old saws, dirty jokes and puns, sarcasm and academic jests” (277 1978). Severin’s argument is especially advantageous to the modern readers who are far removed from the humor that shapes this text. Of particular interest to this analysis is Fothergill-Payne’s examination of *La Celestina* from a Bakhtinian perspective, which we will use as a point of departure in our own discussion of the text. While Fothergill-Payne’s argument focuses primarily on the parodic aspects of the text and the “carnavalesque communication” (33) in *La Celestina*, this paper will examine how laughter functions as a subversive tool, a liberating gesture, used by those marginalized characters to snicker in the face of a rigid society that tries to govern them.

In this discussion of *La Celestina* we will follow the critical approach to the text established by the authors mentioned in search of the comic elements that structure and inform this work. Particularly, we will examine the laughter and the comic elements that shape Rojas’ masterpiece as evidence of the carnival culture, which pervaded the medieval world and spirit. This critical focus will enable us to delve into the subversive side of the laughter that permeates this text with its power to destroy the hierarchical medieval world order. This critical approach will allow for a reinterpretation of Melibea’s death, which has been traditionally characterized within a tragic paradigm⁶, as a part of the carnival culture that challenges authority and brings Pleberio’s world crashing down. Melibea’s leap to her death symbolically represents the carnival world’s movement toward the “lower stratum” (Bakhtin 370)⁷ that functions to challenge hierarchy, liberating her from her father’s rule.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the medieval world offers a double vision of the world, which is comprised of the official world order organized by the state and the church and the non-official vision that manifests in the form of the carnival (5). Bakhtin argues that:

⁴ Puerto explains “es especialmente destacable la coincidencia entre el universo de Rojas y los rasgos que socialmente definen la postmodernidad: carencia de Dios, desconfianza en la Lógica, exaltación, por el contrario, de las pasiones, de las emociones, de los instintos y hasta de la magia, atención a los grupos marginales (en nuestro casos, criados y prostitutas), y crítica sistemática de toda categoría estructuradora” (248).

⁵ According to Puerto all the characters, except Pleberio, “ridículos son, en mayor o menor medida, todos y cada uno de los personajes que pululan por *La Celestina*, sobre cuyas motivaciones recae constantemente la burla de sus compañeros —inestimable, para ello, la función de los apartes— (251).

⁶ Dorothy Sherman Severin argues in her book *Tragicomedy and Novelistic Discourse in Celestina* that “from a totally anachronistic feminist point of view, the modern reader may indeed see Melibea as a tragic heroine, since her social position is undoubtedly that of victim and her only way of making effective social protest is by her suicide” (102).

See also Puerto when she argues: “insistimos en que, hasta el auto XIV de la primitiva versión del texto y el XIX de la tragicomedia, *La Celestina* debería ser apprehendida como <<comedia>> en el sentido más fidedigno. La verdadera tragedia comenzaría, entonces, cuando la figura canalizadora de la trama, Melibea, perida la vida por elección propia... (254).

⁷ The “lower stratum”, according to Bakhtin, represents the material body in the cyclical dance of death and rebirth. The movement toward the lower stratum symbolically points toward the natural life cycle, which is a movement toward debasement, decay and eventually death but for Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, it also entails a rebirth and renewal, a continual evolving cycle. See Bakhtin’s chapter “The material body and the Lower Stratum” for a more detailed discussion of the function of the lower stratum in the popular culture of the medieval world (368).

According to Fothergill-Payne, “the bringing down of all that is held in high esteem to a corporal level is apparent in every turn of phrase in the Celestinesque discourse. All interlocutors, including the impatient lovers, deflate spiritual values by giving them a concrete, corporal meaning” (40).

[...] forms of protocol based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in all countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second life outside officialdom [...]. (5-6)

Bakhtin affirms that to ignore this duality that structured the medieval world and the important role that carnival laughter played in the structuring of medieval and renaissance cultures would result in a failure to recognize the important role of laughter in these cultures (6). The carnival culture permeated the medieval world in three distinct manners, according to Bakhtin: there were the “ritual spectacles,” “comic verbal compositions,” which consisted of parodic discourses (oral and written) “in Latin and in the vernacular” (5), which in the very shape of the discourse, linguistic interchanges between individuals, who exchanged insults, curses, and “popular blazons” (5).

