

Ovid Transformed:
The Dynamics of Sexual Positioning in Titian's *Poesie*

Lacey Ehrenkranz

During the mid sixteenth century Titian completed six canvases for Philip II which represent themes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Commonly referred to as the *poesie*, the series is heralded as a tour de force for its portrayal of female nudes. Each of the paintings illustrates an Ovidian myth pertaining to affairs of the Gods. Titian selected classical legends with overtly sexual overtones that would stimulate more than just the King's intellect. Titian modified Ovid's narrative so they were more enticing to the contemporary mind. This essay strives to prove that Titian's deviations reflect the Renaissance perspective on relationships between the sexes, specifically the eroticism of the dominant male over the passive female.

Titian met Philip II for the first time in 1548 while in Milan. The second and last time he ever met with the young crown prince was in Augsburg in 1551: presumably, it was there that Philip and Titian discussed the commission of the *poesie*.¹ The cycle treated mythological themes taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text which had become part of the standard education for the upper class.² An inventory of 1553 confirms that Philip owned at least one copy of the *Metamorphoses*.³ Philip's commission of the *poesie* was flexible; he and Titian discussed the general theme, but Philip did not request any specific works.⁴ Thus, Titian was left to decide which scenes would please the young king. All six of the *poesie* are images focused on the portrayal of the female nude. Each of the paintings depicts separate stories of male domination which was part of Renaissance ideals concerning the roles of the sexes. Titian's modernization of Ovidian legend subjugated women to a greater extent than Ovid's original text. Titian altered the

¹ Wethey, 71.

² Allen, 334. Mythology underwent a revival during the Renaissance; there was a new appreciation for classic civilizations and their culture.

³ Wethey, 71.

⁴ Nash, 14.

myths, and in doing so tapped into the fantasies of the Renaissance male. By constantly putting the men in the dominant role Titian altered the relationships between the sexes.

Danaë was the first of the *poesie* which Titian painted for Philip II.⁵ During Titian's Roman sojourn of 1545-46, he had completed an earlier portrayal of Danaë and the golden shower of Jupiter⁶ for Ottavio Farnese.⁷ Titian had already established a successful composition for Cardinal Farnese, and with a few alterations, he generated the new *Danaë* for Philip and sent it to Spain in 1554.⁸ Philip received the canvas shortly before he departed for England to conclude his politically strategic marriage to Mary Tudor.⁹ Nash suggests that the *Danaë* could have been a symbol of their wedding; however, her argument is unconvincing.¹⁰ The young crown prince's first wife (and cousin), Princess Maria of Portugal, died shortly after giving birth to their deformed son, Don Carlos.¹¹ Charles V did not include his son, Philip, in the decision concerning his marriage to Mary. Philip was less than thrilled with his father's arrangement. Philip was already pursuing another Portuguese princess to wed when the King informed him that he was to marry the significantly older Mary Tudor. Philip II and Mary of England's marriage lasted only four years and was not a joyful period of Philip's life. His

⁵ Tiziano Vecellio, *Danaë*, oil on canvas, 1.29 x 1.8 m, Madrid, Prado Museum. Viewable at: http://www.wga.hu/art/t/tiziano/mytholo2/danae_pr.jpg

⁶ Tiziano Vecellio, *Danaë*, oil on canvas, 1.2 x 1.72 m, Napoli, Galleria Nazionali, Capodimonte. Viewable at: http://www.wga.hu/art/t/tiziano/mytholo2/danae_n.jpg

⁷ Rearick, 24.

⁸ Nash, 24-5. The Farnese Danae has a cupid and Doric column, while in the Prado Danae contains an old maid and a brick wall.

⁹ Williams, 21-24.

¹⁰ Nash, 28.

¹¹ Parker, 1998, 79.

unhappiness was known to many, including the Queen.¹² Surely, Philip would not have viewed the *Danaë* as a celebration of his unpleasant and forced nuptials.

The transformation of the cupid in the Farnese *Danaë* into the greedy old hag of the Philip's version further denies any matrimonial celebration; the old maid enhances the young nubile sexual beauty of Danaë by comparison. Mary Tudor had stronger associations with the elderly crone than the youthful maiden. A more plausible reading of *Danaë* is that it was created with the intention to whet the erotic appetite of Philip II. Philip would have envisioned himself in the role of Jupiter, who is known for his numerous extramarital affairs.

