SILENCE, ABUSE, AND MADNESS: PICASSO IN JEANETTE WINTERSON'S ART & LIES

SILENCIO, ABUSO Y LOCURA: PICASSO EN ART & LIES, DE JEANETTE WINTERSON

Claudia Martori

Universitat de Barcelona, Spain martoriclaudia@gmail.com http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6069-7546

Received May 16 2023 Revised version accepted May 23 2023

How to cite Martori, Claudia. "Silence, abuse, and madness: Picasso in Jeanette Winterson's *Art & Lies*." *The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies*, vol. 30, 2023, pp. 75-88. https://doi.org/10.17561/grove.v30.8008

Abstract

In Art & Lies (1994), Jeanette Winterson presents three characters who are alter egos of Handel, Picasso, and Sappho. This article focusses on Picasso as an alter ego not only of Pablo Picasso but also of the character itself, whose birth name is Sophia, and of Pablo Picasso's lovers, who were silenced, abused, and driven to madness like Winterson's Picasso. The main aspects taken into account are the fact that the character is silenced by her family and that she is sexually abused by her brother in order to understand that her journey towards becoming the madwoman in the attic is induced by the harmful context that she is surrounded by in the same way that occurred to Pablo Picasso's lovers and to Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre.

Keywords: contemporary literature, gender studies, female silence, Jeanette Winterson, Pablo Picasso, Art & Lies

Resumen

En Art & Lies (1994), Jeanette Winterson presenta tres personajes que son alter egos de Handel, Picasso y Safo. Este artículo se centra en Picasso no solo como alter ego de Pablo Picasso, sino también del mismo personaje de Picasso, cuyo nombre de pila es Sophia, y de las amantes de Pablo Picasso, que fueron silenciadas, abusadas y llevadas a la locura como ocurre con el

personaje de Picasso de Winterson. Los aspectos principales que se han tenido en cuenta son el hecho de que el personaje es silenciado por su familia y que su hermano abusa sexualmente de ella para así entender que su camino hacia convertirse en la loca del desván se origina en el contexto dañino que la rodea, de la misma forma que ocurrió con las amantes de Picasso y con Bertha Mason en Jane Eyre.

Palabras clave: literatura contemporánea, estudios de género, silencio femenino, Jeanette Winterson, Pablo Picasso, Art & Lies

> The artist dies but not the art, not even when so much of it has been destroyed, word of mouth passes it on. Impossible to silence me. (Jeanette Winterson 67-68)

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. (Pablo Picasso 10)

1. Picasso: A triple alter-ego

Jeanette Winterson's Art & Lies is a novel that consists of a fragmented interweaved narration that reflects on love, sex, and life through three characters who are alter egos of three historical personalities: Handel, Picasso, and Sapho. However, this article is only going to focus on one of the characters, Picasso, and how she is silenced, abused, and driven to madness by those who are socially expected to show love and support: her family.

Winterson's Picasso becomes not just an alter ego for Pablo Picasso in the name she chooses for herself, but Picasso also becomes an alter ego of Sophia —her birth name— in an attempt to leave behind that self that has been neglected and rejected by her close relatives. Further, Jeanette Winterson's Picasso seems to have more in common with Pablo Picasso's lovers than Pablo Picasso himself; that, which will be developed further along the text, is due to the way that this female character is treated by men, who silence and abuse her. This, for her, leads to the development of mental health problems as a consequence of that mistreatment and the later admission in a psychiatric facility, much like what happened to Pablo Picasso's lovers.

The reason why she chooses the name of Picasso as her nickname seems to be linked to her father's rejection of her identity. On the one hand, Picasso's father, Jack Hamilton, disregards Picasso's painting because he sees

painting as a masculine activity: "Picasso's father didn't mind how much his daughter read. It was the painting he disliked. He felt it revealed an excess of testosterone and he wanted his daughter to be well balanced like himself" (Winterson 40). Jack views reading as a female activity according to hegemonic standards and it is for that reason that he does not see it as a problematic activity for her to carry out. Painting, however, is linked to an excess of testosterone and, thus, a masculine standard that he does not want his daughter to have —for then she would not fit the hegemonic prototype of a 'good woman'.