The carnival spirit and laughter, as described by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, is a communal laughter, a flippant laughter at life in all its aspects; it is a laughter that encourages the participants of the carnival to grin at formalities, conventionality, death, sex, the body in all its manifestations and changes. According to Bakhtin, from the perspective of the carnival “the entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity [...] this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of the carnival” (12). This is the laughter that reigns in Rojas’ text; it is the laughter of the people at life, death, growing old, at the institutions that restrict their minds and their bodies from fully engaging in the festivities of life. Celestina embodies the carnival essence. She gleefully giggles at life and all its inconveniences, sardonically mocking her aging body with her appetite for life. Readers witness this voracity for life in Act III when she assures Sempronio that she will eventually win Melibea over. She tells him:

Que, aunque esté brava Melibea, no es ésta, si a Dios a placido, la primera a quien yo he hecho perder el cacarear. Coxquillosicas son todas; mas, después que una vez consienten la silla en el envés del lomo, nunca querrían holgar [...] camino es, hijo, que nunca me harté de andar; nunca me vi cansada; y aun así, vieja como soy, sabe Dios mi buen deseo. (Act III, 82-83)

Despite her age Celestina still possesses an insatiable appetite for the pleasures of life, mocking her body with her willingness to live and enjoy life even in her decrepit state. Stephen Gilman, in his introduction to Severin’s edition of the text, highlights this attractive desire to live that emanates from Celestina’s personality when he argues that “no importa que sea vieja, llena de cicatrices, físicamente grotesca [...] lo que en última instancia importa es su valor, su ferocidad mental [...] su fe en sí misma y en su modo de vida” (27). It is this celebration and affirmation of life that draws her to us, that entices us to join her in the carnival.

Ultimately, it is the laughter of the carnival, the laughter at the ridiculous stages of life and society that dominates and reigns fourth in Rojas’ *La Celestina*. Celestina’s contagious snickers at her rigidly structured society turn her world upside down with her carnivalesque laughter, evoking a restructuring and reordering that thrusts her to the center of the very world that attempts to silence her. Pármemo refers to Celestina’s popularity amongst the people of the city when he explains to Calisto in Act I how you can hear people screaming her name from all directions of the city in need of her services: “las unas: «¡Madre acá!»; las otras «¡Madre acullá!»; «¡Cata la vieja!»; «¡Ya viene el alma!»; de todas muy conocida” (Act I, 61). Although Rojas is not the author of Act I,⁸ he develops this characterization of Celestina as the center of attraction throughout the text. For example, in Act IX Celestina talks about the past, painting a vision of herself as the nucleus of pleasure and amusement. Bakhtin tells us that “the influence of the carnival spirit was irresistible: it made man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect” (13). Celestina, as the embodiment of the carnival spirit, draws people to her from all aspects of life, inviting them to join her in this festive laughter while she gleefully dismantles the hierarchy that tries to contain her jubilant life-force.

Fothergill-Payne explores the discursive aspects of this carnival culture that permeate and shape Rojas’ text in her article “*Celestina* “As a Funny Book”: A Bakhtinian Reading,” and argues that “by constantly bringing down the conversation to a corporal and concrete level, Celestina is the true counterpart of polite discourse”(36).

⁸ As Fernando Ibarra and Antonio Sánchez-Romeralo explain in their anthology of Spanish authors, the first edition of *La Celestina* was anonymous (Burgos, 1499) and had 16 acts. In the second edition (Toledo, 1500) the text still had 16 acts but there were added materials. Amongst these materials was a letter to a friend written by Rojas explaining that he was the author of only 15 acts and that he found the first act from an unknown author (117).

