

Pallid Prostitutes, Blushing Brides:
Picasso's Reformulation of Motherhood Through the Harlequin Family
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University Honors in Art History, Spring 2012
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*This paper centers on Pablo Picasso's paintings of Harlequin and his family during the artist's Rose Period (1904 – 1906) with the aim of exposing underlying thematic threads that connect these works with Picasso's earlier Blue Period and with his *Demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907. Rather than focusing on Harlequin, as most scholars have done, I examine Picasso's presentation of the entire family unit, with a particular emphasis on the female figure. Employing a social-historical methodology, I view these mother figures in the light of changing valuations of the role of motherhood and related concerns about degeneration in France around the turn of the twentieth century. Picasso's melancholy works of the Blue Period already have been interpreted in light of twentieth-century debates surrounding prostitution and its "deux risques" – unwanted pregnancy and venereal disease. Building on that existing literature, this paper suggests that the Harlequin family provided a motif through which Picasso could explore more positive ideas about motherhood. The recurrence of prostitution as the subject of *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, suggests that this experiment with a more optimistic outlook was short-lived; Picasso returned to a more disenchanted view of women's social roles. Traces of Picasso's pessimism may even be present in the Harlequin paintings of the Rose Period; this paper explores the ways in which these works function as explorations of art as a mode of expression even as they seem to genuinely address urgent social questions of Picasso's moment. Ultimately, then, this paper places the Harlequin paintings' concern with themes of motherhood and human evolution, and their hints at satire within the continuum of Picasso's work from 1901 to 1907.*

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Rosy Revisions: Motherhood in Picasso's Harlequin Suite

In the period from 1904 to 1905, fascination with the theme of harlequin dominated Pablo Picasso's oeuvre. In his lozenge-patterned suit of intermingling red, yellow and green diamonds and his familiar bicorn hat, the harlequin is easily identifiable among the assortment of circus actor tropes. Originally an important component of the *commedia dell'arte*, the harlequin emerged as a comedic figure in the sixteenth century.¹ The archetypal harlequin communicated extreme elasticity in both his physical and psychological behaviors. Characterized as a lithe and agile figure, the harlequin's personality exhibited anything but grace. Rather, according to Marmontel in his classic essay, he was "equipped with a superficial coarseness that render[ed] his performance

¹ Theodore Reff, "Harlequins, Saltimbanques, and Fools," *Artforum* 19, no. 2 (1971): 33.

more amusing.”² This boorishness, however, was as flexible as the harlequin’s acrobatic body; in an instant, his character was liable to move through a continuum of emotions and temperaments ranging from patience, to naivety, to love. While the traditional distinction of harlequins and other typical entertainers, such as saltimbanques and fools, had become confused by the early twentieth century, Picasso continued to pictorially differentiate between them.

Large and small, painted and etched, the compositions from this year are populated by performers of all shapes and sizes. None, however, are depicted in the midst of a public performance; rather, all are shown offstage, either in a familial setting or in rehearsal for the real spectacle. Those comprised of nuclear families – a mother, father, and child – are the focus of this paper. Looking specifically at five works from 1905 – two gouache paintings and three etchings – I argue that Picasso’s representation of the female figure is in dialogue with contemporary interests in feminine roles and developing models of human evolution. What’s more, I have identified evolutionary themes in the Rose Period, albeit on much different pictorial terms, which act as a bridge between the Blue and Cubist periods. The Rose Period, traditionally treated as an anomaly, can thus be situated thematically in Picasso’s early career. Through an investigation of those artistic subdivisions immediately preceding and following the Rose Period, one finds that motifs connoting motherhood and evolution - and their counterpart degeneration - are oft-revisited and reinvented by Picasso.

² *Ibid.*

Previous scholarly literature on Picasso's harlequin images from the Rose Period tends to fall into three primary categories. The first and most-frequented, the biographical reading, argues for the clowns as mirror images of Picasso's own personality and lived experience. Projecting the artist and his close circle of friends onto the various comic characters, art historians such as Martin Green and John Swan, in their book *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination*, suggest that the circus served as a source of identity for Picasso, whom they postulate felt a kinship with the socially outcast figures it employed.³ In *Bohemian Paris: Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse and the Birth of Modern Art*, Dan Franck puts forth a similar argument. Not only does he agree with Picasso's self-representation as a harlequin, he suggests that the shift in color palette from blues to pinks was a direct result of Picasso's loving relationship with his new mistress, Madeleine.⁴ Theodore Reff's article "Harlequins, Saltimbanques and Fools," although methodologically akin to social history, likewise comes to biographical conclusions. Reff situates Picasso's series within other contemporary portrayals of these three comic figures in literature and theater, thus revealing a unique camaraderie between the artist and his subjects.⁵ Psychoanalytic in nature, Harold and Elsa Blum's article "The Models of Picasso's Rose Period: The Family of Saltimbanques" again takes Picasso's life into account in dealing with one specific work: *The Family of Saltimbanques*. For the Blums, the Rose Period stemmed from a letting go of past traumas and a moving into a new, happier phase of his life. They postulate that the figures represent Picasso at various

³ Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 167.

⁴ Dan Franck, *Bohemian Paris: Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse and the Birth of Modern Art*, trans. Cynthia Hope Liebow (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 75.

⁵ Reff, "Harlequins," 37.

stages of his life, juxtaposing his child-self closest to his “mother” and his adult-self farthest away in accordance with their real-life conflicted relationship.⁶ All of these readings serve to explain away Picasso’s stylistic and iconographical shift as an arbitrary product of his lived experience without questioning factors beyond the artist’s self.

Not only has the projection of Picasso’s biography onto these works permitted an almost-too-neat reading, but also it has, in some ways, hindered our understanding of not only the circus images but also the Rose period at large. On the one hand, the unmediated translation of Picasso’s life onto these images has served to treat them as illustrations of his biography rather than as discrete artistic explorations in their own right. On the other hand, scholars employing this methodology have in effect isolated the Rose Period, preventing us from making connections between the Blue and Cubist periods. Art historians such as Robert Rosenblum and Meyer Schapiro have, on some level, addressed the arbitrariness of these imposed periods through formal analysis of the harlequins. Both see in them pre-cursors to, or prophesies of, Cubism insofar as the purposeful juxtaposition of organic and geometric forms, the flattening of space, and the abstraction of elements and color suggest Picasso’s interest in the manipulation and convention of pictorial forms.⁷ Again, though, this reading fails to recognize the roots of this thinking in the Blue Period and thus the consistency of Picasso’s thematic purpose across time and space.

⁶ Harold P. Blum and Elsa J. Blum, “The Models of Picasso’s Rose Period: The Family of Saltimbanques,” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 69 (2007), 192.

⁷ Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Abrams, 1966), and Meyer Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” *Marxist Quarterly* 1 (1937): 12.

