The lost catalonian original of Celestina

Autor:
Data de publicació: 25-09-2014

As some of you might have noticed, I was recently made aware through Twitter of some articles and notes on Celestina and its possible links to Catalonia:

The first tweet makes reference to a 2010 post by Manel Capdevila, entitled “The lost Catalonian original of Celestina” (“L’original català perdut de la Celestina”), announcing a 2008 conference on the same topic by Jordi Bilbeny, and giving an overview of the main arguments of the speaker, to be amplified at his paper. The second tweet refers to a more recent (2013) article on the urban setting of Celestina by Àlex Sendra, entitled “The city where the action of Celestina takes place” (“La ciutat on es desenvolupa l’acció de La Celestina“), in which Valencia is proposed as the most likely city in which Celestina is set. Both posts are to be found at the official webpage of the Institut Nova Història,

As some of you might have noticed, I was recently made aware through Twitter of some articles and notes on Celestina and its possible links to Catalonia:

The first tweet makes reference to a 2010 post by Manel Capdevila, entitled “The lost Catalonian original of Celestina” (“L’original català perdut de la Celestina”), announcing a 2008 conference on the same topic by Jordi Bilbeny, and giving an overview of the main arguments of the speaker, to be amplified at his paper. The second tweet refers to a more recent (2013) article on the urban setting of Celestina by Àlex Sendra, entitled “The city where the action of Celestina takes place” (“La ciutat on es desenvolupa l’acció de La Celestina“), in which Valencia is proposed as the most likely city in which Celestina is set. Both posts are to be found at the official webpage of the Institut Nova Història, which also offers some other writings on the topic, such as the 2013 “A study places the action of Celestina in Sagunt” (“Un estudi situa a Sagunt l’origen i l’acció de La Celestina“) or the 2014 “The solar eclipse of Celestina” (“L’eclipsi de sol de La Celestina“). Apparently, the official website of the Institut Nova Història also hosted the article “Celestina and Catalonian language” (“La Celestina i la llengua catalana”), which I could not find but hosted at the official website of La vaca cega, where other articles and notes by Àlex Sendra on Celestina can be read.

Provided that, due to my personal attitude toward the text, I am not particularly interested in the possible references to real settings and events in Celestina, I decided to comment briefly and in an informal manner on Jordi Bilbeny’s arguments in favour of a lost Catalonian original of Celestina; the sources of Celestina and its origin being some of my favourite research topics. These can be more or less summarised as follows:

Either the Burgos or the Toledo edition of the Comedia de Calisto y Melibea cannot be the editio princeps, therefore, there must be a previous lost edition of the text or, at least, a previous version of the text
Gracián in his Agudeza y arte de ingenio (1648) refers to the author of Celestina as “el encubierto aragonés”
Vives in his De Disciplinis. I. De causis corruptarum artium (1531) describes Celestina as being written in “nostra lingua”, which cannot be other than Catalonian because Vives was born and brought up in Valencia
There are many catalanisms in the text
The action is necessarily set in some Catalonian city

Bilbeny’s first argument is not unknown to “celestinistas”: reminding us of the polemic so dear to Menéndez Pelayo1 on the meaning of “nuevamente” being that of “nuper” in Latin or just “once again”, he states that the Burgos Comedia cannot be the editio princeps because of its title reading “nuevamente revista y enmendada con la adición de los argumentos de cada un auto en principio”, with “nuevamente” meaning “once more” and implying that there was a previous edition. However, this argument is totally irrelevant, as the only extant copy of the Burgos Comedia does not have a title page, and the edition Bilbeny is referring to is the 1501 Sevilla Comedia, which adds “con sus argumentos

nuevamente añadidos" to the title (not "nuevamente revista y enmendada con la adición de los argumentos de cada un auto en principio", which belongs to the title page of the Valencia 1514 edition of the Tragicomedia). This edition cannot obviously be the editio princeps, as there is a 1500 Toledo Comedia.

