

GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN: THE POWER OF WOMEN IN ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ART, GREEK & ROMAN MYTHOLOGY, AND THE MODERN DAY MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

This paper examines the pivotal role of women as depicted in Renaissance Italian art, forms of mythology, both Greek and Roman, and Middle Eastern icons. As the male and female recipients of these images filter them, they are faced with anomic feelings resulting in pointed conflicts to tradition (the mainstay of men being strong and women being passive). The exception rather than the rule is the woman front and center, exerting her power and sensibilities, and the men remaining secondary in the background. For every insight on this level in socio-political-cultural realms, there appears to be an onslaught of soft, domestic, emotional figures to offset the uncomfortable way that feminine dominance causes one to feel throughout history. This common response serves to highlight the nature of the threat to the status quo, and the ensuing struggle to right its formerly steady ship.

Key Words: Gender, Power, Italian Renaissance Art, Mythology, Middle East

Societies throughout history have experienced the uneasiness that accompanies feelings of “anomie” (Durkheim, 1897). This term is associated with a helpless confusion and/or frustration that results from a disconnect between two competing, conflicting realities – one that is expected, and one that is entirely new, different, and often surprising, unconventional, or even startling. This disjuncture of ideas creates a shake-down of normal, dependable structure and order, as it is commonly known and anticipated. A re-thinking occurs in response – in an effort to make sense out of what sometimes appears as senseless disarray. Familiar examples include the emotion that flows from experiencing divorce, job loss, and the death of a loved one or close personal friend, or natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and monsoons. An upending of familiarity gives way to chaos, lack of control, and often resulting despair and unrest. Such unexpected, sudden change is disconcerting, no matter what the root of the cause may be. It can even occur in happy circumstances, such as hitting a jackpot, which also throws one’s life into a stirred up frenzy. Normalcy is replaced with disorder in a way that is difficult, if not impossible, for which to prepare oneself.

In order to illustrate the outcome of growth as well as discomfort that commonly springs from anomie, three historical examples related to gender inequality will be explored. The first requires an analysis of Italian Renaissance Art. From a wide array of samples, a specific painting is selected as being exemplary of females rarely showcased as powerful warriors and centers of power in their era. The “Allegory of Fortitude” (oil on wood by Tommaso Manzuoli detto Maso da San Friano – circa 1560-1562) is offered as the model (displayed in the Accademia, Florence, Italy). Against the common thinking at the time of women portraying a soft, delicate, maternal caregiving image inside the home, this female force of “Fortitude” is front and center, right foot squarely planted on a complacent (newly conquered) lion’s head, studded mace in hand, seated fearlessly, with Hercules in the background (minuscule in comparison) battling another lion and (some say) fiercely losing. The scene draws the eye forward, highlighting the center of power on the giant, commanding womanly warrior (a tribute to which composed by the present author is located in Appendix B).

This female image stands in direct contrast with conventional thinking at the time. The dominant feminine stereotype of the day was one of delicacy, an earth-bound nature. Fertility was showcased as the center force of womanhood. “Women in Renaissance, like women in the Middle Ages, were denied all political rights and considered legally subject to their husbands. Women of all classes were expected to perform, first and foremost, the duties of housewife... Women who did not marry were not permitted to live independently. Instead, they lived in the households of their male relatives or, more often, joined a convent” (SparkNotes Editors, 2014). “The theme of the life of a Renaissance woman was subjugation. A woman was controlled by her parents throughout her childhood, and then handed directly into the hands of a husband, whom she most likely had not chosen herself, and who would exercise control over her until her death or his” (SparkNotes Editors, 2014; Dunn, 1977). The allegorical “Fortitude” stands in stark contrast to the soft maternal image of the child-bearing mistress of the household often portrayed of even Renaissance royalty at the time (Lucrezia Panciatichi being a prime example). A cross-sectional analysis of a large systematic sample of Renaissance paintings and statues from The Uffizi in Florence (N=174, with 90 of those pieces including one or more women) alone yields a staggering 61% of those portraying a female figure (central or otherwise) being accompanied by a child or children. Those depicted otherwise are either posing in leisurely positions, such as riding side saddle in frills or sitting in silent glory for a family portrait, or they are featured as mistresses of mystifying witchcraft, as the tortured head of Medusa with snakes abounding, as the temptress, Eve, in the Garden of Eden with fate’s apple in hand, or in other similarly unenviable positions (data extracted from Pescio, 1998). It should be noted that not one of the warrior scenes sampled from The Uffizi included a female figure in an instrumental (battle) role– dampening the anomie caused by a woman viewed in power, such as the one encountered while drinking in the unique Allegory of Fortitude at the Accademia. A fully detailed account of the minority of six violent-specific paintings with women even inconsequentially present in the sample is available in Appendix A.

