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Love in a Time of Parody: The Arcipreste, Calisto, and the Parodying of the Male Lover in the Courtly Tradition in *Libro de Buen Amor* and *La Celestina*

The *Libro de Buen Amor*, written during the mid-fourteenth century by Juan Ruiz, Arcipreste de Hita (a man who may well have been fictional himself), and Fernando de Rojas' *La Celestina*, originally published around 1499, both feature love stories replete with the tropes of courtly love. Throughout each work "Lady-Things" are created, objectified, and celebrated; men pay court to ladies whom they have fetishized; affairs end in failure or in abject tragedy, much as the trope dictates. However, within this apparently fidelity to courtly love, both works show a strong parodic element. Using the Arcipreste's go-between Trotaconventos' sales spiel, in which she gives an extensive and parodic description of the Arcipreste to a potential conquest, and Calisto's equally grandiose and parodic pronouncements throughout *La Celestina*, I will investigate the parodying of courtly love present in both works. While *Libro de Buen Amor* is obviously parodic, both works cleverly twist together courtly love and parody. Indeed, both take equal aim at the figure of the "lover." Although the Arcipreste and Calisto are very different figures, I will argue that both equally represent a break with and a complete parody of courtly love.

Courtly love as a trope has been an entrenched part of westernized culture since long before either *Libro de Buen Amor* or *La Celestina*; in fact, its very entrenchment has allowed for the parodic elements on display in both works. The theorist Slavov Zizek has written extensively on its myriad elements, all of which heavily influence the works studied here. At its heart, he claims, lies an inherent violence "which … has to culminate in the ecstatic self-obliteration of death" (Zizek "Deeper Than the Day Could Read" 197). It is, therefore, nearly a prerequisite that a literary affair built upon the foundations provided by courtly love will end in some sort of disaster — preferably, in fact, in death. In order to understand the parodying of the lover present in both *Libro de Buen Amor* and *La Celestina*, it is necessary to understand the violence generally perpetrated against the lady. Indeed, although she may appear to wield considerable power over her lover, she is, according to Zizek, really nothing more than this same lover's creation. He posits that she becomes a "Lady-Thing," and claims that "she functions as a kind of 'black hole' around which the subject's desire is structured," which in turn "conceal[s] … the inherent impossibility of attaining the object" ("Courtly Love" 94). As a construction, the woman loses her autonomy, her personality, and, indeed, her very humanity. Robbed of "herself" by her lover's machinations, she becomes "an 'inhuman partner', a traumatic Object with whom no relationship is possible, an apathetic void imposing senseless, arbitrary ordeals" (ibid 102). Yet since she is also her lover's creation, these "ordeals" can hardly be considered arbitrary: despite their apparent point of origin in the Lady-Thing, they are instead emanating from her lover. She is a strange, remote figure, and her power is not her own. In fact, as Zizek writes, during the heyday "of courtly love, the actual social standing of women as objects of exchange in male power plays was probably at its lowest" ("Courtly Love" 108), once again

highlighting the violence perpetuated against the Lady-Thing by the system that created and maintained her.

The Lady-Thing is both all-powerful and impossibly powerless within the dynamics of courtly love. She, and the system that creates her, are impossibly ripe for parody. Indeed, both *La Celestina* and *Libro de Buen Amor* showcase this parody of courtly love. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that all subjects can be parodied: "This is why medieval parodists played a completely unbridled game with all that is sacred and important from the point of view of official ideology" (84). He further posits that "parody drew into its game all the themes of the official teachings and cult of the Church and … all forms of the serious attitude toward the world" (ibid 85), allowing and in fact encouraging writers to create parodies of society's most orthodox rules. Parody therefore enables writers to take on society's sacred cows without fear of reprisal. *Libro de Buen Amor* and *La Celestina*, through their respective parodies of courtly love, take on not only the Church and established societal rules and regulations — including the tropes of courtly love — but, in both cases, traditional masculinity as well, as can be seen in Trotaconventos' description of the Arcipreste and in Calisto's hysteria throughout *La Celestina*, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Juan Ruiz's *Libro de Buen Amor* takes aim at both the Catholic Church and the trope of courtly love. Ruiz claims to be an Archbishop; as such, the parodic elements of the work take direct aim at more serious, established traditions. Despite the wildly sexual content of the work, it can be claimed that Ruiz speaks, at least to some extent, to many clergymen's escapades: "it corresponded to the sexual predicament of the rank and file of the clerical estate. As we know, ecclesiastics were unable to contract a legal marriage. … those who took to

promiscuity usually had little to fear from church authorities: what mattered was not that the clergy be chaste, but that they be unmarried" (Burkhard 30). *Libro de Buen Amor* is thus able to take aim even more squarely at hypocrisy within the ranks of the church, using the figure of the randy Arcipreste and his helpful procuress Trotaconventos, along with a liberal helping of courtly love, to showcase the promiscuity among the clergy. However, while Richard Burkhard argues that "the resort to an amoral intermediary [Trotaconventos] represents the next step in procedure" for the Arcipreste (26), it will be Trotaconventos who, parodying courtly love, will slyly undermine the Arcipreste's masculinity in the sales spiel she offers a perspective Lady-Thing.

