

## Darkness, Death and Despair in *Celestina*: An Essay

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I deeply appreciate the invitation to contribute these reflections. It has afforded me the opportunity to re-read in a new way a work that has been central to my scholarship, *Celestina*, a work whose own textual origins remain, even today, rather dark. *Celestina* is a work which can today lay claim to being the second most widely-respected Spanish classic exceeded by, of course, *Don Quijote*. My goal here is to present thoughts I have often entertained about how morality, seen in shades of dark and light, play out in this tragedy of human frailties. I do not claim that this essay is the product of external research but, rather, a by-product of my experiences as a reader and teacher of *Celestina*. Before addressing those issues, I would like to offer a few useful generalities as a prefatory justification of the three D-nouns of my title. I will occasionally be citing the text with page numbers from the Cátedra edition of D.S. Severin (Madrid, 1990).

For me the main association with the notion of Dark is menace, at least symbolically. While day and night are diametrically and metaphorically opposed, they in fact do compete and blend with one another both at dawn and dusk, where they often suggest dramatic areas of struggle. World literature is rich with metaphorical readings that confirm this polarized opposition time and again. Night is the most frequent locus of menace, the antipodes of tranquility and Daylight.

The Spanish have a proverbial saying, “la noche es capa de pecadores” (night is the sinner’s mantle). That night world is ruled by Dark. The day world is Light, with connotations of life, insight and understanding. This being so, ignorance is a citizen of the dark. To achieve self-knowledge (both Melibea and Areúsa make this claim, but in a self-interested way) is to banish the dark and draw closer to the light.

Dark, too, are the agents, the instruments of Evil. Light foregrounds the agents of Good. Hope is the promise of light, and despair is the realm of dark. Heaven is eternal light; Hell is eternal dark. We are reminded of Dante’s mid-life crisis at the very outset of his *Inferno*, when the straight path of virtue has been hidden from his sight in this world, contrasted later with the blinding light at the end of *Paradiso*, which light produces a final understanding of a universal love. The void, the dark, has been overwhelmed and exiled by the light of a divine epiphany for the human pilgrim, Dante.

The empty void, nothingness, is, in fact, the primordial essential Dark. It was, after all, from that pre-existing Dark that the Prime Mover fashioned the universe when He purposefully commanded: *Fiat lux*. Out of Chaos (dark), then, came Order (light). But it was, at best, a balanced, even a precarious, order. The dark was not then and forever vanquished, for the fallen angel and prince of Darkness, once a dweller in light, was forever *and ironically* to bear the name of Lucifer, light-bearer. As a result of

Lucifer's vengeful, serpentine agency in the Earthly Paradise, sin and death insinuated themselves into the newly created world of light. There has been ever since a Manichean conflict between the two warring forces of Good and Evil.

We value the light, we fear the dark, even though, in fact, it resides within us. It is a frequent temptation to heed its seductive voice, to surrender to its siren call. But as individuals, we have been given the free will to choose, instead, to heed the softer voice of our good conscience and actively work to quash the dark impulse that vies with the light for supremacy. We may, of course, and also of free will, surrender to the dark impulse. This teeter-totter of good and evil, this ingrained struggle of light and dark is inherited and has come to be, whether we accept or reject that origin, the core of the human condition.

I have gone into these metaphoric concepts of darkness and light for a specific reason. I am motivated by the fact that so few of our great works of literature are devoted to depicting the obscure and disfiguring underbelly of human behavior, untempered by the forces of light. And one of these works ranging alongside the classic Dostoyevskian vision of darkness and despair in *Crime and Punishment* is, as I am proposing here, the Spanish *Celestina*. Indeed, although many of the canonical "great books" do portray evil characters and despicable behaviors, these are almost always vanquished by good characters and noble behaviors. Thus in so many classic fictions, the archetypal structure of Order→Loss of Order→Restoration of Order is observed. Not so with *Celestina*.