Next, the work will delve into Greek and Roman mythological women. Again, an extensive sample was drawn from the best known deities, female and male. Athena is at the helm of warrior goddesses. With her Roman counterpart, Minerva, Athena stands for intelligence, skill, handicrafts, wisdom, and peace, but also to the contrary, warfare and battle strategy. Springing from the head of Zeus, she was fully

formed and armored at birth, with shield and spear and a crown with a crested helm. A great Olympian goddess of wise counsel (athleticism ever tempered by intellectual prowess), she is a rare balance of femininity and masculine power only typified elsewhere by one other sub-deity, Enyo, goddess of war and destruction, and one mortal, Medea, sorceress and wife of Jason who killed her own children to punish Jason for his infidelity. The rest of the Greek and Roman goddesses, and even those on lower footing, exhibit signs of gentle softness often associated with traditional femininity. Examples include Aphrodite/Venus who is equated with love, desire, and beauty. Artemis, though coupled with hunting, the wilderness, and animals, is further paired with youth, childbirth, and the plague. Demeter is the goddess of grain, agriculture, harvest, growth, and nourishment. Hera rules marriage, women, childbirth, heirs, kings, and empires. Hestia is the virgin goddess of hearth, home, and chastity. Persephone, abducted to the Underworld by Hades, is associated with the bountiful seasons of spring and summer when she is allowed to appear above ground. The fall and winter coincide with her disappearance into the depths; hence they are the barren seasons. The male gods are a manly crew. Even Apollo displays “masculine” beauty. Ares is the god of war. Dionysus is the god of chaos, parties, and all sorts of excesses. Hades is well known as the king of the underworld, the dead, and regret in general. Hephaestus is known as the crippled god of fire, and Hermes is the god of travel. Poseidon rules the sea. Zeus, whose Roman equivalent is Jupiter, is king and father of the gods – ruler of Mount Olympus and god of the sky, weather, thunder, lightning, law, order, and justice (Guirand, 1987).

The distinction appears to be clear-cut, with the rare partial exception of Athena, who to Plato has “the mind of God,” as “she knows divine things” better than others. He rationalizes the deity’s mind, and portrays her as appearing at times as a winged creature. She stands in direct contradiction to Aristotle’s ideal of women as the “subordinated sex.” He speaks freely of the “political subordination of women to men in home and society” (Horowitz, 1976), thus smoothing out any anomie related to women in power.

To these philosophers, on every level, women fall below the place of men:

- Maleness is active
- Femaleness is passive
- Maleness is spiritual
- Femaleness is material

Balance is nonexistent between female and male deities. Typically, women are fertile, maternal figures, and men are active, powerful leaders. Societies across the globe are not alarmed, as long as these stereotypes remain in place in art, in literature, and even in modern day eastern and western cultures, upon which the work shall now embark.

Within the contrived atmosphere of artistic masterpieces and mythological legends, the distress of anomic confusion about gender roles is easier to keep in check. But, with modern day attitudes, greater effort must be exerted to keep the compartmentalism intact. Challenges to that mindset have been

