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book review of

*David to Delacroix: The Rise of Romantic Mythology* by Dorothy Johnson

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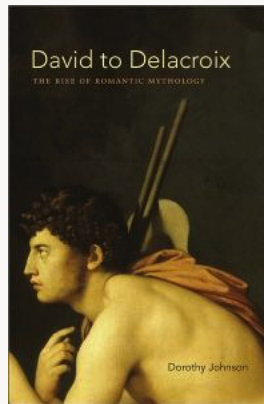
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Dorothy Johnson, *David to Delacroix: The Rise of Romantic Mythology*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 233 pp.; 100 b&w illustrations; 12 color plates. \$45.00 (cloth) ISBN 978-0-8078-3451-0

Dorothy Johnson delivered the Bettie Allison Rand Lectures at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the autumn of 2008. Addressed to the relationship between classical myth and the visual arts in France between the French Revolution and the Second Republic, this series of stimulating talks gave listeners (I among them) a foretaste of Johnson's research into this rich topic. Mythological themes, as Johnson noted at the time, had long been part of the French visual repertoire, though they seem to gain a particular aesthetic import after 1789. Apollo, Diana, Mars, and other classical gods peopled the palaces and gardens of France, just as countless Venuses and Cupids adorned spaces intended for leisure or lovemaking. These works, whether made for the garden of Diane de Poitiers' Renaissance château at Anet or the baroque ceiling of Versailles or the rococo boudoir of a Paris *hôtel particulier*, offered appealing visual manifestations of often pressing ideas: political legitimacy, military prowess, sexual pleasure. Examples by the artists with whom Johnson is most concerned—Jacques-Louis David, Anne-Louis Girodet, François Gérard, Augustin Pajou, J. A. D. Ingres, and Eugène Delacroix—deliver especially intense responses to myths rather more troubling than those that occupied the decorators of either Versailles or the chic townhouses of eighteenth-century Paris. Johnson's own classical erudition, along with her sensitivity to the subtleties of visual representation, resulted in a series of visually arresting and intellectually satisfying lectures.

*David to Delacroix: The Rise of Romantic Mythology* follows the basic organization of the lectures: four essays (here augmented by introductory and concluding chapters) chronologically develop Johnson's argument that French artists after 1789 used mythology less as a form of visual rhetoric than as means of renegotiating subjectivity. In other words, mythology offered a visual language for articulating new ideas about how individuals experienced their own consciousness and how this self-awareness related to emotional well-being and social behavior. While the significance of myth for eighteenth-century French culture and identity has been explored previously by other scholars—Johnson acknowledges the particular importance of Jean Starobinski's writings for her own approach to the cultural significance of myth—the crucial

role played by visual artists in shaping what Johnson calls “mythological consciousness” deserves special consideration. Central to the book’s thesis is Johnson’s contention that classical mythology provided a ready visual vocabulary through which to express current ideas about human physiology and psychology. Specifically, late eighteenth-century investigations undertaken by Vitalists associated with the medical school at the University of Montpellier confirmed the inseparability of mind and body, putting forth the idea that all sensory experiences (physical as well as mental) were fully embodied. The Montpellier Vitalists held that emotional states could not be understood as anything apart from physical experiences. Vitalists were not, strictly speaking, materialists. They allowed for the effects of a soul or vital force, but this force was not theorized as external to the body. These ideas, according to Johnson, were so widespread by the dawn of the nineteenth century as to constitute a popular, if not fully articulated, presumption of psychological self-consciousness. Awareness that emotional states result from the physical experience of unseen—and unwilled—psychic impulses led artists and viewers to understand classical mythology in a novel and exciting way.

For Johnson, the use of myth as a means of expressing psycho-physiological states signals the emergence of a modern sensibility:

Myth circa 1800 in France was considered a serious mode of knowledge about self and society. It could be used as a window to help shed light on and understand modern concerns. It was not a compendium of fanciful stories of no relevance to contemporary life but instead a repository of deep psychological meanings and truths of immense heuristic value (191).

Affirming the long-standing importance of myth for French visual arts, Johnson aims in *David to Delacroix: The Rise of Romantic Mythology* to argue that there is something distinct, even modern, about the cultural role of classical mythology in the post-Revolutionary period.

