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*Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives
of the Metamorphoses
in Europe, from Books
to the Arts*



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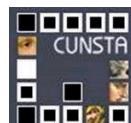
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*Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives of the *Metamorphoses* in Europe, from Books to the Arts*

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What's Love Got to Do with It? Ovid, the "Love of the Gods", and Cinquecento Carved Cassoni

Bar Leshem*

Abstract

In his account of the contest between Pallas and Arachne, Ovid described the latter's woven work as an elaborate representation of the destructive and uninhibited nature of the Olympian gods when their lust overwhelmed their common sense – a record of their seductions, rapes, and abductions of mortals (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 103-128). That passage, together with a longer retelling of each individual myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, created a fertile ground for early modern artists to portray erotic and/or violent scenes between men and women or, in some cases, between men and other, often younger, men. Most notable are the visual representations of myths about the "love of the gods", for example, the rape of Europa and the seduction of Leda on Cinquecento carved *cassoni*, which place the myths and their import in the context of sixteenth-century domesticity. In this study, I explore these images with a view toward the didactic messages that they might

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have conveyed and suggest that through such myths, the bride was exhorted to act in a chaste manner and the groom was warned against succumbing to lust.

1. *Introduction*

In his account of the contest between Pallas and Arachne, Ovid described the latter's weaving imagery:

Arachne pictures Europa cheated by the disguise of the bull: a real bull and real waded you would think them. The maid seems to be looking back upon the land she has left, calling on her companions and, fearful of the touch of the leaping waves, to be drawing back her timid feet. She wrought Asterie, held by the struggling eagle; she wrought Leda, beneath the swan's wings. She added how, in a satyr's image hidden, Jove filled lovely Antiope with twin offspring; how he was Amphitryon when he cheated thee, Alcmena; how in a golden shower he tricked Danaë; Aegina, as a flame; Mnemosyne, as a shepherd; Deo's daughter, as a spotted snake. Thee also, Neptune, she pictured, changed to a grim bull with the Aeolian maiden; now as Enipeus thou dost beget the Aloidae, as a ram deceivedst Bisaltis. The golden-haired mother of corn, most gentle, knew thee as a horse; the snake-haired mother of the winged horse knew thee as a winged bird; Melanthe knew thee as a dolphin. To all these Arachne gave their own shapes and appropriate surroundings. Here is Phoebus like a countryman and she shows how he wore now a hawk's feathers, now a lion's skin; how as a shepherd he tricked Macareus' daughter, Isse; how Bacchus deceived Erigone with the false bunch of grapes; how Saturn in a horse's shape begot the centaur, Chiron¹.

In this contest, each woman weaves her own narrative: Pallas describes the earthly punishment given to many *hubristai* mortals who dared to disobey or challenge the gods². Arachne's weaving visualizes the destructive and uninhibited nature of the gods, their lust overwhelming their common sense; thus

¹ «Maeonis elusam deisnt imagine tauri / Europam: verum taurum, freta vera putares; / ispa videbatur terras spectare relictas / et comites clamare suas tactumque veri / adsilientis aquae timidisque reducere palntas. / fecit et Asterien aquila luctante teneri, / fecit olorinis Ledam recubare sub alis; / addidit, ut satyri celatus imagine pulchram / Iuppiter inplerit gemino Nycteida fetu, / Amphitryon fuerit, cum te, Tiryntia, cepit, / aureus ut Danaen, Asopida luserit ignis, / Mnemosynen pastor, varius Deoida serpens. / te quoque mutatum torvo, Neptune, iuvenco / virgine in Aeolia posuit; / tu visus Enipeus / gignis Aloidas, aries Bistaltida fallis, / et te flava comas frugum mitissima mater / sensit equum, sensit volucrum crinita colubris / mater equi volucris, sensit delphina Melanthe: / omnibus his faciemque suam faciemque locorum / reddidit. est illic agrestis imagine Phoebus, / utque modo accipitris pennas, modo terga leonis / gesserit, ut pastor Macareida luserit Issen, / Liber ut Erigonen falsa deceperit uva, / ut Saturnus equo geminum Chirona crearit. / ultima pars telae, tenui circumdata limbo, / nexilibus flores hederis habet intertextos»: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 103-128. Translated by Miller 1916, pp. 294-297.

² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 70-102.

depicting what Ovid called *caelestia crimina*³, she images Jupiter and other gods seducing, raping, and abducting mortal men and women.

This descriptive passage is one of the most prominent ancient literary works that brings many of the gods' immoral acts together. In Book Ten of his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid described the grieving and heartbroken Orpheus singing about "boys beloved by gods and maidens inflamed by unnatural love and paying the penalty of their lust"⁴. He followed that by the retelling of many myths related to Jupiter's and other gods' loves, for example, the tale of Ganymede and Adonis, along with other myths that revolve around the theme of love.

The title, "What's Love Got to Do with It?"⁵, poses the principal inquiry that I explore in this paper. It leads to such further questions as whether love has any relevance to the subject and if so, in what context. These queries reflect the multifaceted themes and interpretations that I discuss in this paper, wherein I analyze several Cinquecento carved *cassoni* that reflect the early modern concept of love. These *cassoni* portray mythological scenes that visualize both nuptial and sexual contexts. The imagery varies from myths that serve as cautionary tales, warning against the dangers of love, to those that deal with "the love of the gods", as well as more optimistic messages that encourage love and fidelity within nuptial relationships. In this paper, the aim is to showcase the utilization of Ovidian themes in the carved chests and to delve into the interplay between the iconography, the exploration of the chests themselves, and the reception and interpretation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This renowned literary work served as a significant source for domestic imagery during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By examining these connections, we can gain a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between classical mythology, artistic expression, and the cultural context of the time.

2. *The Influence of Ovid's Metamorphoses on Cassoni Imagery: Exploring the Intersection of Mythology, Artistry, and Cultural Context*

In the Quattrocento and Cinquecento, *cassoni* served multiple purposes⁶. In fifteenth-century Florence, for example, these wooden chests held the

³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 131.

⁴ «...puerosque canamus / dilectos superis inconcessisque puellas / ignibus attonitas meruisse libidine poenam»: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, 152-154.

⁵ Inspired by the late Tina Turner's song of the same name, recorded for her 1984 album *Private Dancer*.

⁶ The use of the term 'cassoni' (sing. *cassone*) was much debated in the research field. For a full discussion on the early modern terminology and historiography of these marriage chests during the period see De Marchi, Sbaraglio 2015, pp. 24-41; Claudio Paolini contends that the

bride's possessions and symbolized the family's wealth and power during marriage processions⁷. After the weddings, the *cassoni* were placed in the newlyweds' bedrooms, where they served as both decorative and functional furniture. Sixteenth-century Rome saw the emergence of another tradition wherein the mother of the bride would open the chest a day after the wedding, revealing its contents – the dowry provided by the bride's family – to well-wishers visiting the couple⁸. *Cassoni* served as storage for such household items as clothing, linens, books, and silverware. Some of them featured inner divisions, but with earlier designs one had to open the lid to access drawer-like compartments before outside drawers became popular in the seventeenth century⁹.

Fifteenth-century wooden *cassoni* featured painted designs, evolving from simple floral motifs and depictions of couples to the imaging of narratives known to viewers. Initially, these subjects revolved around stories of love and chastity, gradually expanding to more intricate scenes¹⁰. By the sixteenth century, carved designs reached their zenith and *cassoni* were adorned with exquisitely detailed scenes. Known as *istorie*, these narratives served not only as decorative elements but also as didactic tools. From the second quarter of the Quattrocento on, *cassoni* scenes often depicted classical myths and tales from the Bible, which offered moral examples for the newly married couple¹¹. The concept of *exemplum virtutis* guided these depictions, aligning moral lessons with pictorial representations of ancient history and mythology¹².

