

Virtuous Woman to *Femme Fatale* in J.A.D. Ingres' *Antiochus and Stratonice*

A new reception of a classical theme, story, or motif almost always (and perhaps necessarily) brings about some change of meaning. The change or changes may simply be a matter of adding implications or associations, but in some cases the new work may actually subvert or reverse the meaning of the classical original. A fascinating case of such subverted meaning is found in the visual treatment of the virtuous classical character Stratonice of Syria by painter J.A.D. Ingres.

Appian (*Syriaca* 59-61) and Plutarch (*Demetrius* 38) are the main sources of the story involving Stratonice, and while the two authors differ on details, both emphasize the outstanding virtue of all parties involved in a potentially catastrophic love triangle. King Seleucus has married the much younger princess Stratonice. Seleucus' son Antiochus, however, conceives a burning love for his step mother, and after unsuccessful attempts to overcome his passion, he decides to waste away with starvation rather than act on or give indication of his feelings. The wise physician Erasistratus manages to discover the cause of Antiochus' love sickness and informs the king. The king then selflessly gives up his wife and joins her in marriage to his son, though, as Appian tells us, Antiochus and Stratonice require considerable persuasion before they accept the happy solution. Thus, each character demonstrates remarkable virtue and selflessness.

The subject of Antiochus and Stratonice was treated with increasing frequency by painters from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century. Most of the treatments emphasize the happy outcome, and paintings from the 1600 and 1700's are usually variations on a basic tableau where the doctor feels Antiochus' racing pulse, the king guides Stratonice toward her new husband, and Stratonice with modest gaze accepts her not unpleasant fate. This moment of happy denouement finds its most famous and visually effective treatment in the 1774 work of the

young Jacques-Louis David (this was the painting that won him the Prix de Rome). Roughly fifty years later J.A.D. Ingres paints his own *Antiochus and Stratonice*. The consistency of theme's representations up through Ingres' version and the fact that Ingres was David's greatest pupil make Ingres' painting all the more striking. For, whether Ingres intended it or not, his visual composition transforms the virtuous Stratonice into a figure of ambiguity and even danger.

A comparison of Ingres' painting with David's highlights Ingres' remarkable transformation of the story and the rather simple means he uses to bring about the change. The four main characters are common to both paintings (father, doctor, love-sick son, young stepmother). David places the doctor and son on the left, the king somewhat in the middle, and Stratonice to right of the king. All four are turned toward each other at the moment of happy resolution. Ingres, however, reverses the sides on which the son and doctor are located and depicts the king collapsed in despair on his son's bed. Ingres also repositions Stratonice and places her alone on the left side of the picture. Thus, three of the four figures are looking away from the others (only the doctor turns to look at Stratonice). In Ingres' painting, Stratonice's stance is not only turned away from Antiochus and the others, but it is also more closed off and inward looking. Furthermore, in a floor decoration near Stratonice's feet, Ingres has subtly but clearly placed an image of the Sphinx. Thus, through simple visual means, Ingres has subverted David's image and changed the mood and significance of the classical story without ever having to change its narrative elements.