

Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*

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Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, housed in the collection of the National Gallery in London, unifies two different narratives from antique literary sources. (Fig. 1) The left half of the painting depicts Ariadne in the moment she realizes Theseus has abandoned her on the island of Naxos. Awakening to see his ship at sea, she runs wildly to shore, waving in vain for Theseus to return. The narrative of Bacchus dominates the right half of the painting and illustrates his triumphant return from India.¹ In this scene, Bacchus jumps from his chariot while his raucous entourage follows behind him. Joining the future lovers' dissonant emotional states is a single shared gaze. This gaze unites the trans-emotional and trans-durational elements of each character's history into one painting, and offers the viewer a chance to ruminate on what it means to look and to be looked at within the realm of Renaissance art. A shared gaze, in which Bacchus seems to have power over Ariadne, is the focus of Titian's painting, and is furthermore the focal point and height of drama of two other paintings originally placed alongside *Bacchus and Ariadne* in Alfonso d'Este's *camerino d'alabastro* in Ferrara.

The concept of the Lacanian gaze offers some insight into the active and passive qualities of "looking" (by Bacchus) and being "seen" (by Ariadne). However, while modern Lacanian theory may be applied to Renaissance art, it does not explain the impetus for Titian's chosen depiction. Rather, the contemporary viewer may access the Lacanian concept of the gaze as a means to provide a context for Ariadne, in particular, her subjectivity. In a Lacanian sense, Ariadne's return of Bacchus' gaze provides the power to arrest his movement, so that he is suspended in time and space. Ultimately, this paper will explain how the reciprocal gaze in *Bacchus and Ariadne* mediates the

¹ Pedrocchi, Filippo., Titian: The Complete Paintings, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000 p.135

painting's action, and establishes a narrative anchor by which a serial-based myth is fixed in time.

In the year of 1520,² Titian was offered the commission to produce three paintings complimenting the bacchanalian theme of Alfonso d'Este's *camerino d'alabastro*, aptly named for its white sculptural contents.³ Documentation supporting the existence of the Alfonso's *camerino* has been verified, however its actual location on the Este grounds in Ferrara is unknown. Many scholars contend that it is difficult to determine where this *camerino d'alabastro* originally stood within the grounds of the Este Castle and Palace, though there has been speculation that the room was in the Via Coperta, a passageway between the palace and castle.⁴

The unknown location of the *camerino* on the Este grounds further poses the problem of being able to correctly identify how the paintings were hung and consequently seen by an audience. The last known documentation regarding these works was written in January 1598 by Annibale Roncaglia, one of two agents to the current duke of Ferrara; Roncaglia writes of the departure of the five bacchanalian-themed paintings from Ferrara to Rome, but does not describe the placement of the paintings in the *camerino*.⁵ Among the paintings listed in this document are Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* and three paintings by Titian: *Bacchus and Ariadne*, *Andrians*, and *Worship of Venus*. All four paintings have since been separated: *Feast of the Gods* is now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (Figure 2); *Bacchanal of the Andrians*

² Freedberg, S.J., *Painting in Italy: 1500-1600*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993 p.157

³ Wolf, Norbert., *L. Titian*, Munich; London: Prestel, 2006 p.61

⁴ Goodgal, Dana., "The Camerino of Alfonso D'Este," *Art History*, vol. 1, number 2, June 1978, p.162

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.162

(Figure 3) and *Worship of Venus* (Figure 4) are both in the Prado Museum in Madrid; and, of course, *Bacchus and Ariadne* is in the National Gallery in London. The fifth painting listed is described as depicting “figures of men and women by the Dossi,” but this has either been lost or remains unidentified.⁶

It is believed that Bellini was commissioned first to paint the *Feast of the Gods*, while other commissions for the following bacchanalian paintings were offered to both Raphael⁷ and Fra Bartolommeo.⁸ However, Titian was eventually rewarded the commission upon the death of both Raphael(1520) and the Fra Bartolommeo(1517). From January to March of 1516 Titan visited Ferrara to discuss the cycle of mythologies surrounding Bellini’s initial painting.⁹ With Bellini’s painting as the center around which his own paintings would be presented, Titian needed to compose scenes to fit cohesively with Bellini’s *Feast of the Gods*.¹⁰ In order to alleviate any further impending compositional problems, Titian was eventually asked by the patron to rework Bellini’s painting, presumably in an effort to create more uniformity between the bacchanalian narratives.¹¹

Although Titian generally made only a few minor changes to Bellini’s painting, including a reworking of the landscape, he did expose a breast on the figure of the

