

Author



Nicolas Poussin: An Artist Lost in Art Historical Periodization

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Art History

Kathryn Farrar stumbled onto the seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin while studying paintings inspired by the work of Torquato Tasso. Captivated by Poussin's *Rinaldo and Armida*, Kathryn decided to explore his life further, pursuing an independent research project, under the mentorship of Professor Newman, on the canonization of Poussin as the "Great French Classicist." Throughout her project, Kathryn appreciated the independence and freedom to explore any and all avenues she discovered. Kathryn will spend the coming year continuing her research on Poussin with a Fulbright scholarship to Rome.

Abstract

Giovanni Pietro Bellori opens his biography of seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin with the claim that France was "contending with Italy for the name and acclaim of Nicolas Poussin, of whom one nation was the fortunate mother, the other his teacher and second homeland." How we see Poussin's art today is not only shaped by the image projected by his early biographers—namely Bellori, André Félibien, Giovanni Battista Passeri, and Joachim Sandrart—but is also a product of years of biased criticism. Scholars have imposed nationalistic and stylistic labels on Poussin despite his conscious rejection of all such constraints in his lifetime. In defining Poussin as a French artist, Italy is often treated as nothing more than a geographic crutch to his artistic genius. Through my research I approach Poussin's oeuvre differently; I offer an alternative to the historiographic focus on style by returning to a subject-based reading of Poussin's early works, particularly his collaborative project of drawings with Italian Baroque poet Giambattista Marino.

Faculty Mentor



In her essay, "Nicolas Poussin: An Artist Lost in Art Historical Periodization," Katie Farrar examines the ideological, rhetorical, and material conditions that led to the historical creation and canonization of Poussin—who spent most of his life in Italy and was profoundly influenced by ancient Roman and Italian art—as a French national icon. Her knowledge about the intricate political relations between Italy and France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the history of the artistic academies dialogues easily with elegant close readings of several of Poussin's most well known images as well as with some of his lesser known ones as these images 'answer' earlier images and texts. The essay is a fine example of the best kind of interdisciplinary work on the Renaissance and early modern periods being done today.

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Key Terms

- ◆ *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*
- ◆ Baroque
- ◆ Raphaellesque Classicism
- ◆ *L'Adone*
- ◆ Mannerism
- ◆ *Marino Drawings*
- ◆ Ovidian Classicism

Introduction

“At some stage in these early years, perhaps about 1625, when anti-French feeling ran high in Rome on account of a crisis in the Valtellina affair, Poussin, who always dressed in the French manner, was attacked near the Quattro Fontane by a group of hostile Romans and only saved himself from a serious wound on the hand by parrying the blow with a portfolio of drawings which he happened to be carrying. This incident caused him to change his habit and from that time onward he abandoned his French dress and adopted that of the Romans.”

Although we cannot believe every word of the stories spun by Nicolas Poussin’s early biographers, this anecdote from Giovanni Battista Passeri’s *Vite de Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti* (1773) is heavy with irony: Poussin, singled out as a foreigner in Rome because of his French attire, shields his hand from his xenophobic attackers with his very own canvases. The attack persuades him to dress in Roman clothing thereafter as he tries to ‘pass’ as an Italian. Yet few historians view Nicolas Poussin as an Italian artist; historiographically he is made to shed this Roman identity, only to be imprisoned in his lasting reputation as the ‘Great French Classicist.’

It is historiographic tradition—beginning with Italian painter and biographer Giorgio Vasari in the sixteenth century, and extending through the twentieth century in the work of such scholars as Anthony Blunt and Walter Friedlaender—to favor the artistic style of Classicism. Two opposing trends of Classicism circulated in early modern Italy and France while Poussin was perfecting his skill with the brush: Raphaellesque Classicism and Ovidian Classicism. Raphaellesque Classicism, based on the High Renaissance style of Italian painter Raphael Sanzio (1483–1520), was perpetuated in academic procedures of copying. By aligning Poussin with this style, French academics compelled him to become the conduit between France and antiquity, bringing the Italian Renaissance to the Parisian court. Ovidian Classicism, based on the work of the ancient Roman poet Ovid, dealt with more sensual themes of love and mythological transformations. Because it has been negatively associated with the theatrical Baroque style and the obscure style of Mannerism, scholars have underestimated any of Poussin’s inclinations toward this Ovidian Classicism. It is within this trend of Ovidian Classicism, however, that Poussin’s work can accurately be assessed as a representation of Italian artistry. Understanding Poussin’s relationship with Italian Baroque poet Giambattista Marino, and particularly how Marino’s manneristic interpretation of Ovid’s poetry affected Poussin, widens the field of Poussin studies

to show that the iconographical politics of the painter’s subject matter may be more relevant than the traditional style-based readings of his work have indicated.

Institutional Appropriation of Poussin

Nicolas Poussin has been exalted as a proponent of Raphaellesque Classicism due to the appropriation, and subsequent manipulation, of his style of painting by the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* in Paris. Paradoxically, although Poussin was mildly involved with Italian academies in Rome, he shied away from any direct association with French academies in Paris.

Early in his artistic career, Nicolas Poussin attended the *Accademia di Domenichino* and the *Accademia di Andrea Sacchi* in Rome, where he learned theories of optics, perspective, and anatomy. In 1632 Poussin was elected a member of the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome, and in 1657, his art grew to such esteem that he was named head of the academy, but he chose to decline this honor. After his reputation had grown in Italy, Poussin was lured back to France by Cardinal Richelieu, Chief Minister of the French King from 1624–1642. Because of Richelieu’s policies, royal power was centralized in Early Modern France, and art was but one of the many avenues for the consolidation and centralization of the country’s regionalist factions. Richelieu commissioned Poussin to paint the *Grand Galerie* in Paris in 1640, but Poussin abandoned the project in 1642. Several factors may have contributed to his decisive return to Rome: scholars speculate that Poussin was dissatisfied with the project because he was forced to deal with subjects uncongenial to him (Verdi 15–25); that he felt overworked, underappreciated, and underpaid; that he desired freedom from the French court (Bernstock 42); and that large-scale projects were not Poussin’s strength (Olson 9). Regardless of his motivations, Poussin rejected the administrative responsibilities and the ideological task ‘assigned’ to him by the French Court.

