Allegorizing Choice:
The Apollo Flaying Marsyas Myth in a Religious Context

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Ovid's tale of Apollo's musical contest with Marsyas stirred the imagination of artists in the seventeenth century, just as it had in the previous century. The moral implications infusing this story in western literature determined how painters approached the tale, what scenes they portrayed, and which figures they emphasized. As part of a long tradition of a moralizing Ovid (Allen 163-99), a more insightful religious context was imparted to the story in the second half of the sixteenth century by the Italian poet Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara (ca. 1517-1572), who first published his Italian translation and free elaboration of Ovid's Le metamorfosi di Ovidio ridotte in ottava rima in 1561. Quite famous in his day, Anguillara was best known for his poetry.1 Giorgio Vasari in his Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects describes him as "a man who had distinguished himself greatly by a certain sort of poesies" (Vasari 5: 46).2 In fact, Anguillara's fame was the result of his Metamorfosi, which saw at least thirty-two editions by 1624—all by Venetian publishers (Worthen 587; Thomas 227; Bianconi 218). According to Philipp Fehl, the popularity of Anguillara's translation of Ovid continued into the eighteenth century during Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's time ("Farewell to Jokes" 779).

Although there is no direct evidence that seventeenth-century painters actually read Anguillara's text, its popularity and availability make it reasonable to assume they would have been familiar with it. Artists commissioned to depict scenes from Ovid's Metamorphoses would surely have consulted one of its numerous editions. Modern scholars have demonstrated the influence of Anguillara's Ovid on Annibale Carracci's Perseus and Andromeda (Dempsey 95) and Nicholas Poussin's The Realm of Flora (Worthen 579-85; Thomas 227-30). It is, however, possible to find additional subsequent oblique references to Anguillara's text—such as the two versions of Apollo Flaying Marsyas by the seventeenth-century painters Domenichino and Guercino. Focusing on these two works, this essay suggests a new reading of them through Anguillara's religious insinuations.

Both artworks share a deviation from the traditional iconography
with the inclusion of shepherds depicted as a separate group in the composition. The inclusion of shepherds is certainly original for that specific scene. Although their addition can be seen as simply a conventional device meant to help the viewer enter the scene, they might have another role as well: The paintings are depictions not simply of a god punishing a satyr but of shepherds watching a god punishing a satyr. And their presence may add another layer of meaning to the traditional understanding of this scene. These paintings were completed at the dawn of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, known today as the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48), when religious motives still dominated the turn of the war’s events. So a contextual religious dimension in addition to what traditionally had a moral intention would fit the zeitgeist of the time.

Domenichino executed his version (Fig. 1) in 1617, and Guercino completed his a year later. Domenichino had been asked by the powerful Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini, a nephew of the late Pope Clement VIII, to decorate the Sala del Parnaso in the garden pavilion of his Villa del Belvedere in Frascati with ten scenes from the life of Apollo.6 Today, only two and a half frescoes remain in situ; the others, including Apollo Flaying Marsyas, are in the National Gallery, London.6 Apollo Flaying Marsyas was the most important painting among the ten decorations.