



The Other Side of Vertu: Alternative Masculinities in the Crucible of Revolution

Author(s): Abigail Solomon-Godeau

Source: *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 2, How Men Look: On the Masculine Ideal and the Body Beautiful (Summer, 1997), pp. 55-61

Published by: College Art Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/777679>

Accessed: 19/01/2009 18:46

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=caa>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



College Art Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Art Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Other Side of Vertu

Alternative Masculinities in the Crucible of Revolution

Abigail Solomon-Godeau

Despite the tendency to assume that French art of the immediately pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary period bristled with Republican heroes and stoic martyrs, an examination of the titles in the Salon *livrets* indicates, on the contrary, that erotic or pastoral subjects derived from classical mythology were equally prevalent, despite concerted efforts on the part of the authorities to foster more serious, if not exalted subject matter. Furthermore, and even more surprising, while Republican and Jacobin discourse relentlessly excoriated a baleful effeminacy identified with the *ancien régime* and its dissolute aristocracy, and equally relentlessly celebrated the values of patriotic manliness (*la vertu mâle et républicaine*), French elite cultural production provides countless examples of a very different type of male ideality: specifically, the imagery of ephebic youth, poignant, passive, androgynous, and more or less feminized—either morphologically or narratively, as in stories featuring role reversals.¹ Moreover, an examination of the neoclassical art produced in Rome from the 1770s on makes it quite clear that the French production of androgynous ephebes had numerous predecessors which were later adapted by French artists for revolutionary as well as for more purely aesthetic purposes. The ubiquity and appeal of this feminized ideal of masculinity—for Winckelmann, the apogee of male perfection—would thus seem to contradict an “official” discourse of masculinity concerned to celebrate values more readily associated with Cato or Brutus than with Ganymede or Paris. How should this contradiction be historically addressed?

Here we may take as our cue Thomas Crow’s apt observation that the art of David and his students manifests an increasing “masculinization” of content. “Artists,” he writes, “were asked not only to envisage military and civic virtue in traditionally masculine terms, but were compelled to imagine the entire spectrum of desirable human qualities, from battlefield heroics to eroticized corporeal beauty, as male.”² This important insight, however, requires expansion in several directions: first, it is *neoclassical* elite visual and political culture that manifests an

intensifying masculinization; second, processes of masculinization, however defined, including the relocation of sensual beauty in the male body, cannot be adequately theorized without reference to the unconscious determinations of subjectivity and the historical vicissitudes of gender ideologies. It is thus with reference to this latter that we can better understand the function of feminized masculinity within the masculinized universe of neoclassical art.

Because the graceful ephebe originated within Greek classical art, and because classical art was a recurring influence in French history painting, one cannot pinpoint when it became such a pervasive presence in French neoclassicism. Certainly, charming shepherds and graceful adolescent deities are everywhere to be seen in the art of the earlier eighteenth century. Their numbers increased continually, and their appeal was further bolstered by a parallel production of prints. Nevertheless, the appearance and role of the androgynous ephebes in neoclassicism seems noticeably different from its earlier incarnations, a difference apparent in almost any comparison between Rococo and neoclassical treatments of the ephebic body. The representation of the young god Amor, for example, in Louis Lagrenée’s 1769 *Psyche Surprising the Sleeping Eros* (fig. 1), despite the wings and diminutive hands, is a fairly realistic rendering of a boy’s body. Its greater realism compared to the far more formulaic *Psyche* suggests, as do contemporary works by Joseph-Benoit Suvée, Jean-Baptiste-Henri Deshayes, Jean-Bernard Restout, Jean-Baptiste Regnault, and others, that during this period the male figure prompted more empirical attention, consistent with the new institutional emphasis on working directly from the male model. Turning to later depictions of the ephebe—Pierre-Paul Prud’hon’s 1791 *Winged Youth Leaning on a Herm* (fig. 2), or Bénigne Gagneraux’s *Love Conqueror of Force* of 1787—one can immediately see how the adolescent body has been not only more stylized but unmistakably feminized, the hip arched and rounded, the thighs made plumper, the abdomen fuller. Exploring the neoclassical predilection for androgynous ephebes and the functions they served thus requires that we integrate the work of familiar artists like



FIG. 1 Louis Lagrenée, *Psyche Surprising the Sleeping Eros*, 1769, oil on circular canvas, diam. 47¼ inches. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