Fothergill-Payne also maintains that *La Celestina* “offers countless examples of this ‘festive grammar’ ”(35) of the carnival, providing an alternative discourse that liberates its speakers from the chains of formality in order to discursively transgress the boundaries of decorum. In accordance with Fothergill-Payne’s definition of Celestina as the “counterpart of polite discourse,” (36) we could argue that Celestina’s person encourages the other characters to engage in unconventional speech acts that define carnival discourse. For example, we notice this in the first act when Sempronio arrives at Calisto’s house with Celestina; Pármene announces to Calisto that Sempronio and “una puta vieja” are at the door. Calisto immediately tries to silence Pármene and scolds him for his insolence. However, as Pármene explains, in Celestina’s world this term, which would normally be insulting, is taken as a compliment. He replies to Calisto’s asking:

¿Por qué, señor, te matas? Por qué, señor, te congojas? ¿Y tú piensas que es vituperio en las orejas de ésta el nombre que la llamé? No lo creas; que así se glorifica en le oír, como tú, cuando dicen: «Diestro Caballero es Calisto». Y de más, de esto es nombrada y por tal título conocida. Si entre cien mujeres va y alguno dice: «¡Puta vieja! », sin ningún empacho luego vuelve la cabeza y responde con alegre cara. En los convites, en las fiestas, en las bodas, en las cofradías, en los mortuorios, en todos los ayuntamientos de gentes, con ella pasan tiempo. (Act I, 59)

Pármene’s speech functions as an example of Celestina’s influence, which serves to undermine proper discourse and culture. Her official title and the one that she proudly goes by is “puta vieja,” which Pármene sardonically compares to Calisto’s title as a caballero. In official fiestas, weddings, funerals, parties, festivals, people scream out the name “puta vieja” when greeting her. The use of indecorous language in the fiestas, weddings and funerals that Celestina attends --on a discursive level-- functions to sardonically poke fun at official culture and decorum itself.⁹ Celestina, however, as a carnival figure who is liberated from the power structures that organize her society¹⁰, who does not pretend to follow her society’s hypocritical rules, can freely turn and smile when they call her by her name: “¡Puta vieja!”

Pármene’s speech converts Celestina, the “puta vieja,” into a ubiquitous force that pervades all aspects of society; he tells Calisto that you can hear everyone scream out her name in almost joyous reverence. Ironically, she is transformed into a godlike figure, who pervades all aspects of life and society. There is a collective song that one can hear that sings the praises of the “puta vieja.” We could argue that this communal song represents the voice of the people, the universal voice of the people that sings in unison during carnival time. Even the animals know her by her name “puta vieja;” Pármene comments to Calisto: “si pasa por los perros, aquella suena su ladrido; si está cerca las aves, otra cosa no cantan; si cerca los ganados, balando lo pregonan; si cerca las bestias, rebuznando dicen: «¡Puta vieja!»; las ranas de los charcos otra cosa no suelen mentar” (Act I, 59). Pármene’s speech functions to reflect the relaxed language and spirit of carnival discourse, which liberates individuals from the rigidity of courteous forms of language.¹¹ Fittingly, at the center of this liberating discourse, which pokes fun at conventionality, is the figure of Celestina, who as we have noted earlier is the “true counterpart of polite discourse” (Fothergill-Payne 36).

According to Bakhtin, there are certain types of relaxed “patterns of speech”(17) that manifest during the carnival that do not form part of the official modes of interaction, resulting in an alternative way of communicating that enables individuals to freely use unacceptable forms of speech:

Abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech. They were and are still conceived as a breach of established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability [...] Such speech forms liberated, from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom, become themselves a peculiar argot and create a special collectivity, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally. The marketplace crowd was such a collectivity, especially the festive, carnivalesque crowd at the fair. (187-8)

⁹ See Quiñones who also discusses this section in terms of its the grotesque (55).

¹⁰ Bakhtin indicates that carnival time “marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (10).

¹¹ Fothergill-Payne argues, “the fictitious world of *Celestina* seem a relief from constrained speech and as such, a relaxation of tensions in an ambiance of liberating laughter and fun” (35).

