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Maintaining the Medieval Tradition: Pármeno's Falls in the *Celestina* as a Caution against
Renaissance Individuality

The *Celestina* or *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* is a Spanish novel in dialogue by Fernando de Rojas, published in 1499 – right at the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Where the medieval period emphasized the importance of living life as God had prescribed and favored the community over the individual, the Renaissance allowed for the emergence of a more independent spirit and cultivated an increased interest in the unique individual. The *Celestina* includes a strong emphasis on the metaphor of falling, with the titular young lovers Calisto and Melibea and Calisto's servant Pármeno falling in terms of honor and morality (closely connected to religion) before ultimately experiencing physical falls that lead to their deaths. These falls, both metaphorical and physical, result when the characters break the rules of their social system and go against the hand that Fate has dealt them. Pármeno, especially, struggles with his place as Calisto's servant and undergoes a drastic change – from caring, loyal and honest to cold, deceptive, and greedy. Pármeno, with what seems like a bit of a Renaissance spirit, steps out from under his master's shadow, but this move leads him to a fall in terms of honor, morality, and reason that in turn leads directly to his physical fall and his death. Pármeno's story within the *Celestina* reads as a cautionary tale against adopting the individualist attitude of the Renaissance and in favor of keeping the medieval tradition alive.

Metaphorical falls abound in the *Celestina*. When a character experiences a fall in terms of religion or morality, for example, the story first presents him or her as highly moral and good but somehow, through the course of events, the character becomes markedly immoral and bad. A fall in terms of honor is essentially a significant loss of honor that takes place through the story. Falling in love can be visualized in a similar way, but, at least as it is treated in the *Celestina*, love is more like a pit that someone falls into after previously standing on solid ground. Pármeno experiences all of these. These changes could easily be conceptualized with different imagery, but the many references to falls in the *Celestina*, and especially the physical falls that end lives, strongly suggest the fall as an appropriate metaphor.

The word “fall” (in Spanish, “caída”) or variations of it, appears several times in the work. Examples include Sempronio’s warning for Calisto: “Books are filled with vile and foul examples of women, and of falls suffered by men who like you esteemed them” (Rojas 13) and Pármeno’s lament for the same: “You are undone, vanquished, fallen!” (Rojas 29). Celestina, the old witch, also shows that leading Melibea to a metaphorical fall serves her own goals: “The more deeply she was upset, the happier I became, because that much closer was her surrender and her fall” (Rojas 88). Early on, Pármeno, while he still shows himself as honorable, even foreshadows his own future and recognizes, “I wish for riches, but he who is dishonest in his climb is likely to fall farther than he climbed” (Rojas 34). Here Pármeno goes beyond the word ‘fall’ with the additional use of the image of climbing, strengthening this connection between a fall in a physical sense and one in a metaphorical sense. Pármeno sees no problem with attempting to move up in the world, but stresses the importance of doing so in the right way. He understands that in order to successfully move upward, one must proceed with honesty and honor, because to do otherwise is to invite consequences. In continuation of his earlier thought,

he adds, “I would like to spend my life free of envy, cross deserts and rugged lands without fear, sleep without sudden fright, speak without insults, be strong without abuse, be compensated without opposition” (Rojas 35). Pármeno would like to improve his position, but would prefer to stay in his low place than end up on bad terms with other people. He sees that too much individualism without regard for others is not in his best interest. If he is to climb, he recognizes the importance of caution in avoiding a fall.

McPheeters also considers the presence and frequency of the image of falling, pointing out that “There are numerous references throughout the *Celestina* to falling, especially falling from high estate as part of the inevitable turning of Fortune’s wheel” (333). Celestina, who was once much more prosperous in her rather underhanded businesses, has experienced such a fall before the events of the novel. Perhaps this pushes her to focus so intently on bringing Pármeno over to her side for a better chance at success in profiting from Calisto. Calisto and Melibea – the young nobles who move the plot, trigger everyone’s troubles (including Pármeno’s), and end up losing everything – appear also to be victims of Fortune, just as they are victims of love and of the added manipulations of Celestina. Gilman looks at the connection between falling in terms of Fortune’s wheel and falling in physical space, focusing on how the metaphorical and physical falls work together: “United in the word ‘cayda’ with its two levels of meaning (one figurative and the other brutally real), Fortune and space become one. They merge with four plunges to death as the profit of their enigmatic merger” (351). The fallen characters of the *Celestina* are unlucky enough to be doomed by this “merger.” The nobles Calisto and Melibea and the servants Pármeno and Sempronio are tied together by their common fate. A fall from Fortune is indeed unfortunate, but death, especially without the assurance of eternal life that would come from standing at the pinnacle of virtue in one’s religion, is more than any of these young people were

