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The Tragicomedia as a Canonical Work

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ESTAS PÁGINAS SE PUBLICAN EN HONOR
DE DOÑA MARÍA ROSA LIDA DE MALKIEL,
TESTIMONIO DE UN SIMPOSIO CELESTINESCO CELEBRADO EN 2002,
AÑO DEL CUADRAGÉSIMO ANIVERSARIO DE SU FALLECIMIENTO
Y DE LA PUBLICACIÓN DE SU
LA ORIGINALIDAD ARTÍSTICA DE LA CELESTÍNIA.
IN AETERNAM MEMORIAM.
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Prólogo a la celebración de un aniversario probable: la Comedia, la Tragicomedia, y Celestina

Juan Carlos Conde
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El presente tomo ofrece el texto de las versiones finales de las conferencias presentadas por un selecto grupo de reputados especialistas en el Simposio Internacional Five Hundred Years of Fernando de Rojas’ «Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea», que tuvo lugar los días 18 y 19 de octubre de 2002 en el campus de Indiana University, Bloomington. Como tantas veces, la obvia tiranía de las fechas resultó decisiva en los primeros planteamientos de la idea del simposio, pero con un grado más de sosiego y superadas las primeras urgencias a pie prospectivo de calendario, la conveniencia de marcar ese dígito capicúa de alguna manera que asegurara resultados perdurables iba más allá de la mera fortuna cronológica. Es cierto que es bastante verosímil que 2002 marcara el medio milenio de la primera impresión de la obra de Rojas en su formato Tragicomedia —es algo que todavía entretiene a los especialistas, y que les asegura harta materia de entretenimiento para los años venideros, sin duda—, pero también es cierto que, más allá del impulso conmemorativo de los cinco siglos, algo llamaba, en términos de justicia poética, o, si me lo conceden, y lo preferiría, en términos de justicia erudito-poética, o erudita a palo seco, a la necesidad de un tipo semejante de conmemoración.

Me refiero al hecho de que en el, o en torno al, mirífico 1999 que pareciera marcar el hemmilenario de la primera publicación de la Comedia de Calisto y Melibea —y la formulación renuente obedece, claro, a las dudas que pudiera arrojar la tan traída y llevada marca de impresión y otras particularidades del impreso que guarda la Hispanic Society, o, más sustancialmente, a las que plantea el sabio Jaime Moll en un tan breve como sólido artículo (2000a), o a las que pone aquí sobre la mesa Víctor Infantes; a despecho, claro, de aportaciones más nuevas y todavía no puestas de molde, como las de Vanessa Pintado Hernández, aireadas en el meeting de la Renaissance Society of America celebrado en la primavera de 2006 en San Francisco—, proliferaron, y estuvo y está muy bien que así fuera, las celebraciones conmemorativas de
Medievalists are the custodians of the oldest vernacular canons, ones that are now relatively uncontested. Their very stability is unfortunately an index for some readers of their irrelevance, and the landmark works of the Middle Ages are, in many cases, merely the ones that survived. Those who interpret and cherish the medieval and early modern Iberian canon, and who claim to arbitrate rankings within it, are sometimes also dismissed because of their undiscriminating enthusiasm for anything composed within that venerable period. As Eugène Vinaver reminded us, it’s not just a matter of “our beautiful old texts”, but that all old texts are beautiful, that is, instructive each in a unique way.\(^1\) Medieval masterpieces may be reassigned slightly higher or lower places over time: Laurence de Looze, for example, has in the last few years helped us see unsuspected complexities in Don Juan Manuel’s *El conde Lucanor*, while the *Cantar de mio Cid* seems to be in a fallow period, more interesting at the moment as an engine of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalisms than as a literary creation in itself.\(^2\) But most of the works we concern ourselves with, even passionately, are never threatened with expulsion from the international Hispanic canon, which is something of a danger sign. An uncontested canon is also an uninfluential one. Examining the *Tragicomedia* as a work that tests one of the most protected sectors of our received canon can show us how the recent Canon Wars throw light further

\(^1\) Vinaver’s observation was echoed and reinforced for Hispanomedeival studies by Ian Michael (1970: 2–3).
\(^2\) For a survey of the current approaches to the *Cantar de mio Cid*, see the Fall, 2004 issue of *La corónica* and its Critical Cluster on the *CMC* guest edited by Óscar Martín. For the nationalisms encoded in the *CMC* and Ramón Menéndez Pidal’s panhispanic enterprise that helped enshrine that medieval epic—and its Castilian language—as the normative cultural patrimony of all Spanish-speaking lands, see the work of José del Valle.
back in time than we may have suspected and how to understand this work’s almost instant elevation to canonical status and simultaneous resistance to confinement within a canon of national monuments.

Most participants on the critical scene would conclude that the Canon Wars were over. The 1980s and 1990s echoed with cries to disassemble or discard the national literary canon in the United States, and upstart minority canons—for black studies, women’s studies, canons of great political manifestos, even canonical cowboy poetry—demanded their equal share of some spotlight. Cultural canons emerged, hefting the weight of iconic universality and monetary clout: the canons of landmark advertising, canons of great movies, canons of soap operas, of ingenious toys for children and adults, of handsome cars canonized as functional sculpture, and the human form, buff and transformed into a canvas of desire. This last canon enshrines Demi Moore, nude except for a body-painted tuxedo on the cover of Cosmopolitan, and Christian Bale, as a demented sexual predator in the film American Psycho. Negotiating canons is one form of negotiating cultural capital, and while academics may feel they can broker these deals by systematizing them with theory, many consider the critics marginal players in the big games, either mere taxonomists of the rushing torrent of contemporary artefacts generated by non-academics, or mere historians who speculate on passé trends long since rewoven into patterns at once too vast and too intimate to take in with contemporary eyes.

But figuring out what is marginal and what is central in our own or another historical moment is the job of cultural historians and critics, and offering explanations of why some works like Fernando de Rojas’ Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea take their place as durable points of reference for a given community and how their fortunes evolve and serve new needs prompt an educated public to new levels of self-reflection. The arena of authorized discourse has broadened considerably since academics and their Academies could really dictate canons for that public, through a Diccionario de autoridades, say, or through the selectivity—and marketing momentum—of a Norton Anthology of American Short Stories, or Western Music, or Jewish American literature, or Theory and Criticism.³

³ Literary fashions are as fleeting as any others, and in 2004 Elaine Showalter described the 2001 Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism “as much a tombstone as a manifesto”.