David, Girodet, and Prud'hon with work by less well-known artists such as François-Xavier Fabre, Gagneraux, Régnault, or Charles Meynier, all of whom have remained outside the modern canon. Insofar as modern art historians have considered such artists outside of and apart from a teleologically construed great tradition—aesthetic noncontenders—they have precluded the possibility of developing either a theoretical or indeed a historical apparatus with which to recover the artists' significance. There is, as well, a tendency for scholars of French neoclassicism to focus so exclusively on France as to miss the correspondences, influences, and shared context—especially in the cultural crucible of Rome—that acted on French artists with the result that the examples furnished by earlier European artists are ignored or only cursorily acknowledged.³

Accordingly, the production of French artists active in the revolutionary period must in turn be related to their education in Rome, which, in addition to the venerated works of antiquity, provided them with (among other things) epebic prototypes produced by British artists like Thomas Banks, John Flaxman, Gavin Hamilton, and Benjamin West, Italians such as Antonio Canova, Germans like Anton Raphael Mengs, or Scandinavians like Johan Tobias Sergel and Bertel Thorvaldsen.

By way of exploring what I will inelegantly call the ideological use value of the neoclassical epebe, I will consider Charles Meynier's *Adolescent Eros Weeping over the Portrait of the Lost Psyche* (fig. 3), demonstrating how it fulfilled certain requirements (ideological, aesthetic, and psychological) for its makers and its audience.⁴

Like many of the other artists formed consecutively by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, an established older artist—Joseph-Marie Vien—and finally, the Roman sojourn at the Académie de France, Meynier proved himself a man of all seasons, adapting to the different aesthetic requirements of the Republic, the Empire, and the two Restorations. In like manner, Meynier's subjects were produced in obedience to the demands of the moment: encompassing narratives of Roman history, Napoleonic battle scenes ten years later, and last, religious subjects for churches commissioned by the Restoration arts administration. Although *Adolescent Eros* is a product of the Revolution, like Girodet's comparable and more famous *Sleep of Endymion*, it was painted in the French Academy in Rome. Meynier dated his work 1792, which makes it a close contemporary of Girodet's, although it was not exhibited until the Salon of 1795. Whatever qualitative distinctions one might draw between the two paintings, the existence of Meynier's, as well as earlier works by other artists, demonstrates that the cultural currency of the feminized ephebe not only predated the work of the young Davidians but was an available and popular iconographic type in active circulation. That David exhibited his *Loves of Paris and Helen* in the same year as his *Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789) suggests that the "alternative" masculinity of the sensual ephebe was no more unconventional than the unequivocal manhood of the glowering consul.

With his serpentine contours, sinuously rounded left hip, and elegantly flowing limbs, Meynier's Eros seems closer to the pneumatic female figures of the nineteenth-century Ingres than to his teacher Vien's Greek subjects. Moreover, Meynier's ambitiously scaled painting⁵—probably his official *envoi* from Rome—was surely intended as a virtuosic demonstration of theoretical, formal, and aesthetic expertise, martialized to display his ability to produce an erudite and unmistakably Winckelmannian notion of the *beau idéal*. Meynier's Eros thus stands at the intersection of four overlapping aesthetic tributaries: classical art theory as it was codified within the pedagogy of the Ecole royale and the Académie, within which the *beau idéal* was a central tenet; the Winckelmannian elevation of the ephebic youth to the pinnacle of ideal beauty; the neoclassical predilection for male, rather than female, nudes; and last, the vogue for those mythological subjects that French art criticism designated with the term *Anacreontism*—erotic and pastoral subjects derived from classical mythology, under the aegis of the sixth-century poet Anacreon.⁶ Such feminized and marmoreal but curiously eroticized male bodies might well be characterized as the Horatii's Other, equally sanctioned, equally ideal, and equally, if not more, popular with artists and critics.

While not discounting the possibility that Meynier's painting is a parody of Girodet's *Endymion*, carrying the latter's androgyny to an even greater extreme, the preva-



FIG. 2 Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, *Winged Youth Leaning on a Herm*. Salon of 1791, heliogravure by J. Chaudet after Prud'hon's chalk drawing. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

lence of the ephebe both before and after 1795 argues against parodic intention, just as it argues against any biographical psychosexual interpretation. To the extent that these distinctive icons of grace and beauty are both formally generic and historically specific, an examination of their function in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century elite culture needs to consider both historical matrices.