On the other hand, what this involves is a generalised rejection of Picasso's identity and personality among the family members, but especially her father, the head of the patriarchal structure that is her household:

Her father had said, 'A woman who paints is like a man who weeps. Both do it badly.' He had a right to call himself a patron of the arts. He had commissioned fifty-five pictures over the years, all of them self-portraits.

'Don't talk to me about art,' he had said, although Picasso had never tried, 'I know about art.'

Sir Jack had refused to send Picasso to art school. On her eighteenth birthday he had given her a pair of beige rubber gloves and a long beige apron.

'You can start in Mustard,' he said.

Picasso did. Denied paints she painted in mustard. (Winterson 38).

For that reason, Picasso is denied her identity as an artist and as a woman/ daughter. She acquires a submissive role typical of the hegemonic stereotype of the woman with such a clear hierarchical structure within her family. She is rejected even though she does not have a voice in her family. She finds shelter outside the household — but never within it, where one would expect to feel safer— with art and sex; the former having been denied to her and the latter having been practiced as enjoyment for others but never for her.

Thus, Picasso's self-renaming seems to be a way to please her father in an attempt to become that which he admires, but even then it is impossible to reach her father's standards because, in spite of all her efforts, she will never be a male painter. With this in mind, it is easy to identify this rejection with the idea that she is seen as the odd one in the family for being an artist, but mostly disregarded for not fitting into the stereotypical female figure her family expects her to become.

2. Sexual abuse within the household

Picasso's torment begins with her family's rejection of her since infancy, but it is soon outweighed by the physical and emotional pain brought by Picasso's brother Matthew's continued sexual abuse of her through the years: "Until I was fifteen, my brother used me, night after night, as a cesspit for his bloated adolescence. That place is sealed now" (Winterson 42). In this instance is the first time in the novel where Picasso mentions her brother sexually abusing her. In it, the Picasso that narrates from the present claims to have overcome the trauma of rape within the family. However, the accounts that she narrates do not point towards that emotional healing other than the fact that she is sent to a mental institution, where she could have gotten the psychological help that she might have needed, and that she escapes the toxic environment of her household at the end of the text.

In having been sexually abused repeatedly through the years, her perception of love and sex, as well as the intertwining of the two, becomes completely distorted and modified by her perception of reality as she views the world through the lens of her experiences. It is for that reason that Picasso claims: "Making love. Another of the sick semantics of family life. What had the love to do with sex and what had the sex to do with love? She felt lust for some people, affection for others (disgust for even more), but even when lust and affection grew together was that love? And if they were apart did it matter to pretty up one and overstate the other?" (Winterson 82). For her, love and sex are two separate and distant elements because she has never experienced the two together; she believes this statement because for her sex has been an imposed and painful activity —both physically and emotionally—. As regards love, she has always been deprived of it by her family, thus for her love is still unknown.

Further, Picasso's personality and self-image are forcefully modified by the tragic events —those being sexual abuse and a complete absence of love from her family—. She becomes the opposite of her organic personality, shy, slow, nearly invisible, because her brother blamed his raping of her on the positive traits of her personality: "Picasso thought of her brother and his angry Prod that punished her for being lovely, clever and quick. Under his insistent tutelage she had learned to be shy and slow" (Winterson 82). This instance is followed by "[s]he had learned to hate her body because he said he loved it" (ibid.), which evidences that she has developed self-hatred as a consequence of her brother's abuse.

Thus, Picasso becomes a submissive subject not by choice but by force. It is for survival that she does not fight back, partly loses her identity, and becomes silent/silenced. Picasso explicitly states that when she narrates:

I knew better than to fight. Ten years of Matthew's love embraces and I knew better than to fight. He had twice broken my wrists, once dislocated my hip, and the last time, two years ago, fractured my collar bone. I heard my father talking to him in the library. I thought it was all over. No more lies about a tricky horse. Two free years and I had begun to forget. Not to heal but to forget. I had begun to forget that my body was, what had Matthew called it? a weapon rest. He had me down quickly and pursued his usual gallop over my well broken hills. I was a landscape he had long since flattened. The challenge had gone, but not the familiar pleasure of ownership. These were his acres, my body, my blood (Winterson 156).