More broadly, the second camp deals with socio-historical interpretations of the early Rose Period, identifying contemporary discourses and emerging media as ciphers for unlocking Picasso's artistic intentions. Juliet Bellow's book chapter "Moving Pictures: Pablo Picasso and *Parade*," echoes the conclusion of Rosenblum and Schapiro, but places it within a much different framework. Looking to Picasso's stage curtain and costume designs for the Ballet Russes's production of *Parade*, Bellow brings to light the threads of film, war imagery and mechanizations that underlie Picasso's rendering of the figures and scenery. Picasso's designs fundamentally altered the physical bodies of the dancers so that in effect, they were transformed into moving pictures, rather than being construed (rightfully) as live performers.⁸ In this, Bellow sees an extension of Picasso's Cubist experimentation insofar as he brings the same questions of the integrity and materiality of the body into a further dialogue with the "new" media of film.⁹ Both Rosemary Eberiel's "Clowns: Apollinaire's Writings on Picasso," and Jean Starobinski's "Harlequin, Dancer Among the Dead," attempt to understand the harlequin images in light of contemporary poetry, specifically articulated by Guillaume Apollinaire and Rainer Maria Rilke. Through contrasting modern literature with Picasso's early Rose Period works, both authors come to similar conclusions: namely that these works are inquiries into a world beyond the physical. For Eberiel, the writings of Apollinaire insightfully reveal that Picasso's harlequins explore the spiritual space of collective memory.¹⁰ Starobinski, too, situates these works within an otherworldly realm; his,

⁸ Juliet Bellow, *Modernism on Stage: The Ballet Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Forthcoming from Ashgate Press), 125.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰ Rosemary Eberiel, "Clowns: Apollinaire's Writings on Picasso," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 14 (Autumn 1987): 148.

however, is a purgatory whereby the oscillating nature of the circus performer is made even clearer by a pictorial symbiosis of juggler and beast.¹¹ Contextualizing the shift and subject within the socially constructed frameworks of media and literature opens the harlequins to new questions and readings made impossible under the shadow of biography.

The remaining academic material on the harlequin images postulates iconographic or metaphorical readings in terms of classical mythology and literature. In two essays, Jean Clair also flushes out a complex reading of Picasso's *Parade* curtain. Equating the various props and figures with classical and contemporary symbolism, Clair postulates that the circus stage is a place of worship in which features of disparate religions coalesce into one. Clair suggests that the iconography perhaps has a dual meaning, above its religious implications, which has to do with a concurrent shift from the status of the artist as noble to that of a vagabond.¹² On some level, Yve-Alain Bois's argument in "Picasso the Trickster" addresses Clair's final point. Bois imagines that the harlequin's "trickster" persona, insofar as he is a successful creator and transformer, would serve as an appropriate model for Picasso's turn to simultaneous pictorial diversity in an effort to ensure painting's (and in Bois's estimation, his own) survival of the avant-garde.¹³ The figure of harlequin, rather than acting as a stand-in for Picasso himself, is here a

¹¹ Jean Starobinski, "Harlequin, Dancer Among the Dead," in *Canto D'Amore: Classicism in Modern Art and Music, 1914 – 1935*, eds. Gottfried Boehm, Ulrich Mosch, and Katharina Schmidt (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1996), 131.

¹² Jean Clair, "Picasso Trismegitus: Notes on the Iconography of Harlequin," in *Picasso: the Italian Journey, 1917 – 1924*, eds. Jean Clair and Odile Michel (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 28 and Jean Clair, "Parade and Palingenesis," in *Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as Clown*, ed. Jean Clair (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 30.

¹³ Yve-Alain Bois, "Picasso the Trickster," in *Picasso Harlequin, 1917 – 1937*, ed. Yve-Alain Bois (Milano, Italy: Skira Editore S.p.A, 2009), 26.

metaphor for Picasso's unique artistic practice. Bois aligns this multiplicity of the harlequin with the heterogeneity of Picasso's oeuvre. Bois also sees the metaphor as holding true in reverse: when Picasso wanted to experiment with several distinct styles at once, he would summon the theme of harlequin. Ultimately, then, Bois makes the connection that in light of the harlequin's personification of diversity Picasso becomes the physical embodiment of painting.¹⁴

These interpretations, which methodologically deviate from the biography of the artist, concentrate on the stylistic and conceptual aspects of Picasso's art at the expense of the subject matter, which deserves further analysis. Picasso, who was active in intelligentsia circles both in Spain and France would have, whether consciously or unconsciously, been influenced by changes in turn-of-the-century economic, social, academic, and political environments. Drawing from these various avenues of thought thus helps to illuminate the ways in which Picasso and his pictorial language both comment on and engage with meaningful social questions of his time.

However, despite the large body of scholarship concerning Picasso and his interest in harlequin themes, there has been little if any attention paid to the female presence in these works, a strange fact considering the emphasis on gender roles in French society during this time. The motif of the mother could not be taken as neutral or self-evident at a moment when social debates about the family and about race in relation to the body politic made the image of woman particularly charged. With that said, this paper will examine a segment of Picasso's harlequin series within the framework of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

shifting definitions and valuations of motherhood, the emergence of scientific explanations for the evolution of the human race, and the continuity of these themes in his work from 1901 to 1907.

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Pallid Prostitutes: Picasso and the Deux Risques of Motherhood

Characterized by the monochrome azure palette for which it is named, and the prolific illustration of degraded members of society, the Blue Period defined the years 1901 to 1904. A series of works depicting primarily syphilis-infected prostitutes undergoing treatment at the Parisian hospital-prison, Saint-Lazare, ushered in this new, melancholy period. Picasso's morbid fascination with these confined women constituted a break from his usual pleasure-seeking excursions, as did his adoption of such somber hues. Before 1900, the artist's treatment of the subject of prostitutes espoused two polar views: aversion and attraction. However, after his visit to Saint-Lazare in the summer of 1901, Picasso's mood towards the representation of female sex workers became increasingly grim.¹⁵ According to Patricia Leighton,

[his] early encounter with anarchism in the artistic circles of Barcelona and Paris had a profound impact on his development as an artist, and is an intrinsic part of the social and aesthetic background necessary to an understanding of his work prior to World War I.¹⁶

While this is by no means certain, the anarchists' social critique and romantic revolutionism would explain why Picasso viewed prostitutes, particularly those of the

¹⁵ Michel Leja, " 'Le Vieux Marcheur' and 'Les Deux Risques': Picasso, Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Maternity, 1899 – 1907," *Art History* 8, no. 1 (March 1985): 67.