The iconographic life of Cupid and Psyche is long and was nourished by the eighteenth-century translations of Apuleius and the enduring taste for Anacreontic subjects.⁷ Between 1795 and 1814 at least twenty-eight paintings and sculptures of the subject were exhibited in the Salons, and the theme's popularity increased in the Restoration. Neoclassical artists who treated the subject

included Angelica Kauffmann (in 1792), François Gérard (in 1798), David (in 1817), François Edouard Picot (in 1819), and James Pradier (in 1824). These representations demonstrate considerable variety; in some cases, the lovers are represented as adolescents of approximately the same age—as in Canova’s famous versions; in other instances, Psyche appears older, taller, and relatively more mature physically. Prud’hon, for example, specialized in voluptuous, monumental, rather monstrous Psyches, and there was also a tradition of representing the two lovers as children. While the story licensed painters to focus on either the youthful couple (this was the most common motif) or on Psyche and her tribulations, Meynier—making a virtue of necessity (it was an obligatory *envoi*)—chose to depict the ephobic god alone, accompanied only by putti busily mourning the departed mortal.

Meynier’s choice of subject, therefore, was anything but unprecedented, and like Girodet with his *Endymion*, he made his bid for originality by inventing a new iconography for the subject. The depiction of Eros tearfully contemplating a cameo relief of the departed Psyche occurs nowhere in Apuleius’s text, nor does it seem to have had

any earlier prototypes. Similarly, the crepuscular lighting, with its dramatic chiaroscuro effects of golden light and raking shadow, announce the young artist’s assimilation of the lessons of seventeenth-century Italian painting, just as the curly-haired putti, the *morbidezza* of Eros’s flesh, and the compositional arabesques declare Meynier’s acquaintance with Italian Mannerism. Formally and compositionally, Meynier’s *Adolescent Eros* affirms his painterly accomplishments, his artistic erudition, his mastery of both tradition and his metier. Far more interesting than Meynier’s artistic sophistication, however, is his exaggeration of Eros’s effeminacy, an effeminacy further underscored by Eros’s dolorous passivity; for example, his limp and enervated right arm from which his arrows and quiver have fallen. The rounded and undulating forms of the body are further emphasized by the arrangement of the embroidered mantle snugly secured between the columnar thighs, between which no hint of genitalia is even implied. Finally, bodily mass and gravity are denied; weightless, Eros floats on a vaguely defined shelf of purplish cloud, a sign of ideality as well as divinity, which heightens the effect of girlish grace and delicacy.



FIG. 3 Charles Meynier, *Adolescent Eros Weeping over the Portrait of the Lost Psyche*, Salon of 1795, oil on canvas, 60¼ × 79½ inches. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Quimper.