While it is usually the *woman* who is objectified and turned into an "object of exchange" (Zizek "Courtly Love" 108), Trotaconventos, as she tries to drum up interest in the Arcipreste with a potential Lady-Thing, creates of the Arcipreste's description something very close to an object of exchange. She describes, in great detail, everything from the his eyes to his height to his general shape (Ruiz 1485-1492), making him far more object d'art (albeit a somewhat unattractive object d'art) than person. Much as the fetishist/lover of courtly love reduces his Lady to an object, so does Trotaconventos reduce the Arcipreste to a set of body parts:

> …el cuerpo ha bien largo, mienbros grandes, trefudo, / la cabeça non chica, velloso, pescoçudo …. la su nariz es luenga: esto le desconpónl // las encías bermejas e la falba tunbal, / la boca non pequeña, labroas al comunal, / más gordos que delgados, bermejos como coral, / las espaldas bien grandes, las muñecas atal. // Los ojos ha pequeños, es un poquillo baço; / los pechos

> delanteros, bien trefudo el braço, / bien conplidas las piernas; el pie, chico pedaço. (Ruiz 1485-1488).

It is nearly always the *woman* in courtly love who is reduced to an object, yet here it is the *man*. Using Trotaconventos' rather unconventional sales speech, Ruiz parodies both the church and the trope of courtly love in one description. Trotaconventos is doing her job as a salesman, to be sure, yet it is an odd description indeed she offers. Indeed, Trotaconventos is highlighting accepts of the Arcipreste's body that do not bear out his supposed presence as a successful Lothario: "…the Arcipreste's position on the chain is, in fact, a feminized one in which he is less than a perfect and complete male …. His body ceases to be fit for labor, and he loses his ability to assert masculinity as constructed through the imperative to aggression, sexual domination, and reproduction" (Haywood 143). Since, of course, Trotaconventos' sales spiel fails to convince the potential Lady-Thing, the Arcipreste fails in a most basic endeavor. However, through her description Trotaconventos is creating the conditions for his fall. Her "word-portrait," at the same time it "fails to effect the desired reaction in the lady's heart" (Clarke 408), also *feminizes* the Arcipreste. In Trotaconventos' hands the thorough description of every aspect of the Arcipreste not only makes *him*, more than the potential Lady-Thing, into an object of exchange, but objectifies him just as much as any woman in courtly love, thereby stripping him of the masculine agency he has assumed throughout *Libro de Buen Amor*. It makes him, rather than an example of a courtly lover (even a failed one), instead a parody both of the sexually indiscriminate clergymen of the time but also of the courtly lover who objectifies and fetishizes his "Lady." His feminized description makes him, Louise Haywood suggests, a somewhat less threatening figure: "Similarly, Trotaconventos seems to be trying to convince Doña Garoça" of

his masculinity, “whilst at the same time, suggesting that he will be incapable of presenting a sexual threat to her should they meet” (73). However, the description pushes the parodic element even further. It is here that the Arcipreste changes most clearly from man to Man-Thing, and just as quickly from a privileged position of masculine power within the dominant structures of the Church to one that parodies the Lady’s position within courtly love.

Fernando de Rojas’s Calisto, unlike Ruiz’s Arcipreste, never quite descends to the level of Man-Thing. However, he too becomes an object of parody. Unlike *Libro de Buen Amor*, Ruiz begins *La Celestina* with scenes that could come straight out of courtly love. The work begins with Calisto’s flamboyant declarations of love and devotion to Melibea (who turns him down), and ends with the deaths of both members of the couple, following close on the heels of the deaths of nearly all their servants and associates. The work’s first lines are even fairly conventional: “En eso veo, Melibea, la grandeza de Dios,” Calisto tells the object of his desire (Rojas 46). Here, as he will throughout the work, “Rojas mezcla la carnalidad de los amantes con términos religiosos” (Berecochea 20). The mix once again brings forward Bakhtinian ideas of parody: Rojas, like Ruiz, is simultaneously parodying courtly love *and* religion, thus squarely taking aim at societal rules. Despite the conventional opening, however, Rojas quickly displays the work’s parodic elements, as Calisto’s increasingly flamboyant declarations become obviously parodic: “¿Yo? Melibeo soy y a Melibea adoro y en Melibea creo y a Melibea amo” (ibid 50). Calisto’s claim that he *is* Melibea, and that she has supplanted God in his world — “y en Melibeo creo” (ibid 50) — pushes his declarations past the bonds of normal courtly love and straight into the parodic. His are the words not only of a parody but also of a heretical one: “…in Calisto’s exaggerated passion for Melibea, nothing matters — not even the Christian religion, its

heaven, or its God" (Pérez-Romero 108). Through Calisto's relentless idolatry, Rojas emphasizes *La Celestina*'s parodic elements: he, like Ruiz, directs his parodic prowess not only at courtly love but at religion and at the society it shapes. It does so using a man of the upper classes as its prime parodic target.

