

J. Vanessa Lyon

Figuring Faith and Female Power in the Art of Rubens

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For my grandmother, Dorothy Elizabeth (Betty) Caldwell Lyon,
a feminist dearly missed.



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Abbreviations

CRLB *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard: An Illustrated Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of Rubens*, 27 vols. (Brussels/London: various publishers, 1968–2019)



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Acknowledgements

There was a time, about a year before I finished the research on which this book is based, that a feminist approach to Rubens's art had begun to seem *retardataire*—done, even. It was the late 2000s and important and original studies of the role of gender in Rubens's paintings seemed poised to achieve a tipping point. Margaret Carroll's prescient indictment of baroque rape culture was followed by Svetlana Alpers's provocative Rubens book, Kristin Lohse Belkin's still-unsurpassed survey, Lisa Rosenthal's crucial *Gender, Politics, and Allegory*, and Sarah Cohen's brilliant, proto-queer analysis of the fluidly gendered 'France' in the Medici cycle. Add to these, studies of the Paris program by Geraldine Johnson, Fanny Cosandey, and Elizabeth McGrath and it becomes eminently clear, in retrospect, that this was a golden age for feminist art histories prompted by the works of a seventeenth-century Flemish artist celebrated for his paintings of 'fleshy' women.

A few years later my perspicacious colleague then at Grinnell College, Marika Knowles, encouraged me to return to my own Rubens project. Art History had already changed by that time, for while the Bush era had produced risk-taking and political work on early modern gender, the Obama years seemed to have slowed that work, having convinced at least some of us that it was no longer as necessary. With the advent of the next president, however, a book about active, agential woman rulers and representations of powerful female bodies that challenge masculinist and hetero norms started to seem relevant, and so, I took it up again.

Although the aforementioned studies loom large in my formation—along with emboldening feminist and queer readings by Patricia Reilly and Patricia Simons—my thinking and writing on Rubens and gender has been inspired, deepened, and productively tempered by my doctoral advisor at Berkeley, Elizabeth Honig. Having taught for a while now, I cannot imagine a more generous and preternaturally knowledgeable scholar and I am grateful for the exemplary—if inimitable—model she continues to provide; any missteps or oversights that follow are entirely my own.

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Prologue

In 1600, at the age of twenty-three, Rubens left Antwerp for Italy in search of gainful employment at an Italian court. Also in that year, Venice, Rubens's first port of call, saw the publication of two of the most influential and widely read northern Italian contributions to the *querelle des femmes*. It was the first time two such books by women had appeared simultaneously in the Republic. And it was more than coincidence. The books' contemporaneous publication attests to a surge of interest among Italian readers in women's responses to literary attacks on their nature by male authors as well as the diverse rhetorical tactics available to women who wished to defend their sex. The works are quite different in approach: Lucrezia Marinella's *On the Nobility and Excellence of Women* is a sharply reasoned humanistic rebuttal to *The Defects of Women* (Padua 1595 and 1599), an anti-feminist work by Gisueppe Passi.¹ Moderata Fonte's all-female dialogue, *The Worth of Women*, has been described by Virginia Cox as a more original and in some ways peerless polemic where the author, a married mother, launches fiery attacks on the institution of marriage and women's exclusion from education, among other sources of social inequality.²

Fonte died in childbirth before her book was published. But the posthumous work was dedicated by the author's daughter, Cecilia de' Zorzi, to the teenage duchess of Urbino, inscribing it further in the tradition of the courtly defense.³ Cox sees this seemingly arbitrary dedication, as "somewhat speculative" in view of the noble dedicatee's youth and lacking notoriety. When viewed as a strategic act of politesse, however, de' Zorzi may have intended to invoke an earlier duchess of Urbino, Elisabetta Gonzaga. Referred to simply as 'the Duchess,' the fictional version of this distant cousin of Baldassare Castiglione presides circumspectly over the discussion and definition of the court lady in Book 3 of the *Courtier*.⁴ Urbino, the dialogue's purported setting, and Mantua, home to one of the greatest Renaissance art collections, shared an historic association with learned women and the love of music, science, and above all painting. The aforementioned Elisabetta Gonzaga, portrayed by Titian in 1538, was the sister-in-law of Isabella d'Este, perhaps the greatest of all

1 Marinella's book was reprinted in 1601 and 1621. See Marinella, *Nobility and Excellence of Women*. For the stylistic and conceptual differences between these works and the "extraordinary" circumstance of their simultaneous publication, see Kolsky, "Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Giuseppe Passi."

2 Fonte [Modesta Pozzo], *Worth of Women*, 13ff.

3 For the dedicatory letter see, Fonte, *Worth of Women*, 27–28.

4 Castiglione, *Courtier*, 199–282.

Mantuan collectors and a cultivated humanist who had herself been instrumental in Castiglione's education.⁵

As a newcomer to Italy, Rubens, too, was to seek the favor and patronage of Mantuan nobility. Through the newly appointed governor of the Spanish Netherlands, the Archduke Albert, he was introduced to Vincenzo I Gonzaga, created duke of Mantua in 1587. Although Vincenzo is typically described as Rubens's primary Italian patron, the artist served equally at the pleasure of the duchess, Eleonora de' Medici. God-daughter of Pope Pius V, Eleonora was raised in the Pitti palace by a family the breadth and quality of whose artistic patronage was deemed vastly superior at the time to that of the less worldly Gonzaga. Little known today, Eleonora de' Medici was a celebrated figure in courtly circles until her early death in 1611. So great was her renown, in fact, that this eldest daughter of Francesco I de' Medici and Johanna of Austria was personified as an allegory of fame in a poem by Torquato Tasso.⁶

There is no documentary evidence that Rubens read Fonte and Marinella or the popular and often reprinted proto-feminist books and pamphlets that followed their lead.⁷ But his general interest in and eagerness to procure recent publications makes it possible. Rubens had books brought to him from throughout Europe concerning everything from classical archeology, astronomy, and philosophy to the latest religious controversies. His close relationship with Antwerp's leading publisher, Balthasar Moretus, whose Plantin-Moretus press was the official publisher of the Catholic church—suggests that he kept himself well-apprised of the latest cultural discourses.⁸

In Mantua, more relevantly, Rubens had found himself court portraitist at a duchy presided over by a Medici noblewoman who would choose to have herself portrayed (also in 1600) not by him but by a female artist from Bologna, Lavinia Fontana.⁹ Fontana was heavily influenced by the strident prescriptions of Tridentine enforcers such as her countryman, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, author of the influential *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* (1582; published in Latin in 1594). Cultivating honor as an exceptional woman, Fontana was one of many late cinquecento artists to prize religious orthodoxy over invention, submitting herself to a rigid aesthetic asceticism praised as the cure for mannerism's sensuality and self-indulgence.

