

Mythological Aspects of *Mercury and The Three Graces*

Zach DiSilva



In the Late 16th C engraving titled *Mercury and The Three Graces* (fig. 1) by Agostino Carracci, the very foreground is the back of a woman who is leaning on a die, while the middle figure is holding a rose and the figure all the way to the right a tree branch wrapped in her drapery these three figures are the graces, often referred to in Greek Mythology as the charities. The God Mercury is overlooking these three graces with his youthful body, his winged helmet, and his Caduceus, or magical staff. The use of diagonals, which was common in Baroque art of the time, is shown with the slanting of the Graces. A characteristic of the baroque style was to portray a story in a readable way, steering away from the mannerist style of complex, crowded images that require intellectual knowledge of the subject.

The engraving by Agostino was not an original piece by him however; it was in fact a replica of a painting done by Tintoretto (fig 2) for the Ducal palace¹. Tintoretto's painting of *Mercury and The Three Graces* is comparable to Agostino's painting of *The Communion of St. Jerome* with the use of fast brush strokes. Not only were their paintings similar, but also the artists themselves shared something in common—music, which is known to bring people together in a synchronous manor.

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1. ¹ Newton, Eric. Tintoretto. London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952. Pg. 54
 2. Pg. 55
 3. Pg. 187

Agostino played the Viola and lyre, and Tintoretto playing the lute². Tintoretto painted *Mercury and the Three Graces* for the Sala Del Collegio after a fire in 1574, along three other paintings; *Forge of Vulcan*, *Baccus and Ariadne*, and *Minerva protecting peace and abundance from Mars*³ It is believed that Tintoretto's painting of Mercury and the three graces was a way of using a myth such as this to portray the high officers of republic. One grace leaning on the die represents capaciousness of fortune, and the other two holding myrtle and rose, symbols of perpetual love, while Mercury represents the wisdom of the republic watching over them⁴. Agostino, while practicing the baroque style of portraying classical antiquity in a readable way, did not have the same intentions as Tintoretto did by representing the republic. Agostino used the archetype of synchrony found in the myth portrayed in the print to celebrate the collaboration between himself and his brothers both in the Carracci academy and other collaborations between the brothers.

The three graces, or charities in the image are named Aglaia (splendor), Euphrosyne (Mirth) and Thalia (good cheer)⁵ they are the daughters of Zeus and Eurynome (a child of the titan, ocean). These three graces within Greek myths are always treated as one triple incarceration of love and beauty; they are treated with a

4. ⁴ Newton, Eric. Tintoretto. London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952. Pg, 187
5. Hamilton, Edith. Mythology. New York, Boston, London. Back Bay Books, 1942. Pg, 39
6. Jean Shinoda Bolen M.D., Gods In Everyman (New York, New York: Harper and Row, publishers, 1989), Pg. 162

sense of synchrony, not as separate entities, just like Agostino and his brothers. Mercury is graceful and swift in motion and his father was Zeus and his mother was Maia (daughter of atlas), he was the most cunning God, and lover and friend of the nymphs and graces but above all he was the God of synchrony⁶. Although there is no specific story involving Mercury and the graces, we understand that they are similar in character through synchrony, and also through another outlet—music, which is known to bring people together. When Mercury was first born it was said that he stole Apollo's herd, and he won back Apollo's forgiveness by making him a Lyre out of a tortoise shell⁷. The Graces were said to have danced to Apollo's Lyre in the forest, gave life its bloom and that they were "queens of song"⁸ which is potentially what the viewer is intended to be seeing in the image. Mercury also is said to personify the agility of the mind—which would make for a reasonably preferred subject for Agostino because of his spirit and rigor in being self-educated.

The story of Mercury stealing Apollo's herd the day he was born is a gateway in understanding the relationship between the two brothers within the myth. Mercury was instantly recognized as a God of thief's when this happened, however because he made Apollo his lyre, he gained his forgiveness, demonstrating synchrony and brotherhood—while Apollo gained a new skill and power from the interaction—his music, or the use of the Lyre that Mercury had given him, which is

⁷ Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York, Boston, London: Back Bay Books, 1942), Pg. 147

⁸ Jean Shinoda Bolen M.D., *Gods In Everyman* (New York, New York: Harper and Row, publishers, 1989), Pg. 162

said to bring people together this is comparable to the skills and knowledge the Carracci brothers had shared with each other in their collaborations. Not only did Tintoretto who originally painted the scene play the lute, but Agostino also played an instrument--the lyre, the exact instrument that the Graces dance to. While Tintoretto's painting is said to have been a representation of the republic, it is very probable that Agostino had more of a light hearted interpretation of the scene—such as Caravaggio had a somewhat light hearted intent behind his self-portrait as Baccus.

The three Carracci worked together in a synchronous manor like the three graces and the God Mercury represented. They were synchronous with their travels, studies, the Carracci academy, and of course with their collaborative efforts within the Farnese gallery⁹.

The Carracci brothers started their own academy in Bologna, where many intellects in various sciences enrolled, the brothers endeavored to combine the skills and craftsmanship of artists of the past using Michelangelo's use of figure and Titian's use of color¹⁰. They felt the need to use these influences and channel them into a simplified manor that is easily readable, which is very characteristic of the baroque time. The simplistic style and historical context was not only practiced by the Carracci brothers which is seen in Agostino's print and Annibale's *Loves of the Gods*,

⁹ Arthur MC Comb, *The Baroque Painters of Italy* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard university Press, 1934), Pg. 10

¹⁰ Giovanni Pietro, *The Lives of Annibale and Agostino Carracci* (London: Pennsylvania State Press, 1968), Pg. 10

but it was also taught within the academy¹¹. People who attended the academy often referred to it as academy of the desirous, because of the ardent desire of the members to make them glorious in art¹². In the academy Agostino, being the intellect that he was always praised the members of the academy for “stimulus to glory”, especially for the youth. He would pluck his lyre and play music for the students while simultaneously signing the names of works of the students within the songs to inspire them and to just have some fun within the class¹³. This shows a true connection to the story of Mercury and the graces, because of the music, itself being an art, brought the students of the Carracci academy together inspiring each other to perform better art, just like the three Carracci brothers did—inspired each other in a harmonious effort to be glorious in art. “They lived in their studio without any discord, they had spirit, genius and unity, and when they were jointly called, they jointly took praise”¹⁴.

In conclusion, with Agostino’s leadership in his intellect, Annibale and Ludvico’s technical talent, throughout history the three brothers have been synchronous in perfecting their art and displaying it for the masses. While Agostino did not create the original *Mercury and the Three Graces*, given his intellect and his passion for maintaining a connection with his brothers via the academy, it is no wonder why he would be interested in reproducing such an image of the passion of

¹¹ Giovanni Pietro, *The Lives of Annibale and Agostino Carracci* (London: Pennsylvania State Press, 1968), Pg. 92

¹² Pg. 93

¹³ Pg. 94

¹⁴ Giovanni Pietro, *The Lives of Annibale and Agostino Carracci* (London: Pennsylvania State Press, 1968), Pg. 9

music and the archetype of synchrony portrayed by the God Mercury and the three Graces.

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