



Troy Thomas

# Poussin's Women

## Sex and Gender in the Artist's Works

## Poussin's Women

# Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700

A forum for innovative research on the role of images and objects in the late medieval and early modern periods, *Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700* publishes monographs and essay collections that combine rigorous investigation with critical inquiry to present new narratives on a wide range of topics, from traditional arts to seemingly ordinary things. Recognizing the fluidity of images, objects, and ideas, this series fosters cross-cultural as well as multi-disciplinary exploration. We consider proposals from across the spectrum of analytic approaches and methodologies.

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*Sex and Gender in the Artist's Works*

*Troy Thomas*

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# Part I – Violence and Virtue in Poussin’s Representations of Women

## Abstract

Part I analyzes the themes of Poussin’s paintings and drawings from a gender studies perspective. This section critically examines his depictions of both virtuous and evil women through the lens of the gender constructions of his time. Poussin’s supposed stoical approach to art is critiqued from a gender studies viewpoint. His art calls for reevaluation in light of current critical approaches to gender studies and art history.

**Keywords:** Violence, Virtue, Gender Studies, Stoicism, Criticism

We might say that Poussin’s paintings and drawings are built around a contradiction. On the one hand, they often present scenes of the most desperate human circumstances: death (of Pyramus and Thisbe, Echo and Narcissus, Adonis, Eurydice, the children of Medea, Virginia, Sapphira, the mortals struck down in the *Realm of Flora*); sexual predation (Endymion pursued by Diana, Cephalus harassed by Aurora, the attempted rapes of Daphne and Syrinx); and revenge (Diana once more, avenging Orion, or slaying Chione, Mercury turning Aglauros to stone, the effects of Juno destroying Semele in the *Birth of Bacchus*). On the other hand, his paintings give rise to the most exquisite pleasure, in the geometry of their construction, the beauty of their color, and, for some, their evocation of a lost golden age. These contradictions fixed around destruction on the one side and formal refinement or allure on the other are never resolved, but held in concentrated tension in his works. Disregard for the negative side of this equation has led to interpretations that underestimate the power of the destructive forces presented in his art. For example, it has long been claimed, starting with André Félibien (1619-1695), the painter’s friend and biographer, that even when he depicts scenes with his protagonists locked in conflict, Poussin’s canvases are always harmonious. Félibien asserts that Poussin’s thoughts are always ‘pure and unclouded [...] Everything [in his work] seems natural, easy, suitable and



agreeable'.<sup>1</sup> Such a characterization of Poussin as a 'pleasant' artist undermines the expressive power of his scenes illustrating perilous discord. Another dichotomy existing in his works is between toxic, destructive men and women such as the Roman male aggressors in the *The Rape of the Sabines* and the injurious females already mentioned (Diana, Aurora, Medea) on the one side and members of both genders on the other who exemplify wisdom and virtue, such as Solomon, Scipio, or the Virgin Mary. The artist's choice to design canvases around protagonists either worthy or evil bears out his own statements that fortune mixes the good with the bad,<sup>2</sup> and it is clear that he meant the viewers of his paintings to reflect deeply on this simple but profound point.

Poussin's handling of his female protagonists most often does not support the view, widely held from the artist's day to the present, that his works transport the observer back to an imagined world of golden age perfection. Nor do his women, in the main, reflect a glorious historical age governed by a set of stoic values that presumably also deeply influenced the artist's own personal sense of morality. Poussin's scenes of Greco-Roman antiquity most often feature rapes, actual or attempted (of Europa, Daphne, Syrinx); female predators (Diana, Aurora); women as killers (Medea, Diana), transgressors (Myrrha, Aglauros), and rulers in love (Venus); also scenes of lust (Venus and nymphs spied upon by satyrs or Pan and his followers); unrequited or jealous lovers (Echo, Diana, Juno); and victims (Virginia, Eurydice, Thisbe, Queen Zenobia, the Sabine women). To be sure, he also represents ancient heroines and women of nobility and virtue, but these are a distinct minority. In his religious works we find many positive images of women, most notably repeated versions of the Virgin Mary, but also deceitful females like Sapphira and the pretender in the *Judgment of Solomon*, victims in the *Massacre of the Innocents*, and an adulteress in *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*. Poussin's representation of such protagonists is at odds with the idea that took on mythical status in his lifetime, that he recreated an antique world of ideal perfection. Adding to Félibien's account of Poussin as a congenial, agreeable artist, in 1741 Pierre-Jean Mariette, art dealer in old master prints and owner of drawings by Poussin, wrote of the master's ideal vision of the antique world: 'He composed [...] noble landscapes which make the spectator feel that he has been transported to ancient Greece, to those enchanted valleys described by the poets'.<sup>3</sup> Such an optimistic and romanticized

Note: Quotations from primary sources follow the original spelling and punctuation, even if archaic or, in some cases, incorrect.

1 Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies*, pp. 156, 158: 'pure & sans fumée [...] tout y paroît naturel, facile, commode & agréable'.

2 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 239-240, 348-349.

3 Mariette, *Description sommaire des desseins des grands maîtres*, p. 115: 'il composoit [...] beaux Paisages, où le spectateur se croit transporté dans l'ancienne Grece, & dans ces Vallées enchantées décrites par les Poëtes'.

view of Poussin’s landscapes belies the bleak mood found in many of the outdoor scenes that he painted. Mariette’s characterization of the master’s landscapes as evoking enchantment contradicts their actual tone, which is often somber in the extreme. Pessimism and death mark his scenes of nature such as *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake*, *Landscape with the Body of Phocion Carried out of Athens*, *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow*, *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, *Landscape with Juno and Argus*, and *Landscape with Diogenes*. Alternatively, to claim that Poussin moderates the violence of his scenes by proposing that they be viewed allegorically is not wholly satisfactory. Allegorical interpretations, even if intentional, may be equally bleak in tone or draw attention to remote and intellectual meanings that entail their own contradictions and irresolutions, and, even if they were intended to be positive in mood and were highly respected in Poussin’s day, they cannot explain away the adversity he presents in his canvases.

## Gender studies and Poussin’s works

The aim of this book is to investigate Poussin’s works through his representation of women, and, in their relation to men, through the study of gender as well. The value in viewing Poussin’s mythological, historical, and religious paintings and drawings from the perspective of women and gender is that such approaches open up ways of understanding them that we might not have imagined otherwise. Such perspectives inform the artist’s visual narratives and his figures’ emotional expressiveness with new, unanticipated levels of meaning. We are able to confront directly the power relations of the males and females in his scenes that often feature sexual conflict and violence. Our understanding of his works is deeper when we analyze their sexual discord historically and socially through the changing gender formations of the artist’s seventeenth-century European culture.

In this book, primary focus is given to a critical examination of Poussin’s women, but their relationship to men is also important. Gender may be regarded as a system of power that until recent times in Europe was almost exclusively patriarchal. In the 1970s feminists began working to recover women’s contributions to history and culture and to develop a theory of feminist consciousness. Griselda Pollock has defined gender as the asymmetrical hierarchy between those distinguished both sociologically and symbolically on the basis of perceived, but not determining, differences.<sup>4</sup> Gender historically was claimed to mark a ‘natural’ distinction between the sexes, even if some made the further distinction between sex as a natural

4 Pollock, ‘Women, Art, and Art History’, n.p.

difference and gender as a cultural construction. The relation of sex to gender, however, can be viewed not as the difference between unconstructed nature and culture, but rather, in the wake of works by Michael Foucault and Judith Butler, as norms elaborated by that regime of power-knowledge known as sexuality; thus, sex is as constructed as gender itself.<sup>5</sup> As such, ideologies of sex and gender could determine the formation and perception of all sorts of social and cultural customs and artifacts, including artistic representations. In this book I analyze Poussin's works with a view to revealing what they tell us about the women he represented. This is a task that necessarily takes into account how the women in his works were understood in his own time and how they speak to us today. However much we would wish to keep these two kinds of interpretation separate, it is not always possible to do so. In some cases, with the right kind of evidence, we can gain insight into the 'period eye', but this is a difficult process, relying as it does on the interpretive act of the present observer. In his many preserved letters, Poussin hardly mentions women. He spoke of their beauty, comparing their proportions to Greek columns, and he mentioned that his wife abandoned him in death; he hardly said more than this. To understand the ideologically and historically situated representations of women in his paintings, it is important to analyze his works through social, historical, and cultural frames, and to examine Poussin himself through what we know of him as an artist and a man.

The study of Poussin's works from the perspective of women and gender essentially has been non-existent. Art historians have taken an active role in authoring works on women's theory, ideology, and history; such writers include Mieke Bal, Norma Broude, Mary Garrard, Rona Goffen, Linda Nochlin, and Griselda Pollock. But hardly anything has been written by them or others about Poussin.<sup>6</sup> No published account exists that studies Poussin's women as a general category. However, research on the early modern period utilizing the approaches of women's and gender studies has blossomed in recent decades, and some of the findings in this scholarship are applicable to Poussin. The study of women and gender in early modern Europe has undergone substantial evolution in the last few decades. Archival research has made significant progress in addressing what had been perceived in the 1970s as the invisibility of women in history. In recent years, scholarship has refined and reconceptualized ideas about the connections between men and women in seventeenth-century France and Italy, the two countries applicable to Poussin,

5 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*; Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

6 An exception is Phillippa Plock, *Regarding Gendered Mythologies: Nicolas Poussin's Mythological Paintings and Practices of Viewing in Seventeenth-Century Rome*, PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2004. She discusses several Poussin canvases from the perspective of culturally constructed gendered positions of viewing. She argues that, in viewing selected examples of Poussin's mythologies, seventeenth-century men sometimes underwent an imagined change in gender identity.

since he was born in the first and lived much of his life in the second. In the period when gender and women’s studies were expanding and becoming major forces in scholarship, in the 1970s-1990s, emphasis occasionally was put on ways in which European men conceived of and controlled women, sometimes in starkly negative terms. More recently, as a result of further gender research in areas such as biology, law, household management, and women and work, more nuanced approaches to the interaction of the sexes have appeared in scholarship. The earlier scholarly studies have been, in some cases, supplanted, and in others supplemented, with a richer, more subtle understanding of women and gender relations. For example, recent research has shown that patriarchal authority and control over women were fluid and negotiable, limited by a variety of forces, and less rigid and dominant than sometimes thought.<sup>7</sup>

A brief review of important sources on women, gender, and theory used in this book will be helpful for the reader. Works with a gender studies approach by art historians useful for Poussin include Mieke Bal’s ‘Women as the Topic’, which shows that feminist inquiry can uncover how paintings represent stories about the power relations of men and women and discover how pictures of women can open up traditional clichés, categories, and themes.<sup>8</sup> Bal encourages critical investigation of the varied relations between the sexes rather than simple awareness of a given or standard theme or subject. Jodi Cranston characterizes recent changes in theoretical perspectives used to interpret images of women in early modern art: she notes the ‘adoption of theoretical approaches from disciplines outside of art history that [articulate] the constructedness of the visual sign and the politics of interpretation and reception’.<sup>9</sup> She points out that ‘Early modern depictions of women could be read, for example, as reflecting an apparatus of power, as empowering women, as reinforcing traditional roles, or as engendering some form of transcendence from those very same structures’.<sup>10</sup> Such critical perspectives that open up awareness of the power relations of gender in visual art are directly applicable to analysis of Poussin’s images of women. An author utilizing a gender studies methodology to analyze Ovid, a major literary source for Poussin, is Patricia Salzman-Mitchell.<sup>11</sup> Her many critically perceptive and sophisticated comments about the treatment of women in Ovid are useful in analyzing Poussin’s numerous pictures based on the *Metamorphoses*. In her *Titian’s Women*, Rona Goffen reminds us that a husband,

7 Poska, Couchman, and McIver, ‘Introduction’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender*, p. 8.

8 Bal, ‘Women as the Topic’, in *Women Who Ruled*, pp. 61-78.

9 Cranston, ‘Exhibition review: Images of Women in Old Master Prints and Drawings/Images by Women in Old Master Prints and Drawings’, p. 310.

10 Ibid.

11 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*.

metaphorically, acted with legal authority as a rapist, removing a young woman from her family,<sup>12</sup> an idea useful in examining Poussin's two versions of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (New York and Paris).

Recent publications (mainly since 2012, since a full review would be prohibitively lengthy) from the field of gender studies relevant to Poussin include Domna Stanton's book on French gender dynamics.<sup>13</sup> Stanton reevaluates previous generalizations about gender in early modern France, pointing out that our understanding of gender is multiple, shifting, open to continual remaking, and that gender norms are contested sites of meaning. She notes that the forces affecting the position of women in seventeenth century France are complex and contradictory, both progressive and regressive relative to a particular context. Her case studies in this book examine the accommodations and resistances to unstable and changing contextual gender norms. This process of gender conformity, negotiation and resistance is embodied in the *querelle des femmes*, a debate about the nature, characteristics, and status of women that Stanton sees as dynamic and having been wrongly characterized as a static repetition of the same arguments over time. Thus, elite women played an active military role in the civil wars of the Fronde that divided France (1648–1653), and pitted the nobles and the *parlement* against the King and Cardinal Mazarin, in a way that did not happen again until the Revolution of 1789, even though the Fronde ended with the monarchy's triumph. Stanton discusses the example of a famous polarity in conceptualizing women in the period, the contrast of the sophisticated *précieuse* of the salon and her antithesis, the *honnête femme*. She examines Pierre Le Moynes's *La galerie des femmes fortes* (1647), whose conservatism is indicated by his statement that feminine gentleness has always submitted to masculine force; she also describes how the legal status of women steadily worsened in the course of the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> All these points that illuminate Poussin's conceptions of women are discussed in further detail below. Cissie Fairchilds is more optimistic.<sup>15</sup> She does not deny the conflict between patriarchalism and the forces subverting it. But she maintains that through challenges to the misogynist view that women were inferior to men, spreading literacy, greater opportunities for work, and self-expression in literature and the arts, women's status and opportunities in the course of the seventeenth century actually increased.<sup>16</sup> Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks makes several points relevant to Poussin about women, politics, and early feminism, noting that seventeenth-century authors discussing political rights and obligations almost never mentioned women but simply regarded male experience as universal. She

12 Goffen, *Titian's Women*.

13 Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France*.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2, 4, 7.

15 Fairchilds, *Women in Early Modern Europe*.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.

examines the feminist writers Marguerite Buffet (d. 1680), who emphasized the point that women were as fully human and capable as men, and Bathsua Makin (c. 1600-c. 1675), who argued for women’s education.<sup>17</sup> In the last decade or more, feminist studies have been augmented by an increasing number of works on male, gay, queer, and transgender experience. Books in the latter two categories, such as *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* and *The Transgender Studies Reader*,<sup>18</sup> are useful in examining Poussin’s two canvases that depict cross-dressing, *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond). Works by recent authors in postcolonial theory, such as Leela Gandhi,<sup>19</sup> are helpful in investigating Poussin’s approach to representing otherness, as in *Finding of Moses* (1638, Louvre). Poussin conceptualizes this scene from a Eurocentric perspective by privileging Pharaoh’s daughter. He gives her light-skinned Greco-Roman features, in contrast to the male servant, who is brown-skinned and marked as the foreign ‘other’, even though both are Egyptian. Authors on gender who make specific points relevant to particular canvases by Poussin include Jennifer Haraguchi, who analyzes Lucrezia Marinella’s important and influential work, *La vita di Maria Vergine, imperatrice dell’universo*, published in 1602, which recounts the life of the Virgin Mary.<sup>20</sup> Haraguchi points out that Marinella calls the Virgin’s heavenly assumption an ‘ascensio’, suggesting that she thought the mother should be put on equal footing with the son. This idea has relevance to Poussin’s paintings of the Virgin’s *Assumption* (Washington and Paris), which stress her singular importance by focusing on her alone, without any appearance of God or the Apostles. Among the many valuable points made by Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli is that one of Poussin’s most important patrons, Cassiano dal Pozzo, supported women painters, including Artemisia Gentileschi and Giovanna Garzoni, both of whom corresponded with him.<sup>21</sup> The evidence of their letters written to each other strongly indicates that Artemisia, Giovanna, and Pozzo were all friends. Pozzo’s support of multiple female artists was unusual, suggesting through his patronage that he held a positive view of women in the professions, an attitude that Poussin may have shared. James Saslow argues that Acteon’s destruction by Diana reveals men’s anxiety about female-on-female sexuality, where the erotic partners operate outside of male control,<sup>22</sup> a point relevant to Poussin’s

17 Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe*.

18 Hall and Jagose, eds., *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*; Stryker and Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader*.

19 Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*.

20 Haraguchi, ‘The Virgin Mary in the Early Modern Italian Writings of Vittoria Colonna, Lucrezia Marinella, and Eleonora Montalvo’, pp. 1-13.

21 Rogers and Tinagli, *Women and the Visual Arts in Italy*.

22 Saslow, ‘The Desiring Eye’, pp. 127-148.

early drawing of *Diana Killing Acteon*. Several essays from *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* are important for this study: Katherine Crawford, Jutta Gisela Sperling, and Allyson M. Poska all discuss aspects of courtship and marriage, noting among other things the prosecution of young men who engaged in consensual pre-marital intercourse as statutory rapists, in order to protect daughters and the dowry system.<sup>23</sup> The issue of protection of women is relevant to Poussin's paintings of the loves of the gods, which served viewers as negative, cautionary models of amorous relationships. Lyndan Warner, in the same collection of essays, examines the limited rights of wives, who often had no legal status of their own, and widows, who could not inherit property or assume guardianship of children, and, unless they chose to litigate, were left exposed to the generosity (or not) of male heirs.<sup>24</sup> These points are relevant to Poussin's painting, the *Testament of Eudamidas*, representing a widow and her daughter who are left to the mercy of strangers.

Recent theoretical essays on Poussin include one by David Carrier, who critiques Poussin's supposed adherence to a kind of stoic skepticism that some think influenced his paintings.<sup>25</sup> Joseph C. Forte examines Poussin's theory of modes, where, in response to criticism by his patron, Chantelou, the artist replied that the expressive character of the forms and colors in different works arouse particular feelings in the observer.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Poussin argued, different works necessitated distinctive approaches.

Conclusions reached in this book about the narrative and expressive functions of women in Poussin's works confirm and enlarge upon the recent findings in feminist and gender theory that emphasize the diverse, multi-valent, and complex views of women existing in seventeenth-century Europe. On the one side, some of Poussin's works serve as warnings to men of the dangers posed by powerful women (female deities) who dominate in love, and some show men of authority presiding over submissive women. But other paintings that depict women as victims of male aggression side with the women, eliciting from the viewer a sympathetic response. Still other pictures represent women as intelligent, active agents, exemplifying strength, virtue, wisdom and heroism. These differing approaches to women in his paintings reflect both traditional male power in gender relations and the new assertions of female equality in the wider culture. Created in a dynamic period of changing conceptions of women's roles and perceptions of gender, Poussin's works provide test cases in which to investigate such shifts.

23 Katherine Crawford, 'Permanent Impermanence: Continuity and Rupture in Early Modern Sexuality Studies', pp. 257-278; Sperling, 'The Economics and Politics of Marriage', pp. 213-232; Poska, 'Upending Patriarchy: Rethinking Marriage and Family', pp. 195-212.

24 Warner, 'Before the Law', pp. 233-256.

25 Carrier, 'A Very Short History of Poussin Interpretation', pp. 69-80.

26 Forte, 'With a Critical Eye: Painting and Theory in France', pp. 541-560.

## Unfortunate love, powerful men, and wise, heroic women in Poussin’s works

Many of Poussin’s early works present the theme of unfortunate love, a topic that may be explored profitably through a gender studies perspective. Ill-fated or unrequited love dominates Poussin’s artistic production up to about 1635 in canvases (often in multiple versions) representing *Venus and Adonis* (Figs. 3.1, 3.3), *Acis and Galatea* (Fig. 3.5), *Apollo and Daphne* (Figs. 5.12, 5.13), *Cephalus and Aurora* (Figs. 1.1, 1.2), *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4), *Echo and Narcissus* (Fig. 6.1), *Rinaldo and Armida* (Figs. 2.18, 2.19), and *Tancred and Erminia* (Figs. 3.14, 3.15). In five of these paintings a male figure is kneeling or prostrate, presided over by a dominant female who holds his fate in her hands. The motifs of love and death appear in these pictures, where the unrequited love of a goddess or witch for a mortal portends tragedy. This theme is a central concern of Poussin’s art, and one also that he discusses in his letters, through his comments on the unpredictable nature of human destiny.<sup>27</sup> The artist’s *Mars and Venus* (Fig. 3.13) presents a rare case of unimperiled love, but even that relationship is frustrated: in the painting Mars’s expression conveys his distress at the constraint on his bellicose ways imposed by Venus, and the pair eventually will be exposed to ridicule by Vulcan. In his later works, the scheme of goddesses prevailing over mortal men is dramatically reversed: authoritative male figures instead preside over submissive women. The artist’s paintings with this new theme include *Ruth and Boaz* (Fig. 3.12), *Esther before Ahasuerus* (Fig. 7.10), *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (Fig. 5.10), the *Death of Sapphira* (Fig. 4.10), *Coriolanus* (Fig. 7.2), the *Continence of Scipio* (Fig. 6.3), *Judgment of Solomon* (Fig. 6.8), *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax* (Fig. 5.11), the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (Figs. 5.15, 5.16), *Eliezer and Rebecca* (Figs. 7.8, 7.9), and also a drawing of the *Death of Virginia* (Fig. 5.1).<sup>28</sup> Works of this sort clearly represent the exercise of male power over women. In about a third of these works the effects of male hegemony have destructive rather than positive consequences, and the stories of about half of these narratives strongly imply a demonstration of superior male rationality. But it is also important to recognize that men’s reason in these works is not set against female irrationality: the women appearing in this group are not intended to show presumed negative female traits such as excessive emotion; rather, in the main, the women are reasonable suppliants (as in *Coriolanus*—Fig. 7.2), exemplars of wisdom (*Esther before Ahasuerus*—Fig. 7.10, *Ruth and Boaz*—Fig. 3.12, *Eliezer and Rebecca*—Figs. 7.8, 7.9), heroines (*Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax*—Fig. 5.11), or innocent victims (*Rape of the Sabine Women*—Figs. 5.15,

27 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 239-240, 348-349.

28 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, pp. 21-22, 37-38, discusses the themes of Poussin’s later works.



5.16), *Death of Virginia*—Fig. 5.1). Hence, the rule of supposedly superior males is enforced over women even when they themselves are strong, virtuous, or intelligent.

A number of drawings are included in this book, in addition to the paintings. The reason for this is that a significant fraction of Poussin's important narratives featuring women appear only in drawings. Some of these designs he meant to paint but never did; others were drawings that he turned into paintings which were subsequently lost or destroyed (such as the *Rape of Europa*, Fig. 5.19); still others (the so-called 'Marino drawings', including the *Birth of Adonis*, Fig. 4.7) were planned as finished works not to be painted; and yet others cannot be clearly related to painting projects and may have been intended to remain only as drawings. Some of his drawings are among his most powerfully expressive works, such as his two designs for *Medea* (Figs. 4.1, 4.2) even though one is highly finished and the other is hardly more than a sketch.

### **Poussin's themes in his depictions of women**

Rape is an important theme in Poussin's work. He depicted the attempted rapes of Daphne and Syrinx, both of whom suffered the loss of their humanity and sentience when they were turned into a tree and reeds respectively. The Sabine Women, raped (that is, abducted) by Romans, were the subject of two paintings by Poussin, and he presented the rape of Europa in a series of drawings. The women depicted in these works were the victims of aggressive and injurious males or gods, and through his protagonists' expressive qualities Poussin ensured that the viewer of his pictures would comprehend the fear and tragic circumstances of these female victims. In doing so he opened up a space for the viewer's empathic response. The rapes of Daphne and Syrinx show the women suffering the loss of their humanity, and the males thwarted in their efforts. The viewer's compassion in these scenes is directed toward the females; in the face of the women's tragic transformation into plant form, the males merely suffer loss of pride.

A second large category in Poussin's oeuvre consists of women who control or kill males. These destructive females include Aurora, Venus, Diana, Armida, and Medea. Even though he makes it clear that these women impose harm, in some cases Poussin allows a degree of empathy for these dominating and tyrannous females, since they are presented with physical and psychological nuance and classical idealization of form.

A third theme in Poussin's artistic production consists of heroic women whose lives were threatened or sacrificed, such as Queen Zenobia, and Virginia, depicted in a drawing. But even if these works demonstrate the nobility of the women, their status as positive role models is compromised, because they were victims

of misplaced moral principle, having been killed (or nearly so) by a misguided husband to prevent his wife's capture by the enemy or by a father to preserve his daughter's virginity.

Another of the artist's themes focuses on women, usually Venus or nymphs, who are the object of the male gaze. Satyrs are often included in these works as focalizers and surrogates for the male viewer. For the modern spectator, the prurient aspects of this theme are plain enough, and it seems that the observing satyrs present in such scenes were intended to give Poussin's contemporary male audience license to look.

In a number of pictures from the Bible or Greek and Roman history (*Judgment of Solomon*—Fig. 6.8, *Massacre of the Innocents*—Fig. 5.7, *Death of Sapphira*—Fig. 4.10, *Testament of Eudamidas*—Fig. 6.4, *Coriolanus*—Fig. 7.2), Poussin shows women under duress. They function as victims or transgressors, as helpless or pleading. In all these works, the women exhibit the greatest possible emotional stress. By contrast, the men in these paintings assert authority—they judge, kill, control, or show mercy. The men are active agents and the women are passive objects of exchange (*Eudamidas*), judged (*Judgment of Solomon*, *Death of Sapphira*), overpowered by masculine force (*Massacre of the Innocents*), or threatened and then appeased, but barely so (*Coriolanus*). The women are subject to male oversight and discipline.

A striking fact about his mythological paintings, the great majority of which were made in the eleven-year span between 1624 and 1635, is that they often represent females as aggressive or assertive and males as passive in love. In his works based upon the protagonists in the classical myths as described by Ovid, Hesiod, Lucretius, and others, or upon Tasso's modern mythical characters in his epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), Poussin depicts his women, whether goddesses, princesses, or sorceresses, as amatory instigators (Venus, Erminia), aggressors (Armida), or predators (Aurora, Diana). Conversely, the artist shows the men in his paintings (in the role of hero, hunter, shepherd, or god) as passive (Tancred), impotent (Mars), resistant (Cephalus), agitated (Endymion), or asleep (Rinaldo). The powerlessness of his male protagonists in the face of female provocation is striking. A particularly conspicuous example of this tendency is the artist's London *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 1.2). Here, the licentious goddess of dawn seductively restrains the hunter, who rejects her advances by trying to escape from her embrace while turning to look at a portrait of his beloved wife, Procris, held by an *amorino*. By depicting Aurora as driven by a lustful hypersexuality, Poussin correctly reflects the ancient myth that Venus punished her by instilling in her an unquenchable sexual desire for young men. At the same time, perhaps unwittingly, the artist epitomizes through this painting the view common in his time that women in general had an insatiable appetite for carnal pleasure. In his *Mars and Venus* in Boston (Fig. 3.13), Poussin represents female passion moderately, because of the allegorical significance of

the work, emphasizing love conquering war. Venus leans endearingly toward her lover, looking with sincere affection into his eyes and placing her hand on his, while he is marked with a deeply troubled facial expression. Devoid of passion and desexed through an absent (hidden and invisible) penis, Mars points to his shield and helmet held by *amorini*, apparently explaining to her his unhappiness with the strong influence she has exerted over him to abandon his bellicose ways. Poussin represents Mars and Venus in a traditional allegorical theme of love and war from the humanist tradition going back to the fifteenth century, but, unlike previous painters, he emphasizes the dominating authority of Venus and the pain of the subdued and impotent warrior god. Indeed, Poussin was alone in his generation in representing aggressively powerful women and anxiously passive men within the theme of love—one looks in vain for similar examples in the pictures of Domenichino, Pietro da Cortona, Lanfranco, Guercino, Albani, Reni, or Vouet. (Although Annibale Carracci includes some passive males in his Farnese Gallery ceiling, they are not wrought with anxiety, but smile agreeably, even if asleep, like Endymion. Likewise, Carracci's females are not presented as aggressive or destructive, but, like Diana, exhibit a pleasant affability, in keeping with the ceiling's amiable theme of love.)

The predatory women and passive, resistant, or agitated men as found in several of Poussin's important mythological paintings have failed to elicit the attention of previous investigators. Scholars have left unexplained the pattern of female predation and male aloofness or resistance observable in key mythological works. Another striking fact about his works is that, with exceptions such as his *Tancred and Erminia* in Birmingham (Fig. 3.15), where the Princess of Antioch cuts off her hair with forceful emotion to staunch the wounds of the Christian knight with whom she has illicitly fallen in love, Poussin plays out the impassioned relationships of the sexes more often through the expressiveness of men's faces than women's. Even though he is entirely passive, in fact asleep, in Poussin's Dulwich version of *Rinaldo and Armida* (Fig. 2.19), the hero has a face that is flushed, sensuous, and even pretty, with slightly parted ruby lips, pink cheeks, cute curls, and alluring (even while closed) eyes. In this way, through an attractiveness that seems in part feminized, Rinaldo projects a sensuous appeal that fires the passion of Armida. Her face, by contrast, is harder to read because she is more abstracted stylistically and seen in pure classical profile. Nevertheless, with the help of Tasso's story, the viewer can detect in her facial expression and bodily pose a transition between her first impulse of murderous aggression (signified by the stiletto in her right hand), and her dawning awareness that she is in fact in love with her enemy, the Christian knight (denoted by her left hand, placed gently on Rinaldo's hand that rests on his head). Even more revealing of Poussin's expressive male faces and impassive female ones is his *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4). Here, as the shepherd kneels before the goddess, the complex emotions inscribed in his face and gestures show equal shares

of love, awe, and pain as he contemplates the beauty of the deity standing over him at the same time that he exhibits anxiety about his impending fate, imposed by Diana herself, of sleeping forever. The intense passion that Diana feels for Endymion, repeatedly mentioned by the ancient literary sources, is, by contrast, completely absent from the painting. Even more than the sorceress in his *Rinaldo and Armida* (Fig. 2.19), Diana’s emotion is lost in the pure line of a classically idealized profile. She is imperious and slightly condescending as she places a consoling hand on the shepherd’s shoulder, but her face reveals nothing of the deep sexual craving that she feels for him. In this case, Poussin’s Diana fails to demonstrate unrestrained female passion; instead she represents, in her pure womanly power, the omnipotence of a goddess who dominates Endymion completely. She represents both the way that ideal womanhood (in this case in the form of a goddess of classical beauty) can awaken in man the indescribable longing of love and simultaneously and corrosively suggest that she is responsible for his destruction through a dominating power that in effect charges her with blame for the love she has provoked. The tragedy of the scene is that Poussin creates an image censuring the woman for her sexual power over the man (an idea common in his time) but simultaneously rebuking the man for reaching for a love beyond his understanding.

Through the rarified domains of myth and epic, therefore, Poussin’s works often address issues of women’s and men’s identities through expressions of female power and male passivity. In creating such images, the painter took inspiration from ancient Greek and Roman literary sources such as Ovid, and modern ones like Tasso. More than representing the ancient myths in a timeless and idealized manner, his paintings reflect his historically determined social situation as he consciously or unconsciously articulated its conflicts and assumptions. The females in his paintings can be read on one level as goddesses depicted in the seemingly universal and rarified atmosphere of classical myth, but on another level they reflect and reveal attitudes about women common to Poussin’s seventeenth-century European culture. Poussin’s goddesses, in their pursuit of mortal men, reveal traits characteristic of mortal women as these traits (or biases) were understood within the context his time.

Significant also are the stories of females that Poussin never painted and that were popular subjects for other artists of his time, including Judith Killing Holofernes, the Death of Lucretia, Susanna Spied Upon by the Elders, Delilah Cutting the Hair of Sampson, the Judgment of Paris, and the Death of Cleopatra. The first three of these subjects represent virtuous and the last three compromised females. That Poussin failed to depict these stories may be due to the vagaries of his commissions, but it also may be that he was not as drawn to these topics as he was to others. He may have been disinclined to paint these subjects because they were well-worn motifs treated many times by other artists and, with one exception, they did not derive from the realm of classical myth that he favored.

## Poussin's approaches to his female protagonists

The values inherent in Poussin's antique and biblical pictures bear reexamination in light of this historical framing of views about women. The artist lived at a time when women were beginning to assert their sexual equality and to enter professions previously closed to females, but also when entrenched male views continued to prevail. In light of the contrary signs of enlarged social roles for women accompanied simultaneously by an abiding conservatism oriented toward male control, one notices that Poussin's art is mixed. His historical and biblical canvases featuring 'heroic' females establish a positive view of women. They stand in harmony with the new, more egalitarian view of women in their struggle for sexual equality. The heroines in Poussin's pictures—Phocion's widow, Coriolanus's mother, Queen Zenobia, Esther, Rebecca, the Virgin Mary—lived in historical times, subject to patriarchal rules and restrictions; nevertheless, their positive portrayal in his works as models of female virtue was in line with the aspirations of contemporary women who asserted their sex's empowerment. Many of his mythological works, on the other hand, reinforced traditional masculine views, as when his assertive women control men or when he represents women abused by male aggression. His females' sexual assertiveness is attributable to their unsavory roles as witches (Armida) or greedy goddesses (Diana, Aurora) who take advantage of innocent male mortals (Rinaldo, Endymion, Cephalus). They mirrored the prevailing attitude that women illegitimately appropriate rights and privileges not belonging to them when they become domineering. Traditionally, men had entitlement and power to control women, and not the reverse. A woman assuming the prerogatives of sexual superiority violated men's sense of their rightful dominance and of their duty, they believed, to control women and their presumed natural tendency to hypersexuality. Women who predominated in love upset the natural order of male superiority.

Through his pictures of troubled love, Poussin presented to the beholder images that raised the issue of women's amorous rule at a time when early calls for female empowerment were being voiced and when centuries of tradition regarding expected womanly behavior were openly challenged. When he represented inappropriately domineering women who dared to overwhelm their men in the matter of love, Poussin registered a nearly universal male point of view in showing the debilitating effects of their actions on men. Below the surface of paintings that purported to stand as timeless and learned allegories by showing the noble actions of the gods in the myths of the great classical tradition, the observer of his pictures noticed the negative effects on men of women's sexual aggression. In the case of Poussin's *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4), Diana caused unnecessary mental conflict, not just for Endymion, who was forced to confront eternity in an unconscious state, but for male beholders of his picture as well, since the painting expressed the anxiety

that men felt in the wider culture over the expanding activities of women and the emergence of early feminism.

Poussin most likely was drawn to the stories of ancient goddesses both because of their potential for showing dramatic conflict in his paintings but also because such subjects addressed the issue of relations between the sexes. He often had considerable leeway in choosing his subjects and deciding in what manner to paint them, in spite of the requirements set by patrons. This was because he painted mainly for middle class men who generally placed fewer restrictions on the artist than the royal patrons he went out of his way to avoid. His small studio was indicative of his preference to work for private patrons rather than on the large decorative projects often pursued by other artists. He worked independently of the courts (except for his stay in Paris of 1640-1642, enforced by royal request) and, although most of his works were made on commission, he was able to reflect in them his own taste and interests more than most artists.<sup>29</sup> In addition to being guided by his literary sources and his notions of antiquity and myth, his works were colored, perhaps unconsciously, by the debates about women in his time. He must have appreciated the dichotomy of the goddesses’ mutual beauty and destructiveness, for he represented both qualities in them. Diana and Aurora are alluring women in his conception, but their corrosive natures are revealed in the reactions they elicit from Endymion and Cephalus. Endymion is shown as awestruck by love but also as anxious before Diana, while Cephalus tries desperately to disentangle himself from Aurora’s sexual advances. Men of Poussin’s time would have understood that the hostile sexuality that Diana and Aurora directed toward men was an inherent female trait, one that the artist apparently thought merited further exploration in paint through myth. In explicating their behavior through his chosen medium, would Poussin, one wonders, have been able to imagine that it is in fact the masculine point of view that demeans women as sexual aggressors, or to perceive the idea that women’s destructive nature is projected upon them by men, or to think that it is indeed the male imagination that casts them as hypersexualized and caustic creatures? It is unlikely that he would have thought so, for he lived in a time when patriarchal thinking was just beginning to be subjected to an early type of critique by feminists who did not as yet think this way.

Poussin focused much attention on his characters, often developing them from literary accounts by ancient authors such as Ovid, Livy, and Plutarch, and presenting them in paintings highlighting moments of dramatic climax or crisis. In the process of bringing his works to realization he aimed not only at a novel approach to his story but also applied to visual form the Greek rhetorical idea of *ethopoeia*, where emphasis would be placed on capturing a dramatic image suited to the person

29 Hibbard, *Poussin: The Holy Family on the Steps*, p. 21.

represented, under particular narrative conditions. He focused his attention on the dramatic and emotional conflicts of his protagonists, sometimes choosing to depict transgressive heroines subject to emotional and psychological excesses, pairing them with anguished and oppressed males. Or he represented female victims, usually preyed upon by male aggressors.

Also to be considered is the way Poussin responds through his paintings to texts such as Tasso's or ancient accounts of the myths, the picture-text relationship, and the painter's fidelity to the larger intent of the text. In spite of his insistence on originality in creating pictorial narratives, Poussin was usually faithful to the story lines of his sources. In his St. Petersburg *Tancred and Erminia* (Fig. 3.14) based on *Gerusalemme liberata*, Poussin expresses the pain caused by the debilitating sexual restraint found in the noble conventions of courtly romance as described by Tasso and reflected in the tradition of dignified aristocratic love as recounted by Castiglione in his *Il Cortegiano*. Castiglione had endorsed loving a woman only from afar, without sexual intercourse, and in his love episode of Tancred and Erminia, Tasso did the same, by never following the story to its conclusion, but dropping it from *Gerusalemme liberata* at the point where Erminia has bound Tancred's wounds with her hair. The poet never tells us what, if anything, happened later with respect to her hidden love for the Christian warrior.

Of special relevance to Poussin's ideal art is the appearance of nude or nearly nude beautiful females in his paintings and their relationship to the neoplatonic concept that women's perfection leads men to contemplate the higher things of the divine realm. Female beauty was interpreted as a reflection of an ideal, heavenly zone of perfection that men's souls yearned for and vaguely aspired to rejoin. Women were seen as the intermediaries between the physical world and this divine realm of ideas.<sup>30</sup> I am convinced that Poussin emphasized above all the drama of his stories and not neoplatonic allegory in his narratives. It is just possible that his visually stunning representations of women may have suggested to some the idea, common in his time, that they can lead the souls of men to the contemplation of heavenly perfection. Paolo Berdini reminds us that the neoplatonist Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1543), as well as Marsilio Ficino and many others, maintained that women's beauty does so.<sup>31</sup> Feminists have objected that the woman cannot rise to higher contemplation through observation of female beauty, since she is always the object of the male gaze; women viewers of Poussin's paintings would of course be subject to this caveat. No comparable tradition existed where women could rise to the contemplation of the divine through the observation of male beauty.

30 Dulong, 'From Conversation to Creation', p. 398.

31 Berdini, 'Women under the Gaze', pp. 565-590; Murray, 'Agnolo Firenzuola on Female Sexuality and Women's Equality', pp. 199-213.

In defending the superiority of women, the early feminist Lucrezia Marinella maintained that ‘women are more beautiful than men . . . who can deny they are more remarkable? . . . women are not obliged to love them back, except merely from courtesy’.<sup>32</sup> But above all, the beautiful women in Poussin’s paintings are dangerous: Diana or Aurora have the power to overwhelm men sexually or even bring about their destruction. The paradoxical discrepancy between the idealized body and the dangers it conceals casts doubt that Poussin’s pictures express the neoplatonic conception of the beautiful as a means of access to divinity and instead betoken a tragic view of existence.<sup>33</sup>

In creating paintings based on mythological subjects, Poussin was able to transgress with respect to love his culture’s contemporary social norms, which increasingly emphasized through public officials the legitimacy of the sexual act only within marriage. This restrictive attitude became progressively widespread partly in reaction to Europe’s then current subjection to the ravages of syphilis. The artist himself succumbed to this malady in 1629 at the time that he was painting his early mythologies (his early biographer Giambattista Passeri identified his ailment as the *male di Francia*).<sup>34</sup> Poussin seems to have conformed to the established pattern in his time where marriage was viewed as a social convenience: after his treatment for syphilis, he married in 1630 at least in part to avoid continued contact with prostitutes and further exposure to this debilitating disease. Further, before his nuptials he had taken advantage of the sexual double standard: unlike decent women, men in his time had no need to conform to the requirement of virginity before marriage.

In his mythological paintings, such as his first version of *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 1.1), where the predatory goddess lies on top of her victim’s body, and in his paintings based on Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, such as the earlier of his two renditions of *Rinaldo and Armida* (Fig. 2.18), where the witch touches the Christian warrior’s breast and looks at it with lustful regard, Poussin depicts sexuality outside of marriage. By contrast, in the artist’s own culture, it was considered bad taste even for a husband and wife to display mutual affection in public.<sup>35</sup> His two versions of *Tancred and Erminia* (Figs. 3.14, 3.15) show the Saracen princess as a ‘good’ woman, sacrificing her hair to bind the wounds of the noble Christian warrior for whom she harbors a secret love. In staunching his wounds she fulfills the role of a proper woman from Poussin’s own culture, who lives to serve her beloved. The witch in his two versions of *Rinaldo and Armida* (Figs. 2.18, 2.19) wanted to kill the hero

32 Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, p. 62.

33 Here I adapt to Poussin’s works an idea borrowed from Borin, ‘Judging by Images’, p. 195.

34 Wilberding, ‘Poussin’s Illness in 1629’, p. 561.

35 Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, pp. 66-67.



before she fell in love with him. At the end she is denied her love of the knight when his two companions, Carlo and Ubaldo, achieve his timely rescue from her enchanted island. She reinforces the gender values in Poussin's culture through exhibiting what were thought to be typical female traits, changeableness in love and unrestrained passion.

### **Poussin, stoicism, and his representation of women**

Anthony Blunt imagined Poussin as a stoic and religious skeptic who was close to the *libertines*, rational humanists 'who saw in the teaching of ancient philosophy a moral code on which to base their lives'.<sup>36</sup> Many of Poussin's friends in Rome, like Abbé Bourdelot and Gabriel Naudé, and new ones he met in Paris, like Guy Patin, Pierre Richer, and Pierre Gassendi, were identified as *libertines*, free thinkers who chose to exercise their own critical judgment and remain largely independent of Church and State. These men rejected dogma and the principle of absolute authority. They were conventionally Christian, but hardly devout. Instead of appealing to Christian authority, they propounded what might be called a 'natural' philosophy based on the values of stoicism.<sup>37</sup>

Evaluating the way that he chose to live his life, Claire Pace continues to support the view that Poussin embraced stoical values. She has described how he was governed by independence and a desire to distance himself from the world. Poussin's letters 'convey a sense of detachment and withdrawal'<sup>38</sup> as exemplified in his successful, if furtive, attempt to disengage himself from Louis XIII's court in 1642. His return to Rome was marked by the more tranquil existence that he desired; after this point he hardly any longer painted for princes, nobles, or ministers, but mainly for bourgeois patrons in France.

Even so, he was still afflicted with anxiety: he closely followed and commented upon political events such as the Fronde in Paris, even if from a safe distance in Rome. He witnessed from afar the mounting opposition to Mazarin and the ensuing civil war. He wrote to Chantelou about his sadness that France was governed poorly, that only self-interest reigned, and he expressed his hope that the disorder might bring some good reform.<sup>39</sup> In the fall of 1649, in the calm that marked the end of the first Fronde, when the court and Mazarin returned to Paris, Poussin vented his frustration. 'His joy was . . . undercut by a profound pessimism'.<sup>40</sup> He spoke of

36 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 211.

37 Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 128-129.

38 Pace, 'Peace and Tranquillity of Mind', pp. 74-76.

39 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 386.

40 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 77.

the stupidity and inconstancy of the people, not because he objected to popular violence, but because he was frustrated by the people’s passive acquiescence to Mazarin despite the attempts to reform the regency. Later, in 1651, when Mazarin suffered setbacks and was banished from Paris, Poussin and his French clientele, including Sublet and his circle, celebrated the moment. Eventually, in October 1652, the victorious king and Mazarin returned triumphantly to Paris, as the period of the Fronde began to come to its close. In the wake of the war, Poussin expressed his belief that culture itself had come to a standstill.<sup>41</sup> This was not exactly true: during the late 1640s and early 1650s, Poussin was more productive than ever before, constantly busy with orders for paintings from his French clients.

In continuing her account of Poussin’s stoicism, Pace points to Poussin’s sketching on solitary walks around Rome and the nearby countryside, and living in a modest house without servants. He preferred to stay out of public life and cultivated a life of contemplation, like the neo-stoic writer Michel de Montaigne, one of the few writers ever mentioned in his letters. Pace also affirms Blunt’s view of Poussin’s stoic skepticism: ‘Certain of the artist’s views are in tune, also, with those of the *libertins*—the group of skeptical writers and thinkers who challenged conventional religious beliefs.’<sup>42</sup> In contrast, David Carrier makes the claim that ‘There is nothing in Poussin’s published letters nor in the various nearly firsthand documentations of his life to suggest that he held these ideas,’<sup>43</sup> that is, the notion that he based his life on an ancient philosophical moral code. We can account for these differing views by noting that Pace is speaking of stoicism as a set of general, supplemental ideas that do not supplant Christianity in Poussin’s mind, whereas Carrier assumes that they do. Poussin expressed in his letters an attitude compatible with neo-stoicism, particularly the idea that one should resign oneself to fate’s inevitability. Along these lines, he wrote to Chantelou that one must attain true ‘virtue and wisdom in order to stand firm and remain unmoved before the assaults of mad, blind fortune.’<sup>44</sup> But he combined stoic ideas like these with a Christian point of view when he wrote, ‘one must accept the will of God, who orders things thus, and fate wills that they should happen in this way.’<sup>45</sup> Poussin’s usual avoidance of representing the popular Catholic devotional imagery of his time such as visions and miracles may reflect his interest in the Counter-Reformatory ideal, particularly evident in Jansenism, of recovering the values and practices of the early Church, as seen in

41 Ibid., pp. 79–80.

42 Pace, ‘Peace and Tranquillity of Mind’, p. 75.

43 Carrier, ‘A Very Short History of Poussin Interpretation’, p. 72.

44 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 384: ‘la vertu et de la sagesse qui faut acquérir pour demeurer ferme et immobile aux efforts de cette folle aueugle’.

45 Ibid., p. 278: ‘se faut conformer à la volonté de dieu qui ordonne ainsi les choses, et la nécessité veut quelle se passent ainsi’.

his two Sacraments series. He was not a painter beholden to the papal court and was no friend of Pope Urban VIII, whose long reign lasted until the artist was 50. In spite of the indirect evidence of his paintings, one cannot be sure of his thoughts on religion, since he rarely quoted the Bible in his letters and never discussed his personal religious beliefs.<sup>46</sup>

An important point of inquiry is how Poussin's presumed attachment to the neo-stoicism of his time might have intersected with his pictures featuring female victims. If, as claimed by Blunt and others,<sup>47</sup> the interpretation of Poussin's works hinges on the artist's stoical approach, that would also apply to his canvases displaying female victims. In such cases, we would find in the paintings an accommodation of and resignation to violence upon women, including the rapes of figures like Daphne, Semele, and Syrinx, the deliberate murder of Virginia, and the unsuccessful attempt to slay Queen Zenobia. In these last two cases, women suffered in the service of supposedly noble causes imagined by men. The male bias inherent in such an accommodation of violence to women and its acceptance through detached resignation throws the entire supposed stoic approach in Poussin's art in a wholly new (and negative) light. One imagines instead, judging by his female protagonists' expressions of grief, that the artist in fact felt sympathy for them.

Poussin's alleged stoic approach in his paintings and personal life has been explored by a number of other art historians, including Elizabeth Cropper, Charles Dempsey, and Richard Verdi.<sup>48</sup> It has often been stated that in his later works, after his return to Rome from Paris in 1642, Poussin became more focused on representing the noble and stoic deeds of great men of virtue as found in the moralizing stories of ancient Roman writers such as Livy, Plutarch, Valerius Maximus, and others. Among these heroes was Scipio, who 'magnanimously' renounced his right to enslave and rape a Numidian princess and instead returned her to her betrothed.<sup>49</sup> Poussin's handling of this theme in his *Continence of Scipio* (Fig. 6.3) confirms that he himself held Scipio in high esteem for his honorable restraint in conquering his own passions and thought of him as one of the great examples of mercy in classical times. What is missing in Poussin's conception of the subject is an opportunity for the princess to articulate her own feelings; her point of view remains unexpressed. Her fate is determined by the men in the picture, her father (to whom she is still subject in his role as *paterfamilias*), her betrothed, and Scipio. In the case of his drawing of the *Death of Virginia* (Fig. 5.1), a similar approach pertains, because Poussin has neglected to highlight the stoic heroism of the girl herself, since he

46 Hibbard, *Poussin: The Holy Family on the Steps*, pp. 45, 47; Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 177ff.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 157-176.

48 Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting*, pp. 88, 91, 182f., 194, 254; Verdi, 'Poussin and the "Tricks of Fortune"', pp. 681-685.

49 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, pp. 232-233.

has chosen to depict her already dead, killed by her father to prevent her rape by the evil ruler Appius Claudius. Poussin was surely aware of the moral ambiguity inherent in such a subject; indeed, he chose to illustrate this scene precisely because of its unsatisfactory outcome and the difficulty it presents in resolving its implicit ethical discord.

### **Contrasts between Poussin’s religious and historical/mythological canvases**

In contrast to the destructive females found in some of his mythological works, in his religious paintings Poussin almost exclusively shows women in a positive light (a rare exception is his *Death of Sapphira*—Fig. 4.10). His affirmative approach applies particularly to the Virgin Mary, who appears in over thirty of his canvases, making her by far the most represented female in his oeuvre. Her frequent depiction may be accounted for by her popularity among the artist’s patrons who commissioned religious works. Poussin almost always emphasizes the purity and spirituality of the Virgin; these qualities are especially visible in his paintings that focus on her almost exclusively, such as his London *Annunciation* (Fig. 7.12), and in works that specifically symbolize her immaculacy, such as the Cleveland *Virgin on the Steps* (Fig. 7.14). Poussin also chose to highlight her glory, in two canvases representing her assumption in Washington (Fig. 7.15) and the Louvre (Fig. 7.16). It would be too speculative to surmise, on the basis of his sacred imagery, that Poussin himself was deeply devout, although it is probably safe to assume that he thought of himself as a religious man.

In further pursuing the issue of how the artist’s personal beliefs may have influenced his art, if we turn to Poussin’s pictures of the classical myths and Roman history, we find little to suggest that these subjects convey the idea of ancient moral virtue. Even if Poussin’s personal sense of morality may have been influenced by ancient writers or the revival of stoicism in his own time, his paintings rarely exhibit antique Roman goodness, but instead mainly focus on conflict. Some of his most striking paintings based on mythological and epic sources depict deception and unchecked sensuality in love, while his canvases and drawings based on Roman history and the Bible are filled with subjects emphasizing human conflict, frailty, and unattractive states of mind, including stubbornness (*Coriolanus*—Fig. 7.2), misogyny (*Death of Virginia*—Fig. 5.1, *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax*—Fig. 5.11), unrestrained jealousy (*Medea Killing her Children*—Fig. 4.2), deceit (*Death of Sapphira*—Fig. 4.10), and violent physical abduction (*Rape of the Sabine Women*—Fig. 5.15). The classical beauty of Aurora, Diana, or Armida doesn’t encourage the viewer to dwell on their ideal loveliness ‘raised above all that is local

and accidental';<sup>50</sup> rather, such beauty is dangerous, concealing female emotions portending male destruction. Beauty and predatory sexual behavior are intertwined. Many of his works with ancient subjects feature conflict, whether in love or war. Poussin's paintings occasionally demonstrate stoic virtue, such as his *Continence of Scipio* (Fig. 6.3), but many others highlight dramatic conflict and the human passions, sometimes close to the point of excess and only restrained by the imposed discipline of his classical style. He was clearly interested in representing scenes centering on dramatic strife, particularly episodes where such conflict was tragic and unresolvable. Poussin's own ideas on painting, and those put forward in his name by Félibien, in his *Life of Poussin*, suggest that the artist wanted to present in his paintings an ideal of nobility, but this theory as presented in the master's letters and by his biographer is inadequate to explain the conflict and destructive behavior we see in many of his paintings.

The point of view that classical restraint characterizes Poussin's art has been put forward by writers both historical and current. While there is much in his art to recommend this view, it undervalues his paintings' expressive power and drama. One of the ways that Poussin is said to suppress conflict and unrestrained passion in his works is through his reliance on 'a code of gestures formulated by both classical and later orators'.<sup>51</sup> Both Quintilian in antiquity and Poussin's contemporary Agostino Mascardi stressed the use of bodily gestures, or action, in oratory, as a compliment to diction. Poussin himself emphasized the importance of body language in one of his 'observations on painting' collected by Bellori:

There are two instruments by which the minds of listeners may be mastered: action and diction. The first is itself so valuable and efficacious that Demosthenes accorded it priority over rhetorical devices and Cicero called it the language of the body. Quintilian attributes such importance and vigor to it that he considers concepts, trials, and affections pointless without it, just as lines and color are pointless without it.<sup>52</sup>

The protagonists in Poussin's paintings are, in consequence of his adherence to the importance of gesture, seen as 'measured [...] noble and commanding [...] We are presented with straight backs, harmonious poses, fingers firmly pointing [...]

50 Lee, *Ut pictura poesis, The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, pp. 7, 9.

51 Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 201.

52 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 494: 'Il y a deux instruments qui maîtrisent les âmes des auditeurs: l'action et la diction. La première, en elle-même, est si entraînant et si efficace que Démosthène lui donnait la primauté sur les artifices de la rhétorique, Marcus Tullius l'appelle le langage du corps, et Quintilien lui attribue tant de vigueur et de force que sans elle, il tient pour inutiles les pensées, les preuves, les expressions; et sans elle, les lignes et la couleur sont inutiles'.

the hero of Poussin becomes] the interpreter of the Word'.<sup>53</sup> This focus on gesture as the formal, restrained, and orderly means of conveying meaning in Poussin's paintings deflects us from perceiving the power and destructiveness of the emotions and actions actually at stake in these works, actions often either directed against women or carried out by lustful, selfish, or hurtful females.

### **Poussin's art and today's audience**

In recent decades, the notion that the values presented in the great literary works of Antique European culture are timeless and enduring has been questioned by scholars dedicated to feminism, cultural studies, poststructuralism, and other contemporary academic perspectives. Scores of books have been written since the 1970s that bring new critical outlooks to bear upon the classic texts of ancient civilization. Such studies have questioned the cultural assumptions and points of view of authors such as Ovid and Livy, who, among other sins, have been found guilty of sexism and racial bias. The aim of recent scholarship has not been uniformly to reject the canonical works of classical antiquity, or even necessarily to diminish their inclusion in college humanities courses in favor of a broader, world cultural perspective. Instead of rejection, in many cases scholars have re-evaluated ancient literary texts from current critical viewpoints and have subjected such works to types of analysis that increase their relevance to contemporary readers. In the process of this ongoing re-evaluation, the shortcomings from today's perspective of ancient and early modern 'masterpieces' are sometimes exposed. The foundational impetus of much recent criticism has been to come to a renewed understanding of classic works like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, to critically assess the perceived weaknesses of such works from a penetrating present-day outlook, to clarify the differences between ancient and modern points of view, but also to encourage the continued reading of such works by contemporary audiences, within a framework of thoughtful re-evaluation.

From today's viewpoint, sexism is apparent in seventeenth-century works of art that depict females who are a threat to men, like Diana; gender bias is also present in paintings showing females who are sexualized, even when their stories don't warrant that. Sexism is likewise found in pictures where a power struggle ends with the victory of 'the weaker sex', as with the mother of Coriolanus, in canvases revealing women with power as sexual manipulators, like Aurora, and in works that turn female victims into the henchmen of men, like Virginia. Thus it is fitting that a feminist investigation of seventeenth-century painting highlight unexpected

53 Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 201.

insights into how women can be seen and understood and promote understanding of the varied relations between the sexes (rather than simple awareness of a given or standard theme or subject). Feminism can investigate the relation of women to social power, consider the mistake of explaining female subjects in art simply as stories of victims or of women's wickedness, and explore more deeply an upside-down world in which women get the upper hand. Feminist inquiry can uncover how paintings of women in fact represent stories about the power relations of men and women and discover how pictures of women can open up traditional clichés, categories, and themes. Feminism can acknowledge cultural power, historical persistence, and the possibility of questioning these, show how thematics (such as women as predators, killers, controlling lovers, victims, heroines, etc.) can become a theoretical frame, reveal how men must destroy what seduces them, and expose how the female killed is turned into the killer.<sup>54</sup> Feminist perspectives like these, advocated by the feminist art historian and theorist Mieke Bal, implicitly allow, following poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida, that today's investigators necessarily draw upon their cultural biases and assumptions when they examine works of art, even when those works are historically situated. Bal and her colleague Norman Bryson are skeptical that art historians can reconstruct the 'original' intentions of an artist and the ways in which works of art were interpreted by their earliest audiences, because of the complicating semiotic factors of intertextuality, polysemy, and the location of meaning. Historical narratives are inflected by subjective discourse, both by the original artists who interpreted and altered meanings as they borrowed subjects and motifs from previous art and literary sources and by past and contemporary viewers and historians, who likewise bring their personal and scholarly experiences to bear upon the interpretive act and the search for meaning. Thus, the framing of a work of art in its original historical context(s) is problematic because investigators bring to the pictures they analyze their own legacies of discursive precedents and readings that entail the inevitable mixture of these signs with those perceived in the work.<sup>55</sup> And when historians have had the most success in ruthlessly dedicating themselves to recovering the 'period eye' in interpreting works from the past, they don't always consider the limitations of such an enterprise. A case in point is Elizabeth Cropper's essay discussing Poussin's *Rebecca at the Well*.<sup>56</sup> Jean Pointel commissioned a work from Poussin in 1648 (without specifying the subject), asking that the artist create a painting displaying different kinds of female beauty. Poussin's response was to make the *Rebecca* painting (Fig. 7.8). In her analysis of this work, Cropper draws on Agnolo

54 Bal, 'Women as the Topic', in *Women Who Ruled*, pp. 65-75.

55 Bal and Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', pp. 206-207.

56 Cropper, 'On Beautiful Women', pp. 377-380.

Firenzuola's *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* of 1542, a work that itself recalls the earlier Petrarchan ideal of female beauty. She also discusses relevant passages from André Félibien's *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellens peintres anciens et modernes* (published 1666), which points to the just proportions of each body of the women in Poussin's painting, and to the different airs of their heads. Cropper further describes how Poussin intended to mirror in the various women in the painting the styles of three artists he admired, Raphael, Reni, and Rubens. Cropper's attempt to situate Poussin's *Rebecca* in the actual seventeenth-century moment of its creation is bold and imaginative. She has been praised for the detailed use in her essay of literary sources and conventions of the era to analyze the issue of female beauty in art. She likewise has been admired for her success in recovering the 'period eye'. Even though she was successful in connecting certain conceptions of female beauty as found in literary and visual sources of the period to Poussin's *Rebecca* canvas, she rather narrowly focused on the relationship of source and picture without investigating the underlying patriarchal assumptions that served as the basis of describing and categorizing female beauty. Nor did she utilize a feminist approach to investigate the specific text/picture relationship; instead she assumed that this relationship was self-evident and needed no deeper critical examination. What is needed is space for today's theoretical approaches to function, if the historian's analysis is to hold critical value and to speak to a contemporary audience. It was the men of the period who framed the issue of female beauty, who reduced women to the status of beautiful objects, and who put forward the idea of the 'natural, universal language of painting' and the 'perfect illusion of natural beauty'.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps the best strategy in analyzing the issue of gender in Poussin's paintings is to aim for historicizing richness and appropriateness in analysis, but to be aware that both seventeenth-century feminism and the gender theory of today are useful too in examining his works, and that framing them from our current perspectives is inevitable, not necessarily to be avoided, and essential in keeping the critical enterprise alive.

These points hold true for analyzing works by Poussin that go beyond the theme of female beauty, for example, in confronting the subject of women as killers. One must attend to why they kill. Bellori condemned Medea, represented in two drawings by Poussin, as 'the demented wife' (*'l'insana moglie'*),<sup>58</sup> but feminists have justified Medea's killing of her children as revenge on her unfaithful husband and her survival and remarriage to Aegeus of Athens as an example of her strength. Medea's world was ruled by men who granted themselves the privilege of replacing a wife with another favorite, as Jason, Medea's husband, did when

57 Barzman, 'Gender, Religious Representation and Cultural Production in Early Modern Italy', p. 217.

58 Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni*, p. 449.



he fell in love with Glauce. In such a world Medea not only survived but thrived (for a time) after she rid herself of a faithless husband, a rare case of a female prevailing in a man's world. Further, in her speech to the women of Corinth, where she recounts the ways in which wives are forced into subservience by their husbands, she expresses a profoundly feminist point of view. When Poussin draws her eyes as bullseyes, large and round with dots in the center to represent her irises, he shows her intensity, her rage at Jason, and her determination to kill her children as revenge against him. Her eyes could be interpreted as expressing her feminine strength, more so than her 'demented' status, as Bellori would have it. It is important that the emotional power and the conflicts within Poussin's mythological paintings still be felt by contemporary audiences, within a critical frame that allows their narratives to be sensed and absorbed in ways that speak to today's viewers, even if these modes of perception sometimes differ from the ways his works were received in the seventeenth century. Only by renewing the critical reception of his works through interpretations that directly address contemporary points of view can his works continue to speak to us. The great art historical analyses of Poussin from the 1930s-60s by authorities such as Walter Friedlaender and Anthony Blunt, as ground-breaking and important as they were in their time, are in many respects frankly outmoded today. These scholars and their predecessors never questioned the patriarchal assumptions of Ovid, Livy, Tasso, or of Poussin's other literary sources, nor of the artist's canvases themselves when they deprecate women. Bellori had emphasized Poussin's expression of moral ideas in painting,<sup>59</sup> ideas sometimes demeaning of women. Félibien stressed the nobility of Poussin's 'congenial and agreeable' works,<sup>60</sup> in spite of their recurrent tragic representation of women's suffering or demonization. In the eighteenth century, Mariette wrote of Poussin's evocative landscapes that recreate the enchanted valleys of ancient Greece,<sup>61</sup> despite his work's often troubled scenes. In his more recent interpretation, Blunt highlighted Poussin's deep learning, his allegorical representation of the cycles of nature, and his expression of an undisturbed detachment through stoicism, an approach that often accommodated women's subjection. Even more recently, Louis Marin maintained that Poussin's works are enigmatic and indeterminate, where no universal or generally agreed upon meaning can be discovered.<sup>62</sup> Such a conclusion reflects our contemporary preference for openness, ambiguity, and inclusiveness over closure, privilege, and clarity.

59 Ibid., p. 447.

60 Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies*, pp. 155, 158.

61 Mariette, *Description sommaire des desseins des grands maîtres*, p. 115.

62 Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, pp. 15-94.

While the task of re-interpreting the artistic legacy of Poussin has been going on for some time, such critical evaluation of his art, his literary sources, and his cultural frame by recent scholarship has often failed to keep pace with developments in contemporary cultural theory. The purpose of the present study is both to underline the enduring cultural importance of Poussin’s works and to foreground understandings of them that respond to the perceptions of a contemporary audience. Such an approach can recast, transform, or reject previous interpretations, and invest his works with new understandings pertinent to our time. In a process of discovery, simultaneously this new approach helps us by contrast to perceive more deeply and critically the artist’s own points of view and those of his contemporaries, at the same time that we can uncover both his and their unexamined assumptions in light of the gender issues and biases of his time.

I should say a word about the organization of this book. Part I provides an overview of Poussin’s approaches to representing women in his works, both positively and negatively; Part II presents some cultural and social frames that help situate both our understanding of women in his time and his portrayal of them. In Part III, Poussin’s paintings and drawings featuring women protagonists are arranged by theme in seven chapters. These themes, given in the chapter titles, are reviewed here in Part I and also are discussed in the introductions to each chapter, in the chapters themselves, and in the conclusion. Each painting or drawing is treated separately but all are grouped by theme in the appropriate chapter.

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## Part II – Poussin’s Women—Cultural and Social Frames

### Abstract

Part II examines Poussin’s works from the perspective of attitudes about women in seventeenth-century Italy and France. His ancient and contemporary literary sources are investigated from a gender studies viewpoint, as are his ideas on art. The impact on Poussin of changing views of gender in French theater is analyzed, and the values of his patrons are explored.

**Keywords:** Women’s History—France, Misogyny, Art Theory, Theater, Patronage

### Poussin, Ovid, and misogyny

An issue worth considering in the study of Poussin’s women centers on the author of important poems that inspired many of his mythological pictures. Is the Roman poetry of Ovid, author of the *Metamorphoses* (as well as the *Fasti* and *Ars amatoria*), a feminist or misogynist? Ovid’s critical fortunes with respect to this question are mixed: some have seen his works as proto-feminist, giving voice to women; others, holding the majority opinion, have characterized his literary output as sexist and degrading to women, particularly in his descriptions of them as objects of abusive male sexual desire and rape. For example, it has been said that when Ovid describes the rapes of women in the *Metamorphoses*, he ‘applied his wit to unfunny circumstances.’<sup>1</sup> Ovid’s narrations of sexual encounters have been viewed as pornographic because they convert the women he describes into sexual objects for the delectation of the males within his texts, usually gods, and for the vicarious pleasure of his male readers. One wonders how women, both contemporary with Ovid and in the European Renaissance, received his poetic accounts of rape, since their reading was governed by the patriarchal sign systems that produced and

1 Richlin, ‘Reading Ovid’s Rapes’, p. 158.

perpetuated his canonical texts. His poetry was designed to take into account the voyeurism and imaginative gaze of his male audience.

This last point may also be made with respect to Poussin's pictures. Because of the historical hierarchy of gender favoring men, Poussin's paintings, like Ovid's literary works, often fail to create a position for his female audience or to concretize what the 'female gaze' might require.<sup>2</sup> In the works of both, the female is a site of violence, and in Poussin's paintings, an overriding issue in the construction of gender is often the presentation of dramatic, sometimes destructive, conflict between his protagonists. Even if such struggle may be imagined by some as neutral with regard to the sexes, where the larger purpose is dramatic conflict, free of concern about gender, or indeed where, in some of the artist's narratives, women seem to prevail, deeper analyses reveals that in the end males are favored over females.

It would be wrong to imagine that as an artist Poussin had no stake in the subjects he represented from a gender perspective. Although he presented images with dramatic conflict and sometimes with allegorical meaning, he did more than reconfigure stories from ancient or modern literary sources in attractive pictorial terms for the visual and intellectual delectation of the viewer. He sometimes purposefully set out to depict aggressive or destructive female protagonists, where women were viewed as controlling, harmful, overly emotional, or over-sexed. At other times he displayed them as objects for scopophilic inspection, inviting the male viewer to act as a voyeur. And, while he could not have addressed gender issues in his works from a modern feminist or gender studies point of view, given his historical period, he sometimes showed the suffering of women, or represented them as victims, for example as passive sexual objects who are raped, in which instances the viewer was intended to sympathize with their plight. In examples such as *Thisbe*, *Eurydice*, *Virginia*, the mothers in the *Massacre of the Innocents*, and *Queen Zenobia*, Poussin represented his women with compassionate regard. In these instances females were unfortunate or demeaned, the sad victims of fate or of male aggression.

### **Views on women in Poussin's time: the *querelle des femmes* and the *femme forte***

During Poussin's time new tendencies emerged in the actions of and attitudes about women. In spite of persistent and endemic male bias, women were beginning to articulate the positive qualities of their sex, to break out of traditional patterns of social behavior (often without disturbing the overall social order), and to enter

2 Here, I adapt to Poussin ideas from Richlin, pp. 159, 160, 178.

professions previously the exclusive preserve of men. Early Feminist theory had arisen with the shift to an increasingly secular culture surrounding the rise of Humanism in the fifteenth century and the creation of the modern European states. Christine de Pisan (1364-1430), a professional humanist educated in French and Italian literature, is regarded by many as the first early modern feminist. She sparked a four-century-long controversy that eventually encompassed the French *querelle des femmes* that reached its height of influence during the time of Poussin. Between 1500 and 1650 views of women began to change gradually, through intellectual debate, religious reformation, and the emergence of science, which led to the questioning of past authority. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a substantial number of women began to paint, compose, write and publish. Both male and female authors began to defend women in guidebooks for letter writing, popular manuals on philosophy, proposals for legal reform, and in treatises devoted to women. Some women wrote books decrying the second-class status of their sex. Because the inferiority of women was such a widely held view, feminist writers such as Marguerite Buffet (d. 1680) emphasized the point that women were as fully human and capable as men.<sup>3</sup>

The *querelle des femmes* was the debate over sexual equality in which writers of both sexes who judged women to be maligned spoke out in their defense, mostly against male moralists who wrote with equal earnestness against female empowerment. The early feminists of the *querelle* opposed the misogynist idea that women were a defective sex and exposed the ideology of male prejudice. They often worked at the level of debate, arguing that women were equal to men in intelligence. Because of this, they deserved to be educated; it was in the interests of men as well as women that the latter not be left in ignorance. Furthermore, proper feminine conduct, of paramount concern to male moralists, is more assured when women are schooled. The *querelle* feminists stood against mistreatment of women by males, and persisted in a long, patient, and studious resistance, but they sometimes lacked concrete plans for social action. Exceptions to this were their initiatives in taking on professional roles previously occupied only by men, their active participation as military leaders in the French civil war, the Fronde of 1648-1653, and their work to change laws (usually dealing with inheritance and marriage) that disenfranchised women. A central development in the seventeenth century was the erosion of the idealization of the female that previously had been promoted in the courtly love tradition of the medieval and Renaissance periods. What emerged in its place was the new idea of domesticity, in which the wife was expected to be obedient to her husband and where she was confined within the highly prescribed private

3 Buffet, *Nouvelles observations sur la langue françoise*; Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, p. 12; Sommerville, *Sex and Subjection*, p. 1; Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, p. 14.



sphere of the household. The preindustrial, patriarchal household became the basic social and economic unit of seventeenth-century Europe. Women often found themselves placed under the governance of a household 'master', so that they were subjected to patriarchal control both within the family and by the state. Through their polemics, women of the *querelle* hoped to change the minds of men about the virtues and positive attributes of women, and to convince them that females were rational beings capable of operating outside the domestic sphere. Even so, the *querelle* writers were sometimes loath to anger men or to upset the social order. Their struggle was not often embodied in a political movement, but usually limited to a battle of pens. François Poullain de la Barre is typical in this approach: in his *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (1673), he argues that while women are capable of taking up careers presently closed to them, they should not necessarily be allowed to do so.<sup>4</sup> Many writers in the *querelle* tradition adhere to the position of Mme de Maintenon (Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon), Louis XIV's morganatic wife, who asserts that young *bourgeoise* need only enough writing and mathematics to ensure their success in their domestic duties, for example, in keeping accounts and household records.<sup>5</sup> The *querelle* became increasingly less relevant as the seventeenth century wore on, since in the 1640s it was largely displaced by the concept of the *femme forte* and by the enlightened moralistic literature of the period.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the genre of the *querelle* remained active up to the time of the French Revolution, when more radical ideas began to transform the old debate, centering on the idea of progress and a more active (and disruptive) promotion of political and social change that would benefit women.<sup>7</sup>

The theme of the *femme forte*, the strong or heroic female, emerged in seventeenth-century literary works, its discussion becoming particularly vigorous during the Thirty-Years' War (1618-1648) and the Fronde (1648-1653). During these conflicts, the *femme forte* premise was applied especially to female leaders who displayed uncommon military valor. A prominent example of the woman-soldier as *femme forte* during the Thirty-Years' War was Alberte-Barbe d'Ernéeourt (Dame de Saint-Baslemont), whose military exploits in her war-torn Duchy of Lorraine in 1636-1643 became legendary.<sup>8</sup> She defended her property against French, Swedish, and Croatian soldiers who marauded the countryside. She dressed in men's clothing, pretended to be the 'chevalier de Saint-Baslemont' (her brother-in-law), and learned techniques of hand-to-hand combat from her husband. Later, during the Fronde, a large number

4 Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, p. 19.

5 Maintenon, *Lettres et entretiens sur l'éducation des filles*, vol. 2, pp. 296, 307, 308, 352.

6 Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, p. 63.

7 Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*', pp. 4-7, 10-12, 21-23, 28; Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France*, p. 4; Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, p. 17.

8 Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France*, pp. 127-128.

of noble and common women joined men in pitting the nobles and the *parlement* against Louis XIV, still in his minority, and Cardinal Mazarin, until the monarchy finally won the conflict.<sup>9</sup> Aristocratic women played a central role in the Fronde, motivated by the belief that councils of princes and regional institutions had the right to limit the monarchy. An important *frondeuse* was the Duchesse de Longueville (Anne Geneviève de Bourbon), wife of the governor of Normandy. She supported the resistance of the Rouen and Paris *parlements* against Anne of Austria (regent during the minority of her son, Louis XIV) and Mazarin, and won her brothers, le Grande Condé (Louis II de Bourbon, Prince of Condé) and Armand de Bourbon, Prince of Conti, to the cause. She escaped from Paris when her brothers and husband were imprisoned and joined other noble leaders in neighboring Belgium to plan further action. She returned triumphantly upon the release of the princes and gave protection to the radical Ormée group in Bordeaux. She was accused by the government of high treason; even so, she authored an important pamphlet in which she defended the right to speak out.<sup>10</sup> The Duchesse de Montpensier (Anne Marie Louise d'Orléans), cousin of Louis XIV, was also a prominent figure in the drama of the civil war. In her support of the princes, she led troops against the government of Mazarin and staged a military entry into the city of Orléans to ensure its loyalty.<sup>11</sup> Reflecting these real-life exploits of women, notable writers of the period focused on heroic women, both past and present. Ian Maclean lists 28 books honoring women published in France in the short span from 1640 to 1647.<sup>12</sup> In his *La galerie des femmes fortes* (Paris, 1647), the Jesuit Pierre Le Moyne looked to history for models of praiseworthy female heroism (but also for examples of weakness). He discussed twenty virtuous women exemplifying female power, including Deborah, Judith, Zenobia, Joan of Arc, and Isabelle of Castile. He used these women as examples of historical female leaders who fought heroically, with courage and vigor equal to or exceeding that of men. But Le Moyne, a conservative Catholic, was hardly a feminist: as a Christian moralist, he celebrated female chastity as a heroic virtue.<sup>13</sup> He wrote reassuringly to his male audience that the *femme forte*, in the end, yields to the dominance of men, just as feminine gentleness has always submitted to masculine force.<sup>14</sup> This idea plays with strength and submissiveness simultaneously, with a nod to the moralistic literature of the period. The themes of

9 Ibid., p. 7.

10 Davis, 'Women in Politics', pp. 179-180.

11 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 117; Davis, 'Women in Politics', p. 180.