5 On the historiographical gendering of Isabella's unconventional collecting habits, see San Juan, "Court Lady's Dilemma."

6 See Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 109 and 208, no. 91, for Tasso's "Alla Fama: in lode della sernis. Sig. Eleonora de Medici, principesa di Mantova" (1587).

7 For a general overview of Rubens's possible library, which was not documented until 1613, when the Plantin House began to record its transactions with Rubens, see Baudouin, "Rubens and his Books," 231–46.

8 Magurn, ed. and trans., *Letters*, 12–13. Rubens's correspondence is punctuated with references to controversial and difficult-to-obtain current titles; see, for example, letter nos. 53, 79, 101, 106, and 128.

9 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 109.

Rubens had indeed arrived in Italy at a transitional moment. While in artistic circles, the grip of Paleotti (d. 1597) and the Milanese Archbishop Charles Borromeo (d. 1585) was beginning to loosen, a new approach to Catholic art had yet to be codified. With Caravaggio's unflinching naturalism at one extreme and Domenichino's icy idealism at the other, the conceptual and technical parameters of Counter-Reformation painting were very much in flux in 1600.¹⁰ The strictures of the church and the absence of inimitable and idiosyncratic artists such as Bronzino, Pontormo, and Rosso had seemingly combined to produce a stylistic and critical quandary at the start of the new century, when even the philosophical underpinnings of representation and mimesis were interrogated for their conformity to the bishops' decrees.

Widely disseminated by humanist commentators, above all the Florentine Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), Platonism remained the philosophical school most associated with the flowering of the Renaissance. By the turn of the seventeenth century, however, the clerical and academic institutions that made the rules were leaning toward, or more accurately, returning to, Aristotelian principles (one example of which was the resurgence of the trope of 'judicious selection' from many ideals as opposed to the representation of a pre-existing (and perfect) Platonic Idea). Together with the expectation that sacred art take a selectively empirical approach, was the privileging of implicitly gendered masculine *line* over feminine *color*. "Thus as Aristotle says in the *Poetics*," writes Paleotti, echoing the sentiments of the artist-biographer, Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), "a picture filled with vivid colors, but that does not resemble, will be judged inferior to one made of simple lines that does resemble, the reason being that the colors in the first are an accident of pictorial art, whereas the success of the latter in expressing the thing selected for imitation is the foundation and vigor of pictorial art."¹¹ The Aristotelian ascendancy had a devastating effect on early modern conceptions of sex difference and femaleness, an outcome mirrored and catalyzed by Counter-Reformation visual culture. The church's fear of (seeing) pious and active women in life and art may provide an explanation for the close succession of the two Tridentine decrees most relevant to this book's subject. These rubrics, both approved at the tail end of the final session of 1563, are: "On The Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images" and "Provision is Made for the Enclosure of Nuns [...]." Where the former dictated that "all lasciviousness" be avoided, prohibiting saintly images "painted and adorned with seductive charm," the latter provided that "no nun shall after her profession be permitted to go out of the monastery, even for a brief period under any pretext whatever."¹²

¹⁰ For a concise account of this 'anti-theoretical' moment, see Wittkower et al., *Art and Architecture in Italy*, 14.

¹¹ Paleotti, *Sacred and Profane Images*, 107.

¹² Schroeder, trans., *Canons and Decrees*, 220, 224.

The Triumph of Thomas Aquinas

When approaching a classical author such as Aristotle, especially following the doctrinaire prescriptions of the Council of Trent, it was advisable for Catholic readers to rely on the approved readings of a Christian intermediary. There was no more sanctioned Christian interpreter of the Philosopher than the Dominican scholar and exegete, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). The ‘Angelic Doctor,’ as Aquinas was known, had devoted his life to the difficult project of fitting classical Aristotelian philosophy to medieval Christian theology. Many of Aquinas’s concordist propositions were deeply controversial from the time of his death until the zenith of anti-scholastic Christian humanism in the early sixteenth century. Ultimately, however, Thomistic theology was officially incorporated into the dogma of the Catholic church at the close of the Tridentine council. From that point forward and for the first time, Thomism assumed its place as the font of Catholic teaching and the source of approved doctrine and canon law.¹³

In terms of its wide-reaching impact on spiritual practice and belief, concretely felt by lay and religious women attempting to pursue an ‘active’ or public apostolate, the Catholic church’s vindication of Thomism in the sixteenth century was akin to the (re)discovery of Aristotle in the middle ages. In both periods, women’s rights were severely curtailed by ecclesiastical and doctrinal reforms. As Sharon Farmer has explained, in 1210, Pope Innocent III, fearful that certain abbesses had assumed *de facto* clerical status, proscribed them from such activities as preaching and hearing confession. These and other medieval women—well-known mystics, and powerfully connected nuns among them—had achieved a significant measure of social and political capital. In response to these gains, contemporaneous commentaries on Aristotle’s works provided a foundation for more socially conservative eleventh- and twelfth-century ecclesiology by providing biological and ‘natural’ rationales for the social and cultural disparities based on sex difference. As Farmer states, “Thomas Aquinas’s comments on women are indicative of the degree to which thirteenth-century theologians were receptive to Aristotle’s views of women.”¹⁴

Nonetheless, it is Aquinas who argues that “only as regards nature in the individual is the female something defective and *manqué*,” thereby mitigating, to a slight degree, the Aristotelian explanation of woman as a ‘lacking male’ deprived of full humanity. To be sure, as individuals, women were weak and derivative. Yet in Aquinas’s view the female sex, as a “species as a whole,” could not be understood as defectively lacking because God Himself had created it for the work of procreation—albeit a procreation in which male semen is the operative element.

