

Picasso's *Celestina* Etchings: Portrait of the Artist as Reader of Fernando de Rojas

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We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.

—Pablo Picasso, "Picasso Speaks" *The Arts*

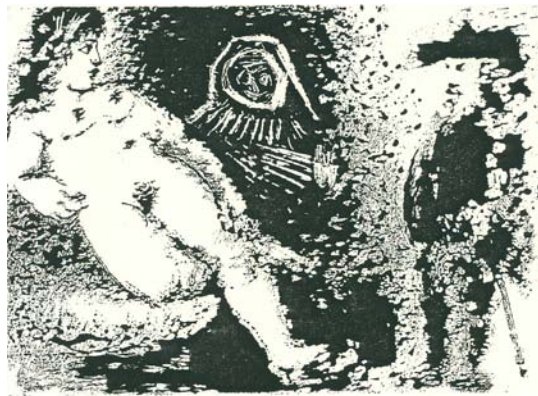


Fig. 1

Between April and August of 1968, just a few years prior to his death, Picasso created a series of sixty-six etchings inspired by Fernando de Rojas's *Celestina*.¹ Originally this series formed part of a larger collection of 347 engravings known as *Suite 347* and it is not surprising that some of the earliest commentators on that sprawling work failed to recognize the literary allusion to a text little

known outside the field of Hispanic letters.² Amid the baroque festival of images that constitutes *Suite 347*, *Celestina* with her prostitutes and clients could easily go unnoticed or be mislabeled as a stereotypical duenna taken from Picasso's autobiographical reminiscences on his Spanish origins.³ Surrounded by and integral to *Suite 347*'s panoply of circus performers and bull-fighters, of musketeers and harem ladies, of harlequins and other refugees from the *commedia dell'arte*, the *Celestina* scenes nevertheless form an identifiable series that Picasso would confirm later by re-using them in a subsequent printing. In 1971, Picasso collaborated on a collector's edition of *La Célestine*, in which a French translation of Rojas's text was published together with the sixty-six *Celestina* etchings and aquatints taken from *Suite 347*.⁴ The fact that Picasso himself chose these images for the project and participated directly in the realization of this edition through the Louise Leiris Gallery justifies their designation as his *Celestina* etchings. But what may make them most intriguing for readers of Rojas's *Celestina* is their unflinching corroboration of Rojas's radically critical vision of what Roberto González Echevarría calls "the dark abyss of modernity" (11). As we shall see in a selection of these images, 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.

This understanding of the radically modern, some might say postmodern, spirit of Rojas's work has been emerging for several decades in *Celestina* studies. In *Celestina's Brood*, a book that marks a key moment in this interpretive paradigm shift, González Echevarría characterizes Rojas's work as

the progenitor of a viper's brood of modern writings in which language is ripped open to reveal that even the literal is a figurative trope and that nothing exists outside the cheats of discourse. Quoting Dorothy Severin's insight that "all the literary models fail [to describe reality accurately or profitably] at the end of the work" after Melibea's dramatic suicide speech and Pleberio's lament (Severin 117), González Echevarría goes one step further. He concludes "that received knowledge, even in the form of religion, is but an elaborate cover-up that literature must constantly expose" (31). There is then no true "critique of authority" because that would imply that there is a more sturdy foundation from which one might honestly criticize the flawed nature of a particular type of discourse. Rojas's work, according to this view, teaches us that "without the delusions of language and literature, fleeting and dangerous as they may be, there is nothing..." (32). *Celestinesque* literature—the prototype of the "modern myth of literature"—is a truth-telling lie [just as art is for Picasso in the quotation from 1923 cited above] because it reveals not only the mendacity but also the radical self-creative and self-liberating energy inherent in all literary discourse. But Picasso, like González Echevarría, also goes further by noting that truth itself is something constructed by society or tradition rather than an objectively apparent and unchanging essence (as Picasso puts it, art's lies tell not the plain or universal "truth" but "the truth that is given us to understand"). In a similar vein, George Shipley closes his article about the criticism of both traditional *auctoritas* and Renaissance empiricism in *Celestina* by citing Kenneth Burke's vision of humanity as the symbol-using and symbol misusing animal, who nevertheless refuses to

acknowledge the abyss that Pleberio evokes after Melibea's suicide, the abyss that is revealed by our realization that our symbols, our imperfect languages, shape reality itself. For beyond words, there is only chaos, a world with no rhyme or reason beyond animal instinct.⁵

So how do Picasso's *Celestina* etchings portray such an understanding of life and art? Can we 'read' his images as a reflection of Rojas's text and add his Celestinesque images to the unfolding reception of this unsung classic of post-modernity in the Hispanic world? It must be made clear from the start that Picasso's images do not illustrate Rojas's text in the strict sense of that word. We do not find, for instance, scenes based on particular passages from the text, nor do his figures correspond in a rigorously literal way to Rojas's descriptions of *Celestina* or *Melibea* or *Calisto*. What we do find is a cast of specific characters and particular motifs and themes drawn from Rojas as well as from Picasso's personal mythology, and from what we might call a Celestinesque portrayal of life and of artistic creation. Rojas's text uses irony, parody and grotesque literalizations to desecralize and subvert even the most authoritative literary discourses,⁶ and Picasso follows suit by making his Celestinesque images expose the libidinal and competitive urges that inform the art world, specifically as he represents it here through the artist-model relationship.⁷