12 Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, pp. 76-77.

13 Le Moyne, *La galerie des femmes fortes*, pp. 311-317; Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France*, pp. 128-129.

14 Le Moyne, *La galerie des femmes fortes*, pp. 235ff.; Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France*, p. 130.

contemporary moral treatises emphasized woman's domestic role, her need to be chaste, obedient, and faithful, her unsuitability for public office, and the necessity that she embrace piety, abstinence, and constant work.<sup>15</sup>

The theme of strong, politically active women as reflected in the *femme forte* tradition appears in several paintings by Poussin: *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow* (Fig. 7.1), where the widow defies corrupt political authority by retrieving her husband's ashes and illegally bringing them back to Athens; *Coriolanus* (Fig. 7.2), in which the general's mother demonstrates her bravery by challenging her son while surrounded by the Volscian enemy; and *Esther before Ahasuerus* (Fig. 7.10), where the queen bravely confronts her powerful, fear-inducing husband, King Ahasuerus, to plead that he save her Jewish people. The three paintings in this group date from the years of the Fronde or shortly after it, from 1648 to 1655, strongly suggesting that Poussin's experience of that political struggle and the *femme forte* concept that accompanied it influenced his choice of these subjects.

The *femme forte* idea was connected to the portrayal of the Virgin Mary, the most exceptional of all women who gave birth to God without the intervention of a human father.<sup>16</sup> Veneration of the Virgin Mary through works of art played an essential role in the Counter-Reformation and seventeenth-century Church. Her experience of divine birth was fundamental to Church doctrine, and her role as mediator, which she shared with priests, was equally essential and stressed in the conflict with Protestants. All Catholic reformers promoted the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the Mediatrix of grace.<sup>17</sup> Lucrezia Marinella's *La vita di Maria Vergine, imperatrice dell'universo*, published in 1602, recounts in prose and *ottava rima* the life of the Virgin Mary from infancy to heavenly assumption, which she calls an 'ascensio', suggesting that she thought the mother should be put on equal footing with the son.<sup>18</sup> Her vivid narrative is both honorific and based on the principle of *ekphrasis*, with scenes presented as a series of strikingly visual literary images. Marinella shows how the Virgin Mary exemplifies obedience, modesty, submissiveness, and industriousness, thereby serving women as a model to emulate in strengthening their individual spirituality and in helping them to conform to society's expected social and familial behaviors.<sup>19</sup> Marinella's book was immensely popular, going through four editions and reprintings by 1617. Marian texts, which flooded Europe after the Council of Trent and into the seventeenth century, stressed '*l'excellence du sexe*

15 Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, pp. 64-65.

16 L'Archevesque, *Les grandeurs sur-éminentes de la très-sainte Vierge Marie*, p. 479.

17 Kessel, 'Virgins and Mothers between Heaven and Earth', p. 165.

18 Marinella, *La vita di Maria Vergine*, p. 67.

19 Haraguchi, 'The Virgin Mary in the Early Modern Italian Writings of Vittoria Colonna, Lucrezia Marinella, and Eleonora Montalvo', pp. 1-13.

*fœminin'* (from the title of Guerry's book of 1635), and women's special relationship with Christ. Women were said to share with Mary a natural sympathy, tenderness, and delicacy.<sup>20</sup> Marian writing thus shared with the moralistic literature of the period a stress on women's weakness, and paradoxically this idea also found its way into works on the *femme forte*, as in the case of Le Moyne's *Gallerie*, where female heroism ultimately was qualified by the idea of women's modesty and deference to men. Female virtue was said to be more striking than man's, because of the paradox of *faiblesse* combined with *force*, moral strength, as it were, in the weaker vessel. But one also finds in Marian literature comparisons of the Virgin Mary to a warrior, stressing her heroic, quasi-military status.<sup>21</sup> Poussin's many depictions of the Virgin Mary emphasize her majesty and miraculous powers, but also her humility. She was the most commonly represented female in his art, in scenes ranging from the Annunciation, Marriage, and Assumption to the Holy Family.

The discussion of womanly courage became a central feature of the new feminism during the regency of Anne of Austria (1643-1651) and the period of the Fronde, a time when Poussin turned to painting women of exceptional virtue: the good mother in the *Judgment of Solomon* (Fig. 6.8), the modest and virtuous Rebecca, who bears comparison with the Virgin Mary herself, in *Eliezer and Rebecca* (Fig. 7.8), and those women depicted in his pictures mentioned above, Phocion's widow, the brave mother in the *Coriolanus*, and the heroic savior of her people, Esther. Poussin may have been aware of the large number of books and treatises published at this time on virtuous women, but even if he didn't consult them, he no doubt heard numerous reports of the exploits of females as factional leaders during the time of the political troubles in France. Le Moyne's emphasis in his *Gallerie* on historical women as models of strength and courage parallels Poussin's inspiration to paint pictures with similar classical and biblical themes of female fortitude. His paintings of worthy ancient women undoubtedly suggested comparisons by his contemporary viewers to women of their own time who were distinguishing themselves through political bravery.

The debates and attributes of the *querelle des femmes* and the *femme forte* were important cornerstones in defining feminism during the seventeenth century. The *querelle* gave rise to the treatise on the excellence of women; the *femme forte* to a discussion of women's heroism. To further define seventeenth-century European feminism, a few more points must be added under the broad heading of changes in women's roles in society, including their relation to the law, work, the institution of marriage, the rise of the salons, and, not least, men's negative reactions to these innovations, aspects that will be discussed next.

20 L'Archevesque, *Les grandeurs sur-éminentes de la très-sainte Vierge Marie*, pp. 479-480.

21 Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, pp. 71-74.

## The 'World upside down'; women, the law, work, and marriage

The new, more socially active roles of women had already been reflected in popular book engravings, broadsheets, and paintings during the late sixteenth century, as described by the feminist art historian Sara F. Matthews Grieco.<sup>22</sup> Some engravings of this sort were meant to be amusing, showing 'the world upside down', as described in their captions, with women 'indecently' taking over the roles of men (Fig. 1.9). These moralizing prints, humorous at women's expense, showed the disorderly effects of a topsy-turvy world when women were allowed to be in charge. Poussin's early mythological paintings of love share some of the qualities of the prints that Matthews Grieco discusses, unveiling a domain where women rule over men, as Venus does in the artist's *Mars and Venus* (Fig. 3.13), Aurora in his *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 1.2), and Diana in *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4). Through his pictures of troubled love, where females are assertive and domineering, Poussin provided the beholder with images whose meanings with respect to women were not dissimilar to these engravings, but with the difference that his depictions were tragic rather than humorous in approach and clothed within the framework of a lofty classicism and an ideal, learned tone. The kinds of females depicted by Poussin as exercising sexual power over men were not understood by male viewers of his paintings as their superiors, but rather were projected through patriarchal inversion as women responsible for men's destruction.

Obscured behind the humorous engravings described by Matthews Grieco were norms pertaining to men's prerogatives that failed to amuse women wishing to advance their rights in Poussin's day. In many ways the circumstances of women in seventeenth-century Europe were not that different from those in Greco-Roman antiquity. Women in both cultures were vulnerable through their lack of power and were beholden to men in virtually every aspect of their lives. Negative attitudes towards women continued to be vented, now increasingly through appeal to science or legal reasoning rather than to the authority of Aristotle or the Bible. In early modern Italy, for example, guardianship of women by fathers, husbands, brothers, and other male relatives had a long tradition stretching back to Roman times, even if Roman and common law (*ius commune*) gave women the right to own and dispose of property and an equal right with men to inheritance. But negatively, through common law Italian women were excluded from all civil and public offices. Competing with common law were the statutes of cities, which were much more restrictive of women's rights. Local statutes absorbed women into their husbands' or fathers' families, so that only men through agnation transmitted patrimony and male guardians controlled female use or disposal of resources. Almost all Italian cities

22 Matthews Grieco, 'Pedagogical Prints, Moralizing Broadsheets and Wayward Women', pp. 61-87.

and towns prevented women from inheriting, in order to preserve the patrilineal family. Dowries were managed by husbands, but could not be used to pay their debts.<sup>23</sup> The legal status of women in France was similar to that of Italy. A French wife in Poussin's time was subject to her husband in all things: even if the goods, houses, or land she brought into a marriage were considered joint property, such assets were managed exclusively by the husband; he alone had the right to buy, sell, or lease. A wife's dowry was normally the only wealth she controlled, while widows were sometimes forced to litigate their husbands' estates for the right to manage them or just to maintain lifetime use, since property went to the husband's male heirs. In some European countries a woman was not even considered a legal person, but was completely subsumed within the identity of her husband. English law was the most restrictive in this regard: a wife had no legal status of her own, while in parts of Portugal and Spain a wife could dispose her property independently of her husband.<sup>24</sup> Patriarchal prerogatives in the young Poussin's native France were complex. The forces affecting women in France were entangled and contradictory, both progressive and regressive relative to a particular context. Through its Salic laws, France was the only European country in which women were forbidden to rule as monarch, even if Marie de' Medici and Anne of Austria were able to serve as regents during the minorities of Louis XIII and Louis XIV respectively. Poussin's contemporaries were hardly impressed by female capability during these two regencies, since neither queen was distinguished by high intelligence and neither had much experience of or interest in government prior to her assumption of power.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, women were not legal persons in seventeenth-century France, except if they were widowed or single and over 25 years of age. They were subject by law and custom to fathers and husbands; in addition, their professional and legal status steadily worsened in this period.<sup>26</sup>

From about 1560 to 1630 a series of royal decrees increasingly tightened paternal control over inheritance of property and marriages. Such efforts to limit women's freedom of choice of husband and to restrict their economic opportunities were a response to the threat women posed to the existing male-dominated economic and social systems.<sup>27</sup> The regulations imposed by the crown were complicated by overlapping regional and local law codes that operated alongside national ones. Even though the legal position of women declined in France, Germany, and England between 1550 and 1700,<sup>28</sup> the French royal decrees could not supersede

23 Kuehn, 'Person and Gender in the Laws', pp. 91-94; 99.

24 Warner, 'Before the Law', pp. 237-240.

25 Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, p. 143.

26 Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France*, p. 7.

27 Collins, 'The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth-Century France', p. 467.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 466.

already established customary laws. Such laws countered the power of fathers and husbands over their wives and children by strongly protecting the latter's rights in inheritance, including required equal provision among heirs. The ability of fathers to determine who would inherit property was limited by customary laws that mandated strict parity between siblings, regardless of sex, thus giving heads of households little opportunity to favor one child over another. As a result, the legal protections in France given to women and children, including daughters, remained quite strong. Daughters were entitled to receive equal shares of their parents' estates. A French widow had a right to a share of her husband's estate and controlled it legally between the death of the husband and the coming of legal age (25) of their children. Yet many widows, especially those from poorer households, fell into destitution.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the increasing legal and social restrictions against women in seventeenth-century France were never entirely successful, because of the struggles against them by women and because of the survival of the household unit as an important economic and social institution. James Collins explains the attempt by powerful men in the French public sphere to increase legal restrictions on women in this way:

When [women] began to enter the market economy in significant numbers, thus threatening to become institutional players in [the] major public spheres [of commerce and politics], patriarchal society responded by institutionally shutting them off, particularly by restricting their use of property [...Women's] decline in legal status and the efforts of moralists to redefine their function in society were responses to the real increase in their economic importance and to the threat posed by that new economic power to the continuation of a patriarchal society. The ruling groups reacted to a threat to their economic and political hegemony, a threat not from another class but from another gender [...] In the matter of assuring continued male dominance of public society by using the state to restrict women's legal rights, [men] stood united.<sup>30</sup>

With respect to work, considering the difficulties that a woman faced if she tried to enter commerce, the easiest way that she could labor was to help her husband with his business, by managing accounts, purchasing inventory, or serving as a sales person. In the service of such tasks, it was thought that a woman needed no education beyond the basics: rudimentary reading and arithmetic. But even these skills were not provided by the state: a woman learned haphazardly, by her own efforts. A range of educational institutions provided girls who sought them

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 443, 465.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 469-470.

out with slowly increasing educational opportunities during the course of the seventeenth century, but what a female was allowed to study was limited and closely scrutinized.<sup>31</sup> Universities were completely closed to her. Diaries, tax, business, police, and household records and other documents provide evidence for the kinds of work women did in the seventeenth century. For want of education, most women labored in menial and low-skilled jobs as domestic servants, farm hands, sheep and cattle herders, launderers, and prostitutes. More skill was required of housewives, spinners and weavers, seamstresses and embroiderers, dyers and woolworkers, millers and bakers, vintners, oil merchants, and cheese makers. Some women as heads of households worked in areas usually reserved for men, as carpenters, goldsmiths, butchers, and grain dealers. Highly skilled jobs of women included running convent schools, tutoring, giving music lessons, teaching languages, managing silk and wool industries, engaging in banking and money changing, and painting pictures.<sup>32</sup> Women of the nobility helped their husbands in the running of large estates, but devoted much of their time to pursuits of leisure such as arranging *fêtes* and *soirées*, reading, and discussing literature and art at the salons.

Until the seventeenth century, marriages were usually arranged by parents with an eye to political, financial, and social advantages, while love entered into consideration only if it did not conflict with these more important factors. In Poussin's day young men often were able to choose their spouses, and arranged marriages became increasingly rare.<sup>33</sup> It has been claimed (although not universally accepted among scholars) that by 1600, many women too exercised free choice in the selection of a husband and no longer acceded to having their mate chosen for them by their parents, or at least had a substantial influence this decision. This more flexible arrangement has been taken as a sign of compromise and cooperation within families and a loosening of the rigid practices of the past.

The traditional notion that women were voracious in their carnal appetites was now, in the seventeenth century, increasingly conditioned by the realization that they were just as likely to be the victims of sexually aggressive men. In contrast to misogynistic texts such as Jacques Olivier's *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes* (1617), cultural productions such as Moliere's plays demonstrate new attitudes toward marriage: Sganarelle in *L'École des maris* and Arnolphe in *L'École des femmes* are ridiculed because they represent those who adhere to old-fashioned concepts of male domination and female seclusion within marriage.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, in the face of such progressive attitudes, traditional laws continued to be enforced.

31 Sonnet, 'A Daughter to Educate', p. 102.

32 Cohn, 'Women and Work in Renaissance Italy', pp. 107-126.

33 Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy*, pp. 53, 54, 56, 223.

34 Collins, 'The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth-Century France', p. 437.



For example, in many countries governments took action against young couples' free-choice partnerships to protect the dowry system that ensured formal family bonds. Laws prohibited elopements and fathers of daughters even prosecuted consensual pre-marital intercourse as statutory rape.<sup>35</sup> In France, males normally were not convicted for sexual misdeeds alone, while females so convicted were punished severely.<sup>36</sup> Even allowing for *femme forte* exemplars, women hardly were able to operate in the public sphere, and were virtually absent from political life. Authors discussing political rights and obligations almost never mentioned women and simply regarded male experience as universal; political theorists subsumed women's rights under those of the male head of the household.<sup>37</sup>

Several of Poussin's paintings feature females whose 'natural private domain' of activity is thrust into the public sphere of men as a result of infractions on the part of the women: *Death of Sapphira* (Fig. 4.10), based on Sapphira's hoarding of money intended for the Church; *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (Fig. 5.10), where an adulterous woman is used as a pawn by Christ's enemies to trick him; or the *Judgment of Solomon* (Fig. 6.8), where one woman claims the child of another. In other paintings by him, women are victims of male hegemony, as in the *Testament of Eudamidas* (Fig. 6.4), where a mother and daughter are left to the mercy of Eudamidas's male friends, or the *Death of Virginia* (Fig. 5.1), where a father kills his daughter to preserve her virginity. In some of his works, women intervene in male affairs, either publically (*Esther Before Ahasuerus*, Fig. 7.10), or surreptitiously (*Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow*, Fig. 7.1).

The political and economic struggle against women, and, above all, the attempt by men to reframe the debate about women in moral terms by emphasizing their virtues in running households and raising and instructing children, has a twofold relevance to Poussin's paintings: first, the women (goddesses) in his paintings who are represented as greedy in love and who dominate hapless males like Endymion and Cephalus are models of negative moral behavior not to be followed by real-world wives and mothers, who should aim for moral decency; from this perspective, Poussin's pictures serve to undergird, by negative example, the re-emerging emphasis on female morality at this time. Secondly, and positively, the evenhandedness extended to women under French customary law, which was widely understood at the time as countering the negative effects of the royal laws restricting women's rights, may have helped shape Poussin's bourgeois views of justice and fairness. His attitudes about women seem to be revealed most particularly in his paintings featuring

35 Poska, 'Upending Patriarchy', pp. 199, 200, 203; Crawford, 'Permanent Impermanence: Continuity and Rupture in Early Modern Sexuality Studies', p. 258; Sperling, 'The Economics and Politics of Marriage', p. 221.

36 Hanley, 'Engendering the State', pp. 13-14.

37 Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 37, 288.

virtuous females such as the mother of Coriolanus or the widow of Phocion. These same middle-class values influenced his presumed sympathy with the goals of the Fronde, and especially his dislike of Mazarin. Poussin had particular reasons to resent Mazarin: after the deaths of Richelieu and Louis XIII, as new First Minister Mazarin was blamed for the political disgrace of Poussin's principal French protector, Sublet de Noyers. With his fall, the collapse of his system of patronage followed, with the result that those under him, Poussin's friend and patron Chantelou and his brothers Jean Fréart and Roland Fréart de Chambray, also suffered disgrace.<sup>38</sup> Another opinion held by the artist, apparently contradictory but one that also grew from his middle-class outlook, was that a strong central monarchy was required to keep the rowdy masses in check.<sup>39</sup> These conflicting beliefs held by Poussin may be partly explained by the almost universal hesitancy of the French people, even those who supported the Fronde, to blame their monarch for their miseries. The young Louis XIV was regarded as a tool in the hands of his ministers and guardians, who hid from him their oppression of his subjects.<sup>40</sup>

### Poussin's feminist contemporaries and the salon

Against the backdrop of legal proscriptions, which women had little chance of changing, early feminists emerged who began to define areas where they could assert their values and their goals. Recent scholarly investigations by feminist historians have uncovered a persistent subculture of women in the late sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries who were pressing for greater freedoms from control by men. Lucrezia Marinella, for example, strenuously argued in favor of the virtues and intelligence of women, going so far as to posit not merely their equality to men, but their superiority, in her book of 1601, *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne co' difetti et mancamenti de gli uomini* ('*The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*'). As her title indicates, at this early stage of feminism, her focus is more on the character of women than their social or political rights. Some early feminists refrained from going so far as Marinella did in asserting the superiority of women, or even their equality, because they were more concerned with improving the lot of women through practical means, for example through education, than they were in engaging in the unrewarding task of challenging the authority of men. In the 1670s Bathsua Makin stated that allowing the education of women in families wealthy enough to afford it would contribute to the public

38 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 75.

39 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 406.

40 Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, p. 155.

welfare and make them more useful to their husbands, but that doing so would not lead to demands for female equality:

Women [...] instructed will be beneficial to the Nation [...] We cannot expect otherwise to prevail against [...] Ignorance, Atheism [and] Superstition [...] than by a Prudent [...] Education of our Daughters [...] My intention is not to Equalize Women to Men, much less to make them superior. They are the weaker sex, yet capable to impressions of great things, something like to the best of Men.<sup>41</sup>

Between Marinella, who asserted the superiority of women, and Makin, who granted their inferiority but argued for their education, was Marie de Gournay, the protégée of Michel de Montaigne and editor of his works, who struck a middle course by asserting the equality of women in her *Legalité des hommes et des femmes* in 1622.<sup>42</sup> Poussin greatly admired the writings of Montaigne, who sometimes praised women and at other times disparaged them; the evidence of his paintings and the little he said about them in his letters suggests that Poussin too was ambivalent in his view of women, as exemplified in his depictions of them as both destructive and virtuous.

One of the avenues for the intellectual development of women of means in the seventeenth century was the salon. Whereas the *femme forte* was largely the creation of male writers, the *précieuse* of the salons represents an independent and secular ideal conceived by women. The earliest salons appeared in Italy in the sixteenth century, but the first to achieve renown in France was founded in the years 1610-1620 by Madame de Rambouillet (1588-1666) in Paris. Her salon was at the height of its influence at the time of Poussin's stay in that city between 1640 and 1642, although no evidence exists that the artist ever attended it. The main purpose of the salons was the discussion of literature and philosophy by both men and women, but the intellectuals and writers whose works were the focus of conversation were almost always men. Nevertheless, women set the tone: the topic for a particular gathering of a salon was chosen by the woman who ran it. The salons gave upper-class women access to learning that was not obtainable elsewhere; they were virtually the only places where women could enjoy the company of other educated men and women, and where sensibility and refinement were paramount. The reactions of powerful men to the salons were mixed: some enjoyed their atmosphere, and advanced their careers by frequenting them, but others warned of the 'feminization' of culture, and such gatherings were mocked as intellectually pretentious by writers like Molière.<sup>43</sup>

41 Makin, quoted in Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 162-163.

42 Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, pp. 14, 16-17; Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, p. 301.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

In general, the salons were influential in turning the public's mind about the virtues of women: during the seventeenth century, the anti-feminist stance became less popular due in no small measure to the success of the salons.<sup>44</sup>

By the middle of the century Parisian salons no longer consisted exclusively of the closed elite of the old nobles, but included women from lower social ranks who aspired to learning and public discourse. The feminists of France advocated wide-spread nobility and promoted an expanded aristocracy open to women from lower social strata who acquired prominence through effort and merit rather than birth. But, in spite of their internal egalitarianism, the salons still comprised a social elite set off from the rest of French society. Circles at court, and by extension the salons of Paris, became centers for female power brokers, who promoted themselves and others through intrigue. Effective intriguers received praise because of their ability to advance houses and individuals. Women of the salons advocated love and romance outside the bounds of custom, rank and marriage, as a way to achieve preferment. *Espirit*, refinement, and beauty, qualities traditionally ascribed to the nobles, could be used by women lacking the necessary family background to enter into the social elite. They depended on their wit, urbanity, and ability to converse. The salons played a central role in social assimilation into the nobility and served as training grounds for the prerequisite social graces.<sup>45</sup>

Views opposing the salons were quick to emerge. The salons were criticized for extending to women of lower rank the privileges and behavior legitimately belonging to the nobility. Women of the salons were accused of idleness, luxury, ambition, illicit love, and of upsetting the social hierarchy by usurping public roles.<sup>46</sup> Critics such as Pierre Le Moyne maintained that women should devote their talents not to public discourse and display but to domesticity, household management, and the education of children.<sup>47</sup> The very qualities that the salons' critics denounced, that women were intriguers, curriers of favor, and advancers of fortunes, were advocated by salon members, who embraced their public independence.<sup>48</sup> Recent research has recognized that the salons were not just places for women to cultivate their social graces, but that many of the *salonnières* were accomplished writers who made significant contributions to French literature.<sup>49</sup>

The debate over the positive and negative impact of the salons is relevant to Poussin's attitudes towards women. It is highly likely, given the artist's solid bourgeois values, that he would have sided with Le Moyne in encouraging women to hone

44 Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, pp. 27, 142.

45 Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, pp. 41-42, 48, 51-52, 53, 170.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 98.

47 Le Moyne, *La galerie des femmes fortes*, p. 251; Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, pp. 63, 65.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86, 178.

49 Beasley, *Salons, History, and the Creation of 17<sup>th</sup>-Century France*, p. 4.

their honest domestic skills rather than participate in the intrigues of the salons. Poussin believed in honest, hard work, lived a simple life, and was disgusted by the machinations at the court of Louis XIII when he was in Paris. He preferred making paintings for well-placed bourgeois bureaucrats like his friends and patrons Cassiano dal Pozzo and Paul Fréart de Chantelou, although his clients certainly included the nobility. This attitude affected his portrayal of women in his paintings, even in subjects that involved court intrigue, such as his *Esther before Ahasuerus* (Fig. 7.10). Another way in which aristocratic women engaged with the arts was through patronage. One of the most important female patrons was Marie de' Medici, Queen and then Queen Regent of France, who off and on hired Poussin in his early years in Paris to work for her, for example to help in the decoration of the Palais du Luxembourg in 1623 under the direction of Nicolas Duchesne. But few women had the considerable financial resources required to reap the rewards of patronage, and such activity was the result of their high status and education rather than the cause of it.

### Seventeenth-century misogyny

In spite of these indicators of women's changing roles in society, entrenched views persisted. Even if in the *querelle des femmes* of the seventeenth century women were beginning to assert their case for gender equality, patriarchy remained firmly in place. Feminist historians who examine the early modern period such as Sara Matthews Grieco underline a renewed conservatism inspired by the Catholic Counter-Reformation and the chilling social effects of syphilis, which reinforced from different angles the moral standard and the practical prophylactic benefits of engaging in sexual activity only within marriage.<sup>50</sup> Conservative male writers of the seventeenth century continued to assert the inferiority of women; in extreme form, they claimed that women were useful mainly for their sexual and procreative functions. Women were said to be less able than men in physical strength, in intellectual capacity, and in controlling their emotions. A preacher of the time claimed that women 'are weaker in understanding so they are stronger in passion'.<sup>51</sup> Such ideas were not new—they had a long history traceable to the biblical tradition and to Greco-Roman antiquity. Belief in the inferiority of women was common in classical, scriptural, patristic, and medieval authority alike. Michael Foucault pointed out that the Greeks associated immoderation with the female: 'the man of non-mastery [...] or self-indulgence [...] could be called feminine'.<sup>52</sup> Aristotle

50 Matthews Grieco, 'The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality', p. 46.

51 Sommerville, *Sex and Subjection*, p. 12.

52 Foucault, quoted in McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine*, p. 6.

maintained that the rational soul was transmitted through the semen only and that the female merely served as the matter upon which the male impressed form.<sup>53</sup> Many early-modern thinkers tended not to break new ground in discussing the status of women, but applied traditional views to the contemporary situation.<sup>54</sup> The Renaissance revival of classical literature, replete with misogynistic biases of all kinds, promoted continued hostility toward women. Some men in Poussin's time thought of themselves as governed by reason, in contrast to women, who, they imagined, were controlled by passion and a tendency to sexual excess. Females' cold, wet humors (as opposed to males' hot, dry ones) were thought to make them changeable and deceptive in temperament. Such speculations about the effect of the dominant cold and moist humors in women surfaced more in feminist and anti-feminist literature than in medical works themselves. Women's supposed inconstancy and violent passions, based largely on Aristotle's *De historia animalium*, persisted throughout the seventeenth century. Against this view, Julius Caesar Scaliger and others argued that men and women have the same bodily temperature and that no ancient authority is correct on this point; another view held that women's higher temperature could be explained by their need to retain food and body fat in order to feed the fetus.<sup>55</sup> Another persistent theory was that women's presumed hypersexuality was the result of their hungry wombs that yearned to be filled. The idea that the wandering womb made women prone to hysteria was a principle the early modern period inherited from ancient Greek medicine.<sup>56</sup> Rabelais, no friend of women, emphasized their animal side:

For Nature has placed inside their bodies in a secret intestinal place an *animal*, a member, which is not in man, in which sometimes are engendered certain saline, nitrous, boracic, acrid, biting, shooting, bitterly ticking humors, through whose prickling and grievous wriggling (for this member is very nervous and sensitive) the entire body is shaken, all the senses ravished, all inclinations unleashed, all thoughts confounded.<sup>57</sup>

Against this view, by 1600 most doctors concluded that the womb is an organ like any other. Consonant with this opinion, early feminists like Marguerite Buffet argued that the male and female reproductive systems affected only those narrow biological functions to which they pertained and had no influence on human will. Nevertheless, the belief that women's boundless lust resulted from their need to

53 Ibid., p. 6.

54 Sommerville, *Sex and Subjection*, pp. 2-3, 9-10.

55 Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, pp. 10-11.

56 Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, pp. 124-125.

57 Rabelais, *Gargantua*, 3:32, trans. and quoted in Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, pp. 13-14.

satisfy the cravings of their wombs survived in medical and popular literature. Those who argued for male superiority asserted that the natural sensuousness and lack of rational restraint in women stood in opposition to the stoic self-denial and reason characteristic of men.<sup>58</sup>

Men across Europe differed to some degree in their views of women, based on nationality, region, religious persuasion, and location in city or countryside. In general, the centralized governments emerging at this time codified new distinctions between public and private life that limited women's opportunities. It is rare to find seventeenth-century writers who wholeheartedly support women's capability to serve in public life or offices of the state.<sup>59</sup> With respect to the private sphere, Kelly (1984) calls attention to the Humanist tradition, which emphasized the male's idealization of the beloved and the holding of her at a distance though sexual abstinence, as recommended by Castiglione, in contradistinction to the older medieval courtly tradition, which allowed illicit love outside of marriage by those of high courtly rank. In spite of such idealized views of women, marital cruelty was a persistent problem: in seventeenth-century France wife beating was legally sanctioned to a 'reasonable' degree.<sup>60</sup> Conversely and simultaneously, with the rise of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, a new emphasis was placed on the loving relationship of man and wife in marriage.

### **The ideas on art of Poussin and his biographers**

It is useful to examine the gender constructions of Poussin's works through the broader context of his ideas on art. He discussed his goals as an artist in his letters and other writings, and contemporary theorists and biographers also addressed his aims in painting. Attention should be paid to how these contemporary writers interpreted his paintings, particularly those works representing aggressive goddesses or female victims. The issue of how stoicism may have colored Poussin's views on the purposes of his art also should be investigated.

Poussin was a prolific letter writer and also left notes, largely based on his reading, regarding art theory and the practice of painting. He said little in his writings about the roles of women or his views on them in his art that are of interest from a gender studies perspective. In a letter of 20 March 1642 to his friend and patron, Paul Fréart de Chantelou, written while he was in Paris, Poussin compared women to

58 Buffet, *Nouvelles observations sur la langue françoise*, p. 224; Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, p. 14; Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, p. 9.

59 Ibid., p. 22.

60 Ibid., p. 17.

the classical beauty of columns and spoke interchangeably of women and beautiful objects:

I am sure you will have found the young women you must have seen around Nîmes no less inspiring than the ravishing columns of the Maison Carrée—after all, the columns are just classical re-creations of their time-honored beauty. Nothing so lightens our task, so it seems to me, as a sweet and pleasurable diversion from the demands of our work. I am never more stimulated to set to work with a will than when I have just seen some beautiful object.<sup>61</sup>

Here, Poussin objectifies women, recalling the theory going back to the ancient Roman architect and theorist Vitruvius that the Ionic column reflects the beauty of perfect female proportions.<sup>62</sup> His comments foreground the importance of beauty in women and reify them in concrete architectural (and reductive) terms. In his observations on painting, Poussin states the often repeated assertion about ideal beauty, that no single, particular woman can possess in herself all possible beauties.<sup>63</sup> This remark reveals his adherence to the standard academic notion of his time, repeated by Bellori, that the artist should strive to depict a higher beauty by selecting and combining the best forms of nature.<sup>64</sup> Poussin cites Aristotle's example of Zeuxis, the ancient Greek painter who realized the impossibility that any single woman could embody universal beauty. Poussin's remark recalls Raphael, who pointed out in a famous letter to Castiglione that to paint a beautiful woman, he had to see many women, but because of the scarcity of attractive models, he followed a certain idea in his mind.<sup>65</sup> This concept reflects a male-oriented point of view focusing on the objectification of women common to both ancient and early modern authorities on art. It does not imply a neoplatonic idealization of female beauty, since nothing is said about an imagined transport by the male viewer to a higher divine realm. Poussin had little to say about the role of women in his personal life, including his wife, Anne-Marie, the daughter of a French baker in Rome, Jacques Dughet, who looked after Poussin during his illness in 1630. Her brother, Gaspard Dughet, became one of Poussin's favorite pupils. In referring to Anne-Marie

61 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 122: 'Les belle filles que vous aués vues à Nimes ne vous aurons je m'assure pas moins délecté l'esprit par la vue que les belles collomnes de la maison quarée veu que celles ici ne sont que des vieilles copies de cellelà. C'est ce me semble un grand contentement lors que parmi nos trauaus i a quelque entremes qui en adoucit la peine. Je ne me sens jamais tant eccité à prendre de la peine et de trauailler comme quand jay veu quelque bel obiect.'

62 Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, 4.1.7.

63 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 338.

64 Lee, *Ut pictura poesis, The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, pp. 13 ff.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 13.



sparingly, Poussin was typical of his time, when propriety sanctioned that a man speak of his wife only rarely. Writing or speaking about a wife by a husband was judged permissible mainly when referring to his wedding day, or more especially, when noting his wife's passing.<sup>66</sup> When Anne-Marie died in October 1664, a little more than a year before his own death, Poussin was in a state of despair: 'She has gone, just when I needed her help most, leaving me stricken in years, half paralyzed, a prey to infirmities of all kinds, a foreigner on my own without friends (for they do not exist in this town)'.<sup>67</sup> Feeling sorry for himself, Poussin seems almost to blame his wife for deserting him in death. His protestation recalls the more blunt assertion of Martin Luther: 'Women are created for no other purpose than to serve men and be their helpers'.<sup>68</sup>

More generally on art, Poussin repeats the frequently held conceptions in his time that the proper concerns of the painter are grand subjects, heroic actions, and things divine; likewise, that the artist should strive for nobility in the subjects to be depicted and avoid the vulgar, the labored, and the trivial. These convictions, also applicable to poetry, were similarly found expressed among authorities who influenced Poussin, such as the historian and literary critic Agostino Mascardi, the philosopher and theologian Paolo Aresi, and the poet Torquato Tasso.<sup>69</sup> These same views are reflected in the writings of Poussin's contemporary biographers, most notably Giovanni Pietro Bellori and André Félibien. In his letter to Chantelou in which he discusses his painting *The Israelites Gathering Manna* (Louvre, Paris), Poussin stresses the need for proper expression in the human figures, so that one can easily determine which ones languish, which are astonished, which are filled with pity, and so on.<sup>70</sup> In addition to such expressive concerns, he goes on to discuss matters of form and judgment, noting the importance of the clarity of the figures, their appropriateness to the subject, and the good understanding of the artist. In another letter to Chantelou he famously discusses the modes, taking this scheme from the Venetian musical theorist, Gioseffo Zarlino. Poussin states the idea that the ancient Greek musical modes are applicable to painting, as rules governing proportion and form in such a way that they arouse the passions of the spectator's soul. Hence the Dorian mode is stable and severe, the Phrygian is intense and astonishing, the Lydian tragic, and the Ionic festive, appropriate, Poussin says, for

66 Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*, p. 67.

67 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 459: '[Elle] est morte, quand j'auois plus besoin de son secours m'ayant laissé chargé d'anées paralitique plain d'infirmités de toutes sortes étranger, et sans amis (car en cette Ville il ne s'en trouue point)'.

68 Luther, trans. and quoted in Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, p. 13.

69 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, pp. 338-339, 344.

70 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 21.

depicting bacchanalian dances.<sup>71</sup> He focuses on issues of style and expression, and the selection of heroic or noble subjects and their proper representation. Even if he occasionally mentions specific paintings, he rarely goes into detail, saying nothing about the portrayal of women except to restate the need to depict ideal female beauty. Only careful analysis of Poussin's paintings themselves can reveal more telling conclusions about his approaches to female subjects in art.

Poussin's seventeenth-century biographers say little about the gender issues raised in his paintings, the conflicts between men and women depicted in them, or his works' largely male-oriented point of view. Instead, Bellori and Félibien, his chief biographers, emphasize the glory of Poussin's learning, his artistic intelligence, and the excellence of his art, based on his deep understanding of classical principles. Poussin is described by Bellori as a *peintre-philosophe*, presenting weighty discourses among his friends on their evening walks in Rome:

Men of intellect came to hear from his lips the finest explanations of painting [...] There was nothing that came up in conversation that he had not mastered, and his words and ideas were so correct and well-ordered that they seemed to have been considered not on the spur of the moment but with careful attention. The causes of this were his good natural inclination and wide reading, and I speak not only of histories, fables, and erudite subjects, in which he excelled, but of the other liberal arts and of philosophy.<sup>72</sup>

Bellori's purpose was to praise Poussin, not to examine his life and works critically. Generally, Bellori gives longer descriptions of Poussin's religious narratives, such as *The Water in the Desert* (also known as *Moses Striking Water from the Rock*, Hermitage, St. Petersburg), than he does of the master's mythological works. When he turns to the latter, Bellori provides brief accounts of the human figures and their various actions and emotions. In his description of Poussin's early drawing of the *Birth of Adonis* (Fig. 4.7), most likely made for the famous poet Giambattista Marino, Bellori focuses not on Myrrha's unspeakable crime of incest nor on her terror at her transformation into a tree, as communicated by her horrified expression, but on how the nymphs who attend to her during childbirth gaze in wonder at her 'new

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 372-374.

<sup>72</sup> Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, pp. 322-323; Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni*, p. 436: 'Huomini ingegnosi veniuano per vdire dalla sua bocca li più belli sensi della pittura [...] Non accadeua cosa alcuna nel parlare, alla quale non hauesse sodisfatto, & erano le sue parole, e li suoi concetti così proprij, & ordinati, che non all'improuiso, ma con istudio pareuano meditate. Della qual cosa erano cogione il suo buon genio, e la varia lettura, non dico delle historie, delle fauole, e delle eruditioni sole, nelle quali preualeua, ma delle altre arti liberali, e della filosofia'.

beauty',<sup>73</sup> imparting to the picture a charm not entirely intended by the artist. Bellori's descriptions sometimes seem to project a sympathetic attitude toward the women depicted in Poussin's canvases. Thus, in his account of Poussin's *Rape of the Sabine Women* (Fig. 5.15), Bellori apparently feels pity for the young women in their frightened reactions to their attack: 'Their flight, their weeping, and their alarm are represented, as are the violence and lust of the predators'.<sup>74</sup> Here, Bellori surely reflects Poussin's effort to depict the tragic aspect of the scene, through the suffering of the women and their frightened state. Bellori describes how, in *Coriolanus* (Fig. 7.2), the general 'is vanquished by his mother's prayers and replaces his sword in its sheath'.<sup>75</sup> In these examples, Bellori is perhaps more moved by the appropriateness or aptness of Poussin's manner of representing his subjects than by discovering in the paintings any sign of the artist's genuinely felt empathy for the women. He is more concerned with the action of Coriolanus, who shows at last his noble, magnanimous concession to his mother in his deciding not to attack Rome, than he is with the women themselves and the risk they are taking in confronting him and his Volscian army. As we might expect, Bellori takes a negative view of Medea in the master's more finished of the two drawings he made on this subject (Fig. 4.2), making a pointed reference to Jason's 'demented wife'.<sup>76</sup>

Poussin's other chief biographer, André Félibien, says nothing of the diverse ways that the artist represents women in his narratives. Félibien ignores the conflicts between Poussin's male and female protagonists, the sufferings of his nymphs such as Daphne or Echo, and his destructive women such as Aurora or Diana. Rather, Félibien maintains the image of Poussin as learned and as making apparent 'the admirable art of handling well the most noble subjects [...] with gravity and modesty'.<sup>77</sup> Félibien calls the artist's thoughts always 'pure and unclouded [...] Everything [in his work] seems natural, easy, suitable and agreeable'.<sup>78</sup> By emphasizing the elevated classicism of Poussin's paintings, Félibien closes off consideration of possible friction between the sexes in his works, and contributes to the legend of Poussin as cultivated, pleasant, and high-minded. Félibien ignores the dramatic gender conflicts

73 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 311; Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni*, p. 410: 'nuova bellezza'.

74 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 329; Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni*, p. 449: 'Rappresentasi la fuga, il pianto, e lo spauento loro; e la violenza, e brama de'predatori'.

75 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 329; Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni*, p. 450: 'vinto dalle preghiere della madre, ripone la spada nel fodro'.

76 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 329; Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni*, p. 449: 'l'insana moglie'.

77 Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages*, pp. 155, 157: 'cet art admirable de bien traiter les sujets [...] les plus nobles [...] de gravité & de modestie'.

78 Ibid., pp. 156, 158: 'pure & sans fumée [...] tout y paroît naturel, facile, commode & agréable'.

that Poussin worked so hard to create, and instead characterizes his art as lofty and contention-free. If he goes on to admit that on occasion Poussin was required (as if compelled by some outside agent) to represent forceful subjects, he asserts that the artist's overriding equanimity was more important: 'Even though he was forced to show vehemence and sometimes anger and indignation in his pictures, even though he was obliged to depict sorrow, he never got too unsettled, but always acted with the same prudence and wisdom'.<sup>79</sup> Félibien goes on to describe his Bacchanals as restrained compared to other artists: 'if, in [painting] the Bacchanals, he has the task of pleasing and entertaining [the spectator] by [depicting] the actions and playful manners which are to be seen [in such works], he nevertheless has done so with more gravity and modesty than many other painters who have taken too many liberties'.<sup>80</sup> But Félibien's dignified conception here of Poussin's Bacchanals is strongly at variance with the lusty approach we find in the artist's London *Triumph of Pan* (see commentary on Fig. 2.1).

It is true that Poussin himself said that subject matter should be noble,<sup>81</sup> but he did not go so far as Félibien in insisting that his paintings always be pleasant and agreeable. By 'noble', Poussin meant that subjects in art should not degenerate into genre painting or low-life scenes, but should be taken from ancient history, mythology, and the Bible. In discussing the '*maniera magnifica*' ('the grand manner'), he says the artist must exercise judgment in choosing subjects that are capable of embellishment and perfection.<sup>82</sup> Within such noble subjects Poussin establishes the requirements for a beautiful image: 'The idea of Beauty is revealed in matter only if it is prepared as much as possible. This preparation consists in three things: order, mode, and aspect or true form'.<sup>83</sup> He did not propose that art should always be amiable: the artist in truth should explore through appropriate means not only the lovely and the pleasant, but tragedy and human failure as well, as, indeed, many of his non-religious paintings (and some of the religious ones too) do. Above all, art for Poussin should satisfy the mind as well as the eye, and it could be argued that scenes of misfortune do that more effectively than pleasing ones.

79 Ibid., p. 156: 'Soit qu'il fallût faire voir dans ses compositions de la vehemence, & quelquefois de la colere et de l'indignation, soit qu'il fût obligé de représenter les mouvemens d'une juste douleur, il ne se transportoit jamais trop, mais se conduisoit avec une égale prudence, et une même sagesse'.

80 Ibid., pp. 156-157: 'si dans les Baccanales il a tâche de plaire, & de divertir par les actions & manieres enjouées qu'on y voit, il a cependant toujours conservé plus de gravité & de modestie que beaucoup d'autres Peintres qui ont pris de trop grandes libertez'.

81 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 463.

82 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 338.

83 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 495: 'L'idée de Beauté ne descend dans la matière que si elle y est préparée le plus possible. Cette préparation consiste en trois choses: dans l'ordre, dans le mode, et dans l'espèce ou vraie forme'.

Nevertheless, some of Poussin's canvases cannot match the call for nobility, delectation, or mental satisfaction, so we come up against the limitations of theory as expressed by the master and his compatriots Bellori and Félibien. In a letter to Chambray, Poussin emphasizes the need to select a suitable and noble subject: 'But firstly, on subject matter: it must be noble [...] In order to give place to the painter to display his genius and industry, one must choose that matter capable of receiving the most excellent form'.<sup>84</sup> In emphasizing the nobility of art, Poussin implicitly puts himself on the side of the conservative, patriarchal historians from antiquity such as Livy and Plutarch, who usually privilege a prevailing male view of the world over a female perspective. Even as he positively encourages the viewer of his two versions of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* to empathize with the plight of the female victims, Poussin negatively represents the women as seized by the most extreme terror possible in a frightful attack upon their persons. Wherein does the nobility of this subject depicting rape reside? It can be found only in the 'noble' attack of Romulus's soldiers, the righteousness of whose cause is weak indeed: merely the hope that eventually the women will submit to their fate as wives who will populate a glorious Roman future. Poussin wrote to Chambray that the end of art is delectation,<sup>85</sup> but his *Rapes* cannot meet that criterion, even if one can 'learn' (another of Poussin's precepts) from the two canvases. In his characterization of the 'maniera magnifica', Poussin enumerates the kinds of subjects required for grandeur: battles, heroic actions, and divine things.<sup>86</sup> But quite often, in human or divine rapes and other tragic scenes, the male protagonists in his paintings are found to compromise virtue and belittle the value of females.

In the reception of his pictures in the seventeenth century, Poussin's beautiful goddesses no doubt were sometimes viewed uncritically as divine beings who could afford to treat mortal men badly simply by virtue of their godly status and remain immune to criticism. But because they were also women, the goddesses could have been regarded as such: the painter's male audience would have elided the goddesses' roles as divinities and women, and could have brought to bear upon them critical attitudes from a male perspective. In their overlapping roles as goddesses and women, Poussin's female divinities may well have been subjected by viewers to misogynist critique, especially when they served as paradigms of bad female behavior that included their fits of jealousy, revenge, and selfish sexual activity, as in the cases of Aurora, Diana, and others.

84 Unglaub, *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting*, p. 15: 'Mais premièrement de la matière: Elle doit être prise noble [...] Pour donner lieu au peintre de montrer son esprit et industrie, il la faut prendre capable de recevoir la plus excellente forme'.

85 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 462.

86 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 338.

Such a mixture of attitudes, where goddesses were imagined both as above and immune to criticism and simultaneously as vengeful, lustful women, may well have conditioned Poussin's own thoughts about them. Like other men in male-oriented cultures, Poussin would have been largely unconscious of his own cultural biases. In recasting the ancient myths in his narrative paintings, Poussin would have imagined, as he confirms in his writings, that his task was to focus on the dignified presentation of these great classical tales. He would not necessarily have thought of the mortal women he depicted, such as the Numidian princess in the story of Scipio, as creatures of patriarchal control, or his selfish and manipulating goddesses as exemplifying male bias directed toward women. Rather, he would have regarded his canvases as presenting the nobility and drama of the revered fables of the Greco-Roman tradition, even if these stories contained elements of gender conflict, female suffering, or presumed privilege among goddesses. In fact, he saw it as his duty to emphasize the dramatic moments of conflict between goddesses and mortal men, and to show the adversities of mortal women, because he imagined that it was the task of the painter who aspired to greatness to represent in a new way these enduring stories of strife, discord, and noble human hardship.

Only in a few of his non-religious paintings did Poussin give the impression that one of the didactic purposes of his art was to teach viewers to honor women or to establish a sensitivity to female suffering; rather, he saw his aim in the first place as presenting dramatic conflict itself. From his point of view as artist and *peintre-philosophe*, the didactic element was intended to teach one to follow the path of nobility and rise above conflict altogether, to avoid falling victim to the jealousies and hatreds depicted in his paintings.

## The influence of theater on Poussin

In presenting scenes of struggle between his protagonists, Poussin's works have much in common with theatrical presentations and literary works of a dramaturgical sort featuring stories of conflict. In addition to emulating artists whose works he greatly admired, particularly Raphael and Titian, and consulting the ancient classical texts of Livy, Ovid, and others as source material, Poussin was most likely familiar with some of the more influential French and Italian theatrical productions of his period, their printed texts, or discussions of them by his friends and associates. The theater provided a visual spectacle of living actors in dramatic situations, and Poussin famously demonstrated his interest in theatrical modes of presentation. He created miniature stage sets, carefully placing small wax or clay figures as protagonists within boxes subject to controlled perspective and lighting conditions from which he would draw studies for his paintings. Critics

such as Paul Desjardins, Roger Fry, and Anthony Blunt have developed analogies between Poussin's art and the theater of Racine and Corneille.<sup>87</sup> Poussin lived at a time when classical French drama was developing into its mature state. The dramatist Alexandre Hardy (1570–1632), for example, began providing action and variety that had been absent in the lyrical drama of the French Renaissance. The latter had been characterized by set pieces including monologues and a chorus. Hardy developed a French theater of action, and for the first time his plays openly portray tragic, dramatic events such as rape and murder, which had been banished as offstage incidents in earlier French theater. His plays were produced during Poussin's formative years, although it is unknown if the young painter saw them. Hardy claimed to have written some six hundred plays. Among the thirty-four extant today are subjects that Poussin painted, including *Coriolan*, a play based on Coriolanus, and *Procris ou la Jalousie infortunée*, the story of Cephalus and Procris. The plays of the famous Pierre Corneille (1606-1684), produced all through Poussin's maturity, encompass some of the same subjects (*Médée*, 1635) and themes as the artist: control of the passions, devotion to country, generosity, inconstancy. Corneille and Poussin often present themes focusing on great historical figures unburdened by minor day-to-day concerns. They normally offer a prescribed, codified, and rational framework within which to represent narrative action and human emotion. Both seek concentration of action, but both sometimes go beyond reason, as when Corneille is swayed by an excessive fervor in his plots, or when Poussin transcends the rational to create pictures of emotional power. It is tempting to imagine that the interest in clear, dramatic action in French theater had a role to play in promoting Poussin's similarly rigorous presentation of human conflict in his art, including the depiction of tension between the sexes.

Other important dramas of the period that Poussin may have known which are connected by subject or theme to his paintings include Théophile de Viau's tragedy *Les amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé*, first performed in 1623; Pierre Du Ryer's *Esther* (1643), and François Hédelin, Abbé d'Aubignac's *Zenobie* (1647). The latter may have had special appeal to Poussin because it was intended to serve as a model for the application of strict rules to writing tragic drama, thus paralleling the painter's own theoretical interest, through his theory of modes, in applying structural models to the making of art. Although not a work for the theater, of special interest is Pierre Le Moyne's *La galerie des femmes fortes* (1647), which includes an account of Queen Zenobia as a model of female heroism. The publication of all of these works preceded Poussin's creation of paintings with the same subjects and may have been partly instrumental in calling his attention to these themes.

87 Desjardins, *Poussin*, p. 100; Fry, *Characteristics of French Art*, pp. 24-28; Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, 1967, pp. 266-267.

By Poussin's time women had been established as actresses in French and Italian theater, and the painter would have seen them perform on stage, along with the men. Since he had the opportunity to witness women performing dramatic roles on stage, his paintings may have been influenced by what he saw there. The practice of male actors playing the roles of women began to decline rapidly. In France and Italy, women's acceptance as public performers coincided with the professionalization of theater in these countries, especially with the rise of the *commedia dell'arte* in the middle and late sixteenth century. But prejudice against women died hard, particularly in the theatrical world, where by long tradition actresses were perceived as prostitutes. Even in the middle and late seventeenth century, the renowned stage actresses Madeleine and Armande Béjart, known for creating some of Molière's greatest female roles, found themselves the targets of slurs and slander.<sup>88</sup> With the rise of female performers on stage, cross-dressing, which had long been a theatrical staple among male actors, took on new life. But the advent of women assuming male roles on stage had little direct effect on Poussin, whose three paintings with cross-dressing themes feature men taking on female roles: his two versions of *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (Figs. 6.6, 6.7) and *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus* (Fig. 2.16). The painter's focus on male cross-dressers may be partly a consequence of his choice of subjects, both of which derive from classical antiquity, a period during which, at least within the theatrical world, women normally were blocked from taking on male roles. Examples of women dressing as men do occur in classical myth and ritual, however: Athena appears as different men in *The Odyssey*, and in the Greek cult of Aphroditus, women donned men's costumes, including beards.

## Poussin's patrons

Poussin was lucky that in the Rome of Pope Urban VIII French culture was particularly appreciated and that broadly educated private patrons drawn to antique subjects were readily available. The artist produced easel pictures mainly for non-aristocratic patrons, often scholars and humanists employed by well-placed prelates, who were sympathetic to his own point of view. His supporters, interested in the latest developments in the arts and deeply versed in ancient religion and mythology, were drawn to his difficult and complex works requiring skill of interpretation. His protectors included the most important patron and mentor of his early career, Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588-1657), secretary to Cardinal Francesco Barberini, nephew of Pope Urban VIII, who shared Poussin's love of classical antiquity and nature.

88 Nicholson, "The Theater", in *A History of Women in the West*, pp. 310-311.



Pozzo was serious, reserved, and even severe in temperament, not unlike the artist himself.<sup>89</sup> A deeply knowledgeable antiquarian scholar, Pozzo supported Poussin in his early years in Rome and continued to add many of the artist's canvases to his collection over time. A prominent figure in Rome's intellectual life, Pozzo was member and strong supporter of the prestigious scientific society, the Accademia dei Lincei. He sponsored many of the society's publications in medicine, botany, and other scientific subjects. To feed his antiquarian interests, he hired young artists to make drawings after antique art and monuments for his *Museo cartaceo* ('Paper Museum'), part of his library and museum that attracted international attention. In his early years in Rome Poussin intensely mined for his own study Pozzo's collection of drawings after the antique and may have added some illustrations of his own to his patron's compilation. Poussin's drawing of the reliefs from Trajan's Column apparently was made from a cast in Pozzo's collection. The many visual references to early Christian practices that Poussin included in his first *Seven Sacraments* series, painted for Pozzo in the late 1630s, reflected the latter's researches into ancient customs and conventions. Poussin's canvases purchased by Pozzo eventually totaled more than fifty, a number that impressed the many connoisseurs visiting his collection.<sup>90</sup> His acquisitions included the *Mars and Venus* (Boston), *Cephalus and Aurora* (Hovingham), *St. John Baptizing the People* (Getty Center, Los Angeles), *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine* (National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh), and *Eliezer and Rebecca* (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).<sup>91</sup> The many letters sent by Poussin to Pozzo provide important documentation on his works and his ideas on art. After the artist's stay in Paris, Pozzo no longer purchased many of his works, partly because Poussin was so busy filling the commissions of the French patrons he had met there, and partly because after the death of Urban VIII in 1644 and the flight of Cardinal Francesco Barberini in 1646, Pozzo's preferment ended and his fortunes declined. One of the few works Pozzo ordered from Poussin after his Paris sojourn was the *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* in 1651. Pozzo also admired the work of female artists: he is known to have supported women painters, including Artemisia Gentileschi. She corresponded with Pozzo in 1630 and later, receiving from him a commission for a self-portrait. Another female painter, Giovanna Garzoni, best known for her still-lives, was likewise patronized by Pozzo. The evidence of their letters written to each other strongly suggests that Giovanna, Artemisia, and Pozzo were all friends.<sup>92</sup> Pozzo's support of multiple female artists was unusual,

89 Haskell, *Patrons and Painters*, pp. 99, 100, 107.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

91 Blunt, 'Poussin and his Roman Patrons', p. 61, with an update of present locations.

92 Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, pp. 56-58; Rogers and Tinagli, *Women and the Visual Arts in Italy*, pp. 291-293, 297.

suggesting through his patronage that he held a positive view of women in the professions, an attitude that Poussin may have shared.

Another patron before Poussin's stay in Paris was the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani (1564-1637), a Roman banker, intellectual, and aristocrat famous for his wealth and his vast collection of art and antiquities that was unrivaled in size around 1630. A serious and informed connoisseur, Giustiniani owned Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* (Chantilly) and *Landscape with Juno and Argus*. Something of Giustiniani's concept of hanging pictures can be discovered in his placement of Poussin's *Massacre*. It was one of a series of four overdoor pictures that included Joachim von Sandrart's *Death of Seneca*, a *Death of Socrates* by a certain 'Giusto Fiammingo', and a *Death of Cicero* by François Perrier. The group consisted of two ancient stoic suicides, and two scenes of murder by tyrants, one of a stoic, and the other of innocents dying for Christ.<sup>93</sup> Cardinal Francesco Barberini (1597-1679, employer of Cassiano dal Pozzo) owned Poussin's *Death of Germanicus* and the *Capture of Jerusalem* among other works, and at his urging the artist won the commission for his *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus*, destined for an altar in the transept of St. Peter's. Fabrizio Valguarnera (d. 1632), the disreputable Sicilian nobleman, commissioned Poussin's *Realm of Flora* and the *Plague at Ashdod*, and Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi (1600-1669, later Pope Clement IX), bought the *Dance to the Music of Time*, the *Arcadian Shepherds* (Louvre), and additional pictures. Other patrons from this period were Jacques Stella (1596-1657), a painter and close friend of the artist, for whom the *Birth of Bacchus* was made, and Marcello Sacchetti (1586-1629), a banker and merchant, who commissioned the *Victory of Gideon over the Midianites*. Bellori says that the *Triumph of Flora* was commissioned by Cardinal Aluigi Omodei (1607-1685) "ne primi tempi," but he was probably too young to have done so and seems to have acquired it in the following years.<sup>94</sup> Omodei also bought the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (Louvre, Paris).

An important supporter of Poussin was Cardinal Camillo Massimo (1620-1677), whose artistic and literary antiquarian interests were promoted by his cultural circle that included Cardinal Francesco Barberini, Cassiano dal Pozzo, and Poussin himself.<sup>95</sup> As a particularly close friend of Poussin and an amateur artist, Massimo apparently took lessons from the master. Massimo commissioned *The Infant Moses Trampling Pharaoh's Crown* and *Moses Changing Aaron's Rod into a Serpent* (both Louvre), and also owned the earlier version of the *Arcadian Shepherds* and the *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus*. The two pictures from the life of Moses owned by Massimo provide further evidence of Poussin's artistic freedom in choosing

93 Cropper, 'Vincenzo Giustiniani's Galleria', p. 125.

94 Blunt, 'Poussin and his Roman Patrons', p. 68.

95 Buonocore, *Camillo Massimo collezionista di antichità*, p. 50.

his subjects. He painted several scenes from Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* and *History of the Jewish Wars* from the late 1630s into the 1650s, including his two versions of the *Capture of Jerusalem* and the *Esther and Ahasuerus*, and was particularly attracted during this period to the Bible's and Josephus's accounts of Moses, scenes from whose life Poussin painted nineteen times. These facts suggest that he rather than Massimo or Pointel was responsible for his choice of subject.<sup>96</sup> The importance of freedom in selecting his subjects is expressed by Poussin himself in a letter to Chantelou's brother, Roland Fréart de Chambray: 'In order to give place to the painter to display his genius and industry, one must choose that [noble subject] matter capable of receiving the most excellent form'.<sup>97</sup> Bellori reinforced the importance that Poussin attached to his own selection of subject: 'In history paintings, he always searched for action, and he said that the painter himself should select the subject most suitable to be represented'.<sup>98</sup> Poussin was the first artist in Italy to paint almost exclusively relatively small easel pictures with the kinds of religious, classical, and modern literary narratives that were normally presented in large frescoes and altarpieces.<sup>99</sup> In creating such works for private patrons, many of whom became his personal friends and who respected his freedom, learning, and artistic process, he was granted wide latitude in choice of subject.

Massimo particularly expressed his personal delight in his two paintings with the subject of Moses. He noted that he paid 300 *scudi* for them, and had been offered 1000 *scudi* many times, but would never part with them. He relished their archeological accuracy and his shared bond with Poussin in being drawn to the customs and religion of ancient Egypt. On the south entrance wall of the gallery in his Palazzo Massimo alle Quattro Fontane, the cardinal displayed three works by Poussin: the late *Apollo and Daphne* given to him by the artist, who was unable to finish the work and near death, below which were his *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus* and his early *Arcadian Shepherds*. These paintings were awarded the best positions available on this wall; over the doorway were pictures by Honthorst and Vouet. The viewer seems to have been encouraged to find connections between the three Poussins on this wall. The *Arcadian Shepherds* and the *Midas* share the moralizing themes of death in Arcadia and the futility of wealth. The arrangement also emphasizes a connection between the dead youth and the mound of earth in the background of the *Apollo and Daphne* and the tomb approached by the herdsmen in the *Arcadian Shepherds*. *The Infant Moses Trampling Pharaoh's Crown* and *Moses*

96 Beaven, *An Ardent Patron*, Cardinal Camillo Massimo, pp. 96-97.

97 Poussin, *Lettres et propos sur l'art*, p. 175: 'Pour donner lieu au peintre de montrer son esprit et industrie, il faut prendre capable de recevoir la plus excellente forme'.

98 Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni*, p. 438: 'Nell'histoire cercaua sempre l'attione, e diceua che il Pittore doueua da se stesso sciogliere il soggetto habile à rappresentarsi'.

99 Unglaub, *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting*, pp. 15-16.

*Changing Aaron's Rod into a Serpent* were given pride of place on the long walls of the gallery.<sup>100</sup> These paintings are linked in the promise and fulfillment of Moses and in the miracles of his discovery by Pharaoh's daughter and the changing of the rod; furthermore, both of these themes contain typological symbolism referring to Christ. Another patron of Poussin was Gian Maria Roscioli (1609-1644), secretary and chamberlain to Pope Urban VIII, whose collection included the *Continence of Scipio*.

Later in his career, when support of the arts in Rome suffered under Pope Innocent X, and when many of Poussin's patrons lost their positions as a result of his election, the artist was able by good fortune to rely on the numerous contacts he had made among French connoisseurs while at the court of Louis XIII in 1640-42. Poussin's later patrons included Paul Fréart de Chantelou (1609-1694), a nobleman originally from Le Mans who became a Parisian collector. Chantelou was secretary to his cousin, François Sublet de Noyers (1589-1645), superintendent of the *Batiments du Roi*, who also became one of Poussin's patrons. A close friendship developed between Poussin and Chantelou, whose collection included the *Israelites Gathering Manna*, the *Ecstasy of St. Paul*, the second series of *The Seven Sacraments*, and the painter's 1650 *Self-portrait*. Like Cassiano dal Pozzo, Chantelou enjoyed a long correspondence with the artist that provided many details of his life and ideas. Poussin was not confident in Chantelou's interpretive skills: the artist had misgivings about his patron's ability to see what he had intended to represent in his *Israelites Gathering Manna*. He therefore wrote Chantelou an explanation, advising him to read the story in the picture to perceive whether everything was appropriate to the subject. He also asked Jean Le Maire to point out the picture's beauties to Chantelou. Regarding his *Ordination*, Poussin maintained that Chantelou had been hasty in his judgments about the picture, and explained that 'it is very difficult to judge correctly if one does not possess considerable amounts of theory and practice combined'.<sup>101</sup> Chantelou's limited ability to 'read' pictures was apparently typical: Félibien was at pains to explicate Le Brun's *Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander* for Louis XIV, who, the writer said, because of the weight of rule and his busy schedule, had little time to think about the art that he saw.<sup>102</sup>

Poussin's most important private patron from the Parisian court was Cardinal Richelieu (Armand Jean du Plessis, 1585-1642), King Louis XIII's first minister. When Poussin was called to Paris in 1640 to work for Louis XIII, he was introduced to Richelieu, who already had been a great admirer of his works. In 1634, Richelieu had received Poussin's *Destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem* as a present from

100 Beaven, *An Ardent Patron, Cardinal Camillo Massimo*, pp. 106, 279-285.

101 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 21, 23; 372: 'Le bien juger est très difficile si l'on n'a en cet art grande Théorie et pratique jointes ensemble'.

102 Michel, *The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, p. 254.

Cardinal Francesco Barberini, the pope's nephew. Soon after, Richelieu ordered two pictures from Poussin for the Cabinet du roi of his château at Poitou, the *Triumph of Pan* and the *Triumph of Bacchus*, followed by a third, the *Triumph of Silenus*. The *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite* was purchased a bit later for another location. This was followed by Richelieu's purchase in 1638 of Poussin's *Rape of the Sabine Women* (New York) from the estate of the Duc de Créqui. The inventory of Richelieu's estate from 1643 mentions a *Finding of Moses*.

Poussin's call to Paris in 1640 was intended to establish French supremacy in the arts as envisioned by Cardinal Richelieu. The Cardinal's idea was to have France displace Italy as the chief artistic center of Europe by bringing to Paris important artists then working in Rome.<sup>103</sup> Richelieu's collaborators in this effort were Sublet de Noyers and his relatives Roland Fréart de Chambray and Paul Fréart de Chantelou; the latter was dispatched by Sublet to Rome to ensure that the reluctant Poussin made the trip to Paris. Poussin had been assured by Sublet that he would not be required to execute wall or ceiling paintings, since his preferred medium was oil to make relatively small easel pictures. But once in Paris, to his consternation, he was given the task of decorating the Grande galerie connecting the Louvre with the Tuileries, a job that he found burdensome and disagreeable. Furthermore, he was required to produce designs for such things as book frontispieces and decorative schemes for rooms, tasks he described as 'trifles' and 'inanities'. As a result of his dissatisfaction, he gave Sublet the excuse that he wanted to fetch his wife and bring her to Paris; by September 1642 Poussin was on his way back to Rome, never to return to France. Cardinal Jules Raymond Mazarin (1602-1661), who succeeded Richelieu in 1642, seems to have bought the *Diana and Endymion* from Poussin in 1632-1633.

Poussin's other clients included court officials, administrators, merchants, bankers, and Parisian bourgeois intellectuals, such as Michel Passart (1611/12-1692), who, as *maître* in the *Chambre des comptes*, was directly responsible for the finances of the French crown. He was also a member of the *parlement*. For him Poussin painted the *Testament of Eudamidas*, the *Continnence of Scipio*, *Camillus Hands over the Schoolmaster of Falerii to his Pupils*, *Landscape with Orion*, and *Landscape with a Woman Washing her Feet*. The last four of these paintings were hung together in the formal picture gallery, or *Grand cabinet*, of Passart's house: two history paintings and two landscapes. The *Orion* picture was identified only as a 'landscape' ('*paysage*') in Passart's personal inventory of his collection. Passart thus granted Poussin's landscapes equal status with his history pictures, signifying their importance, in the hands of this master, as more than mere wall decorations.<sup>104</sup> Melchior Gillier (1589-1669), advisor to the king, apparently ordered the *Moses*

<sup>103</sup> Hargrove, *The French Academy*, p. 37.

<sup>104</sup> Olson, *Poussin and France*, pp. 221, 234.

*Striking the Rock*, and Nicolas Hennequin de Fresne (d. 1672), Master of the Hunt for King Louis XIV, commissioned the *Holy Family on the Steps*. The artist painted his series *The Four Seasons* for Armand-Jean de Vignerot du Plessis (1629-1715), great-nephew of Cardinal Richelieu.

Among his other friends and owners of his works in France was the wealthy banker and silk industrialist Jean Pointel (d. 1660), originally from Lyon. Having settled in Paris, Pointel made regular trips to Rome to visit Poussin in his studio, eventually buying 21 paintings and 80 drawings from him.<sup>105</sup> His purchases included the *Finding of Moses* (1647, Louvre), the *Judgment of Solomon*, Poussin's *Self-portrait* of 1649, the *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*, and the *Landscape with Polyphemus*. Pointel had seen a painting by Guido Reni of the *Virgin of the Sewing Circle* in the collection of Cardinal Mazarin that he greatly admired, and asked Poussin to paint a similar picture representing different kinds of beauty in women. This commission is important because it provides insight into the degree of freedom the artist had in choosing his subjects, as opposed to requirements set down by patrons. In this case, Poussin was free to choose the subject (although not the broader theme of beauty in women). The pattern observable in Poussin's interaction with Pointel is that the latter would request certain outcomes and allow the painter to choose the most appropriate subjects to express them.<sup>106</sup> At first, Poussin seems to have planned a *Moses and the Daughters of Jethro* for Pointel, which never got beyond the stage of drawings.<sup>107</sup> He finally settled on *Rebecca at the Well* as his subject. Further, according to Elizabeth Cropper, the artist seems to have made the decision to base the various kinds of beauty of the women in his painting on the styles of famous artists—Raphael, Reni, and Rubens. Additionally, Poussin may have intended to make analogies between the forms, ideal beauties, and proportions of the women in the *Rebecca* and the classical vases represented in the same picture, similar to the way he had compared the beauties of women to ancient columns in a letter to Chantelou.<sup>108</sup>

Poussin's use of increased archeological detail and sophistication of color in his paintings for Pointel had been noticed by Chantelou, whose jealousy prompted him to write a letter complaining that the artist's canvases made for him lacked the same degree of careful refinement. Poussin responded that different works necessitated distinctive approaches; that the painting specifically mentioned by Chantelou, his *Ordination*, required a soberness in expression, whereas Pointel's *Finding of Moses* called for a sensuous beauty. To clarify why each subject required an appropriate treatment, Poussin described his theory of modes, where the expressive character of

105 Thuillier and Mignot, 'Collectionneur et peintre au XVII siècle', p. 40.

106 Beaven, *An Ardent Patron*, Cardinal Camillo Massimo, p. 97.

107 Keazor, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 70-71.

108 Cropper, 'On Beautiful Women', pp. 379-381, 394.

the forms and colors in different works arouse particular feelings in the observer.<sup>109</sup> Thus, dignified, serious subjects produce a sense of solemnity and gravity in the observer, while joyful themes evoke feelings of delight. This explanation of how the formal structures of different works of art arouse distinct emotions appropriate to the subject is valuable in understanding Poussin's ideas on the *affetti*. It is important to recognize that the artist, not the patron, controls the artistic means to rouse an appropriate emotion in the viewer, even if a commissioner might complain that a work does not please. Poussin's artistic freedom is further reflected in his statement on novelty in art, where he declares that innovation consists in representing a traditional subject in a new way. Thus, even when a subject is specified by a patron, the artist remains in control of invention, form, style, and expression. But because it was Poussin's preference to paint relatively small easel pictures for private patrons, he often was able to choose the subjects to be represented, as well. Pointel and Jacques Serisier, a merchant from Lyon and another of Poussin's patrons who commissioned the two *Phocion* paintings, the *Flight into Egypt* of 1657, and who owned the *Esther before Ahasuerus*, were serious-minded and hard-working men of integrity who seem to have shared Poussin's moral and political outlook.<sup>110</sup>

André Le Nôtre (1613-1700), landscape architect and chief gardener to Louis XIV, bought six paintings by Poussin, plus another three copies of his works (today one of the three Poussin canvases considered genuine in Le Nôtre's posthumous estate inventory—the *Echo and Narcissus* in Dresden—is thought to be a copy). He gave three of his best Poussins to King Louis XIV in 1693, all of which are now in the Louvre: *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, *Finding of Moses*, and *Saint John Baptizes the People*. He also owned a nativity scene, probably *The Adoration of the Magi* (London), and a *Moses Striking the Rock*, according to his inventory, which in fact is most likely the *Moses Sweetening the Bitter Waters of Marah* (Baltimore Museum of Art). Of Le Nôtre's nine paintings by, after, or attributed to Poussin, only one—the Dresden *Echo and Narcissus*—does not have a biblical subject,<sup>111</sup> indicating this patron's preference for religious pictures.

Further patrons included Nicolas Guillaume La Fleur (1600-1663), a painter and friend of Poussin, who owned the *Pan and Syrinx*, and Charles III de Blanchefort-Créqui, duc de Créqui (1623-1687), the French Ambassador to Rome in the early 1660s, who purchased *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (Richmond, Virginia) along with two other paintings. A Lyon banker, Monsieur Lumague, bought the *Landscape with Diogenes*. Additional patrons were Henri d'Etampes de Valençay (1603-1678), the French ambassador in Rome, for whom the *Assumption*

109 Forte, 'With a Critical Eye: Painting and Theory in France', pp. 552-553.

110 Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 129-130.

111 Rosenberg, 'Poussin and Le Nôtre', pp. 80-89.

of *the Virgin* (Louvre, Paris) was painted, and Bernardin Reynon (1613-1686), a Lyon silk merchant, who ordered the *Finding of Moses* (National Gallery, London), and *Christ Healing the Blind*. A man named Mercier, a treasurer and merchant in Lyon, purchased *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man*.<sup>112</sup> Of the fifty or more known patrons of Poussin, none were women, aside from Marie de' Medici at the obscure beginnings of his career, and while the Duchesse d'Aiguillon (1604-1675) owned the artist's *Rape of the Sabine Women* (New York—Fig. 5.15), she apparently inherited the canvas from her uncle, Cardinal Richelieu.

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<sup>112</sup> Thuillier and Mignot, 'Collectionneur et peintre au XVII siècle', pp. 41-42.



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# **Part III**

## **Paintings and Drawings**



# 1. Predators

## Abstract

Chapter 1 considers Poussin's canvases representing Cephalus and Aurora and Diana and Endymion, focusing on the goddesses as sexual predators who snare innocent mortal males, dominating them in love. Their stories reflect a patriarchal inversion in which men project the belief that females control them in love, whereas in Poussin's time the reverse was normally the case, as exemplified in laws and customs severely restricting women's sexual activities outside of marriage.