⁶ Ibid., p.162

⁷ Gould, Cecil., The Studio of Alfonso d’Este and Titan’s Bacchus and Ariadne: a re-examination of the chronology of the Bacchanals and the evolution of one of them, London: National Gallery, 1969, p.18

⁸ Freedberg, S.J., Painting in Italy: 1500-1600, Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993 p. 156

⁹ Wolf, Norbert., L. Titian, Munich; London: Prestel, 2006 p.61

¹⁰ Fehn, Philipp., “The Worship of Bacchus and Venus in Bellini’s and Titian’s Bacchanals for Alfonso d’Este,” *Studies for the history of Art*, vol.6, 1974, p.43

¹¹ Ibid., p.43

sleeping Lotis to the prying eyes of Priapus, the Greek god of fertility.¹² By exposing the upper portion of Lotis' body, Titian in effect creates a juxtaposition between the half-nude Lotis and the fully-clothed Ariadne. When considering the type of love expressed in both Titian and Bellini's paintings, the display of women in terms of their dress becomes crucial. The scene in which a sleeping Lotis is literally exposed to Priapus poses as an adversative love to the scene in which Bacchus and Ariadne share a gaze.¹³ Ariadne symbolizes immortal, divine love, while Lotis represents Priapus' unrequited lust.

In his correspondence with Alfonso d'Este concerning the commission, Titian expressed his concern with the placement of his paintings, and particularly their placement in relation to available light sources. As S.J. Freedberg notes, "light was a sensuous experience for Titian and he sees it as alive."¹⁴ Dana Goodgal places *Bacchus and Ariadne* in the *camerino* on a wall alongside Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* and Titian's own *Bacchanal of the Andrians*. She speculates that the paintings were hung very close together to create an interconnected narrative, and to facilitate a fluid reading from one scene to the next.¹⁵ Goodgal arranges these works with the *Feast of the Gods* on the right, beginning the narrative, the *Andrians* following in the middle, and *Bacchus and Ariadne* on the left side. *Worship of Venus*, according to Goodgal, was meant to be placed on the adjacent wall. The placement of *Worship of Venus* on the adjacent wall allows the sculpture and woman within the painting to aesthetically "rest" against the doorjamb,

¹² Wolf, Norbert., *I, Titian*, Munich; London: Prestel, 2006p.62

¹³ Goodgal p.179

¹⁴ Freedberg, S.J., *Painting in Italy: 1500-1600*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993, p. 136

¹⁵ Goodgal, Dana., "The Camerino of Alfonso D'Este," *Art History*, vol. 1, number 2, June 1978, p.168

thus creating the illusion of the woman looking off the canvas and over to the scene taking place between Bacchus and Ariadne.¹⁶

If it is to be believed that the paintings were arranged in this manner, then the series opens with *Feast of the Gods*, and a depiction of drunken revelry. Lotis, sleeping off the effects of the wine, occupies the right side of the canvas; a lustful Priapus bends down in an effort to lift her skirt. This moment marks the beginning of the narrative and the themes of courtship and drunken festivities. *Andrians* follow as the next scene in the bacchanalian theme. Titian depicts the *Andrians*, inhabitants of the Greek isle of Andros, imbibing in an “orgiastic festival of wine” while awaiting the arrival of Bacchus.¹⁷ The figure in the foreground is completely nude and exposed to the viewer. In considering the progression of theme and narrative, the viewer may read this as one step beyond the partially exposed Lotis; however, there is no moral recrimination for this exposure as there is with Lotis. According to myth, Lotis does not desire the advances of Priapus (symbolized by her closed eyes) and, upon being awakened by a braying ass, darts off into the woods—Here is a moral allegory about the negative effects of the overindulgence of wine and sexual desire; Titian, on the other hand, chose not to continue Bellini’s moralistic example of the negative aspects of such drunkenness; instead, he chose to celebrate it.¹⁸ Titian’s more celebratory attitude towards drunkenness is indicated symbolically through the triumphantly held jug of wine in the center of the painting, but

¹⁶ Ibid., p.179

¹⁷ Wolf, Norbert., *I, Titian*, Munich; London: Prestel, 2006 p.64

¹⁸ Ibid., p.64

also quite literally in the sheet music in the foreground of *Andrians*, which reads in French, “Who drinks and does not drink again, does not know what drinking is.”¹⁹

