Master Narratives and the Wall Painting of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii

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From the god in the doorway who pulls aside his clothing to weigh his exposed penis against a bag of money on a set of scales, to the reception room scene of a stripped king being torn apart by his crazed female relatives (Figure 7), the paintings in the House of the Vettii have titillated tourists and intrigued scholars since they were first uncovered in Pompeii in the 1890s. What questions about ancient Italian society can we productively bring to bear on these images, and how should we formulate them?

Two studies from the 1990s point to some intriguing avenues of approach to these old walls. David Fredrick and Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow use feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey’s pioneering work on the male gaze in twentieth-century cinema, to reveal some of the work done by mythological paintings in Pompeii in encoding social hierarchies. In her 1975 formulation, Mulvey theorises how the patriarchal conditions of early Hollywood produced a cinematic language which was male. In particular, she applies psychoanalytic theory to film and the way it ‘structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking’ by highlighting two features of the gaze which please the male viewer by protecting him from symbolic ‘castration’, a loss of power or privilege. One of these features is embedded in the way images are presented visually: parts of the female body are focalised, exaggerated or beautified, which distracts the viewer from that body’s lack of a penis and the implied threat to the male viewer’s own. The second means is via narrative; Mulvey argues ‘the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification’ and so enjoys the active role of moving the story along. The arc of many of these male-driven stories also ultimately condemns those who are female, providing entertainment through either their punishment or forgiveness for their lack of a penis.

Although Mulvey specifically addresses film, particularly ‘illusionistic narrative film’ from mainstream Hollywood in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, scholars have applied her perspective to numerous other forms of imagery to understand how they encode patriarchy. Using film theory to understand mythological panels is particularly compelling because these still paintings allude to well-known stories. This type of art, thus, both focuses the viewer’s eye and presents a full story arc, much like film, particularly the way Mulvey approaches film. Moreover, as Katharina Lorenz has recently emphasised, images in houses tend to be juxtaposed within rooms in unique ways – that is, although the same scene from a myth might be repeated within a house...
or across different houses, only rarely do different rooms or houses combine a similar set of mythological scenes.\textsuperscript{6} In the way its paintings compositionally and thematically correspond and contrast, each room and each house thus tells its own story using both image and narrative. Finally, ancient Pompeii was a male-dominated society, and it is well worth considering how the paintings in houses inscribed local power structures and pleased patrons.

Fredrick and Koloski-Ostrow, the classical scholars who bring Mulvey’s cinematic perspectives to bear on ancient Italian painting, indeed bring forth important insights; however, both authors also come across imagery which contradicts Mulvey’s patterns. As Fredrick observes,

\[\text{T}hе\text{ erotic object is not only female in wall painting: it can be anatomically female or male, or both – Narcissus, Endymion and Hermaphroditus are all popular. Moreover, a significant number of the victims of sexual violence in the paintings are male (e.g., Actaeon and Hylas); their symbolic castration is also on display. What might these passive or feminized male forms contribute to the grammar of erotic bodies on Pompeian walls?}\textsuperscript{7}

Koloski-Ostrow comes to a strikingly similar question in analysing the paintings of the Casa del Menandro and Casa degli Amorini dorati using the same theoretical framework to understand what she rightly sees as the ‘strongly erotic and violent content of this mythological repertoire’.\textsuperscript{8} After using an image of Actaeon to explore the workings of Mulvey’s gaze, she observes that this male figure, physically torn apart by his own hunting dogs after catching sight of a bathing goddess, Diana, suffers the very ‘castration’ which Mulvey argues men fear and from which early- to mid-twentieth-century cinema provides pleasing avenues of escape.\textsuperscript{9}

