

Assignment 1: Source Analysis – Wall paintings in the House of Jason

Wall paintings of mythological characters and scenes were extremely popular in Pompeii, the styles and topics found there are similar in both large villas and smaller houses and follow a general trend in Roman elite interiors.

The House of Jason (IX.5.18) was a modest sized sub-elite Roman home: Room 'E' is a cubiculum on the south-west corner of the house.¹ In Third Pompeian Style, the decoration is dated to around 10 C.E. during the Augustinian period, although the building itself is at least a century older. Some of the houses in Pompeii had pictorial themes that were linked or flowed from room to room but the pictures in room 'E' are quite distinct in that they occupy such a small room with a very strong red and black colour scheme and internal visual links, such as corresponding pairs of stone columns in each scene and repeating colours between the three frescos, that are not shared with other rooms in the house.² Each of the three pictures depicts the moments of decision before a 'crime' is committed. On wall 'a' directly facing the doorway is a panel 140 x 83 cm of Medea contemplating slaying her two sons, on wall 'b' to the left is a panel 115 x 83 cm of Phaedra, with the help of her nurse, planning an incestuous relationship with her stepson and on wall 'c' is a panel 115 x 87 cm of Paris and Helen with cupid: Helen thinking about leaving her husband for Paris while Paris abuses his host's hospitality by violating his marriage.³ These paintings, and many like them, were preserved by the Vesuvian eruption of AD 79 and removed after excavation to the Museo Nazionale Archaeologico in Naples, in 1879. It is greatly helpful that they were found in their

¹ Dunn and Dunn, 2020a

² Bergmann, 1996, pp. 201, 207-8

³ Ibid., p. 205

original setting informing us of how they would have been viewed by their original audience. There were many ancient plays that could have been sources for the depictions, but few have survived, so these influences are not available to help us understand the meanings more fully. However, Ovid's *Heroides* is likely to be an important influence: a book of fictitious love letters from mythological heroes and heroines, including Medea, Phaedra, Paris, and Helen, it was contemporaneous to the paintings and popular to a wide audience.⁴ However, unusual, and unexpected interpretations are possible as middle-class patrons were playful with mythological interpretations and personalised them to convey layers of meaning that could be political, local, or personal, as well as or rather than, being merely an aspirational imitation of elite sources.⁵

Readings of these wall paintings have emphasised the domestic setting and common theme of tragic love, with Paris playing an accompanying role as a seductress endangering Roman marital and domestic *concordia*.⁶ Bettina Bergmann identifies the central theme as 'the pregnant moment' when Medea, Phaedra, and Helen, as wives ruled by passion, contemplate the violent destruction of her home: expressing fears around female power over men and within the domestic arena.⁷ Paris as seductress functions for Bergmann in this narrative as an externalization of Helen's quandary.⁸ Furthermore, she identifies the association of all the paintings with Venus, the Roman patron goddess of Pompeii since 80 B. C., as a major role

⁴ Isbell, 2004, p. vii

⁵ Meyer, 2012 pp. 284, 302-3

⁶ Beard and Henderson, 2001, pp. 43-45

⁷ Bergmann, 1996, pp. 199-200

⁸ Ibid., p. 207

model for Roman women and considers that all three paintings could well have been read as romantic heroines who will go to any length for love.⁹

Margherita Carucci argues that the widespread use of Medea in provincial Roman houses shows how the Imperial culture of the Roman ruling elite was taken up to demonstrate a household's *Romanitas* at a time when the idealised Augustan Imperial family was increasingly visible as the primary exemplar of domestic *concordia* in statuary and on monuments such as the *Ara Pacis*.¹⁰ Carucci sees her also functioning as a vehicle to express male anxieties about the dangers of women and doubts concerning their own masculinity and ability to govern their domestic world, as exemplified by the inactive tutor.¹¹ Her concentration is on the representation of Medea, her reading of the Paris picture is given, in passing, as 'the story of Helen'.¹²

Mairead McAuley tells us that audiences of depictions of Phaedra would see them in the light of Augustan laws making marriage, and therefore sexual alliances, illegal and incestuous between step relations.¹³ These *noverca* were 'treacherous intruders' and excessively prone to a feminine loss of self-control: historians at the time used imperial mothers and stepmothers to criticize the principate.¹⁴

Caroline Vout, like Carucci, concentrates on Medea, highlighting the popularity of Medea's moment of contemplation in the Roman domestic setting and its imperial associations via

⁹ Ibid, pp. 211, 215

¹⁰ Carucci, 2010, pp. 56, 60

¹¹ Ibid., 62-63

¹² Ibid., p. 58

¹³ McAuley, 2012, p. 40

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 41

Timomachus of Byzantium, a painter whose depictions of Medea and Ajax were purchased at great expense by Julius Caesar and dedicated in the Temple of Venus Genetrix in Rome.¹⁵ This temple represented the Imperial claim to divine ancestry through Venus and dynastic expectations through Augustus and his descendents.¹⁶ Vout also points out that greater political relevance is appropriate to depictions of Medea with her children, as these could evoke impressions of Cupid, the *Primaporta Augustus* is attended by Cupid and two statues of his great grandson depict him as Cupid: one, again, in the Temple of Venus Genetrix and another in the *princeps* own *cubiculum*.¹⁷ So, the depiction of Medea in the House of Jason is ‘the starting point for interrogating the authority of an evolving Principate’.