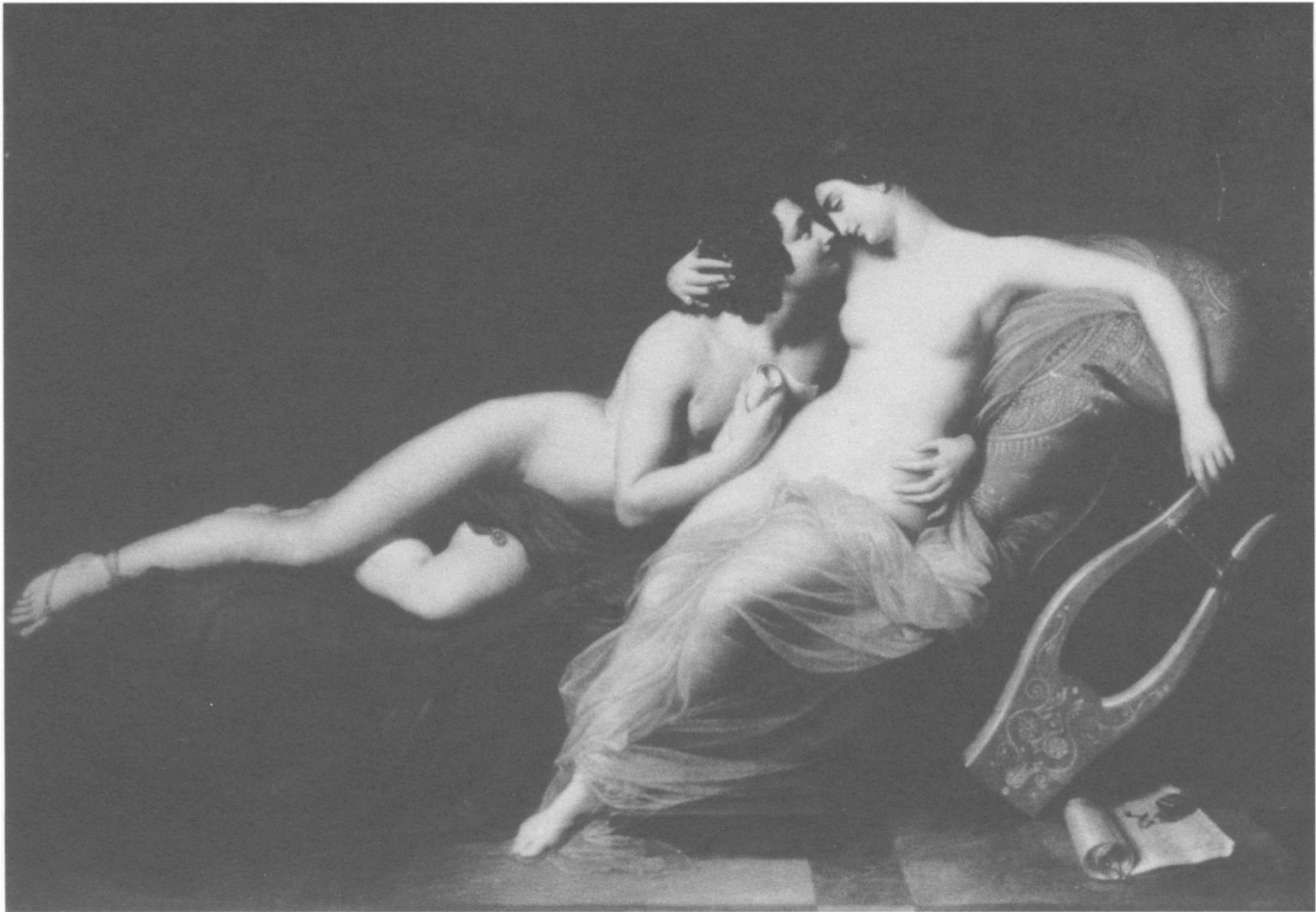


FIG. 4 Pierre-Claude François Delorme, *Sappho and Phaon*, 1834, oil on canvas. Musée municipal d'Elboeuf, Elboeuf-sur-Seine.

This attenuated and serpentine figure reappears in the following decades, in paintings such as Claude-Marie Dubufe's *Apollo and Cypris* of 1821, Pierre-Claude-François Delorme's *Sappho and Phaon* (fig. 4) of 1834, François Gérard's *Hylas and the Nymphs* of 1826, or Pierre-Jérôme Lordon's rendering of the same subject of 1812 (fig. 5). Although the story of Eros and Psyche had a long tradition of allegorical interpretation, on a literal level the narrative focuses on a male-female couple. It is therefore of some moment that Meynier's Eros weeps sadly over a cameo portrait that is a virtual double of his own "néo-grec" head; the tight curls and the top part of the coiffure, as well as the profile, are uncannily close. In spite of the narrative, it is as though the look at the cameo is the look in the mirror; the absorption in the image of the beloved woman belying an amorous fascination with the self. Sexual difference, supposedly represented by Psyche, appears in the painting as a solipsistic doubling of the same.

This doubling of Eros and Psyche suggests something about the erotic imaginary of French neoclassicism in the Revolutionary period; namely its utopian, if unconscious, desire that the pains and perils of sexual difference be safely contained, if not banished, in a reassuring reflection of the intact male self, a phenomenon that for short-

hand I will call "sexual-difference-without-women." This "recuperation" of an eroticized femininity deemed inimical to the public weal suggests the ways by which sexual difference—traditionally embodied in representations of femininity—haunts the art of neoclassicism, whose violent repudiation of the Rococo effectively required the expulsion of femininity, just as the formation of the bourgeois civil sphere, importantly preceded by the "republic of letters" was structurally constituted through the exclusion of women.⁸ Femininity however, is not so easily banished from the Bohemian Grove-style attractions of all-male formations, and like the repressed, it seems to have returned, a symptom of difference, incorporated literally in the body of the same. In this reading, the ubiquity of the androgynous ephebe, exemplified by Meynier's Eros, is fostered not only by the homosocial, or even homoerotic tenor of neoclassical (elite) culture but by the very cultural and political discourses concerned to expel (or contain) sexual difference. Insofar as the sensual appeal of the ephebe was subsumed under the lofty rubric of *the beau idéal*, it could navigate the dangerous boundaries of the recognizably homoerotic; for the *beau idéal* was by definition a Platonic abstraction. Furthermore, as a male figure, it was officially indemnified from moral condemnation. Unlike female