In the Quattrocento and Cinquecento, Italians believed themselves to be experiencing a revival of ancient values, and looked toward ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration. The deeds of ancient heroines, which often em-

terms 'cassone', 'casa', 'forziere' and 'cofano', each referred to a different type of chest in early modern times. The term 'forziere', Paolini contends, derives from the fourteenth-century word 'forcier', meaning '[something to be closed] by force', which refers to chests equipped with a lock. 'Cofano', he continues, comes from the Latin word 'cophinus', meaning 'basket', which refers to a different shape of chest. See Paolini 2006, p. 120; Peter Thornton refers to the problem of terminology as well, stating that before 1500 the term 'cassone' was rarely in use, thus it is incorrect to use the word for chests created during the fifteenth century, and that the preferable term is indeed 'forziere'. However, he states, during the sixteenth century, the term 'cassone' was more in use than 'forziere', but there are some documents that refer to both terms – thus there must have been some difference not known to us today. Cf. Thornton 1984, pp. 246-251; also see Schottmüller 1921, p. XVIII.

⁷ For a full examination on the subject of *cassoni* and their place in the marriage process, see Witthoft 1982, pp. 44-51; Tinagli 1997, pp. 21-24.

⁸ Thornton 1991, p. 204.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 201-203.

¹⁰ Witthoft 1982, pp. 43-44.

¹¹ Giorgio Vasari mentions that the classical narratives portrayed on *cassoni* were usually taken from Ovid or Greco-Roman history. Vasari 1878, p. 148.

¹² Tinagli 1997, p. 22.

phasized feminine virtue, served as frequent references, particularly regarding marital and feminine virtues¹³. Ruling families sought to establish moral guidelines for appropriate conduct in the political and social arenas, with an emphasis in the latter on conjugal virtues and marital chastity. Contemporary education was designed to provide sons and daughters with knowledge of the ancient virtues, which would shape righteous actions and moral behavior. As one of the central texts widely read in early modern Italy, Ovid's epic poem holds immense significance for understanding the mythological narratives and transformations depicted on the *cassoni*. The *Metamorphoses*, a source mentioned also by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) in this context, provides a rich tapestry of classical myths and serves as a foundation for the interpretations and allegorical meanings attributed to these stories in the sixteenth century¹⁴.

Paintings on fifteenth-century *cassoni* have been well researched and are widely known among art historians owing to the nature of the medium: painted panels attached to chests and the attribution of many of them to well-known artists of the period¹⁵. The sixteenth century saw a shift in styles wherein the painted panels were replaced by wooden carved reliefs rendered in an ancient sarcophagi *all'antica* style by highly skilled, yet often unknown artisans¹⁶. Owing to the change in the medium and the fact that the artisans were less well known, these later *cassoni* have not been afforded the same degree of attention and have often been overlooked¹⁷.

Throughout the early modern era, visual representations of abduction and rape were shown in various contexts, and there have been numerous studies designed to determine their role in this period. Among the most well-known and well-studied themes are the abductions and rapes committed by Jupiter against mortal women and men. The love of the gods, in general, was a common subject in early modern decorative schemes of *palazzi*, sculptures in city *piazze*, and domestic settings depicted in paintings and on furniture¹⁸. In what follows, I look at several groups of mythology-themed images carved on

¹³ Syson, Thornton 2001, pp. 12-16; On the celebration of good education women, see e.g., D'Elia 2002, pp. 418-420.

¹⁴ Baskins 1998, p. 9.

¹⁵ For further reading on fifteenth-century *cassoni*, see Schubring 1915; Baskins 1998; Musacchio 2008, pp. 136-156; Witthoft 1982, pp. 44-51.

¹⁶ The fact that in the sixteenth century, furniture were generally the work of artisans is also noted in Colombo 1981, pp. 103-104.

¹⁷ For two comprehensive catalogues on sixteenth-century *cassoni*, see Schottmüller 1921 and Faenson 1983.

¹⁸ Many have discussed the subject in Renaissance art and literature. See, e.g., Cieri Via 1996, pp. 175-215; On the theme of mythological decorations in Italian *palazzi*, see, e.g., Verheyen 1991, pp. 45-53; For the theme of the loves of Jupiter and its reception through the ages, see Lauriola 2022. For more public displays of this theme during the Renaissance, see, e.g., Even 1997, pp. 1-6.

Cinquecento *cassoni* that reflect this theme. However, despite what the name might suggest, there appears to be no connection between what we consider “love” today and some of these myths. Many early modern adaptations of these tales were designed to be read in contexts other than the love between a man and a woman, and I explore these adaptations and their implications to elucidate the meanings of these visual representations.

Diane Wolfthal coined the term «heroic rapes» to describe certain myths that depict sexual violence, a subject that she contends has been overlooked by art historians in favor of the aesthetic and erotic aspects of the artworks and the virtuosity of their creators¹⁹. She divides the portrayal of these themes in visual art in the fifteenth to the seventeenth century into three main categories: domestic nuptial scenes, erotic artworks, and political contexts. Whereas the first category is most relevant to the present discussion, the other two are also important, as Wolfthal describes these artworks as «multivalent», meaning they can have multiple interpretations or functions. For instance, marital images could serve an erotic function and erotic representations could operate on a political level²⁰. Many myths depicting gods’ love or «heroic rapes» were commissioned for the pleasure of male viewers. These images typically feature nude female figures either abducted or giving in to male desire. Such images were popular in the sixteenth century and were viewed in both public and private spaces.

Yael Even has been seeking an understanding of the importance of these violent scenes in the visual arts of the sixteenth century, but she has found that scenes of sexually motivated assaults, pursuits, and forced encounters are still partially incomprehensible phenomena. She points out that such scenes of sexual violence, which were often labeled expressions of love and loss, were more popular in early modern art than scenes of consensual encounters²¹.

Alongside feminist-centered research such as that of Wolfthal and Even, other studies have approached the subject from different perspectives, for example, Susan Deacy’s psychological approach to Zeus’ erotic conquests. In her paper *Why Does Zeus Rape?* she addresses the psychological implications of Zeus’ actions. She identifies him as a «high mating-effort rapist» and contends that the reason or pretext for his abductions and rapes was the intense desire to procreate²².

As we examine these artworks, it is important to keep the wider discourse on sexuality in general in mind. Most of the imagery in question has a sexual component, with nude men and women engaging, willingly or not, with their abductors/lovers. How should we interpret these images in the domestic context of the sixteenth century? In early modern times, sexuality was depicted in

¹⁹ Wolfthal 1999, pp. 27-35.

²⁰ Ivi, pp. 7-35.

²¹ Even 2001, p. 18.

²² Deacy 2018, pp. 103-116.

political, religious, and artistic contexts²³. It was often portrayed negatively, conveying warnings against adultery and infidelity, but it could also have been a way to encourage love and procreation within a marital relationship. As, for example, Renaissance wedding orations often dealt with sexuality within the marital context and generally adopted a positive approach²⁴. In the following sections, I discuss several Cinquecento *cassoni* and decipher the various messages that can be gleaned from their representations of sexuality.