The same figures of Paris, Helen, and Cupid, on wall ‘c’ of the House of Jason, are also on the wall of the larger and grander House of Gilded Cupids: so it is a stock image, although in the latter case it is on the wall of the *tablinum* and visible more publicly across the atrium from the front entrance.¹⁸ In the House of Jason, Paris is in a more private room that is accessed from the main reception room ‘f’ through an intermediate room ‘d’ and partially secreted on the least accessible wall.¹⁹ On entering one would recognize Medea first on the opposite wall, then Phaedra to the left, and would have to turn, once in the room, to see Paris and Helen. Paris’ seated position mirrors that of Medea and Phaedra so, as the third in a series one is primed to encounter another seated woman and at first glance this is how Paris appears, seated and in effeminate attire while Helen stands to one side.²⁰ The gender

¹⁵ Vout, 2012, p. 120

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132

¹⁸ Dunn and Dunn, 2020b

¹⁹ Bergmann, 1996, p. 201

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207

dysphoria creates a visual twist: Paris, not Helen, is the centre of attention here, the final flourish and the climax to the series. Although on the least accessible wall from the doorway, Paris' position on the east wall guarantees him the best lighting in the room from the window on the west wall, he would be the chief beneficiary of the afternoon and evening sunlight, something the patrons must have considered when positioning him there.

Most of the scholarship concentrates on the women in these paintings and emphasises the moment of decision before the act for Medea, Phaedra, and Helen. However, this emphasis does not work in a reading that recognises Paris' centrality in the third picture: it would have made more sense to show the Judgement of Paris here, depicting him as a shepherd, when he was deciding which goddess to choose. This was also a popular scene for wall paintings at the time. Paris had already made his decision by the time he gets to Helen and has come to claim his prize. In contrast with the closed body language and preoccupation of Medea and Phaedra, his pose is relaxed, and he looks out of the picture, confronting and engaging the viewer.

In the first two paintings Medea and Phaedra are staged in their pose, attire, and surroundings as stereotypical, female ideals of the respectable *matrona* whose *pudicentia* was expressed domestically by faithfulness to their husbands and care of their children and households.²¹ This seated pose was a commonplace for the freeborn, respectable, married Roman woman in statuary and paintings. They are pictured in the domestic arena, attended by servants: the paleness of their skin witnesses that most of their time is spent indoors. Their clothing and lack of adornment conveys their female 'honour, dignity and sexual modesty': a long gown with a *palla*, or mantle, over the top made from 'a large rectangle of cloth' which was worn

²¹ Langlands, 2006

wrapped around the body and could be pulled up over the head to be used as a veil.²² The fabrics they wear are appropriately colourful for their gender but plain; there is no frivolous ornamentation that could denote 'female intellectual weakness'.²³ However, Medea has a sword at the ready and Phaedra is taking a traditionally male courtship role so, although they outwardly conform to Roman elite gender expectations in appearance, both are behaving actively as potential penetrators and therefore in a way that would have been read as masculine to a contemporary audience.

According to the one sex model of the time, women were believed to be an inferior version of men, intellectually and morally as well as physically, being incompletely formed in the womb due to lack of heat, they were, therefore, unfit for civic life.²⁴ Maleness was active while the feminine was always passive.²⁵ The Roman ruling class assigned men to one of two groups: they were either active penetrators, free Roman citizen males, or passive penetrable slaves and foreigners, who were assigned to the female. Constant maintenance was required to avoid 'gender slippage' from male to female.²⁶ For the elite male, '*acting like a woman*' was associated with a feminine passive/penetrated body and thereby with a loss of the virtue that was only invested in the masculine.²⁷ The science of physiognomy, popular at the time, involved a belief that a man's true 'gender identity' and therefore the character traits

²² Olson, 2008, pp. 34, 36

²³ Ibid., pp. 11-13, 80-81

²⁴ Conway, 2008, pp. 17-18

²⁵ Parker, 1998, pp. 48-50

²⁶ Conway, 2008, p. 18

²⁷ Ibid., p. 22

associated with it, would be revealed outwardly by clothing and behaviour so a man dressing effeminately may be believed to be morally suspect.²⁸

