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Senior Seminar

Disturbing the Divine:

An Investigation of Caravaggio's *Young Sick Bacchus* and its Contemporary Interpretations

What comes to mind when you hear the name Caravaggio? Is it his signature tenebrism that was a result of his intense use of chiaroscuro? Or do you automatically envision his dramatic *Medusa* and *Judith Beheading Holofernes* paintings? Either way, it seems that the artist and his legacy are held in high regard. But what many people do not know is that the well-known Baroque painter was a ruffian who lived penniless and on the streets for a large part of his early artistic career. These hardships are mirrored in his earlier works, especially his grotesque piece *Young Sick Bacchus* [Figure 1]. With this work, Caravaggio displays his experience with illness through the Greek god of wine, Bacchus, and the disturbing depiction has resulted in a multitude of theories. This essay will discuss these scholarly theories that were created by five scholars, as well as my own theory of the work. This painting is one of defiance from the artistic canon of the time and such contrast will continue to generate theories behind the true meaning of the work.

Michelangelo Merisi (1571-1610) was born in Milan, Italy to parents Fermo Merisi and Lucia Aratori. He would eventually rename himself Caravaggio after his native village near Bergamo, Italy.¹ When he moved to Rome at the age of eighteen, Caravaggio began to transform the manneristic style of his elders.² His dramatic, almost theatrical, realism fully contrasted that of the constrained and academic artwork of his predecessors.³ This drastically new style brought scandal throughout Rome, as the artist would begin to choose his models from the streets to depict religious scenes.⁴

¹ Gilles Lambert, *Caravaggio*, (Germany: Taschen, 2000), 7

² *Ibid.*, 7

³ *Ibid.*, 7

⁴ Renato Guttuso, *Caravaggio*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 2006), 33

His scandalous artistic practices along with his improper reputation led to Caravaggio gaining many enemies on the streets and in the artistic world, who would claim that his art were just copies of the older masters who he tried so hard to push away from. He became known to partake in brawls and even confessed to killing a man over a game of tennis which led him to be run out of the city on numerous occasions and would sometimes land him in jail.⁵ Even with all the hatred and judgment towards the artist, Caravaggio still became an immense figure for the Baroque period and is still known as a revolutionary today.

The artist experienced many ups and downs throughout the beginning of his artistic career in Rome. These hardships started before he even got to the city as the roads that he took to get there were very dangerous with groups of bandits mercilessly robbing and killing travelers.⁶ While there is not any evidence that shows him getting robbed or injured, it was inevitable considering that Caravaggio did not secure a proper escort to the city. Once arriving, Caravaggio spent his time in the lower levels of Roman society until he could find an established apprenticeship.⁷ During this time, the lower-class society of Rome included brothels, prostitutes, and street brawls. Even after finding a position in the studio of the Sicilian painter Lorenzi, Caravaggio continued to live like he was a lower-class citizen.⁸ He would go out with friends to brothels where they would drink themselves senseless.⁹ As the years passed, Caravaggio's fortunes changed as he was offered patronage by Pandolfo Pucci, the younger brother of the Cardinal Pucci.¹⁰ With this patronage Caravaggio created some of his most memorable works, but they all included young boy models. That is because Pucci was known to be inclined towards younger boys. Caravaggio's partnership

⁵ Ibid., 7

⁶ Ibid., 26

⁷ Ibid., 29

⁸ Ibid., 29

⁹ Ibid., 29

¹⁰ Ibid., 32

with Pucci continued until his leave of the residence in the early 1590's for unknown reasons.¹¹ It was after this separation that Caravaggio began to portray female figures.

But it seemed that misfortune followed the young artist as a few years after leaving Pucci, he was struck with an intense illness.¹² While the details of the illness are not certain, many historians have concluded that it was malaria considering that the disease was a turning point in Roman history going all the way back to the first century AD when it arrived in Italy through Greeks traders.¹³ But the lack of medical resources during Caravaggio's stay does not allow them to know for sure. Close to pennilessness after leaving the Pucci residence, Caravaggio could not afford proper care and one of his friends, Longo, ended up taking him to a hospital for the poor for help. His death seemed to be imminent and Longo started to believe that that would be the last time her would see the painter alive.¹⁴ But, to Caravaggio's relief, the Prior of the hospital was an acquaintance of the Pucci household and recognized the artist right away.¹⁵ With his help, Caravaggio made a miraculous recovery within a few months of the incident. But while his life seemingly went back to normal, this traumatic experience stuck with the artist and began to be reflected in his work. One of the most notable being his oil painting *Young Sick Bacchus* from 1593-1594 which is currently on display in the Borghese Gallery in Rome.

