Sexuality in Erotic Imagery of the Loves of Jupiter in Renaissance Art

Ella Huster
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The relationship between Renaissance art of the 15th and 16th centuries and Greco-Roman mythology is an interesting one, especially when looking at it in terms of erotic imagery. It is no revelation that during the Renaissance period, there was a newfound glorification and revitalization of the ancient world's philosophy and way of life, thus influencing the architecture, science, art, literature, government and more, during this time. As Bette Talvacchia said, “[m]ost Renaissance erotica adopted subjects from the literature of classical mythology. Legends concerning the loves of the heroes, stories of the Olympian deities' entangled affairs, and the amorous exploits of Jupiter in particular, provided numerous possibilities for descriptions of erotic situations.”¹ In essence, when looking at Renaissance art inspired by mythological themes, stories and characters, erotica can more or less always be found. Things start to get a bit more complex since there is an almost distinct category within erotic images that is solely held for mythologically-inspired works. This distinction exists because of the “mitigating overlays of literary fiction [and] historical legend”² that works based on antiquity possess. It is inherent that with the revitalization and awe of the ancient world, there would also be a regeneration and admiration of the stories it left behind. This fascination with mythology of the ancient world therefore provided a source of inspiration for artists in the Renaissance.


² Bette Talvacchia, "Classical Paradigms and Renaissance Antiquarianism in Giulio Romano’s I Modi", 3
To properly understand why the revitalization of ancient Greek and Roman life was such a significant factor in artists’ subject and style choice during the Renaissance, one must look back at the kinds of restrictions in place before then. As most know, prior to the Renaissance was the medieval period, a time in which culture, art, literature, music, sexuality and beyond were suppressed. Looking in particular towards the subdual of sexuality (since this essay is primarily about erotic art in Renaissance Italy), the human body/intellect was viewed as shameful because humans were naturally ‘sinful creatures’ (Adam sinned, therefore mankind sinned). Only the holy (God, Jesus, etc…) were pure and perfect. The Renaissance was a sharp break from this way of life and thinking, and a vast cultural transformation occurred. Focus shifted from idolization of the divine and the supernatural to humans and nature -- this newfound outlook is what we now call ‘humanism’. It is important to bring this shift in thinking to light because it directly relates to the subject matter. Artists now had autonomy in their work and were thus able depict images with erotic connotations. This however, does not mean that all were accepting of this kind of work. As an example, one of Lodovico Dolce’s speakers “accuse[d] Raphael of bringing scandal to art by inventing the lascivious Modi”\(^3\). Other critiques and artists thought alike, and did not incorporate nor commend eroticism in their work.

A continuous juxtaposition was in place and along with humanism and the Renaissance, there existed a heightened emphasis on the power and beauty of the body and what it was capable of. The erotic aspect of some of the art being looked at could arguably be classified under this newfound beauty and power seen within the human body, rather than the shamefulfulness of it seen during the medieval times. This collocation can for example be found within several paintings of

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Jupiter and his loves. This paper will focus primarily on the story of Leda and the Swan and supplemented by the myths of Io and Danae.

To quickly recap, Leda and the Swan is a Greek myth. The story goes that Jupiter, the most powerful of the Gods of Olympus, disguised himself as a swan and seduced (or raped, varying versions of Greek myths is common) Leda. Leda, who was the wife of Tyndareus, the King of Sparta, subsequently bore Helen (later known as Helen of Troy), Polydeuces, Clytemnestra, and Castor. One of the images chosen that airs on the more erotic side of the spectrum is an engraving “associated with Agostino Veneziano and thus with Raphael’s print-making circle”\(^4\). This engraving depicts Leda and the swan fornicating on a podium(?), the swan is on top of her and her leg is wrapped around his body. By doing this, she is revealing her buttocks. Turner refers to this aspect of the engraving as a “provocation”\(^5\), writing that the “slight rotation from the profile view which brings the cleft of the buttocks into sight – an idea that Michelangelo would later adopt for his own Leda and the Swan cartoon”\(^6\). Leda and the Swan are also kissing passionately and making eye contact in this particular rendition, adding to the overall fervent, lustful feeling of the image. The swan itself is also portrayed to be more masculine in appearance than seen in other depictions. Its feathers are etched in great detail, with harsh lines and thick chiaroscuro shading, bringing attention to its body and giving it an overall air of ferocity. As well, its feet are drawn as large, outlandish talons, like that of an eagle, which takes away from the typical elegance of the swan we see as a symbol today (it was a symbol then, as well). Though it may seem somewhat trivial to the onlooker, small distinctions like these are what make an image uniquely erotic in those times.