As already noted, Johnson pursues this argument chronologically through the four main chapters; she also develops her thesis thematically, structuring each chapter around a particular mythic character or idea. The god of love animates the first chapter, “Eros and the Origins of Art: Girodet’s Mythic Meditations.” Here, Johnson observes that the significance of Eros in ambitious French art had begun to shift by the 1790s. Heretofore serving as an agent in scenes of playful eroticism or even frank lust, the mischievous son of Aphrodite now functions in post-Revolutionary works as a personification of artistic genius. Anne-Louis Girodet’s works, in particular, demonstrate this change, with the god of love signifying both the transformative and the revelatory capacities of art: “For Girodet, Eros must be present at the creation of art because he is its impetus and inspiration” (40). As the spur to artistic creation, love is the essential theme of Girodet’s *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1819, Musée du Louvre, Paris); as the revealer of truths about nature and consciousness, love enlightens the nocturnal bower of the painter’s famous *The Sleep of Endymion* (1793, Musée du Louvre, Paris).

Johnson turns in her second chapter to the god’s lover and symbolic counterpart, Psyche. “From Eros to Thanatos: The Mapping of the Mythological Body” makes the case for a widening acceptance of Vitalist theories of the link between emotional and physical states through representations of Psyche, whose sexual awakening, tribulations, and eventual abandonment at the hands of Eros offer intense moments for artistic speculation. Initiation into the physical and

emotional experience of sexual desire is exemplified by François Gérard's *Psyche and Amor* (1798, Musée du Louvre, Paris), a painting Johnson negotiates at length, concluding that:

Gérard had created an image of great appeal—the young lovers were seen as sexual yet still innocent and chaste. Contemporary viewers, both male and female, understood the significant moment of the psychological narrative to be of universal import, for the experience of sexual awakening is a common stage in life's journey (86).

Most important for Johnson's thesis regarding the new role of myth as a means for understanding human subjectivity is the painting's reception: "The critical responses to Gérard's *Psyche and Amor* demonstrate that an essential element in late eighteenth-century reinterpretations of mythology was the revelation of psychological truths that were believed to have universal relevance" (87). Along with facilitating her argument in support of the role of myth in articulating a decidedly modern subjectivity, Johnson's discussion of representations of Cupid and Psyche confronts earlier scholarship on the post-Revolutionary predilection for artworks depicting graceful, even feminine, male bodies.

Among the most persuasive attempts to account for the proliferation of such strikingly feminized heroes as Girodet's *Endymion*, Charles-Antoine Callamard's *Hyacinthus*, Jean Broc's *Apollo*, and Jacques-Louis David's *Barra* and his Spartan warriors under the command of Leonidas remains that put forth by art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau in her 1997 book *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation*.<sup>[1]</sup> Nearly two decades after its initial publication as an essay in the journal *Art History*, Solomon-Godeau's theory continues to shape discussion of post-Revolutionary visual culture. Solomon-Godeau contends that the French Revolution was not merely a revolt against absolutism and aristocratic privilege, but an assault on masculinity. The execution of Louis XVI and the subsequent civil violence of the Terror inflicted a psychic wound on the French populace that manifested itself as a kind of ambivalence toward frank expressions of masculine power. Ephebic male bodies represent, according to Solomon-Godeau, a largely unconscious renegotiation of masculine civic and psychic identity. As Johnson summarizes Solomon-Godeau's position, "the depiction of the ephebic adolescent mythic male emerged during the French Revolution as an antithesis to the iconic image of the powerful Hercules, which assumed allegorical significance" under the Revolutionary government (72). Johnson succinctly sidesteps Solomon-Godeau's argument by noting that ephebic types enjoyed at least as much popularity in French art prior to the Revolution. Johnson then asserts her own explanation:

The prevalence of the theme of the ephebic male can be related to the eighteenth-century fascination with the nature of sexuality and sexual identity, the manifestations of erotic development and attraction, both heterosexual and homosexual, and the quest to understand the physiological, psychological, and emotional states that accompany desire—states that were explored in literature of the period and were also being investigated by the natural sciences and medicine (73).

With this, Johnson deflates the presumed idiosyncrasy of the post-Revolutionary ephebe, instead characterizing aesthetic interest in the type as symptomatic of a growing psycho-physiological conception of subjectivity.