The appointment instead fell to French painter Charles LeBrun (1619–1690), who was already well established in the French court upon Poussin’s arrival in the *Grand Galerie*. In 1642, LeBrun ventured to Rome in the company of Poussin, and the latter’s vision of narrative expression deeply influenced LeBrun’s concerns with human psychology in the realm of art (Minor 79–80). After four years LeBrun returned to Paris and, in cooperation with Jean-Baptiste Colbert (French Minister of Finance from 1665 to 1683) and a group of French history painters, he established the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* in 1648. Much

of LeBrun's doctrine was derived from Poussin's views, but carried to rationalistic extremes in the *Académie*. LeBrun quickly claimed for the *Académie* "a power which had hitherto been exerted only by the Church and the Crown: the right to dictate to the painters the texts which their work was to illustrate" (Bryson 30). Artists were prohibited from creating works according to their own inventiveness. Within its curriculum, the *Académie* exclusively promoted the ideology of the state, thereby licensing King Louis XIV complete control over French culture (Minor 13). These political ambitions have led modern scholars, such as H. W. Janson in his *History of Art*, to criticize the *Académie Royale* as a "straightjacket system" that "produced no significant artists" (555). How, then, did Poussin become trapped in this system?

The French *Académie* required a model artist for its students to emulate, an artist who would define a clear set of rules for the discipline of painting. A predicament that arose in the art academies was the issue of learned talent (*ars*) versus natural talent (*natura*): in order for knowledge to be transmitted, conventional rules needed to be established for students to follow. However, as Jacqueline Lichtenstein asserts, "what matters most in painting cannot be learned but takes inspiration, genius, comes of grace" (151). Drawing, most valued in the traditional academies, was essentially the only element of painting that could be subject to rules. Because Poussin's skill in drawing was greatly admired—in the *Cours de peinture par principes avec un balance de peintres* (1708) French art critic Roger de Piles rated Poussin second only to Raphael—he was the perfect artist on whose work the rules of the *Académie* could be based (Minor 13). Poussin not only represented the pinnacle of drawing, he also provided France with its missing cultural link to antiquity: students were pressured to look to the art of Poussin, to the art of Raphael, and to the artists of antiquity to develop their artistic talents in the manner prescribed by the *Académie*. According to scholar Paul Duro, Rome as a whole was deemed too eclectic by the directors of the *Académie*, and so they felt it necessary to generalize its dense historical and aesthetic value. Poussin's oeuvre became simplified as "the model to stand for a whole raft of aesthetic values," just as Raphael was "the antique made accessible to those who had come after the Fall" (54). But are Duro and other scholars skirting the issue of biases toward certain historical periods of art? Was Rome truly 'too eclectic' for the academic tastes, or was the contemporary art in Rome 'too Baroque' for the classicizing *Académie Royale*?

Correlating the Masters: Poussin and Raphael

Before addressing the issue of Classicism in Baroque Rome, and how its vexed status weaves into the complexity of Poussin's relationship with Marino, it is important to clarify how Poussin's stylistic alignment with Raphael made him the model of the French *Académie*. Poussin created a new visual language for the French nation out of his mastery of classical Greek and Roman vocabulary. This raises the question of what exactly defines Poussin's style.

The consensus among scholars is that Poussin assimilated two opposed Renaissance traditions during his early training: the sensuous and intuitive style of Titian, and the classical and rational style of Raphael. During his youth in France, Poussin studied Italian art collected during the reign of Francis I, as well as engravings by Marcantonio Raimondi modeled after Raphael and his school. Thus, some historians say Poussin "had been nourished, as if by mother's milk, on the classical art of Raphael" (Friedlaender 13). But how much exposure Poussin had to Raphael's actual works—not copies—remains in question. Although Poussin's inclination toward the Raphaellesque style was interrupted during a short stop in Venice on his journey to Rome in 1623–24, the Venetian landscape allowed him to study light and color techniques from the masters of the previous century, particularly Titian and Veronese. Poussin was also able to improve his skill in oil painting, a technique he rarely used in France, where he worked primarily in tempera and fresco. Nevertheless, despite the benefits that Venetian art contributed to Poussin's technique, scholars often treat this period as disruptive in his career. It is the 'classical' Raphael profile that is allowed to dominate the characterizations of his work, and scant recognition is given to Titian's eminence.

Walter Friedlaender asserts that the late 1620s—the same time that Titian was most influential on Poussin's style—marks Poussin's so-called Baroque period. During this time, he experimented with chiaroscuro and his style was 'darkish,' but Friedlaender quickly emphasizes that this was "not a *surrender* to the Baroque. [Poussin's] clear, rational French spirit protected him from further steps in this direction" (29–30). Friedlaender implies that the rationality of Poussin's 'French spirit' outweighed the irrationality of the Italian Baroque style. He presumes that the presence of Bolognese painter Domenichino in Rome in the winter of 1634–35 likely encouraged Poussin to reject the Venetian manner and return to the classical tradition of Raphael. Domenichino, along with other Bolognese artists of the Carracci school, firmly established a style in Rome that strengthened the

rational and classical tendencies of Raphael (Wittkower 46). According to Poussin's biographers, this influence persuaded Poussin to later speak of his Venetian period as "a sort of error of which he was almost ashamed. He had been deceived, he said, by the charms of color and the sensuous attractions of Venetian painting...therefore he sacrificed color to drawing, and Titian to Raphael and the Antique" (Blunt 127). The issue at stake here is a deliberate favoritism of stylistic periods in art: French academics (as well as some major modern art historians) revered the Italian Renaissance, and their distaste for the newer styles—namely Mannerism and the Baroque—has led to an enduring bias in Poussin scholarship. Whereas Baroque artists strove for wonder, astonishment and emotion, Friedlaender alleges that Poussin sought calm satisfaction and reason: "Poussin had surely not been tempted to follow the great protagonists of the Baroque illusionistic trend, Pietro da Cortona, Bernini, and Borromini. The division between Italian Baroque and French Classicism, epitomized in the work of Pietro da Cortona and Nicolas Poussin respectively, was definitely and forever decided in the 1640s" (Friedlaender 32). By 1650, Poussin was described as the 'Raphael of our century' by his contemporaries—the title firmly stuck for the likes of Friedlaender and Blunt some 300 years later—and whatever influence the Baroque might have had on Poussin was ignored.

