The first part of this introduction will address some basic questions regarding La Celestina, the Spanish work by Fernando de Rojas from which the interlude was adapted. This will help situate the first English version of La Celestina within a proper context in the second part of the introduction.

Authorship and the definition of genre constitute two of the controversial issues that surround La Celestina (1499) and they epitomise its contumacious resistance to classification. Fernando de Rojas only acknowledged authorship through the interposition of a series of layers between the readers and his identity. This reluctance resulted from the thorny nature of the text: a rather crude and realistic account of the tragic story of two young lovers (Calisto and Melibea), surrounded by a circle of servants, prostitutes, and the pander Celestina, who acts as a sort of underworld demiurge in this affair.

La Celestina opens with Calisto entering Melibea’s orchard in search of a runaway falcon. Once there, he declares his love for Melibea, who rejects him. Dejected, the young lover returns home, where his servant Sempronio suggests he hire the services of the pander Celestina to win Melibea’s favour. Sempronio then plots with Celestina to get as much money as they can from Calisto’s foolish passion. Another of Calisto’s servants, Pármeno, warns the young lover against Celestina and her evil arts. But seeing that Calisto will not listen to reason, and persuaded by Celestina, he also joins her and Sempronio in their ploy to bring about the union of Calisto and Melibea, and obtain as much profit as possible from the whole process. In order to persuade the teenager Pármeno, Celestina also arranges sexual intercourse between him and Aréusa, one of her protégées. Another of her wenches, Elicia, already had the other servant, Sempronio, as one of her lovers — Celestina always advises her young protégées to have more than one lover, since this is a way of diversifying and maintaining several sources of income as well as of obtaining sundry favours. Not without some resistance, Celestina manages to persuade Melibea of Calisto’s good intentions, and with the apparent help of a charmed thread which Celestina sells to the innocent young girl, Melibea falls under the spell of a powerful passion for the young man. After the first clandestine encounter between the two protagonists, the two servants, Pármeno and Sempronio, visit the old bawd to demand their share in the booty she has obtained from Calisto. They argue, and the two servants slay Celestina. They are immediately arrested and executed. Another of Calisto’s servants, Sosia, gives his lord the bad news amidst the young lover’s musings after his first encounter with Melibea. Calisto prepares his next meeting with his paramour, for which he recruits the aid of his servants Sosia and Tristán. When the two young wenches, Aréusa and Elicia, hear about the murder of Celestina and the subsequent execution of their lovers, they decide to take revenge on Calisto and Melibea. They hire the services of a bragging but cowardly mercenary, Centurio, who then
outsources the job to his comrade Traso. In their new passionate encounter, Calisto enjoys Melibea’s company in her garden while his two servants keep watch on the other side of the wall. Traso and others arrive with the intention of making trouble. They quarrel with Tristán and Sosia, and upon hearing that his two servants are in danger, Calisto hastens to aid them, accidentally and fatally falling off the ladder he had previously used to climb into Melibea’s orchard. Desolated after the death of her lover, Melibea commits suicide by throwing herself from the tower of her father’s mansion. La Celestina ends with the heartfelt lament of Melibea’s father, Pleberio.

The problematic nature of the work called for a series of moves to check its capacity for spawning potentially undesirable readings. One of the first among these strategies is the introductory letter called ‘El autor a un su amigo’, where Rojas claims to have stumbled upon the original First Act, written by another unspecified author. Realising it was a profitable and enjoyable text, Rojas declares that he was encouraged to continue the story, which he did until he completed the whole work during a short vacation from his daily duties as a lawyer. Absent from the anonymous first 1499 edition, the reactions to the text may have moved the author and his editors to add this introductory letter in subsequent editions, together with a poem in which the author’s name, Fernando de Rojas, appears in acrostics. These new editions also included five new acts. ¹

As well as inviting closer readings, this codification of the author’s name points to an implicit acknowledgement of the inexhaustibility of the text. This fundamental notion appears in the author’s introductory letter, together with another founding principle in the work: the Heraclitean *omnia secundum litem fiunt*:

> Omnia secundum litem fiunt. [Todo se engendra a modo de contienda]
> Sentencia a mi ver digna de perpetua y recordable memoria. Y como sea cierto que toda palabra del hombre sciente está preñada, de ésta se puede decir que de muy hinchada y llena quiere reventar, echando de sí tan crecidos ramos y hojas, que del menor pimpollo se sacaría harto fruto entre personas discretas. ²

‘Omnia secundum litem fiunt.’ [All things come into being through strife] This maxim is in my opinion ever worthy of being borne in mind. And although it is true that the every word of a man of learning is pregnant with meaning, it may well be said of the statement just quoted that it is really bursting with significance. It is like a tree so richly dressed in boughs and leaves that its tiniest bud may provide some intellectual fruit for the discerning. ³

In the prologue Rojas plunges the reader, through the mediation of Heraclitus and Petrarch, into a cosmic chaos of inexhaustible fluidity, change and competition:

Hallé esta sentencia corroborada por aquel gran orador y poeta laureado, Francisco Petrarca, diciendo: *Sine lite atque offensione nihil genuit natura pares*. ‘Sin lid y ofensión ninguna cosa engendró la natura, madre de todo.’ Dice más adelante: *Sic est enim, et sic propemodum universa testantur: rapido stellae obviant firmamento; contraria invicem elementa confingunt; terrae tremunt; maria fluctuant; aer quattitur; crepant flammeae; bellum immortale venti gerunt; tempora temporibus concertant; secum singula, nobiscum omnia*. Que quiere decir: ‘En verdad así es, y así todas las cosas de esto dan testimonio: las estrellas se encuentran en el arrebatado firmamento del cielo, los adversos elementos unos con otros rompen pelea, trenan las tierras, ondean los mares, el aire se sacude, suenan las llamas, los vientos entre sí traen perpetua guerra, los tiempos con tiempos contienden y litigan entre sí, uno a uno, y todos contra nosotros.’ ⁴

I have found that the opening quotation from Heraclitus is paraphrased by that great master of prose and poetry, the laureate Francesco Petrarca, who has written: *Sine lite atque offensione nihil natura pares*. Which translated means: ‘Mother Nature creates nothing without contention and struggle.’ He goes on to say: *Sic est enim, et sic propemodum universa testantur: rapido stellae obviant firmamento; contraria invicem elementa confingunt; terrae
tremunt; maria fluctuant; aer quatitur; crepant flammae; bellum immortale venti gerunt; tempora temporibus concertant; secum singula, nobiscum omnia. Which means: 'Thus it is, and all things testify to it. The stars come together in the wild firmament of the heavens. Opposing elements struggle with each other. The earth trembles, the seas rise and fall, the air is shaken, flames crackle, the winds wage perpetual warfare with each other, and seasons vie with seasons. Everything singly contends with every other things — and all oppose us.'

This cosmic disorder finds its analogy in the human world, immersed in a continuous process of destruction and reconstruction. And in parallel with that world of human society always at war with itself, there runs the text of the work itself, which naturally cannot escape dissent. Rojas acknowledges that an author can hardly control this diversity of readings:

Y pues es antigua querella y visitada de largos tiempos, no quiero maravillarme si esta presente obra ha sido instrumento de lid o contienda a sus lectores para ponerlos en diferencias, dando cada uno sentencia de ella a sabor de su voluntad.

Well, since this long misery has been known through all the ages, I will not be astonished if this present work may not also have served as a cause of dissension and battle for its readers, for everyone will judge it the way he likes.

The Tudor interlude Calisto and Melebea also paraphrases this idea in its opening lines:

Franciscus petrarcus the poet lawreate
Sayth that nature whych is mother of all thing
w1 out stryff can gyue lyfe to nothing create
And Eraclito the wyse clerk in his wrytyng
Sayth in all thyng create stryff is theyre workyng
And ther is no thing vnder the firmament
with any other in all poyntes equivalent

And accordyng to theyre dictys rehersyd as thus
All thyng are create in maner of stryfe

This is the epistemological fountainhead of Rojas's work. La Celestina is a rich tapestry made up of different styles woven into a dialogic network which evinces this potential for multiple interpretations without concessions to any type of explicit moral. Its raw depiction of human passions, urban chaos, and hedonistic self-interest runs parallel to its generic indeterminacy and ambiguity, and is thus inseparable from its moral inconclusiveness. La Celestina is also a case of the crisis of the exemplary. As a forerunner of the novel it combines different voices and thus reflects the fragmented complexity and the perceived disorder of modern life. It also prefigures the picaresque with its squalid characters fighting for survival on the fringes of society.