3. *Carried Away: Bulls, Horses, and Hybrid Creatures Abducting Women*

One of Jupiter's most well-known lovers, Europa, is featured on a carved *cassone*, now housed in the Hermitage Museum (fig. 1)²⁵. The right-hand panel depicts Europa being carried away by Jupiter in the guise of a bull, while the left one portrays a sea god abducting or engaging with a nereid. The two scenes are imaged at sea, represented by several wavy lines, and in both the female is being carried away by a male figure, or an animal that is known to be a male god in disguise.

The myth of Europa was one of the most often visualized Greco-Roman narratives in the early modern period and has been depicted many times in various media throughout the ages²⁶. Ovid presented the Europa myth twice in his *Metamorphoses*: once as a stand-alone tale describing Jupiter's lust for the Phoenician princess, a story that preceded the founding of Thebes by Europa's brother Cadmus, who sought her across the world, after she was kidnapped by Jupiter²⁷. I noted the second place where Ovid referenced the Europa myth earlier when I discussed Arachne's weaving²⁸.

The Europa myth was also recounted in various literary sources from the Middle Ages and the early modern period, including Dante Alighieri's (1265-1321) *Commedia: Paradiso*²⁹, the medieval commentary and translation of the *Metamorphoses* – the *Ovide Moralisé*³⁰, Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313-1375) *De Mulieribus Claris*³¹, several sixteenth-century vernacular translations of

²³ Pollali 2018, pp. 1-7.

²⁴ D'Elia 2002, pp. 379-433.

²⁵ Image is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

²⁶ For a full discussion on the way the myth was perceived and visualized in the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, see Freedman 2011, pp. 91-100.

²⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 833-875.

²⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 103-107.

²⁹ Dante, *Commedia: Paradiso*, XXXVII, 82-84.

³⁰ Anonymous, *Ovide Moralisé*, 2, 5034-5080.

³¹ Boccaccio, *De Mulieribus Claris*, 9.

the *Metamorphoses*, and sixteenth-century mythographies. An interesting interpretation can be seen in the *Ovide Moralisé*, where Jupiter is portrayed as an allegory of Jesus, where the white bull represents Jesus' earthly form and Europa, both as the princess and the continent, symbolizes a human soul that was redeemed by the son of God³². However, in Boccaccio's interpretation, Jupiter carried out the abduction of the Phoenician princess by placing her on a boat to Crete accompanied by a white bull, as he astutely observed:

This is why I consider it highly inadvisable to give maidens too much freedom to stroll about and listen too readily to the words of just anyone. I have often read that girls who do this have seen their reputations so stained that afterwards they could not be washed clean, even by the glory of perpetual chastity³³.

Thus, while the *Ovide Moralisé* presents a more universal Christian message, Boccaccio, who focused primarily on the education of women in his time, posited a moral lesson by explaining how men could safeguard the honor and chastity of their wives and daughters. The sixteenth-century mythographer Natale Conti (1520-1582) had an approach similar to that of Boccaccio, but focused more on male lust than on female virtue:

It seems to me, that if we look beneath this story's covering, we'll be able to get past the historical explanation and find some advice about how to keep our passions under control. For the ancients have preserved a tale here for us about Jupiter, the supposed king of all the gods, who was so degraded by passion that he actually turned himself into a filthy animal. Their point was that unless we keep ourselves in check by acting prudently and reasonably, our desire (specially that mad, enslaving desire of Venus) will lure us into doing some really shameful things³⁴.

As I noted, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the myth of Europa was widely represented. This omnipresence was largely due to the popularity of Titian's dramatic visualization, with the frightened and half naked Europa being carried away on the white bull (fig. 2)³⁵. The myth was featured in other works of art that predate Titian's painting, and in at least one such depiction can be found

³² Anonymous, *Ovide Moralisé*, 2, 5034-5080; Murray, Simone 2015, pp. 93-95; Lauriola 2022, p. 102.

³³ «Vagari licentia nimia virginibus et aures faciles cuiuscunque verbis prebere, minime laudandum reor, cum contigisse sepe legerim, his agentibus honestati nonnunquam notas turpes imprimi, quas etiam perpetue demum castitatis decus abstersisse non potuit»: Boccaccio, *De Mulieribus Claris*, 9, 3. Translated into English by Brown 2001, pp. 48-49.

³⁴ «Inde fingitur iupiter ipse in taurum animal lasciuum ac furibundum esse conuersus, cum vellent antiqui amoris insolentiam & obscoenitatem per haec patefacere. nam omnia prope bella, deuastationes regnorum, euersiones ciuitatum, incendia prouinciarum descripta a poetis, omniaque hominum deliria, propter lasciuos amores & immoderatam libidinem euenerunt»: Conti, *Mythologiae*, 919. Translated into English by Mulryan, Brown: Conti 2006, p. 796.

³⁵ Lauriola 2022, pp. 120-125.

on a Quattrocento painted *cassone* panel (fig. 3)³⁶. There, we find the whole story: reading from right to left, Jupiter as a white bull is approaching Europa and her companions; the girls are dancing on the shore; Europa is on the bull's back; the bull is carrying her away across the water; and, finally, we see Jupiter and Europa in Crete³⁷. The *cassone* panel portrays Europa going willingly with the bull, while the one image that may imply some sort of fright or regret is the scene in which the princess is looking back at her companions as she is being carried off shore. Nevertheless, this rather serene scene may be an indication of a somewhat positive interpretation of the myth. Thus, two different approaches are reflected in the *cassone* panel and Titian's painting. The first figures the scene as a consensual act, thus relating more to the interpretation in *Ovide Moralisé*, if not in its religious concept, in its positive aspect. The second is similar to the perspective posited by Boccaccio and Conti, wherein the myth is interpreted in a negative way as one that destroys any sense of female virtue and promotes submission to male lust.

A myth that is often paralleled visually to the tale of Europa is the abduction of Hercules' bride, Deianira, by the centaur Nessus. In a carved Venetian *cassone*, now in the Galleria Giorgio Franchetti alla Ca' d'Oro in Venice, a terrified female figure is being carried away by a centaur in a single elliptical frame at the center of the front of the chest (fig. 4)³⁸. The female figure is turning away from her abductor and trying to escape from the centaur's tight grasp. This scene can be identified either as Deianira's abduction or as a woman being abducted by a centaur in the Centauromachy³⁹. In this case, I prefer to identify the scene as Deianira's abduction, largely because it is a single scene and not part of a larger decorative scheme featuring the Centauromachy. Further, as I discuss shortly, the scene reflects the iconography of Deianira in early modern art, and especially that of the sixteenth century.

³⁶ Interestingly, the sequence of scenes from right to left is unusual, particularly in Tuscan paintings of the period, as posited by both Schubring and McComb. Nonetheless, no propositions have been made about the narrative direction. Previously, the counterpart painting to this *cassone* panel was identified as Liberale da Verona's *Abduction of Helen*, now housed in the Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon. This could elucidate the use of the right-to-left direction; the aforementioned counterpart is to be read from left to right. Therefore, if the two panels were juxtaposed, they might reflect the movement of the scenes: one from right to left and the other from left to right. However, Mattia Vinco has convincingly argued against this attribution, asserting that the two panels were not commissioned concurrently. Still, it is plausible that another scene, crafted as this panel's counterpart, may have also employed a left-to-right sequence, making the Europa scene mirror its right-to-left direction. Commissioning a pair of *cassoni* was a widespread practice, especially in fifteenth-century Tuscany. Consequently, another unidentified panel could account for the unusual right-to-left scene sequence observed in the Europa panel. See Schubring 1915, image no. 466; McComb 1924, pp. 20-21; Vinco 2018, p. 78.

³⁷ McComb 1924, pp. 20-21, images no. 21-23.