If Poussin and Raphael are considered the greatest exponents of classicism, then what does their correlation suggest about the values of the French *Académie*? In sixteenth- to early seventeenth-century French painting, there were few traces of Raphael's style be revived and venerated. The first publication from the *Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture* is a clear indication that French taste became grounded in Raphael's art at this time. Written by Abraham Bosse in 1649, *Opinions on the Distinctions Between Different Styles of Painting, Drawing, and Engraving, and of the Relations Between Originals and Copies*, presents a survey of Italian art from the Renaissance to early Baroque, dismissing Mannerism in favor of Classicism. Bosse claims that in Raphael's works, "good taste and the antique coalesce into incomparable perfection; these are the works that should serve as a beacon to French artists from this time—1649—on." He affirms that the aim of the *Académie* was to produce "many Raphaels," and because Poussin's work had reached the same "high summit" as Raphael, he became the ideal model for artists to copy (Goldstein 238–39). Students sent to Rome from the *Académie* in Paris were expected to copy and recopy Raphael's works, especially the Vatican tapestries, *The Transfiguration* (1516–20), *The School of Athens* (1509–10), and *Galatea* (1512). These

copies were then returned to Paris and given to beginning students to copy. In the students' academic routine, it was conventional to study and copy engravings and drawings, not to create original works. Consequently, Raphael was known in France as an artist in black and white (Goldstein 241). It was believed by the *Académie* that if French artists were to copy Raphael's work directly, their sense of national identity would weaken, and it was therefore more beneficial for the artists to copy directly from a French painter who matched Raphael's talent.

Poussin's compositions unmistakably take after the manner of Raphael, as does his fondness for types, poses, and arrangements that would convey a sense of grandeur and noble spirit (Goldstein 240). A detailed comparison of Raphael's and Poussin's respective paintings titled *Parnassus* nevertheless challenges the conflation of Poussin with Raphael; Poussin's *Parnassus*, while adhering to the Raphaelian style, deviates from his precursor's 'Classicism' by including a homage to Baroque poet Giambattista Marino.

The New Parnassus

In the Vatican Palace, Raphael translated the Greek myth of Mount Parnassus, the home of the Muses, into fresco. From 1508–1511, Raphael worked on the *Stanza della Segnatura*, the signature room of Pope Julius II. Serving as the pope's personal study and library, the room housed more than 220 books in Greek, Latin, and the Italian vernacular. The ceiling of the *Stanza* was designed as a key to help the viewer locate the books in the room. In four roundels, Raphael painted the four protectors of knowledge: the female personifications of philosophy, theology, poetry, and justice. Each of the four walls of the *Stanza* contains a complex, highly symbolic fresco: the *Disputation of the Holy Sacrament*, *The School of Athens*, *Parnassus*, and *Jurisprudence*. Standing in the pope's library, surrounded by these frescoes, the Renaissance viewer would have understood the importance of the transfer of knowledge to future generations—the evolution of culture through the appropriation and inheritance of the traditions of the past. This principle of cultural continuity mirrors the role of Raphael's classicizing style in linking antiquity to the Renaissance.

Raphael's *Parnassus* (Figure 1) is located on the wall facing the Belvedere courtyard, just below the ceiling tondo of Poetry. Mount Parnassus curves like an arch above the window. The seated figure of Apollo, playing his viol beneath a group of laurel trees, occupies the center of the composition. Around him are gathered poets from antiquity

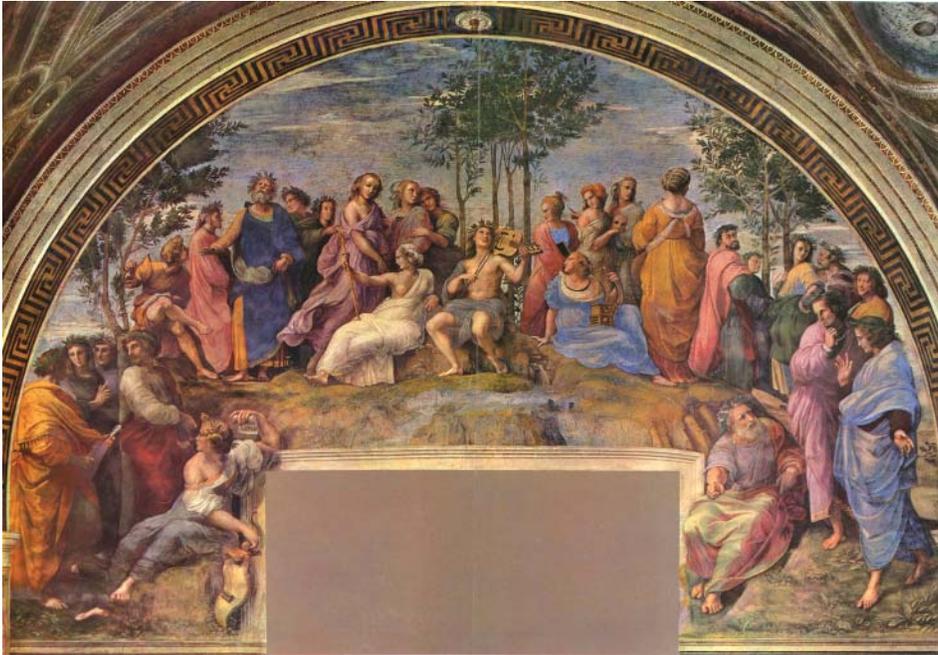


Figure 1

Raphael, *Parnassus*, fresco; Stanza della Segnatura, Museo Vaticano, Rome (1511).

and from Raphael's time. Standing closest to Apollo (and reclining on either side of him) are the nine muses, identifiable by the objects they carry: Melpomene, muse of tragedy, holds a tragic mask; Euterpe, muse of music, holds a flute; Thalia, muse of comedy, holds a comic mask. The only other female figure represented in the fresco is Sappho, the ancient Greek lyric poet. She is seated immediately left of the window, holding a musical instrument in one hand and a rolled piece of paper in the other. On the paper is clearly written SAPPHO—Raphael wants no viewer to mistake her identity. Among the group of men to the left of Apollo are the poets Homer, Virgil, and Dante, all wearing crowns of laurel leaves. The way these figures interact is noteworthy: the blind Homer reaches his hand out to the seated Ennius and seems to be dictating his poetry to him; behind Homer, Virgil looks forward at Dante, but points back to Apollo. In a single composition Raphael has thus painted the trajectory of Poetry, from her origins in the mythological past to classical antiquity to the Renaissance. It was of course this same path that his art was understood to have traveled.

