

## A Duel with Fernando de Rojas: Picasso's *Celestina* Prints

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*In 1971, Picasso pulled sixty-six out of 347 etchings first executed in 1968 for an edition of Spanish writer Rojas's Celestina. While the complete group of prints, known as the Suite 347, has been discussed in the context of Picasso's late work, few have considered how the location of the sixty-six prints in Rojas's text affects their reading. Understanding where Picasso actually inserted the prints into the text sheds light on the play between narrative and image that Picasso intended when binding his etchings with the Rojas story. Considering the prints as part of a book provides a more complete context for understanding the imagery revealing them to be depictions done to rival Rojas's own narrative strategies.*

In 1971, Picasso pulled sixty-six out of 347 etchings first executed in 1968, to be bound in a French language edition of eminent Spanish writer Fernando de Rojas's *Celestina* (a tragicomedy in twenty-one acts that was originally published in its final form in 1502).<sup>1</sup> Four hundred of these books were printed by L'Atelier Crommelynck, and sold through the Louise Leiris Gallery in Paris. While the complete group of prints, commonly known as the *Suite 347*, has been discussed in the context of Picasso's larger pictorial interests of the late 1960s, few art historians have considered the sixty-six *Celestina* prints apart from the others, nor have they much explored how their location in Rojas's text affects their reading. The most plausible reason for this neglect is the narrative impulses behind the iconography in Picasso's etchings, which seem at first glance to challenge modernist assumptions that view Picasso's primary pictorial concern as formalist experimentation.

A few recent critics have begun to explore the literary resonances of Picasso's late etchings following Picasso's own statement that making prints were his 'way of writing fiction.'<sup>2</sup> Janie Cohen has recognized the unusual narrative quality of Picasso's later etchings, focusing on identifying possible visual sources in Spanish art.<sup>3</sup> Karen Kleinfelder has discussed the possible reasons why Picasso was interested in the specific literary character of *Celestina*, (such as the senior artist likely relating to the waning sexual potency of the aging procuress).<sup>4</sup> This paper seeks to build on these scholar's findings to consider to what extent Picasso's actual pictorial solutions set out to rival Rojas's own literary style, including Rojas's use of humor and verbal puns.

The paper considers where Picasso actually inserted a specific series of his *Celestina* prints into the text in order to better understand the play between narrative and image that Picasso intended when binding his etchings with the Rojas story. What is revealed is how Picasso engaged in an artistic game with the great Spanish writer in much the same way that late in his life he used his art to enter into dialogue with great Spanish painters such as Goya and Velasquez.<sup>5</sup> Considering Picasso's prints as part of a book provides a more complete context for understanding their imagery revealing them to be depictions done to rival Rojas's own narrative strategies.



Figure 1

When interpreted in isolation from the book itself, Picasso's *Celestina* prints look seemingly hurried in execution and overtly pornographic in content. (Fig. 1) When first shown, they surprised his audiences as being uncharacteristic of Picasso, even anti-modern, their technical crudity seemingly as debased as their lewd subject matter. When, after his death

in 1973, a group of Picasso's most recent works was put on display in Avignon, the reception was one of horror. Gert Schiff described it as a "state of panic"<sup>6</sup> caused by what was perceived as Picasso's retreat from his modernist innovations of the past. Instead of the polished Cubist compositions they had expected, viewers were confronted with what appeared to be an old man's gratuitous scribbling of an erotic sort, and with subjects and style more typical of a classical Baroque past. A spectacle of comic musketeers (Fig. 2), impassioned horsemen carrying off naked women (Fig. 3) and sprawling nudes (Fig. 4) all seemed hastily



Figure 2

rendered. "Why," in Schiff's words, 'did the most advanced pictorial genius of the era, this embodiment of modernism, immerse himself in a past age which had served as inspiration only to the most hackneyed academicians of the past century? What brought this tireless explorer of form into that



Figure 3

most outmoded field of pictorial creation, Romantic narrative?"<sup>7</sup> These works by Picasso were "hushed up" according to Schiff, "hardly discussed in scholarly literature, poorly represented in exhibitions, [and] commercially unpopular."<sup>8</sup>

But Rojas's text provides another layer of context for considering the Celestina images that places them in

a more favourable light and justifies Picasso's supposedly hasty technique as a pictorial analogue to the comedic play of words found in Rojas's story. By placing his prints alongside the Celestina tragicomedy, Picasso invites us to interpret his images as farce. The actual layout of etchings alongside specific text pages in the 1971 edition is one thing that we can trace directly to Picasso, and it seems actually to encourage our comparison of Rojas's comedic literary vision to that of Picasso's pictorial one.