This is the reason why the author, his printers, and his editors, felt compelled to surround the text with additions that could hem in the loose threads of its fabric. To use the same metaphors that Rojas employs in the prologue, this was a 'pregnant' text, like a tree whose exhuberant leaves and branches needed to be pruned and guided. La Celestina can be thus contemplated as a poetic emblem of the chaotic and struggling multiverse described in the introduction. This discursive dispersion and its pitfalls needed to be restrained, and more appropriate modes of exemplary readings had to be attempted in order to defuse the unsettling nature of such a text. This was the purpose of the lengthy explanations by Rojas and his editors; the steps taken to make the work conform to an unambiguous exemplary reading in the English interlude were far more drastic. The text was submitted to a procrustean process of moralisation under the new ethos of civic humanism.

Fernando de Rojas claimed that one of the main purposes of his tragicomedy was to provide negative examples of sexual morality. The perspective that La Celestina adopted was, however, different from that of Tudor morality plays. James Watkins holds that the main task of morality plays was to resist 'what conservative commentators perceived to be a maelstrom of cultural forces loosening the communal ties that governed a stable, hierarchical society', adding that 'the aesthetic uniqueness that modern critics have sometimes ascribed to Perseverance, Mankind and Everyman arises from subtle variations in the plays' distribution of voices embracing and condemning opportunities for social advancement'. They also criticised ambition, greed, and sexual desire. The problem, however, is that, in the context of the contention between the cultural forces that Watkins describes, La Celestina went beyond the humanists in its obliteration of more traditional values. Its starting point is the Petrarchan re-elaboration of Heraclitus, but it does not follow the humanists in substituting for medieval man their new ideal ethos: a stable social being, rhetorically and civically constituted. La Celestina shows instead that language and its rhetorical operations, far from providing cohesion to social life in the city, could, and frequently did, result in chaos and disorder. Language in La Celestina shows its negative potential, and how it can become a powerful instrument for self-deception (in the case of Calisto), as well as for the deception of others (in the
The inherent pessimism of *La Celestina* leaves very little room for that aspect of humanism which is based, in the words of Charles Trinkaus, on the ‘orator and the lawyer who work to compose the quarrels of the town and bring decency and civilization to all mankind’. Celestina is the antithesis of the ethic ideal of humanist civic rhetoric, a sort of amoral and hedonistic Protagoras rising from within the urban underclasses. In other words, Celestina is a humanist’s nightmare: she transgresses sexual and family morals (she is also a procuress), uses eloquence for all the wrong purposes, and turns to witchcraft instead of socially acceptable religious practices. One of Celestina’s trades is the mending of lost virginities. She is a de facto illegal dealer in much coveted merchandise, and her trade responded to a demand that resulted from the internal logic of the market. Working on the fringes, Celestina and her associates reproduced within the sphere of the urban underworld the same strategies that the new bureaucratic and mercantile classes used in the social, legal, and discursive spaces that they were negotiating. Celestina’s rhetorical versatility becomes one more asset within this fringe market.

*La Celestina* also evinced the contradictions between the tenets of the new Christian-Stoic ratio and the actual materialistic drift of early capitalist socio-economic mechanisms. Like the cohort of prostitutes and servants over which she presides, Celestina needed to negotiate her way through the social fabric by means of her own illicit version of the mechanisms of profit and self-interest. The humanist programme that proclaimed the primacy of individual will and subjectivity as a form of knowledge and sought their ideal co-efficiency with the more general and superior framework of divine providence does not hold at all within the moral universe of *La Celestina*. The work of Rojas marks a moment of lucid disenchantment originating in a radical awareness of the impossibility of a civic-Christian ethos within the context of early modern cities.

