

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the Rubensian body was informed by a multitude of cultural, social and scientific aspects of early modern culture and that it cannot be properly understood with art historical methods and explanatory categories alone. It is therefore firmly rooted in an interdisciplinary basis by specifically drawing on material from the history of medicine and dietetics. The case study of this paper is Rubens' painting of *Pythagoras Advocating Vegetarianism* (painted in collaboration with Frans Snyders between 1618-20). Rather than relying on a narrowly-conceived topic such as the iconographic decoding of the painting alone, this paper will employ a large variety of primary sources to investigate ancient and seventeenth-century conceptions of diet, agriculture and behaviour, in relation to this little studied Rubens canvas. In this way, the Rubensian body as portrayed and conceptualised in this painting may be understood as a lense through which wider scientific-political tenets of early modern culture can be disclosed. While Rubens' familiarity with contemporary developments in medicine and science have been the topic of recent investigations, the contribution of this paper lies in the detailed examination of seventeenth-century debates on vegetarianism in relation to the larger moral-political programme of this painting. It will be argued that this painting is indeed comparable to a political manifesto in that it posits an ideal of a healthy body-mind balance at its centre in support of a pro-Habsburg agenda of European peace.

The discussion on aspects of seventeenth-century dietetics and science (with which Rubens was indeed intimately familiar with) wishes to throw light on what Rubens

and his contemporaries considered to be a healthy body. The fact that the body was regarded as existing in an inextricable unity with the mind, and that its function promptly affected the mind, and that, in consequence, thoughts and passions were tied in with metaphysical issues, will prove crucial to a thorough understanding of the Rubensian body.