13 Colish, “St. Thomas Aquinas in Historical Perspective,” 440. As Colish points out, its adoption by not only the Dominicans, as would be expected, but also by the Jesuits provides one explanation for the dominance of Thomism (or ‘Thomisms’) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

14 Farmer, “Persuasive Voices,” 520.

"The procreativity of a female is the result either of the debility of the active power, of some unsuitability of the material, or of some change effected by external influences," Aquinas had claimed. Yet "the active power in the seed of the male tends to produce something like itself, perfect in masculinity."¹⁵ This deft rhetorical and philosophical move, with which Aquinas simultaneously frames femaleness as a genetic mishap, delegitimizes women's role in generation, and privileges the creative and 'productive' role of the male, had a powerful influence on the conception and self-conception of the early modern (male) artist. Adopting a Thomistic worldview, the male artist might recognize himself as an authorized and superior image-maker having been made (more perfectly than any woman) in the image of God. Rubens's early philosophical mentor, the Neostoic Justus Lipsius, had actually doubled this notion back on itself, making *artists* the model for the Creator, when he referred to a perpetually inventive God as being, "like an Image-maker," who "formeth and frameth to himselfe sundrie sortes of portratures in his clay."¹⁶ It is based in part on Aquinas's ideas that Vasari was able to portray Michelangelo as 'divine,' that is, as a co-Creator with God of sublimely lifelike forms.¹⁷

Having arrived in Rome in his early twenties at the height of the continental Counter-Reformation it is not surprising that Rubens would begin to develop a modern understanding of sex and gender dictated less by the residual mystical Neoplatonic ambiguities of Michelangelo's age than the burgeoning Neoscholasticism of the post-Tridentine church. There were fateful implications for what it meant to be, and to represent, a woman during this Aristotelian cultural turn. But one crucial constant remained. For both Plato and Aristotle, the elision of femininity and beauty was necessary to a theory of sex difference. Femaleness and beauty were moralized by the Greek philosophers and their early Christian interlocutors, but to distinct ends. Where, for example, Neoplatonism embraced female beauty's capacity to reflect an interior moral goodness, Aristotelianism, and the exegetical literalism derived from it, rejected such claims in favor of a view of female beauty as superficial, "accidental," and dangerously deceptive.¹⁸ This early modern outlook was grounded in oppositional masculine/feminine dualities of the sort exemplified in Aristotle's *Physics*. But it was also anticipated by patristic and medieval commentaries on the original inequality of Adam and Eve, and was generally endorsed

15 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.92.1 (p. 37), cited in Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 92–93. For an overview of Aquinas's approach to Aristotle, and subsequent interpretations of this particular 'woman' question, phrased by Aquinas as "Should woman have been made in that original creation of things?" see Allen, *Concept of Woman*, II, 91–101, 127–51.

16 Lipsius, *Two Bookes of Constancie*, 40.

17 On this subject see Campbell, "Fare una Cosa Morta Parer Viva," 597.

18 See, for example, the discussion of Ficino's synthesis of Plato and Christian theology in Maclean, *Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 24.

by seventeenth-century Neostoical philosophers no less than reforming Catholic theologians.¹⁹

The Pythagorean binary structure at the heart of Aristotle's outlook may even be partly responsible for the Renaissance fascination with dueling conceits and competing sides.²⁰ However, Counter-Reformation Italy, too, was a time and place for sophisticated artistic *paragone*. Within Italian, and especially Roman, artistic circles the relative supremacy of color and design, painting and sculpture, and Northern and Italian painting were continually contested—even by interested non-artists such as Galileo Galilei (1564–1642).²¹ Under the incontrovertible decrees of Trent, however, the terms of debate had become greatly refined, the range of potentially affected subjects, generally increased, and the punishment for rhetorical or doctrinal errors, more severe. Galileo would discover this in 1633 as a notorious victim of the Roman Inquisition, condemned to life imprisonment for his embrace of Copernicanism. Although Rubens is often characterized as a hidebound Catholic, his social networks while in Italy suggest a certain openness, or at least scientific curiosity, that could at times have been at odds with the church. Rubens and Galileo moved in the same scholarly circles while in Rome; the painter maintained ties to the astronomer's Lincean Academy. Rubens was also part of the related group of Northern ex-patriots devoted to Lipsius, himself briefly a Lutheran, and the long-time teacher of Rubens's brother, Philip.²²

But even in less elite, more socially diverse spheres of European society, one of the most popularly debated topics was the proper social, moral, spiritual, and biological status of men and women. Addressed more and more by female writers, the 'woman question' rapidly gained in popularity during Rubens's lifetime, reaching a publishing climax in the second quarter of the seventeenth century. The height of the *querelle* coincided with the widest reach and enforcement of Tridentine decrees. Thus for Catholic women, whose very humanity was continually debated on the basis of biblical and philosophical proofs, the Aristotelian propositions resurrected in Trent rang new changes on old themes. Constraint of women's activity was the requirement, whether their gregarious mouths, roving intellects, or gadabout bodies. And yet, while earthly liberties were being summarily curtailed for mortal women an even greater spiritual status was being accorded to female saintliness.

19 The literature on the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the Counter-Reformation is extensive but see, for example, the classic works by Evennett, *Spirit of the Counter-Reformation*, and Wright, *Counter-Reformation*. See also Comerford, ed., *Early Modern Catholicism*.

20 See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.5, 986a22.

21 Finding it the more difficult to achieve, the astronomer concluded that "excellence in painting is very much more admirable than in sculpture." See the letter (c.1612) from Galileo Galilei to the painter Cigoli, in Enggass and Brown, eds., *Sources*, 24.

22 On the Academy, see Baldriga, *L'occhio della lince*; Freedberg, *Eye of the Lynx*.

On the one hand, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed Trent's forced cloister of nuns and the punitively literal and painfully physical bridling of women deemed unruly gossips or scolds. On the other hand, a new-found spiritual fervor arose for holy women such as the biblical Mary Magdalene and modern-day religious such as Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) and Jeanne de Chantal (1571–1642), foundresses of religious Orders in Spain and France, respectively. An astonishing uptick in Marian devotion manifested itself in the contemporary fascination with the Immaculate Conception, a doctrine with medieval origins. A similarly renewed enthusiasm for the doctrine of the Assumption, Mary's effective resurrection and heavenly coronation after an earthly death, increased demands for presentations of the middle-aged Mary as an unstained Virgin rising from her terrestrial grave. Less and less was the Assumed Virgin portrayed as a vigorous and powerful woman. More and more the Immaculate Mary reverted to the humble, often girlish, type of the Virgin at prayer or in a passive state of rest, her downcast eyes foreclosing the viewer's direct engagement. The seventeenth-century church's zealous promulgation of the Immaculate Conception is therefore perhaps the clearest example of the post-Tridentine endorsement of extraordinary (and biologically impossible) femininity over against an essentially flawed, if normative, female nature. Rubens, like Velázquez, came into his own as a Spanish subject at precisely this watershed moment in Catholic spirituality. His was a time when visual culture was newly entrusted not merely to reflect contemporary visions of desirable womanhood but to create and prescribe them as well.