Here Winterson portrays how Picasso has completely lost her voice and power. She chooses to allow others to silence her over receiving a bigger amount of violence because she now knows that, no matter what she does, the rape and the emotional damage are going to be inevitable. She knows she does not belong to herself anymore, but to others; she claims to be *owned* by her brother, but it also becomes evident that her father plays a role in that too for he is complicit in the sexual abuse.

3. The silenced voice of Picasso

As aforementioned, Picasso's silencing is not only related to Matthew's sexual abuse, but also to her family's dissatisfaction and neglect of her since birth. While Matthew is said to have been a very calm baby, she was the opposite:

The next child, a girl, was not stillborn out of the still bed. The baby screamed. Father had the doctors in but the baby screamed. The baby made all the noise allowed. No-one else dared speak when father was at home. 'Speak when you're spoken to,' was the rule, but wife and son never were spoken to and could only whisper now and then, when his back was turned. The baby ignored father's rule and screamed. Mother and son admired the baby and hated her too [...]. At night, when they crept by her room in their black clothes, they peeped through the keyhole to check that she was dead. She was not dead and they feared her (Winterson 159).

Picasso accounts how she had been disliked since birth for not adjusting to the family rules. What first begins as fear for having a baby that challenges the home-established rules —although said baby did not even have capacity for understanding that those were there in the first place— then develops into hatred and neglect.

As revealed at the very end of the novel, Picasso is not her mother's natural child but a child born out of her father sexually abusing a maid they had living at home (Winterson 204-205). On the one hand, this portrays the perpetuation of a patriarchal and abusive role in the men of the family, which first came with Jack abusing the maid and is followed by Matthew repeatedly abusing his sister though the years. On the other hand, the fact that Picasso is born out of an illegitimate encounter, and especially a non-consensual one, seems to be the reason why her family is so dissatisfied with her.

Not only does she become disliked, but her identity is also completely denied by her father, for she has threatened his position of power since her birth. She is not even allowed to choose how she wants to be addressed: "'Sophia?' He refused to call me Picasso. It was his own name he wanted to hear. Sophia. Wisdom. The Ninth Muse" (Winterson 157). Her change of name, however, points towards a rejection her past and her family history; she renames herself as an attempt for rebirth and challenges her position in the family in using the name of a painter, despite that being what her father does not want her to be. Perhaps she chose Picasso to please his father, who said only men can be painters, in an attempt to become that which his father would accept to gain his love, but, even then, he did not.

As a consequence of that and the fact that her family view her in a negative way, she feels completely detached from them and their dynamics, although that does not rid her of the suffocating environment she lives in: "Who were those loud fat people, who filled the spaces so that there was never enough air to breathe, never enough light to see by? Who were those people who used the past like a set of rooms to be washed and decorated according to the latest fashion? Who were those people whose bodies were rotting with lies? They were her family" (Winterson 43). In this account of her perception of her family, it becomes explicit that they did not leave any space for her to occupy because they took up all the space, so it is not only the hatred and neglect they feel towards her that affect her role in the family, but also the fact that she is completely disregarded and not taken into account.

Thus, Picasso's family views her as a burden instead of as a valued and equal member of the family. This is epitomised when her mother tells other

relatives: "'We were a happy family,' she says. 'Take no notice of Picasso.' As if any of them ever did" (Winterson 42-43). In no way is there even an attempt to understand her, get close to her, nor understand the problems she might be facing. In always having been the 'troublesome' child, she is always viewed as lying and difficult, so her opinions, claims, and actions are perceived through that lens. As a consequence, she receives a degrading treatment from the rest of the family.

4. The madwoman in the attic

4.1. Consequences of the lack of recognition she had in the family

Not only is Picasso disregarded within the family, but her mother does not allow for her to have any friends (Winterson 153). This means that, apart from being isolated from the society that is external to her household, she is also isolated within that same household, where she is denied the feeling of belonging. Thus, she is completely detached from the rest of the world and denied of external support or any kind of positive emotional bond.