Raphael's *Parnassus* is commended in detail by Italian biographer and first art historian, Giorgio Vasari: "With the beauty of its figures and the nobility of its painting, the work seems to breathe the breath of divinity, which astonishes anyone who examines it intently, causing them to wonder how the human mind working with the imperfect medium of simple colors could, with the excellence of design, make objects in a painting seem alive" (315–16). But was Vasari

admiring Raphael's original fresco? There are obvious discrepancies in his account: he describes the presence of "naked cupids with the most beautiful expressions on their faces...gathering laurel branches and making garlands of them, throwing and scattering them about the mountain" (315). A quick glance at Raphael's *Parnassus* reveals that there are no cupids to be found. Did Vasari embellish Raphael's original, or was he actually describing a different work; in other words, just how direct was the route from antiquity to the Renaissance?

The issue of copying as a means of inheriting the past takes shape when we approach Poussin's *Parnassus* (Figure 2). Poussin follows Raphael's composition closely, but unmistakable differences lead us to question

what version of 'Raphael' Poussin was echoing. The answer may be found in Anthony Blunt's analysis of Poussin's *Parnassus*. He describes the work as a "free variant of Raphael's fresco in the Vatican, with a not very skillful attempt to fill the gap—due in Raphael's composition to the window—by the insertion of the nymph of the Castalian spring, an awkward figure reminiscent of the School of Fontainebleau" (72–73). Indeed, the location of Raphael's fresco versus Poussin's painting is very significant. Raphael's *Parnassus* frames the view into the Belvedere courtyard, providing the illusion that when the window is opened, the Vatican becomes the 'new Parnassus.' Poussin, however, loses this meaning when he transforms the fresco into oil on a portable canvas. Poussin replaces the window opening with the figure of a nude, reclining nymph. The poets on either side of her appear to be gesturing in her direction, but while their arms are outstretched, they do not look at her. How direct is the inheritance of Raphael by Poussin, and where, then, is Poussin's 'new Parnassus?'

Poussin's 'new Parnassus' is more terrestrial than the ethereal Parnassus of Raphael. As viewers we are invited into the composition via the nymph of the Castalian spring, isolated in the space between the foreground and the background by a shallow step. With arms outstretched toward the poets, the *putti* create an open space for us to step onto Mount Parnassus, wet our feet as we climb the steps past the nymph, and kneel before Apollo to participate in



Figure 2
Nicolas Poussin, *Parnassus*, oil on canvas; Prado, Madrid (1626–27).

the glory of poetry, music, and learning. Note the differences between Raphael's figure of Apollo and Poussin's: whereas Raphael's Apollo looks up, isolated from the muses and poets that interact around him, Poussin's Apollo is displaced to the right of the composition and is in direct contact with a central poet kneeling at his feet, receiving Apollo's offering of a drink. According to Walter Friedlaender, Poussin transforms Raphael's general representation of Mount Parnassus into the apotheosis of one individual by "placing the poet's dedication to Apollo at the center, where he is crowned by the Muses in the ceremony that makes him accepted as an equal in the community of famous poets" (45). Poussin, unlike Raphael, demands his viewers' participation.

In light of these compositional differences, we must ask whether Poussin actually saw Raphael's work and made deliberate changes, or was influenced by a copy of the original. Anthony Blunt has shown that Poussin more closely followed an

engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi (Figure 3) than Raphael's fresco (73). Raimondi, an Italian engraver personally trained by Raphael in Rome, was a key figure in the dissemination of print culture in early modern Italy. His engravings were not often based on Raphael's final paintings, but rather copied from his early sketches and drafts. In Raimondi's *Parnassus*, compositional discrepancies with Raphael's original are evident. Apollo is similarly seated with his lyre in the center of the mountain, but he looks out at the viewer instead of skyward. Raimondi has deliberately divided the space between the muses and the poets, suggesting more of a hierarchy than does Raphael. Furthermore, Raimondi has also added five *putti* holding laurel crowns in the sky, just as Vasari describes as being in Raphael's *Parnassus*. Perhaps Vasari,

like Poussin, came in contact only with this engraving and was moved to describe 'Raphael' based on a copy. Herein lies the danger of the academic institution: in magnifying an



Figure 3
Marcantonio Raimondi, *Apollo and the Muses on Parnassus*, engraving after Raphael (c.1514–1520).

artist's persona and exponentially multiplying his work in the name of artistic education, crucial compositional elements are lost. Raphael's integrity is damaged by Vasari's inaccurate reading of his *Parnassus*; perhaps Poussin suffered a similar fate in the academic tradition of copying.

Erwin Panofsky, in his *Nationalmuseum Skriftserie* (1960), observes that Poussin represented a definite personality in his version of *Parnassus*: that of Italian poet Giambattista Marino (1569–1625). Thus this painting may be “considered a humanistic tribute to the man who introduced Poussin to learned Roman society” (Friedlaender 45). Poussin could grant no higher honor to Marino than to include him in a repainting of the *Parnassus*, the most sacred setting for poetry and learning. Raphael, too, honors poets from his own time with the poets from antiquity, but he clearly denotes their identities. In Poussin's *Parnassus*, the painter does not indicate (and Panofsky fails to tell us) which figure we should recognize as Marino. If the poet kneeling before Apollo is, in fact, Marino, then we must not dismiss the ‘obscurity’ of Marino's Baroque/Mannerist reputation as quickly as previous scholars have done. The figure of Marino, like the engravings of Raimondi, disrupts the purity of the Raphael-Poussin lineage; as a result, Marino's influence on Poussin has been suppressed. Is this a product of our limited knowledge of Poussin's early works, or a product of the iconographic political agenda of the *Académie*?

Poussin and Marino: A Counter-Academic Reading

After thoroughly examining the historiographic tradition of aligning Poussin with Raphaelesque Classicism, we reach a crossroads. Either we can accept at face value Poussin's reputation as the inheritor of antiquity for France, and continue to copy and recopy his classical artistic persona as though we were students of the *Académie Royale*, or we can challenge the unexplored avenues of Poussin's career that deal with the complexities of Ovidian classicism. Curiosity demands pursuit of the latter.