My goal is to work on these questions posed by Fredrick and Koloski-Ostrow, to pick up again this conversation across epistemologies and to interrogate both bodies of knowledge – studies of ancient wall painting and psychoanalytically-based feminist film analysis. How do Pompeian wall paintings contradict the patterns articulated by Mulvey? What are some ancient sources of these contradictions? How do the ‘camera angle’, the internal gazers and the narrative presented in paintings position and please the viewer? What are some modern sources of these contradictions, that is, how have subsequent film theorists responded to Mulvey and what do they bring to the question of how ‘passive or feminized male forms contribute to the grammar of erotic bodies on Pompeian walls?\textsuperscript{10}

My answers will proceed along two vectors. In one, I point to the vast cultural and epistemological gap between twentieth-century Euro-American psychoanalytic theory and ancient Italian concepts and experiences of gender and sexuality. Mulvey, drawing upon Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, gives primary, perhaps even exclusive weight to the differences between male and female bodies. I will argue that it is productive to contrast this focus on gender with ancient Italian practices of slavery, in which what we conceive of as gender, if used in isolation, might have done a poor job of articulating relationships of power. A case study of the decoration of a house in Pompeii potentially owned by a former slave helps explore this contrast. In two paired receiving rooms of the House of the Vettii, the formal compositions of the paintings deliberately call our attention to possible comparisons and contrasts. The imagery resonates with Roman slave practices; paired scenes of corporal punishment and sexualised violence negate the difference between male and female and focus on other means of articulating status.

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hierarchies, particularly the dominion of gods over mortals. In several paintings the Vettii and the artists they commissioned combine stories from Greek mythology in unique ways to assert the status of the owners as masters. In this ancient Italian home – and I suggest in many others – a master gaze significantly inflects the male one.  

Although this first vector reclassifies some imagery in the context of ancient slavery as not gender inversion or instability, but as a pleasurable visual mastery over both male and female bodies, other paintings in the house do encourage the viewer’s identification with, rather than avoidance of, suffering. For example, these same rooms juxtapose a painting of a visually objectified princess, Ariadne, who later wins immortality, with an image of the male hero Hercules, who also became a god, shown as a child being attacked by snakes. The scenes again equate a male and female body, but now they are the protagonists, divinised at the end of the ‘film’, so they also encourage the viewer to identify with the suffering Ariadne and Hercules. In Mulvey’s terms, the viewer bears the burden of sexual objectification in these images, and ‘castration’ is not avoided. How should we understand the appeal of these images? What can they tell us about Pompeian society?

Scholarly reaction to Mulvey’s work in the field of film studies proves useful, particularly Carol Clover’s 1992 analysis of a different violent art, American and British horror films of the 1970s and 1980s. In Men, Women, and Chainsaws, Clover explores multiple examples of cross-gender viewer identification and the pleasures of pain. Clover also sees this phenomenon as able to be explained only partially via psychoanalytic theory because of a cultural distance: ‘many horror scenarios have a pre-Freudian and premodern cast’. In considering the popularity of violent, gender-bending films, however, Clover also draws attention to Mulvey’s blind spot on masochism, the pleasures viewers feel when they are scared or sympathise with characters in pain. Fredrick also points to the potential in analysing how some ancient paintings explore alternative, subordinate subject positions via mythological or fictional characters, although his explanations for this move tend to focus on the anxieties of elite Roman males. Given the broad popularity of such images in Pompeian homes, and their prominence in the case study house (which certainly was not owned by a member of the elite from the capital), I will deploy some of Clover’s conceptions of the ‘masochistic aesthetic’ to explore ‘that particular audience’s stake in that particular nightmare’. Again the crux of my answer will come from cultural particularities of ancient Italy, in which all boys were potential objects of the erotic gaze and thus experienced a period of objectification and subordination. In such a society, cross-gender identification and Freud’s ‘female masochism’ are surprisingly promising notions to consider.

