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THE INTELLECTUAL PROCURESS: CELESTINA'S LEGACY AND THE RHETORIC OF SEDUCTION¹

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In 1673, Jan Vermeer painted a large canvas depicting a young woman playing a virginal (a type of harpsichord, mostly played by women) in the elegant music room of a wealthy household. The picture, now at the London National Gallery, is a marvelous example of Vermeer's ability to enter the intimate dimension of female life and suspend it for a moment, freezing time and action to create a window through which the viewer can forever spy into the private world of a forever young woman. Like many other paintings of this kind, the scene has a magic that keeps the viewer spellbound, looking at the young woman looking back at him (Fig. 1).

The girl's obvious youth and the picture's title, *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, enhance the sense of purity and spirituality, but as we follow the girl's body and face on the vertical plane of the picture we find another painting, right behind the girl's head, that overlaps and connects with it. The miniature painting is a copy of Dirk van Baburen's *The Procuress*, a large canvas depicting a man with his arm around a young woman playing the lute and an old woman clearly asking to be paid the price for the girl's services. (Fig. 2).

¹ Revised and corrected by Giuseppe Pio Cascavilla.



Fig. 1. Johannes Vermeer, *Lady Seated at a Virginal*



Fig. 2. Dirck van Baburen, *The Procuress*

Vermeer introduced the same background in another painting, *The Concert*, completed in 1665, showing two young girls and a man singing and playing the lute and the harpsichord. Here Baburen's painting, which was privately owned by

Vermeer's family², functions as a morally and physically dark background for the standing young female singer³ (Fig. 3). In 1656, a decade before composing these two music-inspired paintings, Vermeer painted his own version of *The Procuress*, a canvas crowded with four figures, the fourth apparently a self-portrait (Fig. 4). The inclusion of the artist's self-portrait was probably inspired by Dirk van Baburen's 1632 *Loose Company*, featuring the artist playing the lute next to a procuress, a young prostitute and her client.



Fig. 3. Johannes Vermeer, *The Concert*

2 The artwork was mentioned in 1641 in the inventory of Maria Thins' house, as "A painting wherein a procuress points to the hand." John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu*, p. 122.

3 The Concert was stolen from the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990 and it has never been recovered.



Fig. 4. Johannes Vermeer, *The Procuress*

Brothel scenes had long been a common subject in Dutch art as part of the visual narrative of the biblical *Prodigal Son* story, but during the seventeenth century artists discarded the religious context and shifted the focus from the moral content to the interaction between the profligate young man and the brothel's procurer. Vermeer's interest in the image of the procurer reflects the general public's fascination with the topic, as well as Dutch artists' awareness of the change in their patrons' taste. The new demand for art favored eroticism over spirituality, transforming the artist's position from visual theologian to purveyor of titillating images. Like the procurer, the artist must bewitch the patron in accepting illusion as reality, and eroticism as fulfillment. However, the reason for this artistic shift is more complex than the artists' materialistic desire for rich commissions.

Artists' and writers' fascination with the figure of the procurer is rooted in a literary genre that first developed in Spain with Fernando de Rojas' *La Celestina*. The story revolves around the character of an old procurer, Celestina, who seduces an innocent girl on behalf of a previously unsuccessful young suitor by enveloping her in a rhetorical web of reverse morality. The enormous success of *La Celestina* is attested by its influence on writers and artists, particularly in Italy, where the tragic story turns into a parody of female education. The Procurer characters that appear in 16th century Italian art and literature, from Aretino's dialogues and Giulio Romano's *Lovers and Procurer*, to Titian's *Danaë*, are echoes of Rojas' original novel. But in Alessandro Piccolomini's *Raffaella* (1539) and Bartolomeo Gottifredi's *Specchio d'Amore* (1542) the line separating education and seduction, artist and

panderer becomes increasingly vague.

It is the claim of this paper that *La Celestina* opened the door for a new pragmatic understanding of art and literature: behind the disguise of the old woman and her convincing use of language, there is the increasingly aware self-portrait of the author as the supreme seducer and supplier of desire. As the artist/writer gains full awareness of his ability to create, offer and control desire in others, he becomes the ultimate procuress, one who through logos or art is able to shape esthetic values and reverse moral categories. Within this new dimension of linguistic/artistic creativity, the esthetic and ethical categories of good/evil, beautiful/ugly cease to be absolutes and become shifting qualities, to be determined not by a moral God but through the power of disguised fe(male) rhetoric.