The third painting following this progression of near drunkenness is *Bacchus and Ariadne*. Here the participants of such revelry are depicted in full action; none of the characters are lying on the ground. Rather, they are in the act of walking across the canvas. Bacchus’ great leap towards Ariadne dominates the scene. In this bacchanalian triad the theme of love is intensified, as well as the celebration of drinking. It begins in the *Feast of the Gods* with a portrayal of “priapic” love and moral recriminations of drinking, moving to more humanized love and rejoicing the feast represented in *Andrians*. Finally it ends with divine love and a boisterous celebration in *Bacchus and Ariadne*.²⁰

Coinciding with the idea of growing abundance we encounter Lacan’s concept of seeing and being seen. Priapus sees Lotis, but she does not share the power of his gaze. In fact, there is no power to his gaze, as is evidenced by her rebuff to his advances. In *Andrians*, love and drink is represented in a more harmonious light. The nude woman in the foreground sensuously lies back asleep while the other revelers engage in personal, intimate conversations with one another; there is no threat to their existence or to the woman’s body.

In *Bacchus and Ariadne*, Bacchus’ dramatic jump from his chariot across the canvas creates a point of contention; as Bacchus lunges from the chariot to the ground—his mantle billowing behind him—both Ariadne and Bacchus are suspended in time,

¹⁹ Ibid., p.64

²⁰ Goodgal, Dana., “The Camerino of Alfonso D’Este,” *Art History*, vol. 1, number 2, June 1978, p.179

gazing intently at each other. Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze and its unique power to halt movement can be applied. In "Seminar XI" Lacan writes, "the gaze in itself not only terminates the movement, it freezes it, it is that which has the effect of arresting movement."²¹ Clearly Titian would not have been aware of Lacan's theoretical writings on the relationship between movement and the gaze. However, it supports a modern interpretation of how the gaze between Bacchus and Ariadne can function as the focal point of this painting, as well as the entire bacchanalian series. Bacchus, animated in mid-leap, is forever suspended by the power of his gaze towards Ariadne. His dominant position in the painting, intensified by his contorted body, heightens the intensity of this gaze and therefore the drama between him and Ariadne.

For many years, scholars have debated the source for the myth of *Bacchus and Ariadne*. Edgar Wind speculated that Ovid's *Fastii* explained the story painted by Titian, but according to Wind, what is shown in the piece is not the initial encounter between Bacchus and Ariadne, but their final encounter, before their celestial apotheosis.²² Later, scholars realized this to be false and cited Ovid's *Metamorphosis* as the source²³; however, eventually Cecil Gould concluded that the scene must be a compilation of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and Catullus' *Carmin*,²⁴ which furthers the theory that Titian used continuous narrative within the painting; Ariadne's wave to the ship in the distance and Ariadne and Bacchus' encounter is described in the *Ars Amatoria*, while the arrival of

²¹ Silverman, Kaja., "How to Face the Gaze," *October Files* 6, 2006, p.145

²² Easson, Angus., "The Source of Titan's *Bacchus and Ariadne*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol.32, 1969, p.396

²³ Pedrocco, Filippo., *Titian: The Complete Paintings*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000 p.135

²⁴ Gould, Cecil., *The Studio of Alfonso d'Este and Titan's Bacchus and Ariadne: a re-examination of the chronology of the Bacchanals and the evolution of one of them*, London: National Gallery, 1969 p.17

Bacchus and his entourage is described in the *Carmina*. The following is an excerpt from *Ars Amatoria* describing the first encounter between Bacchus and Ariadne:

Ariadne wandered distractedly on the unknown sand, where little Dia is lashed by the sea waves. Just as she came from sleep, clad in an ungirt tunic, barefoot, with yellow hair unbound, she cried upon Theseus over the deaf waters, while an innocent shower bedewed her cheeks. She clamored and wept together, but both became her, nor was she made less comely by her tears. Again she beats her soft bosom with her hand and cries, "he is gone, the faithless one; what will become of me? What will become of me?...and now on his cart, that he covered with grape-clusters, the god was giving the golden reins to his yoked tigers; voice, color and Theseus were all gone from the girl: thrice did she essay flight, thrice did fear restrain her. She shuddered, as when dry stalks are shaken by the wind..." "Lo, here am I" said the god to her, "a more faithful lover; have no fear, Gnosian maid, though shalt be the spouse of Bacchus. For thy gift take the sky; as a star in the sky thou shalt be gazed at..." He...leapt down from the chariot; thy sand gave place to his alighting foot; and clasping her to his bosom (for she had no strength to fight) he bore her away; easy it is for a god to be all-powerful.²⁵

The words "as a star in the sky, thou shalt be gazed at" from the passage resonates distinctly in the painting, not only with the circle of stars in the upper left corner but with the intensity of Bacchus' gaze at Ariadne. Though it is unclear which translation Titian sourced, and there must be room for discrepancy between translations, the power of Bacchus' gaze is what ultimately comforts Ariadne and provides the context in which she exists. It seems that Titian not only chose to include one of the more interesting aspects of the passage, but also made it the climax of all three paintings by creating such a heightened sense of immediacy between the two characters. There is nothing ordinary or mundane about Bacchus' leap from his chariot; he alights in a decidedly inhuman way, his body twisting in an impossible manner, his head craned at such an angle it looks as if he is boring a hole into the very soul of Ariadne. In comparison to the other paintings in the series, a fierce sense of energy emanates from *Bacchus and Ariadne*.

