

From Quest to Brothel: The Demise of the Courtly Love Tradition in *La Celestina*

Alyssa Acierno
Hofstra University, United States of America

Abstract

Enduring an arduous quest is an important component of the knightly code of honor. In the courtly love tradition of the Middle Ages, embarking on this quest and prevailing over its daunting obstacles epitomized the essential requirements for courtly love; that is, in overcoming those obstacles, a knight gained the spiritual value and honor that made him worthy of love. Accordingly, the attainment of spiritual value and honor opened a critical door: it allowed the knight to win over his lady and thus fulfill his carnal desires. Lancelot, for example, the main character in Chrétien de Troyes's *The Knight of the Cart*, meets all the quintessential requirements implicit in the courtly love tradition when he embarks on his quest for Guinevere. I will argue in this paper that, by the late fifteenth century, Spanish writer Fernando de Rojas, in his seminal work *La Celestina* (1499), reclaims this tradition's generic and distinguishing principles (a tradition called *amor cortés* in Spanish) in order to set up a specific path of inference for the reader. His reader, clearly recognizing the courtly love scantlings, will assign specific meanings to the work that correspond to a set of possible, courtly-love inspired conclusions, to which he/she is being led. This design is evident from the first lines of the work: when Calisto sees Melibea in her garden and love enters his soul just from the sight of her, the structure of the language and the emotive meaning it creates for the reader is, unmistakably, that of courtly love. But the reasoning texture soon becomes more complex, as the semantic information provided by other characters (who are not courtly lovers and, interestingly, often whisper to themselves or to each other in asides) begins to undermine the reader's path of inference, forging an alternate dimension of meaning where the work's language becomes contested ground, the instrument of credible agents holding pragmatic systems of belief and opposing values. In other words, for the reader, the initial prescriptive dimension of unequivocal meaning anticipated by generic courtly love language and content is challenged and overwhelmed by a subversive pattern of reasoning, one based upon real-life needs, interests and the profit motive.

Keywords: courtly love, medieval Spain, quest narratives, Spanish literature, tragicomedy, *Celestina*

Introduction: The Heroic Quest

Courtly love reasoning, once exposed to real-life concerns, serves to create the comic, grotesque effect that characterizes Rojas's "tragicomedy." Lofty language, the elementary substance of courtly literature, becomes transubstantiated in the real-life environment that Rojas wants to create. And the essential element that makes this treatment of courtly love viable is the elimination – or is it a transformation – of the heroic quest. In a total inversion of courtly love values, Calisto, protagonist and "courtly lover", does not embark on a quest for his lover Melibea: he sends his servant on a debased quest to strike a deal with the old whore, brothel-owner and witch Celestina, who, for the right price, will embark on her own quest to try to convince young Melibea to sleep with Calisto. By discarding/transforming the quest that makes the knight's desires honourable, Rojas skillfully eliminates spiritual love from the picture and disengages the means by which the protagonist might achieve his objective honorably. The artificial world of courtly love created by bored aristocrats, with its spirituality, quests and heroic deeds, serves no purpose – Rojas seems to imply – other than as comic frame: his character might attempt to resemble a courtly lover, but in reality he needs to behave like a man of his times, engaged in the pressing business of attaining carnal love in a late-medieval, pre-capitalistic society.

The courtly love tradition that was entrenched in medieval literature was efficiently codified in Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore* (c. 1188). In Book II of his work, Capellanus, a priest, lists the rules of courtly love to be followed in literature and social intercourse (4). It can be surmised that the rules that he set down do not necessarily reflect his personal beliefs on love, but rather the ideals of the people for whom he wrote, as he was probably commissioned to write this work (Lacey, 16). Yet, whatever his convictions on the subject, the rules of courtly love and the knightly code that appear in this work served as the foundation for many medieval courtly love stories, such as Chrétien de Troyes's abovementioned *The Knight of the Cart*. One such rule, specifically rule fourteen, is especially relevant to this paper because it speaks to the adventurous quest that the quintessential courtly lover or knight must endure for the sake of his beloved. It states: "An easy attainment makes love contemptible; a difficult one makes it more dear" (5). This rule clearly implies that the lover must embark on a difficult journey to win the love of his beloved; otherwise the love is worthless. The purpose of the quest in the courtly love tradition is seen as a vital component of making, not only the knight, but the love itself valuable and honourable. Adding this level of difficulty to the attainment of love presupposes that the courtly lover, through his sacrifice, becomes a more well-rounded person, worthy to love, worthy of love. It is also clear that the quest is seen as the means by which the love itself is infused with substance and value. Thus, during the Middle Ages it was crucial to include some sort of quest in this type literature, as it was an element that placed the requisite spiritual value on the knight and on the portrayed love affair. By putting this rule in full view one can best understand the conventional ubiquity of quests in courtly love literature, voyages for love that became a requisite for practicing ideal love. Moreover, the absence of the quest in late fifteenth century literature that deals with love, as exemplified in *La Celestina*, gives insight into the new pragmatism of a changing society, a mercantilist world of negotiators that emphasizes material benefits over spiritual value.