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4 James Grantham Turner, "Invention and Sexuality in the Raphael Workshop: Before the Modi.", 82
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Nudity in Renaissance paintings was no foreign concept however. A good comparison to highlight the range of styles artists had and could have within the same subject matter would be Leonardo da Vinci’s *Leda and the Swan* oil painting (the original is lost, but copies were made). In this depiction, Leda is fully naked and the focal point of the painting. The swan is seen standing a little behind her and to her right, wrapping its wing around her back and gazing up at her in a sort of admiration. Though Leda is looking downwards and away (probably at her babies), she also is reaching for the swan’s neck in an affectionate manner. Though there is no direct eye contact between Leda and the Swan, there is a clear, consensual fondness between them. In this particular copy, on the left of the canvas (where Leda is probably looking), we can see the two eggs from which Leda’s four children hatched. This ‘hatching from the egg’ was a common branch of the myth of Leda and the Swan. A significant aspect to note is that the most common version of the myth states that Helen and Polydeuces were actually the children of Jupiter (so, the swan), and Clytemnestra and Castor were children of King Tyndareus, which doesn’t coincide with the paintings version having all four children come from eggs- alluding to all four of them being Jupiter’s children. It is also worth mentioning that other depictions (such as the one found in the Borghese Gallery) at times choose to not represent all four children. In ancient Greek stories and texts, all four children were considered ‘twins’ in reference to one another, so it’s interesting to see Leonardo make a clear separation between the two pairs of siblings -- the two girls were from one egg and the two boys were from another. Leonardo is well-known for using sfumato in his paintings, and the smokiness and tonal unity of the piece render an almost elegant, classical take on the story. This painting is an excellent example of a depiction of a Greek myth that does not have the ‘harsh’ erotic quality as seen in the engraving prior; it is sultry and soft, displaying a certain sexual component, but choosing to downplay the vulgarity as discussed in Augstino. This shows that it was
truly the artist’s choice to decide what level of harshness was to be depicted within the sexual components of his or her work.

Antonio da Correggio, a North Italian High Renaissance painter from Parma, also did a number of paintings about Jupiter and his loves, one in particular depicting Jupiter and Danae. Both Correggio’s Danae (written as “Venus”) and Jupiter and Io (later discussed in this paper) were mentioned by Vasari in his book The Lives of the Artists. He states that the painting was originally commissioned by Federico II Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua, who intended to give the painting to Emperor Charles V, king of Spain, as an addition to his supposed collection of works depicting the loves of Jupiter. Correggio’s other works, Ganymede Abducted by the Eagle and Jupiter and Io were additionally located in Spain during the 16th century, thus giving further implication that these paintings were in fact a part of a series. The painting now resides in the Borghese Gallery in Rome.

Jupiter and Danae’s story, as originally described in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, states that Acrisius, king of Argos, was told by an oracle that he would one day be killed by his daughter Danae’s son. To thwart this possibility, Acrisius proceeded to lock Danae in a bronze tower, but that didn’t stop Jupiter from coming to her in the form of a golden rain, making Danae mother to the hero Perseus.

The composition of the painting shows Danae lying in bed while a golden rain falls from a cloud above her. Eros, the figure sitting beside Danae, holds the bedsheets in one hand and extends out the other, catching the golden rain. Two little putti figures are seen testing the gold with arrows and stone, seemingly checking to test its authenticity. Correggio’s vibrant skill in painting the female nude is epitomized in his depiction of Danae: she is beautiful, graceful, and feminine, all characteristics of Northern Italian excellence. There is a definite softness present throughout the

