Two Paintings by Anne-Louis Girodet and Johann Heinrich Füssli

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A renewed interest in early drama and epic poetry was an important feature of Neoclassical art around 1800. In this, as in most other respects, Neoclassicism was an aspect of the Romantic movement, with its fascination with the sublime figures of history and literature. No crucial distinction was in fact made between ancient and modern literature. Artists treated the poetry of Dante, Shakespeare and Milton in the same style and spirit as works by Greek and Roman authors. A key figure here was the English sculptor John Flaxman. Tommaso Pirolì’s line engravings of Flaxman’s drawings provided illustrations for both the works of Homer and Aeschylus and Dante’s Divine Comedy. When they were published in the 1790s, their radical simplicity of outline had an enormous impact. A Flaxman sheet that made a particularly powerful impression was a scene from Aeschylus’ drama Seven Against Thebes, showing the seven Greek chieftains standing, as if in a bas-relief frieze, on either side of a sacrificed bull (Fig. 2). With raised hands, they swear to take Thebes or perish.

Around 1800, the French Neoclassical artist Anne-Louis Girodet (1767–1824) was planning an ambitious painting of the same scene, clearly under the influence of Flaxman, but also (like him) betraying a dependence on Jacques-Louis David’s epoch-making Oath of the Horatii (1785). Girodet had been a pupil in David’s studio, where he had been put to work copying his teacher’s masterpieces.

Fig. 1 Anne-Louis Girodet (1767–1824), Capaneus – Study called The Blasphemer. Oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm. Purchase: Heddå and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7348.
Girodet’s composition of the scene with the seven sworn chieftains outside the walls of Thebes is documented in a small sketch at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and in a large, worked-up drawing preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 3). The planned painting was never executed, but as part of his preparations Girodet painted two full-scale studies of heads – somewhat smaller than life-size. They represent two of the chieftains, who are named by Aeschylus. One of these studies, of Tydeus, now belongs to the Musée André Malraux in Le Havre. The other, a raging, helmet-adorned figure depicted in profile, has recently been acquired by the Nationalmuseum (Fig. 1).

This is Capaneus, described by Aeschylus as a giant “and more than human in his arrogance”. Capaneus cries out that, the heavens willing – or unwilling – he will lay waste the city, and he contemptuously compares the lightning of Zeus to the rays of the noontide sun. Such blasphemy of the gods cannot go unpunished, and Eteocles, king of Thebes, predicts that Capaneus will be killed by Zeus’ thunderbolt, which, according to a later tradition, is the fate that indeed befalls him. For this reason Dante places Capaneus in the Seventh Circle of Hell, where he defiantly continues to blaspheme against the chief deity – whom he calls Jupiter (Jove) – seemingly unperturbed by the eternal fire raining down on him.

The Nationalmuseum’s painting is usually referred to in the Girodet literature as The Blasphemer. From the Cleveland drawing we see how the head of Capaneus was to have been placed, roughly in the centre of the composition, defiantly looking up towards Thebes to the right, with protruding jaw and bared teeth. His face is glowing red with rage. His neck and collar bones are brightly lit by the sacrificial fire burning to the left. The cold light confirms the impression we get from the composition sketch of a nocturnal or storm scene, with dark clouds lit by flashes of lightning, and Girodet
seems to have envisaged the kind of dramatic light effects we find, for example, in the huge canvas Scene from a Deluge (1806, Musée du Louvre).

The head of Capaneus was among the property left by Girodet at his death and catalogued for his estate sale. As is pointed out in a handwritten comment in one copy of the catalogue, it is finished with the exception of the helmet, which is only sketched. The artist, who owned a collection of weapons and armour, modelled the helmet on a 16th-century Italian one, featuring a monstrous face in relief. It has been identified in the collections of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, and had lost its cheek pieces as early as the 19th century (Fig. 4).