This image of the artist with his model was a long-standing motif in Picasso's work going back decades, and the *Celestina* etchings spring from that tradition of meta-artistic introspection in Picasso. In his series of etchings of the Sculptor's Studio from the *Vollard Suite* (1933-34) as well as in later versions of the motif, Picasso uses an

idiosyncratic mythology to meditate on the nature of art and the artist through visually symbolic variations on the artist-model relationship. In a long series of paintings, drawings and etchings, the artist figure is sometimes of classical origins, other times he is a child genius figure or an aging stand-in for the elderly Picasso and in the *Celestina* etchings he is most often decked out as a musketeer. All such figures are, to an extent, tongue-in-cheek, but they nevertheless provide Picasso with a forum to show the public his understanding of his own professional role. In the *Vollard Suite*, for example, Picasso evokes (and simultaneously deflates) the image of the artist as divine prophet or seer by depicting him in a polished classical style, as a Greco-Roman demi-god or legend, like Daedalus. At his side, the beautiful nude model is present but ignored in favor of the mendacious representation of her "reality" that the artist has made, which almost invariably bears only slight resemblance to her. If this classical artist is not obsessed with his own creation, he is engaged in intellectual debate or competition with fellow artists, but he is never involved in communication with the model (even when they are together on the same bed). In the images inspired by Rojas several decades later, the activity of the noble classical artist that we see in the *Vollard Suite* seeking Neo-Platonic ideals through his pursuit of the perfect female nude form is radically changed, and now the artist's pretensions to aesthetic detachment and a pure search for formal beauty are exposed as a sham and a smokescreen for the artist's real, baser motivations.

Here, the more modern, musketeer incarnation of the artist is anything but indifferent to the flesh and blood reality of his model. But it is not that the Picasso of

these *Celestina* etchings uses a modernist conception of what good art is in order to mock earlier generations. On the contrary, the Picasso of 1968 refuses to follow the artistic trends of the previous three decades, and the *Celestina* etchings, like the rest of his later works, were rejected by many of his younger contemporaries for using outmoded artistic strategies rooted in narratives about the human condition and in the representation of the human figure.⁸ As we will see, all manner of style, whether modern or classical, is comically deflated in the *Celestina* etchings, which reveal the libidinal subtext informing the artist-model relationship. Just as Celestina's seductions of Pármeno and Melibea establish a linkage between literary creativity and sexual desire, Picasso here ties his scenes of lust to artistic activity and the creation of an artist's identity. Neither the stately classical artist of the past, nor the abstracted formalist artist of the mid-twentieth century, Picasso adopts a radically self-critical stance in these images that tie the erotic to the aesthetic. In this, as in so many other aspects, he was a close reader of Rojas. Whether humorous, uncanny or almost grossly pornographic, his Celestinesque scenes always refer us to this understanding of Rojas's work through the meta-artistic iconographic details we will consider in what follows.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

To begin to introduce Picasso's visual meditation on Rojas's text, it will be helpful to consider the three main characters that dominate these scenes. The most important and ubiquitous figure in the *Celestina* series is undoubtedly that of the young seductive woman, who may either be a prostitute or a lady of noble standing like Melibea. Of the sixty-six images in the entire series, these young, usually nude or partly undressed, women appear in a total of sixty-one, and eight of them are monumental solitary figures, as in Fig. 2. Karen Kleinfelder, among others, has recognized this female figure as a new version of the stock Picassian figure of the model and as such her role is tied to the pursuit of artistic beauty, to the achievement of artistic perfection, and to Picasso's ongoing obsession with his own role as artist.⁹ The male figure is only slightly less prominent in the *Celestina* series as a whole, appearing in fifty-one of the etchings. The men are usually portrayed as suitors (or johns) to the young women and, as mentioned above, they often appear attired as musketeers (although there is full frontal male nudity in no less than nine of the etchings as well). Only two images show the musketeer/ suitor in monumental isolation, as when he appears fingering his lute in Fig. 3. This Celestinesque musketeer is one of the aging Picasso's favorite masks for the figure of an anti-heroic, slightly ridiculous and sometimes overtly clownish artist whose art is histrionically passionate. He also has direct ties to Picasso's ongoing appropriations of the Great Masters as subjects for his own creations, as Shiff has shown. If the woman's prime attribute is her naked body, the musketeer's most notable characteristics are the symbols of his privileged social and gender status: his showy hat and cape, his boots, his horse and his walking stick or equally phallic pipe.