*Celestina*, by contrast, maps out for the reader a spiraling descent into a final Void, the de-affirmation of this World, Fortune, and Love, through a parallel de-affirmation of language, which will play a principal role in these reflections. These three entities (world, fortune, love) are each specifically and significantly characterized by Pleberio in the work's concluding Act XXI as lacking in essential and enduring Order (light), contrary to his lifelong faith in such order. It is as though a veil had suddenly been lifted from his eyes. Pleberio's ongoing ignorance of the hovering forces of disorder (dark) that have menaced the placidity of his insular existence makes him a proxy for the undeceived Everyman, rudderless and foundering at the very brink of Chaos; words and language having failed him. But as the *Celestina* text makes clear, Pleberio-Everyman is not an innocent victim of forces beyond his control. Instead, he is an agent, albeit passive, of the events leading up to his final despairing lamentation.

Indeed, as textual closure descends, Pleberio stands alone in the middle of the night, bereft of any spark of hope, the broken body of his only daughter and heir at his feet, his fainted or possibly even dead wife also lies unmoving, her body covering their daughter's body. He is staring into an abyss, and the menace of its darkness overwhelms him. His final words, in Latin, symbolically describe the world which has betrayed him: we can sense in those words, *in hac lachrymarum valle*, that his once-bright valley of hope, of light, is now unmasked as a vast darkened lake of tears. How did such existential despair come into being?

To answer this question, I believe we must return to the initial words of the text

which are, as every Spanish high school student knows, Calisto's: "En esto veo, Melibea, la grandeza de Dios" (85). In that simple phrase, divinity is invoked, as well as the hyperbolic image so beautifully studied by María Rosa Lida de Malkiel: the female as the pinnacle of his Creation. While not naked blasphemy, Calisto's divinization of Melibea is only too quickly seen for what it truly is. If Calisto thought to pull wool over the eyes of this supposedly innocent maid with his book-learned, courtly grandiloquence, the equally well-read damsel is immediately undeceived by his rhetoric, and rips away the mask of Calisto's (dark) purpose:

...el intento de tus palabras ha seydo de ingenio de tal hombre como tú aver de salir para se perder en la virtud de tal mujer como yo. ¡Vete, vete de ay, torpe!, que no puede mi paciencia tolerar que haya subido en corazón humano conmigo *el ilícito amor* comunicar su deleyte. (87, my emphasis)

This irreversible rejection, as we know, depresses Calisto, the scion of a noble family well known in Pleberio's circle (XX, 333), and will lead him –rather quickly– to surrender his own free will to that of a hired go-between via the intermediation of a sly and self-interested serving man. This servant, Sempronio, like Melibea before him, also swiftly hones in on the dark message that Calisto's effusive courtly language attempts to disguise and obscure. Having heard in what hyperbolic terms Calisto declares himself a "melibeo," a devotee of a terrestrial goddess, Sempronio quickly senses how the wind really blows. He declares to himself: "bien sé de qué pie coxqueas; yo te sanaré" (I, 93), and then clarifies, at least for the reader (in an aside), what form of cure he can help promote: "traérgela he hasta la cama" (I, 103). We are watching the degradation of language in progress, and it ends with a not unexpected role reversal –the master has placed himself in the hands of the servant and, later, his life will hang on the persuasiveness of Celestina ("entrará essa honrrada dueña, *en cuya lengua está mi vida*" [V, 176, my emphasis]). Melibea rebukes Calisto's illicit love, but Sempronio, seeing opportunities for economic gain, is eager to advance it to its conclusion by the only means that he possesses: access to the verbal expertise of Celestina.

Here, we might pause and reflect upon these first descending steps towards Chaos. If hypocrisy and lust are alive and well in Calisto's heart, and greed and opportunity characterize Sempronio's plan to better his own lot by advancing his master's plans, other strands interwoven into the final tragedies are also being stitched into place in the wings. We need, for example, to consider what is happening to Melibea while she is offstage, though we only learn these details gradually at later points in the text. As the well-bred only daughter and heir of a self-made merchant capitalist, Pleberio, she has been privy to the typical well-guarded, chaperoned upbringing and education of other young women of her socioeconomic station. She has read widely and knows of life and love beyond the walls of her controlled environment only through books. She

is now twenty years old, considerably older than the fifteen by which age most young women of her day were betrothed and married in that unabashedly patriarchal society. Indeed, I invite the reader to freely speculate about the nature of the natural passions that might now, offstage as it were, be simmering beneath the surface of Melibea's well-bred façade.

