

Introduction

The women Rubens chose to paint are what are known as fat women, and therefore to many Rubens is a vulgar painter. But a loftier vision was never bestowed on man. Rubens's women are beautiful, but they are not what the man in the street regards as a pretty woman. They are his own women, and they are women—not creatures without beards or mustaches. And he praises us all the while in his own benign fashion.

– George Moore, *The Lake* (1905)¹

Writing from the southern Netherlands in 1781, Sir Joshua Reynolds opined that among Rubens's deficiencies as a painter, “we may reckon beauty in his female characters: sometimes indeed they make approaches to it; they are healthy and comely women, but seldom, if ever, possess any degree of excellence.”² While Reynolds helped establish a now-standard characterization of the women Rubens painted, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term ‘Rubenesque’ was not generally in use until around 1815. In that year, it was rather benignly employed by a contributor to the English *Repository of Arts* to describe typically Rubensian (ornamental) accessories such as ribbons and flowers.³ By 1834, however, the adjective had taken on many of the negative anatomical connotations for which it has since been known.⁴ It appeared in “The Lover of Beauty; or Which will He Wed?,” a romance anonymously published in a London science and arts monthly known as *The Analyst*. The ‘He’ of the story is a vain and “idolatrous” bachelor captain who falls physically in love with a pretty but vapid distant female relation only to fall cerebrally in love with a less-than-conventionally attractive and/but highly intelligent female wit (in the end, the same person!). Recoiling at his first sight of the woman in question, the captain complains: “of her figure we are reluctantly compelled to speak less flatteringly, a single glimpse was sufficient to indicate that it had never been moulded by the graces [...] it was, in truth, broad and cumbrous, we may say Rubenesque.”⁵

1 Moore, *Lake*, 158.

2 Reynolds, *Journey to Flanders*, 148.

3 *Repository of Arts*, no pag.

4 Lamster, “L’Esthétique du ‘more is more,’” 28, incorrectly dates the first anglophone appearance of ‘Rubenesque’ to a 1913 edition of the English magazine *Maclean’s* in an article that begins with the usual contrast of “Rubens’s women” to today’s “minimalist” women and emaciated models.

5 Anon., “Lover of Beauty; or Which will He Wed?,” 405.

In the centuries since his death in 1640, Rubens has often been associated with women. Undoubtedly, the superficial reason for this is the prominence and characteristic appearance of female figures in his art. Given the historical circumstances of his art-making, however, studies of Rubens might just as easily have focused on the Flemish painter's exceptional cohort of strong-minded and powerful female patrons and the historical and iconographical meanings of the many influential women in his life and work. Feminist in its investments and aims, this book takes for granted the importance of women, not only as a sex—or as sex objects—but as gendered actors in Rubens's art. In foregrounding Rubens's representations of women's bodies and female agency within the contexts of early modern court culture and Catholic theology, I appeal to the "figurative power of gender as a thinking resource that exceeds its own particular issue to become a critical instrument for undoing hierarchy and encountering alterity."⁶ This aptly transdisciplinary paraphrase of the literary theorist and cultural critic Gayatri Spivak, by the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, gets at gender's capacity to reorient, or refigure, real social and political relationships both through and beyond symbolic female forms and fantasies. Looking at and thinking about Rubens's representations of women critically and anew has the potential to uncover the complex, at times radical, nature of his conceptions of gender, conceptions in which masculinity and femininity, far from separable, are mutually constitutive.

More surprisingly, as I hope to show, a fresh consideration of the gendering of female forms in Rubens's art might even change Rubens himself, allowing us to view him not only as a painter of women but as a women's painter. For although, as Geraldine Johnson summed it up, Rubens "devoted a significant portion of his career to painting images either for or of women," Rubens is seldom thought of as an ally in the spirit of the female protagonist in the Edwardian novel from which this chapter's epigraph is taken.⁷ If her words are any indication, during the suffragist interim between the Victorian age and the roaring twenties, a woman's beauty was determined by her body shape and size measured against masculinist convention; then, as now, a fat woman was a vulgar woman. Many art historians, revealing a dismayingly similar outlook, have routinely aligned pronouncements on the quality of Rubens's art with contemporary, mainstream, prescriptions of female beauty. When the strong and vigorous, well-nourished women on Rubens's canvases have failed to emulate the wan and anemic beauty norms of successive eras, the painter has been deemed uncouth and his art derided as crude and excessive. Over the last three centuries, chauvinists and other fat-phobic writers of all genders—his champions among them—have viewed Rubens's lauded erudition and judiciousness as somehow in opposition to the (implicitly poor) choices he made of whom and how to paint. Even, perhaps

6 Pollock, "Whither Art History?," 16.

7 Johnson, "Pictures Fit for a Queen," 447.

especially, now, what has become the notoriously Rubenesque female form continues to be seen by many as a lapse in personal judgment and a failure of cultural taste.

It was not always so. That the female figures Rubens painted were less than beautiful was not, it seems, a possibility for seventeenth-century viewers, who sometimes faulted his portrayal of men, but generally gave him top marks for producing lovely women. It is both ironic and unsurprising that to early modern beholders of Rubens's works, abstractions—the intangible virtues, vices, concepts, and ideas he typically rendered as female—had never seemed more titillatingly immediate and moving. Astounded by his capacity to approximate the physicality of human bodies as well as their everyday gestures and attitudes, viewers of Rubens's day faced the challenge of recognizing his seductively sensual, real-world women as disembodied notions in his secular works and, perhaps more confusingly, as stalwart biblical heroines or paragons of chastity in his devotional art. There is, of course, a significant male population in Rubens's world. This book will argue, however, that as his career advances, female figures increasingly bear the burden of meaning-making, assuming an ever-greater formal and compositional presence as well as more iconographically complex roles in his art.

It is my belief that this is as true of Rubens's religious pictures as of his modern histories, civic allegories, portraits, and mythological subjects. Nonetheless, it is these latter genres, presumed to be more receptive to psychoanalytical and cultural theory, that have proven most engaging to a secularized academy. These are the works that have received the greater part of scholarly attention in the Rubens monographs, case studies, and exhibitions of the last several decades. Significantly, Rubens's mythological and allegorical works are also the shared focus of the most unapologetically feminist studies of his art. Allied with Marina Warner's foundational work on gender and personification, many breakthrough studies of Rubens's allegorical works highlight their propagandistic, yet also polysemous, messages. Among other things, feminist authors have pointed to eroticized figural abstractions that depend on contemporary early modern stereotypes of femaleness while having nothing to do with the historical experience of women themselves.⁸ Since the late 1980s, when they began to achieve critical mass, investigations of the role of gender in Rubens's works have produced provocative and revelatory accounts not only of major paintings and recurring themes but of early modern masculinity's constructed nature (something long observed of femininity) and of women's contributions to seventeenth-century politics and culture at large.

It would therefore be impossible to shed new light on the representation of powerful women and female power in Rubens's religious art and devotional subjects, without drawing on field-changing feminist studies of his secular works by Svetlana Alpers, Kristin Lohse Belkin, Margaret Carroll, Sarah R. Cohen, Geraldine Johnson,

8 See, for example, Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*.