When Picasso bound his prints with Rojas's text, his intent was surely not to illustrate the text, but likely to compete wilfully with Rojas's literary methods and to muse upon its content. Rather than adding some pictures to a story, Picasso essentially created an art book. Donna Stein has defined the *livre*



Figure 4

*d'artiste* as something that goes beyond illustrated text. Instead, she argues, the artist transforms "something common into something extraordinary by summoning images that transcend the literary content of a written or printed text to create a totality that surpasses individual parts."<sup>9</sup> Picasso's prints when bound with a book, she argues, "stand apart from the text, they also interpret the book's spirit, bringing word and image into perfect union."<sup>10</sup>

Picasso demands that his prints be considered as the equal to Rojas's text. Each work by Picasso is printed on one side of a folded page without words on the back. The thickness of these image pages is distinctive compared to the thinner text pages and is what forces the prints to be read as equal to the text and not illustrative of that text.<sup>11</sup> The images thereby assert a separate presence within the book. The prints are not read as illustrative to the text, but as maintaining their own corporeal reality as art image apart from but

parallel to the text. The obtrusive placement of the prints turns illustrated book into art book, and forces the words of Rojas's text to bend according to the needs of Picasso's visual artistry. Perhaps we can see image and text in Picasso's book as working together much the same way as they do in his synthetic cubist works, in which scraps of newspaper containing words are juxtaposed next to visual imagery. Neither serves the other, but the visual and verbal combine in constructive play.

By stressing the physical presence of his prints within the bound text, Picasso thereby equates his mastery as visual storyteller to that of the famed Spanish writer Rojas. It seems certain that late in his life Picasso was considering Rojas in much the same way that he was dialoguing with the greats of art history, transforming their work according to his own interests, and in doing so considering his own artistic vision in relationship to theirs. Picasso once discussed the possibility of creating a painting of Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, "sure to horrify the specialist in the copying of old masters. It would not be," he said, "*The Maids of Honor* he saw when he looked at Velazquez's picture; it would be *my Maids of Honor*."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Picasso turns the story of *Celestina* into *his Celestina*. Picasso's authority over the Rojas's text as expressed through the obtrusiveness of his etchings within the book results in a statement about his own fame as artist, as someone who will have his place, like Rojas, in history.

But why take on Rojas? Why not choose some other Spanish master of more certain reputation, such as Cervantes? Picasso seems to have held a personal affinity for Rojas. Pierre Daix writes that 'Picasso was extremely fond of the picaresque style of Spanish literature and especially of the *Tragicomedia de Calixto y Melibea*.'<sup>13</sup> John Richardson claims 'Picasso knew Rojas's book from adolescence, if not before. In later life he collected various editions; the earliest dating from 1601.'<sup>14</sup> As will be shown, Picasso likely saw parallels between his work and Rojas's particular type of comedic rhetorical manipulation and cynical view of human nature. An analysis of Picasso's prints alongside Rojas's text will show how they share at least four qualities in common: 1) Frank sexual content and the contemplation of waning sexual potency; 2) an equally disparaging description of human behavior regardless of social class (all being described as driven by gross self-interest and greed); 3) the use of humorous double talk and verbal (or in the case of Picasso, visual) puns; and 4) a sense of magic, sometimes presented as ridiculously implausible. These four qualities in Rojas's text become clear in a review of the story.

*Rojas's Bawdy Humour: His Themes and Literary Style*

The lewdness of the *Celestina* plot is evident from its beginning as is its account of selfish human indulgence. The action opens with the lovesick noble youth Calisto raving about his carnal desire for Melibea, who has rejected his advances. His servant Sempronio tells him that if he cannot forget Melibea, then he knows of another way to cure this lust: through the services of the best procuress in town, Celestina. Sempronio quickly develops an understanding with Celestina about milking Calisto for all he is worth. But Calisto's other servant, Pármeno, who recognizes the moral danger that Celestina represents, stands in the way. Pármeno describes Celestina as an iconic figure of the "old whore," recognized by all in society for her illicit (but tolerated) role. Even the stones in the street call her by the name she best loves: "puta vieja." Pármeno tries to warn Calisto, but is told to shut up, and when she arrives in their house, Celestina sets about winning Pármeno over to her side. Celestina uses slick double-talk to wear down Pármeno's moralistic stance as the loyal servant. She convinces him that since the noble classes of the day only seek their own interest in all things, then servants like him should do the same. Gone are the days of loyalty, high-mindedness and noble acts. Besides, she argues, sex is natural and even Pármeno, young stud that he is, must have an ache in his crotch. Pármeno exclaims that yes, his sting is "like a scorpion's tail," to which Celestina replies in typical fashion that his sting is worse, because a scorpion's doesn't cause swelling, but his will cause a swelling for a full nine months. When Pármeno laughs at her joke, he is close to being in her pocket. To seal the deal, she promises to get a girl (Areúsa) to have sex with Pármeno.

