

# Sarah M. Misemer on Renaissance bawd, free will and AI

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Thank you for joining us on the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I'm the Senior Publicist for Hopkins Press Journals. Today we're talking with Sarah M. Misemer, who is a professor in the Department of Hispanic Studies at Texas A&M. She has a brand new article out in *South Central Review*, which is entitled, "What a Bawd from the Renaissance Can Teach Us about AI: Celestina, Robots, and Free Will."

This is just one of the great articles that appears in *South Central Review's* special issue devoted to "Worlds In Crisis." Definitely check out that issue! Dr. Misemer's article takes a look back at a piece of bawdy Spanish Renaissance literature, Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina*, and she considers what it has to say about human free will in the age of AI robots. This article will be free to read on Project MUSE through the end of August, so check the show notes for your links and download that and read it. And with no further ado, let's welcome Dr. Misemer.

Well, Sarah M. Misemer, Thank you for joining us today on the Hopkins Press Podcast. Would you like to introduce yourself a little bit?

## Sarah M. Misemer

Yes, it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much for interviewing me today about my work. And I have spent the last 20 years at Texas A&M. I'm a professor there. I've had various administrative roles, and I am getting ready to take over the department head role for the Department of Global Languages and Cultures here in August. So, it's exciting to be able to chat about my work and think about how that fits into my new role.

## Rahne Alexander

Well, congratulations on the moving on up. That's exciting. [Laughter]

## Sarah M. Misemer

Yeah.

## Rahne Alexander

You have a new article in the "World's In Crisis" issue of *South Central Review*. And it's called "What a Bawd from the Renaissance Can Teach Us about AI: Celestina, Robots, and Free Will." This grabbed my attention immediately, of course. So, first things first, for those who are like me and are not well-read in bawdy Renaissance literature from Spain, can you offer a synopsis of what Fernando de Rojas' masterwork *La Celestina* is about?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Yes. Of course! Well, I mean, most people do not have a big background in medieval. [Laughter] It's the Renaissance literature from Spain. So that's very typical. I've actually had the opportunity to think about this text for really the last 30 years. That's been rolling around as part of my formation. So I did an undergraduate research project at the University of Kansas in 1994 with Isidro Rivera, who's still teaching there. So shout out to my former professor. And we did a project on this text and it's just been formative for me and I continue to return to it. So one of the main things that we looked at, we applied, you know, narratology to this text because it's an interesting text. It's written in a dialogue form, but it was really never meant to be performed. So we were looking at applying narratology to it just as an application of critical theory. But throughout this process, we were talking a lot about the concept of free will. And I have continued to think about that over the years. And as I was looking at the transformations in technology, I thought, wow, you know, this is really starting to encroach on our humanist Renaissance understanding of free will. And so that was sort of the basis for this project.

My area is not Medieval or Renaissance literature. I do contemporary Latin American theater, but this has always sort of been one of those stepping stones to understanding Hispanic literature and the evolution of that throughout centuries really. This is a very modern text. And I'm not sure that people give as much credit to the modern texts that came out of Spain, such as *The Quixote*, and then of course this probably lesser known text, but very, very important text in terms of the canon.

**Rahne Alexander**

Wow. So what goes on in this text? What's happening in *La Celestina*?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

It is a story of two lovers, the main characters, Calisto and Melibea. Calisto is out hunting with a falcon and he sees Melibea and falls madly in love with her. These are two nobles that come from the noble class and he is just completely obsessed with her. He doesn't know how he's going to woo her. He starts talking to his servants.

And they suggest, don't you go see Celestina, who is this madam, and see if she can help you make this connection with Melibea, right? Celestina has, she has an interesting job. She is one of those people who is able to stitch up women who are no longer virgins so that they pass and can be married to more higher class men. She also runs a brothel and she does this sort of, you know, trafficking in love potions. Right? Or love scenarios for people in the community. And so, Calisto i still goes to see her. And of course she is looking at this as a way to make money. And she sort of drags this scenario on for quite a while so that she can extract as much money from him as possible. And she uses his servants as well to try and fleece him of as much money as she possibly can. And in the end, as she sets up this love affair, which they do end up having, you know, an amorous several, several times actually. And this is why this text is very bawdy. [Laughter] As we said, because there are details they meet like eight times in the garden. At the end of this, she does not keep her word to the servants who then turn around and stab her. They end up also dead. Right? They fall out of a window and then are actually

apprehended and executed. Calisto at the end, he's trying to get away from ruffians that the servants had set up along with these prostitutes that Calisto this whole tryst has enabled for Celestina to set up these prostitutes to interact with his servants. Right? So this is all very complicated and tangled. They try and exact revenge as well and everybody in the end ends up either killing themselves or by some turn of fate dying because of the choices that they have made. So Calisto falls to his death as he's trying to escape. Melibea goes and tells her father what's happened once Calisto has died and then she commits suicide. It ends with the father lamenting, you know, everything that has happened.