Finally, Celestina herself appears in twenty of the sixty-six etchings of the series used in *La Célestine*. It is perhaps ironic that she is the last of the three main characters to appear in Picasso's original elaboration of this visual drama; her image only appears in plates after May 14, 1968, more than a month after Picasso began creating the etchings that would later be included in the *Celestina* series. She is always accompanied by at least one of the young women and she is most often also shown interacting with one or more of the gentlemen callers/musketeers. She is identifiable as an aged woman of diminutive stature and sinister aspect, who always wears a dark dress and headscarf, similar to a nun's habit (as noted above, early commentators on *Suite 347* refer to her as a "duenna," see Figs. 4, 5 and 6). Interestingly, she, like the musketeers, often appears holding a walking stick, although her cane is curved rather than straight like those held by the musketeers.

This troika of figures (the two lovers and their procuress) forms the backbone of Picasso's visual appropriation of *Celestina*. They are the props he uses to flesh out his meditation on the portrayal of sexual seduction and intercourse as a metaphor for literary (or artistic) expression. It is specifically in graphic compositions like these etchings as well as in his drawings, that Picasso specialists have found the artist's most obvious attempts to comment on his art and his status as artist. Such supposedly "minor" artistic graphic media as drawing and engraving freed Picasso from the anxiety of history and granted him greater discursive freedom. Werner Hoffman writes that

In [Picasso's] drawings and graphic work, the drama of the act of painting, which is objectified and codified in his pictures, takes the form of a series of explicit commentaries. [...]

The conflicts, fantasies and phobias that are created in his drawings between the artist, his model and his public constitute the subjective basis of Picasso's creative impulse. Taken together, they allow the viewer to penetrate his personality more deeply than do the paintings hanging in museums. To explain that he felt both a prisoner and a tamer of institutionalised art, he needed both the narrative capabilities of freehand drawing and its license to distort. It is Picasso the draughtsman, not Picasso the painter, who pronounces the first and last word through his 'caricatures.' And these works are at times joyful but at other times caustic, for behind the mask of 'délassement' lies the entire drama of his art. (38)

While Hoffman may speak here directly about drawing, these observations pertain to Picasso's engravings, which are also so often inspired by narrative and by introspective impulses. Picasso himself asserted that in the elaboration of the myriad narrative strands and evolving characters of *Suite 347* he felt most like a writer or dramatist, as he created miniature tableaux vivants in drawings and etchings. When viewing the works he was creating at the time (the *Celestina* etchings among them) with a group of acquaintances on May 20, 1968, Picasso said the following: "I spend hour after hour while I draw observing my creatures and thinking about the mad things they're up to; basically it's my way of writing fiction" (qtd. by Otero 170).



Fig. 4

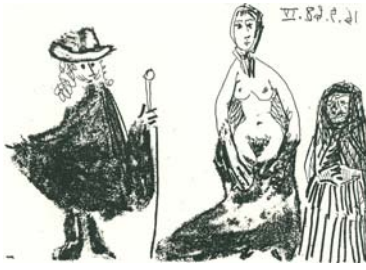


Fig. 5

Beyond the iconographic referentiality that makes the three main characters of the series legible to us, the dramatic element of the *Celestina* etchings is also a key to our understanding of the ways Picasso reads Rojas. One of the reasons that these engravings, like most of Picasso's later work, have generally been ignored and scorned by so many art critics and historians is their dramatically narrative character, something which flew in the face of the cutting edge of modern art. Pictorial figural drama was seen as a thing of the past, an outmoded and irrelevant technique. But these etchings are nothing if not dramatic, and they are rooted in an ironic (and anachronistic) historical mode that evokes Rojas as well as the wider 'Golden Age' of musketeers and their ladies. If we leave aside the few monumental portraits like those isolating the young woman and her suitor (Figs. 2 and 3), most of the pages of the series depict dramatic interactions that inscribe the archetypal figures of prostitute/john (or lady/musketeer) and Celestina herself into tragicomic, non-linear stories. Again, we must keep in mind that there is no chronological development of character nor is there a plot that unfolds from one image to the next. Picasso's *Celestina* images function more like related but non-sequential vignettes in which the various moments of the lovers' relationship are visited and revisited without

reference to the text with which they were published nor to the images that precede or follow them. The 'historicity' of this historical allusion is thus subverted and mocked even as Picasso, perhaps thumbing his nose at his younger contemporaries and disapproving critics, insisted on returning to the great artistic and literary masters of the past for inspiration for his version of "writing fiction."

Seen in this way, one can construe many key moments of the "story," such as the first meeting of the lovers, the spark of revealed desire, the interplay of coquetry and bravado, bold (and crass) declarations of love, the revelation of base motivations and cowardice behind the façade of masculine nobility, social status and heroics (or behind feminine displays of innocence and naïveté), the violence of sexual intercourse and many instances of unflinching introspection and observation of the Celestinesque world in which artistic creation masquerades as sexual desire (and vice versa). Just as there are few if any clear visual references to Rojas's characters (Celestina's famous scar, for example, is difficult to discern anywhere), there are no clear renditions of particular scenes either, although the themes addressed are obviously Celestinesque in their scope and implications. It is telling that Celestina herself only appears in groups; the mistress of mediation and procuress of other people's desires is a social being that lurks in the background as the young lovers negotiate their relationship. She lives in the dramatic moment of desire. But her influence is pervasive throughout the series, whether she appears as a participant in the scene (as in Figs. 4, 5 and 6), as a ghostly presence appearing only in negative (as in Fig. 1), or whether she is completely absent as is the case in two thirds of the images.



