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



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

edited by
Giuseppe Capriotti, Fátima Díez Platas,
Francesca Casamassima

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Ovid's Legacy on Trial. Aristocratic Gender Roles in the Painted Vaults of Two Noble 18th-Century Palaces in Macerata

Giuseppe Capriotti*

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to analyse two cycles of paintings, decorating two noble palaces in the city of Macerata (in the Marche Region in Italy), from the perspective of “decolonizing classics”. The vaults of Palazzo De Vico and Palazzo Costa have been painted in the 18th century on the occasion of two weddings and they are decorated with subjects derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other literary tales, displaying aristocratic gender roles. In the complex decorative system of Palazzo De Vico, stories from Roman wars were used in the rooms frequented by men and mythical love tales for rooms intended for women. In particular, one of the rooms, which was most likely a bedroom, is decorated with four images of mythical abductions or rapes, depicting a model of passivity and submission for the woman. In Palazzo Costa the two main rooms are decorated with the myth of Ariadne (abandoned by Theseus and then married by Bacchus) and with the myth of Phaeton (punished for his haughtiness), mirroring the virtues required from the bride and the groom. The woman is provided with a model for the perfect wife, while the man is urged to be temperate, avoiding pride.

* Associate Professor of Early Modern Art History, University of Macerata, Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Contrada Vallebona, Piazzale Bertelli 1, 62100 Macerata, e-mail: giuseppe.capriotti@unimc.it.

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1. *Introduction*

In 2005, in a volume encompassing fifteen years of her teaching experience at Mills College, (a women's college in Oakland, California), Madeleine Kahn published a book chapter titled “*Why are we reading a handbook on rape?*” *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, recounting and analysing her vivid discussions on the famous Ovid's poem with her students¹. Some of them openly contested and refused the assignment of reading tales from *Metamorphoses*: this poem is a handbook on rape, through which «Ovid was offering instructions on how to imitate them», or a text against women, «conspired with patriarchal culture to silence them as women»². Ovid is accused to have had a real impact on creating the manner in which femininity is conceived in the western world. Because «all the women in Ovid are victims», the book «is written for men who want to victimize women». In effect, many myths told by Ovid are about the power that men have over women or that gods (often male) have over mortals (often female)³. According to some students, a women's college should «learn how to be strong women, not to be rape victims» and should teach «how to resist that stereotype, not reinforcing it»⁴. «I didn't come to a women's college to read books that demean me as a woman», said a student⁵. Because the faculty is «very alert to information about the position of women in society and about the representation of women in text», students were «explicitly searching for literary models that will help them feel more powerful»⁶. The scholar concludes her chapter by explaining that the poet accused by students to be highly misogynist became an effective tool to spark a vivid dialogue among women. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* could stop being an object of exclusively stylistic analysis and instead be used to activate fruitful dialogues between our personal experiences and the stories told, between the reader's present and the text's past, analysing «the differences between the world in which I'm reading this book and the world in which it was written»⁷.

The concerns of the Mills College students – namely, that Ovid still provides misogynistic models to the present-day world – can be associated with the

¹ Kahn 2005, pp. 19-57. The book chapter was partially published in Kahn 2004.

² Kahn 2005, p. 1.

³ The presence of rapes in Ovid's texts has been studied since the 1970s, going from an analysis of the techniques of wit used by the poet to describe rapes (Stirrup 1977), through a presentation of the more than fifty cases of sexual violence in *Metamorphoses* (Curran 1978), to a proper feminist approach to the issue (Richlin 1992).

⁴ Kahn 2005, p. 28.

⁵ Ivi, p. 33.

⁶ Ivi, p. 31.

⁷ Ivi, p. 3 and pp. 56-57. After Madeleine Kahn, other scholars have continued to deal with the problem of teaching and reading Ovid's upsetting stories of sexual violence. See Gloyn, 2013; Sorkin Rabinowitz, McHardy, 2014; Everett Beek, 2016; Marturano, 2020 and Libatique, 2021.

movement known as “decolonizing classics”, which is particularly developed in the United States. According to some scholars, Greek and Roman literature and, more in general, classical antiquity should be considered as the controversial foundation of western culture, because they contain the very origins of a civilization based on slavery, white suprematism, colonialism, oppression of ethnic minorities for centuries, and obviously sexism and misogyny⁸. For this reason, Dan-el Padilla Peralta even suggested to remove some classical authors not only from the pedestal of the literary canon, but also from the school and university teachings⁹. In this case, “decolonizing classics” is strongly connected to the “cancel culture” movement¹⁰. On the other hand, there are scholars who claim that, instead of avoiding them, it is important to continue to teach classics that raise difficult topics (such as rape, pederasty, and slavery), because they can provide a way to open a useful discussion that might have been complicated and traumatic in other settings¹¹. According to Daniel Libatique, in the context of the #MeToo era, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* offer the reader exercises in recognizing the structures of power and domination, as well as the ways in which they are constructed. This act of discernment is necessary if the modern society is to take steps towards dismantling its unjust structures¹².

Without going into the intricacies of this interesting but thorny debate, it cannot be denied that classical antiquity, often proposed as an unattainable model of civilization, is also the bearer of ideas that have been exploited to endorse various forms of oppression and to legitimize injustices and discrimination, even between the sexes, in the following eras. The problem is therefore not so much the classical culture and its set of values, but rather the ideological uses of classics as the model of subjugation during specific historical moments (not only regarding the various forms of cultural and political colonialism)¹³. The issue is therefore the “dark side” of the “afterlife of antiquity”.