This emergent, modern conception of self announces itself most forcefully in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Oedipus Explaining the Enigma of the Sphinx* (1808, Musée du Louvre, Paris) around which Johnson develops her third chapter, "Ingres and the Enigma." Ingres would return to the theme of Oedipus and the Sphinx throughout his career, though Johnson discerns already in his famous *envoie* from Rome "the extent of Ingres's insistence on the psychological intensity" of the theme. Pulsing beneath Ingres's precocious interpretation of the subject (although the artist was twenty-seven years old, he was still completing the final stage of his academic initiation at the French Academy in Rome when he completed this painting) are, according to Johnson, the proto-psychiatric theories of the French physician Philippe Pinel (1745–1826). The publication of Pinel's *Medical/Philosophical Treatise on Mental Alienation or Mania* in 1800 provides Johnson with sufficient grounds to suggest that Ingres shared a psychological rather than merely allegorical interest in the theme of Oedipus and the Sphinx as a meditation on the human condition. What is more, so acute is Ingres's interest in contemporary theories of subjectivity, such as those of Pinel and the Montpellier Vitalists, that he literally corporealizes Oedipus's psychological struggle by bending the hero's body into the form of a question mark (119).

Johnson cites Freud's possession of a copy of Ingres's 1808 *Oedipus Explaining the Enigma of the Sphinx* so as to segue into a discussion of the latent eroticism of the theme, leading to a brief account of the intensification of the erotic content in Gustave Moreau's 1864 painting of the subject, which stands as an intermediary between Ingres's creation of his *Oedipus* and Freud's exploration of the myth: "Sexuality, of course, is an essential element of self-identity, and Ingres was fascinated by its many manifestations, especially as revealed through myth" (129). With this, Johnson passes from the Freudian implications of the Oedipus story to a consideration of Ingres's preoccupation with representations of Venus. Motifs such as the birth of Venus gain new relevance in Ingres's hands. No longer merely a pretext for exploring feminine beauty or reveling in erotic fantasy, the birth of Venus offers Ingres an opportunity to imagine "a basic psychological truth" (137). In an undated preparatory drawing for his 1848 *Venus Anadyomene*, (Musée Condé, Chantilly) Ingres "seems to be asking," Johnson writes:

What if a young adolescent girl without the experience of childhood suddenly appeared nude as a sexual being, yet was still unaware of the seductive powers of her beauty and innocent of her role as the goddess of love? The psychology of this moment interested Ingres, who was fascinated, as we have seen in his early erotic drawings, by the diverse manifestations of sexuality (137).

Thus asserting the psychological import of various depictions of eroticized female bodies, Johnson engages in several close readings of some of Ingres's most striking forays into feminine sexual agency. Her formal negotiations of the painting *Jupiter and Thetis* (1811, Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence) and a pair of drawings of Hermaphrodite and Salmacis are subtle and often original, a feat worth noting given the volume and intensity of the literature devoted to Ingres's oeuvre.

Chapter 4 considers feminine sexuality in terms of tragic myth. Titled "Mythological Madness and the Feminine," the chapter begins by charting a novel trend in representations of the legendary poet Sappho produced around 1800. The episode in Sappho's life that gains an increasing share of artistic interest at this time is her suicide. Suffering from an unrequited

passion for the ferryman Phaon—an unequal condition conjured by the gods—Sappho secures relief by leaping into the sea from a high cliff. Johnson explains that the moments leading up to her suicide are the most compelling to Romantic thinkers, and the treatment of this subject by artists like Jean-Joseph Taillasson and Antoine-Jean Gros bespeak a desire to represent a psychological state as much as a fatal action. Earlier eighteenth-century depictions of the scene, such as Charles Eisen's print illustration for an edition of Sappho's poetry, present her suicide as a mere action, a consequence of a series of unhappy events. By the time Gros paints his *Sappho at Leucadia* (Musée Baron Gérard, Bayeux) in 1801, new ideas about emotional and corporeal subjectivity have begun to inflect the theme of Sappho's doomed love:

Gros distanced himself from the pictorial precedents offered by prints and by Taillasson, but his depiction of Sappho committing suicide in a type of ecstatic rapture does suggest his familiarity with literature sources of the late eighteenth century, particularly sources that describe her psycho-physiological state (158).

Johnson supports her assertion that Gros's image resonated with the burgeoning discourse around the nascent fields of psychology and psycho-physiology by citing a commentary on the painting written by the prominent Vitalist physician Pierre Roussel (1723–82), who observes:

It is easy to imagine that the health of a person consumed by an unhappy passion over a long period will be already undermined by the time she submits herself to a perilous test . . . The application of this extreme remedy required precautions in order not to become disastrous to the person who made use of it. One has even seen madmen cured of their madness by a violent fall. It is, in fact, in accordance with the laws governing sensibility, that extreme states of the soul can be obliterated by extreme physical shocks of a different type (163).