Fig. 6

Another technique for reading these images involves analyzing a particular symbol, such as the musketeer's walking stick, which appears across a number of scenes and so gains greater narrative weight, as we can appreciate in Figs. 4, 5 and 6. The phallic energy of this attribute of the musketeer figure remains consistent across all three of the images. In Fig. 5, however, the walking stick's upright posture and glans-like end offer us a typically Picassian version of Rojas's technique of literalizing metaphors to reveal the base nature of human beings and their society. The walking stick as phallic symbol thus sprouts literalizing visual characteristics that reveal its physical basis in male anatomy. More than a decorous or sober-minded "revelation," though, Picasso's images delight in rubbing our faces in the forbidden and indecorous aspects of the human condition. Freudian symbolism played an important role in Picasso's understanding and representation of the world, and here as in so many others of his compositions, he has no hesitation about reveling in the physical truths that underlie human relations and the cultural symbols we use to assert our identities. As we will see shortly, this same walking stick/penis eventually becomes a paintbrush, linking this series of images to the overarching consideration of the artist-model relationship that frames the entire series. Rather than illustrations

of Rojas's acts, then, scenes like these reveal the role of libido and crass longings in the elaboration of the Grand Tradition of the artist in ways that are analogous to those ways in which the antics of *Celestina*, *Melibea*, *Calisto* and the rest reveal the limited nature of language and literary discourse.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Picasso does not spare himself and his own status as the 'great artist' from his *Celestinesque* desacralization of the heroic artist. In Fig. 7 we recognize the grotesque representation of the musketeer-artist's lust in the phallic walking stick (and comically bugged out eyes). But here, the stylistic play with a potentially cubist portrayal of the nude woman seems to recall the standard description of cubism as a new vision of the subject that allows multiple perspectives to be revealed at once. Something other than the objective revelation of the subject is evident too. Here, of course, we see that the cubist woman is twisted in an exaggerated way, her manipulated form almost a mockery of the classical *contrapposto* pose, twisted so as to show front (breasts) and back (buttocks) simultaneously. Picasso's trademark artistic innovation (perhaps also an evocation of the academically sanctioned compositional technique of the past) in this image becomes just one more artistic trick to get sexual gratification and phallic control over the female object. Kleinfelder's discussion of this aspect of Picasso's graphic works,

including the *Celestina* series, has already explained the radically subversive appropriation of the tradition of the classical nude in images such as this one or that in Fig. 8. There we see the hypocrisy of the musketeers' chivalrous gestures, as their bowing to honor their ladylove only allows them to stare more comfortably into her exposed crotch. Such overt representation of spread female genitalia is certainly unrepresentative of the classical tradition of the nude, but Picasso goes even further towards the realm of pornography by including her anus, which as Kleinfelder says appears almost as a dot to mark the exclamation point that so obsesses the two musketeers (compare the same configuration of the splayed female nude in Figs. 9 and 10). The shocking alterations of the decorum traditionally accorded the classical nude are a good example of Picasso's visual equivalent of what Juri Lotman would call "defamiliarization"; the iconographic regularity of the image is disrupted so that the contrast with tradition heightens the viewer's appreciation of the communicative act undertaken by Picasso.

In Fig. 8, the musketeers' gaze could not be more revealing or its open lustfulness more uncanny. This is only one of the many *Celestina* etchings that could be used to demonstrate Picasso's insistence on representing visually the seamy side of Rojas's text, and the tragicomedy's own remarkably modern frankness about sexual desire and human nature. An uncompromising revelation of the banal motivation inspiring so much of the history of art, with its myriad female nudes painted by and for the pleasure of straight men, is here expressed very graphically (perhaps giving us a clear idea as to why most of the art world reacted with a "state of panic" to the first wide showing of these images in the early 1970s according to Shiff [11]). Picasso's caricature of the artist

as leering John brings the lofty and idealized discourse about great art and great artists down to a debased libidinous level. In much the same way, Rojas's literary text does not balk at suggesting the starkly animalistic drives for sexual pleasure and material gain that underlie even the most idealistic literary discourses about courtly love, religious piety and civic humanism. And whether or not Picasso would have used such words to express this understanding of *Celestina*, his visual analog for the text's ideas speaks just as clearly.