II

The *Interlude of Calisto and Melebea* was published by John Rastell, a member of Thomas More’s household, around 1530. It therefore emerged from the most relevant group of Tudor humanists at the time, which included foreigners like Juan Luis Vives, and early Tudor playwrights such as John Heywood. There are different theories on how *La Celestina* may have reached England, and which of its editions the author of *Calisto and Melebea* may have used. Ungerer suggests that the author of the adaptation may have had access to a Spanish version published in Italy, which would have been brought to England by English students, diplomats, or any other English visitors to that country. He also ventures to suggest that members of Catherine of Aragon’s entourage may have brought the Spanish original with them upon her arrival in England in 1501. As far as the occasion for *Calisto and Melebea* is concerned, Ungerer adds that it may have been especially composed for the wedding of John More and Anne Cresacre in 1529.

There is also some speculation regarding the author of the adaptation. Reed points to Rastell’s authorship, and suggests that although there is no evidence to prove that Rastell knew Spanish, he too might have had access to the 1527 French version. Martinez Lacalle agrees with Reed on John Rastell as the most plausible candidate for the authorship of the *Interlude* — although like the rest of the scholarship, she offers no firm evidence. Ungerer claims to provide conclusive proof in favour of Rastell’s authorship, but his arguments do not seem to fully convince subsequent scholarship. He underlines the coincidences between part of the text of the *Interlude* and other contemporary plays ascribed to Rastell, in particular the parallels between the references to Petrarch and the *omnia secundum litem fiunt* topic by Melebea at the opening of the play and some of the ideas contained in *The Interlude of the Four Elements* (c. 1518), where Rastell ‘displayed a deep concern with the creation of the universe’ (pp. 40–41). Hogrefe suggests that the *Interlude* may have been written by three different hands; Geritz concludes that although there seems to be some evidence which points to Rastell’s authorship, it is not conclusive. Norland, one of the latest scholars to deal with this issue, adds the name of Richard Morison to that of Rastell as a possible candidate. Morison’s name had already been suggested by H.W. Allen many years before.

The importance of the connection between John Rastell, More’s brother-in-law, and the early avatars of *La Celestina* in England has several significant dimensions. John Rastell set up the first public stage in his house around 1524. He was also probably the first printer to issue a dramatic text in English (*Fulgens and Lucrece*, c. 1512–1516). Hogrefe and Norland stress the importance of the influence of the More group upon the emergence of secular drama in early sixteenth-century England. Hogrefe also asserts that though part of this influence owes nothing to their programme of social reform, some plays — including *Calisto and Melebea* — displayed a conscious promotion of the values of piety, virtue, and education. John Rastell’s attitude has been described by Devereux as ‘typical of a new middle class […] anxious to apply the new ideals of humanism to commerce, law, and trade’. These reformist ideals consisted of an overall assessment of law and legal education with a view to producing citizens who could contribute to the improvement of the commonwealth.
Irrespective then of specific, personal authorship, *Calisto and Melebea* reflects the ethos and ideology of More’s household and its humanist bent. Contemplating the adaptation from the perspective afforded by the ideas and values sustained by this group provides fresh insights into the nature of *Calisto and Melebea* in contrast with *La Celestina*. The particular relationship that *Calisto and Melebea* bears with the Spanish original turns the former into a remarkable piece within the group of humanist plays coming out of the circles around Thomas More and John Rastell, and a comparison of both reveals the details and nuances of early sixteenth-century European humanism.

*Calisto and Melebea* can be considered a work of transition between earlier dramatic forms and the first Tudor dramatists. This is one of the first interludes in which the protagonists do not represent allegories in the traditional sense, but are individual characters. Its underlying rationale still continues to be one of moralising exemplarity, as is clearly indicated by the conclusion. But the explicit values that the author of the adaptation proposes are very different from those in late medieval morality plays. In spite of acknowledging the Heraclitean chaos at the beginning of the Interlude, its closure offers the reader a decidedly exemplary reading. But this new reading emerges from the social and ideological universe of the new mercantile and bureaucratic groups, and tries to respond to the anxiety generated by the perception of social dispersion at the heart and the fringes of the city, a dispersion that could end up contaminating its central members and eroding their moral, social, and material economies.