Modern scholars, following the trend set by the *Académie Royale* in seventeenth-century France, have ignored or quieted the significance of Poussin's early fascination with Ovid's poetry due to the inspiration of Italian Mannerist poet Giambattista Marino. A closer reading of Poussin's so-called *Marino Drawings* (1622–23) challenges Marino's battered reputation as a “superficial versifier...a pornographer and adventurer, allegedly a pervert and certainly a fop, known indeed as everything except *poet*” (Ackerman 327), and just as importantly, reshapes our understanding

of Poussin as a classical artist. The *Marino Drawings* are Poussin's only surviving works that can be dated to this youthful pre-Roman period. The Ovidian themes selected by Poussin for these drawings, under the guidance of his teacher Marino, reveal a keen awareness of the political instability of the nascent French nation, stemming from a deeply-rooted cultural rivalry between Italy and France. As an artist in exile, Poussin's competing classicist identities are exacerbated by this cultural rivalry: his paintings—and, to a greater extent, their reproductions—are exchanged between Rome and Paris, and thus his art takes on different meaning depending on the political and geographic context in which it is viewed.

Poussin studied in Paris from 1612 to 1622. While working on a series of paintings for the Jesuits, Poussin attracted the attention of Giambattista Marino, who settled in Paris as a court poet at the invitation of Queen Regent Marie de' Medici in 1615. At this time, Marino was writing his epic mythological poem, *L'Adone*, which was published in Paris in 1623 with a dedication to King Louis XIII. Poussin's early biographers suggest that Marino intended to work with Poussin on an illustrated edition of his poem (Thuillier 36–40), but twentieth-century scholars—such as Jane Costello, Walter Friedlaender, and Anthony Blunt—manifestly reject the possibility that the *Marino Drawings* are based on *L'Adone*. To date, Poussin's *Birth of Adonis* is the only drawing to be considered loosely based on Marino's poem (Simon 57). If it could be shown that Poussin intended to illustrate Marino's poetry, Poussin would be accused of embracing a Mannerist/Baroque reading of Ovid, thus lessening his validity as a successor of Raphael.

Jane Costello, author of the article “Poussin's Drawings for Marino and the New Classicism: I—Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,” attempts to group all of the *Marino Drawings* into a cohesive whole, that is, as illustrations for a new edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Costello's rather selective argument revolves around iconographic and thematic issues. According to Bellori, when Marino was ill “it helped to pass the time to watch Poussin make drawings of themes from his own poetry,” but Costello challenges this point. She explains: “to credit the making of the Marino Drawings to the tedium of illness strikes the modern reader as wanting” (298). Costello immediately follows with her rejection of Bellori's claim that the drawings were illustrations of Marino's poetry and of *L'Adone* in particular. She does not conceive of the drawings as a pastime, but rather as belonging to some other plan or project. To conclude, Costello supposes that a larger number of drawings were made—some belong to an illustrated edition of the *Metamorphoses*, and others were intend-



Figure 4

Nicolas Poussin, *Pallas and the Muses*, pen and wash drawing; Windsor Castle (1622–23).

ed for *L'Adone*, but are now lost (308). This argument is convincing, yet Costello's desire to isolate the *Metamorphoses* from *L'Adone* is significant. Why not see Marino as a filter from Ovid's poetry to Poussin's canvas?

The counterargument to Costello's conclusion of a unified series—which does not leave room for multiple types of classicism—is best articulated by Jacques Thuillier, who argues that we should not force all of the *Marino Drawings* into a single project. Although the drawings are materially unified by pen and ink with a gray wash, stylistic differences among the drawings show that they were not executed consecutively. Two of the drawings, *Pallas and the Muses* (Figure 4) and *Mercury and Argus* (Figure 5), seem to be earlier in date than the others because of their vertical format, and because they display elements of the Mannerist style (90–91). Thuillier vaguely mentions two reasons for his conclusions: both drawings contain nudes posed as classical sculptures, and in both, Poussin expresses a concern for depth, crowding the figures in the foreground and allowing



Figure 5

Nicolas Poussin, *Mercury and Argus*, pen and wash drawing; Windsor Castle (1622–23).

the landscape to recede into the background. Here Poussin's style is "still so close to the art of Fontainebleau and to the 'Mannerism' of Antwerp and of Prague, that one can well imagine these two sheets to be earlier than the rest of the group" (92–93). Ironically, Friedlaender and Blunt place *Pallas and the Muses* and *Mercury and Argus* and the end of their catalogue of the *Marino Drawings*. They recognize that these two drawings are set apart by a different technique and more vigorous chiaroscuro, but they claim that "there is no reason for supposing [them] to be later than the others" (13). There is no mention of Mannerism, however; in fact, Friedlaender and Blunt cite two entirely different drawings as containing Mannerist elements: *Galatea, Acis and Polyphemus* (Figure 6) and *Orpheus in Hades* (Figure 8), to which we will return shortly.

It is important to note that the counterarguments to a unification of the drawings are not restricted to issues of chronology. Andrea Moschetti, in his article, "Dell'influsso del Marino sulla formazione artistica di Nicola Poussin"

(Rome 1913), studied the influence of Marino's writings on Poussin. Moschetti's connections between Marino's poetry and Poussin's painting have mostly been rejected by modern scholars; this rejection seems to have discouraged further investigation into their relationship (Simon 57), as has the discouraging length of Marino's poem, which reaches almost 41,000 lines—more than twice that of the *Odyssey* and the *Divine Comedy*, and roughly four times the length of *Paradise Lost*. The only 'recent' investigation, cited in Simon's article, is Kurt Badt's *Die Kunst des Nicolas Poussin* (Cologne 1969). Badt praises the artists' friendship and draws parallels between the form, composition, and effect of their works: "the apparent dissimilarity of the styles of Marino and Poussin seems to belie a substantial relationship between the two figures. In a broad sense, one could observe that for Marino, 'the aim of the poet is the marvelous,' whereas for Poussin, painting's 'aim is delectation'" (Simon 57). Were these truly Poussin's and Marino's aims, or are these the aims fashioned by critics and modern historians to coerce the artist and poet into their respective stylistic categories? Marino, as an obscure Mannerist poet, disrupts Poussin's role in redefining Raphaellesque Classicism for France.