At the same time, we should not fail to recognize the importance of the humor in these images. As foolish and repellent as the leering musketeer may be, the image is also ridiculous and designed to elicit laughter as a deflationary strategy. The role of laughter in *Celestina* has been studied by various critics, including Severin, Fothergill-Payne and Gerli, and the present discussion may be too focused on the serious end of the serio-comic style of representation that informs Picasso's *Celestina* etchings.¹⁰ It is safe to say that Picasso's self-mockery and the satirical edge that characterizes this series is meant to elicit more snickers and guffaws than tears. In this way, laughter and ribaldry are deployed to dismantle the hypocrisy of the art world, much as Rojas's text used them to subvert the literary pretensions of his day.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

Although the female nude plays a much larger role in Picasso's oeuvre in general, his insistence on picturing the corporeal reality behind the shams of decorum and professional propriety may explain his decision to include several very significant male nudes in the *Celestina* series.¹¹ In most of these plates, the male nude seems to imitate the female nude's greater access to spontaneity and freedom from the strictures of social convention and the naked man sometimes seems to step away from the traditional limitations of his clothed brothers. Even when male nudes are paunchy and exposed in compromising postures, there is generally a greater sense of freedom about them, even an air of happiness or at least of authenticity that is far removed from the stylized (and laughable or hypocritical) desire we find in so many mustachioed musketeers. In Fig. 9, for example, we find one of the few images that may have a direct counterpart in Rojas's text—the banquet scene in *Celestina's* house. That act is famous for its panegyric of wine and it contains the most radical expression of plebeian sentiments in the tragicomedy. In a sense, that scene shows us the most subversive consequences of *Celestina's* philosophy and her way of life. In Picasso's version of the world turned upside down, perhaps following the Platonic banquet set in *Celestina's* house, men have occupied some of the roles of the female nude. His composition centers on a wildly contorted female figure that is dispensing wine to one of her male companions even as she seems to dance in an orgiastic frenzy. No longer the passive object of men's desire, she is the most active of the three figures. Shorn of their societal masks of male privilege, the two male nudes here adopt typically feminized poses, with one laying prone and open-mouthed to receive the woman's gift

of wine while the other remains upright but with his arms posed behind his head in typical (seductive and objectified) female nude configuration (compare him to the woman in Fig. 10).

In contrast to these classically proportioned male nudes in the wine-drinking scene, the hairy short man of Fig. 10 demonstrates a different strategy for the male nude. This figure exaggerates or at least exposes the ungainly and muscular corporality of the female nude's suitors, whose private parts and imperfections are normally hidden from such a revealing treatment. A certain amount of comic deflation seems apparent in the juxtaposition of the hairy nude and the more stylized and conventional heads behind it. Yet the laughter is not entirely at the short man's expense. Despite his crudeness, there is an undeniable sense of power to his body. And of course he is the only one of the three male figures in the image to have any body; the other two appear as disembodied bust and floating head. The two male figures in fore- and middle ground of this image recall two of the different portrayals of the male artist figure common in Picasso's later works (the bald and paunchy artist and the musketeer), but the third figure is a head reminiscent of the classical artist-hero dating from the *Vollard Suite* of the 1930s. Here he is seen floating at the back of the composition. Of the three, this classical artist's head is the only one who is not obsessed with the exposed female nude. Instead he directs his gaze forward, either towards the other two artist figures caught in the act of lustful observation or towards the viewer of the image outside the frame. This idealized artist figure (together with the disembodying values he embodies) contrasts strikingly and comically with the perhaps more autobiographical figure of

the short, balding and obsessive painter in front, who is most likely an alter ego for the short-statured and bald Picasso. The familiar musketeer face completing the group of men hovers in profile between those two extremes of carnivalesque body and ethereal mind. Whether one uses Bakhtinian or Feminist approaches to these images of the artist and his model, it is impossible to deny the extent to which Picasso's meditation on *Celestina* and the nature of the art world is tied to constructions of gender, both masculine and feminine.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

The clash of male and female, of social propriety and free expression of instinctual desire, receives a more direct treatment in these two dramatic images (Figs. 11 and 12), which both seem to recall the classical image of the Rape of the Sabine Women. The usually placid or seductive female nude is here portrayed in a state of distress, with arms raised as if indicating terror or pain. In the first image (Fig. 11), she is dragged along by a seemingly inescapable movement to the right, while disembodied black hands clutch at her torso. Something of the chain of falls that drag all of Rojas's characters to their doom may be evoked by this image. Behind the distressed nude, *Celestina* rushes along, now bearing a cane, arguably akin to the phallic walking stick we have seen associated with the musketeer. This blurring of the lines between the female procuress and the male musketeer points, I would argue, to a similar function shared by both, since they are each intent on achiev-

ing intercourse between the nude and her male suitor, between art object and artistic object-maker, as *Celestina* might have said, "a tuerto o a derecho." In front of this chain of desire we see blurry musketeer figures who lead this frenetic dash, seemingly set in motion and driven along by the procuress. The same theme is treated in a subsequent etching (Fig. 12), which ties the image of violent capture and perhaps rape to the runaway horse of sexual desire. As we have seen, sexuality and gendered social roles play significant parts in Picasso's dramatization of the art world in *Celestinesque* guise. This highlights another key to the *Celestina* etchings: our understanding of these images depends not only on our recognition of their attempts to defamiliarize the traditional artistic canons of representation like that of the female nude, but also on our recognizing Picasso's creation of an idiosyncratic "familiarity" of a new "tradition," a new tradition created and made intelligible through his invented personal iconography (i.e., the classical artist vs. the musketeer) and its attendant symbolism.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

In images like these (Figs. 13, 14 and 15) we can see how his play with defamiliarization and the magical creation of an ersatz "tradition" more to Picasso's liking is achieved. Here Picasso completes the revelation of his metaphorical identification between the musketeer figures and the archetype of the artist, even within the confines of the *Celestina* series. These pages thus link the series even more directly to his consideration of meta-artistic themes vital to his appropriations of the Great Masters.