Throughout his story, Rojas's double-voiced humor allows him to debunk the idealistic discourses of upper-class society exposing the base motivations that lay just below the surface of even the most authoritative commonplaces (much the way Picasso rejects the use of idealistic form to mock the aesthetic elite who champion artistic tradition). Thus, in Celestina's mouth, a seemingly moral dictum like 'show piety/pity for the sick' (*piedad* has both meanings in Spanish) will be twisted to mean that a young girl serves God's will when she assuages the pain (lovesick lust) felt by a young man.

Other kinds of humor do not depend on subversive puns like this, but rely instead on gusto for the grotesque and the ridiculous. Celestina, for example, is famous for her plain speaking about sexual matters. In the

scene in which she procures Areúsa for Pármemo, Celestina takes advantage of the fact that Areúsa is experiencing menstrual cramps by suggesting the best cure is sexual intercourse. When Areúsa protests, Celestina dismisses her excuses, saying,

Look at Pármemo, the little downy-cheeked stud, like a young rooster, a cockerel whose crest will not get limp for a full three nights, no matter how much work he has to do. These are the kinds of goodies that the physicians of my land used to tell me to eat, when I used to have better teeth for such dining. (*Mas como es un putillo, gallillo, barbi-poniente, entiendo que en tres noches no se le demude la cresta. De éstos me mandaban a mí comer en mi tiempo los médicos de mi tierra, cuando tenia mejores dientes.*)

As Pármemo begins to have his way with Areúsa, Celestina begs pardon to leave them with her falsely reverent phrase, “Stay you here in God’s good graces,” only to say next,

I must be going only because you two are making my mouth water with all your kissing and fooling around. I still have a taste for that stuff left on these toothless gums—I didn’t lose that when my molars fell out! (*Quedaos a Dios, que voyme solo porque me hacéis dentera con vuestro besar y retozar. Que aun el sabor en las encías me quedó; no le perdí con las muelas.*)

The crude situation, the ribald pun (toothless mouth / watering mouth—*encías sin muelas / dentera*) and the irreverent use of a religious salutation (“Stay you here in God’s good graces”) are all evident in this scene’s humor. Also implied is Celestina’s waning abilities to take part in the kind of sexual encounters she arranges. This same theme will permeate Picasso’s Celestina imagery.

Magic, like bawdy humor, is integral to Celestina’s plot (as it will be in Picasso’s print series). With Calisto eager for her to set up a liaison with Melibea and the two servants in league with her, Celestina conjures her familiar devil into a skein of yarn that she will pretend to be selling when she gets to Melibea’s house. Whether through the magic of this spell, or just due to her smooth talking, Celestina is able to start preparing the seduction of Melibea and also to convince the young girl to accept the smokescreen of Celestina’s



piously “clean intentions” (*limpio motivo*) in coming to ask for prayers for Calisto’s sore tooth. As a token of her good faith, Melibea is asked to give Calisto her girdle or sash (*cordón*), since it is rumored to have been present on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and imbued with healing powers.

After presenting Calisto with the girdle and receiving a fine cloak in return, Celestina promises that soon Melibea will agree to be with him. A parallel plotline about the servants’ love interests (with the prostitutes Elicia and Areúsa) continues to develop alongside the Calisto-Melibea story. In both the aristocratic or upper-class story and in the lower-class plot, sexual gratification and materialism are the only true values by which people live or make decisions. The only difference is that the lower class characters do not have to dress their desires up in pretentious discourses, as Calisto and Melibea must do. Celestina’s main service to her upper class clients is to give them the base (and debased) language that will let them express their repressed urges and escape the moral strictures of conventional morality. This is likely what makes this text so ‘modern’ for most critics and for Picasso, for in similar fashion, Picasso allows his elite collectors, trustful of his being the modern genius of fine art, to view bawdy prints, their prurient gazes morally protected by the camouflage of artistic challenge.

As Rojas’s plot continues, there is a banquet at which Melibea’s servant arrives to request the return of the girdle. He begs Celestina to come to the house because Melibea feels ill and cannot put a name to it, but somehow she knows that Celestina will be able to help her. Celestina returns, and slowly reveals to the young girl that the fires she feels are her sexual passion for Calisto. Upon hearing Calisto’s name, Melibea swoons and when she recovers consciousness, she is now eager to consummate her love for Calisto. Later, Calisto and Melibea meet and although she objects to his overly passionate pawing (the “conversation of his hands”), they have sex and both are ecstatic. The ease with which Celestina helps Melibea to rationalize her sexual urges is laughable in its unsanctified damning, and in the end tragic, as each character meets a violent and ambiguously ignoble death, including Celestina.

