Caravaggism in the Work of Guido Reni

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An important key to understanding Guido Reni's personal style is his interest in opposing qualities. These opposites include his representation of tensions between the heavenly and temporal, holy grace triumphant over an earthly morass, virtuous physical beauty versus the execrated Christian body. On this partially autobiographical element of Reni's style, very little has been written in depth, although there is some mention of this dialectic in most of the literature on Reni. Of those slight obligatory references, most discuss composition and the opposing relation of Caravaggio's style to Reni's. If a similarity between the artists is mentioned, it is usually in reference to Reni's 1604 *Crucifixion of St. Peter* (Figure 1) or, in a few cases, the 1606 *David with the Head of Goliath*. More often, however, the style (as well as temperament) of Caravaggio is shown to be antithetical in most every way to what Reni stood for. For this reason, the existential naturalism of Caravaggio and the idealistic naturalism of Reni are usually examined as polar opposites giving rise to Baroque trends throughout Europe. This overly-simplified manner for understanding these artists deserves a scholarly response, since it has led to a misunderstanding of the true complexity of Reni's artistic contribution.

Reni's lifelong interest in expressing pairs of opposite forces was aided in part by Caravaggio's mastery of the same technique, which manipulated the rhetorical procedures of the Carracci in order to raise the emotions of the spectator. Also, Caravaggio's style was unavoidable for Reni and many others of the time whose patrons looked forward to the new, expressive tenebrism and realism of Caravaggio. Major Reni scholars, however, find him so profoundly un-Caravaggesque that they typically mention only a handful of works of about 1604-6 where Caravaggio is thought to have only momentarily touched him. Actually, Reni's portrayal of Caravaggesque elements may be seen in three distinct phases of his artistic career: the early years after his exposure to Caravaggio in 1600, lasting until 1607; the middle years, during his peak of success, through 1619; and the late years of his prolific and influential Bolognese studio, lasting until 1642, the year of his death.

Reni's first trip to Rome was by invitation of Cardinal Facchinetti in order to copy Raphael's *Ecstasy of St. Cecilia*. This was during the Jubilee Year of 1600, when the dominant theme was the revival of early Christian roots. This painting, lauded for gentleness that the original lacked, in addition to the 1601 *Martyrdom of St. Cecilia* and *Coronation of Sts. Cecilia and Valerian* gave Reni popularity which extended, for the first time, beyond Bologna. By looking at these, we can see that Reni called upon the simple, rigid symmetry of early Christian paintings as well as the trend of local interest in tenebrism.

Also at this time, the Cavaliere d'Arpino was instrumental in obtaining important patronage for Reni. He did this to overshadow the growing success of Caravaggio. By 1602, Reni was starting to work toward a more expressive naturalism of his own. The rigid compositions of the Saint Cecilia paintings were set aside for more free and active paintings. He did this, for example, in his 1603 *Farmers Presenting Gifts to Saint Benedict* where, by placing a large naturalistic male nude in the foreground of a graceful composition of many figures, he had surpassed even his most recent Roman commissions.

In 1604, in keeping with his partnership with d'Arpino to outshine Caravaggio as well as Annibale Carracci, through more famous commissions, Reni painted the *Christ at the Column*. Ever ready to explore newer options, Reni chose dramatic lighting to render the sharply naturalistic Christ isolated in the shallow, dark foreground. Otherwise, the treatment overall is delicate: from the finely rendered folds of Christ's loin cloth to the light reddening of the cheeks, shoulder and feet; from the elegant modelling of the limbs and feet, to the careful treatment of shadows which give dramatic effect without being opaque.[1] As Otto Kurtz perceptively notes, the decided interpretation of Caravaggio's influence on Reni is in Reni's replacement of the singular individual by way of the typical character, "[abstracting] from the temporal moment and [favoring] an absolute condition of the timeless ideal."[2] Thus he sought to represent the symbolic dualistic realities of his figures, although never giving up his preference for exhibiting the grace and beauty of the body, to demonstrate rather than activate his figures.