³⁸ Information about the chest is extremely hard to find, even in the museum's catalogue. It was discussed very briefly as part of the description of the museum in Fogolari 1956, pp. 15, 45.

³⁹ For the iconography of centaurs in Renaissance art, see Gabbard 1979, pp. 98-137.

As Even observes, both female figures, Europa and Deianira, were abducted by some sort of animal (or, in the latter case a hybrid) and both were taken away over water. They were also both figured, for example, in Filarete's (Antonio di Pietro Averulino, 1400-1469) decorations on the bronze doors of the central entrance of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, dated to 1432-1445, commissioned by Pope Eugenius IV. As both myths were imaged on the lower margins of the doors, Deianira's on the right and Europa's on the left, Even suggests that they were paralleled both thematically and visually⁴⁰.

Similar to many other myths, the Deianira tale came to the early modern period through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its many sixteenth-century vernacular translations. It is told in Book 9 in the *Metamorphoses*, which describes Hercules' birth, labors, life, and death⁴¹. One of the episodes in this account tells of Hercules and his new (here unnamed) bride, as they try to cross the River Euenus. As the crossing is a difficult one, the centaur Nessus offers to carry Hercules' new bride across the river. Hercules had already crossed the waters, but as the centaur is about to reach the other side, he decides to abduct Deianira. Hercules rescues his bride and kills the centaur. This story is told as the first episode Hercules' eventual demise, as, several years later, the blood of the dead centaur will be used to kill him⁴².

It is interesting to note that Ovid and the sixteenth-century translators of the *Metamorphoses* rarely focused on Deianira's victimization but dealt primarily with the story of Hercules rescuing his bride⁴³. This is, of course, reasonable as Ovid's account centers on Hercules' life and deeds. Nevertheless, Giovanni Andrea Dell'Anguillara (1517-1570) did mention Deianira by name and noted that she was frightened of going with Nessus⁴⁴. Further, in his commentary on Anguillara's vernacular translation of *Metamorphoses* M. Gioseppe Horologi (1520-1576) also mentioned Deianira, interpreting Hercules' bride as the Glory that was stolen from Hercules by Lust, represented by Nessus⁴⁵.

Deianira's assault by the centaur Nessus was a prominent narrative in early modern art throughout the Quattrocento and the Cinquecento in Italy and

⁴⁰ Even 2005, pp. 193-197.

⁴¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 1-455.

⁴² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 98-133. A few years after this incident, Hercules falls in love with Iole, and Deianira feels rejected. She remembers that Nessus' blood has the qualities of a love-potion and soaks Hercules' clothes in the blood, not knowing that it will poison him. Hercules dies and is then deified as all of the Olympian gods agree to make him a god. This tale is told in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 134-272.

⁴³ In general, and as discussed by Wolfthal, Even, and Lauriola, those narratives and their visual representations from ancient to early modern times overlooked the victim's point of view unless it served a way to please the male viewer's taste. See Wolfthal 1999, pp. 36-59; Even 2001, pp. 13-19; Even 2004, pp. 7-14; Lauriola 2022, pp. 60-67.

⁴⁴ Giovanni Andrea Dell'Anguillara, *Le Metamorfosi di Ovidio*, IX, 40, 51.

⁴⁵ Ivi, nono libro: Annotationi del Nono Libro.

beyond. The visual evolution of the myth from the beginning of the fifteenth through the sixteenth century, in both the private and the public sphere, is worth noting in connection with the Ca' d'Oro *cassone*.

One of the first early modern domestic portrayals is found on the short side of a painted *cassone* devoted to the theme of Hercules' labors. On the left side of the scene, Nessus is carrying Deianira away on his back, while on the right side Hercules, closer to the viewer – making him much larger, is aiming an arrow at the centaur. Although the myth describes Nessus' action as an assault, enacted without Deianira's consent, the painting images the centaur and Hercules' bride in what appears to be an almost loving embrace, suggesting, as Even observes, that it was a consensual act⁴⁶. Owing to the fact that this scene was a part of the theme of Hercules' valor, which decorated the chest, the portrayal was designed to focus on Hercules' deeds and victories, rather than on Deianira's assault or the centaur's aggression. This suggests that this particular *cassone* may have been intended especially for the groom, as it glorifies heroism, which in those days, was associated with masculinity⁴⁷. During the Quattrocento, this myth was often visualized with the three principal figures: Nessus, Deianira, and Hercules. Even categorizes two main points in depictions of this myth in art. The first, as can be seen on the Quattrocento *cassone* described above, focuses on Hercules' deeds, rather than on the centaur's aggression toward Deianira. The other, which is more relevant to the Ca' d'Oro *cassone* in question, centers on Nessus' aggression and Deianira's victimization⁴⁸.

When we move to the Cinquecento, the focus shifts toward Even's second category. Although some representations of the previous century do highlight Deianira's abduction, and the notion that it parallels Jupiter's rape of Europa, in the Cinquecento that parallel became even more widely accepted, and oftentimes Hercules was removed from the scene. This shift was largely due to Giambologna's (1529-1608) sculptures and the bronze statuette copies that followed. Although Giambologna depicted both the abduction and Hercules' fight with Nessus, presenting it as a hand-to-hand combat rather than Hercules killing the centaur with an arrow, it seems that most of the copies that followed these public sculptures focused on the abduction scene rather than on the fight⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ The image appears and is discussed in Even 2005, pp. 190-193.

⁴⁷ A similar *cassone* panel on which a short side of the chest shows the abduction of Deianira with Hercules preparing to shoot his arrow, and the kidnapped bride and the centaur in a loving embrace is found in the National Trust collection in the United Kingdom, NT 354249. See Rowell 2015, p. 26, fig. 7. Interestingly enough, the sixteenth century also produced at least one *cassone* with the theme of Hercules, with a side panel (this time carved) with a similar representation of the abduction with Hercules preparing to shoot the centaur. See González-Palacios 1996, image no. 37.

⁴⁸ Even 2005, pp. 189-209.

⁴⁹ Even 1997, pp. 1-6.

The two Cinquecento *cassoni* of interest resemble each other thematically as well as in other aspects. The Hermitage *cassone* features two scenes: the abduction of Europa and the abduction of a nereid. The Ca' d'Oro *cassone* shows a single narrative scene in its center but the theme of the abducted nereid is depicted on another *cassone*, which might be identified as the second of the pair. That *cassone*, now in a private collection, resembles the first one in style and in subject matter⁵⁰. Like the Ca' d'Oro *cassone*, the design is minimized into a singular oval frame in the center of the front panel, with two lions – one on each side – holding a cartouche. The oval frame presents another abduction scene – a nereid being carried off by a sea god, identified by his fish-like lower body, with some sort of a sea creature's tail, emerging from the water. Along with the obvious similarities in style and general design, the single oval frame, which depicts an abduction scene, suggests that these two chests were commissioned together.

With their similarities, the Hermitage and Ca' d'Oro *cassoni* also reflect a visible difference regarding each woman's reaction. Europa seems to be holding on to the bull, while Deianira is stretching her arms toward what we may assume is Hercules, although he is not present in this scene, while Nessus is holding on to her, so she cannot escape. Thus, Europa's reaction may imply that Jupiter's act was consensual, though since the representation was somewhat minimized, without many other indications, it is hard to determine conclusively, while Deianira's reaction is unambiguously that of resistance, emphasizing the abduction aspect of the myth.