### *Picasso’s Dialogue with Rojas*

Rojas’s cynical view of human behaviour, subversive puns and description of man’s ominous fate, must have appealed to Picasso. His prints play off Rojas with their sexual flaunting and visual duplicity. Picasso does not



Figure 5

illustrate the famed story of Celestina, but rather, as will be shown, uses several pictorial strategies that comprise a visual analogue to Rojas's narrative. As stated, when he has his etchings bound with Rojas, he makes sure that they are intrusive physically, so as not to be read as secondary to the text pages but rather as their able partner. Then, throughout the prints,

he sets up motifs that correspond to but do not literally represent characters or props in the story. As will be shown, he repeats and suddenly varies these motifs across certain sequences of images in ways that are equivalent to Rojas's double-voiced prose or a comic pun. (Print order is evidently important to Picasso as he carefully dates and orders them. In this he is likely influenced by his study of Rembrandt whose prints also take on greater meaning when states of the print are read in sequence.<sup>15</sup>) In the end, Picasso is seemingly frivolous, albeit complex, with his line work, employing thick and angular lines to give a withering appearance to the old whore Celestina, and then fluid or graffiti-like ones to add a falsely heroic quality to his musketeers. All the while, he upsets his reputation as artistic genius by abandoning his past cubist innovations, manufacturing instead an unsightly yarn that may confuse his audience. As will be shown, Picasso's technical strategies create a raucous visual comedy that parallels Rojas's own.

By turning now to specific Celestina etchings and considering their placement in the bound Rojas book, it will be shown to what extent Picasso's pictorial strategies mirror Rojas's play with forms of discourse. We must first understand that the prints at hand were produced three years before they were bound with the book. A careful documenter, Picasso etched in the plate the date and order of the prints that he made for the *Suite 347*. This makes it possible for us to know that the Celestina portion of the prints was done between April and August of 1968. Furthermore, because each print is marked according to sequence of etching, we can compare the order



Figure 6



of production to their organization in the bound 1971 book. In general, the chronology of the original designs differs from their final layout in the 1971 production. However, there do exist several smaller groups of three to four prints each whose 1968 production order are significantly preserved when later bound with the book. Analysis of two of these groups reveals significant relationships between Rojas's text and Picasso's imagery and technique. That Picasso used the same order in the bound text as he did when he actually made them (at least for these particular groups of prints), suggests that Picasso likely had specific acts from the tragicomedy in mind when originally producing those particular series and may have assumed back in 1968 a future publication of these prints with those very acts. In other words, Picasso did not just suddenly in 1971 decide to randomly pick sixty-six prints from the *347 Suite* and have them arbitrarily bound with the Rojas text. They contain an internal progression that appears intentional. He likely had the *Celestina* story close in mind when etching the plates and always thought of them as having an affinity to the text's narrative development as well as to Rojas's literary style.

### *The May Sixteenth Etchings*



Figure 7

The prints in the first series under consideration were all made on the sixteenth of May 1968, are the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth prints appearing in Picasso's book (Figs. 5, 6, and 7), and are placed in Act IV of Rojas's narrative. The three prints are placed near that moment in the text in which the old whore *Celestina* is speaking in

monologue, questioning her safety should she go forward with her plans to unite Calisto with Melibea. She fears what could happen if Melibea's father discovers what she is doing, but is also afraid of what Calisto's servants might do if she does not fulfil her part of the bargain for which she is being paid handsomely. *Celestina* trusts in her professional abilities as procuress but longs for the days when she was young and could participate in the sexual liaisons she arranges. Her professionalism compels her to continue, for as she says, "Where will the ox go, who no longer plows?"



Figure 8

As is immediately obvious, Picasso's prints are in no way a direct illustration of Celestina's quandary. Instead they portray parallel characters who comment on Celestina's solitary consideration of her professional status as she ages. At the center of Picasso's visual counterpart to Rojas's act is a female nude in changing mantilla. She is a central motif that Picasso establishes throughout this series (but also throughout the book) and is emblematic of the ripe youthfulness for which Celestina (as well as Picasso) pines. This nude appears on the title page of the book, at the beginning of as many as thirteen of the twenty-one of the Rojas acts, and is suggested in most of the others. (Fig. 8) Her depiction at the lead of so many acts differs slightly from how she is viewed in those placed in the body of text. There is less of a narrative quality in that she is more often than not depicted as a passive full length monumental figure. In a few scenes she is accompanied by Celestina and in a few others by musketeers or lovers, but more often than not she appears alone. She is always posed rigidly frontal confronting (perhaps offering herself to?) the viewer. Her dominant presence establishes her (rather than Celestina) as the key character in Picasso's scenes.

Across the series of May sixteenth prints (Figs. 5, 6, and 7), Picasso subtly changes the nude's attire to further his visual narrative. She appears in various stages of undress, once again stands rigidly frontal in each, and peers out at the viewer as across the series more and more of her naked body is revealed. Counterpoint to her is a second motif, which is the musketeer, the triangular shape of his cape along with the nude woman's static posture visually linking the three prints. Picasso carries his comedy forward through subtle visual changes that he makes to these two central motifs.