Readers notice this liberating speech of the marketplace, which defines the carnivalesque discourse used amongst Celestina and her cronies, who represent the banished members of society (the prostitutes, the servants), existing on the fringes. We discover her marginalized position when Pármemo tells Calisto about Celestina's house on the outskirts of the city: "tiene esta buena dueña al cabo de la ciudad, allá cerca de las tenerías, en la cuesta del río, una casa apartada, medio caída, poco compuesta y menos abastada" (60). Ironically, although Celestina exists physically on the outskirts of this society, she permeates all aspects of it.¹² She is the go-between, who not only unites two lovers, but the two separate worlds that comprise this society, as well. Linguistically, however, Celestina and her group dominate the central position. Interestingly, we notice that the verbal interchanges of insults and abuses functions to unite Celestina's marginalized group in discourse, and to liberate them from the chains of decorum. Rojas manipulates his language in order to mark a clear distinction between these competing worlds and allowing for the voice of the marginalized character to be heard above the other voices within the textual chorus. Rojas, therefore, textually gives a voice to this otherwise ostracized group, forcing the reader to recognize their presence, which in turn gives this group a central position from a textual point of view. It is only at the end of the text that we finally hear Pleberio's failed voice of authority, a voice that seems horribly out of place and void of any power.¹³

The familiar language and abusive interchanges that characterize the marketplace discourse that Bakhtin describes permeates Rojas' text and functions to discursively subvert civil and official forms of speech. For instance, examining the verbal exchanges between Elicia and Sempronio enables us to highlight the distinction between proper speech and the abusive interchanges that Celestina's group uses to address one another. In Act IX (the banquet scene) we are witnesses of this indiscreet banter that characterizes carnival dialogue and the discourse used within Celestina's circle.¹⁴ In the aforementioned scene, Elicia reproaches Sempronio for praising Melibea, scolding him by saying:

¡Apártateme allá, desabrido, enojoso! ¡Mal provecho te haga lo que comes, tal comida me has dado! Por mi alma revesar quiero cuanto tengo en el cuerpo, de asco oírte llamar a aquella gentil. ¡Mirad quién gentil! ¡Jesú, Jesú, y qué hastío y enojo es ver tu poca vergüenza! (Act IX, 145).

In typical carnivalesque style, Elicia's insults are directed toward the body, especially "the lower stratum" (Bakhtin 370). Her reaction to Sempronio's adoration of Melibea is a very physical one, concentrated on this "lower stratum." When Celestina asks Elicia to stop bickering and come back to the table, once again her response functions to call attention to the body, as she comments: "Con tal que mala pro me hiciere, con tal que reventase en comiéndolo. ¿Había yo de comer, con ese malvado, que en me cara ha porfiado que es más gentil su andrajo de Melibea, que yo? (Act IX,146). The argument culminates with Elicia cursing Sempronio for laughing at her, reproaching him by saying "¿De qué te ríes? ¡De mala cáncer sea comida esa boca desgraciada, enojosa!" (Act IX,146). Free from the rules that govern the dominant society, Celestina and her cohort can liberate themselves from the fetters of conventionality. For the female members of this society, this entails a liberation from the rules of suitable female conduct, which denies proper girls from engaging in the carnal pleasures and demands chastity. Although, as Celestina points out, the only difference between young women like Melibea and prostitutes like Areúsa and Elicia, is the decorous game of refusal that must be played out by the modest young woman even though she too desires to enjoy in the physical pleasures as much as the prostitute. Trying to appease Calisto after her first meeting with Melibea, Celestina explains Melibea's frigidity in the following manner:

¹² Alan Deyermond affirms while Celestina's house forms part of a "female micro-society" (8) that is marginalized from the "male macrosociety" (8), "in Celestina's household, it is men who are marginalized" (8). Gerli also highlights the contradictory position that Celestina's house occupies in the text. While within the spatial configuration of the city it is set apart from the other dominating households, at the same time Celestina's house is a "central" (192) meeting place. "The old bawd's house is the central place where all the 'marginal' characters in the work converge, a collective desire for sanctuary as well as of the social alienation and disorder around which all the events in the work turn." (192 2011)

¹³ See Severin's argument when she states "Pleberio's voice [...] makes a bitter comment on the failure of Petrarchan neo-stoicism to function for Pleberio in his moment of crisis and agony" (115 1989). See Fothergill-Payne who invites us to read Pleberio's lament comically and to ultimately define Pleberio as a comic not a tragic figure (44). She argues that "Pleberio's lament is consistent with the preceding Acts and should in fact make us laugh not cry" (44).