FIG. 5 Pierre-Jérôme Lordon, *Hylas and the Nymphs*, 1812, oil on canvas, 83½ × 69⅞ inches. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers.

nudes, which possessed the ability, as Diderot complained, “to vex the senses,” the dominant myth of universal heterosexuality, trumped, as it were, ephebic eroticism. In giving painted or chiseled flesh to a figure that by virtue of being male was considered universal, artists like Meynier were thus able to fashion the ideals of the Revolution in either their “hard” or their “soft” incarnations. In the guise of Amor or Paris, Abel or Ganymede—even as a “real” historical subject, like David’s *Death of Joseph Bara*—these ephebic translations of the *beau idéal* are as much indices of the gender politics of the Revolutionary period as are its more ferocious warriors and stoics. As a masculine icon of physical beauty, the ephebic body could, like its virilized brethren, stand for the male values and virtue of a regenerated Republic; as a utopian body (devoid of signs of rank or station), it papered over actual class conflicts; as an androgynous body, it permitted for a wide range of erotic identification and projection; and finally, as a feminized body, it both recuperated and contained a carnal femininity that Jacobin culture was concerned to expel.⁹ Such an interpretation provides a framework for understanding why artists of the period found the androgynous ephebe so well

suitable to the contradictory requirements of a heroic masculine ideal that nominally abjured carnal sensuality, and a culturally embedded homosociality that nominally proscribed homoeroticism. Finally, its widespread currency provides visual evidence of the ways that femininity, as Shoshana Felman has described it, can be seen to exist “inside the masculine, its uncanny difference from itself.”¹⁰ Even as political, medical, or moral discourse increasingly insisted on the absolute boundaries dividing male and female beings, even as femininity was defined in terms of a strict and biologically grounded difference, cultural production testified to an internal division, an uncanny difference within the same.

Nevertheless, the androgynous ephebe can be taken as the presiding, if liminal, emblem of the neoclassical period. Shaped by its roots in older formations—the mid-century cult of *sensibilité*, the sartorial exhibitionism and bodily self-display of *ancien régime* masculinity—the ephebic body presaged new arrangements in the visual culture of modernity, becoming a new dispensation where femininity would henceforth prevail as the sign of the beautiful and the erotic. In such an economy, the imagery

of a patheticized and/or disempowered male beauty could only be the prerogative of a fetishized femininity. At the same time, the ephebic vogue suggests that the production of images of soft, nonphallic, “alternative” masculinities is totally commensurate with a masculinized culture, characterized by misogyny, homophobia, and martial values. The other side of *vertu*, such figures should be taken, therefore, as the flip side of the Same.

For the generation of critics, intellectuals, and belle-lettristes who came of age in the Restoration, the generation for whom the new art was heralded under the banner of romanticism, the *beau idéal*, exemplified by the beautiful bodies of men and youths, was the fossil of a bygone age: “We are on the eve of a revolution in the fine arts,” wrote Stendhal in his Salon of 1824. “The large pictures composed of 30 nude figures, copied from antique statues and heavy tragedies in five acts and in verse, are doubtless quite respectable but whatever one says about them, they are beginning to be boring.”¹¹

While there is obviously no strict line of demarcation dividing these two iconographic regimes, I would propose by way of symbolic closure a painting from the July Monarchy that signals the decisive collapse of the older paradigm, namely, Hippolyte Flandrin’s Prix de Rome winner of 1832, *Theseus Recognized by His Father*. The Lacanian distinction between penis and phallus is given here particularly delirious expression in Flandrin’s unfortunate use of the rib roast to mask Theseus’s genitals and the contiguity of the knife to both. Although some critics made mocking reference to this device (“We would also say that the plate of cutlets used to hide the natural parts of Theseus, standing in front of the table, is a pretty ridiculous idea, a really grotesque form of composition”),¹² the reservations that were most often expressed about the painting as a whole concerned its coldness, the stiffness of the figures, their lack of expression and/or their lack of “nobility.” In effect, the lack of enthusiasm for the painting, even by those like Délécluze who were most committed to a continuation of Davidian neoclassicism, or by the partisans of Ingres, Flandrin’s teacher, suggests that what was subliminally perceived as absent in the work was precisely the sensual and erotic investment in the male body that had previously animated history painting. Indeed, and even if we ignore the rib roast, the pedantic dryness of Flandrin’s painting, its uninspired correctness and dutiful antique reference, its desiccated and leaden color—all confirm the crisis of history painting lamented by academic critics throughout the century.¹³ While the lengthy death agony of history painting had multiple components, not the least important was derived from the “de-cathecting” of the ideal male body. The foreclosure of a culturally sanctioned investment in its beauty, its desirability, and the propriety of its sensual address, as much as any other factor, sealed the fate of history painting and with it, the sensual ephebic body. ■