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Introduction

The women Rubens chose to paint are what are known as fat women, and therefore to many Rubens is a vulgar painter. But a loftier vision was never bestowed on man. Rubens's women are beautiful, but they are not what the man in the street regards as a pretty woman. They are his own women, and they are women—not creatures without beards or mustaches. And he praises us all the while in his own benign fashion.

– George Moore, *The Lake* (1905)¹

Writing from the southern Netherlands in 1781, Sir Joshua Reynolds opined that among Rubens's deficiencies as a painter, “we may reckon beauty in his female characters: sometimes indeed they make approaches to it; they are healthy and comely women, but seldom, if ever, possess any degree of excellence.”² While Reynolds helped establish a now-standard characterization of the women Rubens painted, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term ‘Rubenesque’ was not generally in use until around 1815. In that year, it was rather benignly employed by a contributor to the English *Repository of Arts* to describe typically Rubensian (ornamental) accessories such as ribbons and flowers.³ By 1834, however, the adjective had taken on many of the negative anatomical connotations for which it has since been known.⁴ It appeared in “The Lover of Beauty; or Which will He Wed?,” a romance anonymously published in a London science and arts monthly known as *The Analyst*. The ‘He’ of the story is a vain and “idolatrous” bachelor captain who falls physically in love with a pretty but vapid distant female relation only to fall cerebrally in love with a less-than-conventionally attractive and/but highly intelligent female wit (in the end, the same person!). Recoiling at his first sight of the woman in question, the captain complains: “of her figure we are reluctantly compelled to speak less flatteringly, a single glimpse was sufficient to indicate that it had never been moulded by the graces [...] it was, in truth, broad and cumbrous, we may say Rubenesque.”⁵

1 Moore, *Lake*, 158.

2 Reynolds, *Journey to Flanders*, 148.

3 *Repository of Arts*, no pag.

4 Lamster, “L’Esthétique du ‘more is more,’” 28, incorrectly dates the first anglophone appearance of ‘Rubenesque’ to a 1913 edition of the English magazine *Maclean’s* in an article that begins with the usual contrast of “Rubens’s women” to today’s “minimalist” women and emaciated models.

5 Anon., “Lover of Beauty; or Which will He Wed?,” 405.

In the centuries since his death in 1640, Rubens has often been associated with women. Undoubtedly, the superficial reason for this is the prominence and characteristic appearance of female figures in his art. Given the historical circumstances of his art-making, however, studies of Rubens might just as easily have focused on the Flemish painter's exceptional cohort of strong-minded and powerful female patrons and the historical and iconographical meanings of the many influential women in his life and work. Feminist in its investments and aims, this book takes for granted the importance of women, not only as a sex—or as sex objects—but as gendered actors in Rubens's art. In foregrounding Rubens's representations of women's bodies and female agency within the contexts of early modern court culture and Catholic theology, I appeal to the "figurative power of gender as a thinking resource that exceeds its own particular issue to become a critical instrument for undoing hierarchy and encountering alterity."⁶ This aptly transdisciplinary paraphrase of the literary theorist and cultural critic Gayatri Spivak, by the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, gets at gender's capacity to reorient, or refigure, real social and political relationships both through and beyond symbolic female forms and fantasies. Looking at and thinking about Rubens's representations of women critically and anew has the potential to uncover the complex, at times radical, nature of his conceptions of gender, conceptions in which masculinity and femininity, far from separable, are mutually constitutive.

More surprisingly, as I hope to show, a fresh consideration of the gendering of female forms in Rubens's art might even change Rubens himself, allowing us to view him not only as a painter of women but as a women's painter. For although, as Geraldine Johnson summed it up, Rubens "devoted a significant portion of his career to painting images either for or of women," Rubens is seldom thought of as an ally in the spirit of the female protagonist in the Edwardian novel from which this chapter's epigraph is taken.⁷ If her words are any indication, during the suffragist interim between the Victorian age and the roaring twenties, a woman's beauty was determined by her body shape and size measured against masculinist convention; then, as now, a fat woman was a vulgar woman. Many art historians, revealing a dismayingly similar outlook, have routinely aligned pronouncements on the quality of Rubens's art with contemporary, mainstream, prescriptions of female beauty. When the strong and vigorous, well-nourished women on Rubens's canvases have failed to emulate the wan and anemic beauty norms of successive eras, the painter has been deemed uncouth and his art derided as crude and excessive. Over the last three centuries, chauvinists and other fat-phobic writers of all genders—his champions among them—have viewed Rubens's lauded erudition and judiciousness as somehow in opposition to the (implicitly poor) choices he made of whom and how to paint. Even, perhaps

6 Pollock, "Whither Art History?," 16.

7 Johnson, "Pictures Fit for a Queen," 447.

especially, now, what has become the notoriously Rubenesque female form continues to be seen by many as a lapse in personal judgment and a failure of cultural taste.

It was not always so. That the female figures Rubens painted were less than beautiful was not, it seems, a possibility for seventeenth-century viewers, who sometimes faulted his portrayal of men, but generally gave him top marks for producing lovely women. It is both ironic and unsurprising that to early modern beholders of Rubens's works, abstractions—the intangible virtues, vices, concepts, and ideas he typically rendered as female—had never seemed more titillatingly immediate and moving. Astounded by his capacity to approximate the physicality of human bodies as well as their everyday gestures and attitudes, viewers of Rubens's day faced the challenge of recognizing his seductively sensual, real-world women as disembodied notions in his secular works and, perhaps more confusingly, as stalwart biblical heroines or paragons of chastity in his devotional art. There is, of course, a significant male population in Rubens's world. This book will argue, however, that as his career advances, female figures increasingly bear the burden of meaning-making, assuming an ever-greater formal and compositional presence as well as more iconographically complex roles in his art.

