

PERCEPTION AND PRESENTATION: MYTHOLOGICAL
IMAGERY AND THE FEMALE GAZE IN
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ART

by

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ABSTRACT

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Ostensibly, it would seem that during the Renaissance, subjects of mythological origin in the visual arts were almost exclusively created with the male patron in mind. While this is a highly visible trend, it is important to remember that women, too, were spectators of art steeped in mythological imagery in certain spheres and contexts. Cassoni and spalliere were marriage chests and wall panels customarily commissioned for elaborate wedding rituals of the era and were often painted with such stories. To

determine how the female gaze differed from its male counterpart in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century, paintings meant for the eyes of a specific couple are most illuminating.

A careful examination of frequently depicted mythological subjects and the manner in which they were presented compositionally will therefore allow for some insight into how the primary viewers of these objects perceived the imagery, and whether this supports the notion of a female gaze as separate and different from that of the default male gaze. Conjectures regarding whether it is possible to theorize a gendered way of looking can then be made, and if this is the case, how gender expectations and roles within marriage changed or conditioned the context of the subject that was being viewed. Contemporary texts, treatises, and pamphlets which broach the issue of proper female decorum are used in conjunction with an analysis of the objects and images themselves. This will allow for a discerning look into the politics of marriage, providing a more thorough understanding of how women were expected to conduct themselves, and based on this idealistic view, how mythological paintings found on marriage chests and wall panels would or should have been perceived.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the way people interact with and perceive art has long been of great interest to art historians. While religious art was frequently commissioned in Renaissance Italy, a new trend of depicting stories from mythology experienced its genesis in the elaborately painted furnishings required for marriage rituals of the era. This paper is primarily concerned with the way women experienced and perceived mythological subjects painted on cassoni and spalliera panels that transitioned them into the unfamiliar territory of marital life. I will attempt to determine the nature of the female gaze by juxtaposing it with its male counterpart, and in doing so, will hopefully be able to come closer to defining the intricacies of female spectatorship.

The themes illustrated on marriage furnishings arguably held equal meaning for husbands and wives. Therefore, these painted objects, viewed daily by both parties, are the natural place to begin exploration of how male and female spectatorship differed. Included as an appendix to this paper is a table of commonly illustrated scenes on surviving cassone and spalliera panels. While it does not purport to be comprehensive, it does provide useful information regarding popular religious, secular, and mythological narratives that graced the nuptial chambers of Renaissance households.

Only about one-third of the extant panels in museums and private collections today feature mythological subjects. The scope of this paper has been limited to exploring the manner in which stories from mythology, depicted on marriage furniture, were viewed, interpreted, and perceived in the domestic realm.

Situating the female gaze in Renaissance Italy in relation to its masculine counterpart is no easy task. With a severe paucity in written documentation of how this patriarchal society expected women to engage with painting in general, and especially a dearth of writings regarding this same matter by women, it is necessary to supplement what written evidence is available with other more modern sources. Michael Baxandall offers just such an opportunity through his book, *Painting and Experience*, in which he espouses a revolutionary formula based on Renaissance social life and culture with which to gauge the nature of Renaissance spectatorship. His goal was to determine what constituted what he termed “the period eye”. Locating the Renaissance male patron within the sphere of the social, religious, political, and economic contexts of the period, he attempts to determine the sensibilities that would have guided and informed the way paintings were interpreted, as well as illuminate how the visual culture of the Renaissance affected the way images were actually constructed with respect to spatiality and subsequently painted. Baxandall profiles his viewer as a typical merchant-class to upper-class male, who was most likely familiar with dances of the day, went to church regularly, and had an education heavily weighted in mathematics with a smattering of classical training in his early years.

The inherent problem with Baxandall's period eye, however, is that by default, it excludes the female gaze almost completely. This is due to the criteria he establishes to arrive at what he considers a viable portrait of a typical fifteenth- and sixteenth-century viewer/patron. The reality of the matter is that women were simply not privy to the same education that men were expected to receive, nor did they have the privilege to commission art in most cases, and therefore Baxandall's theory of the period eye is very limited in its scope with regards to addressing female spectatorship. The challenge engendered by Baxandall's theory of the period eye was taken on by Adrian Randolph in "Gendering the Period Eye". His essay was intended to come nearer to situating the female gaze within the period eye to temper the wholly monocular view maintained in *Painting and Experience*. He chooses to analyze deschi da parto, or birth trays, because of their complete enmeshment within the female realm and gaze, and develops what could be considered a model with which he is able to determine what the "gendered" period eye might have looked like.¹

The method Randolph utilizes in his essay is one he constructed to "help explain the formation of gendered biasing in fifteenth-century Italian visual culture." Randolph postulates that the "aim of analysis is not explaining them [objects], so much as their role in various competing systems of communication." His focus on deschi da parto stemmed in large part from the fact that they were used exclusively by women during parturition rituals and declares them the best "laboratory" for such work for this reason. Randolph's analysis was based on the belief that in order to elucidate how women

¹ Adrian W.B. Randolph, "Gendering the Period Eye: Deschi da Parto and Renaissance Visual Culture,"

would have perceived images, it is first necessary to understand how the objects themselves would have been experienced as they were utilized for their specific purposes in daily life. It is thus essential to determine how the form of a certain genre of art was related to its function, what the sociability of an object revealed about the intended spectator, how it functioned within time and space with regards to its physical characteristics, what symbolic significance the object held, and of what spatial and iconographical characteristics the images themselves were comprised.

Application of Randolph's model along with consideration of Baxandall's period eye, which constitutes the male perspective, to other functional art objects in Renaissance visual culture could potentially produce a more concise picture of how a gendered viewing experience would have looked and in what ways this experience differed depending on whether the spectator was male or female. This is of course contingent upon whether a safe determination of the intended viewer's gender can be made for the object in question. Using this model as a point of departure, I will attempt to place cassoni and spalliere, traditionally commissioned for nuptial purposes and painted with scenes from mythology, within the wider visual culture of the Renaissance. Moving further, I will also attempt to situate the iconographical and visual content of the imagery within the realm of the Renaissance spectatrix, or female viewer, in order to determine what role certain fables played in Renaissance life. Social class, the degree of education, and gender expectations within marriage are also factors that inevitably contributed to the viewing experience of women. Therefore, considerations of gender

roles, along with documents revealing modes of female decorum, moralizing prints, and expected behavior should allow for a nuanced discussion of the female viewing experience of marriage furniture bedecked with images thoroughly steeped in mythology. Just as Baxandall entrenched his period eye within the context surrounding his male viewer, so will this paper attempt to reconstruct the context of the female viewer.

Cassoni, a term that first seems to have been used by Giorgio Vasari, were decorative chests often commissioned in pairs for weddings, and played an essential role in Italian marriage celebrations during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Usually called *forzieri* in the records of the period, a term meaning strong-box, the father of the bride and later the groom's family, would arrange for such chests to be built and painted upon engagement.² While there is evidence that some cassoni were batch-produced, with the same scene being set forth in a number of cassoni, many were fashioned according to the specifications set forth by the purchaser with regards both to the dimensions and painted subject, and were typically ordered in pairs.³ Narratives were especially utilized for this purpose, and works by poets such as Ovid and Homer were often chosen to be prominently featured on cassoni, both because of their vibrant, action-packed stories as well as their inherently episodic nature, which lent itself nicely

² Paola Tinagli, "Womenly Virtues in Marriage Furnishings" Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society (Oxford: Legend and University of Oxford, 2000) 266.

³ Graham Hughes, Renaissance Cassoni, Masterpieces of Early Italian Art: Painted Marriage Chests 1400-1550 (Sussex: Starcity Publishing; London: Art Books International, 1997) 10.

to the length of the cassone sides.⁴ Another reason for their proliferation in cassone-painting was the piquing interest of many people in classical modes of thought fueled by the frequent discovery of antiquities in the cities and countryside of Italy. It is no accident that the shape of the cassone was very similar to the ancient Roman sarcophagus, and many of the scenes that decorated sarcophagi eventually made their way onto the sides of cassoni.⁵ Humanist thought and the prominence of antiquities both contributed to the deep-seated desire for the more educated and elite classes of society to incorporate some of the glory of the ancient past into their daily lives. Thus, as more people began embracing this mode of thought, cassone-painting became an accepted and natural outlet for this desire to embody the past. Perhaps not coincidentally, depictions of mythological stories on cassoni appeared around the same time the first generation of men educated according to the principles of humanism came of age to marry.⁶ These fables, which came into vogue around 1430, would therefore have mirrored the kind of education received by men of the wealthy social class that could afford to commission such intricately painted marriage furniture. Studying these images will play an integral role in discerning the nature of myth in the Renaissance generally, and more specifically, will allow for a better understanding of how these myths were meant to be perceived by the wives of men who were quite possibly responsible, if however indirectly, for their appearance on nuptial furnishings. Certainly

⁴ Hughes 15.

⁵ Hughes 20-21.

⁶ Brucia Witthoft, "Marriage Rituals and Marriage Chests in Quattrocento Florence" *Artibus et Historiae* 5 (1982): 53.

the message or morals contained within the iconography of these painted myths were valuable to both the male and female gazes that constituted the marriage.

Spalliere, the other genre of painted domestic furniture this paper is concerned with, were wall panels positioned at eye-level that were usually painted with various narratives and adorned the walls of bedrooms in Renaissance home interiors. Cassone paintings and spalliera paintings are very similar in nature, and it seems especially so today, because seldom are these types of panels found *in situ*. Due to the almost complete removal of these items in most instances from their original context, many art historians have found it difficult to discern and definitively label panels as being either one or the other. Anne Barriault has shed much light on this matter, and in her book *Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany: Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes*, she determines numerous modes of distinction between the two panels. For instance, cassone panels tended to have many figures crammed into a smaller space than did spalliere, which explains why figures on the latter panel were larger than on cassone.⁷ This ties into the next distinguishing feature between the two, which is that cassone paintings are generally constructed with no regard for scientific perspective while spalliera paintings indicated a shift in theories of desirable perspective for works of art. As will be expounded upon later, this movement towards a more unified space perhaps indicates an attempt to more fully structure the gaze, particularly the female gaze, which was a topic of considerable anxiety for the male constituents of fifteenth- and sixteenth-

⁷ Anne Barriault, *Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany: Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania UP, 1994) 58-59.

century Italian society. Spalliere also have a very distinctive line of horizon, which runs continuously between the various panels that make up a spalliera cycle. This is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of a spalliera panel, and again, is related to the idea of harnessing or focusing the viewers' gaze.⁸ Renaissance patrons of spalliera paintings usually preferred to have them painted with narratives, and due to the limited amount of scenes that were typically painted on a single panel, this usually entailed an entire cycle of panels to be commissioned. Favored scenes for this purpose were often stories from Virgil or Ovid, which were especially conducive to this kind of treatment. Some of the cycles that survive scattered across the world in various museums include scenes from Virgil such as the life and times of Dido and scenes from the *Illiad* or *Aeneid*, or Ovidian fables such as Orpheus and Eurydice and Jason and Medea. Spalliera panels were intended to act as windows into the world beyond, and as such, there was a huge emphasis on the natural world that acted as a backdrop to the dramatic scenes unfolding

⁸ The particular placement in a room also serves to allow art historians to distinguish spalliere from cassoni panels. For example, spalliera panels were usually inserted in the wainscoting of a room, and tended to be placed at shoulder-level. Alternatively, cassoni were always placed on the floor of a room and were therefore in the unfortunate position to be subjected to unintentional encounters with the feet of clumsy passersby. Characteristics of this treatment have often manifested themselves physically in the panels that have come down to us from the Renaissance, and usually serve to rule whether or not something is definitively a cassone panel. Another distinguishing feature that serves to tell the two apart are the dents that often appear on the top of a panel used to front a cassone, due to the frequent instance of keys that would have made contact with the surface in a certain place, and after years of consistent use, would permanently scar the area. Because spalliere were placed within the walls of Renaissance homes, they were not subjected to the same "hard-knock" life as were the cassoni, and they certainly would have had no residual damage from keys. For this information and more ways to determine whether a panel is from a cassone or spalliere cycle, see Malcolm Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 37; Ellen Callman, *Apollonio di Giovanni* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) 341-342; Hughes 44 and Barriault 58-61.

in the foreground.⁹ This element, again, hearkens back to the idea of focusing the female gaze and will be explored in more detail later.

As was previously established, the images and scenes covered by this thesis have been limited to the stories found in classical mythology that were most often represented on the domestic furniture of the Quattrocento and Cinquecento. Scenes of great interest for present purposes include stories from the mythologies of both ancient Greece and Rome, as these would have both been familiar and of great interest to Renaissance patrons, artists, and the humanistic scholars of the era. The return to classical texts as a means to educate and illuminate was a catalyst to the appearance of fables on the sides of marriage furniture.

Roman mythology was in and of itself quite different from that of its Greek counterpart. Many of the Greek gods were, in fact, incorporated into ancient Roman religion, but a large part of the civilization's belief system and myth was gleaned from Rome's glorious foundation, and stories of Greek heroes, such as Aeneas, who for the Romans, played an integral role in the founding of the early Roman civilization. The gods and goddesses depicted most often in Renaissance art seldom retained their Greek name, and were instead endowed with and referred to by their Roman epithets. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written in 2 AD, often figures substantially within the scope of mythological art in the Renaissance. While the artists probably did not take their inspiration directly from this text, as few probably read Latin, there were moralized versions of these myths available, complete with drawings of important attributes and

⁹ Barriault 6.

suggested visual interpretations of most stories commonly used in decoration.¹⁰ These texts were penned in the vernacular of specific regions of Italy, and eased the burden that befell artists by acting as a template or virtual short-cut to thinking for workshops of cassone and spalliera production.

To arrive at a viable conclusion regarding the questions posed by this paper, I have divided my efforts into three phases. The first phase, as exemplified in the second chapter, is an exploration of the context in which cassoni and spalliere would have been commissioned as this pertains to the female gaze. Particular attention will be given to the roles husbands and wives were expected to fulfill within a marriage, concerns of the wealthy social class that commissioned these expensive pieces of painted furniture, and the education this particular class would have received. I am especially interested in the juxtaposition of the gender roles and what this kind of analysis can tell us about female viewership. This attempt to map out the various factors that would have informed the way women perceived art with classical subjects, including the distinctive education a woman would have been influenced by as well as the moral virtues she was expected to possess through various forms of informal instruction, should serve to elucidate more fully what exactly she perceived when viewing painted myths. Another influencing factor that will carefully be considered is the array of expectations a society, and more particularly, the wealthy upper-class, heavily entrenched within a patriarchal scheme imposed upon women. These expectations were certainly inextricably intertwined within the viewing habits and experiences a woman had as she gazed upon the lively

¹⁰ Bull Chapter 1.

scenes of myth that graced the sides of her nuptial furnishings that surrounded her in the domestic sphere.

The second phase, which can be found in chapter three, is a thorough examination of the objects in question. The function of cassoni and spalliere, along with an examination of commonly depicted *topos* and themes from mythology, will be delved into. In the last of the three phases, chapter four, I have undertaken a more detailed investigation of a few specific cassone and spalliera panels and how their iconography, together with their spatiality, would have possibly been viewed by women, and how this experience would have differed from that of their husbands. This inquest will establish a means by which I can synthesize the information gleaned in previous chapters in order to arrive at a conceivable conclusion regarding whether or not it is possible to gender Baxandall's period eye.

CHAPTER 2

GENDER EXPECTATIONS

A number of influencing factors must be taken into consideration in order to explore more thoroughly the dichotomy of male vs. female gaze. These elements worked as a whole to shape the identity of individuals and often served to sharply delineate these identities, which were defined by the overarching ideals that determined gender norms and expectations. First and foremost, because the objects of the gaze this paper is concerned with are fables depicted on marriage furniture, a thorough examination must be made of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century gender roles within marriage, particularly of the wealthy upper-class. This entails a determination of what the expectations and normative behaviors befitting a woman and wife of upper-class status would have consisted of, and how this differed from the role her husband played within marriage. Thus, the ideals with regards to behavior and comportment of both men and women are significant for present purposes, as well as a good knowledge of the extent and kind of education provided for both genders. Understanding educational norms of the upper-class is imperative to determining what the female gaze would have looked like, because prior knowledge inevitably informs the viewing experience.

All of the aforementioned factors to be given consideration are heavily contingent upon class, and it is vital to note that the class of people that commissioned the elaborately painted cassoni and spalliere would certainly be members of the wealthier milieu. Each of these influential factors would have played a substantial role in shaping gender identities in both the Quattrocento and Cinquecento. The influence of social and educational norms of the wealthy upper-class affected the manner in which a male or female viewer understood or interpreted a painting, which could potentially produce two very different viewing experiences of a single scene.