**Keywords:** Predation, Patriarchy, Inversion, Aurora, Diana, Gombauld

Two important paintings by Poussin, *Cephalus and Aurora* (c. 1629-1630, National Gallery, London, Fig. 1.2) and *Diana and Endymion* (c. 1630, Detroit Institute of Arts, Fig. 1.4), focus on goddesses as sexual predators who snare innocent mortal males, dominating them in love. The female deities in these myths destroy their earthly lovers: Cephalus is driven to suicide, and Endymion is lost in sleep, forever relinquishing his sentience. The stories of these ancient goddesses continued to reflect male fears of control by powerful females in the seventeenth century, a time when women were still imagined to be consumed with carnal fulfillment because of the biology of their bodies. It was still presumed by many, even if the most advanced physicians no longer thought so, that women's cold, wet humors and their wombs drove them to hyper-sexuality, whereas men's hot, dry humors supposedly disposed them towards rationality and restraint. In addition, reflected in the goddesses' tales is a patriarchal inversion in which men project the belief that females control them in love, whereas in fact in Poussin's time the reverse was normally the case, as exemplified in laws and customs severely restricting women's sexual activities outside of marriage. Poussin announced the theme of predation early in his career, around 1624-1625, with his *Cephalus and Aurora* now at Hovingham Hall (Fig. 1.1), and a few years later developed the idea further in the two great works from his early maturity in London and Detroit. In these pictures the artist shows the power the two goddesses hold over the men, and the differing reactions of the latter. In the London canvas Cephalus clearly rejects



the advances of Aurora, and in the Detroit painting Endymion reveals, mixed together, the more complex emotions of awe, love, and fear. The artist shows the two female deities dominating in love: Aurora looks longingly at Cephalus as she holds onto him, restraining him in his desire to escape her embrace. In the case of Diana, the goddess's pure classical profile reveals little if any hint of her deep passion for Endymion that the classical literary sources emphasize. Instead, the viewer is struck by her majesty, classical beauty, and power. Poussin painted both pictures relatively early in his career and at about the same time, indicating that the theme of women who ensnare men was on his mind. I argue below that Poussin's immediate literary source for his *Diana and Endymion* was not antique, since no single ancient source describes the story of these lovers in full. Nor did he repeat the standard way previous artists had rendered this scene, with Diana embracing or kissing the sleeping Endymion. Instead, his source of inspiration was Jean Ogier de Gombauld's book-length poetic romance, *L'Endimion*, published in 1624. That this is so is indicated not only by the moment he has chosen to represent his two lovers, when the shepherd kneels before the goddess, following Crispin de Passe's engraving in Gombauld's book, but also by the way the artist follows the poet's verbal descriptions that distinctively match the painting. In addition, it may be that one of Poussin's literary sources for his London *Cephalus and Aurora* was Pierre de Ronsard's poem, *Le ravissement de Cephale*, because of its mention of an image of Procris, paralleling the painting, which uniquely shows Cephalus looking at a picture of his wife, even if the poem refers to a mental rather than a physical image. Poussin made these works about the time of his marriage, in 1630, and, although it can remain only speculation, it may be that he was also thinking of how marriage would change his life, with its obligations and the need to submit to his partner's wishes, sexual and otherwise, as reflected in the stories of the two paintings. For even in his patriarchal culture, marital constraints and responsibilities on the part of the husband were recognized.

The early *Cephalus and Aurora* at Hovingham Hall demonstrates that Poussin was slow to mature as an artist, because, even though he was already about thirty when he painted it, the composition is clumsy, with Aurora appearing to float awkwardly above Cephalus as she clings to his body. Furthermore, the picture is gracelessly divided into two parts, with the lovers depicted in small size in the right half of the composition and the secondary figures of the Hours and Zephyr dominating the entire left half, seeming to overwhelm the main subject. Poussin's inventive powers here are relatively weak, with a certain obviousness in the way Aurora accosts her victim by cuddling up to him and the manner in which the languid Cephalus responds, by turning away his cheek and raising his hand in rejection. By contrast, the London version of about five years later is brilliant in its conception, with the loving but dominating Aurora clinging to Cephalus's erect

body as the latter dramatically turns to reject her while simultaneously looking longingly at his wife Procris's picture. The Detroit *Diana and Endymion* is equally impressive, revealing the shepherd's heady mixture of emotions as he kneels and looks up lovingly yet fearfully to his lover, the imperious and stately Diana, who has the power to govern his fate by submitting him to endless sleep while she loves him eternally. The surrounding figures of Aurora, Apollo, Nox, and Somnus are brilliantly integrated into the picture, both in visual organization and meaning.

In the myth of Cephalus and Aurora, the goddess arranges things to her liking by stealing the young hunter Cephalus from his wife Procris, keeping him against his will for her sexual pleasure.<sup>1</sup> She is guilty of sexual misconduct, if not by the moral standards of the gods, then certainly by humans. Cephalus pined for his wife, so much so that Aurora eventually returned him to her, but only after she bore him a son, Phaethon.<sup>2</sup> When reuniting husband and wife, Aurora planted the seeds for later strife between them by making disparaging remarks about Procris' fidelity. Once rejoined with Procris, Cephalus then felt it necessary to test her faithfulness by seducing her while in disguise. Upon discovering his true identity after her husband's successful deception, Procris fled in shame into the forest to take up hunting with Diana and her nymphs. After her return and reconciliation with her husband, Procris then had doubts about Cephalus' fidelity, since she learned that he climbed a mountaintop and sang hymns to Nephele (Cloud), or, in Ovid's version,<sup>3</sup> Aura (Breeze). When she scaled the mountain to spy on him, he heard a rustle in the bushes and, assuming it was an animal, threw his spear. Procris had received this weapon, unerring in hitting its mark, from the jealous and devious Diana, and in turn had given it to her husband as a present. In this way, Cephalus killed his wife.<sup>4</sup> As she lay dying, she begged him never to marry Aura (whose name Ovid cleverly conflates with Aurora) because she mistakenly suspected that he was in love with a nymph by that name.<sup>5</sup> In fact, he merely sang to the wind. Cephalus eventually did remarry, to a daughter of Minyas named Clymene, but never forgave himself for the death of Procris and eventually committed suicide by leaping into the ocean from Cape Leucas.

The goddess of dawn is projected as a sexual aggressor in Poussin's two versions of *Cephalus and Aurora* (Figs. 1.1, 1.2). In both paintings, Aurora tries to seduce the hunter Cephalus, who repulses her advances because of his wish to remain faithful to his wife Procris. According to recently discovered inventories from the 1630s in Rome, the artist's earlier version of the tale (1624-1625, Hovingham Hall,

1 Apollodorus, *The Library*, 3.181.

2 Or several children, according to some sources; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 984ff.

3 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 7.690ff.

4 Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 189.

5 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 7.855-856.



1.1. Nicolas Poussin, *Cephalus and Aurora*, 1624-1625. Oil on canvas, 79 × 152 cm. Hovingham Hall, Yorkshire (Photo after Richard Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, London: Royal Academy of Arts/Zwemmer, 1995, Pl. 1).

Yorkshire, Fig. 1.1) was sold by art dealer Giovanni Stefano Roccatagliata to Francesco Scarlatti in 1633. It was then transferred to Cassiano dal Pozzo in 1635 when Scarlatti could not pay for it. A year later Pozzo returned the painting to Roccatagliata, who owned it until he died in 1652, when it was inherited by Carlo Antonio dal Pozzo, Cassiano's younger brother.<sup>6</sup> Poussin's skill in elaborating the rich iconography in this early work exceeds his technical command in composition and in arranging and painting his figures. The composition is awkwardly divided into two parts, left and right, with the two chief protagonists occupying a relatively small space at the right of the painting. Here, Aurora lies atop the prone Cephalus, pressing her advantage by the pressure of her body, the words she whispers in his ear, and the touch of her hand on his shoulder. With a dour expression, Cephalus turns his head away and raises a hand to stop her. His ruddy cheeks indicate both his youth and his embarrassment. Because of their large size, the figures at the left threaten to overwhelm in importance the two main characters. At center-left the Hours remind Aurora of her duties as goddess of dawn by pouring dew-drops from an urn and sprinkling flowers. Below them Zephyr reclines next to a swan he induced to sing, representing springtime, according to Giovanni Pietro Bellori, Poussin's biographer. However, Zephyr's inclusion could be connected to Ovid's account of how Cephalus sang to Aura, the breeze. Procris had mistakenly interpreted Aura as a female rival, not as the wind, here alluded to through Zephyr. The aged male

6 Cavazzini, 'Nicolas Poussin, Cassiano dal Pozzo and the Roman Art Market', pp. 808-809.

in the background leaning on an urn is the river god Oceanus, denoting the site of the love of Aurora and her husband Tithonus. Little *erotes* at the left, atop Aurora's chariot, hold torches, in this case signifying passion, and more cupids at the right sprinkle petals or shoot arrows to indicate Aurora's ardor and simultaneously to delay the dawn. The theory that these subordinate figures representing the hours, the seasons, and the world place the episode of Aurora and Cephalus in a larger allegorical context of the cycles of nature and time is perhaps too vaguely drawn,<sup>7</sup> since Zephyr may be present in this scene not as a symbol of spring, but as an allusion to Ovid's *Aura*.

The locality that Poussin depicts here with its gods and cupids is Aurora's realm, a place in which Cephalus is an intruder. It is an imaginary domain created by the artist in which a fantasy of female aggression is played out. The painter inverts the usual positions of the bodies in depicting a rape; here the female is on top instead of the expected male. Under Aurora's power, Cephalus is passive, although resistant, displaying an attitude normally associated with women as he tries to preserve his virtue. With his flushed and rosy face, Cephalus is feminized. Aurora's force in the painting implicitly undergirds the view current in Poussin's time that women were unable to control their sexual urges and were responsible for men's destruction.<sup>8</sup> A more positive view of this picture, presumably the one described in the inventory of 1695 as hanging in the *Camera Grande* of Cassiano dal Pozzo's Roman palace, is that it may have encouraged the sexual interest of the women of the family and induced them to produce children.<sup>9</sup>

Called the single greatest image related to Ovid's story,<sup>10</sup> Poussin's second version of *Cephalus and Aurora* (c. 1629-1630, National Gallery, London, Fig. 1.2) depicts the same episode as the earlier Hovingham Hall canvas (the early provenance of the second canvas is unknown). Here, a deeply agitated Cephalus repulses the advances of Aurora, in a far more mature and dramatic presentation than the earlier version. Cephalus pulls away from the goddess as he turns to contemplate a picture held by an *amorino* of his beloved Procris (Fig. 1.3).

The pose of Cephalus recalls both Adam in Michelangelo's *Expulsion* on the Sistine ceiling and Bacchus in Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, which was then in Aldobrandini collection in Rome. The painting shows Aurora trying to convince Cephalus to accept her love. She looks at him imploringly, stretching one arm around his waist and pulling him toward her. In spite of his loyalty to Procris, Cephalus may not have been entirely immune to Aurora's charms—he dallies, allowing one leg to

7 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, pp. 150-151.

8 Sommerville, *Sex and Subjection*, p. 12; Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, pp. 124-125.

9 Plock, *Regarding Gendered Mythologies*, p. 107.

10 Barolsky, *Ovid and the Metamorphoses of Modern Art*, p. 187.



1.2. Nicolas Poussin, *Cephalus and Aurora*, c. 1629-1630. Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 130.5 cm. National Gallery, London (Photo: National Gallery, London/Bridgeman Images).

be entwined with hers.<sup>11</sup> Even so, the painter follows Ovid's account,<sup>12</sup> in stressing Cephalus' protestations to Aurora that he loves only his Procris. His opposition to the goddess is so unrelenting that finally she angrily agrees to send him back to his wife, but not before issuing a warning: 'Stop complaining, ungrateful man: have your Procris! But if my vision is far-sighted, you will wish you had never had her'.<sup>13</sup> The tragedy of Aurora's curse is only alluded to in the picture, by the strength of Cephalus' rejection of the goddess that will cause her to turn on him.

The *Metamorphoses* may not be the only literary source for Poussin's painting, for Ovid says nothing about Cephalus looking at a picture of his wife while resisting the advances of Aurora that is such a prominent feature of the work. Ronsard's *Le ravissement de Cephale* has been suggested as Poussin's source for the motif of Cephalus looking at the picture. But the key lines in the ode, 'Pourquoi pers tu

11 Sohm, 'Ronsard's *Odes* as a Source for Poussin's *Aurora and Cephalus*', pp. 259-261.

12 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 7.707-708.

13 *Ibid.*, 7.711-713.



1.3. Nicolas Poussin, *Cephalus and Aurora*, detail, c. 1629-1630. Oil on canvas. National Gallery, London (Photo: National Gallery, London/Bridgeman Images).

de ton age / Le printens à lamenter / Une froide et morte image / Qui ne peut te contenter' ('Why waste the springtime of your life in lamenting a cold and dead image that cannot satisfy you?'), seem to describe a mental more than a visible image, and allude only indirectly to Procris, who is not mentioned by Ronsard in the poem and who in his version is already dead.<sup>14</sup> Even if the circumstances described in Ronsard's poem are different from the painting, the ode still may have inspired Poussin to devise his own approach to the portrait. Alternatively, the artist simply may have invented the motif of the portrait. The theory that Poussin

<sup>14</sup> Sohm, 'Ronsard's *Odes* as a Source for Poussin's *Aurora and Cephalus*', pp. 259-261; Ford, 'Ronsard's Erotic Diptych', pp. 385-402.

adapted the idea of a portrait from Rubens' painting of *Henry IV Contemplating the Portrait of Marie de' Medici* in the Louvre,<sup>15</sup> installed in the Luxembourg Palace in 1623, seems unlikely, since the story in that painting and its context as a prelude to royal marriage is so different. But it is just possible that here too, as in the case of Ronsard's poem, the Rubens painting may have prompted Poussin to conceive his own very different approach in his *Cephalus and Aurora*.

The little cupid on the right mimics the action of Cephalus pulling away from Aurora, but in the opposite direction. He tugs a red drape to the right, while Cephalus turns forcefully to the left. This contrapposto effect occupies the entire right half of the painting, reinforcing Cephalus' rejection of the goddess. In his mythological pictures Poussin often uses *erotes* in this way, to mirror the main story as expressed by his chief protagonists. At the left are four additional figures. The sleeping nude male is probably the river god Oceanus, who symbolizes the location of Aurora's palace in the farthest east, by the stream of Ocean. From this place she rises each morning to lead Apollo on his way, and this is where she took Tithonus to be her husband.<sup>16</sup> The male nude is more likely Oceanus than Tithonus,<sup>17</sup> because he reclines on a vase with water pouring out of it. The inclusion of Oceanus alludes to the many love affairs of Aurora. Venus punished Aurora for sleeping with Mars by creating in her an unquenchable desire for young men, making her fall in love with a long list of mortals.<sup>18</sup> Following this tradition, Poussin makes the point that Aurora is a *femme fatale*, reinforcing the idea of Cephalus as her victim. Above Oceanus, Pegasus stands ready to serve Aurora.<sup>19</sup> The reclining figure to the left of Pegasus apparently is an earth goddess, since she holds a flower and wears a crown of flowers and wheat. She looks in the direction of Apollo, who vaguely can be made out in his chariot among the clouds at the upper-left, driving his horses toward the center of the picture. It has been claimed that Poussin's painting is an allegory, where Aurora and Apollo allude to the alternating cycle of night and day and these two, in conjunction with the earth goddess and river god, denote the four elements: earth (earth goddess), water (Oceanus), air (Apollo) and fire (Aurora, representing the fiery light of dawn).<sup>20</sup> This interpretation is doubtful, since Apollo is more typically associated with the fire of the sun than with air. Wine suggested a more convincing arrangement of the allegorical elements: Fire (Apollo), earth (earth goddess), water (Oceanus), and Air (Pegasus).<sup>21</sup> In this case, the group of four

15 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 174; Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, p. 299.

16 *Homeric Hymn 5 to Aphrodite*, 218ff.

17 Lavin, 'Cephalus and Procris', p. 284.

18 Apollodorus, *The Library*, 1.27.

19 Lycophron, *Alexandra*, 16ff.

20 Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 105.

21 Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, p. 298.

subordinate figures at the left form the allegory, leaving Aurora out of the scheme, an arrangement that is more logical both compositionally and symbolically.

Poussin depicting Cephalus looking at a picture of Procris provides the motif that will cause Aurora to issue her curse, spelling the destruction first of the wife and then the husband. Aurora represents the double deceit of women: first she tempts Cephalus into an illicit love affair and then she turns to jealous rage as she delivers her curse at the (rightfully) hesitant youth. The male is cast as the hapless victim of female treachery. As with Poussin's *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4), here too the idea of a controlling female bringing about the destruction of a male is an imaginative projection of unnatural feminine authority, the kind of dominance that brings fear to men. The *Cephalus and Aurora* serves as another example of the 'world upside down',<sup>22</sup> where a female (even if a goddess) appropriates the power and sexual authority that was thought of in Poussin's time as rightfully belonging to men.

An educated observer of the painting in Poussin's time likely would have called to mind the story of Cephalus as given in Ovid, since it was intended that such pictures evoke remembered texts. Ovid provides evidence suggesting that the reader look beyond Cephalus's victimhood to his complicity in his love affair with Aurora. He failed to honor his marriage commitment, the *cura* and *amor socialis*.<sup>23</sup> Cephalus is far from innocent and not exclusively the hapless victim of Aurora. His leg entangled with Aurora's points to his own involvement. Poussin's presentation of the subject simultaneously encapsulates the hunter's rejection of the goddess, his anger and sorrow, but also his guilt in adultery. It is, however, the goddess's deception that is the worse, even if she is presented in the painting as loving (or lusting) and gently pleading. She is the one who had abducted the hunter; she became jealous; she issued the curse that spelled death for Cephalus's wife and eventually the hunter himself. The seventeenth-century male viewer of Poussin's painting, recalling Ovid, would imagine the blame to fall principally on her. The most striking feature of Poussin's picture is his representation of the hunter as pained when he is accosted by the lusting goddess: the viewer feels empathy for him and no regard for her.

In this painting Poussin depicts the enticements, dangers, and anguish of physical love at a time when European culture was caught between the religious proscriptions against sexual intercourse outside of marriage and more liberal, positive ideas about love growing from the classical humanist tradition that celebrated physical beauty. Neoplatonism, in particular, was responsible for the conception that the body of a beautiful woman is an earthly reflection of celestial beauty and can lead the male enthusiast to a transcendent and divine level of understanding.<sup>24</sup> Poussin's painting

22 Matthews Grieco, 'Pedagogical Prints, Moralizing Broadsheets and Wayward Women', pp. 61-87.

23 Johnson, 'Confabulating Cephalus', p. 131.

24 Berdini, 'Women under the Gaze', p. 580.



holds these ideas, the dutiful and the humanist, in tension, as the viewer is drawn both to the ideal beauty of the principal figures and to their torment and duplicity. At the same time, Poussin stresses the immediately human, dramatic and emotional aspects of love and its destructiveness more than an erudite neoplatonist or symbolic meaning. A striking feature of Poussin's mythologies is how they join a recreated world of timeless, ideal beauty and a theatrical presentation of dramatic and destructive conflict, precipitated, from a masculine perspective, by the unauthorized and illegitimate superior power of women. In such conflict, Poussin often presents his women as changeable in love and as aggressive sexual predators who destroy men.

Aurora's role as temptress for Poussin's contemporaries would have been judged through the filter of the values of the Christian religious culture and secular prescriptions against sex outside of marriage as much as from the perspective of the classical tradition. In his 1618 edition of Ovid, the *Metamorphoseon*, the classical scholar and Jesuit teacher Jacob Pontanus reveals an attitude active in Poussin's day about the treachery of women. Pontanus was so offended by the sexual explicitness of some of Ovid's tales that he omitted them from his edition, such as the stories of Myrrha's incest (see Fig. 4.7) or Pygmalion's lust. In his commentaries on Ovid's text, Pontanus warns his reader of the lust 'with which women struggled by nature [...] All know that woman, as weak by nature, is violently subject to disturbances of the mind, and can only command herself with difficulty. And so it is no wonder, if we say generally, that women are full of evils'.<sup>25</sup> Aurora's voracious sexual appetite was not only a punishment meted out to her by Venus; it could have been reinforced by the popular medical opinion in Poussin's day that erotic fulfillment was a biological necessity for women, governed as they were by their wombs. Both secular and religious authorities condoned sex only within the context of marriage. 'Sex was subject to a wave of control, [policing], and repression that strove to mold the mores of [people] along lines strictly defined by both church and state'.<sup>26</sup> An interesting corollary of this moral code was that, in this rare instance, women had equality with men. Sex was one of the few activities in which the rights of the wife to her husband's body were equal to his over hers. An extension of this idea is that each had an *exclusive* right to the other's body, that is, each could expect the other to be faithful. This aspect emerges in the Cephalus story when both he and Procris resort to deception to determine the other's fidelity. The modern conceptions that sex may be used for physical pleasure, that it is a means of expressing affection, or that it stimulates emotional bonding of couples were rarely discussed by early modern theorists on sexuality.<sup>27</sup> The ancients, too, recognized the negative side of

25 Quoted in translation in McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine*, pp. 161, 164.

26 Matthews Grieco, 'The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality', pp. 64-65.

27 Sommerville, *Sex and Subjection*, pp. 114, 116.

sex when it was illicit, as reflected in Ovid's fable of Cephalus and Procris. Ovid's story underlines the usual result when the sexual wills of humans and gods compete, that humans invariably suffer in such a confrontation. Cephalus's tale is equally a cautionary one about the sad consequences of sex outside of marriage. While the idea that sex was permissible exclusively within marriage derived from early Christian and medieval thought, it was only in the Counter-Reformation period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that a systematic attack was launched against extramarital intimacy.<sup>28</sup> When contemplating a painting such as *Cephalus and Aurora*, Poussin's audience would have recognized the complexities of sex from multiple perspectives, and, in terms of reception, would not have focused on it only within the framework of ancient classical texts.

One of the results of the restrictive moral imperatives about sex in the official public discourse of Poussin's time was the rise of sexual relations devoid of love, the sole aim of which was to produce a male heir. This unhappy approach to sex was often accompanied, especially in men, by extramarital liaisons. A number of reasons accounted for the much less tolerant treatment of wives than husbands who indulged in love affairs. One was that the husband wanted certainty that his children were truly his own offspring; another was that husbands often treated their wives as property over whom they had the right to demand sexual control. Not only were wives who had extramarital relations condemned, single women who were not prostitutes, especially daughters, who had affairs were also subject to censure, since young women were expected to be virginal at marriage.<sup>29</sup> These cultural attitudes as well would have been carried over by Poussin's contemporaries into their reception of his *Cephalus and Aurora* picture. The goddess would have been doubly condemned for her lust of the married hunter simply because she was a woman. The anguish she caused the young man would have been interpreted as especially cruel by virtue of her female status.

In this picture, Poussin reverses the standard conception of the gaze as found in Renaissance paintings, where the female typically averts her eyes.<sup>30</sup> Far from being a demure female with lowered eyes, Poussin's Aurora is not only the one who looks, she fits the period conception of the sexually aggressive female. She transgresses normal female boundaries by failing to be the object of the gaze; instead she both gazes upon and grasps her male victim. As a goddess, she exerts her sexual prerogatives; but her high status does not prevent the male observer of Poussin's painting from judging her by the gender standards of the day. The eventual deaths of both Procris and Cephalus mark the fatal consequences of her passionate

28 Matthews Grieco, 'The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality', p. 64.

29 Ibid., pp. 81-83.

30 Berdini, 'Women under the Gaze', pp. 566-576.



1.4. Nicolas Poussin, *Diana and Endymion*, c. 1630. Oil on canvas, 122 × 169 cm. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, General Membership Fund (Photo: Detroit Institute of Arts).

but deceptive looking. Cephalus too is represented as looking; as he attempts to break away from Aurora, he regards the picture of his wife with anguished love, a feeling far removed from the lustful gaze that consumes Aurora. As he focuses his attention on his wife's picture, he blocks the gaze of the enticing but treacherous goddess with his right hand.<sup>31</sup> Most likely for this picture's seventeenth-century male observers, Cephalus was viewed as blameless; it was Aurora alone who was perceived as the villain in this story.

Like *Cephalus and Aurora*, the story of *Diana and Endymion* centers on female predation. The moon goddess Diana (or Selene) is known for making love obsessively each night to the lowly shepherd Endymion while he is lost in an endless sleep. Poussin's version of the myth, *Diana and Endymion* (c. 1630, Detroit Institute of Arts, Figs. 1.4, 1.5), may have been purchased directly from the artist in Rome by Cardinal Mazarin in 1632-33.

31 Badt, *Die Kunst des Nicolas Poussin*, p. 516.



1.5. Nicolas Poussin, *Diana and Endymion*, detail, c.1630. Oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, General Membership Fund (Photo: Detroit Institute of Arts).

It is unique, differing from all earlier painted renditions of the story. The artist avoided the conventional approach used by previous painters, including Annibale Carracci (Fig. 1.6), where Endymion is represented asleep while the goddess draws near or embraces him. Poussin's version shows a love-struck and pleading Endymion, awake and kneeling before an imperious Diana. His new conception of the myth is not based on an ancient text, but on Jean Ogier de Gombauld's *L'Endimion*, a book-length mythological romance published in 1624, a few years before the artist painted his picture.<sup>32</sup>

Poussin's borrowings from Gombauld's work focus especially on the emotions of the figures, particularly the shepherd's anxiety over losing his consciousness. Both Poussin and Gombauld create narratives in which Diana controls Endymion's love. Such domination would not have been understood by Poussin's seventeenth-century male viewers as a sign of true female superiority, but served as a mythical projection of men imagining women in control of love, which through patriarchal inversion assigns blame to females for their power over men.

The painting's narrative focuses in particular on Endymion's emotional state as he kneels before Diana. His pose reveals his deep love for the goddess, but also his awe and apprehension. His eyes are damp with tears and he seems to speak as he raises his hands (Fig. 1.5). Diana, by contrast, is noble and regal, with her head shown in sharp profile. Her face, expressionless except for the intensity of her gaze at Endymion, suggests her absolute power over the mortal, but her receptiveness and concern are denoted by the consoling hand she places on his shoulder as she tries to calm him.

The other figures in the painting are handled in an essentially iconic manner, establishing for the narrative the contexts of time and place. More importantly, they point to the iconographic relationship between sleep and the waking state and thus set the stage for Endymion's appeal to Diana as the approaching daylight signals the end of their nightly tryst. That the time is dawn is indicated in the background by the sun god, intent upon mastering his horses in his daily journey. He is accompanied by a flying *putto* holding a torch and by Aurora, goddess of dawn, leading Apollo on his way as she sprinkles flower petals. Poussin paints a crescent moon in early morning light in the process of being overtaken by the more intense light of the sun visible behind Apollo. In a visual tour-de-force, Poussin shows the transition from night to day through a stunning allegory: the solid, winged figure of Nox (night) at the right pulls aside the curtain of night to reveal the chariot of Apollo sweeping across the sky. Somnus, the god of sleep, slumbers on the ground at the right with two drowsy *putti* below him. Poussin shows a little cupid fluttering at Diana's shoulder, whispering in her ear. Perhaps he urges her to grant the shepherd the immortal love for which he asks. The cupid's proximity to Diana, complemented

32 Thomas, 'Poussin, Gombauld, and the Creation of *Diana and Endymion*', pp. 620-641.



1.6. Annibale Carracci, *Diana and Endymion*, 1597-1600. Fresco. Farnese Gallery Ceiling, Rome (Photo © Luisa Ricciarini/Bridgeman Images).

by a lack of any such figure for Endymion, serves to underscore her divine status and his humble mortality. His sheep appear in the background, and a hound at the left belonging to the goddess indicates that at dawn Selene transforms herself into Diana as she prepares for her daily activity of hunting. On a symbolic level, Night and Sleep represent both the temporal and eternal: the diurnal/nocturnal cycle endlessly repeats, but night is also equated with death as it alludes to Endymion's perpetual sleep in the embrace of his lover.

Several different versions of the Endymion myth were told in antiquity. In the most well-known version of the story, Apollodorus says of Endymion: 'As he was of surpassing beauty, the Moon fell in love with him, and Zeus allowed him to choose what he would, and he chose to sleep forever, remaining deathless and ageless'.<sup>33</sup> The implication here is that Endymion asks for immortal youth and sleep so that the goddess Diana can prolong her pleasant love affair with him. With one significant change, Poussin represents this bare bones account of the story. The artist ignores Apollodorus's inclusion of Zeus in order to keep the story as compact and dramatic

33 Apollodorus, *The Library*, 1.7.5.

as possible. He focuses on his pair of lovers, showing Endymion asking for his wish before Diana rather than Zeus. In making this change, Poussin is in agreement with Cicero's account of the myth where Zeus is not mentioned.<sup>34</sup> In Poussin's representation of this moment when Endymion asks Diana to grant him eternal youth in sleep, it seems clear that the goddess influences his choice because of her own sensual desires. She holds all the power in this relationship and, as usual in such interchanges between gods and mortals, she arranges things to her liking. Endymion is so in love with Diana that he is willing to make the difficult decision to give up his consciousness. The gods cruelly force him to take this option.

Endymion's attitude in Poussin's picture is one of deep love and earnest entreaty. His pose suggests an ardency that may be explained in several ways. Poussin's conceit focuses on a temporal drama highlighting the urgency of Endymion's appeal to Diana that he remain in her eternal embrace and that he not be forced to leave her as dawn approaches. The youth kneels in awe before Diana, whose power over him is complete, since she can allow him to live forever in the ambience of her love. The shepherd's sense of his inferiority in the face of Diana's dominance in the painting is mirrored in Gombauld's poem. There, Endymion speaks of how his perceptions as a mortal are frail compared to hers as a god, and how his senses must be dulled by sleep so as not to be overpowered by her much stronger ones.<sup>35</sup>

Endymion's emotional reaction to Diana in the picture is complex: he exhibits love, even awe, but also anxiety in his facial expression and hand gestures. His raised hands convey his wonderment at the goddess's beauty and power, but, indirectly, they also mutually welcome (left) and repel (right) her. Endymion's unease can be explained by his realization that, as Diana presides over his impending death-like sleep, his own desire to be eternally in her arms requires that he renounce his conscious waking state forever. The painter exploited the negative aspect of Endymion's decision to sleep forever in order to heighten the dramatic and symbolic meaning of his painting. Endymion's agitation over his approaching 'sleep' may be taken as a metaphor for the power in love that all women hold over men, and men's apprehension that when they submit to the dominance of women, they relinquish their masculine authority.

Crispin de Passe's second plate in Gombauld's *L'Endimion* illustrates the shepherd kneeling before Diana that undoubtedly served as Poussin's source for this motif (Fig. 1.7).

In addition, several passages from Gombauld's *L'Endimion* help to explain a number of iconographic and expressive features of Poussin's painting. Passages from pages 32–35 read as follows:

34 Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.38.92.

35 Gombauld, *L'Endimion*, pp. 54–55.



1.7. Crispin de Passe the Younger, *Endymion Kneeling before Diana*, plate 2 from Jean Ogier de Gombauld, *L'Endimion*, Paris: Nicolas Buon, 1624 (Photo: Getty Research Institute, Internet Archive).



The Night had already begun to furl up her sails [...] I saw before me [...] a woman [...] but having a little nearer observed her beauty, her stature, and more than human majesty, I knew that she was one of the Goddesses. With what terms now shall I possibly express that which then my eyes fearfully regarded? [...] Behold beauty itself accompanied by an everlasting youth, and such as can suffer neither accident, alteration, nor insult. Oh, how far the divine beauties [...] are different from these here below! [...] But above all, this good fortune was clear to me when, perceiving the bow she held in her hand, and the crescent that shone upon her head, I found her to be the Goddess to whom my heart addressed all its vows: from her I imagined the day became bright, and not from the rising of the Sun.<sup>36</sup>

A striking feature of these passages is that, like Poussin's painting, they focus on two interrelated events: night gives way to day, and Endymion does not sleep when Diana approaches, but is awake, overcome by her beauty. While ancient Roman sarcophagi often signified the appearance of dawn by showing Apollo in his chariot, they invariably depicted Diana approaching a sleeping Endymion, who in this context symbolized the deceased (Fig. 1.8).

Poussin chose instead to focus on the dramatic moment when the shepherd is overwhelmed by the goddess's beauty. The artist thus transformed the usual presentation of this subject, shifting the focus from the iconography of death (although not entirely abandoning that symbolism) to exploring the narrative possibilities of a painting about troubled love.

Another important aspect of Gombauld's text and Poussin's painting is that in both cases Endymion is represented as speaking. Gombauld has Endymion speak in the first person, addressing the reader as he reports his responses to the appearance of the goddess; by contrast, Poussin's Endymion speaks to Diana. In this discursive act the shepherd provokes the viewer to recall texts that recount the myth, in an intertextual process.

A reading of Gombauld's lines quoted above makes it apparent that one of Poussin's most brilliant conceits in his painting, his representation of Nox pulling aside

36 Gombauld, *L'Endimion*, pp. 32-35: 'Des-ja la nuit commençoit à plier ses voiles [...] ie vis deuant moy [...] vne femme [...] mais si tost que i'eus tant soit peu consideré sa beauté, sa taille, et sa majesté plus qu'humaine, ie recognus bien que c'estoit quelqu'vne d'entre les Deesses. De quels termes pourra maintenant ma bouche exprimer ce qu'alors mes yeux peurent voir ? [...] consideres la Beauté mesme accompagnée d'vne éternelle ieunesse, & qui par nul accident ne peut souffrir ny de changement, ny d'outrage. O que les beautez celestes [...] sont differentes de celles d'icy bas! [...] Mais sur tout que ce bon-heur me fut sensible, quand ayant apperceu l'arc qu'elle tenoit dans sa main, & le Croissant qui luisoit sur sa teste, ie recognus que c'estoit la Deesse à qui mon coeur addressoit tous ses vœux. De ce costé-là croyois-je venir le iour, & non pas du leuer du Soleil'.



1.8. Roman sarcophagus, *Selene and Endymion*, early third century AD. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1947 (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

the curtain of night, was almost certainly suggested by a literary trope in Gombauld's text ('The Night had already begun to furl up her sails'). Poussin's refashioning of Gombauld's nautical metaphor of Night furling up her sails would have required a process of mediation. In translating this verbal image into a visual one consistent with his landscape setting, the artist had to alter the trope somewhat: the dark curtain of night (*one* curtain only) replaces the plural sails, and is attached to a high tree limb as Nox reaches to move it. In spite of the metaphorical shift, the parallel with Gombauld's text is striking. Poussin's conception of Nox pulling away the curtain is as brilliant a metaphor in visual terms as Gombauld's furled sails are in his verbal one.

The artist shows his imaginative genius in choosing to set his scene at dawn, the time described by Gombauld and made evident in the painting by the revelation of Apollo behind Nox's curtain. The intense sunlight outshining the moon in the background of the picture reinforces the idea that at dawn Diana makes the transition to her daytime activity of hunting. Gombauld implies this through his reference to the goddess's bow, which in Poussin's painting becomes an arrow, the particular instrument of Cupid and a suggestion of how love-smitten Endymion has become. The painter's Diana wears a crescent moon in her hair, her ubiquitous symbol likewise mentioned by Gombauld. As in Gombauld's text, Poussin's Diana exhibits a majestic and godlike bearing in striking and dignified profile. At the same time, Poussin's Endymion fixes his gaze on the goddess, overwhelmed by her beauty. His deep love for her is already apparent, as in Gombauld's text.

In Book Two, Gombauld mentions Aurora and once again the Sun: 'By this time the Sky began to brighten a little towards the East, and foretell the rising of Aurora from one end of the earth to the other [...] before the Sun had displayed his first

beams'.<sup>37</sup> Once he has named Aurora, within the space of six pages across Books One and Two Gombauld has identified all of the figures in Poussin's painting with the exception of the four *putti*: Diana, Endymion, Apollo, Aurora, Nox, and Somnus are all accounted for on pages 32–35, 54, and 90–91 of Gombauld's text. So while Crispin de Passe's engraving shows only two of Poussin's personages, namely Diana and Endymion, Gombauld's text describes all six principal figures. His text accounts for the emotions, expressions, and poses of Diana and Endymion, features in the painting that are otherwise hard to explain. Nevertheless, Poussin goes beyond illustrating Gombauld's romance to create a work that is uniquely his. He moves away from Gombauld by coordinating these figures into a coherent visual structure with its own narrative. He departs from this text, going back to the original Endymion myth as given in Apollodorus's account by representing the dramatic moment when the shepherd asks for everlasting love in sleep. In the process of borrowing his *dramatis personae* from Gombauld, Poussin reconfigures and organizes them to make one of the most profound interpretations in painting of the Endymion myth.

During a second meeting of Diana and Endymion in Book Two, Gombauld seems to draw out and suspend the time between night and day: 'instead of finding an increase of light, I seemed to remain wholly between the night and the day'.<sup>38</sup> Poussin not only builds his setting around exactly that transition from night to day, but integrates his diurnal and nocturnal symbolic figures with his two key protagonists to establish the temporal urgency of the shepherd's request for immortality. The same feelings towards Diana that Gombauld's Endymion recounts in Book Two can account for the complex mixture of passions in Poussin's uneasy shepherd—joy, respect, and fear:

Shortly after I saw a crescent appear [...] My eyes were suddenly dazzled, and my heart so moved with a continual panting, that I could hardly settle it. At length, having regained my sight, I perceived it was Diana, who, as I thought, had her eyes fixed upon me, before I saw her [...] I stopped suddenly, finding my soul wholly possessed at the same instant with joy, respect, and fear.<sup>39</sup>

37 Gombauld, *L'Endimion*, pp. 90–91: 'Or des-ja vne petite partie du Ciel commençoit de blanchir vers l'Orient, & d'annoncer d'un bout du monde à l'autre, le leuer de l'Aurore [...] plustost que le Soleil n'eust montré ses premiers rayons'.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 93: 'au lieu de voir croistre la lumiere, il sembloit que ie demeurasse tousiours entre la nuit & le jour'.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99: 'Bien-tost apres, je vis paroistre vn Croissant [...] Mes yeux en furent soudain esbloüis, et mon coeur esmeu d'un battement continuel, que j'auois peine d'arrester. En fin ayant r'asseuré ma veuë, je recognus que c'estoit Diane, qui selon ce que je peus juger auoit les yeux sur moy deuant que je l'eusse apperceüe [...] Je m'arrestay tout court, & sentis mon ame en ce mesme instant saisie de ioye, & ensemble de respect & de crainte'.

Poussin was indebted to Crispin de Passe for Endymion's kneeling pose, a motif not explicitly described in Gombauld's text. Crispin de Passe's Endymion, however, reveals no emotional turmoil; for that, Poussin consulted Gombauld's text, where Endymion's inner struggle is brought out in the moments between his pleasurable dreams of Diana and his loss of consciousness. Poussin's great conception of a love-stricken Endymion who earnestly pleads before Diana derives not from Crispin de Passe's lifeless engraving, but from Gombauld's richly nuanced text.

In his Endymion, who is by turns loving and fearful, adoring and conflicted, yearning and despairing, Gombauld follows both classical and contemporary literary precedents for representing the unstable and contrary signs within a patriarchal tradition of a superior female governing a dependent male. Gombauld's text is one of many that exemplifies how men, who actually possess sexual power, typically evoke the fantasy of absolute female erotic rule as a means of holding women responsible for seduction and control. In this paradigm, blame is assigned to females for their power over men. Poussin likewise confronts the issue of power relations between the two principal figures in his *Diana and Endymion*, with its representation of a dominant female and a passive male. Through his incisive visual rhetoric the artist creates in paint an equivalent to the controlling female described in Gombauld's text. However subtly, Poussin's Endymion reverberates with the long tradition of literary and visual examples in which female rule enforces male passivity, leading in this case to eventual surrender in unconscious sexual activity and a death-like oblivion. In Poussin's picture, the shepherd's staff lies inertly upon the ground while a potent arrow is held by Diana, who appropriates this male sexual symbol. Endymion is emasculated in another way: even though he is dressed, the artist covers his genital area with his raised left leg, a strategy that further diminishes his virility.

Poussin's Diana is not the lusty female described by Lucian in his *Dialogues of the Gods*; she embodies the painter's conception of ideal womanhood. She is reserved and dignified, as he imagined her to be in ancient Greek art. Poussin equally based her admirable beauty on what he read in Gombauld, that her allure and grace caused Endymion's beguilement: 'but having a little nearer observed her beauty, her stature, and more than human majesty, I knew that she was one of the Goddesses [...] Oh, how far the divine beauties [...] are different from these here below!<sup>40</sup> In both Gombauld's text and Poussin's picture, Diana's loveliness brings Endymion anguish and a concerned love. Although Poussin renders Diana as beautiful, he declines to represent her as erotically aggressive because her reserve

40 Ibid., pp. 33-35: 'mais si tost que i'eus tant soit peu consideré sa beauté, sa taille, & sa majesté plus qu'humaine, ie recognus bien que c'estoit quelqu'vne d'entre les Deesses [...] O que les beautez celestes [...] sont differentes de celles d'icy bas!'

is what is required for his conception of an anxious and love-struck Endymion to work. Diana's classical restraint serves to mask both her female sexual authority and the idea that women are more consumed with sex than men. The view of females as unchecked in their erotic appetites was a prejudice derived from ancient Greek and Roman theories of the body and from the Christian demonization of sex that had a long tradition extending from St. Augustine up to Poussin's day and beyond. The Diana of the painting is a model of ideal female deportment—she is quiet and temperate, and stands silently and calmly. Through her restraint she exhibits a trait thought of as commendable by men; for example the seventeenth-century writer Philip Stubbes described the perfect woman as having 'modesty, courtesy, gentleness'.<sup>41</sup> Poussin plays with Diana's virginal reputation: the white color of her beautifully painted gown is appropriate for one who represents the female heavenly body, the moon; this color was associated with purity, chastity, and femininity.<sup>42</sup> Even so, the artist alludes in his dignified Diana to the sexual excesses for which she is also known: her same white gown falls seductively off her shoulder, partly exposing her right breast. Her legs, too, are revealed by her gown, which sensuously pulls between her thighs and wraps around her calves, caressing the inner part of each. Caught by the wind, part of her gown flutters in front of her, gently touching Endymion's left leg. Her long hair, also blown by the wind, is pulled around in front, moving towards Endymion's face. The Diana of the Endymion myth exemplified what was considered worst in women, erotic obsession and engagement in sex outside of marriage. If a real woman had behaved this way, she would have been regarded with contempt. As a goddess, Diana was not subject to the moral self-discipline that was expected of ordinary women; gods were known for their dalliance. But the seventeenth-century male viewer could not help but project the standards of sexual behavior expected of ordinary women into a mythological painting such as this. Poussin's Diana would have been regarded as mediating between her admirable restraint and regal bearing with which she is actually represented in the painting and her lusty sexual appetite that is known from the myth. The male viewer would have allowed her sexual transgressions to color his image of her and would have held her accountable for possessing power over men.

At the same time, Poussin violates in this work the humanist principle of the virtuous and passive female by representing Diana as looking intently at Endymion. Although her authority to look is based on her status as goddess, as a female she is governed nevertheless by patriarchal conceptions of women transgressing male prerogatives. Even powerful goddesses such as Diana could be perceived as

41 Stubbes, *A Crystal Glass for Christian Women*, p. 238.

42 Matthews Grieco, 'The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality', p. 62.

illegitimately appropriating the male right to look and thus serve as a negative model of womanhood.<sup>43</sup> As a goddess bent on sexual conquest, Diana was, in her mythical construction, designed to disobey rules and cross boundaries created by men. She represents the fear that males have of women who are more powerful than they and who have the capacity to destroy them. In the Endymion myth, Diana is a creature of the male imagination who preys upon fears of superior women governing their behavior. By virtue of her status as a formidable goddess easily able to control the besotted and disturbed Endymion, Diana's domination in the love relationship depicted in this picture seems total. But her triumph is illusory when considered from the point of view of the seventeenth-century male spectator. He was likely to conceive her as an exemplar of the hyper-sexual female exercising an illicit erotic power over a man. Seen in this way, Diana fails to triumph over the male; instead, she is held accountable for her unwelcome domination in love.

In delegating authority to the female, Poussin creates a reversal of power as found in engravings and broadsheets depicting the 'World Upside Down', popular images of the time that were supposed to demonstrate in a comical way what the world would be like if women and other underlings were put in charge of society and its institutions. A typical example of such inversion appears in Fig. 1.9, where, in a print of the 1570s attributed to Giulio Sanuto, *Così v'è il mondo alla riversa*, we see in the center a feminized man wearing a woman's dress kneeling before a superior female dressed as a soldier. In Poussin's conception the role reversal of Diana and Endymion is treated seriously, not humorously, in keeping with the artist's dignified approach to classical subjects.

But when Poussin shows female control over the male, and the destruction of the male's sexual authority, the artist presents a reversal of customary gender roles very much like the engravings of the 'World Upside Down' tradition. Males in the seventeenth century would have grated at the prospect of kneeling in submission before a woman, as Endymion does. Endymion's forced adoption of the role of sexual subordinate is not unlike the traditional role of the female kept for sexual purposes, the prostitute.

From the scopophilic point of view of the male gaze, Diana is perceived by Endymion as exemplifying a classical ideal of womanhood, in the perfection of her features, and may even be called 'Apollonian' in her dignified restraint. This is so even as she is sexualized through the eroticism of her clinging white *peplos* and her hair, as described above. She may be defined as spectacle, erotic for the shepherd and the (implicit male) viewer alike. She represents the danger of power and beauty mixed together, giving rise to Endymion's awe and anxiety. When Endymion gives

43 On the appropriately modest female who lowers her eyes in the presence of men, see Berdini, 'Women under the Gaze', pp. 566-576.



1.9. Giulio Sanuto (attributed to), *Così va il mondo alla roversa*, c. 1570-1580. Engraving, 39.5 × 50.3 cm. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin (Photo courtesy Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin).

up his sentience, he also gives up sexual control. The male viewer, empathizing with Endymion's plight, feels discomfort in looking at him.

Even as Poussin presents Diana as a sexual aggressor, she remains detached, regal, and passive. Women were normally portrayed as passive in seventeenth-century paintings, and often simultaneously as erotically objectified, whereas men were normally conceived as active. That is indeed the case here, where the static Diana is contrasted to the physically active Endymion. Poussin's presentation of the protagonists reverses another stereotypical approach, where the man remains rational while the female is emotional. Here, the woman, if not rational, is in any case immobile and reserved, while the male is carried away by love, emotion, and anxiety.

In focalizing Endymion, in seeing the picture from his point of view as the active (or reactive) agent, the male observer establishes an empathic identification with the shepherd and a collateral distrust of the power of Diana, even if at first her nobility and regal aspect may have precluded a negative appraisal of her moral

state. A tension is created in the painting between the goddess's depicted nobility and her role as sexual aggressor. This tension was most likely intentional on the part of the artist. Like most of his other mythologies, this one embraces a heroic and ideal conception of the gods, with noble gestures and a sense of an elevated perfection. At the same time, Poussin's mythologies depict stories of the gods that include their self-serving sexual exploitations and jealousies, where the deities seem much less exalted. Poussin's serious approach is dramatic, theatrical, but also paradoxical. The tension in his mythologies between his art's seriousness and nobility of presentation on the one side and the gods' questionable, impulsive behaviors on the other points to an issue he addressed in his letters, namely the fickleness of fortune, an idea that in turn implies a tragic view of existence.

Diana's beauty and destructive behavior, seemingly unconnected traits, in fact had a commonality based on period conceptions of the female nature. In his *Dialogo della bellezza delle donne, intitolato Celso* (1548), Agnolo Firenzuola defined women's beauty by qualities including *leggiadria* (loveliness, charm), *grazia* (grace), and *vaghezza* (beauty).<sup>44</sup> These qualities cannot be grasped by reason, but are elusive. Philip Sohm outlines how these traits derive ultimately from Aristotelian conventions characterizing women as inconstant, vacillating, and unstable. Michelangelo Biondo and Francesco Bocchi described the beauty of women as transitory and amorphous, like smoke. Such views on woman's beauty and inconstancy are two sides of the same coin: women are alluring but also destructive.<sup>45</sup>

Poussin follows Gombauld in presenting his Diana as regal and with a divine perfection of beauty. In doing so, the artist points to the neoplatonic tradition where the woman's admirer (in this case Endymion) is inspired to rise to thoughts of divinity through the conduit of his lady's unsurpassed loveliness. But the moral elevation of the soul that is supposed to be the result of the male's admiration, in this case, as I have argued, is stringently conditioned by another emotion that Poussin's Endymion reveals: anxiety or apprehension. Unlike the impression that Diana makes on Endymion in Gombauld's text, where she is ready to transport the shepherd to immortality among the stars as a result of his awe before her beauty, in Poussin's canvas we do not find unalloyed spiritual rapture in the herdsman's expression. While Gombauld presents a Diana of the courtly love tradition (because in his text, Diana is a stand-in for Marie de' Medici, to whom his book-length poem is dedicated), Poussin portrays a Diana who offers the questionable prospect of endless sleep in place of celestial immortality, and a more complex and troubled Endymion. In his dramatic approach, featuring an anxious Endymion, Poussin explores in a richer, deeper way than his predecessors in art the story of the shepherd and his goddess.

44 Firenzuola, *Opere*, pp. 763-773.

45 Sohm, 'Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism', pp. 765, 773.



The *Diana and Endymion* painting may have a biographical connection with Poussin and his marriage. In 1630, when this picture probably was made, the artist had just overcome a serious illness brought on by the effects of syphilis.<sup>46</sup> He decided to marry in part to avoid future contagion from this disease. The painting might be autobiographical on the level of alluding to the artist, in the guise of Endymion, kneeling before his new wife, Anne-Marie Dughet, with the implication that he is submitting to her sexually. He directs his intimate desires to her alone within the safe confines of marriage as she exercises sexual power over him.

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46 Wilberding, 'Poussin's Illness in 1629', p. 561.

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## 2. The Lustful—Triumphant, Impulsive, Spying, Conquered

### Abstract

Poussin explores the full range of lust and uninhibited sexual desire in his mythological works, from jubilant exuberance and celebration of passion in his *Triumph of Pan* and *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus*, to the impulsive erotic infatuation of Armida in his two versions of *Rinaldo and Armida*; and from shepherds and satyrs spying upon females in *Venus Espied by Shepherds* and *Landscape with Polyphemus*, to lust and love conquered in *Amor Vincit Pan* and *Venus and Mercury*. He examines every aspect of desire: love's triumph, its darker impulses, and finally its defeat.

**Keywords:** Lust, Triumph, Impulsiveness, Spying, Conquered

Poussin explores the full range of lust and uninhibited sexual desire in his mythological works, from jubilant exuberance and celebration of passion in his *Triumph of Pan* and *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus*, to the impulsive erotic infatuation of Armida in his two versions of *Rinaldo and Armida*; and from shepherds and satyrs spying upon females in *Venus Espied by Shepherds* and *Landscape with Polyphemus*, to lust and love conquered in *Amor Vincit Pan* and *Venus and Mercury*. He examines every aspect of desire: love's triumph, its darker impulses, and finally its defeat. It is sometimes thought that Poussin elected to paint scenes that aroused sexual desire in his male audience early in his career, before he became famous, in order to make money at a time when he was struggling to survive in the art world.<sup>1</sup> In fact, he created scenes of erotic delectation throughout his career, not just at the beginning. Even among his late works, sexualized females are found, as in his *Landscape with Polyphemus*, which includes the highly erotically charged image of lecherous satyrs spying on naked nymphs, a repetition of the same

<sup>1</sup> Standring, 'Poussin's Erotica', p. 88, discusses this issue in connection with Poussin's clients and painting practices.

motif found in one of his earliest extant paintings, the Dresden *Venus Espied by Shepherds*. Other late pictures with nude nymphs include his *Birth of Bacchus* (1657, Cambridge, MA), and his final work, the *Apollo and Daphne* (1664, Paris). While it is true that erotic nudes are more often encountered in his early works, he continued to produce such imagery throughout his career, right up to his last painting.

Poussin's *Triumph of Pan* (1635-1636, National Gallery, London, Fig. 2.1) seems a straightforward scene of good-natured erotic ebullience, with satyrs, fauns, and nymphs cavorting and celebrating before a herm of the god Pan, whose name, the sixteenth-century mythographer Natale Conti reminds us, means 'All', in the sense of 'all of nature'. Implied homoeroticism and zoophilia, however, complicate possible meanings of the painting, considering its placement in Cardinal Richelieu's Cabinet du roi of his château at Poitou. Poussin's *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus* (1634-1638, Museu de Arte, São Paulo, Fig. 2.16) shows decently-clad women dancing in a restrained manner; they seem unduly tame, given that they dance before Priapus, the lusty god of gardens. The erotic nature of the scene is indeed exposed in the herm Priapus's erect phallus, a detail that came to light during a restoration of the work in 2009. However, the overall restrained character of the painting may indicate that Poussin conceived it not as a mythological scene, but as a historical episode from Attic legend featuring the Athenian youth Hymenaios taking part in secret Eleusinian rituals in honor of Demeter. In his two versions of *Rinaldo and Armida* (1627, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Fig. 2.18; c. 1628, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, Fig. 2.19), Poussin follows Tasso, who in his *Gerusalemme liberata* characterizes the Saracen witch Armida as embodying the worst characteristics of women: she is guileful, lustful, and irrational. Just as she is about to kill her sworn enemy, the sleeping Christian knight Rinaldo, she falls in love with him, exhibiting womanly capriciousness as she peruses his pretty, feminized, pink cheeks. Whereas Tasso had provided Armida with a multitude of misogynistic traits, Poussin focuses on the dramatic climax of the story, by representing in each of his two canvases slightly different narrative moments when her hatred turns to love. Tasso was an unapologetic misogynist, as Lucrezia Marinella demonstrated in her critique of his *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca* (Venice, 1582), but Poussin gives the witch a classical nobility in his two renderings of her, even if he also catches her changeable female nature. The goddess in Poussin's *Venus Espied by Shepherds* (c. 1625, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, Fig. 2.7) appears to be a victim of male perusal, but she accedes to male desire by putting herself on display. She therefore authorizes their gaze. Poussin's presentation of the subject implies that both the shepherds and the male viewer of the painting are simple innocents who have accidentally stumbled upon a naked goddess. The body of Venus is arranged more for the delectation of the intended male viewer of the picture than for the shepherds, who serve as models of behavior

granting the observer authority to look. The theme of spying on beautiful women appears again in the foreground of Poussin's late *Landscape with Polyphemus* (1649, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Fig. 2.21). Satyrs hide behind bushes at the right as they secretly observe three nymphs, the most prominent of whom is undoubtedly Galatea. She casts a smile in the direction of the viewer, who seems to be meant to focalize the women along with the satyrs, as a voyeur. The scene implies that in this ideal, mythical realm, spying upon women is accommodated or naturalized, implicitly underscoring the innocence of voyeurism. Poussin's early drawing of *Amor Vincit Pan* (c. 1625-1627, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 2.22) is an allegory in which the little winged cupid represents *Anteros*, spiritual love, while the goat-legged Pan symbolizes *Eros*, physical desire. The drawing shows cupid restraining Pan by pulling on one of his horns, humorously preventing him from attacking a nymph. The scene thus illustrates the triumph of noble love over the animal passions. Male sexual aggression is represented by Pan, but this theme is conveyed in a light-hearted manner, as something not to be taken seriously. Poussin's early *Venus and Mercury* (c. 1627-1629, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, Fig. 2.23) also takes up the theme of the base passions conquered. Here, the goddess of love and Mercury appear with their child, Cupid, who struggles with a goat-footed baby Pan. Cupid symbolizes *Anteros*, spiritual love, while the baby Pan signifies *Eros*, or carnal love. Higher love as represented in this painting features the conspicuously erotic, naked figures of Venus and Mercury. Poussin's presentation of the subject in this way may be characterized as parodic, because of the unsustainable contrast between the allegorical component of high-minded spiritual love and the sensualized figures of Venus and Mercury, and because of the way in which the erotic Venus responds unenthusiastically to Mercury's instructions about the virtues of higher love.

The women depicted by Poussin in this and the preceding chapter are cast in a negative light: Aurora and Diana in *Cephalus and Aurora* and *Diana and Endymion* are presented as destructive in their sexual aggression; the females in the *Triumph of Pan* make themselves sexually available; in *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus* the women celebrate uninhibited sexuality; and Armida in *Rinaldo and Armida* is driven by lust. Furthermore, Venus and Galatea in *Venus Espied by Shepherds* and *Landscape with Polyphemus* are displayed for sexually-motivated predatory spying; the nymph in *Amor Vincit Pan* accedes to a male point of view in her playful chastisement of the sexually aggressive Pan; and Venus in *Venus and Mercury* resists with coolness Mercury's advice to conquer the base passions. In sum, the women in these works reinforce the seventeenth-century patriarchal attitudes that women are hypersexual, available for scopophilic inspection, and accommodate male sexual desire.

The lively ebullience and erotic suggestiveness of Nicolas Poussin's *Triumph of Pan* (Fig. 2.1) are typical of his Bacchanals that recreate an imagined mythical past devoid



2.1. Nicolas Poussin, *Triumph of Pan*, 1635-1636. Oil on canvas, 134 × 145 cm. National Gallery, London, bought with contributions from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund, 1982 (Photo © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY).

of social or sexual constraints. Félibien's view was that Poussin wanted to show in his Bacchanals the 'playful manners' (*'manieres enjouées'*) appropriate for such works, but that the artist 'nevertheless has done so with more gravity and modesty than many other painters who have taken too many liberties'.<sup>2</sup> One might reasonably agree with Félibien in thinking of Poussin's goal as establishing cheerful energy in his scene of Pan but also tasteful restraint. Félibien's view that Poussin represents a spirited amorousness among his figures is undeniably correct, and their apparent

<sup>2</sup> Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages*, pp.156-157: 'il a cependant toujours conservé plus de gravité & de modestie que beaucoup d'autres Peintres qui ont pris de trop grandes libertez'.

propriety might be inferred from their camaraderie and the good-natured vigor of their exertions. But another reading of the picture is possible: the details could be construed to imply unusual, even illicit erotic activity. A man and young faun at the right struggle to lift a drunken satyr (the faun's right hand grabbing the satyr's leg to lift him is clearer in the drawing for this subject at Windsor Castle than in the painting.) The intimacy of this group, with the naked man hugging the drunken satyr from behind, could suggest homoeroticism, and, because of the satyr's mixed status as human and animal, also zoophilia. In addition, the frolicking young faun, whose body is touched near his genitals by the satyr's hoof, could imply pederasty. This theme is continued in the vase on the ground in front of this group, which depicts two men embracing, following a print by Marcantonio Raimondi that is in turn based on an antique Dionysian frieze of Silenus and a young male bacchant.<sup>3</sup> A smiling, semi-nude maenad in the center foreground playfully pretends to fend off a satyr by pulling his hair. With one hand, the satyr tries to nab a wine-filled vessel held by the maenad, implying drunkenness; with his other hand, he lifts her skirt. His head almost touches the rump of the man who lifts the satyr to his right, while the backside of the aforementioned maenad is overlapped slightly by the head of a ram to her left, suggesting that the animal is butting her. Another woman at the left sitting on this ram seductively revels a leg as she allows the man behind her to embrace her freely. With her left hand this woman reaches for flowers in a basket held on the head of a mature kneeling faun at the far left. This faun thrusts his left arm suggestively under the hindquarters of the ram, with the result that the animal smiles like the humans; zoophilia is again implied. To the right of center, a nymph in the act of decking the smiling herm of Pan with flowers familiarly rests her right hand on its shoulder. With her left hand she reaches for another garland in a basket held by a child; in the process her finger tickles the chin of this smiling baby. Poussin borrowed the motif of the nymph garlanding the herm from an engraving of the *Sacrifice to Priapus* after Giulio Romano; the corybant at the left blowing a trumpet is taken from the same engraving.<sup>4</sup> Behind these figures we see two nymphs: one at the left carries a deer for sacrifice and at the right another plays a tambourine.

The imagery in the painting is complex: its tone is 'playful', following Félibien, but it could be interpreted as lacking this same critic's 'gravity and modesty'; rather, it could imply an indecent eroticism. Poussin no doubt intended to match, even exceed, the lighthearted and joyous manner of a passage from his chief literary source, Ovid's *Fasti*, going further by injecting elements of erotic humor into the scene. The artist seems to posit the idea that such playful indecorousness was part of an imagined mythological world of the remote past.

3 Cole, 'The Mask of Dionysus', pp. 248-249; 252-253.

4 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, pp. 203-204.





2.2. Titian, *Worship of Venus*, 1518–1519. Oil on canvas, 172 × 175 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid (Photo: Museo del Prado, Madrid/HIP/Art Resource, NY).

Through the observer's inclination and close scrutiny, the painting holds the potential for alternative interpretations, focusing on frolicsome innocence or frank sexual license. Viewer response is an important element in regarding this work. The picture presents ancient ritualistic revelry in all its chaotic complexity, as simultaneously innocent and indecently erotic, or as one or the other, depending on the observer's perception. Like his forebear Titian, whose *Bacchanals for Alfonso d'Este* (*Worship of Venus*—Fig. 2.2; *Bacchus and Ariadne*—Fig. 2.3; *The Andrians*—Fig. 2.4) served as his models for this and the other two mythologies he painted for Cardinal Richelieu's



2.3. Titian, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1522-1523. Oil on canvas, 176.5 × 191 cm. National Gallery, London, bought 1826 (Photo © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY).

Cabinet du roi in the mid-1630s, Poussin neither moralizes nor condemns antique pagan rites; he presents the multiplicity of ancient mythological sexuality by showing ‘the ambivalent values Eros represents.’<sup>5</sup>

It should be kept in mind that Poussin most likely never saw the Renaissance pictures from Isabella d’Este’s *Studiolo* that Richelieu hung with his two (and ultimately three) *Triumphs* in the Cabinet du roi.<sup>6</sup> He was instead largely inspired

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> It remains possible that Poussin may have gone out of his way to visit Mantua while on his journey from Venice to Rome in 1624. See Adelson, ‘Nicolas Poussin et les tableaux du Studiolo d’Isabella d’Este’, n.10.



2.4. Titian, *The Andrians*, 1523-1526. Oil on canvas, 175 × 193 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid (Photo: Museo del Prado, Madrid/HIP/Art Resource, NY).

by the passage from Ovid and by the erotic ebullience found in Titian's three paintings, which had been moved from Ferrara to Rome in 1598.<sup>7</sup> In his *Fasti* the poet describes a feast of Bacchus, who haunted rivers and lonely wilds, bestowing wine and bringing garlands to his followers, Pans, amorous satyrs, Silenus and his ass, Priapus, and naiads: 'one wait[ing] upon the revellers with tunic tucked above the knee; another through her ripped robes reveal[ing] her breast'.<sup>8</sup> Poussin could not have been fully aware of how the meanings of his erotic *Triumphs* for Richelieu

7 Ibid., pp. 239-240, where Adelson discusses Titian's Ferrarese mythologies and Poussin's other visual sources for his Richelieu *Triumphs*; see also Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, 269.

8 Ovid, *Fasti*, 1.391-414.

inexorably would be affected and even altered by their placement with the five Este pictures, and then later, with Jacques Stella's *Liberality of Titus*.

The argument that the herm in the *Triumph of Pan* represents not Pan but a horned Dionysus is unconvincing,<sup>9</sup> because a *Triumph of Bacchus* was already part of this commission by Cardinal Richelieu; furthermore, sculptural or painted images of Dionysus or Bacchus with horns are not common. The further hypothesis that Poussin's *Triumph of Pan* represents the dominance of reason and chastity over lust, because the maenad in the center of the picture playfully restrains a satyr, is equally unconvincing.<sup>10</sup> Pan was god of pastures, flocks, and mountain wilds. Because he was connected with fertility and the season of spring, he was known for his love of maenads during their drunken orgies, and also of nymphs, like Syrinx, whose attempted rape by Pan was the subject of a painting in Dresden by Poussin (see Fig. 5.14). He was also fond of noise and riot, both of which are suggested by Poussin's picture. Pan was given both positive and negative allegorical interpretations in Natale Conti's (Natalis Comes's) *Mythologiae*, the most important of the Renaissance mythological handbooks. Conti calls Pan a symbol of all of nature (Pan = All) and of the sun; he also describes his red face, as seen in Poussin's picture in the form of a mask.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is not necessary to follow the more complex arguments of Blunt and Bull that Poussin found references to Pan's red face in Virgil's *Eclogues*, Ovid, Tibullus, or Rabelais,<sup>12</sup> since Conti was clearly a source readily at hand that the artist knew well. The divine part of creation is symbolized by Pan's upper body, according to Conti, while his ugly lower body represents the earthly beings, who are mired in filth.<sup>13</sup> Conti defines the other kinds of creatures that we find in the painting in negative terms—he characterizes the satyrs as savage and lustful and the fauns as beasts or demons.<sup>14</sup> The artist's *Bacchanal before a Herm* (Fig. 2.5), also in London's National Gallery, is equal to the *Triumph of Pan* in its exuberance. The *Bacchanal* likewise implies homoeroticism in the dancing men in the center and lesbianism in the woman behind and to the right of this group, who looks lovingly at the woman to her right as she gently touches her arm. The *Triumph of Pan* reveals a buoyantly positive, even if allusively illicit, aspect of eroticism in Poussin's artistic production. The mirth and frolic of the participants in this mythical image point to consent, by males and females equally, to gratuitous erotic activity.

Another work by Poussin in the National Gallery, London, his *Nymph with Satyrs* (Fig. 2.6), has quite explicit sexual references. A satyr disrobes a reclining nymph

9 Cole, 'The Mask of Dionysus', pp. 231-274.

10 Ibid., pp. 267-268.

11 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 438-440; I generally use Jean de Montlyard's translation of Conti in Jean Baudouin's edition of 1627, since Poussin more likely consulted a French version than ones in Latin.

12 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 143; Bull, 'Poussin's Bacchanals', pp. 9-10.

13 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 1063.

14 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 443, 449.



2.5. Nicolas Poussin, *Bacchanal before a Herm*, c. 1631-1634. Oil on canvas, 100 × 143 cm. National Gallery, London (Photo: National Gallery, London/Bridgeman Images).

who may be sleeping but more likely is shown in the act of masturbating. A second satyr partly behind a tree at the left likewise seems to be pleasuring himself with his left hand.<sup>15</sup> Blunt had rejected a variant of this painting in the Kunsthau, Zurich, as a genuine Poussin, and, by implication, this London picture as well, partly because of the high degree of eroticism; he did, however, accept the Dresden *Venus Espied* by *Shepherds* (Fig. 2.7), which he described as ‘much more decent than the other compositions in question’<sup>16</sup> [this primary work is discussed separately below].

Thus, the frank sexuality of the London painting and its variants caused him to reject these works partly on the basis of his own prudery. From a feminist point of view, though, Blunt’s claim for the greater decency of the Dresden *Venus* may be questioned, given that it treats the implied male viewer as a voyeur, who, like the two shepherds serving as surrogates, is invited to inspect the naked body of Venus. The display of *Nymph with Satyrs* at the London National Gallery was delayed, probably until 1835, following its bequest to the museum in 1831, most

<sup>15</sup> Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, p. 302.

<sup>16</sup> Blunt, ‘Poussin Studies XII: The Hovingham Master’, p. 458, n. 15.



2.6. Nicolas Poussin, *Nymph with Satyrs*, c. 1627. Oil on canvas, 66 × 50 cm. National Gallery, London, Holwell Carr Bequest, 1831 (Photo © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY).



2.7. Nicolas Poussin, *Venus Espied by Shepherds*, c. 1625. Oil on canvas, 73 × 99 cm. Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

likely because its subject matter was deemed likely to offend public sensibilities. Wine rightly sees the London version as superior to the canvas in Zurich and accepts both as genuine.<sup>17</sup>

Titian provided Poussin with a precedent in the use of this type of erotic imagery in his *Worship of Venus* (Fig. 2.2), albeit with cupids filling in for adult men and women. Titian shows his cupids engaging in sexual foreplay: at the left, one kisses another while mounting him from behind; a similar mounting appears in the center-background, while in front of this group an *eros* mounts a rabbit and another climbs on a mate lying face-down on the ground; two others embrace and kiss in the center-foreground. The homoeroticism implicit in this work is so pronounced that when copying it, Rubens felt compelled to feminize some of the cupids so that the love games became more conventionally heterosexual.<sup>18</sup> Poussin's own painting of cupids, the *Children's Bacchanal II* (Rome, Palazzo Barberini) of 1629-1630, follows

17 Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, pp. 302, 305-306.

18 Goffen, *Titian's Women*, p. 117 and n. 39.



2.8. Nicolas Poussin, *Triumph of Bacchus*, 1635-1636. Oil on canvas, 128 × 152 cm. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO (Photo courtesy Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Media Services/John Lamberton).

Titian's example: at the left, two cupids kiss, another pees, and above this group an *eros*'s face is partly obscured by the prominent buttocks of another clambering into a wine vat.

Poussin's *Triumph of Pan* and his *Triumph of Bacchus* (Fig. 2.8) were commissioned by Cardinal Richelieu about 1635 and hung together in the same room, the Cabinet du roi of his château at Poitou, which was destroyed in the early nineteenth century. While lively, the *Bacchus* is the more restrained of the two works, with the participants fully engaged in their triumphal procession below Apollo, impressive and stately as he drives his *quadriga* across the sky. In spite of their nudity, the participants in this painting engage in no suggestively erotic activity. Conti gives Bacchus a positive allegorical meaning by emphasizing his procreative strength and his representing the sun. But he interprets the god negatively as an example of shameful drunken behavior, particularly as seen in the fierce creatures that follow his chariot, with



their noise, cacophony, and confusion.<sup>19</sup> A third Bacchanal by Poussin, a *Triumph of Silenus* (Fig. 2.9, now known only through copies), was made to accompany these two canvases probably shortly after they were installed in the Cabinet du roi.<sup>20</sup>

The *Triumph of Silenus*, like the *Pan*, holds erotic content: a female centaur manages to drive off Silenus's ass trying to mount her from behind. She attacks the ass with a torch; a male centaur helps her by beating the animal with a thyrsus. Pan, fauns, and humans also populate the scene, and the fat Silenus, outsized wine vessel in hand, is propped up on a chair by two companions, since he is too drunk to sit up on his own. Conti interprets Silenus and the Sileni both positively and negatively: because they were the attendants of Bacchus, who represents the sun, the Sileni symbolize the sun's powers and are a great help to animals. But negatively, Conti, who associated Silenus with bodily abominations, slowness, and irresponsibility, notes that drunkenness like his paralyzes the body and the mind, and says that he was thus incapable of doing anything decent or honorable.<sup>21</sup>

Bull argued that the *Triumph of Pan* and *Triumph of Bacchus* are linked in an iconography celebrating Cardinal Richelieu, because the latter canvas contains the figure of Hercules, and Richelieu was compared to Pan and Hercules in a collection of Latin poems published in 1634, the *Epinicia musarum*.<sup>22</sup> In this collection, an epigram compares Richelieu to Pan on the basis that both are shepherds and leaders. Bull further noted the presence of a pair of anagrams comparing Richelieu to Hercules inscribed into one of the walls of the antechamber to the Cabinet du roi. A ceiling painting of *The Deification of Hercules* was also installed in the Cabinet du roi, along with Poussin's three canvases. It may also be noted that, in addition to the Hercules imagery that Bull adduces, further references connecting Louis XIII and Richelieu to Hercules were found in the château and its grounds. In front of the château, permitting access to its inner courtyard, was a grand domed gatehouse with Hercules and Mars in niches on either side and a statue of Louis XIII above, with a statue of Fame crowning the dome. But even if Hercules was compared to Richelieu, the poems and epigrams that Bull uses as evidence for his theory are of limited use, because they also compare Richelieu to Sampson and David, who are not represented in the Cabinet du roi. Thus, the *Bacchus*, a picture with no explicit erotic content, may allude to Richelieu through the figure of Hercules, carrying a tripod for sacrifices and his club, because the Cardinal was likewise compared to this hero on the ceiling and anteroom. But Richelieu's comparison to Pan is probably not intended in Poussin's *Triumph of Pan*, because of the erotic nature of its imagery

19 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 1065.

20 For the chronology of Poussin's three paintings, see Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, pp. 95-6.

21 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 1063-1064.

22 *Epinicia musarum*, p. 178 and passim; Bull, 'Poussin's Bacchanals', p. 6.



2.9. After Nicolas Poussin, *Triumph of Silenus*, c. 1637. Oil on canvas, 143 × 120.5 cm. National Gallery, London, bought 1824 (Photo © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY).

and since no other connection to the god is found in the room, only in epigrams in a contemporary publication. Further, the symbolic connection of Richelieu to Hercules did not govern the iconography of the room as a whole, since Hercules appears in only one of Poussin's paintings, where he is confined to the background, partly hidden by the other figures; otherwise he is present only on a roundel in the ceiling.

Poussin's three Richelieu Bacchanals, together with the Hercules in the ceiling and Jacques Stella's *Liberality of Titus* (Fig. 2.15), have been interpreted as a triumphant evocation of the kingdom of France, after the return of peace, abundance, and joy following the military triumphs of Louis XIII, who, in addition to Richelieu, has also been associated with Hercules in the *Triumph of Bacchus*.<sup>23</sup> Immediately in front of Hercules in the *Triumph of Bacchus* are two centaurs, one male and one female. The woman sitting on the back of the male centaur has Bacchus' leopard skin fluttering from her shoulder, indicating that she is Ariadne, lover of the god. Bacchus looks at her, as does the Cupid holding the reins of the centaurs, and the female centaur in front of her is about to shower her with flowers. Although they are well behaved here, joining in the celebration of the triumph, centaurs were known as brutish country creatures who were savagely abusive to anyone they met, including the Lapith women, whom they attempted to rape, as Conti reminds us.<sup>24</sup> Conti characterizes the centaurs as vile and evil creatures given to lust and passionate desires; he describes how they felt the rage of Hercules because of their abuse of strangers. Thus offended, Hercules ejected the centaurs from Thessaly. Conti's text may be all that is necessary to explain the presence in the *Triumph of Bacchus* of Hercules right behind the centaurs, expelled by him from Thessaly. Thus, Hercules as depicted by Poussin may not serve after all as an allegory of Richelieu or Louis XIII. Nor is it necessary to suppose, following Charles Dempsey's recondite argument, that Hercules was included in Poussin's *Triumph of Bacchus* on the basis of the late antique solar cults of Attis, Mithras, and Sabazius in which the ancient hero figured.<sup>25</sup> Conti's explanation that Hercules ridded the centaurs from Thessaly may suffice to account for his inclusion by Poussin among the followers of Bacchus.