Melibea's curiosity was, in fact, piqued by Calisto's initial rhapsodizing and she allowed herself to indulge in further conversation with him, even though she should have taken immediate offense that he had penetrated the boundaries of her private garden, ostensibly having lost his hunting hawk. Here the sexual symbolism of hunter and hunted is clear and unmistakable, and will be continuous throughout their relationship ("Señora, el que quiere comer el ave, quita primero las plumas" [XIX, 324]). But even Melibea's flirtatious encouragement of Calisto ("aún más y gualardón te daré yo, si perseveras [I, 87]) quickly ends when she detects his true and underlying aim, and it is thus that her rebuke, when it does come, is so emphatically uttered ("vete, torpe," "ilícito amor," the sharp polarization in her use of "tú" and "yo"). However, this is not to deny that she was attracted by that very same dark purpose but, rather, to affirm only that she was not experienced enough to channel her sentiments more purposefully just then.

Many commentators of *Celestina* make the case that Melibea is innocent and justifiably repulsed by Calisto's lust, and that it will require the adulation and persuasiveness of the famed go-between, Celestina, to break down her resistance. Even more startling, at least to me, is the notion that Celestina's conjuration of the demonic force actively works to effect a magical change in Melibea's insistence on maintaining her chastity until marriage. This goes against the grain of the many times in the text that Melibea makes frank admissions to the contrary: first to herself, then to Celestina, her confidante, then to Lucrecia (all three in Act X), and finally, to Pleberio, her father (in Act XX). Melibea openly acknowledges that the seed of her social and sexual rebellion had its beginning in that same opening scene, and *not* later. We may rapidly survey these moments of self-revelation.

Here is Melibea in her soliloquy from the opening of Act X: "¿Y no me fuera mejor conceder su petición y demanda ayer a Celestina quando de parte de aquel señor *cuya vista me cativó* me fue rogado, y contentarle a él, y *sanarme a mí*?" (238, my emphasis). Melibea knows that her lovesickness began with the sight and incantatory sounds of Calisto. She is unwillingly, from the first, bound by a chain of social norms that restrain her desires, and dearly wishes to be free of them at whatever cost. Only her inbred ties to propriety and her good breeding remain to be severed in order for this wish to be realized.

Here is Melibea addressing Celestina, from Act X, when her final resistance to propriety is tendered: "Muchos y *muchos días son passados que esse noble cavallero me habló en amor*, tanto me fue entonces enojosa *quanto después que tú me lo tornaste a nombrar, alegre*" (245, my emphasis). Melibea rehearses for us her categorical rejection of Calisto. Then, not ever expecting to be able to initiate any

means of undoing the damage, Melibea lets us know of her profound joy when Celestina reveals herself to be Calisto's unexpected ambassador. Yet, this joy is never once expressed in the long interview of Act IV: it remains beneath the surface, while the surface gleams with the language of anger and offence. At the end of Act X, Melibea confides her secret passion to Lucrecia (who already knows it well): "ya as visto como no ha sido más en mi mano; *cativóme el amor de aquel cavallero*; ruégote por Dios *que se cobra con secreto sello* porque yo goze de tan suave amor" (247, my emphasis).

Finally, Melibea reveals the truth to Pleberio, just before her suicide leap in Act XX:

Muchos días son passados, padre mío, que penava por mi amor un cavallero que se llamava Calisto, el qual tú bien conociste [...] descubrió su pasión a una astuta y sagaz mujer que lamavan Celestina. La qual, de su parte venida a mí, *sacó mi secreto amor de mi pecho*; descubrí a ella lo que a mi querida madre encobría (....). (333)

Celestina, confesses Melibea, was astute in finding a way to extract from Melibea's breast the *secret love* she had been harboring there, long before the Act IV interview.

