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0521842441 - Gender, Politics, and Allegory in the Art of Peter Paul Rubens

Lisa Rosenthal

Excerpt

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# Rubens, Allegory, and Art-Historical Method

Given such abundance of thought, such richness in his inventions, such erudition and clarity in his allegorical pictures; and since he has developed his subjects so well, including only the most apt and appropriate elements, it is hardly surprising that one gains from this a perfect understanding of the intended action and that one perceives an immediate and ever-increasing liveliness, which is always, however, within nature's own character.

Roger de Piles, *Dissertation sur les Ouvrages des Plus  
Fameux Peintres* (Paris, 1681).<sup>1</sup>

*C* On December 3, 2001 the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles announced its acquisition of a recently rediscovered collaborative painting by Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder. *The Return From War: Mars Disarmed by Venus*, a large work (125.5 × 160 cm) executed in oil on panel, depicts the vast caverns of Vulcan's forge where Venus, aided by her amoretti, is in the process of divesting Mars

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of his armor and weapons (fig. 21). Brueghel's skill as a painter of still life and landscape is devoted here to the complex space of the forge and the description of a cornucopian array of tools, objects, and materials relating to the forger's practice; Rubens's contribution is the figures in the foreground. The painting's many attractions include the meticulous rendering of the instruments of war cast upon the ground, the vivid psychological exchange between the lovers, the comic elements of the amorettes' action, and the dazzling effects of Rubens's sumptuously painted bodies, especially in the passages where he contrasts Venus's glowing flesh with Mars's dark, gleaming armor. Simultaneous with these visual delights, this encounter between the gods of love and war would have been immediately apparent as an allegory of peace to its seventeenth-century beholders for whom this was a familiar and ever-topical theme. In its subject, and the enunciation of its theme through active, lushly rendered figures, the *Mars Disarmed by Venus* exemplifies what was a central concern of Rubens's art, namely, the creation of compelling allegories promoting the desirability of peace and depicting the horrors of war.<sup>2</sup>

This book explores the inventiveness of Rubens's engagement with the theme of war and peace by probing the complex structure of the pleasures his pictures offer. In Rubens's practice, as exemplified by the Getty picture, the visual allegory is inadequately understood by its generic definition as the cloaking of represented figures with abstract conceits. Venus and Mars do not represent simply the opposition of love and war as abstract ideas but also bodily enact the possibility of their reconciliation; to whatever degree the picture persuades us of its allegorical meaning, it does so by inviting our fullest response to the figures themselves. The outward-directed pose of Venus, causing her to spiral on her own axis as she stretches to remove Mars's heavy helmet, is less a distraction from her meaning than an essential elaboration of it: thus displayed for our delectation she mobilizes our desire, so that like Mars, we will put aside armaments in favor of peace. The picture typifies Rubens's deployment of the figure as a bearer of allegorical, political meaning; its reemergence from obscurity during the course of my work on this book was a timely confirmation of the importance of war and peace imagery in Rubens's oeuvre and a demonstration

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of the painterly virtuosity and intellectual passion that shapes these images.



RUBENS AND THE THEMES OF WAR  
AND PEACE

In works like the recently recovered *Mars Disarmed by Venus*, *The Victorious Hero Seizes Opportunity in Order to Conclude Peace* (pl. I), *Minerva Protects Pax From Mars* (pl. II), and *The Four Parts of the Earth*, or *The Four Rivers* (fig. 6), Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) addressed the most pressing political concerns of his age: the problem of war and the ideal of state power exercised to uphold peace. Two celebrated aspects of Rubens's art are on view in these works: his learned and inventive manipulation of allegory that speaks to the great public issues of his age; and his dynamic and lavish rendering of the human figure. These two skills are linked: allegory is articulated through, or more precisely, embodied by, figures like Mars and Venus, Pax, Opportunity or the river gods, and their consorts. The paintings move and engage us because, even as they rely upon personifications to convey abstract ideas such as war, peace, or wisdom, these figures are depicted with drama, wit, and psychological complexity, forging their allegorical programs to compelling narrative action. And as seen in these examples, the drama that most typically shapes Rubens's war and peace imagery entails the flourishing of, or threat to, maternal, marital, or sexual bonds.

