

JANA GRAUL, *NEID. KUNST, MORAL UND KREATIVITÄT IN DER FRÜHEN NEUZEIT*

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Reviewed by
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In Oliver Stone’s 1987 film *Wall Street* the character Gordon Gekko utters words that in retrospect have come to represent a certain spirit of the age: “Greed is good.” This sentiment lifted the yoke of social responsibility from those who wished to pursue their individual and acquisitive desires. Moreover, seen through the lens of the history of emotions, they foreshadow today’s characterization of the liberal autonomous subject – still so often male, entitled, and capitalist.

Jana Graul’s expansive book – *Neid. Kunst, Moral und Kreativität in der Frühen Neuzeit* [*Envy. Art, Morals, and Creativity in Early Modernity*] – performs a similar type of moralistic inversion by positing envy, traditionally seen as a vice, as opening up space for the definition of something virtuous and as characteristic of its time.

The book does not, however, claim that “envy is good”. Graul’s Envy – the female personification, older, often haggard, angry, and performing self-harm, frequently through the medium of serpents – appears in this book and in early modern European art as a vice. This allegorical figure, either through its gaze or compositional position, points to virtues. For as philosophers from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell and John Rawls have recognized, the moral struc-

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ture of envy (the vice of desiring that which is possessed by another) necessarily and dialectically summons up that which is to be envied. As Robert Greene, writing in the late sixteenth century, succinctly put it: “Envy oftentimes soundeth Fame’s trumpet.”¹ This book is a lengthy examination of this allegorical trope, understanding the presence of Envy (*Invidia*, *Livor*, etc.) in the visual arts as defining various virtues but, pre-eminently artistic virtues.

Graul’s thesis is supported by myriad insights drawn from ancient, medieval, and Renaissance literature and philosophy, and, perhaps most importantly, scores of detailed iconographic analyses of works of art and their complex interactions. These analyses represent the real treasure of this rich volume. Graul tells a comprehensive iconographic story that is breathtaking in breadth and depth.

The result of many years of research and writing, the text possesses an additive character, with the case studies piling up to produce something larger and more intricate than is strictly necessary to support the book’s thesis. The scale, intricacy, and appeal of this beautifully produced volume reflects not only Graul’s persistence and talent, but also the commitment of Hirmer, the publisher, and the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the sponsor of the series within which it appears. With luxurious illustrations and ample scholarly apparatus, Graul’s book exudes a welcome confidence in traditional academic values. The study’s methods and rhetoric are similarly self-assured, unfolding as they do within conventional parameters.

Graul situates *Neid* within the “history of emotions”. There are, however, no cameos for post-modern nominalism and de Manian prosopopoeia, nor a mention of the transformative work regarding personification and gender in *Medieval Studies*.² It seems a bit of a missed opportunity not to have linked this study to the rich debates about the roots of allegorical personification in philosophical realism (associated with the Platonic) and/or philosophical nominalism (associated with the Aristotelian tradition). Indeed, I would have been curious to see how this book might have been transformed through a reading of Sara Protasi’s recent study, *The Philosophy of Envy*, which recognizes the various and non-binary ways in which envy can operate.³ Certainly, Protasi’s philosophical elaborations might have offered Graul further ways to refine the emotions and emotional structures at play in so many of the works of art analyzed

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Robert Greene, *Pandosto. The Triumph of Time*, London 1588, n. p.

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See, for example, James Paxson, Gender Personified, Personification Gendered, and the Body Figuralized in Piers Plowman, in: *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12, 1998, 65–96; Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses. Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia, PA 2003; Maureen Quilligan, Allegory and Female Agency, in: Brenda Machosky (ed.), *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*, Stanford, CA 2010, 163–187; and Katherine Breen, *Machines of the Mind. Personification in Medieval Literature*, Chicago, IL 2021.

3

Sara Protasi, *The Philosophy of Envy*, Cambridge 2021.

in *Neid*. This book is carefully insulated from the scholarship on literary personification and the philosophy of envy.

