Beings of Nature and Reason: Mythological Masculinities in Early 18th-Century French Art and Visual Culture

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ABSTRACT

From the mid-eighteenth century, critics and writers denigrated mythological subjects in French visual art and culture as symptomatic of the corruption of artistic standards. Mythological imagery was also perceived as largely subject to the whims of feminine taste. While recent studies have advanced exciting new approaches to the field of eighteenth-century art history, current work has continued to highlight the feminine subject. Representations of masculinity have yet to enjoy the same level of sustained scholarly attention. Further, many studies have focused on the later decades of the century and continue to minimise the socio-cultural significance and sub-textual references within mythological themes.

An examination of early to mid-eighteenth-century representations of masculine deities Bacchus, Apollo, Pan, Marsyas and the satyr provide a point from which to reconsider conceptions of masculinity during this period. Exploring images alongside contemporary literature and commentaries which mirror scientific enquiry, medical debate, naturalism and materialist philosophy offers a greater understanding of the ways in which masculinity was constructed and maintained during this period. The representation of mythic masculinities engaged both artist and viewer in expressing codes of behaviour predicated on sensorial experience and self-discipline as a means through which to acquire knowledge and prestige. On the other hand, excess marked by the satyr’s body led to charges of sub-masculinity, effeminacy, loss of self and the reversal of gender hierarchies. In this way, this thesis argues that images of mythological masculinities offer an alternative lens through which to consider the complexities of the period via the construction and elaboration of gendered bodies, identities and hierarchies.
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