¹⁴ Further on in this analysis we will discuss the significance of the banquet in the carnival world. –

Todo su rigor traigo convertido en miel, su ira en mansedumbre, su aceleramiento en sosiego. Pues ¿a qué piensas que iba allá la vieja Celestina, a quien tú [...] a sufrir su accidente, a ser escudo de tu ausencia, a recibir en mi mano los golpes, los desvíos, los menosprecios, desdenes, que muestran aquéllas en los principios de sus requerimientos de amor, para que sea después en más tenida su dávida? Que a quien más quieren, peor hablan. Y si así no fuese, ninguna diferencia habría entre las públicas, que aman, a las escondidas doncellas [...] Las cuales, aunque están abrasadas y encendidas de vivos fuegos de amor, por su honestidad muestran un frío exterior [...]. (Act VI, 108-9)

Celestina's speech exposes the hypocrisy of propriety and the decorous games that women are forced to play in the name of good taste in order to secure that modest love is not debased to the level of pure sexual lust.

In contrast to Melibea's resistance and frigidity, we witness the playful and unrestrained lovemaking between Areúsa and Pármeneo in Act VII that, according to Fothergill-Payne, functions as a parodic version of lovemaking that we witness between Melibea and Calisto: "his polite greetings at the door of Areúsa's bedroom are a superb mimicry of the codified forms in use by the upper classes" (36). This scene culminates with Celestina's comment about Pármeneo's sexual prowess, which once again functions to call attention in a grotesque manner¹⁵ to the lovemaking act, metaphorically comparing making love to devouring the lover. Celestina advises Areúsa:

No espero más aquí yo, fiadora que tú amenazcas sin dolor y él sin color. Mas como es un puntillo, gallillo, barbiponiente, entiendo que en tres noches no se le demude la cresta. De éstos me mandaban a mí *comer en mi tiempo los médicos de mi tierra, cuando tenía mejores dientes.* (Act VII, 131) (italics mine)

The attention to the material body, the swallowing, devouring, procreating body, which the carnival spirit celebrates and exalts, culminates in a frenzy in Act IX with the banquet scene.

The banquet scene in Act IX brings together all the miserable wretches of society to partake in the joyous celebration of life in all its colors. Celestina does not restrict herself when inviting her friends to her table; her frolicsome spirit encourages her guests to come to this table of life with a voracious appetite, with the willingness to enjoy the sweet things in life while they can. She advises her guests: "Gozad vuestras frescas mocedades, que quien tiempo tiene y mejor le espera, tiempo viene que se arrepiente [...]" (Act IX, 148). The banquet scene culminates in an orgy between the young couples that upset Celestina's table with their lovemaking, while Celestina sits back and watches what she has created. Fothergill-Payne defines the banquet scene from a Bakhtinian perspective, arguing that "after all what is here being celebrated is not the daily business of eating and drinking, but togetherness, abundance of food and wine and shared in joy. In turn, images of food are intimately linked with the body's growth, its fertility and reproduction and are thus a jubilant confirmation of life" (37). Celestina's banquet, we could argue, comically represents the various stages of life in all its aspects (the youth, the aged, copulation, the changes of the physical body) defiantly affirming and accepting the corporal and its inconveniences. Moreover, this carnivalesque affirmation of life, which manifests in Act IX in the form of a banquet also, as both Fothergill-Payne and Gerli point out, subversively undermines the higher powers that structure society and literally enslaves bodies.¹⁶

This focus on the body, in particular the "lower stratum," forms part of what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism"(20),¹⁷ which represents the laughter of the people:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level [...] [to] degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh. This is the particular trait of this genre which differentiates from all forms of high art and literature. The people's laughter which characterized all forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes. (19-20)

¹⁵ We will examine the function of the grotesque within the carnival further on in our analysis. Gilman classifies *La Celestina* "como una obra maestra de lo grotesco" (22).

