Reframing severed representations: from biography towards a psychoanalytical reading of Caravaggio's self-portraiture

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Reframing Severed Representations:
From Biography towards a Psychoanalytical Reading of Caravaggio’s Self-Portraiture

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**Introduction**

Perhaps one of the most celebrated artists of all time and responsible for ushering in a new style of art during the Baroque period, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio continues to emerge from the pages of history and captivate art historians and art lovers alike. He has been the focus of countless scholars and art critics since his emergence as an artist in 16th century Rome.

Considering this, the lack of tangible historical documentation by the artist and his contemporaries are striking. The accounts historians have of Caravaggio are from second-hand sources and all these were written after his death. The artist himself left very little documentary evidence of his own creative legacy. This research attempts to fill the scholarly gaps due to this lack of evidence, by specifically exploring the artist through a psychoanalytical lens to create a clearer portrait of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio as an artist. This research aims to accomplish this goal by consulting alternative primary sources – second-hand accounts, church records from the Lombardy region, bank statements, and police records from the State Archives of Rome and Naples – examining these documents and biographical aspects of his life in dialogue with his self-portraiture, from a psychoanalytical framework.

This project also draws upon contemporary sources such as research by Andrew Graham-Dixon and Michael Fried.¹ The sources have been carefully reviewed and in juxtaposition to primary sources, such as Giovanni Pietro Bellori.² By combining modern and primary historical documentation with a Lacanian psychoanalytical reading of the artist’s self-portraits, this research moves beyond biography to shed further light on Caravaggio’s oeuvre and the complex dimensions of his self-portraiture. Lacan provides us with an important lens through which to read the artist’s work from a psychoanalytical perspective. Specifically, this research aims to

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examine key works of Caravaggio in juxtaposition to the Lacanian triad and the theory of castration anxiety.

In his article, Michael Fried describes Caravaggio’s oeuvre by saying “Caravaggio is one of those rare painters whose paintings must be understood as evoking a primary, even primordial, relationship to the painter himself…” Considering this, Lacan has been consulted to add a psychoanalytic approach to Caravaggio’s self-portraits, as certain aspects of psychoanalytical theory he developed, such as his concept of the triad, will prove particularly useful for our reading of the artist’s own depictions of himself in various guises. Over the course of his life, Caravaggio has been noted to have completed a total of possibly ten self-portraits, some of which are still being debated by scholars such as Michael Fried, Andrew Graham-Dixon and Leo Bersani.4

This research also will present the possibility that by the end of his life, Caravaggio was concerned with issues of forgiveness as he waited for a papal pardon. One of his last works, David with the Head of Goliath, circa 1610, provides a clue that supports this idea, which will be examined later in this paper. Thus, arguing that while Caravaggio certainly had a flair for drama in both his work and personal life, he also strove to correct his behavior – or at the very least, was remorseful and desired absolution for his sins.

Part One: Biography

Before examining Caravaggio’s self-portraits through a psychoanalytical lens, focusing specifically on his Young Sick Bacchus and David with the Head of Goliath, this first section is dedicated to outlining biographical aspects of Caravaggio’s life. It will attempt to establish a reconstructed biography of Caravaggio, based on verifiable information pulled from Giovanni

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4 See Appendix for illustrations of the remaining self-portraits mentioned here.
Pietro Bellori account of the artist's' life in his work, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architect*. While Bellori was a rival to Caravaggio and a strict classicist, he was also well educated. It is possible that Bellori did not approve of Caravaggio’s techniques as an artist, but he must have seen something in his work that compiled him to write his biography and include him in his writings on modern painters, sculptors and architects. This research was also conducted using Andrew Graham-Dixon’s contemporary examination and alternative primary sources from police records, church records, and archival records.\(^5\) However, the ultimate goal of this research is to go well beyond biography by conducting a fresh analysis of primary sources and select self-portraits.

There are three early biographies on Caravaggio. The first was written in the second decade of the seventeenth century by a physician from Siena named Giulio Mancini.\(^6\) It is theorized that this is the same physician that treated Caravaggio in Rome when he was hospitalized at Santa Maria della Consolazione; however, this has not been verified by documentation. The rival painter, Giovanni Pietro Bellori, wrote the second biography, and was published in 1642.\(^7\) The final biography was written roughly three decades later by another rival painter, antiquarian, and art theorist, known as Giovanni Baglione. This research draws upon Bellori’s references to Caravaggio’s life, as well as newer scholarship conducted by Andrew Graham-Dixon, Michael Fried and other specialists of Caravaggio currently active in this field.

**Not so Humble Beginnings**

\(^5\) These records were reviewed in *A life Sacred and Profane* by Andrew Graham-Dixon. However, the author of this research project also had the opportunity to review many of the same sources in the state Archives of Naples and Rome in the Winter of 2018 and Summer of 2019.


