

Titian and the Rebirth of Tragedy

Andrew Butterfield

This autumn two of Titian's greatest pictures, *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto*, have come to America for the first time, as part of the exhibition "Titian and the Golden Age of Venetian Painting," a selection of works from the National Gallery of Scotland, now at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.* The two paintings, made between 1556 and 1559 for King Philip II of Spain, are among the most celebrated works in the history of European art. They have influenced generations of artists, including such figures as Velázquez, Rubens, and Rembrandt, and they still provoke excited attention and fervent praise. The painter Lucian Freud, for example, recently called them "the most beautiful pictures in the world."

The ravishing application of paint, the luscious brushwork, and the startling compositions of the two pictures impress all who behold them. But just as fundamental to the pictures' power is Titian's poignant exploration of the tragic themes of the myths he represents. Rarely before had any artist looked with such unblinking concentration, and such deep empathy, at the vulnerability and the injustice that are an inescapable part of mortal existence.

Diana and Actaeon and *Diana and Callisto* are two from a suite of six mythological paintings that Titian executed for Philip II between about 1551 and 1562. The other canvases in the series, which Titian called *poesie* (Italian for poems or poetry), are *Danaë* (the version now in the Prado), *Venus and Adonis* (Prado), *Perseus and Andromeda*, (Wallace Collection, London), and *The Rape of Europa* (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston). Titian also planned images of Medea and Jason and of the death of Actaeon for the group. The latter is likely to be the painting of this subject in the National Gallery, London; he seems never to have made the other picture.

All the *poesie* paintings are approximately six by seven feet, with the exception of the first work in the series, *Danaë*, which is somewhat smaller than the others. It is clear from the letters between Titian and Philip II that the painter imagined the *poesie* hanging together in one room, although at the time he was making the pictures a specific setting had not been selected for them. Philip II traveled regularly between his residences, as was the custom with Hapsburg royalty, and the paintings did not have a permanent home before 1623, when they were installed in the Alácazar palace in Madrid.

Given by Philip V to the French ambassador in 1704, the two Diana paintings migrated from Madrid to Paris,

where they formed part of the legendary Orléans collection at the Palais-Royal until the French Revolution. In 1798 they were purchased by the Duke of Bridgewater and put on view in London, soon after passing by inheritance to the future Duke of Sutherland. They stayed in London until the outbreak of World War II, when they were sent to Scotland for safekeeping. Since 1945 they had been on loan from the 6th Duke of Sutherland to the National Gallery of Scotland. In 2009 *Diana and Actaeon* was sold jointly to the National Gallery of Scotland and the National Gallery, London, for £50,000,000. The

read Latin, and he almost surely used the translation of the poem that had recently been made by Lodovico Dolce, the most prolific *littérateur* in Renaissance Venice. Dolce wrote, edited, or translated more than 350 books, including best-selling versions of many classics of Greek, Latin, and Italian literature, from Homer and Virgil to Dante and Castiglione. Dolce and Titian seem to have been good friends: the writer dedicated a book to Titian in 1538, wrote a dialogue in praise of the painter in 1557 that contained a great deal of biographical information nowhere else recorded, and in 1554

down for protection; another attempts to dress and run away at the same time; a third covers her breasts with her arm and raises her legs to hide her pudenda; a fourth looks on from behind a stone pier to assess the danger. Diana at the right has begun to cover herself, and she glares balefully at Actaeon. Unaware of what is happening, the nymph at Diana's feet is still undressing her; the other attendant is trying to protect her from being seen. Everyone is in motion.

It is a dizzying image in which all seems to be spinning and unstable. The lines indicating the space are at disjointed angles. The banks of the river jut upward; the fountain is not level; the supports of the arch, and the stone pier crowned with a skull, do not stand perpendicular to the ground. The staccato rhythm of the gestures adds to the chaos, as do the intensely active brushwork and the vibrant pattern of highlights scattered across the picture. No painting ever before had so strongly suggested a moment of shock and disorder.



Titian: *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556–1559

two museums have until the end of 2012 to raise an equal sum to purchase *Diana and Callisto*.

