

James Mabbe

(ed. de José María Pérez Fernández)

The Spanish Bawd, MHRA Tudor and Stuart Translations, vol. 10

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The Spanish Bawd is the second of two translations by the English author James Mabbe (1572–1642) of that early modern ‘best-seller’ *Celestina* – Fernando de Rojas’s tale of young lovers, servants, prostitutes and the infamous eponymous go-between. Published in 1631, it came several decades after an abridged manuscript version by Mabbe, produced ca. 1603-11 and titled *Celestina or the Tragick-Comedie of Calisto and Melibea*. That Mabbe returned to the work after the first attempt not only mirrors Rojas’s own reworking of the text from *Comedia* to *Tragicomedia*, it is also a testament to the appeal that *Celestina* held for early modern audiences across Europe. While new Castilian editions of the *Comedia* and *Tragicomedia* have appeared in recent years¹, *Celestina*’s European translations have yet to receive similar updates: Kathleen Kish’s edition of the Italian translation dates from 1973 and Denis L. Drysdal’s edition of the French translation from 1974; Guadalupe Martínez Lacalle’s edition of Mabbe’s early seventeenth-century manuscript version appeared in 1972 and *The Spanish Bawd* was last published in 1987 in Dorothy Severin’s bilingual edition. Although an undoubtedly useful tool for comparing Mabbe’s translation against the Spanish and an excellent starting point for students

1. *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, ed. José Luis Canet Vallés (Valencia: Universitat de València, Publicacions de la Universitat, 2011); *La Celestina*, ed. Francisco J. Lobera y Guillermo Serés, Paloma Díaz-Mas, Carlos Mota e Iñigo Ruiz Arzálluz, y Francisco Rico (Barcelona: Crítica, 2000; 2nd edn, Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2011).

reading the work in either language, a refreshed edition encompassing new perspectives and critical work on *Celestina* from the last few decades is long overdue.

As such, José María Pérez Fernández's *The Spanish Bawd*, part of the MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations series, is a timely addition to scholarship on this canonical pre-modern text. The series aims, according to the General Editor's Foreword, 'to restore to view a major part of English Renaissance literature which has become relatively inaccessible' and to extend understanding of 'the process of cultural exchange within the early modern world' (viii) – an objective that Pérez Fernández here achieves. With this critical edition and accompanying comprehensive study Pérez Fernández lays a solid foundation for future scholarship on *Celestina*'s European reception – an avenue of research in need of further critical attention. He has produced a modernised and accessible edition that will appeal to both experienced scholars and students new to *Celestina*. Furthermore, however, he has produced a valuable resource not only for scholars of early modern English literature and culture but Hispanists interested in *Celestina*'s early modern reception as well as scholars of cultural translation and comparative literature more generally.

The introduction provides a knowledgeable and eloquently argued overview of the respective cultural, social, and textual contexts in Spain and England in which *Celestina* was read, which provides an understanding of its place within European literary history for scholars less accustomed to the work and its legacy. Pérez Fernández's study is comprehensive and detailed, presenting a series of snapshots covering a range of key thematic issues, including the conflictive nature of creation and re-creation, the undercurrent of nihilistic pessimism that runs through the narrative, contemporary debates about language and its use in social cohesion, discussions of human agency, relationships between different socio-economic groups, and early modern preoccupation with reading and interpretation. Comparing the 1631 translation to the earlier manuscript version, Pérez Fernández addresses differences of tone and approach – e.g. where Mabbe eliminates sexually explicit or contentious material, such as Areúsa's claims of libertarian freedom or Calisto's near heretical remarks about Melibea – and discusses *The Spanish Bawd*'s publishing fortunes in the context of seventeenth-century censorship. At the same time, he explores how *Celestina* responded to fifteenth-century social and ideological concerns, such as the popularity of chivalric romance and sentimental prose fiction and Italian humanism, which he uses as case-studies to demonstrate how certain issues are dealt with differently by Mabbe in the context of seventeenth-century England. This is a nuanced and perceptive approach to literary reception that brings to light the evolving meanings the work acquired as it moved into new contexts. Noting that *Celestina*'s fate 'was from the start linked to the processes of translation' (p. 1), Pérez Fernández builds a convincing picture of the international networks of cultural exchange within which it existed. Clearly positioning *Celestina* as an important European 'intertext', he argues that comparison of the respective cultural milieus of the original and translation 'provide a fresh approach to the formation of the early modern European canon' (p. 6).

In the final section of the introductory study Pérez Fernández addresses *Celestina's* reception and early modern critical reactions to it. His treatment of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century intellectual and cultural milieus into which *Celestina* was appropriated highlights the evolution of conditions for the production and reception of literary texts and demonstrates clearly that the different versions – including John Rastell's 1525 *Interlude of Calisto and Melibea* – were engendered by and responded to these environments. Also of note is his discussion of the 1570 Salamanca edition by Simón de Borgoñón, which he comments 'prefigures both the milieu into which Mabbe's English translation was launched, and the kind of reactions it elicited' (p. 44). Descriptions of the intellectual and social circles in which Mabbe was working and *The Spanish Bawd* was read provide a wider perspective on the impulses for *Celestina's* appropriation, such as widely held admiration for other Hispanic texts and authors that were being translated at this time and the development of picaresque prose fiction in English. Pérez Fernández also draws important parallels between Rojas and Mabbe's use of the vernacular, noting that they were both part of academic and cultural debates that associated language and linguistic communities with the development of national literary traditions (p. 56).

The critical apparatus of the edition is, overall, well-structured and easy to use. The text itself has been annotated with detailed and informative footnotes addressing variants and Mabbe's source texts, as well as stylistic issues and cultural elements requiring contextualisation for modern audiences. The work itself is followed by a glossary of archaic and obsolete early modern English terms, an index of sources and names, and a comprehensive bibliography. While the glossary is undoubtedly a welcome resource, I would have liked to have page or line references in order to easily find the terms in the narrative itself, thus aiding readers' navigation through the work. There is a slightly frustrating inconsistency in the way in which key terms are dealt with, with some addressed in footnotes without also being listed in the glossary, while at other times readers are directed to the appendix for an explanation. Finally, the list of primary sources in the bibliography provides a quick overview of the texts that Rojas and Mabbe make use of; however, the edition lacks an index of subjects and themes. In such a dense, thematically rich work as *Celestina* this would have been a very useful resource for scholars.

And yet these are relatively minor quibbles about what is otherwise an authoritative edition and a necessary addition to scholarship on Rojas's canonical work for English-speaking audiences. José María Pérez Fernández's *The Spanish Bawd* is a valuable resource for students and scholars of *Celestina's* early modern European reception and legacy, not to mention comparative literature and translation studies. Pérez Fernández succeeds in the aims of the series to open up the work to new audiences, as well as pointing towards new avenues of investigation into this most fascinating text and its ongoing relevance to European culture.