Further, the words 'I love you' become painful for her. Picasso mentions her mother and her brother telling her they love her, which leads to her associating those words with lying (Winterson 154). The reason for that being that they come from an environment where love is never shown, and they are verbalised either by Matthew, who abuses her sexually, or her mother, who completely disregards her and allows for that abuse to happen.

As a consequence of that confusing and isolating environment, she develops deep emotional issues and trauma. Those lead her to a profound loneliness and suicidal thoughts. She feels emptied of life and, as depicted in a scene after having been sexually abused by her brother once more, she is "[n] ot thinking. Not feeling. Not living beyond the in-out-in-out of my defeated lungs" (Winterson 157). This is the effect that men in that household cause, because, as she claims later in the text, her mother had also been devoided of life (Winterson 158).

Moreover, it is her father who pushes her off the roof where she is sat in an attempt to physically devoid her of life too. After that, she decides to kill her father —in a way that seems more Freudian than literal— (Winterson 162-163). This is a freeing thought for her as she accompanies the words "I decided to kill him" with the word "VICTORY" (Winterson 163). But, in spite of her efforts, she finds it impossible to kill such a powerful figure in the family: "All this I did but he would not die. Impossible to murder the dead" (ibid.). Thus, Picasso finds that the only way to escape that hurtful and degrading environment is either her own death or fleeing the household.

4.2 Madness, Jane Eyre, and Pablo Picasso's Lovers

The most relevant consequence of such a harming environment seems to be madness, an element that links Jeanette Winterson's Picasso with Pablo Picasso's lovers. Throughout the narrative, she is threatened by her father with the suggestion of being placed in a mental institution as a consequence of her acts. This means that she is not given the choice of freedom and selfexpression but threatened with being moved to a different power structure where she will still be deprived of that freedom and self-expression and be forced into a different set of rules to follow without her questioning.

Picasso's story resonates with that of Dora Maar, one of Pablo Picasso's lovers. In *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer*, Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington recounts the psychological damage that Dora Maar suffered as a consequence of her relationship with Picasso:

"It was not so much the episode of madness that destroyed Dora," Françoise said, "as the electroshock treatment [...]. Out of guilt, Pablo was paying for her sessions with Lacan, but he never sent her checks, as he did to Olga and Marie-Thérèse. And Dora never asked for anything. She survived because she never lost her dignity as a human being. He succeeded, though, in killing the artist in her. Her painting had been very beautiful, very subtle, very much hem and never derivative; in many ways, in fact, it was quite alien to Picasso's. But something had broken inside her, and it was reflected in her work from then on" (Huffington 324-325).

Françoise Gilot's words in Huffington's text and the use of the word 'survive' regarding Maar's relationship with the painter illustrate that Picasso was indeed an emotional destroyer as the title of the book suggests. However, it is not only the psychological damage that resonates with Winterson's story, but also the idea of 'killing the artist in her' and the way her relationship with painting changed as a consequence of the emotional damage. Indeed, Winterson's Picasso is also severely affected by the male figures in the family to the point where she is placed in a mental institution, which is the same that Dora Maar went through, as Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake explain in their book Life with Picasso (90). In the same way, Jack Hamilton kills the artist in Winterson's Picasso in denying her as a daughter and as a painter.

Suicidal thoughts are the main consequence of the hurtful treatment —both physical and psychological—that Winterson's Picasso receives and the depression that this leads to. Suicide as a consequence of a damaging relationship or unbearable pain is also an element present in Pablo Picasso's life. As Marina Picasso, Pablo Picasso's granddaughter, recounts in her book Picasso, My Grandfather, Pablo Picasso's lovers and even some family members like his grandson Pablito committed suicide after the painter's death because the pain was unbearable (183). In the same manner, Winterson's Picasso's pain is so deep and unbearable that it leads her to attempting suicide —thus, the Picasso effect becomes the Hamilton effect—. Nonetheless, Picasso is punished and further isolated for her suicide attempts instead of her environment perceiving it as a signal that there could be something wrong with her and that she might need help. She is placed in a mental institution not with the intention of helping her but in a selfish attempt to get rid of her as an element of the family. In having silenced her and continuing to do so, Picasso's word becomes meaningless for being a woman, an illegitimate child, and not fitting into the social stereotype of a 'good woman'.