In this paper, I will first present an overview of the House of the Vettii and its likely owners. Next I will explore in more depth how modern scholars have engaged with ancient Italian painting in studying social history, and in particular how gender has been used as a focal point in this analysis. Finally, we will walk through the House of the Vettii, analysing its surviving paintings using both techniques from film theory and information on ancient Italian culture, from slavery to sexual categories. My main goal is to demonstrate that in reading imagery from ancient Italy, gender cannot be viewed productively when separated from a master/slave dichotomy and from ancient Italian conceptions of sexuality, an argument made easier to perceive by looking for where a theory imported from another place and time slips in its explanatory power.
The Wall Painting of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii

Pompeii – a small to medium-sized town on the south-west coast of Italy – was famously buried during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. The House of the Vettii is located in what is now known as Region VI, a neighbourhood in the north-west corner of the walled part of town and to the north and east of the forum area (Figure 1).

This region has a concentration of large-sized homes leading into the forum, but otherwise contains what Andrew Wallace-Hadrill identifies as a characteristic mix of small to large houses and shops.16 Block 15 is on the northeastern end of the region, near the Vesuvian Gate; the House of the Vettii occupies the entire southern end of the block. The main entrance (into room a on Figure 2) is from the Vicolo dei Vettii into the main reception room or atrium, but a side service entrance from the Vicolo di Mercurio also exists (into room 2). The size of the ground floor of the house is approximately 1100m², placing it among the large houses in Pompeii.17

The house was discovered during excavations in the years 1894–95 and was carefully documented in publications by August Mau and later Antonio Sogliano.18 As a result, we know the arrangement of marble furniture in the garden, locations of pottery finds and the like. In addition, within a few years of excavation the roofing of much of the house was reconstructed, which contributed to the remarkable preservation of the in situ painted decoration, although the house has recently fallen into disrepair and has been closed to visitors.

Scholars such as Willem Peters, Arnold de Vos and Mariette de Vos concur that the house was extensively renovated between the earthquake of 62 CE and the destruction

Figure 1: Map of walled part of Pompeii (adapted from Alison E. Cooley and M. G. L. Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook* [London: Routledge, 2004], Figure 1.1, p. 6).
of the town by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. I shall be focusing upon this last ancient phase of the home’s history. Figure 2 shows the general layout in plan.

On the whole, the House of the Vettii is a large but not unusual atrium-style Italian house. Looking through the main doorway into a, the visitor would enjoy a framed and symmetrical sight-line through the entryway, atrium or front hallway (c) and colonnaded rear garden (m), even though the house itself is not symmetrical. For the most part, individual rooms open onto the front hall or rear garden, which were open to the sky and thus provided air and light to all rooms of the house. An astonishing number of the rooms opening onto these are richly decorated with wall paintings generally agreed to have been carried out by a single workshop as part of the renovations following the earthquake of 62 CE. Many large houses in Pompeii offered rooms decorated with expensive panels of mythological scenes; the House of the Vettii has six. The large garden was also richly ornamented with bronze and marble sculpture and fountains – as much luxurious display was packed into the space as possible.

Two small service areas are also evident (v–y and 1–4, shaded in Figure 2). The first consists of a set of rooms around a small central atrium (v) with stairs to the lost second floor and a small central pool to capture rainwater from a presumed opening in the roof. This section’s plain decor, inclusion of a kitchen (w) and architectural segregation from the rest of the house suggest this area was reserved for the labour of the servants of the household and was not meant to be visited by the public or invited guests. The second service area is also utilitarian. Although this section could be entered through a long, narrow corridor (room 3) from the main atrium of the house, it was also accessible from the street through the doorway into room 2. This entrance
was a gate large enough to allow the passage of draft animals, which were stabled in room 4. To the left of this entrance was a latrine (room 1). In the corridor to the atrium, remains are visible of a stairway to the second floor, but again none of the upper part of the house survives.