Starting from the 1990s, many scholars have begun to question why in the early modern period episodes of rape, gender violence, and male dominance or female submission, coming from ancient history and mythology, can often be encountered in public squares and private homes through statues and framed paintings or cycles of frescos. Studies by Yael Even, Margeret D. Carroll, Cristelle Baskins and Diane Wolfthal have shown that episodes like the Rape of the Sabine Women, the Rape of Europe, the Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus,

⁸ See for instance Isaac 2004 and Zuchtriegel 2017.

⁹ On Padilla Peralta cf. Poser 2023. More in general on “decolonizing classics” see Bettini 2023, pp. 66-79.

¹⁰ On cancel culture in the United States and in Europe see: Ng 2022; Maifreda 2022; Vesperi 2022; Bettini 2023.

¹¹ See the essays edited by Sorkin Rabinowitz, McHardy 2014 and Bettini 2023.

¹² Libatique 2021.

¹³ Bettini 2023, pp. 86-111.

Apollo and Daphne and so on were used as a behavioural lesson for virtuous brides, as a governmental tool to promote the submission of women, as a public symbol of political absolutism¹⁴. Using these interpretative categories and the “warnings” of “decolonizing classics”, this essay intends to analyse two cycles of paintings decorating two noble palaces in the city of Macerata (in the Marche Region in Italy), in which episodes taken from ancient mythology, in particular from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, are used to propose aristocratic models of behaviour for the groom and the bride. Triumphant heroes, sorrowful goddesses, and rapes or abductions of women are displayed in two vaults of Palazzo de Vico, probably intended as the antechamber and the bedroom. In Palazzo Costa, the two main rooms are decorated with the myth of Ariadne and the one of Phaeton respectively, mirroring the virtues required from the bride and the groom.

2. *The cycle in Palazzo De Vico*

According to the historiographical tradition, the cycle of paintings of Palazzo De Vico, consisting of five rooms, has been painted by Giovanni Anastasi from Senigallia around 1703-1704¹⁵, precisely on the occasion of the wedding of Antonio De Vico and Rosa Ubaldini, which was celebrated in 1704¹⁶. Giovanni Anastasi died on March 13th, 1704, in Macerata, having made his last will and testament in Antonio De Vico’s house on February 6th, 1704, where he was probably concluding the cycle of paintings¹⁷. Antonio De Vico was the son of Ascanio De Vico from Civitanova in the region of Marche and Zenobia Filippucci from Macerata (who married on April 30th, 1659¹⁸), whereas Rosa was the daughter of Giambattista Ubaldini della Carda from Città di Castello, count of Apecchio

¹⁴ Carroll 1992; Even 1992; Even 1997; Baskins 1998; Wolfthal 1999; Even 2001; Even 2004.

¹⁵ According to Paci 1975, p. 103, the painter participated in the decoration of the palace; Montevecchi 2001, p. 54 claims that Anastasi, dying on March 13th, 1704, left the cycle uncompleted; the same scholar (Montevecchi 2008a, p. 55; 2008b, pp. 87-88) argues that Anastasi probably started to work on the cycle in 1703, with the help of the *quadraturista* Agostino Orsoni, who also worked with him in Tolentino.

¹⁶ Coltrinari 2017. The date of the marriage is taken from a manuscript by Ignazio Compagnoni (preserved in the Biblioteca Comunale Mozzi Borgetti of Macerata), which contains a collection of memories from municipal documents and parish registers. Cf. I. Compagnoni, *Memorie estratte dai registri parrocchiali, da quelli della Confraternita del Sacramento e dai libri dei Camerlenghi*, Biblioteca comunale Mozzi Borgetti (henceforth BCMB), Ms. 526, c. 87r.

¹⁷ Coltrinari 2017.

¹⁸ The date of the marriage is also taken from the manuscript by I. Compagnoni, *Memorie estratte dai registri parrocchiali, da quelli della Confraternita del Sacramento e dai libri dei Camerlenghi*, BCMB, Ms. 526, c. 85v.

(now in the province of Pesaro and Urbino)¹⁹. Ascanio, who was killed on September 7th, 1676²⁰, had another son – Francesco De Vico (1660-1735). The latter was an advocate in Rome, where he became a Lateran canon, bishop of Eleusa in Asia Minor from 1723 to 1735 (the year of his death)²¹, and a member of the Accademia degli Arcadi with the name of Timofilo²². He was a close friend of Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni from Macerata (1663-1728), founder and *custode generale* of the Accademia degli Arcadi²³. In 1721, Crescimbeni dedicated to Francesco De Vico his *Notizie istoriche degli Arcadi morti*, in which he is lauded «for the noble genius in regard the fine Arts, and his good taste, and the fine judgment he shows regarding them»²⁴. In 1724, Crescimbeni published a biography of Gabriele Filippucci, who was the brother of Zenobia (mother of Francesco and Antonio De Vico), in which he provided some additional information about the family: Zenobia and Gabriele were sons of Domenico Filippucci and Lisabetta Pellicani; Francesco De Vico, firstborn of Antonio and Zenobia, was called to Rome by his uncle in 1679; the wedding between Antonio De Vico and Caterina Rosa Ubaldini dates back to 1702²⁵. In 1729, Francesco De Vico asked Francesco Maria Mancurti to write and publish a biography of Crescimbeni, in which he is quoted as a good friend of him²⁶.