¹⁶ Patricia Leighton, "Picasso's Collages and the Threat of War, 1912 – 1913," *Art Bulletin* 67, no. 4 (Dec. 1985): 653.

lower station, as victims of the economic and political status quo. His attention to this subject can be viewed in light of contemporaneous controversy over prostitution, venereal disease, and Saint-Lazare. Moreover, it is unlikely that Picasso, an avid participant in the brothel circuit, could have been unaware or unaffected by these growing concerns. His visit to Saint-Lazare, then, presumes a measure of social involvement arguably echoed in his later works.¹⁷

In the nineteenth century, these debates surrounding prostitution and venereal disease chafed at Parisian society. Beginning in the 1830s, France and many other European countries initiated the development of institutions for the containment, sanitization, and regulation of prostitution by governmental authorities.¹⁸ In Paris, the *brigade des mœurs*, or vice squad, was charged with this responsibility. Under the watchful eye of the *brigade*, prostitutes were required to register with the police, to work within the borders of a designated quarter, typically as residents of *maisons closes*, legal brothels of which they were effectively prisoners, and to succumb to normative venereal examinations.¹⁹ While technically illegal, prostitution was indulged out of the hopefulness that such illicit sex would serve as an alternative outlet for potentially destructive inclinations, especially within the lower classes. By the 1870s and 1880s, two factions dominated the still hot-button issue: on the right were the abolitionists, who viewed regulationism as supporting immoral behavior, and to the left, those who opposed the authoritarian treatment of women under this same system.²⁰

¹⁷ Leja, “‘Le Vieux Marcheur’ and ‘Les Deux Risques’,” 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The years 1898 to 1902 saw the apex of this ongoing battle regarding legislative control over prostitution. Governmental authorities could no longer use the safeguarding of public decency and morality as a façade for regulationism.²¹ The clientele had grown beyond the lower classes as persons of the petit and regular bourgeois joined in the pleasure of these illicit sexual activities. While men of the upper and middle classes had long sought out prostitutes and mistresses, at this time, they began frequenting the disreputable *maisons closes*. New defensive mechanisms were necessary and members of the medical profession provided an answer around which conservative forces could rally. They argued that syphilis, a serious threat to public health, could only be contained by an even greater governmental hold on prostitution. Doctors and medical experts thus supported the mandatory examination and treatment of afflicted prostitutes as a means to prevent the spread of venereal disease.²² Picasso, who moved to Paris during the height of such debates and who visited the brothel districts and Saint-Lazare, could not have avoided, at least subconsciously, interaction with these socio-political issues.

An article by Jules Hoche published in the March 1901 issue of *La Grande Revue* entitled “Une visite à la Prison de Saint-Lazare” detailed his visit to the prison under the same guide as Picasso, Dr. Louis Julien. Hoche’s essay, which may or may not have been read by Picasso, nonetheless is helpful in illuminating some aspects of the artist’s early Blue Period work. The presence of maternity in Saint-Lazare was of particular consequence for Hoche in his position against regulationism; it was common for children to accompany their mothers to the hospital-prison upon their incarceration. Hoche

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

lamented that these women, who committed no crime, but only ‘loved,’ were treated as prisoners rather than patients.²³ Further he blamed socio-economic mechanisms, like poverty, maternity, and its many obligations, for driving women to sell themselves in the first place. This two-fold interpretation of maternity – that it was visible among the inmates (a sight the artist would have witnessed with his own eyes) and that it was considered to be at the root of prostitution – can be read into Picasso’s work from 1901 to 1902.

In Michael Leja’s “‘Le Vieux Marcheur’ and ‘Les Deux Risques’: Picasso, Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Maternity, 1899 – 1907,” this argument is more fully fleshed out through the analysis of Picasso’s 1901 canvas entitled *Two Sisters*. The titular women huddle together in a cerulean chamber. Both are cloaked in sapphire robes with white shawls covering their dark hair. Bare feet peak out from beneath their floor-length dresses. On our left, eyes closed, one patient’s frail body bows toward another on the right, who in turn clutches a baby to her chest. Originally, from an off-hand comment made by Picasso, “mere” was mistakenly read as “soeur” and then translated to “nun,” leading scholars to believe that the prisoner was seeking comfort in a religious confidant.²⁴ Since the translation was remedied, it has also become commonplace to suggest that the two are sisters, with one visiting the other in her state of demise.²⁵ Hoche’s article, however, combats the idea of this scene as a visitation; as he observed on his trip to the hospital-prison, social calls to venereal patients took place across two sets of bars located about one and a half meters apart. Moreover, as the mother is adorned

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

with a Phrygian cap in a preparatory sketch, and the two women wear loosely adapted versions in the final work, one can glean that infection has plagued them both.²⁶ Rather than biological sisters, then, they are more companions in suffering at the hands of sex, venereal disease, and motherhood. Leja concludes that a reading of this sort is in accord with contemporary anarchist attitudes toward maternity, an attitude with which Picasso sympathized. In 1901, Picasso served as editor for the expressly anarchist magazine *Arte Joven* in Madrid.²⁷ Once in Paris, Picasso's artistic trajectory continued on the anarchist path; scenes of bourgeois leisure gave way to depictions of the impoverished, the marginalized, and the downtrodden, all of which were at the fore of leftist concerns. For Leja, then, these facts are enough to establish Picasso's anarchist tendencies and to locate them within his work of the early Blue Period.

The issue of maternity resurfaces again in Leja's argument surrounding Picasso's mother-child images like *Sur le Banc*, *Mother and Child on Seashore*, and *Woman Huddled on Ground with Child* from the same period. Unlike his *Mother and Baby in Front of a Bowl of Flowers*, which Leja deems a "secular Madonna in a bourgeois drawing room," Picasso's work from 1901 to 1902 reflects upon the drawbacks of motherhood.²⁸ Rather than the wretched mother finding comfort in her child, the baby becomes a burden that intensifies her situation and accentuates her misery. This conception of motherhood situates Picasso within contemporary rhetoric that pessimistically articulates its hardships and pressures for women of lesser financial means. For Leja, then, Picasso's mother and child images exhibit changes that parallel

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

shifts in his depiction of prostitutes insofar as both are positioned as victims of the Parisian socio-economic system.²⁹ At the same time, Michael Corday's 1901 novel, *Vénus*, expressed this negative attitude even more explicitly. The main character, Mirat, said:

Poetry and art must stop idealizing sexual love and own up to the fears and difficulties it always entails...In relations involving prostitutes, where the illusion, for men at least, of carefree sex persists, the *threat* of venereal disease is always present. In relations with 'honest' women, the primary fear is maternity, a danger...particularly acute for the unwed mother.³⁰

Picasso's work from 1901 to 1902, as suggested by Mirat, refuses to romanticize motherhood; instead, the artist purposefully exposes the *deux risques* lurking in its wake.