This love, like Calisto's, is revealed as lust. Its being kept secret for so long produces an intense inner torment that in the end renders Melibea insensible (Act X). It is when she recovers from a short spell of unconsciousness that a new and assertive Melibea is born, one who now actively abandons the norms of propriety so as to taste the forbidden fruit of unrestrained sexual congress. It is she who now will provide the time and the place for the subsequent carnal encounters. They are staged and covertly celebrated within the confines of that portion of the paternal home provided for her, a walled garden bower (a *locus amoenus*) that Calisto will physically and metaphorically penetrate. Calisto's departure from the first frustrated meeting occasions some noise, and Pleberio and Alisa awaken and suspect that something is amiss, but they are instead convinced by their daughter's fabrication that the noise was made by Lucrecia, fetching for her a jug of water for her thirst. Pleberio is insufficiently on his guard since, at this juncture, greater vigilance may have changed the course of all their destinies. But he allows the lie to stand as truth and remains in total ignorance of what is to pass under his own roof. And *thirsty* Melibea may have been, but it was, the reader knows, not for water, but for the forbidden and now postponed caresses of Calisto. Language takes yet another turn towards meaninglessness.

In encouraging these trysts in her family home, Melibea is knowingly risking the entire family's dishonor, but her overarching desire overshadows all the good sense of her former self. She is in the strong grasp of a new thrilling and forbidden passion. So strong is that passion that it will override all obstacles to secure its continuance. Thus Melibea will embark upon the clever portrayal of her former self, in order to maintain

her parents in darkest ignorance. By light of day she plays the role, falsely if you will, of the dutiful and chaste daughter. Yet under the mantle of night, that protector of sinners –as noted in the Spanish adage quoted earlier– she herself surrenders to the very same *illicit* passion she had so vociferously condemned in Calisto. Melibea’s unbridled passion becomes perilous and all-consuming, consuming both Calisto and herself in the end.

All of this ultimately uncontrolled passion, let us remember, had been sparked by the sight and incantatory sounds of Calisto in the opening scene of the text and grew daily more fervent out of the sight of the reader. Melibea’s own descent into dark despair, which precedes that of Pleberio, takes place when Calisto slips from the very ladder of access to her bower and plunges to his premature death. This loss will cancel the promise of her future of a long life of love, and this will, in turn, provide the sole momentum for her own subsequent suicide plunge. There is no expression of repentance, no retraction, no remorse for anything except for the brevity of their long month of lovemaking. Let us again listen carefully to Melibea. Realizing that Calisto’s broken body on the street below is without life, Melibea cries out to Lucrecia, her faithful lady’s maid and accomplice: “Rezando llevan con responso mi bien todo; muerta llevan mi alegría. *No es tiempo de yo vivir, ¿Cómo no gozé más del gozo? ¿Cómo tove en tan poco la gloria que entre mis manos tove?* ¡O ingratos mortales, jamás conocéys vuestros bienes sino quando dellos carescéys! (XIX, 328, my emphasis).

Melibea is harsh on herself for having delayed so long the “gloria” that now consumes her every moment. Calisto dead, she is alone in her darkest hour: life holds no further reason for living. The reader has already heard Melibea passionately exclaim (to Lucrecia) in frustration as her parents belatedly contemplate a possible betrothal for her: “*No tengo otra lástima sino por el tiempo que perdí de no gozarle, de no conoçerle, después que a mi me sé conoçer, no quiero marido, no quiero ensuziar los nudos del matrimonio [...] como muchas hallo en los antiguos libros que leí (...).*” (XVI, 304, my emphasis).

Melibea’s use of the sexually charged ‘gloria’ and ‘gozar’ in these contexts indicates self-recognition of her furtive, transgressive behaviour, and an immersion in the stolen fruits of sexual wantonness. Part of the pain we can detect in her complex web of emotions derives from Melibea’s tacit recognition of the destructive nature of her moral descent into the dark and hidden underbelly of social and sexual rebellion. She is forsaking her family, betraying her upbringing, and degrading treasonously the parents who have only and always provided for her every material want. Pleberio’s blind confidence that the reigning social order was seamless and complete, and that his ceaseless pursuit of more and greater income from his shipbuilding, orchard management, and construction projects will provide an ample dowry for his only child are simply short-sighted, born of a fatal lack of foresight.