The arguments of these scholars end prematurely. After Jane Costello labeled Ovid as Poussin's overarching source, few have attempted reinterpretation. Or, rather, few have sought 'further interpretation,' because it requires only a cursory reading of the *Metamorphoses* to recognize that Poussin's scenes are obliged to Ovid. Absent from each of these arguments is the devalued detail that Poussin accessed Ovid through his teacher, Marino. Veering away from Marino as a source shows that Poussin needed to be dissociated from Mannerism to be strait-jacketed into the classical agenda of the *Académie*. Who, then, was Marino's Ovid? Furthermore, what exactly did it mean to imitate Ovid in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, and how did this motivate twentieth-century scholars to reject Marino?

The Ovid Revival

In France, the rise of interest in Classical Humanism dates to the early sixteenth century. In this period, municipal primary education for young males was reformed; towns and provinces were linked to the French crown by a common humanist curriculum, which helped elide regional differences. Inheriting antiquity, the importance of which Raphael made clear in his *Parnassus*, thus served two functions in early modern France: first as social cement, and second as an exertion of political power (Olson 25–30). Artists and poets inadvertently became vehicles for transmitting the authority of antiquity onto the modern state.

Partiality for Ovidian themes in literature and art can be traced to the late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth centuries. At this time, two contrasting schools emerged in European literary circles: the biblical school and the mythological/Ovidian school. The popularity of the biblical trend was most clearly expressed in the works of Tasso (*Il Mondo Creato*), Du Bartas (*La Semaine*), and Milton (*Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*). In the Ovidian school, conversely, writers broke away from the conventional themes of military and amorous adventures of Christian knights by basing their work on classical erotic stories, as did Marlowe and Chapman (*Hero and Leander*), Shakespeare (*Venus and Adonis*), and Gongora (*Polifemo y Galatea*). When Marino began writing *L'Adone*, this renewed cultivation of classical material, as a rebellion against the biblical, was already in the air (Priest, intro to Marino's *Adonis*, xvii–xviii).

Unlike in literature, a partiality for the mythological school was slower to flourish in painting. The Ovidian stories Poussin chose to illustrate are "favorite tales, but their apparent familiarity is deceptive. For a century and more before 1622, representations of many of these subjects in easel painting or fresco are very rare" (Costello 306). When these stories did occur in art before the seventeenth century, they were most often planned for compositions on stained glass, tapestries, pottery, silver, or prints (307). In Poussin's lifetime, the situation began to change, as painters reached out to a richer Ovidian selection. Costello does not explore this point further, but these expanding visual representations of Ovid point to the rising tendency to entwine classical myth with political power. As France became centralized under Cardinal Richelieu and King Louis XIII, it became increasingly important to have an iconographically unified French Art. The classicism of Raphael, via Poussin, provided the visual foundations for the new French nation. For this iconography to be successful, Marino's importance had to be mitigated, a bias that has endured in modern scholarship on Poussin. Returning to Jane Costello's article, she explains, Poussin's "views were taking shape under the influence of his fresh impression of the poetry of Ovid, and in antagonism to the existing *Metamorphoses* illustrations...as Poussin read his Ovid, he formed an impression of it that was personal" (316). Undoubtedly Poussin was innovative, but Costello credits him entirely for rethinking Ovid. What she fails to mention is that Marino already rose to this challenge.

Good Classicism, Bad Mannerism

In his own lifetime Marino earned the reputation as "the new Ovid," much in the same way that Poussin became "the

new Raphael.” Marino was indebted to the Ovidian school; his *L'Adone* is saturated with themes from the *Metamorphoses*, along with numerous other mythological sources. The severance of Ovid’s style from that of Marino is therefore contrived by modern scholars and, as I show, a byproduct of the periodization of the Renaissance and the Baroque.¹

Returning for a moment to oversimplified stylistic labels, Marino is known as the epitome of Mannerism and Poussin as the founder of Classicism. Because Mannerism obtained the reputation of being anti-classical,² it has been treated as an unfavorable period by those who adore Renaissance art. There is a recurring desire in modern scholarship to extricate Poussin from the obscurity of the Mannerist style: Poussin is perceived to have been swept up by its newness, but finding it distasteful, he needed to ‘free’ himself from it. This interpretation necessitates the portrayal of Marino as a minor figure in his life, however pivotal he may have actually been (at the very least he is credited for helping Poussin go to Rome). But was Mannerism, via Marino, such a bad influence after all? Perhaps Poussin’s engagement with Marino was willing experimentation.

In Friedlaender and Blunt’s catalogue of Poussin drawings, the two works with Mannerist elements are identified as *Galatea, Acis, and Polyphemus* and *Orpheus in Hades*. As previously mentioned, Thuillier labels *Pallas and the Muses* and *Mercury and Argus* as examples of Mannerism. Thuillier associates some elements of *Galatea, Acis, and Polyphemus* with the first two Mannerist drawings—the “fracturing of the spatial planes, the foreshortening of the pair of lovers and the dramatic tension are all characteristic of the Second School of Fontainebleau” (93)—but in his description of *Orpheus in Hades*, no mention is made of Mannerism. In fact, Thuillier asserts, “[t]his sheet is without doubt the one that most closely anticipates the compositions of Poussin’s maturity” (96). Is Thuillier rejecting Friedlaender and Blunt,



Figure 6

Nicolas Poussin, *Galatea, Acis, and Polyphemus*, pen and wash drawing; Windsor Castle (1622–23).

or is he, too, lost in periodization? It is not apparent whether, for Thuillier, Mannerism is simply a youthful phase in Poussin’s stylistic development that he had to overcome.

A closer examination of the drawings reveals that the facets labeled as Mannerist are not concrete, but rather fluctuate depending on the historian who defines them. In *Galatea, Acis, and Polyphemus* (Figure 6), the giant Polyphemus slouches on a rocky outcropping in the foreground. His powerful, menacing gaze directs the viewer’s attention to the diminutive figures of Galatea and Acis copulating in the background. This is the precise moment, as described by Ovid, of Polyphemus’s realization that his love for Galatea will not be returned. Polyphemus loses himself in a jealous rage:

And when he saw my lover and me together,
Both unsuspecting, he bellowed out, ‘I see you,
I’ll make this the last time you get together!’
His voice was big and terrible as Cyclops
Should roar with anger, Etna heard it
And trembled... (Ovid, XIII, ll. 873–78)

We can imagine Poussin’s Polyphemus on the verge of shouting this threat. His muscular body is full of tension, as he is just about to spring forth from the rocks and attack Acis. Galatea is craftily positioned between the two men, emphasizing the precariousness of her love for Acis and her disgust for Polyphemus. According to Blunt and Friedlaender, what is Mannerist about this drawing is the dramatic scaling of Galatea and Acis, juxtaposed with

1. The demarcation of stylistic periods was perpetuated by such scholars as Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), and his pupil Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (1888). Burckhardt generally viewed the periods following the Renaissance (namely Mannerism and Baroque) as “raw and deviant.”