A prime example of the courtly quest is the one endured by Lancelot, a knight in the court of King Arthur, in Chrétien de Troyes's *The Knight of the Cart*. Likely commissioned by Marie de Champagne (Lacey, 137) and composed in the twelfth century, this story describes the various adventures that Lancelot must undergo in order to win the love of Queen Guinevere. The first trial that Lancelot must overcome regards the cart that is used to transport criminals.

By embarking on this quest, the knight gives up his honor, pride and even his identity; these were great sacrifices, personal hardships he had to bear in order to continue his journey to his lady. The obstacles continue when Méléagant abducts the queen and Lancelot must cross the Sword Bridge, a physically demanding and dangerous task that leaves him badly wounded, in order to save her (68–70). Finally Lancelot is captured and imprisoned by Méléagant and must fight in a tournament against him in order to win his freedom and that of his lover (121). All of his labors are immensely difficult, and when he overcomes one obstacle, he is faced with yet another.

Lancelot's quest clearly bespeaks the difficulties described by Capellanus in his fourteenth rule of courtly love. In his obstacles, this knight sacrificed his pride, freedom, wellbeing and identity all for the sake of his beloved. This quest forces him to learn and practice endurance, perseverance, physical strength and restraint. Furthermore, it stresses that carnal love cannot be attained without this spiritual journey; that is, a knight must prove his spiritual strength and honor before he can earn the physical pleasures that his lady can provide. In accordance with Capellanus's fourteenth rule of courtly love, Lancelot gives worth to his love by enduring this quest; the difficulties that he had to face made his love honourable.

The Debased Quest

The quest and the idea of this spiritual journey are thoroughly debased in *La Celestina*. Calisto, the supposed "Lancelot" of this tale, does not embark on any sort of quest at all but sends cronies in his stead. In the beginning of this story, Calisto seems to be a quintessential courtly lover when he appears in Melibea's garden, uses courtly love rhetoric to try and win over his chosen love, and subsequently locks himself in his room in utter despair over the initial rejection by his "lady" Melibea. In his overblown rhetoric we can easily spot the distinctive aspects of courtly love pronouncements: exalting the beloved as an individual who is vastly superior to the lover, bemoaning unfulfilled desire, presenting love as an illness and using neo-Platonic language to express it all. Such conventions were well-known and still very popular in Spain in Rojas's time and beyond, as Diego de San Pedro's *Cárcel de Amor* (1492) and *La Historia del Abencerraje y de la Hermosa Jarifa* (1561) clearly illustrate. In *La Celestina*, however, the reader soon realizes that Calisto is not a knight, but rather a parody, a counterfeit courtly lover that is incapable of undertaking the expected quest. He is essentially unable to perform that quest due to the environment in which he is placed by the author: it is a literary environment that necessitates credible characters, closer to the realities of the new, mercantile world. While Calisto expresses himself like a courtly lover, he does not *think* like one, but like an unscrupulous merchant that will stop at nothing to procure the goods he desires. His courtly love discourse, then, has been a misleading clue that has sent the reader on a fool's errand. Such discourse, then, is soon shown to be the consequence of an excessive cupidity that has led to the young man's derangement. Therefore, and unlike the knights of the courtly love tradition, Calisto does not win his lady through pure good deeds and an adventurous, honourable quest; rather, he goes to the lowliest brothel owner and self-proclaimed love doctor, Celestina, to win Melibea's love. In the mercantile, pre-capitalistic environment that pervades Rojas's text, this courtly love character is anachronous and must pay for his love in gold, as every character in the story knows. So payment comes in the form of a gold chain that Calisto gives Celestina for her service (the debased "quest"); she then performs the only quest possible in the realistic mercantile environment of the times. In the social climate that pervades the work, a knightly quest is disallowed and "courtly lover" Calisto is shown to be a sham, a blood and bones human being pretending to be a literary character.

So in striking this deal with Celestina, there is no journey for the protagonist, there are no carts, no bridges, and no jousts to endure. He essentially locks himself up in his room, professing unyielding faith in his new god, Melibea, a faith that will save him without the need for great deeds or good works. Such thinking seems like a depraved exercise in solifidianism.¹ Thus it is that the traditional quest of the courtly love tradition is transubstantiated into the jaunt of a hired old prostitute to the beloved's house. In the social climate in which the author has placed his story, love cannot provide the incentive for an arduous and spiritually rewarding journey; in such a setting as this, love is commercialized and becomes a commodity. The significance of the altered quest lies in Rojas's elimination of a moral dimension in the social geometry of this pre-capitalist, mercantilist society. In the self-regarding materialism of a protagonist who seeks immediate satisfaction, carnal love is much easier to attain and more immediately available if thought of as a commercial transaction; it is no longer something that must be earned through the protracted exertions that attend honor and spirituality.