To determine what the normative standards surrounding the production and resulting spectatorship of marriage furniture were, there are a number of places to turn. A valuable source of information is Leon Battista Alberti, whose impetus to pen his *On the Family*, a book written in four parts, was partly to address issues that had manifested themselves within his own family. Feeling that the values and morals upheld by previous generations had faltered during his own time, he wrote this instructive manual to re-establish what in his view were the virtues and moral behavior essential to preserving the social order of the merchant class as a whole. In *On the Family*, part three, he tackles issues related to domestic life, namely, how best to govern and maintain the household for the purpose of ensuring the continued prosperity of the family. His examination deals largely with the psychology of marriage, and within that realm, what each partner's responsibility in marriage is. Inevitably then, he gives readers a glimpse into the normative gender ideals and expectations within a marriage of the Quattrocento. Alberti sets up this book as a dialogue between an old patriarch,

Giannozzo, the brother of Alberti's great grandfather, and Lionardo, a twenty-nine year old man. This author's preoccupation with fusing classical teachings and traditions with actual experience is exemplified by these characters. The old man speaks from experience whereas the young interlocutor bases his responses on his education in the literary works and philosophies of classical writers.

A man of great versatility, Alberti was also an artist, architect, and art theorist who was keenly interested in mathematical principles. In *Della pittura*, he advances concepts that were widely acknowledged and accepted in the art world, both by patrons and artists. Notably, Baxandall bases much of his period eye on concepts set forth by Alberti in this work, arguing that they were widely accepted modes of thinking and thus would have informed the way patrons interpreted paintings. Most importantly for this paper is Alberti's theory on perspective, which became the standard for rendering art. This shift to linear perspective is especially pronounced when considering cassone and spalliera painting side by side. The dramatic differences in spatiality and perspective from the earlier marriage chests to the later spalliera panels is bound up in the contemporary ideals of gaze, and how the scenes themselves were to be interpreted by spectators.

Another source of important information regarding what the virtues and expectations of each gender were in Renaissance Italy is *The Courtier*, written by Baldesar Castiglione over a number of years, between 1508-1518. He thought himself to be a paragon of courtly virtue, and was inspired to write this text during his time at the Court of Urbino. A court that had gained quite a famous reputation, he served first

Guidobaldo Gonzaga, whose father Federico da Montefeltro had seen to it that the city became a center for patronage and literary achievement.¹¹ Importantly, this treatise on courtly life addresses what the role of upper-class women in both social and political life should be. Indeed, the dominant female personality of the court during Castiglione's tenure as an intimate member of the courtly circle was Elisabetta Gonzaga. The setting of this handbook is the Court of Urbino, and in a number of lively debates and discussions that take place over four nights, refined men and women, among them Elisabetta herself, paint a picture of a perfect courtier and lady of the court. The virtues, constitution, and comportment belonging to these imagined members of noble society are developed in great detail, and therefore give an idea of what the ideal mores of polite society were. While reality is often far from the ideal, this view into the paradigmatic behavior and desirous virtues befitting both genders provides useful information about gender expectations and therefore, the identity formation, of both members of a marriage.

Finally, pamphlets and treatises addressing moral and gender issues written and circulated during the Quattrocento and Cinquecento are of vital importance to reconstructing the context surrounding the commissioning and subsequent viewing experiences of painted panels. These tracts give a direct indication of popular social expectations related to gender and class, often addressing perceived short-comings existing in real life in an attempt to curb behavior seen as licentious and undesirable.

¹¹ Baldesar Castiglione, The Courtier Trans. George Bull, 1967 (London: Penguin Books-Penguin Group, 2003) Introduction, 9.

Pamphlets that discuss the role images played in the conception of children within the constructs of marriage are also valuable to this paper due to the primacy they give to the gaze. These particular pamphlets were often written from a biological standpoint, which allows for a glimpse into the prevailing scientific theories of the era. Promulgated theories were often thoroughly entrenched in Aristotelian principles of gender and the natural dispositions of women in relation to men, which tended to validate the information for readers. As is illustrated both in Castiglione's *The Courtier* and in Alberti's *On the Family*, many arguments, whether they addressed science, nature, gender roles, or religion contained elements of classical ideas. Educational manuals and texts read to children for the purpose of teaching them to read also simultaneously espoused moral values and gender expectations, inculcating young minds as early as five years old. These, too, furnish information that will further illuminate the gendered gaze in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Guides directly addressed to the family provided advice on everything from how fathers could arrange the most beneficial marriage for their daughters to what roles men and women were expected to take in matrimony.¹²

Education received by upper-class children differed significantly between males and females, although this gulf was considerably wider between children of both sexes when comparing the upper and middle to lower social classes. There is a great dearth in actual statistics from before 1600 regarding how many school-age children, boys and

¹² An examination of these numerous documents has been undertaken by Rutgers historian, Rudolph Bell, the results of which can be found in his book, *How To Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians*. In scope, Bell's book addressing primary sources and essentially "how-to" manuals written during the Renaissance remains unmatched.

girls, were given an education, but nevertheless, there are some. Numbers show that a likely 30 to 33% of Florentine boys between the ages of six through thirteen were literate in 1480 and that about 33% of Venetian boys between six and fifteen and 12 to 13% of Venetian girls were literate in 1587-88.¹³ Giovanni Villani, whose statistical estimation of how many children were attending school is discussed by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, writes in his *Cronica* that around 1338 that there were 8,000 to 10,000 boys and girls with the ability to read, and of that number, 1,000 to 1,200 of them were learning calculation and mathematics, and 550 to 600 children benefited from grammar and logic education.¹⁴ This interesting information has been quantified by E. Fiumi to read that members of both sexes that were given an elementary education in 1338 represented 60 percent of children aged 6 to 13 which equaled 10% of the entire population of Florence. The numbers of girls being educated as early as the first half of the fourteenth century is somewhat surprising, yet Klapisch-Zuber has qualified these assertions by reminding her readers that starting at the beginning of the fifteenth-century, middle- and upper-class girls were mostly being educated at home by learned family members or in convents, unlike their male counterparts, who continued to attend public schools even into the Quattrocento. In Renaissance Italy, there were essentially two types of schools available to children with the “right” qualifications, namely that they were male and offspring of the populace that belonged to the noble and wealthy

¹³ Paul F. Grendler, “Schooling in Western Europe.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 43.4 (1990): 779.

¹⁴ Giovanni, Villani, *Cronica* vol. 3 book 11 ch 94 qtd in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* Trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) 108.

merchant classes. The first was Latin school which was geared towards educating boys that would one day rise to fulfill leadership roles in society. It was there that rhetoric and poetics were taught, with the major emphasis falling on works by Virgil, Cicero, Terence, Horace, Ovid, Caesar and Valerius Maximus.¹⁵ This swing towards a wholly humanistic education began during the first few decades of the fifteenth century in Italy and made its way to the rest of Europe in the sixteenth century.¹⁶ It was thought that the practical literary skills along with the moral and civic values espoused by a humanistic program of work at such Latin schools would lead to a great payoff both in character and in civil responsibility as the children grew into adolescence and adulthood.

The second kind of scholastic institution was considered a vernacular school, which would have been the path most merchant and craftsmen's sons would have attended. This curriculum focused more heavily on vernacular literature and in practical mathematics, with little to no emphasis in Latin. Vernacular schooling was a continuation of the education provided during the Middle Ages to the members of the Italian merchant community.¹⁷ Not as much is known of the curriculum of such schools, although, because they were not regulated by the state in the same manner as the so-called Latin schools, some scholars believe that the main texts would have

¹⁵ Grendler 782.

¹⁶ Grendler 781.

¹⁷ Grendler 784.

encompassed a wide range of literature including those with biblical origins such as lives of the saints to some of the more popular romance novels of the day.¹⁸

The schools that have so far been discussed seem to shed little light on the schooling of females; however, thanks to recent scholarship in this realm, it is known that Renaissance pedagogical theorists did believe certain women should be educated and in keeping with these notions, some, albeit usually inferior, education was available to girls. The profile of the girl who was given this type of opportunity almost certainly belonged to the upper and middle classes, and even then, she was only expected to attain knowledge that would allow her to better fulfill her station in life as wife and mother.¹⁹ Needless to say, the curriculum boys who went to Latin schools were expected to master was generally off limits to girls. Those who were lucky enough to receive any form of education would only have been taught basic reading and writing skills in the vernacular, with a few exceptions, which certainly excluded them from the writings of learned humanists, who only wrote in Latin for the better part of the fifteenth century. The vernacular languages were thought to be beneath the lofty ideas espoused in writings of the humanists, therefore, if one did not know Latin, exposure to such treatises would have been limited. Wealthy girls would sometimes have been sent to long-term boarding schools in female monasteries, and those with less monetary means may have been able to afford a tutor, learned from a family member, or might be

¹⁸ Grendler 784.

¹⁹ Grendler 784.

able to attain elementary vernacular reading and writing skills at same-sex catechetical schools, where they would also have received religious instruction.²⁰

Having said that, a very few exceptional cases do exist in which certain girls were given a Latin education, just as a relatively small number of boys, all descendants of the noble and wealthy merchant classes, were sent for such schooling.²¹ Opportunities for the application of such learning after graduation, however, were scant for the female sex, unlike boys in the same situation, who were able to attend a university at the culmination of their education and then go on to apply their learning in various public and esteemed fields. By contrast, even educated women of the elite class were eventually relegated to the role of mother and wife in order to protect the family honor and ensure her chastity remain in tact. Some correspondence with humanists would have been possible, but for the most part, an education based in the classics could be seen as a curse, due to the accusations men were liable to make of a woman's chastity when she was too knowledgeable of such subjects.²² To supplement this notion, it is helpful to consider Giovanni Nevizzano's opinion of the matter of education and how it tied to the honesty of a woman. Writing in the first part of the sixteenth century, he purported that while a woman's knowledge or education should assist a husband by providing for a well-managed household, for a man to marry a learned woman could potentially backfire on him due to her predisposition to dominate him and

²⁰ Grendler 785.

²¹ Grendler 785.

²² Rose Marie San Juan, "Mythology, Women, and Private Life: The Myth of Eurydice in Italian Renaissance Furniture Painting." *Art History* 15.2 (1992): 136.

“because letters are instruments of luxury and are more of an elegant ornament than a necessity to an honest woman.”²³ Nevizzano’s opinions of the educated wife, then show what seems to be a general consensus that the more schooling a woman had, the less likely she was to be honest. When taking such opinions into consideration, it is easily seen how a woman’s chastity might be at stake if she proved to be more learned than befitting to her station and role, as mother and wife, in society.

The male concern of being dominated by a more learned wife was indeed at the forefront of many citizens’ minds as is exemplified by the new genre of print that made its debut onto the literary scene in mid-sixteenth century. These moralizing broadsheets were essentially formatted like modern-day comic strips with many small images laid out in numerous rows on a single sheet. The most prevalent theme or *topos* that was explored by this new genre was known as the *Mondo alla riversa*, which translates to Topsy-Turvy World. Numerous scenes of gender reversal graced the fronts of these broadsheets, and functioned as a kind of satire on the crumbling of social mores and virtues, providing commentary on what would occur if the world, in fact, were turned upside down. The intense preoccupation of these images with the “woman on top” gives an example of what kind of havoc would ensue if educated women, who presumed to know too much, took the reigns. Vignettes concerned with the reversal of gender roles within a family are especially interesting. As one example illustrates, a child is raining blows upon his father, while his mother, the inciter of this rebellious

²³ Giovanni Nevizzano, *Sylvae nuptualis libri sex* (Venice, 1573) qtd. in Catherine E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998) 27.

behavior, looks on approvingly. A reversal of this kind must have caused considerable unease in the patriarchs of households, because according to societal norms, the influence of a mother was to be phased out when the child was still relatively young in order for loyalty to the patriline to be established.²⁴ This scene shows a blatant disregard for social standards of gender expectations, and served as a deterrent for husbands who might be tempted to ignore social prescriptions of accepted wifely behavior within marriage. This theme also manifested itself in stories with mythological origins. One in particular that was making the rounds in courtly society and humanist circles depicted the story of Omphale dominating Hercules. In paintings of this subject, Hercules is often pictured wearing Omphale's dress and devoid of his most notable attribute, the lion's skin, which symbolized his masculinity and strength. This variation of the Topsy-Turvy World is mostly concerned with the erotic power wielded by women that could easily be used to dominate or demasculinize men and subsequently lead to the destabilization of the entire social order.²⁵

The reason for the proliferation of the Topsy-Turvy World motif, especially with respect to the "woman on top" theme, was in part due to a growing number of women who were beginning to compete with their male counterparts in the acting, artistic, and literary realms as well as the ongoing and heated debate known as the *querelle des femmes* which was in full swing at this time. This debate, carried on in the

²⁴ Sara F. Matthews Grieco, "Pedagogical Prints: Moralizing Broadsheets and Wayward Women in Counter Reformation Italy," Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy ed. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 67.

²⁵ Grieco "Pedagogical Prints," 67.

writings of female and male humanists arguing the superiority of their gender, was cause for grave concern for those who wished to maintain the social order, which seemed perilously close to mirroring some of the vignettes on the popular and heavily-circulated moral broadsheets.²⁶ Nevizzano's warning to men who might consider marrying a woman more educated than themselves thus had much in the way of contemporary fuel to warrant its utterance. Destabilization of the family unit was practically a guarantee of the subsequent deterioration of the social order. The first step in preventing such decay was to ensure the wife understand her role within the household and recognize the consequences of overstepping her bounds.

Evidence of the fact that most girls remained mostly illiterate, even when considering the opportunities afforded some, can be found in book three of Leon Battista Alberti's *I Libri Della Famiglia*, although, as will be discussed, it does leave some room for questions. In addressing the young men's queries about how to best deal with a wife and how much should be shared with her, Giannozzo answers, "Only my books and records and those of my ancestors did I determine to keep well sealed both then and thereafter. These my wife not only could not read, she could not even lay hands on them." He goes on to say "I also ordered her, if she ever came across any writing of mine, to give it over to my keeping at once."²⁷ While it seems that Giannozzo is essentially acknowledging to his audience that his wife does not know

²⁶ Grieco "Pedagogical Prints," 71.

²⁷ Leon Battista Alberti, *I Libri Della Famiglia, Book Three*. Trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Prospect Heights: IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1994) 79.

how to read, he still seems to express an inordinate degree of anxiety regarding the accidental discovery by his wife of notes and other items that he has written on.

This conversation, then, rather than flawlessly exemplifying most women's utter lack of schooling in the Renaissance leads to some interesting questions regarding the extent of his young wife's literacy. Can his wife, in fact, read at an elementary level in the vernacular? Is she perhaps only illiterate when it comes to Latin? Is Giannozzo here showing the preference for Latin as the measure of literacy rather than the vernacular, as the humanists tended to do? If she was completely illiterate, why would Giannozzo have gone to such great lengths to keep his books and records "well-sealed both then and thereafter"?²⁸ He even mentions that "To take away any taste she might have had for looking at my notes or prying into my private affairs, I often used to express my disapproval of bold and forward females who try too hard to know about men in general."²⁹ This particular example leads one to believe that if nothing else, his wife may have possessed a limited degree of literacy, most likely consisting of elementary written language and reading skills in the vernacular, perhaps just enough for her to teach her young children their letters and rudimentary reading skills which were taught before any formal schooling would have begun, but certainly not enough to peruse lengthy texts, and especially nothing penned in Latin.

Other educational opportunities for women would have been strictly limited to learning the duties befitting to a wife and mother. Tasks such as managing the servants

²⁸ Alberti 79.

²⁹ Alberti 79.

and household, perpetuating the posterity of her husband, raising the children and perhaps teaching them their letters, and providing for the moral integrity of her family were her most important charges. These skills she would have learned by watching her own mother and close female relatives and her curriculum, so to speak, may have been supplemented by the vast array of “how-to” manuals the advent of the printing press allowed for. For instance, the books that were used to instruct children in reading Italian also served as primers on behavior, giving children lessons in morality and virtue while teaching them to read. *Fior di virtu*, a reader of great interest for present purposes, was assigned to boys and girls after the primer.³⁰ It was written before 1325 and reprinted multiple times in the sixteenth century, complete with woodcuts, supplying visual examples to supplement the written text. One of the sections in this forty-one chapter book is entirely devoted to chastity, which comes as no surprise due to it being something that girls would inevitably have had imprinted in their mind from an early age. As in many of the other chapters, an example from the animal world, that of the mating habits of doves, is given as a model for behavior becoming of women.³¹ It then further expounds on this theme by imploring the reader to follow the advice of Ovid to avoid idleness, an attribute which possessed was thought to be a great catalyst for lustful thoughts and actions. Of course, other admonitions abound, including dissuading the practice of female to male conversations, avoiding singing, dancing, and

³⁰ Rudolph Bell, How To Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) 170.