Fig. 5. Titian, *Danaë with Nursemaid or Danaë Receiving the Golden Rain*

First published in 1499 untitled and then under the title of *Comedia de Calisto e Melibea*, Roja's work gained great popularity at a time of strong and mutual cultural influence between Italy, Spain and Flanders. In 1502 two editions were published in Seville with different titles: *Libro de Calixto y Melibea y de la puta vieja Celestina* and *Tragicomedia de Calixto y Melibea*, the latter also appearing in Salamanca and Toledo the same year. Interestingly, in the title of the 1502 version, *Libro de Calixto y Melibea y de la puta vieja Celestina*, we note the beginning of a shift in focus away from the doomed couple and towards the old hag. It is no longer a "comedia" or "tragicomedia," it is simply a book. This change points to the fact that the procuress'

popularity must have grown by leaps and bounds to the detriment of the other two protagonists and it was logical that eventually she would be transformed into the privileged focus of the story, and the book would come to be known simply as *La Celestina*.

The question is: What is it about the portrayal of Celestina that has resounded so profoundly with readers since the first publication of the book? Why did she displace the original protagonists of the text with such ease? The answer may be that Rojas was able to tap into the deepest fears men have towards women. Rojas constructs and deconstructs through Celestina the prevalent notions and myths about women that have enjoyed currency in Western societies since classical and biblical times. Among the received ideas about females that Rojas delves into, there is the relationship between gender and logos; between the word and its custodians. He exposes men's need to control the word that confers power in order to create the world and invent gender subjectivities along with the relations that govern them.

Although critics have lavished much attention on the linguistic aspects of *La Celestina*, few have focused on the role of language as the driving force behind the novel: specifically, the way language is manipulated by Celestina to seduce, to create desire and need. It is for this reason that the procuress is not just depicted in the traditional imagery of witches that had been created and propagated by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and undoubtedly still held sway in early modern Spain. Instead, she is portrayed as a woman aware of the power of logos to invent and reinvent realities. As such, the text is a precursor of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* with regard to its modern and postmodern tendencies. In other words, Celestina is much more than a witch who concocts potions and magic spells to bring about her work as a go-between, she is a woman who appropriates the role of Eve in Genesis as she usurps patriarchal discourse and wreaks havoc on society by showing reality for what it actually is, a social construct manipulated by discourse.

Before the procuress appears on the scene, Sempronio describes her to Calisto as “una vieja barbuda que se dice Celestina, hechicera, astuta, sagaz en cuantas maldades hay” (67-68). The imagery chosen by Sempronio to describe Celestina is striking indeed. What stands out is the characteristic demonization of women. She is a witch and a whore, two prevalent negative images of women that had been ingrained in the collective psyche of medieval Christian men and which society as a whole had learned to fear and deplore. Later, Parmeno also describes Celestina as “[una] maestra” of unseemly deeds (75-77). The description of the “alcahueta” as “astuta, sagaz and maestra” is very telling. When applied to a man, “astuto, sagaz y maestro” denote intelligence and a mastery of knowledge rightfully put to use. However, this is far from the case when Parmeno and Sempronio use these terms to characterize Celestina. Parmeno and Sempronio are not praising the old woman for her knowledge. For them, “astuta, sagaz, y maestra” cannot represent positive qualities in a woman, they are instead extremely negative attributes. Consequently, in

describing her in such terms, both servants are warning Calisto not to trust Celestina. She is dangerous not only on account of her witchcraft, but more so because she is an intelligent, sage, knowledgeable woman. She has in her possession, moreover, the power of the word. The combination of knowledge and the power of logos in the hands of a woman has a dangerous, evil dimension, manifest in the bearded aspect of the old hag, which reminds the reader of a male sage but also of the devil. As such, Celestina fuses together Eve and the Serpent of the Garden of Eden. This subtext is developed throughout the novel.

This notion is made transparent at the end of the Third Act, when Celestina receives the mission of procuring Melibea for Calisto. Before embarking on the task, “la vieja barbuda” enacts a ritual involving serpent oil, sewing string and words written on paper with the blood of a bat. Like a high priestess at a black mass, Celestina conjures the power of Pluto, the devil, to help her attain her goal with Melibea. It is obvious Celestina’s power is not based on faith but on the power of the words written with the bat’s blood. It is the force of these written words that conjures the power of the devil, and it is the power of these words that is passed on to the sewing string, which is ritually transformed into the language of desire that will enmesh Calisto and Melibea. The string, then, is symbolic of the seductive force of discourse; and it is with this ‘cord’ of words that Celestina elaborates a serpentine (in the Garden of Eden sense) web of desire, and ultimately also of deceit, which leads to the tragic demise of the hapless lovers.