These two myths and their various visualizations were widely known in the second half of the sixteenth century through Titian's painting and Giambologna's sculptures, among other well-known works. However, it seems that even without elaborate depictions, viewers might well have understood the narratives and the messages they conveyed, but those messages might have changed with the context. On several occasions these myths were portrayed in the public sphere⁵¹, where the visualizations, which highlighted messages of pleasure, heroism, and victory were designed to appeal to the male gaze. This approach might also have been in evidence in the private sphere, for example, the images on the *cassone* that depict Hercules' life⁵². However, along with

⁵⁰ The *cassone* is discussed in Santini 2002, p. 22, image no. 13.

⁵¹ As was the case of Giambologna's original sculptures.

⁵² *Cassoni* visualizing myths about Hercules are not exclusive to the fifteenth century, as they are also found in the sixteenth. Though I do not deal here with portrayals of that myth on carved *cassoni*, I note two prominent examples: a *cassone* in the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, dated 1550, accession number 1957.152, and another in the Musei Reali Torino, dated to the second half of the sixteenth century with additions from the nineteenth century, inventory no. 6491. Both *cassoni* feature several scenes of Hercules' labors. For the Torino *cassone*, see Pedrini 1925, p. 80, image no. 188; González-Palacios 1996, p. 37 image no. 34; Colle 2009, p. 38, image no. 25.

messages designed with the male point of view in mind, there were others directed to women, especially those rendered in the domestic context of the sixteenth century. As can be seen in literary sources, especially Boccaccio's tales, the abduction of women, whether consensual or not, could undermine the most important female virtue of the time – chastity. The loss of her chastity might have affected not only the woman in question, but could also have destroyed the honor of her family – of her parents, her husband, and her children⁵³. Other literary sources, such as Conti's works, rather than focusing on the feminine reaction, deal with myths that tell of male lust and warn men not to succumb to such desires. Thus, these representations might convey messages to both the bride – not to surrender to men, maybe even a message related to fidelity, or infidelity – and to the groom – not to succumb to lust, but also to safeguard his bride from «too much freedom to stroll about and listen too readily to the words of just anyone»⁵⁴.

4. *Bird's-Eye View: Leda and Ganymede*

The next two *cassoni* under discussion continue the theme of Jupiter's loves. These chests can be identified as a pair owing to two main aspects: the general design of each chest – with the decorative scheme and the division into two major panels of approximately the same size, and the subject matter featured on each panel.

The first *cassone* in question is housed in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, while the second one was sold on an auction website and is now in a private collection (figs. 5 and 6). The front panels on the Gardner *cassone* feature two major scenes. The left panel depicts Leda, the Spartan queen being seduced by Jupiter disguised as a swan. She is seated, half naked, her head turned away from the swan, one hand reaching in the same direction, while her other hand is stroking the swan, which is on her right. The scene on the right panel portrays Apollo with an orb that mirrors Leda's position. The second *cassone* was identified there as the second of a pair, and, according to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Catalogue, was sold in Paris in 1982⁵⁵. That *cassone* shows the handsome Ganymede with Jupiter disguised as his eagle, in an almost identical position to that of Leda – his head turned to the left, one hand reaching in the same direction, while the other caresses

⁵³ On the female and family honor in the Renaissance, see Cohen, Cohen 2019, pp. 96-98.

⁵⁴ «Vagari licentia nimia virginibus et aures faciles cuiuscunque verbis prebere, minime laudandum reor...»: Boccaccio, *De Mulieribus Claris*, 9, 3.

⁵⁵ Calderai, Chong 2011, pp. 96-97. Owing to the arms on the two *cassoni*, the museum identified them as having been commissioned by the Vitelleschi family of Tarquinia and Rome.

the eagle, which is depicted on the right. On the right panel, we see a female counterpart to Apollo, holding a similar orb, who is shown against a similar background. The two *cassoni* seem to create an interesting play of contrast: each features one female and one male figure, while the roles are reverse in the two. Jupiter's lover is a female figure on the first *cassone*, and a male figure on the second one, while the figure holding the orb is once a male figure and once a female.

After Leda, the wife of the Spartan king Tyndareus, was seduced, or raped, by Jupiter⁵⁶, she became pregnant with both Tyndareus and Jupiter as the fathers, laying two eggs with, according to most ancient sources, two sets of twins: the twin sons Castor and Pollux, known in Greco-Roman mythology as the Dioscuri, and twin daughters, Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra, who are also known figures in ancient literature⁵⁷. Leda's tale was described in only one short sentence in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in connection with Arachne's weaving: «She [Arachne] wrought Leda, beneath the swan's wings»⁵⁸. As the myth was not elaborated in Ovid's text, many Cinquecento mythographers mentioned her only briefly in connection with her association with Jupiter⁵⁹.

The myth's iconography in early modern art varies. It was portrayed, for example, by Michelangelo and by Leonardo da Vinci, the two depictions rendered in completely different fashions. Leonardo executed several studies of the subject. A finished painting was attributed to him but, according to Barbara Hochstetler Meyer, it was a mistaken attribution⁶⁰. Leonardo's studies, and the finished paintings after Leonardo's sketches, present an interesting aspect of the myth, focusing on Leda's motherhood⁶¹. In Leonardo's studies she is depicted standing or kneeling, stroking the swan, and there are one or more infants at her side. These details are presented more clearly in the completed paintings that were based on Leonardo's studies, for example, the one in the Galleria degli Uffizi, attributed to Francesco Melzi (fig. 7)⁶². There, Leda is in a *contrapposto* position, embracing the swan, and looking downward toward the ground where all four of her babies have hatched from two eggs.

⁵⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 109; Pseudo-Apollodoros, *Biblioteca*, 3, 10, 5; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3, 13, 8.

⁵⁷ On the myth and its sources, see Hathorn 1997, pp. 346-347.

⁵⁸ «fecit olorinis Ledam recubare sub alis»: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 109. Translated by Miller 1916, 296,297. She is also mentioned briefly in Ovid's *Amores*, where she is described as a beautiful woman with long black hair. Ovid, *Amores*, 2, 4.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Conti 2006, p. 79; For other early modern sources, see Draper 1971, pp. 50-52. For more about Leda's reception in early modern literature and art, see Rossoni 2002; Zarri 2015, pp. 57-61.

⁶⁰ Meyer 1990, pp. 279-294.

⁶¹ Ivi, pp. 280-286, images nos. 1-5.

⁶² Ivi, p. 287, image no. 6.

Michelangelo's lost painting, known through several copies, such as the one by Cornelis Bos (1510-1556) (fig. 8), depicted a completely different scene. He omitted Leda's and Jupiter's offspring and imaged the more erotic aspect of the myth. Leda, lying down, is embracing the swan who is on top of her, entangled between her legs, and the two seem to be kissing⁶³. If the swan were replaced by a man, this scene would have been categorized as an obviously erotic, one that would have been popular in prints and engravings in this period⁶⁴.

These two visualizations are among the most prominent iconographies in early modern art⁶⁵. On the Gardner *cassone*, although the scene seems to focus on the seduction aspect of the myth, being closer to Michelangelo's portrayal rather than to Leonardo's, it can also be interpreted as an abduction scene, similar to the Europa and Deianira narratives. The swan and Leda are not portrayed during intercourse, and the Spartan queen, turning away from the swan, is similar to Deianira's attempt to flee Nessus on the Ca' d'Oro *cassone*.

The counterpart of the Gardner *cassone* presents a similar scene, this time with a nude young boy and an eagle, which can be identified as a visualization of the myth of Ganymede, abducted by the king of Olympus to be his cupbearer, who eventually gains immortality. Popular in antiquity and in the early modern period, both in literature and visual art, that myth is rarely depicted on *cassoni*, as the homoerotic subtext, which is prominent in the interpretations of the myth throughout the ages, does not fit the context of the domestic bedchamber⁶⁶.