³¹ Bell 171.

playing music, and of eating and drinking to excess for fear that the indulger would be unable to fight “the fires of lust” on a bloated stomach.³²

Other printed works meant to help children in grasping vernacular reading and writing skills were also utilized by the Renaissance populace. The pamphlets were often not only read by youngsters, but perused by their mothers and fathers at home. *El costume delle donne*, or *Ways of Women*, is one such pamphlet. This poem was broken into eight-line stanzas and gave practical advice on the raising of children, specifically girls, and how to provide for their moral well-being by encouraging such activities that were appropriate for their gender, while discouraging vices such as dancing, idleness, and talking too much. Their poetic constructions indicate that these types of booklets were meant to be read aloud and memorized for future reference.³³ This would have allowed the illiterate members of the household to gain access to the written word while not specifically having to read it themselves. Indeed families of the upper-class would likely have gathered together for the purpose of reading aloud from texts that were widely consumed at the time, most likely including fables written by Ovid, Boccaccio, and other popular literature of the time.³⁴ This kind of tradition would ensure that even though most women would not have been able to read the Latin texts themselves, they would certainly have been familiar with mythological stories, therefore possessing the

³² Bell 171.

³³ Bell 171-172.

³⁴ San Juan 136.

tools necessary to discern prescribed meaning from the visual narratives that decorated their marriage furniture.

Another method of socializing a young girl into a mature, demure, and docile wife and mother can be seen when taking into consideration all the print sources that were available after the printing press was introduced to the country in 1469, the first being established in Venice. With this new technology, a time of literary revolution commenced and the effects on Renaissance society were numerous and far-reaching. The price of books fell significantly, and the output and its sheer variety increased to an astonishing level. By 1500, Venice had 417 such printers, with the prices of books being such that just about any member of society could afford to own one.³⁵ This was also a time when Latin was rapidly being replaced with texts written in the vernacular, which also served to reach a wider audience than previously had been the case. It was in such an environment that it became feasible that women were in a better position to either utilize the meager schooling they had received as young girls, or listen to books being read to them by literate members of the family. Giannozzo's wife, however, would not have been party to the benefits of such proliferation of literature, however, because while she seems to have received a basic education, it would have been long before the printing press made its debut in Italy.

The printing press gave rise to a sharp increase in treatises and crudely constructed pamphlets written on matters of proper conduct and expected modes of behavior of both husbands and wives of Renaissance society. Ideas regarding what

³⁵ http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761562769/Printing.html, Retrieved January 8, 2006

constituted the perfect wife and mother, as well as the expectations of model husbands and fathers, were much argued over and discussed by writers during this time. While there had always been discussions of this sort even before the printing press revolutionized the dissemination of literature, the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century was a time of unmatched verbosity regarding these matters. It seems likely that men would have read many of these treatises or pamphlets, and then imparted the wisdom gleaned or affirmed to their wives, whom they hoped would follow the examples and advice of the authors of such “how-to” manuals.

Moral broadsheets and other printed images became very popular and were usually much more affordable than other imagery at the time, beginning in the sixteenth century, giving members of society that did not belong to the wealthier class an opportunity to possess them. This would have ensured a greater uniformity in the way women were “educated” in matters of morality. Whereas cassone paintings and other furniture intended this result, it wasn’t affordable to everyone, therefore its use as a tool for indoctrination of Renaissance ideals would not have been universal. Only later, after the rise and decline in popularity of painted wedding chests were such items available to a wider audience, thereby ensuring that the rest of the population would now have access to and hopefully conform to standards of behavior outlined in the tracts. Gabriele Paleotti, author of *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane*, was writing in Bologna in 1582. He believed that “Pictures are like an open book that can be understood by everyone, for they are composed of a language that is common to all

sorts of people.”³⁶ This rather poignant sentiment sheds light on the attitude or zeitgeist of the upper-class sixteenth-century Italians, who certainly, as the extant examples have shown, gave primacy to the image in both the domestic realm and in civic life.

Illustrations and text were used in conjunction in the pamphlets and booklets published during the sixteenth-century, allowing for an expansion of audience. Even though many people were illiterate, the text or basic impetus of the message would still have been discernable to this population due to the interpretive nature of the images. Those who could read would have received the added bonus of having the ideas mentioned in the tracts illustrated next to the text. The dual nature of such illustrated pamphlets catalyzed the immediacy with which consumers were able to identify with the printed word and picture. Grieco has effectively shown in her essay that “printed pictures faithfully represent the stock precepts of current theological, moral and scientific debates on the nature and social identity of the female sex and reflect the increasing emphasis on ‘disciplinamento’ that characterizes both Renaissance and Counter-Reformation treatises on social behaviour.”³⁷ These prints, then, become very useful to the present purpose of this section, which is to discover how exactly women were influenced to cultivate and retain the characteristics that made them good women. Essentially, the most important obligations women had were to protect her chastity, ensure the continuation of the patrilineage into which she had married by producing

³⁶ Sara F. Matthews Grieco, “Persuasive Pictures: Didactic Prints and the Construction of the Social Identity of Women in Sixteenth-Century Italy,” Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society (Oxford: Legenda and University of Oxford, 2000) 285.

³⁷ Grieco “Persuasive Pictures,” 287.

male children, provide moral and religious instruction for her children, and provide for the economic welfare of the household by managing it wisely and efficiently while her spouse tended to duties outside the home.

Why were so many illustrated pamphlets being made and distributed during the sixteenth century? For one thing, the family unit was considered to be the building blocks of society. Ensuring the moral and religious health of a family would provide for the welfare and continued prosperity of the society as a whole. In this way, the abundance of nuclear family units became a visible sign of the vigor and permanence of a society, and familial considerations were given importance as civic duty. Another thing that accounts for the viability of using these pictures and moralized broadsheets as a measure with which to gauge the perception of women and their role in a patriarchal society is our reliance on the fact that these writings and pictures were made and distributed based on the laws of supply and demand.³⁸ The prevalence of a certain type of print, therefore, will give insight into issues that were at the forefront of many families' minds, not excluding the less wealthy, who would also have had the means to purchase such images.

One of the major recurring themes in theoretical writings on the subject of the family is the depiction of the family as being a natural institution, created by the divine.³⁹ Nascent within this perception of the family is also the notion of gender-specific roles played by both husband and wife. While many of these pamphlets

³⁸ Grieco "Persuasive Pictures," 287.

³⁹ Grieco "Persuasive Pictures," 288.

focused heavily on the role of the feminine in a marriage, namely her chastity, wifely duty, and maternal obligations, men, too, were given standards of behavior to follow, such as how to act in the presence of men of higher social standing, and how best to govern the family. Along with this split in household duties along the gender line, there was also a difference in the virtue of husband as opposed to the virtue of wife.⁴⁰ Virtue for men consisted of exercising proper behavior both in the civic world outside his home, and privately, within his domestic environs whereas women were relegated to displaying virtuous behavior only within the privacy of their home.⁴¹

The preoccupation with determining what virtues should belong to which gender was mirrored in Castiglione's *The Courtier*. During one of the evenings spent fashioning the perfect courtier, the focus changes at the behest of the ladies in the company to the creation of the courtier's female equal. Notably, the women present persuade the men to undertake this task, rather than voicing their own opinions on the matter. The only thing said in their own defense was spoken by Emilia, who remarked "God grant that we do not happen to give this task to some fellow conspirator of signor Gaspare's who might fashion a court lady knowing only how to spin."⁴² After this comment, the Duchess quickly agrees with her companion and feels the task should be given to someone who "will imagine the highest perfection that can be desired in a woman, and also express this in suitable language [...]," presumably so the women in

⁴⁰ King 22.

⁴¹ King 22.

⁴² Castiglione 202.

the circle would be able to follow the argument and then retain it for future reference.⁴³ They listen on as the Magnifico determines that “although they [Courtiers and Court ladies] have in common some qualities, which are as necessary to the man as to the woman, there are yet others befitting a woman rather than a man, and others again which befit a man but which a woman should regard as completely foreign to her.”⁴⁴ Of the characteristics or virtues that should be common to both genders, the Magnifico believes that those of the mind are most important. These include coming from a good family, possessing intelligence, magnanimity, continence and forethought and being naturally graceful and well-mannered. The Magnifico contends almost immediately that women should take care not to act in manly ways with respect to engaging in sporting activities as well as in displaying the “manners, words, gestures and bearing” of men.⁴⁵ One of the woman’s chief characteristics should be a “soft and delicate tenderness, with an air of feminine sweetness in her every movement [...]”⁴⁶ The main sentiment here seems to be that a woman should in almost every way appear to be the opposite of a man. She should avoid vanity, jealousy, and a biting tongue as well as shun affectation and eschew being contentious.⁴⁷ Unlike the Courtier, a Court lady should be naturally beautiful and “must also be more circumspect and at greater pains to avoid giving an excuse for someone to speak ill of her; she should not only be beyond

⁴³ Castiglione 202.

⁴⁴ Castiglione 211.

⁴⁵ Castiglione 211.

⁴⁶ Castiglione 211.

reproach but also beyond even suspicion, for a woman lacks a man's resources when it comes to defending herself."⁴⁸ This particular charge relates directly to the fact that women who appeared to be too educated would inevitably be attacked by others for being unchaste. Educated upper-class women would thus have had to go to great lengths to ensure their reputations remained intact. Other virtues that were discussed as being necessities for women of good character directly had to do with their status as wives. They should be ever mindful that they care for their husbands' belongings, as well as the children and household in general. Caring for the belongings of the household shrewdly was indeed a major attribute wives were to cultivate, and Giannozzo discusses how he molded his wife into the perfect little caretaker, giving her lessons on how to manage the servants as well as how to store the excess food and even approached the necessity of ordering things according to season, so nothing would be wasted or lost. In outlining her wifely duties, he explains some of his own as being the provider of the household, bringing home the food and other items necessary for his wife to secure properly and make sure they were not wasted. Here, another difference between gender expectations within marriage manifests itself. Giannozzo's didactic intent with regards to teaching his wife places husbands in the role of teacher or educator of their spouse, whereas women must be the obedient pupil, ever eager to retain what their husbands stipulate. Indeed, Giannozzo even credits a wife's compliant nature to a husband who is properly exhibiting the expected gender norms pertaining to

⁴⁷ Castiglione 211.

⁴⁸ Castiglione 211.

the male. He argues that, “All wives are thus obedient, if their husbands know how to be husbands.”⁴⁹ Alberti outlines other virtues necessary for both wives and husbands in his dialogue between Giannozzo and Lionardo. According to him, wives of good character should speak little and weigh their words carefully before uttering them, so as to give them added strength.⁵⁰ They should not spend their days chatting superfluously with neighbors, nor should she desire any man’s company save her husband. Giannozzo’s explicit mention that his wife should take care not to covet another man’s presence serves to illustrate a concern that was widely felt in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy.

According to the model of the perfect lady of the court, a woman of good upbringing such as was part of the wealthy educated class had extra responsibilities not pertinent to women of lower social classes. For instance, she should also have “a certain pleasing affability whereby she will know how to entertain graciously every kind of man with charming and honest conversation, suited to the time and the place and the rank of the person with whom she is talking.”⁵¹ Castiglione also accounts for scenarios in which an educated woman might feel uncomfortable, and discusses how she might safeguard her virtue. If in the presence of immodest or questionable banter, she should make sure to exhibit a “slight blush of shame”.⁵² She should also take care to avoid

⁴⁹ Alberti 86.

⁵⁰ Alberti 87, 90.

⁵¹ Castiglione 212.

⁵² Castiglione 212.

engaging in gossip with respect to the unchaste or unseemly deeds of other women, because participating in such conversations would lead others to suspect her own chastity.⁵³ The ever-present tightrope walk women in courtly society and those of the wealthy merchant class were forced to negotiate, is epitomized and even acknowledged by the male speaker in *The Courtier*. The Magnifico argues that:

Her serene and modest behaviour, and the candour that ought to inform all her actions, should be accompanied by a quick and vivacious spirit by which she shows her freedom from boorishness; but with such virtuous manner that she makes herself thought no less chaste, prudent and benign than she is pleasing, witty and discreet. Thus she must observe a certain difficult mean, composed as it were of contrasting qualities, and take care not to stray beyond certain fixed limits. Nor in her desire to be thought chaste and virtuous, should she appear withdrawn or run off if she dislikes the company she finds herself in or thinks the conversation improper.

Clearly, the standards imposed on women and wives of the upper classes were almost impossible to maintain, but they were certainly expected to balance carefully both their inner constitution or mindset with their outward appearance and actions, which were often visible to others. This goes hand in hand with the notion of outward appearance and dress somehow either enhancing or debasing the inner qualities, such a chastity, grace, and gentleness, a woman possessed. In fashioning the model lady of the Court, the Magnifico prescribes that she should “always dress herself correctly and wear clothes that do not make her seem vain and frivolous [...]” yet “[...] this lady of ours ought to be able to judge what kind of garments enhance her grace and are most

⁵³ Castiglione 213.

appropriate for whatever she intends to undertake [...].”⁵⁴ He further explains that clothing should match the nature of the one who wears it, so choosing the right color and cut is of utmost importance, as well as ensuring that flaws pertaining to weight and other beauty standards are disguised. Alberti’s patriarch and main speaker in *On the Family III* also broaches the idea that physical appearance either masks or enhances inner beauty while educating his young new wife. He is adamantly against the female practice of putting on makeup and in order to clarify his stance, he uses a metaphor that will inevitably make a lasting impression on the young neophyte. Using a silver statue of a saint, whose face and hands were fashioned from ivory as the basis for his example, he asks his wife how valuable the statue would be if she put make-up on it every morning and rinsed it every night. The point he wished to make by way of this illustration was that the beauty of the statue would be negated and ruined after this cycle had repeated itself a number of times. Attempting to sell it after such wear and tear would fetch a much smaller sum, even though the intrinsic value, to be read, inner beauty, was still intact, owing to its yellowed and weathered outward appearance.⁵⁵

Many of the treatises and pamphlets that discussed proper behavior were buttressed by the notion of differences in the physical and mental makeup between the sexes. For instance, Alberti specifically addresses these differences in the third book of *On the Family*. Lionardo, one of the younger men with whom Giannozzo is conversing, agrees with the older man when he mentions his lack of temperament for dealing with

⁵⁴ Castiglione 215.

⁵⁵ Alberti 84-85.

household matters specifically designated as woman's work by volunteering that it is, in fact, an ancient notion. He ventures, "I agree, for you are, indeed, precisely of the opinion of the ancients. They used to say that men are by nature of a more elevated mind than women. They are more suited to struggle with arms and cunning against the misfortunes which afflict country, religion, and one's own children."⁵⁶ The younger man continues his support of Giannozzo by stating "The character of men is stronger than that of women and can bear the attacks of enemies better, can stand strain longer, is more constant under stress."⁵⁷ Women, in his opinion, however, are "almost all timid by nature, soft, slow, and therefore more useful when they sit still and watch over our things. It is as though nature thus provided for our well-being, arranging men to bring things home and for women to guard them." He continues by outlining the duties that naturally befit a woman's temperance and physical capabilities, including details such as her diligence in protecting the goods the husband has brought home, staying at her post, and taking care that the household is in order, all the while, remaining "locked up at home," also consigned neatly to her place.⁵⁸

Discussion of appropriate places to look also engrossed commentators and authors of pamphlets on gender expectations within marriage. The attempt to harness the gaze has important implications for this study, which endeavors to determine the gendered viewing experiences of mythologically ornamented marriage furniture, due to

⁵⁶ Alberti 77.

⁵⁷ Alberti 77.

⁵⁸ Alberti 78.

the lack of direct contemporary information regarding viewing habits available today. Many treatises and pamphlets actually prescribed how and where the female had the license to direct her gaze. Among them, the writings of a Florentine man named Francesco da Barberino, who by trade was both a lawyer and a poet, serve to illuminate some of these notions. His treatise, penned in 1315, gives us insight to the degree women were restricted, going so far as to tell them how, when, and where to direct their gaze. He advises that women should “abstain from looking at all - save him.”⁵⁹ His advice was clearly meant to constrain the woman’s field of vision in order to give up control to the husband, who was subsequently given the leeway to look wherever he wanted later on in the same treatise. Catherine E. King approaches the subject of the relationship between husbands and their wives, contending that “This was a system in which the husband was regarded as the discriminating viewer who scrutinized his wife inside and outside the home. He was the critical observer, and she was the object of his examination. As a viewer, her gaze was primarily to be restricted to the privacy of the house, or, if in company, she was told to look at her husband with admiration, or at the ground.”⁶⁰

Catherine E. King’s comment regarding this notion is well-put: “The scopic double-standard is underlined by the way in which the poet told the wife never to let her own eyes stray to look at another man, but that if her husband looked at another woman,

⁵⁹ Francesco da Barberino, qtd. in Catherine E. King Renaissance Women Patrons 23.