Given its size and complexity, I imagine that there will be few readers who will read this book from beginning to end. Rather, I foresee that most users of this text will approach it more tactically, focusing on particular sections and insights. I believe the author has anticipated this type of reading, with basic theses repeated in each chapter and subchapter. An ambitious reader who chooses to read the entire book may feel, as did I, that the repetitions yielded a vortical and rather slow rhythm to the text. If, instead, one plunges into the opus to discover a particular analysis, the text is satisfyingly self-supporting. On balance, I think the author made a wise decision in ensuring such tactical readers could easily find their bearings.

The first four chapters of this imposing volume erect a strong foundation. At its core, one finds Mantegna's print, traditionally given the title *Schlacht der Seeungeheuer/Battle of the Sea-Gods*, but here retitled as *Kampf neidischer Urkünstler/Fight of the Primeval Artists*. Building on Michael Jacobsen's insights presented in an article of 1982,⁴ Graul expands the analytical framework beyond the biographical (with Mantegna chafing against those he perceived as envious and therefore critical of his work) to establish in Chapter 1 this bold and synthetic engraving as one key leitmotif of this book. In the engraving, Mantegna pictures the belligerent Telchines, artisan/sea-gods, thought by some to have invented certain arts, including metal-working. The Telchines were envied by others, on account of their skill, which produces an analogy between these "primeval artists" and Mantegna who felt similarly. For this reason, proposes Graul, Mantegna included a symbolic self-portrait in this metal-plate engraving, just below the figure of Invidia, here clearly identified by the inscription on the tablet the figure holds.

Mantegna's pictorial statement is interwoven with analogous literary expressions in Chapter 2, which treats, in turn: (a) ancient and medieval concepts of envy; (b) nascent art theoretical statements by Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo Dati, et al., with Graul identifying the key turning point in Michelangelo Biondi's *Dialogus de invidia [Dialogue on Envy]*, published in 1539 (which explicitly defined the dialectic of Envy/Excellence, Vice/Virtue, at the heart of the book's thesis); and (c) the complex biographical and cultural definitions of envy in the sixteenth century, especially in the life and work of Benedetto Varchi. Mantegna's print remains a touchstone throughout the study.

Upon the strong base produced by the opening two chapters, Graul offers two chapters that bridge to what I see as the major contributions of this book. The bridging chapters address, respectively, artistic signatures in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and a series of case studies that revolve around Leonardo and artistic virtue in the early sixteenth century. These intriguing stud-

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Michael Jacobsen, The Meaning of Mantegna's *Battle of the Sea Monsters*, in: *Art Bulletin* 64/4, 1982, 623–629.

ies might have fallen victim to a more ruthless editor. While the insights abound, the thetic momentum slows down: these chapters offer keen iconographical analyses and will, I am sure, contribute meaningfully to the literature on a score of artists and their work. They are, however, somewhat ancillary to the broader thrust of the book, which picks up in Chapters 5 and 6.

It is hard not to see Chapter 5 as the center of this study, with all the other chapters serving to support and frame it. This chapter swirls around Federico Zuccaro's design for the catafalque deployed during the funerary celebrations held in 1564 to honor Michelangelo Buonarroti. Developing and expanding ideas aired by Patricia Simons,⁵ Graul traces the concept of envy in Michelangelo's oeuvre, focusing on the *Last Judgment*. Then, more originally and intriguingly, Graul builds on the work of Tristan Weddigen to describe the biographical impetus for Zuccaro's psychomachia on the catafalque, pitting Minerva against Envy, but also its complex reception in subsequent decades.⁶ This leads to a plot twist, with Envy opposed to Truth in the work of Zuccaro himself, Giovanni Stradano, Giovanni Baglione, Gianlorenzo Bernini, Carlo Maratti, Raymond Lafage, Pietro Testa, and others. Graul explores ways in which the moral positions occupied by the arts, painting, and creative practice more broadly are figured in relation to the personification of Time, which in some cases also becomes an antagonist. Moreover, following the sinuous iconographic path defined most complexly by Pietro Testa, the author traces the appearance of Envy in the allegories of the *via virtutis* and/or Hercules at the Crossroads. The many examples adduced all flesh out a pictorial art theoretical narrative that runs through the sixteenth and especially the seventeenth centuries: artists – whether like Cerrini responding to explicit criticism, or Testa, exploring various ways in which artistic creativity could be set within the complex allegorical and *all'antica* edifices so common to the rhetoric of his age – figured their truth-telling practice as allied with or overcoming time, and visually opposed to the envious gazes of others. In such pictorial theoretical statements, artists promoted their activity as eternal and virtuous.