¹⁶ See Fothergill-Payne who discusses the subversive function of this banquet that turns "the official world [...] upside down, Church and State are unmasked as great partners in the world of prostitution, and the upper classes, part of that very network, are derided for their oppression and cruelty to those that serve them" (39). See also Gerli who examines the degradation Melibea by the prostitutes as a symbolic social revolt against the "social and sexual fabric of the world in which the characters in *Celestina* live" (372, 1999).

¹⁷ See Harry Véllez Quiñones' article that develops in detail the grotesque elements of this text.

Harry Vélez Quiñones defines Celestina and her world as the epitome of this grotesque realism by arguing “her connection to the body as a site of sexual transactions and exchange of bodily fluids heightens her grotesqueness” (54). Her person and her livelihood are centered around the body (Quiñones 54); “Celestina’s occupations are closely linked to bodily functions [...] she is a seamstress and the best hand at restoring lost virginities” (54).

Rojas highlights the corporal in all its shapes and manifestations, comically and sardonically, to poke fun at the hypocrisy of the dominant order and decorum (embodied by the Church and the patriarchal society) that negates the body publicly, but privately enjoys all the pleasures of the flesh. Celestina’s focus on the physical body, especially the sexual pleasures of the body, subversively mocks the Church’s power, by degrading and debasing its very place of worship as a means of procuring more clients for her sexual trade.¹⁸ Sempronio brings this to our attention in the beginning of Act IX when he tells Pármeno:

[...] Cuando ella tiene que hacer, no se acuerda de Dios ni cura de santidades. Cuando hay que roer en casa, sanos están los santos; cuando va a la iglesia con sus cuentas en la mano, no sobra el comer en casa [...] lo que en sus cuentas reza es los virgos que tiene a cargo y cuántos enamorados hay en la ciudad y cuántas mozas tiene encomendadas y qué despenseros le dan ración y cuál mejor y cómo les llaman por nombre porque cuando los encontrare no hable estraña, y qué canónigo es más mozo y franco. Cuando menea los labios es fingir mentiras, ordenar cautelas para haber dinero. (Act IX,142)

Celestina’s abuse of the spiritual space as a means to find potential clients amongst the clergy represents the carnival laughter and conversion of the world “inside out” (11) that Bakhtin describes. Her celebration of the body, her love of sexual pleasure, good wine and food, in true carnival spirit, functions to call into question the hierarchies of her society and establish a different order.¹⁹

According to Gerli in “Dismembering the Body Politic,” it is the grotesque body that points toward (and symbolizes) social dissonance and transformation in Rojas’ Spain. For example, Gerli argues that the grotesque portrait of Melibea’s body in Act IX serves to highlight this social revolt occurring within the subordinate social groups: “Melibea’s portrait, placed there in the mouths of the two whores, Elicia and Areúsa, functions as a figural nexus that subsumes a series of symbolic connections linking sexuality, corporality, nutrition, and desire to questions of social authority, privilege, agency, money and power” (372).

Bakhtin informs us that Rabelais²⁰ focus on the “lower stratum,” on the material body and its functions serves to reflect the precarious state of the medieval world structure that was in a state of transformation (403): “at the time of Rabelais the hierarchical world of the Middle Ages was crumbling [...] the material bodily principle, earth, and real time become the relative center of the new picture of the world” (404). We are also explicitly made aware of the crumbling state of the medieval world order in Rojas’ text when Sempronio says to Celestina in Act III:

[...] helado está el río, el ciego ve ya, muerto es tu padre, un rayo cayó, ganada es Granada, el rey entra hoy, el turco es vencido, eclipse hay mañana, la puente es llevada, aquél es ya obispo, a Pedro robaron. Inés se ahorcó, [Cristóbal fue borracho]. (Act III, 80)

Sempronio’s speech gives us a vision of bodies in flux, it calls attention to the instability of life and the continual transformations that reshape and reorder society. Nothing is stable; everything eventually changes and is reordered by time.

However, as Bakhtin shows us, the realm of the carnival and grotesque realism with its exaltation of the body and all of its transformations, reflects a positive state of continual growth for the body of the people.