Born to Fermo Merisi and Lucia Aratorì, Caravaggio spent his earliest years in the upper-middle class of Milan. His farther Fermo was an ordinary stone mason. A number of census records belonging to the Catholic Church, referred to him as a *mastro*, designating him as a qualified artisan with the ability to set up shop and hire apprentices. He presumably made a modest living but there was no indication of great social pretensions. His business operated in Milan and according to the probate inventory lists he owned “a set of old iron mason tools,” but these lists did not include any books or instruments that would indicate a knowledge of theoretical aspects of architecture,\(^8\) suggesting that he was never in direct service to the *Marchese* as previously believed.\(^9\)

There were, however, close links between Caravaggio’s family and the noble Colonna and Sforza families of Italy, but these links originated from the side of the painter’s mother.\(^10\) Giovan Giacomo Aratori, Caravaggio’s maternal grandfather was an *agrimensor* whose job it was to help resolve land disputes and ownership rights.\(^11\) His work put him directly in contact with the Colonna family who owned a great amount of land in the region. Contrary to Caravaggio’s father and paternal grandfather who worked with their hands, Giovan Giacomo was a professional whose work generally required more literacy in geometry and arithmetic than that of a mason.

Giovan Giacomo’s responsibilities meant that he was a familiar figure among the local nobility and acted directly as an agent for the Marchese Francesco I Sforze di Caravaggio. The importance of the relationship between the Merisi family and the Sforze and Colonna families


\(^9\) Marquis, in Italian, derives from the word Marche which in Italian means borders. Marquis is a noble man who is the governor of a border Provence and is in charge of protecting those borders.

\(^10\) The link between Caravaggio’s mother and the Colonna family is an invaluable piece of information, Giacomo Berra, *Il Giovane Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio; la sua Famiglia e la scelta dell’ars pingendi*, (Paragone, vol. 53 2002), 40-128.

\(^11\) The author of this research has translated “Agrimensor” from the Agrimensor. “Ager” meaning field or territory and “mensor” meaning a measurer or surveyor in Latin.
followed Caravaggio into adulthood, and he would call on the support of Costanza Colonna, the wife of the Marchese Francesco I Sforze, numerous times in his adult life—specifically, during his legal disputes in Rome. This relationship could be responsible for Caravaggio’s view of himself and altered his personal perception of his place on the social hierarchy, leaving an important psychological mark on the artist’s life, as this research will demonstrate.

**The Epidemic of 1576**

Caravaggio was no stranger to tragedy. His whole life seemed to be packed with hardships and disadvantages. In the summer of 1576, he would experience his first taste of what life had planned for him, and it would prove to be undesirable. Caravaggio was only five years old when an outbreak of bubonic plague struck Milan. A census from the Milanese parish of Santa Maria della Passerella records the presence of Fermo and Lucia Merisi, Fermo’s first daughter from a previous marriage, Caravaggio’s paternal grandfather Giovan Battista Merisi, and Caravaggio’s four younger brothers. Oddly enough, Caravaggio’s name was not listed in the census, and neither were his two-year-old sister, Caterina, or his youngest brother, Giovan Pietro.\(^{12}\)

It is possible that they had already been evacuated from the city in order to protect them from the pestilence or the censor simply missed their presence in the household. Regardless, the historical records show that the entire family moved to the countryside town of Caravaggio in the autumn of 1577.\(^{13}\) Because of this, there is no reason to assume that the artist was living anywhere other than with his parents when the outbreak struck; and so, it is very likely that he witnessed the horror of the epidemic first-hand as a child. Due to these dramatic events in

\(^{12}\) Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 44.
\(^{13}\) Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 45.
Caravaggio’s life, a psychoanalytic reading of his work offers an appropriate means of providing greater insight to their meaning.

The plague reached its peak when Caravaggio was only five years old, but it was the following year when the contagion reached his family. The deaths of Caravaggio’s father and his paternal grandparents were all recorded within a day of one another in October of 1577. A separate document indicated that Caravaggio’s uncle Pietro had died of plague earlier that year in August of 1577. By the age of six, Caravaggio had lost nearly every patriarchal member of his family— a tragedy for any family, but psychologically devastating for a young child.

All Roads Lead to Rome

It was in the autumn of 1592 when a young Caravaggio traveled to Rome to set up shop. Some historians, like Paul Johnson, believe that Caravaggio had fled Milan due to inflicting an injury on an officer during unknown quarrel. In his book, *Art: A New History*, Johnson touches on this instant in Caravaggio’s life that occurred before he was twenty years old. He presumably had been part of a quarrel in which an officer was wounded, prompting him to abandon his position under master painter, Simone Peterzano. Before Caravaggio’s premature departure from Peterzano, the contract between the young aspiring painter and the master indicated a relationship where Peterzano would provide room and board along with expert art instruction for the following four years. This apprenticeship began in the spring of 1584. However, some theories suggest that Caravaggio did not complete the full course of his apprenticeship as suggested by his earliest paintings done while residing in Rome due to his immature technique.