forged by fearless women. As current, highly publicized Middle Eastern examples, Queen Rania of Jordan maintains that “we are all born with the gift of thought,” and “education is a life line” (Al Abdullah, 2014). Malala Yousafzai, Nobel Peace Prize recipient and champion of education for girls in Pakistan and globally, who was shot in the head by the Taliban as a result, offers yet a stronger model of courage – arising from common roots to stand before the United Nations advocating: “One child, one teacher, one pen, one book, can change the world” (Yousafzai, 2013; 2013a). For years, girls in the Middle East where their education is suppressed have been masquerading as boys, just to get access to schooling. The risks are immense, as discovery can lead to instantaneous murder. What is the threat posed by women with education? The status quo sees this as an erosion of their central power to control, thereby creating a strong sense of panic, also an offshoot of anomie. These oppressors are fearful of the unknown that such education will create, and they are complacent with their ruling status, that they do not wish to have challenged. Extraordinary lengths have been sought to maintain women in the home and out of sight. Especially clinging to the branding of women as traditional is Turkey’s current President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. On November 24, 2014, it was widely reported that this self-proclaimed world leader had openly disputed gender equality, while defining the role of a woman in society as one equated with motherhood. President Erdogan’s address was to the Women and Justice Summit in Istanbul. It was there that he presented his view of a “much more fair, humane, and conscientious way” to treat women than as the equal to men. He maintained that “you cannot bring women and men into equal positions; that is against nature because their nature is different.” The event was hosted by the Women and Democracy Association. He further called for each Turkish woman to have at least three children, in fulfilling their responsibility to motherhood as outlined in the Islamic faith. Erdogan is new to his presidential role. He was prime minister for the past 11 years. Others among the conservative group have gone so far as to criticize Turkish women for defeating their religion’s ideal of feminine modesty by simply smiling in public. Because a feminist movement exists in the country, this display of power was met with extreme revolt by many. Emerging from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, a secular foundation has been strongly built over the years (Williams, 2014). This example cuts two ways. It counters Queen Rania and Malala, as they move the Middle East forward with their cries for equal treatment of women, which have been viewed as creating turmoil in the minds of conservatives. However, it also creates anomie for many in Turkey, who have adjusted to new, modern thinking, and do not wish to move backward (which is indicated by their recent fall of 15 places to rank a lowly 120th out of 136 nations in the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index).

Anomie, that disconcerting feeling of helplessness that results when sudden change is thrust on us, can arise in many forms. When whatever one deems as the status quo is challenged, anomie is the common response. In return, we struggle to establish order in what appears to be an orderless world, whether that involves dehumanizing paintings of powerful women warriors by balancing them with countless soft, gentle, maternal images elsewhere, or by adding numerous fertile, crop-enhancing female mythological creatures into the mix, to soften the warrior side of Athena so seldom revealed among those famed stories passed down through history, or whether female power in the Middle East and elsewhere will continue to be tempered with a celebrated sensitivity unknown (and further viewed as compromising) to male counterparts. Clinging to the branding of women as domestic and traditional has been the standard response to the unfamiliar territory of anomic emotion stirred on all three of the

socio-political-cultural landscapes treated within this analysis. Interestingly, this does not necessarily erode female power however, as it often instead highlights women as unique, formidable, fierce contenders for a spotlight that is not anymore under the complete control of those born into a dominant status. After all, if one is not threatened, why would they bother to lash out at all?

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Appendix A

The Uffizi – Women in Battle/Violent Scenes, by Painting, Artist, and Role Played

The Discovery of the Corpse of Holophernes, by Sandro Botticelli. Judith, with a look of melancholy, strolls with sword in hand, the decapitated head held high behind her.

The Judgment of Solomon, by Giorgione and others. Madonna kneels before Christ child; other women look on as sword is lifted in violence by a male.

Death of Adonis, by Sebastiano del Piombo. It is almost as if the women front and center are unaware of the figure reclining in death in the background.

Sacrifice of Isaac, by Empoli. A female, winged angel attempts intervention, swooping down on the knife to be used in sacrifice.

Sacrifice of Isaac, by Alessandro Allori. A female, winged angel circles overhead while sacrificial steps are taken.

Henri 1V Triumphantly Entering Paris, by Pieter Paul Rubens. Women recline as spectators to battle.

Appendix B

Ode to Allegory of Fortitude

As fierce as fire, deep burning glow,

She sits poised for attack.

Atop a lion, right foot firm,

Her bravery none so lacks.

In left hand, mace steadfastly held,

Right hand, on column graced.

Her stare a mighty warrior's,

With whom no one keeps pace.

To her left is Hercules,

Diminished in his fight.

Another lion conquers him,

Before he takes to flight.

***“Fortitude,” this woman’s name,
She wears it like a crown.
Toppling foes and enemies,
With calm in place of frown.***

***Florence is still home to her,
With David near her side.
Centuries pass without a thought,
She remains tamed lion’s pride.***

by G. Weatherby

In honor of Accademia’s “Allegory of Fortitude”

*Oil on Wood, by Tommaso Manzuoli detto Maso
da San Friano (circa 1560-1562)*