Following with Bilbeny's argumentation, the 1500 Toledo edition of the Comedia cannot precede the Burgos Comedia because it has preliminary texts that the Burgos Comedia does not include. Leaving aside the fact that he seems not to be familiar with the problems regarding the lost page (or pages) of the only extant copy of the Burgos Comedia (this might explain why he does not know about the missing title page and keeps confusing the 1502 Sevilla edition with the Burgos Comedia), and that his decision to demonstrate that the Burgos Comedia cannot follow the Toledo one is based on the above mentioned chronological implications of the use of "nuevamente" in the title page of the Burgos (Sevilla for everyone else) edition, this argument is totally irrelevant as long as there is not an ecdotic support behind. Despite uncommon, paratexts can be modified, omitted, and changed with editorial purposes, and, in my opinion, to determine the filiation of texts it is better to work with what we have before making any assumption on what we do not have. In addition, the Burgos edition not following the Toledo edition, or vice versa, does not reveal anything about any of them being a better or a worse candidate for being the editio princeps, but only demonstrates that they are not related vertically.

With regard to the 1500 Toledo edition of the Comedia, Bilbeny makes reference to an argument in favour of its being the editio princeps of which I have never heard: apparently, some scholars (which?) have interpreted the hidden message of the acrostic verses as an evidence of the 1500 Toledo Comedia being the editio princeps. More interesting is that, at this point of the argumentation, Bilbeny makes the first statement that can be seriously taken into consideration: the use of the verb "acabar" in the hidden message of the acrostic verses implies that there was some kind of previous work. However, his argumentation is darkened by the fact that he does not make any reference to the preliminary texts stating that the Comedia originated in an unfinished manuscript found in Salamanca, not being quite clear if this is what he has in mind (that the "papeles del antiguo autor" were a Catalonian manuscript, in line with Di Camillo's2 theory on the Italian origin of the first act of Celestina) or if he is referring to something else, more specifically, to a full Celestina in Catalonian (as I suspect he does). However, this lack of clarity could be the result of Manel Capdevila, the man summarising Bilbeny's ideas, being too concise.

In any case, what is clear from the above is that Bilbeny is not familiar with the editorial tradition of the Comedia, since he does not acknowledge the existence of a 1501 Sevilla edition, although continuosly referring to it, and does not know that the only remaining copy of the Burgos edition of the Comedia is incomplete, not to mention that he seems unaware of the manipulations it suffered before arriving to the Hispanic Society. Had he been familiar with this aspect of the Burgos edition of the Comedia, he would have been able to use, for example, Jaime Moll's3 arguments against the Burgos Comedia being the editio princeps. Moreover, had he considered taking a look at the stemmata proposed for the three known editions of the Comedia, Bilbeny could have used, for instance, Patrizia Botta's4 stemma to prove that any of the known Comedias cannot be the editio princeps:

Stemma (Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes).

Moving on to the second main point of Balbeny's argumentation, there is no doubt that Gracián's Agudeza y arte de ingenio refers to the author of Celestina as the "encubierto aragonés":

"Agudeza y arte de ingenio", p. 344 (Huesca, Juan Nogués, 1648; Google eBook).

With regard to this, I cannot help but remembering Emilio Blanco's5 words on this topic: "Hoy lo veo bastante más claro, y quiero pensar que el jesuita confundió o identificó la Puebla de Montalbán de los versos acrósticos con el Montalbán turolense (que le resultaría más familiar), lo que explicaría la ubicación propuesta, así como el carácter encubierto del autor". Should Emilio Blanco be right, "encubierto" would exclusively make reference to the geographical origin of the author being "hidden" in the acrostic, and not to a deliberate concelament his Aragonese provenance, only known to his more or less contemporary Aragonese fellows, like Gracián himself, as it seems to me Bilbeny is suggesting. Moreover, Gracián writes his Agudeza y arte de ingenio about one century and a half after the first edition of the Comedia appears, so that it cannot be defended that, as a contemporary of Celestina, he could have had access to some kind of information nowadays unknown to us. Actually, his being the only reference to the

Aragonese origin of its author makes very unlikely that this was some kind of general knowledge either of his or of Celestina's time, which has not reached our days. Not to mention that he is not as contemporary to Celestina as such an argument would need him to be.

Slightly different is the case of Vives's De Disciplinis, as Bilbeny's argumentation makes some assumptions that need to be treated with great care.

"De Disciplinis", fol. 30r (Antwerp, Michael Hillenius, 1531; Google eBook).