¹⁸Mary S Gossy, in her book *The Untold Story*, highlights Celestina’s position of power within her society that ultimately leads to her demise because she is converted into the scapegoat that will have to expiate the sins of others. Gossy argues, “Celestina is a scapegoat, a screen upon which the guilt and fear of others are projected. These projections are easily focused on her because her behavior is heretical [...] she is powerful and outside authority” (39).

¹⁹ Bakhtin tells us that the “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions [...] it was hostile to all that was immortalized and incomplete”(10).

²⁰ François Rabelais (1494-1553) was a French writer, humanist, doctor and monk. His book *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* has received conflicting interpretations amongst the critics. Of particular interest to this study is Barbara C Bowen’s book *Enter Rabelais, Laughing*.

Although it embraces change, and all of its ramifications (death and old age, to mention just a few), this new world order depicts a vision of immortality, of material transcendence on earth that partakes in the recurrent renewal and rebirth of things. As Bakhtin points out, this material bodily principle that governs the carnival and grotesque realism is “the body of the people and mankind, fertilized by the dead, is eternally renewed and moves forever forward [...]” (404). The carnival spirit unites the people in the processes of change and renewal. As we have seen in our analysis of Rojas’ text, it represents the breaking down of stability, of hierarchies, of all that refuses to engage in this dance of life, birth, and death. Within this world in continual flux, death is an inevitable and necessary process, a pretext that enables the carnival to begin again, for the new generation of participants to partake in this banquet, in this carnival.

The deaths that end the drama of Rojas’ *La Celestina*, therefore, can be understood as a necessary part of a carnival that recognizes no hierarchies without a distinction between life and death, but rather encompassing all aspects of life in a true affirmation of the world and all that it entails. The deaths represent a defiance against the suffocating structure of a society that orders the world in which the characters of Rojas’ text live. Melibea’s involvement with Celestina awakens her to life and although she leaps to her death, she also is leaping from a living death that she has survived within the enclosed walls of her father’s house. As Severin explains “Melibea is trapped in the tomb of Pleberio’s house, garden and tower” (102 1989). Melibea’s life is a living death and the carnival laughter that Celestina infuses in her life invites Melibea to partake in the dance of life and death, thereby freeing her from the suffocating world represented by Pleberio’s fortress that unsuccessfully tries to protect his only child. Her death, therefore, in true carnival spirit, also subverts the institutions that structure her world. Significantly, her leap from her father’s tower (a symbol of patriarchal power and stability) dramatically accentuates her revolt against the power structures that govern her world.²¹ Although Melibea’s death provokes empathy and adds to the tragic element of this text, we can also define it in terms of the necessary part of the carnival world, which embraces all aspects of life.²² Calisto’s death in sharp contrast, as Quiñones points out in his analysis, should in fact induce laughter considering the situation of his death: “it is laughable as well as pathetic that Calisto should fall and split his head open as a result of a senseless scheme concocted by Elicia and Areúsa, sabotaged by Centurio, and finally executed by Traso el Cojo and his accomplices” (59).²³

Celestina’s death, however, does not end the carnival spirit; it is only a prelude to the next carnival that will begin again, lead by her disciples Elicia and Areúsa. Celestina dies, viciously murdered by Sempronio and Pármeno who will meet with death themselves, but she has planted her carnival seed in the minds of her disciples, who will carry on and revive the carnival laughter that echoes throughout the text in defiance against a society that attempts to muffle their voices and their spirit. Ultimately, then, it is Celestina who is granted the last laugh, even after her death.

²¹ See footnote 13.

²² Both Fothergill-Payne and Quiñones highlight some comic/ grotesque elements of Melibea’s death, pointing out the ridiculous speech that precedes this death. See Fothergill-Payne (43) and Quiñones (59).

²³ Severin affirms, “Rojas modified the intention of the primitive author, which he contended had been to write a comedy. He could not, however, change Calisto, whose parodic character was too well established to be metamorphosed [...] Calisto was too good a joke to be altered or discarded: he provides the comic impetus for Acts VI and XI” (1989, 27).

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