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He arrived in Rome without a fixed address and barely enough *scudi*\(^{18}\) to feed himself, but Caravaggio proved to be resilient, and after a few short months found himself doing hackwork for the highly successful painter, Giuseppe Cesari.\(^{19}\) Cesari was Pope Clement VIII’s favorite painter, and Caravaggio specialized in painting flowers and fruits in his workshop.

While Caravaggio had connections in Rome (such as his uncle Ludovico Merisi, a priest, as well as Constanza Collona), historians theorize that he fended mostly for himself.\(^{20}\) Caravaggio moved from place to place and studio to studio, searching tirelessly for employment and direction. It was during this disruption of seeking a roof and commission, Caravaggio formed close relationships that would prove to be useful to further his career. He became well acquainted with the painter Prospero Orsi, the architect Onorio Longhi, and sixteen-year-old Sicilian artist Mario Minniti. Orsi, who was an established professional, introduced Caravaggio to influential collectors. Longhi, on the other hand, introduced him to the world of Roman street fighting, while Minniti served as a friend, a model, and a suspected lover.\(^{21}\)

In 1594, Caravaggio produced the composition that could be considered his first masterpiece and would grab the attention of a very important art patron, Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte. This Cardinal would be Caravaggio’s key into a higher realm of elite patronage in the art world. Del Monte would do more than sponsor Caravaggio’s work. He also housed, fed, and provided for the artist. Art historians, such as Howard Hibbard and Andrew

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\(^{18}\) A type of currency used in Rome during the 17th century.

\(^{19}\) The *scudo* was the currency for the Papal States until the 19th century.


\(^{21}\) Fred Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages, Vol.II*, (Boston: Cengage/Gardner 2017), 594. Kleiner references Robert Engass and Jonathan Brown, *Italian and Spanish Art 1600-1750* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1992). As a personal opinion, the complex homoerotic relationship with Minniti would have a large role in Caravaggio’s work in Rome as well as appear in his matured late style. As noted by Kleiner, art historians debate the homosexuality or bisexuality of Caravaggio. While there are many theories, Kleiner argues that evidence is lacking,
Graham-Dixon, continue to debate if a sexual relationship or desire existed within this professional relationship. While many historians, like Hibbard, claim that a sexual desire existed between Caravaggio and Del Monte, Graham-Dixon has argued that these rumors may have been propaganda fueled by the pro-Spanish groups to weaken Del Monte’s power within the church.²²

**Psychological Reading of Criminal Record**

Caravaggio’s criminal activity is possibly one of the most enticing attributes of his character and may reflect psychological issues, such as castration anxiety and a dominant ego-ideal, that the artist may have been grappling with when he created some of his best-known works. As discussed, Caravaggio’s behavior reflected a warped sense of nobility by claiming a higher social status in society than he actually had. In fact, Caravaggio was apprehended numerous times for carrying a weapon throughout Rome, because only noble men were permitted to carry swords in public, according to strict regulations.

For example, on May 28th, 1605, Caravaggio was sighted by Capitoline officers carrying a sword and dagger.²³ He was then arrested for not having written permission to carry such weapons and abruptly taken to prison. During this period, all official documentation was composed in classical Latin because Rome was a state run by the Roman Catholic Church. This particular document contains the statements of the arresting police officer, Captain Pino, written by an official notary and also contains sketches of Caravaggio’s sword and dagger. Caravaggio was later released without charge thanks to Cardinal Francesco Del Monte, the governor of the city and aforementioned patron of Caravaggio.²⁴

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²⁴ The translation of this document was supplied through the State Archives of Rome.
One popularly related altercation transpired on April 24th of 1604, when a waiter reported an assault after serving Caravaggio eight artichokes at the Osteria del Moro, a local restaurant in the artist’s neighborhood. In the report, Caravaggio allegedly threw a plate at the waiter and threatened him with a sword after a verbal altercation regarding the artichokes. Caravaggio had asked the waiter which of the botanical flowers had been cooked in oil and which were cooked in butter. The waiter replied telling Caravaggio to smell them to determine the cooking technique used. This exchange points to a long-lasting cultural feud between northern and southern Italians, which is still prevalent today. Caravaggio accused the waiter of taking him for a barone and responded by throwing the plate and striking the waiter in the face.

Between 1600 and 1606, Caravaggio’s name appeared no less than fourteen times on police records in Rome, ranging from minor misdemeanors to murder. On May 28th, 1606, Caravaggio and a man named Ranuccio Tommassoni were part of a serious brawl. The description of the event resembles the appearance of a modern-day gang war. It was arranged in advance by eight participants. Caravaggio and his three companions met their rivals on the pallacorda court in the Campo Marzio area. The court documents report that the brawl broke out over a gambling debt and resulted in Caravaggio killing Tommassoni. Caravaggio was injured during the fight and, after quickly receiving medical treatment, fled the city with help from the Marchesa Constanza Colona. After this, Caravaggio literally had a price on his head and was sought by Papal authorities.