There is, in *Celestina*, a pattern of social disintegration governing the action from start to finish which we must consider here. Nothing in it is without cause, and no

cause is without its effect in this spiralling descent towards Chaos that forms the true spinal cord of the work. This disintegration is often observable in omnipresent ironic foreshadowing and carnivalesque role reversals. It is no accident that Celestina replies to Sempronio, when she is apprised by him in Act 1 of Calisto's urgent need of her mediation skills, with the following medical image: "Bien has dicho, al cabo estoy; basta para mí mecer el ojo. Digo que me alegro de estas nuevas, *como los cirujanos de los descalabrados (...)*" (I, 107, my emphasis). That Calisto will end up somehow with his head in three pieces ('descalabrado') is, from this vantage point, now all but inevitable.

Another oft-cited passage which illustrates how all things are linked in this downward spiral contains ironic foreshadowing of major proportions and comes, like the words of Celestina (above), early on in the work. Pármeno, a raw youth in the service of Calisto, is attempting to make Calisto aware of the perils that his chosen course of action portends:

Señor, porque perdiste el otro día el neblí fue causa de tu *entrada* en la huerta de Melibea a le buscar; la *entrada* causa de la *veer y hablar*; la *habla* engendró *amor*; el *amor* parió tu *pena*; la *pena* causará perder tu cuerpo y el alma y hacienda. Y lo que más dello siento es venir a manos de aquella trotaconventos [...]. (II, 134-35, my emphasis)

Indeed, this syllogism could be seen as a thumbnail sketch of what will come to pass, since Calisto refuses to heed this and all subsequent warnings against proceeding with his assault on Melibea's virtue. On the contrary, Pármeno's protestations about and proofs of Celestina's many clandestine occupations confirm for Calisto that he is following the most expeditious path to his goal. Ironically, it turns out both ways. It is the most expeditious path to the seduction of Melibea which is, shall we say, a not unwilling seduction, given the analysis of Melibea just offered. But it also turns out that the satisfied desire proves to be Calisto's undoing and, as Pármeno has earnestly predicted, the master loses his body, his soul (Calisto dies unconfessed) and his worldly possessions in a manner directly and, again ironically, tied to his amorous bravado.

In Act XIX, likely exhausted after three bouts of lovemaking with the enraptured Melibea, Calisto, hearing a scuffle in the street below and thinking his new and inexperienced pair of servants should not handle it alone, foolishly and without arming himself rushes to the ladder and, in his ill-advised haste, misses a step and falls, fatally, to the street stones below. The finer irony is that, as he prepares for his thoughtless act, perhaps to impress the two female witnesses with his bravery—Melibea's maid has been nearby, witnessing the lovers' 'gloria'—, the need for his aid, so his servants insist, has vanished, as the ruffians had been easily routed. Thus we experience the dark absurdity of his haste, and the absolute absurdity of his death.

After Pármeno's ironic words of foreshadowing have been thus gruesomely

realized, there is a final example of this linked cause and effect that rounds out the work. The words are Pleberio's. They are structured like Parmeno's syllogism, but the role they play serves a different finality. In the closing Act XXI, Pleberio sees stretched out before him an immense wasteland, useless to him now the mountain of riches he had accumulated in the past. His daughter lies before him, lifeless. In her leap and fall, she has successfully imitated the leap and fall of Calisto, but she had, prior to her plunge from the tower of the house she called home, confessed to Pleberio her earlier "fall from grace," assuming full responsibility for her actions and their disastrous consequences.

Pleberio is stunned as he absorbs the falseness behind his faith in the World, Fortune and Love. For him, all is lost and there is no meaning in existence. In his grief Pleberio allows as that he does not so much bewail the death of his daughter as he does the disastrous cause of it; "Y yo no lloro triste a ella muerta pero la causa desastrada de su morir" (XXI, 340). No, it is the deceitful appearances and promises of the world, and of fortune and, especially, of love that make it all now seem to have been, in reality, a flowering but fruitless orchard, a serpent-covered meadow, a river of tears, sweet but poisonous potions, a horrific desert, a labyrinth of errors full of vain hopes, false happiness, and genuine sorrow (XXI, 338). Love and his servants are faithless villains personified. Despairing and disillusioned, Pleberio winds up his lament with this final syllogistic sequence: "Del mundo me quexo porque en sí me crió, porque no me dando vida, no engendrara en él a Melibea; no nascida, no amara; no amando, cessara mi quexosa y desconsolada postremería" (XXI, 343).