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This too separates medievalists from those who defend other, more modern canons because our justifications are supposedly aesthetic, that a composition’s inclusion in older, established canons implies a hard-to-measure but widely felt endorsement of the high art value of our anointed works. But if we say that all our works are works of art, aesthetic values themselves are abandoned, or at least re-explained in terms of theological cohesion, integrated spirituality, political idealism, tidy structure, metrical perfection, or the lowest of the low, sincerity—and Oscar Wilde observed that the one thing all bad poetry has in common is that it’s sincere (Harold Bloom 1994: 16).

The recent Canon Wars were fought almost exclusively on English-speaking soil, but the creation and sacralization of national canons is shared by all cultural polities including Spain. The emergence of a Spanish national canon is the result of a long-term sorting process conducted by prestigious cultural self-assessments like the *Diccionario de autoridades* and the forces of

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4 Some oblique proof of the self-contained English-language fixation on canonical struggles is found in a recent special issue on “National Literary History” in *Modern Language Quarterly* (64.2 [June, 2003]). Of the six articles, all deal with British literary history except one, “Trostgründe: Cultural nationalism and historical legitimation in nineteenth-century German literary histories”, which compares twentieth-century rejections of that national master narrative with the ferment and reformulations evident in Great Britain. To some extent the rhetoric of the Canon Wars has become an export commodity or a view reimposed by English-language critics on other national histories; Brook Thomas cites the histories of French and German literature issued by Harvard University Press and authored by American academics. Despite its title, Juan Ignacio Oliva omits recent American polemics over the Anglo-American canon in favor of a general survey of post-structuralist critical modes. The Canon Wars may have originated in (then) West Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s, and still had a popular audience at the turn of the century with Dietrich Schwanitz. As point of contrast, see the discussions on canon and identity from within Japanese studies in Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit and the inaugural volume of *PAJLS. Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies*, “Issues of Canonicity and Canon Formation in Japanese Literary Studies”, 1 (2000). I am grateful to Rachel DiNitto for these references.

5 The Real Academia Española first published the *Diccionario de autoridades* in 1726 and despite the *Tragicomedia’s* long presence on the Church’s *Index* of forbidden books (from 1640–1822) “Rodrigo de Cota, o sea el Bachiller Fernando de Rojas: Calixto y Melibea, o Celestina” was listed among other masterworks of the late
the marketplace. The popularity of Spain’s ballad collections and live theater, of shorter narratives like the *Lazarillo* and Cervantes’ *Novelas ejemplares*, and longer narratives like chivalric and pastoral novels, helped organize literature into acknowledged genres with influential exponents. The reputation of some of these has never wavered over time, like that of Lope de Vega, while the original popularity of others came to be vilified and still later rehabilitated, like that of Luis de Góngora. In the late nineteenth century a preference emerged among essayists like Azorin for naming and celebrating “nuestros clásicos” which served as a canon in the sense that literate Spaniards (especially the conflicted Generación de ’98) sought in these works the wellsprings of national identity, as yet unproblematized with the implicit moral imperatives of any claims to continuity in the national experience.6

Ramiro de Maeztu for his part helped consecrate *Celestina* in the triumvirate of Spanish classics with *Don Quijote* and the figure of Don Juan, although more in the spirit of collecting great national literary archetypes than of discrete works of perfect art that anchor a canon.7 This is not an

fifteenth century held up for general esteem by the *Diccionario*. That first list also included Pero López de Ayala, Juan de Mena, Hernando Pulgar, El Tostado (Alfonso Fernández de Madrigal), Enrique de Villena, Alfonso Martínez de Toledo, and the earlier anonymous *Bocados de oro*.

6 Hinrich C. Seeba describes the “culturalist” approach to national literatures as “a commitment to literature as a social practice, to history as a discourse of continuity, to the nation as a mental construct in the historical context of ever-changing ideological agendas and practices, especially the continuous rewriting of literary history, that have appropriated history for the purpose of legitimating political objectives” (2003: 182).

7 The foregrounded position of the Don Juan figure has since faded in Hispanic studies, in part no doubt because this womanizer and rapist is for those inside the Hispanic experience no longer credible and as received by those outside the Hispanic world a slur and a liability. *Celestina’s* ranking as Spanish literature’s second-ranking masterpiece after the *Quijote* has been a universal piety of the profession at least since Maeztu (Nicasio Salvador Miguel repeats it as a given, 2003: 15), even if its genre is still unassigned, whether “dialogue novel”, or (with Crosas 2003: 95–97) “dialogue narrative”, or unproduceable theater; “domestic readers’ theater” seems closest, but many critics now feel that in light of recent theoretical advances, arguing about genre, like periodization, is just more shuffling of archetypes. To my knowledge no one has seriously studied why everyone, inside the academy and out, seems to agree that the *Tragicomedia*’s second-prize status is true.
anticanonical stance, however: forming a repertoire of national types is a way of mapping a psychological landscape which necessarily undergirds a master narrative of convergent ethnic identity. Others before Maeztu had felt the same tug toward admitting archetypes and raised moral objections to this sort of determinism: Juan de Valdés, Juan Valera and Menéndez y Pelayo had all faulted the work and scolded the characters in the Tragicomedia for the contingency (and not inevitability) of their actions. Their reproaches are futile, of course, for literary figures but may indirectly chastise living readers disposed to take these types as fully realized life options.

The contemporary Spanish educational establishment has for the most part not engaged itself with the Canon Wars except as to modulate traditional categories. Francisco López Estrada’s Introducción a la literatura medieval española displays one of the best reasoned and most lucid surveys of medieval Spanish literature, one based on the presumption that periodization allows one to pick out the outstanding works of an age and use them to define its mentalité, although the justifications become reciprocal and the rationale circular. Eukene Lacarra Lanz has shown how movements in the eighties to

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8 Maeztu (1926) wrote that “Es posible que La Celestina se escribiera con un propósito de ejemplaridad” (113) but, alluding to Rojas’ bruised sensibilities as a converso, more as “la excusa con que cubrió el autor la necesidad espiritual en que se hallaba de publicar La Celestina, necesidad surgida meramente de que la intuición artística es un tesoro oculto que no adquiere valor sino cuando se pregona” (118), something Roberto F. Giusti calls with unintentional waggishness “freudismo avant la lettre” (1943: 128).