bargaining for. Perhaps part of our good servant Pármeno's problem lies in that, being at the low point of the wheel at the start and attempting to climb, he finds himself knocked down when the wheel turns. It is, after all, not up to man to change his place. That is for Fortune herself to decide. Might holding tight and trusting in the natural twists of fate have served him better? Such a tactic would be more in line with the medieval man than the Renaissance one, after all. As Pármeno asserts his individuality and attempts to fight his fate, he actually ends up diminishing his character and carrying himself to a tragic end. The consequences of Pármeno's choice suggest that it was the wrong one, and that the alternative – maintaining the status quo – would have been preferable.

Fernando de Rojas makes references to falls in terms of religion in the *Celestina* as well, without need for the use of the word itself. The connection between the experiences of the characters and falls in the biblical sense has been examined before. As Weinberg says, "...all the characters fall from a state of grace as Christians in good standing, a fall symbolized by their deaths without confession, far from the consolations of their religion" (143). Calisto, Melibea, and Pármeno all commit rather un-Christian acts and die without resolving these issues. It is especially clear that Pármeno has lost this 'good standing,' given that by the time of his death he has become self-centered and greedy, and, in fact, a murderer. Dedication to God and to the Catholic Church was a defining feature of medieval life; turning away from this serves no character well in the *Celestina*. In addition to these personal falls from grace, others have also made connections to the Fall of Man. According to Weiner, "If one examines the forces which move the plot and the characters... he finds precisely those which lead to the fall of man: temptation, desire, seduction, gratification, and punishment" (389). Truesdell agrees and explains it in this way: "We have before us the Fall taking place in fifteenth-century Spain" (275). While

other analyses consider Calisto to be the one representing Adam here, Truesdell affords that honor (or dishonor?) to Pármeno. He explains how Celestina confronts Pármeno with the “triple temptation”: temptation of the flesh, avarice, and presumption, comparing each to an aspect of the Fall of Adam. Pármeno gives in to each, accepting Celestina’s manipulations in order to receive three things he desires: a young woman that he lusts after, monetary gains through the “legacy of his father”, and freedom from his master Calisto (Truesdell 268). Pármeno is particularly attracted to this temptation of presumption, and he struggles with it the most, as we will see. For a servant with a burgeoning Renaissance spirit, nothing could be more appealing.

Pármeno is a particularly interesting character to examine because he is surprisingly human-like, and because of the challenges that this fact presents for him. In his introduction to *Celestina*, Roberto González Echevarría writes: “A remarkable modern feature of *Celestina* is the characters’ development... These characters are not flat, unchanging, and lacking a past that weighs upon the present action” (Rojas xviii). After describing some of Pármeno’s past, concerning his parentage and his time with Celestina when he was young, he writes, “Pármeno, in short, is a character who changes and develops during the action of the work” (Rojas xx). We see that Pármeno has always been on the lower end of the social system, always subservient to someone else. Having lived with Celestina, and before that with a mother just like her, may have affected him. His goodness at the start of the story may reflect an attempt to get away from the criminality of his family and his past, and yet his change of heart may also reflect a lasting influence of that past. Pármeno is clearly a not real person, but in some ways, he acts like one. He has a past, he has beliefs and emotions, and he changes – with a personal struggle. Pármeno attempts to assert his individuality and his personal value because he *is* an individual. While to the modern reader this would seem to be a positive quality, the results – a sharp decline in honor

and morality, a murder committed for greed, and his death – suggest that in the medieval context, asserting one's individuality is not a particularly good idea.