Because by Rojas's time the courtly quest was still somewhat popular in its conventional form (as demonstrated by the two texts referenced above), his character Calisto is able to create a set of expectations that point precisely to that quest when, at the very beginning of the story, he laments to his servant Sempronio that Melibea is inaccessible and places her on a pedestal, comparing her to God. Such inaccessibility has been the motivation for courtly knights to undertake the arduous quest so as to gain access to the lady's favour. So, is this the beginning of Calisto's quest? It is not, for such quests would be considered nothing short of ridiculous given the spirit of mercantilism that underpins Rojas's conception of his story. Consequently, as Calisto broods in his rooms, spewing a synthetic collection of bombastic courtly love rhetoric, his servant makes a comment that would never be made in a traditional courtly love setting: Instead of relating to and encouraging his "spiritual" love for Melibea, Sempronio remarks that "He is mad and a heretic..." (Rojas, 4). It is clear that for the servant, Calisto's "spiritual" rantings are seen as pathetic, laughable and overly dramatic.

Parodying the Tradition

So the absence/deformation and parodying of the knightly quest allows Fernando de Rojas to accomplish his aesthetic objectives more effectively. At every point he is seen navigating the tradition of courtly love, which was extremely popular earlier in the Middle Ages and still well-known in his times, through new and unusual waters. First, Rojas makes Calisto a counterfeit courtly lover, and while he dies in the pursuit of his love, he in fact does so in the most banal manner possible by tripping and falling to his death. Moreover, by reviving the courtly love tradition in his golem Calisto, Rojas can more cogently portray his protagonist as unhinged, given that his thought process is in absolute conflict with the underpinning ethos of the work. Furthermore, with the debasement of the knightly quest the author can portray the final cause of the characters' actions as pure and simple desire, be it carnal or monetary, creating a stark contrast with the parodied spirituality of courtly love. In the end, materialistic Calisto fulfills his carnal desires without having to go through perilous obstacles that test his honor.

But as a consequence of the old prostitute Celestina's quest, all the main characters of the tragicomedy lay dead. In light of this, it might seem that Rojas wants to draw attention to the

¹ From the Latin *sōlus* (alone) and *fides* (faith), a theological doctrine, of Protestant origin, which affirms that faith alone insures salvation regardless of good works. It derives from Luther's translation of Rom. iii:28.

antithetic quality of the consequences: while in *La Celestina* death and mayhem ensue, in true courtly love narratives the knight usually “gets the girl” and love is triumphant. Should this be interpreted as Rojas’s endorsement of courtly love virtues? It is conceivable, but given that the author goes out of his way to point to the artificiality of courtly love, the courtly love world of Calisto’s psychological landscape is exposed as a dangerous daydream of escape from reality, that same reality where utilitarian concerns tend to quash such fantasies. A different mindset is emerging in Europe: within its neoteric structures, the lover must not try to earn the love and pleasure of his lady through flights of fancy when he can simply buy it. The mercantilism attached to love thoroughly removes the spiritual dimension from a text where it would have been superfluous; the spiritual love that made one honourable and made love valuable is fallacious and has no place in the new mindset. But when one weighs all of this, a caveat comes to mind: all the main characters lay dead in pools of blood and, as in Calisto’s case, with their brains strewn all over the paving stones. Such is the price to be paid for their cupidity. So is Rojas bemoaning the end of the type of society that endorsed courtly love as *model* of behaviour? Is he, consequently, denouncing the new mercantilist mindset?

Perhaps, but we must remember that he is using courtly love conventions for aesthetic purposes, so his attack on the materialistic mindset of his times does not necessarily mean that he yearns for the artificial world of knights errant. What may have been Rojas’s complaint is the loss of a generic model that had governed the psychological states through which people *assessed* their behaviour. As such, he was likely highlighting how society’s conventional *models* of behaviour have changed since the inception of the traditional courtly tales. When stories such as *The Knight of the Cart* were composed, people, particularly the entitled class, had more time to dream up ideal forms of behaviour. The courtly tradition and knightly code essentially stemmed from an elegant boredom that allowed time for more eccentric flights of fancy. Now, the incipient commercialism of Rojas’s society seems to have left little time and energy to maintain these courtly models of social intercourse. Additionally, social intercourse has become more commercialized, as lords have lost control of their vassals, the exchange of goods and services has become standard and monetary reward has replaced compelled loyalty; in the Middle Ages, honor may not have had a price tag, but in *La Celestina*’s social milieu everything had one, including honor and love. This seems to be the gist of Rojas’s message.

Conclusion

In the end, facts of life at the end of the fifteenth century demanded new ways of thinking about literature. While the old aristocracy was losing ground, a new mercantile class, at times with the king’s help, was steadily filling the economic, political and cultural vacuum left behind. And because the images, symbols and meanings present in courtly love narratives conveyed social models of behaviour they were increasingly seen as outdated; they became a tool to portray a lunatic’s extravagance in the new community imagined by Rojas. It is no coincidence that the author conceives Calisto as an aristocrat, one that has internalized the outdated fantastic musings of his class and, like Don Quixote, is acting according to their illusory prescriptions. As an implausible courtly lover injected into a text that conveys the essential prolepsis of that tradition, it could be said that Calisto follows courtly love codes, but in a practical manner more suited to the times in which the author has embedded him. To succeed, Calisto must adulterate courtly love at every step of the way. The debased quest, in the final analysis, is the most salient characteristic of Calisto’s efforts in this regard.

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Corresponding author: Alyssa Acierno

Email: aaaci13@gmail.com