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Poussin's Women: Sex and Gender in the Artist's Works

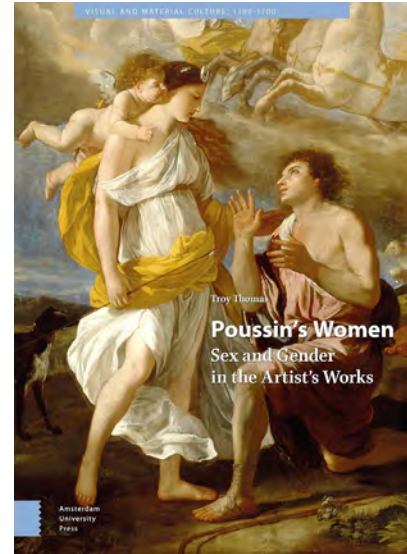
Troy Thomas

Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press, 2020.
386 pages, 106 color illustrations. \$150.00 (cloth), \$140.00 (eBook).
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Around 1630, Nicolas Poussin painted the canvas *Echo and Narcissus* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), depicting the tragic demise of the lovers as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Scholars have long noted Poussin's innovative rendering of the Ovidian myth as a key moment in the development of the artist's mature style and poetic approach to subject matter—particularly the bold handling of Narcissus, whose spot-lit corpse lies splayed in the foreground of the shallow landscape, a motif derived from earlier Venetian prototypes. Opposed to such conventional focus on issues of style and iconography, Troy Thomas instead develops a novel exegesis of the painting, centering the fate of Echo in his new book *Poussin's Women: Sex and Gender in the Artist's Works* (2020). In Thomas's view, Poussin intended the picture just as much as an elegy to the nymph Echo who, having arrived too late to halt the transformation of her beloved, is so consumed by grief that she seemingly melts into the rocky outcropping where she reclines in the background. Leveraging this unusual detail of Echo's dissolution,

Thomas brings into sharper focus the implications of the nymph's own transformation, a feature of the painting usually marginalized by the male gaze. Echo's loss of voice—and body—is thus interpreted as an allegory of the patriarchal silencing of women's voices and agency that occurred in seventeenth century France and Italy.

This fresh interpretation of a prominent Poussin canvas is representative of the numerous and sensitive case studies Thomas conducts through the lens of women's and gender studies in his volume. His agenda is welcome and addresses a gap in current scholarship on Poussin. Surprisingly, it is merely the second book-length monograph to critically examine Poussin's representations of women, preceded only by Phillipa Plock's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation *Regarding Gendered Mythologies: Nicolas Poussin's Mythological Paintings and Practices of Viewing in Seventeenth-Century Rome* (2004). Thomas casts a wider net than Plock by undertaking a systematic assessment of how depictions of women in the artist's overall *oeuvre* construct a discourse on female gender and sexuality. In the author's view, Poussin's



representations of women parallel the sexist realities they faced in French society and politics, an arena where the descent into voicelessness was a fate commonly inflicted upon them.

Although engaged with specialist debates, Thomas's arguments in this handsomely illustrated volume can, for the most part, be followed by general audiences, since ample space in every section is devoted to exposition of each painting's theme. More judicious editorial choices, however, could have been exercised in some places: single paragraphs often stretch to over three pages long, while the figure illustrations begin only after roughly one-hundred pages of text. In both cases, readers are left somewhat breathless. Yet once crisp, color-correct images of Poussin's paintings, drawings, and supporting

illustrations appear, they enliven Thomas's discussion, bolstering its appeal to undergraduate as well as graduate students engaged in the study of early modern art and humanities disciplines.

Poussin's Women belongs to a larger vein of feminist inquiry in art history, inaugurated by Rona Goffen's groundbreaking volume *Titian's Women* (1997), refocusing attention on the oft-overlooked female figures populating Old Master and modernist paintings. Similar feminist studies applying methodologies from gender and women's studies—to Vermeer, Renoir, and nineteenth century female portraiture in France—have yielded rich insights into the visual culture involving women, real and painted, in Dutch and French society.¹ Scholarship to date has paid little attention to the topic of women in Poussin's art and Thomas's study thus seeks to fill a major lacuna in research on the artist.