⁶⁰ King 22.

she was to pretend not to notice, and hope his mood would change.”⁶¹ Continuing on with this theme of looking or averting the gaze, Francesco Barbaro asserts his opinion regarding what constituted an immodest woman by verbalizing her main transgression as possessing wandering eyes. This ties neatly to the idea of the unrestricted gaze as upsetting to the natural order which appears later in this thesis when treating the subject of linear perspective in painting as opposed to the multi-faceted nature of the organization of imagery rendered on cassoni.

During a time when the visual was given primacy, there was much “scientific” evidence that supported the assumption that an imprint of an image in the eye would lead to a physical outcome or manifestation of the qualities possessed by the image viewed.⁶² For instance, as a child, a woman was encouraged to play with holy-dolls, crude representations of a baby Jesus, and these were often part of the marriage trousseau given to her by her mother. It was also thought to have been held during the nuptial ceremony to encourage reflection on the duty to provide children for her new husband. These dolls served as visual reminders to the bride of her new station in life

⁶¹ King 23.

⁶² Renaissance notions of science differ significantly from the definition of science adhered to today. Aristotle’s treatises often formed the basis of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century scientific thought, and due to this reliance on classical manuscripts, “theories” were often not proven by modern-day standards but were used to explain natural occurrences. Some manuscripts that were considered scientific during this time include Giovanni Marinello, *Delle medicine partenenti all’ infermità delle donne*. (Venice: Francesco de’ Franceschi, 1563); Mercurio, *La commare*, (Biagi et al.), who bases his ideas of the gaze and imagination affecting the appearance of babies on Aristotelian thought. Much of the time, the “evidence” used to support these suppositions was classical as well, such as Hippocrates’ defense of a woman who was thought to have given birth to a baby who looked nothing like her husband, however, its features matched a picture that was positioned in the room where the intercourse took place. See Rudolph M. Bell’s *How to Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) for more citations of treatises considered scientific during the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century.

and all the expectations that that were levied upon her in this new role. Another example of the suggestive use of imagery can be found on the underside of a cassone lid. The reclining nude or nearly nude figures that were hidden within, often with the names Paris or Helen written next to them, encouraged the new couple to engage in sexual activity that would lead to the conception of a child (Fig. 1 and 2). Giulio Mancini wrote in his treatise *Considerazioni sulla pittura* on the subject of libidinous imagery and appropriate usage. He would have approved of the concealed nudes within the chest, as he prescribes that such images should remain hidden until their use was warranted in the creation of children. Mancini felt suggestive images should be put to just such use in the bedroom “because such sights help excite the parents and make beautiful, sound and healthy children.”⁶³ That the child was the ultimate end result of copulation was a well-known prescription of licit sexual behavior, enforced by both religious doctrine and circulating pamphlets.⁶⁴

It is again possible to see an instance of the gaze being focused or constrained when considering the appropriate viewing behavior during coitus. It was thought that if, during the moment of conception, something ugly or horrendous was imagined or looked upon, it would negatively affect the outward appearance of the baby when it was born. An example of this belief found in an astrological treatise written by Marsilio

⁶³ Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, vol. I ed. Adriana Marucchi (Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1956) 143 qtd in Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions in Renaissance Italy” *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* eds. Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 49.

⁶⁴ Michael Roche, “Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy” *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998) 153-156.

Ficino entitled *Liber de vita* states that “people who are making babies often imprint on their faces not only their own actions but even what they were imagining.”⁶⁵ Therefore, it was considered important for the couple copulating to free the mind of bad images and think or look at images of something beautiful to ensure the birth of a robust baby boy. This perceived notion is further elucidated when perusing the warnings of contemporary bestiaries, or books which featured real and imaginary animals along with physical descriptions and allegorical interpretations of the beasts. Usually a moral accompanied such books, and one in particular weighs in on the dangers or benefits of visual imprinting. It admonishes women to avert their gaze from grotesque animals because “whatever [women] view, or even if they imagine it in their mind during the extreme heat of lust while they are conceiving, just so do they procreate the progeny.”⁶⁶

If viewing ugly or grotesque sights when copulating would produce misshapen children, then the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian couples believed the opposite must also be true. To this effect, Alberti writes in his *De re aedificatoria* of 1452: “Wherever man and wife come together, it is advisable only to hang portraits of men of dignity and handsome appearance; for they say that this may have a great influence on the fertility of the mother and the appearance of future offspring.”⁶⁷ Indeed, it is

⁶⁵ Marsilio Ficino, *The Book of Life* Trans. Charles Boer, (Irving : Spring Publications, 1980) 143 qtd in Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions” 48.

⁶⁶ T. H. White, ed, *The Book of Beasts* (London: Cape, 1956) 89-90 qtd in Musacchio 48.

⁶⁷ Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* trans. Joseph Rykwert et al., (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988) 299 qtd in Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions” 49.

evidence enough of the popularity of this “scientific” theory if Alberti, a renowned author, artist, and theorist, mentions it in his work.

The subject of prescribed sexual norms within a marriage was often discussed in pamphlets and treatises in fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy. These tracts determined that the only acceptable time to engage in coitus, even within marriage, was for the purpose of creating offspring. These documents went so far as to determine the correct positions to be used in copulation, namely, the man should be on top of and facing his wife. The missionary position, as it is known, was acceptable because it allowed for the uninterrupted conception of a child. Any other position could possibly disrupt this occurrence, thereby resulting in illicit sexual behavior, even if the copulating couple was married. A great stir was caused when Giulio Romano produced drawing in which sixteen positions of sexual intercourse were depicted, engaged in by heterosexual couples. Not surprisingly, only one of these positions, the missionary style, was sanctioned by religious doctrine. Engravings of these drawings were made by Marcantonio Raimondi in 1524, and the ensuing uproar was imaginably frenzied. Many of the prints were destroyed, but not before a substantial number were circulated and subsequently hidden for private viewing pleasure. Sonnets were written by Pietro Aretino to accompany each of the positions and his bawdy humor was scorned by many, even Giorgio Vasari, who writes about the incident in his account of Marcantonio Raimondi’s life.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Bette Talvacchia, Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 6.

Although Vasari seems to have gotten some of the details wrong, he believed there were 20 different positions drawn, the point to be made is there were certain behavior expectations of couples who wished to engage in intercourse. One of these prescribed norms was that copulation was warranted only in the event that a child was to be conceived, and even then, the position this should occur in should be no more enticing or pleasurable than necessary to conceive. The reason for the Church's disapproval of any other positions was partially because they felt any deviance from the norm might lead husbands and wives to derive undue amounts of sensual pleasure from the act, committing the deadly sin of lust. There were some treatises, however, that argued both partners must reach climax in order for the seed to be implanted in the womb, and it is here that sexual proscription becomes less clear. For instance, Galen, who was writing medical treatises in the second century but still much read in the period this paper is concerned with, believed that the implantation of the procreative seed supplied by the female sexual organs into a woman's womb caused a high degree of pleasure. Those religious theorists who believed his biological standpoint to be correct were more likely to be in favor of allowing for some measure of sexual pleasure accompanying intercourse.⁶⁹

Interestingly, wives wielded as much power as husbands did when it came to conjugal relations. The Church doctrine treated sex within marriage as a business debt, thereby allowing both parties to collect on the debt as necessary. This way of thinking had a biblical foundation in I Corinthians 7:3, when Paul teaches that within marriage,

⁶⁹ Talvacchia 117.

each partner must pay a due.⁷⁰ While the Church made a great effort to relate its stance on conjugal relations to the public, it has been observed that there was a significant decline in female fertility in fifteenth-century Tuscany.⁷¹ This indicates that, far from the ideal standards of behavior, married couples must have increasingly engaged in sexual activity that allowed them to limit the number of children they had. What this consisted of cannot be said definitively, but most likely, there was not a decrease in copulation. Bernardino of Siena, a preacher active both in Florence and in Siena during the 1420s made conjugal relations a vital part of his sermon. While he preached that both husband and wife had a responsibility to fulfill the marriage debt, he addressed women more frequently when admonishing against depriving the spouse of this right, allowing a glimpse into a contemporary notion of what was considered gender-specific behavior.⁷² He also cautioned women to be chaste even during carnal relations, and never allow the husband to see them naked or touch areas of the body that were considered shameful or indecent. Wives did have certain latitude to refuse the sexual advances of their spouse, particularly during menstruation. Intercourse during this time of month was thought to be the cause of deformed children, and was thus an undesirable condition for the conception of a healthy baby. However, Bernardino mentioned to his female listeners that it was better to pay the conjugal debt during menstruation than it was to engage in anal intercourse, which was considered extremely sinful. If the

⁷⁰ Talvacchia 117.

⁷¹ Rocke 154.

⁷² Rocke 155.

husband demanded such a replacement, the wife would be better off if she attempted to hide her menstrual state and submit to his request.⁷³

It was in such an environment that both husbands and wives considered the imagery on their wedding furniture. The way each perceived the stories and the messages they relayed was informed by social ideals with regards to gender expectations. There is much evidence that suggests the stories depicted on cassone and spalliera panels were to act as exempla or models of prescribed behavior for both men and women. According to Lionardo Bruni, the author of a treatise on the education of patrician women, certain mythological narratives were appropriate for women, and would facilitate meditation on the virtues they should endeavor to acquire, including continence, temperance, and modesty. Going further, he suggests that a carefully chosen myth was of great value to the process of socializing women into their roles in the domestic environs they inhabited.⁷⁴ This supports the notion that cassone paintings were used to impress and inform. Due to the lively nature of these stories, the act of viewing imagery and then translating the significance of the morals into their own lives was both pleasurable and an effective means to impart the importance of maintaining the status quo by adhering to social norms.

⁷³ Rocke 156.

⁷⁴ San Juan 136.

CHAPTER 3
DISCUSSION OF OBJECTS

Recognizing the significance of painted nuptial furniture to marriage rituals and the marital life of a newly-wed couple is essential to deciphering how each would have viewed the stories commissioned for the occasion. The physical form of the cassone was integral to its function. Its shape, a rectangular box ranging in size from 38 by 130 cm to 43 by 175.8 cm, essentially allowed for its role in the marriage rituals of fifteenth-century Italian couples.⁷⁵ The interior of a cassone would have been long and deep enough to accommodate the bride's trousseau as it was being transported to her new home, and later the length and width was thought to have been such that a woman could comfortably store her garments without folding them.⁷⁶ This was important, because many of the dresses that would have found their place in a cassone could very possibly have been damaged had they been folded, due to the expensive practice of having intricate precious metal threads woven throughout the gown. Even Giorgio Vasari

⁷⁵ Cristelle Baskins, Cassone Painting, Humanism and Gender in Early Modern Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 5.

⁷⁶ Hughes 44.

attests to this when he comments that “the inside then was lined with cloth or silk, according to the wealth and power of those who commissioned them, to protect the clothes and other precious things kept there.”⁷⁷ The depth was also carefully gauged so that a woman could comfortably reach into the chest to retrieve items as she needed them, without having to stretch strenuously for the object of interest.⁷⁸ Hughes makes a valid point when he remarks that sarcophagi, which cassoni were modeled after, would have had to be long enough to accommodate a body, so it seems logical to surmise the wedding chests would have adhered to the same standards.⁷⁹

A cassone’s external form was just as imperative to its function as the interior was. It became customary for the chests, usually commissioned in pairs, to be lavishly decorated with scenes taken from mythology, literature, and history. The painted surface usually extended from both the long sides and short ends of the chest, to the chest’s interior, where a waiting scantily-clad or nude individual was often discovered reclining as soon as the lid was lifted (Fig. 1 and 2). Classical subject-matter was used predominantly from around 1460, although as Malcolm Bull has indicated, today less than a third of the surviving cassoni are replete with painted myth or other various classical subjects.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Paola Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 22.

⁷⁸ Hughes 44.

⁷⁹ Hughes 44.

⁸⁰ See Bull 37 and my Appendix: Among the most prevalent subjects, battles are painted on many of the surviving panels, both classical in origin as well as more recent military endeavors. The classical subjects of military triumphs, including the Trojan War, were considered by fifteenth and sixteenth century individuals to be historical as opposed to mythological in origin. Other prominently featured subjects

It is useful to think of a cassone's purpose or function as existing in two phases: the mobile and the static. In its mobile phase, a marriage chest fulfilled a highly symbolic and ceremonial role as the vessel of transport for items of great importance related to the marriage ritual.⁸¹ The practice of using cassoni for this purpose was originally begun in order to meet the requirements of newly enacted sumptuary legislation, which attempted to curb the sky-rocketing cost of marriage. The rising cost of weddings due to inflated dowries and subsequently lavish counter-dowries grew to inhibit the actual rate of nuptial ceremonies, placing the creation of new family alliances and lineages in jeopardy. The worry about this increasingly dire situation can easily be seen from the point of view of Renaissance society when considering the outcry citizens of Pisa made to the signoria in Florence. In 1463, they pleaded with him to pass sumptuary legislation restricting the expenses of marriage to a manageable level because

there are about nine hundred nubile girls, more than three hundred of whom are twenty-four years of age or older, and many youths and men who might take these girls as wives instead remain without wives, as much as they wish to marry, on account of the great expenses that they would be required to make for the apparel and ornaments of married women [...]⁸²

include stories found in contemporary literature, such as the story of Griselda as well as narratives of famous men and women from the Bible, like David, Joseph, the Queen of Sheba, Esther and Susanna.

⁸¹ Witthoft 46.

⁸² E. R. Rainey, Sumptuary Legislation in Renaissance Florence Ph. D (Columbia University, 1985) 466-467 qtd in Catherine Killerby, Sumptuary Law in Italy 1200-1500 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 51.

Such garish displays of luxury that the marriage processions facilitated were sternly rebuked both by the various entities that governed the Italian peninsula during the Renaissance and the clergy of the church, if each for somewhat different reasons. The enactors of the sumptuary laws did so partially due to their conviction that the money spent on such items would serve to stimulate the economy if it were not tied up in such material goods. As Catherine Killerby aptly states, a main economic reason for the legislation of such laws was that “luxury consumption also led to the dissipation of reliable sources of capital, also necessary for a strong economy, and so was to be condemned.”⁸³ The display of luxury was also seen as a means for those with political motivations to attain power and prestige, and so in this instance, it would also be detrimental to the stability of the political realm. In addition, there was the fear that the exhibition of luxury could also quite possibly undermine society as a whole, erasing the carefully and diligently constructed class lines which might in turn lead to societal angst and upheaval.⁸⁴ In terms of religion, the clergy felt that luxury led to moral turpitude and caused attention to wander to concerns of the flesh, therefore emphasis should be placed more on the spiritual union of marriage as opposed to the outward displays of ostentation that usually accompanied such celebrations.⁸⁵ Soon, however, the legislators’ attempts to veil the lavish wedding presents and bridal trousseaux from the eyes of the public resulted in the exterior of the chests, initially employed to conceal the

⁸³ Killerby 7.

⁸⁴ Killerby 7.

⁸⁵ Witthoft 51; Killerby 7-8.

richness of the marriage gifts, being painted with increasingly more decorative narratives, whereupon the law was upheld, but its purpose and intent neatly circumvented.