The work includes many of Caravaggio's signature artistic practices including the pronounced tenebrism, also known as the stark contrast between the highlights of the foreground

¹¹ Ibid., 38

¹² Ibid., 39

¹³ Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on the Economics of Antimalarial Drugs, *Saving Lives, Buying Time: Economics of Malaria Drugs in an Age of Resistance*, (Washington DC: National Academies Press, 2004), ch. 5

¹⁴ Ibid., 39

¹⁵ Ibid., 39

with the darkness of the background¹⁶, and the dramatic posing of the central figure. However, the grotesque depiction of the young male figure differs from the flushed, youthful beauty seen throughout his other works. The oil on canvas is sixty-seven by fifty-three centimeters and showcases a young, muscular male turned at a ninety-degree angle with his head looking over his shoulder, his bewildered eyes staring straight out at the audience. He is wearing a white cloth draped across half of his body which is secured with a dark ribbon and his skin carries a yellow hue with pale, almost white, lips. The fit form of the figure sets off the sickly discoloration of the skin. While the boy does not necessarily look weak, he still looks quite ill and dazed. A wreath is sat on top of the figure's head and a bundle of lightly colored grapes is being held in both hands. The background is filled with barren darkness and the only objects occupying the table in front of him are another bundle of grapes, in a darker color, and two peaches.

All of this can be seen with just a ground-level visual analysis. As the viewer looks deeper, they may begin to realize through certain attributes that the figure being shown in the Greek God of wine and debauchery, Bacchus. The laurel wreath, the classical-style toga, and the bundles of grapes all act as iconographical elements of the God. These allow us to pinpoint him even when he is ghastly depicted in Caravaggio's Baroque style and not the usual Classical style that Bacchus is known for. But why Bacchus? This question generates even more confusion when bringing up the idea that this is a self-portrait of the artists. Some resources have gone as far as to give it the title *Self-Portrait as Ill Bacchus*.¹⁷ This concept can be attributed to Roberto Longhi, a scholar who spent many years of his life dedicated to analyzing and supporting the artist's reputation and career. He was the person responsible for giving the piece the title *Sick Bacchus* and for interpreting the

¹⁶ The National Gallery, "Glossary: Tenebrism", (London: The National Gallery, n.d.), <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/tenebrism#:~:text=Tenebrism%20is%20a%20term%20derived,with%20a%20predominantly%20dark%20setting.>

¹⁷ Ibid., 15

subject as a reflection of Caravaggio and what he was going through at the time.¹⁸ Longhi's evaluation of the painting is supported by two key points. The first one being that the oil painting may have been one of the few outcomes from the months in which Caravaggio stayed in the hospital and recovered after the illness.¹⁹ The second one being the fact that the figure is a mirrored image of one of the four figures in his piece *The Musicians*, made in 1597 [Figure 2].²⁰ According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where this painting currently resides, the recognizable figure second from the right is a self-portrait of the artist.²¹ These have all led many to believe that he took inspiration for this portrait from his portrayal in *Young Sick Bacchus*.

This concept of a self-portrait has raised even more questions about the piece, which have all resulted in a multitude of theories. What we do know is that it was confiscated by the authorities for tax payment. The artist was accused of illegally possessing firearms, and to gain his freedom back, he gave a collection of his works to the Apostolic Chamber, also known as the papal treasury.²² Once in the papal treasury, the piece was given as a gift from the pope to his nephew Scipione Borghese.²³ Now housed in the Borghese Gallery in Rome, many scholars have taken it upon themselves to try and figure out the true meaning behind this unique and alluring piece. Some of these scholars include Kurt Bauch (1897- 1975), Herwarth Röttgen (1931- present), J.B. Lynch (unknown), Maurizio Calvesi (1927-2020), and Kristina Hermann Fiore (1945- present). Each theory

¹⁸ Antonio Lommelli, "Self-Portrait as Bacchus (Known as 'Sick Bacchus')", (Rome, Borghese Gallery and Museum), <https://www.collezione.galleriaborghese.it/en/opere/self-portrait-as-bacchus-known-as-sick-bacchus#:~:text=Longhi's%20interpretation%20of%20the%20painting,Herwarth%20R%C3%B6ttgen's%20idea%20that%20it>. P. 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39

²⁰ Ibid., 39

²¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Musicians*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435844>

²² Borghese Museum, p. 1

²³ Ibid., p. 1

that is created about this piece tries to understand why Caravaggio would create such a dramatic and grotesque piece so early on in his career when he was still trying to gain new patronage.