Class also plays a major role in Leja's understanding of Picasso's Saint-Lazare series insofar as poverty is shown to heighten the dangers inherent in love.³¹ In his works, low social status and amorous affection often coalesce to produce a unique blend of social criticism and symbolist pessimism. In some sense, this link can be seen by the eventual transformation in Picasso's work of the Phrygian bonnet referencing prostitution and venereal disease, to a flowing hood more generally symbolizing poverty.³² This understanding of the poverty-love relationship feeds into the second issue Hoche takes up in his essay: the *quarter judiciare*, or the quarters for female thieves and common-law criminals in Saint-Lazare.³³ An encounter with an alluring patient/prisoner in the dungeons of the hospital-prison, whom Hoche later discovered was robbing her male

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

³² *Ibid.*, 74.

³³ *Ibid.*, 73.

clients, points to the ever-present “dangerous magic of love.” Passionate attraction was deemed hazardous; one must resist feminine charms in order to secure one’s personal health, safety, and life. In this scenario, love and relationships are even more deadly than recreational sex.³⁴

La Vie, another of Picasso’s canvases from 1901, illustrates this notion. In Leja’s reading, he identifies the couple on the left as Picasso’s comrade Carlos Casamegas and his lover Germaine. In its original conception, though, Picasso had intended for the couple to represent himself with the same woman, whom he apparently had a relationship with after the suicide of his friend. Leja looks to preparatory sketches, which include an elderly man not present in the final version, to suggest the clenched pairing as the primary focus.³⁵ The completed work explicitly threatens the survival of the young couple; with the elderly figure converted to a mother-child figural grouping, and the canvases behind the subjects – one a terrified couple, the other a hunched woman – threats of rejection, abandonment, mutual suffering, and obligations outlasting love pervade the space. The substitution of Casamegas for himself, Leja states, changes the work into a factual image of the fleeting nature of affection.³⁶ Moreover, *La Vie* can be situated within the nineteenth-century tradition of love related torment in literature and art. Picasso, then, did not see women as *femmes fatales*, but as victims of love.³⁷ In more powerful ways than men, these women who were abandoned and charged with the sole

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

responsibility of a child within the constraints of poverty, understood the cruel and unjust ways of life.

As touched on above, Leja explains that an understanding of this sort establishes that Picasso was in fact a socially conscious individual.³⁸ I would like to suggest that Picasso's dialogue with conceptions of motherhood and concerns of societal evolution remains a common thread throughout his work in the first decade of the twentieth century. As his interest in prostitutes, venereal disease, and Saint-Lazare at the onset gave way to the equally depressing subjects of invalids, alcoholics and beggars in the rest of the Blue Period, the artist's observation of retrogression and degeneration in general was solidified. He looked to those marginalized figures of society as reverting back to a primitive state of uncleanness and unproductiveness, not out of personal choice, but again as a product of the modern social, economic and political life of Paris and Europe. In a similar vein, the Rose Period, occupying the years 1904 to 1905, is reflective of contemporary ideas surrounding maternity and social progression, yet in a very different way. Using the circus as a platform for staging discourses, Picasso comments on the "New Order" and investigations of biological evolution in early twentieth-century Paris (see more below).

However, it also must be noted that there was another side to Picasso, one who was a little more dispassionate about social issues and who was more concerned with the way representation itself functions. The latter is made clear in his *At the Lapin Agile* from 1905. This work has, like many from the Rose Period, been considered in light of

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

Picasso's biography; scholars have identified the figures as Père Frédé, the owner of the Lapin Agile, Germaine, the same figure from *La Vie*, and the artist himself. Yet in their various guises, it becomes clear that Picasso is playing with the signature pictorial styles of his peers. Père Frédé, depicted as a musician in loose, sketchy brushstrokes resembles a work by Edouard Manet of the same subject. Germaine, outlined in blue, almost in the mode of caricature, is reminiscent of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Picasso, too, in the lozenge-patterned harlequin costume, reflects his own personal artistic expressionism. For Leo Steinberg, this commentary on the arbitrariness of style "criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized."³⁹ Picasso's adoption of other artist's styles thus contaminates purified categories, ultimately alienating the connoisseur.⁴⁰ Not only does this work stand for the refusal of biography as a tool for interpreting Picasso's complex interventions into art, then, *At the Lapin Agile* reveals the irreverent nature of Picasso insofar as he is not only interested in social issues but also in artistic issues of pictorial illusion.

Leja, too, recognizes this alternate Picasso. "The dominant drive in his works," he says, "is toward symbolism and away from contextual particularity. We must be content to locate the work's origins in contemporary discourse and to remain, with Picasso, imprecise about meanings attributable to the finished work."⁴¹ By removing the particularities of location, time, situation and other real-world connections, Picasso frequently leaves his work somewhat open-ended, full of calculated ambiguity. To quote

³⁹ Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," In *Other Criteria: Confrontation with Twentieth-Century Art*, ed. Leo Steinberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴¹ Leja, "'Le Vieux Marcheur' and 'Les Deux Risques'," 76.

Michael Leja again, “the value of genetic study here is not in providing the meaning of individual artworks but in locating a common origin for a broad and superficially disparate collection of paintings in a set of distinct and persistent concerns and attitudes.”⁴² This paper works toward a similar end, but attempts to expand studies like Leja’s to provide a more inclusive framework that allows for the reassertion of the seemingly anomalous Rose Period back into Picasso’s recognizable pictorial investigations.

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Blushing Brides: Picasso and Motherhood in the “New Order”

Although the Rose Period breaks with the melancholy blueness of the previous years, and the cast of characters change, it nevertheless can be read as a reformulation of the same themes: motherhood and evolution. From 1904 to 1905, Picasso turned from the retrogressive representation of prostitutes, alcoholics, invalids, and beggars - through which he situated contemporary society as backwards - to a certain degree of social optimism whereby the degeneration of turn-of-the-century Paris could be potentially reversed.

In late 1904, like the general populace, Picasso and other members of the avant-garde intelligentsia became increasingly attracted to the circus and fair.⁴³ Serving as a bohemian meeting place, the Cirque Médrano aroused Picasso from his blue slumber of the previous three years. Upon his return to Paris in 1904, he began to attend the circus

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Green and Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot*, 164.

three to four times a week with his friends, the poets Max Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire. According to his longtime mistress Fernande Olivier, Picasso “admired [the performers] and had real sympathy for them.”⁴⁴ It was this sympathy that continued to draw Picasso behind the curtain of the Cirque Médrano where he and his friends “felt very flattered because they could be intimate with the clowns, jugglers, the horses and their riders.”⁴⁵ His familiarity and fascination with the circus and its performers brought light and life back into his works. Rose-colored scenes of circus families and friends eclipsed the degeneration of the previous years.

Harlequin’s Family with an Ape, from 1905, imagines an intimate moment. Two performers, seated against the muted green backdrop of the circus tent, gaze upon their infant child. The man, cloaked in a simpler version of the typical unitard yet nonetheless distinguishable as a harlequin by the felt bicorn hat, leans into his wife. The child, half-nude and thus clearly male, squirms in his mother’s lap. Cradling his head gently in her delicate hands, the woman leans in to kiss her son’s supple cheek. From the floor next to the young family, a human-like baboon contemplatively turns his head to them, one hand resting gracefully on his knee.