No musketeers actually appear in Rojas's story since its publication historically predates the era of such armed men. The ease with which Picasso transposes the musketeer into it is likely an extension of his reading of such devices in surrealist theory. Picasso states, "Images come to me and I put them in. They are a part of the reality of the subject. The Surrealists in a way were right. Reality is more than the thing itself. Reality lies in how you see things...Don Quixote can come into *Las Meninas*."<sup>16</sup> The lack of any literal connection allows Picasso to imagine text and image as functioning separately, two expressive approaches stimulated by contemplation

of a generative idea that influence but are not dependent on each other. It frees Picasso to bring via the visual form nuances that embellish upon the Rojas text.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 9

panion one of Calisto's servants, perhaps Sempronio or Pármeno. But at another level the musketeer is Picasso himself, especially evident in those images where musketeer doubles as artist. The musketeer's cane transforms into stylus or brush that captures the prostitute's image onto his easel, or that literally conjures the model's body with a sexually suggestive prod.<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 9) Interestingly enough, Picasso had once depicted his own printer Piero Crommelynck as a musketeer further securing the musketeer-artist metaphor.<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 10) Once again we see that Picasso is not interested in illustrating Rojas's text, but offering a visual meditation on its characters.



Figure 10



Figure 11

It needs to be reiterated that Rojas's actual characters and Picasso's figures are only loosely correlated. At one level, the nude could be identified with Melibea, the object of Calisto's desire, or at another with one of two prostitutes who appear in Rojas's story, Areúsa or Elicia. The musketeer is likely Picasso's guise for Calisto, and the musketeer's com-

At the center of Picasso's second print, the musketeer holds a distinctively phallic cane. (Fig. 6) The musketeer's "erection" is so blatantly on display as to be droll. Indeed, there is a comic quality to the way in which the musketeers in Picasso's prints pursue their sex objects. One even has a big nose like a clown. (Fig. 11) The quick gestural marks that Picasso often uses to describe their forms seem to physically make light of their characters. When one has viewed enough of Picasso's images of musketeers throughout the *Celestina* series, one can only conclude

that the representation of the musketeer is some kind of satirical jab. Schiff found Picasso's musketeers to be more like "picarized" noblemen rather than respected "soldiers of Their Most Catholic Majesties" in truth "leading the life of beggars and robbers and hiding under an ample cape clothes made of filthy rags."<sup>20</sup> The supposedly heroic protector, in the end, is nothing but a john seeking gratuitous physical pleasure, much like Calisto and Melibea in Rojas' story. And the manner in which Picasso traces their form is no more serious in tone than Rojas's appropriation of courtly love through Calisto's parodic speeches as the lovesick nobleman pining for his lady-love's "good graces."



Figure 12

Yet, if Picasso sees himself in the guise of the musketeer, then he is mocking himself too, perhaps as the ever lusty, yet aging artist still seeking gratification from drawing (and seducing) his model. Picasso adds his own portrait to one of the prints. (Fig. 12) If we are to read Picasso's persona in the lead musketeer, then it is another musketeer who comes between

him and his model in the third print (Fig. 7), and who magically replaces the first musketeer's "erection" so blatantly on display in the second (Fig. 6). Is this second musketeer Crommelynck, his printmaker who in the end is the one who consummates the final print by completing the artistic process for Picasso? Does Crommelynck become a sexual surrogate who, unlike the dated artist himself, is still able to perform? Picasso seems to invite such associations through his visual magic of replacing one image with another across the two plates. The manner in which phallic cane suddenly becomes proxy in this second print is indeed magical trickery, a clever slight of hand on Picasso's part that responds to Rojas's use of ribald jokes and puns.

With his surrogate in place, Picasso the musketeer only watches. The audience can only stare as well. The gazes of the figures directed at the audience in the second print, is a strategy used by Picasso to invite the audience to gape at what the prostitute has to offer, in turn exposing the fine art viewer's prurient curiosity as no different than that of the musketeers'. When one considers, as Schiff has suggested, "the secondary meaning of the Spanish word *mosquetero*, which refers to those non-paying spectators who stood in the back of the theatres of Spain's Golden Age,"<sup>21</sup> then we realize that by

employing the musketeer motif the way that he does in this second print, Picasso is deliberately referencing and poking fun at such spectator sport. The effect parallels Rojas's dismissal of social hierarchies when it comes to erotic self-indulgence.

In her monologue, Celestina laments the passage of time that has forced her to remain a spectator and not a participant in the sexual liaisons she arranges. When she oversees the banquet for the servants and their prostitute-girlfriends in her house, she bemoans the passage of the years, that have left her fortunes much decreased, since she used to have at least nine girls in her stable and now she is reduced to only two: "That is the way of the world, let it pass, let its wheel turn, its waterwheels rise and fall, some full and other empty. The law of life is such that nothing remains for a long time in the same state; its order is change." During this gathering, she salivates as the younger guests begin an orgy and even upset the table. Watching them, Celestina can only reminisce about her lost days of sexual vigor.