Evidence suggests the house may have been owned by former slaves, or freedmen. Scholars from de Vos and de Vos to John Clarke generally agree that Aulus Vettius Conviva and Aulus Vettius Restitutus were owners of the aptly named House of the Vettii. These names appear on two bronze seals found inside the front hall close to the remains of a large chest on the south wall; ‘A. Vetti Restitutus’, or ‘of Aulus Vettius Restitutus’ and the image of an amphora were engraved into one, ‘A. Vetti Convivaes [sic]’, or ‘of Aulus Vettius Conviva’ and a caduceus were carved into the other. A ring was also found with the initials AVC. Although Henrik Mouritsen casts reasonable doubt on the reliability of seal stamps in identifying the owner(s) of Pompeian homes, even he agrees that the ring and seals help confirm the identification of Conviva and Restitutus as owners in this particular instance. In addition, in a slogan painted onto the outer east wall of the house, Restitutus asks voters to support a certain Sabinus in his run for political office. Such programmata are well-known in Pompeii. Although scholars disagree on whether or not the supporter named in them must be the owner or intimate associate of the owner of the house whose facade is so painted, the seals, ring and programmata in this instance work together to show that Conviva and Restitutus were likely residents of the house and socially prominent.

Similar evidence points to the status of these men as freed. First, Vettius Conviva seems to be identified in another graffito on the southern facade of the house as an Augustalis, a type of priest. Fragments of a seal ring may also have had the abbreviation Aug following his name. Scholars such as Steven Ostrow and Andrik Abramenko have shown that this local priesthood was largely held by former slaves, and that this office would indicate Conviva possessed some wealth and standing in the community, since candidates for the sacred college donated costly gifts of public benefaction and were chosen by the town council. ‘Restitutus’ was commonly, if not exclusively, a slave name. When he was freed, the praenomen (first name) and nomen (family name) of his former master would have been added, and thus A. Vettius Restitutus was in all likelihood also a freedman.

A. Vettius Conviva appears as a witness in a famous preserved set of business tablets owned by one Q. Caecilius Iucundus. The tablets were buried in the earthquake of 62 CE; by this time, Conviva was a free man, since he is identified in them with the praenomen, nomen and cognomen characteristic of free males. Altogether the evidence is convincing that he was a freedman and an owner of this large house during its final phase. But who was A. Vettius Restitutus, and what was his relationship to Conviva? Scholars traditionally call the men ‘brothers’, which is possible but far from provable. Their shared praenomen and nomen indicate that they may have been owned by the same person and subsequently freed – any familial relationship they would have had is obscured by their freedman nomenclature, which privileges their relationship to their former master. They may have been brothers, or they may have been fellow slaves (colliberti), who, as Sandra Joshel has demonstrated, often formed economic and social partnerships, or they may have been father and son. Another alternative is that Restitutus was Conviva’s ex-slave – his name would be the same whether he was freed by Conviva himself or by Conviva’s former master. Given Conviva’s more
established status, I might suggest that he was an owner of the house, and that Restitutus was an important member of his household – a son, brother or freedman – to whom the property perhaps passed upon Conviva’s death. Two branches of the gens Vettia are known in Pompeii; both families produced several candidates for local offices in the early empire and thus could have had former slaves of the wealth and status of the owners of the House of the Vettii.  

What are the implications if this house was owned by former slaves? First, we will need to think about ancient Italian notions of slavery and the dynamics through which some slaves became free. Then I shall review how earlier scholars have seen freedmen in the decoration of the House of the Vettii. Finally, I articulate how I will interpret the imagery with their status in mind.

**Slavery and freedom**

Keith Bradley and Richard Saller, among others, have explored extensively what the jurist Gaius referred to as the ‘primary distinction in the law of persons’, demonstrating how slave was distinguished from free in terms of law, labour, discipline, religion and sexuality. Slave-owning Romans considered their slaves to be part of their *familia*. A legal family unit was defined as the eldest free male (*paterfamilias*) and those subject to his authority, including his free and legitimate children, his slaves and potentially his wife. Within a large urban household, slaves had specialised jobs organised into a social hierarchy. Work performed for the free members of the family would have included food storage, preparation and service, textile production and cleaning, house maintenance and childcare; depending upon the house, services might also entail work for the family shop or business, secretarial and accounting tasks, management, work as an artisan, valet or dresser, messenger, entertainer, tutor, guard and the like.