9 Seeba (2003) affirms that “the culturalist approach would concentrate on the practice of periodization” (183) and its concommitant organization of the national past into evolving political struggles that left their best articulated record in the polity’s literature. López Estrada concurs with Zumthor that “El conjunto de las ‘literaturas’ románicas y también germánicas ofrece el período convencionalmente llamado Edad Media una notable unidad; la mayor parte de las proposiciones que fomulo a propósito de la poesía francesa, podrían fácilmente traspasarse y verificar su aplicación a la italiana, la española o la alemana” (1979: 558). For his part, and without much justification, Juan Benet confesses that “No creo que la literatura medieval tenga muchos rasgos propios. Es tan sólo la literatura que se escribe en Europa en la Edad Media …” (1985: 93).
include women in historical and literary studies were intended to “rectificar el canon” (62) and they were political in their promptings and goals.\(^{10}\)

The construction of a master narrative is a cultural phenomenon that emerges in tandem with political as well as aesthetic aspirations, and which of these predominates depends on notions of their separability. Charles Altieri sees the consecration of canons as an imploding tendency, and stepping back from existing canons to debate their validity and understand their formation as an essentially liberating activity.

\[T\]o accept any claims about transhistorical values is to blind oneself to potential sources of strength within the material differences shaping an agent’s life in the present. The ideal of a canon […] makes us a victim of that most dangerous of others - the fantasy of a best self to be excavated from our historical being. In pursuing such a chimera, we purportedly give authority to an other and condemn ourselves to an inescapable self-alienation and self-disgust. […] Canons are simply ideological banners for social groups: social groups propose them as forms of self-definition and engage other proponents to test limitations while exposing the contradictions and incapacities of competing groups. ([1983] 1990: 23)

… I want to argue that the past that canons preserve is best understood as an enduring theater helping us to shape and judge personal and social values, that our self-interest in the present consists primarily in establishing ways of employing that theater to gain distance from our ideological commitments, and that the most plausible hope for the influence of literary study in the future lies in our ability to transmit the past as a set of challenges and models. ([1983] 1990: 24)

While Altieri understands the best use of canons as a common meeting ground where thoughtful citizens overcome their ideological myopia, defenders of the classics, a canon of necessarily antiquated works, like Italo Calvino and Harold Bloom, claim that they only strive to appreciate works which have stood the test of time and have been able to transcend cultural frontiers, like those of Mark Twain or Fyodor Dostoevsky, and for

\(^{10}\) For a global assessment on “Bringing Iberian women writers into the canon”, see the special issue of La corónica 32.1 (2003).
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Bloom, above all Shakespeare. A number of other insightful theorists who helped shape the debate over the canon attempted taxonomies of its functions or components.

Alistair Fowler identified six canons including the potential canon of all preserved discourse, the accessible canon of a given moment, selective canons produced by those recognized authorities voicing their judgements, official canons which are really a record of the overlap among diverse selective

11 Harold Bloom's The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages appeared in 1994 and created a virtual industry for Bloom as a canonizer and spokesperson for the traditional curriculum. The publication series which swelled in the wake of his widely acknowledged position as arbiter of canonical status has churned up scores of editions of canonical wannabes accompanied by his imprimatur or relegation to second-class citizenship; see Larissa MacFarquhar for a biographical assessment of Bloom's contributions. All but eleven of Italo Calvino's thirty-six essays appeared in 1991 in Perché leggere i classici (Milan: Mondadori) although some were written as early as the 1950s; the only Hispanic subjects Calvino takes up are Tirant lo Blanc and the work of Jorge Luis Borges. The work of Bloom, Calvino and also of John Guillory (Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation) in the early 1990s was preceded by a grumpier assessment of the fallen state of American culture by Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind, which (with E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s Cultural Literacy, both issued in 1987) created something of a sensation in academic circles and gave ample fodder for conservative commentators like then US Secretary of Education William Bennett. The aftershocks of this collective jeremiad are chronicled, in part, by Kevin J. H. Dettmar, Scott Heller, David Kaloustian, Courtenay Leatherman, Lawrence Levine, Alison Schneider, Peter N. Stearns, and Mary Anne Frese Witt.

12 Many have contributed to the study of canons and the forces that create and sustain them, including Charles Altieri, Alastair Fowler, John Guillory, Moshe Halbertal, Wendell V. Harris, Lois Rudnick, and Cornel West. For the broader field of cultural studies which seeks in part to validate more disparate representations of cultural value, see Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, and John Thieme. For various assessments of the notion of “canon” in the field of Hispanic Studies, see Roberto F. Giusti, Roberto González Echevarria, Noé Jitrik, John M. Lipski, Jesús González Maestro, Gonzalo Navajas, Juan Ignacio Oliva, Miguel Ángel Pérez Priego, Montserrat Ribao Pereira, Ilan Stavans, and Keith Whinnom. Joseph T. Snow, Francisco Cossas and Jesús González Maestro have authored studies on the Tragicomedia under various canonical lenses, but mostly in terms of its persistent popularity or as a trip point in applications of genre theory or periodization.
canons, personal canons, and critical canons (those works and passages that draw the most professional comment and speculation; in the Tragicomedia these would include Sempronio’s speech ending with “ganada es Granada” or Pleberio’s closing lament). Wendell Harris, in an oft-cited article in *PMLA*, extended Fowler’s categories by adding the unique Biblical canon, the practical pedagogical canon we tacitly agree on for classroom use, acknowledgment and privileging of a diachronic canon, and grudging concession that there exists a “nonce” canon of hits whose triumphs may only be ephemeral.13

There are even some empirical measures of how the Tragicomedia has come to be ranked among the great canonical works of Spain. In their survey of American graduate departments of Spanish literature (“Required Reading”), Joan L. Brown and Christa Johnson found that 98% of all masters’ and doctoral programs that have a list include Celestina on it; the only authors or works ranking higher are Miguel de Cervantes, Benito Pérez Galdós, and Lazarillo de Tormes at 100%, and the Poema de mio Cid, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega, Rubén Darío, Pablo Neruda and Camilo José Cela, all tied at 98%.14

Harold Bloom is most helpful for our purposes when he reminds us of the inherently conflictive nature of canon formation, an essential conflict that the Tragicomedia invokes as a classical dictum when it intones in its Prologue that “Omnia secundum litem fiunt.”

Our educational institutions are thronged these days by idealistic resisters who denounce competition in literature as in life, but the aesthetic and

13 Returning to movies, for as much as it thrilled viewers when it first appeared, how many have recently seen or even heard of a screening of *Sophie’s Choice*, as compared to a screening of, say, *Citizen Kane*? The annual list of Oscar nominees is a perpetual nonce canon, while the Awards themselves are an imperfect attempt to create a more durable one.