A knee length tunic and toga, short sleeved and plain wool in sombre colours such as black, white, or grey would be the appropriate dress code for a dignified and morally upright Roman male citizen.²⁹ By present day standards Paris can be described here in Butlerian terms as having a ‘parodic identity’: by mimicry of the feminine he reveals the learned performative aspect of much gendered behaviour; but a Roman audience would have seen gendered characteristics as indicative of an essential inner disposition.³⁰ In painting three, he is garbed in a colourful, long tunic with sleeves to the wrists. A *chiridota tunica* such as this was associated with *cinaedi*: effeminate males who lacked self-control and enjoyed not only passive homoeroticism but also overindulgence in heteroerotics: the ‘well-groomed adulterer’, such as Paris, would also be considered to be in slavery to his sexual passion and lacking in self-mastery.³¹ Compared with Medea and Phaedra’s lack of adornment, Paris’ earrings and high slatted sandals further indicate a lust for ornamentation that was an aspect of feminine weakness.³² Also, his Eastern style of Phrygian cap and the association of his adornment and clothing with foreign *luxuria* generally. So, while Medea and Phaedra are presented as penetrators, Paris is classified as penetrated. He is showcased as the least masculine of the three, despite his darker skin tone. His outer demeanour and garb, together with his seductive behaviour, classifies him as female: morally weak and passive, and unfit for civic life.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 18-19

²⁹ Olson, 2008, pp. 13-14; 2014, p. 186

³⁰ Butler, 2006, p. 187

³¹ Olson, 2014, p. 185, 192-193, 196-7

³² Olson, 2008, p. 84-85; Conway, 2008, p. 33

Previous scholarship has associated Medea and Cupid with the Principate and this can be extended to a political reading of Paris as an Augustus. Cupid appears in the third painting indicating toward Paris, his size and position mirroring that of Medea's youngest son in the painting to the right, that to Vout evokes Augustan dynastic projection.³³ Gender slurs that suggested effeminacy and *cinaedus* status had been used politically against Octavian in the past and there is an example recorded where a double entendre in a theatre play that casts the ruler of the world as a *cinnaedus* is read as concerning Octavian by the audience.³⁴ In Ovid's *Heroides*, one of the likely sources for these pictures, Paris in his letter to Helen reminds her of the union of the Phrygian Anchises with Venus, that results in the Julian line.³⁵ Pompeii had fought with the Italians against Rome in the Italic War 91-87 BC, as Rome's allies they had wanted full Roman citizenship but were refused.³⁶ Pompeii was conquered and subsequently colonized by Roman veteran soldiers: positions of political power were filled by veterans for the next twenty years or so leaving Pompeiians largely disenfranchised.³⁷ Their Oscan language was replaced by Latin and existing cults with Venus, now the guardian of Pompeii as well as a favourite of Augustus, while new Imperial buildings, in the Roman style, started to take over the landscape.³⁸ Tensions and resentments seem likely: there may have been many years of disagreement between colonists and colonized.³⁹ To subversively cast the *princeps* Augustus, who was the primary example of Roman hegemony, as abnormal and effeminate and unfit for civic life would be a way of

³³ Vout, 2012, p. 132

³⁴ Conway, 2008, pp.40-41

³⁵ Ov. *Her.* XVI

³⁶ Leonard and Lobell, 2019, p. 28

³⁷ Cooley and Cooley, 2004, p.17

³⁸ Ibid., p. 19; Leonard and Lobell, 2019, pp. 28-30

³⁹ Cic. *Sull.* 60-62

subversively expressing a political allegiance that could not be safely asserted in a more overt way. That the paintings can only be seen by those invited to the inner sanctum is further evidence of their potentially dangerous message.

Another layer of meaning may be uncovered by considering how Paris, as a well-groomed ladies' man, may have appealed here to members of a middle-class audience who may associate him with elegance and refinement.⁴⁰ Pompeii was a cultural mix, people had settled there from different areas over the centuries, mostly Greeks, Etruscans and Samnites. It was also a thriving port.⁴¹ Before Roman colonisation the Greek East had greatly influenced Pompeian culture, many buildings, both public and private, were Hellenistic in style from late second century B.C. onwards.⁴² The Sanctuary of Dionysus was monumentalised around same time and used until the Vesuvian disaster, despite worship of Dionysus being forbidden by Roman senate since 186 B.C..⁴³ Most of the negative associations with the exotic East are from a Roman, proscriptive, elite viewpoint not necessarily shared in local communities or colonies, whose own traditional gender characteristics were socially valuable and a source of pride. A regional Roman gender model may have influenced but not have the last word in all local constructions of gender relations.⁴⁴ So, on the one hand there is an idealised, hegemonic Roman masculinity for Pompeian men to aspire to for civic social recognition but also possibly conflicting, local and traditional, middle-class gendered characteristics to be negotiated here.

⁴⁰ Olson, 2014, pp. 196-199,204

⁴¹ Leonard and Lobell, 2019, p. 28

⁴² Cooley and Cooley, 2004, pp. 5-6

⁴³ Ibid. p. 11

⁴⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, pp. 849-850

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