I argue that the paintings in the Cabinet du roi did not have a coherent, fixed iconographic program envisioned from the beginning, but that as paintings were added to the room new meanings emerged that overlaid ones already established. In 1627 Richelieu was given by Duke Charles I of Mantua the five Renaissance allegories originally from the *Studiolo* of Isabella d'Este that he installed in the Cabinet du roi; then in 1636 the Cardinal added two *Triumphs* by Poussin, followed by a third; finally he added Jacques Stella's picture of the *Liberality of Titus*. Each time a new work or works were added, the rather loose and evolving symbolic program of the room's pictures changed: layers of meaning were added that altered viewers' perceptions of the paintings individually and collectively.

23 Robin, *Étude iconographique des Bacchanales Richelieu*, pp. 47, 66, 90; Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues* p. 361; Wine in Goldfarb, *Richelieu, Art and Power* p. 295.

24 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 716-721; 1075.

25 Bull, 'Poussin's Bacchanals', p. 5; Dempsey, 'The Classical Perception of Nature', pp. 219-249; Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, p. 361, gives further reasons for rejecting Bull's arguments as well as other proposals by Dempsey, and summarizes additional unconvincing interpretations by Santucci and Keazor of Poussin's Bacchanals.

By 1676, when Benjamin Vignier, governor of the Château de Richelieu from 1662 to 1684, wrote his description of the estate, including the Cabinet du roi and its pictures, at least some of the meanings intended by the Cardinal for the room's pictures (see below) had been lost to memory. Vignier replaced those original meanings with a newly emerging personal and subjective form of art interpretation. The evolution of meaning over a relatively short space of time of the assembled art works in this room reminds historians that artistic programs intended by ambitious patrons were often short-lived in public memory. This historical amnesia was especially prominent at a time when personal reflections on art were displacing the universalizing meanings intended by powerful leaders bound to absolutist, aristocratic rule.

Vignier's book, *Le chasteau de Richelieu, ou L'histoire des dieux et des héros de l'antiquité, avec des réflexions morales*, describes the château and its contents and moralizes the pictures in verse. His work has been known for some time by art historians, who occasionally have referred to it but who have not studied its implications of meaning for all of the paintings in the Camera du roi, taken as a group.<sup>26</sup> Vignier indirectly provides a clue as to why Poussin's *Triumph of Bacchus* was ordered by Richelieu, noting a bust of Bacchus in black bronze as part of the collection; indeed, the grounds were dotted with busts and statues of Bacchus.<sup>27</sup> Apparently one reason why Richelieu ordered the subjects he did from Poussin was to draw the viewer's attention to his collection of antique sculpture.

In turning to the paintings in the Cabinet du roi, Vignier's rhymed commentary on Poussin's *Triumph of Pan* runs as follows:

Oh that the vapors of wine cause strange evils!  
 A man is made to see all his faults,  
 cannot hide anything of what is in his soul,  
 And makes more of an uproar than a goblin.  
 But it's worse when a woman  
 Lets herself get excited by wine,  
 Then she becomes squalid  
 And without much ado, a big whore.<sup>28</sup>

26 Vignier, *Le chasteau de Richelieu*, passim; Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, pp. 358, 361, 379, discusses Vignier's description of the Cabinet du roi with the paintings' placements and his accounts of Poussin's *Triumph of Pan* and *Triumph of Silenus*. Brief references to Vignier appear in Bull, 'Poussin's Bacchanals', p. 5, and Cole, 'The Mask of Dionysus', p. 267.

27 Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, p. 361.

28 Vignier, *Le chasteau de Richelieu*, p. 63:  
 'Que les vapeurs du vin causent d'étranges maux!  
 Un homme en étant pris fait voir tous ses défauts,



2.10. Andrea Mantegna, *Pallas and the Vices*, c. 1500-1502. Tempera on canvas, 159 × 192 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Gérard Blot/© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY).

Vignier intended his commentaries to be moral lessons, in this case pointing out how the painting warns against overindulgence. His verses, clearly highly subjective responses, nevertheless catch the flavor of illicit erotic activity in this painting, calling attention to strange evils. Referring to the fauns and satyrs in the picture, men, he says, expose the deepest faults of their souls under the influence of wine. Vignier reveals his misogyny in asserting that it is worse when women (pointing to the females in the painting) fall under wine's power, becoming whores. While

Il ne peut rien cacher de ce qu'il a dans l'ame;  
 Et fait plus de bruit qu'un Lutin:  
 Mais c'est bien pis quand une femme,  
 Se laisse échauffer par le vin,  
 Puis qu'elle devient une infame,  
 Et sans un grande hazard, une grande Putain'.



2.11. Andrea Mantegna, *Mars and Venus*, 1497. Tempera on canvas, 160 × 192 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo © Photo Josse/Bridgeman Images).

he doesn't describe specific sexual acts, he strongly registers his sense of moral disgust. He makes no positive statements about the subject; for him, the painting holds no uplifting allegorical meaning. This is a significant point in light of the positive interpretations of this painting given by recent art historians, focusing on parallels between Pan and Richelieu and on the assertion that the picture represents the dominance of reason and chastity over lust.<sup>29</sup> Possible positive allegorical meanings in the painting cannot be discounted, however, because Vignier wrote some forty years after Poussin sent his pictures to Richelieu, and, although he was an intelligent observer, Vignier was unaware of correspondences that may have been intended or seen by the artist, the patron, or other interested contemporary observers from the 1630s. Vignier's *réflexions morales* remind us that when seventeenth-century viewers looked at paintings, they did not always

29 Cole, 'The Mask of Dionysus', pp. 267-268; Bull, 'Poussin's Bacchanals', pp. 5-6.



2.12. Pietro Perugino, *Battle of Chastity and Lasciviousness*, 1503. Tempera on canvas, 160 × 191 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Philippe Fuzeau/© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY).

think in terms of learned classical allegories or references to patrons; rather, they scrutinized pictures for clues of meaning and expression that they filtered through their individual imaginations and sensibilities.

The five Este pictures with which Poussin's three canvases were displayed in the Cabinet du roi had been built originally around the themes of ideal love, chastity, and the victory of Virtues over Vices: Mantegna's *Pallas and the Vices* (Fig. 2.10) and his *Mars and Venus* (Fig. 2.11); Perugino's *Battle of Chastity and Lasciviousness* (Fig. 2.12); Costa's *Coronation of a Woman Poet* (Fig. 2.13) and his *Comus* (Fig. 2.14).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The titles of the Este paintings are as given in Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros. Wine, National Gallery Catalogues*, pp. 358, 360, discusses the placement of the paintings in the Cabinet du roi, based on Vignier's description and a sketch of the room made by Léon Dufourny in 1800.



2.13. Lorenzo Costa, *Coronation of a Woman Poet*, 1505-1506. Oil and tempera on canvas, 164.5 × 197.5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

Vignier gives Mantegna's *Pallas* a positive moral meaning, since the picture is clearly allegorical in intent:

Vice and virtue never agree,  
It is necessary that one of the two gives way to the other;  
Therefore Minerva expels  
The monstrous tyrant from this delightful palace.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Vignier, *Le chateau de Richelieu*, p. 61:  
'Le vice & la vertu ne s'accordent jamais,  
Il faut que l'un des deux cede à l'autre la place:  
Aussi Minerve chasse  
Ce monstrueux Tyran de ce charmant Palais.'





2.14. Lorenzo Costa, *Comus*, c. 1507-1511. Tempera on canvas, 152 × 239 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

However, Vignier doesn't read Poussin's pictures in the Cabinet du roi in this way as allegories, since, in spite of their sophistication and erudition, he sees two of them as frankly lascivious and satiric in their imagery, with no clear noble or high-minded meaning. For example, this is how Vignier describes Poussin's *Triumph of Silenus*:

This mocking master of the party,  
 Mounted on a leopard  
 Makes it clear with his belly,  
 That by eating very good meals  
 He prevailed in his battles,  
 And that his ass and he triumphed without difficulty.<sup>32</sup>

32 Vignier, *Le chasteau de Richelieu*, p. 62:  
 'Ce Mestre de Camp goguenard  
 Monté dessus un Leopard  
 Fait bien voir avec sa bedaine,  
 Qu'en faisant de fort bons repas,  
 Il gaignoit des combats,  
 Et que son Asne & luy triompherent sans peine'.

Vignier establishes an ironic tone in asserting that Silenus' big belly ensures his victories in his amorous conquests. That Vignier intends his verses to be personal reactions to the paintings with moralizing overtones rather than careful descriptions is indicated by his inaccuracies. For example, he calls the tiger in the picture a leopard; he describes Silenus as mounted on the leopard rather than slinging one leg over it from his chair; and he says that Silenus' ass 'triumphs' (in his attempt to copulate with the female centaur), where instead the animal is clearly failing to do so.<sup>33</sup> Vignier understands that this bawdy and humorous painting is not a learned allegory. By contrast, he gives Poussin's *Triumph of Bacchus* a wholly positive interpretation, seeing no lascivious or morally negative features in it:

Glory is without second,  
When after doing everything blissfully well  
One bears a famous title  
From the first triumphant over the world.<sup>34</sup>

As for the remaining paintings, Vignier finds Costa's *Coronation of a Woman Poet* admirable in its positive presentation of the sweet charms and power of happy love.<sup>35</sup> He sees in Perugino's *Battle of Chastity and Lasciviousness* a contest between the tender sentiments of chaste love and the attraction of pleasures that make people unhappy.<sup>36</sup> Here, unlike Verheyen in his book of 1971 on Isabella d'Este's *Studiolo* pictures, Vignier rightly avoids positing a victory of Chastity over Lasciviousness, or in condemning Lasciviousness outright.<sup>37</sup> As Campbell stresses in his book of 2006 on the same paintings, in Perugino's work the battle's outcome is still uncertain and Lasciviousness (or *Eros*) is viewed ambivalently, as engaged in a *psychomachia*, in the struggle between chastity and love that takes place in the human heart.<sup>38</sup> In Costa's *Comus*, Vignier praises the charming love island of Venus where Mercury keeps Discord, Fraud, and Envy at bay.<sup>39</sup>

33 Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, p. 379.

34 Vignier, *Le chateau de Richelieu*, p. 63:

'La gloire est sans seconde,  
Quand après avoir fait par tout des bien heureux,  
On porte se titre fameux,  
Du premier Triomphant du monde'.

35 Vignier, *Le chateau de Richelieu*, p. 62.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

37 Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*, p. 44.

38 Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*, pp.171, 176-177, 188, 189-190.

39 Vignier, *Le chateau de Richelieu*, pp. 64-65; Vignier provides no verses for Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* because he says he doesn't recognize the subject.



2.15. Jacques Stella, *Liberality of Titus* (*Allegory of the Liberality of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu*), c. 1637-1638. Oil on canvas, 191 × 146.2 cm. Fogg Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, gift in part of Lewis G. and Charles Nierman and purchase in part from Alpheus Hyatt Purchasing Fund (Photo: Fogg Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA/Bridgeman Images).

In addition to the Este pictures and Poussin's, Jacques Stella's *Liberality of Titus* (Fig. 2.15) was set into the chimney of the Cabinet du roi at a slightly later date. It is likely that Stella's canvas was to be grouped with the other pictures as a symbol of the king's and Richelieu's love for the people of France.

For in the painting, under the guise of Titus, and with Richelieu portrayed as the man standing beside him in a red toga, Louis XIII distributes coins to his people. It may be that when Richelieu commissioned Stella's picture, he envisioned that this canvas should establish a theme which would now allow the previously installed pictures to be seen in a new light. At this point, Stella's picture would implicitly draw the previous works into the broader theme proposed by Robin,<sup>40</sup> one celebrating the peace, abundance, and joy established under the reign of King Louis XIII and the leadership of his first minister, Richelieu. Stella's picture deliberately repeats the motif of the happy, dancing figures seen in Poussin's canvases. The dancers celebrating the sensual pleasures of wine and erotic activity in Poussin's three canvases (including his newly installed painting of Silenus) would now be interpreted through the similar dancing figures in Stella's picture, with the new meaning focusing on the happiness of the French people under the rule of the King and Richelieu.

Even before the installation of the *Silenus* and Stella's picture, the Este paintings and Poussin's two original Bacchanals likely were seen as responding to one another symbolically. The fact that Richelieu commissioned Poussin's paintings a few years after receiving the Este pictures suggests that a program including the latter works may have been intended. By 1636 the Este pictures and the first two of Poussin's Bacchanals (*Pan* and *Bacchus*) were meant to be viewed as a set, because in a letter to Richelieu the Marchese Pompeo Frangipani states that he had asked Gaspard de Daillon, Bishop of Albi, to bring from Rome to the cardinal's château 'two paintings of Bacchanals that the painter Poussin has already executed in conformity with your wishes and intention'.<sup>41</sup> In another letter Gaspard de Daillon compares the Este pictures with Poussin's, finding the latter more beautiful.<sup>42</sup> All of these pictures with the themes of ideal love and sensuality are related. The overriding theme of the arrangement of the pictures in Richelieu's Cabinet du roi with Poussin's *Triumphs* of Pan and Bacchus (and eventually the *Triumph of Silenus*) and the five Este pictures must have focused on complementary kinds of love, *amor honestus* (virtuous love) and *amor voluptuosus* (pleasurable love). The five Este pictures and Poussin's works all contain references to both kinds of love. For example, Perugino's *Battle of Chastity and Lasciviousness* shows both types of love, chaste affection and sensual pleasure,

40 Robin, *Étude iconographique des Bacchanales*, pp. 47, 66, 90.

41 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 146; Wine, *National Gallery Catalogues*, p. 358.

42 Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, pp. 95-96.

while Poussin's *Bacchus* exhibits *amor honestus* (the virtuous love of Bacchus and Ariadne) and his *Pan* and *Silenus* display *amor voluptuosus* (love engendered by the pleasure of wine but also, negatively, the attempted rape of the female centaur by the ass). Poussin's canvases especially, but also the Este pictures, gain their intensity through their ambivalence in meaning, through the polarizing forces of *amor*: Poussin's Bacchic paintings echo the contradictory qualities of the god himself. His *Triumph of Pan* especially reveals the power of this duality, where Felibien's positive assessment of the scene's joyous ebullience is complemented by the implication of illicit erotic activity. What would apply here is love characterized by *honestas* in its Renaissance meaning of 'moral worth', while the meaning of *voluptas* as applied to love would not necessarily (although could) indicate a negative quality, but might also focus on 'the striving for human happiness', mainly in the body but also in the soul, as described for example by Cosma Raimondi, the Cremonese Epicurean.<sup>43</sup> In the writings of the French Jesuit Epicurean philosopher Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), the end of philosophy is to achieve a state of *voluptas*, which is not associated with sensual pleasures, but with a pleasurable tranquility of mind and body.<sup>44</sup> Earlier, in his dialogue *De voluptate* (*On Pleasure*) Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457) had identified the Christian concepts of charity and beatitude with pleasure. When we endure the difficult struggle to find virtue (*honestas*), says Valla, what we ultimately seek is pleasure or delectation (*voluptas*), which is identified with love (*amor*).<sup>45</sup> Through the lens of Epicureanism, the subjects represented in the Este paintings and Poussin's may be seen as complementary.

But these meanings of *amor honestus* and *amor voluptuosus* in the *Cabinet du roi* were fully realized only after Jacques Stella's *Liberality of Titus* was installed. Stella's picture celebrates the happy reign of Louis XIII, aided by Richelieu. In this canvas, *amor honestus* and *amor voluptuosus* work together to allude to the love of the king for his people, focusing on the establishment of a benign peace where the populace might thrive and enjoy the fruits of that amity. Through the act of the King's love, *amor voluptuosus*, here referring to the pleasure and the physical well-being of the king's people, comes into play, the same quality celebrated in Poussin's canvases in a different way. Stella's picture shows the virtuous love of the king through his wise leadership of the state, and the benefits he provides for his people. The king demonstrates his love through his generosity, his '*liberalité*', noted by Vignier in his description of Stella's painting as an admirable attribute of a monarch.<sup>46</sup> Vignier mentions 'a good King', referring to Titus as representing

43 Davies, 'Cosma Raimondi', pp. 238-244.

44 Gassendi, 'Ethica', pp. 693, 715; Sarasohn, 'The Ethical and Political Philosophy of Pierre Gassendi', pp. 241, 256, 257.

45 Valla, *On Pleasure, De voluptate*, pp. 262-263, 270-271, 274-275.

46 Vignier, *Le chasteau de Richelieu*, p. 67; Boyer, 'Richelieu et la "curiosité"', p. 379.

Louis XIII, but he makes no mention Richelieu, who is also portrayed in the picture, standing next to the king:

Liberality is loved by all,  
 Foreigners and subjects surrender to her charms,  
 There are no enemies that she cannot overcome,  
 And next to her a good King sees his arms triumph.  
 Titus in this picture spreads over the Romans  
 An infinity of riches.  
 And the Romans are seen receiving his largess,  
 Which was opening their hearts when filling their hands.<sup>47</sup>

Here, Vignier stresses the king's love for his people and their love for him in return, because of his largess. Stella's work, the final one commissioned for the Cabinet du roi, makes several compositional references to the other paintings in the room. The celebrating people below the podium recall the Bacchanals of Poussin and Mantegna's *Mars and Venus* that were hung close by. By encompassing both *amor honestus* and *amor voluptuosus*, Stella's painting, joining these themes with a third element, *liberalité*, unifies the pictorial program of the Cabinet du roi from its prominent placement on the chimney.

Another way of looking at the pictures in the Cabinet du roi puts aside elevated allegorical meanings and instead pertains to a practical scheme that Richelieu established in the lands adjoining his estate. Vignier provides a clue to this other meaning of the pictures when he notes the black bronze bust of Bacchus mentioned above and goes on to connect the Bacchic theme with the Cardinal's development next to his château of a town named Richelieu that centered on wine making.<sup>48</sup> Vignier points out the wisdom of the Cardinal, who had the foresight to plant vineyards in an uncultivated place called the Folly. The resulting wine, says Vignier, was excellent and accounts for Richelieu's great esteem for the god Bacchus. All three of Poussin's pictures for the Cabinet du roi refer to wine: the *Triumph of Pan* celebrates the god who symbolizes

47 Vignier, *Le chasteau de Richelieu*, p. 67:

'La Liberalité se fait aimer par tout,  
 Etrangers & sujets se rendent à ses charmes,  
 Il n'est point d'ennemis qu'elle ne mette à bout,  
 Et par elle un bon Roy voit triomper ses armes.  
 Titus dans ce Tableau répand sur les Romains  
 Une infinité de richesses.  
 Et les Romains sont voir recevant ses largesses,  
 Qu'on sçait ouvrir les coeurs quand on remplit les mains'.

48 Ibid., p. 9.

all of nature and simultaneously the figures in it show the effects of drinking wine, while his *Triumphs* of Bacchus and Silenus feature the god of wine and one of his chief followers. In this context, the Este pictures and Poussin's would be regarded for their general celebration of the harmony, happiness, and peace that people enjoy under Virtue's and Love's mild reign. It should be noted that the series of poems in the *Epinicia musarum*, mentioned above, repeatedly call attention to the *Virtus* of the Cardinal.<sup>49</sup> The *Titus* picture by Stella brings these themes together, where Louis XIII and Richelieu, through their love and largess, create the conditions in which the French people flourish, with a nod to the Cardinal's establishment of his town and viniculture.

The original ownership of *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus* (c. 1634-1638, Museu de Arte, São Paulo, Fig. 2.16) has been connected with Cassiano dal Pozzo,<sup>50</sup> and also with King Philip IV of Spain, possibly as a pendant to the latter's *Hunt of Meleager and Atalanta*. The painting displays Hymenaios and a stately but spirited group of women dancing around a central herm of Priapus, set before an elaborate trellis of flower garlands. Hymenaios, the god of marriage, was said to be the son of Apollo or Bacchus, but some ancient fables regarded him instead as mortal. Thus, according to Attic legends, he was an Athenian youth of such delicate beauty that he could be taken for a girl. He disguised himself as a woman to be near his beloved, traveling with her to Eleusis to take part in the Thesmophoria, a religious festival and fertility celebration.<sup>51</sup> Only women were allowed to attend this festival in honor of Demeter and Persephone, and they were sworn to keep the rituals secret. In order to attend the festival, Hymenaios cross-dressed and adopted a woman's point of view. The theme of cross-dressing was common in the literature and theatrical performances of ancient Greece and Rome and also of Poussin's time, but was rare in painting.<sup>52</sup> Poussin imagines that the festival attended by Hymenaios included a ritual dance by women in honor of Priapus. Hymenaios apparently is the figure in the painting with the least feminine attributes, standing just to the left of Priapus, placing his hand on the herm just below his erect phallus, as if adjusting the flower garland adorning the statue. The picture continues the theme of the happy celebration of passion that Poussin had established in earlier works. However, the *Hymenaios* painting contains considerably less tumult than, for example, Poussin's series of Bacchanals that he had painted for Cardinal Richelieu's Cabinet du roi of his château at Poitou, where the figures are given over to wild abandon (Figs. 2.1, 2.8, 2.9; see also 2.5). As such, the *Hymenaios* picture marks Poussin's evolution toward a more measured style in the late 1630s.

49 *Epinicia musarum*, passim.

50 Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 126.

51 Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, p. 536.

52 For more on cross-dressing in Poussin's art, see the discussion of his two versions of *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, Figs. 6.6 and 6.7.



2.16. Nicolas Poussin, *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus*, c. 1634-1638. Oil on canvas, 167 × 376 cm. Museu de Arte, São Paulo (Photo © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY).

The artist's positive, ceremonious treatment of the Priapus theme may have been inspired by Conti's comment in his *Mythologiae* that the god's fertile seed was rich in divine power.<sup>53</sup> Other figures in the *Hymenaios* canvas include two female musicians playing a lyre and double pipe at the far left, balanced by a woman holding flowers at the extreme right. A woman to the right of the herm who places her hands on its shoulder and whose draperies flutter as she kicks back a foot is a variant of the maenad to the left of Priapus in a print of the *Sacrifice to Priapus* after Giulio Romano.<sup>54</sup> Other women dance in Poussin's picture and present flowers to the god. Greek myth establishes Priapus as a god of fertility and gardens; he is associated with frankly sexual activity, as in Ovid's account of his attempt to rape the nymph Lotis.<sup>55</sup> The Romans treated his worship as sophisticated pornography, and in the *Priapeia*, obscene epigrams of the first century A.D., the god boasts of his sexual prowess and his defense of gardens by threat of sodomy. Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian of the first century B.C., says with wry understatement that men under the influence of Priapus found '[their] members . . . tense and inclined to the pleasures of love'.<sup>56</sup> Poussin was not averse to creating riotous, suggestively erotic pictures featuring Pan and Bacchus. But in this work celebrating Priapus, who was often considered as something of a joke by urban dwellers in antiquity, and in honor of whom frankly obscene poems and pictures were created, the artist

53 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 1066.

54 See Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, fig. 81.

55 Ovid, *Fasti*, 1.391ff.

56 Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, 4.6.1.





2.17. Nicolas Poussin, *Birth of Priapus*, c. 1622–1623. Graphite underdrawing, pen and brown ink, brown wash on paper, 19.4 × 32.3 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

has in fact chosen a dignified, albeit joyful, manner of presentation. The figures dancing before the herm of the god are honorable and respectable. This restraint suggests that Poussin conceived his picture as representing a scene from Attic history rather than from ancient mythology, focusing on worship at the secret Eleusinian rituals in honor of Demeter, rites in which Hymenaios took part, according to his story. Sexual excess was associated with the worship of Priapus, in rituals similar to those of Dionysus, but Poussin imagines that the Eleusinian worship is more subdued. Such moderation may also point to the role of Hymenaios, in his divine form, as the god of marriage. The herm Priapus is shown smiling, like the other figures in the painting, who are festive in their worship of the god as they present him with their flower offerings. In the early 1620s Poussin had made a study of the *Birth of Priapus* (Fig. 2.17), the only drawing in the Marino series not based on Ovid but most likely on a French edition of Conti,<sup>57</sup> who recounts how the jealous Juno touched Venus's womb with a poisonous hand, resulting in Priapus's deformed penis. The drawing shows the nymphs attending Venus repulsed by the abnormal size of her infant's sexual organ, while satyrs and fauns celebrate and delight in the child's deformity.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 513–515.

<sup>58</sup> For more on the drawing, see Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, p. 27; Rosenberg and Prat, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594–1665, Catalogue raisonné des dessins*, p. 10.



2.18. Nicolas Poussin, *Rinaldo and Armida*, c. 1627. Oil on canvas, 95 × 133 cm. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

Poussin explores the impulsive, erotic infatuation of a Saracen sorceress, Armida, for a Christian warrior of the First Crusade, Rinaldo, in his two versions of *Rinaldo and Armida* (Figs. 2.18, 2.19). In his *Gerusalemme liberata* of 1581 Torquato Tasso characterizes Rinaldo as the noblest of men, while Armida is an evil enchantress who cannot be trusted. She is known for her wit and beauty, but also for her guile. All the hidden frauds that witch or woman could practice are familiar to her. In her infamy, she wishes to kill this best of men; she plies her feminine wiles by deceitfully lulling him to sleep. She then gives in to another of her female characteristics: lust overtakes her and, weak as her will is, she falls in love with her enemy, the very man whom she should despise. For Poussin's contemporaries, the notion that Eve, the prime instigator of evil, lurked in every member of her sex, easily could be applied to the pagan sorceress. Indeed, Tasso describes Armida as following 'Eve's vesper star' as she secretly makes her way into the camp of the Christian knights.<sup>59</sup> Armida's shift in feeling towards Rinaldo, from hatred to desire, is a mark of her

59 Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata*, 4.27.

irrationality, one of the chief characteristics of women according to patriarchal tradition. Physiological theory of Poussin's time held that the passions generated by the womb made women lustful, irrational, and hysterical, qualities we notice in Armida.<sup>60</sup>

Armida as conceived by Tasso exemplifies a veritable catalog of misogynistic traits. Through her guile and personification of female evil, following the model of Homer's Circe, she captures lords and princes from the Christian knight Rinaldo's crusader camp and turns them into monsters. Rinaldo manages to rescue them, in the process raising Armida's ire. She vows revenge on him, and, disguised as a beautiful sprite, lulls him to sleep on the banks of the Orontes River with the intent of destroying him. But her weak female will fails her and she finds herself falling in love with him. Tasso describes the sorceress's initial hatred of Rinaldo and her change of heart through complementary metaphors of cold and heat. The adamant-hard snow held within her breast is melted as she realizes she no longer wants to kill the knight but love him instead. Rinaldo's fair eyes, though closed, are hot, dissolving the snow congealing her breast. In his first version of *Rinaldo & Armida* (c. 1627, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Fig. 2.18) Poussin chose not to depict Armida's intent to murder Rinaldo, but presents her already smitten with him and completely absorbed in observing his body. She doesn't look into his eyes, which are closed in sleep. Rather, she observes the upper part of his bare breast above his cuirass, hinting at lust more than love. Sexual inversion is suggested in Armida's assuming the superior position normally acceded to the male as he gazes upon his beloved. This conception of the subject is new, since earlier versions by Annibale Carracci and Domenichino show a later scene in Tasso's story where, as a captive in Armida's enchanted garden, Rinaldo is so infatuated by the beautiful witch that he holds her mirror while she arranges her hair. In giving Armida license to look, Poussin, like Tasso, emphasizes her violation of female propriety. The innocent Christian knight has been subjected to the witch's will through her illicit use of a drug to induce slumber. She hovers over Rinaldo in a pose similar to Venus in Poussin's *Venus with the Dead Adonis* (Fig. 3.16), painted about the same time, but with a different emotional inflection: love grows from lust in place of death giving rise to grief.

Poussin depicts the profiles of Rinaldo and Armida as mirror images of each other, as if, to follow Tasso, Armida is Narcissus looking at her own reflection. Tasso's Narcissus metaphor, 'e'n su la vaga fronte pende omai sì che par Narciso al fonte',<sup>61</sup> is found repeated in the painting. Poussin represents Armida Narcissus-like

60 Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, pp. viii-ix.

61 Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata*, 14.66.527-528: 'and now she bends so above his handsome face that she seems Narcissus at the spring'.

looking into the invisible mirror of Rinaldo's body and turning from enemy to lover through the natural magic of *Eros*.<sup>62</sup> The Narcissus idea of self-absorption has been transferred from the male to the female in both Tasso's text and Poussin's painting, reflecting gender conceptions of Poussin's time, when women were thought of as more self-indulgent than men. Poussin mainly uses Tasso as his literary source for his two versions of *Rinaldo and Armida* (see also Fig. 2.19), but mines Giambattista Marino's *L'Adone* for ideas as well. Marino extends Tasso's metaphor of Narcissus, applying it to Venus in a poem that Poussin clearly knew and used also as a textual basis for this Moscow version of *Rinaldo and Armida*. Venus in *L'Adone* follows the model of Narcissus, seeing herself mirrored in the face of her lover, Adonis ('in lui si specchia').<sup>63</sup> Poussin conveys the same idea with the mirrored profiles of Armida and Rinaldo.

Some see Armida responding to the glowing intensity of Rinaldo's face and ruby cheeks,<sup>64</sup> which Poussin contrasts to the sorceress's white skin (as noted above, I see Armida's eyes as fixed on Rinaldo's exposed chest). The gender reversal apparent in this Moscow version is reinforced when the beautiful, recumbent and sleeping Rinaldo, his cheeks flushed, takes on the appearance of a sleeping Venus. The Narcissus and Venus metaphors deepen when she 'discovers in the venereal attributes of Rinaldo the reflection of her own desire.'<sup>65</sup> Analogically she plays a double role, as the 'male' observing the beloved, but also as Venus regarding Mars, since the painting's composition also derives from images of Venus disarming Mars, a fact reinforced by Rinaldo's discarded armor. Armida's transformation from 'bellicose enemy' to 'smitten lover', as Tasso indicates in his poem, is given visual form by Poussin, who shows this change as already having taken place, 'The venereal body [of Rinaldo serving as] the crucible of Armida's transformation.'<sup>66</sup> The discarded arms are an appropriate visual symbol of her transformation from enemy to lover. If the roles in this painting were reversed and the man was regarding the woman, Poussin's painting would present an occasion for appropriate male inspiration by the female beloved and maintain what was perceived in the artist's day as the proper gender relationship. But, from the point of view of the gender biases of the seventeenth century, Armida is almost indecent as a woman regarding a man as an object of beauty. It is no accident that Poussin's lustful witch violates the gender standards of propriety and decorum as understood in the artist's society. When the man beholds the female beloved, normal audience expectations are preserved, but when the situation is reversed, perversity results. Tasso describes how Rinaldo succumbs to Armida's enticements

62 Careri, 'Mutazioni d'affetti, Poussin interprete del Tasso', pp. 354-355.

63 Marino, *L'Adone*, 3:79-3.

64 Unglaub, 'Poussin, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, and Corporeal Poetics', p. 30.

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Ibid.*

while under her spell on her enchanted island. But the poet subsequently relates how, after he is rescued by his two companions Carlo and Ubaldo, Rinaldo recants his dalliance with her, resuming his heroic role as a Christian knight. At the end of his poem Tasso tells how Armida, wanting to kill herself, is saved by Rinaldo. Moved by love for him, she accepts his guidance in shaping her future life. In doing so, she holds the promise of becoming a dutiful and compliant woman, yielding to Tasso's conception of the superior wisdom of male authority.

In Poussin's *Armida* contemporary male viewers would have seen, through the filter of Tasso's perception of gender, a typical operation of the female imagination, where the woman, not knowing her own mind, is changeable, succumbing to her impulses of the moment, falling in love with an enemy soldier. These same viewers would have observed also the transfer of the Narcissus idea to the female, which at that time would have made perfect sense. In this way, Armida, as a female sorceress, the strangest and least comprehensible of women, would have been saddled with a doubly negative persona, as both impulsive and narcissistic.

Even if Poussin's first *Rinaldo and Armida* was interpreted by contemporary observers through Tasso's poetic account of this story, the painting was not as sexist in its visual presentation as Tasso's text had been. Poussin provides Armida with a certain classical nobility: her head is shown in serene antique profile, gently regarding the knight and touching his shoulder. Nothing about her costume or demeanor suggests she is a treacherous witch. Even her chariot with splendid, spirited horses restrained by two attractive female attendants is imposing in its grandeur. The classical form of the river god Orontes likewise adds dignity to the scene. Poussin hardly suggests that Armida has cast the spell of sleep on Rinaldo or that she plans to use the chariot to ferry him to imprisonment as love slave on her secret island. Through the pantomime of the *amorini* pretending to shoot arrows at Armida, Poussin emphasizes the love that has overtaken her. Indeed this is the principal expressive purpose behind the scene—to show the passion that has gripped Armida, rather than to present her witchery. She herself is bewitched, by the male beauty of the knight. Armida is invested by Poussin with a drama and nobility that is held in tension with what the reader of Tasso knows about her.

The seventeenth-century feminist Lucrezia Marinella criticized Tasso's defense of women when he said that only heroic women, larger than life (queens, princesses, etc.), stand at an exalted level above the ordinary virtues of propriety and chastity. He said, 'Modesty and prudery do not suit heroic ladies any more than they would gentlemen, because they possess their own virtues that cannot be shared by the majority, nor can any immodest act of theirs be called infamous'.<sup>67</sup> Tasso in effect says that when a heroine, such as the reticent Princess Erminia, who harbors a

67 Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, p. 139.



2.19. Nicolas Poussin, *Rinaldo and Armida*, c. 1628. Oil on canvas, 80 × 107 cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

secret love for another hero in Tasso's epic, Tancred, succumbs to her passions, she is justified, because she is of a higher, nobler class of women to whom the ordinary laws of comportment do not apply. Perhaps the witch Armida also qualifies as a heroine according to Tasso's sexist and class-regulated formula, because at the end of *Gerusalemme liberata* she bends to Rinaldo's will and promises to renounce paganism.

In his second version of *Rinaldo and Armida* (c. 1628, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, Fig. 2.19), also based on Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, the composition is more compact, concentrated, and classical. The river god, multiple *amorini*, chariot with female attendants, boat, column, and forest of the Moscow version have disappeared.<sup>68</sup> Even though the painting is smaller, the figures are larger, almost filling the picture space. Now we see the Saracen witch Armida at the very moment that she is deciding not to kill her enemy, the Christian knight Rinaldo, because

68 Careri, 'Mutazioni d'affetti, Poussin interprete del Tasso', p. 355.

of her sudden impulse of love. The Moscow version had given no hint of Armida's intention to kill Rinaldo; she was already smitten by him. Here in the London version she holds the dagger in her right hand with which she intended to slay him, but an *amorino* stays her right arm as she herself undergoes a transformation. The *amorino* restraining her is Poussin's invention to visualize Armida's changing feelings that in Tasso are communicated more readily in words.<sup>69</sup> Armida looks at Rinaldo's head, specifically his hair and his right hand resting above it. Armida's changing attitude towards Rinaldo is expressed in her contrasting hands as the viewer's eye moves from left to right in the manner of reading a text: her right hand holding the treacherous dagger is now held back by the *amorino*; by contrast, her left hand reaches over the sleeping knight's head to gently touch his own hand. In this version Poussin paints a visual analogy of Tasso's careful verbal construction tracing the change of Armida's feelings for Rinaldo. In the painting her right hand is impetuous and tense, while her left hand touching Rinaldo is placed with languid abandon.<sup>70</sup> Tasso's metaphor of Armida's moving from the frost of hatred to the warmth of love is conveyed in Poussin's picture by the clothing: Armida's cold white and blue drapes at the left give way to the warm red, orange, and gold of Rinaldo's apparel at the right.<sup>71</sup> Poussin also preserves Tasso's metaphor of Rinaldo's heat in his London picture through the warrior's flushed cheeks, slightly parted lips, and widely splayed arms. Similarly, the painter devises a way to follow the poet's metaphor of snow through the whiteness and firmness with which he paints the sorceress's breasts. Poussin follows Tasso's poem in depicting her breasts as exposed.<sup>72</sup>

In both of Poussin's versions, Rinaldo is feminized; in the first, the usual superior position of the male is now held by Armida, as she hovers over the supine Rinaldo, who appears in the attitude of a Giorgionesque Venus, with one leg and arm seductively raised, and with his head in a pretty profile. In the second version, his sleeping pose retains the analogy with Venus, but to this is added an inflection of the antique *Sleeping Faun*, suggesting a doubling of sexual identity.<sup>73</sup> Armida's stark profile and marble-like skin in the second version betray little of her awakening love; her passion is instead projected onto the face of her beloved: 'Poussin transposes [the attributes of love] from Armida to Rinaldo, whose face thus serves as the screen or mirror of Armida's projected Narcissistic desire'.<sup>74</sup> Rinaldo sports charming curls in his red hair and ruby, slightly parted lips, framed by flushed cheeks. He looks vulnerable in his sleeping state, as he lies limply under the sorceress. As a passive,

69 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 161.

70 Careri, 'Mutazioni d'affetti, Poussin interprete del Tasso', pp. 355-356.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 356.

72 Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata*, 14.60.

73 Unglaub, 'Poussin, *Ut pictura poesis*, and Corporeal Poetics', p. 32.

74 *Ibid.*

unconscious body subject to erotic interest, the sleeping Rinaldo reverses the usual relationship of man and woman, becoming the object of the female gaze. In spite of his feminization in this episode, Rinaldo is characterized elsewhere by Tasso as personifying the 'Ireful Virtue', or warlike instinct in man, which can lead to good if guided by reason. But a man moved by such a feeling has the potential to embrace the evil of sexual violence if he succumbs to concupiscence.<sup>75</sup> Although Rinaldo temporarily surrenders to Armida's charms, he eventually rejects her, turning his attention to his duty as a warrior. In describing Rinaldo's triumph over sexual desire, Tasso adheres to the traditional Renaissance ideal of abstinence encouraged by Castiglione and the noble moral code. In his *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 1.2), Poussin focused his attention on the dangers of unbridled female lust as indicated through the anxious expression of Cephalus. Here, in the *Rinaldo and Armida*, as the witch's murderous intent is transformed into erotic longing, her threatening aspect is mitigated by her changeable female nature. Armida's inconstancy, established in *Gerusalemme liberata*, is brought about by greed for carnal fulfillment that overcomes her desire for revenge. This idea of women's greedy nature is emphasized by Tasso in his *Il Padre di famiglia*, where he compares women's cupidity to man's intellect.<sup>76</sup> Armida's instability in love, translated by Poussin into visual form, would have opened her readily to criticism through the gender bias of seventeenth-century male viewers.<sup>77</sup>

*Venus Espied by Shepherds* (c. 1625, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden; see above, Fig. 2.7) is among the earliest examples by Poussin of a scene showing Venus or a nymph spied upon by satyrs or shepherds. Other paintings by or attributed to him with this theme are in collections in Cleveland, Zurich, Kassel (Fig. 2.20), Moscow, London, and St. Petersburg; drawings include four versions in Windsor, three in Paris, one in Bayonne, and one in London.

These numerous examples make it clear that works of this kind where males spy on females were among the most common in Poussin's oeuvre. Titian had been famous for painting this type of subject featuring idealized nude goddesses, although Poussin's version, unusually for him, looks more like it was made directly from life or drawings of the living model posing in the studio than Titian's examples of this genre. The pose of the goddess in Poussin's *Venus Espied by Shepherds* shares features with Venus in his Fort Worth *Venus and Adonis* and the nymph in his Munich *Midas before Bacchus*. The subject of Poussin's Dresden *Venus* serves as the universal paradigm for the objectification of the female body within the discourse of voyeurism and

75 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, Tancred and Erminia*, p. 28.

76 Tasso, *Tasso's Dialogues*, p. 84; Sohm, 'Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism', p. 777, n. 46.

77 On male opinion of female inconstancy in the period, see LeGates, *In Their Time, A History of Feminism*, p. 84.





2.20. Nicolas Poussin, *Venus, Satyr, Faun, and Cupids*, c. 1626-1630. Oil on canvas, 96 × 74.5 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kassel (Photo: Ute Brunzel/ Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel/© Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel/ Bridgeman Images)

demonstrates the importance of male ocular sexual pleasure in regarding the female form. In Book 5 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Venus complains about female deities who wish to remain virginal, such as Minerva, Proserpina, and Diana, and in pictures like the present one, she at first seems a passive victim of male looking, but she is complicit by putting herself on display. In arranging herself as the embodiment of male desire, she takes the side of men, authorizing their gaze.<sup>78</sup> Venus's body, seen from slightly above and arranged across most of the foreground space, is disposed more for the delectation of the intended male viewer of the picture than for the shepherds, who serve as focalizers or models of behavior directed at the observer. Her unconscious sleeping state encourages the shepherds and the viewer to examine her naked form unhindered, without any danger of reprisal from the goddess. The collusion of the two shepherds, where one is shown whispering to the other, suggests that the viewer is part of a shared experience of looking and confidential male bonding that further entitles this clandestine activity. The amorous shepherd and shepherdess in the distance heighten the erotic feeling. The presentation of the subject implies that both the shepherds and the male viewer of the painting are simple innocents who have stumbled upon a naked goddess, giving them permission to look.

The theme of spying upon beautiful women appears again in the foreground scene of a more ambitious painting from Poussin's late period, *Landscape with Polyphemus* (1649, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Fig. 2.21). Poussin made this work for Jean Pointel, the French banker and silk merchant who also ordered the *Eliezer and Rebecca* (Louvre, Paris). The two paintings are linked by an emphasis on beautiful women, in this case the semi-nude nymphs in the foreground who are spied on by satyrs. Félibien noted that Pointel specifically asked Poussin to paint a scene filled 'with several girls in whom one could notice different beauties',<sup>79</sup> a charge that resulted in the *Eliezer and Rebecca* picture. The St. Petersburg canvas shows satyrs hiding behind bushes at the right as they secretly gaze upon three nymphs, the most prominent of whom is undoubtedly Galatea. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid has Galatea say of the Cyclops Polyphemus: 'All the mountains felt the sound of his rustic piping [...] I, hiding beneath a rock and resting in the lap of my Acis, heard the words he sang at a great distance and well remembered them'.<sup>80</sup> In nearby lines the poet describes Charybdis combing Galatea's hair as the latter tells the story of Polyphemus.<sup>81</sup> The foreground of the painting shows Galatea wringing out her wet hair as she listens to the giant's music.<sup>82</sup> Her identity as Galatea is further suggested

78 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, pp. 182-183.

79 Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages*, p. 100: 'de plusieurs filles, dans lesquelles on pût remarquer différentes beautés'.

80 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 13.785-789.

81 Ibid., 13.738-739; see also Barolsky, *Ovid and the Metamorphoses of Modern Art*, p. 215.

82 Friedlaender, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 182-185.



2.21. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Polyphemus*, 1649. Oil on canvas, 150 × 198 cm. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

by her blue-green hair and blue robe, signifying her status as a water nymph, with a pool and water jugs at her feet. Additional evidence is her desire not to be seen by the Cyclops, as indicated by her hiding behind a companion, since she is in love with Acis and wishes to resist the giant's wooing. The figure sitting on the foreground rock with its back to the viewer and holding an urn has been identified as Galatea's lover, Acis.<sup>83</sup> This proposal may be rejected, because the figure in question has the soft curves of a woman and her physical appearance (but not her pose) is virtually identical to the female behind Galatea, just to the right. Furthermore, she has none of the masculine features of the mountain god sitting across the painting at the left. And if it is objected that Ovid describes Acis as a boy, and therefore should not have the rough, masculine physique of the god, neither does the female on the rock resemble the physical type of Acis in Poussin's *Acis and Galatea* in Dublin (Fig. 3.5). What we see is a group consisting of Galatea and two female companions spied upon by two lecherous satyrs hiding at the right of the painting.

83 Sauerländer, "Nature through the Glass of Time", p. 108.

One of the nymphs spots the satyrs and lays a hand on Galatea to warn her. In the seventeenth century, satyrs were glossed allegorically as representing the universal principle of generation, and in their elemental fire, or passion, they sought to mate with nymphs, representing another element, water (further explaining the water jugs and pool below Poussin's nymphs).<sup>84</sup> The mountain god sitting at the left looks into the scene towards Polyphemus, sitting on a rocky crag in the center of the picture, playing his pipes. In the middle distance men work at farming, digging, plowing, and watching their flocks, indicating the early history of humankind during the transitional period from the Golden Age represented by the Cyclops, satyrs, and mountain god to the beginnings of agriculture.<sup>85</sup> Ovid goes on to tell the sad story of Acis, his terrible death by stoning at the hands of the jealous Polyphemus (Fig. 3.6), and his transformation into the god of the river that bears his name.

Ovid has Galatea describe Polyphemus as feminine in the way he combs his stiff hair with a rake, trims his shaggy beard with a sickle, and gazes upon and composes his fierce features in a pool.<sup>86</sup> Galatea reifies him as if he were a woman.<sup>87</sup> As Galatea wrings her wet hair, she casts a smile in the direction of the viewer, who is implied to be male and who apparently is meant to focalize the women along with the satyrs, as a voyeur. The viewer may be a surrogate for the missing Acis, who will approach Galatea and take his place beside her to enact the scene described by Ovid, where she rests in her lover's lap as she listens to the Cyclops's song.

The painting marks the transition from the world of myth to the beginnings of civilization, as indicated by the juxtaposition of the old order of nymphs, satyrs, god, and giant with the modern world as represented by the farmers at work and the coastal town in the distance. The picture thus invites a nostalgic longing for the passing of an old, idealized mythical existence and its replacement by the more routine activities of civilization. In modern existence, a monster such as Polyphemus or playful satyrs planning an attack on innocent nymphs would have no place. The painting implies through the smiles of both nymphs and satyrs that in this ideal realm spying upon women is accommodated or naturalized; it is perceived as a normal activity in the world of myth. By representing the confrontation of satyrs and nymphs as amusing, the painting implicitly underscores, in the realm of ancient fable, the innocence of voyeurism.

Poussin's early drawing of *Amor Vincit Pan* (c. 1625-1627, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 2.22) is an allegory of love in which the little winged cupid represents *Anteros*, spiritual love, while the goat-legged Pan symbolizes *Eros*, physical desire.

84 Hedelin, *Des satyres, brutes, monstres, et demons*, pp. 206-207, 212-213; McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, p. 47.

85 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 299.

86 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 13.764-767.

87 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, p. 185.



2.22. Nicolas Poussin, *Amor Vincit Pan*, c. 1625-1627. Slight graphite underdrawing, pen and gray-brown ink, gray-brown wash on paper, 11.5 × 14.1 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

This work is part of a group of drawings that Poussin presumably gave around 1640 to Cardinal Camillo Massimo, who bound them in a volume that eventually became part of the Royal Library at Windsor. The drawing at hand shows a cupid restraining Pan by pulling on his horn, humorously preventing him from attacking a nymph. The scene thus illustrates the triumph of noble love over the animal passions. Depictions of this type were sometimes given the title *Amor Vincit Pan*, or 'Love conquers Pan', where 'Pan', the Greek word for 'all', is substituted as a pun into the commonplace Latin motto *Amor Vincit Omnia*, or 'Love conquers all'.<sup>88</sup> A famous example of this type is a frescoed medallion from Annibale Carracci's Farnese Gallery ceiling in Rome, showing a little cupid overcoming a satyr, a depiction that Poussin would have known directly or through engravings. The present drawing shows Pan grasping for a wine

88 Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, p. 46.

flask held by the nymph and reaching for the girl herself with his other hand, while simultaneously expressing surprise at the cupid's attack from behind. Male sexual aggression is represented by Pan, but this theme is conveyed in a light-hearted manner, as something not to be taken seriously. Thus the drawing is pleasing to a masculine sensibility because of the playful, offhand manner in which the theme of attack upon a female is treated, as if it is of little consequence. Simultaneously, the drawing appeals to a feminine point of view by representing the nymph as unafraid and complicit in the humorous treatment of the scene. She sits serenely and smiles at the way Pan is upbraided by the diminutive cupid. The viewer is thus encouraged to focalize the scene from a female point of view, identifying primarily with the nymph, but also with the cupid, in their collaboration to achieve a humorous victory over the untamed Pan.

Poussin took up this theme in several other works, for example in his *Venus, Satyr, Faun, and Cupids* in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kassel of about 1635 (see above, Fig. 2.20). In that scene Venus defeats the satyr by sitting on his back and pointing the direction she wants him to take her. But contradictorily, even though she apparently represents higher or spiritual love in that painting, her pose seen from the back is conceived in a most erotic manner. The walking faun at the right focalizes Venus's body through his male gaze, even though he suppresses his sexual urges as he carries the group's picnic supplies. Both this painting in Kassel and the drawing at Windsor could be construed to represent the triumph of woman over man's bestiality.

Poussin's early (cut down) canvas of *Venus and Mercury* (c. 1627-1629, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, Fig. 2.23) also takes up the theme of the base passions conquered. Here the father of Cupid, Mercury, points out the child to his mother, Venus, as the boy struggles with a goat-footed baby Pan. Light-skinned and winged, Cupid symbolizes *Anteros*, spiritual love or love returned, while the baby Pan, darker in coloration, signifies *Eros*, or carnal love. The foreground is littered with objects—a lute, a musical score, an artist's palette, scrolls and pages of poetry and literature, along with the caduceus, a token of eloquence—that symbolize the higher arts associated with both Mercury, the protector of the arts, and *Anteros*. These objects represent the spiritual pursuits that are victorious over the lower passions. This high-minded theme explains why Venus and Mercury do not engage in the sensual play of love. Mercury points at the goat's feet of *Eros* as he admonishes Venus not to succumb to mere physical love. She reacts to his advice with coolness. The painting thus apparently undergirds the seventeenth-century view that women are hypersexualized by nature and reluctant to forego the enjoyments of carnal lovemaking. Because Venus and Mercury are the parents of Cupid, the painting is also in some sense an 'Education of Cupid' as the boy struggles against the lower passions symbolized by *Eros*.<sup>89</sup> It may seem odd to

89 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 108-110.



2.23. Nicolas Poussin, *Venus and Mercury*, c. 1627-1629. Oil on canvas, cut down, right-hand part 78 x 85 cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London (Photo: Dulwich Picture Gallery, London/Bridgeman Images)

the modern viewer, but no doubt appeared quite natural to artists and viewers of Poussin's time, that higher love is represented in a painting featuring conspicuously erotic, naked figures. The artist's presentation of this subject may be characterized as parodic, because of the unsustainable contrast between the allegorical component of high-minded spiritual love and the sensualized figures of Venus and Mercury, and because of the way that Mercury instructs the unenthusiastic Venus about the virtues of higher love. (This work is the right-hand part of a larger painting cut down in the eighteenth century. The other part, the *Concert of Loves* in the Louvre, represents four music-making *putti* and a fifth holding up two laurel wreaths, one intended for the victor of the struggle in the present Dulwich picture.)

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### 3. Lovers—Genuine, Controlling, Unrequited, Jealous

#### Abstract

Poussin's paintings present a wide range of approaches to love. Deeply felt love is portrayed in his *Venus and Adonis* (two versions), *Acis and Galatea*, *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite*, *Arcadian Shepherds* (first version), *Spring* (Earthly Paradise), and *Summer*. *Mars and Venus* depicts controlling love. Unfulfilled love is shown in his *Tancred and Erminia* (two versions) and *Venus with the Dead Adonis*, while *Landscape with Juno and Argus* represents jealous love.

**Keywords:** Lovers, Genuineness, Control, Unrequitedness, Jealousy

Poussin presents a wide range of approaches to love in his paintings, from deeply felt to controlling, from unfulfilled to jealous. Genuine, reciprocal love is the theme of several works, including two versions of *Venus and Adonis*, *Acis and Galatea*, *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite*, and even his first version of the *Arcadian Shepherds*, in which a partly clothed shepherdess suggests previous erotic activity. In addition, the first two canvases of his *Four Seasons* series include positive lovers: *Spring* (Earthly Paradise) portrays Adam and Eve before the fall, and *Summer* depicts Ruth and Boaz, who will become wife and husband. In *Mars and Venus*, Venus is shown as controlling in love, since she coerces Mars to dally in her bed of pleasure, thus thwarting his ambition to pursue his bellicose ways. Unrequited love is represented in *Tancred and Erminia* (two versions), where Erminia is unable to fulfill her love for Tancred. Finally, Poussin's *Landscape with Juno and Argus* displays jealousy in love. The jealous Juno places on the plumage of her peacock the hundred eyes of Argus, whom she had sent to guard Jove's latest paramour, Io; the all-seeing monster had been killed by Mercury at Jove's behest.

The *Venus and Adonis* in the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth (c. 1624-1625, Fig. 3.1) expresses the deep, mutual love of the couple as Venus lies peacefully in her lover's lap, gently holding him as she looks into his eyes. Symbolic hints of Adonis's future early death, such as the torch on the ground, the sleeping cupid, and

the black clouds, are kept to a minimum. The other version of *Venus and Adonis*, in Providence (1625, Rhode Island School of Design, Fig. 3.3) shows the couple as loving and embracing, but asleep, their fitful slumber agitated, echoing the pronounced symbolic imagery in the painting alluding to Adonis's death through his encounter with a boar. Such ominous imagery includes cupids and Adonis's hunting dog chasing a rabbit, and a dour river god sitting next to the flowers into which Adonis will change. *Acis and Galatea* (1627-1628, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Fig. 3.5) equally shows the genuine love of a happy couple, as they embrace and kiss near cavorting sea deities and a relaxed Polyphemus peacefully playing his pipes on a mountaintop. The painting gives little hint of the future death of Acis at the hands of the brutish Cyclops. Poussin's canvas of *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite* (1635-1636, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Fig. 3.7) depicts the triumph of a couple in love and newly married (see my arguments supporting this identification of the subject and not the *Birth of Venus*). The exuberance of the marriage scene is supported by celebrating cupids, one of whom holds a nuptial torch over Amphitrite's head, while reveling sea deities appear below. In the foreground is the dolphin that convinced Amphitrite to marry Neptune; the creature carries on its back the infant sea-god Palaemon, the child and companion of Neptune. Poussin's first version of the *Arcadian Shepherds* (c. 1628-1629, The Chatsworth Settlement, Fig. 3.9) shows two rustic shepherds and a shepherdess discovering an inscription on a tomb that reads '*Et in Arcadia Ego*' ('Even in Arcady there am I'), indicating the presence of death and the brevity of life. The shepherdess represents youth and love; her state of partial nudity hints at erotic activity previous to the discovery of the tomb and underscores the need to capture the fleeting pleasure of love. Poussin's *Spring (Earthly Paradise)* (1660-1664, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 3.11) from his *Four Seasons* series presents the loving couple Adam and Eve before the fall. The pair contemplate nature's plenitude, as Eve points to the fruit of a nearby tree, indicating to Adam the fecundity of creation. The serpent, prelude to the Fall, is nowhere to be seen; thus the picture represents the state of innocence of the couple. They show no signs of the psychological stress they customarily exhibit in pictures that depict them having defied God's command by eating the forbidden fruit. Hence, the bounty of nature is emphasized in a scene that prefigures the future Christian paradise and Eve's role symbolizing the New Eve, Mary, the mother of Christ. The second painting from the *Four Seasons* series, *Summer (Ruth and Boaz)*, 1660-1664, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 3.12) depicts the poor Moab woman Ruth kneeling before the wealthy owner of estates, Boaz, in the foreground of a harvesting scene, as she begs permission to glean barley and wheat from his fields. Eventually Boaz marries Ruth; their son, Obed, continues the family line with Jesse, then David, and eventually Christ. The second theme in this chapter, control in love, is represented by Venus, who in *Mars and Venus* (c. 1627-1628, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Fig. 3.13) persuades Mars to

remain in her bed and enjoy their love, thus thwarting his instincts to go off in pursuit of the art of war. The allegorical theme of the painting is love conquering war, where Venus disarms Mars. By showing Venus as the controlling partner and Mars as the passive one, Poussin reveals the war god's displeasure and symbolic impotence through his strained expression and, even more strikingly, by his absent (or hidden) penis. Poussin represents an emotional and mental struggle, a battle of minds (an erotic *psychomachia*), between the masculine and feminine positions. Theme three of this chapter, unrequited love, is represented by Erminia in two versions of *Tancred and Erminia* (c. 1631, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Fig. 3.14; and c. 1633-4, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, Fig. 3.15). As the Christian knight Tancred lay wounded after a battlefield victory, the timid Princess Erminia of Antioch, nurturing a tortuous passion, discovered him and staunched his wounds by cutting off her hair. Poussin's first representation of the scene from about 1631 shows a delicate Erminia mustering her energy to save the life of her secret beloved, but the artist's second version depicts her as a much stronger female, a virtual amazon, forceful and husky, with an aggressive mien, desperately ripping through her hair with a sword to staunch Tancred's wounds. Nevertheless, her excessive timidity (belied by her sturdy build and vigorous action in the second version) prevented her from ever revealing her secret love for the Christian warrior. *Venus with the Dead Adonis* (c. 1626-1627, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Caen, Fig. 3.16), not included below in this chapter in extended discussion, also represents unrequited love; Venus lost the young Adonis to early death. The painting shows the goddess grieving as she pours nectar on Adonis's body as little scarlet anemones, the flowers that immortalize his memory, sprout from his blood. His sad end was marked by his masculine recklessness and pride in defying Venus's advice to desist in hunting the boar. Even though Venus failed in asserting her regulating power over the youth, he still remains under her controlling eye after his death. He had asserted his own inferior power, because of his youthfulness and inexperience, compounded by his proud belief that he could prove his masculinity by demonstrating his superior skill as a hunter. He defied Venus as a mark of rebellion, in reaction to her forceful female passion. Their story represents a test of wills that the mortal youth was doomed to lose. Venus's superior power as a female served as a warning to Poussin's contemporary masculine audience to be wary of women's uncontrollable passion. Adonis's death encapsulates the consequences of both succumbing to and defying female control in love. Jealousy in love, the final theme in this chapter, is represented by the jealous Juno in *Landscape with Juno and Argus* (1636-1637, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, Fig. 3.17). The sad queen of the gods, having lost in her rivalry with Jove over his paramour Io, consoles herself by placing the hundred eyes of Argus on the plumage of her peacock. She had sent Argus to guard Io, but her husband outmaneuvered her by dispatching Mercury to kill the monster. In her defeat, Juno



3.1. Nicolas Poussin, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1624-1625. Oil on canvas, 98.5 × 134.6 cm. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX (Photo: Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth/Art Resource, NY)

makes the best of her humbled position in a particularly feminine way, by treating the eyes of Argus as decorations to adorn her emblematic bird.

It should be noted that aside from the first category in this chapter, genuine love, where the males and females are conceived as equal partners, the remaining categories, controlling, unrequited, and jealous love, all feature females who are manipulators, unanswered, or suspicious. It thus falls to the lot of women to control or suffer, while men come off as innocent or relatively unscathed.

Poussin presents unperturbed mutual affection in his early *Venus and Adonis* (c. 1624-1625, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, Fig. 3.1). This painting is doubted occasionally as an original work by Poussin.<sup>1</sup> According to recently discovered inventories from the 1630s in Rome, this picture was sold by art dealer Giovanni Stefano Roccatagliata to Francesco Scarlatti in 1633. When Scarlatti could not pay for it in 1635, it was given to Cassiano dal Pozzo as guarantor, then returned to

1 Thuillier, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 245-246; Dempsey, 'Poussin Problems', pp. 41-42; but see the enthusiastic endorsement by Oberhuber, *Poussin, The Early Years in Rome*, p. 82.



3.2. Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, 1554. Oil on canvas, 186 × 207 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid (Photo: Museo del Prado, Madrid/HIP/Art Resource, NY).

Roccatagliata in 1636, but reacquired by Pozzo after that date.<sup>2</sup> In neither of his paintings of Venus and Adonis as lovers, the present work and the one in Providence (Fig. 3.3), does Poussin follow Ovid or Titian (Fig. 3.2) in focusing on the goddess warning her young companion of the dangers of hunting the boar.

In both of Poussin's pictures she is passive; the present canvas shows her lying in Adonis's lap, gazing lovingly into his eyes as she gently touches his hair; in the work in Providence both she and her lover are asleep. A third painting in Caen shows Venus mourning the dead Adonis (Fig. 3.16). Unlike the Providence version, where stark images of hunting *erotes*, straining dogs, and the dour river god holding flowers

2 Cavazzini, 'Nicolas Poussin, Cassiano dal Pozzo and the Roman Art Market', p. 810.



allude to Adonis's death, the present picture contains less obvious symbolism of his fatal encounter with the boar. It emphasizes instead the happy love of goddess and hunter. The pair exchange tender glances as Adonis sits under a tree with the nude Venus resting quietly in his lap. Venus pulls Adonis down toward her, fulfilling her wish as described by Ovid: 'I would like to lie there with you.' By articulating both her gentle tug on Adonis and her beautiful breasts, the artist hints at Ovid's account of what will happen next when she makes a pillow for him of her bosom.<sup>3</sup> Little *erotes* play with the swans of Venus's chariot and with doves and flowers, symbolizing the lovers' bond, although the blossoms obliquely refer to the floral form that Adonis will take upon his death. The hunter's dog sits quietly, even though the swans have caught his attention. Other hints of tragedy are the torch lying on the ground beside a cupid whose sleeping state may allude the hunter's death, although this *amorino's* main purpose seems to be to mimic the quietude of Venus and Adonis and represent the sleepiness that follows love making. The only other reminders of Adonis' sad fate are the hunter's spear, cape, and horn and the ominous, dark clouds in the background with ghostlike *erotes* reclining on them. The overall tone of the painting is happy, with the loving couple surrounded by frolicking *amorini*. Venus and Adonis are partners equally devoted to a loving companionship; we see no hint of Venus's anxiety or Adonis' coolness that are prominent features of Titian's multiple painted versions of the story (see Fig. 3.2).<sup>4</sup>

In Poussin's conception, the tragic end of the tale is suggested almost subliminally, with small hints of negativity almost entirely engulfed by feelings of contentment. The troubling aspects of the story, focusing especially on the goddess's sovereign control over and libidinous craving for a mortal and the grave consequences for him, have been virtually squeezed out of the painting. Thus the idea central to this tale, that a powerful, domineering woman can, through excessive ardor, destroy a male inferior to her, is virtually absent here, and can only be imagined as an afterthought, through Venus's seductiveness and the power of her passion.

The subject of the two lovers asleep in *Venus and Adonis* (1625, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, Fig. 3.3) implies the power of the goddess over the mortal hunter, who, normally active, is rendered impassive in love. While the lovers appear to enjoy each other's company in mutual slumber, their tense poses and serious facial expressions in fact suggest troubled sleep. Even if Venus naps, she is still the more 'active' partner: she adopts a seductive pose with an arm lifted above her head and a leg provocatively raised. By contrast, Adonis is caught in a decidedly non-erotic pose, with a heavy arm swung unceremoniously over the body of the goddess. His sleeping form alludes to his future death. That his passive

3 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.556-559; Barolsky, *Ovid and the Metamorphoses of Modern Art*, p. 178.

4 Thomas, 'Interart Analogy', pp. 19-22.



**3.3. Nicolas Poussin, *Venus and Adonis*, 1625. Oil on canvas, 75 × 99 cm. Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence, RI (Photo: Rhode Island School of Design Museum).**

state is the fault of Venus is suggested by his hunting dogs, whose eagerness to chase a hare caught by *erotes* at the left symbolizes the active life typical of Adonis before his encounter with the goddess of love. A scene with *erotes* chasing a hare was described in antiquity by Philostratus and illustrated in Renaissance editions of his *Imagines* (Fig. 3.4).<sup>5</sup>

The ancient author notes that the hare is loved by Venus because it copulates in all seasons and desires always to be pregnant, negatively suggesting that women wish for the same.<sup>6</sup> Poussin's scene of *erotes* capturing a hare also alludes to the hunt of the boar that will prove irresistible to Adonis and result in his death. One of the implications of Adonis's chase of the boar is that by ignoring Venus's warning not to hunt, he will assert his independence from her and make her anxious, thus ensuring his own destruction. The little cupid at the top of the painting on a cloud pretends to shoot an arrow at the pair of lovers, implying Venus's power over Adonis.

5 Vigenère, *Les images ou tableaux de platte peinture des deux Philostrates*, p. 41.

6 Philostratus, *Imagines*, 1.6; Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 106-108.



3.4. *The Erotes*. Engraving from Blaise de Vigenère, *Les images ou tableaux de platte peinture des deux Philostrates* (Paris: l'Angelier, 1629), p. 41. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris/Bridgeman Images).

Her infatuation with the young hunter was in fact prompted by Cupid, one of whose arrows grazed her when he was kissing her. After that, Ovid tells us, charmed by Adonis's beauty, Venus abandoned Cythera, Cnidos, and Heaven, always remaining by the side of her Adonis, as in this painting.<sup>7</sup> Ovid continues by having Venus tell her lover to lie with her on the grass, under a tree; then the poet describes how she made a pillow of her breast, as in the painting.<sup>8</sup> By tying up his dogs and setting aside his quivers, cape, and arrows in order to dally in the play of love, Adonis violates his essential nature as a hunter. The river god at the right looks reprovably at the lovers, suggesting that he is displeased to see Adonis turn away from the chase even as he foresees the huntsman's death. The god embraces a cornucopia turned upside down, an ill omen, and in his other hand holds the flowers into which Adonis will turn at the moment of his death. All of this suggests that it is the power of women to dominate in love that brings about men's destruction.

A similar love story that portends future disaster is *Acis and Galatea* (1627-1628, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Fig. 3.5). Poussin shows the principals enjoying their genuine love, embracing in a kiss, while Polyphemus, the cause of impending misery, quietly plays his pipes in the background. The painting represents Polyphemus wooing Galatea with a song, while the nymph rests in the arms of her Acis, as described by Ovid.<sup>9</sup> The mood of the painting differs from Ovid's poem, however, since the latter describes the giant as highly satirical and agitated when serenading Galatea. The painting, by contrast, shows Polyphemus sitting calmly, seemingly unaware of the lovers' presence. Two *erotes* flying over the water shoot cavorting sea gods below with arrows of love, who, under their influence, playfully accost nereids. The uninhibited nereids, offering no resistance to the sexual advances of the sea gods, remind the viewer of the tensions that go unstated in the picture, that is, of Galatea's strong distaste for Polyphemus's sexual advances. Ovid describes her repulse of the giant as strongly masculine in its force; she was hard from Polyphemus's perspective. When in Ovid's telling Polyphemus woos Galatea with his song, he is feminized, but in her resistance to him, the Nereid becomes masculinized by her obstinacy and intransigence. By contrast, her demeanor in Poussin's painting is mild—Poussin, like Ovid, shows no inequality in love between her and Acis.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Poussin shows Galatea as the more active lover—she gazes into Acis's eyes and holds his neck. As a nereid, a deity, she is the superior—one might even say masculine—partner, while the youth (Ovid says he was just sixteen, with soft cheeks marked by an

7 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.529-536.

8 *Ibid.*, 10.556-559.

9 *Ibid.*, 13.738-897.

10 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, pp. 31, 184-193.



3.5. Nicolas Poussin, *Acis and Galatea*, 1627-1628. Oil on canvas, 98 × 137 cm. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin (Photo © National Gallery of Ireland).

undefined down) is embraced rather than the one who hugs. Unlike Aurora in relation to her Cephalus, Galatea shows no female frenzy in her love for Acis—the true violence in this tale lies elsewhere, in Polyphemus’s jealousy of Acis. Poussin provides little hint of the end of the story, where, in retaliation for Galatea’s cold rejection of him, the giant embodies masculine brutishness by throwing a boulder at Acis, killing him. The painter instead presents his scene as a littoral fantasy of happy love.

In Ovid’s text, the teller of the story is Galatea, who characterizes Polyphemus as rough and horrible. When Ovid describes Polyphemus’s playing his pipes and wooing Galatea with his song, he emphasizes the frustration of the giant, who gets more and more agitated that Galatea loves Acis rather than him. Polyphemus ends his song by singing that his slighted passion rages hotly and that he will tear out Acis’s guts. As soon as he ended his song, Ovid says, Polyphemus rose up like a bull in rut, chasing Acis through the woodlands. He wrenched off a piece of mountain and flung it at Acis, killing him. In his *Mythologiae*, Conti says that the Cyclops tried to alleviate the anxiety he felt about his love for Galatea by playing on his



3.6. Nicolas Poussin, *Polyphemus Discovering Acis and Galatea*, c. 1622-1623. Graphite underdrawing, pen and brown ink, brown wash on paper, 18.5 × 32.3 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

pipe while he listened to the Muses' songs.<sup>11</sup> Poussin's presentation of the giant in this way points to the likelihood that he read Conti in addition to consulting Ovid. The only suggestion of Polyphemus's future vehemence in the painting is in the attitudes of the cupids. The concerned looks of the cupids supported by sea creatures at the bottom-right seem to foretell the impending tragic fate of the lovers, while the two cupids in the sky, serious to the point of anger, suggest the violence that will occur with Acis's death.

Poussin represented the incident that led to Acis's violent death in a drawing from the Marino series of 1622-1623 (Fig. 3.6).<sup>12</sup> In this work based on Ovid, Polyphemus watches Acis and Galatea making love under some trees as he erupts into a jealous rage while hiding behind huge boulders, one of which he will use to kill his rival. With its erotic, voyeuristic, and violent theme, this drawing has been compared to pornographic prints such as Agostino Carracci's *Lascivie* and Marcantonio Raimondi's *Modi*.<sup>13</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that Poussin's picture in Fig. 3.7 (1635-1636, Philadelphia Museum of Art) represents the *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite*, and not the *Birth of Venus* as is often claimed.<sup>14</sup> Bellori and Félibien both identify the subject as the

11 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 510.

12 Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, pp. 21, 26, cat. 6.

13 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 6 and n. 23.

14 Thomas, 'Poussin's Philadelphia Marine Painting', pp. 40-76.



3.7. Nicolas Poussin, *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite*, 1635-1636. Oil on canvas, 114.5 × 146.5 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, George W. Elkins Collection, 1932 (Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY).

*Triumph of Neptune*, and the central figure already was described as Amphitrite in 1653.<sup>15</sup> According to both Bellori and Félibien, the painting was made for Cardinal Richelieu, for whom a picture of a marine subject may have had appeal in the mid-1630s when he was working to turn France into a great naval power. No ancient literary source, as far as I am aware, says that Neptune was present at Venus's birth from the sea. The reason why this is so is that, according to Hesiod and other ancient sources, he did not yet exist: he was born later to his parents, Cronos and Rhea, along with his five Olympian sisters and brothers, including Zeus.<sup>16</sup>

The story of Neptune and Amphitrite, who in the end joyously celebrate their marriage, was told by several ancient authors, including Hyginus,<sup>17</sup> and by Lorenzo Pignoria

15 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 205; Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 120.

16 Thomas, 'Poussin's Philadelphia Marine Painting', p. 51.

17 Hyginus, *De astronomia*, 2.17.

in editions of Vincenzo Cartari's *Imagini de gli dei* after 1615.<sup>18</sup> At first, Amphitrite wanted to remain a virgin and fled from Neptune's advances. She took flight to the edge of the ocean, where Neptune sent a dolphin to find her; the dolphin then persuaded her to marry Neptune. In his version of the story, Oppian says that after the dolphin discovered the nereid hiding and told the sea god that he had found her, Neptune 'straightway carried off the maiden', making her his bride and queen of the sea.<sup>19</sup>

In this exuberant painting, Poussin shows Amphitrite, accompanied by her attributes of dolphins drawing her sea chariot, as she accepts her triumphal marriage to Neptune, at the left, arriving at the water's edge in his car pulled by sea horses. A little winged child rides the dolphin closest to the viewer. This figure may be a cupid or more likely the minor deity Palaemon, a child of Neptune known for riding dolphins and serving as companion to his father (Fig. 3.8).<sup>20</sup> Ovid describes how the dead mortal child Melicertes was changed into a god by Neptune and renamed Palaemon.<sup>21</sup> The illustration of Palaemon in Vincenzo Cartari's *Imagini de gli dei*, a source well-known to Poussin, appears on the same page as the story of Neptune and Amphitrite.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Cartari describes a sculptural group of Neptune and Amphitrite at Corinth that includes a depiction of Palaemon.<sup>23</sup>

Surrounding Neptune and Amphitrite in Poussin's picture are tritons and nereids who blow a sea horn, hold a veil above Amphitrite, cavort as lovers, and skim across the waves. The figure seen from the back at the right may be Tethys, the mother of Amphitrite, and Oceanus, god of the source river of the great ocean, is represented by the flowing vase in front of her. Cupids in the sky sprinkle flowers (more appropriate for a marriage than a birth of Venus) and ride in a sky chariot pulled by doves. Neptune's status as bridegroom is indicated by a cupid at the top-right, who shoots him with an arrow of love.<sup>24</sup> A flying cupid holds a nuptial torch over Amphitrite's head, indicating her role as bride.

In his play *L'Amphytrite* published in Paris in 1630, M<sup>r</sup> de Monléon describes a vision that Amphitrite has of Neptune,<sup>25</sup> a scene that includes several of the participants also present in Poussin's painting. Amphitrite views tritons, dolphins, and Neptune in his chariot pulled by sea horses. When Amphitrite finally agrees to marry Neptune, the

18 Thomas, 'Poussin's Philadelphia Marine Painting', pp. 44, 54-57; Cartari, *Le vere e nova imagini de gli dei*, pp. 534-535.

19 Oppian, *Halieutica*, 1.383-392.

20 Conti, *Mythologiae*, p. 86; Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 163.

21 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.542ff.

22 Cartari, *Le vere e nova imagini de gli dei*, p. 534.

23 Thomas, 'Poussin's Philadelphia Marine Painting', pp. 54-55.

24 For an earlier example of a cupid in the sky shooting an arrow at Neptune in a scene of Neptune and Amphitrite, see a majolica wine cooler from Urbino, c. 1570: Erdberg, 'Outstanding Maiolica', p. 304 and fig. 10.