14 One would have to confess that many of the medieval Spanish works listed by Brown and Johnson (“Required Reading”) are there because they readily yield to segmentation and selection (Berceo, Don Juan Manuel, Juan Ruiz, Marqués de Santillana, Jorge Manrique) for insertion into anthologies. Educated Spaniards (except for Crosas 2003: 106) seem to agree on the Tragicomedia’s status as an obra maestra second only to the Quijote, confirmed in a public poll in the Madrid newspaper *El mundo* (November 19, 1995: 76–80).
agonistic are one, according to all the ancient Greeks, and to Burckhardt and Nietzsche, who recovered this truth. What Homer teaches is a poetics of conflict, a lesson first learned by his rival Hesiod. All of Plato, as the critic Longinus saw, is in the philosopher’s incessant conflict with Homer, who is exiled from The Republic, but in vain, since Homer and not Plato remained the schoolbook of the Greeks. (1994: 6-7)

We may not agree with Bloom, always spoiling for a fight, that entry into the canon is always the result of a struggle. The Tragicomedia may have been polishing its “defensivas armas” but one feels that it’s parade armor and not battle gear. But it is true that a work’s retention in a canon and its relative importance over time is a function of its being worth fighting over, and one must resist any presumption that we are honoring works merely because they are old. If any counter-example were needed, we could point to Silius Italicus’ Punica, an interminable and wretched epic poem from the Silver Age that survives—all of it—merely because it is a classical period Latin epic. Charles Witke of the University of Michigan used to speak of it ruefully as “that cold water faucet left running”.

One of the purest examples of the kid glove treatment a classic may receive in acknowledgment of its canonical status is displayed with a work composed (and perhaps canonized) earlier than the Tragicomedia. Writing in the early 1950s about the Libro de buen amor, María Brey Mariño becomes an eloquent spokesperson for the philological yardstick imposed on any candidate for inclusion in the national canon. She cautions that Juan Ruiz’s work was in danger of becoming inaccessible to those without sufficient training, “… como tantas obras literarias escritas en los tiempos de formación del idioma …” (1954: 6). Only with linguistic acumen and sensitive attention to literary qualities can the work be transmitted to a new generation which truly does speak the same language despite its need for tailored editions and even modernizations:

Indispensables […] son las tareas del paleógrafo, del gramático historiador, del filólogo, para que nuestras primitivas manifestaciones literarias conserven limpios los vocablos, la frase, el estilo de la época, sin que una palabra mal escrita o la falsa interpretación de un texto cubran de amarillo jaramago el mármore del idioma. Pero no hay que olvidar que, además del interés monumental, de reliquia venerable, que tienen tales obras, conservan otro no menos importante: el estético, de cuyo goce no hay por qué privar a
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tantos y tantos lectores de lengua castellana solamente porque no están familiarizados con las primitivas formas. (1954: 6)

She is equally sensitive to stature on an international scene, and bristles at the prospect that translations of foreign authors thought fashionable should outshine native ones:

... si a través de traducciones llegan a nosotros Tagore,15 Virgilio, Ibn Hazm, Goethe, Dostoiewsky, lejanos en tiempo, psicología y cultura, bien podemos intentar la versión de obras escritas en nuestro propio castellano primitivo por escritores cuyo carácter respondió a los mismos estímulos psicológicos que el nuestro, rodeados por la misma geografía, herederos de las mismas culturas. (1954: 9)

Brey Mariño is in large part defending herself against anyone in the general public who might think her presumptuous to tinker with and update a national treasure, or among professional philologists who would sniff at her lack of credentials.16 What is at stake here is her sacralization of the Spanish language through which one can access the intimate psychological prehistory of the nation and acquire (or script oneself for) shared perceptions and values. This is analogous to that feature already discussed that helps make works “classics”, the representation of archetypes accepted as portraying something of universal or national character. Centurio fits the bill as a miles

15 Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Indian poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1913.
16 Her defense is one of egalitarian values, that the life of the common citizen will be enhanced by exposure to this wellspring of ethnic identity: “Y en cuanto a la inutilidad del esfuerzo, no creo que lo sea el ponerla al alcance de quienes son capaces de saborearla, una creación literaria riquísima en contenido de jugosa, cálida y sencilla humanidad.” Perhaps her most telling defense is couched negatively, but it reveals by inversion her apprehensions about the chilling effect of pure historical linguistics on the literary artefact: “La finalidad es vivificar el hallazgo para que sea posible ofrecerlo a la cultura presente de manera que despierte evocadora emoción de las épocas pasadas, sin producir ni la indiferencia forzosa de la ininteligible ni el escalofrío que provoca la contemplación de una momia. ¡Lejos de nosotros el rabioso afán de hurgar, escarbar y revolver sin ton ni son para no conseguir otra cosa que apagar un rescoldo lleno aún de calor vivo y convertirlo en cenizas incapaces de resurrección!” (1954: 7–8).
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gloriosus, a figure from antiquity and common in the Western tradition,¹⁷ Calisto as the love-addled swain, thick with lust, and Celestina, of course, taken as a characteristically Spanish figure (Julio Caro Baroja, *inter alii*). This parade of nicely realized psychological and dramatic characters types may involve more of a staggering success for the *Tragicomedia* in assembling an otherwise customary cast within a local tradition; questions of any true representation of national character should be parked to one side along with other recycled forms of Romantic nationalism and Nietzschean metaphysics of race.¹⁸

If we set aside the anachronism of the Canon Wars themselves and those who waged its battles for control of university curricula and cultural preeminence, and ask what might be pertinent to Fernando de Rojas and his contemporaries about value and selectivity in what they read and hoped to share, we can address the historical trajectory of the *Tragicomedia* as an increasingly canonical work.

The penetration of the *Tragicomedia* into its cultural milieu was swift. Everyone now agrees that the elaboration of the *Tragicomedia* from the *Comedia* was a byproduct of its explosive popularity. Within a scant score of years Rojas’ readership had expanded to the point where those who

¹⁷ Manuel Criado de Val (1961: “Arquetipos españoles: Centurio”) finds him endowed with a deeper, more skeptical component to his personality. See also Criado del Val on “La ‘hija’ de Celestina” (1962) and “Calixto, Don Quijote, Segismundo” (1964).