As the same musketeer characters that we have seen ogling, seducing, groping and raping, Celestina's girls suddenly trade walking sticks for paintbrushes, the scene of the seduction between young woman and musketeer suddenly is transferred into the realm of the art world, and the representation of sexual desire shifts from the brothel to the artist's studio. Narrative slips like these, which take us from one sphere to the next, from metaphorical to literal modes, make the *Celestina* series just as double-voiced as Rojas's text.¹² In Fig. 15, the artist's belief in his god-like powers to create are given representation in a new version of the Pygmalion myth as the musketeer-artist paints the object of his desire, who is also object of his art, into existence. Sexual energy and creative zeal channeled into the strictures of art in the artist's studio suggest that the deep identification with Rojas's work felt by Picasso springs from his introspective analysis of his own situation as artist. On a personal level, the elderly Picasso's fear of sexual as well as artistic impotence and death must have fueled his interest in charting his own accomplishments against the Great Masters of the past, among whom he includes Rojas.¹³ The entire engagement with Rojas is, after all, only different from Picasso's many appropriations of artists like Goya or Velázquez because in Rojas his model for imitation and appropriation was literary rather than visual. In paintings, drawings and engravings that borrowed imagery and compositional styles from previous masters of the European tradition Picasso had long before established a visual dialogue with the past and proclaimed his own status as heir and rival to that tradition.



Fig. 15

As Dominique Dupuis-Labbé has written, in these appropriations of the Masters carried out by Picasso with increasing fervor in his later years:

the original was transformed, took on a parodic, comical or sacrilegious form, lost part of its own life in order to be 'digested' by Picasso: an authentic phenomenon of transubstantiation occurs on the canvas. The paintings by the masters are totally reinvented so that the new canvases seem a product of his own imagination. The phrase sometimes used to designate this period does not seem adequate, for we are talking not only of appropriation but also of liquidation: with the variations, Picasso settled his account with tradition and found a new freshness which was to be the source of his painting in his last years. One might say that Picasso moved from homage to repudiation. (72)

The ambivalent feelings evident in many of Picasso's appropriations of the Great Masters of painting are no doubt related to the Oedipal dramatic lens through which he seems to have understood his role.¹⁴ Those "fathers" of his artistic tradition are certainly worthy

of his admiration and respect, and yet he believes that his own status must eclipse theirs (as it had his own biological father's) in order for him to realize his potential. There is a large dose of anxiety of influence in such an understanding of his professional identity. In turning for creative inspiration to a literary master like Fernando de Rojas, however, the creative and psychological imperatives were different. The appropriating act in Picasso's *Celestina* etchings is less antagonistic than in many of his other dialogues with the Great Masters of Tradition. This may be due not only to the fact that Rojas was not a painter, but also may owe, as I have been suggesting, to the remarkable similarity in strategy and outlook that one can discern between Picasso's parodic, serio-comic expression and Rojas's text.



Fig. 16

This interwoven complex of impulses—anxiety of influence, struggle for professional success and melancholy about professional and personal impotence—provides the subtext for one of the few *Celestina* etchings in which no female subject is present (Fig. 16). This is important because it suggests that although the urge to possess the nude woman is preeminent in this deconstruction of the art world, Picasso's critical representation of his profession also acknowledges at least one other non-aesthetic motivating factor involved in the pursuit of art, namely the competition for

fame and status. In Fig. 16, two musketeers battle each other with their swords (yet another metamorphosis of the walking stick/paintbrush), while their long manes and capes fly in the wind of their own exertions. Meanwhile, a third male figure, who is nude as well as big-bellied and balding, observes their struggle for supremacy from the sidelines. On his head we note a laurel wreath indicating his status as a classical winner in the Apollonian contest for artistic prestige and maybe, therefore, his role as arbiter of the younger contestants' efforts.¹⁵ While this is a unique composition in the context of the *Celestina* etchings, the climactic moment of struggle with the placid, observing presence of the bald man recalls the many threesomes composed by *Celestina* and the two lovers. The old procuress's role as instigator of the sexual liaison is here replaced (or recreated and reinterpreted) in the ostensibly impartial role of the elder artist-judge, who is evidently meant to evaluate and thereby validate the struggle between the two musketeer-artists and their swordplay. Whether Picasso would identify himself with the musketeers or the crowned judge of the art world in this image is probably beside the point. The non-linear nature of his meditation on the nature of his art allows him to embody different aspects of himself in various characters at different moments in the "narrative." He can be both musketeer scrambling to prove himself (even at age 80) and the established representative of the classical tradition. He can be *Celestina* herself, identifying with her power to direct the desires of others and her uncompromising dedication to a base material definition of human reality, as well as to her melancholy envy of the young lovers whose sexual antics provoke the memory of happier times in her toothless mouth. He

can even identify with the female nude (at least ironically) as we see in Fig. 17 when he inserts a self-portrait into the heart of the Celestinesque world.