These information regarding the connection between the family and the Academy of Arcadia are quite useful to understand the literary culture emerging from the cycle of paintings. In addition, the genealogical data extracted from these testimonies should be coupled with the presence of coats of arms in the cycle. Like the other four rooms, the hall of the building is decorated with a complex illusionistic system of *quadrature* and perspectival *trompe l'oeil*. The structure of the vault consists of a fictive porch with an open top offering the view of the sky. In effect, in the middle of the vault, Juno, accompanied by a bird (probably her peacock), is arriving on a cloud to deliver a yoke, symbol of the wedding, to a couple of newlyweds. Among the many cupids who are surround-

¹⁹ Cf. I. Compagnoni, *Memorie estratte dai registri parrocchiali, da quelli della Confraternita del Sacramento e dai libri dei Camerlenghi*, BCMB, Ms. 526, cc. 87r; *Memorie di famiglie maceratesi*, I, BCMC, Ms. 540, c. 332r. On the history of the family and its palace, see Paci 1996, pp. 585-591.

²⁰ Cf. I. Compagnoni, *Memorie estratte dai registri parrocchiali, da quelli della Confraternita del Sacramento e dai libri dei Camerlenghi*, BCMB, Ms. 526, c. 155r., according to which Ascanio died of wounds. According to the *Memorie di famiglie maceratesi*, I, BCMC, Ms. 540, c. 332r., he was killed by Giovanni Compagnoni delle Stelle. Cf. Paci 1996, pp. 587-588.

²¹ Paci 1996, p. 588; Baldeschi 1723, s.p. Some manuscripts preserved in the Vatican Library confirmed he was a Lateran canon and bishop of Eleusa. Cf. Forcella 1879, pp. 292-293, 295.

²² Crescimbeni 1804, p. 76.

²³ Cf. Merola 1984.

²⁴ «pel nobile genio verso le belle Arti, e il suo buon gusto, e il fino giudizio, che mostrate intorno ad esse»: Crescimbeni 1721, dedication letter.

²⁵ Crescimbeni 1724, pp. 2, 11, 44, 67.

²⁶ Mancurti 1729, pp. 83, 88.

ing them, one is blind and is carrying an arrow and a quiver on his back: he is for sure Eros, the god of love. Another one, close to him, is carrying the coat of arms of the De Vico family, that is, an armored arm holding a heraldic fleur-de-lys. The same heraldic symbol is displayed in many other mural paintings and in some bas-reliefs of the building as well. At the four corners of the hall, an essential cycle of the life of Hercules is displayed inside four ovals: Hercules and Omphale, Hercules killing the centaur Nessus, Hercules giving a crown to a woman (probably Deianira), and another damaged scene, depicting maybe another episode of the life of the hero. The decoration of the vault is enriched with four other ovals, displayed under the fictive porch, in which four episodes based on literary poems are painted: *Cupid and Psyche* (from *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius), *Angelica and Medoro* (from *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto), the *Venus and the fight between Eros and Anteros* (coming from a very rich literary tradition²⁷), and *Vertumnus and Pomona* (from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). All these episodes are the perfect outline for a matrimonial allegory.

The vaults of other two rooms are decorated with scenes from Roman history. While the subjects in the first room, deriving from the history of the Roman Republic, have all been correctly identified²⁸, those in the second have yet to be thoroughly studied²⁹. Because the protagonists of the episodes are mostly men, is it possible to hypothesize that these rooms were also used as board-rooms by the male family members. On the other hand, the remaining two rooms, in which literary episodes are again dominant, are focused on female characters. This suggests that the rooms in question were predominantly used by women. The subjects selected for the decorations of these last two rooms are very interesting for the aim of this paper.

²⁷ Comboni 2000.

²⁸ Giuliadori 2019/2020. The centre of the vault is decorated with the figure of Mars in his chariot. The other episodes, painted in ovals, are: Aeneas escapes from Troy, Aeneas against Turnus, Mucius Scaevola, The moderation of Scipio Africanus, Caesar and the severed head of Pompey, Fulvia against the severed head of Cicero. In addition to armoured arms (part of the coat of arms of the De Vico family), which are displayed in many parts of the vault, the four corners feature depictions of heraldic symbols: a fleur-de-lys (another symbol of the De Vico family), a cross with four balls (coat of arms of the Filippucci family), a rampant lion and a bird. For the moment I have not been able to link these last two heraldic symbols to any family.

²⁹ The centre of the vault features Zeus, recognizable for his thunder and eagle, in the act of receiving an olive branch from a pregnant woman who is crowned by a cupid. Close to her there are two felines. The subjects of the four narrative monochromes have yet to be identified. In the corners there are four puttos carrying heraldic symbols, on top of which there are monochrome ovals with female personifications: above the fleur-de-lys (the De Vico family) there is Hope with an anchor; above the cross with four balls (the Filippucci family) there is Fortitude with a shield and an oak tree branch; above the eagle there is Fidelity with a key and a dog; above the eight-pointed star there is a personification that is difficult to identify (a woman with a headband scattering flowers). For the moment I have not been able to link the eagle and the eight-pointed star to any family, although the latter is present in the Ubaldini coat of arms (together with the deer antlers, which never appear in the cycle).

