

**“Elisabetta Sirani’s *Timoclea* and Visual Precedent,” *Source*, 30, 2011, 37-42**

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Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665) has received much and well-deserved attention during the past few years, as scholars have defined her oeuvre and refined interpretations of her imagery.<sup>1</sup> Generally, Sirani selected her historical characters and their precise actions to emphasize female courage, independence, and strength. When she portrayed popular characters, such as Judith, she innovatively chose unusual moments within a familiar narrative to enhance the protagonist’s valor, assertiveness, self-control and virtue. This approach is particularly evident in Sirani’s portrayals of heroines from ancient history. Several of these have been considered without visual precedent. Proceeding from text, Sirani surely could have composed her paintings. But, as is well established, artists generally blend textual narratives with visual prompts. Although Sirani’s feminist inclinations may have encouraged her to seek out episodes to emphasize the bravery of women, these subjects may have been encouraged by visual examples. I would like to propose a precedent for the *Timoclea Putting Alexander’s Captain Down the Well* that suggests a broader cultural framework for this painting.

The episode of Timoclea killing the captain of the Thracian army under Alexander by putting him headlong down a well is a curious one indeed. It is narrated by Plutarch in his *Life of Alexander*, and thus firmly within the humanist literary tradition. Sirani read Plutarch in an Italian edition.<sup>2</sup> The relevant passage reads:<sup>3</sup>

Among the other calamities that befell the city [Thebes], it happened that some Thracian soldiers, having broken into the house of a matron of high character and repute, named Timoclea, their captain, after he had used violence with her, to satisfy his avarice as well as lust, asked her, if she knew of any money concealed; to which she readily answered she did, and bade him follow her into a garden, where she showed him a well, into which, she told him, upon the taking of the city, she had thrown what she had of most value. The greedy Thracian presently stooping down to view the place where he thought the treasure lay, she came behind him and pushed him into the well, and then flung great stones upon him, till she had killed him. After which, when the

soldiers led her away bound to Alexander, her very mien and gait showed her to-be a woman of dignity, and of a mind no less elevated, not betraying the least sign of fear or astonishment. And when the king asked her who she was, “I am,” said she, “the sister of Theagenes, who fought the battle of Chaeronea with your father Philip, and fell there in command for the liberty of Greece.” Alexander was so surprised, both at what she had done and what she said, that he could not choose but give her and her children their freedom....

The episode demonstrates how a violated yet virtuous and brave woman avenges her attacker. Timoclea coolly took control and figured out how she could manipulate the situation to kill the captain. Alexander, impressed with her dignity and bearing, rewarded her with her freedom; his motivation to do so may have been reinforced by her brother’s earlier support of Philip.

Within illustrated lives of Alexander, Timoclea was not included. One exception is Domenichino’s oval painting, ca. 1615, which belongs to a series glorifying Alexander.<sup>4</sup> Timoclea stands as a prisoner before Alexander, in order to receive his respect and compassionate pardon. Domenichino portrayed Timoclea as a proud captive who receives Alexander’s mercy. In contrast to that portrayal of Timoclea, Sirani showed the earlier actions which caused her to appear before Alexander.

In her search for powerful and assertive women, Sirani surely would be capable of creating an image prompted solely by the text of Plutarch.<sup>5</sup> Her erudition and imagination were considerable, and her patrons eager for unusual themes. Yet her portrayal of Timoclea killing the captain is not the first. An interest in uncommon themes is shared among artists of the long Renaissance, and a precedent for a rare theme does not determine a connection between two artists’ renditions. However, it is possible that Sirani may have been familiar with Matthaeus Merian’s illustration of Timoclea, from J. L. Gottfried’s historical chronicle, a history of the world written in German and first published in 1629-30, subsequently appearing in editions of 1642, 1657, 1674, 1710, 1743, and in Dutch 1660 and 1698. <sup>6</sup> Sirani’s contacts in Italy and

Germany were numerous, and her house and studio were frequently visited by royalty and connoisseurs. It seems, indeed, as if she herself were holding court to these visitors.<sup>7</sup> Some of them were German, and may have been contacts through which such a German book might have been acquired, whether as a purchase or gift.

For the Gottfried chronicle, Merian illustrated episodes that had singular qualities, so that they could be identified easily. Five illustrations concern the life of Alexander, with the text of four adapted in brief from Plutarch, and one from Josephus: the birth of Alexander, Timoclea, Alexander cutting the Gordian knot, Alexander meeting the High Priest outside Jerusalem, and the building of Alexandria. Curiously, battle scenes which figure so prominently in Alexander's biography are omitted, but the unusual inclusion here is Timoclea. Plutarch's text specified a well in the garden of a grand house and a woman putting a man down the well, head first. Merian included large rocks upon the ground near the well, available for Timoclea to throw upon the victim.

Similarities between the Merian engraving and Sirani's painting are the requisite narrative elements: garden, well, house, and the heroine pushing on the captain's suggestively splayed legs. While Merian's Timoclea gazes downward, Sirani's Timoclea furrows her brow, staring at her victim's up-ended knee. Sirani embellished the well with two reliefs, one of the battle between the Lapiths and centaurs, and the other of Galatea. The Lapiths punish the centaurs for their misbehavior at Hippodamia's wedding feast, which included carrying off the bride, and Galatea represents the power and beauty of women. Both subjects demonstrate the conflict between higher powers of reason and lower instincts.