Pármeno is the perfect candidate for a decline precisely because he stands in such a high place to begin with. While Calisto obsesses over Melibea, and Celestina and Sempronio (Calisto's other servant) plot to take advantage of this, Pármeno remains reasonable, moral, and loyal. Where Sempronio sees a way to profit from Calisto's distress, Pármeno warns him about the dangers of dealing with Celestina and worries about his well-being. He says, "...as it is, with all hope already lost, my happiness evaporates, and I weep... I would not want my master to suffer" (Rojas 31). He has strong opinions in other areas of conduct as well, beyond his role as servant. He has a reasonable view of the reality of dishonesty and greed: "I wish for riches, but he who is dishonest in his climb is likely to fall farther than he climbed. I would not want wealth gained through deceit" (Rojas 34). In addition, when speaking with Celestina about the possibility of a friendship with Sempronio, he says, "Ah Celestina! I have heard my elders say that an example of lust or avarice does great harm, and that a man should confine his dealings to those who make him better, and not those he plans to improve" (Rojas 36). Pármeno understands the dangers of dealing with the wrong people and giving in to dishonesty, lust, and avarice. As the reasonable one among a cast of characters ruled by their desires, he foresees the downfall that is likely to result from seeking riches and pleasure without carefully considering the consequences of one's actions. This Pármeno, who epitomizes the good and moral and believes that "it is not those who have very little who are poor, but those who want very much" (Rojas 35) demonstrates just what a medieval servant should be.

Pármeno does not take his early movements lightly. He struggles. He fears making the wrong choice and trusting in the wrong person. With careful consideration, Pármeno concludes

that what appears to us to be his first step downward, trusting Celestina, is in fact the right thing to do. He sees this move as the right one because it involves having faith, listening to his elder, and choosing peace over conflict; all ordinarily good things, according to his beliefs. Even so, he expresses to Sempronio that he is “frightened” (Rojas 39). At first, though the story will show that he makes a bad decision, he is still trying to do the right thing and be a good person; only, he does not know precisely what that means. According to Brancaforte, “La Celestina... pone de relieve el factor moral interno, la lucha entre la razón y las pasiones... [y] se sigue la ley moral que requiere que los personajes que se dejan guiar por sus pasiones sean castigados” (204). Aware of the importance of following reason and doing what is morally right, Pármene finds himself first pulled to the side of reason in the fight between reason and passion. His passions will eventually get the best of him, and he will be punished, but whatever the outcome, his struggle is a human one, as he deals with an issue that real people are often faced with.

Pármene’s next step downward, and possibly his most important one, is also made with consideration and reason, but influenced by an emotional reaction. Pármene implies that until this point, Calisto has been a good master. He says, “I love Calisto because I owe him loyalty: because I am his servant; because of the good he has done me...” (Rojas 30-31). But, obsessing over his own issues with Melibea, Calisto begins to speak very unkindly to Pármene. In a single conversation, he refers to Pármene as a “noxious flea” (Rojas 43), a “muddlehead” (Rojas 44), a “pissmire” (Rojas 45), “a gob of fawning, a pot of malice” (Rojas 45), “bad company” (Rojas 45), and a “blaggard” (Rojas 45). After this, Pármene considers that loyalty in reality does him little good, telling himself, “I suffer for being loyal; others win by being evil, I lose by being good... they call traitors knowledgeable and those who are loyal stupid... Never lick someone’s boots again” (Rojas 46). Here, Pármene follows Celestina’s advice: “These masters today love

themselves more than their servants, and they are not hurt by it; their servants should do the same” (Rojas 34). This is not an unreasonable step, considering his earlier decision to trust in her and his recent experience that backs it up. But it will prove to be a terribly significant one. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, written centuries later, Sigmund Freud reaches a conclusion similar to Pármeno’s when, in his analytical consideration of the commandment to ‘love thy neighbor’, he writes, “But anyone who follows such a precept in present-day civilization only puts himself at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the person who disregards it” (146). This issue of choosing loyalty and kindness in the face of untrustworthy others remains, and is an issue facing human beings even now. The question of which way to go has not necessarily been decisively answered. But in the context of *Celestina*, medieval Europe, and Pármeno’s decision to challenge his fate, the answer appears to go decidedly against the position taken by both Pármeno and Freud.