In the first of the two rooms the decoration involves the actual vault and the frieze, which is painted in continuity with the vault in a single illusionistic architectural ornamentation. In the middle of the vault there is Hercules with *leonté* (the skin of the Nemean lion) and club. He is conversing with a goddess, probably Juno, represented by means of a crown of peacock while stepping on a snake (a probable reference to her attempt to kill him when he was a child) and is carrying a branch with two pomegranates. It is difficult at this point to identify the actual episode depicted in this painting, but a cupid in the sky is holding a yoke, the symbol of marriage. In each corner of the frieze there are two coats of arms indicating the families that are the protagonists of the wedding alliance (fig. 1): the armoured arm holding a fleur-de-lys (De Vico family) and a cross with four balls (Filippucci family). Clearly, the room celebrates the marital alliance between the De Vico and Filippucci families on the occasion of the marriage of Ascanio De Vico with Zenobia Filippucci, which took place in 1659. On the frieze there are four mixtilinear spaces in which episodes from mythology and literature are displayed. Two are dedicated to goddesses' thwarted loves: Venus is descending from the sky in a vain attempt to help Adonis, who was killed during a failed hunt (fig. 2); on the opposite side, Diana is descending from the sky to love Endymion, who is forever asleep (fig. 3). The first myth, told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is combined with an analogous tragic love derived from other classical sources, such as Apollonius of Rhodes and Apollodorus, according to which Endymion, loved by Diana, is eternally alive, but always sleeping³⁰. The other two spaces, one opposite the other, are dedicated to male heroes saving desperate women. The first one is Perseus liberating Andromeda by riding Pegasus, the winged horse (fig. 4). The source is still Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, even if Perseus riding on the back of Pegasus refers to a specific tradition originated by the *Ovide moralisé*³¹. The other one is a hero riding a hybrid animal, that is, an hippogryph, to free a woman who is threatened by a sea monster (fig. 5). The episode is told by Ludovico Ariosto in his poem *Orlando furioso*: Ruggero frees Angelica, who is about to be attacked by an orca, while she is held prisoner on an island and chained to a rock³². Like in the two previous scenes, even though the episodes are based on different literary sources, they have been selected due to a clear correspondence: the protagonists are two male heroes able to attain their love after having saved women threatened by a monster. Looking at the structure, created by the selection of episodes, it is noticeable that the two goddesses are unable to attain their love, whereas the two male heroes do it after a heroic and dangerous action. In the first two episodes women are active protagonists,

³⁰ Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, 4, 57-58; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 1, 7, 5.

³¹ Guthmüller 2009, p. 266.

³² Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, 10, 92-112.

but they are destined to forfeit their love, while in the other two scenes the women are passive protagonists, rescued by the heroic action of a male character. Gender polarity is therefore very evident in the decoration of a room that was supposed to celebrate an aristocratic marital alliance.

A similar atmosphere can be felt in the last room of the noble apartment of the palace, which was probably a bedroom, being the last one of a series of rooms. At the top of the vault there is Apollo holding a stick and a lyre between Eros with a harrow, bow and quiver, and Urania, the muse of astronomy and geometry, who is crowned by stars and is holding a globe (fig. 6). Some cupids are holding the heraldic symbols of the De Vico family. In the corners, at the top of the fictional architecture, there are the other eight muses, painted in monochrome and disposed in couples³³. In the four corners of the room there is still the coat of arms of the Filippucci family that, paired with the heraldic symbols of the De Vico in the vault, once again underlines the families' matrimonial alliance. The space of the frieze, which is in fictional continuity with that of the vault, features four scenes of abductions or rapes, painted inside ovals: the abduction of Proserpina, conducted by Pluto (fig. 7); the rape of Europa, committed by Jupiter transformed into a bull (fig. 8); the dolphin carrying the nereid Amphitrite toward Neptune (fig. 9); while the last rape is perhaps the one of Orithya, even though Boreas the wind is represented without wings (fig. 10)³⁴. The myths of Proserpina, Orithya and Europa are told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, while the story of Amphitrite is only quoted by Ovid. According to many other sources, Neptune falls in love with the nereid after seeing her dance, but she tries to escape; at the end of the story, a dolphin leads her to the god who finally marries her³⁵. Apart from Europa, raped by Jupiter and destined to be the founder of a continent, all the other women are raped to become brides of their rapists. All these mythical abductions or rapes are caused by the women's irresistible beauty. At first glance it seems rather striking that a connubial bedroom is decorated with four episodes of rape or abduction of girls. However, the author of the iconographic program constructed a rather clear and coherent

³³ The first couple is composed of Clio (History), represented with a book and a clarion, and Terpsichore (Dance) with a *rebecchino* instead of a harp; the second couple features Thalia (Comedy) holding a mask and Melpomene (Tragedy) with a sword, crowns and sceptre; the third couple is composed of Erato (Lyric Choral Poetry) with a violin and Calliope (Epic Poetry) with books and crowns of laurel; the last couple features Euterpe (Music) with a flute and other wind musical instruments, and Polyhymnia (Rhetoric and Voice Music), who is making an emphatic gesture and carrying scrolls.

³⁴ According to Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 682-721, Boreas enveloped the woman with his wings. According to other traditions, Orithya was raped by Boreas on the river Ilissus (Apolodorus, *Bibliotheca*, III, 15), that could be represented by the fountain in the painting.

³⁵ All the sources of the myth of Amphitrite, including the later one by Eustathius of Thessalonica (late 12th century), which recounts the skirmishes between these two gods, are analyzed by Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1981.

structure, so that gender roles and power relations between the sexes could visibly emerge: male characters are powerful, dominant and violent, while female figures are victims, brutalized and subjected.

The decorations of these two rooms allow for two additional considerations; the first one regarding the occasion of its realization and the author of the iconographical program, and the second one concerning gender roles and an extensive use of abductions and rapes in rooms destined for women.