Philip was a strong advocate for Catholicism and took his faith very seriously.¹³ The idea that a king who is still known for the religious zeal of his reign would be the patron of a set of paintings with strongly sexual pagan themes might seem contradictory. However, decorum demanded that religious paintings be absent of any eroticism so Philip was forced to turn to different motifs to sate his wants. Scenes from mythology were the perfect solution; they could fulfill emotional and psychological needs that non-secular paintings could not.¹⁴ It is important to note that the *poesie* were part of Philip's private sector, unlike the religious works which were part of his public life.

Danaë is mentioned in *Metamorphoses* only in relation to her son, Perseus.

Ovid's description of Danaë and the shower of gold is summarized in only a few lines.

Perseus was also the son of Jove,
the child begotten on Danaë in the golden rain.¹⁵

¹² Williams, 22-24. After a false pregnancy which was caused by cancer of the uterus Mary died in 1558. The marriage lasted only four years, of which Philip only spent fourteen months with his aging bride.

¹³ Parker, 2001, 29-51. Parker gives an in depth treatment of the Philip's messianic rule.

¹⁴ Freedman, 10

¹⁵ Humphries translation of Ovid, book 4, lines 610-612

Although Ovid only briefly mentions the story of Danaë, her legend had grown in popularity and scope by the Renaissance. The myth of Danae and the golden shower was widespread throughout Europe well

Titian's choice of illustrating such a seemingly miniscule scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was part of the *paragone* of poetry and painting which was actively debated in the sixteenth-century. Titian created a rich painting full of emotion and narrative from a vague description. The legend of Danaë had been treated by various writers of the Renaissance. A wide narrative tradition had developed which presented different interpretations of what Danaë symbolized. She was seen as a mythical embodiment of the ideal woman.¹⁶ Her father, the King, had locked her away into a tower securing her virginal quality, thus making her chastity indisputable. Therefore, she was also completely faithful to her one lover, Jupiter.

. Titian's Danaë gazes languidly into the clouds which pour into her prison tower room; originally the face of Jupiter was depicted in the clouds, but overzealous cleanings have erased its appearance.¹⁷ Titian created a Danaë who is a fully sensual being. Her left hand rests between her open legs in a gesture which shows acceptance and even pleasure in being Jupiter's conquest. Beside her on the bed a small dog sleeps. During the Renaissance and earlier a dog was considered a symbol of fidelity, and a sleeping dog which does not waken was viewed as a testament of the man's familiarity with the woman and further validated his claim over her.¹⁸ Hence, the sleeping pooch reinforces Jupiter's legitimate possession of Danaë.

before Titian's lifetime. For more information on contemporary interpretations of Danaë's legend see Nash, 25-27.

¹⁶ Nash, 26.

¹⁷ Goffen, *Titian's Ladies*, 221.

¹⁸ Nash, 27

St. Augustine's condemnation of the lascivious nature of the story of Danaë and Jupiter turned it into the model for sixteenth-century erotic imagery.¹⁹ Danaë was the perfect combination of chaste wife and willing mistress which appealed to sixteenth century male ideals. She later went on to successfully raise her son into a hero, completing the role of the ideal Renaissance woman.

The second of Titian's *poesie* for Philip II was *Venus and Adonis*.²⁰ Philip received the canvas in 1554, while still in England.²¹ *Venus and Adonis* was designed to be the visual counterpart to *Danaë*. In the middle ground of the composition the sleeping cupid's pose echoes that of Danaë. When hung as pendants, the eye could play between the reclining forms; the restricted palette also formed a strong visual relationship. Titian consciously planned the nudes to balance one another,

E perche la Danaë, che io mandai gia a Vostra Maesta, si vedeva tutta dalla parte dinanzi, ho voluto in quest'altra poesia [*Venus and Adonis*] variare, e farla mostrare la contraria parte...²²

Titian's letter to Philip explains how he conceived of the pose in *Venus and Adonis* to play off of that of the *Danaë*. Through a variety of poses, Titian aimed at presenting to the young king a visual feast of the female form.²³ The *Metamorphoses* has a full account of the legend of Venus and her mortal lover Adonis.²⁴ In *Metamorphoses* Venus

¹⁹ Ginzberg, 23.

²⁰ Tiziano Vecellio, *Venus and Adonis*, oil on canvas, 1.86 x 2.07 m, Madrid, Prado Museum. Viewable at: http://www.wga.hu/art/t/tiziano/mytholo2/venus_a.jpg The Lausanne Venus and Adonis is viewable in Rearick, W.R., "Titian's Later Mythologies," *Artibus et Historiae*, v. 17, n. 33, 1996, page 35. Panfasky argues that the canvas was first sent to Madrid and then forwarded to England. 150. However, Wethey states that it was sent directly from Venice to London. 189 Due to improper shipping a horizontal fold was visible; Philip complained about in a letter from December sixth 1554. Rearick theorizes that original *Venus and Adonis* is now Lausanne canvas, while the Prado version is actually Titian's replacement copy for Philip II. 35

²² Fehl, 143

²³ After Philip's marriage to Mary Tudor he officially became the King of England.