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25 It is thought that Caravaggio may have believed that the waiter was insulting him for being from the north, implying that Northern Italians lack taste and consider a meal anything covered in butter and dripping with cheese
26 Literally translates to “baron” however, in this context, it is used ironically and means the exact opposite, indicating someone who believes themselves to have taste but in reality, has none.
27 A pallacorda refers to a court where a sport similar to tennis would be played. This game was invented in the 13th century.
28 It is important to understand that Italy was not as we recognize it today. Italy was divided into forty-four states, kingdoms, territories and Duchies. Therefore, while Caravaggio was wanted for murder in Rome, he was free to live and work within other territories.
Circumstances Surrounding Caravaggio’s Death

On July 12, 1607, Caravaggio arrived in Malta after fleeing Naples after once again encountering trouble.\(^\text{29}\) It was here that he was commissioned by Alof de Wignacourt, the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta, to paint his portrait. Wignacourt was so delighted to have such a famous artist as his official painter that on July 14, 1608, Caravaggio was knighted and welcomed into the Order of Saint John as a Knight of Obedience. While in the service of Wignacourt, Caravaggio painted a variety of portraits of his fellow knights, but he also composed *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* – one of his largest works, and, of all of his paintings, the only one he ever signed.\(^\text{30}\)

Caravaggio’s good graces with the Grand Master would not last long. By August 1608, he once again found himself in prison after a disagreement that led to Caravaggio severely insulting another knight.\(^\text{31}\) This action landed Caravaggio in Maltese prison. During this imprisonment, Caravaggio had no connections to figures in high places to come to his aid.

Caravaggio spent the whole month of September being detained at the Prison of Fort San Angelo, inside the *guva*.\(^\text{32}\) This room was reserved for knights who had committed grave offenses. Today, there are still reminisce of medieval melancholic graffiti left on the walls of the cell. One of these records are left from a sixteenth century Scottish knight of Malta named John Sandilands.\(^\text{33}\) The engraving translates as “imprisoned forever, victim of evil triumphing over good – so much for friendship.” While Caravaggio himself did not leave any mournful graffiti,

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\(^\text{29}\) Caravaggio was a big success in Naples, yet in 1607 he left his fame in Naples for monastery life in Malta. It is possible that Caravaggio left Naples due to bounty hunters tracking him there. However, there is no real documentation that indicates why he left.

\(^\text{30}\) Here I refer to Caravaggio’s *The Beheading of John the Baptist*, 1608, Oil on Canvas, St. John Co-Cathedral, Valletta.

\(^\text{31}\) It is important to understand that an insult on a knight or his honor was treated with the same severity as if that knight had actually been assaulted physically. Therefore, it was seen as a physical attack and reprimanded as such.

\(^\text{32}\) An underground cell cut directly into the rock of Castle Sant’Angelo of Malta.

\(^\text{33}\) “John James Sandilands, imprisoned in the living grave. Where evil triumphs over good. To the satisfaction of my enemies. So much for friendship.” (Sandiland, possibly 16th century)
nor does it appear that he showed any repentance, he appears to have confronted his imprisonment pragmatically by making an escape plan.

Throughout the history of Fort San Angelo, few prisoners had ever escaped. Indeed, escaping the *guva* was simply unheard of. To better create a mental image of the tremendous scope of an escape attempt, one must note that Caravaggio would have had to scale the walls of the cell, climb the ramparts of the castle, lower himself down a 200-foot drop, swim around the castle’s promontory, and manage to secure a captain whom was brave enough to ferry an escaped criminal. Caravaggio appears to have accomplished all of this in such a way that both predeceasing and modern historians are still theorizing on the exact details. Historians Faith Ashford and Andrew Graham-Dixon both recount the historical documents from the Brotherhood Knights of Malta in their respected works, yet neither have definite answers as to how Caravaggio was able to effectively escape.\(^{34}\) Nonetheless, the artist was able to flee successfully, and sought refuge in Sicily.\(^{35}\)

For the remaining years of his life, Caravaggio moved from place to place, his fiery persona always wreaking trouble in his wake. In the autumn of 1609, after relocating to Naples for the second time, the artist had cause to be more optimistic for his future. The Grand Master of the Knights Malta had called off the search for Caravaggio and there were conversations of a papal pardon that would grant him permission to return to Rome.\(^{36}\) Caravaggio perhaps felt emboldened by his change in fortune and paid a visit to the *Osteria del Cerriglio*.\(^{37}\) The location of this much celebrated tavern was in a narrow alleyway not far from the church of Santa Maria

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\(^{36}\) It is theorized that Cardinal Scipione Borghese, Nephew of Pope Paul the V, assisted Caravaggio in securing his papal Pardon by being an intermediary between the Pope and Caravaggio.