In the entire cycle clear heraldic references to the Ubaldini family are missing. On the other hand, clearly recognizable are the ones connected to the wedding between Ascanio De Vico and Zenobia Filippucci, which took place in 1659. However, Ascanio died tragically in 1676, leaving his wife with their two sons, Francesco and Antonio. It is highly unlikely that the cycle, which is consistent with the style of Giovanni Anastasi and homogeneous from a stylistic point of view, was completed before Ascanio's death or on two different occasions. Assuming that this floor was indeed painted by Giovanni Anastasi in preparation for the wedding between Antonio De Vico and Rosa Ubaldini before his death in 1704, one has to infer that these last two rooms were decorated to celebrate a previous wedding in the family and that they were probably used by the widow Zenobia. In fact, we should not fail to consider that the whole cycle could have been much more extensive than the five surviving rooms and that the most recent wedding could have been celebrated in other rooms of the palace which have now lost their decorations. Zenobia was a descendant of a relevant family from Macerata, more important than the De Vicos, who were from Civitanova. Thanks to the inheritance of Zenobia, who died in 1714, Francesco and Antonio enlarged their palace and received also the Filippucci collection of paintings, which is now lost³⁶. Francesco and Antonio dedicated a tombstone to their mother in the church of St. Francis in Macerata, where she was buried³⁷. In the epigraph Zenobia is firstly remembered for being the sister of Gabriele Filippucci, who is considered famous for having refused the position of a cardinal. Then she is celebrated for her notable innocence and her matronly morality, for the education of her offspring and for her vast munificence towards the poor, as well as for having always behaved excellently towards her sons³⁸. Therefore, Zenobia was truly beloved by Francesco

³⁶ Paci 1996, p. 590; Paci 2000, pp. 276-279.

³⁷ The tombstone, conceived by Lazzaro Giosafatti, was relocated to the family collection when the church of St. Francis was demolished in 1824. Cf. Paci 1996, p. 591.

³⁸ G. Rangeschi, *Raccolta di iscrizioni esistenti nei varii monumenti del territorio di Macerata*, BCMC, ms. n. 528, c. 152: «ZENOBIAE PHILIPPUCIAE DE VICO PATRICIAE MACERATEN. / GABRIELIS NON TAM OB DELATAM / QUAM OB RENUNCIATAM PURPURAM CELEBRIS / SORORI / MATRON. MORUM INNOCENTA / PROLIS EDUCATIONE / AC EFFUSA LARGITATE IN PAUPERES / CONSPICUAE / FRANCISCUS S.R.E. REFERENDARIUS / ET ANTONIUS FRATRES DE VICO / MATRI DE SE OPT. MER. POS. / VIXIT ANN. LXXVII / OBIT A.S. MDCCXIV».

and Antonio, who played a crucial role in the renewal of the family palace. Whereas the second-born son Antonio led the family toward a new wedding, the firstborn Francesco conducted his ecclesiastical career with the help of his uncle Gabriele Filippucci and cultivated his literary interests thanks to his relationship with Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni. In my opinion, the iconographical program of the rooms was conceived by an intellectual who was closely connected with these three highly cultivated prelates. In the last two rooms of the palace, which were probably intended for the widow Zenobia, the subjects of the decorations underline the state of subjection reserved for an early modern aristocratic woman. Therefore, in most of the paintings, the women, virgin and defenseless, are generally saved, kidnapped, or raped by a male hero who ultimately becomes their legitimate husband. In this historical context, how can the presence of episodes of abduction and rape in a room intended for a woman be justified? Or how were abduction and rape perceived in relation to the wedding in the early modern period?

In effect, in the legislation of the pre-unification Italian states, *stuprum* (rape) and *raptus* (abduction for sexual purpose) were considered a terrible crime against virginity and honor of a woman, but also against the honor of her father and her entire family. Therefore, the loss of virginity of a consenting woman was also considered as a rape³⁹. Although the punishment for the rapist could vary, depending on the local legislation and the social conditions of both the rapist and the victim, in many states of the peninsula death penalty was contemplated. The rapist could avoid this punishment by providing a dowry to the victim, thanks to which she could marry another man, or by marrying her directly: despite the perplexities of the Church, the shotgun marriage was considered a valid compensation for the victim and her family in many former Italian states⁴⁰. In many cases, however, there was a prejudice against women, who were considered responsible for the seduction with the aim of achieving marriage, by virtue of the popular Ovidian motto *vis grata puellae*⁴¹. Ovid, along with Catullus, is often quoted in legislative discourse regarding rape⁴². In a sense, Ovid does indeed seem to have provided role models for later ages.

Concluding this part, it can be observed that in Zenobia's rooms a double male perspective emerges: the presumed fragility and passivity of the female protagonists, who do not attain their love or are saved (in the first room), is combined with the celebration of their beauty and seductive abilities, which prompts acts of uncontrollable sexual violence (in the second room). Both situations are solved and, in a sense, justified by marriage. These ideas, in this

³⁹ Morello 2013.

⁴⁰ Alessi 1989; Alessi 1990; Alessi 2006.

⁴¹ Ovidio, *Ars amatoria*, I, I, 673-674. Cf. Santangelo 2020, p. 71. On the use of this motto cf. Brescia 2014; Carbone 1999.

⁴² Di Renzo Villata 2020.

context, make these subjects appropriate for rooms intended for an esteemed woman, even if they seem quite removed from our modern sensibility.

3. *The two halls of Palazzo Costa*

Like Palazzo De Vico, the structure of the building and of the decorated rooms of Palazzo Costa is very complicated⁴³, but in this essay I will deal only with the two halls of the main floor, whose decorations are inspired by two myths told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Phaeton and Ariadne. In this case also the decoration of the noble palace was commissioned for the occasion of an important wedding, that is documented in an epigraph composed by the parents of the groom, Giacomo and Teresa Costa, in the private chapel of the palace⁴⁴. By means of this epigraph they wanted to preserve the memory of the union between their son Benedetto with Costanza Filippucci Cornacchia, celebrated in the chapel on August 29th, 1791⁴⁵, by the prestigious figure of cardinal and bishop Paolo Francesco Antamori⁴⁶. In the chapel there are a couple of coats of arms unified under a crown. They are the coat of arms of the Costa family, that is, an arm holding a rib (in Italian, *costa* or *costola* is a rib), and the coat of arms of the Silvestri family, that is, a rampant lion holding a branch with three pears and a strip with a comet on the left and three mounts on the right. The presence of this coat of arms is due to the fact that Teresa, the wife of Gia-

⁴³ For the history of family and the palace, which deserve a more in-depth analysis, see Paci 1996, pp. 596-581.