In its second, or static, phase, a cassone was placed in the newly-decorated nuptial chambers where it served both as storage for clothing and other items of worth, and at times as a bench for visitors to rest upon. Chairs were not commonly used in this era, and so, cassoni were a practical solution to the issue of where to sit. Also serving in the capacity of an educational device, it provided newly-married women guidance on their roles as mother and wife. Although the narratives cassoni were often adorned with were not mentioned in this particular instance, the function of the cassone as a means to educate is nevertheless beautifully exemplified in the third book of Alberti's *On the Family*, when he discusses with his listeners the conversations he had with his young bride soon after their marriage.⁸⁶ In an attempt to impart to his wife the importance of keeping a smoothly functioning household, he uses her marriage chest as a metaphor illustrating how she should go about maintaining order in the household of which she was now in charge. His wife, eager to please him, answered too hastily for Giannozzo's liking that in order to keep a good house she should keep everything "locked up properly". He quickly corrects her saying:

Dear wife, if you put into your marriage chest not only your silken gowns and gold and valuable jewelry, but also the flax to be spun and the little pot of oil, too, and finally the little chicks, and then locked up

⁸⁶ In this phase, the exterior also served as an educational tool for young children, who would most likely have spent a significant amount of time studying and learning the narratives. The cassoni would have been the perfect height for a young boy or girl to gaze comfortably at the imagery while standing or sitting on the floor next to the chest.

the whole thing securely with your key, tell me would you think you had taken good care of everything because everything was locked up?⁸⁷

This indicates that marriage chests were an integral part of life, enough so that she was able to identify with such an example in order to better understand another, perhaps more unfamiliar, idea. Gionnozzo himself seems to think his use of the cassone as an educational tool is quite clever, stating to his avid listener before launching into his example that “the illustration that then occurred to me I think will please you.”⁸⁸

Another static function the cassone fulfilled included the storage of maternal dowry gifts like prayer books or “holy dolls”, which were usually images of Jesus in infancy whose main purpose was to assist the new wife in her daily devotional activity, and also served as a reminder of her most important duty of all: producing children, and more specifically, a male heir, to carry on her husband’s lineage. That the cassone held things from the mother of the bride emphasizes the importance of a woman to remember her maternal lineage, which was often overshadowed by the dominance the patrilineage held in the lives of many early modern families.⁸⁹

Cristelle Louise Baskins has indicated that there was most likely a shift in the function of cassoni around the middle of the fifteenth century, when the husband’s family began to take upon themselves the commissioning of the marriage chests and the painted decorations that adorned its surface while in the process of redecorating the

⁸⁷ Alberti 91-92.

⁸⁸ Alberti 91.

⁸⁹ Baskins 6.

nuptial chamber. At this time, it became the norm for brides to transport their dowry and marital gifts to their new home in baskets.⁹⁰ The mobile function of the cassone became obsolete at this juncture, losing much of its public ritual significance with the termination of this practice.

The next step in understanding how a cassone and its art would have been viewed, utilized, and perceived by women is examining the aspects of sociability the marriage chests inherently possessed, and then determining who exactly the intended spectators were. It is at this point in the analysis that the actual subject of the imagery painted on the marriage chests becomes important. While the mythological subjects painted on the chests will be taken into account in more detail at another point in this thesis, here it is necessary to understand what effects the imagery has on spectatorship and sociability. Scholars have postulated that the understanding of mythology by women in courtly settings was an inherent form of sociability and thus required of them, but notes that these same women were caught between two opposing ideals. The first expectation, based on gender norms, was that their chastity would remain intact, but the second expectation, a class ideal, focused on the fact that as wealthy women of the educated elite class, they were expected to be knowledgeable and able to carry on a conversation in subjects such as literature and the classics.⁹¹ In this manner, training and knowledge of literature and mythology could be considered an indication that the woman in question had neglected to protect the other virtues she was to embody. If she

⁹⁰ Baskins 4.

⁹¹ San Juan 136.

appeared to be too knowledgeable in matters of classical origin, her chastity became suspect, and charges of abhorrent sexual behavior could be levied upon her, causing not only her reputation to be marred, but that of her kin as well.⁹²

The sphere occupied by the marriage chests would have been shared in many instances by both men and women. First, they were used in the procession between the bride's former place of residence and her new home, whereupon spectators would have included both the invited guests, family members, and the townspeople who were primarily engaged in the activity as spectators, well-wishers, and in some instances, trouble-makers. In its static phase, the marriage chest was situated in the bedroom of the home, where it would only have been seen by a small number of intimate friends and relatives who spent time in the room socializing with the chest's owner. The *camerino* was often the most used and extensively decorated room of a Renaissance house, and when visitors were entertained, this would have been the most comfortable room to inhabit.⁹³ It is important to note that the visitor who was privileged enough to enter the woman's bedroom would inevitably have been limited to a female family member or intimate friend because generally, women were not encouraged to spend their time socializing. It was considered unbecoming for a woman to gab away as it would prevent them from tending to their household duties. Evidence of this attitude is

⁹² San Juan 136.

⁹³ San Juan 133. She contrasts the female private room with that of her male counterpart, asserting that the former facilitated a more intimate sociability because of the increasing restrictions of women from the less private rooms of the home. See also the third book of Alberti's *On the Family*, where he discusses with his new bride what access she has to various rooms in the domestic interior, and which parts are off limits to her.

expressed by Giannozzo in Alberti's *On the Family*, as he gives his neophyte wife yet another lesson in female comportment:

[...] I shall be truly glad if I see that you disdain the frivolous mannerisms, the habit of tossing the hands about, the chattering that some little girls do all day, in the house, at the door, and wherever they go. They talk now with this friend, now with that one; they ask a lot of questions and say a lot of things that they don't know as well as a lot that they do. All that is the way to get yourself the reputation of an irresponsible featherbrain...talking too much has been ever the habit and sign of a silly fool. So be glad to listen quietly and to talk less than you listen.⁹⁴

The subject of the stories on marriage chests were certainly directed to a specific couple. Wives by default would have been the primary spectators, however, due to the husband's frequent absence from the home and alternatively, the wife's ever-present role within the domestic interior. Inevitably, the husband would have had a chance to view the chest each night he spent in the bedroom with his wife. Children, too, were spectators of cassone, especially because the painted narratives would have given a wife and mother the chance to impart to them the virtuous qualities they were to cultivate during their formative years.

The symbolic function of a cassone was perhaps one of its most important characteristics, setting it apart from other types of decorated furniture. The cassoni were symbolic of the marriage ties that the woman's family would forge with another, hopefully more powerful, family, establishing a firm social alliance while bolstering their reputation in the eyes of the community. It also signified the financial transaction

⁹⁴ Alberti 87.

of the marriage, and the husband's duty to provide for her well-being and comfort, as was exemplified by the gifts he offered to his wife which were held inside.⁹⁵ It can be said that the richness with which it was fashioned attested to the wealth of the marriage and the financial benefits it brought to both families, while the imagery on the cassone indicated the inculcation of ideals inherently associated with the marriage. When contemplating this particular function of a wedding chest, it immediately becomes clear that there was a commodification of marriage during this era, and as with all commodities, it had to be financially viable and stable, so as to benefit all parties involved in the transaction, so to speak.⁹⁶ Marriage chests were used in the *vincolo vero*, a public procession that established the marriage in the eyes of the community to which they belong and signified the solidity of the familial link that had just been wrought through their union.⁹⁷ Significantly, the marriage chests were symbolic of the rituals which reworked the "conflicting interests of the family unit and its larger community [...]."⁹⁸

In both its mobile and static phase, the cassone acted as a vessel or container for precious items, just as women were considered vessels for the children they were expected to conceive. According to a statute issued in Florence dating to 1433, women were metaphorically likened to "little sacks, to hold the natural seed which their

⁹⁵ Baskins 5.

⁹⁶ Baskins 5.

⁹⁷ Witthoft 46.

⁹⁸ San Juan 134.

husbands implant in them so that children will be born.”⁹⁹ This was a reflection of a popular Aristotelian view on conception and birth, wherein a mother was cast in the same role as the part the earth played in the growth of vegetables, “to contain, preserve, and supply it with fitting nourishment,” whereas the husband “projected and cast forth [his seed] into the womb of woman as into a field.”¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the conceived notions of the roles filled by both men and women in childbirth were represented by cassoni, and their use in the rituals celebrating marriage functioned as a reminder of the ultimate desired result of such a union, which was to propagate the lineage.

Thus a marriage was not simply a private affair between the betrothed couple, rather it was elevated to a civic virtue and by engaging in such a union, a couple sought to uphold a civic morality while ensuring that the basic familial unit continued to prosper.¹⁰¹ San Juan also touches on this subject and ascertains that, “Painted chests, which were explicitly associated with the conjugal unit and a particular family lineage, became implicated in rituals which negotiated these private bonds with those of the community.”¹⁰² Victor Turner’s theory fits well in the discussion of the symbolic role cassoni played in the marriage ritual. In his discussion of the liminal state of any ritual that accompanies a rite of passage, he maintains that essentially the persons undergoing the rite arrive on the other side as a blank slate, having been stripped of all prior status

⁹⁹ Gene Brucker, The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 181 qtd in Baskins 3.

¹⁰⁰ Aristotle, The Complete Works of, 1984 ed. J. Barnes Part I, Generation of Animals 1127-32 qtd. in Margaret R. Sommerville Sex and Subjection: Attitudes to Women in Early-Modern Society 63.

¹⁰¹ Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity 21.

previously incurred, upon which society is now able to make a deep impression.¹⁰³ This idea of the *tabula rasa* then gives rise to the notion that imagery found upon marriage furniture in general and cassoni in particular, would have been the first socializing influences to be made upon the new couple. These painted narratives acted as an inculcating force with which to impart the societal norms and standards of behavior that a couple was now expected to adhere to or embody as befitting to their newly-achieved status.

Just as the marriage ritual contained elements belonging to both the public and private spheres, so, too, did cassoni and the imagery they bore contain both elements meant for public and private viewing experiences. In this way, cassoni mediated between the public nature of the union and the private affairs that would follow the celebrations (interior/exterior).¹⁰⁴ Mercea Eliade writes, “Every marriage implies a tension and a danger and hence precipitates a crisis; this is why it is performed by a rite of passage.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the act of leaving one group to join another must be negotiated by a ritual process in order to legitimize and protect the interests of both families involved. The man or woman about to be married are moving from one status complete with its normative behavior ideals to a married state which is also replete with expected modes of behavior. Eliade’s theoretical standpoint is supported by

¹⁰² San Juan 133.

¹⁰³ Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 1995) 103.

¹⁰⁴ Witthoft 52.

contemporary notions of the marriage rituals, especially exemplified in the quasi-military triumphal processions that occurred between the home of the bride and that of her new husband. The idea that marriage resolved old familial conflicts, both real or imagined, in order to broaden their sphere of influence has much evidence to support it. Marco Antonio Altieri, wrote *Li Nuptiali* sometime after 1500, in an attempt to reconcile the humanist principle of civic order to religious order.¹⁰⁶ Using classical antiquity as a means to this end, he formulates theories on the origins of religiously sanctioned civic duties, which leads him to focus on nuptial rites. According to Altieri, much rancor underlies the alliance established when two people marry. Many of the rites performed during marriage ceremonies of his time were explained in his treatise as symbolizing the tensions upon which Rome was built, namely, the rape of the Sabine women. He contends that “the least gesture in the espousal ceremonies puts us in memory of the rape of the Sabines; when someone takes his wife by the hand, he is showing that he is using violence on her.”¹⁰⁷ For Altieri, like Eliade, ritual is a means to restoring the social order after a schism or split caused by differences between families occurs. Indeed, even a popular fifteenth century Italian novella, known as the “Istoriotta amorosa fra Leonora de’ Bardi e Ippolito Bondelmonti” and the precedent to the well-known Shakespearean play, *Romeo and Juliet*, addresses the seemingly frequent

¹⁰⁵ Mercea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* Trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1987) 185.

¹⁰⁶ Klapisch-Zuber 248.

¹⁰⁷ M. A. Altieri, *Li nuptiali* ed. E. Narducci (Rome, 1873) 70 qtd. in Klapisch-Zuber 255.

occurrence of marriages arranged to erase former tensions and ill-will between powerful families.¹⁰⁸

Perhaps the last thing to be said about the importance of cassoni both in the marriage rituals and in their later static phase within the marriage chamber of the newlywed couple, is the fact that they represented the family's financial and even moral standing. For example, in *On the Family*, Giannozzo discusses the importance of household goods and elevates the term *masserizia*, which originally meant family savings, to have moral value. According to Goldthwaite, who bases this next quote on Alberti's notions of *masserizia*, "[...] possessions have a strong moral quality about them. Household goods, in short, were a form of capital that represented family solidarity and honor," and going further, "[...] household possessions of a family were the material core of its identity and existence, the foundation of the reputation of the family; it consists not of money, but of those material goods that assure the solidarity of affection and the bonds of blood, honor, and virtue."¹⁰⁹

Usually, a cassone's spatial qualities manifest themselves in the same way as the images that appeared on tapestries meaning that 50 to 70 figures cover between one quarter and one half of the total height, and the rest is landscape (Fig. 3).¹¹⁰ There are between four and twelve episodes depicted in cassone painting, with groups of figures

¹⁰⁸ Judy Rawson, "Marrying for Love" *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society* ed. Letizia Panizza (Oxford: Legenda-University of Oxford, 2000) 422.

¹⁰⁹ Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 211. Goldthwaite is interested in consumption habits and their foundation in Renaissance culture and convincingly argues that the inherently urban environment of Italy during the Renaissance prompted this new mentality of consumer culture.

often set one above the other, in a background that stretches over most of the picture surface.¹¹¹ The illusion of depth can be said to be almost non-existent on cassone paintings, and the artists' tendencies to place figural groups one above the other added to the almost decorative nature of the painting. This tapestry-like composition suggests a kind of "viewer mobility," which is supported by Randolph's comment that "Unlike the spatial constructions associated with stained glass or tapestry which encourage visual mobility, the novel 'legitimate' construction of fifteenth-century art sought to marry the spectator to a fixed position of visual power [...]"¹¹² This manner of organization imbued cassone painting with the ability to facilitate gaze entering from many access points, but was considered illegitimate due to its unregulated points of entry as opposed to the perspective and proportion Baxandall purports were the preferred means of viewing the subject of a particular painting. It is important to remember, however, that his book presupposes the male gaze while staying silent on the appropriate viewing habits of women.¹¹³

Some common mythological narratives painted on cassoni include *The Judgement of Paris*, *The Rape of Helen*, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Diana and Actaeon*, *Jason and Medea*, *Cupid and Psyche* and *The Adventures of the*

¹¹⁰ Hughes 43; Barriault 58.

¹¹¹ Barriault 58.

¹¹² Randolph 550.

¹¹³ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* 2nd Ed (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 103-108.

Argonauts.¹¹⁴ Giorgio Vasari, who lived in the sixteenth century, wrote “[...] the stories painted on the front were usually taken from Ovid and from other poets or stories told by Greek and Latin historians, as well as hunting scenes, jousts, love stories, and other similar themes, according to taste.”¹¹⁵

By contrast, spalliera panels were usually 70 by 157 centimeters on average and more square than cassone paintings.¹¹⁶ These panels were a historical outgrowth of fifteenth-century cassone painting and prelude to mythological cycles that appeared on canvas and in sixteenth-century fresco. They tended to be placed at eye- or shoulder-level, as is illuminated by the literal meaning of spalliera, which is “shoulder”. Perhaps one of the most interesting functions spalliere were meant to fulfill was that of a window, giving artistically-constructed visual access to the world beyond.¹¹⁷ In a culture where women spent most of their lives indoors, this particular decorative object set into the wall must have been a comforting sight. The claustrophobia they might be inclined to feel on a daily basis would have been somewhat warded off by the pleasant imagery adorning these panels, of garden, nature, and often delightful scenes of mythology and poetry. The verisimilitude artists of spalliere attempted to achieve with their paintings also added to their charm and function as surrogate windows. Spalliera panels were often commissioned as a series or set, with the intention of being placed in

¹¹⁴ Bull 28.

¹¹⁵ Tinagli 22.

¹¹⁶ Barriault 56.

¹¹⁷ Barriault 6.

some sort of sequential order in the domestic chambers.¹¹⁸ They were frequently encased within the architectural elements of the room, between wooden pilasters and entablatures and were often attached above cupboards, settles, beds, and chests or armadi, lettucci, cassoni, respectively. Spalliera panels also served to keep the interiors of a home warmer than it would have been otherwise.

Like cassoni, spalliere were also commissioned in honor of weddings, often during the process of the redecoration of a set of chambers in the home of either the groom's father or in some instances, the groom's home, specifically meant to serve as the nuptial chambers. Here they were integral parts of the decorative schemes, and tied to the architecture of private rooms.¹¹⁹ It comes as no surprise, then, that a few extant panels do commemorate marriages, both contemporary and classical. Another purpose they served was to reinforce the values of patrimony, familial duty, and civic-mindedness. They would remind all who saw them daily of their particular roles in society and act as exempla with which to guide the family of the house.

Because they were usually commissioned by leading families, such as the upper-class and wealthier sections of the merchant-class, they served as symbols of a family's "magnificence". Magnificence was becoming a virtue during this time on the Italian peninsula, due to the changing notions of what constituted virtue, and fifteenth-century humanists such as Leonardo Bruni and Alberti championed the idea that wealth was a facilitator of building virtue because possessing it, according to Goldthwaite's

¹¹⁸ Barriault 2.