\(^{37}\) A Neapolitan tavern that was often frequented by artists and poets.
Nova. Problems arose for Caravaggio when he tried to exit the tavern. A group of men had been waiting for him and ambushed him upon his exit. The altercation was so severe that on October 24, 1609, a Roman newspaper related that Caravaggio had succumbed to his injuries and died. However, scholars have demonstrated that this was factually not the case. The brawl had left Caravaggio with a permanent limp, blinded in one eye, and no longer to be able to hold a paintbrush as he once had, potentially explaining why his painting style changed so dramatically. After this traumatic event, his paintings appear less defined as the possible result of shaking hands. Thus, this incident can be seen as spurring a new stylistic shift in the artist’s work, which led him to engulf his compositions in greater darkness to hide the imperfections in his work.38

By July of 1610, Pope Paul V (born Camillo Borghese) granted Caravaggio his long-awaited pardon for the murder of Ranuccio Tomassoni. What happened next is still not completely clear. Dixson cited Baglione for the event that took place:

He boarded a felucca39, and suffering the bitterest pain, he started out for Rome… When he went ashore the Spanish guard arrested him by mistake, taking him for another Calvliere,40 and held prisoner. Although he was soon released, the felucca which was carrying him, and his possessions was no longer to be found. Thus, in a state of anxiety and depression he ran along the beach in the full heat and when he reached Porta Ercole, he collapsed and was seized with a malignant fever. He died within a few days at about forty years of age…41

While we know that Caravaggio could not have traveled to Porta Ercole on foot, the core of the facts was correct. On July 28, 1610, a Roman avviso reported “...news of the death of Michelangelo Caravaggio, the famous painter, excellent in coloring and in drawing from nature

39 A small vessel propelled by oars or lateen sails or both, used on the Nile and formerly more widely in the Mediterranean region.
40 This is an Italian expression for criminal.
41 Graham-Dixon, Caravaggio, 427
following his illness in Port Ercole.”

Today, the exact cause of Caravaggio’s death remains unknown. Documentation simply states that Caravaggio had fallen ill and died. On analyzing one of his last compositions, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, and the shakiness of the hand that painted the work, it can be observed that Caravaggio was unwell before leaving for Rome. The stress of the arrest, and the delirious ride to Porto Ercole in the hot July Italian heat, appears to have been more than his condition could withstand.

It can hardly be imagined that Caravaggio could have perceived that his works would survive so far into the future, nor that he would be remembered to the same ranks of Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo or Raphael. Yet Caravaggio was indeed a master of darkness and light, known for the technique of chiaroscuro, as well as his use of dramatic realism. Caravaggio used models from everyday life, draped in their modern fashion and placed them in mythological and biblical narratives. His explosive style inspired a new school, called the Caravaggisti, which followed in his dramatic style and chiaroscuro aesthetic. These artists included names like Artemisia Gentileschi and Francisco de Zurbarán, who would each take their own place in the history of art.

Considering the dramatic elements of the artist’s bibliography, one must acknowledge that Caravaggio withstood hardships that even the most weathered individual today would find overwhelming. Yet via the trademark chiaroscuro style he became known for, Caravaggio channeled his pain and torment and transferred it to canvas, granting the viewer a glimpse into

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42 A newsletter used to convey political, military and economic news.
43 Rémi Barbieri. Alda Bazaj. Elisabetta Cilli. Giuseppe Cornagli. Michel Dancourt. Giorgio Gruppioni. Didier Raoult. “Did Caravaggio die of Staphylococcus aureus sepsis?” *The Lancet* 18, 11 (2018). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(18)30571-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(18)30571-1). The remains of a body, found near Port Ercole where the body of Caravaggio was believed to be buried, was found and tested against DNA of modern relatives of Caravaggio. The examination was conducted by IHU Méditerranée Infection Institute of Marseille. The results that came back do show a relationship between the DNA taken from the remains and the living family members of the artist. If scholars are to believe these are the remains of Caravaggio, then scientific testing suggests that the cause of death was Staphylococal.
the brawling streets of sixteenth century Rome, the bloody allegories of the Bible, and the psychological dimensions of the artist’s soul.

I. Part Two: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Caravaggio’s Works

Before examining the artwork of Caravaggio through a psychoanalytic lens, it is important to consider what psychoanalysis is. The word psychoanalysis is comprised of the Latin root “psycho”, meaning spirit, and the Greek “ἀνάλυσις” (análusis), meaning to loosen. Thus, literally, psychoanalysis means to loosen the spirit. According to Ford and Urban in Systems of Psychotherapy: A Comparative Study, the field of psychoanalysis is attributed to the canonical figure of Sigmund Freud.44 Another major figure in the development of psychoanalysis includes Jacques Lacan, of which this research has relied heavily on.