⁴⁴ «D(OMINO) O(POTIMO) M(AXIMO) / PAULO FRANCISCO ANTAMORIO / TIT(ULARI) S(ANCTI) ALEX(I) CARD(INALI) AMPLISS(IMO) /URBIS VET(ERI) EPI(SCOPO) VIGILANTISS(IMO) / QUOD / IN HOC SACELLO SACRIS INTERFECTIS / PROQ(UE) DIGNITATE ORATONE HABITA / BENEDICTUM COSTA / CUM COSTANTIA PHILIPPUCI CORNACCHIA / III KALEMD(IS) SEPT(EM) BRIS) MDCCXCI MATRIMONIO COPILA(VE)RIT / NE TANTAE PIETAT(IS) HUMANITATISQ(UE) / MEMORIA INTERIRET / JAC(OBUS) ET THERES(A) COSTA CONIUG(ES) SPONSI PARENTES / G(RATIA) A(ETERNAE) M(EMORIAE) PP(OSUERUNT)». The couple had two other sons, Sforza Antonio and Carlo. Sforza Antonio was born on February 29th, 1772, remained celibate, and died on October 3rd, 1846. Cf. A. Natali, *Raccolta di memorie, biografie e necrologie di alcuni esemplari sacerdoti e illustri cittadini*, II, BCMB, ms. 562bis, pp. 105-116.

⁴⁵ In other documents, the wedding is dated back to 1790 or 1789. In the obituary written for Benedetto Costa by his close friend Antonio Natali in 1818, the day of the wedding is August 30th, 1790. Cf. A. Natali, *Raccolta di memorie, biografie e necrologie di alcuni esemplari sacerdoti e illustri cittadini*, I, BCMB, ms. 562, p. 8. In the court files of a trial that involved Benedetto and Costanza in 1815, the wedding is dated back to 1789. Cf. *Processi civili*, in BCMB 21/12/F/1.

⁴⁶ Paolo Francesco Antamori was the cardinal of Sant'Alessio and the bishop of Orvieto. Cf. Paviolo 2021. It is possible that 1789 was the year of the prenuptial agreement, 1790 the year of the actual wedding, and 1791 the year of a private celebration in the family chapel.

como, was a Silvestri⁴⁷. Costanza Filippucci Cornacchia, the wife of Benedetto Costa, was the first daughter of Paolo Filippucci and her mother was the only daughter of the Cornacchia family of Sarnano (in province of Macerata)⁴⁸. For this reason, she also received her mother's inheritance, enriching considerably the heritage of the Costa family⁴⁹.

The coats of arms of all these families, Costa, Silvestri, Filippucci and Cornacchia, are displayed in a corner of the vault of a magnificent hall of the palace, entirely dedicated to the myth of Phaeton. The presence of the coat of arms of the Filippucci (the same as that of Zenobia) and Cornacchia (a talking coat of arms with a carrion crow, which is *cornacchia* in Italian) documents that at least two of the halls were painted on the occasion of the wedding of Benedetto and Costanza, after receiving the inheritance of the Cornacchia family.

Following Ovid's tale⁵⁰, the unknown painter started his story on the short side of the vault, depicting the dispute between Phaeton and Epaphus. While Phaeton claims to be the son of Apollo, Epaphus, son of Jupiter, accuses him of not having any evidence of this paternity. In the painting (fig. 11), Phaeton is indicating his father Apollo, who appears in the sky with his horses, to Epaphus, who is wearing an armour. Desperate for not being believed, Phaeton reaches his mother Clymene, asking proofs for being the son of Apollo. In the opposite painting, on the other short side of the hall, Clymene is indicating which direction to take to reach and ask explanation from his father, who appears on the horizon inside the circle of the sun (fig. 12). The story continues in the painting on the long side of the vault, where Phaeton has already reached the mansion of his father, who is sitting on a throne surrounded by the personifications of the four seasons, as told by Ovid (fig. 13). As we know, to prove that he is in fact his father, Apollo allows his son to ask him for anything and Phaeton asks and receives permission to drive the solar chariot for a day. His father tries to dissuade him from the too arduous undertaking, but Phaeton insists. His journey, however, turns out to be disastrous because he ends up causing fires throughout the world after failing to control the chariot. In the end Jupiter is forced to strike him with a lightning and make him fall into the river Eridanus (Po River). In the painting, represented as the principal episode at the centre of the vault (fig. 14), Phaeton is falling down, whereas on the left

⁴⁷ Teresa Costa, born Silvestri, died on July 7th, 1826. Cf. A. Natali, *Memorie che contengono cenni necrologici...*, BCMC, ms. 578, pp. 29-30. The Silvestri coat of arms can also be found in the *impresa* of Francesco Silvestri, who was a member of the Accademia dei Catenati of Macerata. Cf. Simi 2008, pp. 94-95.

⁴⁸ Costanza Costa, born Filippucci Cornacchia, died on February 18th, 1849, when she was 79 years old. Cf. A. Natali, *Memorie che contengono cenni necrologici...*, BCMC, ms. 578, pp. 31-32. Her husband Benedetto Costa was born on January 22nd, 1771, and died on March 23rd, 1817, before his wife and mother.