The first written account of Ganymede is found in Homer's *Iliad*, where, owing to his beauty, the young Phrygian had become Zeus' cupbearer⁶⁷. Ovid related a similar, yet more detailed, account: in his *Metamorphoses*, the myth of Ganymede and his abduction by Jupiter is told by Orpheus in his love song mourning the death of his wife, Eurydice⁶⁸. Several other ancients recounted the myth, including the Greek philosophers Xenophon and Plato, each interpreting

⁶³ On this subject, see Wallace 2001, pp. 473-499.

⁶⁴ This subject is discussed in detail in Talvacchia 1999; R. W. Medlicott suggests five different interpretations of the myth in visual representations from antiquity to modern art: the idealization of the scene, a comic interpretation of the myth, Leda as the goddess Nemesis, a parental scene with the portrayal of Leda's and Jupiter's offspring, and a focus on the dangerous and destructive aspects of the seduction. To that Medlicott adds the erotic aspect of the scene, contending that in ancient art, representations of the intercourse between the woman and the swan was not perceived as a negative thing or an unusual one – as representations of Jupiter transforming into animals and seducing women abounded. Cf. Medlicott 1970, pp. 21-22.

⁶⁵ Interestingly enough, some representations combine these two approaches. Some early modern engravings combine images of the sexual act of Leda and the swan and depictions of their children, already hatched from the eggs. See, e.g., Boorsch 1982, pp. 12, engraving by Giulio Bonasone, image no. 148-II (150); Spike 1985, p. 35, image no. 25 (294).

⁶⁶ On this subject, see Saslow 1986.

⁶⁷ Homer, *Iliad*, 20, 231-235. A shorter reference is also recounted in 5, 265-267.

⁶⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, 135-161.

the narrative in a different way. In his *Symposium*, Xenophon discussed the different aspects of love, taking relevant myths as examples. To prove the superiority of divine as opposed to carnal love, he wrote about the myth of Jupiter and Ganymede, interpreting the latter's beauty as a divine feature, in contrast to the feminine loves of Jupiter, who represent the mundane⁶⁹. Plato discussed the Ganymede myth in two different treatises. In *Phaedrus*, he interpreted the myth in a fashion similar to that of Xenophon, positing the notion of relationships between younger and older men, while in *Laws* it seems that he objected to these kinds of relationships and present Ganymede in a negative light⁷⁰.

Several medieval and early modern accounts have allegorized the myth as an ascension of the human soul to the divine realm. In this context, the beauty of Ganymede represents the virtuous human soul, who wins the love of the divine God, imaged as Jupiter⁷¹. Dante, for example, referenced the myth in *Commedia's Purgatorio*, and wrote of it as a metaphor for the spiritual elevation of the human soul⁷². In Critoforo Landino's commentary on Dante's account, the flight of the eagle is compared to divine charity, raising the human spirit to God, and Ganymede is the human soul who is loved by God⁷³. In the sixteenth century, Conti recounted the myth and offered various ancient interpretations, including the homoerotic aspect of the narrative:

I'm really offended by the stupidity of those commentators who associate this myth/ with disgraceful, shameful acts that aren't even worthy of animals! It's absurd to/ think that someone abducted Ganymede just to debauch him, as if men needed any/ encouragement to commit such a wicked and evil vice!⁷⁴

After a long rant about the falsity of the myth and its various interpretations, Conti concluded this account with his own perception of the myth:

To be Jupiter's cupbearer simply means that God is really delighted by the function of wisdom, which emanates from the souls of the wise. The divine goodness is always thirsting marvelously for wisdom, meaning that it wants us to become wise as well. And when we begin to attain such wisdom, our charity and innocence will move us closer to the divine goodness. Then we will be offering Almighty God sweet nectar from our cups. For nothing is more pleasant for a man than to be wise. And if wisdom becomes our golden rule, then we're almost like gods already, freed from the sordid conditions of mortal bodies and heading toward the immortal bodies in heaven⁷⁵.

⁶⁹ Xenophon, *Symposium*, VII, 23-30.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 255; Plato, *Laws*, 1, 636; For a full discussion about the Ganymede myth in ancient and early modern literary sources, see Marongiu 2002, pp. 9-18.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 27.

⁷² Dante, *Commedia: Purgatorio*, 9, 19-30; Marongiu 2002, p. 15.

⁷³ Ivi, p. 15.

⁷⁴ Conti 2006, p. 864. The Latin verse is given in the following footnotes, along with the rest of the paragraph.

⁷⁵ Ivi, pp. 864-865.

He then went on to explain that Ganymede was considered beautiful because «the wise man's spirit is free from sin. And also because [...] wisdom is such a beautiful virtue that if we had a glimpse of it we would be sure to fall in love with it»⁷⁶.

The myth was popular in the visual arts from antiquity to the early modern world, with an increase of its visual representations around the second half of the fifteenth century until about the time of the Council of Trent in the second half of the sixteenth century, at which time visualizations decreased owing to its homoerotic connotation⁷⁷. James M. Saslow suggests an iconographic division of the myth of four main categories: «the rapture of the pure human soul or intellect in the presence of divinity, the uplifting power of chaste earthly love, and both the delight and the disapproval associated with sexual passion, particularly in its homosexual form»⁷⁸. Thus, it seems that much as in the literary interpretations of the myth, its visualizations also reflect various interpretations.

In some cases, Ganymede is depicted among the gods, mostly as a beautiful young man, serving a cup filled with nectar. Such is the case, for example, in one of Peter Paul Rubens' (1577-1640) painting, where Ganymede serves not Jupiter, but rather two goddesses, while being carried by the eagle (fig. 9). This painting figures the young man becoming immortal, the virtue exemplified by his beauty, enhanced by his youthful face, golden hair, and firm yet delicate body. However, it is the abduction scene that is most common in visual arts: Ganymede is visualized as a young man, a boy, or even a baby, and the ascension is portrayed as either willing or unwilling and violent⁷⁹.

Relevant to the present discussion is a panel on the short side of a fifteenth-century *cassone* in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (fig. 10)⁸⁰. There, a Renaissance young man, who seems to be unconscious or dead, is

⁷⁶ «Ego sane longe aliter sentio, neque puto divina ad nos deferenda suis, sed humana potius vtiliter ad Deorum naturam oportere conferri. Na quid aliud per hanc fabulam demonstrabant sapientes, quam prudentem virum a Deo amari & illum solum proxime accedere ad divinam naturam: est enim Ganymedes anima hominum, quam ut diximus, ob eximiam prudentiam Deus ad se rapit, cum stulti neque sibi, neque caeteris quidem sint utiles. Illa vero anima pulcherrima est, quae minimum sit humanis sordibus, aut flagitiis corporis contaminata: quam Deus diligens ad se rapit. Na cum nihil sit inter mortalia, quod propius quam sapientia ad summi Dei naturam accedat, quod per Ganymedem in coelum raptum significabat antiqui non possum non summopere improbare quorundam stultitiam, qui obscuro quaedam, & neque brutis ipsis sine pudore iniungenda, per hanc fabulam intellexerunt, nimirum Ganymedem raptum fuisse ad stuprum, quasi aliquod incitamentum necessarium esset mortalibus ad tam nefandum, tamque impurum vitium»: Conti 2006, p. 992.

⁷⁷ Saslow 1986, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Many such examples can be found in Marongiu 2002. Violent scenes are seen, e.g., in image nos. 5, 15. Ganymede being carried away more willingly is, e.g., found in image nos. 4, 6, 7.