Legally, slaves were considered a particular type of property, and they were not allowed to own capital of their own. Even so, many owners allowed their slaves to keep a small private fund, from which some slaves eventually bought their freedom. Slaves had even less control over their human offspring than the products of their labour. The children of a slave woman had the same status as their mother; they were the property of her owner, liable to be exposed at birth or sold, lent, given or willed out of the household at his or her whim. Although slaves sometimes took spouses, these bonds created no legal ties between the couple or between slave fathers and children. In fact, all the slave’s familial relationships outside of that to the owner went formally unacknowledged in the broader community. Finally, as will be discussed in greater detail below, slaves had no control over their own bodies. The elite, male authors of our surviving literature assume that male and female slaves were available to their masters for sexual use, and they consider corporal punishment appropriate for slaves, but not for freeborn members of a household.

The transition out of slavery into freedom was predictably complex. Among slaves with specialised and marketable skills, manumission was not uncommon; slaves either saved the money to purchase themselves or were freed by their owner in a will or for varied purposes during the owner’s lifetime. Within the Roman legal system, someone freed by a citizen became a citizen. Freedmen were thereby able to marry and produce legitimate children, make contracts and wills, vote, take legal action and own property. As has been recently and carefully documented by Mouritsen, two
factors continued to shape the lives of a freedman or freedwoman throughout their lives, however: stigmas attached to having been a slave and continuing obligations to one’s former owner. Patrons retained a claim on their former slave’s labour, estate, public obedience and sexual services. Formal restrictions on the activities of freedmen seem to stem from their onetime lack of bodily integrity: ex-slaves were forbidden from joining the Roman military and holding most political and religious offices. An important exception was two cults created by the first emperor Augustus, including the priesthood of the Augustales which we have noted A. Vettius Conviva held. Many freedmen also invested energies in the success of their legitimate children, since once adults they would have the opportunities of the freeborn open to them.

The House of the Vettii in scholarship

Previous scholars have approached the House of the Vettii and other art commissioned by freedmen with the status of ex-slaves in mind. Lauren Hackworth Petersen has argued well, however, that they tend to draw heavily on impressions of the concerns and predicaments of wealthy freedmen gleaned from the way they are mocked for comic effect by elite writers such as Juvenal, Martial and Petronius. For example, Petronius composed a fictional banquet given by an ex-slave Trimalchio in which he depicts the host as overly material and crass, lacking sophistication and education in myth or history. The fictional freedman also makes critical social errors in the way he presents his own masculinity and sexual history, and he fails to distinguish himself from and control his slaves, among many other faults. Although some of these echo aspects of the transition from slavery to freedom which I have outlined, Petersen rightly emphasises the irresponsibility of using this stereotyped caricature as evidence for the concerns and interests of real people of a different class from the powerful elite author. We must remember that the freed were part of a subculture largely lost to us but in which, as Joshel and Petersen have shown, labour was a source of pride and identity, rather than shame, as it was among the elite.

In characterising the House of the Vettii, some scholars have succumbed to this tendency to draw on literary caricatures of freedmen, a tendency Petersen calls ‘Trimalchio vision’. Petronius presents his character as wildly overcompensating in behaviour and material display for the education and refinement which he lacks. The decoration of the House of the Vettii has similarly been called ‘overburdened’ and ‘outlandish’. Special emphasis in this type of reading is placed on the painting of Priapus in the doorway, weighing his mighty member on a set of scales, an image echoed in a marble statue of Priapus found elsewhere in the house. Clarke emphasises that this god was associated with fertility and averting the evil eye through laughter, but it is difficult not to see these aggressively male images as overcompensation. Economic historian Michael Rostovtzeff also reads the famous painted frieze, in room q, of miniature Cupids and Psyches busy at a wide range of labours as biographical information about how the Vettii earned their wealth.

