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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.

Response by Troy Thomas, Penn State University.

I have long thought it unfortunate that reviewers sometimes choose to focus mainly on what a book is not rather than what it is. One purpose of a review is to provide an accurate summary of a book so that the reader may decide whether to examine it further. In her review, Sheila McTighe devotes limited space to describing my book's contents and overlooks key elements. I therefore begin with a brief overview of the book. In part one, I lay out my methodology, describe the field of gender studies as it applies to art history, outline Poussin's approaches to his female protagonists, and show how the artist's oeuvre may be investigated profitably from a gender viewpoint. Part two focuses on a series of social and cultural "frames" (institutions, outlooks) of seventeenth-century France and Italy that shed light on how Poussin represented women. Part three presents a series of iconographic investigations of Poussin's paintings and drawings from a gender studies perspective, with a focus on the roles, conception, and interpretation of his female figures. Here, his women are grouped thematically, as predators, lustful females, lovers, killers, victims (two types), and heroines. Almost every page of my book, the first to be published on this topic, contains new iconographic arguments highlighting gender analysis of Poussin's women.

Noting my discussion of how power relations of gender intersect with visual signification in part one, McTighe asks: "Where, one wonders, do that 'constructedness of the visual sign' and 'politics of interpretation' go once the book is underway?" In fact, my book contains numerous examples of the nexus of gender, power, and politics and how visual signs communicate this.

In Poussin's *Contenance of Scipio*, for example, I describe how the deferential pose of a beautiful maiden (unnamed by Livy) becomes a sign of the male power over her as exercised by her betrothed, Allucius, by the Roman general, Scipio, and by her father. Even if the painting shows Scipio refraining from his right as victor to sexually assault his young female captive, this example raises the issue of how women's destinies were determined by men and how their status as property, rather than as legal persons, often excused carnal attack. In relating this image to the sexual politics of Poussin's day, I point out how legal theorist Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) was among the first to argue that perpetrators of rape should be prosecuted during times of war. [1]

Similarly, my discussion of Poussin's *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion Collected by His Widow* focuses on the intersection of gender and politics: "By 1648 Poussin was [working] for French clients . . . of new wealth based on mercantilism and finance who often desired [paintings] with secular, antique subjects and moralizing themes. . . . Jacques Serisier, a silk merchant from Lyons, ordered from Poussin two [pictures] based on the theme of Phocion's funeral and ashes. These subjects were unusual, never having been painted before . . . [The *Widow* picture] honors the private virtue and devotion of a *woman*, who [, in commemorating her husband by retrieving his ashes for secret burial in Athens, undertook an act judged to be illegal by the corrupt regime. Because] of the public nature of her [deed, she] also becomes a political hero. . . . As a [courageous] female . . . 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. . . . [The canvas is] not only a political statement about the unpredictability and insecurity of public favor in ancient Athens; [it registers] by association Poussin's [and his clients'] reactions to the . . . upheavals in France during the Fronde of 1648-53. . . . 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 . . . Serisier supported the frondeurs, in part because of Mazarin's tax policies that seriously curtailed trade. . . . Even though Poussin shared the views of the frondeurs in their dislike of Mazarin, because of the harm the first minister had done to his French clients like Chantelou, the artist held back from committing himself. . . . In response to the current political upheavals in Paris, Poussin wrote of 'the stupidity and fickleness of the masses,'[2] 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. Poussin's statement may equally be applied to the crowds in ancient Athens that had in turn condemned and then rehabilitated Phocion. . . . [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" (pp. 303-306, 351).

McTighe states that my 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." I should point out that in addition to addressing politics, the picture of Phocion's widow draws attention to the role of gender in the reception of Poussin's paintings, in this case by his French clients. They easily could have compared Phocion's widow to heroines of the Fronde. This canvas shows how, through his creative process, Poussin imagined an interconnectedness between the ancient textual sources he used for his subjects and contemporary issues of politics and gender. Particularly because of its allusion to the Fronde, the picture likewise demonstrates the cultural function of image-making in the seventeenth century. If my discussion of female patrons of Poussin is brief, it is because they were almost nonexistent, although I make the point that Marie de' Medici supported the artist in his early years by employing him to help decorate the Palais du Luxembourg. Because other paintings fit better my theme of Heroines and Great Ladies, it is true that I omitted illustration and analysis of Poussin's two canvases purchased by women, *Holy Families*, made for Marie de Castille and Madame de Montmort.

Turning to another example of gender politics in my book, Poussin's *Coriolanus* apparently recalls the artist's own meditations on the Fronde. Concurrently, the picture shows the heroism of

Coriolanus's mother, Veturia, while a vulnerable, semi-nude allegorical figure representing Rome conflates the possibilities of sexual and armed aggression: "The artist's *Coriolanus* 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. . . . 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 the Fronde. . . . [Veturia] is more of a hero in this story than [Coriolanus] himself . . . [for he] remained obdurate . . . until his mother finally convinced him to end the siege. . . . Rome [is] symbolized as an unprotected woman [, allowing] slippage between military and sexual conquest" (pp. 351, 307-309).