Sometime in October, 1604, Reni finished his first Roman masterpiece, *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* (Figure 1), for Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini. Malvasia writes that "d'Arpino promised Cardinal Borghese that Guido would transform himself into Caravaggio and would paint the picture in Caravaggio's

1 D. Stephen Pepper, "Caravaggio and Reni: Contrasts in Attitudes," *Art Quarterly* 34 (1971): 327.

2 "Die Ersetzung des Einmalig-Individuellen durch das Typische ist die entscheidende Umdeutung." Otto Kurtz, "Guido Reni," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, new ed. 11 (1937): 193.

dark and driven manner."[3] Having studied Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* in the Cerasi Chapel, Reni, in contrast to some features in his preliminary drawing (Figure 2), chose to eliminate all but the principle figures, placing them in the foreground on an axis around which bodies and limbs project, muscles tense beneath the heavenly spotlight. A Caravaggesque young bravo with a plumed toque gets his hammer. Reni even considered, in his study of the composition, including the buttocks of an executioner turned directly toward the viewer in typical Caravaggesque fashion. His painting, otherwise, is un-Caravaggesque in its attention to graceful and decorous gestures in a classical, triangular composition, as well as its lack of pain and movement. Reni's Saint Peter displays a struggle between his ignoble helplessness and noble resignation.[4] His pose is very noble and elegant while his body appears no better than, as Stephen Pepper notes, "a piece of poultry."[5] Whereas Michelangelo painted Saint Peter's physical suffering, and Caravaggio expressed the saint's psychological dilemma between physical and spiritual forces, Reni wishes to show the saint's acceptance of and adherence to divine grace even in his most compromised position.

Nevertheless, Reni avoided to some extent what may have been recognized as Caravaggio's folly: portraying, in several rejected paintings of his early Roman career, holy subjects as helpless victims of capricious gallants. Such is the case with his rejected first version of the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* for the Cerasi Chapel, known only through the copy in the Hermitage. The humility in Reni's subjects would be just as degrading to their helpless human forms if it were not for the thorough application of his signature *grazia* (or divine vision).[6]

Reni's main concern was to exclude any element that would detract from the timeless, idealized, spiritual moment. By comparing his 1607-8 *Samson Slaying the Philistines* with its study (Figures 3 and 4), it is apparent that his first instinct was to depict a violent and active Samson over a writhing hoard of fallen soldiers attempting to defend themselves. His primary means for improvement, however, is more in attune with the Carracci, as he has simplified and classicized the geometric composition with monumental, effortless figures. All action is suspended in timeless rapture. Still, Reni's Caravaggesque process of balancing calculated relationships gives form to the reality of his subjects.[7] By this example, we see that the uncertainty of his early years has passed, and with the security of his reputation with wealthy patrons such as the Borghese, he continues to follow his formalist method of selecting from Raphael, the Carracci and Caravaggio those elements which emphasize *grazia*, that delightful angelic grace.

Reni's 1611 *Massacre of the Innocents* (Figure 5) contains two prototypes: the first is a study by Raphael for his *Massacre of the Innocents* (Figure 6), especially in the outstretched executioner in reverse on the right of Reni's version, and the second is the face of the screaming boy fleeing in Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, seen as the face of the mother to the right.

Not since the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* had Reni the opportunity to undertake an altarpiece. This *Massacre of the Innocents* is easily one of Reni's most famous works, but it is not, as it is typically described, "historically romantic," "intimately romantic," evocative, sentimental or neoclassical.[8] These descriptions of Reni's painting do not apply because of his unique unity of Raphaelesque rhythmic, metered and symmetrical composition; Carraccesque scenery and classicism; and as Gian Carlo Cavalli states, the Caravaggesque "thoroughly studied counterpoint of movements and of intense color relationships [governing] the action."[9] These paintings reveal that Reni's approach is strictly formalist: a painterly composite of formal elements drawn together from a portfolio of sketches so that, rather than acting, they demonstrate symbolically their roles.