¹¹⁹ Barriault 2-3.

interpretation, “presented a moral challenge because it put virtue to the test in ways not experienced by the person not burdened by the encumbrances of material possessions”.¹²⁰ Wealth, then, acted as an indicator as to the status of a particular family’s nobility and the proper use of wealth became a matter of private advantage and pleasure, which in turn supported the act of possessing.¹²¹ Magnificence, a quality only afforded by the wealthy, was thus acknowledged as a kind of physical manifestation that demonstrated to those around them the proper moral conduct adhered to by the elite. This leads one to the logical conclusion that the more spalliera panels one could afford, the more visible was the display of their inner sanctimonious selves seen by society.

Spalliere, as Barriault has mentioned, revive the spatial continuity of ancient Roman fresco cycles. The Roman pastoral frescoes opened up simulated views for spectators just like spalliera were meant to do, as indicated by their function as “windows”.¹²² They were often painted with buildings and other architecture, linear perspectives, and small figures.¹²³ In the extant panels, the figures and horizon lines are usually consistent in height: from two-fifths to one-half the height of the field. Landscapes are also usually continuous from panel to panel, and the colors manifested

¹²⁰ Goldthwaite, Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600 206.

¹²¹ Goldthwaite, Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600 206-207.

¹²² Barriault 2.

¹²³ Barriault 54.

in one panel in the series are usually repeated in each of the other paintings as a “rhythmic punctuation and unifying element”.¹²⁴

The scenes they are painted with appear in both linear and non-linear narrative modes, and the stories are told through figures and settings whose proportions equal that of pictorial reliefs and frescoes. There is a definite unified presence of narrative and space meant to be viewed at eye-level.¹²⁵ The spatial composition of spalliera paintings were partly based on Leon Battista Alberti’s theory in *Della Pittura*, in which he espoused that a picture should be constructed as an open window, with its space unified through one-point perspective, and its narrative centered with all elements subordinated to the main action.¹²⁶ For instance, the artists of spalliere established the centric point Alberti speaks of, using it to draw the horizon line to divide panel into almost equal parts sky and landscape. Also, the figures are usually two-fifths or one-half the height of the painted field. Notably, the figures seem more integrated into their setting than in cassone panels. What is very apparent upon studying these panels is that the settings of the painted scenes are integral to their composition.¹²⁷

Another element of spalliere in keeping with Albertian theory is that the heads of the figures are usually placed by the dividing line, and so the heights of the figures diminish from foreground to background through rational spatial planes. There is a

¹²⁴ Barriault 56.

¹²⁵ Barriault 56.

¹²⁶ Barriault 56.

¹²⁷ Barriault 59.

definite reduction in figures and episodes when compared with cassone paintings, which ends up averaging twenty to thirty figures in two to seven scenes within a spalliera painting. Artists of this particular genre were very interested in verisimilitude and tended to organize their fables according to linear perspective schemes. This was partly because they believed that just as a viewer could be convinced of the very real story unfolding before them, those viewing their work would also be persuaded of the veracity and importance of the themes contained within the scenes.¹²⁸

The symbolic elements spalliera paintings were imbued with heavily figured within the marriage rituals and customs of Renaissance Italy. They contained meanings that were both civic and nuptial.¹²⁹ According to a number of scholars, they acted as painted treatises and should be compared to visual versions of humanist texts focusing on the family, its duties and civil responsibilities.¹³⁰ As with cassone paintings, the images they were painted with were visual morals or exempla that seemed to be directed to both men and women, reminding them of their duties as members of society, and how the fulfillment of their respective roles and adherence to the normative gender expectations within marriage added to the stability of their society.

Spalliera paintings often focused on the Ovidian myths of *Perseus and Andromeda*, *Venus and Mars*, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and *Bacchus and Ariadne*. It is significant that appearing for the first time in Renaissance panel painting for domestic

¹²⁸ Barriault 60.

¹²⁹ Barriault 5.

¹³⁰ Barriault 6.

interiors were bucolic landscapes rendered in linear perspective, with frolicking woodland animals and mythical creatures contained in virtual windows that attempted to extend the viewer's perception of space. Protagonists of these stories can be divided into types, including chaste and obedient wives, heroines who would sacrifice themselves rather than dishonor their family or state, warriors who return victorious and altruistic husbands.¹³¹ The iconography helped to express social and political ideals for familial and civic stability and seemed to address both wives and husbands.¹³²

¹³¹ Barriault 7.

¹³² Barriault 7.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF PAINTINGS

Exploration of the cultural climate that fostered the atmosphere conducive to the proliferation of painted marriage furniture has allowed for the discernment of the social constructs and gender expectations that governed the domestic lives of husbands and wives of the upper-class. Similarly, studying the objects has indicated the functional and symbolic importance these chests and wall panels held within the marriage rituals and marital life of a couple. It is now necessary to examine evidence that supports the proposal that mythology was used to provide a moral message to the viewer along with the subjects and themes of the panels themselves. These inquests will facilitate the formation of assertions regarding the way gender expectations shaped or determined a woman's visual experience of mythology present on her marriage furniture. An examination of a few common myths that adorned these furnishings, as well as consideration of the information that has already been discussed with regards to gender roles and expectations within marriage, will perhaps lead to a greater understanding of how husbands and wives were expected to perceive these stories and whether this interpretation differed between the two.

Before this phase can be commenced, it is advantageous to take into consideration the guiding principles of humanism, and how they relate to the myths that account for one-third of the extant panel subjects this paper is concerned with.

Attention will also be given to the manner in which cassone and spalliera panels were rendered with regards to spatial and perspectival characteristics and how these changed over time. These particular artistic elements play a special role in this phase of my examination due to an interesting link that can be made between the female gaze as written about by authors of contemporary treatises on female comportment and expectations within marriage, and the manner in which such stories on marriage furniture would have been viewed by the couple, particularly the woman, for whom they were commissioned.

The appearance of mythological stories on the sides of marriage chests and spalliera panels in the fifteenth and sixteenth century has been explained by some as occurring due to the ever-widening sphere of influence humanist precepts had on the wealthy upper classes. Humanism during the Renaissance was a broad movement that was based upon the renewed interest in classical texts and philosophies. The idea that beauty was the path to universal truths and therefore a virtue was embraced by many humanist scholars of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, as well as the notion that the themes expounded by these texts would in some way lead to moral truths and should therefore be taken as models or exempla for society to emulate. This idea seemed to occur repeatedly throughout many of the Greek and Latin texts that were being studied by such scholars, and were brought to the public by contemporary authors such as Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio who based many of their stories on fables and myths of the classical era. Themes that resonated most strongly with the Renaissance humanists included civic duty and self-sacrifice for the sake of virtue, and stories that relate

similar themes are present in many mythological narratives that graced cassone and spalliera panels of fifteenth-century domestic interiors.

That the iconography on painted marriage furniture was meant to be read with humanist precepts in mind by the newly-wed couple is up for debate, but should be taken into consideration when attempting to distinguish the viewing habits of both men and women. It is particularly important when considering that the commissioning of such chests and wall panels were a luxury belonging almost exclusively to the wealthy, and therefore more educated, members of society. Direct access to humanism and humanist circles was limited to the class that was educated in the classical texts written by Virgil, Homer, Ovid, Plato and others. Significantly, the wives of such educated men would also be more apt to be literate, thereby granting them access to such information, especially when vernacular editions became more available.

A leading humanist of the time, Pico della Mirandola, was of the mind that ancient poetry and mythology had been constructed in a manner that would hide the true meaning and essence from the ordinary people while effusing their wisdom only to those worthy of the power of their message. He believed that “it was the opinion of the ancient theologians that divine subjects and the secret Mysteries must not be rashly divulged ... divine knowledge ... must be covered with enigmatic veils and poetic dissimulation” which would reserve “the marrow of the true sense for higher and more perfected spirits.”¹³³ As Edith Balas mentions in her book on the Mother Goddess in

¹³³ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Commento sopra una cazione d'amore composta da Girolamo Benivieni, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence, 1942) 580; qtd. in Edgar Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the

Renaissance art, and Jean Seznec before her, this way of understanding the powers and purposes of mythological imagery brings to mind Botticelli's enigmatic painting now known to us as the *Primavera*, which still has not yet been deciphered definitively, although many theories of its probable subject-matter abound (Fig. 4).¹³⁴ This work, which has now been identified as a spalliera painting, is thought to have been commissioned for the marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici in 1482. The Medici family was very deeply immersed within the humanistic world and would have appreciated the challenge of interpreting the painting's subject matter and contemplating its veiled meanings.

It can thus be argued that mythology was simply a device employed by the commissioners or patrons of art, usually men, in an attempt to veil the ultimate didactic intent of the item being commissioned. Take for instance the cassone, at first commissioned by the father of the bride for the multi-faceted purpose of complying with sumptuary laws, acting as a rich symbol of the hopefully economically and politically beneficial union of his daughter to a man of equal or greater status, and as a vessel for the numerous wedding gifts and items of value that needed to be stored and protected after the marriage had taken place. This kind of ritual exchange and alliance was occurring during a period in time that witnessed a woman's rights among her own society dwindling, and her movement in and around that society becoming increasingly

Renaissance: An Exploration of Philosophical and Mystical Sources of Iconography in Renaissance Art (New York: Norton, 1958) 24.

¹³⁴ Edith Balas, The Mother Goddess in Italian Renaissance Art (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon UP, 2002) 35; Jean Seznec 112-116.

more restricted. In fact, male visitors from other parts of Europe were so dismayed and bewildered by the absence of femininity in the streets that they felt the need to comment on their lack of visibility in society, stating that on the rare occasion that respectable women were spotted moving about in public, they were covered from head to toe and gazed at no one.¹³⁵ This paucity of women in the Italian streets captured the imagination of Philip Skippon, who noted that “All the young women (except the ordinary common whores) are close kept within.”¹³⁶ Fyne Moryson, another sixteenth-century traveler who visited Venice remarked that “woemen...if they be chast, [are] rather locked up at home, as it were in prison.”¹³⁷

As most likely seen from the prevailing male perspective, it was necessarily a time to instill the expectations that befell their daughters in a more subtle yet effective way, so as not to seem overtly harsh and overbearing in their intent. The subtlety that was possible through the teachings of a painting taken from mythology may necessarily seem to the modern reader to be negligible, but if taken from the perspective of fifteenth-century upper-class society with access to humanist thought, it was certainly a less overt manner of indoctrination than using the stories that littered the Old Testament. The proposal that the narratives on the sides of the marriage chests and on spalliere were meant to serve as exempla for both the wives and husbands they were

¹³⁵ Robert C. Davis, “The Geography of Gender in the Renaissance,” Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London: Longman-Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998) 21.

¹³⁶ Philip Skippon, An Account of a Journey Made thro’ the Low-Countries, Germany, Italy and France in A. Churchill and J. Churchill, eds, Voyages (London, 1746) vol 6, 533; qtd. in Davis, 21.

¹³⁷ Fynes Moryson, An Itinerary (Glasgow, 1907) vol 1, 70; qtd. in Davis, 21.

commissioned for has much evidence supporting it, although it must be kept in mind that the content of the paintings on such panels were controlled by males, and thus reflected their ideas of which stories were appropriate to be depicted for such an occasion. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* had enjoyed a long history of being allegorized by the time his work was being employed in the service of art in the Renaissance, and because of this illustrious history, the male population felt suitably comfortable using his stories as exempla for women to contemplate.¹³⁸ That a commentary on this text, little-known in the Middle Ages, was being frequently reproduced during the Renaissance indicates the degree of comfort artists must have felt when rendering the fables on marriage furniture.¹³⁹ It was certainly thought that a great deal of moral instruction could be derived from the stories, benefiting both the female viewer directly, and her husband, who would indirectly enjoy the advantages that came with a wife who took care to absorb and adhere to the messages such images would have impressed upon her.

Indeed, a certain allegorizer of Ovid's fables, thought to be N. di Agostini, believed the pagan poet had a firm grasp on what he considers "our law" and felt that he must have been divinely inspired because he chose to write about events that so closely mirrored biblical accounts.¹⁴⁰ A few fables he makes note of include the similarities

¹³⁸ D. C. Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970) 163.

¹³⁹ Allen 163.

¹⁴⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphosi*, trans. Agostini (Venice, 1533) 2; qtd. in Allen, 177.

shared between the story of Noah in the Bible and that of Ovid's Deucalion and Pyrrha, as well as the creation story featured in Genesis and Ovid's own account of the creation for which Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus were responsible. Another trend that allowed for the flowering of mythology in domestic painting was the creation of the emblem or "emblemata". The first program of emblems was created by Alciati and featured in his collection named *Emblematum liber*, published in 1531.¹⁴¹ Emblems were essentially pictures that held a hidden moral lesson, which the viewer had the responsibility to discern and decode, often with the aid of an explanatory paragraph that followed it. Mythological figures were frequently utilized as emblems, and in this capacity, the pagan deities stood for either vices or virtues, and often served as vehicles for depicting moral truths.¹⁴²

As was alluded to in previous chapters, the formal principles guiding panel paintings differed considerably between cassoni and the later spalliere. Significantly affecting how a painting is perceived, the spatial arrangement of figures and the perspective with which it is rendered both have important implications for this study of the female gaze. Just as Randolph points out in his attempt to gender the period eye that images on *deschi da parto* have "many, even infinite points of entry," so too must paintings on most *cassone* panels be considered. Instead of adhering to the linear perspective championed by Leon Battista Alberti, paintings on *cassoni* most often read like a tapestry, in which the different scenes of the narrative are set in close proximity to

¹⁴¹ Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art* Trans. Barbara F. Sessions. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992) 100.

one another, sharing the same space and setting. This way of structuring the figural groups one on top of the other, leaving only a narrow band of sky at the top, allows for the viewer to “enter” the painting visually through a number of different scenes. Even though these scenes play from left to right, it can be confusing to follow the action of a story organized in this manner, especially for modern viewers who are accustomed to images being rendered in the linear perspective proposed by Alberti. When linear, or scientific perspective, is employed in the composition of a painting, it allows for the spectator to interpret that one visual plane is equal to one specific scene in a single time and place. This manner of perspective was increasingly used with the advent of spalliera panels, which normally featured only one scene per panel, as opposed to the numerous vignettes crowded together on a single cassone panel.

Utilizing such a perspective allowed for a greater degree of verisimilitude in panel painting, as did the practice of drawing a continuous horizon line, which remained uniform around the room and tied the spalliere cycle together visually. It seems that the artist’s intent when painting a spalliera panel was to acutely focus the viewer’s gaze so that access to the painted vista would only be possible from a specific and predetermined location. If the painting was to extend the space of the viewer, which was the guiding principle to the concept of linear perspective, it could only be done from a single point of entry. This extension of the viewer’s space helped to regulate the

¹⁴² Seznec 101.

gaze by focusing it, while giving it the ability to survey, due to the prominent line of horizon stretching across the panel.¹⁴³

The notion that a certain perspectival and spatial arrangement of a painting helps to focus and control the gaze by allowing only a single point of visual access can be linked to what has already been mentioned in previous chapters regarding the female gaze. Namely, that a preoccupation with perspective goes hand in hand with the anxiety that seemed to pervade this society regarding the detrimental and dangerous consequences of the female gaze. As was previously established, in a number of treatises or pamphlets that address female modes of comportment, there are included certain prescriptions addressing where a woman was encouraged to look, and where she should refrain from gazing.

Women who looked about freely were thought to be in possession of “wandering” or roving eyes, which was just as undesirable a trait as was the practice of allowing wives to walk, or wander, outside in the public eye.¹⁴⁴ While a good wife was to lower her eyes and look nowhere but the ground while in the city, according to Cardinal Giovanni Dominici in a 1416 treatise, she was certainly allowed to look about freely in the countryside, where God’s creations abounded.¹⁴⁵ This particular exhortation for the licit female gaze may in fact have contributed to why spalliera panels with seascapes and idyllic forest settings became so popular. According to *On*

¹⁴³ Randolph 550.

¹⁴⁴ King 25.

¹⁴⁵ Giovanni Dominici, Regola del governo di cura familiare ed. D. Salvi (Florence, 1860) 46-47 as cited in King 24.

Marital Matters, a Latin treatise written by Francesco Barbaro at the same time Fra Dominici was publishing his, a woman was to carefully watch her husband's emotional state, so she might change her mood to mirror his, as was a commonly preferred characteristic of a good wife.¹⁴⁶ This indicates that a woman was also to turn her gaze inward and examine herself so as to exhibit the proper attitude as dictated by her husband's disposition. Francesco Barberino went so far as to adamantly state, "Abstain from looking at all - save him!" When these assertions regarding the regulation of the female gaze are taken into consideration with the shift to linear perspective in spalliera paintings which allowed for a more controlled viewing experience, the implications are significant.