In Chapter 6 Graul unifies a series of case studies into a glorious florilegium, united by recurring references to two lost reliefs designed by Daniele da Volterra for the Orsini chapel in Trinità dei Monti. In one relief we see satyrs dismantling, scrutinizing, and measuring Daniele's own work in the chapel; it is an allegory of the envious motivations and barren academicism of the artist's critics. In the other relief, Michelangelo is pictured, according to Graul, as a figuration of "judgment". Graul understands the reliefs

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Patricia Simons, *Envy and Other Vices in Michelangelo's Last Judgment*, in: *Source. Notes in the History of Art* 33/2, 2014, 13–20.

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Tristan Weddigen, *Federico Zuccaro. Kunst Zwischen Ideal und Reform*, Basel 2000.

as offering a specific defense against Pietro Aretino's envious criticism of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel. More broadly, however, these reliefs help Graul initiate a series of analyses unpacking pictorial sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art theoretical statements, positing very directly the contest between, on the one hand, artistic virtue and judgment, and, on the other hand, the vice of envy. I was particularly drawn to Graul's interpretation of Giovanni di San Giovanni's frescoes in the Pitti Palace, which move seamlessly from the allegorical to the historical and political. The murals show a herd of satyrs ransacking Parnassus, expelling the artists, poets, and philosophers, who are then welcomed into Grand Ducal Tuscany.

The book ends with a form of postscript examining an enormous print designed by Pietro Liberi and, according to a 2013 study by Chiara Accornero, featuring an allegorical self-portrait of the artist in the act of punching a tumbling Envy.⁷ This struggle takes place in the margins of a broader battle, in which hundreds of mostly naked men – conveniently taking up canonical poses drawn from, above all, works by Michelangelo – participate in a symbolic and allegorized *guerra dei pugni*, a type of ritual battle to control a bridge in Venice. This dramatic visual coda offers Graul an opportunity to sum up the ambivalent dialectic linking Envy and artistic virtue. A chaotic reprise of Mantegna's battling Telchines, Liberi's print lays bare the fundamental antagonism at the heart of Graul's book: the artist struggling against the envy of others (artists, patrons, art critics) and in so doing promoting artistic virtue. In this final summation, the author emphasizes the contradictory moral stance of the artist and of the personification of Envy within the history of the figuration of emotions.

Reflecting upon the book as a whole, I find it striking just how often artists turned to the personification of Envy in different genres and contexts. There is no doubt that Graul has mined a rich iconographical seam, with profound implications for students of art theory and the status of the artist in early modern Europe. While the analysis of relatively repetitive iconographic motifs might have led to a dreary march through stale allegories, Graul manages to keep the text lively, with each case study given sufficient independence but always tied back to the main thesis of the volume.

That said, this book is fundamentally analytical, with synthesis only at what Erwin Panofsky might have called the second level of iconographical analysis. Graul does latently and occasionally patently figure the works of art studied as art theoretical. This, at least, was my inference. The personification of Envy becomes a way for artists to gain a foothold within the emerging literary-dominated world of art criticism. This necessarily has Graul select works by artists who were particularly engaged with this type of thinking. The history of early modern painting that emerges from this detailed

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Chiara Accornero, *Pietro Liberi cavaliere e fenice dei pittori. Dalle avventure di spada alle lusinghe dell'accademia*, Treviso 2013.

tracing of Envy is one that emphasizes the practice of artists who were either concerned by envious attacks and/or desirous of promoting artistic practice as a virtuous rebuttal to waxing literary art criticism. This is a rarefied, poetic, masculine, cultural sphere populated by ambitious artists, often hyper-sensitive, quick to take offense, and methodical in plotting arcane artistic ripostes. Given this, it is hardly surprising that the book revolves around the work of Michelangelo and its reception.

A canny aphorism is attributed to Cosimo de' Medici: "There is in gardens a plant which one ought to leave dry, although most people water it. It is the weed called envy." Graul's history of early modern European art is a garden overgrown with this well-watered weed. In this analysis envy itself is not "good", but Graul more than amply demonstrates that any good analysis of early modern thinking about artistic autonomy and/or pictorial art criticism must take this emotion, and this book about it, into account.