¹⁸ The essentialist attitude toward language as vessel for the looming archetypes of national identity still has its proponents. An article by Arnoldo Mora (1964, “Don Juan y la Celestina: arquetipos mitico-estéticos”) is summed up by the editor of *Célestinesca* as “Son dos creaciones-mitos de pueblo/tradición (siguiendo a Jung) que se han universalizado, usadas en este artículo para ensalzar ‘el genio de la lengua castellana’” (Snow 1999c: “Suplemento bibliográfico”, 175: #1154). The post-Romantic presumption of the essential interchangeability of archetypes and their expression in popular art had deep roots in Spain, and López Estrada sums up the still reigning attitude that “la literatura castellana se muestra propicia la la incorporación de la obra folklórica, y aun a la folklorización de la obra literaria …”, something which Menéndez Pidal dubbed an “arte de mayorias” and which moved Claudio Sánchez Albornoz to rank Spain “the pueblo más pueblo de Europa” (all in López Estrada 1979: 562). For five thoughtful pages on the value of reading one’s national literature, see López Estrada “¿Esfuerzo vano?” (1979: 572–76).
disapproved had to raise their voices louder and louder to decry its dangers (Chevalier 1976: 612–21). By 1577 Bartolomé de Villalba y Estaña reported that the students of Salamanca showed off a site near the tanneries that they dubbed the house of Celestina, “tan escuchada de los doctos y acepta, de los mozos tan loada” (cited in Chevalier 1976: 610). The house itself may have been an arbitrary choice by the students who just wanted to satisfy the lurid curiosity of visitors anxious to take in the most notorious local shrines to misbehavior, something the lads’ praise of her (“de los mozos tan loada”) seems to allude to. Still, the honor attached to the book that recounted her exploits is also confirmed in the students’ report that it was on their schoolmasters’ minds as well as their own (“tan escuchada de los doctos y acepta”). University professors, randy students, and idly curious visitors are all captured by the currency of the Tragicomedia as a leading new contender in their overlapping selective, personal, critical and nonce canons.

This is somewhat paradoxical because at least eventual membership in a canon almost always presumes that a text requires the mediation of an educational system which selects works for their utility within a curriculum and syllabus and enshrines them as “great” through that process. There are moments when educational systems make contemporary curricular products influential: in the thirteenth century there was Peter Lombard’s Sentences, and more recently those Norton anthologies. But these are not classics in themselves, only vehicles for the classic works they reframe for the current generation of readers. They are part of the process of mediation for texts on their way to becoming continuously new forms of discourse, be those classroom commentaries, legal disquisitions, or sermons. The Tragicomedia offers itself as a new sort of classic, too lively in many spots to be called “archaic language” even 500 years later, but with extensive stretches of formal, if passionate, prose larded with sententious material that begs for secondary discourse to explicate or expand on it.¹⁹

¹⁹ Texts granted canonical status by their national readership often deploy somewhat archaic language or language that is noticeably stylized, and therefore embody some sort of linguistic authenticity for that speech community. Although the regional or class stylizations of a Mark Twain or a Toni Morrison would seem to disqualify works for canonization among literature that strives for high and timeless rhetoric; social register is merely standing in for the otherness of the venerable and old. In the hands of lesser masters of language, artful naturalness can become transparent
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Obviously, Spanish society in the sixteenth century, the readership that propelled the Tragicomedia to the top of its first best seller lists, lacked the formal, institutional mechanisms now required to declare a work canonical. Those mechanisms settled into place for vernacular literature only gradually with the growth of national academies and circles of recognized scholars who became, at least in non-administrative ways, arbiters of taste and literary quality.

But early modern Spain did have unofficial, even bullish, social and economic mechanisms which also brokered its cultural capital. These included royal and noble patronage and the validation, cachet and access to dissemination that patronage awarded to writers who won the approval of the elite. There was a growing market in what are now called “trade books”, dependent as always on the tastes of the buying public. Shoppers for reading matter in the sixteenth century, more than today, were making investments for the long-term entertainment and edification of a circle of family and peers. Apart from tomes specifically purchased to display on coffee tables or to carry under one’s arm at public gatherings, items of conspicuous consumption and casual pretense which often remain unread, reading a book today has become a decidedly privatized experience, even when it leads to extensive public discourse, professionally compensated in the case of professors of modern languages. The purchaser, or perhaps more accurately, the successive owners, of copies of the Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea in the 1500s shared their texts by taking turns reading the work aloud, repeating favorite passages without regard for sequence, and pausing to critique or discuss the work at frequent intervals. This demand for orality, which saturates both the rhetoric of the work and the common mode of its earliest reception, and the apparently fierce dialogue which it engendered among various classes of Spanish society, contributed in large measure, I would argue, to the acceptance of the Tragicomedia as a canonical work within the ambit of the national imaginary.

Pandering. Translated classics are expected to conform to expectations of elevated rhetoric too: no one wants an Iliad or Don Quijote that makes over their characters as chatty American suburbanites, and misguided grasping at contemporary idiom—like the 1970s’ Good News Bible, touted at its release as in “today’s language”—trades authenticity for relevance too cheaply.
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Fernando de Rojas, already at the publication of the *Tragicomedia*, perceived on some level how his earlier sixteen-act version was becoming canonical.

Y pues es antigua querella y visitada de largos tiempos, no quiero maravillarme si esta presente obra ha sido instrumento de lidi o contienda a sus lectores para ponerlos en diferencias, dando cada uno sentencia sobre ella a sabor de su voluntad [...] Mayormente pues ella con todas las otras cosas que al mundo son, van debajo de la bandera de esta notable sentencia: “que aun la misma vida de los hombres, si bien lo miramos, desde la primera edad hasta que blanquean las canas, es batalla”. Los niños con los juegos, los mozos con las letras, los mancebos con los deleites, los viejos con mil especies de enfermedades pelean, y estos papeles con todas las edades. La primera los borra y rompe, la segunda no los sabe bien leer, la tercera, que es la alegre juventud y mancebía, discorda. Unos roen los huesos que no tienen virtud, que es la historia toda junta, no aprovechándose de las particularidades, haciéndola cuento de camino; otros pican los donaires y refranes comunes, loándolos con toda atención, dejando pasar por alto lo que hace más al caso y utilidad suya. [...] Así que cuando diez personas se juntaren a oír esta comedia, en quien quepa esta diferencia de condiciones, como suele acaecer, ¿quién negará que haya contienda en cosa que de tantas maneras se entienda? (Rojas 1978a: 42–43)