Notes

1. The substance of this essay, which was presented in a CAA session chaired by Donna Hunter (February 1996), is derived from my book, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

2. Thomas E. Crow, *Emulation: Making Art in Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 2.

3. Robert Rosenblum’s classic work *Transformations in Late-Eighteenth-Century Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967) is, of course, integrally concerned with these influences and cross-fertilizations, as is Hugh Honour’s *Neo-Classicism* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1968).

4. On Meynier, see the following: *French Painting, 1774–1830: The Age of Revolution*, exh. cat. (Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975); Régis Michel, “De martyr à l’épéhe,” in *Le Mort de Bara*, exh. cat. (Avignon: Musée Calvet, 1989), and his discussions of several drawings by Meynier in *Le beau idéal, ou l’art du concept*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1989). See as well *Regards sur Amour et Psyche à l’âge néo-classique*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Institut Suisse pour l’étude de l’art, 1994).

5. It measures 60¼ x 79½ inches.

6. The standard art-historical discussion is René Schneider, “L’art anacréontique et alexandrin sous l’Empire,” *Revue des études napoléoniennes*, 2 (November–December 1916). See as well the discussion in Jean Locquin, *La peinture d’histoire*, the brief but excellent discussions of this cultural formation in Régis Michel and Philippe Bordes, *Aux armes et aux arts! 1789–1799* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1989). As a pastoral poet, Anacreon wrote themes that are essentially bucolic, romantic, and sensual, but more to the point, they are sexually polymorphous; within the cycle, the poet addresses himself to both male and female lovers. Ode 22, “Sur Bathylle,” provides some notion of the nature of Anacreon’s appeal.

7. See *Regards sur Amour et Psyche à l’âge néo-classique*.

8. The modern theorization of the concept of the public civil sphere is that of Jürgen Habermas. See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991). The feminist critiques of the gender blindness implicit in Habermas’s model on which many of my own arguments depend include the following: Carole Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986); Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Joan Landes, “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration,” in *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, ed. Johanna Meehan (New York: Routledge, 1995); Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989); Nancy Fraser, “What’s Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender,” in *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, ed. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carole Pateman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

9. See in this respect, Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). I am much indebted to Potts’s work on neoclassical masculinity, particularly his discussion of David’s *Death of Joseph Bara*.

10. Shoshana Felman, “Re-reading Femininity,” *Yale French Studies* 41 (1981): 41.

11. “Nous sommes à la veille d’un révolution dans les Beaux-Arts. Les grands tableaux composés de 30 figures nues, copiés d’après les statues antiques et les lourdes tragédies en cinq actes et en vers, sont des ouvrages très respectables sans doute, mais quoi qu’on dise, ils commencent à ennuyer.” Cited in Georges Wildenstein, “Les Davidiens à Paris sous la Restauration,” *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 6, bk. 53 (1824), 237–54.

12. “Nous dirons aussi que le plat de côtelettes employé pour cacher les parties naturelles de Thésée, debout devant le table, est une idée bien ridicule, un moyen d’agencement bien grotesque.” *Journal des artistes*, Sept. 30, 1832, 241–45; cited in Philippe Grunchev, *Les Concours des Prix de Rome 1797–1863*, exh. cat. (Paris: Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1986), 139.

13. For an inclusive discussion of the causes of the death of history painting in the later part of the nineteenth century, see Patricia Mainardi, “The Death of History Painting in France, 1867,” *Gazette des beaux-arts*, Dec. 1982, 219–26; and idem, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

ABIGAIL SOLOMON-CODEAU, associate professor of art history at the University of California at Santa Barbara, is the author of *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).