Caravaggesque technique came to be a handy short cut for intensifying dramatic interaction in classical arrangements. Reni imbues *Lot and His Daughters* (Figure 7), of 1615, with a weighty urgency, as the figures crowd the picture plane, divided by pitch darkness and stark light, held together by the red cloak and interplay of gestures.

In his earlier and middle years, Reni's combination of Carraccesque and Caravaggesque elements won him praise for his anticipation of the first phases of French romanticism. For the *Feats of Hercules* series painted between 1614 and 1623, Reni was lauded for their monumentality, rich color and breadth of treatment.[10] The same was true for his *Apollo and Marsyas* (Figure 8) of 1622, as it may remind one of Géricault or Delacroix. Reni's flexibility and facility for portraying the

3 Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *The Life of Guido Reni*, trans. Catherine and Robert Enggass (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980) 50.

4 G. C. Argan, "Guido Reni," *Comunità*, 1954, in *Studi e note dal Bramante al Canova* (Rome, 1970): 253-261.

5 Pepper 335.

6 *Grazia* is a response Malvasia often used. G. F. Fabrini defines *grazia* as what Dolce considers that "indefinable presence which proves so attractive [*aggridire*]...operating...so that it fills another person's soul with infinite delight" referring to paintings by artists such as Raphael and Titian. D.S. Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue of His Works with an Introductory Text* (New York: New York University Press, 1984) 60.

7 "Ci si inoltra nel percorso selettivo delle corrispondenze calcolate e degli equilibri obligati, che è per Reni la condizione de la visibilità stessa del reale." F. Valli in: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, *Guido Reni 1575-1642* (Bologna, 1988) 44.

8 F. Valli in: Los Angeles County Museum, *Guido Reni 1575-1642* (Los Angeles and Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1988) 191.

9 Gian Carlo Cavalli quoted by Andrea Emiliani in: Los Angeles County Museum 63.

10 Benedict Nicolson in: Los Angeles County Museum 352.

sublime and terrible undoubtedly contributed to his being nearly the most influential and famous post-Renaissance Italian painter. Emerging from darkness into the starkly lit foreground are the *Combat of Cupids and Putti* of 1627 and the *Portrait of a Widow* (Figure 9). Many scholars agree that the portrait is of Reni's mother who died sometime between 1630 and 1632, which dates the work to that time. The dramatic naturalism of shadows created by the light source directed from the left expresses a profound psychological and emotional condition.[11]

Both Caravaggio's *Flagellation* (Figure 10), of the early Neapolitan period of 1607, and Reni's painted sketch of the *Flagellation* (Figure 11), from 1640-42, illustrate the point of forceful versus noble ways of painting. Yet both artists use a similar composition, combining the push and pull of twisting henchmen in contrast to the incorruptible body of the suffering Christ. The profoundly symbolic occurrence of innocence under a spotlight, facing the powers of darkness is a masterfully conveyed dichotomy for both artists.

While it would be incorrect to consider Reni among the dedicated Caravaggisti, his use of certain Caravaggesque elements is obvious in his starkly lit, dynamic, compact compositions of monumental figures close to the picture plane, themselves and their constituent parts dramatically projecting into dark surroundings. For painters like Reni, eclecticism, by virtue of its culmination of styles, defies the certain definition of original style; thus his use of Caravaggio's manner, be it ever so slight, begins as early as his copy of Raphael's *Saint Cecilia* of 1600 and shows up periodically until as late as *The Flagellation of Christ*, 1640-42. At Agostino Carracci's funeral in 1603, Reni would have heard Lucio Fabrio's oration attributing to Agostino the principle of eclecticism as that of individual autonomy. Fabrio states that the eclectic painter:

> imitating the best painters without ever binding oneself to the manner of any one painter, however great he might be, because he deemed that no one had ever been found who, setting up as his ultimate goal the imitation of someone else's example, had ever been able to equal, let alone outstrip him.[12]

Reni openly experimented with naturalism as well as realism, classicism as well as romanticism, to the extent that his painting style has been characterized as complex and Janus-like, bringing together several kinds of would-be opposites, such as *colore* and *disegno*, the erotic and the chaste, and engagement and detachment.[13] The characterization of Caravaggio's style is similar to this with an emphasis on the erotic and engagement, while Reni's emphasis is on the chaste and detachment. Utilized in Reni's classical and markedly symbolic theater of opposites are virtue and vice, the old and the young, the beautiful and the ugly, sharply elegant bodies in contrast to slack bodies with stiffening joints and unkempt beards.[14] It is not enough to say that these artists paint opposing qualities of the same naturalistic experience, one Dionysian, the other Apollonian, but that they, in so doing use the same system of representing pairs of opposites, like *colore* and *disegno*.

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11 A. Mazza in: Los Angeles County Museum 204.

12 Ezio Raimondi in: Los Angeles County Museum 120.

13 Michael Levey, "Frankfort-am-Main: Guido Reni und Europa," *Burlington Magazine* 131 (Feb. 1989): 169.

14 Emiliani in: Los Angeles County Museum 49.

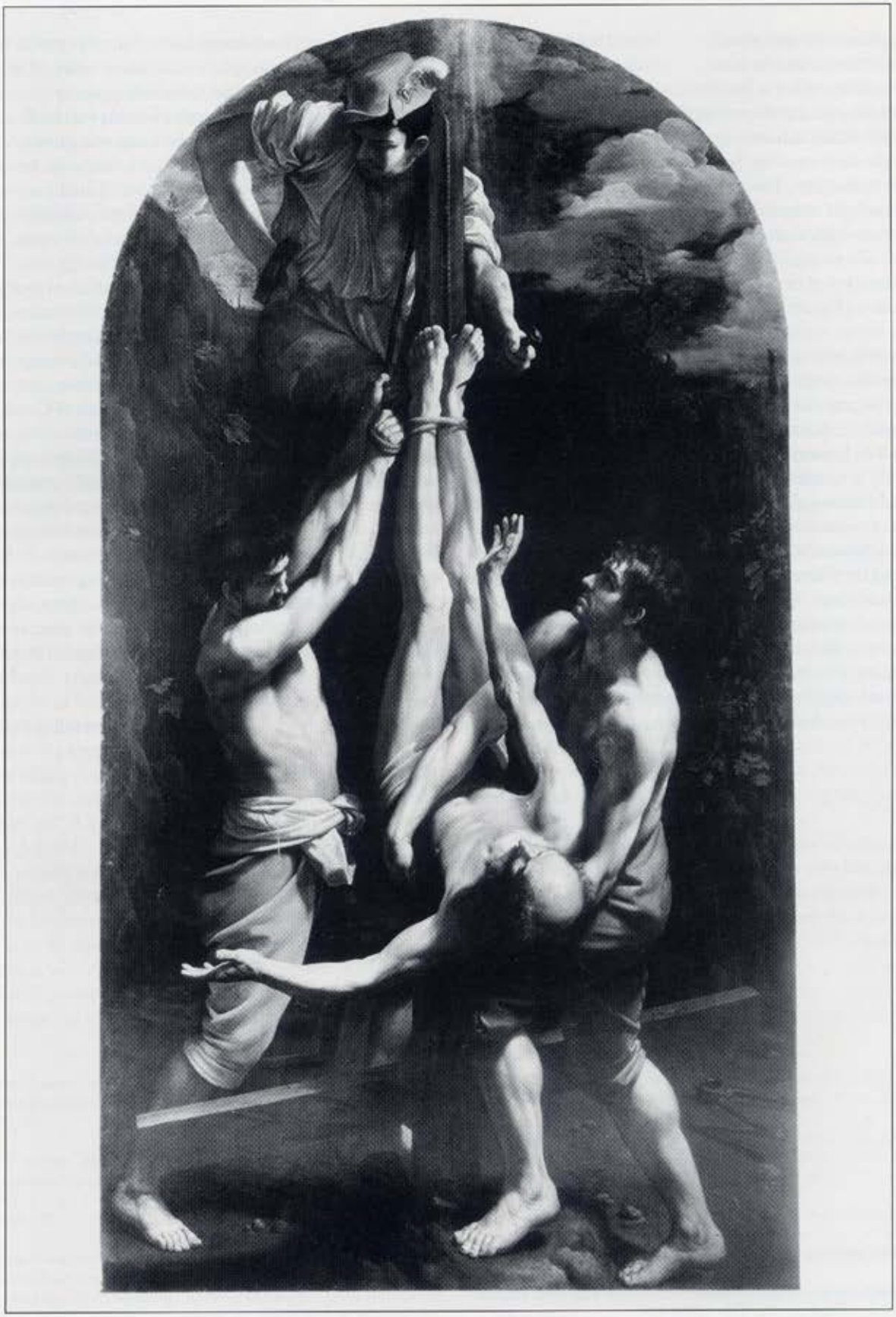


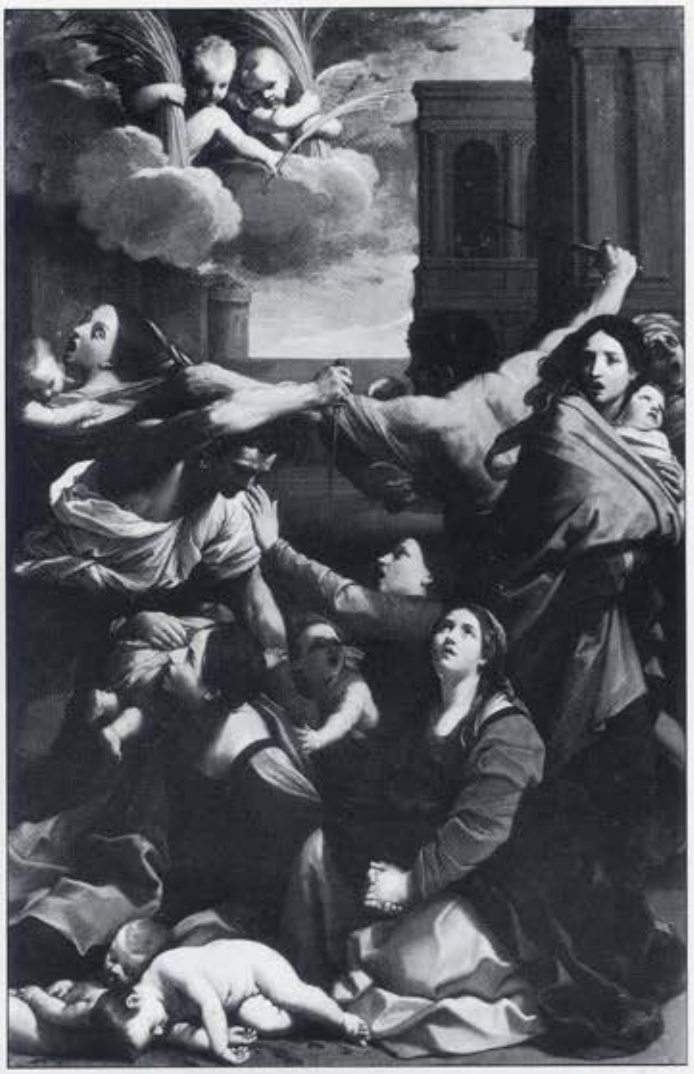
Figure 1. Guido Reni, *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, oil on canvas, Vatican Museum, Vatican City.