2. See Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1957).

the giant Polyphemus (12). These scholars are eager to dismiss any connections between this drawing and Poussin's later representations of Galatea, as if suggesting his deliberate removal from these obscure Mannerist elements (much in the same way it is suggested that Poussin must extricate himself from his Venetian interlude). Thus, according to Friedlaender and Blunt, what is Ovidian about Poussin's drawings are his themes, and the elements labeled Mannerist involve stylistic technique.

However, these 'Mannerist elements'—which are not large in number but reduced to the distinct issue of scale—could simply be a visual trick to exaggerate the size and strength of Polyphemus. Such figural scaling is not as unique to this drawing as previous scholars would have us believe; it is repeated in *Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus* (Figure 7). Ovid explains that while Apollo plays his pipe in the background, Admetus's cattle:

Went wandering off and
Mercury saw them, stole them,
Drove them into a forest where
he hid them
(Ovid, II, ll. 682–84).

Poussin shows the herds of Admetus wandering away in the foreground. The bull in full view echoes the figure of Polyphemus: it has a muscular body, a single exaggerated eye, and its tense posture anticipates the movement of the cattle away from the scene. The eyes of both the bull and of Polyphemus funnel the viewer's attention from the looming figure in the foreground to the diminutive action of the background. Poussin has turned the primary action in Ovid—Galatea and Acis making love, Apollo playing his music—into secondary pictorial elements, privileging the solitary figure for the foreground. If we were to buy into the stylistic rationalizations of Friedlaender, Blunt, and Thuillier's stylistic rationalizations, then *Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus* should be cited as another example of Mannerist 'dramatic scaling.' The fail-



Figure 7

Nicolas Poussin, *Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus*, pen and wash drawing; Windsor Castle (1622–23).



Figure 8

Nicolas Poussin, *Orpheus in Hades*, pen and wash drawing; Windsor Castle (1622–23).

ure of these scholars to identify this drawing with *Galatea*, *Acis*, and *Polyphemus* highlights the inconsistencies in stylistic labels; how can an element deemed Mannerist in one drawing be ignored in other drawings? And should we not credit Marino with Poussin's reinterpretation of Ovid, suggested in Poussin's transformations of primary poetic action to secondary pictorial elements?

The second so-called Mannerist drawing in Blunt and Friedlaender's catalogue, *Orpheus in Hades* (Figure 8), follows the text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* very closely:

And with his words, the music
 Made the pale phantoms weep: Ixion's wheel
 Was still, Tityos' vultures left the liver,
 Tantalus tried no more to reach for the water,
 And Belus' daughters rested from their urns,
 And Sisyphus climbed on his rock to listen.
 That was the first time ever in all the world
 The Furies wept. Neither the king nor consort
 Had harshness to refuse him, and they called her,
 Eurydice. She was there, limping a little
 From her late wound, with the new shades of Hell.
 And Orpheus received her. (Ovid, X, ll. 40-51)

Poussin situates Orpheus with his harp in the very center of the composition; Eurydice stands before him, shyly covering her nudity and looking straight at the ground. Numerous captives of Hades surround them, resting from their torments. Pluto is seated on his throne with Persephone at his side and Cerberus at his feet. Ovid's entire cast of characters is present in the drawing: Tantalus waist-deep in a pool of water on the left, Belus's daughters and the Furies frozen in wonder to the right of Orpheus, and Sisyphus leaning over the rock on the far right. The reclining nude figure of Tityus, who is not actually labeled by Blunt and Friedlaender, is characterized as being "Michelangelesque in character, but it is also related in pose to Raphael's Heliodorus in the *Expulsion of Heliodorus*. These elements of Italian Mannerism are, however, seen through the eyes of the Second School of Fontainebleau" (12–13). Are we to conclude that Mannerism simultaneously borrows from Raphael's Renaissance and Michelangelo's Baroque? This is highly unlikely, and proof that periodization—or, simplifying Poussin's identity as a classical Renaissance artist—is not an effective method of analysis for Poussin's oeuvre.

As I have shown, the degree to which Poussin prescribes to Mannerism is ultimately irrelevant because the term is carelessly applied to unusual stylistic elements. What is most important to keep in mind is that Poussin's drawings and paintings borrow thematically from Ovid just as much as Marino's poetry. Marino's pages are bound by Ovidian mythology; Robert Simon even calls *L'Adone* "a modern encyclopedia of classical mythology" (57). Moreover, a closer study of his poetry reveals Marino "to be less a paraphraser of classical myth than an interpreter of it" (64). If we agree to this claim, then we find Poussin in the most advantageous position in his early career. Marino does not simply teach him about the ancients and introduce him to literary circles, but also he widens Poussin's capacity for mythological understanding:

Poussin seems to have read Marino's poetry like a mythographic handbook, extracting and incorporating visual descriptions of the gods and their legends. What makes this use of Marino potentially important for the study of Poussin's paintings is that the poet's mythological sources were varied and recondite, and thus through Marino's fuller retelling of legend Poussin was often exposed to different, expanded conceptions and representations of specific mythological themes (Simon 64).

Poussin weaves his way through numerous interpretations of mythology, visual and literary, to master the vocabulary of the Latinate tradition. In seventeenth-century Italy, to know ancient myths and biblical stories was commonplace, but to revise them, to have the ability to make them new (versus dutifully replicating them), was the sign of a talented artist. This draws attention to the artistic virtuosity of Poussin in a way that his commodified historiographic role does not.