It is my belief that this is as true of Rubens's religious pictures as of his modern histories, civic allegories, portraits, and mythological subjects. Nonetheless, it is these latter genres, presumed to be more receptive to psychoanalytical and cultural theory, that have proven most engaging to a secularized academy. These are the works that have received the greater part of scholarly attention in the Rubens monographs, case studies, and exhibitions of the last several decades. Significantly, Rubens's mythological and allegorical works are also the shared focus of the most unapologetically feminist studies of his art. Allied with Marina Warner's foundational work on gender and personification, many breakthrough studies of Rubens's allegorical works highlight their propagandistic, yet also polysemous, messages. Among other things, feminist authors have pointed to eroticized figural abstractions that depend on contemporary early modern stereotypes of femaleness while having nothing to do with the historical experience of women themselves.⁸ Since the late 1980s, when they began to achieve critical mass, investigations of the role of gender in Rubens's works have produced provocative and revelatory accounts not only of major paintings and recurring themes but of early modern masculinity's constructed nature (something long observed of femininity) and of women's contributions to seventeenth-century politics and culture at large.

It would therefore be impossible to shed new light on the representation of powerful women and female power in Rubens's religious art and devotional subjects, without drawing on field-changing feminist studies of his secular works by Svetlana Alpers, Kristin Lohse Belkin, Margaret Carroll, Sarah R. Cohen, Geraldine Johnson,

8 See, for example, Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*.

Elizabeth McGrath, and Lisa Rosenthal.⁹ However, in these and other histories of baroque art, feminist and women's and gender and sexuality studies have had a complicated and uncertain relationship with historical theology and church history—and all of the above fields with Queer theory and LGBTQ studies. This need not be the case, as the feminist historical theologian Margaret Miles has shown. Miles's scholarly foci and innovative methods required her to turn to images for information about women's lives and their representation unavailable in texts. In classic studies such as *Image as Insight* and *Carnal Knowing*, she demonstrates that art history's fundamentally interdisciplinary nature can, in fact, sustain fruitful crosspollination between these fields.¹⁰ But if, as Miles has written, “the power of images to crystallize and communicate religious ideas and sensibilities is a point that must still be made in religious studies,” art history in general, and especially studies of Rubens, would similarly benefit from theologically sensitive, but no less emancipatory, queer-of-color and feminist-minded approaches to the artist's religious works.¹¹

Toward articulating a “critical theology of liberation,” feminist biblical studies scholar and theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has stressed the difference between a restorative “hermeneutics of sympathy” and (*pace* Ricoeur) the more necessary and dangerous “hermeneutics of suspicion.” As the latter “attempts to decode meanings that are concealed,” it must recognize that, not unlike gender, “the Bible is to be understood as a tool of power that, as such, inspires acts of discrimination and oppression or acts and visions of liberation.”¹² Where the bible and its narratives are concerned, rather than sympathetically assuming or projecting Rubens's un/problematic orthodoxy, it is important that scholars of art and religion attempt to discern the full range of interpretive possibilities in his images. Like the feminist exegete, the feminist historian of religious art decodes meanings knowing that “one of the most effective means of concealment is the function of androcentric language that claims to be generic language.”¹³ Because I believe that androcentric language can be analogous to androcentric imagery, or visual rhetoric, in works of art—and certainly to the androcentric linguistics of art history—I have been guided by Schüssler Fiorenza's revisionist framework in a project similarly concerned with decoding and unveiling the meanings behind and beneath self-consciously figurative material. When confronting the portrayal of women for and within the historically masculinist institution of the Christian church, our hermeneutical suspicions are always warranted.

9 Alpers, *Making of Rubens*; Belkin, *Rubens*; Carroll, “Erotics of Absolutism”; Cohen, “Rubens's France”; Johnson, “Pictures Fit for a Queen”; McGrath, “Tact and Topical Reference”; Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics, and Allegory*.

10 “Exploration of the interdependence of religion, gender, and culture requires an interdisciplinary approach to historical evidence.” Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 12.

11 Valantassis, ed., *Subjective Eye*, p. xxvi.

12 Plaskow and Schüssler Fiorenza, “Martin Marty Award Conversation,” 174.

13 Plaskow and Schüssler Fiorenza, “Martin Marty Award Conversation,” 174.

This is that much truer of the art of Rubens, whose Catholicism rarely goes unmentioned. Skepticism about the sincerity of Rubens's faith, and the sincerity of the Catholic church itself, is sprinkled, for example, throughout the critical works of Reynolds and Ruskin. By contrast, other scholars writing in the wake of Enlightenment anti-clericalism (which included the suppression of the Jesuits by Pope Clement XIV in 1773) have deemed Rubens an uncritical church lackey who accepted reactionary Counter-Reformation doctrine whole cloth. This is not a book that seeks to define Rubens's personal religious beliefs, the specifics of which we have no real way of knowing, but which are perhaps more complicated than is often assumed. I would go so far as to claim, however, that Rubens's images provide proof of his faith in Catholic praxis as something central to modern life, from which the spiritual was never separate or absent. In this respect, I find myself at odds with the author of *The Catholic Rubens*, who contends that for Protestant viewers like himself it is a "confessional error" to attribute his altarpieces "merely to Rubens's personal, subjective piety" when they are more properly seen as public mechanisms of Catholic renewal.¹⁴ To my (Episcopalian) mind the error—still repeated in histories directed at a suspicious or antagonistic 'us' of monolithic Protestant or atheist readers—comes in failing to grasp that the instrumental intent of his art takes nothing away from the subtlety of Rubens's spiritual discernment or his subjectivity as a seventeenth-century Catholic. Moreover, it is consistent with the complex nature of identity that Rubens, the early modern painter, never operated in the world as solely either Catholic, male, aspirationally noble, German-born Flemish, or (presumably) attracted to women, but was rather known and knew himself as the sum of these inextricable parts. I do agree with Sauerländer that Rubens's "mythological and ecclesiastic pictures are one," a fact attributable to his figurative understanding of the historicity, and typological progression, of the church. In sum, the Catholic Rubens is for me the only Rubens.