Eventually, Pármeno begins to turn away from the reason that has guided him so far. He moves from a place of reason when considering Calisto’s problem to diving right in to the same mess himself. Seeing the effect of his love for Melibea on Calisto, Pármeno says, in an aside, “His life does not mean much to him, we will be wearing mourning if this affair advances” (Rojas 83). He is aware of Calisto’s attitude that death “would be a relief to this torment of [his], for it is greater and pains [him] more” (Rojas 84). And yet, faced with the same situation, infatuation with a young woman, he says to Sempronio: “I told you I was dying for Areúsa’s love” (Rojas 104). Pármeno recognizes this obsession with Melibea to have a negative influence on Calisto, but is not able to resist the object of his own affection. Here, though reason tells him that he should avoid setting everything else aside in pursuit of a woman, his passions are stronger and tell him that no value and no person is worth more than love. It is here, where he begins to

push his values aside, that Pármeno begins to lose that which made him at first such an honorable man. As a man of honor with strong values, such a loss of personal values is a powerful punishment in and of itself. The Renaissance-like emphasis on himself as an individual that Pármeno has begun to adopt seems to actually detract from the person – the unique and valuable individual – that he was.

The opposite of reason (which Pármeno has begun to reject), one could say, is madness – and the connection between madness and love is strong in the *Celestina*. Sempronio sees this in Calisto: “I do not deceive myself, this master of mine is mad” (Rojas 9), as does Melibea: “His illness must be madness!” (Rojas 67). We could assume that the reasonable Pármeno would agree whole-heartedly. But after spending the night with Areúsa, Pármeno feels euphoric, and this feeling leads him to a conversation with Sempronio about love and madness. Pármeno asks, “Then is it madness to love, and I am crazed and have no sense?” (Rojas 118). Sempronio replies, “By your standards you are mad” (Rojas 119). These characters voice the idea that to fall in love and forget all else, throwing away the plan previously set out for one’s life, is madness. Getting what he wants with Areúsa only pushes Pármeno even further down. After all, in the *Celestina* “...love is identified as a malignant supranatural force, causing far greater tribulation than joy...” (Earle 93). Pármeno (along with essentially everyone else) is also negatively affected by Calisto falling for Melibea, as that is the trigger that starts this whole crisis. Yet he fails to connect the two cases and see where his own passions might lead him.

Another downside to being ruled more by passions than by reason is that strong emotions are not always positive or euphoric. When Sempronio fails to share in his excitement over his experience with Areúsa, Pármeno says,

...in this sad life pleasure does not come without its opposite, anguish. We see joyous, serene, bright sunshine replaced by dark clouds and rain; comfort and pleasure by sorrow and death; laughter and delight by weeping and mortal passion; and finally, tranquility and repose by grief and sadness. (Rojas 120)

In this moment he offers a rather negative view of life, suggesting that perhaps his choice to change himself, to get out from under Calisto and his role as the perfect, loyal servant, has not made everything so much better. His mood is unstable; he is more easily moved by his passions than before. If Fortune wishes to punish Pármeno for asserting his individuality, following his passions, and rejecting the medieval model, this is certainly one way to go.

Through all of this, Pármeno challenges his fate and makes decisions, but he does not do so entirely on his own. Celestina and Sempronio exert a certain negative influence by pushing him in a direction that serves their own desires. Celestina makes shaping Pármeno a goal of hers: “But if I am still alive, he will be made over in my pattern” (Rojas 51). Celestina is the force that encourages the other characters to question the hand that Fortune has dealt them. She wants to turn Pármeno completely away from his fate and make him into someone else; someone like her. This, she believes, will prove beneficial to her (though we know otherwise by the end). Sempronio shares her thoughts and goals in that respect, seeking riches himself, and tells Pármeno that, according to Celestina, “fortune favored you” (Rojas 120). Celestina and Sempronio (who also deals quite a bit in deception) twist the meaning of fortune. They make a subtle manipulation here, knowing that, at least before, Pármeno was concerned with doing the right thing and presumably doing what he was meant to do. He has expressed his values and his concerns to them before, and they know how to push him further down in the service of their own goals.