Out of the four historians listed above, Rottgen, a German historian, created a theory on the piece that seems to be the most practical. He states that the figure is a representation of the effects of Bacchus's drunkenness.²⁴ During the time that this was created, the Greek God would have been a common icon throughout Rome. Many would have known his origin story and drunken practices. Connecting this idea with the fact that this was created right after Caravaggio arrived in Rome, where he was going out and getting drunk every night with his companions, it is easy to believe that this is him showing the unpleasant effects of the drunken, reckless state that he was just in before getting admitted into the hospital. What makes this theory interesting is that it makes it seem that Caravaggio's eyes have finally opened to the side effects of drunkenness, with the depiction of an unsightly, deformed figure of Bacchus that he chose to represent as himself. But Caravaggio continues his reckless tendencies all the way until his death, making this theory of self-reflection unlikely.

Bauch, another German historian with a focus on Rembrandt and Caravaggio, came up with a theory on the work that goes a little further with the idea that it represents the five senses, specifically taste.²⁵ Other depictions of Bacchus focus on his relation to wine and the drinks' intoxicating flavor. This can even be seen in a later work of Caravaggio where he depicts the same God in a much more appealing light. *Bacchus*, created in 1596, includes a youthful Bacchus, similar in age to the one in *Young Sick Bacchus*, with a flushed complexion, muscular build, and an alluring gaze [Figure 3]. He is partially reclined and offering the glass of wine in his left hand out to the viewer. The sensual nature of the piece is a full contrast to that of *Young Sick Bacchus*. In

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10

²⁵ Ibid., p. 10

Bacchus the fruit is flourishing and the color of the wine is deep and rich, unlike *Young Sick Bacchus* where the grapes are pale and the peaches look like they are on the brink of rotting. Even though Bauch does not fully investigate these peaches, it is important to note that the peach is a symbol of longevity.²⁶ In real life- the fruit is used as a health benefit and, in Chinese beliefs, it is considered medicine that wards off evil spirits.²⁷ The display of these molding peaches next to the lush purple grapes could show the sickness and recovery of the artist. The picture automatically brings a sour taste to your mouth which contradicts the rich, intoxicating flavor that *Bacchus* brings to the viewer. Bauch believes that this painting plays with the senses in a negative way because it helps bring the unnerving details of the work to life.

J.B. Lynch focuses on the sense of melancholy in his interpretation of the piece. Lynch uses the work *Self-portrait as the Abbot of the Academia del Val di Blenio* created by Gian Paolo Lomazzo in 1568, twenty-five years before *Young Sick Bacchus* [Figure 4]. Like Caravaggio, Lomazzo uses characteristics of Bacchus to represent himself. His portrait includes a goat-skin cloak, a laurel wreath, and Bacchus's thyrsus, a staff displaying branches of ivy.²⁸ Lomazzo, like many other artists during this time, used the Greek God in a positive light to help represent his belief in the artist as a poet.²⁹ Lynch saw this as an interesting contrast to Caravaggio's piece, which included many of the same attributes, but in a much darker manner. Lynch believed that instead of using the God as a physical representation of Caravaggio, it was a symbol for the melancholy that he was feeling during this time. This was made at the beginning of his career when he first moved to Rome and was not making any profit from his works. He was so poor that during his near-death experience, the only reason that he retrieved proper care was because of his relationship with Pucci. All these

²⁶ Robert, Antony, *The Peach Tree*, Perspectives on History, August 30, 2022, p. 2

²⁷ Ibid., p. 2

²⁸ Gabriela Paiva de Toldeo, "The Academy of the Blenio Valley self-fashioning identity in the Milanese Cinquecento", (Brazil: University of Campinas, 2018), 5.

²⁹ Ibid., 5

aspects had to have affected the artist psychologically. Lynch sees this self-portrait as Caravaggio's was about speaking out about this psychological melancholy without saying anything out loud.