**Rahne Alexander**

You talk about how this is one of the early emergencies of the tragicomedy, right?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Yes. Originally this work was written in 1499 and it was called the *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. Then later on in 1514, they rename it to *tragicomedia*, a tragic comedy. And then by 1518, it's just well known as *La Celestina*. Right? So she emerges as the main character for this. But you can see where the tragic element comes in, because in the end, everybody ends up dying.

**Rahne Alexander**

In your article, you talk a little bit more about this, but it seems like this was kind of a reaction to the Spanish Inquisition. Right?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Yeah, this is very much part of that time period. So Fernando de Rojas is descended from *conversos*. Right? So these are Jews that were forced to convert to Christianity. The Inquisition takes place in Spain for actually quite a long time. So it's instituted in 1478. The Pope issues a papal bull, which is requiring people to have sincere devotion. It's required. Which basically outlaws any other religion except for Christianity. And it starts in Castile. Right? Where Isabella I is the ruler. She has basically the central part of Spain and she marries Ferdinand, who has kind of the northern part of Spain as part of his kingdom. And when they get married and they inherit these kingdoms, they basically are able to unify most of Spain. Right? And so in 1478, the Inquisition happens, and by 1479, they are both in control of their kingdoms and unite them and then spread the Inquisition throughout Spain. And they later on in 1492, expel any Jews who are unwilling to convert. And they also go to war with the last part of the Muslim Empire in Spain, which is Granada, in an effort to expel also the Muslims. So this is really a tactic for them to consolidate their power through the monarchy, through a Catholic unified country.

**Rahne Alexander**

Reading through this made me think about the ways that bawdiness has emerged to respond to a lot of other social, religious, political authoritarianism. I'm thinking of de Sade, of course, and thinking even of the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s.

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Absolutely.

**Rahne Alexander**

So we're kind of in the midst of another period of rising political authoritarianism around the world. And it's interesting that we're facing kind of another existential crisis when it comes to the question of free will. So can you talk a little bit about the notion of how free will exists in the world of *La Celestina*, and the parallels you see now with the rise of various AI engines?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

So, *La Celestina* is a text that comes about really at this transition, this inflection point in the evolution between medieval and the Renaissance. Right? So, you know, the Renaissance starts in Italy in the 13th, 14th century with a rediscovery of classical texts, so Roman and Greek texts. And as part of this evolution, really what happens is as the new world order takes place where there's an emphasis on human development and the development in both personal and political realms through this exploration of human virtue. Right? So there's this potential for the human to have control over their life. Right? So as we move from the feudal system, which is highly codified, highly stratified. Right? We move into the Renaissance period where there is more agency available to people. And so this idea of moving from this really like world of dualities. Right? There are only really two sides. Right? We move into the Renaissance where there's way more nuance and way more agency and ability to develop the human life. Right? And the human actions within that system. So you can see in this piece, in *La Celestina*, characters who know the constraints and continue to make choices, even though they know that they may have a bad consequence to them, they have the ability to start making those choices. And we see that, *La Celestina* is, she is sort of trapped in this system where she is a woman who is a widow who has to make a living. Is it okay within the Catholic religion to have the type of job that she has? *No*. But she makes that choice anyway because she has to survive. Melibea and Calisto are not supposed to have an illicit affair out of wedlock. This threatens bloodlines, this threatens political lines. But they do it anyway. Right? And even Melibea, at the end, she commits suicide. She makes that choice. That is not a Catholic choice. [Laughter] Right? She commits suicide in response to her, the death of her lover. We can see the initial actions of these characters as they're starting to think about, well, how do I have my own agency even in this highly restricted societal constraints? Right? So you can see them start to play around with their own agency. And I think that's part of where we see this modern aspect to the text coming about. And so as I was looking at AI and thinking about the constraints that AI is putting on us, I started to think about, where does our agency lie when we have systems, new systems that are constraining our behavior in ways that we probably aren't even aware of.

**Rahne Alexander**

I mean, the little bit of interaction that I've had with AI chatbots has been interesting to see the ways that they kind of egg me on. It takes me a beat to think, well, this is not actually a sentient being.

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Absolutely. So that was one the things I talked about in my article with the hyper nudging. And that's a term that Karen Yeung coined. But it's really this idea that there are these systems that are influencing our behavior, just as you described, that we're not aware of. So there's this power behind the scenes that nudges us in certain directions and responses. And we're not even aware of it. It takes a lot of big

data sets to sort of work through these things. But again, do you have the free will that you thought you did if you don't know that that's happening behind the scenes?

**Rahne Alexander**

Yeah. And that gets at the heart of what you talk about as your understanding of the free will, which is reflected in the decision of I can, but I won't or I can, but I will. Right?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Yeah. And John McCarthy, you know, had very pioneering work in the 1950s that laid the foundation for AI. And that's really the threshold that AI has to cross artificial intelligence, that idea that the machine understands the constraints and then is able to make choices that they will or they won't within those constraints. So that's really the threshold that AI has to cross to become a sentient machine with the idea of free will.