A scholar of seventeenth-century art and theory, particularly the careers of Poussin and Caravaggio, Thomas is well-equipped to plumb such questions and approaches his study with commanding knowledge of Poussin's activities and *oeuvre*. His previous articles on Poussin focused on several important discoveries about the artist's textual sources for his paintings, ideas further developed in the present study. His principal goal, however, is revisionist: to expand the methodological approach to the artist's drawings and paintings by applying a blended feminist and psychoanalytic lens as a challenge to claims that Poussin's images celebrate the best aspects of ancient and pagan cultures. Thomas also seeks to recover how their original

audiences perceived the women depicted or, as he puts it, "to foreground understandings of them that respond to the perceptions of contemporary audiences [...] to perceive more deeply and critically the artist's own points of view and those of his contemporaries" (49).

This emphasis on *Rezeptionstheorie* is admirable, though hindered by the relative dearth of substantive extant Seicento accounts of Poussin's paintings—save the theoretical lectures on his art delivered by the likes of Philippe de Champaigne and Charles Le Brun at the French Académie Royale. Curiously, however, Thomas does not make use of these. Otherwise, neither Poussin's contemporaries nor the artist discuss his art in any detail, apart from Poussin's famous letter on the musical modes to his patron Paul Fréart de Chantelou. As Thomas admits, Poussin left virtually no trace of his views toward women. As such, one of the revelations of Thomas's study is that Poussin's art does not express a unified view of women; they variously operate in his works as predators, killers, heroines, and voyeurs—but just as often as dupes, victims, lovers, and sex objects. In this way, Thomas wishes to demonstrate how closely Poussin's fluctuating vision of women mirrors the reality women faced in French society in his time—the central claim of his book—as their rights underwent dramatic shifts over the course of the Seicento. In Thomas's view, Poussin's paintings embody these shifts and serve as a litmus test for women's mercurial, though ascendant, status in society.

Poussin's Women is organized into three main sections. The first

outlines the suitability of gender and identity studies for analyzing Poussin's art. Thomas refers to numerous texts from third-wave feminist art historians and gender theorists, though somewhat obliquely and not linked concretely to aspects of Poussin's art with the level of depth and clarity one might expect. Thomas categorizes an array of well-known historical, biblical, and mythological subjects by the artist that feature women according to what he identifies as either virtuous or evil protagonists: Phocion's widow, Coriolanus's mother, Queen Zenobia, Esther, Rebecca, and the Virgin Mary are held up as heroines; while Armida, Diana, Aurora, Medea, Sapphira, and Venus are cast as villains.

Section two explores Poussin's paintings against the cultural and social frames shaping attitudes towards women in seventeenth-century France and Italy. Drawing upon much recent scholarship on the evolving legal and civic lives of women in early modern Europe, Thomas underscores several poignant gender tropes emerging in visual and literary culture that he argues can also be discerned in Poussin's paintings. For instance, the burgeoning discourse of the *femme forte*, *querelle des femmes*, and "topsy-turvy world"—inverting normative power dynamics between the sexes—all gained momentum during the mid-seventeenth century. These are variously linked to three paintings celebrating womanly virtue made in the wake of the civil uprising known as the Fronde, namely, the *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion* (1648, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool); *Esther before Ahasuerus* (c.1665, Hermitage

Museum, St. Petersburg); and *Coriolanus Entreated by his Mother* (c.1650, Musée Nicolas Poussin, Les Andelys). While reading such paintings in light of shifting attitudes towards female valor is entirely viable, it would be more convincing if Thomas could connect such early feminist debates to either Poussin or his circles—given the lack of evidence that the artist, or any of his patrons and collectors, ascribed to such views, or attended any of the progressive Italian or French salons where such agendas were advanced.

Section three, which comprises the bulk of the book, pivots to a series of in-depth examinations of women represented in Poussin's paintings and drawings, clustered into seven categories: predators, the lustful, lovers, killers/transgressors, victims (killed, assaulted), victims (voiceless, deceived), and heroines/great ladies. Here, Thomas's extended, systematic approach proves incredibly valuable, since it reveals, in a glance, the range of multi-valent and conflicting roles women perform in Poussin's *oeuvre*. However, the descriptors Thomas invents, while useful shorthand for the various inflections of female identity Poussin depicts, remain highly subjective and originate from a somewhat shaky psychological basis rooted in modern rather than seventeenth-century phenomena. The reader may wish for labels more aptly grounded in early modern nomenclature, since it is unclear whether any of Poussin's audiences would have used the above descriptors.