The new audiences for Tudor interludes wanted their strategies and moves to attain and maintain their social position justified and elevated to the category of moral exempla. As Watkins has argued, these new interludes, ‘instead of resisting class mobility as a manifestation of pride and avarice, [...] hail it as a reward for righteous living. They openly champion thrift and education, the practices that enabled enterprising individuals to rise above their forebears’ status.’ (1999, p.775).

Marriage of daughters was, of course, one means of maintaining and advancing such social position – hence the need to control sexual behaviour, since virginity became not just a moral value in the realm of family honour, but an essential commodity for the perpetuation and advancement of the social and economic status of the family. Celestina and her associates reproduce within the sphere of the urban underworld the same strategies that the new bureaucratic and mercantile classes used in the social, legal, and discursive spaces that they were negotiating vis-à-vis the ancient aristocracy and the emerging absolutist monarchy. Hence, Celestina’s versatile eloquence becomes one more asset she may use in this marketplace, together with virginity-trading and witchcraft.

After radically eliminating most of the story – the main plot and sub-plots of the Spanish original – the Interlude focuses its efforts on defusing and re-orienting the flux of discursive chaos and social disruption set in motion by Celestina’s verbal deceit. By doing this, it manages to annul her capacity to seduce Melebea into abandoning the correct patterns of female behaviour that provide stability to the family name and facilitate the smooth transmission of material property through a proper marriage.

The interlude — in particular its closing lines — focuses on the constellation of values upon which these new classes were trying to negotiate and stabilise their social, legal, and moral spaces: social stability by means of preventive legislation, obedience in sexual conduct within the context of paternal authority, and an emphasis on education and learning as tools to promote private and public morality leading to familial and civic harmony.

These new classes constituted the basis of reformist humanism all across Europe. Marcel Bataillon, in his account of the humanism of Juan Luis Vives, coincides with Watkins’s analysis of the humanism of the Rastells. Bataillon emphasises the fact that Vives’s interests were those of the puritan, trading class into which he had married in the Netherlands, and that the spirit of his work was the same as that of these new merchant class. This is why these humanists were led to become involved in politics with the aim of regulating life in the city, by, among other means, instituting public welfare to get rid of wanderers and beggars, and more generally prevent the undesirable proliferation of this urban underworld. This regulatory impulse also coincided with the interests of the Rastells as lawyers and publishers of legal texts aimed at the harmonisation and normalisation of common law.

One of the main differences between *La Celestina* and its first English adaptation was that they were articulated upon different modes of exemplarity. The former works upon the principle of negative exemplarity, as Rojas clearly states in his declarations before and after the main text, whereas the latter is articulated on the workings of positive and explicit morality. Thus, in the original, Celestina succeeds in bringing Melebea out of the sphere of family and social control, which sets in motion a tragic plot leading to multiple deaths, while in *Calisto and Melebea* Celestina’s subversive persuasion proves to be ineffective. The interlude thus tames and reduces the inexhaustibility of the original, its discursive diversity, and rechannels what is left towards its convergence with the ideals of civic humanism.

Given that all the sordid and tragic elements of the original have been eliminated, the interlude seems to have been inspired, at least in part, by Juan Luis Vives, with his interest in regulating and controlling both the social by-products of the new urban and commercial dynamics, and the proper education of young women, as laid out in treatises like *De subventione pauperum* (1526) or *Institutio Foeminae Christianae* (1523). The measures proposed in the concluding lines
of Calisto and Melebea were also meant to take the place of Church beneficence and thus contribute to reclaim an increasingly secular social space from spheres where the Church had traditionally played a central role. These proposals were also meant to improve on the traditional approach by defending preventive legislation against begging, prostitution, and other unproductive and immoral social activities.

José María Pérez Fernández
Universidad de Granada