**Rahne Alexander**

So in your piece, you end on a true cliffhanger, this ominous note that goes, as robots also come to understand free will and impose limitations on the systems in which we operate, and we even discover text, current or classical, and use them as the basis for knowledge needed to freely choose and pursue full individual potential, or are we returning to a new orthodoxy that imposes control?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Yeah, that was, it is ominous. But I, you know, one of the things that I've been thinking about is there's another term that's been, talked about the new world order that happens when humanism comes in. There are a lot of people now talking about another new world order coming about called algocracy, right? So "algo" from algorithm and then "cracy". Right? And this idea that there's the power being taken away from people and put into algorithms or machines. Right? That are run by transnational companies. Right? And programmers. And so moving this power away from the demos. Right? From democracy, from the people to now machines. And so, you know, if you start to think about that, it is a little bit ominous. It was widely reported in just in May by the Palisade Research Group that many models, the OpenAI codecs, many models that power ChatGPT were sabotaging the script that was given to them by humans to shut down. So that they could continue to work on solving the problems. They were working on math problems. So these machines subverted that script and refused to shut down. We've seen X's Grok AI bots had to have many, many posts scrubbed because they are very inflammatory, anti-Semitic, and have some really important complications for the world. Right? There's another machine also called Claude Opus 4 that they did a fictional test with it, and it tried to blackmail the programmer by using information on an extramarital affair. So you know, I end on an ominous note, but I do think. [Laughter] There is the potential for some of these really negative aspects of these machines, of these Robots. Of course, my husband and I talk about it all the time. If you grew up in the 1980s and you watched war games or Terminator, you know, these are sort of the things that you grew up thinking about. Right? Do machines take over the world and what happens to the humans that have created them? And so in thinking about free will, I'm wondering what constraints we are aware of. And I'm wondering if those constraints are becoming even more powerful than we realized. And so where does

our moral agency for becoming human, for having that project of humanity and moral agency, where does that leave us?

**Rahne Alexander**

It's so interesting to think back to what goes on in *La Celestina*, the tragic comedy aspect of it is comedy based on just human fallibility in a way that a computer maybe never can grasp or grok as it were. [Laughter]

**Sarah M. Misemer**

[Laughter] Well, know, the, *La Celestina* is, you know, we've been using this term, bawdy, right? So let's think about that a little bit. The text itself has humor in it. It's funny, but it's not like a true farce or satire. So it's got these moments in it where there are these elements of off-color types of humor and situations in it. And the tragic element is very clearly there when all of the characters end up dying. But I think between those two extremes, you know, the funny sort of off-color type of humor, the *human parts* of that humor that have to do with, you know, sex and affairs and, you know, some of these like underworld type of, of behaviors that the crime and the trafficking in people, these elements are human, are very human. And I think the choices that our characters make in this piece, even though it ends up driving them to their death, really is part of that human experience and you know, that ability to have that agency to make those decisions, whether you land on the side of the proper Catholic behavior or whether you subvert that and so, know this text is really interesting because it could be read as a cautionary tale like look what happens when you misbehave.

**Rahne Alexander**

[Laughter]

**Sarah M. Misemer**

But you know the great part about this text is that it can be read the other way as well. Yeah, these things happen, but you can also do them and have fun and you know laugh a little bit while it's happening I love that that it can be read both ways. And I think that's the beauty of this text and what makes it such a contemporary text, even though it was written so long ago. That's probably the reason I've been thinking about it for 30 years.

**Rahne Alexander**

[Laughter] Yeah, and yeah, I mean, you said that it was not written to be performed. Is it something that has been performed?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

No. Well maybe people have performed parts of it. It's very very long and the dialogue, there are monologues within it, but it's just not really appropriate for staging but I do think it's written in a format that is sort of this question-answer type of format with the dialogue. Right? So again I think even with the format of the dialogue you see some agency with the characters expressing themselves without a narrator. Right? So I think even that format makes you have the sense that there is some ability to maneuver and express yourself even in a highly constrained society like that, that was the monarchy of Ferdinand and Isabella I.

**Rahne Alexander**

This is great. I'm hoping everybody reads this article. It gave me a lot to think about. Is there anything else you'd add? And would you like to talk about what you're working on next?

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Well, as I mentioned, this isn't really my area of focus. It just has been sort of a love that I've had on the side. My real area of focus is contemporary Latin American theater. And I'm working on a project right now that is actually about micro theater, *micro teatro*, which is a certain format that came out of Spain in 2009 and has spread all over Latin America and even into the United States. They're very short plays that take place in 15 minutes with 15 spectators in a room that is 15 by 15 meters. And so they're very short, you have very immediate presence of both spectators and actors. And I'm looking at a work by a playwright named Florencia Aroldi, and she is really going back to the immigrant experience in Argentina, but with the great grandchildren of those immigrants. So there's this real through line with the family and the immigrant family in Argentina kind of updated for this new format. So that's the project that I'm working on. Hopefully we'll be able to get some articles out about that soon. And it's been a fun project.

**Rahne Alexander**

Yeah, that sounds fascinating. Well, thank you for your time today. I'm glad you could join us here on the Hopkins Press Podcast.

**Sarah M. Misemer**

Thank you so much, it was a real pleasure!

**Rahne Alexander**

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