Given the author's concern for gender discourse and its subversion in French society, it is somewhat surprising that only cursory analyses

are conducted of Poussin's two versions of *Achilles among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, in Boston (c.1649) and Richmond (1656). Although Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's theories of gender construction (referred to as "Michael Foucault" throughout the book) are cited in the first chapter, surely a concerted framing of these *Achilles* paintings using the above texts could have redoubled Thomas's thesis. This loaded theme—replete with transgressive female agency, cross-dressing, and scopophilic women in Poussin's handling—ostensibly derived from culturally specific experiences familiar to Poussin's audiences. Thomas does not mention it, but the choice of subject for the Richmond picture must have been dictated by its patron, Charles III de Blanchefort, Duc de Créquy, who was heavily involved with the French royal court ballet, where male transvestism was not only rife but celebrated.

In this regard, one problematic facet of the methodological assumptions in *Poussin's Women* is the tendency to invest Poussin with an unwarranted (and ahistorical) degree of agency in determining his imagery. Only rarely did Poussin's patrons give him complete freedom in selecting subjects, as Jean Pointel possibly did with *Eliezer and Rebecca* (1648, Paris, Musée du Louvre). As many scholars have, Thomas takes the biographer André Félibien at his word, reporting that Pointel only specified a theme and not a subject. The author concludes that the picture showcases "womanly courage," despite the fact that Pointel's only criterion was that it feature an array of female

beauties—hardly a proto-feminist agenda. In truth, the full scope of the commission can only be known through the letters from Pointel to Poussin, which sadly remain untraced.

In other passages, Poussin's choice of subject is interpreted as indicative of the artist's own feminist outlook. Thomas reasons that, "By choosing to depict these stories in his paintings in the first place, Poussin reveals more than just his interest in selecting tales with dramatic conflict; he takes the side of the women, standing against male prejudice, misogyny, brutality, and lust" (231). Such assertions conflating the painting's theme with Poussin's own stance toward women drift into hazardous terrain by seeking to reconstruct authorial intention, endowing the artist with an untenably fervent feminist outlook. In reality, the Ovidian source material of many of the mythological pictures under discussion provided the misogynist *mise en scène* and tone Thomas wishes to ascribe to Poussin.

Nevertheless, in many instances, Thomas achieves inspired readings of Poussin's imagery by utilizing the type of psychoanalytic methodology mentioned above. Writing of his *Mars and Venus* (c.1627-28, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts), Thomas compels us to recognize anew exceedingly subtle glances and gestures between the figures that mark the lovers' dalliance as "a battle of minds (an erotic *psychomachia*) between the masculine and feminine positions" (193-94). Rather than overturn traditional interpretations of the painting, Thomas's sounding of such gender dynamics amplifies the resonance of the dramatic *affetti*

for which Poussin was lauded in his own time.

In undertaking a study akin to Goffen's volume on *Titian's Women*, Troy Thomas sets himself a difficult task. Unlike Titian, Poussin never painted pictures in which solitary women or groups of women comprise an autonomous subject. Instead, women always appear as part of a larger narrative crowd; thus, isolating them from a wider cast as the topic of critical inquiry remains somewhat artificial or disingenuous. Thomas's systematic appraisal of how women operate in these scenes therefore proves less revealing and more limited than he purports. Although admirable in its aims and framework, *Poussin's Women* ultimately falls short of achieving a viable new direction in Poussin studies, given the methodological missteps mentioned.

What does emerge from this study, however, is how, more broadly, the identity of women in seventeenth-century France—painted or real—remained largely yoked to men, their power in society always contingent and dialectical. The identities Thomas affirms for Poussin's women range so widely because, as he shrewdly uncovers, the civic and legal status of women at the time was itself evolving and fluid. If refined, this framework might yield more robust results applied to Seicento artists in Poussin's ambit whose work has more existing data (Domenichino, Guido Reni, Andrea Sacchi, and Philippe de Champaigne) and would be a fascinating extension of Thomas's work.

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Endnotes

1. Marjorie E. Wieseman, ed., *Vermeer's Women: Secrets and Silence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Tamar Garb, *The Painted Face: Portraits of Women in France, 1814-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Ann Dumas and John Collins, *Renoir's Women* (New York: Mullen, 2005).