Titian had met Philip II in Augsburg in 1550–1551, and they appear to have come to an agreement that in exchange for an annual stipend the painter would make one picture a year for the king. Before his death in 1576 Titian executed about twenty-five works for Philip, chiefly religious and devotional pictures, such as the *Saint Jerome* and the *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* in the Escorial. The *poesie* are almost the only secular narratives he made for the king.

Titian had a free hand in selecting the subjects for the *poesie*, an all but unheard-of privilege in the Renaissance when most artists worked according to prescribed commissions. While most of the *poesie* recount the interaction of gods and mortals, the group does not seem to have had a unifying symbolic program. Still, Titian certainly conceived the Diana paintings as a pair, and the two pictures address similar issues of fate, cruelty, and the fragility of human life.

Titian based both *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto* on the accounts of these myths that appear in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He did not

he also published correspondence between Titian and Philip II about the *poesie*.

Diana and Actaeon illustrates the tale of the unfortunate youth who, while hunting in the woods, stumbles upon the goddess Diana and her nymphs bathing in a fountain. Outraged at being seen in the nude, Diana splashes water on Actaeon, magically transforming him into a stag. He flees, but his hunting dogs catch him. He desperately tries to call them off, but he no longer has the power of speech, and the beasts savagely tear him to shreds. Ovid stresses—and Dolce makes clear in his translation—that Actaeon is guiltless; he is simply a victim of fate. This can't be said of the goddess. "To some," Ovid states, "she seemed more cruel than just." Dolce expands on Ovid's text slightly: "Too cruel to some the goddess seemed, nor did they think he deserved such a terrible martyrdom."

In the picture Titian shows the moment of discovery. Actaeon at the left is advanced as if stepping forward, yet the weight of his body is back, as if he were trying to stop suddenly, and his hands are raised in a gesture of surprise or fear. The naked nubile nymphs, who were luxuriating in the cool water a moment ago, react with terror to his intrusion. One tries to pull a red cloth

Diana and Callisto also depicts an instant of supreme intensity. The myth it recounts is as horrifying as that of Actaeon. Callisto was an ideal female youth—virginal, modest, noble—who hunted with Diana and her nymphs in Arcadia, the land celebrated in classical poetry as the place of human happiness during the mythic Golden Age. But her perfection was rewarded in the most terrible and ironic way: it caught the eye of Jove, who came down from heaven and raped her. Pregnant and ashamed, she became fearful, disconsolate, and solitary—something that Dolce stresses in his translation far more than Ovid does in the original. Still she managed to hide the pregnancy until one hot summer day when Diana and her nymphs went to bathe in a sacred fountain. According to Ovid and Dolce, when Callisto refused to undress, the other girls ripped her clothes away, revealing her condition. Immediately, Diana banished her. According to Dolce's translation, the goddess says, "Begone! And with your vile and stained body don't offend the sacred fountain. Never again come into my presence."

Callisto gave birth to a son, but her sufferings were not over. Juno catches her, and although Callisto begs for mercy, first beats her and then turns her into a bear. The features of Callisto's physical beauty that attracted Jove now become ugly and monstrous. Like Actaeon she fully retains rational understanding but completely loses the power of speech. She can only growl and grunt. For fifteen years she lives in a state of constant terror, a human in bestial form, and yet not truly part of the animal world. Finally, by accident she encounters her son, who, believing her to be a bear, tries to kill her. To avoid the crime of matricide, Jove transforms both mother and son into stars in the heavens.

Titian's painting shows the moment of revelation and banishment. But it is important to realize that he may have

(continued on page 20)

*The exhibition is on view at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, October 17, 2010–January 2, 2011; the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, February 5–May 1, 2011; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, May 21–August 14, 2011. This essay is drawn in part from the catalog *Titian and the Golden Age of Venetian Painting: Masterpieces from the National Galleries of Scotland*, edited by Edgar Peters Bowron (Yale University Press, 2010). Other footnotes appear in the Web version of this article at www.nybooks.com.

(continued from page 16)

changed the story slightly. In a letter he wrote to Philip II as he was finishing the picture, Titian said it represented “Callisto, pregnant by Jove, stripped at the fountain by order of Diana by her nymphs.” In Ovid and in Dolce, the nymphs strip her first; only then is her pregnancy discovered and she is punished by Diana. If it is right to follow Titian’s wording exactly, the picture shows Diana ordering the nymphs to strip the girl, which makes Diana’s actions seem even crueler.