²⁴ Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, book 10, lines 519-739. Humphries, 251-258.

abandons Adonis, warning him to take heed and not hunt dangerous game. Burrow writes how Ovid's Venus

Is a manly woman who can tuck Adonis under one arm and his horses' reins under the other, and it is she who uses all the traditional rhetoric of male seduction.²⁵

However, Titian inverted the Ovidian myth by making Venus the weaker of the pair.

Adonis takes on the dominate role as he leaves the goddess to go meet his fate. She pulls at him in vain as he strides forward, her body twists back into an unstable pose. Titian presents a corrective version of Ovid's Venus, modernizing her to conform to the feminine ideals of his time.

Titian forever changed how the story of Venus and Adonis was perceived. He turned a story of female strength into one of weakness and dependency. The subjugation of females tapped into male fantasies of the Renaissance. Ludovico Dolce goes into detail in a letter to Alessandro Contarini about the overt sexual inclinations a man feels when viewing Titian's Venus,

I swear to you, sir, that there is no man... that seeing does not believe her alive; who does not feel a warming, a softening, a stirring of the blood in his veins. It is a real marvel; that if a marble statue [the Knidian Aphrodite] could by the stimuli of its beauty so penetrate to the marrow of a young man, that he stained it himself, then, what must she do who is of flesh, who is beauty personified and appears to be breathing?²⁶

Dolce's reference to the statue of Aphrodite of Knidos is a flattering comparison to make; it emphasized the unequivocal eroticism of Titian's Venus.

The third of the *poesie* returned to the myth of Perseus. Philip received the canvas in 1556, while staying in Ghent.²⁷ Titian once again supplied the King with an

²⁵ Burrow, 306.

²⁶ Ginzburg, 29-30

²⁷ Wethey, 170.

erotic image containing a dominant male. *Perseus and Andromeda* shows Danaë's son, now a man, who has come to rescue the helpless Andromeda from the sea monster.²⁸

Titian followed Ovid's text more closely in this portrayal than in *Venus and Adonis*.

Titian does part from Ovidian legend by excluding Andromeda's parents; and once again, he varies the pose of Andromeda from those of his previous female nudes. The third of the *poesie* contains a bound, standing nude whose arm is chained above her head. The arm accentuates the sinuous s-curve of her elongated body. In reality her unbalanced stance would be impossible to hold; she would fall to her left while her head turns to the right trying to catch a glimpse of her savior. X-rays of the canvas confirm that Andromeda's pose was Titian's primary focus in creating the composition. Lank points out that Titian first worked up her form on the right side of the canvas, but with a slightly different pose. He began by painting both of her arms above her head and one of her legs raised.²⁹ Andromeda is another example of the chaste and submissive woman which Titian thought would appeal to the tastes of the young King. Perseus fell in love with the vulnerable Andromeda upon first sight; he was overwhelmed by the beautiful maiden and would save her only if she would be his wife in return.

She was so beautiful, so much so that he almost forgot to move his wings. He came down to her saying: "My dear, the chains that ought to bind you are love-knots rather than shackles..." at first she made no answer, too much the virgin to speak to any man.³⁰

After Andromeda's parents agree to give her to him, Perseus goes on to kill the sea monster and save his woman. Perseus is the hero; he and his promised prize,

²⁸ Tiziano Vecellio, *Perseus and Andromeda*, oil on canvas, 1.83 x 1.99 m, London, Wallace Collection. Viewable at: http://www.wallacecollection.org/c/w_a/t_m/jpg/P11-perseus-and-andromeda-Titian.jpg

²⁹The X-radiograph of *Perseus and Andromeda* is viewable at: http://www.wallacecollection.org/c/w_a/t_m/jpg/P11-xray.jpg

Refer to Lank, 405, for an analysis of the x-rayed image.

³⁰ *Metamorphoses*, book four, lines 677-683, Humphries, 103.

Andromeda, then marry and live a long and happy life together. Andromeda, the virginal damsel in distress, completes the erotic fantasy for male viewers who psychologically identify with Perseus, the dominant male hero.