In the same way that Matthew has a hunter nature as a rapist and Jack does too in the way he is willing to emotionally diminish whoever in order to maintain his dominating patriarchal figure, Pablo Picasso had the same instinct, like a predator looking for prays and finding pride in each new kill:

Pablo's many stories and reminiscences about Olga and Marie-Thérèse and Dora Maar, as well as their continuing presence just offstage in our own life together, gradually made me realize that he had a kind of Bluebeard complex that made him want to cut off the heads of all the women he had collected in his little private museum. But he didn't cut the heads entirely off. He preferred to have life go on and to have all those women who had shared his life at one moment or another still letting out little peeps and cries of joy or pain and making a few gestures like disjointed dolls, just to prove there was some life left in them, that it hung by a thread, and that he held the other end of the thread. From time to time they would provide a humorous or dramatic or sometimes tragic side to things, and that was all grist to his mill (Gilot and Lake 242).

In this way, Pablo Picasso is a collector of his dead prays as much as Jack and Matthew are in Art & Lies, because, as Winterson's Picasso claims, "Jack Hamilton had made sure that his wife was dead before he married her"

(Winterson 158) and he "could only love what was dead" (Winterson 158). Matthew, in playing the role of the perpetuator of sexual abuse, is also bound to become a collector of his prays, although his only known pray in the story is Picasso. This form of imposition of power forces submission on the other subject and thus also works as a way of silencing in that it diminishes the other.

In spite of Winterson's Picasso being forced to take the role of the pray, after another episode of sexual abuse from Picasso's brother she finally tells her father that she has been abused. However, her father's response is not friendly nor compassionate:

He said you attacked him. He said "She's gone mad again father. She's gone mad again." What have you done?'

'He raped me.'

'You little slut.' [...]

'I'm going to tell the police.' I said, sing-song, dreamlike. 'This time, the nice doctor and the nice police. I'm going to tell them.' [...] [M]y father pushed me off the roof (Winterson 157-158).

This is followed by the following thoughts: "She had never come to him for money. She had come to him for love. She had left empty handed. Her father could only love what was dead. As Picasso fell she thought, 'He will love me now. My father will love me'" (Winterson 157-158). This is the first instance in the story where Picasso stands up for herself and tries to find justice, but even then her father uses physical violence against her —like her bother does when he abuses her sexually— to silence her. Her father allows for the raping to happen and prefers to protect Matthew, perpetuating the powerful masculine ideal against the weak, powerless, and submissive female subject. Further, in spite of all the pain, silencing, and disregarding, Picasso is forever expecting a family love that never arrives. She is constantly faced with disillusionment and frustration in her hope for things to change —or rather, for love, acceptance, and compassion to arrive.

In an earlier instance, Picasso had already been regarded as crazy by her father. She is constantly told that she is not mentally stable and is repeatedly faced with the threat of being institutionalised:

Without thinking, Picasso ran into the parlour, into the newspapers, into the best clothes and the dead air. She was painted from head to foot.

'Self portrait,' she said to their astonished faces.

'Call the doctor Matthew,' said her father.

The doctor packed his stethoscope, his gloves, his warrant and his syringe. The doctor got into his car and set off. [...]

'I am a doctor,' he said.

'Sorry,' said Picasso. 'I don't take drugs.'

She walked on, past his purple face in his snow-shot purple car, through the silent city and into the railway station. (Winterson 48)

This brings to the table the question of whether she is accused of being mentally ill as a way for her father to justify sending her away from the family or whether she becomes mentally unstable as a consequence of the rejection and pain exhorted on her —or even both. In the context of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, in which Bertha Mason plays a similar role to Winterson's Picasso, Ian Ward discusses the relevance of "the efficacy of Rochester's strategy of interiorising his wife's insanity" (Ward 117) as a key element of Bertha Mason's madness. In the same manner, the male characters in the narrative, but especially Picasso's father Jack, force the idea of madness upon her in such a powerful manner that she will start acting in such a way.

