

Motion as Lust in Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*

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The artists of the Renaissance era faced a very delicate challenge in the interpretation of classical myths, as this required the interpreter to be faithful to both pagan literature and Christian orthodoxy. Specifically, these authors sought to reconcile the seeds of Christian morality within pagan works with both the original context and the truth of revealed religion. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Italian artist and architect, follows this tradition in his sculptural adaptation of Ovid's "Apollo and Daphne."¹ Bernini juxtaposes the concepts of motion and stability in the sculpture to convey the unstable nature of lust compared with the solidity of love. From a standpoint steeped in a Christian tradition that associates motion with lust and has a tradition of moralizing interpretations of Ovid, Bernini emphasizes the moralizing aspects of the myth; he implies a Christianized chronology of events both before and after the moment he sculpts. This portrayal aligns well with the ecclesiastical position of his patron, Cardinal Borghese, and earns a moralizing epitaph from the future Pope Urban VIII.

The association of lust with motion is deeply rooted in the Christian theological tradition. This theology sees lust as the impetus for unhealthy motion within the soul and body of the sinner. St. Augustine writes, "And this lust not only takes possession of the whole body and outward members, but also makes itself felt within, and moves the whole man with a

¹ See appendix, fig. 1, fig. 2.

passion in which mental emotion is mingled with bodily appetite.”² Dante interprets this view vividly in the *Inferno*, where “the carnal sinners, who subject reason to lust” are punished. There resides “the hellish storm ... hither, thither, down, up it leads them.”³ Dante thus externalizes the internal tempest of lust in his allegory. This idea of lust as motion remains popular into the Renaissance period; the infamous Girolamo Savonarola preaches that humans “feel lust rise up from every part.”⁴ There is this consistent theological imagery of lust as the impetus for motion, especially unsustainable, self-exhausting motion. Conversely, images of rest and stability are associated with love and contemplation of God. “Our hearts find no peace until they rest in you,”⁵ writes Augustine, just as Dante writes, “all suspended did my mind gaze fixed, immovable, intent, ever enkindled by its gazing.”⁶ The Catholic tradition not only emphasizes the sin in concupiscent motion and the virtue in divine rest but also an implicit temporality to the motion—as it arises from the want of a specific object⁷—and eternity to the rest. Augustine’s language has these overtones of eternity—his heart “rests in God”—as does Dante’s phrasing—his mind is “ever enkindled.”⁸ Bernini undoubtedly had experience in Catholic tradition, and, by extension, it is reasonable to assume his familiarity with these deeply

² Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* (New York: Random House, 1950), 464.

³ Dante Alighieri, “Inferno,” in *La Divina Commedia*, ed. H. Oelsner, trans. J.A. Carlyle, Thomas Okey, and P.H. Wicksteed (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1933), canto 5: 37-9.

⁴ Girolamo Savonarola, *Sermoni e Prediche* (Prato: Ranieri Guasti, 1846), 1:200. <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=HEIAAAAAYAAJ>. Translation mine from original source: “da ogni parte sente la concupiscenza insurgere.” ‘*Insurgere*’ is a Latin term, whereas the rest is Italian. For ‘*insurgere*’ translation, see “Perseus Latin Word Study Tool,” *Tufts University*, accessed December 7, 2013, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?lang=la>

⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 21.

⁶ Alighieri, “Paradiso,” *La Divina Commedia*, canto 33:97-9.

⁷ See Augustine, *City of God*, 463-4.

⁸ Augustine’s use of the word ‘rest’ in Latin is *requiescat*. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, ed. James O’Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 3. This is same verb from the phrase ‘*requiescat in pace*’ and ‘*requiem aeternam dona eis*’, implying more of a finality and totality than the English translation.

rooted theological traditions.⁹ Therefore, it is imperative to fully understand this theology, implied by images of motion and rest, before one analyzes the manner with which Bernini treats these images.

In *Apollo and Daphne*, Bernini depicts the crucial moment in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, at which the frenzied motion of the poem—its imagined chases of lamb and wolf, deer and lion, dove and eagle, and hound and hare—is slowed by “heavy numbness.”¹⁰ This transition is one in which exuberant motion is confronted by the slow march of rooted stability. Through the lens of the aforementioned theology, this represents not only a physical interaction between fluidity and stasis, but also a moral comparison between the concupiscent attraction of lust and the divine contentment of love.