Indeed, Ximena Berecochea seconds this argument in her article "Calisto: ruptura con la tipificación de un amante ideal," wherein she posits that it is *Calisto* himself who is the single largest object of parody in *La Celestina*: "Todas las acciones de Calisto son una parodia de las que un buen amante … desarrolla. El tono más corriente lo mezcla con la retórica del amante cortés que Calisto parece no saber utilizer," which she argues serves "como única guía la parodia que Rojas construye" (22). Much as Ruiz, through Trotaconventos' feminized and satiric description of the Arcipreste, parodies courtly love, so too does Rojas use a man as the main object of his parody. His avowals of love are so consistently grandiose as to be parodic. He also turns the same language of courtly love that he uses to refer to Melibea toward Celestina when he is speaking to her. Although their relationship is strictly one of business, with an exchange of money on the one hand and services on the other, he calls her, after she has presented him with Melibea's girdle, "¡O mi señora, mi madre, mi consoladora! Déjame gozar con este mensajero de mi gloria. … ¡O tú, señora, algría de las viejas mujeres, gozo de las mozas, descanso de los fatigados como yo!" (Rojas 116). It is unclear, since his hyperbolic language is unchanged throughout his declaration, whether he is glorying more in the elderly Celestina or in the girdle she has acquired for him. Melibea's girdle is also a celebration of the wordily, a snide refutation on Rojas' part of "the hypocritical otherworldly ideology of the upper classes with its contempt for worldliness" (Pérez-Romero 231). Not only is Melibea's girdle — and

Calisto's fetishization of it — a worldly possession, but it has also fallen into Calisto's hands through an economic transaction involving multiple (mostly female) agents. Calisto, girdle in hand, is now free to celebrate the fetishization of the Lady-Thing in peace.

However, he is evidently unclear on what is involved in courtly love. As Zizek writes, the Lady is a paradox: "our 'official' desire is that we want to sleep with the Lady; whereas in truth, there is nothing we fear more than a Lady who might generously yield to this wish of ours — what we truly expect and want from the Lady is simply yet another new ordeal, yet one more postponement" ("Courtly Love" 96). If he were a good courtly lover, Calisto would have no desire of sleeping with the Lady-Thing he has created; instead, he would want only to continue fetishizing her. Melibea, however, becomes the Lady-Thing that acquiesces: "Pues ve, mi señora, mi leal amiga, y habla con aquel señor y que venga muy paso y de allí se dará concierto, según su voluntad, a la hora que has ordenado" (Rojas 161). Were Calisto rigidly following the tracts of courtly love, this would be enough to send him into hiding. However, it is indeed what he has *sought*, and in Berecochea's words, "Calisto demuestra constantamente que lo que busca es la consumación sexual" (18). While he continues with the linguistic requirements of courtly love, he does not comply with its basic tenements.

The words are, for Calisto, a twisted parody of their original intentions; whereas for another man, following the rules laid out by courtly love, the girdle alone would be enough (and would become fetishized), Calisto requires the woman herself. Once he has gained her, he wants to consummate their affair. However, consummation of a supposedly "courtly" relationship at once pushes it outside the bounds of courtly love and, in Calisto's case, even further into parody. Zizek posits that relationships must be broken in order to maintain their

perfection, writing: “The ultimate proof of a true … love is that the lovers split, renounce the full consummation of the relationship: if the lovers were to remain together, they would either die or turn into an ordinary everyday bourgeoisie couple” (“‘There is No Sexual Relationship’” 8). Neither Calisto nor Melibea, therefore, want a relationship approximating this “courtly” love; instead, both seek carnality, an earthly pleasure to trump whatever may come after: “… the end of human alienation and the attainment of fulfillment can be found only in this world” (Pérez-Romero 231). Their desires, therefore, directly challenge societal rules at the same time as Rojas uses Calisto to adroitly parody the courtly lover, and Calisto’s wild declarations of love hold within them the germs of rebellion. Through these snide jabs at society, Rojas also continues to parody not just courtly love but society at large.