The representation of death and melancholy was a common topic in the art world during the late 1500's, when *Young Sick Bacchus* was made. This concept emerged throughout the Renaissance period as a romanticization of the "troubled genius" or "tortured artist" archetype. This trope includes a misunderstood genius who turned their hardships, like mental illness, trauma, and money troubles, into motivation for their craft.³⁰ Many connected artistry to the astrological signs. Painters were under the signs of Mercury as they all had a spark of creativity accompanied by a restless nature to produce art.³¹ But artists like Albrecht Durer took this a step further by believing that artists were also under the moody planet of Saturn, which is what Lomazzo credited in his portrait.³² This is what gives meaning to their art and what creates a divide between the artist and a regular person. This trope puts the artist on a higher pedestal because they were able to turn their tragedies into something beautiful. Many, including Lynch, see Caravaggio as a tortured artist because he endured many of the same hardships that most tortured artists experience; mood swings, depression, debauchery, paranoia, sloppiness, and suicide.³³ *Young Sick Bacchus* was the artist's attempt to turn his misfortune into art and while it does not depict the most beautiful scene, it still includes innovative lighting, detail, and anatomy.

While Lynch, Longhi, Rottgen, and Bauch all stemmed their theories on the notion that this was a self-portrait created during his time at the hospital after a near-death experience, Maurizio Calvesi's interpretation goes a completely different direction. Calvesi takes a religious approach

³⁰ Jack Neath, "The Tortured Artist Trope", (Medium, 2023), <https://medium.com/@jackneath2/killing-the-tortured-artist-trope-924b38e24b6c>

³¹ Laurinda Dixon, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Melancholic Persona in Art, Ca. 1500-1700*, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 2013), 116

³² Ibid., 117

³³ Ibid., 120

and bases his theory off the various religious works that Caravaggio did during this time. While many believe that Caravaggio's choice to only depict young boys stems from his or his patron's homosexual nature, Calvesi views these depictions as Christological allegories.³⁴ Using Caravaggio's paintings *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (1593), *Bacchus* (1596), *Boy Peeling Fruit* (1592-1593), and *Young Sick Bacchus* (1593), Calvesi connects each figure with a different version of Christ [Figure 5 & 6]. *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* is a representation of Christ as a representation of love and eternal life and *Boy Peeling Fruit* is Christ redeeming humanity of original sin.³⁵ The historian recognizes the Greek God in Caravaggio's *Bacchus* painting as a symbol of resurrection and the offering of Christ's blood through the "chalice" of wine that he is offering to the viewer.³⁶ What is interesting is that he does not recognize the Greek God in *Young Sick Bacchus* and states that the figure is a redeemer with symbol of death shown through the grapes and resurrection through his wreath.³⁷

This theory fully changes the interpretation of the work and transforms the known attributes of the Greek God Bacchus, his grapes and laurel wreath, into Christian representations of death and resurrection. If we look at this theory through a semiotic lens, which is the art historical methodological of signs and what they represent beyond the formal level, the explanation of the symbols may be seen as a reach.³⁸ While semiotics can clarify the deeper meaning of an artwork, sometimes the analyses that people create go too far. Caravaggio was known to bend the rules of religious paintings by often taking people off the street to be his models. This could help justify the Christological allegories of *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* and *Boy Peeling Fruit*, but it seems to clash

³⁴ Unknown, "Caravaggio of the Search for Salvation", (Storia dell'arte, 2023), <https://www.storiadellarterivista.it/shop/articoli/caravaggio-o-la-ricerca-della-salvazione/>. P.1

³⁵ Ibid., p. 1

³⁶ Ibid., p. 1

³⁷ Ibid., p.1

³⁸ Anne D'Alleva, *Methods & Theories of Art History*, (United Kingdom: Laurence King Publishing, 2005), 28

with the inclusion of the Greek God. Stating it that he included all these details of the God just for them to be depictions of Christ seem to contradict each other.