Bernini shows his particular skill through his depiction of a moment that at once encompasses a range of moments. With the figures in both motion and stasis, he manages to portray them before, during, and after metamorphosis. The sculpture shows the delirious chase, moments before its numbing stop. Daphne's upper body pushes forward, carrying her momentum through—“running scared”¹¹— while at the same time her feet “became mired in

⁹ Domenico Bernini, *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini*, trans. Franco Mormando (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011) 228-9; Franco Mormando, *Bernini: His Life and His Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 14-5, 106-8. Accounts differ on the extent of Bernini's piety and education, especially at the young age at which he sculpted the *Apollo and Daphne*. His son and biographer, Domenico, lauds his consistent and devout piety throughout his life. Bernini scholar Franco Mormando questions the extent of the Bernini's piety in his youth. Nevertheless, Mormando cedes the point that, at least outwardly, Bernini would have professed the Catholic faith and that Bernini absorbed a basic understanding of intellectual issues through his Roman—especially Papal—social circles. His theology lacks genius, and is “banal,” says Mormando. Therefore, Bernini would have been steeped in this standard Catholic tradition, even if only to create a reputation of conformity.

¹⁰ Ovid, “Apollo and Daphne,” in *Metamorphoses*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indiana: Hackett, 2011), 529, 530, 560-1, 578.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 553.

roots,” holding her steadfast against the earth.¹² “Her hair streamed out behind her,”¹³ in pure motion, as, simultaneously, “her hair turned into leaves,” calmly rooted against her bark.¹⁴ This same bark spans between her knees, holding her fast as she lifts one leg to continue her pace.¹⁵ Even Apollo, fueled by Cupid’s impetus to motion, counteracts his frenzy with one steadied arm, elusively grasping at Daphne’s rapidly transfiguring form.¹⁶ Bernini’s depiction of this moment of metamorphosis- this marriage of action and inaction- offers us the opportunity to infer his interpretations of Ovid on a wider scale, from both before and after the moment depicted.

Bernini’s particular focus on motion and stability allows the viewer to imagine the moments preceding the metamorphosis. Ovid portrays the chase with the language of frenzy: Daphne’s “flight is faster than if she were wind,”¹⁷ while Apollo runs closely behind her. To understand Bernini’s interpretation of Ovid’s vivid descriptions, one must first look to the positions in which this action has left the characters. The flowing hair and clothing, coupled with the raised feet and general running posture of the figures obviously implies Ovid’s vigorous motion.¹⁸ What we further have the ability to interpret is how Bernini reads between the lines of this motion while molding the pagan myth to fit Christian mores, based on the

¹² Ibid., 582. See appendix, fig. 1.

¹³ Ibid., 556.

¹⁴ Ibid., 580. See appendix, fig. 3. Note that the sourced English translation is actually “Her hair turned into *fluttering* leaves,” [emphasis mine]. The original Latin is “*in frondem crines [...] crescent.*” Ovid, “Book One,” in *Metamorphoses* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966], 550. This Latin has no reference to the motion of ‘fluttering,’ and I have therefore removed it from the quotation. Its inclusion would confuse the comparison between the motion of Daphne’s hair and the stability of her foliage, and seems to be added to the translation to facilitate the adaptation of the original meter as opposed to furthering the meaning of Ovid’s language.

¹⁵ See appendix, fig. 1.

¹⁶ See appendix, fig. 2.

¹⁷ Ovid, “Apollo and Daphne” (2011), 525.

¹⁸ See appendix, fig. 1.

structure of the sculpture. Though the movement may be excessively sensual, Bernini draws the viewer's gaze to the anguished face of Daphne, which is the direct result of this bodily motion.¹⁹ Bernini's emphasis, therefore, is less on the eroticism of Apollo's hunt, and more on the negative effects of his lust.

Following his own metamorphosis at the hands of Cupid, Apollo loses his measured nature in favour of the animalistic comportment of a hound in pursuit of prey.²⁰ His wild and unmeasured pace causes his left leg to flail out at an odd angle, which requires his counter-posturing and the slight raising of his right arm for balance. This near loss of balance is especially clear when the statue is viewed from behind. From here the viewer sees that not only does Apollo run without balance, he also leans with his upper body which portrays him having little or no control over his own trajectory.²¹ This breakneck manner shows that Apollo is driven by a force external to his own agency. In his internally transformed state, he is at the mercy of the vicissitudes of unchecked lust.

Bernini's choice of Ovid for artistic appropriation is not original; it indeed follows a long tradition, especially in the form of poetry. Perhaps the most notable example is the anonymous *Ovide Moralisé* of the twelfth century. Written in Old French, it provides tens of thousands of lines of Christian moralistic reinterpretations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For example, Ovid's lines,

So too the virgin and the deity ran,
His speed spurred by hope and hers by fear,²²

¹⁹ See appendix, fig. 2.