In post-iconoclasm Antwerp, perhaps even more than in Rome, where similar acts of vandalism and violence had not occurred, enforcing the proper veneration of the *sacro imago* was an essential Catholic rejoinder to the Reformers, who had privileged the word and the ear over the image and the eye.¹⁵ Analyzing Rubens's religious works in comparison with representations of similar themes and narratives by both earlier and contemporary artists allows us to see that many of his compositions—despite establishing artistic norms for subsequent Counter-Reformation imagery—were highly original, even unorthodox, at the time of their creation. As I will suggest, this is often most appreciable in his representations of women in/as religious subjects.

A disclaimer is nonetheless in order. For even if Rubens presented his viewers with a palpably new kind of female agency by finding novel, highly naturalistic, modes through which to propagandize female power—which I believe he did—it

14 Sauerländer, *Catholic Rubens*, 274.

15 Herremans, "Legitimate Use of Images," 118.

would be both anachronistic and inaccurate to consider the painter a feminist. As Carroll and Rosenthal have persuasively argued, some of his classical and mythological imagery, specifically that dating from c.1612–20, blatantly promotes not only conventional asymmetries of sex and power but the inevitability of rape, toward baldly patriarchal, absolutist ends. In a bracing, now-canonical article, Carroll calls on readers to register Rubens's valorization of the divine-right sovereign's subjugation of *his* tacitly feminized people through masterful and violent "mystifications of sexuality—with their seductive fictions of conquest and capitulation."¹⁶ But what, one wonders, about the female sovereign in need of power and promotion? To suggest that Rubens thought differently, and differently over time, about 'pagan' historical women, or mythological goddesses, or women as a sex, or particular female saints, is merely to acknowledge that not all women were created equal by him. Beyond this claim, as I have indicated, is the more interesting possibility that along with the circumstances of his family life and his employment and patronage, his views on women and how they might be figured in his art changed.

Figura versus Allegory

There is no doubt that Rubens had a figural type. Earthy, full-breasted, and voluptuous in some cases, athletic and muscular in others, the women in his art evince weightiness, vitality, and volume. With their rosy cheeks and typically pale, dimpled flesh, they are, more often than not, meant to appear both beautiful and natural, subtly idealized yet nonetheless approaching what we might today term realistic. While evocative of copiousness, their presence is neither gratuitous nor 'merely' decorative. In fact, when understood as powerfully built, thriving, and physically capable rather than abnormal, distorted, or decadently obese, the Rubenesque woman embodies, in an almost talismanic manner, transcendence of the "Pestilence and Famine" Rubens refers to as "those inseparable partners of War." Whether she is fully clad or baring a breast, her robust physique shows as much as it tells of desirable surfeit, health, and invulnerability to the violent acts of enemy soldiers and other invaders so familiar to the citizens of Rubens's long besieged Flanders.¹⁷

Through their scale, iconographical attributes, compositional groupings, and expressive gestures, women are commonly charged by Rubens with communicating what mattered most to him. As Kristin Lohse Belkin writes, "even in Rubens's religious paintings, women often express the emotional content of the narrative."¹⁸ Indeed, their emotive, *metaphysicality* exceeds the purely symbolic, just as their

16 Carroll, "Erotics of Absolutism," 101.

17 Rubens to Justus Sustermans, Antwerp, 12 March 1638, in Magurn, ed. and trans., *Letters*, no. 242, p. 408.

18 Belkin, *Rubens*, 8.

natural-seeming behavior and appearances belie the fact that they have been precisely animated and stilled at a predetermined point in a narrative that, pictorially at least, has neither a beginning nor an end.¹⁹ Creating believably human forms and performances is the inner drive of Rubens's artistic project. Yet even the realest-seeming women in many of his religious works are not solely employed as carriers of emotion, any more than they are employed solely to represent themselves. Beyond serving as eroticized containers of abstract concepts or recognizable feelings, or providing flattering portraits of actual persons, the women in Rubens's religious works frequently act as typological forms of expression, or *figurae*. Simultaneously standing for themselves and something or someone historically elsewhere, they embody Catholic ideas of sacred or spiritual fulfilment projected in the fullness of time.

Species of metaphor are not always distinguished in studies of visual art. Yet one thing this book suggests is that, anchored as they are in a tradition of Christian exegesis in tension with Greek philosophy and rhetoric, Rubens's truly *figurative* pictures are importantly different from the immense number of works that are generally considered his allegories. Although both modes rely on metaphor's substitution of one thing for another, often in order to teach openly while revealing covertly, the nature of the relationship between the two 'things' in question is not the same. In art this has meant that allegories employ a representational form concretely present to the viewer as a means of invoking a disembodied idea located notionally off-site. Allegory's potential for obfuscation and ambiguity, if not outright deception, is frequently heightened by an unexpected or counter-intuitive allegorical combination that might produce cognitive dissonance in more thoughtful viewers.²⁰ Consider, for example, a 'beautiful' unclothed woman holding a maquette of the sun and intended as Truth. Although her nakedness cannot but sexualize the female figure, a personification of Truth is to be understood metaphorically as unadulterated or innocent, yet also encouraging her own revelation or disrobement. Similarly, the sun, productive of heat and physical brightness, stands for enlightenment, metaphorically meant as knowledge, or more properly, its discovery. But 'knowing,' too, carries a euphemistically sexual, biblical valence, such that the beholder might be forgiven for asking him/her/themselves what it would mean to truly *know* such a captivating Truth.²¹

While taking a turn around a Roman Palazzo one day, Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689) is said to have responded to Bernini's voluptuous allegorical sculpture of *Verità* in just this manner.²² According to a 1668 biography, the once-Lutheran Catholic convert wryly observed to the cardinal accompanying her that it was "good that all

19 On the manner in which Rubens sacrifices drama for clarity by separating action from meaning in his early allegories, see the germinal article by Alpers, "Manner and Meaning in Some Rubens Mythologies."

20 Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory*, 3.

21 For this personification allegory in an eighteenth-century context see Sheriff, "Naked Truth."

22 On Bernini and Christina see Zirpolo, "Christina of Sweden's Patronage of Bernini."

truths are not marble.”²³ Placed on the lips of Christina, an enthusiastic collector of art and alleged libertine reputedly “of the humour of Sappho,” the remark is a queer one on many levels. In works such as Bernini’s, allegory draws the viewer in by ‘other-speaking,’ quite often by ventriloquizing its message through eroticized or idealized female forms offered to the public gaze (the Greek *allos* means other; *agoreuein*, to speak in the assembly).²⁴ Because it is sometimes less than forthcoming, and often strategically so, allegory’s meaningful connections can easily and intentionally slip into a realm of seeming arbitrariness, where, as Walter Benjamin memorably observed of allegorical German baroque mourning plays, “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else.”²⁵ A lack of (obvious) correspondence between what is seen and what is signified is consequently a common allegorical quality.