The aged Picasso must have seen himself in the character of Celestina, old yet still interested in sex, and still a curiosity to an expectant audience. Kleinfelder has interpreted the figure of Celestina as a double for the aged version of Picasso himself, the voyeur and enabler of the antics of a younger generation of artistic fornicators. "The aged procuress," writes Kleinfelder,

is both a voyeur, an indirect participant, and the mastermind behind the scenes who directly determines all that ensues. In this sense, she becomes Picasso's counterpart, the artist who is both a voyeur of his own creations, watching the antics of his characters from a remove, but who also functions as a kind of 'procuress', manipulating his characters, setting up the scenery, staging his own fantasies for his amusement.<sup>22</sup>

The inspiration that Picasso takes from Rojas, however, goes far beyond the convenient similarities between himself as engraver and the procuress's voyeuristic delight in arranging the sexual antics of her younger companions. By portraying himself as a double for Celestina, Picasso clings to his role as mediator between the post-mimetic modern artists and a humanistic tradition of art that reaches back to Spain's Golden Age and beyond.<sup>23</sup> He also recognizes his own status as living myth: the Great Artist who has lived past his glory days, when his creations had marked the cutting edge of modern art. In his old age, he is like Celestina with her younger disciples in the artistic misuse of authoritative discourse, for like her, Picasso had led the way for much



of modern art and now was watching an art world that had marginalized him. He had given the post-cubist vanguard a freedom from the distractions of mimesis and all that implied, allowing them to concentrate like the musketeer on that which most gratifies the modern visual artist—effective form freed from any extraneous concerns about art’s previous didactic or propagandistic societal duties. Also like Celestina, he may have felt betrayed by these younger artists who had learned from him and moved beyond him into styles that Picasso could not or would not imitate.

*The June Ninth Etchings*



Figure 13

Yet bemoaning one’s loss of reputation is treated as duplicitous in Rojas’s text. This idea gets played out in a scene deeper in the Rojas book in Act XII wherein Melibea’s feigns regret of her loss of virtue at being seduced by Calisto. Here Picasso places a second group of prints originally etched on the

same day (identified on the plate as I, II, and III from 9 June 1968) once again in chronological order. (Figs. 13, 14 and 15) Adjacent to these prints are contained passages of the impending conquest of Melibea by Calisto. Rojas’s text is ambiguous about Melibea’s willingness to be seduced toying with the unlikely possibility that it is actually rape. Is she the chaste victim of Celestina’s spell? Or is Melibea rationalizing her licentious behavior by imagining it to be outside her will?

It does not seem incidental that Picasso’s prints share visual affinity with Rubens’s equally ambiguous rape scene of the daughters of Leucippus, a painting that Svetlana Alpers describes as being unusually graceful for depicting such violence.<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 16) Alpers notes the lack of fear on the daughters’



Figure 14

faces in Rubens’s conception of the scene, and interprets the painting as an allegory of marriage; human passions, symbolized by rearing horses, are





Figure 15

brought under reign by cupids. Picasso's scenes of horseman abducting women have been more traditionally attributed to Poussin's influence. But the placement of Picasso's figures so close to the frontal plane, with their underlying diagonal movements and gestures, more closely suggests Rubens, as does the implied content of sexual ambivalence suggested in their location in Rojas's narrative. Across the three prints the abducted nude becomes more clearly the center of focus, her placement squarely in line with the frontal plane, like those nudes in Rubens's painting, and her body flattened to run parallel to the picture surface. Large menacing hands grab hold at her breasts as if presenting her naked body to the would-be delighted viewer. The frontality of her form parallels those monumental nudes that Picasso places at the first of so many acts across Rojas's book and re-establishes her as the key object of desire.

### *Picasso's Visual Jousting*



Figure 16

It was such blatant display of ravenous sexuality along with a kind of pictorial narrative more typical of old masterpieces that first shocked Picasso's critics. Picasso was likely indifferent to those who would have him continue to produce works with familiar cubist vocabulary. Kleinfelder notes that the most "disturbing" feature of Picasso's art is "his stylistic plurality."<sup>25</sup> Kleinfelder quotes Picasso as saying, "Basically I am



Figure 17

perhaps a painter without style. Style is something that locks a painter into the same vision, the same technique, the same formula. One recognizes it immediately, but it is always the same suit, or the same cut of suit. I thrash around too much. I am never fixed and that is why I have no style.”<sup>26</sup>

