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# REVIEWS

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James F. Burke. *Vision, the Gaze, and the Function of the Senses in Celestina*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. 139p.

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This is a worthwhile book, one which in my judgment will almost immediately and of necessity figure in any bibliography of essential studies of the *Celestina* (labelled a “Tragicomedy,” though still of disputed genre, written by Fernando de Rojas and possibly others) and/or of the late Spanish Middle Ages (or the Early Modern period, as it may be called currently). Nonetheless, Burke’s volume will also potentially appeal, and even grow to be invaluable, to those not specializing in that masterpiece of fifteenth- (and sixteenth-) century Spanish letters. Burke writes clearly and explicitly, without descending into the hieratic jargon of the latest critical modalities. A reader of general interest and even one of relatively limited experience with matters Hispanic will certainly be able to read this volume productively, grasping much of its innate import and implications. Additionally, as Burke develops his arguments, he provides sufficient threads of the plot line of the *Celestina* so that even those less familiar with this work will be able to follow him. Indeed, such readers may even catch a vision of Rojas’ text such that they will want to plunge into it in earnest (albeit in translation: incidentally, Burke translates all non-English quotations he makes).

Burke’s study evidences a profound appreciation and thorough understanding of the literary complexities of *Celestina*; his admiration, as well as his scholarly enthusiasm certainly communicate themselves to the reader. Those readers/writers focusing, for example, on the interplay of science and literature in any age will also want to read carefully, as the author brings to bear information from a variety of scientific disciplines, whether of a Classical Greco-Roman or a more Medieval or Renaissance provenance, on the literary questions he so thoroughly treats. Scientific ideas and scientists from later centuries are also periodically quoted, as Burke stresses that the more “modern” is appropriate and even readily applicable to Medieval issues. Religious and folkloric matters also frequently enter into the discussion, as vision, along with the acoustical, had bearing far beyond the strictly belletristic or scientific.

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General readership notwithstanding, it is to specialists to whom *Vision, the Gaze, and the Function of the Senses in Celestina* really seems to be addressed; they would do well to take particular note of Burke's tome. He illuminates some previously vexed, or at least potentially murky issues, shedding light on matters such as just what Rojas might have known of Classical antiquity (Plato and Platonic questions are a principal, though not an exclusive, focus here, as numerous other philosophers and physicians are quoted in detail). Burke also focuses on issues of authorship, on the Semitic background of Rojas and of the text of the *Celestina* itself, and even on the nature and implications of love in the *tragicomedia*. His discussion of notions of selfhood as elaborated in the work, how the senses form and focus the "exterior" on the "interior" and vice versa, is revealing. Burke's treatment of the nature and functions of *Celestina* herself, on a variety of planes and in numerous contexts, is especially enlightening. What she perceives and why, and then how those sensations (however sensual) are articulated, in her own field(s) of reference and in those of the other characters, constitutes a primary ingredient of the *tragicomedia*.

Burke's book is logically organized, drawing the reader along gracefully, but inexorably, to the conclusions to be reached. The nature and workings of the "higher senses" constitute a principal focus of Burke's investigation, though other sensory functions also figure along the way, particularly in the final chapter "The Banquet of Sense and the Garden of Delights" (concepts which the author localizes within the action of the *Celestina*). Thus, significant emphasis is placed on vision and visual fields, the highest of the senses, the one where the divine and the terrestrial most constantly and consistently seem to compenetrate. Light, whether as presence or absence, is a frequent topic of his book, as Burke focuses illumination and darkness in numerous contexts. He describes how the characters of Rojas' text see and do not see, are seen and not seen, while using and abusing the sensory information available to them from a variety of visual sources, whether of a heavenly or more earthly origin. The chapter "The Higher Spiritual Vision: Saint Mary Magdalene" is particularly illuminating; in this section of his book, as well as in various other chapters, Burke engages in an ongoing study of the nature and implications of the "evil eye" in *Celestina* and in the cultural milieu at large. Here, as throughout his book, Burke draws from a wealth of sources. His discussion of the acoustical elements of the *tragicomedia* also exemplifies the best tradition of literary scholarship. He details how auditory imagery, much like its visual counterpart, informs the text and texture of the *Celestina*. Numerous writers have discoursed on the orality/aurality of this work and the period it represents; Burke's study should take its place among the preeminent ones of this bent. His research

is thorough, even exhaustive, though the reader must confess, finally, to experiencing more exhilaration than exhaustion while working through the book. *Vision, the Gaze, and the Function of the Senses in Celestina* is by no means an easy study to read. But the reader should sense early on that the reading is definitely worth the effort. ✱