And so, in Act Twelve, we see the culmination of Pármeno's descent. By turning away from his master and the place that he once comfortably held, he has opened himself up to a departure from everything that he once was. By rejecting his medieval values of community and religious morality, he transforms himself into a Renaissance individual – a version of himself clearly inferior to the original. Once so concerned for others' well-being, he now believes it is best to "never weep over the troubles of others" (Rojas 163). Once so cautious of becoming like the underhanded Sempronio, he now tells him, "You and I think alike, we are of one mind" (Rojas 163). Once fiercely loyal, he now says of Calisto, who might be in serious danger, "he is my least concern" (Rojas 169). Where he once said, "I would not be happy living on ill-gotten gains" (Rojas 34), he now claims, "Friendship has no worth where money is concerned" (Rojas 174). Early on, Pármeno says to Calisto, "When, Señor, have you seen envy in me, or seen me place my self-interest or displeasure before your well-being?" (Rojas 26-27). Where he was once offended by such a thought, he now thinks nothing of doing exactly that. The parallels demonstrating how Pármeno has fallen from high character to low are everywhere, and are clearly deliberate.

Sempronio's lover Elicia still believes that Pármeno remains a better man than Sempronio and, worried for Celestina's life when the young servants and the old woman fight over gold, pleads, "Hold him, Pármeno, hold him. Do not let this insane man kill her" (Rojas 179). But Elicia is wrong, and Pármeno instead contributes to the murder, shouting, "Die! Die! Of enemies, one fewer!" (Rojas 180). Finally, having lost everything of himself and having committed murder for the sake of greed, Pármeno punctuates his devastating metaphorical fall with a physical one, jumping out of a high window with Sempronio in order to escape the law: "Jump, I am following you" (Rojas 180). We later learn that this leap does not quite kill the two

men, and so they are executed by the law. At the time of his death, Pármeno has completely lost his identity – a fact that his former self would surely lament. While many other paths might also have led to Pármeno’s death, it is the particular one he follows – the one of Renaissance-like individuality – that truly ruins him.

According to Sosia, another servant of Calisto who shares the news of the falls and deaths of Pármeno and Sempronio, “One’s brains were spilling out of his head, and he was as good as gone; the other had both arms broken and his face was mangled” (Rojas 185). In the context of the link between the metaphorical and the physical falls, it is reasonable to assume that the one more clearly fatally injured was Pármeno, and the other Sempronio. If the fall through space is meant to emphasize and go along with the metaphorical one, then it makes the most sense for it to end in death, as did those of Calisto and Melibea. Sempronio remains at more or less the same level throughout the book, thus if anyone should have any chance of surviving his drop, it should be him, who did not have so far to fall, having both started and ended low. Pármeno, having come so far down in character, should not need the help of a human executioner to die at the end of it all. Fate and a fall through space can be expected to take care of his death. Both men were beheaded anyway, but only one had already lost his brains. How could that not be Pármeno, who had already lost himself before he leapt from the window? If his thoughts and his reasoning had already been broken and spilled out of him, it would certainly be appropriate for this to occur in a physical sense as well, as the brain was understood even at that time to at least be involved in these processes.

No one gets a happy ending after the events of the *Celestina*. All of the major characters die, and the text suggests that none of them have a peaceful, cheerful afterlife to look forward to. Their level of comfort and acceptance with this may vary, but the fact remains that none of them

would be described as “Christians in good standing” (Weinberg 143) at the time of death, and none were able to give a last confession. With this sort of ending, we can conclude that the movements made by the characters throughout the story did not ultimately lead them in the right direction. Pármeno underwent the greatest change, taking the greatest risks, and his fate proved a gruesome one. By the time he died, he was not happy; he was suspicious, afraid, and wrathful. He meant for every step he took to protect him from the dangers of following the love-crazed Calisto, but danger remained. He died anyway, and he did so without honor, religion, or good moral or mental health. Sempronio said that fortune favored him, but that was clearly not the case. Asserting his individuality with a Renaissance spirit and freeing himself from a fate tied to his master’s proves to be the worst choice that Pármeno could have made.

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