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painting, particularly the mastery of the female nude -- coming from Correggio’s overall ethereal, seemingly effortless, brush strokes and painting technique. These qualities render a perfect comparison to Leonardo’s Leda: the idealistic head type is present in both works as well as a soft, luminous, and refined delicacy. Leonardo’s painting style has clearly anticipated the works of Correggio, which is clearly seen when examining Danae. The other figures depicted in Danae create a less intensely erotic energy, as for example seen in both Michelangelo’s and Agostino’s Leda representations. There’s more than one subject to look at within this work, and the passion between Jupiter and Danae is a discreet one. Looking more closely at the interaction between the pair, the eroticism is also reduced because of both Jupiter’s transformed identity and the presence of Eros. Jupiter, in the form of a golden rain, doesn’t have any ‘human’ features we can attach to him -- he is simply portrayed as golden rain coming down from a cloud. This is quite different from the other Jupiter depictions discussed throughout this paper which all show him with lifelike qualities, thus making his interactions with his loves more tangible and sultry than those seen within Correggio’s Danae. Another component which renders this image less erotic is the presence of Eros in the painting. Positioned on the left/right of Danae: his direct interaction with her lessens the intensity of the moment shared between her and Jupiter. But that is not to say that this image has zero erogenous qualities. In fact, there are quite a few. The seduction from the piece comes almost entirely from Danae herself. Everything from her facial expression, her nudity and her positioning helps create a beautiful and sensuous woman. The intensity one can feel does not derive from the two lovers playing off of one another but rather from Correggio’s sheer talent in painting the female nude.
There was a depiction done by Michelangelo of Leda and the Swan, now only known through copies\(^8\), that encompasses both the erotic aspect of Agostino Veneziano’s engraving as well as the softness and subtlety of Leonardo’s painting. As discussed previously, in the two copies of Michelangelo’s lost original drawing (one is an actual copy of the painting in the National Gallery and the other is a drawing done by Cornelis Bos), Leda raises her leg just enough so that her buttocks is showing, which was seen as stimulating in the Renaissance. In this rendition, Leda and the swan are also seen kissing and making eye contact with one another, yet it is still much less intense and ‘vulgar’ than in Agostino Veneziano’s engraving. The tonal unity, sfumato and overall delicacy of the painting produces a softness and sophistication within this work, quite similar to that seen in Leonardo’s. In Michelangelo’s depiction, he chooses to play on the elegance and beauty of the swan, drawing almost no attention to its feet (unlike Agostino Veneziano) and has its body almost become one with Leda’s. Her skin is nearly as white as the swan’s feathers, and there is minimal contrast between the two figures themselves. The swan is resting its body on top of Leda, with her leg lifted, creating a sort of intimacy between the two, blocking out the viewers.

Another depiction done by Antonio da Correggio of Jupiter and his loves is the story of Io. Inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the story goes that Io, the daughter of Inachus, king of Argos, is seduced by Jupiter who transforms himself into a dark cloud to hide from his jealous wife, Juno. Correggio’s style prefigured what was to come out of the Rococo period through his intense use of colors and mystical light, and his *Jupiter and Io* painting is a perfect example of his mastering of the North Italian style. This painting, also commissioned by Federico Gonzaga II, was intended to be

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\(^8\) James Grantham Turner, "Invention and Sexuality in the Raphael Workshop: Before the Modi."
given to Emperor Charles V as an addition to his ‘collection’ on the loves of Jupiter. Unfortunately, it never made it to its patron (but after Gonzaga’s death it was sent to Spain) and now resides in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Austria. The soft yet extreme seduction within this work shows Correggio’s sheer skill in painting the female nude (a typical skill of North Italian painters), even though this intense moment is in no way vulgar to the viewer. Moreover, Jupiter and Io are the only two figures depicted in the painting, unlike Leonardo’s Leda and the Swan, where Leda’s children are also present and the image is thus rendered less erotic. This ensures that the focal point of the piece is on the pair, creating an even more intense depiction. Correggio’s Jupiter and Io is argued to be one of the most palpable examples of female climax in Renaissance art, Io’s subtle yet definite facial expression giving way to an extremely natural, organic sense of emotion, which would be later adapted by many Baroque artists. Though Jupiter does have an elusive quality -- he is a cloud-- his features are still easily identifiable (we can see a face and arms on the cloud), making his direct interaction with Io feel natural. His ‘arm’ is intimately wrapped around Io’s body and his face seems to be almost kissing her cheek. Jupiter’s evanescent, immaterial body creates a stark contrast from Io’s luminous, marble-like flesh, which further draws in the viewer to their sensual intimacy.

Looking towards Io and her body language, the aesthetic female back view is perfectly executed by Correggio and her arm and legs have a muscle definition similar to that of Michelangelo’s Leda (and many of his other female figures). This is an overall excellently crafted painting: Correggio’s brushstrokes are undetectable, a skill he would have acquired from studying the works of Leonardo, in addition, his use of rich color and intense light are also clearly present. We can draw many comparisons between Correggio’s Jupiter and Io and the three Jupiter and Leda depictions in this

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essay through painting style, subject and erotic intensity. *Jupiter and Io* is an excellent representation of the capabilities of Northern Italian Renaissance artist, particularly in the mastering of the female nude.