Lacan was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who adopted many of Freud’s ideas – specifically the Ego, Id, and Superego, and reinterpreted these components into a triad of orders known as the Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real. By drawing upon these frameworks to examine the artist’s work, the psychological aspects of Lacan’s orders emerge in two of Caravaggio’s most famous confirmed self-portraits: The Young Sick Bacchus (Figure 1) circa 1593 and David with the Head of Goliath (Figure 2) circa 1610. These two works are critical for understanding Caravaggio as an artist and unpack ideas such as decapitation and the severing of one’s identity from themselves that appear to surface in his work. In order to examine these complex notions of identity, this research engages Lacan’s psychoanalytical theories to shed a fresh light on Caravaggio and bring forth a new interpretation of his self-portraiture.

By drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalysis to build upon the scholarship of Andrew-Graham Dixon, Lorenzo Pericolo, and Michael Fried, this segment of my research contributes to

a more complex understanding of works like Caravaggio’s *David with the Head of Goliath* as a retroactive self-portrait. As mentioned prior in this research, Dixon’s *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane* presents some of the more recent biographical research on the artist, while Fried’s work, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, has been especially useful as he also explores a psychoanalytic interpretation.\(^\text{45}\) To conduct this analysis, I have examined these works in chronological order and am comparing them to other work that are not self-portraiture in Caravaggio’s oeuvre.

In its most literal sense, a self-portrait is a representation by an artist of themselves. Yet when explored in depth, self-portraits fulfilled a variety of purposes, including serving as a form of self-promotion by artists to secure commissions and patrons. Often, such portraits are not commissioned, and thus biases that may appear in commissioned portraiture may not be as prevalent. While a patron’s bias may be extracted from this equation of representation, the artist’s own biases persist. Therefore, these works can also reflect the artist’s way of rendering both psychological and physical states. Many artists during in the Baroque period participated in self-portraiture, and Caravaggio is no exception. Caravaggio often depicted himself as the primary subject of mythical narratives, as seen in his self-portrait, *The Young Sick Bacchus*, and also depicted himself as a bystander in some of his commissioned works like that of *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, which will be examined shortly.

First analyzing *The Young Sick Bacchus*, which was painted between 1593 and 1594 in Rome. The original patronage of this work is unknown. However, it was given by Pope Paul V to his nephew, Cardinal Scipione Borghese, and remains today in the reputable Borghese collection.

\(^{45}\) It is important to note that I am aware of the controversy surrounding Fried’s writing on Caravaggio, in which his psychoanalytical approach was critiqued by some art historians – such as Pericolo – for not engaging closely enough with primary sources or relevant contemporary discussions by Renaissance specialists. However, I find Fried’s process to be a useful steppingstone for reading into key works in a way that carefully engages with but goes further than biography.
in Rome. Historians do know that during the completion of this Bacchus, Caravaggio would have been working in d’Arpino’s studio. However, it is just as possible that the painting could have been completed during Caravaggio’s six-month hospital stay at Santa Maria Della Consolazione due to an illness that historians still remain unable to identify with certainty.

At first glance, Caravaggio’s Bacchus looks like a typical portrayal of the Roman god of wine, art, and theater. A crown of ivy adorns his head, he is dressed in the classical draperies of ancient Greece and there are bushels of grapes scattered across the painting. To the unexperienced eye, this is an ordinary Bacchus. However, looking more closely, there are obvious anomalies. The flesh has a slight greenish-gray color, and there are deep bags under his eyes. His lips are parched and dry and his fingernails are filthy. This is not the Bacchus that viewers of the 16th century would have been accustomed to seeing. Rather, Caravaggio is sending a subtle, yet dramatic message. He has brought Bacchus down from his divinity and depicted him as mortal. Taking things, a step further, Caravaggio has depicted this humanized Bacchus as himself.

There is one more crucial element of this work that may hint to a future obsession with the theme of decapitation within Caravaggio’s work: the physical anatomy of the model in this specific work, The Young Sick Bacchus. If examined closely, the head of the figure appears to be floating above Bacchus’s (or Caravaggio’s) shoulders – suggesting detachment or disembodiment. Due to the sharp contrast between the black background typical of Caravaggio’s

46 Further information confirming provenance is pending from the Borghese Gallery.
47 According to the website of the Galleria Borghese, the painting was confiscated from d’Arpino’s studio in 1607 to be added to the Borghese collection.
48 Archives from Santa Maria della Consolazione, in 1592, the same year Caravaggio would have been working on the Young Sick Bacchus, he was hospitalized for six months. It is very likely that the self-portrait of Caravaggio shows the likeness of the artist during his illness.
tenebrism,\textsuperscript{49} as well as the awkward angle of the neck, which fades into the canvas, the head does not appear to properly be attached as one would expect. This depiction foreshadows a common theme of decapitation that evolves into Caravaggio’s mature work—an aspect that has been noted by scholars such as Fried.\textsuperscript{50}

During the creation of this piece, historians relate that Caravaggio displayed a warped sense of self-importance and a violently uncontrollable temper, as his criminal records show that he was in constant trouble with the local authorities in Rome. Only a few short years after completing this self-portrait, between 1600 and 1606, Caravaggio’s name appeared fourteen times on criminal records. As mentioned in the previous section, these accusations ranged from minor misdemeanors to murder.