25 Monléon, *L'Amphytrite*, pp. 39, 41, 77, 136-137.





3.8. *Palaemon*, from Vincenzo Cartari, *Imagini de gli dei*, Padua: P. P. Tozzi, 1615, p. 534 (Photo: Author)

skies open up and the gods descend to a watery grotto where sirens, tritons, Oceanus, and Thetis reside. It is here that Neptune and Amphitrite celebrate their nuptials. The naiads and their lovers, and the God of Love himself, are included in Monléon's play. This scene was one of the most spectacular in a play that shared with court ballets startling and expensive stage effects. As he was planning his painting, Poussin may have heard of this play's impressive staging of Neptune's arrival before Amphitrite by sea chariot.<sup>26</sup>

Those who claim that Poussin's painting represents the birth of Venus assert that the picture cannot be a Neptune and Amphitrite because the pair is not shown in the same sea chariot.<sup>27</sup> But Jacob Jordaens's *Neptune and Amphitrite* (Rubenshuis, Antwerp) of c. 1645, like Poussin's work, shows the marriage pair in separate shell cars, as does a picture by Francesco Albani, and one attributed to Giorgio Vasari depicts Amphitrite riding on a shell chariot separated from Neptune, who drives a pair of dolphins. A number of other pictures repeat this pattern of separate figures.<sup>28</sup>

26 Thomas, 'Poussin's Philadelphia Marine Painting', pp. 57-58.

27 Sommer, 'Poussin's *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite*: A Re-identification', pp. 323-324.

28 Thomas, 'Poussin's Philadelphia Marine Painting', pp. 60-67.

In Poussin's painting, Amphitrite has given up the former reluctance she felt toward Neptune, now expressing her acceptance in her gentle smile and the inclination of her head in the direction of her new husband. Poussin shows a resplendent Amphitrite whose nudity is indicative of the classical idealization of the beautiful female. She is given precedence over Neptune by occupying the center of the painting, even though the earliest descriptions of the work refer to the picture as a *Triumph of Neptune*. Amphitrite's prominence is further emphasized by the four figures, including Neptune, who look at her. The exuberance and energy of the picture mark it as a glorious example of the triumph of love.

The *Arcadian Shepherds* (c. 1628-1629, The Chatsworth Settlement, Chatsworth, Fig. 3.9) depicts two rustic shepherds and a shepherdess discovering an inscription on a tomb that reads *'Et in Arcadia Ego'* ('Even in Arcady there am I'). It is implied that Death, as represented by a skull on top of the tomb, speaks these words, which suggest that no place, not even bucolic Arcady, is immune from the effects of mortality. The picture is thus a *memento mori*, a reminder of death, in classical rather than medieval form. The painting was included in an inventory of works owned by Cardinal Camillo Massimo at the time of his death in 1677.<sup>29</sup> Massimo also owned Poussin's *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), but it is uncertain if the works were viewed as pendants allegorizing *vanitas*.<sup>30</sup> An antique description of a tomb in Arcady is found in the fifth *Eclogue* of Virgil; in the Renaissance Jacopo Sannazaro continued this theme in his *Arcadia* of 1502, which may have served as a literary source for Poussin.<sup>31</sup> In addition, a likely visual source was a painting of this subject by Guercino of c. 1618-1622 (Fig. 3.10), which shows two shepherds reflecting on a tomb's inscription identical to the one in the Chatsworth painting.

On top of Guercino's tomb is a prominent skull, the intended 'speaker' of these words. In Poussin's version the shepherds, who have stumbled upon the tomb in a sudden and dramatic confrontation with death, are eagerly engaged in deciphering its message. His group is enlarged from Guercino's two to three, including the shepherdess, whose disheveled clothing and exposed leg and breast suggest erotic activity previous to the discovery of the tomb. The fleeting nature of the pleasures of love are thus also brought into play, and, more generally, the shepherdess may serve as an allegory of the brevity of life, youth and beauty. Her placement here is suggestive of the association of love and death, with the implication that even the inhabitants of this idyllic place must succumb to a final silence.<sup>32</sup> Equally as rustic and unrefined as the two shepherds, the shepherdess is yet unequal to them in rank

29 Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 80.

30 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 142-143.

31 Pace, 'Nicolas Poussin: "peintre-poète?"', p. 81.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.



3.9. Nicolas Poussin, *Arcadian Shepherds*, c. 1628-1629. Oil on canvas, 101 × 82 cm. Collection of Duke of Devonshire, Chatsworth Settlement Trust, Chatsworth (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).



3.10. Guercino, *Arcadian Shepherds*, c. 1618-1622. Oil on canvas, 81 × 91 cm. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome (Photo: Alfredo Dagli Orti/Art Resource, NY).

because of her gender. The two men occupy more privileged positions closer to the tomb's inscription, and show greater awareness of its import. One shepherd points to the words on the tomb, leaning forward to study them carefully, while the other looks at the skull on top of the tomb with an expression of surprise. By contrast, the young woman, further away and less involved, regards the tomb with sober reflection. The old river god Alpheus, indicating a river in Arcady, sits in the foreground, failing to notice the shepherds. His eyes are closed, suggestive of death.<sup>33</sup> In a later version of this subject (Fig. 7.4) Poussin establishes a more elegiac and noble tone.

*The Four Seasons: Spring (Earthly Paradise)* (1660-1664, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 3.11) is part of a set of landscapes depicting the Four Seasons, painted at the

33 Panofsky, 'Et in Arcadia Ego', pp. 295-320; Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 170.



3.11. Nicolas Poussin, *The Four Seasons: Spring (Earthly Paradise)*, 1660-1664. Oil on canvas, 116 × 160 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

close of Poussin's career for Armand-Jean de Vignerot du Plessis, second Duc de Richelieu, great-nephew of the famous statesman.<sup>34</sup> The artist presents Adam and Eve as a loving couple in the Garden of Eden contemplating nature's plenitude. Eve rises to her knees, pointing to the heavy fruit of a nearby tree, thus indicating to Adam, who sits before her, the fecundity of nature. Meanwhile, God the Father, creator of all, departs among the clouds to the right. His hand is raised, signaling that he surveys and blesses his acts of creation as he hurries into the distance, in a pose similar to Michelangelo's deity in his *God Creating the Sun, Moon, and Plants* from the Sistine ceiling. Poussin's scene depicts the earthly couple before the Fall, in a state of innocence, since the Bible attests that they did not stray until Eve was tempted by the serpent, which is absent from the picture. After creating Adam and Eve, in Genesis, 1, God spoke to them: 'And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree

34 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, pp. 304-305.

with seed in its fruit [...] I have given every green plant for food”.<sup>35</sup> The account continues in Chapter 2: ‘And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’<sup>36</sup> Since the serpent doesn’t appear until Genesis, 3, it is clear that the painting is based on these passages from 1 and 2. The couple’s purity is indicated by their smiles and relaxed poses; they show no signs of the psychological stress they customarily exhibit in pictures that depict them having defied God’s command by eating the forbidden fruit. Their innocence amid the bounty of nature is appropriate for a scene representing springtime. Although the serpent is missing, the tree with its hanging fruit (clearly green apples tinged with red) inevitably suggests the tree of knowledge and the fall, but, given that the painting stresses the positive imagery of the perfection and glory of nature, even more so the scene prefigures the future Christian paradise. By pointing to the fruit Eve associates herself with the fertility of nature, and through her innocence and purity she foreshadows the New Eve, Mary the mother of Christ. Thus, she is represented simultaneously as the originary mother of all and a prefiguration of the Virgin. This symbolism is continued in the streams at the bottom of the picture and in the distance, both of which, in addition to representing the river of Paradise described in Genesis, allude to the ‘garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon’ described in the Song of Solomon.<sup>37</sup> Medieval exegesis associated the bride of Solomon, who personified these waters, with the New Eve, the Virgin Mary, and here, the painting suggests elision with the original Eve as well. In its representation of Spring through Adam and Eve and the Christian valence thus implied, the painting adapts the idea of rebirth in this season to symbolize mortal redemption. Thus, Eve takes on a positive symbolism, and, even if the painting suggests as a secondary feature the eating of the forbidden fruit and the fall of humanity, these were necessary steps toward ultimate salvation. In the picture, Eve is represented as a positive female force, connecting the first pristine state of the Garden with the Heavenly Paradise and human redemption.<sup>38</sup>

Poussin continues his Old Testament theme in *The Four Seasons: Summer (Ruth and Boaz)* (1660-1664, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 3.12), the next in his *Four Seasons* series. The scene centers on the first meeting of the Moab woman Ruth and the wealthy Israelite Boaz, owner of great estates. Her impoverished condition is shown as she humbly kneels before the commanding figure of Boaz, begging permission

35 Genesis, 1.29-30.

36 Ibid., 2.9.

37 Ibid., Song of Solomon, 4.15.

38 Sauerländer, ‘Die Jahreszeiten’, pp. 169-184; Sauerländer, ‘Noch einmal Poussins Landschaften’, pp. 107-137.



3.12. Nicolas Poussin, *The Four Seasons: Summer (Ruth and Boaz)*, 1660-1664. Oil on canvas, 116 × 160 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

to glean barley and wheat from his fields. The Bible tells us that she had anticipated finding grace in his eyes.<sup>39</sup> Poussin shows Boaz granting Ruth's request with his right hand, pointing down to her and a sheaf of wheat at her feet, and with his left hand he instructs his servant at the right to charge his young men not to touch her.<sup>40</sup> In the background we see a majestic group of five horses (reminiscent of those on the Arch of Titus in Rome) brought into the field, as groups of men and women cut and sheave wheat. A bagpiper sits at the right, performing for the workers and perhaps alluding to the future wedding ceremony of Ruth and Boaz. As the biblical story continues, Boaz then orders some of his men to let handfuls of grain fall that Ruth might glean them.<sup>41</sup> Eventually he buys the inheritance of Mählon, Ruth's dead husband, and purchases the right to marry her himself.<sup>42</sup>

39 Ruth, 2.2.

40 Ibid., 2.9.

41 Ibid., 2.16.

42 Ibid., 4.9-10.

Once married, Ruth and Boaz have a son, Obed, whose line continues with Jesse, then David,<sup>43</sup> and eventually Christ. Ruth and Boaz therefore hold an honored position as a loving couple within the lineage of Christ that began with Abraham. In the Middle Ages their marriage was interpreted as symbolizing the union of Christ and the Church. More typological symbolism appears at the left in Poussin's picture, where two women are shown making bread, prefiguring the Eucharist in the New Testament. In fact, the whole focus on grain in this picture has Eucharistic significance, emphasizing Ruth's role in the future establishment of Christianity. One explanation for Poussin's Seasons cycle would play on the associations with other topical series common in the seventeenth century, the four times of day, the four ages of man, the four elements, the four ages of the world.<sup>44</sup> But by featuring in his first two canvases of the series prominent Old Testament women, Eve and Ruth, each one representing love, marriage, and her season through a connection with the fruit of nature, the apple and wheat, there can be no doubt of their typological symbolism prefiguring the New Testament. Eve is represented as a loyal wife and Ruth as a future one, but, equally importantly, as prototypes and mothers they serve essential roles in laying the foundation for Christianity.

The chief significance of *Mars and Venus* (c. 1627-1628, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Fig. 3.13) is allegorical rather than dramatic, and the representation of female passion in this early work is softer and more measured than in the slightly later London *Cephalus and Aurora* (see Fig. 1.2). The theme of the Boston painting, as described by Lucretius, Virgil, and others, is love conquering war, where Venus is shown disarming Mars. The picture symbolizes the peace that comes when love rules the god of war. In a sexual reversal of roles, the usual dominant position of the male is given to the female, where the goddess becomes the controlling partner and Mars the passive one. Venus leans endearingly toward her lover, looking with sincere affection into his eyes and placing her hand on his as she gently draws him to her. Mars's negative reaction is shown in his troubled expression. He points to his shield and helmet held by *amorini*, apparently explaining to Venus his unhappiness with the strong influence she is exerting over him to abandon his bellicose ways. He has no choice but to give up his arms, for he has fallen under her spell, unable to resist her charms. The canvas does not support, through the controlling influence of Venus, contemporary calls in Poussin's time for a greater regard for women and their point of view; rather, it represents a traditional allegorical theme of love subduing war in a humanist tradition going back to the fifteenth century and ultimately back to antiquity. In his commentaries on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in his Latin edition of 1618, Jacob Pontanus quotes Anacreon's remark that the

43 Ibid., 4.17.

44 Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 242.





3.13. Nicolas Poussin, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1627-1628. Oil on canvas, 155 × 213.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Augustus Hemenway Fund and Arthur William Wheelright Fund (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston/ Bridgeman Images).

male's fire and sword can be conquered by womanly beauty.<sup>45</sup> In this comment, following Ovid's tale of Atalanta, Pontanus links woman's beauty with danger. The picture expresses Mars's fears and presents his male point of view in light of the two aspects just mentioned, his discomfort at his disarmed state, and the powerful love that Venus holds over him.

Mars's defeated condition is emphasized through his absent (hidden) penis. He is seated in such a way as to make it virtually invisible. His absent member is another way in which the artist symbolizes his desexed and weakened state. Since it is associated with aggressive male behavior, Mars's absent penis indicates the power of Venus to render him impotent and passive. One might imagine that Mars's missing member may be accounted for partly by the increasingly strong strictures against total nudity in the wake of the religious reforms of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: 'Under the dual influence of the Protestant Reformation

45 McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine*, p. 165.

and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, artists relinquished their hard-won battle to display the human form, and a multitude of accidental draperies, leaves, and fortuitous shrubs once again veiled the nude [...] The lower half of the body became a world apart, a forbidden territory that the seventeenth-century *précieuses* refused to name'.<sup>46</sup> From this perspective, Poussin's attempt to hide Mars's phallus in this picture seems an awkward solution; in his other paintings, the artist sometimes found less unsatisfactory ways to avoid complete nakedness, for example with the placement of strategic draperies. Just as often, he openly painted penises, such as Ajax's in the *Realm of Flora* (Fig. 5.6) and the river god's in the London version of *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 1.2). Mars's missing manhood is used in the *Mars and Venus* picture in an expressive way by Poussin; its absence is an important element in the allegorical significance of the work. The omitted member is an apt symbol for Mars's inability under Venus's influence to pursue the manly art of war.

The other figures in the painting undergird this theme of Mars's enforced abandonment of his favorite activity of initiating the clash of arms. Two little loves to the right of Mars withdraw his helmet and shield, preventing him from using them, but they register disappointment in their faces and seem to withhold the armor reluctantly. Mars's implements of war, his torches, cape, and sword, are strewn on the ground at the bottom-center, likewise indicating his impotency to fight. Two river gods at the right reinforce gender stereotypes: a male god, siding with Mars, is dejected, holding his head in his hand, while a nymph adopts a sexy pose and smiles in sympathy with Venus's triumph over war. At the bottom-left, an *amorino* removes Mars's arrows from his quiver and another sharpens them, altering and defusing their purpose as instruments of war. In showing an *eros* converting the weapons of Mars into arrows that instead inflict the wound of love, Poussin develops a theme from Lucretius's *De rerum natura*.<sup>47</sup> Lucretius describes how Venus subdues Mars by administering the eternally living wound of love ('*aeterno devictus vulnere amoris*').<sup>48</sup> One must imagine that Mars himself has been pierced by these arrows of love, as indicated by his present subdued state. Behind Venus and Mars another *eros* holds a love-arrow pointing at them as he lifts the curtain to their bedchamber. A semi-nude nymph at the far left, in contrast to the happy one at the right, is lost in dejection because of Mars's truncated ambitions for bellicosity; she looks disapprovingly at the *amorini* who sharpen Mars's arrows into implements of love. In the end, Poussin is not as concerned with the abstract, allegorical struggle of the contest between love and war as he is with showing the emotional and mental struggle, a battle of minds (an erotic *psychomachia*) between the masculine and

46 Matthews Grieco, 'The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality', pp. 64-65.

47 Dempsey, '*Mavors armipotens*', pp. 436-437.

48 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 1.34.

feminine positions. He represents this struggle through his figures' expressions and through the disarmed and desexed Mars and Venus's assertion of female desire. Through his imagery, the artist shows the powerlessness of the male in the battle of love. The painting, made for Cassiano dal Pozzo,<sup>49</sup> may have been intended as a marriage picture for his younger brother, Carlo Antonio, who married Theodora Costa in 1627.<sup>50</sup> The theme of the painting would have encouraged the young couple to embrace peace and love. The picture's emphasis on the controlling but mild female influence of Venus seems to indicate Pozzo's favorable regard for women, particularly with respect to matters of love.

Tasso (*Gerusalemme liberata*, 1581) tells the story of the Christian knight Tancred and his prisoner, the Saracen princess Erminia, who experienced unrequited love when she secretly developed an infatuation for her captor. After his victory in single combat over the Saracen giant Argantes, Tancred lay wounded on the battlefield, where, nurturing a tortuous passion, Erminia discovered him and staunched his wounds by cutting off her hair, the incident depicted by Poussin in his first version of *Tancred and Erminia* (c. 1631, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Fig. 3.14). The painter includes Tancred's squire Vafirino at the left, who raises his master so that Erminia may treat his wounds, while Argantes lies dead in the right background. In Tasso's account, the delicate, timid, and virginal Erminia never realizes her goal of winning the heart of Tancred, her sworn enemy. In Cantos 6 and 7 she steals the armor of Tancred's paramour Clorinda, hoping with it to be able to enter the Christian camp and take up a love affair with Tancred. Even as she initiates her plan, she feels conflicted between her yearning for Tancred and her duty to her Islamic cause. When she is ambushed and her plan misfires, she flees, not appearing again until Canto 19. There, accompanied by Vafirino, to whom she reveals her story, she discovers and revives Tancred after his combat with Argantes. Before she is able to proclaim her amorous feelings to Tancred, his companions arrive and arrange lodging for him in Jerusalem. Erminia is forced to seek safe shelter nearby as the battle for the sepulcher continues.

The two women from Tasso's epic represented by Poussin, the witch Armida and the princess Erminia, both fail to stabilize and develop their love for their Christian knights, reflecting a romantic tradition of unrealized amorous desire going back to the Middle Ages. Armida is thwarted in her passion for Rinaldo because he is rescued from her by his friends; Erminia is unable to fulfill her sexual desire since Tasso abandons her love story with Tancred before any conclusion is reached. But Erminia's inability to consummate her desire for Tancred also reflects the stricter Christian morality of Tasso's and Poussin's time, which had replaced the courtly

49 Standing, 'Some Pictures by Poussin in the Dal Pozzo Collection', pp. 611-612.

50 Plock, *Regarding Gendered Mythologies*, p. 154.



3.14. Nicolas Poussin, *Tancred and Erminia*, c. 1631. Oil on canvas, 98 × 147 cm. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

love tradition that had on occasion exalted the libertine proclivity of the nobility. Now, love outside of marriage was forbidden by church and civil authorities. Carnal affection was intended to be limited to man and wife and marital fidelity, once rare, now became a conjugal duty for all.<sup>51</sup>

Less than twenty years after the *Gerusalemme liberata* first appeared, in 1600 the Venetian poet and early feminist Lucrezia Marinella critiqued the misogynistic attitudes of several poets and writers within the framework of her general refutation of sexist arguments. She faulted Tasso's defense of women because he exempted only 'heroic women' (i.e., female rulers) from the widely held view among men of women's native imperfection.<sup>52</sup> Tasso seems not to have considered Erminia a particularly 'heroic' woman, even though she was daughter of Cassano, King of Antioch. The poet describes her as sensitive and timid. Her chief accomplishment, binding the wounds of Tancred with her hair, was not an independent, altruistic act, but carried out in service to a man because of her secretly held passion for him.

51 Schulte van Kessel, 'Virgins and Mothers between Heaven and Earth', p. 135.

52 Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, p. 139; Kelly, *Women, History and Theory*, p. 77.

In this, the earlier of his two versions of the subject, Poussin gives the princess the delicate features that Tasso describes, where she is caught between fear and love as she regards Tancred. The sensuous, atmospheric effect of light and color in this work from Poussin's early maturity suggests the influence of the Venetian style. More urgently, the artist uses color expressively to heighten the drama of the moment: Erminia's haste in tending to Tancred's wounds is underlined by the pallid, grey color of his face, suggesting that he is near death. Simultaneously, Erminia's passion is conveyed in her noticing Tancred's bare breast, just as Armida looks at Rinaldo's in the first (Moscow) of the artist's two versions of *Rinaldo and Armida* (Fig. 2.18) of about four years earlier.

In none of these four pictures does Poussin, following Tasso, provide the respective knights, Rinaldo and Tancred, with suitable lovers who might fulfill typical male expectations of their paramours. Men in Poussin's time wanted women to be both passionate and modest, and, above all, loyal and subservient. Poussin represents Armida's and Erminia's conflicted feelings as they behold their beloveds: 'the theme of conflicting emotions and divided moral allegiance [...] attracted [Poussin] in both the Rinaldo and Armida and Tancred and Erminia subjects [... He depicted the] choices that confront Armida and Erminia, the former torn between love and revenge and the latter between love and faith'.<sup>53</sup> Armida failed as a lover because, as a witch who beguiled Rinaldo, she made him fall asleep so that she could kill him. Only a momentary feeling of lust that washed over her as she contemplated his pretty face prevented her from carrying out her evil plan. And, although a princess, the sensitive Erminia of the Tancred story likewise failed as a lover, because of her excessive timidity. Her meek, impassive behavior marks her as a woman incapable of rising to a sufficient level of self-confidence and passion. Certainly Poussin chose to paint these two women because their stories offered the opportunity to represent conflicting emotions in his scenes. He never depicted the story of Clorinda, a woman warrior of the Saracen army and close friend of Erminia, for whom Tancred harbored an unrequited passion and whom he accidentally mortally wounded while she was disguised in armor; as she lay dying on the battlefield, she requested that he baptize her. Of the two stories he did paint, the men are heroic, noble, and strong and the women are flawed. In her passive, unassertive state, in waiting for Tancred to demonstrate his affection instead (which he never does), Erminia is a properly deferential female, but this very virtue ensures her lack of success in the pursuit of love.

Poussin's second version of *Tancred and Erminia* (c. 1633-1634, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, Fig. 3.15) from *Gerusalemme liberata* depicts the Saracen princess with a more forceful demeanor, even violating the spirit of

53 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, Tancred and Erminia*, p. 28.



3.15. Nicolas Poussin, *Tancred and Erminia*, c. 1633-1634. Oil on canvas, 75.5 × 99.7 cm. Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

Tasso's description of her as timid and fearful. This canvas is characterized by a more tightly integrated, organized, and compact construction and a noble and classical conception. Erminia is huskier, has an athletic frame, a more aggressive mien, and a stronger, even violent, emotion. More Raphaelesque in conception, she is a sturdy, vehement woman desperately ripping through her hair with a sword to supply material with which to staunch the wounds of the Christian warrior, Tancred. In her drama and intensity she takes on a heroic status imagined by Poussin that transcends Tasso's conception of her. She is so determined in her action to save Tancred's life that the secret love she harbors for him is not evident as it was in the first version in St. Petersburg (Fig. 3.14). In this Birmingham version, she is again accompanied by Vafrino, Tancred's squire, and once more the Saracen giant Argantes lies dead in the background after his combat with Tancred.

The cupids flying overhead are a new addition in this version. Richard Verdi has proposed that in contradistinction to Tasso, Poussin points to the consummation of Erminia's love for Tancred by the actions of these *amorini*. He argued that by showing the two cupids bearing the torches and arrows of love, Poussin implies the

happy outcome that Tancred and Erminia are ultimately united in love.<sup>54</sup> Verdi may be making too much of the cupids and their attributes: Poussin's intention in his picture most likely was to respect Tasso's purpose in establishing this single-sided love story. The poet's (and artist's) intent was not to imply an ultimate blissful union of Erminia and Tancred, but rather to represent the pain of unrequited love in the female and to reinforce the aura of nobility and allure in the male hero. Poussin would have wanted Tasso's description of the pain of Erminia's tortuous passion to resonate in the mind of the viewer. In this case, the spirited cupids remind the observer of Erminia's deep desire for Tancred, but also, by way of inversion, they recall negatively her painful, disappointed love.

As in Poussin's earlier version of this story, Erminia looks at Tancred's body, which is now more exposed. Another indication of erotic interest is Tancred's left arm, which, held by Vafrino, also rests on Erminia's knee. Tancred's raised arm recalls Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* from the Sistine ceiling, and reminds the viewer of Tancred's eventual revival.<sup>55</sup> However, in his unconscious state, Tancred is unaware of the placement of his arm, while the princess ignores it, as she is entirely focused on staunching his wounds. In spite of these amorous cues, this time the artist's Erminia seems more a model of female virtue according to the humanist and bourgeois tradition of the Renaissance: she has determination and resolve to heal the hero and is completely dedicated to serving him; she is also chaste in her love for him.

Poussin's *Landscape with Juno and Argus* (1636-1637, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, Fig. 3.17) must have been painted for the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani in Rome, for the picture appears in an inventory of his collection made a couple of months after his death in December 1637.<sup>56</sup> Ovid tells the story of how Jove espied the lovely Io and raped her in a cloud to prevent his wife from seeing anything.<sup>57</sup> Out of jealousy that some female might be the object of her royal husband's attentions, Juno came down to earth to investigate. But ahead of time Jove had turned Io into a heifer to keep Juno off the scent. Nevertheless, because of her continuing suspicions, Juno sent Argus to hold Io captive in her animal form, and to guard her with his hundred eyes to prevent Jove from transforming her back into a girl for his further sexual pleasure. Feeling sorry for Io, Jove sent Mercury to slay the beast. In the right foreground of his *Landscape with Juno and Argus* Poussin depicts the lifeless body of the decapitated Argus, whose glowing eyes are being removed by Juno to decorate the plumage of a peacock, the bird she holds in her lap and

54 Ibid., p. 11.

55 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 198.

56 Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 116; Sutherland Harris, 'Poussin's *Juno, Argus, Io, and Mercury in a Landscape*', p. 160, with strong arguments, dates the painting much earlier, to the mid-1620s.

57 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.567-746.



3.16. Nicolas Poussin, *Venus with the Dead Adonis*, c. 1626-1627. Oil on canvas, 57 × 128 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Caen (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).



3.17. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Juno and Argus*, 1636-1637. Oil on canvas, 120 × 195 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin (Photo: Jörg P. Anders/bpk Bildagentur/Gemäldegalerie, Berlin/Art Resource, NY)



which is dedicated to her as her emblem. In the sky is the prominent cloud in which Jove hid Io, and in front of it flies a naked Mercury, holding his caduceus over his shoulder, departing after having slain Argus. Io is behind Juno, in her form as a heifer, thrashing about in panic.

In this story, Juno's anger was not directed at her husband for his sexual indiscretions, but instead at the hapless victim, Io. The innocent girl's imposed sufferings seemed endless: Ovid explains that once she was forced to become a heifer, she endured being locked up at night by Argus, hobbled and haltered, with only leaves and bitter grass to eat; she had to sleep on the hard ground and drink muddy water. She was filled with terror because she could not talk, only low. She had no arms or voice with which to plead to Argus. Her family suffered too; Io's father was distressed that instead of choosing her a husband, he would have to select her mate from some herd.

At the bottom-center of the painting are two figures in a cave and at the left are two females, whose presence may be explained by Conti's *Mythologiae*. Conti's account of Io's story differs on several points from Ovid's version; he provides many more details from various ancient literary sources and gives extended physical and historical interpretations of the myth.<sup>58</sup> He says that Io is connected with both the moon and the earth, and that some ancient sources name her as the daughter of the river Inachus. She was born from the mouth of Inachus, who was married to Melia; these two are likely the male and female seen in the mouth of the cave in the center of Poussin's painting.<sup>59</sup> According to Conti, Jove embraced Io in a cloud because he represents the sun and the warmth of the upper air, through which the earth's (Io's) vapors are continually rising. Poussin may have meant the prominent cloud in the center of his painting to refer to Conti's physical interpretation of Jove as moist air (the god is shown as a cloud in Correggio's *Jupiter and Io* of 1532-1533, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, where he is anthropomorphized with a vaporish grey head and large, paw-like hand). Conti links Io with the moon because it too is associated with moisture; his elaborate physical interpretation of the story, which is described here in brief summary, is reminiscent of his similar account of Orion's connection to nature, which was famously used by the art historian Ernst Gombrich to explain Poussin's imagery in his *Landscape with Diana and Orion* (see Fig. 4.5). Two females, one nude and the other nearly so, with flowers in their hair, are seen at the left of the painting. Before them are two putti, one picking flowers and the other presenting a cornucopia full of blossoms to the right-hand figure, who holds a spray of wheat in her hand. This must be Ceres, the goddess of grain and earthly fecundity; Conti describes Io as a symbol of the earth's fertility and agriculture,

<sup>58</sup> Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 913-920.

<sup>59</sup> By contrast, Sutherland Harris, 'Poussin's *Juno, Argus, Io, and Mercury in a Landscape*', p. 159, following Ovid, identifies all of the women including Io as nymphs.

and it seems likely that Poussin intended these figures at the left symbolize this aspect of her. The woman at the far left is probably one of Io's sister nymphs.

In several ways, the issue of the gaze is brought out in this story. Io is subject to Argus's unrelenting gaze, since only two of his eyes sleep at a time. The narrative shows how Juno is overpowered by the masculine might of her husband and by Mercury. In response to her adversaries' killing of Argus, Juno hopes by gathering his eyes to preserve in diminished form the power of the monster's gaze, for her own purposes. But her efforts are largely in vain. Her own gaze had been easily obstructed by Jove when he had transformed Io into a heifer and put her in a cloud so that she could not be seen by Juno. The goddess ends up by enacting the 'sadly mocking and fetishistic gesture of carrying Argus's eyes as decorative blind spots on her peacocks'.<sup>60</sup> Poussin paints the agitated state of the heifer, its muscles tensed and its head lolling to one side with its tongue hanging out. This is because of Juno's jealous desire to regain the gaze of Jove, who now had regard for Io; the goddess punished the girl by sending a Fury to harass her and drive her mad with terror. Juno imposed blindness and delusion on Io, distorting her gaze.<sup>61</sup> Poussin expresses Io's deranged state by the way he depicts the contortions of the heifer. Moved to pity by such a sight, Jove implored Juno to end Io's misery. Thus the heifer once again became a nymph, who bore Jove's son. The story demeans both Io and Juno, the one suffering as a deranged heifer and the other outmaneuvered by her husband, while Jove endured all with relatively little discomfort.

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60 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, p. 25.

61 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

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## 4. Killers, Transgressors

### Abstract

The explosive aggressiveness or peevishness of women and goddesses in several works by Poussin result in tragic deaths. Works depicting killers in this chapter include *Medea Killing her Children*, *Diana Killing Acteon*, *Landscape with Diana and Orion*, and *Diana Slaying Chione*. Transgressors who suffer transformation or death include Myrrha in the *Birth of Adonis*; Aglauros in *Mercury, Herse, & Aglauros*, and *Sapphira* in the *Death of Sapphira*.

**Keywords:** Killers, Transgressors, Revenge, Power, Jealousy

The explosive aggression and peevishness of women and goddesses in several works by Poussin result in tragic deaths. His two drawings of *Medea Killing her Children* graphically illustrate how a mother takes horrifying revenge on a husband who abandoned her. The goddess Diana was quick to kill those whom she regarded as offending her, often basing her actions on unjustifiable pretexts. *Diana Killing Acteon* depicts the death of the young hunter at the hands of the goddess for the slight of observing her while bathing. In *Landscape with Diana and Orion*, the goddess kills the hunter Orion, according to one version of the story, on a dare from her brother, Apollo, and to protect her virginity. *Diana Slaying Chione* shows the goddess killing a mortal woman by shooting her through the tongue for boasting that she was the more beautiful. Transgressors who suffer transformation or death in works by Poussin include Myrrha, who is changed into a tree by the gods for her crime of incest in the *Birth of Adonis*, and *Sapphira*, who in the *Death of Sapphira* is struck dead by God for hiding money intended for the Church. Another transgressor appears in Poussin's *Mercury, Herse, & Aglauros* (c. 1627, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, Fig. 4.9), a painting not included for detailed study in this chapter. This canvas shows the sad story of Aglauros,<sup>1</sup> who, through jealousy, had tried to bar Mercury's way to her sister Herse, whom the god loved. For her transgressions of jealousy of her sister, greed, and desire for Mercury, Aglauros was turned

<sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.708-833.

to stone by the god. Poussin's picture seems to warn women not to open secrets through longing and particularly through the gaze, which is a male prerogative. By representing Mercury's destruction of Aglauros, the scene points to male control of women's sexuality and the subjection of females to male disciplining for their moral transgressions, principal themes of gender dynamics in Poussin's time. In his drawing of *Medea Killing her Children* at Windsor Castle (c. 1649-50, Fig. 4.2), Poussin depicts Medea's eyes like targets, as large circles with dots in the center to represent her irises. By drawing her this way the artist conveys Medea's rage at Jason for taking a new wife. Bellori described Medea as 'demented' (*insana*), but her eyes could be interpreted as expressing her anger and strength, more so than hysteria. She was sometimes admired for what would now be called her feminism, exemplified by her speech to the women of Corinth in Euripides' play where she decries the power men exercise over women. In her fury she kills her children as revenge against her husband, but Poussin's drawing seems to allow that her wrath may be temporary. The artist's drawing *Diana Killing Acteon* (c. 1625-27, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 4.3) signals men's anxiety about the destructiveness of female sexuality and power. The drawing reverses the hunt's function as a metaphor for male sexual conquest by showing Diana destroying the hunter. Diana's desire is to kill rather than to exercise sexual control; she craves total female power, something so fearful to men that their ardor to retain patriarchal control over women was undoubtedly reinforced in the seventeenth century by this story. Diana's arbitrary and capricious desire to kill Orion, who seeks her out in Poussin's *Landscape with Diana and Orion* (1658, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fig. 4.5), reinforces her misandry and serves as a symbolic warning to males of the dangers of women. The painting promoted an adversarial attitude toward women among men, undergirding their resolve to treat females as enemies on whom sexual conquest (such as Orion's attempt to love Diana) might be justified. In his *Diana Slaying Chione* (c. 1622-1623, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 4.6), Poussin shows the aftermath of the goddess shooting and killing her mortal challenger. Diana's touchiness was prodigious in respect to the claims of female rivals such as Chione, who had asserted that her beauty was greater than that of the goddess. In this work it is the mortal woman who suffers; Ovid, who recounts this story, says nothing of the fault of the two gods who had raped Chione because of her beauty. Poussin stresses the self-satisfaction of Diana in seeing her rival dead; he heightens the sad plight of Chione by showing her grieving father and children mourning her loss. As Ovid had done in his *Metamorphoses*, Poussin represents the plight of Myrrha sympathetically in his drawing of the *Birth of Adonis* (c. 1622-1623, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 4.7), where she is shown giving birth to the future lover of Venus. Like Ovid, the artist emphasizes her anguish and shame as she is turned into a tree at the moment of her son's birth. She was forced to endure transformation into a

tree by the gods as punishment for her crime of incest with her father. Myrrha's eventual rehabilitation (albeit as a tree) by the gods is suggested by Poussin through his inclusion in the scene of the goddess Lucina and the nymphs who happily assist her in childbirth. The story of Myrrha makes a female, the daughter, guilty of a sex crime, and not a male, the father: she assumed all the blame and punishment for their incest. In Poussin's century, incest was regarded as a crime but was not punished as severely as sodomy. Myrrha's incest is an extreme example of the Renaissance idea that women had voracious sexual appetites: her behavior would have been regarded as a manifestation of women's lustfulness and their willingness to upset the natural sexual order. The artist's *Death of Sapphira* (c. 1654, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 4.10) shows the avaricious Christian woman Sapphira struck dead by God for her transgression of withholding money from the Church. Along with other Christians, Sapphira had brought her money to St. Peter and the Apostles for distribution to all members of the religious community, but she secretly held back a portion for herself. At the moment her deception was discovered, she was struck dead, falling to the ground among a group of shocked and fearful Christians, while St. Peter stands at the right, pointing a condemning finger at the dishonest woman. Her greed, like her husband's in Raphael's well-known cartoon the *Death of Ananias*, was interpreted as a warning to those who neglected to tithe to the Church.

The stories behind the paintings and drawings in this chapter expose women as killers (Medea, Diana) and as driven by lust and greed (Myrrha and Sapphira). Such tales in Poussin's time reinforced men's fear of women and the belief that their unpredictable, lascivious, and rapacious nature required that they be checked through male control and by legal and religious constraint.

Jason and the Argonauts landed in Colchis to acquire the Golden Fleece. Medea, the daughter of King Aeëtes at Colchis, fell in love with Jason, helped him by magic to achieve his goal, and fled her homeland to return to Greece with him. Later, when Jason deserted her, she took her revenge by murdering, among others, their own sons. Medea was thus obsessed with her calculated desire to lash out against an unfaithful husband, at whatever cost. She killed her sons only because she wanted to cause Jason the greatest possible pain. Ovid barely touched on this episode;<sup>2</sup> the best-known full account is Euripides's play. But Poussin readily could have found a rich account of Medea's life and deeds in Natale Conti's *Mythologiae*, conveniently available to him in Jean de Montlyard's French translation.

Poussin's *Medea Killing her Children* (c. 1649-1650, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 4.1), one of two drawings of this subject, had been purchased by Cardinal Camillo Massimo, an important patron of Poussin in his later career.<sup>3</sup> In the drawing

2 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 7:394-397.

3 Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, pp. 10, 180.





**4.1. Nicolas Poussin, *Medea Killing her Children*, c. 1649-1650. Pen and brown ink on paper, 15.9 × 16.7 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).**

Medea is about to stab her younger son, whom she grabs upside-down by the leg. The boys' nurse recoils over the body of the older one, expressing her surprise and shock through wide open eyes and mouth as she lunges dramatically to the right, away from Medea. A horrified Jason desperately reaches out furiously towards his wife from a balcony, too far away to intervene. The woman beside Jason is his new bride from Corinth, the princess Glauce (also known as Creusa).

As an outsider whom the Greeks considered a barbarian woman, Medea had given up everything to be with Jason. He explained to her that he couldn't pass up the opportunity to marry Glauce, a royal princess, but that he hoped someday to join the two families and keep Medea as his mistress. She did not believe him. Before she killed their children, she reminded him of the sacrifices she made for him and the ways in which she had helped him. *Medea* is the only Greek tragedy in which a killer of her family remains unpunished at the end of the play, since she sets out for Athens to start a new life, and the only one about child-killing in which the deed is performed in cold blood and not in a state of temporary madness.<sup>4</sup>

Medea has both feminine and masculine qualities. Her great intelligence and skill were typically viewed as masculine traits by the ancient Greeks. But her ingenuity in manipulating the men around her would have been regarded as a negative female trait. The different methods she employed to murder her victims likewise were interpreted as either feminine or masculine, depending on the procedure.

4 Hall, 'Introduction', in Euripides, *Medea; Hippolytus; Electra; Helen*, p. xvi.

Her choice in Euripides's play to kill the princess Glauce by sending her a dress and crown covered in poison would have been recognized as a woman's way of murder. But dispatching her children in cold blood by knifepoint was viewed as a masculine type of killing.<sup>5</sup> Medea exhibited strong maternal love for her children, something viewed as normal for mothers in Athenian culture. Nevertheless, when she takes revenge against her husband by chillingly murdering them, she reveals another side of her complicated role as an intelligent but strong-willed, calculating, and destructive protagonist.

*Medea Killing her Children* (c. 1649-1650, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 4.2) is a more finished drawing with the same subject as the previous one (Fig. 4.1), probably from the collection of Cassiano dal Pozzo.<sup>6</sup> It shows Athena, represented as a statue, shielding her face from the scene in horror, instead of standing passively as she did in the earlier version, and now the dead older child is on the lap of the nurse instead of lying on the ground in front of her (for the story, see the previous drawing). Poussin was no doubt drawn to this subject because of its dramatic possibilities, and through the greater level of detail in this second version he is able to explore more specifically Medea herself and the others' reactions to her abhorrent act. He represents Medea as single-minded and heartless in brutally murdering her children. She is determined in her action, showing not a shred of mercy, pity, or hesitation. Poussin represents Medea's cold, premeditated act of anger and jealous fury by drawing her eyes as round circles with dots as irises, like targets. She shows not insanity, but female strength and vengeance against an unfaithful husband who betrayed her. In their reactions to Medea's grisly deed, the nurse in the foreground and Jason on the balcony both exhibit the greatest degree of horror and disbelief. The expression of shock in Glauce, Jason's new wife, who stands behind him, is somewhat less intense, no doubt because as Medea's replacement she feels little attachment to her and her children. Poussin is technically incorrect in including Glauce in the scene, since Medea had killed her and her father King Creon before slaying her own children.<sup>7</sup> But there can be no doubt that the artist found Glauce's inclusion to serve the interests of his pictorial drama. He often brought together into one dramatic scene protagonists who were spread over separate episodes in the stories he used for his subjects. Poussin would not have found it a nourishing prospect in pictorial terms to follow Euripides' play with accuracy, since all the scenes of his drama involve only two actors, Medea and someone else. At the end of her story, having rid herself of Jason, Medea later prospered by marrying Aegeus of Athens.

5 Griffiths, *Medea*, pp. 73-75.

6 Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, pp. 11, 180.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 180.



4.2. Nicolas Poussin, *Medea Killing her Children*, c. 1649-1650. Slight black underdrawing, pen and brown ink, pale brown wash on paper, 25.5 × 19.9 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

In his first tragedy, *Medée* (1631), Poussin's contemporary Pierre Corneille explored the devastating power of the female, and in particular the frightening mother who imperils her children. *Medée* shows orderly culture overcome by the chaotic force of female rage. Poussin represents a similar irruption of female toxic power, and reaction to it not only in the horrified expressions of the nurse, Jason, and Glauce, but in the response of the statue of Athena, who, in covering her face with her shield, symbolizes wisdom and reason unable to countenance such destruction. Poussin's Athena allegorizes the utter impossibility of watching Medea's act or making sense of it; in doing so, the goddess acts like a chorus of one, replicating in visual form the chorus's function of reacting to the action in a Greek drama.

The extensive account of Medea's deeds given by Natale Conti in his *Mythologiae* is filled with a litany of the witch's acts of horror.<sup>8</sup> To slow down her father Aeëtes, who was chasing her to prevent her and Jason from getting the Golden Fleece, Medea killed her own brother Absyrtus and scattered his dismembered body. In another episode, by means of magic, she convinced the daughters of King Pelias of Iolcos to kill their father and boil his body in a cauldron. When reading of these gruesome stories, Poussin must have imagined Medea to be a monster. Conti adduces that Medea's jealousy of Jason for marrying Glauce was much greater than her madness. He asserts that Medea lusted after Jason with an intense longing, and used all her magic to make him fall in love with her. The mythographer records that there wasn't any kind of cruel or passionate crime that she didn't commit. Nevertheless, by giving an account of the respect that Medea garnered from the women of her native Colchis, Conti hints at a feminist interpretation: after she returned to her homeland and restored her father's kingdom to him, the native women instituted cults of divine worship in her honor. No men could attend these rites, because of the injuries that Jason had inflicted on her. Even so, Conti concludes his discussion of Medea by moralizing her story to show how one can lose one's mind, become terribly miserable, lose everything one owns, and lead a wretched life.<sup>9</sup> Although recent feminists have regarded Medea sympathetically because of her skill in prevailing in a man's world and her pro-female speech to the women of Corinth in Euripides' play recounting the ways in which wives are forced into subservience by their husbands, she usually was considered an odious example of womankind in Poussin's time. While Conti presented a partly supportive view of Medea, at one point emphasizing her jealousy rather than madness as the reason for killing her children, and relating how she won the respect of the women of Colchis, other commentators, like Bellori, described her as Jason's 'demented wife'.<sup>10</sup>

8 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 566-580, 1069.

9 Ibid., p. 1069.

10 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 329; Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, et architetti moderni*, p. 449: 'l'insana moglie'.



4.3. Nicolas Poussin, *Diana Killing Acteon*, c. 1625-1627. Pale blue paper, slight graphite (?) under-drawing, pen and brown ink on paper, 15 × 23.6 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

Poussin's early drawing of *Diana Killing Acteon* (c. 1625-1627, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 4.3), from the collection of Cardinal Camillo Massimo, illustrates the goddess shooting Acteon, who had been hunting with his dogs when he came upon the naked goddess bathing with her attendants. Outraged, she transformed him into a stag; he was then torn to pieces by his own hounds.<sup>11</sup> The head of one of Acteon's dogs is visible in the drawing, nipping at his master's hindquarters. Like this drawing, Titian's painting of *Death of Acteon* (Fig. 4.4) also shows Diana shooting an arrow at the hunter. The drawing has often been described simply as *Diana Hunting*, but it must show Diana shooting Acteon, because she is rising from a kneeling position and is almost naked.<sup>12</sup> She has no sandals, which Ovid says she took off while bathing after the hunt. In addition, her quiver is on the ground, and the nymph who accompanies her at the left is sitting, not running, as would be required in the hunt. Another naked nymph reclines to Diana's right, leaning on a large urn of water, which Ovid describes as sitting in the goddess's bathing grove.

Diana and her companion nymphs are well-known for having forsworn the company of men, but they did not avoid sex altogether. Jove, aware that Callisto

<sup>11</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.138-252.

<sup>12</sup> Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, pp. 50, 52; cat. 18.



4.4. Titian, *Death of Acteon*, c. 1559-1575. Oil on canvas, 178.8 × 197.8 cm. National Gallery, London (Photo: National Gallery, London/Bridgeman Images).

rejected men, disguised himself as Diana, the nymph's leader, so that he might lie with her. Acteon's destruction by Diana reveals men's anxiety about female-on-female sexuality, where the erotic partners operate outside of male control.<sup>13</sup> The theme of female revenge for an erotic transgression also appears in Poussin's drawing of *Diana Slaying Chione* (Fig. 4.6).

The hunt is a common erotic metaphor for desire and sexual domination, but Diana reverses the power of Acteon as hunter by shooting him in turn and setting his dogs upon him, in effect destroying the both the metaphor and the youth. He is transformed from hunter to prey, from one who exercises his male gaze to one

<sup>13</sup> Saslow, 'The Desiring Eye', p. 142-143.



4.5. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Diana and Orion*, 1658. Oil on canvas, 119 × 183 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1924 (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

who is taken down. He had been following his quarry in the woods and then by surprise found himself facing a naked goddess. In return he then becomes the target of Diana and his own dogs, who behold him with the gaze of desire, albeit the desire to destroy.<sup>14</sup> Because the viewer of the drawing is behind Diana and follows her line of sight as she shoots the stag Acteon has become, the observer sees from her point of view as focalizer. The male viewer of the drawing is thus forced into a female position as observer of a scene of male destruction.

The story of the giant hunter Orion ends tragically when he is killed by Diana because he made the mistake of falling in love with this virgin huntress. Earlier, he had been blinded by King Oenopion for attempting to violate the king's wife (or daughter), Merope. An oracle then told Orion that he would be cured by the rays of the sun. From Poussin's late career, *Landscape with Diana and Orion* (1658, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fig. 4.5) was painted for Michael Passart, a successful Parisian businessman who became an auditor and notary in the *Chambre des comptes* and a member of the *parlement*. The painting shows the blacksmith Cedalion standing on the shoulders of the blind giant, guiding him

14 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, pp. 48, 51-52.

towards the sun's healing rays. In a famous article of 1944, Ernst Gombrich located Poussin's literary sources for this painting in Lucian and Natale Conti.<sup>15</sup> It is now believed likely that Poussin found Cedalion described in a French translation of Philostratus's *Imagines*.<sup>16</sup> This text describes Cedalion as guiding Orion while standing on his shoulder, so the painter had no need to hunt out the appropriate passage in the lengthy Latin text of Lucian; it is also likely that he read Conti's *Mythologie* in the French translation by Jean de Montlyard published in many editions starting in 1599.<sup>17</sup> Cedalion leads Orion to the sea, across which the giant will swim to seek out his beloved Diana, the goddess who, according to some, had sworn never to love or marry any man. Orion's sight returned to him when the sun shining over the sea struck his eyes. As he began to swim to Diana, Apollo, her brother, challenged her to prove her skill in archery by shooting a speck in the water. She did so, killing Orion, thus, in this account, managing to keep her vow of remaining virginal; Conti's version has Diana so grief-stricken at Orion's death that she asked Jove to place him among the stars. Another report attributed to Hyginus claims that Apollo challenged Diana to shoot Orion because he objected to her love for the giant.<sup>18</sup> Yet another variant has it that Orion committed the outrage of seizing Diana by her robe, thus prompting the divine virgin to send a scorpion to kill him.<sup>19</sup>

Following Conti, Poussin shows the blind Orion making his way to the sea. The artist paints Diana in the sky nonchalantly leaning on a cloud as she watches the giant approach. Orion has Hephaestus at his side, pointing the way to the rising sun (Poussin departs from Lucian's version in which Hephaestus views the incident from Lemnos).

The picture has been interpreted as an allegory of nature, focusing on the circulation of water in earth and sky, as described by Conti. Following the ancient Greek poet Euphorion, Conti notes that Orion had three fathers, Neptune, Jove, and Apollo, representing water, air, and the sun. These elements, creating rain, wind, and heat and thunder, explain the raincloud encircling Orion in the painting as well as his blindness. According to Conti, Diana (the moon) gathers up earth's vapors and converts them to rain and storms. The picture is thus an allegory of the

15 Gombrich, 'The Subject of Poussin's Orion', pp. 121, 228; Lucian, *De Domo*, 28-29; Conti, *Mythologiae*, pp. 457-459.

16 Helsdingen, 'Notes on Poussin's Late Mythological Landscapes', pp. 157-158; Blaise de Vigenère, *Les images ou tableaux de platte peinture des deux Philostrates*, pp. 624-625.

17 Helsdingen, 'Notes on Poussin's Late Mythological Landscapes', pp. 157-158.

18 Hyginus, *Astronomy*, 2.34, in Eratosthenes and Hyginus, *Constellation Myths, with Aratus's 'Phaenomena'*, p. 103.

19 Aratus, *Phaenomena*, 1.634-641, in Eratosthenes and Hyginus, *Constellation Myths, with Aratus's 'Phaenomena'*, p. 154.



circulation in nature of water, which moves from rising clouds (around Orion) to return to earth as rain once its vapors are touched by the moon.<sup>20</sup>

Sheila McTighe elaborates this idea that Poussin's canvas builds upon Conti's allegorical account in which Orion's blindness originated in a storm or tempest.<sup>21</sup> She interprets Orion as a thundercloud, that is, water vapor born from air and water and heated by the sun, and when his blindness is cured with the help of Hephaestus by the healing power of the solar rays, he achieves moral redemption. But, in fact, his recuperation after his moral failing in attempting to rape Merope is short-lived, because he is then killed by Diana. As the moon goddess who controls clouds and storms, she prevails in her power.<sup>22</sup> Positively, the painting gives the allegory visual form, by depicting the formation and dissipation of clouds and storms, visualizing the cycles of the elements, representing the rejuvenating power of nature, and revealing the sun as the source of life.<sup>23</sup>

But negatively, Diana's slaying of Orion at the end of the story, either in order to retain her virginity (in one of his accounts Conti says that the giant had dared to touch her) or to satisfy the wishes of her brother Apollo, served as a symbolic warning to men of the dangers of women in both the ancient culture of Lucian and in the seventeenth-century society of Poussin. From a male perspective, the story of Orion's death at the hands of Diana supported the narrowly sexist view of projecting blame for men's assaults on their female victims rather than perceiving their own actions as illicit. The myth that women had the power to be vengeful and destroy men who dared accost them sexually would have promoted an adversarial attitude among males, undergirding their own resolve to treat women as the enemy on whom sexual conquest may be justified. For example, in Poussin's own time, during the Fronde, French soldiers taking part in the civil war were free to rape and kill women of their own country who were perceived as threats because they sympathized with the *frondeurs*.

The mortal Chione had borne children by both Apollo and Mercury through their rape and deception of her. As a result of her attractiveness to these gods, Chione boasted that she was more beautiful than Diana. The goddess of the hunt heard of this claim and took revenge for the insult by shooting Chione through the tongue, killing her.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is the mortal woman alone who suffers; misogyny is expressed

20 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 892-896; Gombrich, 'The Subject of Poussin's Orion', pp. 119-122; Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 315-316; Carrier, *Poussin's Paintings*, pp. 106-115.

21 McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, pp. 34ff.

22 In a recent interpretation, Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, p. 435, have proposed that Poussin followed the Christianized interpretations of the Orion myth in Jean de Montlyard's French translation of Conti.

23 Rosenberg, *Poussin and Nature*, p. 284.

24 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11.301-327.



**4.6. Nicolas Poussin, *Diana Slaying Chione*, c. 1622-1623. Pen and brown ink, brown wash on paper, 18.5 × 31.5 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).**

in the idea of an indiscrete woman who brags of her beauty, and nothing is said of the fault of the two gods who raped her. They were perfectly free to take advantage of her because of their privileges as male deities. The sexual desires and conquests of masculine gods are never condemned but attributed to natural male urges, and their illicit sexual activity is ignored or dismissed with a lighthearted tone. The idea of special male privilege is a projection applied to the gods but implicit in attitudes of men generally in the cultures of both classical antiquity and Poussin's own time, when by law women suffered severe penalties but men hardly at all for sexual activity outside of marriage.

In his early drawing *Diana Slaying Chione* (c. 1622-23, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 4.6), owned by Cardinal Camillo Massimo, Poussin gives the story a greater human meaning by focusing on the aftermath of the killing. He represents Chione's father, Daedalion, known for his devotion to her, and her two small sons (by Mercury and Apollo) grieving over her body.<sup>25</sup> In response, Diana's heartlessness is displayed as she walks away from the scene with her two hunting dogs; her smug, self-satisfied expression indicates how pleased she is with her action. An early painting of this subject by Poussin (Musée des beaux-arts, Lyon) has been published recently.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenberg, 'Nicolas Poussin's *The Death of Chione*', pp. 184-186.

Many other examples appear in classical mythology of revenge killings like this one. Among the goddesses involved is Venus, who caused Phaedra, Hippolytus's step-mother, to fall in love with him, resulting in her suicide and his violent death. But Diana especially was known for the many deaths she caused. She was said to be responsible for the demise of Adonis either because of her jealousy of his hunting skills or because of Venus's role in the death of Hippolytus, one of her favorites. Diana brought about Acteon's death after he saw her naked (Fig. 4.3). She also killed Niobe's seven daughters, while her twin Apollo slew her seven sons. These murders were in response to Niobe's pride in asserting her superiority as a mother to Leto, the twin gods' mother. In addition, Diana killed Orion, while he was swimming to her across the sea because of his love for her (see Fig. 4.5). The story of Chione is especially chilling because Diana does not resort to the usual deception used by the gods in their death plots against mortals, but is harshly direct, shooting her helpless victim in the mouth, the source of the utterance that belittled her.

Poussin treated the theme of mortals destroyed or transformed at the hands of goddesses in three drawings, the present one, the *Birth of Adonis* (Fig. 4.7), and *Diana Killing Acteon* (Fig. 4.3), and in several paintings, sometimes in multiple versions, including *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4), *Venus with the Dead Adonis* (Adonis killed by the jealousy of Diana, Fig. 3.16), *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 1.2), *Narcissus* (punished by Nemesis, Fig. 6.1), the *Realm of Flora* (including the deaths of Narcissus and Adonis, Fig. 5.6), and *Landscape with Diana and Orion* (Fig. 4.5). To these may be added the deaths caused by the mortal woman Medea, the theme of two drawings by Poussin (Figs. 4.1, 4.2). In total, these subjects involving deaths or metamorphoses brought about by goddesses or mortal women appear in fourteen paintings and drawings by Poussin. By contrast, the number of paintings depicting deaths or transformations at the hands of male deities is four: *Apollo and Daphne* (two versions, Figs. 5.12, 5.13), the *Realm of Flora* (Apollo causing the deaths of Hyacinthus and perhaps Clytie, Fig. 5.6), and *Pan and Syrinx* (Fig. 5.14). Thus, women are represented three and a half times more often than men as destroyers of others in Poussin's mythological works. This imbalance may be partly attributed to the long tradition in classical antiquity of representing women as heartless killers out of jealousy, rivalry, perceived slights, revenge, or lust, and Poussin's seventeenth-century culture continued unabated in supporting such themes in the arts.

Poussin's drawing of the *Birth of Adonis* (c. 1622-1623, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 4.7), part of the Massimo collection, shows the anguished Myrrha reacting to her fate of turning into a tree. Branches and leaves sprout from her raised arms as she gives birth to Adonis. She was transformed into a tree by the gods for committing the crime of incest with her father, King Cinyras, who sired her child. Adonis is received by surrounding nymphs as he emerges from Myrrha's body that has split open like the bark and wood of a tree trunk. Myrrha was keenly aware of



**4.7. Nicolas Poussin, *Birth of Adonis*, c. 1622-1623. Pen and brown ink, gray wash on paper, 18.3 × 32.5 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).**

the repugnance of her own unspeakable transgression. Through her turned-down mouth she expresses dejection at the branches emerging from the top of her head as she simultaneously looks up to the gods in supplication, according to Ovid, actually asking for her reduced state as punishment for her crime. Like Ovid's text, the artist's principal source for his story, Poussin's drawing focuses attention on Myrrha's human qualities, including her reactions of alarm, fear and pain. Unlike other artists' works that often emphasized her tree-like aspect (Fig. 4.8), Poussin's picture shows her humanity, presenting her hominal form and feelings that clearly emerge from the economical but expressive lines of his drawing.

By representing her pathos, Poussin's drawing points to the horror of the misdeed that resulted in her transformation. Myrrha had been consumed by carnal desire for her father, the cause of which was punishment by the gods for her refusal to honor Venus.<sup>27</sup> Ovid relates how she suffered because she found herself drawn to her father and fought against this desire. The closer she came to her crime the more she recoiled from it with terror: 'Myrrha herself knew her own wickedness, and fought against it: "What kind of thing is this that I am planning? O gods, I pray you, keep me decent, keep me devoted, as I should be, to my parents, respectful of their rights! Keep off this sin, this crime—or is it a crime? Devotion cannot condemn such love as a crime".<sup>28</sup> The poet narrates her anguish in her monologue (10.319-355), suicide

<sup>27</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library*, 3.184.

<sup>28</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.319-324.



4.8. Marcantonio Franceschini, *Birth of Adonis*, c. 1685-1690. Oil on copper, 48.5 × 69 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden (Photo: Elke Estel, Hans-Peter Klut/bpk Bildagentur/Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden/Art Resource, NY).

attempt, revelation of her dark craving to her nurse (10.377-430), and approach to her father's bedroom (10.455-464). After several nights of lying with his daughter in the dark, Cinyras ordered a light brought in and when he discovered who his lover was he wanted to kill her, but the pregnant Myrrha escaped, wandering into distant lands.<sup>29</sup>

The story of Myrrha makes a female, the daughter, guilty of a sex crime, and not a male, the father. It never occurred to her father Cinyras, since he committed the act of coupling with her, that he might want to kill himself, or flee, as she did, becoming a wanderer dispossessed of a homeland. All of the blame fell to her.<sup>30</sup> She recognized her own guilt and knew that she deserved wretched punishment. She asked for transformation in order to avoid polluting the worlds of the living and the dead. Finally, according to Ovid, nine months pregnant, exhausted from her travels, and displaced in the far-off land of the Sabaeans, Myrrha suffered the fate of being turned into a tree while giving birth to Adonis. She had begged for

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 10.476-487; McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, pp. 115-116.

and was granted forgiveness by the gods, who obliged her plea to end her misery by enacting her transformation. A woman who had been guilty of forbidden passion turned out after all to be a sympathetic character to whom a kind of honor was restored even as the least worthy of suppliants.<sup>31</sup> Poussin's drawing alludes to her privileged status by depicting the dignified crowd of naiads who attend the birth of her son. Lucina, goddess of childbirth, stands naked at the right, holding a vessel. A nymph at the far left shows surprise, while others, one of whom smiles, help with the birth and another at the left readies a ewer to catch Myrrha's tears, the tree resin yielding her aromatic myrrh.<sup>32</sup>

Myrrha's incest is an extreme example of the Renaissance idea that women had voracious sexual appetites. Even though her aberrant sexual desire was explained in her myth as punishment by the gods, her behavior could still be seen in Poussin's time as a manifestation of women's natural lustfulness. Her incest had been clearly characterized in Roman antiquity by Ovid as unnatural and shameful, unlike other sex practices of his time, such as homosexuality and lesbianism, which were understood as examples of 'Greek love' by the ancient Romans and, although frowned upon, were allowed under certain conditions, for example between a citizen and a foreigner or slave. The degree of criminality of sex acts in the Renaissance was determined by their type. The rape of a young woman of marriageable age received the lightest punishment of any sex crime, especially because in many cases the man and woman involved were considered married once they had intercourse. Or, to force that outcome, because women bringing rape charges were usually more interested in retrieving their reputations than in punishing the offender, they sometimes asked the judge to force their rapists to marry them.<sup>33</sup> In seventeenth-century Italy, sodomy was punishable by imprisonment or death, even if the latter sentence was rarely imposed, but little was said about lesbianism. In Germany in the sixteenth century, female homosexuality was included among capital crimes, while in England a statute forbidding same-sex relations made no mention of women at all.<sup>34</sup> Thus lesbianism was often seen as 'invisible' and outside the realm of sexuality. With respect to incest, the type was important: in seventeenth-century Europe incest was broadly defined as sex among relatives and was sometimes permissible, for example between cousins, especially among royalty. Incest between daughter and father was a less serious crime than might be imagined: in England, at least, incest was not declared a felony until 1650, before which time it was handled by ecclesiastical authorities. Punishment for incest was sometimes surprisingly lenient, while sodomy

31 McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine*, p. 41.

32 Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, p. 16, Cat. 1.

33 Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, p. 61.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 67.



4.9. Nicolas Poussin, *Mercury, Herse, and Aglauros*, c. 1627. Oil on canvas, 53 × 77 cm. École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris (Photo © Beaux-Arts de Paris/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY).

and bestiality were considered more serious crimes. Myrrha's transformation into a tree while giving birth to Adonis may be viewed from the perspective of the 'monstrous birth', which was associated with sexual laxity or deviance in early modern sex manuals such *Aristotle's Masterpiece* of 1684.<sup>35</sup> Conti moralized the story of Myrrha, explaining that she wanted to become a tree because of her shame in sleeping with her father. Conti takes the misogynist position that her myth tells us something about the nature of female desire: even though Myrrha's act was disgraceful, indecent, lewd, and unholy, she went around complaining how unfortunate and wretched she was.<sup>36</sup> Poussin's contemporaries would have understood Myrrha as a weak woman, overcome by an indecent obsession and upsetting the given sexual order. But Poussin's response to the story in his drawing is nuanced: in choosing to highlight the dramatic event of Myrrha's simultaneous metamorphosis and childbirth, and her acceptance by the noble gods and nymphs, the artist stresses the climactic moment and the elevated dignity of the scene in

35 Wiseman, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore: Representing the Incestuous Body', p. 184.

36 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 518.



4.10. Nicolas Poussin, *Death of Sapphira*, c. 1654. Oil on canvas, 122 × 199 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

accordance with classical theory but underlines also the episode's tragic aspect reflective of the morally transgressive act that led to her transformation.

Poussin's *Death of Sapphira* (c. 1654, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 4.10) focuses on a woman who endures instant death for her transgression of withholding money from the Church. The Christians of Jerusalem had decided to give all of their money and property to the Church in order to distribute their wealth in common among all, so that even the poorest would have a share according to his need. Along with the others, Ananias, husband of Sapphira, brought his money to St. Peter and the Apostles for distribution, but secretly held back a portion for himself. When St. Peter confronted him about this, Ananias instantly suffered death by the hand of God. Later, when Sapphira, wife of Ananias, appeared before St. Peter, she also lied about withholding money and as a transgressor was likewise struck dead.<sup>37</sup> Poussin painted his *Death of Sapphira* in tribute to Raphael, who had depicted the *Death of Ananias* (Fig. 4.11) as one of his cartoons for the Vatican tapestries. Poussin shows Sapphira falling to the ground, dead, as indicated by the greyish color of her skin, among a group of shocked and fearful Christians, while St. Peter stands at the right, pointing a condemning finger at the deceiving woman.

37 Acts, 4.32-5.11.





4.11. Raphael, *Death of Ananias*, 1515. Tempera on paper, 340 × 530 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Photo: Victoria and Albert Museum, London/Bridgeman Images).

Two Apostles accompany St. Peter, one pointing to heaven, the source of Sapphira's destruction. In the background, an elderly Christian man gives money to a poor woman seated on the ground with her child. This act of charity serves as a countertype to the evil deed of Sapphira and represents the generosity she failed to perform. This background group is surrounded by splendid architecture recalling famous sixteenth-century buildings in Rome, even though the setting is supposed to be Jerusalem.<sup>38</sup> The painting is rigorously organized in its geometrical structure, while the figures represent the passions in the clearest possible manner. Sapphira denotes the worst type of transgressor, a woman who violates the trust of her fellow Christians through deception and lying. St. Peter is firm in his condemnation, while the Christians surrounding her react with complete surprise and horror but also sympathy. A man and a woman break her fall, either unaware of her transgression or shocked at the extreme consequences of it. The man just mentioned and another at the back of the group are alarmed by her death and by St. Peter's forceful response, and three women each react differently: the one previously referred to tries to steady Sapphira, unaware that she is already dead; another raises her hands in surprise and wrinkles her brow in anguish as she looks

<sup>38</sup> Frommel, 'Poussin e l'architettura', p. 131; Ottani Cavina, 'Poussin and the Roman Campagna', p. 45.

at the man next to her; and a third with her back to the viewer, representing Charity, prepares to leave the scene while holding her child with one hand and comforting the anguished woman to her right with the other. Sapphira herself slumps down, her face ashen and her hands limp and lifeless. By representing good women, the poor one in the background, the one at the left representing Charity, and the two others in the foreground group, Poussin makes a point about virtuous females whose behavior contrasts with the evil Sapphira. Her vile deed, like her husband's in Raphael's cartoon, was interpreted as a warning to those who neglect to tithe to the Church.

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## 5. Victims I—Killed, Assaulted

### Abstract

Poussin's compositions depict victims of tragic deaths or assaults, most of them women. Works showing the dying include the *Death of Virginia*, *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, and the *Realm of Flora*. Among women assaulted, Poussin's works include the *Massacre of the Innocents*, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax*, *Apollo and Daphne* (two versions), *Pan and Syrinx*, *Rape of the Sabine Women* (two versions), and the drawing the *Rape of Europa*.

**Keywords:** Killers, Transgressors, Revenge, Power, Jealousy

Poussin's works include victims of tragic deaths or assaults, most of them women. The chief protagonist in his drawing of the *Death of Virginia* was slain by her own father to protect her virginity, while *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* shows Eurydice killed by a snake. *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* represents thwarted young lovers committing double suicide based on their tragic misperceptions, and the *Realm of Flora* depicts the seven mortals from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who died and became flowers. Among those assaulted, the *Massacre of the Innocents* includes a principal mother and four others who tried to prevent Herod's soldiers from slaughtering their children, and *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* shows the humiliation of a woman used by the scribes and Pharisees to try to trick Christ. In *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax*, Zenobia barely survives an attempted mercy killing by her husband to prevent the enemy from capturing her. Poussin's first version of *Apollo and Daphne* depicts the girl's unfortunate transformation into a laurel tree; his second version shows her before her confrontation with Apollo, fearful and huddling by her father for protection. *Pan and Syrinx* likewise portrays an attempted rape, while the artist's two versions of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* represent forced abduction. Similarly, Poussin's drawing of the *Battle between the Israelites and the Midianites* shows the Midianite women terrified of the destruction of their tribe and capture by the Israelites as they seek protection behind the lines of their soldiers; eventually the worst came to pass as

they were seized. Another of Poussin's drawings, the *Rape of Europa*, depicts the girl just before she is carried off by Jove, who assaulted her in the guise of a white bull.

In the *Death of Virginia* (c. 1634-36, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 5.1), the victim's father, Lucius Verginius, put family honor before the life of his young daughter: he killed Virginia to prevent the evil ruler Appius Claudius from raping her. Once Lucius had committed this repugnant deed, he fled and later tried to justify his act. The people, blaming Apius for this outcome, brought an end to his corrupt regime. Livy describes Lucius as a popular and exemplary man, but in Poussin's drawing, he seems cowardly as he flees the crowd around Apius after murdering his daughter. From a gender perspective, the act of a father slaying his daughter is based on the entrenched masculine view that a virgin's honor is more important than her life. Poussin conceives Lucius not as a stoic hero, but as a villain whose crime is as abhorrent as Appius's. His act of filicide remains the tragic and unsatisfactory outcome in this politically and socially ambivalent story. Poussin's *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* (c. 1650, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 5.2) shows Eurydice bitten by a snake at her wedding, symbolizing the vagaries of fortune and early death. Later, Orpheus convinced Pluto to allow his wife to follow him out of Hades (the subject of a drawing by Poussin). While exiting Hades, Orpheus turned back to look at Eurydice, thus violating Pluto's agreement that he not face about to see her; in this way he lost his wife forever. This careless act was something Orpheus easily could have avoided, especially since he had been warned that his new wife's life was in the balance. Orpheus's urgent desire to look may be interpreted as an unconsciously misogynistic act. Later, according to Ovid, Orpheus selfishly consoled himself for the loss of his wife by sleeping with young boys. *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (1651, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt, Fig. 5.4) depicts the sad end of the lovers' story, where the distraught Thisbe rushes towards Pyramus only to approach him at the moment of his death. He had just committed suicide, in horrified reaction to his conviction that his beloved Thisbe had been killed by a lion. The distressed Thisbe then followed her lover in death by suicide as well. The tragedy of their tale is that after enduring a mutual desire while unable to see each other, they finally met when it was too late, with death intervening. Poussin conflates the lovers' uncontrolled passions and ultimate grief with a raging storm in his landscape setting. The artist may have been inspired by Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara's *ottavo rima* translation of Ovid, where the poet compared Thisbe's mounting grief to a swelling gale. The *Realm of Flora* (1631, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, Fig. 5.6) portrays the deaths of the seven mortals from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who die and are transformed into flowers. All but Ajax were lovers who met early death, usually at the hands of the gods. In a paradoxical conception, the humans lose their sentience, yet continue to exist as flowers in the cycle of nature. Priapus, appearing as a herm, is a symbol of perduring fertility, and Apollo the sun god, driving across

the sky, is the source of life. This symbolism explains Flora's joyful dance among the dying mortals. But the negative aspect of the picture is the mortals' loss of human consciousness, mobility, and will. The painting is thus elegiac in its message, a bittersweet meditation on life and death within the inexorable cycle of nature. Even though she represents the continuity of life, Flora's happy dancing among dying humans seems perverse; thus she acts simultaneously as a positive and negative female symbol. The *Massacre of the Innocents* (1627-1628, Musée Condé, Chantilly, Fig. 5.7) shows the unspeakable anguish of a mother, under assault by a soldier, trying to prevent the slaughter of her child. Her face is wildly distorted with fear as she pleads with the swordsman to spare her infant. The executioner wields his sword over his head, ready to come down hard on her child whom he holds under foot as he grabs the mother's hair. Brutal masculine force is pitted against the motherly instincts of the female. *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (c. 1653, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 5.10) presents the power of Christ's words to save an assaulted, shamed woman from death by stoning. Here, Christ confronts the scribes and Pharisees, who desired to denounce him for violating Jewish law. The accused woman kneels in the center of the composition, lowering her head and gathering her clothes to indicate her shame. The scribes and Pharisees accused her of adultery in order to humiliate her, but because of their callous and demeaning acts, they themselves were discredited by Christ. *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax* (c. 1657-60, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Fig. 5.11) depicts Zenobia, Queen of the Armenians, about to give birth as she flees from pursuing Persians; in this condition she begged her husband to kill her rather than risk falling into enemy hands. After he stabbed her and continued in his flight, she clung to life and was discovered by shepherds, who saved her. They took her to the nearby city of Artaxata and the court of Tiridates, who treated her with kindness. Zenobia's attempt to have herself killed in this story indicates the unspeakable treatment that women normally could expect at the hands of their captors in ancient times. Poussin's earlier version of *Apollo and Daphne* (1625, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Fig. 5.12) portrays the end of the story, showing Daphne becoming the laurel tree into which her father obligingly turns her to avoid her rape by Apollo. Daphne manages to retain her virginity, but at great personal cost: Apollo obtains command over her, since as a tree she remains forever passive under the god's control. She resigns herself to endure as his emblem. As a tree she signals metaphorically that women remain permanently passive, under the authority of fathers, husbands, and gods. In losing her ability to move freely as a virgin she becomes immobilized, symbolically serving the idea of masculine containment and regulation. The artist's late *Apollo and Daphne* (1664, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 5.13), his last painting, depicts the scene before Apollo's attempted rape of the nymph. The god is seated at the left, smiling and looking longingly across the picture to Daphne. She is shown

at the far right, sitting on the ground. She is under threat by Apollo and fearfully embraces her father, the river god Peneus, for protection. The many other subordinate scenes and figures form a complex allegory whose meaning is still under debate. The capricious Cupid, shooting Apollo with a gold arrow and Daphne with one of lead, shows that love can be a destructive force that eventually leads to the sad transformation of the girl. Both Cupid and Apollo demonstrate sexually aggressive behavior and the presumed privileges and prerogatives of males. The smile and pose of Apollo, expressing authority, convey his power over Daphne. By contrast, the fearful girl who seeks her father's protection is ineffectual in avoiding a sexual confrontation with the god. *Pan and Syrinx* (1637, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, Fig. 5.14) shows Pan, the god of wild nature, shepherds, and flocks, pursuing Syrinx. Since Syrinx found the river Ladon (here represented by her river-god father) blocking her escape from the assault of the god, she prayed to her sisters, who obliged by transforming her. As a result, instead of possessing the girl, Pan found himself holding an armful of the tall reeds that she had become; these he cut and made into the pipes named after the nymph. By playing his reed pipes, he found a way to memorialize Syrinx and keep her with him always. She was thus objectified by Pan in a symbolic and displaced union. Through no fault of her own other than to deny men and gods the pleasure of raping her, Syrinx was forced to beg for transformation into the humble reeds that Pan impudently appropriated as a remembrance of her. As reeds, Syrinx became inscribed with the marks of her would-be lover and a memorial to him and his lust. The painting points to the unrestrained sexuality that existed in an imagined mythical past where a patriarchal conception of rape was accommodated. Poussin's two versions of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1634, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fig. 5.15; c. 1637, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 5.16) present the struggle of Romulus and his Roman warriors to seize and carry off unmarried women from the Sabine tribe to make them their wives. From his pro-Roman perspective, Plutarch interprets this event in as positive a light as possible, claiming that the Romans did not commit wanton rape, but acted to ensure their future and to form an alliance with the Sabines. Both of Poussin's paintings show the Romans swept up in the frenzy of their assault on the Sabine women. Nevertheless, in spite of the confusion of the melee, the artist keeps the action under classical control, imparting to his canvases a nobility that diverts the viewer from the subject's terrifying aspects. The beautiful designs mask the intolerable mistreatment of the women as they are seized against their will under knifepoint and sword and forced into marriage. Women likewise suffer grievously in Poussin's drawing of the *Battle between the Israelites and the Midianites* (c. 1630, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 5.18), which shows Midianite women terrified of capture as they seek protection behind the lines of their soldiers. Their fear was justified, because the Israelites destroyed the Midianite army and their women were enslaved

or killed. God demanded vengeance against the Midianites because they had led Israelites into sin at Peor. Midianite women, so the story went, had drawn Israelite men into evildoing by seducing them and encouraging them to sacrifice to their gods. Thus, in fulfilling God's vengeance, Moses commanded that all of the captive Midianite women who had slept with Israelite men be put to death. As happens so often in such tales of patriarchal vengeance, it is women who are held accountable, because of their seductive charms. Poussin's large, finished drawing of the *Rape of Europa* (1649, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Fig. 5.19) represents a complex scene that occurs just before Jove, in the form of a bull, carries Europa across the waves to Crete. At the left Europa sits on the back of the bull, accompanied by her maidens, while Mercury and Cupid fly through the air, pointing the way to Crete. To the right of this group is another maiden who flees from a snake: she is almost certainly Eurydice. To the right of the snake two naiads and a river god repose. Poussin may have set up an opposition between the fertile Europa, carried off to found a dynasty of kings in Crete, and Eurydice, condemned to the barrenness of the underworld. Another way to interpret these figures is that just as Europa's abduction was brought about by Jove's passion, so Eurydice's death resulted from the attempt of Aristaeus, son of Apollo, to rape her. In fleeing from Aristaeus, Eurydice noticed a snake in the grass too late; she was bitten, thus cold death awaited her. Aristaeus had to repent for the crime by sacrificing bulls at the shrine of the nymph companions of Eurydice. At the bottom-right the snake guards its riverbank; to the left, behind Eurydice, are the two dryad sisters who cry out to warn her; in the background at the right are the cattle of Mount Lycaeus that Aristaeus was called upon to sacrifice; above these to the left is the shrine of the nymphs where Aristaeus was directed to make his offering; and at the top-right in the distance is Mount Rhodope, which rang with the cries of the nymphs. Poussin thus focused on animals threatening women as stand-ins for human male aggression: the snake for Aristaeus in Eurydice's story and the bull for Jove in Europa's tale. Both scenes point to the deception of females by male aggressors, and serve as premonitions of the next part of their stories, not shown in the drawing, where the bull carries off Europa for his sexual pleasure and Eurydice dies from her snake bite.