Baxandall, when formulating his theory of the period eye, stresses the importance of perspective in the interpretation of paintings because this way of looking was ingrained in male viewers of the period.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, while husbands may have been very familiar with the perspective Alberti proposed as being the "correct" way to render pictures, its exclusive use in marriage furniture towards the end of the cassone's proliferation and into the trend of commissioning spalliera panels that followed indicates it also affected the female viewing experience. Whether there was an overt attempt made to focus the erratic gaze of the wife by converting to an exclusive use of linear perspective in nuptial furniture or whether it was simply playing to male taste cannot be definitively answered, but this is an important development and should be

¹⁴⁶ King 25.

¹⁴⁷ Baxandall 124-128.

kept in mind as the focus shifts to identifying the themes and subjects of cassone and spalliera panels.

It must also necessarily be kept in mind that often, cassoni were commissioned in pairs, yet many of these panels have not survived together, and seldom when they can be linked are they still intact. The same fate has befallen spalliera cycles, which are now scattered across the world in many public as well as private collections. This separation or loss of the complementary other may in some way affect the interpretation of the story and morals as the principle viewers would have understood them, but it is nevertheless important to attempt a feasible reading of the narratives.

A particularly interesting story from mythology that appears several times on extant spalliera panels is the Ovidian tale of the love between Venus and Mars. In Ovid's account, Venus has an affair with Mars, the famous war god, much to the dismay of her severely misshapen husband Vulcan. Determined to catch them in the act, the goldsmith fashions a nearly invisible net of gold in which the clandestine lovers unfortunately become trapped. Much to their chagrin, their imprisonment is made public and the calamity that befell them was spoken about with great relish by the other gods in the pantheon. This particular incident, however, is not the subject of these particular panels. A comparison of the differences with which this subject was rendered will perhaps elucidate a preoccupation with common moralizations, or perhaps, a difference in the way each was to be perceived.

In one version, painted by Sandro Botticelli in 1485, Venus and Mars recline in a forest clearing on either side of the panel, with legs stretched out and facing one

another (Fig. 5). The differences in mental acuity between the main subjects, however, is immediately apparent. The goddess reclines with one arm leaning on a pillow, alert and watchfully gazing towards her lover, while Mars has abandoned himself to a deep slumber. His left arm rests languidly on his armor while unbeknownst to him a small satyr child peeks playfully from the neck of his battle attire. Behind the lounging couple, two mischievous little satyrs attempt to remove Mars' sword while one blows a horn directly into the oblivious god's exposed ear, indicating to the viewer how far from consciousness this god really is. Juxtaposed with his nearly undressed state, Venus stands in stark contrast, with her dress covering her completely except for her hands and feet. This appearance of modesty belies the sensual act that seems to have occurred just moments before Mars fell asleep. The inclusion of satyrs in the painting alerts the viewer to this previous act of love, as these creatures often symbolized carnal love in Neo-platonic thought.¹⁴⁸

There are a few crucial differences in iconography between this panel and the one created by Piero di Cosimo just twenty years later (Fig. 6). While Venus and Mars are both still reclining in the same basic positions on either side of the panel with feet and legs pointing towards one another, Venus is now almost completely nude. A suggestively sheer fabric of gossamer that seems to accentuate rather than conceal her most private areas is draped carelessly around her body. She is still gazing in the direction of the sleeping Mars, but in her left arm is now nestled a little baby. The satyrs

¹⁴⁸ H. David Brumble, Classical Myths and Legends in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: A Dictionary of Allegorical Meanings (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press-Greenwood Publishing Group Inc., 1998)

have been replaced with small winged *putti* or cupids in the background, but their position has been moved to a greater distance behind the threesome. These cupids frolic around a large rock in the idyllic clearing behind the trio, playing with the armor of Mars, just as in the earlier panel. A significant addition to this scene is a white hare, carefully placed next to the baby and mother, while two doves touching beaks sit at the goddess' feet.

The meanings and morals the viewing couple would have absorbed from these paintings function on multiple levels. One theme that can be derived from this subject is informed by the Neo-Platonist notion that love, when placed in opposition with dissonance, overcomes strife and discord. The removal of Mars' battle armor, and its transformation into play-things for spirited satyrs and cupids serves to exemplify his vulnerable state. Venus' steady gaze juxtaposed with Mars' state of oblivion also indicates that she is in the position of power, actively looking while he is reduced to being the object of her gaze. An amorous embrace, according to this reading, was the only means by which this god could overcome his natural instinct to spread strife and conflict wherever he went.¹⁴⁹ In the version of the fable depicted on these panels, the coupling of Mars and Venus produced the child Harmonia, who may be pictured in the panel painted by Cosimo, nestled in the goddess' arm.

On another level, this subject, especially in the version painted by Cosimo, functions to reinforce the ideal end result of copulation, which is conception. A wife and husband would both be able to benefit from such a message because the marriage

¹⁴⁹ Brumble 207.

debt was commonly thought to be shared equally between the two. The manner in which both sets of figures are reclined in each panel is strongly reminiscent of the positions the scantily-clad individuals painted on the underside of the cassone lids are in, however, the later panel displays Venus in a more advanced state of undress, reflecting more directly the nudes in cassoni. It is possible to make the assumption that this similarity is not simply coincidental, and if this is the case, then the function of the libidinous nudes in the cassoni, to encourage conjugal relations for the purpose of procreation, has been transferred from a covert position on the underside of the cassone lid to a more visible location within the fifteenth-century bedroom. Another clue that leads to this reading of the imagery is the rabbit that sits next to the baby and the doves that appear to be kissing at Venus's feet. Rabbits were known in the Renaissance to be symbols of fertility, a belief that was most likely based on Aristotle's observation that a rabbit bears "numerous offspring...and it is abundant in semen. This is shown by its hairiness. It has an excessive amount of hair; indeed, it has hair under the feet and inside the jaws, and is the only animal which does so...and for this same reason, too, men that are hairy are more prone to sexual intercourse and have more semen than men that are smooth."¹⁵⁰ The rabbit, coupled with the doves that were symbols of chastity and incidentally mate for life, point to the fact that on this level, the interpretation of both husband and wife, when gazing at this panel, would necessarily have had to do with their duty to continue the patrilineage.

¹⁵⁰ Aristotle, Generation of Animals. Trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge: Loeb, 1942) 774a.30b.5 qtd. In Brumble 343.

Doubtless in this instance, the cupids in the background would act as encouragement for the couple to concentrate on producing a male heir, but the small child in Venus' arms should now be thought of as a baby boy, in contrast to the earlier reading labeling it as Harmonia, a little girl. The ambiguity of the baby's sex, fairly uncommon in domestic paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, thus works to facilitate both interpretations of the painting. Cosimo's panel also has a rather phallic rock formation placed in its background, around which the *putti* are cavorting. This does not seem to be coincidental when taking into consideration the very real emphasis this painting places on fertility and procreation. It is quite possible, given both the visual evidence and what is known about the power and potency images were thought to possess in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century, that this panel was placed within gazing distance from the bed, and meant to act as motivation for copulation.

Perhaps the main difference between the earlier panel and that of the one painted by Cosimo twenty years later is that Botticelli's panel is more subtle in how the action is presented to the viewer. Venus is more fully-clothed than in the later version, and the love-making that occurred moments before the scene depicted on the panel is alluded to by the satyrs, who symbolized carnal love. Cosimo's panel is more blatantly suggestive of the physical relationship between Venus and Mars, with the goddess revealing much more of herself as well as holding a baby, which would have served to remind viewers, both male and female, of their duty to procreate. In both panels, Mars is shown in a vulnerable state, while Venus gazes about her freely and powerfully. A wife viewing this scene must have felt bolstered upon seeing such an image of role-

reversal between the genders, where the female gaze is clearly dominating the male gaze. The baby notably points towards the sleeping Mars, almost as if to direct the viewer to the sleeping spectacle the god has made of himself. Clearly these spalliere are functioning on two levels, humanistic and domestic, which neatly ties into the idea held by Mirandola and other humanists that mythology and ancient texts hid their true meaning under “enigmatic veils and poetic dissimulation” to be discovered by the viewer.¹⁵¹

Jacopo Tintoretto’s *Apollo and Diana Killing the Children of Niobe* is yet another interesting spalliera panel that certainly seems to have had moral significance for the husband and wife who owned it (Fig. 7). This rather gruesome tale exploring the consequences of hubris can be found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and was available to fifteenth-century audiences via moralized editions of this text. According to Ovid, Niobe bore the King of Thebes seven boys and seven girls, whose beauty and bravery she often extolled and boasted of to anyone who would listen. The fatal flaw occurred when she grew so prideful that she dared compare her fourteen children to Latona’s mere two. Latona then called upon her powerful set of twins, Apollo and Diana, to teach Niobe a lesson in humility. The punishment levied upon Niobe, watching the death of all of her children at the hands of the vengeful twin deities she had dared to compare them with, was so horrible that she was said to have been reduced to tears for the rest of her life.

¹⁵¹ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Commento sopra una cazione d’amore composta da Girolamo Benivieni, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence, 1942) 580; qtd. in Edgar Wind 24.

Tintoretto's painting depicts the moment when the two avenging gods shoot arrows into five of Latona's terrified children as they desperately attempt to flee. One moral the viewer, whether they be male or female, would inevitably have contemplated while gazing at this panel was that learning to temper pride with a good measure of humility was necessary for a virtuous and fruitful life. Meditating on the consequences of a prideful nature which might easily be cultivated within the minds of people belonging to their social class due to their wealth and lineage would be a lesson for both husband and wife to keep in mind. The fact that the transgressor in the myth is a woman, however, would most likely have had further implications for the female viewer. As was previously established, sumptuary laws had been put in place to guard against the rising cost of marriage as well as to protect against the show of luxury, which the clergy felt could lead to pride and moral degradation. The young brides were considered to be the main impetus for the large sum of money spent on marriage festivities, in part because of the sizable counter-dowry of rich clothing the groom was expected to provide; therefore this theme within the painting might also serve as a warning to the young wife against the practice of collecting expensive clothing and makeup for fear it might cause her to assume a prideful nature, which in turn, would lead to neglect of other virtues.

Another message, perhaps the most powerful one based upon what has already been established about the importance of having children, concerns the posterity of a married couple. The ultimate goal of marriage and expected part of a wife's duty to her husband was to continue the patriline. Niobe's punishment surely struck fear into the

hearts of those who wished to create a family, especially if they had read the story for themselves. Taunting Latona's lack of numerous offspring and going so far as to accuse her of being barren, Niobe says:

There she had twins, while I've had seven times
As much as she. Of course I'm very happy
(Can you doubt that?). I am too rich in making
Boys and girls, too rich for Fortune to outwit
Me now: if she takes many, I have more;
If I lose several of the brood I made
I won't be robbed or left with two poor infants
Which were Latona harvest - all she had
To keep herself from total barrenness.¹⁵²

The ability to produce children was bound up with both gender expectations and social prescriptions, so the inability to do so would have been an extremely difficult condition for either husband or wife to come to terms with. Niobe, therefore, is extremely blasphemous when she flagrantly accuses Latona of being almost barren. While the birth of children was always a joyous occasion, especially if the baby was male, the inherent dangers surrounding child birth were also always kept in mind. It is possible that viewing the death of Niobe's children on this panel prompted the couple to contemplate the virtue of humility necessary so that they might be granted fertility and safe births.¹⁵³ Interestingly, the morals that can be drawn from this panel seem to address the interests of both female and male spectators; however, because the artist chose to portray a woman's downfall rather than that of a man, it is perhaps an

¹⁵² Ovid, The Metamorphoses Trans. Horace Gregory (New York: New American Library-Penguin Group, 2001) 168.

¹⁵³ Musacchio, Imaginative Conceptions 59.

indication of the prevailing notion that wives were most likely to employ faulty judgment in the matter of pride.

A panel by Piero di Cosimo thought to depict the story of a nymph, Procris, who meets an untimely death at the hands of her husband has some interesting implications for a female viewer (Fig. 8). The Ovidian version of the story is narrated by Cephalus, her husband, and is told with the deepest regret and sorrow. According to him, the love he and Procris shared was marred after he was kidnapped by Aurora, goddess of the dawn. Due to his intense longing for his true love and wife, Aurora unwillingly allowed him to return to her, but not before planting a seed of doubt within his soul, which nagged him to question the chastity of his wife throughout his long absence. Disguised as a stranger, he tempted Procris in order to see for himself whether she would remain true to her missing husband. Immediately sorry when she eventually gave in to his advances, he revealed himself as her husband and begged for her forgiveness. After a few happy years had passed for the couple, Procris was told that her husband was likely having a love affair with another woman, because he had been overheard saying, “Come to me Aura / [...], and press your lips against my heated breast; look how I burn.”¹⁵⁴ Wrestling with the implications these utterances held, Procris eventually let her jealousy get the better of her and followed her husband while he was hunting one morning. Cephalus heard a rustling in the trees and threw his magical javelin towards the disturbance. Too late, he realized he had inadvertently killed his wife, thinking her to be the prey he was hunting.

¹⁵⁴ Ovid 211.

In Cosimo's painting, Procris is lying on her side, with her head in a position that clearly indicates her lifelessness to the viewer, and displays wounds on her exposed throat, wrist, and hand. Bending over her partially nude body is a satyr, who brushes a tendril of hair from her forehead as he places one hand on her bare shoulder. A dog, presumably the one she had received from the goddess Diana herself, observes the scene while three more congregate closer to the water's edge, behind the action. That the painting focuses so completely on the tragic end to this marriage speaks volumes as to how a wife would have been expected to perceive the story, and what lesson she ought to take away from that viewing experience. Procris' fatal flaw was not that she reluctantly gave in to the numerous advances Cephalus, disguised as a stranger, made towards her, but that she had dared to question her husband's devotion to her. Interestingly, this ill-fated end was not in the cards for Cephalus, when he committed the same error in judgment after being released from Aurora's grasp, yet when his wife experienced this kind of doubt, she paid with her life. This appears to be an explicit warning to the wife, to trust wholeheartedly that her husband would remain true to their marriage vows, and not to question the matter. Barberino addresses this subject in his vernacular poem, "The Rules and Customs of the Lady", believing a wife should adamantly guard against letting her gaze fall on a man other than her spouse, yet if her husband happened to indulge in the sight of another woman, she should act as though she had not noticed and patiently wait for this moment of incontinence to pass.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Barberino, Reggimento e costumi di donna, 89 cited in King 23.

Additionally, the use of this particular myth also seems to be a lesson on the consequences of listening to and spreading gossip, for that was what compelled Procris to question her husband's devotion, ultimately leading to her demise. Ovid writes, "That teller of tall tales then went to Procris, / Reciting in a whisper what she'd heard."¹⁵⁶ Castiglione also touches on this matter in *The Courtier*, when the Magnifico is engaged in conjuring the perfect Court lady. He warns that, "[...] she should avoid an error into which I have seen many women fall, namely, eagerly talking and listening to someone speak evil of others." and later, "[...] those who go about continually prying into the love affairs of other women, relating them in such detail and with such pleasure, appear to be envious and anxious that everyone should know how the matter stands lest by mistake the same thing should be imputed to them."¹⁵⁷ When taking into consideration these sources, this spalliera panel is a clear proscription against mindless chatter and gossip between women, with the harshest of consequences exemplified in the female protagonist's untimely death. While it seems that this painted myth directly addresses the female viewer, it does have some important implications for the husband as well. Each instance he viewed this painting would have reaffirmed his role as husband in the marriage, namely that his virtue was inscrutable and while he had a duty to carefully examine and see to it that his wife be faithful, she did not have this same license when it came to the question of marital continence.

A relatively popular myth for cassone painting was the story of Cupid and Psyche, which was first told in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. At least two complete sets of

¹⁵⁶ Ovid 211.

cassone panels are known to exist in relatively good condition. The panels belonging to the Bode Museum in Berlin were thought to be commissioned for the wedding of Piero de' Medici and Lucrezia Tornabuoni in 1448 (Fig. 3). The first panel has nine scenes from this fable as well as nine figures of Psyche, while the continuation includes both eleven scenes and figures of Psyche. The narrative begins on the left side with the natal home of Psyche, who is standing on the balcony receiving the praises of her beauty given by the genuflecting men below. Her less beautiful sisters gaze jealously towards Psyche, whose beauty is so ravishing that the worshipers have all but abandoned the temple of Venus. The scenes that follow depict the most significant events in the story, including Psyche's fearful walk up the mountain to meet her new husband, the moment when Cupid flees after being awoken by his wife's furtive plan to identify the source of her happiness, and the endless search she embarks upon to find the husband she drove away with her curiosity and distrust. The last scene, ending on the right side of the second panel, joins them both in a public marriage ceremony attended by the gods. In the *Golden Ass*, Venus concedes to allowing Psyche to undertake strenuous tasks in the art of housewifery to regain her favor and win her husband's heart back. The young girl manages to complete the tasks with the help of a few deities who take pity on her, and eventually Cupid himself must save his beloved, with whom he now aches for a reunion.