Most of these theories come from the early 1900s, but the different views of the work have continued into the present-day. A more contemporary theory is that of Kristina Hermann Fiore. Fiore is an author who focuses on the investigation of the Borghese Gallery and its history. She sees the painting as a homage of artistic inspiration.³⁹ Like Lynch, Fiore looks back at the works of Lomazzo who used Bacchus to depict the connection between artist and poet. It was a common throughout sixteenth-century Italy for artists to place themselves under the representation of Bacchus as a figure of the creative process.⁴⁰ This theory depicts the artwork as a way for Caravaggio to display his ego as an artist and not as a display of his reaction to his illness. Many contemporary historians agree with Fiore's idea, including Philip Morel.⁴¹ Morel believes that Caravaggio included the ivy crown as a symbol of the glory of the poet/painter and that the aggressive squeezing of the grapes in the Gods right hands is a recreation of the "invention" of wine.⁴² One can take this explanation further by stating that the artist included invention to mirror his own inventions in the art world. This would not be the first time that Caravaggio unashamedly uses a divine figure to mirror his artistic ego in his artwork. His *David with the Head of Goliath* displayed his confidence in his artistic abilities through the bold and secure presentation of the figures [Figure 7].⁴³ Many believe that the head of Goliath is also a self-portrait of the artist, which lead us to think about the artist's reasoning behind such depictions of himself.

³⁹ Borghese Gallery, p.11

⁴⁰ Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 34

⁴¹ Borghese Gallery, p. 11

⁴² Borghese Gallery p. 11

⁴³ Alyson McGowan, "Reframing severed representations: from biography towards a psychoanalytical reading of Caravaggio's self-portraiture", (Tennessee: University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2020), 21

There seems to be a clear divide between historians when it comes to the true meaning behind the painting. Earlier historians used the writings of Roberto Longhi which introduced the suggestion of a self-portrait from the painter's illness. With this base, scholars like Bauch, Rottgen, and Lynch theorized deeper meanings on drunkenness, melancholy, and taste. Other scholars, like Calvesi, took a different perspective and connected the secular pieces back to the religious pieces of Caravaggio. More contemporary scholars took a methodological approach and processed the painting as a call out of the "troubled genius". While I can agree that all these theories are highly justifiable and come with great proof, I see a different meaning when looking at the work.

I see *Young Sick Bacchus* as Caravaggio's attempt to go against the artistic canon during that time. As stated earlier, his talents brought scandal to Rome because they were so different from his academic predecessors. Everything he did was unconventional from his dramatic use of light to his improper use of street models for religious scenes. Bacchus would have been a well-known and easily deciphered figure in Rome at the time. But Caravaggio included so many anomalies that it would have been hard to recognize the God without the grapes and the wreath, and even those were uncharacteristic. The grapes are an unappetizing shade of yellow and the leaves on the wreath are decaying. Both attributes along with the exclusion of the Bacchus's thyrsus, his staff, humanizes the God. Caravaggio took a classical figure that would have been portrayed on such a high pedestal by his counterparts and brought it down to a mortal resemblance. The painter's defiance of the standard Renaissance and Baroque art canon started early in his career and *Young Sick Bacchus* is a prime example of that.

While we may never know the true meaning behind the grotesque depiction of the Greek God, it is easy to say that Caravaggio did not make it with the market audience in mind. This is reflected in the fact that it was taken as compensation of thievery and tax evasion two separate times before landing in the Borghese Gallery. This disturbing painting will continue to create

questions as the years go on and Caravaggio's legacy, whether it includes the good or the bad characteristics of the artist, continues. Even though this may not be one of the artist's most memorable works, it is a perfect representation of his innovative artistic choices. So, given all this information, what do you think the true meaning is behind Caravaggio's decision to disturb the divine?

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Figure 1: *Young Sick Bacchus*, Caravaggio, 1593, oil on canvas, photo credits: the Borghese Gallery and Museum



Figure 2: *The Musicians*, Caravaggio, 1597, oil on canvas, photo credits: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 3: *Bacchus*, Caravaggio, c. 1596, oil on canvas, photo credits: Uffizi Galleries



Figure 4: *Self-portrait as the Abbot of the Accademia del Val di Blenio*, Lomazzo, c. 1568, oil on canvas, Milan, photo credits: Brera Pinacoteca



Figure 5: *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, Caravaggio, 1593, oil on canvas, photo credits: Borghese Gallery and Museum



Figure 6: *Boy Peeling Fruit*, Caravaggio, 1592-1593, oil on canvas, photo credits: Longhi Collection



Figure 7: *David with the Head of Goliath*, Caravaggio, c. 1610, oil on canvas, photo credits: Borghese Gallery and Museum