The women killed and assaulted in this chapter are victims of male prejudice (Virginia); fate—a snake bite—combined with betrayal, by Orpheus (Eurydice); tragic misunderstanding (Thisbe); unfortunate love (the mortals in the *Realm of Flora*); misogyny (the woman in *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, *Rape of the Sabine Women*); fear of male brutality (mothers in the *Massacre of the Innocents*, Zenobia, the Midianite women); and male lust (Daphne, Syrinx, Europa). By choosing to depict these stories in his paintings in the first place, Poussin reveals more than just his interest in selecting tales with dramatic conflict; he takes the side of the women, standing against male prejudice, misogyny, brutality, and lust. Even



if females are acknowledged according to patriarchal opinion to be the weaker sex in these paintings, they are also sympathetic victims who resist, sometimes heroically, male aggression and bigotry. Thus, the paintings in this chapter reveal another side of Poussin's approach to women in his works, not following the ideas indicated in the previous chapters that mainly focused on female's predation, lust, greed, transgression, and jealousy, but on their unfortunate ends or their righteous (however ineffectual) defiance of male privilege.

In an episode from ancient Rome recounted by Livy and Valerius Maximus,<sup>1</sup> the tyrannical *decemvir* Appius Claudius desired the maiden Virginia. To save her honor her father, Lucius Verginius, stabbed her to death, resulting in a public outcry that led to the overthrow of Appius Claudius's corrupt regime. Poussin's drawing, the *Death of Virginia* (c. 1634-1636, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 5.1), which may have been owned by Cassiano dal Pozzo, presents the evil Appius Claudius seated on his dais; below him are two men, Icilius, Virginia's betrothed, and Numitorius, the uncle of her father, according to Livy, lifting up the lifeless body of Virginia and showing it to the people as they bewail the crime of Appius. Numitorius and the man standing to his right both shout at Appius, expressing their disgust. At the right, Virginia's father Lucius flees the scene, holding the knife he used to slay his daughter. This theme has been described as 'typical of the stoic subjects close to Poussin's heart',<sup>2</sup> implying that the artist would have imagined Lucius to be virtuous in killing his daughter to preserve her maidenhood, but also sorrowful at her loss. From his Roman point of view, Livy describes Lucius as a popular and exemplary man in his home life and in his career in the army. From a gender perspective, however, such an act of a father slaying his daughter is not an act of stoic virtue but one based on ignorance and the entrenched masculine view that a virgin's honor is more important than her life.

Livy laments over the girl's unhappy beauty and the 'necessity' that had constrained her father to kill her. To the left of the dead Virginia, Poussin shows matrons gathered under the dais, raising their fists at Appius and, according to Livy, crying out 'Was it on these terms that children were brought into the world? Were these the rewards of chastity?'<sup>3</sup> Poussin appears to side with these women. Their accusations are directed at the lecherous Appius, but their cries could be interpreted also as questioning the action of the girl's father, who had taken it upon himself to end his daughter's life. Even if Livy comes short of embracing the father's murderous act, at least he presents an account justifying his actions. By contrast, Poussin is not particularly sympathetic to the girl's father; the artist shows him fleeing to the right, frightened by possible retribution from Appius. Poussin conceived the father as more cowardly

1 Livy, *History of Rome*, 3.44-58; Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, 6.1.2.

2 Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, p. 97 and fig. 34.

3 Livy, *History of Rome*, 3.48.8.



5.1. Nicolas Poussin, *Death of Virginia*, c. 1634-1636. Pen and brown ink, brown wash on paper, 17.7 × 23.4 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

than noble—he appears to stick out his tongue at Appius as he dashes away. The father rushes off speedily, with his body angled in the direction of his flight. He anxiously glances back at Appius, who points him out with his thumb to his soldiers as he orders them to take pursuit. Livy says that by wielding his knife and surrounded by a sea of supporters, Lucius made his way to the city gates and freedom. Then, with his followers, he set off for his army camp outside of Rome, where he described the crime of Appius and defended before his fellow soldiers his own action of killing his daughter. He was satisfied that his daughter's virtue has been protected by her death.

But it never occurred to him that his integrity might have been better served by his own death instead, by means of a public suicide, to become a martyr to family honor. That act almost certainly would have precipitated the collapse of Appius's rule, and would have had the added advantage of preserving the life of his daughter, since in that case he would have had no need to sacrifice her. Or, at the very least, he should have allowed himself to be captured by Appius's soldiers, to join his daughter in death.

Such thoughts may have crossed Poussin's mind as he pondered over the story. In the way he draws Lucius, furtively looking back as he makes a hasty exit, Poussin

suggests his cowardly escape, killing his daughter but saving himself. The artist conceives him not as a stoic hero, not as a man who saved his daughter's virtue at whatever cost, but as a patriarchal tyrant and a villain whose crime is as repugnant as Appius's. By running away, Lucius entirely surrenders his moral authority. Poussin thus seems to side with Virginia against her father. Nevertheless, by presenting the scene in its pure visuality, as the artist must inevitably do, he is unable to affirm through words that the death of Virginia was entirely unnecessary. He is restricted to offering visual clues in his drawing, for example her limp, dead body that suggests her life was more important than protecting her virtue. He appears to represent her father as a coward wielding his knife, threatening the crowd as he flees, and not as a (tentative) hero, as in Livy's account. For Livy, the important element in the story of Virginia is her father's stoic resolve to kill his daughter rather than allow her to become a victim of rape by Appius Claudius. This drama has no heroes, except the women who demand justice for Virginia's death by threatening Appius with their fists. Poussin represents the sad fate of the daughter, but equally points to the crime of the father. In his conception, the story is not merely about the sexual impropriety of a corrupt ruler, but equally is unresolved in its political and social ambivalence, with respect to which an evil ruler is dethroned, but where the act of filicide by the father Lucius remains tragic in its unsatisfactory outcome.

Poussin's *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* (c. 1650, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 5.2) was painted for Jean Pointel, the Parisian merchant who became Poussin's main French patron after Chantelou. The picture shows Orpheus, representing the arts, playing his lyre at his wedding party. The group before him consists of two reclining nymphs; Hymen, the god of marriage, crowned and standing behind them; and, at the back of the company, his new bride, Eurydice, kneeling and turning to the left as she raises her arms in surprise. Eurydice is frightened because she has just espied a snake readying to bite her ankle and send her to Hades. Once bitten, she will fall lifeless to the ground. Thus the bride is allotted the role of symbolizing early death. At the right, Orpheus and the remainder of the wedding party are unaware of the tragic event unfolding behind them, while Eurydice has caught the attention of a man fishing at a river bank behind her. He likewise is unaware of the tragic outcome. In Virgil's version of the myth, following her marriage to Orpheus, Eurydice caught the eye of the minor deity Aristaeus, who pursued her; as she ran, she stepped on a viper and died instantly.<sup>4</sup> Ovid's account is different: he says that death came to the bride when bitten by a snake while walking with her nymphs at her wedding. Poussin follows Ovid's version, but she is not accompanied by nymphs, rather, she is isolated at the back of her wedding party when the snake suddenly appears at her side as a fluke of fortune (the artist refers to humanity's subjugation

4 Virgil, *Georgics*, 4.453-527.



5.2. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*, c. 1650. Oil on canvas, 124 × 200 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

to fortune in a stoic vein in several of his letters). Ovid says that Hymen, whose torch sputtered and smoked, did not bring good luck.<sup>5</sup> Smoke rising from a building in the distance that looks like the Castel Sant' Angelo in Rome reminds the viewer of Hymen's sputtering torches and of the tragedy befalling Eurydice.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, in depicting the contrast between Orpheus as bringer of civilization and the burning building, Poussin may have been alluding to the political crises of monarchies across Europe, including the Fronde in Paris, in the years just before this work was painted. Such an allusion would have marked the artist's uneasiness at contemporary changes of fortune, paralleling Eurydice's unfortunate and unexpected death. It has been claimed that the painting's oppositional symbols—Orpheus's wedding, Eurydice's death; peaceful city, burning fortress; nymphs and snake—reflects Poussin's interest in hieroglyphic signs in his later works.<sup>7</sup>

I cannot agree with the revisionist view that the standing figure in the foreground group is Eurydice rather than Hymen.<sup>8</sup> This flat-chested figure is clearly masculine,

5 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.1-10.

6 Ottani Cavina, 'Poussin and the Roman Campagna', p. 45.

7 McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, pp. 53-78, 125.

8 Badt, *Die Kunst des Nicolas Poussin*, p. 602; Wild, *Nicolas Poussin: Leben, Werke, Exkurse*, p. 140; Steefel, 'Rereading Poussin's *Orpheus and Eurydice*', p. 60; Keasor, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 77.



5.3. Nicolas Poussin, *Orpheus in Hades*, c. 1622-1623, Graphite underdrawing, pen and brown ink, grey wash on paper, 18.9 × 32 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

even if slightly feminized, as Hymen indeed was in Greek mythological tradition. Furthermore, Ovid describes Hymen as wearing a saffron-colored robe, which is exactly what we see in the picture: his robe has the purple-crimson color of saffron threads taken from the saffron crocus. Pierre Rosenberg affirms that this standing, crowned figure is Hymen.<sup>9</sup> The isolation of Eurydice at the back of the wedding party makes her easier to spot by the viewer, who also takes note of her fright at seeing the snake; no doubt that is the reason why the artist placed her there. On the negative side, putting her in that position has led to the confusion in identifying her and mistaking her for a servant.

Early in his career, Poussin had made a drawing of the subsequent event in the story, *Orpheus in Hades* (Fig. 5.3), where Orpheus journeys to the underworld to play his lyre before the court of Pluto in an attempt to convince the latter to release his wife.<sup>10</sup> Pluto does so, but Orpheus disobeys the underworld king's order that he not turn around to look at Eurydice as they make their way back to earth. Orpheus could not resist looking back to check on her progress; thus he lost her forever. Ovid says that he turned to look because of concern for Eurydice, thinking she might falter; he was eager to see her and turned to her in love, but she was gone in a moment.<sup>11</sup> Ovid continues: 'Dying the second time, she had no reproach to bring against her husband, what was

9 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 230.

10 Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, p. 20, Cat. 4; Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 780, gives an account of this episode.

11 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.56-57.

there to complain of? One thing only: he loved her. He could hardly hear her calling “farewell!” when she was gone’.<sup>12</sup> Ovid generously interprets Eurydice’s perception of Orpheus’s ill-advised looking as the fault of his concerned love, but this careless deed was something he easily could have avoided, especially since he had been warned that his new wife’s life was in the balance. Orpheus’s urgent desire to look may be interpreted as an unconsciously misogynistic act. Ovid goes on to say that Orpheus wandered to Rhodope and Haemus, where he lived for three years without a woman, even though many desired him. Instead, he gave his love to young boys only, and he told the Thracians that was the better way: ‘Enjoy that springtime, take those first flowers!’<sup>13</sup> Conti cites Ovid’s lines, calling Orpheus’s homoerotic behavior ‘disgraceful’;<sup>14</sup> Conti further points out that after Eurydice died and once he had rejected women, Orpheus went about trying to convince men that every woman was an evil monster. In this manner, Orpheus selfishly consoled himself as he suffered from the loss of his wife.

*Orpheus in Hades* is connected with a group of drawings that Poussin may have made in Paris for his early mentor, the poet Giambattista Marino, based on their description by Bellori in his *Lives* of 1672. These drawings include the *Birth of Priapus* (Fig. 2.17), *Polyphemus Discovering Acis and Galatea* (Fig. 3.6), *Diana Slaying Chione* (Fig. 4.6), and the *Birth of Adonis* (Fig. 4.7). The connection with Marino is uncertain, however, because in many respects the drawings seem better suited to illustrate Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* rather than the former’s *Adone*, as Bellori states.<sup>15</sup>

*Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (1651, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt, Fig. 5.4), painted for Cassiano dal Pozzo, depicts the sad end of the lovers’ story, where the distraught Thisbe rushes towards Pyramus only to approach him at the moment of his death. He had just committed suicide, in horrified reaction to his conviction that his beloved Thisbe had been killed by a lion. In the background, under a stormy sky, the lion attacks a group of men and animals.

Ovid tells the story of this pair, who were forbidden by their parents to marry, but who found a hole in a wall between their two houses and talked through it of their love for one another. They planned a meeting outside the walls of their city. Thisbe arrived first to find a lion with its jaws dripping with blood. She fled, dropping her cloak that was then torn to shreds by the lion. Pyramus then arrived, finding Thisbe’s bloody cloak and believing her to be dead. In despair, he thrust his sword into his side. Thisbe then returned to find her lover dying and decided to perish with him by plunging upon his sword.<sup>16</sup>

12 Ibid., 10.60-63.

13 Ibid., 10.83-85.

14 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 781-782.

15 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 311; Clayton, *Poussin, Works on Paper*, p. 16; Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 39.

16 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.55-166.



5.4. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, 1651. Oil on canvas, 192 × 273 cm. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt (Photo: Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt/HIP/Art Resource, NY).

The tragedy of their tale is that after enduring a mutual desire while unable to see each other, they finally met when it was too late, with death intervening. Earlier in their story, Ovid explored the idea of the lovers separated by their wall, prevented from seeing and touching each other. Ovid plays with the poetics of absence: the pair exchange words secretly through the wall's hole. Their desire increases because of the impossibility of meeting and caressing:

‘Envious wall’, they said, ‘why do you stand between the lovers? How big a thing would it be for you to let us join our bodies in embrace, or if this is too much, to open for our kisses? We are not ungrateful: we confess that we owe it to you that a passage is given for our words to reach each other’s loving ears.’<sup>17</sup>

The wall may be taken to signify societal constraints, but it also serves as an erotic icon, with its hole through which the lovers deliver their passionate words. Their

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4.73-77.

desire that it might open for more overt erotic exchange heightens its sexual symbolism.<sup>18</sup>

Poussin amplifies the painful story of the lovers' deaths by placing the episode in a stormy landscape with a lion attacking horsemen, cattlemen, and shepherds. The inclusion of a storm, not mentioned by Ovid, is justified by Helsdingen,<sup>19</sup> who cites Bellori as explaining Poussin's expressive purpose. Bellori describes how in Poussin's painting Thisbe discovers her dead lover 'while earth and sky and all things give off an air of doleful horror'.<sup>20</sup> Helsdingen further explains that in his well-known *ottavo rima* translation of Ovid's text of 1584, Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara compared Thisbe's mounting grief to a swelling gale ('il vento cresce'),<sup>21</sup> thus drawing a comparison in a verbal metaphor between the girl's horror and an imaginary, turbulent landscape that could have been noticed by Poussin in his reading as he planned his picture.

The lion from which Thisbe escaped may be paired symbolically with the separating wall that represents social restraints like her parents, from whom she likewise fled. But, simultaneously and contrariwise, because she and Pyramus met illicitly outside their city, the lion, which defies social order, signified the pair's violation of such constraints. Poussin emphasizes the urgency of the drama, ignoring Ovid's playfully seductive approach. The painter conflates the lovers' uncontrolled passions with the raging storm of the landscape setting. Through their inability to master their passions, the pair is lost to the vicissitude of fortune, indirectly reflecting, according to McTighe, Poussin's apparent stoic and *libertin* philosophy.<sup>22</sup> The painting shows the pitiable consequences of passion lost and in particular the finality of death for one lover and, just prior to Thisbe's death, unimaginable anguish for the other.

As she runs toward her dying Pyramus in the painting, Thisbe passes her light blue, blood-stained cloak on the ground that earlier had prompted her lover to stab himself in grief. The cloak that Pyramus wears is also significant: the drapery between his legs suggests through its form an erect penis, but with a slit through its length, perhaps alluding to the sword wound higher in the young lover's chest that drains him of his manhood (Fig. 5.5). The slit in the penis-shaped drapery also suggests an elision of male and female genitalia, symbolizing the tragic end of a story of frustrated love.

The *Realm of Flora* (1631, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, Fig. 5.6), a captivating work from Poussin's early maturity painted for the Sicilian nobleman

18 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, p. 65.

19 Helsdingen, 'Notes on Poussin's Late Mythological Landscapes', p. 177.

20 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 332.

21 Anguillara, *Le metamorfosi di Ovidio*, p. 114.

22 McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, pp. 38-40. For an interpretation of the painting based on an Augustinian Christian philosophy, see Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, pp. 428-429.





5.5. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, detail, 1651. Oil on canvas. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt (Photo: Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt/HIP/Art Resource, NY).

and embezzler Fabrizio Valguarnera, presents the goddess of Spring, Flora, presiding over all the humans from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who die and turn into little flowers. It was Poussin's invention to gather into a single picture the mortals from Ovid's scattered references who were transformed in this way. The first figure at the left is Ajax, who has an agonized expression as he falls on his sword. He commits suicide after his humiliation in losing the arms of Achilles to Ulysses. He is changed into a carnation, seen springing from his sword. Appearing to his right, Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection in a water-filled vessel. He wastes away in death to become the flower bearing his name as the resigned Echo, whose love he spurned, looks on. Behind Narcissus, Poussin shows Clytie, unrequited in her love for Apollo as her gaze follows him across the sky. Because of her obsessive love of the sun god, she neglects all of her other needs and dies, becoming a heliotrope. Flora appears next, symbolizing the regenerative force of nature as she happily dances among the mortals, sprinkling petals. To her right comes Hyacinthus, who was killed accidentally with a discus thrown by his admirer, Apollo. Poussin shows him holding his head and looking at his Hyacinthus blossoms. Adonis occurs next, inspecting the thigh wound inflicted upon him by a wild boar during the hunt about which Venus had warned him. He becomes the Adonis flower, or anemone.



5.6. Nicolas Poussin, *Realm of Flora*, 1631. Oil on canvas, 131 × 181 cm. Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

Finally, a pair of lovers appears in the right foreground. Smilax and Crocus are mentioned only in passing by Ovid, but Giuseppe Orologi's annotation to Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara's Italian translation of the *Metamorphoses*, published in thirty-two editions between 1561 and 1624, implies that they were too eager to enjoy love, and so never did.<sup>23</sup>

The humans' change into floral form is a metaphorical, yet paradoxical, form of death in respect to their identity as men and women. They lose their humanity and sentience, yet continue to exist in another form within the cycle of nature. Representing nature's continuity, flowers die in autumn and reappear in spring. Adonis and Hyacinthus in particular are symbolic of resurrection. Priapus, shown as a herm at the left, is a symbol of perduring fertility, and Apollo, driving his chariot of the sun across the sky, is the source of life. This symbolism explains Flora's joyful dance and the general lightness of tone and color in the painting, suggesting

<sup>23</sup> Anguillara, *Le metamorfosi di Ovidio*, p. 152; Thomas, "Un fior vano e fragile", *The Symbolism of Poussin's Realm of Flora*, pp. 225-236.

calm and even happiness.<sup>24</sup> But a negative side is present too—as the humans are changed into flowers in this picture, they become fixed to the ground, deprived of their mobility and freedom to act, their will. Hence, the painting is elegiac in its message, a bittersweet meditation on life and death within the inexorable and unending cycle of nature. The sunlit atmosphere of the picture (its overall coloration has been described as 'blond'), and the lighthearted Flora, representing the transformative power of enduring nature, contrast with the sadness of the dying mortals. Because the change of the mortals into flowers is allegorical, the tragic side of their deaths seems to be neutralized by the cheerful tone emphasizing the positive idea of unfading nature. But Poussin is deliberate in setting up this contrast of the joyful and tragic aspects that he no doubt intended to affect the viewer through their very irreconcilability, thus promoting a thoughtful and prolonged contemplation of the painting and the messages it contains. Aside from Ajax, Poussin's figures are all lovers who die young, some shown in pairs and some singly. In the allegorical commentaries from Renaissance editions of the *Metamorphoses*, these transformations symbolized the fragility and vanity of life as well as the brevity of existence.<sup>25</sup>

Poussin presents female passion negatively in the case of Clytie in particular. By showing Clytie's obsessive longing for Apollo in the way she stares at him in the sky even as she shields her eyes from his brightness, Poussin suggests the inappropriate hysteria of female passion, as also described by Ovid: his Clytie is 'madly consumed with love'.<sup>26</sup> Clytie violates the female code of remaining demure in love and modestly averting her gaze. Her audacious, transgressive looking may be the very reason she was changed into a flower in the first place. Apollo, who turned against her, seems himself to have been the cause. Clytie's 'visual fixation' turns to phototropism when she becomes a flower, a punishment meted out by the sun god for her too assertive looking while in human form. As a flower she is immobile, stuck in place in the ground, able to move only her blossomy face.<sup>27</sup> Like most of the deaths in this painting, Clytie's was brought about by the passionate, jealous, or controlling gods. They likewise punished Narcissus for spurning a lover, causing him to fall in love with himself, and Hyacinthus' death was brought about by Apollo when he misfired his discus.

An innocently diverting approach is generally employed by Ovid, who typically turns the erotic and destructive lusts of the gods, as in the case of Apollo's desire for Hyacinthus, into witty and amusing tales through word play and lightness of

24 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 117; Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, pp. 180-181.

25 Thomas, "Un fior vano e fragile", *The Symbolism of Poussin's Realm of Flora*, pp. 225-236.

26 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.259.

27 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, pp. 31, 33, 100-101.



5.7. Nicolas Poussin, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1627-1628. Oil on canvas, 147 × 171 cm. Musée Condé, Chantilly (Photo: Musée Condé, Chantilly/Bridgeman Images).

touch. Apollo's loves for boys like Hyacinthus are never envisioned by Ovid as rapes but instead as scenes of mutual love and camaraderie. Boys are not visually objectified in the way that women are. In this respect male/male relations are privileged over male/female ones. A complaisant approach is an essential feature of Ovid's handling of rapes of women as well. Poussin follows Ovid's manner in this painting, with its bright coloration and the happy Flora dominating the mortals. Even so, in observing these premature deaths, the viewer remains aware of the negativity of the gods' dominating influence.

Flora's dancing among dying men and women suggests a certain perversity. Her happiness appears to be unseemly as she presides over the death of these mortals, some of whom are victims of failed love relationships with the gods. Even in understanding the picture as a metaphorical representation of the cycle of life,



5.8. Nicolas Poussin, *Massacre of the Innocents*, c. 1626-1627. Oil on canvas, 97 × 131.7 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville, Paris (Photo: Bulloz/© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY).

death, and rebirth in the seasons, the viewer may find it difficult to overlook the sinister aspect of Flora's gay demeanor. In choosing a female as leader of this group of unfortunate lovers at the moment of their sad demise, Poussin adheres to the longstanding classical tradition of using a woman as a symbol of death. The artist represents death and rebirth (as humble flowers, quite a step down from human sentience) through the aegis of the female, who in his painting shows no empathy for the dying mortals; indeed she views their deaths positively. Even if her role is allegorical, she is presented as a negative model of female authority and control.

Poussin probably painted his second version of the *Massacre of the Innocents* (c. 1627-1628, Musée Condé, Chantilly, Fig. 5.7) for the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, for the work is known to have been in his collection. The picture depicts the unspeakable anguish of a mother, under assault by a soldier, trying to prevent the slaughter of her child. Since the Bible gives no detailed description of the Massacre of the Innocents,<sup>28</sup> ordered by Herod the Great, the Roman-appointed King of

<sup>28</sup> Matthew, 2.16.



5.9. Marcantonio Raimondi, after Raphael, *Massacre of the Innocents*, c. 1512-1513. Engraving, 28.1 × 43 cm. British Museum, London (Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum, London/Art Resource, NY).

the Jews, artists had wide latitude in how to present the scene. Painters made free use of this subject to display mayhem and slaughter on a large scale. Poussin did so in his first version (Fig. 5.8) of this scene, where he showed eighteen figures in all, with four mothers and three executioners in the main foreground group.

Twenty-three figures appear in Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving after Raphael of this subject (Fig. 5.9). It is unusual, therefore, that in his second version of the scene, which is partly inspired by Raphael's design, Poussin shows only one mother and executioner in the foreground. Another woman holding her dead child appears behind the principal group, and three more women are shown in the distance, partly cut off from view by a high, broad temple platform. In spite of his single group in the foreground, Poussin makes it count: one can hardly imagine a more distraught, victimized mother than this. Her face is distorted with fear as she pleads with the swordsman to spare her child. The executioner wields his sword over his head, ready to come down hard on her infant he holds under foot. The assaulted mother's expression is so forceful that she appears to violate the bounds of classical restraint for which Poussin is known in his pictures. To demonstrate this point, one may note that none of the mothers in Marcantonio's engraving, an exemplary model of High Renaissance classicism, show such an intense degree of emotion, even though the scene is turbulent. Poussin heightens the emotional effect of his

foreground group by creating what is essentially a close-up, with these figures filling the picture space. The architectural setting is reduced to cropped details, including a small section of an enormous column at the left, while only a small part of a classical temple appears in the background. This disposition of architecture is very different from Marcantonio's ample setting with many buildings. In the present painting from Chantilly, we can just make out a detail of the fingernails of the mother digging into the back of the executioner, as she simultaneously pleads with him with her other hand. Meanwhile, he grabs her hair to keep her out of his way as he focuses on decapitating her child. His pose of pulling her hair derives from an object then in the Vatican collection, an Amazon sarcophagus, a drawing of which Cassiano dal Pozzo had in his Paper Museum.<sup>29</sup> The mother behind this main group holding her dead child puts one hand to her head, raising her eyes to the sky as she cries out in agony, looking like a classical maenad, but wracked with pain instead of ecstatic rapture. The principal mother's face is unforgettable as she reacts to the assault on her child with an intensity of emotion unmatched in any other painting by Poussin. Picked out with exceptionally strong light, her face with its expression of alarm and fear stands in the sharpest possible contrast to the calm, classical setting dominated by horizontal and vertical lines. In this work, brutal masculine force is pitted against female motherly instincts.

Poussin's *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (c. 1653, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 5.10) was painted for André Le Nôtre, the landscape architect who served as Louis XIV's principal gardener. The picture presents the power of Christ's words to save an assaulted, shamed woman from death by stoning. John, 8.2-11 relates how the scribes and Pharisees at the temple in Jerusalem brought before Christ a woman they accused of adultery, asking him if he would adhere to the law of Moses commanding that she be stoned. In this confrontation, the scribes and Pharisees desired to put Christ in a position where they could denounce him for violating Jewish law. Jesus wrote something on the ground, then responded to them that he without sin should cast the first stone. Convicted by their own consciences, they went away one by one, so that when Christ was alone with the woman, he bade her to go and sin no more. According to a medieval tradition, the words Christ wrote in the dirt were 'earth accuses earth', a reference to Genesis, 3.19: 'for dust you are and to dust you will return'. However, the Hebrew inscription in Poussin's painting, while not completely decipherable, seems to begin with the words of the Decalogue, 'I am [the Lord your God, who has brought you out of the house of bondage]'.<sup>30</sup> The episode emphasizes mercy and forgiveness and is also a call to follow a holy way of life.

29 Cropper, 'Vincenzo Giustiniani's Galleria', p. 124.

30 Exodus, 20.2; Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, pp. 398.



5.10. Nicolas Poussin, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, c. 1653. Oil on canvas, 121 × 195 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

The accused woman kneels in the center of the composition, lowering her head and gathering her clothes to indicate her shame. Christ points to her as he charges the Pharisees to examine their own consciences. The latter react in different ways, some running away, some startled by Christ's words, and some accusing others. A group of them at the right tries to decipher the words Christ wrote on the ground. In the background is a modest woman holding a child who has been interpreted as Charity, reinforcing the humane message of Christ.<sup>31</sup> As a model of motherhood, she also represents the kind of life to which the adulterous woman should aspire.

In this work, as in others of the same period, Poussin was inspired by Raphael, above all in the taut classicism and drama of the tapestry cartoons for the Sistine Chapel (see Figs. 4.10 and 4.11). The accusations against the woman by the scribes and Pharisees were callous and demeaning, and putting her in the midst of a crowd added the burden of public humiliation. Mosaic law (Leviticus, 20:10; Deuteronomy, 22:22-24) called for the death of both the man and the woman caught in adultery, although this decree was rarely enforced. The Pharisees' focus on the woman alone in John is therefore a clear sign of their male bias and their unjust behavior in singling her out as their victim.

<sup>31</sup> Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 297.





5.11. Nicolas Poussin, *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax*, c. 1657-1660. Oil on canvas, 156 × 194.5 cm. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Photo: State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg/HIP/Art Resource, NY).

Poussin's *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax* (c. 1657-1660, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Fig. 5.11) focuses on the aftermath of an attempt by a desperate woman under assault by the enemy to allow herself to be killed rather than submit to capture. Zenobia was wife of King Rhadamistus and was Queen of Armenia during the years 51-55 A.D. Aided by the Parthians, the Armenians revolted, so she and her husband were forced to flee the kingdom's capital and find their way back to Iberia. While pursued by the Parthians in their flight, Zenobia was seized by the pains of childbirth and, not wishing to hinder her husband's escape, begged him to kill her rather than allow her to fall into their enemies' hands. Urged by the intensity of his love for Zenobia, he unsheathed his scimitar, stabbed her, dragged her to the bank of the Arax and committed her to the stream, so that her body might be swept away. But she showed signs of life at the river's edge, and, still breathing, was discovered by some shepherds, who, inferring from her appearance

that she was a noble woman, bound and treated her wound with their remedies. This is the moment represented by Poussin in his painting. The shepherds then took her to the city of Artaxata, where she was brought before Tiridates, who received her kindly and treated her as a royal person.<sup>32</sup>

The episode represented by Poussin shows an unforeseen event in the story when Zenobia does not die, as expected, but miraculously recovers. We see a shepherd ministering to Zenobia's wound, and a shepherdess pointing to it. Another sheep herder points to the city of Artaxata, where they will take her, and two more rustics at rear-center and left discuss their plans. The god of the River Arax appears behind the other figures at the right.

That the desperate Zenobia felt forced to beg her husband to kill her rather than allow herself to fall captive to the enemy indicates the unspeakable treatment that women normally could expect at the hands of their captors in ancient times. For example, eighty-five years earlier the story of another queen, Cleopatra, who was also caught up in a war that involved Rome, was much less happy in its outcome. Zenobia's kind treatment by Tiridates was exceptional; she is said to have lived out her life peacefully in his court, whereas her husband Rhadamistus, after returning to his original home in Iberia, was put to death as traitor by his own father, Pharasmanes.<sup>33</sup>

This painting is now widely accepted as an original work by Poussin, although in the past it was sometimes doubted, in part because it is unfinished in many areas, making its authenticity difficult to determine.<sup>34</sup> It is possible that Poussin abandoned the picture because of his shaking hands that plagued him in his later years, or because he lacked or lost a patron to buy it. Poussin's drawing of this subject at Windsor has a different composition, with two quite animated figures surrounding the central group of a figure holding the slumping Zenobia.

Poussin's first version of *Apollo and Daphne* (1625, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Fig. 5.12) presents the story at its conclusion (for his later version, see Fig. 5.13). This early work by the artist shows the unfortunate results of Apollo's amorous woodland chase: his pursuit of the nymph Daphne is over; she is already becoming a tree, with branches springing from her arms and body. The sun god's expression reveals his sense of loss at the arboreal transformation of his victim even as he hastens to remove a branch growing from her body in order to fashion from it the object that henceforth will become his emblem, the laurel crown (he is shown already wearing one). The story had begun with a dispute between Apollo and Cupid over an issue of masculinity—whose arrows held the greater power. Daphne was the

32 Tacitus, *Annales*, 12.51.

33 *Ibid.*, 13.37.

34 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 255-256; Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 164.



5.12. Nicolas Poussin, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1625. Oil on canvas, 97 × 131 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich (Photo: bpk Bildagentur/Alte Pinakothek, Munich/Art Resource, NY).

innocent victim of Cupid's plot to take revenge on Apollo for belittling his prowess at archery. A flying *amorino* pretends to shoot Apollo with his bow, alluding to the gold-tipped arrow with which Cupid shot the god to make him fall in love with Daphne. The girl had fled Apollo's assault, since she also had been shot with an arrow by Cupid—a lead-tipped one, making her reject the god. Even before this, she had renounced sex and marriage, as a follower of the chaste goddess Diana. The girl's father, the river god Peneus, to whom she had appealed to save her from ravishment by Apollo, is bent over at the bottom of the painting, filled with grief at the fate of his daughter. Peneus reluctantly obliged her by turning her into a tree. The girl herself lifts her head and turns it to one side, expressing sadness at her pitiful end. Four additional *amorini* at the left, wistful and reflective, hold various attributes or sit near them, including an urn, a cornucopia, a sheaf of wheat, and straws spouting water. These items allude to the fecundity and bounty of nature denied to Daphne because of her transformation. In their attitudes the little loves seem to reflect on Daphne's misfortune and Apollo's frustration. The *amorino* at

the far left whose face is lost in shadow watches the pair with a blankly stupefied expression that conveys the tragedy of the scene.

In Ovid's tale Daphne manages to retain her virginity, but at great personal cost: Apollo obtains command over her by declaring her to be his tree. The god assumes the role of the active and penetrative partner through his virile desire. Poussin explicitly visualizes Ovid's point by situating Daphne in his painting as the object of Apollo's gaze. The canvas shows her at the moment of her transformation with the god's eyes fixed on her. Poussin depicts Apollo's enveloping arms anchoring her in position as he asserts his dominion over her. He stakes out his ownership with his hands on her body that is quickly overtaken by arboreal form. As a tree Daphne will remain forever passive and under Apollo's control. The god's authority over her may be viewed as a symbolic marriage, where she remains forever fixed in possession by him.<sup>35</sup> At first, she too was active, in running from the god, but now in her unresisting state she resigns herself to endure as his emblem. She has fallen under the force of masculine power, both Apollo's and her father's. The female as tree in Roman antiquity and in Poussin's day alike was an ideal metaphor to signal that women should remain permanently passive, under the authority of fathers and husbands. In losing her ability to move freely as a virgin she becomes immobilized, serving as a broad metaphor that can include the idea of masculine containment and regulation through marriage.

The last painting of Poussin's old age, *Apollo and Daphne* (1664, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 5.13), was given to Cardinal Camillo Massimo by the artist when he realized that he could not complete it due to a tremor in his hands. Although Poussin derived much of his imagery in the picture from Ovid,<sup>36</sup> he made use of other sources, including Philostratus and Conti's *Mythologiae*. The canvas depicts Apollo seated at the left in a relaxed but magisterial pose, smiling and looking longingly across the picture to the nymph Daphne. His ardent expression indicates that Cupid has already shot him with the gold-tipped arrow that has inflamed his passion. Cupid acted thus as a result of his dispute with the sun god over who had greater skill with the bow. Daphne is shown at the far right, sitting on the ground. Cupid is readying to shoot the lead-tipped arrow that will harden her heart against Apollo, and while the sun god is not yet assaulting her directly, she is under threat by him and fearfully embraces her father, the river god Peneus, for protection. Coiled around the trunk of the large oak tree at the left is the snake Python, whose fate was to be killed by Apollo.<sup>37</sup> The god bragged about killing the snake to Cupid, thus initiating their feud, since the love god thought himself the better shot. To the left of Apollo,

35 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, pp. 29-30; 91-93.

36 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.452-567.

37 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 330, based on Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.446-447, Apollodorus, *The Library*, 1.4.1, and *The Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, 362-363, 372-374.



5.13. Nicolas Poussin, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1664. Oil on canvas, 155 × 200 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

Poussin shows the crafty Mercury stealing an arrow from the sun god's quiver. This episode appears in Conti's account derived from Horace, but it is also given in Philostratus.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Panofsky pointed out that in Blaise de Vigenère's French translation of Philostratus, a unique (prior to Poussin) illustration appears showing Mercury stealing Apollo's arrow, a circumstance that makes Poussin's use of this translation and pictorial source likely.<sup>39</sup> Sitting above Python in Poussin's picture, in the same tree, is Melia, daughter of Oceanus, who, according to Pausanias, had been abducted by Apollo and bore him children.<sup>40</sup> Another oceanid, Admete, grasping the oak tree as she stands behind Apollo, is guarded by him but seems about to be snatched by Mercury.<sup>41</sup> Various nymphs occupy the middle zone between Apollo and

38 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 325, 423; Horace, *Odes*, 10.9-12; Philostratus, *Imagines*, 1.26; see also Helsdingen, 'Notes on Poussin's Late Mythological Landscapes', p. 163.

39 Panofsky, 'Poussin's *Apollo and Daphne* in the Louvre', pp. 34-36.

40 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 9.10.5.

41 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 520.

Daphne. The cattle of Admetus that Mercury stole from Apollo and a dog appear in the middle distance,<sup>42</sup> to the left of a dead figure lying on the ground discovered by a pair of shepherds. Panofsky reproduces the illustration from Blaise de Vigenère's translation of Philostratus that shows Mercury stealing the cattle of Apollo (and his arrow as well); he also identified the deceased in the middle distance of Poussin's work as Hyacinthus, a young man much loved by Apollo and mortally wounded by the god when the pair were playing with the discus.<sup>43</sup> Having formerly believed this dead figure to be Narcissus, Blunt later agreed with Panofsky that it must be Hyacinthus.<sup>44</sup> But the dead youth has also been identified as Leucippus, an Arcadian who loved Daphne; Apollo, also in love with the girl, became jealous of him.<sup>45</sup> In order to get close to Daphne, who was dedicated to virginity as a follower of Diana, Leucippus disguised himself as a girl (the jealous Apollo was behind this). Daphne and her maiden companions discovered his ruse and killed him; thus the dead youth in Poussin's picture may be him and not Hyacinthus.<sup>46</sup> This tale, upending Daphne's status as an innocent victim and revealing her as a killer, shows that she can be just as destructive of men as Apollo is of women. Cropper and Dempsey's theory has much to recommend it, since Leucippus figures in the story of Apollo and Daphne directly, as Apollo's rival for the love of Daphne, who then killed him because he deceived her, while Hyacinthus, although another lover of Apollo, has no immediate connection with the story. An additional factor in favor of identifying the deceased as Leucippus is that his story is featured prominently in Conti's *Mythologiae*, a text that Poussin undoubtedly consulted. The end of Daphne's story had been painted by Poussin in his youth (see Fig. 5.12), where, his chase of the unfortunate nymph over, Apollo is shown embracing her as she endures transformation into a laurel tree.

Following Ovid and focusing on Apollo's solar benevolence as well as his slaying of the destructive Python, interpreters have seen the Louvre painting as an allegory of nature and the importance of the sun's heat and water in the generation of life.<sup>47</sup> The picture has been glossed as signifying life and death; again through Apollo, god of pastoral poetry and unattainable desires, as symbolizing the creative fertility and sterility of the poet; and as representing the frustrated love of the solar deity

42 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 325, 423; Philostratus, *Imagines*, 1.26; Panofsky, 'Poussin's *Apollo and Daphne* in the Louvre', pp. 34-37.

43 Ibid., pl. 27 and pp. 37-41; see also Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 326; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.562ff.; and my Fig. 5.6, where, to the right of Flora, who dances and sprinkles flowers, Hyacinthus appears, holding his wounded head.

44 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 337, n. 16.

45 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 332; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 8.20.

46 Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting*, pp. 303-306.

47 Helsdingen, 'Notes on Poussin's Late Mythological Landscapes', pp. 167-168.



5.14. Nicolas Poussin, *Pan and Syrinx*, 1637. Oil on canvas, 106.5 × 82 cm. Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

through sterility, privation, and death.<sup>48</sup> Blunt sees Apollo and Cupid, both of whom appear at the left side of the painting, as symbols of life and fertility. By contrast, Daphne and Hyacinthus (if this identity is correct), shown at the right, met tragic ends, signifying sterility and death, according to Blunt.<sup>49</sup> Apollo's destruction of Python is a particularly apt analog to the sun's importance as a force of fertility. Ovid had characterized Python as a creature born in the early stages of the earth's creation when a deleterious dampness was the rule. But Conti points out that in destroying dampness (i.e., Python) through its heat, the sun (Apollo) represents a fertilizing force beneficial to life.<sup>50</sup> The serenity and happiness of the nymphs stretched across the foreground of the painting, and their integration into the bucolic landscape, contrast with the apprehensive Daphne and with the dead youth in the background, scenes reminding the viewer that in the scheme of life, love and death are intertwined. Love, usually thought of as a positive force, reveals its negative aspect through the pride and capriciousness of Cupid, who destructively shoots Apollo and Daphne with his arrows that bring about their opposing reactions to one another and finally the sad transformation of the girl. Cupid's role in the story can be understood as an explanation on an allegorical level of sexually aggressive male behavior; the same may be said of Apollo, who claimed ownership of Daphne as his rightful prize. Apollo's status as a god may likewise be interpreted as representing the privileges and prerogatives of the male. The smile of Apollo in Poussin's painting, and his pose, expressing authority, convey his power over Daphne. By contrast, the sad and passive Peneus and his daughter, succumbing to fear and in need of protection, point to her ineffectualness in avoiding a sexual confrontation with the god.

Syrinx and Daphne both suffered the fate of taking on vegetal form, one as reeds and the other as a tree. Like her leader, the goddess Diana, the Arcadian nymph Syrinx desired to remain a virginal denizen of the woods. Following Ovid's account,<sup>51</sup> in his *Pan and Syrinx* (1637, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, Fig. 5.14) Poussin shows Pan, the god of wild nature, shepherds, and flocks, pursuing the nymph. In a lost letter to Jacques Stella, quoted by Félibien, Poussin said that he made this picture for the painter Nicolas Guillaume La Fleur, of whom little is known, but described as his close friend by Florent Le Compte.<sup>52</sup> Since Syrinx found the river Ladon (here represented by her river-god father) blocking her escape from the god's assault, she prayed to her sisters to be transformed. As a result, instead of

48 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 346; McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, p. 172; Panofsky, 'Poussin's *Apollo and Daphne* in the Louvre', p. 28.

49 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 347.

50 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 346.

51 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.705-706.

52 Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, pp. 122-123.



possessing the girl, Pan found himself holding an armful of tall reeds, which he cut and made into pipes that are named after the nymph.<sup>53</sup> By playing his reed pipes, he found a way to memorialize Syrinx and keep her with him always. She was thus objectified by Pan 'in a symbolic (and displaced) union'.<sup>54</sup> In her attempt to remain virginal Syrinx often had to flee her suitors, including satyrs and gods of field and woodland. When Pan wanted her, she told him 'no' and fled until the River Ladon forced her to a stop. A victim of her own beauty, she found it necessary to endure running from lusty males, even when she made clear to them her intention to preserve her virginity. Through no fault of her own other than to deny men and gods the pleasure of raping her, she was forced to beg for transformation into the humble reeds that Pan impudently appropriated as a remembrance of her.

Poussin contrasts the smooth, white skin of Syrinx with the dark, leathery, and partly fur-covered body of Pan. The misogynistic implications of her constraint by her father, the river god Ladon, are hard to avoid; his complicity allowed her to be overtaken by Pan. Her father seems to be deeply troubled by his own act of blocking her path. A river nymph, one of the sisters to whom Syrinx prayed for transformation, is seated at the left. She, like the *amorino* seated beside her and the two others in the foreground, is startled by Pan's assault. The two *amorini* in the foreground sport vases and play at being river gods as they lean forward to get out of the way. Pan's amorous state is indicated by Cupid, following him in the air; the latter holds a torch of love and an arrow that, pointed at Syrinx, proves to be ineffectual against her. As she flees, Syrinx looks at the arrow of Cupid with surprise and fright, since she wants at all cost to avoid its sting. The reeds into which she will be transformed grow under and behind her. As laurel tree and reeds, Daphne and Syrinx become inscribed with the marks of their would-be lovers and memorials to them and their lust.

Daphne and Syrinx are like the goddess Diana in that they attempt to avoid sexual contact with males. The theme of the rejection of love by such chaste females appears in seventeenth-century literary works. Taking up an approach found in Tasso's 1573 play, *Aminta*, the highly influential and lengthy novel *L'Astrée* by Honoré d'Urfé (published in several parts between 1607 and 1627) includes the motif of virginal women rejecting the sexual advances of men. This subject in turn is connected with the hunt through the flight from love, as when females try to avoid contact with the satyr, the ultra-masculine creature whose pursuit of them is devoid of respectful solicitation or any thought of marriage. Literature of the period fully describes this theme and variations on it, such as the *libertin* defense of betrayal by Hylas in D'Urfé's novel. Inconstancy is justified by him as the natural state of the world, as praiseworthy. Because women are endowed with '*bellezza*'

53 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.689-712.

54 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, p. 92.

and '*leggiadria*', but also often, unfortunately from the libertine's point of view, with noble restraint, they attract men by fleeing before them.<sup>55</sup> Poussin's many pictures of males pursuing or lustfully regarding females reflect not only ancient literary sources such as Ovid, but also this theme in its many permutations and meanings in the contemporary literature close at hand in his culture. In addition to lust, such meanings include, in their more ideal forms, the neoplatonic praise of a woman's beauty and her inspiration of higher and nobler feelings in her lover, as found, for example, in Poussin's *Diana and Endymion*.

If one regards Poussin's *Pan and Syrinx* from another perspective, from Syrinx's point of view, it expresses love in elegiac rather than erotic terms. Syrinx, a victim of unfortunate lust, did not have time to mediate on her sad transformation, but the viewer of Poussin's picture is invited to do so on her behalf. An elegiac approach is found in many of Poussin's mythological pictures from the late 1620s and 1630s, where the victims of unhappy love include the goddess of love herself, whose beloved Adonis dies; Cephalus, whose love for Procris is destroyed by Aurora; Echo and Erminia, whose loves are unrequited; the shepherd Endymion, overwhelmed by the moon goddess; and Daphne, victim of the male bravado of Cupid and Apollo. Through the animal lust of Pan, Poussin's *Pan and Syrinx* points to the unrestrained sexuality that existed in an imagined mythical past where a patriarchal conception of rape was accommodated. Mythical rapes may have had happy results, as when Europa was carried off to found a dynasty of kings in Crete, but more often they lead to unfortunate consequences, as in the cases of Semele, who dies when confronting her ravisher, Jove, or Daphne, Myrrha, and Syrinx, who find themselves transformed into vegetal beings. In Poussin's works, where the tragic consequences of human passions often predominate, a stoical strain has been detected.<sup>56</sup> The stories in his paintings are more susceptible to stoic interpretation than the Ovidian texts from which they often derive because the artist almost always rejects the poet's witty approach. To accept the stoical implications of Poussin's pictures of rape is to accommodate coerced sex as unfortunate but unavoidable.

The story of the Rape of the Sabine Women is told by Livy and Plutarch.<sup>57</sup> The legendary founder of Rome, Romulus, and his Roman warriors invented the ruse of inviting the neighboring Sabines to a *consualia*, games and sacrifices in honor of a newly discovered sanctuary of Neptune. At the signal of Romulus, the Romans seized and carried off the unmarried women of the Sabines to make them their wives. From his pro-Roman perspective, Plutarch interprets this event in as positive a light as possible: '[The Romans] did not commit this rape wantonly, but with a

55 Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, pp. 159-160.

56 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 103-105.

57 Livy, *History of Rome*, 1.9-13; Plutarch *Life of Romulus*, 14.



5.15. Nicolas Poussin, *Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1634. Oil on canvas, 154.6 × 210 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1946 (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

design of forming an alliance with their neighbors [the Sabines] by the greatest and surest bonds'.<sup>58</sup> Romulus conceived this plan, according to Plutarch, because few of the men in his newly established city had wives and needed them if Rome was to prosper; furthermore, he hoped to make this outrage an occasion for friendship and union with the Sabines once they realized that their women had been treated kindly.

Poussin's first version of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1634, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fig. 5.15) is most likely the canvas owned by Marie-Madeleine de Vignerot, Duchesse d'Aiguillon; it was probably given to her as a gift by her uncle, Cardinal Richelieu.<sup>59</sup> The scene shows Romulus at the left, standing on a raised temple platform and raising his cloak, the signal for the Romans to attack. Below him, the Sabines are caught by surprise and swept up in the frenzy of the assault. Both Sabine women and men run for their lives, as other women who have been captured plead for help. The two groups of Roman soldiers lifting

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 128.

Sabine women in the left foreground are variations of the pair at the right in Pietro da Cortona's version of the subject of c. 1627-1629 in the Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome (Fig. 5.17). A woman at the bottom-right desperately grabs the cloak of her father as a Roman soldier fends him off with a knife. An old woman in the center between two fallen children raises one hand to her forehead in disbelief and with the other pleads for mercy with the ruthless Romans. In the middle distance a Roman restrains a Sabine woman with his left arm and with his right points in the direction of his home, trying to convince her to go with him peacefully. Here, he adopts a self-indulgent and paternalistic, if amatory, attitude.

The painting often has been regarded as representing noble humans performing heroic deeds, a point of view deriving from a classical theory of art that was central to misogynist interpretations of the seventeenth century and continues to inform even recent analyses.<sup>60</sup> This idea of grandeur is preserved in Poussin's depiction of heroic bodies spread across a panorama that subjects their controlled, frozen action to a rigorously ordered composition. The consequent nobility imparted to the scene serves to divert the viewer from its terrifying aspects and the intolerable mistreatment of the women. Even so, in spite of his great love of ancient classical culture and his creation of paintings highlighting the virtue of Roman heroes such as Scipio (Fig. 6.3) and Coriolanus (Fig. 7.2), Poussin doesn't shrink from presenting the horror of this scene, exposing Romulus's calculated deception and the violent seizure of women under knifepoint and sword. The painting depicts 'the foundational myth of a state predicated on sexual violence and patriarchal succession'.<sup>61</sup> The ancient Romans thought of rape (*raptus*) as the forceful theft of property, in this case women, who, along with children and elders, endure great suffering. Roman law interpreted an abduction of this type from the point of view of the husband or *paterfamilias*, against whom the crime was said to be committed. We see this idea reflected in the father who tries to protect his daughter from a Roman assailant at the right side of the painting. The violent event is presented in an aestheticized and sanitized manner, glorifying the foundational story of the birth of Rome.<sup>62</sup> Thus, this kidnapping was condoned as honorable because the women were abducted not out of lustful desire but supposedly so that Rome could fulfill its historical destiny.<sup>63</sup>

The second, more complex and turbulent version of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (c. 1637, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 5.16), less frieze-like and with the action disposed

60 Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The 'Heroic' Tradition and its Alternatives*, pp. 4, 34.

61 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 8.

62 Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The 'Heroic' Tradition and its Alternatives*, p. 9.

63 Saslow, 'The Desiring Eye', p. 131.



5.16. Nicolas Poussin, *Rape of the Sabine Women*, c. 1637. Oil on canvas, 157 × 203 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

in a deeper space, was painted for Cardinal Luigi Omodei.<sup>64</sup> Poussin reinvents the scene of Romans carrying off the Sabine women by focusing on three main groups arranged in a pyramid. In the left foreground, a Roman soldier lifts up a Sabine woman who pulls at his hair as he strides towards the edge of the picture to the left. Balancing this group in the right foreground is a trio of figures including a Roman wearing a helmet grabbing a woman who flees to the right, running behind her father, who bolts in the same direction, ignoring the plea of his daughter in favor of saving his own life. The apex of the pyramid appears in the middle distance, where a Roman wearing a cuirass struggles to hoist up a woman with her arms raised in the air. This group is reminiscent of the soldier and Sabine woman at the right in Pietro da Cortona's Capitoline version of the subject (Fig. 5.17). Both of Poussin's versions take in a larger field of action than Pietro's, and paradoxically manage

64 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, pp. 108, 111; Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 127.



5.17. Pietro da Cortona, *Rape of the Sabine Women*, c. 1627-1629. Oil on canvas, 280.5 × 426 cm. Pinacoteca Capitolina, Palazzo Conservatori, Rome (Photo: Pinacoteca Capitolina, Palazzo Conservatori, Rome/Bridgeman Images).

to show greater compositional organization and more chaos simultaneously. The chief groups in the right-foreground of Poussin's two canvases contain a father, a daughter, and a Roman soldier; in both cases these groups are grittier and seem less staged or posed than Pietro's. At the center-left and far right in Poussin's Louvre version are two old women, the first of whom is kneeling as she appeals for mercy before Romulus, who stands at the left on a temple platform, in a rather too elegant, even precious pose, raising his cloak in signal for his soldiers to attack. The other aged woman at the right kneels with her grand-daughter hiding in her skirts as she tries to reason with a Roman soldier who reaches to take the younger woman.

The scene doesn't depict a series of rapes in the modern sense of sexual violation, rather, it shows abductions. As such, it is a subject that since the Renaissance has been interpreted as depicting the bravery and hardiness of the earliest Romans. From a modern point of view, this incident has quite different implications, stressing the seizure of women against their will followed by enforced marriage. This second version by Poussin implies a stronger critique of the event than his earlier rendering. Whereas the Metropolitan Museum version seems to glorify the nobility of public assault, this more savage Louvre version emphasizes the rough violence of the story.

This episode followed unsuccessful negotiations that the Romans held with the Sabines to obtain wives; thus it was an illegal act that broke trust with their neighbors

and precipitated a war between Rome and several neighboring tribes. After the Sabines captured the citadel of Rome, on the Capitoline Hill, the Sabine women, now wives of the Romans and mothers of their children, intervened, imploring their husbands on the one side and their relations on the other to cease fighting. The battle thus came to an end, with the Sabines agreeing to become one nation with the Romans.<sup>65</sup>

The subject of the Rape of the Sabine Women, like the sad romance legend of Griselda, who had to persevere in patience and obedience while her husband pretended to kill their children and dissolve their marriage, was favored for use in marriage pictures during the fifteenth-century in Italy. At that time, violent subjects and those emphasizing marital discord were thought to be suitable images to decorate the bridal chamber, to remind the newly married woman to be faithful to her husband, who, metaphorically, acted with legal authority as a rapist, removing her from her family.<sup>66</sup> Poussin's two versions have a more archeological flavor, as scenes taken from Roman history, and are unrelated to the marriage picture tradition. Nevertheless, in their boldly dramatic presentation of the scene, Poussin's two paintings that emphasize violence against women are caught in the nexus of meaning between Plutarch's justification of the act for the glory of the Roman state on the one hand and an implied empathy for the suffering women on the other.

While the subject of Poussin's drawing, possibly owned by Cassiano dal Pozzo, in Fig. 5.18 (c. 1630, Royal Library, Windsor Castle) is not certain, it most likely represents the *Battle between the Israelites and the Midianites*, as recounted in Numbers, 31:1-12. The alternative hypothesis, that the subject is *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (Clayton, p. 64), seems unlikely. The drawing contains several features that connect it closely with the *Israelites* theme. Numbers, 31:1-12 reads in part:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people' [...] And Moses sent them to the war, a thousand from each tribe [...] with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand. They warred against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every male [...] And the people of Israel took captive the women of Midian and their little ones, and they took as plunder all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods [...] Then they brought the captives and the plunder and the spoil to Moses.

The remainder of the chapter goes into great detail regarding how the women, children, and spoils should be treated and divided by the Israelites. The women and children in the drawing are arranged in a tight group at the left, and not focused

65 Livy, *History of Rome*, 1.9-33.

66 Goffen, *Titian's Women*, p. 32 and n. 74.



5.18. Nicolas Poussin, *Battle between the Israelites and the Midianites*, c. 1630. Graphite underdrawing, pen and brown ink, brown wash on paper, 16.3 × 28 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

in the center, as they should be if the subject were the *Sabine* intervention. The booty or spoils seen in the large wagon at the left of the drawing are discussed many times in Numbers and thus are quite pertinent to the *Israelites* battle, but totally irrelevant to the *Sabine* subject. The prominent battle trumpets in the center of the drawing are described in Numbers and are applicable to the *Israelites* theme, but inappropriate for the *Sabine* topic. Finally, the camel appearing at the right in the drawing would be completely out of place geographically for the *Sabine* intervention, but perfectly apt for the *Israelites* battle.<sup>67</sup>

The Midianites were destroyed by the Israelite army under Moses because, it was said, the former tribe had led the Israelites into sin at Peor.<sup>68</sup> Midianite women, it was claimed, had drawn Israelite men into evildoing by seducing them and encouraging them to sacrifice to their gods. Thus, in fulfilling God's vengeance against the Midianites, Moses commanded that all of the captive women who had slept with Israelite men be put to death.<sup>69</sup> As happens so often in such tales of patriarchal vengeance, it is women who are held accountable, because of their seductive charms, and not the Israelite men, who were just as guilty of sexual impropriety. Poussin

67 Rosenberg and Prat, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665, Catalogue raisonné des dessins*, p. 44, also favor the *Israelites* over the *Sabine* motif.

68 Numbers, 25.

69 Numbers, 31.17.



shows sympathy for the Medianite women, representing them as frightened victims and mothers concerned for their children's safety rather than as harlots.

That the *Sabine* subject does not fit the drawing is made clear by its description by Livy and especially by Plutarch.<sup>70</sup> These writers relate how the Romans had forcefully carried off Sabine women and married them, ensuring the future population of their city. Later, when a Sabine force attacked Rome, the women intervened in the battle between their husbands and their relations, bringing peace to the competing tribes. Plutarch describes how the Roman wives rushed and shouted in every direction through the ranks of the armed men, who were roused to pity them. At the defining moment of the intervention, the wives separated the two armies and spread through their ranks, as in Jacques Louis David's later version of the subject. But Poussin's drawing shows all the women at one side of the battle, presumably behind the Medianites' line of combat. Poussin indicates the importance of the women by modeling their forms with heavy, dark ink; he thus creates in them a notable contrast with the more finely drawn fighting soldiers. Starting at the far left, a woman kneels and prays to the gods to be saved as she is embraced by her fearful older daughter while her younger child has fallen down in front of her. Next, a woman embraces her soldier husband as their child reaches up to them. Then, a third woman, the most prominent of all, rushes toward a soldier wielding his sword, as she pleads to be saved. Above this group, behind the wagon filled with booty, two more women appear. One puts her hand to her breast; the other throws her arms out as she beholds the spectacle of the battle while her child reaches up to her. Almost all of the rest of the drawing is filled with soldiers in the fray of battle, but at the top, between trees on a hill, two figures are seen. One of them, a woman, kneels in prayer to be saved. She and the large woman at the bottom-left who also prays are more appropriate for the *Israelites* subject than the *Sabine* theme. So, while the drawing shows a battle scene, it particularly highlights the women at the left, who are fearful for their lives, destined to see their tribe destroyed, and become captives of the Israelites.

The *Rape of Europa* (1649, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Fig. 5.19) is the finished design for a lost painting of the subject that Poussin painted in 1649 for 'Monsieur Pucques' (actually Picques), a friend of his patron Paul Fréart de Chantelou.<sup>71</sup> The drawing represents a complex scene that occurs just before Jove in the form of a bull assaults Europa, carrying her across the waves to Crete. At the left in the drawing Europa sits on the back of the bull, helping one of her maidens in front to place a wreath of flowers over its horns, a motif taken from Ovid and previously engraved by Primaticcio.<sup>72</sup> At the far left fly Mercury and Cupid, the latter riding

<sup>70</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, 1.9; Plutarch, *Life of Romulus*, 14-19.

<sup>71</sup> Rosenberg and Prat, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665, Catalogue raisonné des dessins*, p. 650.

<sup>72</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.867-868.



5.19. Nicolas Poussin, *Rape of Europa*, 1649. Pen with bistre wash on paper, 26.3 × 57.2 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (Photo: Author).

Jove's eagle, pointing the way for the bull to follow the sea waves to Crete.<sup>73</sup> Sitting or standing to the right of Europa are several more maidens, one of whom at the right of this central group flees from a snake. Behind the snake to the right two naiads and a river god repose. Cattle appear at the far right, and in the distance is a classical landscape including a castle on a hill with smoke rising from it that resembles the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, closely matching a similar motif in Poussin's *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* of 1650 in the Louvre (Fig. 5.2). At the base of the hill is a herdsman playing pipes as he reclines in front of a shrine.

The scene of a girl fleeing a snake in the story of Europa is unknown elsewhere. But the pose of the girl is close to that of Eurydice in Poussin's Louvre *Orpheus and Eurydice*, giving rise to the claim that she is indeed Eurydice.<sup>74</sup> One way of looking at Europa and the girl with a snake is through contrast: one can imagine that Poussin has set up an opposition between the fertile Europa, carried off to found a dynasty of kings in Crete, and Eurydice, condemned to the barrenness of the underworld.<sup>75</sup> It may be added that this theory of the opposition of fertility and sterility as represented by Europa and Eurydice seems to be supported by the nymph to the right of the former, who smiles as she points in the direction of the open water and Crete, and by the river god and his companion nymph at the right side of the composition. The river god, looking slightly downward and observing

73 The identity of Cupid, who has no bow or arrows and who otherwise never appears riding Jove's eagle, has been questioned; see Helsdingen, 'Notes on Poussin's Late Mythological Landscapes', p. 172.

74 Alternatively, Hesdingen, *ibid.*, p. 173, identifies her as a symbol of fertility, Proserpine, who was seduced by Jove in the form of a serpent.

75 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 319-320; McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, p. 176.

the scene near at hand, is lost in dejection because he notices the snake and the imperiled Eurydice, while the nymph beside him smiles as she overlooks the central group and regards Europa at the other side of the composition, imagining her role as progenitor of Cretan glory.

But another interpretation of the scene is more apt in explaining several important features it contains. Just as Europa's abduction was brought about by the passion of Jove, so Eurydice's death resulted from the attempt of Aristaeus, son of Apollo, to rape her.<sup>76</sup> This idea may be elaborated further. Virgil gives an account of the story of Aristaeus and Eurydice that is not connected with her marriage to Orpheus, the latter subject represented by Poussin in his painting in the Louvre (Fig. 5.2). Virgil describes how Proteus, the ancient god of the sea, tells Aristaeus that he must repent for the crime of bringing about Eurydice's death when, as he chased her, she failed to notice in the tall grass a snake guarding the banks of a river. But when they saw the snake, the dryad sisters of Eurydice, says Proteus, filled the mountaintops with their cries, so that *'flerunt Rhodopeiae acres'* ('the heights of Mount Rhodope wept').<sup>77</sup> We must assume, observing Poussin's drawing, that Eurydice, thus warned, tried to flee. The sad aftermath is not shown in the drawing—it was too late; she could not avoid the snake's bite, thus cold death awaited her. Virgil goes on to relate how Cyrene, the nymph-mother of Aristaeus, tells him how to make amends for his crime. He must sacrifice to the nymphs, with whom Eurydice used to dance in forest groves. He needs to choose the handsomest of the bulls grazing on Mount Lycaeus, and heifers too. He is then required to sacrifice these animals at the shrines of the nymph goddesses. These elements of the story as told by Virgil are represented in Poussin's drawing: at the bottom-right we see the riverbank that the snake guards; to the left of and behind Eurydice are the two dryad sisters who cry out; in the background at the right are the cattle of Mount Lycaeus that Aristaeus must sacrifice; above these to the left is the shrine of the nymphs where Aristaeus was directed by his mother to make his offering; and at the top-right in the distance is Mount Rhodope, which rang with the cries of the nymphs. Of special note is that in Virgil's *Georgics* the snake is referred to in Latin as a 'hydrus', which is a water snake; its lower-case masculine form must be distinguished from the capitalized feminine 'Hydra', which is the female serpent-monster. Virgil uses the Latin masculine accusative form, 'hydram', so his snake that attacks Eurydice is male, like the bull that carries off Europa.

In this interpretation, Poussin focused on animals threatening women as stand-ins for human male aggression: the snake for Aristaeus in Eurydice's story and

<sup>76</sup> Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 780; Virgil, *Georgics*, 4.453-527; Verdi, 'Poussin and the "Tricks of Fortune"', p. 683, mentioned this point but did not develop it.

<sup>77</sup> Virgil, *Georgics*, 4.461.

the bull for Jove in Europa's tale. Both scenes point to the deception of females by male aggressors, and serve as premonitions of the next part of their stories, not shown in the drawing, where the bull carries off Europa for his sexual pleasure and Eurydice dies from the snake bite. Conti, however, offers a different interpretation of Aristaeus, giving us insight into the patriarchal attitudes of the sixteenth century.<sup>78</sup> Rather than denoting the male aggression of rape, for Conti Aristaeus represents the 'good', because he is very much in love with Eurydice, who signifies the soul. This kind of 'moral' interpretation, typical of Conti's time in explaining the ancient myths, completely overlooks the issue that Aristaeus was driven by the desire of rape.

Blunt's theory that the nymph at the far right washing her hair represents fertility and alludes to Europa seems too convoluted;<sup>79</sup> by ignoring the stories unfolding at the left, this naiad is simply meant to contrast with the more attentive river god and nymph next to her, who pay close attention to the snake, Eurydice, and Europa. It has been asserted that the nymph washing her hair is the unfortunate Arethusa, on whom a rape was attempted by the river god next to her, Alpheus.<sup>80</sup>

Ovid tells of Jove's ingeniously deceptive plot to rape Europa. He instructed Mercury to drive the King of Sidon's herd of cattle to the sea shore. Then Jove, who held the power with a mere nod to make the world tremble, set aside his majesty and took on the form of a bull as he went lowing among the heifers. He made a great show of displaying his bovine form before Europa, who was duly impressed with his muscles and the dewlaps hanging from his chest. By slow stages he gained her confidence as she overcame her fear. She then brought flowers to him, as he kissed her hands with his tongue. Eventually she had the temerity to climb on his back, his signal to edge towards the water and then suddenly chase across the waves with his prize, leaving her girlfriends far behind on the shore (as depicted by Titian, *Rape of Europa*, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston).

Poussin depicts the moment when Europa places a floral wreath on the bull's horns, an indication of her perfect trust of the animal. Ovid says she looked at him in admiration.<sup>81</sup> She had no suspicion that the bull was actually the disguised Jove, whose intention was to rape her. She was unable to discern that in his appearance as a bull he was a fraud. As a female she did not have the controlling male gaze, thus the bull's action of taking her across the waves, away from the safety of her friends, would determine her fate. In the drawing the bull is quiet, not even looking, yet he possesses the male gaze that must have been operating earlier, spying out the girl, although Ovid does not mention this. If the male gaze is 'performative, penetrative, controlling, and

78 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 784.

79 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 320.

80 Rosenberg, *Poussin and Nature*, p. 244.

81 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.858.

objectifying,'<sup>82</sup> then Europa's trusting, feminine gaze is the opposite of this. As he occasionally does elsewhere, Conti actually presents a critique of male patriarchal behavior in his moral interpretation of this myth. He describes Jove as so degraded by passion that he turned himself into a filthy animal.<sup>83</sup> But then Conti immediately turns against women, blaming them for men's misfortunes, and quoting Euripides, who says that woman is the specious curse of man. He goes on to say that even though women are recognized by everyone as imperfect creatures with crazy ideas, they are helped in their crimes by men, who will do anything to please them. He concludes that in spite of the fact that women have an intrinsic sense of shame imprinted on them by nature, men should have pity for that unfortunate sex, which suffers from so many more disadvantages than men.<sup>84</sup> Here, as he condescendingly advises men to have pity for the weaknesses of women, Conti undergirds the patriarchal biases of his time.

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82 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, p. 28. For further analysis of the Stockholm drawing, see Friedlaender, *The Drawings of Nicolas Poussin, Catalogue Raisonné*, pp. 14-15 and figs. 166-169, and Rosenberg and Prat, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665, Catalogue raisonné des dessins*, pp. 660-665.

83 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 942.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 943.

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## 6. Victims II—Voiceless, Deceived

### Abstract

Further categories of victimhood appear in Poussin's works, including the voiceless and the deceived, making examples of this broad theme of female victims (including those discussed in Chapter 5) the most common in his oeuvre. In the present chapter, all of the victims are female. The voiceless are found in *Echo and Narcissus*, *Hercules and Deianeira*, the *Continenence of Scipio*, and the *Testament of Eudamidas*. Deceived women appear in the *Birth of Bacchus*, *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, and the *Judgment of Solomon*.

**Keywords:** Victims, Voicelessness, Deception, Jealousy, Power

Further categories of victimhood appear in Poussin's works, including the voiceless and the deceived, making examples of this broad theme of female victims (including those discussed in Chapter 5) the most common in his oeuvre. In the present chapter, all of the victims are female. The voiceless include Echo in *Echo and Narcissus*, whose human form fades into a rock while she longingly tries to converse with the one she loves. The young woman in the *Continenence of Scipio* is likewise without a voice, since she is entirely passive, her fate having been determined by Scipio, her betrothed, and her father. The voiceless grandmother and daughter in the *Testament of Eudamidas* are innocents whose fate hangs upon the mercy of the male heirs named in the will of Eudamidas. Poussin's drawing of *Hercules and Deianeira* (c. 1637, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Fig. 6.2), not included in detailed discussion in this chapter, also shows a voiceless woman, Deianeira, who has no say in who becomes her husband, as the outcome is determined by men, Hercules and Achelous, who fight each other to win her, and her father, King Oeneus, who agrees that the winner shall marry his daughter. Turning to women deceived, while she is not shown in the *Birth of Bacchus*, Semele, the mother of Bacchus, fell victim to Juno's deception when she was sent to Jove to be destroyed. Also deceived were the daughters in *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, who were led to believe that Achilles was a woman. The real mother in the *Judgment of Solomon* was deceived by the false one, who claimed the child of the former as her own.