Rubens's repeated association of peace with the pleasures of love and with a Venus-like figure draws upon Renaissance allegorical traditions. By the seventeenth century this vast catalogue of personifications, attributes, and symbolic objects, derived from antiquity and exhaustively glossed by humanist scholars, artists, and emblematisers, had evolved into a rich, flexible, and widely apprehended language for the representation of almost every area of human endeavor. Rubens's humanism compelled him to contemplate contemporary politics through this allegorical language, and his profound learning allowed him to wield it with particularly inventive fluency. It is Rubens's innovation to

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pair male river gods with female consorts, thus creating a new iconography of global peace as loving couples in his *Four Parts of the Earth*. His maternal Pax in the *Minerva Protects Pax From Mars* similarly forges a new personification of Peace, whereas in *The Victorious Hero Seizes Opportunity in Order to Conclude Peace* Rubens radically revises the established iconography of “Occasio” or “Opportunity” to refashion her as a submissive bride. In each case we must understand Rubens’s allegorical inventions as deliberate attempts to augment his images’ efficacy, to make their speech more plain, powerful, and persuasive.

For Rubens, working in Antwerp in the Habsburg Spanish Netherlands during the waning of the “Eighty Years War,” questions of war and peace, and good government, had specific, local urgency. Seventeenth-century Antwerp was freshly emerging from a violent past marked by political and religious strife. The marriage in 1477 of Mary of Burgundy and the Habsburg Archduke Maximilian of Austria had incorporated the Burgundian Netherlands into the Habsburg’s extensive dominions. These territories were later ruled by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor who abdicated the throne in 1555, leaving the western lands to his son, Philip II, who reigned as King of Spain and the Netherlands from 1556 to 1598. Raised in Spain, the devoutly Catholic Philip continued, like his father, to rule from Madrid. But unlike Charles V, who had allowed a good measure of political autonomy in his Netherlandish holdings, Philip II aimed to assert tighter control over these territories in which he perceived the dual threats of growing political discontent with Habsburg rule, and the spread of Calvinism. Philip’s increasingly repressive regime included commanding control of the Netherlands’ States General, the locally constituted body that traditionally had overseen political and legislative structures of the region. At the same time he pursued a harsh policy of persecution of Calvinist sympathizers, which relied upon banishment, arrest, and execution of those deemed heretics. Violent reactions to Spanish rule and brutal retaliations by the Spanish army continued for decades: in 1566 a wave of anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish iconoclasm swept through Flanders, and Antwerp was ferociously sacked by mutineering troops in the infamous “Spanish Fury” of 1576. Finally, in 1585, depleted after a long siege, the city of Antwerp capitulated to Habsburg rule.

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The former bastion of militant Calvinism soon became a center of Counter-Reformation Catholicism in the Southern Netherlands and a secured outpost of the Habsburg realm.

The Northern Netherlandish provinces, however, had continued to resist Spanish dominion, eventually establishing an independent, predominantly Protestant republic, which was eventually ceded and recognized by Spain in 1648 when the Peace of Münster officially ended the “Eighty Years War.” De facto acknowledgment of the Dutch Republic had occurred earlier with the interruption of active hostilities during the Twelve Year Truce of 1609–21, which Philip agreed to on terms set by the Northern Netherlands. Although the period of truce allowed a measure of recovery and redirection of resources by both parties, Antwerp continued to suffer economically as the Dutch had gained control of traffic on the river Scheldt, thus maintaining a stranglehold on the city’s once-thriving port throughout Rubens’s lifetime.

Rubens’s commitment to peace crucially shaped his professional career. Once appointed as court painter in 1609 to the Habsburg Regents of the Netherlands, Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella, Rubens became a trusted advisor to Isabella. After her husband’s death in 1621 he acted as her political emissary and attempted to help broker a peace among England, Spain, and the Netherlands. Rubens’s images promoting peace and envisioning a government ruled by wisdom and restraint not only expressed his personal political views (of which we have ample evidence in his voluminous surviving correspondence), but also were produced as persuasive forms of rhetoric. Just as his altarpieces sought to inspire viewers’ personal faith while instilling Counter-Reformation ideology, so did his political images aim to convert viewers to the cause of peace while upholding absolutist notions of statehood.