The discussions above focus on specific examples of the kinds of analysis McTighe finds wanting in my text, and, if I have so far overlooked her word "overarching," I draw the reader's attention to parts one and two, where broader approaches to my topic are discussed, and to my conclusion, with its overview of my findings. For example, in my conclusion I point out how the issue of sexual politics entwines Poussin's subjects taken from Tasso with that poet's ideas: "Tasso's [*Gerusalemme liberata*] exposed the misogynistic biases of his age, as pointed out by Lucrezia Marinella in her contemporary feminist critique of his ideas.[3] . . . [She] condemned his class- and gender-obsessed bias when he asserted that only noble, heroic women may be excused from the constraints of moral custom. Tasso . . . 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.[4] . . . Because he mined Tasso for subjects of dramatic sexual conflict . . . Poussin . . . opened himself as well to feminist critique" (p. 345). [Both the aggressiveness and the reticence of Poussin's female protagonists taken from Tasso are discussed elsewhere in my book.]

McTigue faults my book for failing to take into account Poussin's patronage and the reception of his works, but these issues are indeed discussed in many pages. The artist's *Testament of Eudamidas*, for example, based on a story told by Lucian, shows how the fate of an impoverished mother and daughter is left to the mercy of a dying man's heirs. This painting thematized a politics of reception and how in Poussin's day, as in antiquity, women were especially vulnerable upon the death of their male relations. Women often could not inherit property and were left exposed to the generosity of male heirs. When Poussin's patron Michel Passart took possession of this picture, he was presented with a work devoid of obvious visual pleasure, one that was harsh and spare both in subject and style. Passart was asked to accept 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. 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. Given his positions and his duty to ensure that the expenses of the crown were made in the public interest, he would have had a special appreciation for the subject of this painting. Furthermore, the painting expresses Poussin's own ethical and political views. The subject of the picture reflects the artist's own words on the transitory nature of worldly goods that implicitly highlight the value of generosity and the public good: "We own nothing outright; all possession is merely temporary." [5]

McTighe's claim that I have neglected women's scholarship on Poussin is a big assertion considering that what she finds missing from my account are only four journal articles, two of

which are taken from Phillippa Plock's dissertation, which I cite. In response, I can point to my bibliography, which runs sixteen pages, a high number for any book. My bibliography includes 95 entries citing articles and books (including edited volumes) by women, a sizable total. Admittedly, I did overlook Lianne McTavish's article, "Reproducing Poussin," in which, among other things, she deconstructs the painter's reputation as an artistic intellectual and the idea that this trait was necessarily tied to his status as a male. I will focus, however, on another article mentioned by McTighe: Elizabeth Cropper's analysis of Poussin's two versions of *Achilles among the Daughters of Lycomedes*.<sup>[6]</sup> I believe Cropper's interpretation to be misleading. In her discussion of the Richmond painting, she says: "Achilles now gazes with pleasure upon his own beauty, still acting like one of the maidens he has been trained to imitate, even though he has drawn the sword. At this moment, the elegant and calmly posed Achilles in his woman's clothes is far more interested in admiring himself in the mirror . . . than in taking up the gleaming shield. . . . Regarding Achilles' self-affirmation, Poussin shows that the young hero must make a judgment of denial at the moment of his most intense pleasure before he can take up the sword and the story go forward."<sup>[7]</sup>

In my view, Cropper misreads Achilles's reaction to his image in the mirror. In my book I state that "[Achilles] 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,<sup>[8]</sup> where Achilles recognizes himself as a warrior and not a woman when he sees his reflection in the shield" (p. 293). Achilles is not merely indulging in a narcissistic moment by admiring his female beauty. Rather, more masculine-looking and more composed than in the Boston version, he admires himself wearing the helmet, an act that, like holding the sword, gives away his true sex. He realizes that he must set aside his disguise as a woman and embrace his role as a soldier. This point is emphasized also by Philostratus the Younger, in the French translation by Blaise de Vigenère known to Poussin. The painter catches the nuanced meaning of this text: "[Achilles,] whose proud comportment is linked to a tender delicacy, will soon reveal his true sex."<sup>[9]</sup> Cropper additionally interprets the Richmond canvas as political, a reading likewise emphasizing Achilles's moral failure in gazing at himself in the mirror with womanish, self-absorbed pleasure. She sees the painting as "a sort of portrait of the king [Louis XIV] and of the dangers of masquerade."<sup>[10]</sup> But if, as I believe, Achilles admiring himself in the helmet indicates his thinking ahead to his duty to fight in the Trojan war, Cropper's political interpretation doesn't work either.

McTighe further claims that my book includes little consideration of the influence of the theater on Poussin. However, among my many mentions of the stage (including a section on theater in part two under its own heading), in my analysis of Poussin's two *Achilles* pictures I examine not only males disguised as females in plays, but also parallels with Honoré d'Urfé's popular novel, *L'Astrée*. I wish that McTighe had dug a little deeper to find my discussions of the topics she failed to discover and to recognize the many new iconographic readings that I provide. I can only invite the readers to judge for themselves.

## NOTES

[1] Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace*, trans. Francis W. Kelsey (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), p. 657.

[2] Charles Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin* (Paris: J. Schemit, 1911), p. 406.

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- [3] Lucrezia Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. and trans. Anne Dunhill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 139.
- [4] Torquato Tasso, *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca*, ed. Maria Luisa Doglio (Palermo: Sellerio Editore, 1997), pp. 54-55.
- [5] Jouanny, *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, p. 197.
- [6] Elizabeth Cropper, "Conception and Deception: Poussin's Mirrors," *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 4 (1999): 76-95.
- [7] Cropper, "Conception and Deception," p. 81.
- [8] Statius, *Achilleid*, 1. 841-960.
- [9] Blaise de Vigenère, *Les images ou tableaux de platte peinture des deux Philostrates sophistes grecs* (Paris: l'Angelier, 1614), p. 566.
- [10] Cropper, "Conception and Deception," p. 91.

Troy Thomas  
Penn State University  
txt2@psu.edu

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