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Troy Thomas, *Poussin's Women: Sex and Gender in the Artist's Works*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 386 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. €128.00 (hb). ISBN 9789463721844.

Review by Sheila McTighe, The Courtauld Institute of Art.

New books on Nicolas Poussin are rather rare these days, and one that promises a fresh point of view on large numbers of Poussin's works should be welcome. This book adopts what it calls "a gender studies perspective" on the entirety of the artist's output, which is organized thematically by the paintings' subjects rather than presented in biographical context or chronological development (p. 25). The book's target audience would seem to be undergraduate and postgraduate students who will benefit from an updated, readable introduction to Poussin's art. Students may also find new topics of research in Poussin's representation of women, a rich and fundamental aspect of his art that has often been neglected in previous scholarship. Introductory chapters briefly sum up the past scholarship on Poussin's career and then map the contours of gender studies, mainly in Anglo-American terms. The body of the book then consists of seven chapters that each describe a type of female persona depicted by Poussin: predators, lustful women, lovers, killers, victims (with these further subdivided into two types), and heroines.

The book thus forms a useful encyclopedia of Poussin's representations of women. It focuses less than one might have expected on the way the artist represents masculinity and femininity. The author of course differentiates between sex, as denoted by anatomy, and gender, defined as the norms or boundaries for behavior and comportment associated, in any given culture, with male and female sexes. But the book does not present an overarching argument elucidating the role of gender, for example, in Poussin's creative process, in the cultural functions of image-making in the seventeenth century, in patronage of his works by women, or in the reception of Poussin's paintings. The thematic approach here leads toward very general statements. The author notes at the end that Poussin's depictions reflect a "solid, bourgeois" outlook (without clarifying what that might mean in seventeenth-century societies) (p. 342). The final sentences of the book affirm that Poussin's "approach conforms to the male-oriented norms of his time" (p. 354).

In treating "male-oriented norms of his time," the text spends almost no time on the cultural differences between Poussin's two worlds of Rome and France, one the place of his birth and education, the other his chosen exile. Thomas primarily discusses women's roles in seventeenth-century France rather than in the more conservative world of papal Rome, where Poussin spent most of his career. Of course, Poussin's painted women are all drawn from preexisting mythological, biblical, and historical characters, a body of material broadly shared by European

artists and writers in early modernity. Thus, the topic of women and gender roles in his art must, of necessity, deal with what Poussin inherited and what he changed in his representations. Whatever the story that Poussin depicted, we are faced with the artist's idiosyncratic techniques for translating words into images and for reworking canonical texts into fresh visual inventions. This perhaps explains why, rather than any extended interpretation of gender, this book gives a series of brief iconographical readings of Poussin's women in their narrative contexts. These iconographic accounts contain new insights, but methodologically they remain quite old-fashioned.

Helpfully, Thomas's readings focus on the female characters not only in Poussin's finished paintings, but also in his drawings. This allows the author to integrate into the discussion the early series of mythological drawings, the so-called "Marino drawings" of Ovidian scenes. It also allows Thomas to address the very large, highly finished drawing of the abduction of Europa from the end of the artist's life, which represents a painting that is no longer extant. It is very good to see included here the two drawings of Medea slaughtering her children, today in the Royal Library at Windsor, which Thomas treats in his chapter on Poussin's women as killers. They haven't played a major role in studies of Poussin before this, as they are not related to any known painting. Thomas speculates that perhaps the artist didn't proceed to paint the subject because of the shocking level of female violence it entailed (though that didn't stop artists from depicting the male violence in the biblical Slaughter of the Innocents). The rough sketch and the more highly finished design at Windsor seem to be rooted in contemporary theatrical staging of the Jason and Medea tragedy.

Thomas briefly explores the role of theater in relation to Poussin's Medea drawings, but throughout the book he does not do much with the material on women in early modern theatre and musical performance that would help illuminate masculine and feminine roles in Poussin's art. His remarks on this topic are brief. Delving deeper into this material would particularly have helped in discussing Poussin's two richest depictions of gender trouble, the two versions of *Achilles among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, dating to the 1650s. These represent Achilles first transformed into a woman--or at least dressed like one--to evade the Trojan war, then shocked back into masculinity by the sight of his soldier's gear. It might seem like an obscure subject today, but this remasculinization of Achilles was painted by a very large number of artists, including two versions by Rubens and a wonderful version by Frans Francken that is set in a *wunderkammer*.^[1] The story was also hugely popular as a subject for drama across Europe, including plays by Calderon de la Barca and two seminal early operas in Italy during the 1640s and 1650s.^[2] None of this makes its way into Thomas's pages on the paintings. It is not material solely pertaining to Poussin or to Poussin's women. The Achilles story provided a platform for widespread exploration of gender's ambiguities, most apt for an era of drama dependent on crossdressing and misgendering as plot devices, and for a musical theater in which male singers were prized for their high soprano voices. Thomas's interpretations dwell on gender affirmation in Poussin's paintings, but these two works show Poussin's, and seicento culture's, deep fascination with gender fluidity.