As Vives was born and brought up in Valencia, Bilbeny concludes that his mother tongue must have been Catalonian, therefore, "nostra lingua" refers to Catalonian and not to Castilian, as it has always been said (and translated). This would not be a bad point of departure if his description of the linguistic climate around Vives were not historically imprecise and biased, as he states that Vives chose to write in Latin because his personal circumstances did not allow him to write in Catalonian. Actually, Bilbeny suggests that Vives was being prosecuted by Castilian authorities and, his hatred for Castile being therefore extreme, he decided not to have anything to do with his prosecutors by writing in Latin, instead of in Castilian. However, Balbeny's argumentation does not take into account that Latin was the language of culture at the time, the language of the University and of Humanism, thus the language an intellectual like Vives himself would choose to spread his ideas in. Any vernacular, be it Catalonian or Castilian, would have limited the reach of his writings, and even affected their intellectual status.

Moreover, it seems to me that Bilbeny's argumentation suggests that there was some kind of prohibition to write in Catalonian, of which I have never heard and which does not correspond to the bibliographical records of book published in Catalonian in the XVIth century (see, for example and for an overview, Worldcat). To a certain extent, it also looks as if Bilbeny were suggesting that Vives was being prosecuted because of his linguistic background, and not because of his heterodox ideas. Finally, Bilbeny portrays a linguistic climate that does not correspond to what I have heard about XVIth century Valencia, but very much ressembles a more modern phenomenom: Bilbeny assumes that Vives could not feel at ease speaking Castilian, it being some kind of imposed language to him and the language of his prosecutors, and that he only considered Catalonian as his mother tongue. However, his belonging to a family of merchants puts him in a position in which Catalonian-Castilian bilingualism is to be expected, even if only with practical purposes. Therefore, unless there are further evidences of Juan Luis Vives considering his mother tongue Catalonian and excluding Castilian as such, this argument is not persuading enough.

In my opinion, Balbeny's most stimulating argument is the high amount of catalanisms to be found in the text, based on the same ideas in Àlex Sendra's article "Celestina and Catalonian language" ("La Celestina i la llengua catalana"). However, leaving aside that I am not an expert in historical linguistics and that Sendra's article needs a review on itself, when I read their works I cannot avoid thinking on the problem of the linguistic background of typesetters, so that many of the catalanisms Sendra identifies in his article could be explained as the result of Catalonian typesetters working on a text in Castilian, not necessarily badly translated from Catalonian, as Bilbeny and Sendra suggest at different points in their argumentations. Moreover, the catalanisms listed by Sendra being basically of lexical type (when not paleographically motivated or no catalanisms at all, but it is something for a future blog entry), and not affecting the syntactical structures or forcing the meaning of the text, diminish the suitability of the theory of the translation from a lost original in Catalonian.

Typesetter's linguistic interference would be a possibility to be really taken into account had the known editions of the Comedia not been printed in Castile (Burgos, Toledo and Sevilla), where it is very unlikely that the typesetters were of Catalonian background. Therefore, either do we assume that the editio princeps of the Comedia was printed in a Catalonian speaking region, where the first catalanisms were introduced, or do we think of an alternative third explanation. The first that comes at hand is the possibility of a Catalonian-speaker writing in Castilian and, very likey, in a Catalonian-speaking milieu.

Regarded from the point of view of the recent studies by José Luis Canet6 and Jordi Pardo7 on the role of the Valencian editor Alonso de Proaza and of the University of Valencia in the publication of Celestina, this last possibility makes a lot of sense. If the work were somehow related to the University of Valencia, it is very likely that it was first printed by Valencian printers and written and/or edited by someone with Catalonian as a mother tongue or, at least, as an everyday communication language. Thus the catalanisms. Moreover, it would explain why Valencia admits being proposed as the real city in which the action of Celestina takes place. However, in any case does it imply that it were originally composed in Catalonian.

With regard to the location of the action, I do not find it relevant at all, however, I would like to warn readers against Bilbeny's reference to an English edition of Celestina set in Valencia. Effectively, there is a 1707 English edition of Celestina set in Valencia:

"The Life of Guzmán d'Alfarache, or The Spanish Rogue, to which is added The Celebrated Tragi-Comedy Celestina", vol. 2 (London, Borwick et al., 1707; Archive.org eBook)

However, there are many things that make this edition an unsuitable source of evidence. In first place, besides the wrong attribution of the work to Mateo Alemán, this is not a translation of Celestina as such, but an adaptation to the stage and to contemporary British taste, as it appears in the title page ("Reduc'd from 21, as it is in the Original, to 5 Acts; and adapted to the English stage") and, particularly, in the preface:

Now it is improv'd by the Alterations now made in it, let those judge that will compare the one with the other. [...] We have adapted his Tragicomedy to the Stage, [...] If any of the Sentiments are a little too free, they are the Spaniard's, from whom [...] we have rather taken than added to him in this particular. We have made the Humour modern as well as the Expression.