Although the *Rape of Europa*³¹ was the sixth, and final, of the *poesie*, it was designed to be hung in a pendant relationship with *Perseus and Andromeda*; thus, it is logical to discuss the work out of chronological order. In 1561 Philip II returned his court to Madrid, and one year later he received *Rape of Europa*.³² Titian would have been aware that this scene was flattering to the king, for Philip is equated to the king of the gods, Jupiter, who conquers Europa, just as Philip aimed at gaining control of Europe.³³

When hung together, the compositions of the *Rape of Europa* and *Perseus and Andromeda* create a delicate visual balance. After much consideration Titian positioned Andromeda at the far left of the canvas while Europa and Jupiter, as the bull, are pushed into the right half of the painting. In *Perseus and Andromeda* a city is visible, yet hazy, in the extreme right background; in *Europa*, the magnificent landscape fades into the distance in the background at left. The center flying putto's stance is a clear derivative of Perseus' tumbling battle pose. The serpentine body of the putto riding the fish echoes the body of the noticeably distressed Europa; even the fish in the water relates to the rippling sea monster in *Perseus and Andromeda*. These two canvases are both predominately seascapes, unlike the other four *poesie*, whose composition's do not contain vast amounts of water.

³¹ Tiziano Vecellio, *Rape of Europa*, oil on canvas, 1.78 x 2.05 m, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Viewable at: http://www.wga.hu/art/t/tiziano/mytholo2/rape_eur.jpg

³² On page 164 Panofsky states that *Europa* was sent to Madrid on April, 26, 1562. Parker dates Philip's return to Madrid, page xxii, 1998.

³³ Tanner, 162.

Ovid describes the legend of the rape of Europa in the end of book two; she was outwitted and stolen away by the lustful king of the gods. Philip was familiar with *Metamorphoses* and knew that power and sexual prowess which were associated with Jupiter. Jupiter always received what he desired; he possessed whichever young beauty he wanted. Neither mortals nor gods could impede Jupiter; he personifies the ultimate ideal of the dominant male.

Jove put down his heavy scepter: the great father, great ruler of the gods, whose right hand wields triple-forked lightning, and whose awful nod makes the word tremble, put aside his might, his majesty, and took upon himself the form of a bull... And he, the lover, gave kisses to hands held out, rejoicing in hope of later, more exciting kisses... And he rises, ever so gently, and slowly edges from the dry sand toward the water, further and further, and swimming now, with the girl, trembling a little and looking back to the land, her right hand clinging tight to one horn, and the other resting easy along the shoulder, and her flowing garments filling and Fluttering in the breath of the sea-wind.³⁴

Titian makes alterations in his depiction of Europa departing from what Ovid has described. In the painting, it is Europa's left hand which holds tight to the horn; her other hand does not rest on the bull's shoulder but reaches up and over her head clutching her garment that billows in the wind. She has been captured by the god for his pleasure; like Danaë, Europa's splayed legs are sexual suggestive.

The fourth and fifth of Titian's *poesie* are myths associated with the fierce virgin huntress, Diana. Philip received *Diana and Callisto*³⁵ and *Diana and Actaeon*³⁶ in August of 1560, while staying at the Alcázar of Toledo with his new third bride, Isabel de Valois, who was only fourteen years old.³⁷ Philip was an avid hunter, and the Diana

³⁴ *Metamorphoses*, book two, lines 845-875, Humphries, 55-56.

³⁵ Tiziano Vecellio, *Diana and Callisto*, oil on canvas, 1.88 x 2.06 m, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland. Viewable at: http://www.wga.hu/art/t/tiziano/mytholo2/diana_c.jpg

³⁶ Tiziano Vecellio, *Diana and Actaeon*, oil on canvas, 1.88 x 2.06 m, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland. Viewable at: http://www.wga.hu/art/t/tiziano/mytholo2/diana_a.jpg

³⁷ Wethey, 79.

scenes must have appealed to him both for their sexual content, as well as their allusions to the hunt. Titian chose scenes that do not deal directly with hunting; instead he preferred to depict the goddess of the hunt during her bath. Titian presents the King with two voyeuristic scenes which offer the beholder a plethora of views of the female nude. Yet the maidens depicted were unattainable, Diana and her band of beautiful huntresses fiercely guarded their virginity; they were renowned for their chastity and modesty.

According to Rearick, *Diana and Callisto* was painted before its counterpart.³⁸

The story of Callisto is yet another account in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* of Jupiter's dominance over an unsuspecting beauty.