This turbulent moment in the artist’s life, coupled with a lack of reliable first-hand testimonies of the artist, encourages a reading of this work (and others within his oeuvre) from a psychoanalytic frame. We may begin to unravel the complex dimensions of Caravaggio’s self-portraiture by drawing upon Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage to further examine this piece. Traditionally referred to as the moment that a child first recognizes themselves in a mirror, the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage is identified as the instance in which the ideal-ego and the ego-ideal is formed within the subject. It is important to note that the ideal-ego is associated with the Imaginary order and the ego-ideal is associated with the Symbolic order within the Lacanian triad. According to Lacan, the ideal-ego is the idea of perfection which the ego strived to emulate (similar to the function of the ego in Freudian theory), while the ego-ideal is when the subject

\textsuperscript{49} According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, tenebrism is defined as “a style of painting especially associated with the Italian Painter Caravaggio and his followers in which most of the figures are engulfed in shadow, but some are dramatically illuminated by a beam of light usually from an identifiable source.”

\textsuperscript{50} Fried, “Severed Representations,” 314-329.
sees itself from the ideal point. With this in mind, *The Young Sick Bacchus* appears to emulate Lacan’s dominant ego-ideal in the artist. While this piece is recognized by scholars as a self-portrait of Caravaggio in the guise of the Roman god Bacchus, this reading argues that the artist does not depict himself as an idealized divinity. Rather, a Lacanian reading of the work reveals the artist has reversed their roles in terms of importance, so that rather, Caravaggio depicts the god Bacchus as himself, highlighting the artist’s own recognizable human identity over that of the mythical god.

To consider important changes between Caravaggio’s early and immature works through a psychoanalytic lens, one can compare *The Young Sick Bacchus*, discussed above, with the Prado’s *David with the Head of Goliath* circa 1600 (Figure 3). In the same year, Caravaggio was contracted to decorate the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi. It is here where the artist composed his two famous commissions, *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (Figure 4) and *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (Figure 5), both also completed in the year 1600. A quote from Ballori details this moment in Caravaggio’s career by saying,

“...the painters then in Rome were greatly taken by his novelty, and the young ones particularly gathered around him, praised him as the unique imitator of nature, and looked on his work as miracles.”

The dramatic and intimate feel that is created in the Prado’s *David with the Head of Goliath*, typically of Caravaggio’s style, activates the piece. When examined closely, it is obvious that the artist is using one of the strongest compositional shapes, the triangle, which is used to guide the viewer to three separate points, with the top point—David—being the strongest

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52 While this piece is not recognized as a self-portrait of the artist, it is relevant to consider this work in terms of style, due to his famous later interpretation of the same scene, which is discussed later on in this research.

element. As quoted earlier, from “Severed Representation in Caravaggio,” scholar Michel Fried suggests that Caravaggio is a type of artist whose paintings must be understood as in relation to the painter himself. If we accept this theory that Caravaggio’s works act as a stand-in or surrogate for himself from a psychoanalytical frame, we can conclude that because of the bold, confident style visible in his work at this time, Caravaggio was secure in his abilities as an artist during this period of his life.

As a final point of comparison allowing the viewer to consider self-portraiture in the artist’s mature work, this research will analyze and contrast the Prado’s *David with the Head of Goliath* with the Borghese’s 1610 version (Figure 2), where I argue that we see a more vulnerable Caravaggio. During the period of his life in which this work was painted, the artist was wanted for murder in Rome and fleeing his date with the executioner’s block. According to an article by Marvin E. Wolfgang titled, “Political Crimes and Punishments in Renaissance Florence,” it was common practice for criminals convicted of major offenses to be beheaded in Italy. The unjust murder of another person would be one such instance. Considering that information, it is interesting that during this period of Caravaggio’s production, his fascination with decapitation appears to have evolved into an obsession, as he painted more than six compositions that featured the theme between 1606 and 1610.

Beginning with a formal analysis of the piece, this research notes a drastic change in style where there is a more intense contrast between the voided background and the illumination of David’s sword. It is important to note how the brushstrokes have changed. Prior to finishing this painting, Caravaggio had been severely beaten in a street brawl, which left him unable to paint with the same skill.54 As compared to the Prado’s version, Caravaggio is still using a strong triangular composition where David is still at the highest point. However, the sword which David

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54 This was noted in the biography section of this research.
holds continues off the canvas, symbolically severing the substrate and destabilizing the triangular composition.