At the left in the painting, the nymphs surround Callisto and rip her cloths from her body. The complexity of Titian’s depiction of the women is notable. The nymphs are beautiful and yet terrifying in the avidity with which they pounce on their victim, who moments before had been their companion. In his translation Dolce contrasts the fearful solitude of Callisto with the happiness of the “beautiful elect band” formed by Diana’s nymphs; this contrast does not appear in Ovid’s original text.

Titian, too, wants us to feel Callisto’s abandonment and isolation; he shows her isolated and alone in her suffering. In contrast to the elegant coiffures of the other nymphs, her hair is disheveled and unbound, a common sign of rape in classical literature. Callisto’s sweaty face is in shadow, and yet her gravid abdomen is in light, intensifying the sense of exposure. She looks up to heaven, and her eyes glisten with tears. In both Ovid’s poem and Dolce’s translation, she pleads with the gods for mercy, and when this is denied, she curses Jove for his evil. In Ovid, no longer able to speak, Callisto woefully raises her arms to express her anger; but Dolce adds that she also glances up to heaven with pitiful and terror-stricken eyes. Likewise, Titian wants the viewer to empathize with Callisto in her sorrow and desperation.

In the other half of the picture, we see imperious Diana, who with a regal and easy gesture casts Callisto into exile. In Ovid’s and Dolce’s versions, Diana is angry. But Titian makes her seem almost indifferent in her cruelty. Diana is surrounded by still more nymphs, lovely and amoral creatures, who are accustomed to doing her bidding and seeking her approval. The two servile hunting dogs crouching among the girls add to the sinister atmosphere. Titian has imagined Diana as if she were a tyrant in her court, a heavenly Poppaea.

Viewers as different as Erwin Panofsky and Lucian Freud have felt that there was an element of tragedy in Titian’s two Diana paintings—a response that seems to me correct, both on interpretative and historical grounds. I think it is crucial to see these and other works from the late period of Titian’s career in light of the rebirth of interest in tragic drama and poetry that took place in Venice and Padua in the sixteenth century.

Consider some highlights in the chronology. Around the time that Titian arrived in the city, Aldus Manutius, the leading humanist printer of Venice, published the first complete editions of the tragedies of Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus; and in 1506, he printed Erasmus’s translation into Latin of Euripides’ *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*. The first tragedy in Italian, *Sofonisba*, was written in 1515 by Giangiorgio

Trissino, a writer from Vicenza in the Veneto. (Also a patron of the visual arts, he is perhaps best known today for having discovered the architect Palladio.) Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza was built specifically in order to stage tragedies, and the first play put on there was Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* in a translation by the Venetian aristocrat Orsato Giustiniani.

Moreover, two of Titian’s friends were central to the revival. Pietro Aretino wrote a tragedy, *Orazia*, which was published in Venice in 1546. Dolce translated the tragedies of Seneca into Italian, and printed a complete edition in 1560. He also was the first to translate Greek tragedies into Italian, publishing plays by Euripides: *Hecuba* in 1545, *Jocasta* in 1549, *Iphigenia in Aulis* in 1551, and *Medea* in 1557. As



Titian: Diana and Callisto, 1556–1559

he tells us in his dialogue *Aretino*, which he wrote in 1557 chiefly to praise Titian, he also staged plays by Euripides in Venice. Dolce’s versions of Euripides stirred interest across Europe; for example, one of the first tragedies in English, *Jocasta*, written by George Gascoigne in 1566, was based directly on Dolce’s version of the play.

The enthusiasm for tragedy in Venice and Padua reached a climax during the second half of the 1550s, at the time that Titian was making the *poesie*. For instance, Giovanni Andrea dell’Anguillara’s translation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus* was staged and printed in Padua in 1556. Dolce’s *Medea*, as we have already seen, was published in Venice in 1557, and another translation of Euripides’ play by Maffeo Galladi was printed there the following year.