²⁰ "A Gallic hound/Snuffs out and starts a hare in a field." Ovid, "Apollo and Daphne" (2011), 560-1.

²¹ See appendix, fig. 1.

²² Ovid, "Apollo and Daphne" (2011), 567-8.

the author reformulates,
He goes not slowly,
Neither does the beauty run slowly,
She is like one displeased
About losing her virginity:
Fear gives her speed.²³

This subtle change focuses the reader away from the association of Apollo's lust with 'hope,' which one could read as virtuous in Christian context, and focuses the reader on the fact that Daphne is specifically afraid of losing her virginity and thereby her virtue. This reformulation of Ovid, while certainly not the only moralizing adaptation of the work, is the most thorough and provides a compelling basis for later appropriations of the Apollo and Daphne myth.

According to art history professor Andrea Bolland, Ovidian references in Italian Renaissance poetry and art often have roots in the poetry of Petrarch, who frequently conflates his idealized Laura with the elusive Daphne. The sixth sonnet of the *Canzoniere* shows this conflation particularly well:²⁴

and when by force he [*Amor*] takes the reins himself,
I am left there in harness of his lordship

²³ *Ovide Moralisé*, ed. C. de Boer (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1915), 1:2990-4, <https://archive.org/details/ovidemoralispo12boer>. Translation mine from the original Old French:

*il ne vait pas lent,
Ne la belle ne court pas lente,
Com cele qui pas n'atalente
De perdre sa virginité:
Paours li donne isneleté.*

For the translations of 'n'atalente,' 'Paours,' and 'isneleté,' see, respectively: Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire: Thirtieth Session, Third Series (1877-78)* (Liverpool: Adam Holden, 1878), 6:36, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=HgkNAAAAYAAJ>; S.-J. Honnorat, *Dictionnaire Provençal-Français* (Digne, France: Repos Imprimeur-Libraire-Éditeur, 1847), 787, <https://archive.org/stream/dictionnairepro00honngoog>; A. Bos, *Glossaire de la Langue d'Oïl (XIe-XIVe Siècles)* (Paris: J. Maisonneuve, Libraire-Éditeur: 1891), 276, <https://archive.org/stream/glossairedelala01bosgoog>.

²⁴ Andrea Bolland, "Desiderio and Diletto: Vision, Touch, and the Poetics of Bernini's Apollo and Daphne." *The Art Bulletin* 32 (2000): 350, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051379>.

Only to reach the laurel where is gathered
the bitter fruit, once tasted, that afflicts
Rather than comforts someone else's wounds.²⁵

Again, we see the Apollonian figure, at the mercy of lust's motion, ending in unfulfilled desire. While only gently moralistic, with the author cast as guilty for the edification of the reader, this formulation forms the basis for more explicit moralistic interpretations of Ovid.

Bernini emphasizes the two extremes of emotion present in Apollo's hunt for Daphne: hope and fear. He makes extremely clear in his sculpture that Apollo "is himself spurred on by hope, she [Daphne] by fear,"²⁶ by sculpting the emotions into the stationary evidence of their bodily movements. Viewed alone, Apollo's manner of motion may seem erratic, yet viewed with the object of his desire he runs toward something. He is pulled chest first, legs struggling to power the drive of this magnetism, towards Daphne. He looks and reaches forward in hopeful expectation.²⁷ In stark contrast, Daphne's movements are erratic in a different fashion. In the place of wanton lust, unimaginable terror drives her. She twists her body in such a way to distance herself from Apollo's embraces, even before he catches her.²⁸ Her face remains a frozen visage of terror: half a final, pleading appeal back to her oppressor and half a desperate invocation of supernatural protection.²⁹ The dichotomy of her tormented fear and his headstrong hope only exemplifies the general discord Bernini presents as the result of Apollo's lusty desires. The pair's limbs, hair, clothing, and other attributes become, in places,

²⁵ Francesco Petrarca, "6", in *Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 9-14, Dalhousie Electronic Resource.

²⁶ Ovid, "Book One" (1966), 539; Translation mine, from original Latin: "*est hic spe celer, illa timore.*" See "Perseus Latin Word Study Tool."

²⁷ See appendix, fig. 1.

²⁸ See appendix, fig. 2.

²⁹ See *ibid.* Cf. Ovid, "Apollo and Daphne" (2011), 575-7.

indistinguishable from each other.³⁰ The result is a whirlwind of opposing forces that come to a head in the sculpture. Bernini is sure to make clear that the state of the two before this moment is not an enviable one. Not only is it not sustainable, as those in the throes of lust inevitably are “overcome by the labour of the flight,”³¹ it is also unfulfilled. Though Apollo is in possession of hope, without the subsequent possessions of faith and love, he cannot be at rest. The possession of hope without its companions is as the possession of lust without its object. His heart is restless;³² the lack of these virtues brings about deep anxiety in him and terror in Daphne.