In her near-voicelessness, in being able to repeat only the last words she hears, Echo reflects the broader issue of the silencing of women not only in the ancient Roman culture of Ovid, Poussin's chief literary source for his *Echo and Narcissus* (c. 1629-1630, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 6.1), but also in the painter's own time, when women typically were cut off from expressing themselves in the public sphere and placed under the regulation of fathers and husbands in the private world. Poussin suggests the idea of the insubstantiality of women when he shows Echo disappearing into the rock on which she leans. In his *Metamorphoses* Ovid encourages the reader to sympathize with the frustrated Echo, who does the best she can to express her love for Narcissus in the words allowed her. Ovid cunningly has the nymph change the meanings of Narcissus's words that she repeats so that she may reveal her love for him. In contrast to the slowly disappearing Echo, Poussin emphasizes Narcissus as the dominant, fully three-dimensional (albeit dying) figure in the front of his painting. Against their full-bodied portrayals of Narcissus, both poet and painter inscribe Echo as a site of passive ineptitude and failure. The *Continence of Scipio* (1640, Pushkin Museum, Moscow, Fig. 6.3) depicts the famous Roman general during his Iberian campaign of the Second Punic War. He returns a beautiful maiden he had captured to her parents and her Celtiberian fiancé, Allucius, who in return became a supporter of Rome. Scipio controlled his passions, allowing generosity to overcome his physical desire for the maiden. Normally, a young woman could expect appalling treatment by her Roman captors. Scipio's conduct has been described as an example of the kind of stoic behavior greatly admired by Poussin, even if, to the modern mind, his refraining from raping a young woman hardly seems to rise to the level of stoic virtue. In this story, the fate of the young woman is determined by men, primarily by Scipio, but also by her fiancé and her parents, to whom she is returned. The bride-to-be, reinforcing male power, lowers her head before the general and her betrothed, submitting to both men, in deference to their mutual control over her. In the *Testament of Eudamidas* (1644-48, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Fig. 6.4), a poor, dying man entrusts the care for his impoverished mother and daughter to two well-to-do friends. Lucian states that this bequest provoked ridicule among Eudamidas's fellow Corinthians, since he bestowed a burden upon his heirs that might bankrupt them instead of providing them with a generous windfall. But the heirs, deeply respecting Eudamidas's intentions, sheltered the two women. The poor mother and daughter of Eudamidas were voiceless and helpless victims in a society that was unsympathetic to their welfare and their fate was uncertain, dependent on the goodwill of others. It was only the willingness of Eudamidas to appear a fool by making his strange bequest that the lives and fortunes of his mother and daughter were salvaged. The *Birth of Bacchus* (1657, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA, Fig. 6.5) tells the story of Semele (not depicted in the painting), who implored Jove, her lover, to appear

to her in his glory. Jove's jealous consort Juno had tricked Semele into asking the thunder god to see him in this manner. Pregnant with Jove's child, the deceived Semele was then destroyed by the fire emanating from the overpowering god. Because he had not warned Semele about the destructive consequences of seeing him in his glory, Jove betrayed her and therefore was complicit in Juno's plot to bring about her destruction. The thunder god then snatched Semele's half-formed child from the flames and sewed him up in his thigh until the baby, Bacchus, was born. Poussin shows Jove in the sky, refreshing himself after the birth of Bacchus by drinking nectar, while his newborn is tended by nymphs at the bottom of the picture. At the right, Narcissus and Echo are shown near death. Echo and Semele are linked in that both were punished by Juno for empowering her philandering husband, the one condemned to repeat only the last words she hears and the other to ask to see Jove in his destructive glory. The story behind Poussin's two versions of *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (c. 1651-1653, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Fig. 6.6; c. 1656, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Fig. 6.7) is that Achilles' mother, Thetis, knowing that her son would die if he fought in the Trojan War, disguised him as a girl and sent him to King Lycomedes of Skyros, telling him that Achilles was her daughter. Lycomedes agreed to take care of the 'girl'; in this way, his unsuspecting and deceived daughters accepted Achilles into their company as a maiden. Achilles was attracted to Deidamia, one of the king's daughters, eventually forcing her to have sex with him; she then bore him a child. When Ulysses and Diomedes were sent to convince Achilles to join in the Trojan War, they cunningly deposited a heap of gifts before Lycomedes's daughters, including a sword and shield hidden among the jewelry, clothes, and other finery. When it came time to make selections from among the gifts, the young women were attracted to the jewels, but Achilles instinctively grasped the weapons, thus revealing himself. Achilles' cross-dressing reminds the viewer that he may have had both male and female lovers, and hints of transgenering. In Aeschylus's tragedy *Myrmidons*, Achilles and Patroclus, close friends and fellow soldiers, practiced 'Greek love'. The *Judgment of Solomon* (1649, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 6.8) relates the story of two harlots fighting over a child before their sovereign. Each of the two women asserted before Solomon that the child was hers. The untruthful woman was guilty of a horrible deception, victimizing the true mother. Solomon commanded his swordsman to cut the child, giving half to each woman. Out of grief, the true mother beseeched the king not to slay it but give it to the other woman, while the other urged Solomon to kill it so that neither would have it. In this way, the king was able to determine the true mother, returning the child to her. Solomon's test was clever in that it was designed to reveal the compassion of the true mother and the jealousy of the other. Because the essential turn in the story is the true mother's instinct that breaks the deadlock, she takes equal precedence with Solomon, even though he was famous for

his wisdom and the story was used to exemplify male sagacity. While Solomon was wise enough to realize that the true mother would give up her child rather than see it killed, the story privileges the instincts of motherhood as much as male wisdom.

In this chapter, women are rendered voiceless or are deceived and destroyed through the jealousy of Juno (Echo, Semele); are voiceless in the face of male power and privilege (the young woman in the *Continenence of Scipio*, the women in the *Testament of Eudamidas*); are deceived by the protective mother of Achilles, Thetis (the daughters of Lycomedes); or are misled through an evil mother's jealousy (the good mother in the *Judgment of Solomon*). Thus, it is only women who deceive or destroy; men are merely 'passively' guilty by virtue of their imagined or presumed privileges of 'rightful' power.

Echo's ability to repeat only the last word she hears, a motif cleverly worked by Ovid,<sup>1</sup> may be regarded as a sign of what was expected of women in the male-centered culture of the poet's Imperial Rome. Females in his society were excluded from the public sphere and most government roles, even if they were sometimes involved de facto in politics and civic life, and were expected to defer to men and consent to what they said.<sup>2</sup> The women of antiquity were Echo-like in the impossibility of their being able to speak on an equal footing with men. The insubstantiality, the absence represented by the female, is ingeniously underlined by Ovid when he describes how the body of Echo disappears so that only her voice remains. This idea is repeated in seventeenth-century Italy in the poem 'Eco' by Giambattista Marino, who likewise plays with the idea of the non-existence of the nymph: 'towards the end of the poem [Pan] confirms that there is actually no one there, that he speaks to the waves, the stones, and the wind [rather than to Echo], and he concludes the poem by fully admitting the futility of his, and Echo's, speech: "Harsh joke, wicked mocking! So, to my eternal torture that same voice is without voice. [A]nd that, which always groans and weakens, for me only grows dumb. Illusory daughter of air and speech, perhaps you amuse yourself: well I see that you are nothing".<sup>3</sup> The women of Marino's and Poussin's day also mainly were voiceless in the public sphere, as they had been in Ovid's Rome.<sup>4</sup> Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus* (c. 1629-1630, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 6.1) has been identified as a work from the collection of Cardinal Angelo Giori inventoried in 1669.<sup>5</sup> The picture is suggestive of this idea of

1 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3:357-401.

2 Kampen, 'Between Public and Private', p. 218; MacMullen, 'Women in Public in the Roman Empire', pp. 208-218; Boatwright, 'Placia Magna of Perge', p. 249.

3 Iarocci, 'Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus*', p. 214; Marino, *La lira, rime del cavalier Marino*, 3:65.

4 Collins, 'The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth-Century France', pp. 469-470; Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 37, 288.

5 Brejon de Lavergnée, *L'inventaire Le Brun de 1683*, pp. 37, 39; Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 76.



6.1. Nicolas Poussin, *Echo and Narcissus*, c. 1629-1630. Oil on canvas, 74 × 100 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

the insubstantiality of women when the artist shows the nymph disappearing into the rock on which she leans. Poussin may have developed his idea of a vanishing Echo from his reading of Marino as much as from Ovid himself.

In his *Metamorphoses* Ovid encourages the reader to sympathize with the frustrated Echo, who does the best she can to express her love for Narcissus in the words allowed her. Echo had been wandering in the forest when she chanced upon Narcissus and fell in love with him. When he tries to locate his friends with his calls, Echo is provided with words to articulate her interest in him. Ovid cunningly has the nymph change the meanings of Narcissus's words that she repeats so that she may reveal her love for him: 'By chance, Narcissus lost track of his companions, started calling; "Is anybody here?" and "Here" said Echo. He looked around in wonderment, called louder "Come to me!" "Come to me!" came back the answer'.<sup>6</sup> But Echo is ineffectual in her attempts to communicate; hers is a story of unrequited love, frustration, and loss brought on by Juno's curse of limiting her to

6 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.379-382.

repeat the last words of whatever she hears. Juno was enraged when she discovered that Echo had been in collusion with Jove by distracting her in conversation while her husband was engaged in his infidelities; thus the goddess meted out Echo's punishment. While the reader may find delicious cleverness in Ovid's word play, she/he is simultaneously aware of Echo's plight. In recounting her exasperated state, Ovid highlights Echo's misfortune by projecting it upon the reader. In doing this, the ancient poet unconsciously allows his text to point to the predicament of women as largely voiceless in his Roman society. Just as the body of Echo slowly disappears in Ovid's text, leaving behind only her voice, so when Poussin likewise shows Echo fading, he gives Ovid's words visual form. He paints Echo's body with less detail than Narcissus's, withholding from her the fully three-dimensional volume and solidity that he bestows upon Narcissus and the torch-bearing *amorino* standing in the middle ground at the right. Both Ovid and Poussin create a space for the transition from girl to abstract resonance, and both inscribe Echo as a site of passive ineptitude and failure.<sup>7</sup> Like Ovid's poem, Poussin's picture equally may be regarded as directing attention to the invisibility of women in his own culture. But unlike the poet, who stresses the presence of the nymph by telling his story from her point of view, Poussin does the opposite: he emphasizes Narcissus by depicting him as the dominant (albeit dying) figure in the front of his painting.<sup>8</sup> Placed in the background of the picture, Echo appears as a secondary protagonist. By highlighting the male and downplaying the role of the disappearing female, Poussin's painting more concretely articulates a male-oriented position than Ovid's poem does. Like Ovid, Poussin underscores Echo's tentative pursuit of Narcissus; hers is not a full-bore assault like Aurora's on Cephalus. In the *Metamorphoses*, Echo follows Narcissus secretly—'*sequitur vestigia furtim*'.<sup>9</sup> Her limited ability to speak leads, as Ovid tells us, to the disembodied echo with which we are all familiar, because 'she is an empty voice with no self-agency'.<sup>10</sup> Ovid describes Echo's frustration at her inadequate vocalization even as he shows how Narcissus's utterances are rendered unstable by her responses, by her changing the meaning of the words when she repeats them: 'Echo's words are not mere reflections of Narcissus's speech; they are copies that alter the stability of the "original" they supposedly mimic. In uncoupling meaning and intention, Ovid's poem offers the eerie possibility that

7 Deitch, 'The Girl He Left Behind', pp. 225-227.

8 An important visual source for Narcissus's pose is Paris Bordone's *Dead Christ Mourned by Two Angels* in the Palazzo Ducale, Venice—see Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 80, fig. 27. In addition, for poems by Giambattista Marino, Ottavio Tronsarelli, and Ottavio Rinuccini as Poussin's literary sources for his unusual representation of the dying Narcissus, see Unglaub, *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting*, pp. 72-81.

9 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.371.

10 Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies*, pp. 36-37.

echoic sound may be read as the nymph Echo's volitional speech'.<sup>11</sup> Whereas Ovid had given limited but ineffective agency to Echo by suggesting the way she is capable of changing the meaning of Narcissus's words, by contrast Poussin makes her a secondary feature of this painting. Unable in his medium to offer a visual equivalent for Echo's changing the meaning of words, Poussin substitutes for this lack by alluding to Echo's unrequited love through the *amorino* at the right, whose flaming torch symbolizes her burning passion for Narcissus. Simultaneously that same fire points to the youth's self-absorbed infatuation,<sup>12</sup> but likewise denotes his death, since such torches were carried in funeral processions and used to light the pyre.<sup>13</sup> The girl's frustration and eventual death are indicated through her fading image. The artist's protagonists show little attempt to articulate words: while the mouths of Narcissus and Echo are both slightly open, they seem not to speak, or if they do, they do so laconically and with weariness. They are passive and almost beyond speech as the one dies and the other dematerializes. While it may seem a truism that a painter cannot capture the meaning of speech in a picture, Poussin had made the representation of vocalization (and through gesture and expression the meaning of that vocalization) an important and dramatic part of other paintings, such as Endymion's speaking in his *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4). Here, however, the artist plays down the importance of speech, by showing the pair as barely able to articulate words. Echo's placement in the background and her lack of effective agency, marks of her punishment by Juno for past infractions, are suggestive of the negative assessment of women who pursue men. In her insubstantiality and passivity, she conforms to the Renaissance male's ideal of mute womanhood. By indicating her meager presence, this painting presents an image of the subservient female that would have been readily comprehended by seventeenth-century male viewers.

Narcissus is a comely youth who scorns female lovers and perishes as a result of his futile desire for his own reflection. He is described by Ovid as a boy verging on manhood: 'For Narcissus had reached his sixteen years'.<sup>14</sup> The poet tells the reader that young men were also attracted to Narcissus's beauty, introducing a homoerotic theme in the story. Ovid says that it was indeed a youth and not a girl who caused Narcissus's downfall: a rejected boy prayed to Nemesis that one day he should fall in love with himself 'and not win over the creature that he loves'.<sup>15</sup> Narcissus then succumbs to his own reflection in a clear pool. He thus is attracted to a male (albeit himself), compounding his narcissism with homoeroticism. Ovid is quite explicit

11 Bloom, 'Localizing Disembodied Voice in Sandy's Englished "Narcissus and Echo"', pp. 130-131.

12 Barolsky, *Ovid and the Metamorphoses of Modern Art*, p. 96.

13 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 79.

14 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3:351-352.

15 *Ibid.*, 3:404-406.

regarding a male's love for another of his own sex when he describes Narcissus thinking about the reflection he cherishes: 'He [says Narcissus of his own reflection in the pool] is charming, I see him, but the charm and sight escape me. I love him and cannot seem to find him! [...] He is eager for me to hold him. When my lips go down to kiss the pool, his rise, he reaches toward me'.<sup>16</sup> Once Narcissus realizes that he is in love with himself, he wishes that he could escape from his own body, and has a premonition that he will die early.

In developmental and psychological terms, Ovid's boy is at a stage when such youths are often fascinated by and even attracted to their own sexuality. Poussin depicts Narcissus not as puerile, but as a mature adult male. The painter avoids the obvious in choosing not to show the young man reflexively examining his own image in the pool; he depicts him near death, the wage he pays for being self-absorbed. Narcissus fails any more to see his reflection: he no longer admires himself with his eyes, which are nearly closed as he approaches death. Poussin alludes to the self-fascination of Narcissus indirectly, by representing its end result; in doing so he creates a painting that invites a reflective and elegiac response from the viewer. The painter's interpretation of the myth opens a space for the observer to feel sympathy for or even pity Echo, all the more so because the object of her love is an adult and not a boy whose sexual inclinations normally by now would be firmly established as heterosexual.

Narcissus's myth has been linked in our own time with homosexual desire, on the basis of the Freudian theory that characterizes narcissism as the interruption of normal heterosexual libidinal development.<sup>17</sup> The early moderns of Poussin's time would not have understood the myth this way, since the identity of distinct sexual orientations had not yet been established. Renaissance commentaries on Ovid usually explained Narcissus's error as the folly of falling in love with an image. In his 1567 English translation of the *Metamorphoses*, for instance, Arthur Golding moralizes the myth as a 'mirror' of vanity and pride, and for emblemist Geoffrey Whitney, Narcissus symbolizes the inflated self-esteem that few people can escape and that afflicts every level of society.<sup>18</sup> Conti glosses Narcissus's self-infatuation with his stunning beauty as reflecting a lack of awareness that such a gift is given by God's generosity and that his own arrogance turns his assets into dangerous liabilities.<sup>19</sup> Observers in Poussin's own day most likely interpreted his painting through such meanings. As for Echo, the Ovid commentaries of the early seventeenth century emphasize her lack of agency, characterizing her as one who,

16 Ibid., 3.446-452.

17 Digangi, "Male Deformities", p. 94.

18 Ibid., p. 95.

19 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 1092.

automaton-like, merely mouths what she hears, failing to direct the words she repeats towards her own meanings. Sandys's commentaries in his 1632 English translation of the *Metamorphoses* follow this pattern, focusing on her inability to communicate in a personally meaningful way, by returning the voice 'directly from whence it came'.<sup>20</sup> Noting the views of Francis Bacon on the diminishing loudness of repeated echoes, Sandys associates 'Echo's aural reflections with the visual ones that misled Narcissus [...] Echo's presence is rendered as illusive and fictive as Narcissus's mirror image, and she is defined, like the mirror image, in relation to Narcissus, rather than as an entity all her own'.<sup>21</sup> In his painting, Poussin likewise represents a diminished Echo who in her illusive presence is a passive reflection of Narcissus's being.

Sandys includes in his commentary a translation of Ausonius's Epigram XXII, where Echo taunts the painter about the artistic limitations of his medium: 'If thou [...] wilt paint me, paint a sound', making the point that a picture can never fully portray an aural event.<sup>22</sup> While at the end of Ovid's tale Echo is finally reduced to invisibility, existing only as sound, by virtue of his medium Poussin must inevitably represent her before she disappears, even if he shows her trying to speak. As is the case in his *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4), here too the artist relies on texts recalled by the viewer to supply the missing sense: the observer fills Echo's partly open mouth with the words that Ovid or other poets had supplied. If the painter cannot represent the aural, through the agency of the informed viewer he can at least recall remembered speech and give it resonance in his canvas. Through this painting Poussin suggests the interconnectedness of painting and poetry; in his writings he likewise emphasizes the similarities of these two arts. For example in his 'observations on painting' he writes of the mutual importance of action and diction in rhetoric and compares these to painting.<sup>23</sup> He seems not to have been interested in taking sides in the debate, which had been very active in the sixteenth century, over the superiority of painting or poetry; he recognizes their mutual importance. He points to the power of the visual by representing Echo and Narcissus in the purity and beauty of their visibility, even as he is able simultaneously to allude to her impending disappearance through her sketchy form and his transformation into a little flower. Indeed, in spite of his solid, corporeal presence, Narcissus is shown with flowers already beginning to appear around his head. For Ovid, too, the implied viscosity of the unfortunate pair is important; as a writer he relies on the reader imagining their physical presence that permits them to utter sound in the first place. In his

20 Bloom, 'Localizing Disembodied Voice in Sandy's Englished "Narcissus and Echo"', p. 142, quoting Sandys.

21 Ibid., p. 143.

22 Ibid., p. 145.

23 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 494.





6.2. Nicolas Poussin, *Hercules and Deianeira*, c. 1637. Slight black underdrawing, pen and brown ink, brown wash on paper, 21.7 × 31.6 cm. Royal Library, Windsor Castle (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

articulating the power of the visual even as he depicts his figures attempting to speak, Poussin acknowledges the importance of the aural, but in this case, because of the particular nature of this subject, he stresses the insubstantiality of speech. In this he is close to Sandys, who in his commentary on Echo questions whether sound has any power at all. Sandys writes that Echo ‘consumes to an unsubstantial voice’, and that she ‘converts into a sound; that is, into nothing’, because sound has no physical form.<sup>24</sup> By representing Echo as lacking agency, Poussin’s canvas points to patriarchal ideology as found in early modern social practices, and particularly in books on conduct, which attempt to regulate women’s morality by emphasizing their need to be silent as well as sexually continent.<sup>25</sup> Echo’s story is tragic because her forced mirroring of Narcissus’s speech means that her attraction to the beautiful youth will remain unfulfilled; simultaneously, her myth undergirds the prevailing cultural code in the time of the painter that women remain silent.

The Continnence (or Clemency) of Scipio is an episode recounted by Livy about the Roman general Scipio Africanus during his Iberian campaign of the Second

<sup>24</sup> Bloom, ‘Localizing Disembodied Voice in Sandy’s Englished “Narcissus and Echo”’, p. 145.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.



**6.3. Nicolas Poussin, *Continence of Scipio*, 1640. Oil on canvas, 114.5 × 163.5 cm. Pushkin Museum, Moscow (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).**

Punic War.<sup>26</sup> On learning that an exceptionally beautiful maiden (unnamed by Livy) he had captured was engaged to a youth named Allucius, the general gave up his rightful booty as conqueror, refused a generous ransom for her, and returned her to her parents and her Celtiberian fiancé, who in return became a supporter of Rome. In spite of his reputation as a womanizer, Scipio controlled his passions in this story, where his generosity overcame his physical desire. On occasion a Roman general, in place of wanton raping and pillaging of conquered peoples, offered generosity instead, as in this case, to draw the subjugated tribes to Rome's side. Normally, a young woman could expect appalling treatment by her Roman captors. Scipio's conduct has been described as an example of the kind of stoic behavior greatly admired by Poussin,<sup>27</sup> even if, to the modern mind, his refraining from raping a young woman seems not to rise to the level of stoic virtue.

<sup>26</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, 26.50.

<sup>27</sup> Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 161.

Poussin's *Continence of Scipio* (1640, Pushkin Museum, Moscow, Fig. 6.3) was commissioned by Gian Maria Roscioli, secretary and chamberlain to Pope Urban VIII,<sup>28</sup> and was later acquired by Michel Passart, counselor of the king and *Maître des comptes* in Paris, perhaps as early as 1644.<sup>29</sup> The scene shows Allucius bowing in thanks before Scipio, who was then given a ransom of gold by the girl's parents. Through generosity the general returned these riches to the young couple 'as a nuptial gift'. The young woman in question, in a dark blue robe, stands between Scipio and her betrothed. Her mother appears behind her, while the girl's father stands at the far right, behind the soldiers. A young woman wearing a white chiton, wingless and therefore departing from the usual iconography of Victory, and not mentioned by Livy, stands on her tiptoes behind Scipio, raising a laurel crown over his head as a mark of his virtue. In a drawing by Poussin of this subject in Chantilly,<sup>30</sup> this figure becomes a true winged Victory floating above the crowd. At the right in the painting, a group of Roman soldiers marvel at the magnanimity of Scipio, who was regarded as one of the great exemplars of mercy during warfare in classical times. By turning over the young woman to her betrothed, Scipio was seen as relinquishing his own share of the spoils of war and throttling his own urge to sexual violence for the good of the state.

In this story, the fate of the young woman is determined by men, primarily by Scipio, but also by her fiancé and her parents, to whom she is returned. For example, she is subject to the authority of her father, as *paterfamilias*, under whose *potestas* she is regulated as a Roman daughter. She will remain so ruled under his power even in her future role as wife, as if she were voiceless, an object to be handled as property.<sup>31</sup> Allucius bows before Scipio as a sign of his supreme authority, and the bride-to-be, reinforcing male power, likewise lowers her head before the general, but at the same time she turns her body in the direction of her betrothed, as if she is actually submitting to both men, in deference to their mutual control over her. To the modern viewer, it may seem mystifying that a general should be admired for his stoic self control in failing to rape a female captive, but from ancient times to Poussin's day such rapine was typically carried out by soldiers, if not by their generals. Women's status as property in some European countries rather than as legal persons aided in condoning sexual assault, as did the soldiers' perceived right to seize whatever booty they could from the enemy. In the early seventeenth century, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) was among the first to argue that the perpetrators of rape should be prosecuted during war just as in times of peace.<sup>32</sup> Poussin imagined that

28 Barroero, 'Nuove acquisizioni per la cronologia di Poussin', pp. 69-74.

29 Schnapper and Massat, 'Un amateur de Poussin: Michel Passart', pp. 104-107.

30 Rosenberg and Prat, *Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665, Catalogue raisonné des dessins*, pp. 556-557.

31 Cowell, *Life in Ancient Rome*, p. 60.

32 Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace*; Askin, *War Crimes Against Women*, pp. 30-32.



6.4. Nicolas Poussin, *Testament of Eudamidas*, 1644-1648. Oil on canvas, 110.5 × 138.5 cm. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen (Photo: Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen/Bridgeman Images).

by virtue of his restraint, Scipio deserved to be surrounded with all the trappings of exalted rule; nothing in the painting suggests that the artist intended to undermine his august status or that he was ambivalent about his power or mercy.

The story of Eudamidas from antiquity is told by Lucian and repeated by Montaigne in his essay *On Friendship*, where Poussin most likely read it.<sup>33</sup> Eudamidas, a poor man, entrusted the care for his mother and daughter after his death to two well-to-do citizens, Aretaeus of Corinth and Charixenus of Sicyon. According to the will of Eudamidas, Charixenus even had the responsibility to provide his daughter with a dowry. Lucian states that such a will provoked ridicule among Eudamidas's fellow Corinthians, since he bequeathed a burden upon his heirs that might bankrupt them instead of providing them with a generous windfall. But Lucian uses this story to demonstrate the true regard of the heirs, who deeply

33 Lucian, *Toxaris, or Friendship*, 22-23; Montaigne, *Essais*, 'De l'amitie' ['On Friendship'], pp. 258-277; Bättschmann, *Nicolas Poussin, Dialectics of Painting*, p. 51.

respected Eudamidas's intentions, and in his *Testament of Eudamidas* (c. 1643-1650, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Fig. 6.4) Poussin treats the subject with an apt and poignant seriousness. According to Bellori, the painting was made for a member of a successful bourgeois family who owned at least four of Poussin's works, Michel Passart.<sup>34</sup> He served as *auditeur* and then *maître* in the *Chambre des comptes*, charged with administering the country's finances. The canvas shows Eudamidas, his face contorted by pain, dictating his will to a scribe, while his doctor monitors his condition. The pathos of the scene is expressed through the careworn expression of his mother and his crying daughter. Later in Lucian's story, the two men (not represented in the painting) who accept responsibility for the women exemplify the finest form of friendship. Charixenus survived Eudamidas by only five days, so Aretaeus took on both bequests, caring for both the mother and daughter, and providing the latter with a generous dowry on the same day that he married off his own daughter.

The impoverished mother and daughter of Eudamidas may be regarded as voiceless and helpless victims in a society that was completely unsympathetic to their welfare and whose fate was uncertain, dependent on the goodwill of others. It was only the willingness of Eudamidas to appear a fool by making his strange bequest that the lives and fortunes of his relations were salvaged. The two women were entirely dependent on the courage of Eudamidas to make his unusual will, which his fellow citizens regarded as laughable, and on his two friends' unstinting generosity, which was widely regarded among the people of Corinth as unlikely to be realized. The story exemplifies the true friendship that Lucian wished to underscore, and reflects Poussin's admiration for Eudamidas's faith in the loyalty of his two friends and their willingness to share their wealth. In this respect, the story reflects some words written in a stoical vein by Poussin himself: 'We own nothing outright, all possession is merely temporary'.<sup>35</sup>

This tale points to the tenuous circumstances in ancient Greece of poor women, whose fate was dependent on the generosity of men. Poussin expresses the desperate plight of the women, who not only grieve over Eudamidas, a man near death, but who are also apprehensive about their own futures, uncertain at this point that the two friends will save them. Poussin chose not to depict the two heirs at the deathbed scene, in part to avoid dissipating the emotional power of the suffering women. The two men beside the bed of Eudamidas indifferently and quietly go about their business, the one, a physician, feeling the patient's heart and the other, a lawyer, carefully recording the will. Poussin's client, Michel Passart, was presented with

34 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 332.

35 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 197: 'Nous n'auons rien en propre nous tenons tout à louage'.

a painting devoid of obvious visual pleasure, one that was harsh and spare both in subject and style, even to the point of impoverishment, with muted narrative incident. When Passart accepted this picture with so few signs of painterly embellishment, when purchasing a work so hard, dry, and immobile, he bought into the obligation of internalizing and interpreting the work's difficulty. To understand the story, he would have had to consult Lucian or Montaigne. He also would have had to accept implicitly Poussin's type of moral rhetoric in art, directed at a middle class audience whose taste in painting recoiled from the sort of luxury favored by the wealthy nobility. This painting thematized a politics of reception:<sup>36</sup> Poussin's work essentially denied the luxury status of easel pictures. In terms of social and legal practice, viewers of this painting would have been particularly affected by its subject, since in Poussin's day the women of a man's household, including his widow, mother, or daughters, were especially vulnerable after his death. Generally, they could not inherit his property or assume guardianship of children, and, unless they chose to litigate, were left exposed to the generosity (or not) of his male heirs.<sup>37</sup> As *auditeur* and later *maître* in the *Chambre des comptes*, one of the prestigious sovereign courts of Paris, Michel Passart worked in an office directly responsible for the finances of the crown.<sup>38</sup> Given his positions and his duty to ensure that the expenses of the crown were made in the public interest, Passart would have had special appreciation for the subject of this painting.

The *Birth of Bacchus* (1657, Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA, Fig. 6.5) was painted by Poussin for Jacques Stella, himself an artist and a follower of the master. Stella was also an important patron of Poussin in his later years. The painting is based on the story of Bacchus's birth as told principally by Ovid and Apollodorus and repeated by Natale Conti in his *Mythologiae*, the well-known Renaissance mythological handbook familiar to Poussin.<sup>39</sup> But the cave in the picture covered in ivy and grape vines is derived from Philostratus.<sup>40</sup> Semele, mother of Bacchus, implored Jove, her lover, to appear to her in his glory. Jove's jealous consort Juno, disguising herself as an old woman, had tricked Semele into asking the thunder god to see him in this manner. The deceived Semele was then destroyed by the fire emanating from the overpowering Jove.

Semele was annihilated by the plotting and jealous Juno, but Jove must also share blame for the girl's destruction. He knew that if she witnessed him in his full majesty she would be destroyed; he also was aware that she was pregnant with his child, and he must have known that his jealous consort was behind the innocent

36 Olson, *Poussin and France*, pp. 173-174.

37 Warner, 'Before the Law', pp. 237-240.

38 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 42.

39 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.259-315; Apollodorus, *The Library*, 3.26-29; Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 459-462.

40 Philostratus, *Imagines*, 1.14.



6.5. Nicolas Poussin, *Birth of Bacchus*, 1657. Oil on canvas, 114.5 × 167.5 cm. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, gift of Mrs. Samuel Sachs in memory of her husband (Photo: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA/Bridgeman Images).

Semele's request because, once born, the baby was hidden from the prying eyes of Juno. By not warning her of the danger of her request, Jove had little regard for Semele's life, even though she carried his child. As he approached Semele to embrace her in the same manner that he did Juno, the girl was unaware that when the royal pair clasped powerful thunder and lightning issued forth. The mighty god was careful to use a lightning bolt of limited force; nevertheless Semele died in the thundering embrace.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Jove was complicit in Juno's plot to bring about Semele's destruction. At the moment when Semele was consumed by fire for beholding and embracing him in all his power, Jove snatched her half-formed child from the flames and sewed him up in his thigh until the baby, Bacchus, was born.

Poussin's painting shows Jove reclining after his labor, on a bed in the sky at the upper-right. He is attended by Hebe, who restores him with a cup of nectar. This story of Jove as an example of male birth has a precedent in the myth of Minerva springing fully formed from the same god's head. Jove thus appropriates the role of birth parent, having denied Semele her rightful place as mother to Bacchus.

41 Bächtmann, *Nicolas Poussin, Dialectics of Painting*, pp. 105-107.

In the bottom part of the painting, a group of nymphs from Nysa emerges from the water. They are eager to see the child Bacchus, miraculously brought to them by Mercury, who stands at the center-right looking at the infant and the nymphs while pointing to Jove in heaven, the source of the miracle. The nymphs will hide the infant in their cave, protect him from the jealous wrath of Juno, and nurture him with milk and wine. According to Bellori, it is the nymph Dirce, daughter of the river god Achelous, who accepts the newborn Bacchus.<sup>42</sup> Jove thus becomes an absent father, discharging the infant as soon as he is born, consigning him to the nymphs, who are now responsible for raising and protecting him. Among the trees above the cave of Achelous, covered with grapes and before which stand sacred vessels, is Pan, the leader of the nymphs, welcoming the child by playing his syrinx.

Appearing to the right in the painting are Echo and Narcissus (see Poussin's other painting focusing on this subject, Fig. 6.1), both of whom are near death. Narcissus is stretched out on the ground, gasping for air and close to his last breath. Echo too is dying, having turned to a cold stone color as she languishes over a rock, lamenting her rejection by Narcissus. This episode has no obvious connection to the main theme in the painting of the birth of Bacchus, but various theories have been put forward to explain it. Bellori suggested that the painter merely adhered to Ovid's sequence of the stories in the *Metamorphoses*, where the tale of Echo and Narcissus follows the one on Bacchus's birth.<sup>43</sup> Bellori's statement in fact is not correct, since the story of Tiresias is placed between those of Bacchus and Narcissus. Furthermore, Bellori really provides no explanation at all, offering only the supposition that the two stories are unconnected. Another hypothesis, proposed by Anthony Blunt in his well-known 1967 book on the artist, is that a contrast is intended by Poussin between the negative, unrequited desire of Echo for Narcissus, whose self-love was barren, and Bacchus, who in antiquity commonly was viewed as a positive symbol of fertility.<sup>44</sup> The problem with this explanation of fertility and sterility is that it is too general to account for the specific imagery in the painting. Blunt applied this theory to other works by Poussin, including the late *Apollo and Daphne* in the Louvre and the large, finished drawing of the *Rape of Europa* in Stockholm.<sup>45</sup> Blunt's hypothesis of fertility and sterility is a prototypical idea that perhaps has appeal because of its universality, but because of that very generality, it does not provide us with an understanding of the distinctive representations and symbolism in Poussin's *Birth of Bacchus*. A more complex interpretation was proposed by Sheila McTighe in her 1996 book *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*. According

42 Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, p. 327.

43 Ibid.

44 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 317-319.

45 Ibid., pp. 320, 346.



to McTighe, the conjunction of birth and death as symbolized by Bacchus and Narcissus is based on the ancient neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry's allegory of generation and corruption. In this case, the purple cloth appearing in Poussin's painting behind the group with Bacchus would allude to Porphyry's description of 'sea-purple cloth' woven by nymphs as a symbol of the birth of the soul into material bodies. The mixing bowls resting on the cloth in the painting then would refer to the vessels of the nymphs described by Porphyry that contain water in the way that bodies contain souls, as an allegory of generation and corruption, a 'hieroglyph' of the processes of nature.<sup>46</sup> This idea, while ingenious, seems unduly complex. As an academic theory, it even may exceed the understanding of the erudite Nicolas Poussin. More likely, the jars mentioned by McTighe contain not water but the wine and milk that Philostratus describes as offered by the nymphs to the new-born Bacchus as nourishment.<sup>47</sup> Philostratus also mentions the ivy and grape vines around the cave as symbols of Bacchus, and the purple drape no doubt is meant to harmonize with the theme of vintage.

Before laying out my arguments about what Poussin may have learned from literary sources regarding connections between the two stories in his painting, I should mention some relevant points made by Dora Panofsky. She noted that Philostratus describes the setting of Bacchus' birth in terms apparently identical to the surroundings for Narcissus's death, namely, the cave of Achelous and the sacred Theban fountain of Dirce at Mount Cithaeron, including the pool in which Bacchus was born, decorated with vines, ivy, and grapes.<sup>48</sup> These features are clearly represented in Poussin's setting for his picture. Furthermore, Philostratus mentions Bacchus in his description of a painting representing Narcissus's death: 'The youth [Narcissus] has taken his stand on the bank [of the pool ...] There is also the cave of Achelous and the nymphs [...] the pool is not unadorned with what pertains to the rites of Bacchus who has produced it for the benefit of his ministering nymphs [...] For, it is embroidered all around with vines and ivy having most beautiful branches and buds, and also with grapes and thyrsus stalks from one side to the other.'<sup>49</sup> Philostratus says here that the setting of Narcissus's death seems to be the same place associated with Bacchus's birth, but he does not explain what the connections are between Narcissus and Bacchus or why the settings of their stories are the same. In its reference to grapevines and ivy, this passage reads like a second statement by Philostratus, one that describes another painting showing the birth of Bacchus: 'The flame [that causes the death of Semele] fashions for him [the infant

46 McTighe, *Nicolas Poussin's Landscape Allegories*, pp. 109-112; 165-171.

47 Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting*, pp. 297-298.

48 Panofsky, 'Narcissus and Echo', pp. 118, 120.

49 Philostratus, *Imagines*, 2.23; Panofsky, 'Narcissus and Echo', p. 120.

Bacchus] I know not what semblance of a cave [...] Ivy with its beautiful berries luxuriates all around it; and grapevines, together with stalks of thyrsus, already spring eagerly forth from the earth'.<sup>50</sup> Panofsky speculated that Philostratus may have known of some classical author who connected the birth of Bacchus with the death of Narcissus, but she was unable to find such a source. Poussin would have had at his disposal a popular French translation of Philostratus published in many editions starting in 1609 by Blaise de Vigenère, the *Images ou tableaux de platte peinture de deux Philostrates*.

Poussin goes further than Philostratus in connecting Bacchus and Narcissus. Whereas Philostratus had described two separate paintings, one showing the cave of Achelous prepared for Bacchus in the story of Semele, and the other showing the same setting in the story of Narcissus, Poussin depicts the birth of Bacchus and the deaths of Echo and Narcissus in the same picture. Furthermore, in his description of the Narcissus painting, Philostratus did not include an account of the youth's death, whereas Poussin shows him dying along with Echo. Poussin clearly acquired a deeper knowledge of links between Bacchus and Narcissus than were provided by Philostratus. I propose to explain what Poussin may have discovered in his effort to understand the deeper connections that tie together the story of Semele, Juno, Jove, and Bacchus with the tale of Echo and Narcissus. First of all, Semele desired Jove just as Echo longed for Narcissus. Poussin may have meant the death of Echo to be compared to the destruction of Semele, who, out of jealousy, was deprived by Juno of life and love, just as Echo was Juno's victim who died as a result of rejection by Narcissus. Echo kept the jealous Juno entertained with stories while her husband, Jove, dallied with his lovers. When Juno discovered Echo's deception, she punished her by condemning her to be able only to repeat the last words said by another. Echo loved Narcissus, who was so self-absorbed that he thoroughly ignored her clever repetitions of his words that conveyed her ardor. And just as Narcissus died of total devotion to self-love, Echo too died, by pining away for love of him, until only her voice remained. Similarly, Semele died as a result of Juno's jealousy: Juno had tricked Semele into asking Jove to see him in his glory, knowing that his power would destroy her. Pan, who appears in Poussin's painting on the hilltop as part of the tale of the infant Bacchus, also has a connection with the other story of Echo. She rejected Pan before she in turn was spurned by Narcissus. Furthermore, Narcissus was known as Antheus, an epithet, as Pausanias tells us, of Bacchus.<sup>51</sup> Bacchus's surname Antheus, which means 'flowery', from the Greek *anthos* (ἄνθος), 'flower' or 'blossom', was an alternate name for Narcissus, cut down in the flower of his youth. As a result, Bacchus and Narcissus, representing birth and

<sup>50</sup> Philostratus, *Imagines*, 1.14; Panofsky, 'Narcissus and Echo', p. 118.

<sup>51</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 7.21.6.

death respectively, are connected through their etymologically linked names. The painting thus joins the stories of Juno, Jove, Semele, and Bacchus with the classical myth of Echo and Narcissus, through the deceits of Jove, the fusion of the names of Bacchus and Narcissus, and the mutual deceptions of Semele and Echo by Juno, who was responsible for their deaths.

This explanation of Poussin's picture may be developed further. In his *Mythologiae*, Natale Conti tells us that the name 'Narcissus' is derived from an ancient Greek phrase meaning 'being in a stupor', because Narcissus was stupefied with desire.<sup>52</sup> The key word in Greek is *narke* (νάρκη), meaning stupor, sluggishness, or numbness, the root for our word 'narcotic'. Conti also notes that Bacchus liked to wear a wreath of narcissus flowers, to symbolize the heaviness of the spirit of those who are drunk.<sup>53</sup> So Bacchus and Narcissus are connected both by the narcissus flower and by the etymology of Narcissus's name, meaning sluggishness, a quality likewise associated by Conti with the wine of Bacchus.

Another connection between Bacchus and Narcissus is the three-day festival celebrated in Athens and elsewhere in ancient Greece known as the Anthesteria, the Festival of Flowers or Blossoms. Bacchus's epithet Antheus, 'flowery', which was applied to Narcissus, comes from the same root as Anthesteria, the name of the festival. During this celebration, *pithoi* (storage jars) from the previous autumn's vintage were opened as people gathered at the sanctuary of Dionysus and drank wine. The celebrants wore garlands of flowers and also decked flowers on large earthenware jars of wine. A point confirming that the narcissus flower was sacred to Bacchus was made by the third century Greco-Egyptian author Athenaeus of Naucratis. He described the narcissus as the only flower entwined with ivy in garlands made in honor of Bacchus.<sup>54</sup> In his *Imagini de gli dei delli Antichi*, Vincenzo Cartari, the well-known Renaissance mythographer, makes the same point as Natale Conti in his *Mythologiae*, namely that garlands with narcissus flowers were made in honor of Bacchus.<sup>55</sup> During the ancient Greek Anthesteria, it was believed that the ghosts of the deceased walked the city during the festival. Pots (*chytroi*) were filled with a porridge-like mixture made from seeds and grains that were dedicated to Hermes Chthonios, the manifestation of Mercury (Hermes) who served as guide for the journey between the world of the living and the dead. All of these points are relevant to Poussin's painting, which includes earthenware jars of wine, pots, narcissus flowers, the figure of Mercury, and the theme of life and death through the figures of Bacchus and Narcissus. Narcissus's stupor of desire led to his death, a

52 Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 1026.

53 Ibid., p. 474.

54 Athenaeus of Naucratis, *The Deipnosophists*, 15.25.

55 Cartari, *Imagini de gli dei delli Antichi*, p. 381; Conti, *Mythologie*, p. 1026.

state symbolized by his flower, which, as pointed out in Renaissance mythological handbooks, symbolized brevity of life.<sup>56</sup> Bacchic stupor, on the other hand, induced by wine and aided by the narcissus flower, was thought to lead to special divine insight. The Narcissus flower was used by the Greeks in a funerary context, and its sacredness to Bacchus is connected with this deity's own death and resurrection and his manifestation as a divine communicant between the living and the dead.<sup>57</sup> Bacchus had specific associations with Hades, including the claim of Heraclitus that Dionysus (Bacchus) and Hades, representing the opposites of life and death, were the same god.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, Bacchus and Narcissus are connected because both were known by the epithet *Antheus*, meaning 'flowery', because the narcissus flower was sacred to Bacchus, because of the etymology of Narcissus's name, meaning stupor, a quality that Conti tells us links Narcissus with Bacchus, and because of the symbolization of life and death through the attributes of the narcissus flower, wine, Bacchic stupor, and the roles of Bacchus himself. Poussin contrasts the figures of Bacchus and Narcissus: both have their eyes closed and their mouths open, but they signify different things. Bacchus is smiling, with mouth upturned, while Narcissus's mouth is downturned in pain. Bacchus's passive body and expression signify the intoxication induced by wine that lead to divine understanding and a vivid awareness of life, but Narcissus's body and countenance are meant to suggest death. These connections, in addition to the linkages of the stories of Semele and Echo through the jealousies of Juno and the deceptions of Jove, explain the presence of Narcissus and Echo in Poussin's painting of the *Birth of Bacchus*. Bacchus represents life and Echo and Narcissus death. Bacchus's role as a symbol of life in the painting is additionally supported by his well-known functions as fertility god and god of resurrection. The garland with grape vines and narcissus flowers intertwined, as described by Athenaeus of Naucratis, may be taken as an emblem of these interconnections.

The subject of Achilles among the daughters of Lycomedes, not mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, is taken from Ovid, Hyginus, and Statius, the last of whom gives the fullest account.<sup>59</sup> Poussin easily could have found a good summary of the story in Conti.<sup>60</sup> Achilles' mother, Thetis, knowing that her son would die if he fought in the Trojan War, disguised him as a girl. She then introduced him to King Lycomedes of the island of Skyros as her daughter who had a boyish upbringing and now needed to learn feminine ways by living among ordinary girls of her age, so as

56 Thomas, "Un fior vano e fragile", *The Symbolism of Poussin's Realm of Flora*, pp. 227-230.

57 Knoespel, *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History*, pp. 2-3, nn. 16-23; Riu, *Dionysism and Comedy*, p. 105.

58 Kerényi, *Dionysos, Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, pp. 239-240.

59 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 13.162-170; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 96; Statius, *Achilleid*, 1.198-960.

60 Conti, *Mythologie*, pp. 958, 1011.



**6.6. Nicolas Poussin, *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, c. 1651-1653. Oil on canvas, 97 × 129.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Juliana Cheney Edwards Collection (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston/Bridgeman Images).**

to prepare for a normal marriage in the future. Lycomedes agreed to take care of the 'girl'; in this way, his unsuspecting and deceived daughters accepted Achilles into their company as a maiden. Achilles was attracted to Deidamia, the king's fairest daughter, eventually forcing her to have sex with him; she then bore him a child.

Meanwhile, a prophecy suggested that the Trojan War could not be won without Achilles. When war threatened, Ulysses and several other Greek leaders, including Diomedes, were sent to fetch him, knowing they had to trick him into revealing his true identity. Cunningly, they deposited a heap of gifts before Lycomedes's daughters: jewelry, clothes, and other finery, but also a sword and shield. When it came time to make selections from among the gifts, the young women were attracted to the jewels, but Achilles instinctively grasped the weapons, thus revealing himself. Achilles appears at the right in Poussin's *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (c. 1651-1653, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Fig. 6.6), pulling a sword from its scabbard, as one of the daughters in the center reacts with alarm. At the left, Diomedes holds up four fingers as he bargains over the booty with the two standing daughters, while

Ulysses, realizing the success of their ruse, has his eyes fixed on Achilles' reaction to the sword. Poussin gives Achilles a highly feminized appearance, particularly in the delicate features of his face, large eyes, and coiffured hair with ringlets. His feminine qualities contrast dramatically with the bearded and muscled Ulysses at the left, indicating that Thetis, his mother, had magically altered his appearance. Such a striking change suggests analogies with transgendered individuals, although that modern term would not have been used or understood either in antiquity or in Poussin's time, since modern identities of gender did not yet exist.

After Achilles's identity had been exposed and the Achaeans were about to sail off to the war, Deidamia, heartbroken over the impending loss of Achilles, cried and confessed to Lycomedes that they had become lovers and had a child together. As he leaves, she implores him never to have children with other women.

Later, once Achilles was dead and Ulysses was vying in his rhetorical contest with Ajax for the arms of the great warrior, the Ithakan recalled the scene: 'I was the one who hid, in the women's trinkets, arms that would rouse a warrior. As he stood there, still in his dresses, and reached out his hand toward shield and spear, I told him: "Son of Thetis, Troy, doomed, is waiting for you: why delay her?" It was my hand that sent [this] brave man forward to his brave deeds.'<sup>61</sup> For further analysis of the feminization of Achilles, including narcissistic, transgender, and homoerotic aspects of the story, see the next commentary.

The mood is quieter in Poussin's second version of *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (c. 1656, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Fig. 6.7) than in his earlier Boston rendition (see above); now the composition is more restrained and formal. The Richmond painting is extraordinarily well documented: Poussin himself recorded that he received payment for it on 15 November 1656 from Charles III de Blanchefort, duc de Créqui, who was to become the French Ambassador to Rome in the early 1660s, and who owned two other paintings by the artist.<sup>62</sup> Unlike the Boston version, in the present canvas the ruse of Ulysses and Diomedes to discover the identity of Achilles, disguised as a woman, is represented without the suggestion of motion. Instead of dramatically unsheathing the sword hidden among the jewels and clothes to trick him, Achilles calmly lets the weapon dangle from his hand. He regards himself in a mirror, while wearing the helmet that he discovered among the finery in the chest. Poussin apparently based this presentation of the subject on Statius's account of the tale, where Achilles recognizes himself as a warrior and not a woman when he sees his reflection in a shield.<sup>63</sup>

61 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 13.165-170.

62 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 491, Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 301.

63 Statius, *Achilleid*, 1.198-960.



6.7. Nicolas Poussin, *Achilles Among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, c. 1656. Oil on canvas, 98 × 131 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund (Photo: Travis Fullerton/© Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond).

While Achilles looks less like a woman here than in the earlier version, his act of admiring himself in a mirror, (*'objet féminin par excellence'*),<sup>64</sup> is one more usually associated with a female. More than that, an aspect of narcissism is clearly present here in his use of the looking-glass for self-contemplation. In Poussin's day a man studying himself in a mirror would have been thought of as feminized. Achilles' more vigorous action of pulling the sword from its scabbard in the Boston painting was decidedly more masculine. His cross-dressing reminds the viewer that he may have had both male and female lovers, and hints of transgending. This aspect of his disguise is disorienting for the viewer, because, although his mother altered his appearance so that those who saw him regarded him as female, he nevertheless fell in love with Deidamia, one of the daughters of King Lycomedes, who, even though deceived by him, nevertheless loved him in return and bore him a child.

64 Rosenberg and Prat, *Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665, Catalogue raisonné des dessins*, p. 698.

To the ancient readers of Statius's account of this episode or to Poussin's contemporaries who observed his pictures of it, Achilles would have seemed admirable for his masculine sexual exploits with Deidamia, even though he deserted her, but his disguise as a woman would have been regarded as unmanly. Nevertheless, both the ancients and early moderns would have been fascinated by Achilles's cross-dressing because of its violations of expected male behavior. Achilles could get away with masquerading as a woman because his masculinity and heroism in battle were unquestioned, and because of the tradition of cross dressing in Greek myth and culture. Other examples from antiquity include Tiresias, changed into a woman for seven years; Hercules, forced to wear women's clothing by Omphale; Athena, appearing to mortals in *The Odyssey* in the guise of men; also worshippers in the cult of Aphroditus; and Hymenaios during an offering to Priapus (the subject of a painting by Poussin—see Fig. 2.16); in addition, female roles in Greek theater were played by male actors. In Poussin's day, cross dressing was practiced by male performers, for while women began to play roles on stage in the 1600s, men continued to take female parts into the next century. But in Poussin's world men usually cross-dressed on stage in the context of burlesque, because it was considered demeaning for males to appear as females, the lesser sex. Women who cross dressed, by contrast, were not found objectionable, because they aimed for something higher, namely masculinity.<sup>65</sup> Many examples of cross-dressing men can be found in the popular pastorals of the seventeenth-century; for example, in Honoré D'Urfé's influential novel *L'Astrée*, completed in 1627, the male character Céladon, who is clearly presented as effeminate, wears women's clothing in his effort to free his lover Astrée from prison.<sup>66</sup>

Although Homer is silent on the issue of whether Achilles was bisexual (that modern term would not have been used), in antiquity the view that he was prevailed. In Aeschylus's tragedy *Myrmidons*, Achilles and Patroclus, his close friend and fellow soldier, practiced 'Greek love'.<sup>67</sup> In Greece, mature men and adolescent boys would often enter into a sustained, close relationship as master and pupil. For ancient Romans, homoerotic encounters were more often solely based on momentary sexual gratification. Homosexual activity was not frowned upon by writers like Horace,<sup>68</sup> particularly if a free Roman citizen was the active, penetrative partner using a young slave or noncitizen as the passive companion; but if he enjoyed being buggered, the older participant betrayed his masculinity. In Poussin's time, sodomy was potentially a capital offence, although executions for

65 Dekker and Van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism*, p. 55.

66 D'Urfé, *L'Astrée*, passim; Maclean, *Woman Triumphant, Feminism in French Literature*, p. 168.

67 Sanz Morales and Laguna Mariscal, 'The Relationship between Achilles and Patroclus', pp. 292-295.

68 Horace, *Satires*, 1.2.116-118.





6.8. Nicolas Poussin, *Judgment of Solomon*, 1649. Oil on canvas, 101 × 150 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

this crime were becoming less common than previously.<sup>69</sup> The painter's two versions of Achilles disguised as a woman no doubt elicited provocative comments in his own day, but our modern way of categorizing people with terms like 'bisexual' or 'homosexual' would not have been understood. In antiquity, as in the Renaissance, people were not classified by sexual orientation or type, since such distinctions had not yet been conceived. Instead, people were categorized by what they did, not what they were.

The Judgment of Solomon, the story of two harlots fighting over a child before their sovereign, is told in I Kings, III.16-28. One of the women tells Solomon that they both gave birth to children within three days of each other in the same house. The speaker claims that because the other woman's child died, that one took the speaker's child and replaced it with her dead one. The next morning, the speaker said, she recognized that the dead child beside her was not her own. Then the two women each asserted before Solomon that the living child was hers. The woman who exchanged the infants was guilty of a horrible deception,

69 Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789*, p. 67.

victimizing the true mother, but at first Solomon was unable to discover to whom the living child belonged. He then asked that a sword be brought to him. He commanded his swordsman to cut the child, giving half to each woman. Out of grief, the mother of the living child beseeched the king not to slay it but give it to the other woman, while the other urged Solomon to kill it so that neither would have it. In this way, the king was able to determine the true mother, and returned the child to her.

In his *Judgment of Solomon* (1649, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 6.8), painted for Jean Pointel, an important patron later in the artist's career,<sup>70</sup> Poussin depicts the moment of Solomon's command that the child be killed and shows the reaction of each woman. The true mother at the left renounces the child rather than see it killed, while the bad mother at the right, holding her own child who had died, angrily points to the swordsman, demanding that he kill the baby he holds. It sometimes has been pointed out that Poussin should not have shown the woman at the right holding her dead child, but the artist undoubtedly did so in order to reinforce the innocence of true mother at the left in contrast to the lies and greediness of the evil mother. By holding one corpse and demanding half of the other, the evil mother reveals her essential nature as a 'reaper of death rather than a nurturer'.<sup>71</sup> Groups of men and women (and a child) to the right and left of Solomon's raised throne react with horror at the impending death of the infant, with the exception of the man closest to Solomon at the right, who with a gesture of his hand indicates his awareness of the king's strategy.

The characterization of the two women in the story as prostitutes explains why they live alone, with no men or servants in the house, so that no witnesses were aware of the switching of the infants. Solomon's test was clever in that it was designed to reveal the compassion of the true mother and the jealousy of the other. Because the essential turn in the story is the true mother's instinct that breaks the deadlock, she takes equal precedence with Solomon, even though he is famous for his wisdom and the story is used to exemplify male sagacity. Solomon was wise enough to realize that the true mother would give up her child rather than see it killed. Thus the story privileges the instincts of motherhood as much as male wisdom. One way that Poussin highlights the true mother is by placing her in the foreground; she is therefore larger than Solomon, whose throne is set farther back in space. The mother has a commanding presence because she is big and solid in build, while Solomon is a slight man.

70 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 210.

71 Unglaub, 'Poussin's *Esther before Ahasuerus*', p. 125.

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## 7. Heroines, Great Ladies

### Abstract

Heroic and noble women appear mainly in Poussin's historical and religious works. Women achieve heroic status in his *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow*, and *Coriolanus*. What I call "great ladies" appear in *Landscape with Numa Pompilius and the Nymph Egeria*, and the *Arcadian Shepherds* (second version). Great ladies are represented in Old Testament scenes such as the *Finding of Moses*, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, and *Esther Before Ahasuerus*. But the Virgin Mary in his New Testament scenes most perfectly fulfills the designation "great lady," in his *Annunciation*, *Holy Family on the Steps*, *Assumption of the Virgin*, the and *The Seven Sacraments: Marriage* (two versions).

**Keywords:** Heroines, Great Ladies, Courage, Wisdom, Majesty

Heroic and noble women appear mainly in Poussin's scenes from Greek and Roman history, allegory, and religion, but hardly ever in his mythologies. Their broad absence from his mythological works reminds us of the degree to which women are depicted as transgressors or victims in such pictures. Women achieve heroic status in two historical works included here. The widow of Phocion risks arrest and performs what may be considered a political act by secretly disinterring her husband's ashes to take them back to her home in Athens in *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow* (1648, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, Fig. 7.1). The painting honors the widow's unadorned private virtue and her devotion to the memory of her husband as she undertakes an act judged to be illegal by the corrupt regime. In *Coriolanus* (c. 1653, Musée Nicolas Poussin, Les Andelys, Fig. 7.2), the general's wife, mother, and matrons of Rome display their courage by urging him to call off his siege of Rome. Coriolanus's mother was especially eloquent in convincing him to end the invasion. She and the other women displayed their heroism in pleading in the face of male power as potential victims of the force of arms.

What I call 'great ladies' are noble and esteemed women who appear in a historical picture, an allegory, and in a number of religious paintings included here. *Landscape with Numa Pompilius and the Nymph Egeria* (c. 1626, Musée Condé,

Chantilly, Fig. 7.3) is a historical canvas showing Numa Pompilius, the legendary Sabine second king of Rome, with Egeria, his divine consort and counselor, who provided him with prophecies, laws, and religious training. Egeria held a special, high place among women; she served Numa as a source of intellectual and spiritual inspiration, and excelled in the public sphere usually reserved for men by expounding laws and defining religious rituals. The woman in Poussin's second version of the allegorical *Arcadian Shepherds* (1638-40, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 7.4) is older, wiser, and more discerning in her understanding of the elegiac meaning of the inscription on the tomb than her counterpart in his earlier version. Her more idealized appearance suggests that she might be a priestess or an allegorical figure, with superior intelligence and insight, perhaps *Sophia* (Wisdom) or possibly *Mnemosyne* (Memory), in the sense that one appeals to her in search for the meaning of the human past. Turning to Poussin's religious paintings, we find great ladies represented in Old Testament scenes such as the *Finding of Moses* (1638, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 7.5), where it is the dignified and stately Pharaoh's daughter who discovers Moses. Her regal authority is moderated by her benevolent demeanor and her compassion for the child in the basket, whose future fortune is assured by her discovery of him. In *Eliezer and Rebecca* (1648, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 7.8), Eliezer encounters the generous and kind Rebecca, who smiles modestly at him and places her hand over her heart, as the Virgin Mary does in scenes of the Annunciation. The painting thus alludes to Rebecca's role as a prefiguration of the Virgin. *Esther Before Ahasuerus* (1655, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Fig. 7.10) shows the brave and beautiful Esther approaching King Ahasuerus to ask that he save her Jewish people. Although she feared rebuke from him, and even death, he acceded to her request. Esther is caught within conflicting discourses: on the one side, she is a harem *femme fatale* who secures a questionable interfaith marriage with the king; on the other, she assumes a role through Christian typology as a precursor of the Virgin Mary.

But it is the Virgin Mary in Poussin's New Testament scenes who most perfectly fulfills the designation 'great lady'. The Virgin appears in paintings based on her biblical role as mother of God (Madonna and Child or Holy Family); on medieval doctrines highlighting her special status (Dormition, Assumption into Heaven, Coronation as Queen of Heaven, Immaculate Conception); on her major feasts (Annunciation, Visitation, and Purification); and on important events in her life (Birth, Presentation in the Temple, Betrothal, Marriage). These themes had been described in the apocryphal gospels and hagiographies and retold in Renaissance devotional handbooks. The Council of Trent in the late sixteenth century had reaffirmed that the Virgin was worthy of the highest veneration. In the seventeenth century, she remained in the public imagination as the most effective intercessor with Christ and the most potent protector against life's travails. Her cult was reinforced by

relics, reports of miraculous apparitions, civic processions, festivities on Marian feast days, and the activities of lay confraternities established in devotion to her.<sup>1</sup> Poussin depicted many, if not all, of the various subjects based on the life of the Virgin or on her devotion. He never represented the Birth of the Virgin, Coronation, Immaculata, Madonna of Loreto, Madonna of the Rosary, Mater Dolorosa, Purification, Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, or Visitation. But he did paint, often in multiple versions, the *Adoration of the Magi*, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, *Annunciation*, *Assumption*, *Crucifixion*, *Death of the Virgin*, *Deposition*, *Flight into Egypt*, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, *Return from the Flight*, *Holy Family*, *Marriage*, *Pietà*, and *The Virgin Appearing to St. James*. The great majority of Poussin's portrayals of the Virgin focus on the down-to-earth events of her life and her role as mother of Christ rather than on her miracles, her appearance in heavenly visions, or her personification of theological doctrines, although the few depictions he made in the latter categories are impressive in their idealism and majesty. Representative works by Poussin of the Virgin are discussed in this chapter: his *Annunciation* (1657, National Gallery, London, Fig. 7.12), where the Virgin has turned inward and is given over to pure spirituality, ready to receive God's grace at the moment of the incarnation; the *Holy Family on the Steps* (1648, Cleveland Museum of Art, Fig. 7.14), where her importance as the vessel chosen by God to bear Christ incarnate is emphasized by her nobility and placement at the apex of a triangle of figures; the *Assumption of the Virgin* (c. 1631-1632, National Gallery, Washington, Fig. 7.15), where the focus is on the Virgin's majesty and grandeur at the moment of her spiritual rebirth as she ascends to heaven, ready to accept her glory; and two versions of *The Seven Sacraments: Marriage* (c. 1636-1640, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, Fig. 7.18; 1647-1648, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, Fig. 7.19), in which the miracle of Joseph's rod alludes to the miraculous birth of Christ and points to the Virgin Mary as the most esteemed of women.

This chapter, focusing on a variety of brave, heroic, and noble women depicted by Poussin in a series of historical, allegorical, and religious pictures, demonstrates his wholly positive view of females across a wide spectrum of subjects and themes. And even if the Virgin Mary was the 'great lady' most often represented by the artist, for the obvious reason that religious pictures were in high demand, it is also true that Poussin's style was particularly well suited to represent her majesty, nobility, spirituality, and above all her humanity.

By 1648 Poussin was painting for French clients not of the noble class, but men of new wealth based on mercantilism and finance who often desired pictures with secular, antique subjects and moralizing themes. As an example, Jacques Serisier, a silk merchant from Lyons, ordered from Poussin two paintings based

1 Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy, 1350-1650*, pp. 42-43.





7.1. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow*, 1648. Oil on canvas, 116.5 × 178.5 cm. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (Photo: Walker Art Gallery, National Museums, Liverpool/Bridgeman Images).

on the theme of Phocion's funeral and ashes.<sup>2</sup> These subjects were unusual, never having been painted before, although a French translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, where Phocion's story is told, had been available since 1559.<sup>3</sup> Plutarch describes the Athenian politician and general Phocion as honest, virtuous, and frugal. He refused to comply with the commands of Antipater, the Macedonian king who had gained control of Athens. Phocion also often found himself at odds with his own Athenian assembly because of his unyielding opposition and his determination always to do what he thought was the maximum good for his fellow citizens. As a result, he was falsely accused by the people of Athens of turning their city over to Antipater, of plotting to aid Antipater's discredited son Cassander in seizing power, and of helping the Macedonian general, Nicanor, whom the Athenians wanted to attack. Because of these and other actions, Phocion's political enemies among the Athenian lower classes turned against him and condemned him to death, even though he opposed Polyperchon, the Macedonian king who had succeeded Antipater. After

<sup>2</sup> Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 387, 389.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Les vies des hommes illustres grecs et romains*, trans. by J. Amyot (Paris: Michel de Vascosan, 1559).

his execution by Polyperchon, Phocion's unburied corpse was not permitted to be buried in Attica nor was anyone allowed to cremate it there. A hired man took it across the Megarian frontier, where the body was burned.

In the foreground of his *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow* (1648, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, Fig. 7.1), a scene set before the city of Megara and one of Poussin's most rigorously and classically organized landscapes, Phocion's widow collects her husband's ashes as her servant keeps watch. Plutarch says that 'a woman from Megara' performed this act, but because of an error in translating the Greek author's text, the lady was subsequently identified as Phocion's widow. She is one of the few unalloyed heroic women to be found in Poussin's works, since in collecting his ashes she respected her honorable husband's memory by undertaking an act judged to be illegal by the corrupt regime. Widow and servant perform their deed out in the open, but furtively and with a sense of danger. Blunt thought their caution justified, since he judged the youth hidden among the trees at the right to be spying on them.<sup>4</sup> But Olson presumed otherwise: he saw the youth as striking a pastoral and elegiac note, resting in a meadow and playing a flute, oblivious to the widow's act.<sup>5</sup> While the servant of the widow, on the watch, turns to look furtively in the general direction of the youth, in his leisurely indifference he poses no danger. In the distance, people go about their daily activities, unaware of the sad event in the foreground. The widow puts her own life in jeopardy by taking her husband's remains home to Athens by night, and burying them at her hearth, where she set up a tomb in the most sacred space of the home. Soon afterward, the Athenians had a change of heart; Phocion's remains were properly reburied, at public charge, and a bronze statue was erected in his honor.<sup>6</sup>

A painter who articulated 'the cultural and political values of a *masculine*, patriotic class' (emphasis mine),<sup>7</sup> Poussin, in this picture, honors the private virtue and devotion of a *woman*, who, because of the public nature of her act, also becomes a political hero. The painting has been interpreted as a political statement about the unpredictability and insecurity of public favor, particularly as applied to the Fronde.<sup>8</sup> René Démoris described Phocion as embodying the 'futility of political heroism',<sup>9</sup> and one might connect that thought with the distance that Poussin kept from the turbulent world of politics. The artist followed political events, particularly the machinations of Mazarin in the mid-1640s and later the disastrous events of

4 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 295.

5 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 225.

6 Plutarch, *Life of Phocion*, 1.37.

7 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. xv.

8 Blunt, 'The Heroic and the Ideal Landscape', pp. 158-160; Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 139, 153; Sauerländer, 'Nature through the Glass of Time', p. 105.

9 Démoris, 'From The Storm to The Flood', pp. 91-102.

the Fronde (1648-1653), which affected many of his French patrons. As a female hero defying the regulations put in place by the unprincipled political leadership of Athens, Phocion's widow may have had special appeal to Poussin's client Serisier, and to other French collectors of the artist at this time. Even though Poussin shared the views of the *frondeurs* in their dislike of Mazarin,<sup>10</sup> because of the harm the first minister had done to his French clients like Chantelou, the artist held back from committing himself. Disillusioned perhaps by the futility of fighting against absolutism, Poussin preferred, as he said, to 'sit quietly in his corner and watch the comedy unfold in comfort'.<sup>11</sup> French observers would have noticed Phocion's heroism in his stand against the fraudulent Athenian regime, a government easily comparable to the regency because of Mazarin's perceived corruption and self-interest. Many businessmen like Poussin's client Serisier supported the *frondeurs*, in part because of Mazarin's tax policies that seriously curtailed trade.<sup>12</sup> In response to the current political upheavals in Paris, Poussin wrote of 'the stupidity and fickleness of the masses',<sup>13</sup> presumably because after forcing the royal faction and Mazarin to retreat from Paris in late 1648, the mobs were largely indifferent to his relatively quick return.<sup>14</sup> Poussin's statement may equally be applied to the crowds in ancient Athens that had in turn condemned and then rehabilitated Phocion. The great Athenian leader was thus subject to the 'tricks of fortune', a phrase used by Poussin in a letter he wrote to Chantelou in 1648 describing the theme of seven paintings he wished to paint.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, the picture has been given a stoic interpretation, emphasizing Phocion's moral rectitude, devotion to duty, refusal to pander to public opinion, rejection of all awards, and acceptance of his fate without complaint or answer to his accusers.<sup>16</sup> But at heart the painting contains a moral message about the distinction between public acclaim (or condemnation) and unadorned private devotion, the latter exemplified by Phocion's widow. She gains nobility through her authentic fidelity to her husband's memory.

Two years after showing great valor in the siege of the Volscian town of Corioli, the Roman general Coriolanus was tried and exiled from Rome because of his proposal, deemed too harsh, to withhold the distribution of grain in his city. By this tactic he had hoped to take advantage of a famine in order to win concessions from the common people and reinforce the power of the patricians. His plan went awry when it stirred the plebeian class to threaten violence; as a result he alienated his

10 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 79.

11 Démoris, 'From The Storm to The Flood', p. 95.

12 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 87.

13 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 406: 'la bêtise et l'inconstance des peuples'.

14 Olson, *Poussin and France*, pp. 78-79.

15 Discussed by Richard Verdi, 'Poussin and the "Tricks of Fortune"', pp. 680-685.

16 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 165-166.



7.2. Nicolas Poussin, *Coriolanus*, c. 1653. Oil on canvas, 112 × 198.5 cm. Musée Nicolas Poussin, Les Andelys (Photo: Christian Jean/© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY).

fellow patricians, who forced his exile. Thus spurned, he then rejected Rome and joined the Volsci as their general, returning with their army to assault his native city. While camped outside of Rome as he prepared his attack, he was met by his wife, two small sons, and his mother, together with the matrons of Rome, all sent by the Roman senate to urge him to call off the siege.<sup>17</sup> They successfully pleaded with him to end the invasion. On his return to the Volsci, he was put to death as a traitor. According to one account, the Volscian leader Attius Tullus Aufidius raised support to have Coriolanus put on trial, but then had him assassinated before the trial ended.<sup>18</sup>

Poussin's choice of the subject *Coriolanus* (c. 1653, Musée Nicolas Poussin, Les Andelys, Fig. 7.2) may have been inspired by contemporary politics. By taking up arms against his own country, Coriolanus has parallels with the French princes who led the revolt against the royal court and Mazarin during the Fronde, which occurred during the years that Poussin made this painting.<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously, taking into account Coriolanus's intent to destroy his native city, Poussin's work may allude to Mazarin's and the regency's oppressive use of force against its own people during

<sup>17</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, 2.40.

<sup>18</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Coriolanus*, 1-39.

<sup>19</sup> Thuillier, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 261.

the Fronde.<sup>20</sup> Many drew a comparison between Coriolanus, an unsympathetic figure who waged war against his fellow Romans, and the soldiers loyal to the regency, who victimized the French people.<sup>21</sup> In allowing himself to be swayed by the women's entreaties and permitting his sense of duty towards Rome to overcome his desire for vengeance, Coriolanus ultimately revealed his humanity.<sup>22</sup> It might seem that through a sense of loyalty, Coriolanus sacrificed his own life for Rome, the city that had previously treated him so badly.<sup>23</sup> But in fact he was governed by arrogance and anger, treating ordinary people with contempt. Poussin therefore had 'selected a theme that invited the critical evaluation of a leader who lacked the political shrewdness to garner popular support'.<sup>24</sup> The artist had selected the subject of Coriolanus from Plutarch's series of negative accounts of commanders who were contrasted with good leaders.<sup>25</sup>

Livy makes the point that because the men of Rome seemed incapable of defending their city with their swords, the populace put their hopes in the women, who might succeed with tears and entreaties.<sup>26</sup> The painting shows Coriolanus returning his sword to its scabbard in a symbolic gesture indicating his decision not to attack Rome, while the pleading women kneel before him. The woman with a light blue mantle just in front of him with her arms raised is his mother, Veturia, who, according to Livy,<sup>27</sup> was especially eloquent in convincing him to end the invasion. She is more of a hero in this story than the general himself, for the Roman senate had sent ambassadors and priests to plead with him, to no avail. He remained obdurate in his determination to attack Rome until his mother finally convinced him to end the siege. Livy describes how Coriolanus had been moved at first by the sight of his mother, but Poussin does not show any affection on the part of the general towards Veturia. Rather, the artist emphasizes Coriolanus's stiff pose and stern demeanor that signal his obstinate pride. The painter focuses on the general's stressful confrontation with the pleading women rather than allowing any maternal embrace.<sup>28</sup> Two of Coriolanus's Volscian officers at the right, understanding the dire consequences for their general and for Volsci of his resolve not to fight Rome, grimly reveal their contempt for the women. A semi-nude woman warrior at the left is an allegorical figure representing Rome. Her vulnerable state in her partial

20 Olson, 'Painting for the French', pp. 166.

21 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 112.

22 Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 143.

23 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 161.

24 Olson, *Poussin and France*, p. 113.

25 Olson, 'Painting for the French', p. 166.

26 Livy, *History of Rome*, 2.40.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Olson, 'Painting for the French', p. 114.



**7.3. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Numa Pompilius and the Nymph Egeria*, c. 1626. Oil on canvas, 75 × 100. Musée Condé, Chantilly (Photo: Harry Bréjatr/© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY).**

nudity, in particular her exposed, soft breast, taken together with the potentially threatening sword held by Coriolanus, suggests the possibility of sexual aggression on the part of the general and his troops who had laid siege to the city. Rome symbolized as an unprotected woman therefore allows slippage between military and sexual conquest.<sup>29</sup> Behind the figure of Rome is Fortune, reclining on her wheel as she looks up to Rome. Her presence indicates that Rome is fortunate in avoiding conflict with Coriolanus and the Volscians. Even though the women in Poussin's painting are heroic in their action, they are depicted as frightened, pleading, and fawning as they prostrate themselves before the obdurate Coriolanus, who, after so much hesitation, is finally resolved to put aside his attack on Rome. The painting thus presents two sorts of valor; first the heroism of the women, who plead in the face of male power as potential victims of the force of arms. Then, it shows the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

heroism of Coriolanus, who, flawed by his initial unyielding temper and stubborn refusal to concede to the Roman ambassadors' many previous entreaties to call off his siege, must now face the consequences of abandoning his Volscian allies. The heroism of the women, however, is undercut by the way Poussin represents them as kneeling supplicants who beg before the general.

Poussin's *Landscape with Numa Pompilius and the Nymph Egeria* (c. 1626, Musée Condé, Chantilly, Fig. 7.3), possibly made for Cassiano dal Pozzo,<sup>30</sup> depicts a scene from the legends of early Roman history. Numa Pompilius, the second Sabine second king of Rome, after Romulus, stands before the seated nymph Egeria, who served as his divine consort and counselor.<sup>31</sup> Egeria provided the legendary Numa with the original framework of prophecies, laws, and religious rituals of ancient Rome. Known for his wisdom and piety, Numa is reputed to have written down the divine teachings of Egeria in 'sacred books' that he had buried with him. She dispensed her wisdom and prophecy in exchange for libations in sacred groves dedicated to her. She was supposed to have taught Numa to be a wise legislator. As a woodland nymph and symbol of wisdom, she was a religious and law-giving minor deity akin to greater goddesses like Diana or Minerva. She assumes an allegorical role for Poussin, who mythologizes her as a nude female in the presence of an equally nude pipe-playing woodsman, both of whom recline to the left of the clothed and crowned Numa Pompilius. Their nudity marks them as mythical beings of the forest, but also indicates the great distance of this historical period of Rome, in its remote early days.