⁴⁹ Paci 1996, p. 575.

⁵⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, 748-779; II, 1-366.

Jupiter on his eagle is launching a thunder and on the right the chariot and the horses are out of control. In the right corner, the personification of the river Eridanus is watching the sad event, astounded. The personification of the same river is represented in the right corner of the last episode of the myth, which is depicted on the other long side of the vault (fig. 15). The scene depicts the metamorphosis of the Heliades, the three Phaeton's sisters, transformed into trees producing amber (originating from the girls' tears).

In the Western tradition, the myth of Phaeton normally represents the sin of *hybris*, hubris, that is, a feeling of pride, excessive self-confidence and arrogance that requires punishment⁵¹. The audacity to aspire to great feats must not drive a man to exceed the limits of his own strength, as it leads to an inevitable fall⁵². The episode that is mostly represented is certainly the Fall of Phaeton, but there is no shortage of cycles entirely dedicated to him, although they became increasingly rare starting from the 17th century⁵³. In the context of Palazzo Costa, Phaeton could represent a counter-hero, a model not to be followed, a behaviour to be avoided. In the obituary written by Antonio Natali for Benedetto, the deceased is in fact remembered as a temperate, humble, obedient, and generous man, who always remained unharmed by the deceptive freedom, fallacious doctrines, and false philosophies of his time. Natali says: «Philosophy of Sophism and Libertinism, in your chariot you can draw only the weak spirits and corrupt hearts!»⁵⁴. Hence, Benedetto is not in this chariot. Even if it is difficult to establish a direct link between Phaeton's chariot and the dangerous ideas of the Revolutions, the hero's fall seems to be a warning to those who a few years later will welcome the arrival of Napoleon with hope. In the cycle, the repeated presence of Apollo immersed in the luminous disk of the sun, which attracts the unsuccessful Phaeton, could perhaps be a reference to Enlightenment ideas.

Whereas this hall offers a model to which an aristocratic man should adhere, the second one, without any coats of arms but stylistically and compositionally similar to the previous one, provides a model for a noble bride using the myth of Ariadne. The structure of the vault is very similar to the first one, with four episodes at the base of the vault and a central scene. Ovid dismisses the story of Theseus, Bacchus, and Ariadne in a few verses, giving very few details⁵⁵. In contrast, Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara, a 16th-century translator of Ovid's

⁵¹ Marongiu 2008a.

⁵² For example, this is the interpretation given by Dolce 1553, p. 39; Alciato 2009, pp. 344-245; Bardi 1684, pp. 14-15.

⁵³ Marongiu 2008b.

⁵⁴ «Filosofia del Sofisma, e del Libertinaggio, tu puoi trarre al tuo carro avvinti solo spiriti deboli e cuori corrotti!»: Cf. A. Natali, *Raccolta di memorie, biografie e necrologie di alcuni esemplari sacerdoti e illustri cittadini*, I, BCMB, ms. 562, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VIII, 169-182.

Metamorphoses, which was published until the 18th century, provides numerous details that allow us to better follow the story, even if the painter probably relied on other literary traditions as well⁵⁶. In the first episode (fig. 16), depicted on a short side of the hall, Ariadne has already decided to help Theseus after receiving the promise to be married and taken by him in Athens. She is leading the Greek hero toward the labyrinth, and she is giving to him a ball of yarn, thanks to which he will find the exit from the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur⁵⁷. The following episodes are depicted on the opposite short side of the wall (fig. 17): Theseus, wearing the same armour as in the previous scene, is leading Ariadne toward a ship and she is escaping with him for the sake of love. In the third episode (fig. 18), painted on one of the long sides of the hall, Ariadne is abandoned by Theseus, who has now boarded the ship with his crew, while the young woman despairs at having granted him her love⁵⁸. On the other long side of the hall (fig. 19), Ariadne has already been persuaded to accept a new love by Bacchus, who is marrying her in the middle of the scene. Bacchus has arrived with his followers: his two boats are full of maenads and satyrs, while Silenus, on the left, is already drunk and helped by two satyrs⁵⁹. The story reaches its happy ending in the central scene of the vault (fig. 20), which features the triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne on a chariot led by felines. Maenads and satyrs precede the newlyweds, whereas Silenus is riding an ass, helped by satyrs.

The wedding and the triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne are particularly suitable to celebrate a wedding⁶⁰. Therefore, in the cycle of the hall, the sorrowful love felt by Ariadne for the deceiving Theseus is extensively displayed: Ariadne has been seduced with a promise of a wedding and then abandoned with deceit. This part of the story is reflected in documented episodes of women who, in the early modern age, were seduced with a promise of marriage and then never married⁶¹. As was already mentioned, under common law, this was equivalent to rape because it results in the loss of an honest woman's virginity. However, in the Palazzo Costa cycle, as in the myth, the issue is resolved with

⁵⁶ Anguillara 1561, pp. 279-284.

⁵⁷ Anguillara 1561, p. 227 and 279, describes the labyrinth as a tower with high walls and quotes the thread given by Ariadne.

⁵⁸ According to Anguillara, Theseus fell in love with Phaedra, Ariadne's sister. For this reason he seduced her inside a pavilion in the harbor and then, while she was still sleeping, secretly abandoned her in Crete (not in Naxos), carrying with him her sister (Anguillara 1561, pp. 229-280). A similar tale was already in Bonsignori 2001, p. 388. In the cycle of Palazzo Costa, Phaedra is missing, and Theseus probably abandons Ariadne in Naxos, following a very famous tradition.