But if allegorical arbitrariness hovers at one end of the metaphorical spectrum, figurative logic occupies the other. *Figurae*, unlike allegories, are interrelated and contingent, their two parts resemble rather than diverge from one another. Though articulated through linear and teleological human histories, *figurae* find their ultimate temporality in eschatological, Godly time, or *kairos*, as opposed to human, calendrical time, or *chronos*.²⁶ That many of the powerful female figures in Rubens’s religious art might be understood as at once historical, anachronistic, and prophetic has to do with the nature of *figura* herself. Grammatically feminine and synonymous with corporeality, figures—theologically *figurae*—have a typological structure. Within a Christian context figuration implies predictive and moralistic relationships between Old Testament and New Testament *types*—and here we can include persons as well as events and circumstances—across time and place, and well beyond the bible. While Erich Auerbach, still the authority on *figura*’s semantic history, had literature in mind when he outlined the hermeneutical practice, figural interpretation can and should be transposed to the visual realm. Its structure allows art historians to similarly propose a “connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first.”²⁷ Auerbach’s definition, synthesizing the development of *figura* from Terence to Dante, relies on an orientation to history that is generally different from that of allegory, which presents and represents abstractions as ageless and eternal. As Auerbach goes on to explain:

23 Åkerman, *Queen Christina of Sweden*, 305. “‘Je le crois bien,’ repartit la Reine dans le même instant, ‘toutes les vérités ne sont pas de marbre’”; cited by Arckenholtz, *Memoires concernant Christine Reine de Swede* (Amsterdam, 1751), 518. Christina noted in her memoirs “that after reading Sappho in the original Greek she finally understood the nature of her true feelings for women.” See Stein, “Iconography of Sappho,” 27.

24 For key studies (and bibliographies) of allegory, see, for example, Greenblatt, ed., *Allegory and Representation*, esp. Fineman, “Structure of Allegorical Desire”; Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery*, 26–48; Baskins and Rosenthal, eds., *Early Modern Visual Allegory*, 1–10.

25 Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 175.

26 Minear, “Time and the Kingdom,” 81.

27 Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 53.

The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life. Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act, but this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions; these are quite secondary, since promise and fulfillment are real historical events, which have either happened in the incarnation of the Word, or will happen in the second coming.²⁸

While there are important distinctions between allegory and *figura*, such distinctions reside at the level of intention and completion since both forms aim to convey deeper, less apparent, meanings lying beneath a literal surface that can nevertheless operate, albeit less compellingly or usefully, on its own.²⁹

It bears repeating that *figura* can therefore be viewed as allegory's theological analogue, particularly when it reveals historical echoes and correspondences with typological significance. Rubens's *figurae* are not only found in biblical or religious subjects. They are also a feature of ostensibly secular stories and genres where the modern viewer might least expect them—but the erudite seventeenth-century Catholic would very likely have taken their meaning. Like any good Christian humanist, Rubens (unlike many conservative Counter-Reformation theologians) was always looking for ways to reconcile classical wisdom and culture with Catholic doctrine. This outlook was in line with what Augustine of Hippo considered the necessary process of appropriating Egyptian gold, his metaphor for those “studies for liberated minds” that must be removed from “pagans” by Christians and “applied to their true function.”³⁰ The interpretations presented in this book adhere to Auerbach's bipartite schema for *figura*, which gives equal weight to two historical sides, aware of their reciprocal, even dialectical, progress toward a spiritual goal. As Auerbach, drawing on Tertullian, states: “real historical figures are to be interpreted spiritually (*spiritualiter interpretari*), but the interpretation points to a carnal, hence historical fulfillment (*carnaliter adimpleri*: *De resurrectione*, 20) for the truth has become history or flesh.”³¹ Tertullian's claim that the highest or truest (anagogical) fulfilment is made manifest in and through material substances may seem strange until one considers the doctrine of transubstantiation whereby the eucharistic sacraments of bread and wine are transformed into Christ's real presence as body and blood—though without any appreciable change on the outside. Hypothetically opposed to gendered theologico-philosophical hierarchies of male spirit/mind over and against female body/matter, Auerbach's reading, in which truth's progress concludes with *becoming* history

28 Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 53.

29 Fletcher, *Allegory*, 7.

30 Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 2.40 (p. 125).

31 Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 36.

or flesh, affords new hermeneutical possibilities for the (status of) female bodies in Rubens's religious art.

Ways of Proceeding: Frameworks and Formal Concerns

This book means to show that over the course of his career Rubens's religious art evolves to a point where the female form figures quintessentially Rubensian powers of peacemaking, reproduction, and devotion in typological and trans-historical ways his male personae never could. I relate this evolution to changing relationships with the women in Rubens's life—not only his living patrons, wives, and children but the Virgin Mary and other female saints he perceived to be potent and worthy of respect.

Support might conceivably be sought for this argument in the documentary evidence of Rubens's professional and intellectual life. In addition to inventories of his book purchases and art collections, this material includes a fairly large body of personal correspondence.³² The first editor of the *Codex diplomaticus Rubenianus*, Charles Ruelens, once conjectured that Rubens may have penned as many as 8,000 letters in his lifetime. Unfortunately, only a few hundred letters by his hand are known today. Among these one encounters occasional, if indirect, indications of Rubens's opinions about living or historical women's intellectual capacities and essential nature and these will be duly examined here. But with a handful of notable exceptions, the portion of Rubens's letters that have survived—spanning his mature career but overwhelmingly concerned with diplomatic matters, war-related intelligence, and current events—provide little in the way of references to art, whether his own or that of others. More frustratingly still, discussions by the artist of the women in his works are quite rare, especially with regard to his religious paintings.

Happily, we have the art.