This is an astonishing display of semantic polyvalence. In this supposed survey of life stages and the common experiences of each (little ones play, children learn their letters, youths have their dalliances, old men their spells of crotchettiness), the key is in the word “papeles” which is either the levels of maturity one enacts in each life stage, or the constructed social roles one adopts deliberately at any given age (precocious little scholars, young men posturing gravely, old men acting like young fools, etc.). It also alludes to the physical papers borne by readers of various ages as they acquire a literate life and at the same time create a life around what they read. Lest we miss the word play, Rojas tells us straight out that infantile readers will only scratch at and rip the pages (an allusion to the censors that awaited his text?), immature ones will not get the point (but which point?), lusty youths will turn quarrelsome (to find their happy appetites both stimulated and interdicted?). The part about how “la alegre juventud y mancebía discorda” just as easily means that for those with appetites for both sex and reading, those pursuits
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will turn disputatious, which in a sense resolves the argument about the book’s essential morality that has surrounded the work since its first appearance. Talking fiercely about morality is moral, because it takes morality seriously without presuming any conclusion. It establishes itself among its textual antecedents (Seneca, Petrarch) but knows that some in its readership will find it most useful for its trivialities (“otros pican los donaires y refranes comunes, loándolos con toda atención, dejando pasar por alto lo que hace más al caso y utilidad suya”). But the anticipated audience will always be a circle destined to be a theater of conflict where its readers will be set against one another, the book rising to full stature as an “instrumento de lid o contienda a sus lectores para ponerlos en diferencias”.

The *Tragicomedia* emerged, rather explosively, just as the Renaissance was formulating neoclassical and nationalist canons as a reaction to scholastic rigidity and increasingly sterile modes of textual analysis on a sclerotic battery of approved works. The new work’s philosophical ambit—not to mention its social panorama—was jarringly holistic, not exegetical. Rojas’ infiltration into the establishment as well as into popular culture—by 1633 there had been some 90 printings, by any standards a runaway best seller—was important for the solidification of a new canon and the imagined community every canon creates.

First, Rojas’ choices of source texts confirm that the emergent canon of his day has moved from religious to secular, specifically classical, sources. One’s authority and persuasiveness was now to be found in alignment with non-clerical authorities and their new philosophies of life. When religious writers are cited, like Bernardus Silvestris, the reference is to their less spiritual side, like the anti-feminist tracts of this Bernard. or should we overlook the other secular wellspring of Rojas’ philosophy, popular wisdom encoded in folk wisdom and refranes. Paradoxically, these served to both ground the work and destabilize its argumentative framework: while the characters of the *Tragicomedia* tweak their favorite refranes as needed to obey a line of reasoning in their preferred direction, in the aggregate they construct a universe of causalities based on commonplace observation and social convention, a less embracing world view, and in some ways an anti-intellectual one.

Second, the new canon for which the *Tragicomedia* was a leading edge—and presumably all modern avatars of it—was up to tackling the big questions, such as the morality of a wide spectrum of behavior, social
alliances and the nature of the family bond, the calamity of sudden death, and more importantly perhaps the fleeting nature of that tragedy itself. Sempronio prattles on to Celestina almost with flip callousness: “No hay cosa tan difícil sufrir en sus principios que el tiempo no la ablande y haga comportable. [...] Disminúyelas el tiempo, hácelas contingibles” (Auto 3, Rojas 1978a: 80). Celestina’s own death is foretold, and more importantly her dismissibility. After dominating the working by force of her blaring personality, death carries her off and life bumps along without her. Hers is arguably the most moving death in the work, not for the sympathy or pathos we feel but precisely because we and the fictional characters whose world we enter prove that we can live without her. This may be the most frightening theme in the work, how little our own deaths will mean to anyone else. The persuasive case the Tragicomedia makes about the essentially forgettable nature of our lives—more so than the Comedia does with its shorter time span for Calisto and Melibea’s illicit affair after the old bawd’s demise—helps elevate the 1502 work to canonical status.

Third, after all the debate on whether the Tragicomedia is a moral/didactic work or not, we have to recognize (again with Harold Bloom) that its canonical status derives in part from the fact that it does not pump for any cause, moral or otherwise. Moralists may be miffed that it fails to make a clear case for a recognizable party line, or at least denounce an appropriate target for vilification, but its strength lies in that it satisfies our suspicion that partisan conflicts can be lumped with that famous series that concludes Sempronio’s same speech, part of an exchange shared conspiratorially between the two most cynical characters in the book, “helado está el río, el ciego ve ya, muerto es tu padre, un rayo cayó, ganada es Granada” (80)—this last item, arguably the great moral and military campaign of his readers’ lifetime, reduced to a jingle.

Fourth, to some extent every work aspiring to be canonical takes on representatives of the existing canon and offers answers it hopes will be of equal gravity to the same fundamental questions. When the Tragicomedia was written, the Malleus maleficarum was well ensconced in the religious canon of the period (or at least its regulatory arm in Church discipline), and more so no doubt in the popular sector of that religious sphere than in any administrative or theological one. The Malleus offers one assessment of how love entanglements intersect with magical practices and the Tragicomedia
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another, both attempting to formulate explanations that are psychologically convincing if not subject to experimental proof.

Fifth, the Tragicomedia from the start was simultaneously proclaimed a canonical and libeled as an anticanonical work. Defenders of public morality felt that it was a “libro pestifero” (Juan Luis Vives in 1523), a book both “vulgar” and “vano” (Fray Antonio de Guevara, 1529) and yet just as early others judged it something to be shelved with unproblematically canonical works, like five volumes of Seneca in Latin, and high-end vernacular compositions like the Crónica troyana and the Visión defeiteable (testament of Francisco Treviño, Galicia, 1511), and stored next to a treatise on Gregorian chant and a Roman breviary (Zaragoza, 1517). Already in 1518 passages from Celestina are being cataloged as documents to moral themes, sandwiched between Ovid and Pope Hadrian. Juan de Valdés in 1535 was apparently the first to recognize the self-conscious and deliberate, stylized language employed in Celestina and ponder its occasional lapses but still overwhelming accomplishments, affirming that “ningún libro ay en escrito en castellano donde la lengua sté más natural, más propia ni más elegante”.