Ovidian Themes as Political Propaganda

And now we arrive at one final question: when there is such an extensive array of mythological stories to choose from, what is the significance of the scenes chosen by Poussin? The subject matter of the *Marino Drawings* reveals an awareness of the political rivalry between France and Italy, which, in turn, indicates the instability of the artistic trends of Baroque and Classicism in the Parisian court. To release Poussin from his classical strait jacket, we must revise the grouping of the drawings done by Friedlaender and Blunt in their *catalogue raisonné*. They group the drawings by subject, not chronology, and summarize Poussin's themes without a thorough exploration of their possible significances. I prefer to approach the drawings in the following two categories:

1. Cycles of birth and death
2. Prefigurations of rebirth

To the first category belongs the *Birth of Adonis*, born from Myrrha, who was transformed into a myrrh-tree after committing incest with her father; the *Birth of Priapus*, the fertility god born from Venus; *Diana Slaying Chione*, because Chione claimed to be fairer than the goddess; *Dryope*, who was transformed into a tree after plucking a lotus flower, not knowing it was the nymph Lotis; and finally *Acis Transformed into a River God*, where Acis was killed by the jealous Polyphemus. Consistent throughout these drawings are the presence of children: Adonis, Priapus, Chione's twins

with several offspring of Apollo and Mercury, Dryope's son playing with a group of children, and Acis springing from the river in the form of a youth.

My second category of drawings involves prefigurations of rebirth. *Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus* refers to the story of Jupiter and Europa; Poussin illustrates the moment Mercury is sent to drive the cattle of Europa's father, Agenor, down to the shore where the maiden was playing. *Galatea, Acis and Polyphemus* suggests the moment before Acis is killed and reborn as a river god. Finally, in *Orpheus in Hades*, Orpheus persuades Hades to restore Eurydice to the living world (but we know that later in the story his mission failed). The tension between life and death permeates all of these drawings.

These themes are no accident; in fact, they reflect the political instability of seventeenth-century France, which Marino and Poussin observed firsthand as they collaborated in the heart of the Parisian court. In 1615, Marino was welcomed to the court after he wrote the panegyric *Il Tempio* in honor of Marie de' Medici, queen consort from 1600–10 and Regent from 1610–14. Marie de' Medici was an outstanding patroness of the arts, and her marriage to King Henry IV in 1600 proved highly beneficial for France's subsequent appropriation of the Latinate tradition from Italy. Marie's Italian roots dominated her intimate court circle; with her taste for festivals and spectacle, Marie seems to have "favored a nascent Baroque style" (Marrow 15). But why the Baroque style? The seventeenth century marks a historical turning point for Europe as a whole: responding to the disarray of the sixteenth century (the antagonism of political theories, Luther's protest and countless religious wars, population growth and overseas expansion, just to name a few), Europeans were striving for stability and confidence after 1600. The Baroque style epitomized the popular belief that uncertainty could be subdued by grandeur and immensity, and its greatest figures—Rubens, Bernini, Velasquez—served and apotheosized monarchs and popes who claimed to be repositories of all authority (Rabb 35–58).

Returning to the point that Poussin reached out to richer Ovidian themes, there is much to be said about how the themes selected by Poussin relate to the political atmo-



Figure 9
Nicolas Poussin, *Birth of Adonis*, pen and wash drawing; Windsor Castle (1622–23).

sphere of the seventeenth-century Parisian court. The importance of education, as established in the iconography of Marie de' Medici's court, is reflected in the Marino drawings. A decisive shift occurs, however, in the characteristics of the individual that receives the education. My first category of drawings—the birth/death cycle—is unified by the common element of mother and child. The mother is often being punished in some way, while the child is treated as a triumph of nature. In Poussin's *Birth of Adonis* (Figure 9), Myrrha has been exiled after an incestuous relationship with her father; after her transformation into a myrrh tree, Adonis is miraculously born from her bark. Even though the birth is the central action, the scene is crowded with figures, many of whom are more engaged in individual conversation than in the extraordinary scene before them. Turning to another example of a similar subject, Poussin's *Dryope* (Figure 10) illustrates Dryope's transformation into a tree after she plucked the flower of a lotus, unaware that this flower was the nymph Lotis. Dryope's last request was that her son could remain near her tree and be taught that all flowers are goddesses in disguise. Numerous other children crowd the scene, and these are thought to be the children of Apollo and/or Mercury. Both Myrrha and Dryope suffer from a tragic fate, but secured in their children is the potential for a prosperous future.

If these mother figures are representations of the Queen mother, Marie de' Medici, and the children are symbols of the maturing king, Louis XIII, then the instability of the French monarchy becomes pronounced. In 1617 the French court was disrupted by Louis XIII turning against his mother and her Italian advisors. Marie de' Medici was



Figure 10
Nicolas Poussin, *Dryope*, pen and wash drawing; Windsor Castle (1622–23).

forced into exile and her Italian-dominated court was removed in favor of the absolutist monarchy of King Louis XIII. Hence the need to punish the mother figures in Poussin's drawings. Poussin shows that Marie de' Medici upheld her respect in the courts only as the king's mother; iconographically, her role as an educated ruler was erased in order to demonstrate the maturation of the new king. On the heels of the banished Marie de' Medici, the Baroque style fell out of fashion in France, and so, too, did Marino's Mannerist poetry.

Contrary to the drawings in the first category, which seem to uphold the promise of Louis XIII's monarchy, the second group—prefigurations of rebirth—undermines the future of the French court. *Galatea, Acis and Polyphemus*, *Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus*, and *Orpheus in Hades* each capture an apprehensive moment that will result in a death, a rape, and a second death, respectively. Each one of these drawings is concerned with deception. It is likely that Poussin, friend to Marino, friend to Marie de' Medici, evokes his resistance to the nascent French nation through this set of drawings. Like Marino's *L'Adone*, Poussin's early work—with its fluctuating style and countless humanist sources, both literary and pictorial—must have suffered from such an unstable political atmosphere. Poussin fails to celebrate the court, and buried in this failure is the suggestion that Poussin is not a true classicist.

A New Direction

Raphaelesque Classicism has defined and immobilized the academic reputation of Nicolas Poussin for nearly four centuries: “Raphael and Raphaelism were key to the program of an academy in which virtually every young

artist was introduced—and indoctrinated—into the theory and practice of art from his earliest years of study; to remain close to Raphael, students were made to understand, was always to be on sure ground” (Goldstein 260). But this has also resulted in the limiting of Poussin's virtuosity as an artist. The *Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture* suppressed certain elements of Poussin's art in order to package him into a model for future generations of artists, and this political agenda has been engrained in Poussin scholarship ever since. Poussin's involvement with Giambattista Marino

deserves much more attention. It is time to look beyond the conventions established by twentieth-century scholars and read Poussin's paintings—and Marino's poetry—in a new light.

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