This destabilization of the substrate may allude to the Lacanian theory of castration anxiety in both the literal and symbolic sense. According to the classic Freudian theory of the castration complex, this phenomenon occurs when a male child originally attributes the penis to both sexes. It is when he discovers that the female lacks this member that he infers the girl is the subject of castration. The Lacanian theory of castration anxiety is theorized to be caused by unfulfillment based on a physical or symbolic blockage that results in the frustration of a desired outcome.

A closer examination of *David with the Head of Goliath* further supports this theory. The Latin inscription on the blade that David holds in the painting reveals the text, “*humilitas occidunt superbiam,*” which translates to “*humility kills pride.*” From a psychoanalytic point, we can think of the sword, the severed head of Goliath, and the figure of David as the visual embodiment of Lacan’s Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. In this formula, Goliath represents the Imaginary order, by which the human subject—in this case Caravaggio—creates fantasy images of themselves as well as the ideal object of desire. The Symbolic Order, which deals in restrictions of desires and must adhere to societal norms, is represented by the figure of the sword itself. Finally, David can be seen as the Real, which according to Lacan, is the state of truth that humans strive to return to but have been severed from by the Symbolic.

During the completion of this composition, Caravaggio was in the process of securing a papal pardon in order to return back to the Holy Roman Empire. Caravaggio would receive such

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57 This translation is the author’s and was confirmed by Prof. Kristen Knopick, Lecturer of Classics and Latin.
a pardon, however, as mentioned in the previous section, he would not make it back to Rome. While Caravaggio did not survive the journey back to Rome, this painting did, and it was presented to Pope Paul V as a gift – the same Pope who granted the artist’s pardon. According to Andrew-Graham Dixon, this was Caravaggio’s original intention for the piece, revealed thanks to records belonging to the boatman.⁵⁸

A psychoanalytic approach allows for a new interpretation of the impression of the wound on the forehead of Goliath, represented as Caravaggio by the artist himself. Those with ties to the Catholic faith may recognize the imprint as the mark of absolution, which is given by a priest after confession in order to absolve the sins of the confessed. Coupled with the other elements of this composition, the research argues from a Lacanian reading, that this work serves as a double self-portrait, with the figure of young David also functioning as an indirect retroactive self-portrait of a young Caravaggio. In fact, there are some physical resemblances between the David and other confirmed self-portraits of the artist – these resemblances are specifically seen when observing the nose, ears, mouth and overall facial shape. It is strongly suggested through this composition, that Caravaggio was not only remorseful for the effects of his unchecked temper, but also may reflect the contemplation of self-forgiveness. By approaching this painting from a psychoanalytic perspective, this last confirmed image of a decapitation by Caravaggio, may also reflect the artist’s desire to be absolved of his crimes and his death sentence by the Pope. If this was indeed the case, the image was successful.

II. CONCLUSION

⁵⁸ Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio*, 434. Dixon claims to have uncovered the identity of the boatman as well, relating his name was Alessandro Caramano. Caramano was presumably an ordinary man who did not have the ability to read or write. However, it is his testimony that has provided the earliest provenance of these works belonging to Caravaggio.
In conclusion, this research has sought to highlight Caravaggio’s tumultuous life in relation to his artistic production, noting a trend towards themes of decapitation near the end of his career – a moment in which he himself faced potential execution by way of beheading, and was potentially engrossed with themes of self-forgiveness. The development of this thesis involved consulted historical documentation from key primary sources and archives, such as the State Archives in Rome and Naples, which contains documents such as bank transcripts, personal accounts, and residential and church records. It has also sought to respond to previous and contemporary research by leading scholars of Caravaggio in the field. These accounts have been used in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory to convey ideas such as a strong, unfounded, sense of self-importance and a dominant ego-ideal at play in the artist’s early works, such as *The Young Sick Bacchus*. This analysis also observes an evolution in the artist, both in his technique and personality, and ultimately establishes a reading of self-forgiveness and absolution in works made by the artist’s towards his end of life.

By drawing on Lacanian theory to analyze the last confirmed image of a decapitation painted by the artist, Caravaggio’s *David with the head of Goliath* of 1610 may be understood as a double self-portrait with an important dual function. The image serves as a mode in which the artist could visually contemplate his own spiritual self-forgiveness while negotiating a legal papal pardon for his crimes and death sentence. Bridging biography with a psychoanalytical approach, this thesis has reinterpreted key works by Caravaggio, such as his self-portraiture, in order to highlight aspects of this landmark Baroque artist’s tempestuous life and creative production that have remained underexplored in scholarship, such as his growing concern with themes of absolution prior to his death.
Bibliography


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Figure 5. Merisi da Caravaggio, Michelangelo. *The Calling of Saint Matthew*. 1599-1600. Oil on Canvas. 340 x 322 cm. San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.
Appendix: Caravaggio’s Other Self Portraits