Domestic images of circus life much like this one run the course of Picasso’s Rose Period. However, there are two distinct motifs located within the milieu of these nuclear compositions. In the format represented by *Harlequin’s Family with an Ape*, the clothed mother figure is inextricably linked to the nude male child. An ape also accompanies this figural grouping in two of the three examples while the father/harlequin

⁴⁴ Green and Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot*, 165.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

is slightly detached from the rest of his family. In the other type, the mother figure is nude while the father/harlequin, still physically distanced from his wife, cradles the swaddled infant, presumably male in light of the unclothed examples. In all five works with this theme, the male looks directly at his partner.

It is my aim here to suggest that the formal elements of these works, particularly with regard to the female figures, reflect an imposed framework of contemporary thought with regard for the nature of motherhood and of a collective desire to understand the scientific origins of mankind. Yet in doing so, Picasso usurps the traditional notions of patriarchal lineage by positioning the female figure as the fertile producer and the male figure as the aloof observer; while seemingly revisionist on the part of the artist, this understanding coincides with the establishment of a new social order in Paris at the turn of the century.

As discussed in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's book *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women*, at the start of the twentieth century:

...when the cataclysmic transition from the Old Order ended in the United States and Europe, when society began to re-form itself into something that could once again be called an "order," a settled and reproducible way of life, that new "order" rested heavily on [a more] romantic conception of woman and the home. The dominant ideology defined woman as the perpetual alien, and the home as an idyllic refuge from the unpleasant but "real" world of men.⁴⁶

The new world in the words of Ehrenreich and English, then, was divided into two diametrically opposed realms: "a 'public' sphere of endeavor governed ultimately by the

⁴⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women*, Rev. ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 31.

market; and a 'private' sphere of intimate relationships and individual biological existence."⁴⁷ In this system, the ideal woman was defined on domestic terms, assuming the roles of wife and mother. Children, then, were an essential part of this dichotomy. In what the two authors term the "Century of the Child," the child was realized by the adult population as the center of life, the key to a civilization with unlimited potential. With child mortality rates decreasing, childhood came to be understood not as a "makeshift to keep mankind from dying out," but as a symbol for the "continued life of mankind in its onward march to its divine destiny."⁴⁸ Within this framework of the exalted child, motherhood was cleaved from its diagnosis as a purely biological condition or a part-time occupation; rather, it was glorified into a "noble calling."⁴⁹

In the aforementioned gouache, Picasso's pictorial decisions support this reading. Seated on the lap of the female figure, the child is situated in the approximate location of his mother's womb. Connected both physically and spatially to the source of his mother's generation, he is, in a sense, the ultimate fulfillment of her reproductive potential. The exposure of the child's genitals reinforces notions of procreation whereby he lays claim to future generations of mankind. However, it is actually the woman who rightfully assumes this role; as a direct product of his mother's womb, the furthering of the human species ultimately originates with her. The formal arrangement of the mother and child – with the mother's gaze trained on her infant son and the baby's direct eye contact with the viewer – is reminiscent of Picasso's earlier *Mother and Baby in Front of a Bowl of Flowers*, which Leja called a secular Madonna. Compositionally akin to Renaissance

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

depictions of the Virgin Mary and Christ child, the circus mother is equated with a certain level of divinity.

Furthermore, the harlequin father is isolated from the fruit of his loins; physically withdrawn by his own tense, reclusive posture and blank, unemotional stare, he appears to have had no part in the conception of this child. As a member of the political, economic and social world that is the public sphere, the father is essentially removed from the childbearing and child-rearing processes. In *Harlequin's Family with an Ape*, the occupational divide is as much responsible for the disjuncture between the father and procreation as is the physical space. Whereas the father will, at some future moment, appear before the audience in the guise of harlequin, the woman remains forever behind the scenes.

Picasso's *The Bath*, a drypoint etching also from 1905, depicts a similar motif. Kneeling, the woman embraces her small son whose buttocks and genitals confront the viewer. Her face is composed in a content smile as she sponge bathes the child in her arms. To her right, the child's father leans nonchalantly on a cube, seemingly the oversized prop from Picasso's *Young Acrobat on a Ball* of the same year. Again the father is a harlequin, identifiable by his costume and hat. Here, as in *Harlequin's Family with an Ape*, he observes the scene before him with an expressionless stare. In *The Bath*, perhaps the gendered divide is even more obvious. The woman, accompanied by the instruments of domesticity, is spatially resigned from the harlequin, who in turn claims possession of the accoutrements integral to his public life.

In another etching from 1905, entitled *Saltimbanque Family with Monkey*, the family is accompanied by a primate for the second time, again located at the heels of the female figure. As in the previous two works, the body language of the respective parents is extremely telling. On the left, the mother holds her child up at arms length, smiling warmly into the baby's obscured face. The harlequin in this image stands rigidly on the right; with his hands clenched behind his back and his feet firmly planted, he stays clearly within a demarcated space of his own making. His facial expression, as seemingly characteristic of these works, lacks any definable emotion.

In the other "type" of harlequin family, the father holds fast to the infant; within this second paradigm mother is severed from child in exchange for the female nude. Her sensual, curvaceous body reflects its natural fecundity, despite its dislocation from the product of her womb. In the new regime, the discovery of the child, in Ehrenreich and English's eyes, was also a discovery of the power of women. Insofar as she presided over the new child, the "evolutionary protoplasm," she consequently controlled the society's not-so-distant future; men, invested in progress, thus became hyperaware of this new power. In Ehrenreich and English's words, "it is as if the masculinist imagination takes a glance over its shoulder and discovers it has left something important behind in the 'woman's sphere' – the child."⁵⁰

Trepidation exudes from the father figures in the nude works. Located within interior settings, *The Mother's Bath*, a drypoint etching, and *Harlequin's Family*, a gouache painting, take up very close compositional structures. Both from 1905, they

⁵⁰ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 210.

depict a female nude on the right and a harlequin with child on the left. In *The Mother's Bath*, the female body is viewed full-frontally as she adjusts her cascading waist-length hair. The deepest etching in the work is that which gives shape to the woman's genitals, drawing the viewer's eye to the source of her reproductive power. To her left, the harlequin awkwardly cradles their child. Uncomfortable in the position of caretaker, yet untrusting of a feminine upbringing, he trains his gaze on his wife. Located within the opposite realm in comparison to the previous three harlequin images, the baby breaches the boundaries between private and public, demonstrating his eventual part in the progression of public (male) society.

