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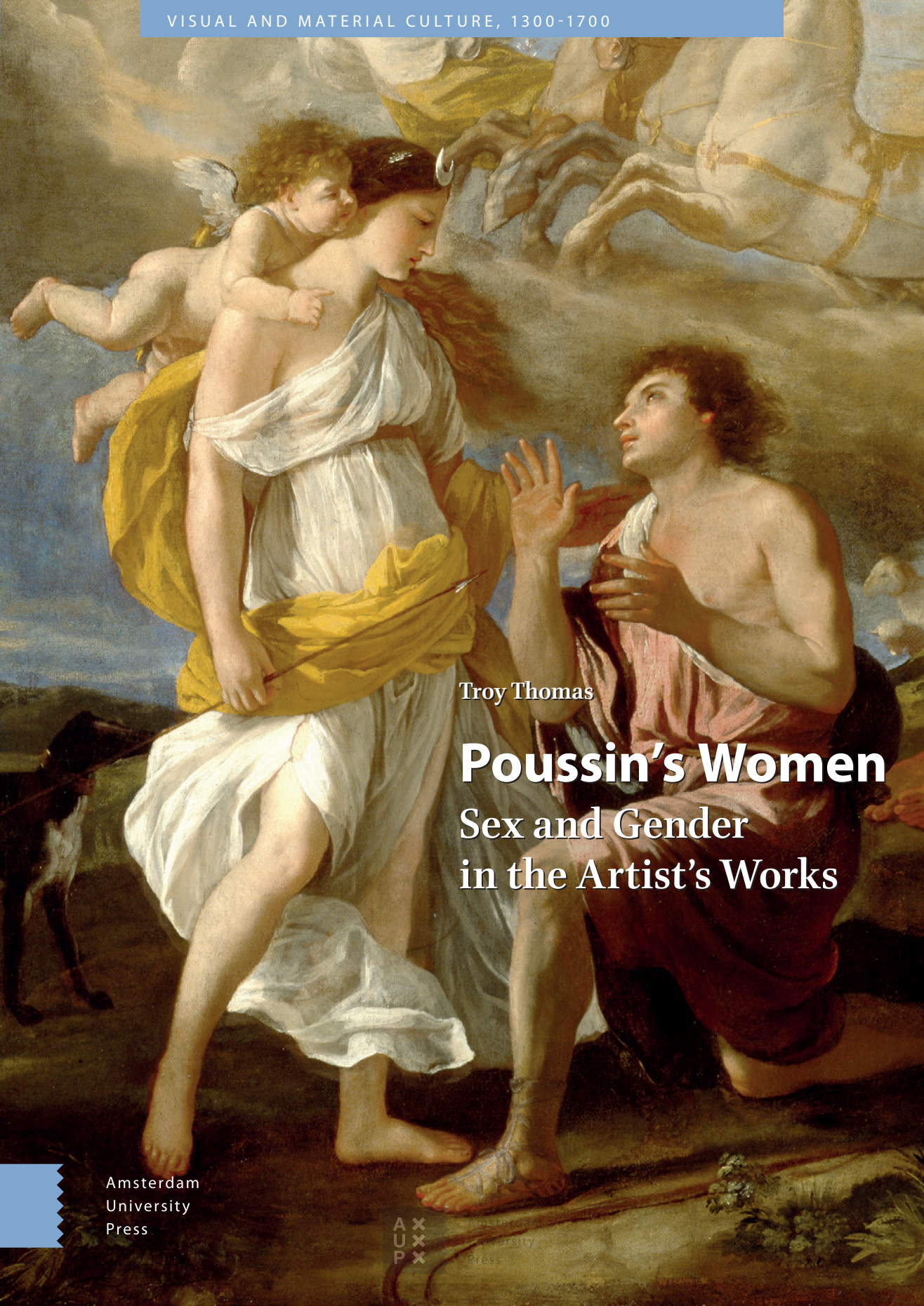

Troy Thomas

Poussin's Women

Sex and Gender in the Artist's Works

Amsterdam University Press

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Dr. Allison Levy, an art historian, has written and/or edited three scholarly books, and she has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards, from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Association of University Women, the Getty Research Institute, the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library of Harvard University, the Whiting Foundation and the Bogliasco Foundation, among others. www.allisonlevy.com.

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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

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agreeable'.[1] 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,[2] 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'.[3] 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 fumèe [...] 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 maistres*, p. 115: 'il composoit [...] beaux Païsages, où le spectateur se croit transporté dans l'ancienne Grece, & dans ces Vallées enchantées décrites par les Poëtes'.

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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.[4] 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.

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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.[5] 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.[6] 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.

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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.[7]

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.[8] 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'.[9] 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'.[10] 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.[11] 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*.

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metaphorically, acted with legal authority as a rapist, removing a young woman from her family,[12] 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.[13] 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 Moyne's *La gallerie 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.[14] All these points that illuminate Poussin's conceptions of women are discussed in further detail below. Cissie Fairchilds is more optimistic.[15] 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.[16] 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.

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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.[17] 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*,[18] 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,[19] are helpful in investigating Poussin's approach to representing otherness, as in is *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.[20] 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.[21] 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,[22] 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.

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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.[23] 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.[24] 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.[25] 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.[26] 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.

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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.[27] 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).[28] 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.

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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.[29] 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.

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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.[30] 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.[31] 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.

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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'.[32] 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.[33]

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*).[34] 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.[35] 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.

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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'.[36] 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.[37]

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'[38] 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.[39] 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'.[40] 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.

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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.[41] 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'.[42] 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',[43] 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'.[44] 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'.[45] 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 aquérir 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'.

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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.[46]

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,[47] 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.[48] 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.[49] 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.

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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

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and accidental';[50] 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'.[51] 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.[52]

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 ellemême, est si entraînante 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'.

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the hero of Poussin becomes] the interpreter of the Word'.[53] 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.

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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.[54] 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.[55] 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*.[56] 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.

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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'.[57] 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*'),[58] 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.

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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,[59] ideas sometimes demeaning of women. Félibien stressed the nobility of Poussin's 'congenial and agreeable' works,[60] 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,[61] 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.[62] 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 maistres*, p. 115.
62 Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, pp. 15-94.

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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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