Roussel's response is the most compelling of the contemporary commentaries that Johnson cites in support of her contention that Romantic conceptions of emotional experiences were mediated by the emerging field of psychology.

For Johnson, then, what distinguishes Romantic approaches to mapping emotional states onto the body from earlier efforts by French artists at creating a "legible body" is the influence of modern, medical approaches to explaining mental states and consciousness.<sup>[2]</sup> Myth, she contends, was seen by 1800 as a means of demonstrating the physiological interconnectedness of mind and body observed by thinkers like Roussel. Women's mental states sparked especial curiosity. Johnson notes a "fascination around 1800 with what was seen as the mysterious, unpredictable, and passionate nature of women and the extreme emotional states that could lead them to desperate acts" (164). Motherhood attracted particular interest:

It should not surprise us that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, naturalists, biologists, physiologists, medical practitioners, and the first psychiatrists would be fascinated by the various states of physical, moral, mental, and emotional well-being that characterize motherhood (165).

Socially deviant or perverse mothers sparked the greatest fascination for physicians and artists in the post-Revolutionary period, and Johnson points to Jacques-Louis David's *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799, Musée du Louvre, Paris) as exemplary of the era's curiosity around

“mothers in extreme circumstances who are led to psychological states in which they become destructive and potentially dangerous to their children” (169). Few mythological figures rival Medea in fulfilling this fatal destiny.

Medea suffered abandonment by her lover, the mythic Argonaut captain Jason, who cast her aside in order to secure a politically useful marriage with a Corinthian princess. Medea satisfies her rage and jealousy by stabbing to death the two young sons she had born to him. Johnson’s discussion of this myth focuses on Delacroix’s *Medea Pursued and about to Kill Her Children* (1838, Musée du Louvre, Paris), an image that presumably demonstrates the ongoing Romantic response to modern, psychological explications of human behavior, though Johnson allows this point to emerge obliquely via the content and handling of the painting itself. Without appealing to Vitalist commentaries or other contemporary medical treatises, Johnson nevertheless states that:

In Medea, Delacroix reveals his fascination with what a mother could be led to do through passion, anger, hatred—extreme psychological states that obliterated her biological, maternal feelings to protect her children at all costs, emotions dictated by nature as well as by society’s cultural expectations for motherhood (183).

For all the persuasiveness of Johnson’s formal and literary analyses of Delacroix’s painting, her account too readily collapses “psychological states” with “emotions” and “feelings.” The care Johnson takes in her chapters on Psyche and Oedipus in laying out the contemporary relevance of Vitalism and the ideas of Pinel provides firm footing for her analyses of artworks produced around 1800. With the passage of several decades—and the renowned intellectual curiosity of Delacroix—some attention to the state of contemporary psychological research in general and ideas around psycho-physiology in particular would strengthen this chapter and help to clarify the book’s major thesis concerning the emergence of a historically and epistemologically distinct “mythological consciousness” in the decades immediately following the French Revolution.

Johnson compares her approach to that of Ariadne, and the analogy proves apt. Her allusive prose provides the reader with a reassuring narrative thread that elegantly links the various myths and artworks she discusses. At moments, though, the fineness of Johnson’s discussion defers the robust exploration of social and ontological conditions necessary for the sort of cultural analysis she commends in her introduction. The scope she laid out for the book was, perhaps, too great for a single study:

. . . we will explore how myth was understood as a means of knowledge . . . we will look at depictions of myth that emphasize its psychological dimensions on the eve of the birth of modern psychiatry . . . we will also see that the reinterpetive fascination with myth was often directly engaged with the disciplines of the natural sciences—anatomy, biology, physiology, and psychology. And we will see that artists typically rejected prominent past paradigms of mythic subjects in order to invent episodes and significant moments that added to what was known, what was read, and what was seen in the literary and visual sources (13).

Johnson herself recognizes the labyrinth of material she must navigate, and the ultimate intent of the book—“to have begun to show, that without a deeper understanding of mythology and,

above all, what it meant to the people of the time, we cannot hope to understand French Romantic art”—reveals a more modest but no less important scholarly ambition (191). *David to Delacroix: The Rise of Romantic Mythology* delivers a persuasive invitation to scholars to revisit late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century mythological art, a corpus of material too often neglected in favor of more obviously politicized historical subjects or portraiture.

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## Notes

[1] See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

[2] See Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981) for a discussion of the influence of Cartesian theories of subjectivity on the work of Charles Lebrun and Jean-Baptiste Greuze.