In their movement away from the modern fractured style for which Picasso was famous, the *Celestina* prints are far from regressive. Looking past their rough and hurried appearance to a closer inspection of their surface reveals an astonishing mastery to rival Goya, as Picasso displays imaginative facility at a variety of print techniques on the same plate.<sup>27</sup> They are partly sugar-lift aquatints, a process that can create deep, opaque blacks. In this technique, black ink mixed with sugar is used to paint the image on the plate. After it has dried, an acid resistant varnish is used to cover the plate. The plate is then soaked in water that dissolves the sugar causing those areas

of the varnish to lift. The surface is covered with powdered resin and then bitten in acid. The technique allows the fluid quality of the drawing to be maintained, as opposed to thin line work being available alone. Picasso often combines the sugar-lift aquatint technique with others. According to Brigitte Baer, this included using “a varnish stick (a sort of lithographic crayon) for stopping portions of the copper plate,” or a “system of creating a whole range of whites, greys, and blacks by biting his aquatints directly by hand.”<sup>28</sup> Sometimes he dissolved “away the varnish on the stopped out areas with turpentine” to create a “graffiti effect.”<sup>29</sup>

The complexity and overlay of techniques makes it difficult to figure out what technique Picasso is using where. The sophistication of method is, however, out of sync with the crudeness of the resulting forms, as if such sophistication is a sham, and it is this aspect of Picasso’s work that evokes Rojas’s double-voiced discourses. Edges are raw and uneasy when compared to prints made earlier in his career. They are in stark contrast, for example, to the elegant linearity found among the prints of the *Vollard Suite* (Fig. 15) whose carefully resolved compositions were what audiences came to expect of Picasso. In fact, in keeping with the story they complement, Picasso’s forms are an in-your-face sort of a Rojas joke aimed at mocking audience expectations.

In the *Celestina* prints Picasso is perhaps using a pictorial strategy that is similar to what an artist like Manet used, for example, in the *Olympia*, whereby he lets the viewer know that he is familiar with the academic rules of painting by referencing them (like the correct proportions and appropriate display of *contrapposto* for a reclining Venus/nude), but then mocks the rules by deliberately executing the work ‘badly’ according to those same rules. Picasso’s printmaking is sophisticated, but the result is on the surface deceptively crude. The strategy recalls Rojas’s technique of referencing classical literary discourse only to subvert it into a bawdy joke by a slick turn of phrase or an ironic context. Picasso’s “hidden” technical mastery contrasted with his overt “messiness” of form seems to be a conscious play with expectations that mirrors very closely Rojas’s overt play with intertextuality. Picasso certainly did not learn this strategy from Rojas, but must have felt a kinship with Rojas’s methods to have bound his imagery with Rojas’s words.

The fluid, almost abstract properties of literary expression had long interested Picasso since his play with words as image early in his career as a cubist. The differences and similarities between the artist’s mark versus the writer’s phrase was a continuing interest late into life. While further

study of Picasso's placement of his other *Celestina* prints in Rojas's text is needed, it is clear that through his partnering with Rojas's words, Picasso developed a visual narrative strategy to rival Rojas's own. Picasso produced an art book that released layers of meanings not otherwise possible through print imagery alone that speak to his reputation as aging artistic genius, still inventing, still lusty for his model, who like *Celestina* works his magic to remain in the action.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the first-person prefatory material before the *Tragicomedy*, Rojas recounts that he is the second author of this text. According to his version of the text's origins, Rojas, while on vacation from his legal studies in Salamanca, found an anonymous, and incomplete, one-act comedy (written, he says, by an *antiguo auctor*), a play about a lovesick nobleman named Calisto who hires an old whore named *Celestina* to procure the loving attentions of *Melibea*, and how *Celestina* then convinces his loyal servant *Pármeno* not to hinder her activities as Calisto's go-between with *Melibea*. Asserting his 'clean intentions' (*limpio motivo*) of Christian moral didacticism for his participation in this literary act, Rojas then claims to have completed the one-act manuscript and published it as the 16-act *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea* (earliest extant copy from 1499). After the initial success of this *comedia*, Rojas tells us, he was obliged by his pushy readers and his publishers to increase the number of 'sweet' scenes, which he did in his final version of the drama, a twenty-one act drama now called *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*. This entire first-person introduction is made doubly suspicious by Rojas's insistence on anonymity in case the book should land him in trouble for its dubious subject matter.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Gert Schiff, *Picasso: The Last Years, 1963-1973* (New York, 1983) p. 4, who cites Roberto Otero, *Forever Picasso* (New York, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Janie Cohen, 'Memory, Transformation, and Encounter in Picasso's Late Prints', in Janie Cohen, ed., *Picasso: Inside the Image, Prints from the Ludwig Museum, Cologne*, (London, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Karen Kleinfelder, *The Artist, His Model, Her Image, His Gaze: Picasso's Pursuit of the Model*, (Chicago and London, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> This paper developed from work that the author is doing with Professor William Nowak, a Rojas scholar, and that was partially presented at the *School of Visual Arts Eighteenth Annual National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists: Art and Story*, in New York in October 2004. In a subsequent article, Nowak has described how certain of Picasso's prints depicting artist and model convey 'a