A theoretical apparatus imported from outside the field of classics is one way to evade Trimalchio vision. Mulvey’s work from 1975 provides tools for decoding an image’s expression of power relations. These methods are both visual – in terms of costuming, body position, focalisation, the way characters view others inside the frame and how that encourages an external viewer to look – and narrative – in terms of who
acts, who is acted upon and who is punished. This is the draw of Mulvey’s approach, even though her ideas have been challenged on many fronts, including her own critique in subsequent work.56

In addition to such theoretical tools, another tack I intend to take is to consider persistently whether or not it matters if the owners of the house were freeborn or freed. A significant body of recent scholarship, including the work of Maud Gleason, Erik Gunderson, Anthony Corbeill and Amy Richlin, has analysed the literary production and artistic commissions of elite Roman men for the ways they define and defend their privileged status as men or attack the legitimacy of rivals based on questionable masculinity.57 Freedmen and other men had just as much, if not more motivation to assert their status as men and masters for themselves, for their peers, for their fellow citizens and for their own slaves and ex-slaves. In the end, the fact that this house may have been owned by former slaves only serves as a useful prompt to consider the question whether or not gender alone encodes social hierarchies in its mythological paintings.

I hope to demonstrate that considering the stories told by the images of this house from a freed rather than a freeborn male’s point of view – or just from a master’s rather than a male’s point of view – reveals much, regardless of the owner’s actual status. As we have seen, Pompeian households had a slave/free dynamic as much as a male/female one, and behaviours, institutions, ideas and objects helped hold both hierarchies in place. Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan note in the introduction to their 1998 book, Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture, that ‘material culture had a role in structuring the relations of men and women, masters and slaves, and functioned to uphold citizen discourses of gender and social status’.58 How material culture structured both social hierarchies at the same time, however, has been underexplored: ‘scholars of antiquity overlook gender when talking about status or overlook status when talking about gender’.59 Thinking about the transition from an objectified slave to an objectifying master can help us unsettle more broadly our notion of what it meant to be male in this slave-owning society and to consider its effects on the potential of psychoanalytic interpretation.

Houses, painting, myth and gender

Scholars such as Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Eleanor Windsor Leach, Katharina Lorenz, John Clarke and Shelley Hales have studied broadly the work done by the wall painting of ancient Italian houses to create and project the identity of the owner, their role in the home and in the wider community.60 The mythological panel has provided particularly rich fodder for analysis. Wallace-Hadrill defines it as ‘a formally constructed scene, in a Hellenizing idiom, of a subject from Greek mythology’.61 Particularly prevalent in later styles of Pompeian wall painting, such scenes are usually set into privileged sections in the centre of a decorated wall, rather like a framed painting in a modern home, but here painted into a fresco which covers the entire wall (Figure 7).62

Daniela Corlăita Scagliarini, John Clarke and others have argued that such paintings tend to be absent from spaces through which people moved, where the decoration was not designed to encourage lingering study or promote conversation.63 As we have briefly seen, in terms of basic architectural structure, large Italian houses of the early imperial period consisted of two primary features, the main hall or atrium and a colonnaded garden, often but not always aligned on a central access and with smaller
rooms opening off from each. In homes decorated with wall painting, mythological scenes tend to be presented in the reception rooms, including rooms designed for the dinner party. Such paintings are usually elaborate and engaging, calling for explanation and thus prompting conversation, as is evinced not just by the decoration of such rooms across Pompeii and beyond, but in some literary accounts analysing similar mythological art. The mythological panels of a home displayed the owner as Hellenised, cultured, wealthy and urbane; as we shall now investigate further, they have also been read as a complex discourse about relationships of power.