Pleberio is disconsolate and despairing for he has—as have the other members of *Celestina's* cast of characters—strayed from the moral path of right thinking. God, for all of *Celestina's* characters' use of the word, is merely a word, an idea, ubiquitous in the language they employ but never a guide for right living. Each seems to worship at another altar: Calisto, the confessed "melibeo," at Melibea's; Celestina, at the altar of greed and pride; Pleberio, at the altar of the gods of commerce; the servants and their prostitute girlfriends, at the altar of concupiscence and sexual control (of others). Celestina can count many members of the Church hierarchy among her best clients. Calisto spends hours at the Church of the Magdalene praying for Celestina's success in the corruption of Melibea. Both Calisto and Celestina, just before their death, cry out for confession, but this is again a mere reflex, one more use of empty language, since in neither case can we be convinced of any amount of the necessarily sincere contrition.

Celestina, the first to die, is stabbed thirty times by Calisto's servants, Sempronio and Pármeno, with whom she, ironically, had forged an unholy confederation for the purpose of milking Calisto's predicament for as much shared reward as possible. If indeed "PRIDE GOETH BEFORE A FALL," then Celestina, with long years of experience in the manipulation of a wide swath of her underworld and upperworld contemporaries, blinded by her pride and greed, falls victim to the frustration of these same confederates when she makes it clear that her promises to them of gain were just, well,



empty words. These empty words lead directly to a vengeance that rewards her with a violent death for a life devoted to verbal prestidigitation and deceit. The downward spiral of language continues.

When the gendarmerie approach to investigate the shrill night cries emanating from Celestina's house, the cowardly assassins leap from a second story window and are captured even as they fall. Before the dawn light they have been summarily beheaded in the town square by a judge who thus pays off old debts of friendship to Calisto's father by keeping the son's name scandal-free. Calisto's fall is next, followed by Melibea's, completing the death of the work's five principals.

The surviving prostitutes and lovers of the two beheaded servants hire a braggart soldier turned pimp to avenge for them the deaths of the first three, but this vainglorious rascal makes a flamboyant (empty) promise to do so but then, having no intention of fulfilling the promise, himself hires a semi-crippled associate to pass by Melibea's garden street and create a disturbance. Ironically, though this stand-in has no interest in that Calisto and Melibea should die, an unpredictable chain of events brings about this outcome in ways the prostitutes or the braggart soldier could never have imagined.

There are, then, no noble characters in *Celestina*. Each of the thirteen characters that speak is thinking egoistically only of him- or herself, and betrayal among them is common; deceit in language and behavior is a norm and, as has been shown, between them they commit all seven of the Deadly Sins. In like fashion the Ten Commandments are all upended with murder, covetousness, stealing, falsehoods, disrespect for parents, and desecration of the Sabbath on open display. Many regularly do unto others as they would not have done unto themselves. In *Celestina* there are no acts of true kindness: all is done with a view to advancing a private agenda. Bonds of friendship and familial bonds prove to be tissue-thin and, in the end, are easily sabotaged by the pursuit of individual desires.

The center cannot hold. The language used as a cover for the shady practices that dominate in *Celestina* has become fossilized, empty of mutually-understandable meaning. *Res* and *Verba* are not connected. Words, in short, do not mean what they represent and are therefore unreliable as trusted communication. Witness Celestina's mockery of the Sermon on the Mount when, in telling Pármemo of the punishment meted out to his now dead mother for her practice of witchcraft and grave robbing, she mouths the scripture that tells Christians that Blessed are they who suffer unjustly, for theirs shall be the Kingdom of Heaven (III, 199), twisting its real meaning to her own present purpose, and getting away with it.

All in *Celestina* is obscure, dark. Night rules the Day. It seems to me significant that great portions of the text take place at night. Yes, Calisto speaks to Melibea in her rural retreat in daylight, but when so ceremoniously dismissed, he returns home and, once in his bedroom, commands that all light be shut out. Celestina's initial visit to Calisto takes place at night, for Calisto has her escorted home by Sempronio in order to protect his new investment of "cient monedas" (II, 130). Celestina conjures the

Dark Force under cover of night. It is night when she leaves Calisto's house a second time and is this time escorted through the darkened streets by Pármeno. They then make a nocturnal visit to the home of Areúsa, the prostitute living on her own, and Celestina convinces her to allow the virgin, Pármeno, into her bed, so as to cement his full cooperation in her confederation. As this sexual inducement suits Pármeno, too, he swears he will comply with all her wishes henceforth. But that he does not do so will come as no surprise to the alert reader.