The painting shows Numa plucking the Golden Bough of the grove, which he would have been unable to take unless guided by fate.<sup>32</sup> Egeria was given the respectful name 'consort' (*coniuncta*), and, while Plutarch used dignified language in saying that Numa was 'admitted to celestial wedlock' with her, later, Juvenal ironically referred to Egeria as Numa's 'girlfriend' (*amica*). Poussin shows Egeria sitting before a small body of water, in reference to the story that when Numa died, she melted into tears, becoming a spring.

Positively, Poussin's painting places Egeria in a special, high category among women; she deserves honor for her prophecies and wise counsel. She served Numa as a source of intellectual and spiritual inspiration, and excelled in the public sphere usually reserved for men by expounding laws and defining religious rituals. But, against this, the artist indicates Egeria's mythical standing as a lesser deity by representing her nude, while his Numa is fully clothed. Such distinctions between nudity and dress were used conventionally in seventeenth-century pictures to

30 Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, p. 121.

31 Plutarch, *Life of Numa*, 4; Ovid, *Fasti*, 3. 259; Livy, *History of Rome*, 1.21.3; Juvenal, *Satires*, 3.13.

32 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 39.

discriminate between mortals and gods. From another point of view, however, Poussin's display of Egeria nude seems to diminish her status in comparison to the king, in part because her nudity rather indecorously highlights her role as Numa's sexual companion. Numa was a legendary, if not precisely a mythical, person; as such he may be regarded as co-equal in status with the nymph, yet he is clothed. If, on the other hand, Numa is considered a historical rather than a vaguely mythical personage, then his clothed state as against Egeria's nudity creates an incommensurability between them based on genre. Combining myth and history in the same painting creates confusion and likewise seems to marginalize the nymph, to banish her to a world of fantasy and imagination in distinction to Numa's actual historical presence.

It is not known for whom Poussin's second version of the *Arcadian Shepherds* (1638-1640, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 7.4) was made. It seems to have belonged to the amateur engraver Chevalier Henry Avice, possibly as early as the 1640s.<sup>33</sup> The scene is set in ancient Arcady, where shepherds discover through an inscription on a tomb that even in this idyllic place people must die. One may imagine the inscription to be the declaration of death itself, who utters the words '*Et in Arcadia ego*' ('Even in Arcady there am I'). Or, as suggested by Erwin Panofsky in a famous essay, since the skull representing death as seen in the earlier Chatsworth painting (see Fig. 3.9) is omitted in this second version of the subject, Poussin more likely intended the occupant of the tomb to be the speaker. The deceased would thus say, in a controversial translation described by Panofsky as inaccurate, that nevertheless fits the mood of the painting, 'I, too, lived in Arcady', inviting a solemn meditation on the idea of mortality.<sup>34</sup> The mood is therefore one of quiet reflection—as the left-hand of the two central participants attempts to read the inscription, the other struggles to understand what he has just read, and the third man to the far left is lost in thoughtful contemplation. Unlike the artist's earlier version, where the figures rushed forward to read the inscription and conveyed shock at learning of death's presence, here they exhibit no fear and regard death with calm detachment. This painting no longer reflects the medieval, moralizing tradition of Poussin's earlier picture, but is now elegiac in tone, with the figures lost in reading and thinking. Even so, the missing skull in this version is replaced with a shadow (of the arm of the man trying to decipher the inscription) in the shape of a scythe.<sup>35</sup> In this work Poussin exhibits a wholly positive view of women through the female at the right.

33 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 15.

34 Panofsky, '*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition', pp. 295-320; Heehs, 'Narrative Painting and Narratives about Paintings', p. 228. For an analysis of Panofsky's method, see Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 104-119; also Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, pp. 79-81, 128-129; and Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting*, pp. 196-205, 307-312.

35 Steefel, 'A Neglected Shadow in Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*', pp. 99-101.





7.4. Nicolas Poussin, *Arcadian Shepherds*, 1638-1640. Oil on canvas, 85 × 121 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

She often has been called a shepherdess, but she is not dressed in the simple garb of a rustic. Furthermore, the erotic connotation of the shepherdess in Poussin's earlier Chatsworth version is entirely absent in the woman in the present Louvre version. The young woman's exposed breast and youthful, rustic demeanor in the Chatsworth version suggested the fleeting nature of youth and beauty, supportive of the *memento mori* conception of the picture as a whole, whereas in the present version her counterpart seems older, wiser, and more discerning in her understanding of the elegiac message of the inscription. The richness of this woman's deeply colored and finely spun robes, along with her idealized classical profile, suggest that she is a priestess or an allegorical figure, most likely *Sophia* (Wisdom), or possibly *Mnemosyne* (Memory), in the sense that one appeals to her in search for the meaning of the human past.<sup>36</sup> Whereas the man outlining the words on the tomb with his finger is as yet unable

<sup>36</sup> Heehs, 'Narrative Painting and Narratives about Paintings', p. 228; Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, pp. 104-119, and *To Destroy Painting*, pp. 36-37; Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting*, pp. 196-205, 307-312. For a summary of other allegorical interpretations aiming to identify this woman, see Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 156.



7.5. Nicolas Poussin, *Finding of Moses*, 1638. Oil on canvas, 93 × 121 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

to decipher the inscription, and the man pointing to it turns to look to the woman for help in understanding what he has read, the woman, through contemplation, has grasped the inscription's meaning and is lost in a deep reverie. Her superior status to the man next to her is indicated by his quizzical or troubled expression in reaction to what he has read, while she, having assimilated the meaning of the inscription, has a more relaxed, contemplative attitude as she places a comforting hand on her neighbor's back. In this second version of the subject, therefore, Poussin presents a more positive, sympathetic, and mature conception of the woman, focusing on her superior intelligence and insight rather than merely on her sexuality.

Poussin painted almost twenty pictures from the life of Moses, making this theme among the most common of his career. The large number of canvases devoted to Moses indicates his importance in announcing Christ in the New Testament through typological symbolism.<sup>37</sup> The *Finding of Moses* (1638, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 7.5)

37 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 144; for further allusions to Christ, see Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, p. 342.



7.6. Nicolas Poussin, *Theseus Finding his Father's Arms*, c. 1636-1637. Oil on canvas, 98 × 134 cm. Musée Condé, Chantilly (Photo © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY).

was first recorded in the possession of André Le Nôtre, landscape architect and principal gardener to King Louis XIV.<sup>38</sup> The particular episode seen in this canvas is taken from Exodus, 2.5-10, where Pharaoh's daughter, Thermuthis (also called Bithiah), rescues the baby Moses from the Nile. Moses had been sent down the river in a bulrush basket by his mother Jochebed to save him from Pharaoh's order that all male Hebrew infants be killed. The first of three versions of this subject painted by Poussin, this is the one in which Thermuthis stands out most prominently and has been called the most celebrated and admired of the group.<sup>39</sup> Grand in bearing and status, Thermuthis is accompanied by only three women, unlike the artist's other versions, where she must compete for the viewer's attention with seven to nine maidservants. The tallest of the women in this painting, Thermuthis instructs with the forthright gesture of her left hand her male and female servants at the

<sup>38</sup> Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 142.

<sup>39</sup> Thuillier, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 256.



7.7. Nicolas Poussin, *Venus Bringing Arms to Aeneas*, 1639. Oil on canvas, 105 × 142 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen (Photo: Gérard Blot/© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY).

water's edge to bring the baby Moses to her.<sup>40</sup> Thermuthis is distinguished from the other figures by her gold robe, and her head, seen in pure profile, makes her look like a Greek goddess. Her regal authority is moderated by her benevolent demeanor and her compassion for the child in the basket. Behind her at the left a river god personifying the Nile reclines. The young girl on whose shoulder Thermuthis rests her right arm may be Miriam, Moses' sister. Unlike the maidservant behind and to the right of the princess, Miriam shows no surprise at the discovery of Moses. She had followed the basket down the river to keep track of what happened. At Miriam's own suggestion, Thermuthis told her to find a nurse from among the Hebrews to tend to the child. Miriam then went and fetched Moses' mother as nurse. A little later Moses became the son by adoption of Thermuthis; it was she who gave him the name by which he subsequently became known.

40 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 213, points out that the male servant in the water derives from the account of Flavius Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*.



7.8. Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, 1648. Oil on canvas, 118 × 197 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

In contrast to the light-skinned Thermuthis, whose idealized features are based on Greco-Roman prototypes, the river god and male servant in the water are brown-skinned, indicating Poussin's marking them as Egyptian. Conceptualizing his scene from a Eurocentric perspective, Poussin privileges Pharaoh's daughter by giving her light-skinned Greco-Roman features, while presenting the male servant as the foreign 'other', even though both are Egyptian.

Poussin painted other scenes depicting powerful yet benevolent women watching over future heroes. These include *Theseus Finding his Father's Arms* (Fig. 7.6), showing Theseus's mother, Queen Aethra, revealing to him the sword and sandals that his father, King Aegeus of Athens, had hidden, and with which he could claim his birthright. Another example is *Venus Bringing Arms to Aeneas* (Fig. 7.7), painted twice by the artist, where the mother of Aeneas, Venus, shows him the weapons forged by Vulcan that he will use in his struggles to found Rome.

Poussin thus represents the three mothers in these paintings (one of whom adopted her son), a princess, a queen, and a goddess, in a highly positive manner: they are noble, prescient, and kindhearted, and their elevated status and support ensure the success and fame of their sons.

The painting *Eliezer and Rebecca* (1648, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 7.8) shows Abraham's servant Eliezer discovering Rebecca at a well. Abraham had ordered Eliezer to journey out of Canaan to Nahor, a city in Mesopotamia that was the land

of his kindred, to find a wife for Isaac. Eliezer arrived outside the gates of the city to rest his camels at a well. When Rebecca arrived with other women to fetch water, she offered Eliezer a drink and also watered his camels. Struck by her kindness, and deciding that she must be the woman destined to marry Isaac, Eliezer gave her a gold earring and bracelets. Later, having invited Eliezer to her family's house, she agreed to go with him to become Isaac's wife.<sup>41</sup>

The reason for the large number of women (thirteen in all) who afford no space in the picture for camels, usually included in this scene, may be explained by the circumstances of the commission. The picture was ordered from Poussin by Jean Pointel, the French banker and silk merchant, who requested a painting featuring many young maidens representative of different types of female beauty.<sup>42</sup> Pointel mentioned a painting by Guido Reni that he much admired, asking Poussin to create a similar work (conspicuously, with no subject specified, so that the artist was free to choose one). Félibien described Pointel's desire this way:

This picture is notable for the diversity of the noble and graceful expressions of the heads, and for the pleasing vestments, painted in that beautiful manner that Guido [Reni] possessed. Monsieur Pointel, having seen it, wrote to Poussin, testifying that he would be gratified if he would make a picture like that one, filled with several girls in whom one could notice different beauties.<sup>43</sup>

Eliezer is shown in the painting holding his gift of bracelets in his left hand and with his right offering Rebecca the earring, although the latter also has been interpreted as a ring, alluding to Rebecca's role as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary in scenes of the Annunciation and her mystical marriage to God.<sup>44</sup> Unlike his earlier (c. 1627, private collection) and later (c. 1660-1665, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Fig. 7.9) versions of this subject, the Louvre painting does not show Eliezer drinking water offered by Rebecca, nor does it feature the aforementioned camels, a lack that prompted criticism by Philippe de Champaigne in a *conférence* at the Académie Royale in 1668.

Charles Le Brun, director of the Académie, quickly came to Poussin's defense, claiming that the artist's omission of the beasts enhanced the beauty and nobility

41 Genesis, 24.

42 Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages*, pp. 99-100; Cropper, 'On Beautiful Women', pp. 377-380.

43 Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages*, p. 100: 'Ce tableau est considerable par la diversité des airs de tête nobles et gracieux, et par les vêtements agréables, peints de cette belle maniere que le Guide possedoit. Le Sieur Pointel l'ayant vû, écrivit au Poussin, & lui témoigna qu'il l'obligeroit s'il vouloit lui faire un tableau rempli comme celui-là, de plusieurs filles, dans lesquelles on pût remarquer différentes beautez'.

44 Glen, 'A Note on Nicolas Poussin's *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*', pp. 221-224; Hughes, 'Embarras and Disconvenance in Poussin's *Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well*', pp. 493-519.



7.9. Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, c. 1660-1665. Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 138 cm. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Photo © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge/Art Resource, NY).

of the subject.<sup>45</sup> But one wonders if the emphasis by Félibien, Bellori, Le Brun, and the artist himself on the 'nobility' of art sometimes intrudes as misplaced theory, since this picture and several others by Poussin include humorous elements that belie that claim. Helsdingen has suggested that the absence of camels in Poussin's scene may have been dictated by the terms of Pointel's commission.<sup>46</sup> Instead of camels, the Louvre *Rebecca* focuses on Eliezer offering her the jewelry and the reactions to this act by the women gathered to fetch water. Malcolm Bull proposed that in painting this scene Poussin consulted the text of the ancient Jewish historian Flavius Josephus rather than the Bible, since Josephus's account involves numerous women and does not mention camels, which by contrast are essential to the biblical version.<sup>47</sup> The response of Poussin's Rebecca to Eliezer is one of humility; she smiles modestly at him and places a hand over her heart, as the Virgin Mary does in scenes of the Annunciation. Rebecca has analogies with

45 Jouin, *Conférences de l'académie royale*, pp. 87-99.

46 Helsdingen, 'Notes on Poussin's Late Mythological Landscapes', p. 182.

47 Bull, 'Poussin and Josephus', p. 336.

the Virgin in other ways: she is chaste and virtuous; her marriage to Isaac is like the spiritual union of Christ and Mary, according to Pierre Barnard, who wrote in 1641; the presents offered by Eliezer represent faith and charity; her blue robe is the same color as the Virgin's; and the multiplication of vases filled with water allude to Mary as the fountain of the garden.<sup>48</sup> Christopher Hughes emphasizes humorous aspects of Poussin's scene, and addresses as well Philippe de Champaigne's *conférence* discussion and remarks by Félibien, where the ironic expressions and sassy poses of the three women at the right are said to convey their jealousy of Rebecca.<sup>49</sup> The responses of the women on the left are varied, with some unaware of the principal protagonists, some focusing on carrying water, and one prominent woman in red and green who is so captivated by Rebecca's reaction to the jewelry that another prevents her from pouring more water into an overflowing vessel.<sup>50</sup> From a modern point of view the theme of the painting would be considered sexist because of its assumption that a woman would offer herself in marriage to a man she had never met. In the biblical account, Eliezer asks Rebecca's parents to give her as wife to Isaac; only then do the parents ask Rebecca herself if she consents. The version of the story as told by Josephus is different: Rebecca had no say at all in the matter; Eliezer asks only her parents to consent to her marriage.<sup>51</sup> Poussin focuses on Rebecca's suitably modest and respectful response to Eliezer as he offers the jewelry and asks whose daughter she is.

The women in the painting react with jealousy, enthrallment, inattention, and so on, to Eliezer's selection of Rebecca as Isaac's wife. In addition, the various beauties of these females are represented by Poussin in answer to Pointel's request. According to Elizabeth Cropper, Poussin reflected previous artists' ideals of beauty in the women he pictured: the jealous woman at the right leaning on her vase is said to resemble Reni's style in depicting women (I am unconvinced by this stylistic analogy), while the woman at the far right apparently mirrors Rubens' ideal, and the woman at the far left carrying water is Raphaelesque in conception.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Poussin was aware that more than one style of beauty existed, so that in his *Rebecca and Eliezer*, where he was specifically commissioned to show various kinds of womanly beauty, he paid homage to the differing ideals and individual styles of artists whom he admired.<sup>53</sup> In addition, the graceful folds of the peplos of the jealous woman at the right hang like the flutes of a classical column; she

48 Larchevesque, *Les grandeurs suréminentes de la très sainte vierge Marie*, p. 698; Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, pp. 322-323.

49 Hughes, 'Embarras and Disconvenance in Poussin's *Eliezer and Rebecca*', pp. 511-13.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 512, where this humorous motif is discussed.

51 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.16.

52 Cropper, 'On Beautiful Women', p. 379.

53 *Ibid.*



thus recalls the beautiful women of Nîmes whom Poussin compared to the stately columns of the Maison Carrée.<sup>54</sup> A specific classical source can be identified for the pose of Poussin's jealous woman. She leans on a vase with her right arm, props her left hand on a raised hip, and lifts her right leg to rest it on the step of a well. Her pose is borrowed from an ancient relief of a priestess leaning on a tripod that was owned by Claude-Henri Fabri de Peiresc, from which Poussin made a drawing.<sup>55</sup> Poussin used this same drawing as a basis for the pose of the woman at the far left in his *Infant Moses Trampling on Pharaoh's Crown* (Louvre). Cropper points out how the vessels carried by the women in the *Rebecca* conform to the ideals of womanly form described by Agnolo Firenzuola in his *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* (1542): vases with long, graceful necks, slender necks over wide bodies, and graceful handles, are compared to like qualities in women—beautiful necks, hips, and arms.<sup>56</sup> Rebecca serves as a model of the type of woman admired equally in antiquity and in Poussin's time: she is modest, deferential to men (like Eliezer), and respectful of parental authority.

King Ahasuerus of Persia was convinced by his adviser Haman that all Jews in his land should be killed, because they followed their own laws and their loyalty was suspect. Esther, Ahasuerus's queen and a Jew, was much grieved by this order and was reminded through the king's chamberlain by Mordecai, a former counselor to Ahasuerus and leader of the Jews, that, in spite of her station, she would not be spared in the slaughter. She agreed to go before the king and plead that her people be saved, in spite of the danger of such an act, for anyone approaching Ahasuerus without being summoned would be killed. In the Vulgate's account of her story she was greatly relieved when the king was pleased to see her, as indicated by his extending his royal scepter; she then invited him and Haman to dine with her. However, in his *Esther before Ahasuerus* (1655, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Fig. 7.10), first recorded in the collection of Jacques Serisier in 1665, Poussin mainly follows Jerome's appendix to the story of Esther in the Vulgate, and Josephus's similar account in *Antiquities of the Jews*, which differ from the Vulgate in their presentation of this episode. Meanwhile, remembering that he had failed to reward Mordecai for his former service, Ahasuerus asked Haman his suggestion for a suitable prize to be given to someone the king wished to honor. Imagining that the king meant to honor him, Haman suggested the use of the king's apparel and insignia. Haman also ordered that a gallows be built to execute Mordecai. At a second banquet with Ahasuerus and Haman, Esther revealed that she was a Jew and accused Haman of

54 See 'The ideas on art of Poussin and his biographers' in my Part II for the quotation from the artist's letter to Paul Fréart de Chantelou.

55 Beaven, *An Ardent Patron, Cardinal Camillo Massimo*, pp. 99-100 and fig. 3.11.

56 Firenzuola, *Opere*, pp. 763-773; Cropper, 'On Beautiful Women', pp. 380-381. See 'Poussin's art and today's audience' in Part I above for a critique of Cropper's approach to this painting.



7. 10. Nicolas Poussin, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 1655. Oil on canvas, 119 × 155 cm. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY).

plotting to destroy her people. The king immediately ordered Haman to be hanged on the gallows the latter intended for Mordecai, who then by royal decree received Haman's property as a gift and became Ahasuerus's prime minister; in addition, a decree was issued permitting the Jews to defend themselves.<sup>57</sup>

Poussin took as his subject the moment when Esther appears before Ahasuerus seated on his throne, intending to invite him and Haman to dine with her, and unsure whether she will be received or killed. Poussin shows her fainting as she approaches the king in his throne room, an episode not mentioned in the canonical Vulgate but described in Jerome's appendix and in Josephus's account of the story. She fainted because of the king's apparent anger and her apprehension that she might be killed if he failed to hold out his golden scepter to indicate his approval that she approach:

<sup>57</sup> Esther, 3-8.

[Ahasuerus] looked up, afire with majesty and, blazing with anger, saw her. The queen sank to the floor. As she fainted, the color drained from her face and her head fell against the lady-in-waiting beside her. But God changed the king's heart, inducing a milder spirit. He sprang from his throne in alarm and took her in his arms until she recovered, comforting her with soothing words. "What is the matter Esther?" he said. "I am your brother. Take heart, you are not going to die; our order applies only to ordinary people. Come to me." And raising his golden scepter he laid it on Esther's neck, embraced her and said, "Speak to me."<sup>58</sup>

Poussin shows Esther supported by three maids as she faints and falls backwards, her face sinking over her right shoulder so that it faces the viewer. The artist departs from the appendix in that he represents King Ahasuerus neither as angry as described at the beginning of the text given above nor as comforting Esther as at its end, but rather as showing surprise at her collapse. The king leans back in his chair, raising his right hand and opening his mouth in astonishment. He makes no effort to aid his queen, but serves as a paradigm of majesty. His scepter, reinforcing his pose, is arranged at the same angle as his body as it rests in balance on his extended left index finger. The scepter creates a diagonal in the picture from bottom left to upper right, in effect moving away from Esther rather than toward her. Three male courtiers behind the king look on bewildered; another servant, who represents the enslaved Jews, watches the scene as he stands near a column in the background.<sup>59</sup>

Artemisia Gentileschi had painted this subject in the 1630s (Fig. 7.11). Her version also closely follows the Greek additions made to the original Hebrew narrative included in the appendices of Jerome's Latin translation, popularly used in the seventeenth century, after the Council of Trent gave them canonical status in 1546. Poussin's picture represents the same scene and has the same general compositional scheme as Gentileschi's version, with Ahasuerus enthroned at the right and Esther fainting on the left. However, it is unlikely that Poussin knew Gentileschi's canvas, which was probably painted in Naples. Perhaps verbal reports or drawings of it reached him that would explain the similarities in composition. Otherwise, the two paintings differ in the number of figures and in their appearance, costumes, and expressions. Ahasuerus as Gentileschi conceives him is a young, overdressed fop without majesty, and Esther has a solid muscularity, while Poussin's Ahasuerus is older, with a regal bearing, and his Esther looks like a classical matron. Paolo Veronese produced a painting of this subject that was in the collection of the naturalized French citizen and businessman Eberhard Jabach (born in Cologne) until he sold it to Louis XIV in 1662, and Poussin may have seen it in Paris. Poussin's

58 Vulgate, Esther, 15.10-13 (Jerome's appendix).

59 Unglaub, 'Poussin's *Esther before Ahasuerus*', pp. 114-136.



7.11. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 1630s. Oil on canvas, 208.3 × 273.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Elinor Dorrance Ingersoll, 1969 (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

version is closer to Veronese's in the majesty and authority (but not the pose) of Ahasuerus, but more like Gentileschi's in the fainting pose of Esther. Guercino also created a version of *Esther before Ahasuerus* in the 1630s,<sup>60</sup> but with a significantly different compositional scheme that places Ahasuerus on the left, reacting to Esther sympathetically as he extends his scepter to her. Domenichino's fresco of the subject (S. Silvestro al Quirinale, Bandini Chapel, Rome) from the 1620s is also different, with Ahasuerus on the left, bolting out of his chair to aid the fainting queen.

Not only did Esther appear beautiful in the king's eyes when she appeared before him in the throne room, her beauty was her main attribute that attracted all to her. Before Esther, Ahasuerus had another queen, Vashti, who refused to come before him. So the king, deciding to replace her, sent officers throughout the country to find fair young virgins to be brought to his court. One of these, Esther, was 'fair and beautiful' (Esther, 2.7) and 'obtained favor in the sight of all of them that looked

60 University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor.

upon her' (Esther, 2.15). When he saw her, Ahasuerus 'loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set a royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti' (Esther, 2.17). Her beauty, then, was her determining attribute that resulted in her queenship as well as in Ahasuerus's conceding to her wish that he save the Jewish people. Poussin displays her classical beauty, enhanced by her splendid gold dress and crown, but focuses more on her pale complexion and act of collapsing. The scene emphasizes fear-inducing male power and the emotional reaction of a woman.

Esther elicits contradictory readings as a heroine, serving on the one hand as prototype of the Virgin Mary through her divine elevation to queenly rank; through her name, which means 'star', paralleling the Virgin's appellation as '*stella maris*'; and through her role as the '*ancilla*' of Ahasuerus, just as the Virgin is the '*ancilla Dei*'. But she also threatens this typological protocol through her status as a harem favorite of Ahasuerus with an alien sexual identity as a clandestine Jew.<sup>61</sup> She triumphs over her enemy Haman and saves her Jewish people through her beauty, which enables her to bend the will of her husband-king, although the apocryphal biblical account supplements this version of her story by saying that 'God changed the king's heart'. Esther is caught within conflicting discourses: on the one side, she is the harem *femme fatale* who secures a questionable interfaith marriage, and, on the other, she assumes a role through Christian typology as the Virgin Mary's precursor.<sup>62</sup>

The play *Esther* was performed at the Maison royale de Saint Louis at Saint-Cyr, a school for girls under the supervision of Madame Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquis de Maintenon, until its reform in 1689, when theatrical productions and all other aspects of instruction promoting the elite values of the famous French salons were eliminated.<sup>63</sup> Apparently the play was now viewed with suspicion because Esther, begging for the support of King Ahasuerus by using all of her feminine charms, promoted the sort of behavior embraced by the *précieuses* of the salons to curry favor at court. This was the sort of conduct no longer accommodated at Madame de Maintenon's school, which hence forward would educate girls to be honest bourgeois housewives. This episode and the attitudes behind it may shed light on Poussin's handling of the subject. Poussin's solid bourgeois values (see Part II) seem to have influenced his approach to *Esther*: he emphasizes her modesty in both expression and dress more than Gentileschi and, compared to her handling of Ahasuerus, depicts the king with stoic restraint, majesty, and the masculine power that frightened Esther, causing her to faint. Even though his painting represents

61 Baskins, 'Typology, Sexuality, and the Renaissance Esther', pp. 37-38.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

63 Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes*, p. 191.



7.12. Nicolas Poussin, *Annunciation*, 1657. Oil on canvas, 105.8 × 103.9 cm. National Gallery, London, presented by Christopher Norris, 1944 (Photo © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY).

an intrigue at court, he conceives the subject in such a way as to underline the propriety and reticence of Esther as well as the masculine authority of the king, more in line with his bourgeois outlook.

In his late work, the *Annunciation* (1657, National Gallery, London, Fig. 7.12), Poussin has reduced the subject to emblematic simplicity, possibly because the picture was intended to hang above the tomb of the artist's patron, Cassiano dal Pozzo, who died in the year it was made. Poussin had informed his other patron Chantelou in 1657 that he was working on Pozzo's tomb, destined for Santa Maria sopra Minerva in

Rome.<sup>64</sup> Less convincing is the proposal, suggested by the inscription at the bottom, that this painting may have been made for Pope Alexander VII's chapel at Castel Gandolfo. The inscription reads: 'POVSSIN. FACIEBAT. ANNO SALVTIS. MDCLVII. ALEX. SEPT. PONT. MAX. REGNANTE. ROMA'. The Virgin Mary's cloak is yellow in place of the usual blue, although its turned-over lining, serving as a mantle, is blue. Her tunic is purple rather than the standard red. She sits on a green-blue pillow placed on a low, raised wooden platform that in turn rests on a tiled stone floor. The archangel Gabriel kneels at the right, announcing to her that she shall bear the son of God. In place of her house, the traditional location of the Annunciation, is a green drape that fills most of the background space. Part of the drape hangs over a bed baluster at the right. The remainder of the background is painted a dark brown. The dove of the Holy Spirit flies over the Virgin's head, indicating that this picture, like most Annunciation scenes, represents two events, the Annunciation and Incarnation of Christ.<sup>65</sup> In front of Mary on the platform is the opened holy book that she traditionally reads when Gabriel appears.

Mary raises her head slightly, closes her eyes, and stretches out her hands in response to Gabriel's message. More typically in Annunciation scenes, she bows her head and places her hand over her heart in acknowledging Gabriel's arrival, in the way that she is represented in an early picture of the late 1620s sometimes attributed to Poussin but most likely painted by Charles Mellin (Musée Condé, Chantilly, Fig. 7.13).<sup>66</sup> That earlier work shows the more elaborate setting of her house, including a large window through which God the Father and the numerous *putti* surrounding him have entered.

The differences between these two paintings are striking. The earlier one is more Baroque in style and is conceived as a narrative, especially in the respectful way the Virgin acknowledges Gabriel's arrival. The later one is iconic and conceptual, with each figure fulfilling its essential, independent, and self-contained role: the Virgin, sitting cross-legged with her eyes closed and arms outstretched, has turned inward and is given over to pure spirituality, ready to receive God's grace at the moment of the incarnation, and Gabriel carries out his paradigmatic function, pointing simultaneously to heaven, the source of the miracle, and to Mary, the vessel of God's will. Gabriel's first words, 'Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women',<sup>67</sup> indicate both the divine source of his message and point to the special, indeed, unique status of Mary. The spiritual effect

64 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 445-446; this argument for the picture's placement, suggested by Jane Costello, was refuted by Eric Wilberding, with inconclusive results—see Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, p. 380.

65 Ibid.

66 On this picture, see Thuillier, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 267; Hughes, 'Embarras and Disconvenance in Poussin's *Eliezer and Rebecca*', p. 504.

67 Luke, 1.28.



7.13. Charles Mellin, *Annunciation*, c. 1626-1627. Oil on canvas, 75 × 95 cm. Musée Condé, Chantilly (Photo: Musée Condé, Chantilly/Bridgeman Images).

is heightened by the strong light descending from above and by Gabriel's wings and sash, which feature orange-red, blue, warm grey, and blue-green variants of the unusual color harmonies of the Virgin's clothing and pillow. The artist suggests her elevated status by placing her on a wooden platform above a raised stone step, while simultaneously alluding to her humility by showing her seated cross-legged on a low cushion. In his conceptually stark and uncluttered composition for this subject, Poussin highlights the spiritual purity of the Virgin and her singular place among women.

Poussin painted well over a dozen Holy Families and almost thirty pictures as variants on this subject, making it the most commonly depicted theme of his career. Because of the rigor of its logically structured composition, the *Holy Family on the Steps* (1648, Cleveland Museum of Art, Fig. 7.14) is the artist's most famous picture of this type.<sup>68</sup> The painting was made for Nicolas Hennequin de Fresne, Master of

68 A high-quality copy is in Washington—see Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, pp. 209-210.





7.14. Nicolas Poussin, *Holy Family on the Steps*, 1648. Oil on canvas, 72.4 × 111.7 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund (Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art/Bridgeman Images).

the hunt for King Louis XIV.<sup>69</sup> The work shows the Virgin, Christ Child, and the infant St. John the Baptist forming a central cluster, while St. Elizabeth and Joseph establish the outer elements of the triangular group of figures. The four drawings that survive for this work and the painting itself demonstrate that the balance of the whole was foremost in the artist's mind, with the result that the figures are integrated with the architectural background with utmost care. The enframing architecture reinforces the symbolic importance of the figures: a Corinthian capital above the Virgin's head appears to supply her with a crown, while a rectangular block of sky above the Christ Child substitutes for a halo.<sup>70</sup> The apple that the Baptist hands to the Christ Child has a double significance, pointing to the Virgin as the New Eve, and to Christ, who as the New Adam offers redemption and salvation in place of original sin. The basket of apples at the bottom of the painting reinforces this symbolism. The Virgin's importance in this painting as the vessel chosen by God to bear Christ incarnate is emphasized by her placement at the apex of the

69 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, p. 397.

70 Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, pp. 264; Hibbard, *Poussin: The Holy Family on the Steps*, p. 84.

triangle of figures and by the bright red of her tunic. Conversely, the lower status of Joseph as husband but not father is indicated by his inferior position at the right, where he is obscured in shadow. His prominent foot may refer to the earth, by contrast to the divine associations of the capital and patch of sky above, and his cane may symbolize old age and death. Alternatively, with his compass signifying the creative aspect, he has been interpreted as the hidden God, the heavenly artisan, and shadow of the Holy Spirit on earth.<sup>71</sup> The prominent stairway in the painting behind the figures that leads to a bright sky above suggests the *scala coelestis*, the stairway to heaven. Mary was glossed as the *scala coelestis* in the Renaissance, as both humanity's means of access to heaven and the route by which God descended to earth in the form of Jesus.<sup>72</sup> St. Elizabeth's emphatic glance toward the Virgin suggests an analogy with an Old Testament prophetess.<sup>73</sup>

In formal and symbolic terms, the large vase overflowing with greenery that sits upon a prominent baluster just to the left of the Virgin echoes in shape her head and body and may allude to her as the one who brings forth everlasting life in the form of Christ. Extending this analogy, the orange tree below and to the left of the baluster suggests both the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. The tree thus refers to Eve and also to the Virgin, her countertype in the New Testament; additionally, the tree may allude to the chastity and purity of the Virgin.<sup>74</sup> The large basin overflowing with water below the tree is no doubt an allusion to the *fons vitae* (fountain of life), a symbol of baptism and salvation.<sup>75</sup> The river of Paradise of the Old Testament (Genesis, 2.10) became transformed into the river of life emanating from God and Christ in the New Testament (Revelations, 22.1). Passages from the Old Testament mentioning the *fons vitae* (Psalms, 36.8-9) are given specific baptismal meaning in the New and allude to Christ, the Virgin, and the Church. The fountain in Poussin's painting may also symbolize the Virgin's purity, a typological reference to her through the bride of Solomon, described as a 'well of living water' (Song of Solomon, 4.15). Thus, while other symbolism also appears in the painting, such as the precious containers at the bottom-right, most likely containing frankincense and myrrh and referring to the gifts of the Magi,<sup>76</sup> the Virgin Mary as the vessel of life, the Church, and salvation is given special prominence, both formally and symbolically.<sup>77</sup> Poussin's

71 Chorpensing, 'The Enigma of St. Joseph in Poussin's *Holy Family on the Steps*', pp. 277-279.

72 Hibbard, *Poussin: The Holy Family on the Steps*, p. 90.

73 Kauffman, 'La Sainte Famille à L'Escalier', pp. 141-150.

74 Sutherland Harris, 'Howard Hibbard, Poussin, *The Holy Family on the Steps*' [review], p. 36.

75 Hibbard, *Poussin: The Holy Family on the Steps*, pp. 69-70.

76 Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 183-184.

77 Kauffmann, 'La Sainte Famille à L'Escalier', pp. 141-150; De Grazia, 'Poussin's *Holy Family on the Steps* in Context', pp. 39-40.



7.15. Nicolas Poussin, *Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1631-1632. Oil on canvas, 134.5 × 98 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund (Photo: Art Resource, NY).



7.16. Nicolas Poussin, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1649-1650. Oil on canvas, 57 × 40 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

rigorous, geometric composition reinforces the majesty of the Virgin, through the clear oval of her head resting on her stable shoulders, her angle in space supporting the *contrapposto* turn of her head, and her placement at the apex of the triangle of figures. The clarity of the modelling in light and dark and the viewer's position slightly below the group add to her nobility.

Poussin's *Assumption of the Virgin* from c. 1631-2 in Washington's National Gallery of Art (Fig. 7.15) is his first version of this subject; his second (Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 7.16) is from 1649-1650.<sup>78</sup> Both versions are unusual in that they don't show the Apostles gathered at the Virgin's tomb, as described in the *Golden Legend* and depicted by many artists whom Poussin admired, including Titian, Annibale Carracci, Reni, and Rubens. In the Washington canvas, a group of *putti* surrounds the Virgin in the sky while others drop flowers into the tomb from which she has risen. The Paris version shows her in larger scale and borne aloft by more mature angels, with no coffin present. The monumental columns that enframe the Washington scene are also missing, and the Virgin is shown frontally rather than in three-quarter view. By omitting the Apostles, in both versions Poussin allows exclusive focus on the Virgin, magnifying her glory without the distraction of representing her grieving followers and their sense of loss. Haraguchi analyzes Lucrezia Marinella's important and influential work, *La vita di Maria Vergine, imperatrice dell'universo*, published in 1602, which recounts the life of the Virgin Mary. Haraguchi points out that Marinella calls the Virgin's heavenly assumption an 'ascensio', suggesting that she thought the mother should be put on equal footing with the son.<sup>79</sup> This point is relevant to Poussin's two *Assumptions*, which stress her singular importance by focusing on her alone, without any appearance of God or the Apostles.

If in the Washington painting the Virgin is slightly apprehensive as she anticipates what lies ahead, in the Louvre version she is totally assured in her faith and her future role as Queen of Heaven. In its overall conception and monumental simplicity, the Louvre painting has close affinities with Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving after Raphael of *Psyche Carried to Heaven*.<sup>80</sup> In a letter to Chantelou of early 1650, Poussin mentions that he made what must be the Louvre painting for Henri d'Etampes de Valençay, the French ambassador in Rome.<sup>81</sup> By showing *putti* strewing flowers

78 The Washington canvas is not universally accepted as a work by Poussin—see Thuillier, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 267 and a summary of attributions in Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, p. 174. It may have been in Vincenzo Giustiniani's collection as early as 1638, then in the Soderini collection by mid-century—see Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin, A Critical Catalogue*, pp. 63-64, and Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, pp. 236.

79 Haraguchi, 'The Virgin Mary in the Early Modern Italian Writings of Vittoria Colonna, Lucrezia Marinella, and Eleonora Montalvo', pp. 1-13.

80 Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, pp. 236-237, fig. 102.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 234.



7.17. Nicolas Poussin, *The Virgin Appearing to St. James*, c. 1629-1630. Oil on canvas, 301 × 242 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: Musée du Louve, Paris/Bridgeman Images).



7.18. Nicolas Poussin, *The Seven Sacraments: Marriage*, c. 1636-40. Oil on canvas, 95.5 × 121 cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, on loan from the Duke of Rutland (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

in her empty casket, the artist emphasizes in the Washington canvas the Virgin's spiritual rebirth and the grandeur of the ascent itself. Her majesty is enhanced by the *putti* surrounding her, especially those gyrating, praying, and reaching heavenward at the base of her robes. Two *putti* at the top of the scene open up the clouds, and another by her side smiles as it energetically points to the heavens above. As she rises among the clouds, her eyes are turned upwards in anticipation; her mouth is slightly open and her hands held out, ready to accept her glory.

The Washington *Assumption* may be compared with Poussin's *Virgin Appearing to St. James* (Musée du Louvre, Paris, Fig. 7.17), a work painted a year or two earlier and also featuring the miraculous presence of Mary. This canvas shows her borne on a pillar and cloud as she appears to St. James and others, including a small group of Christians, at Saragossa. Discouraged by his lack of success in converting the natives of what is now Spain, the Saint was assured by the Virgin that these people would eventually be converted and that their faith would be as strong as the pillar supporting her. Some in the crowd are overcome with fear, while others

instantly convert as they witness her miraculous appearance. James kneels before the Virgin, his hand at his heart, looking at her with an unforgettable expression of admiration, love, and unshakable devotion. In all three of the paintings discussed here Poussin emphasizes the majesty and glory of the Virgin, whom he must have imagined as the greatest archetype of faith, motherhood, and female empowerment.

Poussin painted scenes of *Marriage* twice, as part of his two series of *The Seven Sacraments*, the first commissioned by Cassiano dal Pozzo in the late 1630s: *The Seven Sacraments: Marriage* (c. 1638-1640, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, on loan from the Duke of Rutland, Fig. 7.18); and the second by Paul Fréart de Chantelou in the mid-1640s: *The Seven Sacraments: Marriage* (1647-1648, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, on loan from the Duke of Sutherland, Fig. 7.19).

Both paintings show the marriage of Mary and Joseph, and in both cases flowers spring from Joseph's rod. This miracle indicates that Joseph had been chosen by God as Mary's husband and alludes to Aaron's rod, which by flowering again points to the birth of Christ. In the Dulwich version, the presiding ecclesiastic is dressed as a bishop, wearing a miter and cope, rather than the attire of a Jewish priest. These anachronistic vestments symbolize the marriage as Christian. The dove of the Holy Spirit hovers over the central triangular group of Mary, Joseph, and priest. Joseph and Mary hold hands as they kneel, but the husband is given prominence over the wife by his elevated position, by the shadow obscuring the face of Mary, and by the glance of the priest, who looks at him rather than her. Most of the witnesses on the left are women and most on the right are men; they respond to the event with muted joy, looking at the marriage couple or talking quietly to each other. A young man at the right points to the flowers on Joseph's rod. Among those standing behind the Virgin are her parents, Joachim and Anna; the latter is given special prominence by her height, her aged face, and her red drapery. The setting is an austere hall with symmetrical Corinthian columns and blind niches on the back wall. The women in particular are tall and slender, echoing Poussin's statement, derived from the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius, that the proportions of the Corinthian column may be compared to those of a slender girl.

The second (Edinburgh) version, painted as part of the series of Sacraments for Chantelou, has a more elaborate setting because of the wishes of the patron.<sup>82</sup> Chantelou had preferred Poussin's *Finding of Moses* painted for Pointel to his own *Ordination*. To accommodate his disgruntled patron, the artist added some decorative elements to Chantelou's new *Marriage*: festoons hanging near the ceiling, landscape vignettes visible through the three windows, the chair of the priest, the chalice and ewer held by a servant, and a larger number of figures than appeared

82 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 376; Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin, 1594-1665*, p. 254; Forte, 'With a Critical Eye: Painting and Theory in France', pp. 552-553.





7.19. Nicolas Poussin, *The Seven Sacraments: Marriage*, 1647-1648. Oil on canvas, 117 × 178 cm. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, on loan from the Duke of Sutherland (Photo: Antonia Reeve Photography).

in Pozzo's earlier version. This time the three principals are low in the picture, with the bare-headed priest sitting in a chair and Mary and Joseph kneeling; here too the husband is given prominence over the wife by his slightly higher position and by his well-lit face. A man behind the Virgin opens his hand in surprised reaction to Joseph's rod with its sprouting flowers, which are more prominent here than in the earlier version. A man at the right and a kneeling woman behind the Virgin also point to the rod. When seeing the picture in Chantelou's collection on his visit to Paris in 1665, Bernini was struck particularly by the mysterious veiled woman at the far left, partly hidden by a column. She is half a woman, an ellipsis whose missing face is taken up and substituted by those of the seven other women between her and the Virgin, women who look most attentively at the marriage scene before them or, in two cases, discuss it with their friends. The two men man at the far right standing on either side of a column, taken together, reveal the total profile view of a man, the front half at the left of the column, and the back half at the right, and both of their faces are visible. The left foot of the man draped in red is propped on the base the column, perhaps alluding to the idea, originally found in Vitruvius and known to Poussin,<sup>83</sup> that human proportions are expressed in the different architectural

83 Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, 4.1; Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 122.

orders of columns, men in Doric, women in Ionic, and young girls in Corinthian. This idea of proportionality, and hence beauty, would also be implicit in the woman hidden behind a column at the left. Her counterpart, the young woman at the right of the column reaching down to her child, is largely visible in frontal view, but the woman at the left is mysteriously hidden. The rigorous structure of the two men at the right suggest masculine rationality in their full visibility, but the half-woman at the left may imply the mysterious and beautiful nature of women, and in particular, given the subject of the painting, the mystery of the Virgin and her miraculous birth. The sacramental and Eucharistic significance of the scene is indicated by the cross created by the floor tiles, seen in sharp perspective at the bottom of the painting.<sup>84</sup> Two babies appear in the painting, the one already mentioned, standing by the column at the left, wanting to be picked up by its mother, and the other (we see only its head) in a basket to the left of the Virgin. These children undoubtedly allude to the Christchild who will be born to the Virgin and Joseph.

It is unusual for Joseph to be given prominence over the Virgin in these pictures, since in other subjects such as the Holy Family it is the Virgin as mother of Christ who predominates. The special attention to Joseph may be accounted for by the Christological symbolism associated with him, in particular the beginning words of Matthew's gospel that trace Christ's ancestry back to the Old Testament through his line and not Mary's. This symbolism is particularly appropriate for a marriage scene, especially because of the related typology of his rod. Nevertheless, the rod was also associated with the Virgin, since it flowered without being fertilized.<sup>85</sup> Hence, these two canvases depicting marriage allude to the miraculous birth of Christ and point to the Virgin Mary as the most esteemed of women.

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84 Clark, 'Poussin's *Sacrament of Marriage*', pp. 236-239.

85 Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, pp. 177-178.

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# Conclusion

## Abstract

Females both impose and endure human suffering more than males in Poussin's works, indicating both vengeance and victimhood as womanly characteristics. Some of Poussin's women are evil or destructive; others are victimized, heroic, or virtuous. He shows women as lovers, as jealous and duplicitous, as killers, but also as the gateway to redemption. He was aware of the injustices often imposed by men upon women, and urges his viewers to meditate on the unfairness of their victimhood. His purpose, as he said himself, is to encourage his viewers to think deeply about the moral implications of the subjects that he paints, no matter how harsh or noble they might be.

**Keywords:** Destructiveness, Suffering, Submissiveness, Heroines, Nobility, Virtue

A survey of Poussin's representations of women makes it clear that he does not, as is often inaccurately affirmed even today, depict 'the best aspects of ancient, pagan civilization [in] a coherent whole in art'.<sup>1</sup> The beauty of his paintings, his deployment of their colors, boldly or delicately orchestrated as required, his carefully coordinated figures, spun out in rigorous yet lovely compositional structures, beguile us into imagining that his subjects, like his pictorial constructions, are broadly uplifting. In the face of his pictures' attractiveness, we have to remind ourselves that his subjects are so often destructive. In his presentation of scenes of rape, war, injustice, and revenge, Poussin aims chiefly to present dramatic narratives that engage the viewer in thoughtful reflection on human conflict. He wrote to Chantelou in 1648 that he would like to illustrate 'the most distressing tricks of Fortune ever inflicted on man'. These paintings, Poussin said, 'would remind people of the moral strength and wisdom they must develop in order to be able to remain steadfast and resolute in the face of the very worst which that

<sup>1</sup> Mérot, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 129.

blind madwoman can do to them'.<sup>2</sup> He never made these pictures, but many of his finished works easily could be imagined as part of such a series, canvases in which protagonists are tested by the ill will of others (as is the good mother in the *Judgment of Solomon*—Fig. 6.8) or by the forces of nature (as are both lovers in *Pyramus and Thisbe*—Figs. 5.4, 5.5). In his output as a whole, women either suffer or impose suffering out of proportion to men. It is mainly in his religious pictures (and a few from ancient history and allegory) that women are represented as virtuous.

Poussin's treatment of women varies depending on his subjects, but his approaches to them are undergirded by his solid bourgeois values. Such is the case even when he depicts courtly subjects like *Esther before Ahasuerus* (Fig. 7.10). Esther served as a prototype of the Virgin Mary, but simultaneously she was a *femme fatale*, a harem favorite of Ahasuerus. In playing down the erotic charms of Esther and magnifying the gravity and majesty of Ahasuerus, Poussin succeeds in expressing the worthiness of Esther's cause and proper dignity in the king. By handling the subject in this way, he discloses his own conception of apposite and proportionate values and virtues. Poussin's scene emphasizes fear-inducing masculine power and the emotional reaction of a woman; he underlines in his depiction the modesty of Esther and the male authority of the king. But Esther's mild cunning is exceptional in his art. Quite often, his works are critical of women, as in *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 1.2) and *Rinaldo and Armida* (Fig. 2.19), where, in spite of their classical beauty, the pernicious sexual excesses of the goddess and the witch are made clear. On occasion he depicts women as virtuous, as in *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow* (Fig. 7.1), where Phocion's widow defies the corrupt Athenian regime by reclaiming her husband's ashes. He shows women as sympathetic and genuine lovers, as in *Acis and Galatea* (Fig. 3.5), but also as jealous and duplicitous, in works such as *Landscape with Juno and Argus* (Fig. 3.17) and *Diana Slaying Chione* (Fig. 4.6). He portrays them as killers (*Medea*—Fig. 4.2), but also as the gateway to redemption (*Annunciation*—Fig. 7.12). He represents them sympathetically when they are overwhelmed with grief (*Testament of Eudamidas*—Fig. 6.4) but also shows the consequences of their evil deeds (*Death of Sapphira*—Fig. 4.10). Poussin expresses in his art the competing and conflicting attitudes about women as reflected in his larger culture, during a period when opinions about them were going through complex and profound changes.

Tragic themes or ones stressing human failings were understood by Poussin to provide more fertile opportunity for thoughtful reflection on the part of the

<sup>2</sup> Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 384: 'les plus estranges tours que la fortune aye jamais joué aux hommes [...] rapellant l'homme par leur veue à la considération de la vertu et de la sagesse qui faut aquérir pour demeurer ferme et immobile aux efforts de cette folle aueugle'.

viewer than ones with pleasant, unchallenging subjects. In this respect he said, 'Faintheartedness is to be despised' in choosing to paint in the 'magnificent manner', which, he says, might include subjects such as 'Olympian Jove, who could make the universe tremble with a nod of his head'.<sup>3</sup> When he did paint Jove, in his *Birth of Bacchus* (Fig. 6.5), the thunderer's magnificence was conditioned negatively by his own and Juno's deception that led up to this scene, allowing Semele to be destroyed. He also appropriated her rightful role as birth parent. One who reads Poussin's statements on art and compares these with his paintings notices that the latter often contain destructive elements not fully admitted to in his writings. Many other instances of damaging behavior on the part of gods appear in his paintings, including some already mentioned featuring female divinities: *Cephalus and Aurora*, *Diana and Endymion*, *Landscape with Juno and Argus*, and *Diana Slaying Chione*. The theme of the first two of these paintings, goddesses who enslave mortal men by their demanding love, is characteristic of Poussin's early mythologies. The latter two of these canvases exemplify the jealousy of goddesses directed at mortal women, Io and Chione, who suffer as a consequence. To such hostility may be added the 'tricks of Fortune' Poussin mentioned in his letter to Chantelou that appear in various ways in works such as the *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (Fig. 5.4), *Venus with the Dead Adonis* (Fig. 3.16), *Birth of Adonis* (Fig. 4.7), *Apollo and Daphne* (Fig. 5.12), *Pan and Syrinx* (Fig. 5.14), and *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* (Fig. 5.2). All but one of these paintings focus on the accidental intertwining of love and death (or transformation into plant form and loss of human sentience); while the remaining picture, *Birth of Adonis*, involves Myrrha's incest with her father as a result of punishment by the gods. In all of these canvases, women suffer. The harm inflicted by the gods and fortune in these works is thus aimed mainly at women, who in Poussin's pictures suffer disproportionately in relation to men; female goddesses also outnumber male deities in wielding their destructive power. Thus, females both impose and endure human suffering more than males in his works, indicating both vengeance and victimhood as womanly characteristics. It is impossible to know if Poussin was conscious of his disproportionate representation of female destroyers and victims; such a circumstance was a byproduct of male-oriented culture both in his own century and in Greco-Roman antiquity, which in large measure supplied his literary sources.

Because they were free of any external restraints, goddesses such as Diana and Aurora who preyed on men for their gratification lived out their sexual fantasies in a manner unavailable to ordinary women. The lusty female deities of the ancients served as a warning to men in Poussin's time of what women might be capable if they

3 Ibid., p. 488-489: 'da sprezzarsi la viltà [...] maniera magnifica [...] Gioue Olimpico: che col cenno commuoua l'vuiuerso' [sic].



were permitted to pursue their desires in a boldly uninhibited manner. Whether conscious of it or not, Poussin created paintings of female erotic excess that served indirectly to undergird men's perceived need to restrain women and prevent them from indulging in their natural sexual inclinations that would threaten social and familial foundations. Actually, the reverse in the exercise of sexual prerogatives was more often true: men in ancient and modern cultures had created opportunities for themselves to take the lead in sexual exploits in ways that women could not. This advantage favoring males is explained partly by their constraint of wives within households and their control of women legally and through custom principally because men wanted to be certain of their paternity. Poussin's paintings of assertive goddesses opened up a fantasy world where men were free to project their fears of aggressive female sexual instigators in a way that justified their traditional restraint of women. In his early (c. 1624-5) version of *Cephalus and Aurora* (Fig. 1.1), for example, the strong-willed goddess, inverting normal expectations, assumes the position usually given to the male, lying on top of the young and reluctant hunter, as she presses her sexual advantage. His second version of 1629-1630 (Fig. 1.2) shows Cephalus repelling the advances of the goddess, turning away from her to look at a picture of his beloved Procris, thus projecting Cephalus by inversion into the feminine role of dutiful mate, mirroring traditional family structure in the way that women, not men, and in particular decent and honorable wives, were typically expected to behave. In his *Diana and Endymion* (Fig. 1.4), the goddess holds a phallic arrow, the male symbol, directly in front of her (clothed) genital area, while the shepherd's emasculation is symbolized by his rod that lies inertly on the ground and by the way he kneels before her in abject submission.

Presumed female weaknesses were exposed by Poussin in his double versions of *Rinaldo and Armida* (Figs. 2.18, 2.19) and *Tancred and Erminia* (Figs. 3.14, 3.15), which show opposite, negative traits in women. In his second version of *Rinaldo and Armida* (Fig. 2.19), the witch begins with feelings of vengeance, wanting to kill Rinaldo; then she is changeable (another imagined female weakness) in giving herself over to lust (a third inferred negative trait in women) when gazing at the sleeping warrior. Poussin depicts Armida's hating and loving Rinaldo simultaneously in the painting. The artist converts Tasso's original textual account of the witch's changing feelings for Rinaldo into visual form; the idea of simultaneity that we see in the painting was explored a bit later by Emmanuele Tesauro in a treatise on the figurative use of language. Tesauro, a follower of Poussin's mentor, the poet Giambattista Marino, and a friend of the artist' patron, Cassiano dal Pozzo, included in his treatise a section on the '*Metafora di oppositione*', describing phrases with opposing elements. He compared such phrases to a coin or medal with two faces.<sup>4</sup>

4 Tesauro, *Il cannocchiale aristotelico*, pp. 293-294; Plock, *Regarding Gendered Mythologies*, pp. 66-68.

Poussin managed to contain Armida's changeableness within a single, powerful image of simultaneous hate and love, a fickleness that was negatively inferred to be an essential feature of women's nature in the seventeenth century. Their only certain, fixed characteristic was their changeability, the cause of which was posited to be their biology. Women's cold, wet humors and wandering wombs were imagined to govern their unpredictable behavior; they were thus conceived to be forever cast as victims of their own anatomy.

The other female protagonist depicted by Poussin from Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, Erminia, is at fault for being too timid in revealing her secret love of Tancred. Women, it seems, are to be condemned for both excessive lust and too much carnal timidity. Tasso's literary epic exposed the misogynistic biases of his age, as pointed out by Lucrezia Marinella in her contemporary feminist critique of his ideas.<sup>5</sup> Because he mined Tasso for subjects of dramatic sexual conflict that he might reinterpret through the art of painting, Poussin (certainly inadvertently and unconsciously) opened himself as well to feminist critique. Marinella's sophisticated feminist criticism of Tasso condemns his class- and gender-obsessed bias when he asserts that only noble, heroic women may be excused from the constraints of moral custom. Tasso also claimed in his *Discorso della virtù femminile* that men's *fortezza* (strength) and *liberalità* (freedom from prejudice) made them eminently suitable for work in commerce, politics, and the public sphere, whereas women's  *pudicizia* (modesty or chastity) rendered them useful only for household duties.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the known commentary on Poussin's art, whether written by patrons in correspondence with the artist, penned by his supporters such as Bellori and Félibien, or discussed and recorded in the meetings of the French Academy led by Charles Le Brun, centered on whether a particular work of his was found to be aesthetically pleasing or deemed effective and accurate as a visualization of an historical event. Virtually nothing survives by way of comment on his approaches to depicting women, except general statements about their beauty or their suffering in his historical paintings. A poem of 1653 by Hilaire Pader entitled '*Des Amants*' does survive, supposedly describing a painting by Poussin that shows the simple, sweet pleasures of a male lover resting his head on his lady's breast.<sup>7</sup> This poem could be taken to describe accurately Poussin's two early pictures of *Venus and Adonis* in Fort Worth and Providence (Figs. 3.1, 3.3), but Pader's verses are entirely uncritical and not useful in applying to his more complex canvases of troubled love.

Poussin also made pictures that frankly celebrated uninhibited erotic activity, as in his London *Triumph of Pan* (Fig. 2.1). In such paintings depicting an imagined

5 Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, p. 139.

6 Tasso, *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca*, pp. 54-55.

7 Plock, *Regarding Gendered Mythologies*, p. 1.

mythical world of sexual pleasure, devoid of the emotional conflict dominating some of his other works, the artist allowed his seventeenth-century viewers to escape freely into a zone of erotic fantasy. Precisely because such scenes are mythical projections, where sex is normalized without any constraint or consequences, they are perceived by their observers as pointing to the perverse, but are readily accommodated because of their fictive status and joyous exuberance. Images like the *Triumph of Pan* are enjoyable to peruse, but because viewers regard them as having no relationship to actual lived experience, they are perceived as parodic. This quality of removal from ordinary life is accentuated by the allegorical significance of such works, where, in this case, the governing idea of *voluptas* (in the sense of positive pleasure, human happiness, and well-being) may link this painting with the other canvases in the Cabinet du roi of Richelieu's château at Poitou, where the parallel themes of *virtus/honestas* and *liberalité* seem to be explored as part of the room's larger allegorical program. Poussin's pictures of satyrs or shepherds spying on naked women (Figs. 2.6, 2.7, 2.21) frankly depict male lust. Because the (male) viewer identifies with the satyrs (by complicitly appropriating their right to look), he becomes a voyeur, giving himself permission to peruse the naked female form. By accommodating and naturalizing the inspection of nude women, such pictures project the innocence of voyeurism, at least within the realm of mythological art. An opposite approach to love is presented in the artist's *Venus and Mercury* (Fig. 2.23), where higher love (*Anteros*) triumphs over the base passions (*Eros*), but the picture has an equally parodic effect, since higher love is represented by attractive, naked figures. Such conceptions of the subjects of love and sex demonstrate the complexity of Poussin's approaches to the erotic.

Scenes of genuine, untroubled love certainly were painted by Poussin, as in his *Venus and Adonis* (two versions, Figs. 3.1, 3.3), *Acis and Galatea* (Fig. 3.5), *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite* (Fig. 3.7), and two works from his *Four Seasons* series, *Spring (Earthly Paradise)*, Fig. 3.11, and *Summer (Ruth and Boaz)*, Fig. 3.12). But even in some of these works, disaster is waiting in the wings; for example his Providence version of *Venus and Adonis* (Fig. 3.3) hints more than a little at the impending fatal consequences for the hunter. In other paintings, troubled love is the dominant theme. *Mars and Venus* (Fig. 3.13) shows how the controlling goddess has a negative effect on Mars's masculinity. Even though Venus exhibits a loving regard for Mars, her gentle domination is enough to threaten his manhood, as symbolized by his absent (hidden) penis. This image points out just how fragile male identity is, how easily threatened men are, and how quick they are to blame women for constraining them. The tragedy implicit in the artist's two versions of *Venus and Adonis* comes to fruition in *Venus with the Dead Adonis* (Fig. 3.16), where it is again the goddess's desire to control her lover that in this case results in his death. Adonis, resisting the restraint of Venus, felt compelled to prove his manliness by hunting the boar against her express wish, thus insuring his destruction. Jealousy is the theme of

*Landscape with Juno and Argus* (Fig. 3.17), where Juno's killing of Argus yields her only the sadly fetishistic triumph of carrying Argus's eyes as decorative blind spots on her peacocks. Poussin was masterful in depicting the positive aspects of love, enduring, exuberant, or hopeful, as in the half-dozen examples at the beginning of this paragraph, but he was equally fascinated by creating pictures of complex, troubled love, as in the other works mentioned here.

The actions of female killers and transgressors are depicted by Poussin in a series of powerful works such as his two drawings of *Medea Killing her Children* (Figs. 4.1, 4.2). It may be the ferocity of these images that prevented Poussin from developing them into paintings. In addition, the feeling of repulsion for female crime in Poussin's day was quite strong: women who ignored social constraints by resorting to evil deeds such as infanticide were considered far more dangerous than men, and were dealt with severely by the law.<sup>8</sup> This public attitude, too, may have caused Poussin to hesitate in making paintings based on his *Medea* drawings. Another drawing, *Diana Killing Acteon* (Fig. 4.3), shows the goddess shooting the ill-fated hunter merely because he happened to stumble across her while she was bathing nude. This work featuring male destruction expresses men's fear of lesbianism, since Diana and her nymphs spurned men and practiced female-on-female love. The prickly Diana appears as a killer in two other works, *Landscape with Diana and Orion* (Fig. 4.5), and *Diana Slaying Chione* (Fig. 4.6), again shooting opponents on the slightest of pretexts, demonstrating her female touchiness. The *Birth of Adonis* (Fig. 4.7) depicts the sad fate of the transgressor Myrrha, who, painfully aware of and repentant for her crime of incest, begged the gods to transform her (they obliged by changing her into a tree as she gave birth to Adonis). Her forgiveness by the gods for her offence, described by Ovid and represented in the drawing by the supportive deities and nymphs surrounding her, indicates the rewards to women for repentance, meager as they are. The *Death of Sapphira* (Fig. 4.10) is a cautionary tale addressed to women, reminding them that they are subject to male disciplining for their moral transgressions of deception and lying. Poussin generally did not paint comparable scenes of male killers or of men guilty of moral infractions. He did so only under special circumstances, as when depicting the corrupt deeds of male gods (Jove, Apollo, Pan, Mercury), or showing great masses of anonymous men (*Rape of the Sabine Women*—Fig. 5.15, *Massacre of the Innocents*—Fig. 5.8), or representing a guilty male who had worthy but misguided motives, as in the case of the father in the *Death of Virginia* (Fig. 5.1). Other works, such as the *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* and the *Massacre of the Innocents* (Chantilly, Fig. 5.7), turn out not to be notable examples showing lone male killers after all, because the executioners carry out their duties not out of personal enmity, but as passive instruments of the state. With

8 Clark, *Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England*, p. 53.

these provisos, Poussin did not depict scenes showing a single mortal man as the principal figure maliciously harming others: he only showed women in such roles.

In addition to his paintings focusing on destructive women, another major theme in Poussin's works is women killed and assaulted through no fault of their own. Such works elicit the viewer's empathy for these hapless female victims. It could be argued that even in the opposite cases of depicting women as aggressors or victims, Poussin still emphasizes their weakness. In the first case, women exercise their negative power; in the second, their powerlessness, but men still blamed them in the latter case for their ineffectualness. In the *Death of Virginia* (Fig. 5.1), for example, Virginia, who is slain by her father to prevent her rape by the evil ruler Apius, is doubly a victim of misogyny, by both her father and Apius. Her father's guilt is as great as Apius's, through his misguided notion of twisted virtue whereby he finds his daughter's death preferable to her rape. Marcus Cato (234-149 B.C.), who lived almost three hundred years after Virginia, still attests in his time that the killing by a husband of a Roman wife guilty of adultery is permitted, without trial.<sup>9</sup> Even in Poussin's century it was not uncommon for male kin to abandon a daughter who had been raped, because of the loss of family honor. If Poussin's drawing suggests the culpability of Virginia's father, as I have argued in Chapter 4, the artist embraced an enlightened view by seventeenth century standards in representing his guilt. Poussin depicted other women who suffered or died as innocent victims. Eurydice (*Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*—Fig. 5.2) and Thisbe (*Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*—Fig. 5.4) both die through the vicissitudes of fortune. Through the raging storm that Poussin introduces in the latter painting, not mentioned by Ovid in his account of the two lovers, and through the lion that is central to Ovid's tale, the artist symbolizes the pair's intense passion that expose them to the mutability of fate. In his stoical approach to fortune as reflected in his letters, Poussin recommends restraint and withdrawal from extreme passion (such as that of Pyramus and Thisbe) in any area of life as the best antidote to the unpredictability of existence. His *Realm of Flora* (Fig. 5.6) is a bittersweet meditation on early death, often brought on by the gods. Clytie's unfulfilled love for Apollo, depicted in this picture, was interpreted in the artist's time as an example of the 'madness' of female passion. Her rejection by Apollo, who hardened his heart against her, subjected her to the uncertainty of fortune and the capriciousness of love. The *Massacre of the Innocents* (Fig. 5.7) shows Poussin's extreme expressive distortion of the principal mother's face caused by her panic and fear. Notable are her raised eyebrows and wide-open eyes and mouth. Later, in the 1670s, when Charles Lebrun developed his theory of physiognomy based on Poussin's paintings and the ideas of René Descartes, he focused most of all on the eyebrows and eyes as the conveyors of

9 Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 10.23.

facial expressive meaning.<sup>10</sup> *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax* (Fig. 5.11) addresses the unspeakable treatment women could expect at the hands of their captors, resulting in Zenobia's decision to have her husband attempt to kill her rather than fall captive. Female prisoners of the Romans could expect to be raped, held as hostages, tortured and killed, or sold into slavery; occasionally, generals such as Scipio Africanus (*Continence of Scipio*, Fig. 6.3) would allow them to return to their families in order to pacify conquered peoples and turn them into allies. The first of Poussin's two versions of *Apollo and Daphne* (Fig. 5.12) emphasizes the authority over and control of Daphne by the god, where her transformation into a tree fixed in the ground symbolizes expected female passivity and regulation. The later version (Fig. 5.13) movingly shows Daphne afraid, cowering under the protection of her father, as Apollo serenely gazes in her direction, already planning his seduction. If indeed the dead man in the right middle distance of this picture is the youth Leucippus, who loved Daphne and of whom Apollo was jealous, he was killed by Daphne and her maiden companions for his relatively innocent deception of disguising himself as a woman to be near his beloved. The painting would thus include both male (Apollo's) and female (Daphne's) aggression. In *Pan and Syrinx* (Fig. 5.14), the nymph feels obliged to ask for transformation to avoid rape, pointing to female powerlessness and to the accommodation of rape in a mythical past. Poussin shows Pan pursuing Syrinx into the arms of her father, the river god Ladon. In blocking her escape, the personified river actually facilitates Pan's conquest. The artist thus visualizes Ladon and Pan colluding to seal her fate. Poussin's two versions of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (Figs. 5.15, 5.16) are still sometimes interpreted as exemplifying the heroic deeds of the early Romans. In such an interpretation the sexual violence of the episode is largely ignored, and the exercise of male power that results in females' enforced marriage is overlooked. Later, the women are severely stressed once again when they are subjected to the necessity of intervening between their Roman husbands and Sabine relatives to stop the warfare between them. The *Rape of Europa* (Fig. 5.19) points to Jove's deception, carried to extremes by disguising himself as a bull and luring Europa by kissing her hands with his tongue to facilitate her abduction. His fraud violated the trust Europa placed in him. In this same work, Eurydice is shown attacked by a snake, as a result of Aristaeus's attempt to rape her. In such works showing women killed or abused, Poussin reveals another aspect of his treatment of females. Here he shows a sympathetic, supportive approach, engendering in the viewer an empathic identification with the women as victims. In such paintings, Poussin demonstrates a further negative aspect of patriarchy, where women suffer because of men's hostile

10 Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions*, pp. 9-30.

attitudes toward them. The artist here displays a sensitivity to women and their roles as victims of male bias and aggression.

Voiceless and deceived female victims also appear in Poussin's works as a major theme. His quintessential example of the voiceless woman is Echo, where, in *Echo and Narcissus* (Fig. 6.1), the artist conveys her lack of self-agency by depicting her fading image. The nymph's inability to communicate reflects the condition of real women in Poussin's day, like those in Ovid's Roman society, of having to defer to men. Accompanying this theme of voiceless and deceived women in Poussin's later works is a new category of picture where goddesses or witches who threaten men with their powerful demands of love no longer predominate. Instead, in his old age the new motif emerges of male authority figures, presiding over submissive women. Paintings in this category include *The Four Seasons: Summer (Ruth and Boaz)* (Fig. 3.12), *Esther before Ahasuerus* (Fig. 7.10), *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (Fig. 5.10), the *Death of Sapphira* (Fig. 4.10), *Coriolanus* (Fig. 7.2), and the *Death of Virginia* (Fig. 5.1). Likewise, in the *Continence of Scipio* (Fig. 6.3), the fate of the (nameless) young woman is decided by men: by Scipio, the girl's father (her *paterfamilias*, holding legal rights over her, even after marriage), and her fiancé, Allucius. The handling of the girl reminds us that in Poussin's time women were treated as property in some regions of Europe even if they had status as legal persons. The poor, dying man in the *Testament of Eudamidas* (Fig. 6.4) charges his friends to care for his aged mother and daughter after his death, showing the viewer how vulnerable women were in antiquity. In Poussin's era the women of a man's household were equally at risk, left exposed to the generosity (or not) of his male heirs. The *Judgment of Solomon* (Fig. 6.8) privileges the instincts of motherhood as much as male wisdom, because the true mother, having been deceived by the evil one, is willing to give away her child rather than see it killed. She thus gains the same heroic status as Solomon, but under the most stressful conditions imaginable, when she expects to lose her child forever. In these paintings, too, Poussin reveals the limits to and restrictions on female freedom, almost always at the hands of controlling men.

The heroines and great, respected women in Poussin's paintings come almost exclusively from ancient Greek and Roman history and the Christian religion, not mythology. Phocion's widow (*Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow*—Fig. 7.1), defying the corrupt Athenian state by collecting her husband's ashes, gains heroic status through her own act of private virtue. This painting and others such as the *Realm of Flora* (Fig. 5.6), the *Death of Sapphira* (Fig. 4.10), *Queen Zenobia found on the Banks of the River Arax* (Fig. 5.11), and the *Testament of Eudamidas* (Fig. 6.4) were new subjects in art, testifying to Poussin's originality. The artist was well aware of his own novelty not only in inventing new subjects but in reconceiving conventional subjects in a new way. In reworking some words borrowed from Tasso, he commented on originality in art in his *Osservazioni sopra la pittura* transcribed

by Bellori: 'Novelty in painting does not consist primarily in the subject that has never been seen, but in good and novel arrangement and expression, and in this way the subject that was commonplace and stale becomes singular and new'.<sup>11</sup> This emphasis on the original treatment of known subjects is characteristic of his art, and can account for his stress on the 'tricks of fortune' and women who impose or endure suffering out of proportion to men in his oeuvre as a whole. In the case of his two Phocion canvases, the one mentioned above and the *Landscape with the Body of Phocion Carried out of Athens*, the capriciousness of fortune implied in their content extends to politics, both ancient and current, as well as to personal suffering: the *Phocion* pictures are not only a political statement about the unpredictability and insecurity of public favor in ancient Athens; they register by association Poussin's reaction to the political upheavals in France during the Fronde of 1648-53. The artist's *Coriolanus* (Fig. 7.2) may also allude to the Fronde, since by taking up arms against his own country, Coriolanus has parallels with the French princes who led the revolt against the royal court and Mazarin. The general's mother, wife, and the matrons of Rome may be considered as heroic as Coriolanus himself, since they risked death by appearing before him and his troops to convince him, in the face of his previous obdurate refusal, to give up his siege of Rome. In *Eliezer and Rebecca* (Louvre version—Fig. 7.8), Eliezer decides that Rebecca, a kindhearted woman who was thoughtful in offering him a drink of water, must be the woman destined to marry Isaac. The story of the painting reflects a patriarchal conception of marriage, since Rebecca consents to marry a man she has never met. Even if the point of her narrative is to establish her worthiness through her character, generosity, and altruism, her virtue is defined by her willingness to yield to a male-centered view of matrimony. It is in his paintings with Christian themes, however, that Poussin expresses the highest nobility of women, and one woman in particular, the Virgin Mary. In his depiction of the Virgin Mary in his *Annunciation* (Fig. 7.12), Poussin stresses her majesty and spirituality, ready to receive God's grace at the moment of the incarnation. The Virgin's importance in the *Holy Family on the Steps* (Fig. 7.14) as the vessel chosen by God to bear Christ incarnate is emphasized by her placement at the apex of the triangle of figures, by the bright red of her tunic, and by the Marian symbolism in the painting. Poussin emphasizes the majesty of the Virgin, whom he must have imagined as the greatest archetype of faith, motherhood, and female empowerment. Both versions of his *Marriage* from the two *Seven Sacraments* series show the nuptials of Joseph and Mary (Figs. 7.18; 7.19). The husband is given prominence over the wife in these works, both because of Joseph's higher position in the paintings and because of an

11 Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 490: 'La nouità nella Pittura non consiste principalmente nel soggetto non più veduto, ma nella buona, e nuova dispositione e espressione, e così il soggetto dall'essere commune, e vecchio diuene singolare, e nuouo'.



emphasis on the traditional iconography of flowers miraculously springing from his rod. It is unusual for Joseph to be given distinction over the Virgin in this way, since in other subjects such as the Holy Family it is the Virgin as mother of Christ who predominates. The particular attention to Joseph may be accounted for by Christ's descent from Abraham through the paternal, not the maternal, line. Joseph's rod nevertheless also alludes in a special way to the Virgin, since it flowered without being fertilized. From one perspective, Poussin's representations of the ideal, perfect woman as in the case of the Virgin Mary demonstrate his larger culture's veneration of the female in a positive way. But it is widely recognized that such adoration of women is an essential feature of patriarchal culture, where women are idealized in theory and at a safe remove, but are treated poorly in lived reality. Nevertheless, Poussin's many pictures of revered females demonstrate his society's admiration for great women and their sense of justice and virtue that is often superior to men's.

In characterizing Poussin's approach to women generally, we may divide his works into narratives based on four broad categories, Greco-Roman mythology, ancient history, the Bible, and modern epic poetry (subjects from Tasso). While Poussin explores a great variety of approaches to and characteristics of women, it is his images of destructive women and female victims that stand out in his mythological and historical paintings, while his biblical scenes mainly show virtuous, majestic women, most clearly represented in his many paintings of the Virgin Mary. Even though Poussin could not have been aware of our modern concept of feminism, he certainly was conscious of women as evil, destructive, victimized, heroic, or virtuous. His ideas of womanhood were undergirded by the perceptions and indeed the biases of his day, which is to say his approach conforms to the male-oriented norms of his time. Even so, he is aware of the injustices often imposed by men upon women, and urges his viewers to meditate on the unfairness of their victimhood when they are so represented. And, if he shows women as erotically aggressive or injurious, more so than men, he depicts males causing female destruction as well. His larger purpose, as he said himself, is to encourage his viewers to think deeply about the moral implications of the subjects that he paints, no matter how harsh or noble they might be.

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