Therefore, the setting of the action is irrelevant, as the translator (John Savage?) could have set the action wherever he wanted in Spain. Moreover, although his choice of Valencia might not be fortuitous, but suggested by something intrinsic to the text, Captain John Steven's contemporary English translation of Celestina sets its action in Madrid, this being a sign of the freedom with which English translators proceeded.

"The Spanish Libertines", title-page (London, Samuel Bunchley, 1707; Google eBook).

To sum up, Bilbeny's arguments are not sufficient to support the existence of a lost original of Celestina in Catalonian. Not only none of his arguments in favour of a lost original of Celestina in Catalonian is definitive, but his argumentation is terribly biased, imprecise, and, above all, methodologically indefensible. His argumentation shows a total indifference toward primary sources and, above all, an absolute lack of interest on the editorial history of Celestina and on previous scholarship; not to mention the lack of references to his sources, which he handles with little professionalism. Moreover, he does not distinguish between the current socio-historical circumstances of Catalonian-speaking regions and these in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, actually, he makes the current question of Catalonian Nationalism extensive to the time Celestina was being composed and read. In addition, he deliberately ignores anything that can question or qualify his conclusions, particularly when it comes to the feasibility of his sources and the extent of his statements. Finally, it seems that his whole argumentation had been built ad hoc to support the idea of a lost original of Celestina in Catalonian, with no critical spirit. This unprofessional attitude is particularly disappointing as, treated with greater care, some of Balbeny's observations could be used to support the idea of the University of Valencia playing a leading role in the publication and spread of Celestina.

It is no secret that the Institut Nova Història, in which this article originates, has a strong political colour, it being a foundation devoted to research on "the distorted account of the History of Catalonia and the former Catalan-Aragonese Crown", according to the description at its official site. However, no nationalistic revisionist intent justifies such approach to the topic of study, with some evident methodological deficiencies (for example, ignoring everything about the material condition of the only extant copy of the Burgos Comedia). As a result, Bilbeny's arguments have not been as stimulating as I thought they would be and I am still think that there aren't enough proofs to believe that Celestina was originally written in Catalan.

1 "Aunque su título diga 'de lingua casteliana in italiana nouamente traducta', no basta para que podamos inferir que hubiese otra traducción o edición anterior, porque el novamente puede tener aquí, como en otros casos, el sentido de nuper (poco ha, recientemente)". Menéndez y Pelayo, Marcelino (1943), Orígenes de la novela. III- Cuentos y novelas Cortas. "La Celestina" (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), p. 411.

2 Di Camillo, Ottavio (2010), “When and Where Was the First Act of La Celestina Composed? A Reconsideration’, in Devid Paolini (ed.), “De ninguna cosa es alegre posesión sin compañía”: estudios celestinescos y medievales en honor del profesor Joseph Thomas Snow (New York: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies), pp. 91-157.

3 Moll, Jaime (2000), “Breves consideraciones heterodoxas sobre las primeras ediciones de la Celestina“, Voz y letra: Revista de literatura, 11 (1), 21-25.

4 Botta, Patrizia (1994), “Otra vez hacia una edición crítica de La Celestina (II)”, in Actas del III Congreso de la Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval, Tomo II (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca), pp. 953-963. Available on-line.

5 Gómez Blanco, Emilio (2001), “Algunas notas sobre la recepción de Celestina en los siglos XVI y XVII”, in “Celestina”: recepción y herencia de un mito literario (Cáceres. Universidad de Extremadura), p. 44.

6 Canet, José Luis (2007), “Celestina, ‘sic et non’. ¿Libro escolar-universitario?’, Celestinesca, 31, 23-58. Available on-line.

7 Pardo, Jordi (2000), “Alonso de Proaza, ‘homo litterarum, corrector et excelsus editor’”, Convenit Selecta, 3. Available on-line.