⁵⁹ According to Anguillara (1561, pp. 283-284), Bacchus married Ariadne only thanks to the help of Venus, who is present in many depictions of the wedding of Bacchus and Ariadne (Capriotti 2021, pp. 40-45). In Palazzo Costa Venus is not featured in the painting.

⁶⁰ The same subject can be found, for example, in Palazzo Farnese in Rome and in Palazzo Buonaccorsi in Macerata. Cf. Capriotti 2018, pp. 352-353.

⁶¹ Alessi 2006, pp. 616-617; Di Renzo Villata 2020, p. 94; Santangelo Cordani 2020, p. 59.

an excellent marriage: after being victimized, Ariadne was persuaded to accept the new love and eventually she gets married to none other than a god; that is, she is rewarded with an illustrious marriage. Although she is still a woman saved by a man (and although the male view is still predominant), this was the ideal solution even in the common law of the early modern age. In such context, the story of Theseus, Ariadne, and Bacchus was particularly suitable for celebrating the virtues of an excellent wife who accepts a prestigious marriage. While in the first hall Phaeton represents the vices that a groom should know how to avoid, in the second Ariadne embodies the virtues of an excellent bride.

4. Conclusions

Although the episodes of victimization of women recounted by Ovid are very far from our modern sensibility, for many years they represented authoritative models of behaviour that were in line with a society strongly centred on (sometimes aggressive) male predominance and on the stereotype of a woman naturally predisposed to marriage, even after having experienced episodes of violence. Despite this, we should not stop reading Ovid or admiring works of art taken from his poems, nor exclude them from school and university curricula, erasing their memory, as proposed by some American scholars. On the contrary, as Maurizio Bettini acutely proposes, we should have the courage to highlight those elements that most clash with our sensibility and use them as tools for reflection to better understand our present⁶². To do this we should analyse these works (in our case, the complex cycles of paintings in noble palaces of the early modern age) not only for their internal and external stylistic references, with an exclusively philological approach. As art historians we should above all try to question the roles played by the characters depicted therein and by the audience who looked at them in the past; we should not fail «to unmask the eroticized and sanitized images of rape that [are] included in the canon»⁶³; we should scrutinize the changeable “social representations” of the values and cultural visions that have informed such a selection of episodes; and we should also begin to ask ourselves the reasons for the widespread diffusion of iconographic subjects that are the bearers of moral principles so removed from our modern sensibility. In this way we could employ Ovid and his legacy in the battle against present and future gender discrimination, using them «as a *comparison* tool useful for interpreting the assumptions of these unacceptable attitudes today»⁶⁴.

⁶² Bettini 2023, p. 132.

⁶³ Wolfthal 1999, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Bettini 2023, p. 133.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. Giovanni Anastasi, Coats of arms De Vico and Filippucci, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 2. Giovanni Anastasi, *Venus and Adonis*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 3. Giovanni Anastasi, *Diana and Endymion*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 4. Giovanni Anastasi, *Perseus and Andromeda*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 5. Giovanni Anastasi, *Ruggero and Angelica*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico

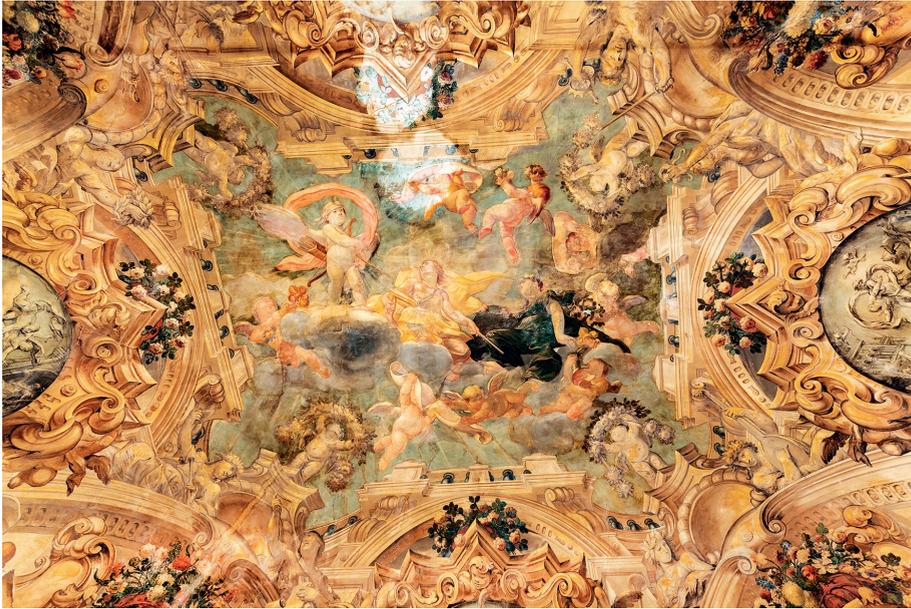


Fig. 6. Giovanni Anastasi, *Vault of Apollo and Urania*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 7. Giovanni Anastasi, *Rape of Proserpina*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 8. Giovanni Anastasi, *Rape of Europa*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 9. Giovanni Anastasi, *Amphitrite and Neptune*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 10. Giovanni Anastasi, *Rape of Orithya*, Macerata, Palazzo De Vico



Fig. 11. *Phaeton and Epaphus*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 12. *Phaeton and Clymene*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 13. *Phaeton and Apollo*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 14. *The fall of Phaeton*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 15. *The metamorphosis of the Heliades*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 16. *Ariadne and Theseus toward the labyrinth*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 17. *Ariadne and Theseus leaving Crete*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 18. *Theseus abandons Ariadne*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 19. *The wedding of Bacchus and Ariadne*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa



Fig. 20. *The triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne*, Macerata, Palazzo Costa

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