Harlequin's Family, too, expresses a similar sentiment. In a three-quarter-profile view, the woman's body is depicted by Renaissance standards of ideal beauty, meaning a small bust leads into a more voluptuous hip. From within the expanse of her alabaster skin, a small patch of dark pubic hair calls attention once again to her reproductive organs. A bowl, located at almost the same level as her genitals, echoes the shape of the womb; throughout history, the bowl has been symbolic of a feminine spirit, typically Mother Earth, and her (re)generative powers.⁵¹ The harlequin, with his back to the picture plane, again turns his head towards the woman. The dark shadows that congregate in the hollows of his eyes suggest a look colored by fear. Peeking over his left shoulder, the baby has once more crossed into the public realm. This is made clearer, too, by the harlequin's proximity to the curtain opening, an immediate exit into his masculine sphere.

⁵¹ Julie Nelson Davis, "Artistic Identity and Ukiyo-e Prints: The Representation of Kitagawa Utamaro to the Edo Public," in *The Artist as Professional in Japan*, ed. Melinda Takeuchi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 131.

The heightened connotations of motherhood at this time exist as part of a larger set of philosophical and cultural concerns in which questions surrounding the birth of mankind are central. The inclusion of a primate in two of the five works is a direct reference to recent treatises tackling the scientific mechanisms of evolution. The next section will argue that the female's close proximity to the ape furthers the notion of her place in the creation of mankind and her identification as a figuring of Mother Nature. Situated between the ape, humanity's past, and the child, humanity's future, the woman is distinguished as both the ultimate biological producer of mankind and as the avenue through which social progression occurs.

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Evolutionary Theories: Motherhood and Social Progression

Jean Clair, in his reading of Picasso's *Parade*, makes much of the ladder and ape motif. He identifies the ladder as a *Scala Paradisi*, the route by which humans make their ascent into heaven. Juxtaposed with an ape at its apex, however, Clair suggests that the ladder signifies the hierarchy of beings, with celestial figures occupying the uppermost rungs.⁵² In this section, I will argue that the apes do not hold purely religious weight in Picasso's works, but rather reflect contemporary developments in the understanding of human evolution. Moreover the ladder, a symbol present in one of Picasso's familial scenes, references the *Scala Naturae*, a conceptual structure which details the Phylogenetic Chart, or great chain of being. This ordering was one of science's primary functions and reasons for pursuing thoughts of evolution; making order from disorder,

⁵² Clair, "Picasso Trimegistus," 19.

scientists sought empirical evidence of the ladder's named rungs.⁵³ In conjunction with the New Order identification of motherhood as not simply biological, but as a venerable, vital role, and children as bearers of the future, the ape references woman's place at the heart of mankind: she is the ultimate producer of life. Moreover, this reading postulates a high position of woman on the *Scala Naturae*.

The roots of this pursuit began in the mid-nineteenth century, when there was an increased interest in the origins of mankind. While thoughts of evolution had been around for over one hundred years, the social focus of the nineteenth century on primitivism and early man provided a new milieu in which to explore these age-old questions. Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck, as early as 1809, was publishing texts that uncompromisingly advocated for evolution. Lamarckian theory, put simply, argued that simple life forms arise out of inanimate matter from spontaneous generation and inevitably progress towards greater complexity and ultimately, perfection.⁵⁴ Lamarck's evolutionary position, while of tremendous popularity in France, was ultimately disproved when, fifty years later, Charles Darwin published his *On the Origins of Species by Natural Selection*.

Darwin, and lesser-known co-discoverer Alfred Russel Wallace, presented a sweeping synthesis of two separate theses: the first being that all organisms have descended with modification from common ancestors, and the second that the chief agent of modification is the action of natural selection on individual variation.⁵⁵ His concept of "survival of the fittest" was indeed upsetting to most. Gregor Mendel's 1865 paper

⁵³ Douglas J. Futuyma, *Evolutionary Biology*, 2nd ed. (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates Inc, 1986), 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

discussing the Laws of Segregation and Independent Assortment, which confirmed Darwin's notions, went primarily unnoticed as many saw these findings as essentially about hybridization rather than inheritance. Rediscovered and republished in 1900 by his followers under the name Mendel's Laws of Inheritance, particulate inheritance and ultimately modern genetics was established as the basis of human evolutionary thought.⁵⁶

Picasso would have been versed in these developments. Published between five and fifty years before the start of his Rose Period, the theories of Darwin, Mendel and their predecessors had been circulating throughout Europe and abroad for some time. The identification of "Old World Monkeys" as man's earliest ancestor by Darwin, one of the most distressing portions of the theory at large to many conservative citizens, would thus have been common knowledge.⁵⁷ Picasso, as an artist and member of the intelligentsia, arguably knew about the debates surrounding Darwin and his theories. I will suggest that perhaps Picasso, who as part of an artistic circle dedicated to progressive pictorial representations, understood the idea of "survival of the fittest" better than most, albeit on much different terms. The inclusion of a primate in two of the works from his suite of harlequin familial images is thus telling of Picasso's understanding of this contemporary social and scientific discourse.

In *Saltimbanque Family with a Monkey*, an ape occupies the bottom left corner, seated at the foot of a ladder. Looking up, his snout originates a line of visual progression that leads to a woman, through her outstretched arms, to an infant child. The presence of an ape, juxtaposed as he is next to a ladder, signals a connection to Darwinian theories of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁷ Charles Darwin, *Descent of Man, and selection in relation to sex*, Rev. ed. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1880), 5 – 25.

evolution. At the lowest rung, the primate is the least “developed” of the human line. Moving up the height of the ladder, the eye next reaches the woman, representing modern human beings. This shift signifies the evolutionary tract of the human race. However, the child, held up to apex of the ladder, adds a layer of complexity to the image.

In light of the renewed interest in the child and childhood as responsible for the bringing forth of society to its greatest heights, the mother’s extension of the child suggests his role in the procreation of a more “perfected” humanity. The mother’s lifting of the child to this position corresponds to contemporary notions of motherhood in two ways: the first, as the physical producer of the “new” child, the ultimate extension of herself, she is biologically furthering the progress of the human race. On the other hand, her role in the actual “raising” of the child, in terms of child rearing, is part and parcel of the “new” child as an advancer of the social realm as well. In this reading, the woman is located at a very privileged place in the evolutionary chain, both as the producer of humanity thus far and as the bearer of future generations to come.

Harlequin’s Family with an Ape likewise affords a similar vision. Seated in a very human-like manner, a baboon turns his head to look upon one of Picasso’s familial scenes. Again, as in *Salimbanque Family with a Monkey*, the primate is located next to the woman/child pairing. However, here, there is no ladder present; rather the line of vision beginning with the ape’s snout moves from the lower right and ends in the upper left with the male harlequin. The woman occupies roughly the same position in this work, namely as the intermediary between humanity of the past and future. In reading the work this way, the grown harlequin prefigures the role that the young child will eventually take up. Moving from the ancestral primate through the woman, the harlequin is a physical

embodiment of the male child's potential to inhabit the public realm. Moreover, this reading suggests that in the world of the circus, the woman is not only producing the next generations of man, but also the harlequins of the future. In this way, children play a role in bringing humanity, society and the circus to their destined perfection.