#### ALLEGORY AND INTERPRETATION

Even as Rubens’s art aptly exemplifies the confidence in the efficacy of images broadly associated with Counter-Reformation Europe and

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its absolutist courts, it also mobilizes allegory's potential instabilities. Rubens has left ample evidence that he was quite conscious of the complexities of constructing political allegory. In what is perhaps the most familiar example in Rubens's oeuvre of the potential illegibility of allegory, his cycle of twenty-four paintings (ca. 1622–25) representing the life and deeds of Marie de Medici, the French Queen Mother, was from its inception subject to a range of interpretations.<sup>3</sup> The allusive and elusive quality of this cycle has been understood as a necessary political expediency in light of the delicate and vexed political conditions under which this commission was produced: the Queen Mother Marie had only recently returned from an exile imposed by her son, the King Louis XIII, with whom she was newly reconciled. Rubens's deft manipulations of this cycle's allegorical constructions produced a flexible rhetoric that could avoid the hazards of too precise a set of topical referents while still flattering both the mother and her wary and distrustful son.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the *Felicity of the Regency*, which replaced a rejected canvas of the Queen's departure from Paris, Rubens commented in a letter "This subject which does not specifically touch upon the *raison d'état* of this reign, or apply to any individual, has evoked much pleasure."<sup>5</sup> But whereas in this instance Rubens made a virtue of the malleability of allegory that could generalize its referents and give rise to multiple explications, elsewhere he would insist on its obvious, unambiguous legibility. In a written description of his *Horrors of War* (fig. 25), set out in a letter to a fellow artist and courtier in the household of the picture's patron, Rubens expresses his confidence that for the educated viewer the picture's conceit is "very clear" and easily understood.<sup>6</sup> The implications of this text are discussed more fully in chapter 3; for now let us note that Rubens presumes that such understanding requires a careful, judicious viewing of the work, one that takes into account the figures' actions and interactions, as well as their identification. Allegory, even when speaking a direct voice, entailed for Rubens more than a simple denotative structure.

By the seventeenth century allegory was widely understood as a flexible rhetoric informed by a supple lexicon. The popularity of emblem books in which image, motto, and text were set into dynamic play attests to the fascination of seventeenth-century audiences with

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allegory's polysemy.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in his *Wtlegghingh op den Metamorphosis* (Commentary upon Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), making up Book 5 of the six books of the 1604 *Schilder-boeck*, Karl van Mander, the Dutch painter and theoretician, distinguishes among three types of interpretation: historical ("gheschiedigh"), natural or elemental ("natuerlijck"), and didactic and moralizing ("leerlijck en stichtelijcke").<sup>8</sup> Both the structure of emblem books and the interpretive practice of van Mander presume multiplicity and simultaneity of meaning in images and poetic texts.

Rogier de Piles, the French theorist and academician, attributes difference and simultaneity of another sort to visual allegory. In his *Cours de Peinture par Principes* (1708) de Piles lays out three requirements of allegorical inventions.<sup>9</sup> The first is legibility (here he cautions against overly obscure references or newly invented symbolic elements); the second is that the allegorical language be authorized by tradition (de Piles names Cesare Ripa, whose *Iconologia* was the standard manual for visual personifications, as a particular authority and antiquity as a more general one); and the third is "necessity," that is, the avoidance of extraneous ornamentation. But for all of his insistence on the economy and clarity of allegorical language, de Piles also asserts that allegorical images operate most effectively when they conjoin allegorical and narrative figures, requiring us to read meaning in two discrete but simultaneous registers. As de Piles puts it: "Works in which only a portion of the elements are allegorical engage our attention more readily and pleasurably, because the viewer who is helped by the mixture of purely narrative figures will with greater delight unravel the allegories that accompany them."<sup>10</sup> In de Piles's formulation narrative pleasure enables and supports what we might call "allegorical pleasure," that is, the delightful unraveling of referential meaning. Tradition guarantees the authority and stability of discrete signs, but their operation depends upon a viewer who oscillates between seeing figures and apprehending what they denote.

De Piles's analysis of allegory anticipates key features of our contemporary theories of allegory. De Piles sees the full effects of allegory arising from the fruitful exchange across the gap that differentiates it from history painting. This difference, which de Piles locates *between*

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distinct genres, postmodern literary theory situates *within* the very fabric of allegorical figuration itself, treating it as a structure of distance, dissonance, and deferral. The Renaissance definition of allegory as the representation of one thing by means of another resonates with current theoretical assumptions regarding all representations as systems of signs. Early modern allegory, in this view, strives to “conceal, while protecting (and while apparently ignoring), an irreversible disjunction of signifier and signified.”<sup>11</sup> In visual allegory this disjunction operates under distinct and particular pressures as the materiality of represented figures more emphatically complicates the alleged transcendence of their embodied conceits. Semiotics offers a method attuned to the workings of the sign in visual as well as linguistic formations, and thus offers a means of probing how painted allegory’s hermeneutic value as a tool of instruction or persuasion must grapple with (or against) its figural basis.

