

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

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Adelaide

Art History

April 2016

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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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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was generously funded by an Australian Postgraduate Award for the first three years of my research and for this I am sincerely grateful to both the Federal Government of Australia and the University of Adelaide.

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor Dr Lisa Mansfield, who has been an invaluable source of personal and academic support throughout the years. As a most trusted advisor, Lisa has consistently encouraged my work and I have greatly benefitted from her knowledge, experience, patience and enthusiasm. Special thanks also to Professor David Lemmings, whose generous feedback and academic support has been invaluable and very much appreciated.

I would also like to thank Professor Catherine Speck and Professor Ian North who have each demonstrated an interest in my work and offered many positive comments in response to presentations over the years. I express my gratitude and admiration to the wider community of scholars in my field whose work motivated my initial explorations of eighteenth-century art history and has greatly enriched my own.

I am thankful to all the many people associated with several institutions including the British Museum, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Cleveland Art Museum, and especially to Emma Davidson from the Centre for the History of Science in London for generously answering my queries and providing access to all important resources on request.

My friends and peers have been a constant source of love and encouragement throughout the years, and I am truly grateful for each of them. I treasure all of my friends and special thanks must go to Donna Reid, Karen Beasley, Jennifer Kalionis, Julie Collins, Louise Bird, Steven Anderson, Christopher Bridge and Craig Henley, all of whom have very kindly provided a listening ear and very kind words when I have needed them. In particular I express my heartfelt gratitude to my wonderful family for their love and forbearance. The memory of my Mum, Wendy Cooper, continually sustained and guided my progress through to the end. My thoughts have been with her and I am forever grateful for everything both my parents have done - and continue to do - to nurture their children and grandchildren. I am greatly indebted to my Dad, Garry Cooper, who was always in my corner and continues to watch over us. I will always cherish his words of advice and humour, and the gift of his mateship. Melissa has also been a great ally and I am grateful for our sisterhood. In a time of great loss, my parents have ensured that wonderful family friends continue to surround us. Kris Watts, Gary Watts and Jeff Tun Tin have been so generous in their support and friendship, and I will always consider them a part of our family. Each of those I am so privileged to call family and friend have played their own parts in ensuring that this project has been seen through to the end, although they may not be aware of it. Finally, I would like to express my immense love and gratitude to my amazing children Seth and Scarlett for keeping me grounded and focused. I could not have done this without both of you.

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