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Cubist Courtesans: The Corrupted Mothers of Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon

The Rose Period has long been considered a deviation from Picasso's oeuvre in part because of the conceptually and visually experimental work that emerged in the following years, beginning with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in 1907. *Les Demoiselles* not only marked the artist's ascent into a strictly Cubist vocabulary, but a return to the depiction of degenerate sectors of society and retrogression. The final version, a product of many preliminary studies, locates five buxom prostitutes within a brothel, each striking a different risqué pose. Their nude bodies are fragmented by unnatural angles, geometric patterns of color, and abstracted elements, making them appear somewhat grotesque. In the center, two of the figures stare wide-eyed out of the picture plane, wordlessly seducing the male viewer. In earlier sketches the composition included a sailor as the potential client and an officer of the *brigade des mœurs*. Mary Mathews Gedo has suggested that the officer, in the guise of a medical student, referenced the venereal disease and Saint-Lazare hospital-prison of the Blue Period; again, then, there was an implicit warning about the dangers of sexual love.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Leja, " 'Le Vieux Marcheur' and 'Les Deux Risques'," 76.

In the final version of *Les Demoiselles*, both of these male figures are removed, reframing the encounter scene as one in which the viewer functions as the visitor to the brothel and is thus expected to choose one of the brazen women for himself. This tactic of participation is one that was common in early twentieth-century erotic and pornographic photography.⁵⁹ Modern viewers, who would have recognized this connection, would have also understood the conflation of barbarity and sexuality inherent in the allure of the work.

Like *La Vie* and *Two Sisters* from the Blue Period, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, too, seems to express Picasso's disenchantment with modernity. Here, though, his discontent derives not only from the recognition of societal failures, but an appreciation of past and indigenous pictorial traditions. The physical presence of "primitiveness" within the canvas is an overt reference to his emerging interest in non-Western aesthetics. In this, Picasso celebrates elementary forms, even translates them into his Cubist vocabulary. However, one cannot overlook the former commentary, that of deficient social structures and thus the subsequent decline of civilization in modernity.

Michael Leja concludes that in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Picasso manipulates the female form to personify peril's attractiveness; however, his uncanny transfiguration of the body – especially the recasting of two of the prostitutes in the African aesthetic – fails to retain the "magic irresistibility of sex."⁶⁰ Instead Picasso's mutilation of the female form suggests the projection of fears and anxieties surrounding sex and the body of the woman, and fundamentally changes her image so as to refuse the mystical allure of

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

sex altogether. Moreover, Leja places *Les Demoiselles* in a dialogue with earlier works insofar as the motif of danger versus temptation persists throughout. Images of women cast either as erotic beings or victims of love in the Blue and Cubist Periods mark opposing ends of the twentieth-century spectrum of femininity. For Leja, *Les Demoiselles* was an ambitious, yet unsuccessful, attempt to portray the conflict whole, to force the viewer to acknowledge the binary inevitabilities of submission and subsequent harm.⁶¹

As a result of this failure, the women of *Les Demoiselles* are left to assume the erotic role. In *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity*, David Lomas examines *Les Desmoiselles* through the lens of psychoanalysis. He says, “*Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* can be thought of as inaugurating an artistic practice of transgression, the fallen woman metamorphoses a ‘system of flights and descents into the lower depths’.”⁶² Picasso, in 1907, returned then to the degeneration of society and the role of sexuality in its demise. Transgression of the classical ideal is articulated through the body of the fallen woman, the prostitute, who serves as the antithesis to the ideal of womanhood, the mother. In this way, the female figures from the Rose Period are reinvented in *Les Demoiselles* through the Freudian opposition of sacred and profane love, which had once contradictorily attached to the mother. The incest taboo prohibited this union, though, prompting the severance of the libido from the mother and its projection onto other objects. As Lomas argues, “All future object-choices are thus merely surrogates for the original, now barred, maternal object – this explains why desire, set in train by the ‘interposition of the barrier against incest,’ is refractory to complete

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² David Lomas, *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 134.

satisfaction.”⁶³ Further, he contends that Picasso’s women in *Les Demoiselles* are corrupt incarnates of the mother, taking on the orgiastic nature cast aside in light of the incest taboo to maintain the purity of her role as the ideal woman.

Whereas the prostitutes of the Blue Period, syphilis-infected and suffering at the hands of institutional flaws, are cast as victims in Picasso’s work, the sex workers of the early Cubist period bear more responsibility for the ramifications of their deviant actions. Bare-breasted, legs spread, they are offered to the world for what they are: whores. Picasso does not sympathize with them as he did with the azure mothers of 1901 to 1902. The prisoner-patients, depicted with their children, find only heightened despair in light of the economic circumstances that both precipitated the selling of their bodies and prevented them from aptly providing in the wake of maternity. By 1905, however, Picasso’s mothers are once again portrayed as finding joy in their offspring, albeit continued conditions of low socio-economic class. The harlequin females, whose maternity stemmed from a presumably loving marriage rather than a purely sexual relationship, have not (at least not yet) encountered the transience of affection cautioned by the Blue Period works. Moreover, in accordance with the “New Order,” these women do not venture out into the public world; instead, they are protected from the atrocities of modern life by the rose-colored confines of the circus tent. With the explicit inclusion of a male gaze – from the woman’s harlequin partner - in each of the Rose Period works addressed here, Picasso likewise prohibits the voyeuristic participation incited by the perspective of *Les Demoiselles*. Perhaps in some way, Picasso was suggesting that the marginalization of circus performers and their families from society at large in fact

⁶³ *Ibid.*

provided a safe haven from the realities of the modern world. Thus in order to preserve the sanctity of the Madonna-like mothers of the Rose Period, Picasso removed the threat of prostitution, channeling the discarded libido wholly into *Les Demoiselles*.