My way into Rubens has always been close looking. Here, focusing at times on details of little interest to previous viewers, I train feminist, historical-theological, and queer gazes on a selection of Rubens's gynocentric 'religious' subjects and other imagery of women less obviously informed by Catholic doctrine. The works considered are but a small sample of the thousands of paintings and drawings attributed to Rubens.³³ I am convinced that more attempts can be profitably made to interpret Rubens's art diachronically within his own massive and far from static *oeuvre*. In the words of Hayden White, "it can be argued that interpretation in history consists

32 Based on the partially inherited library of his son, Albert, Rubens's collection of some 500 volumes was perhaps the largest and most comprehensive associated with an early modern artist. See Arents, *De bibliotheek de Pieter Pauwel Rubens*, 80.

33 According to the *Corpus Rubenianum* Ludwig Burchard, Rubens's *oeuvre* comprises some 2,500 compositions and around 10,000 works of art, www.rubenianum.be/en/content/corpus-rubenianum-ludwig-burchard (accessed 16 December 2019)

of the provisions of a plot structure for a sequence of events so that their nature as a comprehensible process is revealed by their figuration as a story of a particular kind.³⁴ The plot structure that follows is more Jacob Burckhardt than Ludwig Burchard—and intentionally, as it tracks what I perceive to be significant changes over a career of some four decades. In this respect I depart from what, in the hands of many Rubens scholars, has become an edifying approach to Rubens's art through synchronic microhistories and technical, philological, or iconological case studies. My hope is that with all the archival, iconographical, and historical scholarship available to today's Rubenists—with so much important work now accomplished—it is possible to write about the artist in ways that recognize this invaluable research while modestly expanding, even intervening in, accounts of Rubens and his art to date.³⁵ Toward this goal, this book is in historiographical conversation with many well-known studies of Rubens. Analyzing the uses and abuses of gender in canonical scholarship and its common sources allows me to make the case that art historians and critics continually marshal conservative and limiting notions of sex difference and female beauty to manage Rubens, his art, and indirectly, the bodies of real women ourselves.

In positing the centrality and figurative multivalence of the female body in Rubens's works, my arguments typically begin with his formal and compositional choices and, in Michael Baxandall's terms, with the problems (technical and social) they seek to address and the questions they raise.³⁶ Perhaps the most overarching of these is the so-called 'woman question,' or *querelle des femmes*, a cultural debate over the status of women that reached a peak during Rubens's lifetime. Some of the concerns and claims of the *querelle* set the stage for my analysis of specific paintings. But I have not tried to offer anything approaching a history of the representation of gender and sex difference in seventeenth-century Europe—or even in the art of Rubens's own Spanish Netherlands. Nor should Maria de' Medici and the Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia, the two female sovereigns on whom I concentrate, be taken as illustrative of women more generally since their (perceived) exceptionality was arguably the source of their power to begin with.

When Rubens paints women he draws on past and present conventions of masculinity and femininity in order to endow his figures with biological sex as well as rhetorical gender. In his religious works, rather remarkably, sex and gender do not always run on parallel tracks. This accords with at least some branches of Christian theology, where, as we will see, personages such as the ephebic disciple Christ loved

34 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 58.

35 The encyclopedic Antwerp-based research project known as the *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* is the only investigative project of its kind devoted to a single artist. Currently the *Corpus* consists of some twenty-nine parts in forty volumes devoted to cataloguing and explicating the various genres and subjects of which Rubens's art is comprised. It is projected to be completed in 2020.

36 See Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 14–15.

and/or John the Evangelist, or the virile, standing Virgin Mary/*stabat mater*, have been assigned traits traditionally associated with the 'opposite' sex. Paradoxically, in this regard, the *querelle des femmes* was rooted in a distinctive brand of clerical misogyny that relied on philosophical and theological binary oppositions to fuel its battle of the sexes. As Joan Scott has described historical circumstances of this sort: "the binary opposition and the social process of gender relationships both become part of the meaning of power itself." Scott goes on to observe that "changes in the organization of social relationships always correspond to changes in representations of power, but the direction of change is not necessarily one way."³⁷ These two contentions, subsets of a now-classic definition, propose gender as a proper category for historical analysis, but one from which power is inseparable. Scott's framework is doubly applicable to the realm of art, where representation is too often presumed to be the effect of a social or institutional cause rather than the other way around. For historians, Scott contends, the "interesting" questions are: "which symbolic representations are invoked, how, and in what contexts?"³⁸ In focusing on the always-already symbolic nature of the female body, these are my questions as well, though I am equally interested in what I perceive to be Rubensian figuration's frustration of historical directionality in the name of Godly time.

This study moves chronologically through Rubens's career from roughly his first decade back in Antwerp until his retirement from diplomatic service in the mid-1630s, a few years before his death. Chapter 1 investigates Rubens's developing representational strategies for depicting sex difference and female power in early works made on either side of his Italian journey (1600–8). I examine three very different Rubensian couples—*Samson and Delilah*, *Self-Portrait with Isabella Brant*, and *Heracles and Omphale*—as pictures not only in dynamic dialogue with one another but also in relation to conventional depictions of marriage, both sacred and secular. Chapter 2 continues with the highly productive period corresponding to the Truce of 1609–21, when Rubens would secure commissions for the iconic Antwerp Crucifixions and execute a suite of complex mythological paintings, including the deceptively prosaic *Juno and Argus*. Rarely examined alongside these works are the artist's contemporaneous depictions of the Virgin Mary's *Assumption*, proposed here as a *via media* between Rubens's previous Michelangesque imagery and his increasingly Venetian approach to making pictures.

37 Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category," 1067. For a highly useful overview of the incalculable impact of Scott's essay on subsequent feminist history, see Elliott, "Ages of Joan Scott," 1390–1403.

38 Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category", 1067.

A diptych of sorts, Chapter 3 provides a comparative study of Rubens's most inventive and important, though dramatically different, large-scale programs for female patrons. The commissions were executed consecutively in the mid-1620s for Maria de' Medici and Isabel Clara Eugenia. Two of the Thirty Years War's best-known and embattled female rulers, both women endeavored to portray themselves as divinely appointed sovereign widows, receiving strikingly different artistic responses from Rubens. Chapter 4 concludes the chronology with a close reading of homoerotic imagery in the London *Peaceful Reign of King James* as it engages Old Testament tropes of reconciliation and peacemaking. The chapter's focus, *Peace Embracing Plenty*, is one of the painted subjects in the Whitehall Banqueting House ceiling program installed in 1636. Taking up Rubens's critical and biographical fortunes beginning shortly after his death in 1640, the fifth and final chapter traces the feminization of the artist and his style in art writing of the seventeenth century and beyond.

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