In a compelling example, Fredrick uses the work of Mulvey to analyse Pompeian paintings of the mythical figure, Ariadne. This princess helped the hero Theseus escape the labyrinth on Crete, only to be abandoned by him on a different island; she was later discovered there by her future husband, the god Dionysus. The three extremely common scenes of Ariadne’s abandonment by Theseus while she sleeps, of her realisation of her abandonment upon awakening and of the discovery of her by Dionysus while she again sleeps make her ‘the single most popular individual subject in Pompeii’. Ariadne’s storyline fits Mulvey’s concept of sadistic voyeurism well. In Fredrick’s words:

The paintings voyeuristically insist on sexual difference in the absolute division of mobility and power between Ariadne on the one hand and Theseus and Dionysus on the other. Theseus’s departure and Dionysus’s arrival are sadistic in Mulvey’s terms in that they emphasise the movement of the narrative around the static figure of Ariadne, whose fate is determined by the males: punishment by exposure on a desolate island, or the ‘reward’ of union with Dionysus, a ‘marriage’ which Ovid, in Ars Amatoria 1.527–64, presents as a rape.

In turn, the panel on the south wall of room p in the House of the Vettii provides an excellent illustration of Mulvey’s ‘fetishistic scopophilia’ in the paintings of Ariadne (Figure 3). A satyr lifts clothing off the reclining Ariadne so that the approaching Dionysus can gaze at the front of her naked body. We as viewers are guided by his example to view her erotically, as well as by the way her drapery falls to reveal to us her bare backside. Fredrick provides critical insight in finding an expression of power tied up with the pleasure and privilege of looking, and he identifies as a major theme of images throughout this house the concealing or revealing of bodies using drapery, veils or disguises.

What then catches Fredrick’s attention, however, are the many scenes also popular in Pompeian homes in which male bodies are exposed to the viewer or punished by the storyline. Examples include Actaeon and his hunting dogs, described above; Hylas, the young lover of Hercules pulled to his watery destruction by a lust-filled nymph and Endymion, the mortal youth loved by the moon goddess Selene and usually depicted reclining nude beneath the night sky. Fredrick interprets these scenes as ‘men playing the feminine’ and relates them to similar examples found in elite literature in the capital, such as in elegy and satire. Maria Wyke, Marilyn Skinner and others have explained those inversions as expressions of political alienation and a loss of power among elite men in Rome as they adapted to life under autocratic rule. Fredrick also usefully explores the cultural associations of the Roman banquet as a source for these ‘gender inversions.’ He argues that anxieties arose in elite males over the vulnerabilities they perceived to be inherent in the banquet – a time and space when the body became susceptible to, even penetrable by, various pleasures, including food, drink and sex.
Both of these phenomena may help explain how and why such images became a feature of pattern books, or at least common in the repertoire of images from which patrons chose. Trends may have originated in Rome, and as Wallace-Hadrill and Clarke suggest, among the owner’s motivations in selecting art in this house was to display the luxury characteristic of the upper classes. But alienation due to the increasing concentration of political power into fewer and fewer hands at the top level in Rome would have held little meaning in Pompeii. And even if ‘mythological paintings . . . articulated . . . a space where Romans could contemplate – and insert themselves into – scenes of erotic fascination, passivity, bodily dissolution and mutilation’, into which roles did home owners insert themselves?

I put forward two approaches to these fundamental questions. For some of the images which seem to invert gender hierarchy and which certainly do not provide escape from ‘castration’ for the male viewer, I suggest that by focusing on gender we are misunderstanding the viewer and the nature of his pleasure. Koloski-Ostrow points toward this viewer:
As a spectator of these scenes, the viewer sees not just anatomical differences between men and women, but social difference as well. The men (or gods) who control the women or men of suffering possess more than the penis. They wield the phallus, the ultimate symbol of the male Roman social order. The house owners who commissioned such scenes for their own domestic stages thereby created a painted script with subtle, and not so subtle, messages of control easily legible to visitors and members of their own households. Such mythological images strongly suggest that an inherent ‘language of power’ is painted symbolically in these houses, mainly for the pleasure of male viewers presumably, which emphasises anew the authority of the dominus. Distinctive gender differences are depicted in a visual ‘language of power’ for the pleasure and use of the dominus in these houses.