Without being thought a “classic” quite yet—the notion is still anachronistic for this period—the Tragicomedia has already become a landmark in the struggle to define the emergent canon. It will be Quevedo in España defendida in 1609 who will offer Celestina as an exemplar of the greatness of the Spanish language in the face of other tongues, and internationalize its importance, a project already launched for him in the market place by the flurry of published translations that preceded his catch-up proclamation. Abroad, the Tragicomedia enjoyed numerous readers in the original who appreciated its fusion of linguistic flair and memorable lines and who quoted Rojas’ text to illustrate usage in their grammars of Spanish, admirers like César Oudin (1597) and Charpentier (1597) in France, John Minsheu (1599) in England,

20 References all in Snow (1997); for Valdés in particular see Francisco Javier Satorre Grau (1995: quotation at 800).
21 Quevedo reaffirms this opinion in his preface to the Comedia Eufónsina in 1631, and in 1780 Juan Pablo Forner declares the Tragicomedia to be the pinnacle of early Spanish literature (Snow 1997: 154 and 165). The first translation of Rojas’ masterpiece, into Italian, happened within a few short years of the work’s completion, and subsequent translations into every major European spoken language with reprints in each, plus versions in Latin and Hebrew, kept presses churning for 150 years.
Henricus Doergangk (1614) in Cologne, and L. Franciosini (1638) in Italy (Satorre Grau).

I have mentioned the moral and rhetorical poles the work helped define among its readership, but there are social poles as well. In 1541 Blasco de Garay offers with a slippery sort of self-effacement that his only audience will be the same one that reads works like Celestina: “... y el principal prouecho que aqui hazer pretendo, no tanto a los muy bien doctrinados, quanto à los que no suelen leer, sino a Celestina o cosas semejantes” (Snow 1997: 128).22 The latent class distinctions among its real world readers—and the theater of conflict seems definitely set in the world of publishing and reading—are inevitably components of any Canon Wars, and one of the delights of reading works “outside” your assigned or putative class is that you can access a sort of imaginative class mobility unavailable to the illiterate. One can come to feel knowledgeable of a world more refined, or more shoddy, than your own by sampling the canon of a group that would not otherwise invite you in. To some extent, some of the appeal that enshrines a work in someone’s personal canon may have less to do with philology than with voyeurism.

On its way to canonization in the curriculum, the seamier aspects of the Tragicomedia were rehabilitated in due course. An untitled note in the Seminario pintoresco español of 1836 (before Celestina became required reading for students, and only shortly after its removal from the Inquisition’s Index librorum prohibitorum or Index expurgatorius), praises the important 1835 edition of Rojas’ masterpiece as a work full of “obscenidades” but so delightful that it still enthralled and delighted what the author called his “castisimos antepasados”. Some of the many continuations are named in this newspaper’s literary essay, as are the recurrent translations into other languages, as proof of the book’s merits. The anonymous author baptizes the Tragicomedia as a “libro maestro de pudor” of all things, which perhaps proves that canonical works are nothing if not malleable to their readers’ needs.23

22 In 1572 Juan Lorenzo Palmireno’s Phrases Ciceronis obscuriores in hispanicam linguam conversae a ... also relies on a passage from Celestina to validate a rhetorical turn (Snow 1997: 136).

23 One might note that 2002 is the 500th anniversary of the publication of that Tragicomedia and the 100th of the first critical assessment of Fernando de Rojas as a converso. Rojas’ possible self-consciousness as a cristiano nuevo has been fodder for
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In a way, the canonical status of the Tragicomedia is a byproduct of the very disputes over its worthiness, and helps launch the competition among canons in Spain. Although the very idea of preserving a canon connotes a stuffy righteousness, exclusionary in its disdain of potential newcomers, a canon is never an only child; it’s always a sibling in a brawling litter, fighting for attention. John Guillory reminds us pointedly that a canon can pretend to be a patriarch but has to be a pugilist; it isn’t supposed to sit on a shelf, it’s supposed to compete. The monolithic canonical convergences of earlier periods yield to a decidedly more pluralistic world, one that the age of the Tragicomedia helps usher in.

José Luis Canet offers yet another important glimpse into earliest struggles over the canonicity of the Tragicomedia and how they helped transform the establishments of learning that are the natural custodians of canons. Canet posits that the 1514 edition of Rojas’ masterpiece, now accepted by many as the best starting point for editing the complete 21-act version of the work, was not cheap. The quarto format of this Valencian edition is moderately expensive, and so were the lavish original illustrations.

much discussion about a specific experience of alienation that might claim universality in world literature and particular resonance in the unrest/disquiet/angst of the twentieth century: see icasio Salvador Miguel (1999), as noted in Snow’s “Suplemento bibliográfico” (1999c): 182: #1191. And the Tragicomedia’s irksomeness to the censors working for the Holy Office of the Inquisition takes until (or culminates in) 1640 when it is finally placed on the Index. This is a canon too, one that recognized the potency of the works it wishes to banish from the forum of public discourse. One censor in 1632 famously defined the book as “El más proporcionado instrumento y más eficaz medio que pudo inventar el padre de la mentira y engaño …” (García Cárcel and Burgos Rincón 1992: 104). The fact that the name of Fernando de Rojas, and those of Juan de Mena and Rodrigo Cota as well as that of Alonso de Proaza as corrector, were firmly attached to the Tragicomedia probably added a measure of protection against the displeasure of the Holy Office which was obsessed with the suspect nature of works written or edited anonymously (1992: 106). The consensus of modern historians of the Inquisition and its Index is that for all its fulminating and the fuel it provided for centuries of non-Spaniards to condemn the control of print matter in Spain, the Inquisition’s ability to surpress the circulation of books was often spotty (97).

24 Jesús Montoya Martínez (1999), studying records for bookshops in Granada, lists from a testamentary inventory the 1571 prices for the eight warehoused copies of Celestina as 42 maravedis, an identical amount as for copies of the anonymous De
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The corrector and perhaps publishing editor is none other than Alonso de Proaza, the principal advocate of the philosophical school of Ramón Llull, and by extension advocate of the Parisian (nominalist) model of textual interpretation within a classroom setting. Its methodology endorsed true debate and the exchange of opinions. Rather than being a speculative publication for a general educated readership (i.e. a “trade book”), this edition of the Tragicomedia represents an editorial venture for a niche market of young-thinking scholars who are willing to spend something extra for a work that represents their personal academic praxis.