Celestinesque portrayal of life and of artistic creation,' that mirrors Rojas's literary vision. ('Picasso's *Celestina* Etchings: Portrait of the Artist as Reader of Fernando de Rojas', *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 9 (2005): 1-17). They do so, Nowak argues, in that Picasso like Rojas uses 'irony, parody and grotesque literalizations' to subvert pictorial tradition to the point of mocking even his own fame. Picasso's *Celestina* imagery, like Rojas's text, 'exposes the libidinal and competitive urges that inform the art world, specifically as he represents it through the artist-model relationship.' Rojas links the sexual with the rhetorical, for as Nowak argues, 'Rhetorical prowess is the basis and the significance of *Celestina*'s powers of persuasion inside Rojas's text, it is also the key to her famous 'seductions' of Pármeno and Melibea.' (William Nowak, 'Picasso's *Celestina* Etchings: The Artist as Reader of Fernando de Rojas?', paper presented at the 57<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Foreign Language Convention in Lexington, Kentucky, 16 April, 2004). Picasso's pictorial prowess is the corollary to *Celestina*'s magical words, and is what advances the themes within the narratives of his *Celestina* prints. Picasso is the 'Graphic Magician,' as Betsy Fryberger has tagged him, (Betsy Fryberger, *Picasso: Graphic Magician: Prints from the Norton Simon Museum*, (California, 2000) p. 11), enticing his audience to participate in a visual comedy that satirizes man's more carnal desires. In the process, Picasso mocks his own role as artist. As Nowak argues, 'Picasso finds in Rojas's work a kindred spirit and a useful metaphor for engaging with the classical canon of Western visual artists as well as for exposing and commenting on his own role as an 'Old Master' of modern art' (*Arizona*).

<sup>6</sup> Schiff, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Schiff, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Schiff, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Donna Stein, 'When a Book Is More Than a Book', in Robert Flynn Johnson, *Artist's Books in the Modern Era 1870-2000: The Reva and David Logan Collection of Illustrated Book*, (San Francisco, 2001) p.17.

<sup>10</sup> Stein, in Johnson, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> According to the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco catalogue, 'Picasso did not want the text to be printed on the verso of the leaves with etchings,' causing the arrangements of the pages to be unusual, with occasional 'uncut double leaves with one etching and one page of text alternat[ing] with single leaves with two text pages.' Johnson, p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in, Susan Grace Galassi, *Picasso's Variations on the Masters: Confrontations with the Past*, (New York, 1996), p. 154. With regard to Picasso's art based on old masters, Galassi states, 'Allusions or references to earlier paintings enhance or amplify the meaning of a work, but do not determine it,' Galassi, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Daix, *La Célestine*, Paris, 20 May – 13 July 1988, 29. For this discussion in relationship to Picasso's painting of Celestina see Carol Salus, 'Picasso's Version of *Celestina* and Related Issues', in Joseph T. Snow, ed. *Celestinesca*, (Michigan State University, November 1991), pp. 3-17.

<sup>14</sup> John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso, 1881-1906*, I, (New York, 1991), p. 288.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of how Rembrandt used sequential series of prints as a form of liturgical meditation see Margaret Deutsch Carroll, 'Rembrandt as Meditational Printmaker', *Art Bulletin*, December, 1981, pp. 585-610. Cohen describes how Picasso plays with characters in various states of Rembrandt's *The Three Crosses*, Cohen, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work*, (New York, 1959), p. 374. (from Galassi, p. 178.)

<sup>17</sup> This is much the same way as Galassi has described Picasso's dialogue with old master painters. 'A variation,' she writes, 'forms a reciprocal relationship with its source, rooted in contrast, in which the new work and the old modify and define one another in turn.' Gallassi, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the artist and model in Picasso's art, see Kleinfelder, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Schiff, p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> Schiff, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Schiff, p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> Kleinfelder, p. 200.

<sup>23</sup> Observation of Nowak.

<sup>24</sup> Svetlana Alpers, 'Manner and Meaning is some Rubens Mythologies,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Volume 30, 1967, p. 285.

<sup>25</sup> Kleinfelder, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Kleinfelder, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Aldo Crommlync gives a wonderful description of the complexity of Picasso's working of the plate, Cohen, p. 13-17.

<sup>28</sup> Brigitte Baer, 'Seven Years of Printmaking: The Theatre and its Limits', in Tate Gallery, *Late Picasso: Paintings, sculpture, drawings, print, 1953-1972*, London, 1988, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> Baer, p. 96.