Just as the viewer extrapolates Bernini’s depiction to interpret the beginning of Ovid’s myth, one also builds an image of the myth’s dénouement from the sculpture. In the rooted stability of the post-metamorphic union, Apollo’s love is transformed from one that focuses on the physical, temporal beauty of Daphne—

Her hair ... her neck,
Her eyes, her mouth...
Her fingers, her hands, her arms...
and what is hidden.³³

—to one whose focus is “beautiful undying leaves.”³⁴ This proper love holds the same subject and object as lust, as the tree is still Daphne, still reacts to Apollo,³⁵ yet is in a purified form, lending the scene the stability it holds by nature.

Bernini foreshadows the final rest of the pair in those parts of his sculpture that emphasize Daphne’s transformation. According to Ovid, both joy and faith accompany this

³⁰ See appendix, fig. 1.

³¹ Ovid, “Book One” (1966), line 544. Translation mine, from the original Latin: “*victa labore fugae*.” See “Perseus Latin Word Study Tool.”

³² Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* (1977), 21.

³³ Ovid, “Apollo and Daphne” (2011), 519-24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 599.

³⁵ See *ibid.*, 588, 600.

state.³⁶ Whereas Apollo's posture betrays his hope in lust, his left arm, which succeeds in its goal of physical contact, reveals the faith that will soon come to him. Apollo partially embraces Daphne's torso at the very boundary of her transformation; his touch is not frenzied with desperate, it is strong, yet gentle.³⁷ If we imagine the progression of this action, Apollo would only be able to fully embrace Daphne once the nature of their relationship had fundamentally changed: when his lust is no longer compatible with its object and must necessarily augment itself.

The interpretation of the myth's conclusion as ultimate concordance of love is evidenced in Bernini's sculpture by the placement of Apollo's hand, as aforementioned, along with his face and body position. Apollo's left hand rests on the edge of Daphne's transformation. This is a reminder that Apollo's love does not shift from one human to another tree, his intense affection remains for the same object, while the affection itself changes from lust to love. Similarly, the rapt wonder in his gaze, directed at Daphne's changing fingers—the metamorphosis in action—has the glazed look of one awestruck, filled with promises of the future.³⁸ This moment of realization begins the subsequent transformation of his lust into love, his motion into stability. Lastly, while his posture is indicative of a haphazard loss of balance,³⁹ Apollo's physical position directly mirrors the shape of Daphne in the throes of metamorphosis.⁴⁰ This alignment

³⁶ "You will accompany the Roman generals/When joyful voices ring out in their triumphs/[...]/You will ornament Augustus' doorposts,/A faithful guardian." Ibid, 592-6. Emphasis mine. A more literal translation of the last line—*"fidissima custos"*—(Ovid, "Book One" [1966], 562) would be "a most faithful guardian." For '-issima' as superlative, see Frank Smalley, *Analysis and Formation of Latin Words* (Syracuse, NY: John T. Roberts, Publisher, 1879), <http://books.google.ca/books?id=zmbRAAAAMAAJ>, 32.

³⁷ See appendix, fig. 2.

³⁸ See appendix, fig. 1.

³⁹ See Ibid.

⁴⁰ See Ibid.

foreshadows their eventual concordance, in which Daphne “seemed to nod her leafy crown in assent,” in response to Apollo’s proposals.⁴¹ Therefore, certain aspects of the sculpture, especially those immediately related to Daphne’s transformation, point to the harmony created by her stability and the transformation of Apollo’s lust to love.

Up to this point, this essay has based arguments upon historical context and artistic interpretation. While this is compelling, there is much room for differing interpretations of Bernini’s intention. Although there is undeniably complex nuance in Bernini’s art, this essay seeks to solidify the interpretation of a moralizing *Apollo and Daphne* with the addition of some contemporary contextualization. The sculpture was commissioned by Cardinal Scipione Borghese as the third in a series of four figures, the others being *Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius; The Rape of Proserpina; and David*.⁴² The bookend sculptures, *Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius* and *David*, seem to be natural subjects for a Roman Cardinal: they emphasize the history of both Roman and Christian traditions through the figures of their antecedent leaders. One finds the theme of the dangers of lust and the triumphs of love in these sculptures as well. Aeneas overcomes temptations of his lust for Dido to found Rome, while David exhibits characteristics of lust in his youth but his love of God ultimately anchors him in faith.⁴³ In the other two, the Ovidian mythological subjects, one sees the common theme of anguish, suffering, and pain in

⁴¹ Ovid, “Apollo and Daphne” (2011), 601.