Calisto’s death near the end of *La Celestina*, rather than returning Rojas’ work to the safety of serious courtly love, underscores its parodic elements. Calisto does not die from a broken heart; nor does he die at the hands of Melibea’s father. Instead, Calisto puts a foot wrong on his ladder and dies from the resultant fall: “¡O, válame Santa María! ¡Muerto soy! ¡Confesión!” cries Calisto, while his servant Tristán emphasizes that he did indeed die “sin confesión,” and Melibea, still in the house, confesses her affair and then throws herself to her death after Calisto (Rojas 224-231). Calisto’s death cry should perhaps be seen as the frantic howl of a man falling to his death down a ladder, yet in the context of his other grandiose statements it becomes darkly comic itself, a strange nod to Bakhtin’s belief that parody twists that which frightens us into humor (90-91): a fall down a ladder should terrify most of us, whether or we are climbing it to consummate a relationship that should, according to the terms we claim to follow, remain unconsummated and fetishized forever.

However, Calisto manages to be amusing until the end, despite the seriousness of his plight. Françoise Maurizi argues that the ladder itself takes on a parodic element, as "la escala del paraiso: pierde su valor sagrado" (165). The "heavenly ladder," in this case, leads not to any Christian heaven but to Melibea and her bed, emphasizing Calisto's ties to the corporeal world and to the carnality represented by his encounters with Melibea. It also once again underscores his blasphemy, cleverly parodying the fetishization of the Lady-Thing. If he is climbing to, and then falling — or being cast down from — paradise, he once again is demonstrating that the faith in which he was baptized, with its emphasis upon another world, holds no sway over him. It is also a clever twisting of typical gender representations: "For the most part they [women] are subservient, foolish, destructive, or inconsequential" (Gloeckner 136). However, in *La Celestina* it is very much Calisto who is depicted as unintelligent and, in the end, fairly inconsequential. In fact, unlike Calisto's accidental death, Melibea's suicide is one she plans, preferring to leave the world than remain without Calisto (Rojas 228). While it is much harder to see the parodic elements within her suicide than those present in Calisto's fall from the ladder (and his apparent fall from grace), parody remains a factor in her death. Berecochea writes that the ideal lover of courtly love must show his devotion by dying: "Al final de la novela, su constancia y devoción se muestra" through his death, which becomes "'una muerte noble, inevitable, digna de un amante perfecto'" (19). Thus, it is the man's place to die, nobly, in the name of protecting his fetishized Lady-Thing. Here, however, the noble death falls to Melibea. As he twists gender roles, Rojas once again parodies courtly love alongside society. The weak and flamboyant Calisto is fated to fall from grace and die in an accident; Melibea, assuming the mantle of the ideal courtly lover, chooses to follow him in death. There is no "final

redeemer" (Zizek "Deeper Than the Day" 202) present here; instead Melibea makes her own decision and then dies, following a courtly tradition her lover never fully understood. In the pathos of her suicide lurks the parody of both a genre and a society, a final reminder of Rojas' consistent use of parody throughout *La Celestina*.

While both works showcase their parodic elements in vastly different ways, Juan Ruiz in *Libro de Buen Amor* and Fernando de Rojas in *La Celestina* both take unerring aim at the male subject within religion and society, using the courtly lover as an avenue of parody. The elderly Trotaconventos, serving the Arcipreste as salesman and procuress, uses the description she offers Doña Garoça as a space to undermine the Arcipreste's masculinity and, therefore, his privileged position within society and the Church. His feminized description, which draws emphasis to all the *wrong* parts (including his small eyes), forcibly strips from him the power inherent in the lover within courtly love. No longer can he objectify his perspective Lady-Things, for Trotaconventos has, very handily, objectified *him*. In fact, through her words, he becomes a feminized Man-Thing, symbolically neutered by the power of a woman's speech. Rojas' Calisto, while he does not become a Man-Thing as does the Arcipreste, still stands as the primary target of parody within *La Celestina*. Rojas' use of parody is sly, carefully couched behind apparent fidelity to the traditions of courtly love; the lovers even die at the end of the work. However, even in their deaths Rojas' use of parody is evident, and he levels his parodic efforts at society as much as at courtly love. Calisto is a failure as a courtly lover: unlike the ideal lover, he needs more than an object to fetishize, requiring consummation and thereby making a mockery of his courtly language — which, of course, he also turns towards the elderly procuress Celestina. His very death is a parody: unlike the courtly lover, he dies in an accident, bypassing the "noble"

death demanded of a good courtly lover. His Lady-Thing, on the other hand, furthers the parody through her suicide. Whereas Calisto has demonstrated his own callowness through *La Celestina*, Melibea, in her death scene, claims for herself the position of the ideal lover as defined by the trope of courtly love. When she throws herself to her own death, Rojas completes his dark parody: it is Melibea, not Calisto, who gains agency in this last scene. The parody Juan Ruiz offers is distinctly light-hearted; that presented by Fernando de Rojas is considerably darker, and somewhat more nuanced. Nonetheless, both works, using men in positions of power as their primary targets, break with and parody courtly love as well as the societies under which they live.

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