Thus, Picasso becomes the madwoman in the attic, much like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and like Pablo Picasso's lovers. In an attempt of what could either be self-expression or an act of mental instability, Picasso paints each room of the house a different colour, which constitutes the summit of the maddening process for Picasso in that household:

'She's mad.' Sir Jack came towards me. 'She did this. Sophia did this. And not just this. The drawing-room is green. The kitchen is orange. My study, my study, is blood red.'

'Where is your daughter?'

'In the attic. I want you to certify her. Now' (Winterson 175).

Here, her father plays the role of Pablo Picasso, whose lovers often ended up mentally unstable, and of Rochester in Jane Eyre. He claims his daughter has gone mad for having painted each room a different colour, locks her in the attic —where she becomes 'the madwoman in the attic', much like Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre—, and wants her madness to be certified so that he can justify locking his daughter in the attic and how neglectful he has been of her. Nonetheless, in comparison with Bertha Mason, Art & Lies gives us Picasso/ Sophia's back story so we can understand that what happens to Picasso is not a consequence of her madness, but the madness is a consequence of the abusive environment she lives in.

Overall, Picasso's narrative in Art & Lies portrays the effects of such damaging dynamics within the household in a context of complete isolation. Picasso is a voice that has dared to speak even when she was not spoken to, thus breaking her father's rules. And for that and for the fact that she is the illegitimate child product of rape, she is submitted to the patriarchal power, neglected as a figure of the family, sexually and psychologically abused, as well as silenced. However, she has tried to defeat the patriarchal figure —her father—, has tried to fight her brother Matthew back when he sexually abused her, has dared to be a female painter in a context that did not accept that, and has voiced her thoughts and discomfort when she thought it necessary.

Nevertheless, in spite of trying to subvert those roles that have been imposed on her —that of the submissive, quiet, and obedient woman—, once she reaches the peak of the psychologically induced madness, she will come to realise that she cannot change others and her only escape from the silencing, abuse, and further mental health issues is leaving that context. It is then that she is faced, for the first time, with freedom, choices, and new opportunities. Picasso's narrative in *Art & Lies* presents a story that subverts the deeply harming traditional hegemonic gender roles and questions the legitimacy of the patriarchal figure in the same way that Charlotte Brontë did in Jane Eyre in 1847. Likewise, Jeanette Winterson uses the figure of a well-known predator artist like Pablo Picasso to question the internalisation of these roles and the hardship that trying to escape these hegemonic constructs involves.

Thus, in Winterson's novel hegemonic patriarchal structures are questioned and defied. However, in a context where those are deeply solidified, it becomes unavoidable to suffer the consequences of that diminishing power for a long period of time. Picasso learns that, much like what happened to Pablo Picasso's lovers, she was bound to experience severe mental health issues derived from the psychological load that the patriarchal figure put on them and to fall down the spiral of the psychologically induced madness. She becomes aware that it would be impossible to find that reality that she is looking for within the household and finds herself having no choice but leaving that environment in order to find a reality where she is not silenced nor abused, and in which the limits of her mental health are not put to the test; a reality that pleases her and that she finds bearable. A reality where "that which is lost is found" (Winterson 205) and where "it [is] not too late" (Winterson 206).

References

- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Wordsworth Classics, 1999.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination. Yale University Press, 1979.
- Gilot, Françoise, and Carlton Lake. *Life with Picasso*. McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- Huffington, Arianna Stassinopoulos. Picasso: Creator and Destroyer. Simon and Schuster, 1988.
- Picasso, Marina. Picasso, My Grandfather. Translated by Catherine Temerson. Riverhead Books, 2001.
- Picasso, Pablo. Picasso. Forty Years of his Art. Ed. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. The Museum of Modern Art, 1939.
- Ward, Ian. "The Rochester Wives." Law and Humanities, vol. 2, no. 1, 2008, pp. 99-130. https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2008.11423744
- Winterson, Jeanette. Art & Lies. Vintage, 2014.

Notas

1. A term which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar introduced in their book The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination and taken from Bertha Mason's narrative in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre.

Claudia Martori