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Oscillating Objectives: Ambiguity or Authenticity in Picasso's Work

The formal deconstruction characteristic of Cubism was not solely an attempt by Picasso to create a complete vision of a figure from multiple angles on a two-dimensional surface. Rather, Cubism was a conceptual practice whereby Picasso could fabricate the confrontation of incompatible points of view in order to reveal to the audience the conventions of pictorial illusionism. Picasso's desire to expose the deception of aesthetic expression can likewise be identified in his tendency towards ambiguity and sham authenticity, which, as mentioned above, make for a difficult go of interpreting his multifaceted works. The reading fleshed out in this paper is by no means the ultimate word in Rose Period scholarship. As addressed by Leja, one finds that Picasso himself was often unconvinced of a single, uncontestable meaning within his many works.⁶⁴

Within the nuclear family works of the harlequin series, the formal elements of motherhood and evolution can double on some level as interrogations of Picasso's evasiveness and genuineness. In *Harlequin's Family with an Ape* the woman wears an ambiguous costume of a thin-strapped, knee-length white dress, a black shawl, and flesh-colored flats. Her hair is pulled into a tight bun atop her head. With her left foot planted on the tent floor, and the right raised up on its toes, one could conclude that she is not

⁶⁴ Leja, " 'Le Vieux Marcheur' and 'Les Deux Risques' ," 76.

only a mother, but also a dancer. If this were in fact the case, Picasso would on some level be imbuing woman with agency beyond motherhood, again positioning the circus as an exception from society at large. The questioning, uncomfortable look directed to the nude female figure by the harlequin father could also be seen as a subtle reference to this disillusionment with the positive valuation of motherhood in the “New Order.”

The same uncertainty could be said for the ape. In Jean Clair’s essay, “Picasso Trismegistus: Notes on the Iconography of Harlequin,” he states that monkeys were rich in religious symbolism at this time. For the Spanish, the ape symbolized the fall of man. Picasso, originating from Malaga and raised a Catholic, would have known of this iconographic tradition. In his evaluation of the *Parade* curtain, Clair suggests that Picasso is being ironic in his representation of the ape insofar as he is depicted as so purely animal that he is placed above humans on the *Scala Paradisi*.⁶⁵ Perhaps, then, Picasso’s inclusion of a similar motif in the harlequin images is meant to convey the pathetic fallacy of animals possessing human characteristics. The monkey, here, would serve to unravel the social aspects of the work, ultimately mocking art as an expressive system. This might be seen as reflective of Picasso’s artistic process, but for me such an argument fails to recognize his known involvement in intellectual and political circles during the first decade of the twentieth century.

In discovering traces of evolutionary thought and social conceptions of motherhood in the Rose Period, one locates what Michael Leja calls “a common origin for a broad and superficially disparate collection of paintings in a set of distinct and

⁶⁵ Clair, “Picasso Trismegistus,” 21.

persistent concerns and attitudes.”⁶⁶ These threads serve to reintroduce the works produced from 1904 to 1905 back into Picasso’s oeuvre in a way that creates a more cohesive picture of his work than ever before imagined. Even the weirdness and irony that are common criticisms of the Rose Period paintings seem to dissolve into Picasso’s larger pictorial aim of exposing illusion, both in terms of aesthetic and societal conventions.

Unlike the preceding and following phases of Picasso’s artistic opus, the Rose Period looks to the future and hopes for progress, as opposed to the typical commentary on the degeneration of modern society. Picasso’s positioning of the female in the harlequin works discussed here posits her as capable of initiating social and biological change. The ambiguities, too, posit possible feminist readings in which Picasso offers up a certain level of agency (in the form of the ability to perform publicly) and visually questions the new valuations of motherhood. It is unclear why Picasso would, at this time, consider optimism in exchange for his usual negativity. As of yet, I do not have a definitive answer; however, opening Picasso’s harlequin works to new methodological inquiry suggests that these works are not necessarily an uncomfortable fit in Picasso’s oeuvre, but rather mesh thematically on some level inaccessible through a biographical reading.

⁶⁶ Leja, “‘Le Vieux Marcheur’ and ‘Les Deux Risques’,” 76.

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Fig. 1. Pablo Picasso, Two Sisters. 1901.



Fig. 2. Pablo Picasso, La Vie. 1901.

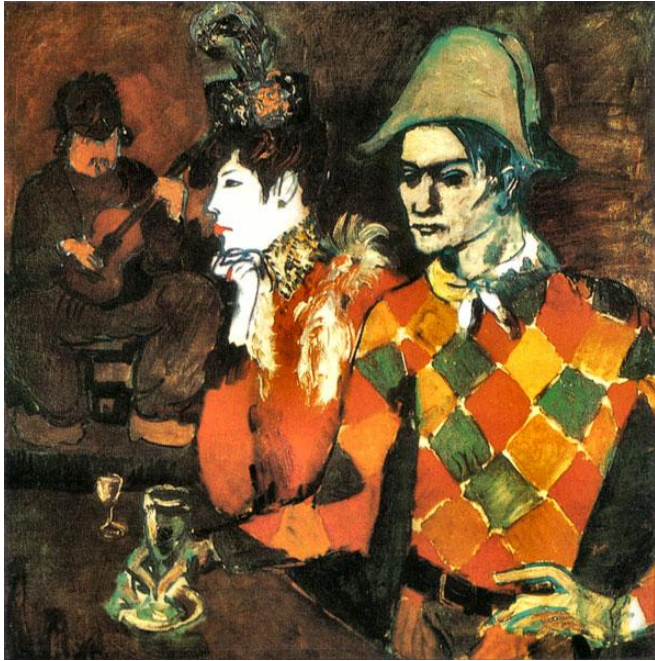


Fig. 3. Pablo Picasso, At the Lapin Agile. 1905.



Fig. 4. Pablo Picasso, Harlequin's Family with an Ape. 1905.



Fig. 5. Pablo Picasso, The Bath. 1905.

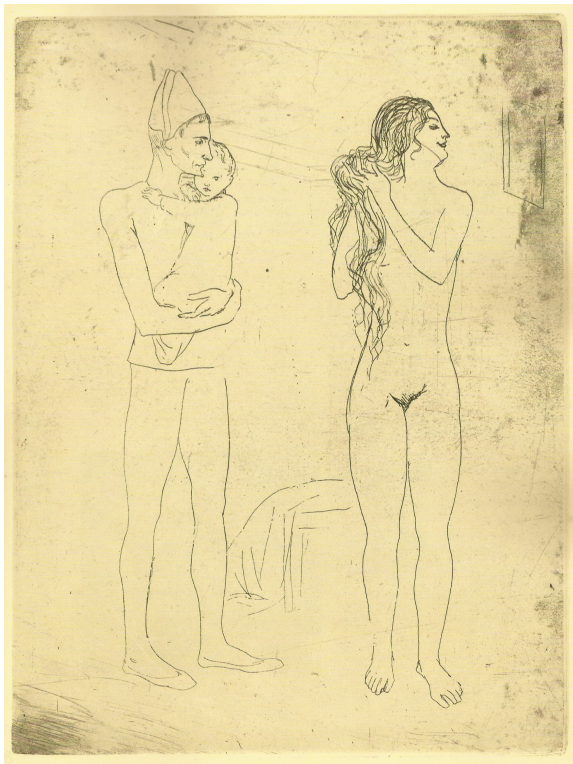


Fig. 6. Pablo Picasso, The Mother's Bath. 1905.



Fig. 7. Pablo Picasso, Saltimbanque Family with Monkey. 1905.



Fig. 8. Pablo Picasso, Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.) (Version O). 1907.