The Swiss artist Johann Heinrich Füssli (1741–1825) belonged to an earlier generation than Girodet, was like him linguistically gifted, and had broad literary interests. Füssli was well acquainted with the classical texts, but his most original achievement was as a pioneer of pictorial art inspired by 17th-century literature. As a young man he moved to England, where, under the name of John Henry Fuseli, he worked for decades on themes from the works of Milton and Shakespeare in particular. His drawings and paintings in a highly personal style seized on the dramatic and the supernatural, but also the comic and the bizarre in works such as Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In addition, Füssli earned a living from illustration work. In the 1790s he supplied engravers with designs for his friend Johann Caspar Lavater’s Essays on Physiognomy, for example, and for Charles Allen’s History of England and A New and Improved Roman History. He had also been commissioned to produce a series of title pages for Bell’s British Theatre, a collection of British plays that was published in 35 volumes between 1791 and 1798. A dramatic scene was chosen to illustrate each piece. The Nationalmuseum has acquired a painting that served as the basis for William Satchwell Leney’s engraving for the title page of Edward Young’s drama The Revenge (1721) in the series (Fig. 5). Its tondo form is explained by the fact that several of the engraved scenes were surrounded by a round decorative frame, below which there was a tablet inscribed with the illustrated lines from the play.

In the case of The Revenge, the scene in the engraving was given an octagonal shape, which we must assume was Leney’s choice (Fig. 6). The plot of this drama, which was frequently performed on London stages throughout the 18th century, was based on earlier plays, chiefly Aphra Behn’s Abdelazer, or The Moor’s Revenge (1676) and Shakespeare’s Othello (1604). It is set in Spain, where Zanga, the captive son of a Moorish king, avenges his father’s death by arousing the fatal jealousy of Don Alonzo. Alonzo’s beloved Leonora is driven to suicide to prove her innocence. Füssli depicts the scene (Act V, Scene 2) in which Leonora, in Zanga’s presence, discovers on the floor the
dagger which Don Alonzo had used to kill Zanga’s father. In the previous scene, the jealous Alonzo had intended to kill her, but had thrown the dagger down, and he can now be glimpsed exiting to the right. In the theatre, the role of Zanga was played in blackface make-up. In the painting, marks can be made out on his cheek, perhaps a reference to the humiliating blow Alonzo had previously dealt him, further provoking his revenge. Characteristic of Füssli are Leonora’s dramatic gesture and the elongated limbs, in this case with Zanga’s accentuated thigh muscles visible through his costume. A close study of the picture’s surface reveals traces of the striped pattern of Zanga’s coat, seen in the print. A technical study, undertaken by the paintings conservator Fernando Caceres, has shown that Füssli made several compositional changes to details of the painting during the work process. These include the figure of Don Alonzo and the dagger on the floor (a late addition), suggesting that the painter may originally have intended to represent a different scene of the play.

Fig. 4 Plate XCVII from A. Rockstuhl and E. Gille, Musée de Tzarskoe-Selo ou collection d’armes de Sa Majesté l’Empereur de toutes les Russies, St Petersburg 1835–53. The Italian 16th-century helmet that appears in Girodet’s study of Capaneus is illustrated top right. National Library, Stockholm.

Fig. 6 William Satchwell Leney, Leonora Discovers Don Alonzo’s Dagger, illustration in Bell’s British Theatre, 1793, ©Trustees of the British Museum.

Notes:
2. Ibid.; further documentation in the sale catalogue, Christophe Joron-Derem, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, sale 22 June 2016, lot 66 (pp. 16–21).
3. Trans. E. D. A. Morshead.
4. Inferno, XIV. Dante’s source is the Roman poet Statius’ epic, the Thebaid, which deals with the same subject matter as Seven Against Thebes. Dante’s use of a figure from ancient mythology to represent the religious sin of blasphemy is actually quite remarkable.
6. Gert Schiff, Johann Heinrich Füssli, pp. 163, 515 (no. 887), 527 (no. 942), II, pp. 243 (fig. 887), 277 (fig. 942).