There was a further step that Thomas apparently thought he was taking, beyond iconography and beyond a catalogue of depicted women, into interpretation that was feminist and political. It was summed up in his quotation of Jodi Cranston writing about new approaches to gender in the visual arts. He agrees with her that useful work on gender adopts "theoretical approaches from outside art history that [articulate] the constructedness of the visual sign and the politics of

interpretation and reception” (p. 27). Where, one wonders, do that “constructedness of the visual sign” and “politics of interpretation” go once the book is underway? And of reception studies there is no sign here.

Thomas’s original aims are clarified in an interesting discussion of Elizabeth Cropper’s seminal 1976 article on Poussin and codified notions of feminine beauty that ultimately go back to Petrarch.[3] Thomas points out that even though Cropper “was successful in connecting certain conceptions of female beauty...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” (p. 47). He takes Cropper to task for not tackling the patriarchy, and he dismisses the essay’s rich contextualization of Poussin’s painting and his ideas as “narrow” (p. 47). It would seem that Thomas places mere historical contextualization (which he strangely calls “the period eye”) against the analysis of gender roles, a superior form of interpretation (p. 47). Surely, however, we need the information that Cropper so lucidly brought to bear on Poussin’s Rebecca if we hope to unpick the patriarchal system in which it is embedded? Thomas subsequently omits any mention of Cropper’s interpretation of the *Achilles among the Daughters of Lycomedes* paintings as potential pendants with the *Madonna on the Steps* paintings of around the same period.[4] This is the only extended study of the Achilles paintings prior to Thomas’s book, a very original argument that contrasts strongly with Thomas’s own, so the article’s omission leaves a real gap in the book’s scholarship.

Because Thomas’s aim is to survey the whole of Poussin’s career, he must skate over material rapidly, and this occasionally leads to some other lacunae in the scholarship. I would like to add here the titles of some studies of Poussin and gender that were left out of the text and its bibliographies, which come from women scholars. A 1996 article by Lianne McTavish on a drawing by Poussin that she identifies as an image of women and childbirth is not cited.[5] The publication was derived from her dissertation, entitled *Complicating Categories: Women, Gender and Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century French Visual Culture* (PhD diss. University of Rochester, 1996), which should have fed into Thomas’s topic. So, too, Phillipa Plock’s *Regarding Gendered Mythologies: Nicolas Poussin’s Mythological Paintings and Practices of Viewing* (PhD diss. University of Leeds, 2004) could have played a larger role here. It is at least cited, but strangely the published articles in which she developed her ideas further are nowhere cited or mentioned.[6] Thomas writes, “[Plock] argues that, in viewing selected examples of mythological paintings by Poussin, seventeenth-century men underwent an imagined change in gender identity” (p. 26, n6). But that is reductive of Plock’s actual thesis, which concerns the way Poussin’s paintings were received or read within Rome’s clerical and celibate court society, with its unusual gender imbalance and its erasure of women from the papal hierarchy.

Thomas’s neglect of women’s scholarship on Poussin is likely to be unconscious rather than deliberate. But as an unexamined aspect of his own practice as an art historian, these lacunae stand in contrast to his “art history from a gendered perspective” (pp. 27-31). If the study of gender doesn’t demand that we take gender bias into account in our own work, what hope do we have of giving an appropriate account of it in the practices of past eras?

NOTES

[1] See Lisa Rosenthal, “Frans Francken the Younger’s *Discovery of Achilles*: Desire, Deception, and Inalienable Possession,” in W. Melion, J. Woodall, and M. Zell, eds. *Ut Pictura Amor: The*

Reflexive Imagery of Love in Artistic Theory and Practice, 1500-1700 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 704-729.

[2] See Wendy Heller, "Reforming Achilles: Gender, *Opera Seria*, and the Rhetoric of the Enlightened Hero," *Early Music* 26 (1998): 562-581.

[3] See Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, *Petrarchismo*, and the Vernacular Style," *The Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 374-394.

[4] See Cropper, "Conception and Deception: Poussin's Mirrors," *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 4 (1999): 76-95.

[5] See Lianne McTavish, "Reproducing Poussin," *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 23 (1996): 36-51.

[6] See Phillipa Plock, "Watching Women Watching Warriors: Nicolas Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia* and the Visuality of Papal Court Tournaments," *Art History* 31 (2008): 139-158; and "Touching Looks: Masculinizing the Maternal-Feminine in Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia*," in *Sense and the Senses in Early Modern Art and Cultural Practice*, ed. Alice E. Sanger and Siv Tove Kulbrandstad Walker (New York: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 169-182.

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