This points to an aspect of canonicity untreated by Calvino or Bloom, or even Guillory: how a community may cast votes for a work’s inclusion in its national canon by linking its cultural capital to its material capital. Just as modern middle-brow shoppers for Hispanic titles might indulge in an showy leather-bound edition of Don Quijote—or the kitschy and iconic editions of the gaucho epic Martin Fierro sewn into bindings covered in dappled pony hides—the smartly styled first Valencian edition of the bawd’s tale is a quiet declaration in favor of the artful discourse learned minds train themselves to unpack and unravel. The canon validates itself by its own press runs, and the 1514 edition had an impressive printing of perhaps 500–1500 copies, a fact that unwittingly helped guarantee the durability of its impact as a disproportionate number of copies of this edition passed from hand to hand and from generation to generation, confirming the worthiness of its contents by its respectful production values.

Finally, the inescapable canonical “weirdness” of the Tragicomedia has been the playground of generations of scholars already, from those who puzzle over whether Rojas or his characters believed in magic or not, to what sort of internal or external clocks are adequate to measure the hours that pass in their fictional world. There’s also the weirdness of the loss of dialogic contemptu mundi, Ovid’s De Tristibus and Pedraza’s Suma (a law manual) (39). Another inventory from 1583 records another libreria in possession of 32 copies of Celestina priced at 34 maravedis and another three copies at 51 maravedis each.

The notion is Bloom’s, although he calls it a “wondrous strangeness”. Wolfgang Kayser and Stephen Gilman hailed the quality of what they termed the grotesque, but with a special sense of contortion of the human condition which is both distinctive and shocking.

Gilman (1962), drawing on Wolfgang Kayser, discusses Celestina as a paragon of the “grotesque”: “Indeed I would maintain that it is the masterpiece, the epic of the
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presence in the final act: after a 20-act magisterial, sustained exchange between characters who are never alone on the stage, in the final scene we are left wondering who Pleberio is talking to: his alienated self? God as impassive stage manager? the silent audience, forced onto the stage with Pleberio and his God as the lights are brought up? And most recently there is our appreciation of the weirdness of Rojas’ “transgendered ventriloquism”, the projection of a male author’s voice into male characters who report or imagine women’s voices, and women characters who sometimes muse about what their male lovers are saying of them. This dazzling ricochet of gender within the same or successive speaking voices is a triumph of both Fernando de Rojas and Juan Ruiz (and in a rather flatter way of the Spanish sentimental romance), and defies the supposed monolithic standards of sexual performance some modern readers think form the baseline of all medieval literature.

grotesque, and precisely because it avoids the spooky, the caricaturesque, and the distorted. In it in an almost pure form, dimensions themselves, the newly perceived dimensions of time and space [fifteenth-century perspectivism in the graphic arts?], are applied to a traditional moral universe” (299). Gilman’s summation of the importance of the work in its flashiest character is telling: “Celestina was the center of [the *Tragicomedia*’s] human appeal and of its human repugnance, so much the center that, aside from affirmation or negation, she took over the literary world in which she lived. Like Don Quijote or Lazarillo de Tormes, or Don Juan Tenorio, Celestina stepped out beyond her author’s intentions and began to live an authentic and ever-renewed life in the imagination of century after century of readers. Through this heroic anti-heroine, they (we in our turn) have not only relived viciousness and sheer degradation but have done so as a human experience. In this, I think, lies the superiority of Celestina over the great villains, the Iagos and Agrippinas, of world literature. It is in this unique, incredible, seemingly impossible coexistence not of human beings but of full humanity with evil, that the final importance of the *Celestina* is to be found” (1962: 305). Gilman, like Bloom, seems to share a now discarded belief in the existence of complete lives of literary characters independent of their embeddedness in specific works of literature and narrative contingencies, accepting fictional characters as fully formed entities capable of reflections and decisions outside those recorded in the narratives that encase them (MacFarquhar 2002: 95–96). For additional reflections on *Celestina* and the grotesque, see H. Vélez Quiñones (1995).
A provisional spectrograph of the importance of the *Celestina* divides it into three areas or aspects. It is, in the first place, a central landmark in the history of Western literature. In it we can see, as perhaps in no other work, not merely how the novel and drama began but also what they had to overcome in order to begin. At the frontier between the didactic and allegorical forms of the Middle Ages and the modern genres, the *Celestina* is a triumph of literary discovery as startling and in its own way as important as any geographical or technological discovery. To think of its author [...] as a literary Gutenberg or Columbus may seem farfetched, but that is exactly what he is. In the second place, the *Celestina* is a masterpiece in its own right, which is to say that it evaluates human life in a way that is.lastingly significant. Its vision of man at home, in society, and in the universe, of the individual in perilous encounter with himself, with other, and with the dimensions of time and space, has increased in relevance over the years. Finally, in the area of imaginative creation, it presents not so much a literary experience as direct immersion in an acid bath of life. [...] Knowing Celestina herself as intimately as the reader comes to know her is something more than unsettling; the shock waves can penetrate far beneath the surface of mind and habit. (Gilman 1962: 283–84)

These confrontations of market place, academy, taste making, international posturing and stereotyping, psychological plausibility and voyeurism and delight in the weird but true are just some of the battle lines in Canon Wars now transformed into blurred but endlessly conflicted frontiers. The criteria for inclusion are staked out as antiquity, presumed historical and cultural continuity, and resonance with the human experience. The negotiation of ceaselessly renewed canons ultimately rejects the authority of the customary arbiters of the national canon, professors of literature and philology in favor of much broader suffrage. Academics have become to some extent the enemy in a populist confrontation of nations in search of their *hispánidad*, and their (partially escapist) search for a national identity.

The *Tragicomedia* is a canonical work because it encourages and sustains competition not among other texts it displaces in some prior canon or because it prevents other works from joining that canon, but because it offers such a remarkably versatile tool to pose questions about its relationship to other texts, to its readers, and readers to each other. The competition the *Tragicomedia* provokes is among ideologies which are more or less equipped to explain it or call out to alternative works whose ideologies
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are at once thrown into contrast and validated as respected antagonists. And it seems that after 500 years, the *Tragicomedia* still pushes our evolving canons in challenging and rewarding ways.

The displacement of this search in Spain from the period of Franco’s dictatorship to a remote and mythic past is precisely the arena of contention that canons are meant to provide. Nationalisms may want to create canons, but canons form themselves like solar systems where each object assumes an orbit and relative position determined by the gravity of its neighbors. In the end, nationalisms don’t create canons (à la Brey Mariño); canons create nationalisms by perpetually rescripting identity in the light of the creative gifts of those who write in the native tongue.