⁴² Domenico Bernini, *Life of Bernini*, 105. See appendix, fig. 3, fig.4, fig. 5.

⁴³ See Virgil, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. Rolfe Humfries (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 87-112, 177-205; see 2 Sam. 11:2-5, 22:1-4.

the wake of over-passionate lust. Just like Daphne, Proserpina is depicted in utter despair at the moment of Pluto's conquest.⁴⁴

The concluding reasoning for this reading of *Apollo and Daphne* lies in the poetry of Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, the future Pope Urban VIII. In 1620, the year between the completion of *Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius* and the beginning of *Apollo and Daphne*, the Cardinal published the youthful collection of his *Poemata*. His poetry also cursorily treats the subject of Daphne's hunt and metamorphosis.⁴⁵ He writes, in a poem which Marc Fumaroli called "his encyclical on Christian poetics,"⁴⁶ lines such as:

Nevertheless, veiling him called Phoebus [Apollo],
Virgin Daphne here sings a song.
Who, with sensuous lute-playing, reveals
A home of living hell and iron bars? ⁴⁷

This verse, as an example, contrasts the outward beauty of Daphne with her internal torment, as Bernini contrasts her sensuous body with her agonized expression. As a friend and patron of Bernini, Barberini defends the piety of *Apollo and Daphne*, in the presence of Bernini, Borghese, and others, by composing a couplet: "Those who love to pursue fleeting forms of pleasure, in

⁴⁴ See appendix, fig. 4.

⁴⁵ Bolland, "Desiderio and Diletto," 314-6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 316.

⁴⁷ Maphæi Barberini, "Poesis Probis et Piis Ornata Documentis Primævo Decoris Restituenda," in *Poemata* (Antwerp: Balthasar Moreti, 1634), 25-8, <https://archive.org/details/maphaeisrecardb00gallgoog>. Translation mine from original Latin:

*Attamen obnubens illum sub nomine Phoebi,
Virginis hanc Daphnes fabula nota canit.
Quis blando citharæ sonitu potuisse recludi
Viventi infernae ferrea claustra domus?*

See "Perseus Latin Word Study Tool."

the end find only leaves and bitter berries in their hands.”⁴⁸ Bernini carves this epigraph on the base of *Apollo and Daphne* in 1625.⁴⁹ Using Petrarch’s “bitter fruit” to describe the fugitive nature of lust, the future Pope lyrically encapsulates the perils of unsustainable earthly love that Bernini sculpts. This epithet, displayed so prominently, acts as a lasting reminder that, though Bernini’s sculpted bodies may appear overly sensual, the ultimate message is one of morality.

The complex web that Bernini weaves, comparing the pitfalls of impassioned motion with the ordered stability of stasis, shows a compelling allegory for the comparison of lust and love. He balances, with accuracy and skill, these two elements. His depiction, along with the accompanying epigraph, thoroughly imbues the ideals of Christian theology into Ovid’s ancient poem. This depiction does, however, beg the question of how far Bernini is imposing Christian mores onto what is, fundamentally, a pagan myth.

Whether Ovid would agree with the demonization of motion and lust, compared to stability and love, is a question that one cannot answer completely. This question opens the door to subsequent questions regarding the moral and ethical duties of artistic interpretation, and exactly where the boundaries of artistic license fall. This debate, however, well exceeds the scope of this essay. All one can be sure of at this time is that, regardless of this potential debate, such license, appropriation, and reinterpretation are abundantly evident in Ovid’s *Apollo and Daphne*.

⁴⁸ Bolland, “Desiderio and Diletto,” 316; “Apollo and Daphne,” *Galleria Borghese*, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.galleriaborghese.it/borghese/en/edafne.htm>.

⁴⁹ Bolland, “Desiderio and Diletto,” 327, n.48.

Appendix



Fig. 1: Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne* (Rome: Galleria Borghese, 1622-24), image courtesy of the Web Gallery of Art.



Fig. 2: Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne* (detail), image courtesy of the Web Gallery of Art.



Fig. 3: *Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius*, (Rome: Galleria Borghese, 1618-19), image courtesy of the Web Gallery of Art.



Fig. 4: Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Pluto and Proserpina* (Rome: Galleria Borghese, 1621-22), image courtesy of the Web Gallery of Art



Fig. 5: Gianlorenzo Bernini, *David* (Rome: Galleria Borghese, 1623-24), image courtesy of the Web Gallery of Art.