⁸⁰ Ivi, p. 16.

being carried away by what appears to be an angry, black eagle, while two of his male companions are on the ground, evincing expressions and gestures of shock. The image seems to represent a violent scene of a forced abduction, where Ganymede's companions have roles similar to those of Europa's female companions, implying the suddenness of the rape or abduction.

The sixteenth-century *cassone* that features Ganymede presents a very different scene from its fifteenth-century counterpart. Much like Leda's imagery on its mate, this *cassone* depicts Ganymede as a young man, one hand reaching toward the eagle, while his other hand, body, and face are all turned in the other direction. The pairing of the myths of Leda and Ganymede is an obvious step: both were abducted or seduced by Jupiter, who had disguised himself as a royal and symbolic bird⁸¹. However, owing to the homoerotic aspect, Ganymede might seem a surprising choice for a *cassone* meant to teach a young bride and groom the proper behavioral norms of the society. Moreover, observing, for example, the fifteenth-century *cassone* and comparing it to the one from the sixteenth century reveals a significant difference. On the one hand, on the Quattrocento painted panel Ganymede is dressed as he is being carried away by an eagle, and there is no suggestion of an erotic or lustful abduction. On the other hand, the image on the Cinquecento carved *cassone* does reflect an erotic interpretation, as it features a nude and beautiful Ganymede stroking the eagle.

So, how can one interpret the two images – that of Leda and that of Ganymede – in the domestic context of the Cinquecento? To answer this question, we have to consider several different aspects. To begin with, images depicting abduction scenes from Greco-Roman mythology, and especially from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, were popular in literature and in art in the early modern period in both public and domestic contexts. Thus, the choice to portray these two Jupiter "love stories" was a reasonable one. To that we can add the fact that these two specific myths were prominent in the visual arts of the early modern period, depicted as they were in various iconographies. Thus, it is not surprising that these myths found their way into the bedrooms of young brides and grooms.

The most challenging aspect here is to discern the didactic message and the reason for choosing these specific myths, both of which have some erotic overtones, to decorate the chests. Leda's figure, even though not widely discussed in the literature, is nonetheless an interesting choice, since she birthed four figures that are prominent in Greco-Roman mythology. Thus, in general, her figure could have been an *exemplum* for the young bride to encourage the procreation of beautiful and virtuous children. In the *cassone* imagery, Leda is not presented as the mother of her hatched children, and the scene features a more sexual

⁸¹ On the symbolism of birds in early modern art, see Medicott 1970, p. 16.

interaction. However, this might be read not only as an erotic scene, but might also be seen as a union that will be followed by the miraculous birth. Furthermore, several early modern treatises discussed the marital obligation of sexual intercourse, both for the bride and the groom, and, as Gabriella Zarri contends, this were manifested in amorous mythological imagery⁸².

Ganymede might be a more complex challenge, as his figure is rather contradictory in ancient, medieval, and early modern interpretations and representations. However, we might eliminate the homoerotic aspect of the myth, since it was likely meant for a man and a woman, rather than as a celebration of a same-sex couple, which was frowned upon, especially during and after the Council of Trent⁸³. Thus, Ganymede might have been meant to be understood as an allegory to encourage the couple, or specifically the groom, to act virtuously, so his beauty, derived from his virtue, might be appealing to God. Thus, the Leda *cassone* might have addressed the bride, while the Ganymede *cassone* was meant for the groom or both the bride and groom, with didactic messages such as the exhortation to procreate and to be virtuous.

Along with the didactic messages that might be derived from these *cassoni*, the visual and aesthetic aspects are also prominent here. Similar to the pairing of Europa and Deianira, here, too, the two myths can be compared. Jupiter, descended from the heavens in a shape of a bird to bestow honor upon a young mortal, making him either a servant of the gods (Ganymede), or rendering her (Leda) the mother of demi-gods who will grow up to be heroes. The similarities are clear, as the artisan or patron chose to describe the two mortal figures in a similar fashion, replacing only the bird and the gender portrayal. This is also apparent in the mirroring panel of each chest, where Apollo, a male figure, holding an orb, is presented across from Leda, and a female figure, depicted in the same manner as Apollo, is figured on the Ganymede *cassone*⁸⁴. Thus, the intent to parallel between the two chests is visible on both panels in each case, making it not only a way to educate the newlywed couple, but also to appeal to their decorative taste.

5. *Marriage, Lust, and Sexual Intercourse: Concluding Notes*

In the second book of his *Mythologiae*, Conti addressed the theme of Jupiter's love, with harsh criticism of his character:

⁸² Zarri 2015, pp. 60-61. For Renaissance treatises that address this subject, see, e.g., Da Siena 1888; Da Bologna 1525.

⁸³ Saslow 1986, pp. 1-16; Rocke 1996.

⁸⁴ The orb, which often symbolizes the sun and thus the wisdom and virtue in Renaissance art, is frequently associated with Apollo and his role as the sun-god. See Brumble 1998, pp. 28-30.

Is there any shape which Jupiter did not assume, in order to possess the women he lusted after? Could any husband with a beautiful wife leave his house without worrying about it? How many women did he rape through his treachery? How many of them were stained with dishonor? How many did he abduct from their countries? What? He wasn't even satisfied with the almost countless embraces of women? Isn't it true that he also enjoyed the body of the young Ganymede, the most/ handsome lad of his time? And even though Jupiter's life was reportedly defiled by /so many vices, most people were not ashamed to call him god⁸⁵.

In this paper, I have examined several *cassoni* whose decorations explore the theme of the love affairs involving Jupiter and other mythological figures, drawing primary inspiration from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The didactic messages that the narratives seem to convey clearly reference the societal expectations in regard to the bride and the groom. It is not surprising that the Europa, Deianira, Leda, and Ganymede myths were visualized on Cinquecento carved *cassoni*, as all of those narratives were well known in sixteenth-century art and literature.

The various myths that feature Jupiter's loves can be interpreted in different ways, not only in the general context of early modern art, but also within the Cinquecento *cassoni* imagery under discussion. One relevant discussion was presented by Anthony F. D'Elia, who contends that: «While women receive great praise for their physical beauty in wedding orations [...] fifteenth-century anti-marriage works often depict women as lustful creatures without sexual restraint»⁸⁶. As an example, D'Elia references Domenico Sabino's *On the Conveniences and Inconveniences of Wives (De uxorum commodis et incommodis)*, where he wrote about the negative implications of female lust:

It is almost impossible to protect what everybody desires. Some seduce /women with beauty and elegance, others with song, and still others with /continuous gifts. Women, however, are by nature and will so inclined /toward lust that even if men did not rely on these devices, they would easily/ succeed in seducing them⁸⁷.

⁸⁵ «Quam enim in formam no mutatus fuit Iupiter, ut optatis a moribus potiretur? aut quis for mosioris mulieris maritus domo secures discedere poterat? quam multas dolo vitiauit? Quam multas stuprauit? quam multas extra patriam asportauit? quid? Num fuit is innumerabilium prope fominarum complexibus contentus? Nonne Ganymedem pulcherrimum suae aetatis adolescentem in deliciis habuisse creditus est? tot impuris sceleribus Iouis vi ta dicebatur fuisse contaminate, quem tamen Deum appellare plerosque non puduit at hic tanem & optimus & maximus...»: Conti, *Mythologiae*, 93. Translated by Mulryan, Brown: Conti 2006, p. 80.

⁸⁶ D'Elia 2002, p. 407.