Shifting focus towards a loves of Jupiter topic that’s a bit different than the ones discussed is the story of Jupiter and Antiope. The *Pardo Venus*, also known as the *Jupiter and Antiope* by Tiziano Vecelli (Titian) is a painting seemingly depicts the story of Jupiter and Antiope, loosely based off of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in which he writes of Jupiter, who transforms himself into a satyr while Antiope sleeps and proceeds to force himself onto her. The painting is Titian’s largest mythologically inspired work. It was commissioned by Philip II of Spain and is currently displayed at the Louvre in Paris. Debate of whether the painting is in fact a Venus or an Antiope has taken place, but consensus usually stands with Antiope for a multitude of reasons. Primarily, the subject matter between the woman and the satyr clearly leads to the story of Antiope. It is also indicated as such in inventories of El Prado. Venus arguments on the other hand are less strong, according to art historian Malcolm Bull, "[i]n later inventories the terms "naked woman" and "Venus" are almost interchangeable" and additionally, he claims that the presence of Cupid is as well an indeterminate since Cupid is often seen accompanying other people. The painting itself has a divided composition. In the foreground, a tree stands between Jupiter and Antiope and the other figures represented (a sitting couple and two men hunting), creating two disconnected scenes. Jupiter (the satyr) is seen creeping up on Antiope while she’s sleeping under the tree and lifts her drapery. As stated earlier, Titian presumably borrowed this scene from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as he did with all his mythologically inspired works for Philip II. This as well can further attest to the scene at hand in

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fact being a Jupiter and Antiope. The background of this painting also has several notable details, such a naked couple (seemingly two women) sitting by the riverbank, and shifting to the right, a man with several dogs running around in the grass. Focusing on Jupiter and Antiope, this particular interaction is quite different than the ones previously examined in this essay. For one, Antiope is asleep and therefore not consciously consenting to Jupiter’s advances. Titian expertly draws the female nude and epitomizes his talents here with Antiope. Her arm placed behind her head was a common method for exemplifying the female body. This scene is also not an ‘in the moment’ representation of the sexual act that took place (like that of Michelangelo, Agostino, and Correggio), but rather, it is a precursor to what’s to come. It is important to show a painting of Jupiter and his loves that somewhat lacks the powerful erotic components of the previous paintings studied. There is an obvious sexual component within the piece because of the nature of the story as well as Antiope’s graceful nudity, but there is no underlying seductiveness.

The range and similarities found between these images all based on the loves of Jupiter show just how significant humanism was during the Renaissance. Artists would not have had the autonomy to do as they pleased if it were not for the cultural changes that came about because of the Renaissance and the newfound praise and admiration of Classical Roman and Greek times. Seeing that multiple reputable, talented artists could take a single theme within Greek mythology and portray these stories in so many different styles is an incredible result of this shift in mentality. Because of the recent fascination with classical antiquity and its literature, art, philosophy, and more, artists were not just inspired by the freedom that came with this movement, but also the stories that existed during this time they admired so much, like that of Leda and the Swan. Not only were artists fascinated with these tales, but they provided a justification to experiment on the canvas. Looking at depictions of Hercules, Jupiter, Venus, and many more it is evident just how relevant these mythological stories and figures were to artists of the Renaissance. Since the approbation for the
ancient world was so fervent at this time, artists were thus able to test their bounds and push their
limits, having Greek mythology as something to fall back on and justify their creativity and
experimentation. These figures and stories were used in order to push the limits on depicting the
body, recreating certain sexual scenes, and erotic fascinations that would have been previously been
considered disgraceful. This freedom in art was inevitably correlated with the sexual freedom and
experimentation that also took place during the Renaissance. The role of ‘teacher and apprentice’
was a common one, and sexual interactions between elder men and young males was viewed as
normal. This dynamic was also extremely prevalent and customary during ancient Greek and Roman
times, so it is safe to assume the resurgence and popularity of this relationship throughout the
Renaissance can be partially credited to the glorification and revitalization of the ancient times. This
cultural movement lead to a new way of thinking, and a newly found appreciation and curiosity for
humans and the human body. Knowledge and experience was admired just like in the Greco-Roman
era, people wanted to learn, master, and create new advancements – with erotic imagery being one
of those skills they longed to perfect.
Bibliography

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