When Pármeno returns home the following day, Calisto is again locked in his darkened room, singing to himself. Shortly afterwards, the first of the lovers' assignations is arranged for midnight, and all subsequent nightly visitations end only with the coming of the dawn light and the threat of discovery. Celestina is murdered in the dark of pre-dawn. Her murderers are beheaded before first light. Calisto crashes down head first in the dark, and Melibea commits suicide before first light. Pleberio's final lament and the work's closure take place in this real but also metaphorical Dark.

It is impossible to consider every action of the work's XXI acts and 350 pages in a presentation of this length. I have instead been deliberately selective. I have focused more on the work's underlying structures to build a stronger case for the triumph of darkness, despair, and death over all else in *Celestina's* late fifteenth-century world. I have also tried, I hope successfully, not to graft modern moral attitudes onto the work. But now, in the remaining space, I must ask a final question: what is so terrifyingly dark about *Celestina*?

What is the menace of such a text, with its emphasis on nighttime action, deceit, death, degeneration of language, and final despair? Why is there, on the other hand, no relief from this accelerating downward spiral, why no noble actions, why no virtuous characters? Why are we left on the brink of the abyss, listening to the fading chords of a series of unanswered questions addressed by Pleberio to the world and not to the Supreme Being?

I began this series of reflections with Pleberio and his private revelations about Order or, rather, lack of Order. He is not an innocent, I said. And he is not the innocent because he was not blind to the ways of the world but, rather, absorbed in his hopes that he would be immune from them: "como aquel que mucho *ha hasta ahora callado tus falsas propiedades*" (XXI, 338, my emphasis). It was a false reality, supported by willing ignorance. But a reality, even a false one, is created and upheld by words whose meanings are theoretically shared by the members of a community.

In *Celestina*, the constant reality is the debasement of language: it serves only and always to camouflage, to deceive, to pervert and distort, to mislead, to falsely promise and then to feign noble impulses by covering up underlying, naked self-interest. Indeed, my tentative answer to the question as to the menace in the *Celestina* text is that it is –among the other many things that it "means" to its readers and critics over its more than five hundred years of literary life– very possibly a stark parable about the death of language as a conveyor of meaning. The social fabric falls apart, lowlife characters dominate those from the upper class, bonds of trust have evaporated

between lovers, co-conspirators, friends, family members, and the public and its institutions of justice, religion, and education.

I have attempted in this brief essay to outline a few of the important cases of the barrenness of language in our text, from the vacuity of the florid opening speeches of Calisto to the closing lament of the bowed and broken Pleberio. The grand paradox of *Celestina* that impresses and pleases me, I confess, is that the text assigns itself the daunting task of using language to expose the death of language, and does so in such a dazzling variety of ways, only some of which I have touched on here. No act, no scene is missing this component of the failure of language to communicate other than false messages. In doing so, its corrupted nature becomes clear to the reader. Honest language is supplanted by bombast and rhetoric, and all the schemes built upon such language have been toppled by the moment we find ourselves alone with Pleberio at the brink of the abyss. Language has failed us all.

*Celestina* is a text entirely encapsulated in dramatic dialogue. Its only actions are speech acts. There is no controlling narrator to tell us what people are thinking as they think it. We are left, as readers, with words, words, and more words. We must enter into the text prepared to be good listeners. Each new speech act may illuminate or clarify others. This happens with such frequency that we must reread the text several times before we can feel we have our feet on solid ground, discerning the lies and deceit that all are using to gain advantages over others. Almost no dialogue in the work turns out to be what it first seemed, for empty words are used as masks for the private or secret thoughts and emotions of the speakers as they each struggle for what they desire. As a construct of language, *Celestina* attempts to illuminate the dark and despairing menace inherent in the debasement of language and is relentless throughout the work in demonstrating its degeneration. This is the menace in the text. It is the final Fall, and a successful un-Creation. And it is, supremely, a text whose final silence, ironically, seals its greatness and bespeaks its eloquence.