Fig. 17

To Picasso's left side in this image, an especially sinister Celestina has appeared, now significantly holding the only visible walking stick in the form of a cane with a flaccidly curved end. She rises up behind him, almost like a dread shadow. Her androgynous status as female with (deflated) phallic emblem is very suggestive in itself, when thinking about her role in this meditation on the nature of art and the artist. In the center of the group, between Celestina's dark and amorphous shape on the one hand and a contented and naked younger couple on the other, Picasso's likeness apes the provocative poses we have seen assumed by the prostitutes in other etchings (compare Fig. 2). We do not see the perineal shot of the female nudes we have noted above (evidently some taboos still stayed Picasso's hand in this exposé of the forbidden areas of the art world). Nonetheless, this is a fine tour de force of the meta-artistic representation of the artist and his model. We see how Picasso's preoccupation with his own role as artist and with the nature of artistic expression is here tied directly to Rojas's iconic figure of the Old Bawd. And this suggests a further identifying parallel between the naked Picasso and the Celestina figure:

they are both short characters, each with a smooth head. One wonders if under that head covering we wouldn't find Celestina to be both paunchy and balding, a version of Picasso in drag.

Indeed, Kleinfelder has already 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," she writes:

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 own amusement. (200)

To this excellent interpretation, I would add that the inspiration that Picasso takes from Rojas seemingly goes far beyond the convenient figure of the Old Bawd and her voyeuristic penchant for delighting in and arranging the sexual antics of her younger companions, just as Picasso created these Celestinesque scenarios for his own characters.

We have noted that in his old age Picasso's artistic star had been eclipsed and that his later work was generally dismissed. By portraying himself as a doppelganger for his own version of Celestina in these etchings, then, Picasso clings to and yet mocks his chosen role as mediator between the moderns and a classical artistic tradition reaching back to the Golden Age of Renaissance painting, and beyond to Greco-Roman Antiquity. If as many

critics have pointed out, literary tradition is problematic in Rojas's parodic text, the artistic tradition was doubly vexed in the art world inhabited by Picasso. The move away from the figure into abstraction and formalist concerns that in Western Europe had followed Picasso and Braque's Cubist experimentation with form in large measure responds to a desire for a more "authentic" or "modern" visual expression. Narrative legibility and mimetic iconography, so vital to classical and nineteenth century academic visual artists, had therefore been jettisoned by most of Picasso's younger contemporaries in favor of an artistic language of supposedly pure and abstract visual form. But Picasso almost always retained the classical element of narrative and enlarged his personal iconography in the face of a changing art world. Like *Celestina* with her young pupils in the artful use of authoritative discourse to obtain what they want without the restraints of traditional morality, Picasso had taught the academic art establishment an essentially modernist approach to the art of painting, an approach that freed them from the "distractions" of mimesis and allowed them to concentrate on that which most gratifies the visual artist's sensibilities: the search for effective form, freed from concerns about the consequences for the artistic tradition's previous social duties as didactic or propagandistic tool of social elites. And even as physical impotence and old age overcame him, Picasso found himself marginalized as an artist, his later works derided or ignored by the critical elite of the art world (even if he would continue to find lucrative commercial markets for his output). The metaphorical stab in the back by younger generations of artists may constitute one more affinity that Picasso felt when reading and meditating on Rojas's text, particularly on the figure of the Old Bawd.

Few if any *Celestina* scholars have studied these etchings as part of the reception of Rojas's work, but for anyone interested in how the twentieth century opened up new ways of reading this classic they will be very suggestive. It remains to be seen if they will contribute to the growing consensus that Rojas's text constitutes one of the foundational moments in the formulation of a literary "modernity" in Spain. Nevertheless, an interdisciplinary approach to the text's reception by diverse readers such as Picasso allows us to assess our appreciation of Rojas's work with a new palette. Instead of leaving the text bound in the chains of neo-historicism or univocal authorial intentionality, a consideration of the *Celestina* etchings may allow us to appreciate the evolving meaning that this classic has had and continues to have in Hispanic culture.¹⁶ If, as so many *Celestina* scholars now believe, Rojas's work is vitally concerned with unmasking the deceits of (literary) art, then it is notable that Picasso's treatment of *Celestina* suggests that he had already reached very similar conclusions about her enigmatic figure in the late 1960s. Today his *Celestina* etchings still constitute an intriguing pictorial meditation on the significance of Rojas's work as a lens for understanding the human creator in a modern, anti-heroic world.