Figure 2. Guido Reni, *Study for the Crucifixion of St. Peter*, 1604, Szepmuzeszeti Museum, Budapest (Museum of Fine Arts).

Figure 3. Guido Reni, *Study for Samson Slaying the Philistines*, graphite and wash on paper, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Windsor.

Figure 4. Guido Reni, *Samson Slaying the Philistines*, fresco, Vatican Museum, Vatican City.

Figure 5. Guido Reni, *Massacre of the Innocents*, oil on canvas, 1611, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.



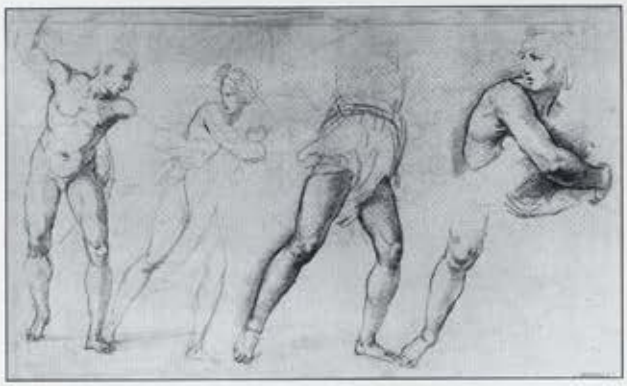


Figure 6. Raphael, *Study for the Massacre of the Innocents*, c. 1510, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.

Figure 7. Guido Reni, *Lot and His Daughters*, oil on canvas, 1615, National Gallery, London.

Figure 8. Guido Reni, *Apollo and Marsyas*, oil on canvas, 1622, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

Figure 9. Guido Reni, *Portrait of a Widow*, oil on canvas, 1630-32 (attribution), Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.

Figure 10. Caravaggio, *The Flagellation*, oil on canvas, 1607, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.

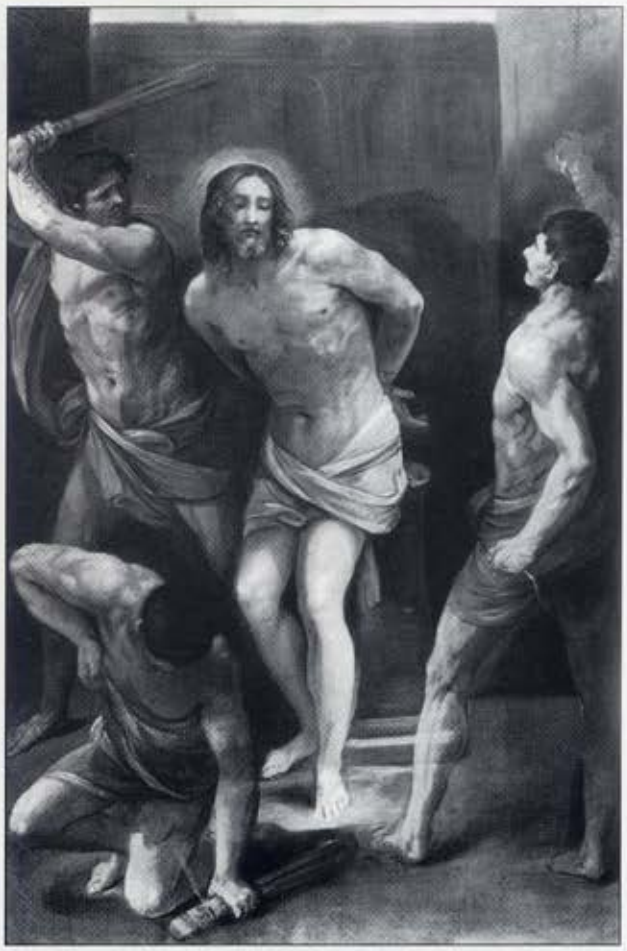


Figure 11. Guido Reni, *The Flagellation of Christ*, oil on canvas, 1640-42, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.