Reading Plutarch with care, and having an interest in representing women in unusual situations that demonstrated their exceptional strength of both character and physique, Sirani

surely would have found Timoclea fascinating. Some of her subjects seem to have never previously been represented, as *Portia Wounding her Thigh* and *Berenice cutting her Hair*.<sup>8</sup> The prominence of Portia within the narrative of Brutus and Julius Caesar surprisingly did not produce much interest in representing her, although a few paintings depict her committing suicide by eating hot coals. Perhaps in reaction to that tradition, Sirani sought a test of character that would show Portia in a more positive way. Berenice, the subject of an ode by Catullus, is less prominent, but an oddly seductive theme.

Among the 20 titles from Giovanni Andrea Sirani's estate to be given to the surviving daughter Anna Maria, one item may well be identified as the Gottfried Chronicle: *Officina istorica*. Of the seven books that are historical compilations or histories, this one has no author. All titles are given in Italian. If indeed this were the singular publication in a language other than Italian, the inventorist may well have given it only cursory attention; as a book in German, it may have been merely described it for what it was -- a historical work. The Gottfried Chronicle with its Merian illustrations belongs to the category of books useful to practicing artists, as **are** all the other books in this group. When viewed along with Merian's print, Sirani's *Timoclea* is not as isolated as previously thought.

#### NOTES

1. Recent publications include Babette Bohn, "The Antique Heroines of Elisabetta Sirani," in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 80-99; Stefania Sabbatini, "Per una storia delle donne pittrici bolognesi: Anna Maria Sirani e Ginevra Cantofoli," *Schede umanistiche: rivista semestrale dell'Archivio umanistico rinascimentale bolognese*, vol. 2 (Bologna: Editrice CLUEB Bologna, 1995), pp. 85-101; Adelina Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani. Una Virtuosa del Seicento bolognese* (Bologna: Compositori, 2004); and Jadranka Bentini and Vera Fortunati Pietrantonio, *Elisabetta Sirani: "pittrice eroina" 1638-1665* (Bologna: Museo Civico Archeologica, 2004).
2. A number of editions of Plutarch were available; Modesti identified Sirani's Plutarch as a two-volume set published in Venice 1602, which appears in the list of 20 books and ten items in the inventory made in 1666, and that passed to Anna Maria Sirani (1645-1715), Elisabetta's younger sister, in 1672, following the death of their father Giovanni Andrea

Sirani (1610-1670). This list comprises books and art objects that would have been useful in an artist's studio. See Modesti, pp. 135 ff, for a discussion of the books in this list, and for the conclusion that the library of Giovanni Andrea most likely was larger, perhaps comprising an estimated eighty volumes. See further Raffaella Morselli and Anna Cera Sones, *Collezionisti e quadre nella Bologna del Seicento: inventari 1640-1707* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Information Institute, 1998), pp. 413-15; and Sabbatini. I am grateful to the staff of the Getty Research Library for sending me the inventory in electronic form.

3. Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Romans and Grecians*, John Dryden tr., Life of Alexander (New York: Modern Library Edition, ca. 1930), p. 809.
4. Paris, Louvre; see R. Spear, *Domenichino* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), cat. no. 43, for this painting, which is one of the eleven scenes, by different artists, of the life of Alexander for Cardinal Alessandro Peretti Montalto.
5. See also Modesti, pp. 240 ff., who suggests that Elisabetta's interpretation of Timoclea may be indebted to the 24 February 1659 festivities organized in honor of one of her patrons, the pontifical legate Cardinal Giulio Farnese. These festivities included reenactments of Alexander's battles, but not the episode of Timoclea. Such an occasion would have heightened contemporary awareness of the events of Alexander's life, and indicated how such events epitomized worthy qualities in secondary figures.
6. J. L. Gottfried, *Historische Chronica, oder, Beschreibung der fürhnehmsten Geschichten, so sich von Anfang der Welt biss auff unsere Zeitten zugetragen...*, Vol. I, (Franckfurt: Caspar Roeteln, 1629-30), and Vols. II – IV (1631-34). Merian's illustration of Timoclea appears in Vol. I, Part 2, folio 148. For an account of the editions of this publication and its use in the Rembrandt studio, see A. Golahny, *Rembrandt's Reading: The Artist's Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), pp. 137 ff.
7. Bentini and Fortunati, p. 34.
8. For the *Portia* of 1664, Stephen Warren Miles and Marilyn Ross Miles Foundation, Houston, Texas, see Bohn, p. 89, who discusses pictorial precedent in Guido Reni's painting of Portia with the dish of hot coals. The *Berenice* is in the Galleria Altomani, Pesaro. Although the subject of Portia stabbing her thigh seems unique to Sirani's painting, it has resonance with the popularly depicted Lucretia committing suicide. In general design of figures and setting, Sirani's *Portia* resembles several precedents of Lucretia's suicide, most particularly that by Merian in the Gottfried Chronicle, 1629-30, Vol. I, part I, folio 128.

Illustration captions:

1. Elisabetta Sirani, *Timoclea*, 1659. Oil on canvas. Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples. (© Archivio dell'arte - Luciano Pedicini).

2. Mattheus Merian the Elder, *Timoclea*, engraving, 1629-30, in J. L. Gottfried, *Historische Chronica, oder, Beschreibung der fürhnehmsten Geschichten...*, Franckfurt, Vol. I, Part 2, folio 148. Reproduced here from the Dutch edition of Leiden 1698, in the original direction of the 1629-30 edition. Reproduced with the permission of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University Libraries.