The fascination with tragedy was inspired in part by the study of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the text was known only in a rough Latin translation of an Arabic redaction of the Greek original. But in the sixteenth century, humanists for the first time shifted the focus of their attention to the Greek text, which was printed by Aldus in Venice in 1508. As Bernard Weinberg has mapped out in his magisterial examination, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (1961), this

change stimulated enormous interest among intellectuals and writers in the sixteenth century.

One key text in this development was Francesco Robortello’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, printed in 1548. Although originally from Florence, Robortello was the Venetian government’s professor of ancient literature in the 1550s. Additionally, in 1554 in Venice Giambattista Giraldi Cintio published his study of the genres of literature, including tragedy. Moreover, in 1559, the year that Titian completed the Diana paintings, two essays on tragedy were printed in Venice. One was Antonio Sebastiano Minturno’s *De Poeta*; the other was Dolce’s study *I dilettevoli sermoni*, which opens with a discussion of the origins and functions of tragedy.

aspra fortuna—the bitter enemy, fortune. In 1559, in his essay *I dilettevoli sermoni*, he says that the purpose of tragedy is to contrast the “*fragilità humana*” with the “*felicità e beatitudine Divina*.”

The unbridgeable difference between human frailty and Olympian immortality and blessedness is on view in Titian’s *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto*. Yet Titian, perhaps, presents an even grimmer understanding of this difference. In Dolce, man’s enemy is fate. Titian, on the other hand, seems to stress the unfathomable and unmerited cruelty and injustice of the gods. Looking at these pictures, it is easy to think of Gloucester’s anguished cry in *King Lear*, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;/They kill us for their sport.”

Italian Renaissance ideas of tragedy also help us understand the emotional content of Titian’s pictures. According to Aristotle, one of the defining characteristics of tragedy is that it elicits two emotions—*eleos* and *phobos* in the Greek. These are the so-called tragic emotions. In modern English versions of Aristotle’s *Poetics* the words are almost invariably translated as “pity” and “fear.” But in Italy in the sixteenth century, the terms were more often rendered as *compassione* and *horrore*. Compassion and horror are what we feel when we look at the two Diana paintings; and these terms are even more apposite to the viewer’s response to Titian’s haunting picture *The Flaying of Marsyas* (now in the Archbishop’s Palace at Kroměříž, Czech Republic).

The sixteenth-century discussion of the tragic emotions emphasized that one of their causes was the unjust nature of suffering. Either the tragic victim was entirely innocent, or the punishment far outweighed any misdeed he or she may have committed. (Italian theorists did not emphasize *hamartia*—the tragic flaw.) Furthermore, the more horrific the pain the victim suffered, the greater the sorrow and the compassion it stirred in the viewer. Robortello in 1548 wrote:

Sorrow is produced by all horrible things, such as floggings, wounds, murder; compassion by the same things if they happen to a person who does not deserve them.

Cintio in 1554 stated:

Persons of high status [in tragedy] arouse great compassion if horrible things happen to them; and the reason for this is if it appears to the viewer that even if the person deserves punishment, it should not be so severe. And this judgment, mixed with the severity of the torture, induces the horror and the compassion, which are necessary in tragedy.

We are moved by Actaeon and Callisto, as well as by Marsyas, because they do not deserve the terrible suffering they endure.

In Titian’s *Flaying of Marsyas*, the figure of Midas on the right seems to be in a state of profound and troubled meditation, as if he were contemplating and attempting to understand the horror and injustice of what is taking place. It has been plausibly suggested that this figure is a self-portrait

Bridgewater Collection/National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

by Titian. Throughout his career, Titian showed an uncommon power of empathy, and this ability to imagine and to depict the widest range of human feelings was recognized by his contemporaries as one of the outstanding characteristics of his art.

From the 1550s on, his art acquires an even greater depth of sensitivity and pathos. In the Diana paintings, and in other late masterpieces such as the *Marsyas*, the Hermitage *Saint Sebastian*, or the Munich *Crowning of Thorns*, there is a confrontation with

physical suffering and spiritual solitude that has little precedence in European visual arts.

One way to understand this newfound depth is in relation to the revival of classical tragedy, where the themes of human loss and grief had

also been investigated. But the revival of these powerful texts only provides the background for the expressions of genius. Titian is the great tragic poet of the Venetian Renaissance, one who merits comparison with Euripides and Shakespeare. □