⁸⁷ Domenico Sabino, *De uxorum commodis et incommodis*, MS, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Chis. H IV I 1, fols. 108v-117v: «Atque hoc quidem confirmare audeo ... definders multo facilius esse arcem nec natura nec opere munitam tutarn praestare ab hostibus quarn ut uxoris forma omni labe impudicitiae careat», translated into English by D'Elia 2002, p. 407.

However, in the same dialogue, he also offered a defense of women:

Why is it strange then that wives sin according to nature, since men are /sinning against and in defiance of nature? We are all equal in sinning/ according to nature. But since the female vice is doing something natural,/ women deserve some leniency. The wicked deeds of men, however, are so /great that they far surpass women in every kind of vice and disgrace ... Men /are not satisfied with servant girls, mistresses, or prostitutes, but resort to/ boys in order to relieve their wild man lust⁸⁸.

While most of the *cassoni* discussed above figure the sexual abduction of men and women, on some it is imaged as a non-consensual act, while on others the imagery suggests that it is consensual. This corresponds to Sabino's quoted text, which considers both male and female lust. In some instances the *cassoni* imagery can be read as a warning against male lust and in others against female lust.

In addition to its didactic messages, the *cassoni* imagery also reflects a remarkable aesthetic quality. This can be seen most clearly on the two chests that visualize Jupiter's disguises as birds. The male and female nude bodies of Leda and Ganymede are idealized, and are not imaged as trying to escape or resist Jupiter's attempted abduction or rape. The sensual aspects of the myths of the love of the gods have been studied extensively. Such imagery not only conveys didactic and meaningful messages, but also showcases the classical taste of the patrons, with depictions of male and female nude bodies in various positions and the exploration of themes that were considered taboo at the time.

In addition, and to conclude, it is evident that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* played a significant role in shaping the imagery found on Cinquecento carved *cassoni*, particularly when considering the theme of the love of the gods. The rich tapestry of myths and narratives presented in Ovid's epic poem served as a wellspring of inspiration for artists and patrons during the early modern period. By translating these mythological stories into visual representations on Cinquecento *cassoni* panels, artists not only conveyed didactic messages but also explored aesthetic qualities and delved into captivating and controversial

⁸⁸ Domenico Sabino, *De uxorum commodis et incommodis*, MS, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Chis. H IV I I 1, fols. 114r-115r: «Quid mirum est, inquam, mulieres aliquid peccare secundum naturam cum illud idem mares peccent adversante ac repugnante natura. Nam licet viri complures qui non modo incontinentes sed ne pudid quidem quia in eo quod peccatur secundum naturam pares sumus ... Tam enim vobis incontinentia quam nobis impudicitia, dedecori ac probro iure optimo tribuenda est. Cum vero id vitium quod mulierum est proprium cuiusque qui naturale quoddam faciunt aliqua venia digne sunt, etiam mares usurpent, tantus cumulus accedit avirorum scelorum ut mulieres a viris in omni vitiorum ac flagitii genere longissime superentur . . . Vagatur liber animus mariti, solutus legibus. Non illi satis ancille sunt, non pellices, non deinique meretrices et postribule pro nephas. Et impudici pueri ad explendam furentem atque insanam libidinem adhibentur», translated into English by D'Elia 2002, p. 408.

subjects. The influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on the design of the *cassoni* imagery reflected the prevailing classical taste and sensibilities of the time, while engaging with the complexities of human emotions, power dynamics, and the allure of the divine. The visual narratives on the *cassoni* panels stand as a testament to the enduring impact of Ovid's work, leaving an indelible mark on the cultural and artistic landscape of the Cinquecento.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. Unknown, *Left: Sea-God and Nereid; Right Europa and the Bull*, second half of the 16th century, wood (walnut) carved and gilded, 57×88×67.5 cm, St. Petersburg: Hermitage Museum, Inventory number Эпр-6791



Fig. 2. Titian, *The Rape of Europa*, 1560-62, oil on canvas, 178×205 cm, Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum



Fig. 3. Liberale da Verona, *The Rape of Europa*, 1475-1500, oil on wood, Paris: Musée du Louvre



Fig. 4. Unknown, *Nessus and Deianira*, late sixteenth century, Venice: Galleria Giorgio Franchetti alla Ca' d'Oro



Fig. 5. Unknown, *Left: Leda and the Swan; Right: Apollo with an orb*, 1580-89, walnut, 65×171.5×61 cm, Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Accession number F15s7



Fig. 6. Unknown, *Left: Ganymede and the Eagle; Right: Woman with an Orb*, 1580, 62×178×58 cm, private collection



Fig. 7. Attributed to Francesco Melzi, *Leda*, oil on panel, 1508-15, 130x77.5 cm, Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi. Inventory number 1890, n. 9953

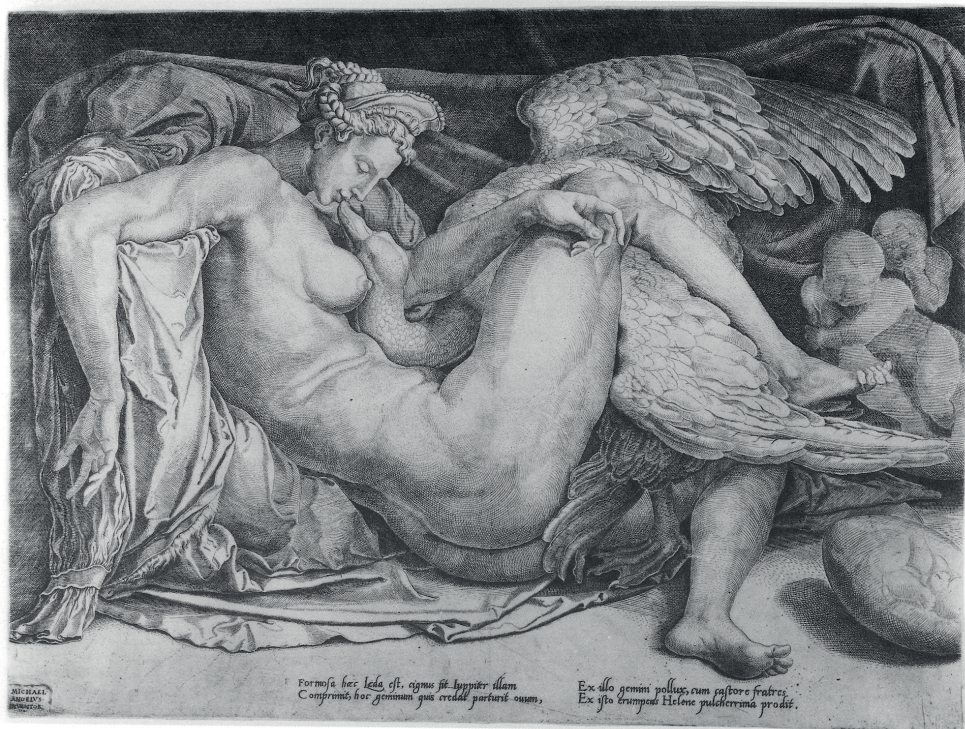


Fig. 8. Cornelis Bos, *Leda and the swan*, 1544-66, engraving, 30.2×41.3 cm, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession number 57.658.153



Fig. 9. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Abduction of Ganymede*, oil on canvas, 1611-12, 203×203 cm, Vienna: Schwarzenberg Palace



Fig. 10. Workshop of Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso and Marco del Buono di Marco, *Rape of Ganymede*, tempera on panel, after 1465, 38×40 cm, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts. Accession number 06.2441

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