So he put on Diana's face and garments... And kissed her [Callisto] the way a maiden does not kiss, or should not... And he gave himself away with his embracing. She really struggled against him... But girls are frail, and anyway, who could conquer the might of Jove? He won, and then, a victor, went back to Heaven, and she loathed the forest...³⁹

However, Titian chose not to depict the rape, instead, he portrayed the moment when Diana discovered her maiden's betrayal of their virginal vows. Callisto lies prostrated on the ground; her companions have already forcefully undressed her, revealing her pregnancy. Banishing Callisto, Diana assumes an authoritative pose that towers above the other figures in the composition. Callisto and Diana occupy separate sides of the canvas; the distance between them is emphasized by the brook. Near the pregnant Callisto is a fountain. The fountain contains bas-reliefs of the legend of Actaeon, a visual link to its pendent. On top of the fountain is a putto, a symbol of Callisto's fertility, which stands in stark contrast to the images of the hunt associated with Diana. The goddess is surrounded by her maidens who have bows and arrows, along with both the

³⁸ Rearick, 48.

³⁹ *Metamorphoses*, book two, 423-438, Humphries, 41-42.

tracking dogs. Diana's regal status is heightened by the lush fabric draped behind her. She is the pinnacle of the pyramidal form that her maidens form around her. She is in a strong and commanding pose. This is the sole work of the *poesie* which shows a woman in a position of power. Yet, the scene still takes place in an erotic setting, and it is important to realize that one woman's power over other women is shown, not a woman's dominance over man. Although the scene is full of female nudes and there are no males depicted, it still refers indirectly to Jupiter's complete dominance over the unwilling Callisto, thus tying *Diana and Callisto* into the larger theme of man's dominance over women in the *poesie*.

The second myth of Diana provided Titian ample opportunity to show a woman outranking a man. Ovid's Diana is powerful and decisive, even cruel. Without a moment's hesitation she punishes Actaeon for his offense.

While she [Diana] was bathing there, all naked, Actaeon came... through the unfamiliar woodland till he entered the cool dripping grotto, the nymphs, all naked, saw him, saw a man, and beat their breasts and screamed, and all together gathered around their goddess, tried to hide her with their own bodies... Diana blushed at being seen... looking quickly for her arrows, found no weapon except the water, but scooped up a handful and flung it into the young man's face.⁴⁰

Ovid makes Actaeon into an innocent bystander; he accidentally discovered the chaste goddess in the nude. Diana jumps to the conclusion that he was purposefully spying on her and punishes him by turning him into a stag to be hunted down and killed by his own dogs. Actaeon's fate is alluded to by the stag's skull hung upon the pillar. Titian once again alters Ovid's implications; Titian changes Actaeon into the resolute voyeur.

Actaeon leers in at the goddess and her companions while bathing. He does not stumble unknowingly upon the scene but is revealed hiding behind a curtain. Ovid's enraged

⁴⁰ *Metamorphoses*, book three, lines 173-191, Humphries, 62.

Diana is made into a cowering, indecisive, weak female by Titian. She is subjugated to not only the gaze of Actaeon, but also that of King Philip. Male viewers of the painting are awarded the sexual possession of the goddess and her nymphs for which Actaeon dies, without the consequences Actaeon must endure. Unlike Ovid's Diana, Titian's deity does not seek her weapons nor does she sprinkle Actaeon with the water which is the catalyst in his metamorphose. The patron goddess of virgins recoils into herself, and halfheartedly covers her naked form. None of the nymphs react with the vigor described by Ovid; there is no screaming or flocking around their leader. They seem to appear largely indifferent to the surprise intrusion of a male; the nymph drying off Diana's leg does not even pause in her task. Diana is only assisted in covering her nudity by one nymph.⁴¹

The eroticism of the *poesie* was created with the aspirations of privately pleasing a publicly Catholic king. The rules of decorum allowed scenes pertaining to the cultures of antiquity to have such overt sexual connotations. Yet, there was a clear distinction to the Renaissance eye about what was classified as erotic and what was pornographic.⁴² Titian's *poesie* unmistakably belonged to the category of erotic works. However, Titian did not exclusively produce sexual scenes like the *poesie* for Philip II. In fact, paintings of the female nude make up only a minority of Titian's total output, which was no greater a percentage than other contemporary artists produced. Furthermore, Titian created a larger amount of religious paintings for Philip than secular works.⁴³ The *poesie* were meant to fulfill Philip's desire for erotic paintings. The series deliberately aimed at

⁴¹ Tanner convincingly theorizes that the African woman is a symbol of Diana's identification as Fortuna. 540, 1982

⁴² Goffen, Venus of Urbino, 11.

⁴³ Hope, 111.

presenting every possible view of the female body. The misogynistic ideology represented in the *poesie* was merely a reflection of the Renaissance culture. Titian tapped into the unconscious male fantasies of the period when he created paintings that highlighted the dominance of males. The idea of the subjugated woman and powerful man was indoctrinated into sixteenth-century culture. The *poesie* is an important cycle for many reasons, one of which is their documentation of the sexual ideals of Renaissance society.

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