The significance this story would have held for newly-weds was great as it also mirrors some of their most important wedding rituals. The first panel is set up spatially

¹⁵⁷ Castiglione 212-213.

to reflect the contemporary custom of leaving the natal home, depicted on the left of the panel, in order to reside in the nuptial home, on the right side of the panel. These two physical structures dominate the panels, demonstrating just how important this event was in the ritual process. Similarly, just as a fifteenth-century young bride would have proceeded to her new husband's home flanked by many family members and well-wishers, so is Psyche part of a procession that leads her to the mountain where she will soon be united with her new husband. This narrative has at least two moralizations; one directed towards the bride, and the second at the couple in general. The first moral, which would have been easily understood by female viewers familiar with the story, was quite simply that distrust of her husband and too much curiosity into his affairs leads to unhappiness. This particular theme is also present in the panel representing the death of Procris. In both instances, the wife's lack of judgment in questioning the motives of her husband leads to unusually difficult circumstances that could have been avoided had they simply obeyed and trusted their husband. In this particular story, Psyche is eventually reunited with Cupid, albeit after much undue stress, which is the extreme opposite of Procris' fate, who cannot regain what she has lost. It is quite revealing that the panel seems to completely leave out the tasks of housewifery Venus commanded her to do in order to regain her favor, again indicating that the main message that should be absorbed here is that a good wife does not question her husband. As is shown on the second panel, sadness and sorrow are one's only companions when curiosity or distrust is added to the picture. A young bride would also most likely take from a viewing of this subject the importance of obedience within marriage. While

Psyche gave in to the temptation to disobey or distrust her husband, she was also restored eventually and as such functioned as an example of virtuousness. Many marriages were arranged during the fifteenth-century and because of this custom, love did not play a large role in the engagements of couples. The story of Cupid and Psyche might therefore illustrate an idea gaining some popularity during this period that a marriage, while arranged, did not necessarily need to be devoid of love.

After analyzing these five panels, it appears that the weightiest moral to be taken from each story was directed to the female gaze. This is so not only when considering the particular myth used, but also what specific scene was chosen to be highlighted in each panel, as well as the fact that the action unfolding on the panel is usually catalyzed by a woman's decision. The husband seems to be indirectly addressed, however, and for the most part, one can conjecture that he would come away from viewing the panel having his role as husband, or the authoritative half of a marriage, unequivocally reaffirmed. That they were inscrutable and beyond reproach by their wives is a common thread that weaves its way through some of these subjects, especially when considering the panels depicting the death of Procris and the story of Cupid and Psyche.

The moral of these paintings also seems to rely on the utilization of negative images to reinforce virtuous behavior in wives. This trend is apparent in each of the panels discussed except for the two whose subject deals with Venus and Mars. For instance, although Niobe is not shown in the panel, both the male and female viewer would instantly recognize that the gruesome scene unfolding happened as a result of her

pride, which in turn negatively affected her husband, who lost his heirs because of his wife's error in judgment. Another example is the taxing quest Psyche had to embark on to find the husband she had lost through her own fault. While this one ended happily, the message seems to be that the path to her happiness would have been much smoother had she obeyed Cupid's original request to refrain from looking at him. Here, too, as in the panel with Procris, a warning against gossiping with other women is at issue. Psyche allowed her sisters to talk her into questioning her husband's motives, just as Procris was goaded into following her husband on his hunting escapade by a gossip, at her grave peril.

The panels depicting the story of Venus and Mars, however, placed women in the position of power by way of Venus' unwavering gaze in both versions. This visual representation of the female gaze stands in direct opposition to what many of the treatises had to say about where women were licensed to look. According to the authors of these tracts, the female gaze was to be harnessed at all times to look only at the ground, at her husband, within the privacy of the home, or in the countryside. Cosimo's painting perhaps demonstrates that while there was much literature circulating on the topic of ideal wifely behavior, the reality was often much different. Women may certainly have held more power within a marriage than usually assumed.

Themes reiterating the importance of having children were also present in two of the panels analyzed, including both Cosimo's painting of Venus and Mars, and Tintoretto's *Apollo and Diane Killing the Children of Niobe*. The latter made its point using negative examples, while the former gave a very positive and more direct

message to the viewers of the painting. Each of these panel paintings seem to have multiple *exempla* or morals for the viewer to contemplate, and judging from the panels analyzed here, these themes had much to do with reinforcing gender expectations and roles within marriage. They also prescribed desired behavior by displaying people, usually women, who had made bad choices. While each of these panels was addressed to a specific couple, it seems that the painted myths explored here were directed more towards reinforcing the negative behaviors often thought to be characteristic of women, in an attempt to avoid common pitfalls, while offering the male spectator a chance to reaffirm his role within the marriage.

After considering the gender expectations, class ideals, and social norms guiding fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italians in relation to paintings of myth on marriage furniture, there can certainly be some conclusions made about how the female gaze differed from that of the male counterpart. A wife's experience as a woman was considerably different from her husband's upbringing as a man. Each gender was expected to adhere to certain socially-prescribed standards of comportment, but even though the expectations that guided their thoughts and actions were different, there were priorities each shared in common. Many of these priorities were mirrored in the themes depicted on marriage furniture in their bedrooms, and included having children to continue the family line, being part of a solid marriage, and cultivating virtues befitting to their gender. These priorities ultimately affected the way they understood the painted narratives. Seemingly, while both husband and wife must have understood the implication of the images for their spouse, the contemplation of the virtue or moral

meant specifically for them would have been the most important to their viewing experience.

From the iconographical analysis of the panels in this paper, it is apparent that women were often forced to digest ominous warnings about what consequences straying from their socially-prescribed role in a marriage would befall them, while men were exempt from the harshest of messages. While the stories chosen for marriage furniture were not always solely about the negative traits of women, the particular scenes depicted on these panels did seem to dwell on the consequences of failing to cultivate virtues that should be common to the female gender. Although the story of Venus and Mars stands as an exception, the female gaze was subject to much regulation in this era, especially with regards to where it should be directed in public. Yet, even within the domestic sphere, women were subject to having their field of vision constrained, contained, and focused albeit through the romantic and idyllic vistas of mythology.

APPENDIX A

IMAGES

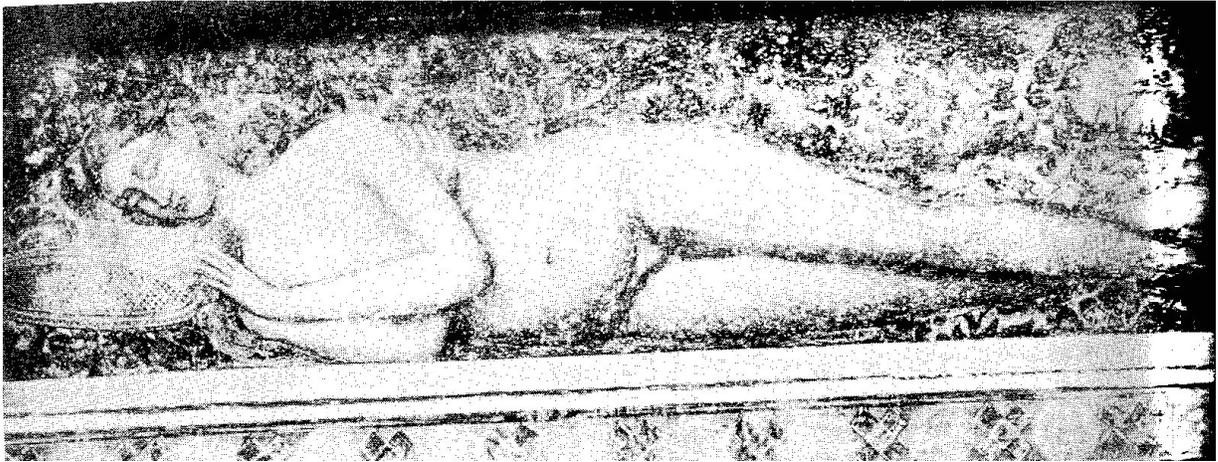


Fig. 1 Nude, inside panel of cassone lid, Paola Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity* 28.

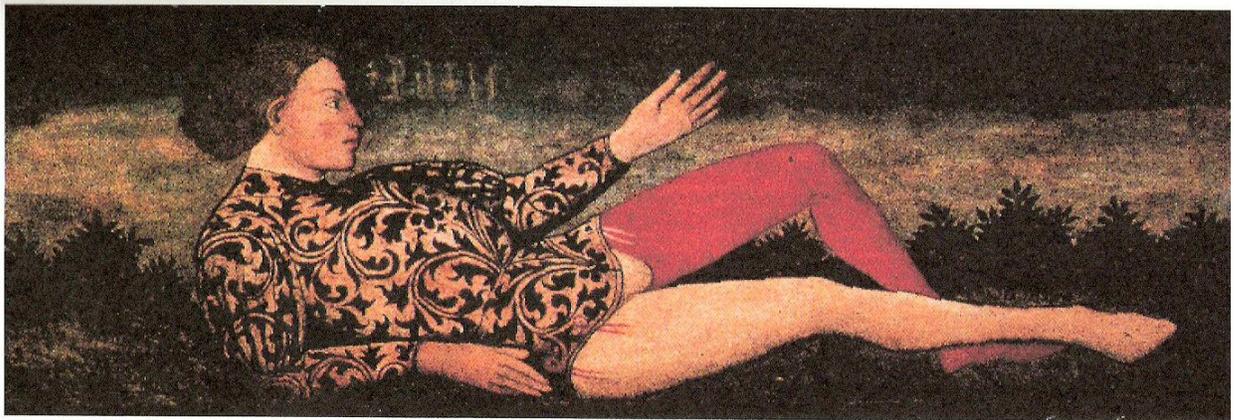


Fig. 2 Unknown Florentine Artist, *Paris*, 1470. inside panel of cassone lid, Ludovica Sebgondi, "What Young Men Wore in Fifteenth-Century Florence" *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society 1150-1650* ed. Konrad Eisenbichler 43.



Fig. 3 Close to Granacci, *Cupid and Psyche*, 40 x 30 cm. Berlin: Bode Museum



Fig. 4 Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, c. 1478-82. Tempera on panel, 203 X 314 cm. Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi.



Fig. 5 Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*, 1485. Tempera and Oil on Poplar, 69.2 x 173.4 cm. London: The National Gallery.



Fig. 6 Piero di Cosimo, *Venus, Mars, and Love*, 1505. 72 x 172 cm. Berlin: Bode Museum.



Fig. 7 Jacopo Tintoretto, *Apollo and Diane Killing the Children of Niobe*, c 1545-48. Oil on Panel, 22.9 x 67.6 cm. London: Courtauld Gallery.



Fig. 8 Piero di Cosimo, *A Satyr Mourning Over a Nymph*, 1495. Oil on Poplar, 65.4 x 184.2 cm. London: The National Gallery

APPENDIX B

TABLES OF THEMES

Table 1.1 represents how the subjects found on 345 panels break down numerically and percentage-wise according to these categories: Classical Myth; Roman Myth and Classical History; Biblical and Saints; Renaissance and Medieval Literature; Triumphs, Virtues and Liberal Arts; and Various Other Subjects.¹⁵⁸ Tables 1.2-1.7 break down these categories into the subjects which comprise them, stating the particular character affiliated with the story and upon how many panels they appear. Subjects are listed first in order of frequency, and then alphabetically.

Table 1.1 Categorical Breakdown of Panels

Categories	Total Number of Panels in Category	Percent of 345 Total Panels Included in Study
Classical Myth	121	35%
Roman Myth and Classical History	95	28%
Biblical and Saints	56	16%
Triumphs, Virtues and Liberal Arts	36	10%
Various Other Subjects	21	6%
Renaissance and Medieval Literature	17	5%

¹⁵⁸ Panels were taken from various sources, including Paul Schubring's *Truhen und Truhenbilder der italienischen Frührenaissance: Ein Beitrag zur Profamalerei im Quattrocento*, Graham Hughes' *Renaissance Cassoni: Masterpieces of Early Italian Art: Painted Marriage Chests 1400-1550*, and Anne B. Barriault's *Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany: Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes*.

Table 1.2 Classical Myth

Stories	Number of Panels		Stories	Number of Panels
Scenes from the Odyssey	14		Callisto and Antiope	1
Judgment of Paris	8		Daphne	1
Argonauts	6		Death of Procris	1
Orpheus and Eurydice	6		Deucalion and Pyrrha	1
Apollo and Daphne	5		Erisychthon	1
Atalanta	5		Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite	1
Bacchus and Ariadne	4		Hippodameia	1
Cupid and Psyche	4		Jason and Hypsipyle	1
Rape of Helen	4		Judgment of Midas	1
Antiochus and Stratonice	3		Juno, Menelaus, Athena	1
Briseis	3		Lapiths and Centaurs	1
Jason	3		Minos	1
Apollo and Music	2		Minos and Daedalus	1
Diana and Actaeon	2		Minos and Pasiphae	1
Hercules	2		Myrrha and Adonis	1
Io	2		Myrrha and Kinyras	1
Jason and Medea	2		Paris, Helen, Venus	1
Leda	2		Philemon and Baucis	1
Mars and Venus	2		Pyramus and Thisbe	1
Narcissus	2		Satyr Family	1
Perseus and Andromeda	2		The Three Fates, Chronos, and Love	1
Phaeton	2		Theseus and Ariadne	1
Prometheus	2		Venus	1
Rape of Europa	2		Venus and Cupid	1
Wedding of Thetis and Peleus	2		Wooden Trojan Horse	1
Achilles	1		Zeus	1
Achilles and Hector	1			

Table 1.3 Roman Myth and Classical History

Stories	Number of Panels		Stories	Number of Panels
Lucretia	9		Saladin and Torello I	2
Aeneas	8		Titus and Vespasian	2
Scipio	8		Alexander	1
Rape of the Sabines	7		Assassination of Jacopo del Cassero	1
The War of the Romans and Gauls	5		The Battle at Tesus	1
Battle Scenes	4		Caesar	1
Trajan	4		The Conquest of Pisa	1
Aemilius Paulus	3		The Conquest of Salernos	1
Cato	3		Darius	1
Duilius, Bilia and Tuccia	3		Death of Brutus	1
Mucius Scaevola	3		Death of Pompeii	1
Virginia	3		Dido	1
The Battle of Anghiari	2		Duilius and Bilia	1
The Battle at Zama	2		Hippodameia, Camilla, and Lucretia	1
Camilla	2		Maxentius	1
Darius and Alexander	2		Portia	1
Horatius Cocles	2		Scipio and the Wedding of Aluceius and Lucretia	1
Marcus Curtius	2		Story of Lucia	1
Romulus	2		Tuccia	1

Table 1.4 Biblical and Saints

Stories	Number of Panels		Stories	Number of Panels
Joseph	11		Mary	2
Solomon	8		Constantine on the Walls of Jerusalem	1
David	4		Daniel	1
Esther	4		David and Goliath	1
Susanna	4		Jephtha and His Daughter	1
Zenobius	4		Judith	1
Moses	3		Judith and Holofernes; Samson and Delilah; Solomon's Worship	1
Tobias	3		King David	1
Bernardine Preaches	2		Mardochai and Haman	1
George and the Dragon	2		Martyr of Sebastian	1

Table 1.5 Triumphs, Virtues, and Liberal Arts

Stories	Number of Panels		Stories	Number of Panels
Triumphs	28		Trivium and Quadrivium	2
Allegories	2		Intelligence and Strength	1
Seven Arts and Seven Virtues	2		Love and Chastity	1

Table 1.6 Various Other Subjects

Stories	Number of Panels		Stories	Number of Panels
Scene of Thebes	3		Friedrich III and Eleanor of Aragon	1
Knight Novel	2		The Horse Race	1
Perspective Pictures	2		Palio-fest	1
Scene of Musicians	2		Portraits of Famous Artists	1
Various Pairs of Lovers	2		San Giovanni Crisostomo	1
Wedding Scene	2		Unicorn and Lady	1
The Deer Hunt	1		Wedding of Leonora de Bardi and Filippo Buondelmonte	1

Table 1.7 Renaissance and Medieval Literature

Stories	Number of Panels		Stories	Number of Panels
Griselda	8		Alatiel	3
Nastagio	6			

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