Recent thinking about allegory has foregrounded the operation of desire or violence as a means of repairing the rift at its center. Joel Fineman has characterized allegory as a structure of endlessly deferred longing for a signifier that will complete it, whereas Gordon Tesky describes it as a struggle to impose meanings upon bodies.<sup>12</sup> Although developed largely in relation to texts, these discussions can usefully inform our thinking about allegorical images by acknowledging the material, and specifically bodily, investments in allegorical constructions. The conventions governing the embodied form of abstract ideas as personifications cannot be neutral nor “merely” linguistic, but are themselves deeply bound up with broader notions of gender as categories of cultural meaning.<sup>13</sup> These theories, which posit an erotics as well as a poetics to the structure of allegorical meaning, point us to two other important methods for the analysis of Rubens’s allegorical images: gender, understood as a social and cultural construction, and psychoanalysis, understood as a means of approaching the operation of desire. Gender analysis, semiotics, and psychoanalysis will each contribute to my understanding of how Rubens’s allegories speak to, seduce, and persuade us of their meanings.

By focusing our attention in particular ways on the body in his allegorical works, Rubens pushes the oscillation between allegory and



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history, as de Piles would have it, making evident the disjunction that has attracted so much interest among contemporary scholars of early modern allegory. By inviting us to attribute human qualities to his figures, qualities that in turn destabilize their strict legibility, Rubens's allegorical practice in particular activates the potential instabilities in the relations of figure and conceit. His images intimate the disjunctive and less controllable aspects of allegory that in their normative functions remain more firmly masked over. Rubens does not represent an anomalous case so much as one in which allegory's malleable and potentially disjunctive forms, as understood in seventeenth-century as well as twenty-first-century terms, are pressed to their limits.



METHODS I: GENDER, FAMILY, AND  
SOCIAL MEANING

This study considers *how* Rubens's political allegories work their persuasive effects. I begin from the premise that for Rubens the embodiment of allegorical meaning, that is, the inscription of meanings onto rendered bodies, is not an easy, mechanical, nor fully containable process but is instead one that demands an interpretive method matched to its complexities. The focus of my interest is in investigating how categories of male and female and notions of maternity and paternity create meaning in Rubens's political allegories. Despite the evident centrality in Rubens's war and peace imagery of themes of love, familial community, and the body as an agent of meaning, current scholarship on Rubens offers only a handful of analyses informed by developments in feminist and gender theory. Major monographs on the artist have fully analyzed how the official institutions of church and state exert ideological demands on the painter, whereas gender and family remain naturalized rather than viewed as similarly ideological, cultural constructions. Feminist theory's axioms that gender is not natural and fixed but is constantly being constructed within its cultural contexts, and that its meanings are fluid, unstable, and difficult to control enables

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a powerful re-reading of both the images and the humanist culture in which they operate.<sup>14</sup>

This book explores how the multiple and shifting meanings attached to gender in early modern social practice and humanist thought allow Rubens's painted figures to disrupt as well as uphold the allegorical programs in which they participate. This interrogation of gendered meanings seeks to expose the mechanisms by which signs of gender instability repeatedly threaten allegorical unity. Femininity, for example, is deployed by Rubens as a trope for the fruitfulness and pleasures of peace, while it is also associated with a morally dangerous and anxiety-provoking sexuality. Similarly, masculinity, although allied with valor and philosophical truth, is represented also in these allegories as war-like and inimical to the aims of civilization. In each case I consider how the thematics of love and marriage are intertwined with those of political and moral virtue and how the established categories of Rubens's allegorical discourse (virtue/vice; mastery/enslavement; war/peace; masculine/feminine) trouble and destabilize each other.

Feminist interpreters of early modern culture have alerted us to the multiple ways in which the figure of "woman," although functioning broadly as a site of symbolic and allegorical inscription, remains shaped by contemporary notions about marriage, family, and women's social role.<sup>15</sup> The forms of public rhetoric depend, in other words, on cultural arrangements in what we consider the private sphere. Of course, as has been long recognized, distinctions between the public and private realms were undergoing dramatic shifts in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century. Broadly drawn, these shifts entailed the rise of the nuclear family as a unit, increasingly defined by affective bonds and situated in a feminized private space made ever more distinct from the public spheres of commerce and politics.<sup>16</sup> Rubens's paintings of his own family, especially those of his second wife, Hélène Fourment, and their children, actively work to consolidate these emergent social ideals. Their proclaimed split between public and private worlds and between family and politics has structured what has become the canonical narrative of Rubens's life. According to this account, Rubens delved into an intense period of political activity at least partly to assuage his grief over the death in 1626 of Isabella Brandt, his first wife;