Such a reading of the text makes the subversive nature of this novel quite evident. Celestina must die not because she is an “alcahueta” or a witch, but because she has usurped from men the supreme authority, the knowledge and power to unleash the creative and seductive forces of discourse: the same power that Eve discovered by way of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, when she ate from the Tree of Knowledge and for which she and Adam were ultimately punished with mortality. Ever since, women have been exiled from the realm of discourse, while the creative and seductive use of language eventually was monopolized by men. Women were fore-ordained to endure a long silence that would last millennia. With the advent of Christianity, the idea that language and women were a volatile combination, which was to be avoided at all costs, became institutionalized. For it was thought that in the hands of women, such as Celestina, language ceased to be a truly creative force, becoming instead a destructive element in society as the denouement of the novel makes evident. As such, Celestina embodies that which medieval men and society feared most: a woman who tapped once more into the seductive power of logos and the Tree of Knowledge.

Celestina’s destructive rhetorical power is reworked in Pietro Aretino’s 1536 *Dialogo in which the courtesan Nanna instructs her daughter Pippa* (on seducing men and becoming a prostitute). Aretino assimilates Celestina’s dialogic model and enriches it with a modern parody of Petrarchan language and value system, which

he places under the control of courtesans rather than educated courtiers. Turning upside down Castiglione's great work *Il Cortigiano* (The Courtier), an educational treatise on how to become a perfect courtier, Aretino associates the courtier with its female correspondent: *la cortigiana*, a term that in the sixteenth century shifted from defining a court lady to indicating a courtesan. Aretino, the ultimate panderer and blackmailer, is himself both a *cortigiano*, a man of the court, and a *cortigiana*, a courtesan willing to sell his pen to whomever pays the most.

Following Aretino's example, Piccolomini's *Raffaella* and Gottifredi's *Specchio d'amore* demystify the element of witchcraft and substitute it with the humor of a reverse morality presented as a parody of female education. The young victims are easily subjugated by the eloquence of the old procuress' transvestite authorial male voice, that is, the voice of a scholar pretending to be an old woman, who is nonetheless as eloquent as a scholar in teaching another woman how to seduce a man. From this perspective, every advice on feminine beauty, attire and behavior represents the trespassing of a camouflaged male author into the forbidden private world of femininity, offered to the public view through the peep-hole of the dialogue. Rhetoric and literature, the domain of the male educator, emerge as the most efficient seduction weapons: they can not only conquer the heart of a woman, but seduce and conquer other men through the 'educated' body of their female pupil.

The artist/writer/procuress seduces his public by creating and shaping both desire and its object of consumption, a beautiful woman, an 'unreal' artistic product over which he has absolute control. While the 'fake' procuresses of the Italian dialogues go unpunished, Celestina is a real, uncontrollable and fearsome woman, and the disruption she causes means that she must be destroyed. Her subsequent transformation into an increasingly self-aware portrait of the ever-controlling male author exorcizes this anxiety, but at the same time denounces the pandering nature of both literature and art. Vermeer's painting-inside-a-painting is a celebration of such awareness and a warning, to the educated viewer, that all desire, beauty, love, youth, when mediated through art, are nothing but an old procuress' trick.

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IMAGES

- Figure 1 – Johannes Vermeer, *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, The National Gallery, London, c. 1670-1672.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Seated_at_a_Virginal#/media/File:Lady_Seated_at_a_Virginal,_Vermeer,_The_National_Gallery,_London.jpg
- Figure 2 – Dirck van Baburen, *The Procuress*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, c. 1622.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Procuress_\(Dirck_van_Baburen\)#/media/File:Dirck_van_Baburen_-_The_Procuress_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Procuress_(Dirck_van_Baburen)#/media/File:Dirck_van_Baburen_-_The_Procuress_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)
- Figure 3 – Johannes Vermeer, *The Concert*, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, stolen in 1990, current location unknown, c. 1664.
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- Figure 4 – Johannes Vermeer, *The Procuress*, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, c.1656.
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- Figure 5 – Titian, *Danaë with Nursemaid* or *Danaë Receiving the Golden Rain*, Museo del Prado, Madrid, c. 1560.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dana%C3%AB_\(Titian_series\)#/media/File:Tizian_-_Danae_receiving_the_Golden_Rain_-_Prado.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dana%C3%AB_(Titian_series)#/media/File:Tizian_-_Danae_receiving_the_Golden_Rain_-_Prado.jpg)

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