²⁵ Ovid. *Ars Amatoria*. Trans. Cecil Gould. London: National Gallery, 1969

Suspended in flight, Bacchus cranes his neck to fully impart the power of his gaze, which Ariadne seems to both fear and accept. Either way, while Ariadne is the one being seen by Bacchus, it is clear that she also looks back at him, thus engaging a god. In a sense, the internalization of his gaze is what defines her subjectivity. Although Theseus has departed, Bacchus has arrived and provided the Lacanian mirror she needs in order to exist. She shares his gaze and, and yet, is overcome by its power. According to Lacan, there is an agency of viewing and the subject of the look.²⁶ Lacan's theory of gender based subjectivity lies in the idea that the figure being looked at is made subject because of *the look*. According to Paolo Berdini, this subject of the look also has a symmetrically opposite, yet complementary recipient and creates a status in which the subject becomes a spectacle located in the field of vision.²⁷ According to Berdini, Lacan's theory on the look as the gaze "should manifest a split along gender lines, where the gaze is identified with the woman as spectacle."²⁸ Therefore, the masculine is the seeing—the look—and is opposed and complemented by the feminine being seen. Ariadne has become that spectacle that is located within Bacchus' field of vision. The gaze of Bacchus is what gives Ariadne her subjectivity and her looking back at him empowers him while at the same time affirming his masculinity. If one views the three paintings as Goodgal intends and reads them from right to left, *Feast of the Gods*, *Andrians*, and *Bacchus and Ariadne*, one can imagine that Titan was establishing the gaze between Bacchus and Ariadne as the height and climax of the bacchanalian series. Here, in the last painting, love is more than

²⁶ Berdini, Paolo., "Women Under the Gaze: a Renaissance Genealogy," *Art History*, vol.21, no. 4, December 1998, p.573

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.573

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.575

celebrated, it has become divine. In *Feast of the Gods*, Priapus is not empowered to fully realize his lust or desire because Lotis does not look back at him. The gaze is the ultimate power that is celebrated, not frowned upon, within Titian's depiction of the bacchanalia.

Deanna Shemeck also argues for the application of Lacanian theory in the Renaissance. She writes "subjectivity or the sense of self is constituted by the gaze."²⁹ For Shemeck, Lacan contends that the gaze is not us looking out at the world, but rather, "the pressure of us looking and being looked at by the Other; this exterior Other constitutes our existence."³⁰ Shemeck also argues that, in Lacanian terms, what the Renaissance did was integrate the power of the gaze.³¹ She writes that the power of the gaze is most apparent in visual culture,³² as we can see in Titian's painting. Previously, her identity had been defined by the presence of Theseus, and now, without him, Ariadne must find another, or the Other, to provide the Lacanian mirror for which she can use to define her own subjectivity.

In conclusion, it can be said that the moment of drama, the intense gaze between Bacchus and Ariadne, is the height of the piece as well as the climax in the entire bacchanalian series that once was housed within the *camerino d'alabastro* of Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara. Titian has, in effect, created a stylistic progression between Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*, and his own *Andrians* and *Bacchus and Ariadne*. He makes use of this one look between Bacchus and Ariadne to highlight the power of the gaze and shows the viewer what it means to look and be looked at. This stylistic progression of the

²⁹ Shemeck, Deanna., "Circular Definitions: Configuring Gender in Italian Renaissance Festival," *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. XLVIII, no.1, Spring 1995 p.2

³⁰ Ibid., p.2

³¹ Ibid., p.2

³² Shemeck analyses wall paintings in Ferrara that depict annual races held in the local festivals.

theme of love, courtship, and drunkenness is completely celebrated by Titian and finds its culmination in the powerful gaze held between Bacchus and Ariadne. Lacan's theory of the gaze provides the viewer with another facet in which to interpret the painting. For Lacan, the idea of one's existence is not presented through how they see the world, but how others see them. Bacchus provides the look, which gives Ariadne the context in which she can exist.