Fig. 18

Notes

¹ Like the other images in this article, Fig. 1 comes from the edition of *La Célestine* (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier Crommelynck, 1971) bound with Picasso's *Celestina* etchings, 400 copies of which were sold through the Louise Leiris Gallery. The order of the images in this article corresponds to the needs of my argument, and not to their disposition in the book, nor to the order of their creation. After reviewing the order of the images in relation to the text, I can find no direct correspondence between written word and the image printed next to it. Picasso evidently envisioned a different kind of synergy between Rojas's text and his own visual narrative. In fact, "Picasso did not want the text to be printed on the verso of the leaves with etchings" (Fynn Johnson and Stein 164). Therefore, as Baker and Nowak have pointed out:

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. One might immediately think of Picasso's 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. (29-30)

² Barr Sharrar, for example, states that there is "what could be called a Spanish series within *Suite 347*" identifiable by the nudes in mantillas and the "duennas" (i.e., *Celestina* figures) that accompany them, but he misses the allusion to Rojas (518).

³ Jean Sutherland Boggs gives a list of the "astronomical" cast of characters invented or recouped from earlier works by Picasso for *Suite 347* to show the "intensity of his narrative imagination," of which the *Celestina* images are only one series (154-55).

⁴ *Suite 347* of 1968 was not the first time Picasso had treated the *Celestina* motif; his portrait of a noted Barcelona prostitute titled "La *Celestina*" is a well-known image from his youth,

and shows that his fascination with Rojas's text dates at least from 1904.

⁵ In addition to the studies cited by González Echevarría and Severin, there is a growing bibliography of *Celestina* scholars who have addressed various aspects of the (post) modernity of Rojas's text. From Malcolm Read, George Shipley and Peter Dunn, to Mary Malcolm Gaylord and Mathew Bentley, the modern self-referentiality and anti-heroic conception of human discourse in *Celestina* has been an increasing point of departure for scholarly approaches to the text.

⁶ On the use of excessive referentiality or literalization of metaphor to reveal the illegitimacy of language and of representation in *Celestina*, see González Echevarría 14-32.

⁷ Cohen's interpretation of Picasso's late graphics concludes that they as well as Picasso's early experimentation in formalism anticipated many of the preoccupations of late twentieth century postmodernism:

His understanding of the relativism of style, his strategies of deconstruction and appropriation, and the radical perceptions that prompted those explorations, all foresaw the conception of reality and representation that would prevail at the end of the twentieth century. Early in this century, Picasso had stepped outside of representation and had seen its shifting planes, perceiving the fact that there were many 'more or less convincing lies,' [...]. Throughout his life he remained true to that fundamentally postmodernist conviction. (98)

⁸ Shiff wrote the following to characterize the generally negative reaction to Picasso's later works following a retrospective show in 1973:

Why 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 most

outmoded field of pictorial creation, Romantic narrative?" According to Shiff, for many years this later phase of Picasso's career was "hardly discussed in scholarly literature, poorly represented in exhibitions, [and] commercially unpopular. (11)

⁹ Leiris has noted a shift in Picasso's treatment of the artist-model relationship in the 1953-54 *Verve Suite*. There art no longer elevates the artist to superhuman status as (he argues) it had in the 1933 *Vollard Suite*. "Now Picasso individualized and differentiated these characters, noting the mannerisms of each of his reincarnations in so incisive a way that he sometimes came close to caricature." In Leiris's view, this is an "ambiguous reevaluation," but it points to the development of a legible cast of characters and to Picasso's willingness to take a satirically critical tone with his own profession (171-72).

¹⁰ On the role of the Spanish serio-comic tradition in Picasso's work, see Bozal.

¹¹ Hoffman makes the following statement about Picasso and the nude in graphic arts:

Picasso usually depicted women in total and submissive nakedness, and men (artist, collector or voyeur) covered by one of civilisation's masks, a guise which both accentuated the superior status of men and was also a hindrance for them. There is an echo of the contrast that Diderot reduced to the formula 'artificial man vs. natural man.' This distribution of roles—male dignity as restriction as opposed to female spontaneity—is furthered by two types of line: the female body adapts to the course of the curve—the exceptions confirm the rule—while that of the man is an intricate labyrinth of broken lines. (36-37)

If he is correct in this generalization, the curved lines of these male nudes further feminize them.

¹² Baker and Nowak have explored the technical sophistication of Picasso's *Celestina* engravings:

The complexity and overlay of techniques makes it difficult to figure out what technique he 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, evoking 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 forms found among the prints of the *Vollard Suite*, whose elegant lines and 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 joke aimed at subverting audience expectations. (34)

¹³ Anglin Burgard argues that this appropriating strategy began in Picasso's youth, and is a consistent trait of his professional and personal activities throughout his adult life, not just during his old age.

¹⁴ See Anglin Burgard's discussion of the psychological motivations of Picasso's art.

¹⁵ The artist as hero and cult-image is honored by the throng and crowned with a laurel branch as an immortal. In the context of self-mockery in these etchings, the laurel wreath recalls Picasso's 1900 drawing of Sabartès as a fin-de-siècle poet. (Barr Sharrar 28)

¹⁶ According to Noé Jitrik's restatement of Jauss's Reception Theory,

Se puede reconocer que los textos que nos han sido entregados por la cultura van cambiando en la medida en que cambian las maneras de leerlos, lo cual es posible en virtud de los cambios que tienen lugar en las sociedades mismas y en las normas que las ordenan. (36)

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