I propose that we take Koloski-Ostrow’s cue further and focus more on the viewer’s status as a dominus, or master, and less on his maleness. Gender can be extremely useful in signifying, and therefore studying, relationships of power, many of which have little or nothing to do with the relationship between actual men and women, as Joan Scott so well articulated in 1986. But if gender is culturally constructed, it is constructed differently by each culture, and similarly the degree to which gender is used to signify other relationships of power has the potential to vary over time and space, as well. Mulvey’s 1975 spin on European psychoanalytic theory, with its notions of castration and the phallus, insists on the primacy of gender, and on a gender which is closely tied to anatomical sex. Our use of these terms can obscure cultural difference, and an exclusive focus on gender can cause status categories not particularly active or resonant for us, such as slave and master, to fade from our view. In the case study, we shall see that some images which torture and eroticise male bodies should not be read as gender inversions, but as ancient Italian expressions of the privilege of a master to enjoy female and male bodies.

In turn, some of the paintings in both narrative and visual focus do encourage the viewer to sympathise with a suffering body. These images imply that escape from ‘castration’ is not the only interest of the male viewer, which challenges Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze in a different way. As noted above, Fredrick pursues intriguing reasons for at least elite men to have desired temporarily to explore subordinate subject positions. I will expand the conversation by using reactions to Mulvey among feminist film theorists, particularly the work of Clover, who in analysing twentieth-century British and American horror film finds similarly problematic gender slippage and visual pleasure from pain.

**Case study: ancient slavery, sexuality and the House of the Vettii**

Among the rooms of the House of the Vettii endowed with mythological paintings, two apparently paired receiving rooms opening into the east wall of the rear garden will command most of our attention. The northern of the two (p) has walls elaborately painted as an imitation picture gallery (Figure 4). Faux marbles in the lower zone support an intricate theatrical facade in the middle and upper registers. In the centre of all three walls, imitation masterpiece paintings are set into a dark red background. To the longer walls, the north and south, are added images of white faux tapestries to either side of the myth scenes. On the north wall, the mythological panel features Pasiphae, wife of Minos, the king of Crete, who was punished by the gods with lust for a bull (Figure 5). The famed Athenian craftsman Daedalus, visible in the foreground with his back to the viewer, points to the wooden cow he has constructed for her to conceal
herself and consummate her desire. The Minotaur who lived within the labyrinth (later defeated by Theseus) resulted from their union.

Ariadne, Theseus’s helper and Pasiphae’s daughter, is shown on the opposing south wall being discovered by Dionysus (Figure 3). Between these two scenes, on the east wall, are presented Juno and Ixion (Figure 6). Ixion was a mortal man who lusted after Juno, Jupiter’s wife; Jupiter substituted a cloud-figure, Nephele, for his wife during the rape and then caught the blasphemer. Ixion was scourged and bound to a fiery wheel, part of which is visible to the viewer’s left in the painting while a seated Juno looks on from the right. The nude male figure of Mercury, the messenger of the gods, stands between Ixion and Juno, as though he is explaining to her what has occurred. Nephele, the crouching female figure in the foreground, subsequently bore Centaurus, the father of the breed of half-horse, half-human centaurs.

In the parallel room to the south (n), at the other end of the peristyle garden, the upper register of the decoration has been lost. Above a red socle appears a
middle zone separated into bright yellow gold central spaces for mythological paintings and flanking faux ‘windows’ into an illusionary cityscape beyond the wall (Figure 7). The myth scenes in this room present Pentheus being killed by female followers of Dionysus on the east wall (Figure 7), the punishment of Dirce on the south (Figure 8) and an infant Hercules battling snakes on the north (Figure 9). Pentheus was a king of Thebes who denied that his cousin Dionysus was a son of Jupiter. Dionysus punished him by driving their female relatives mad and having them physically tear Pentheus apart during a religious ritual. The mortal woman Dirce was punished by the twin sons Antiope bore for Jupiter; Dirce had long imprisoned and then attempted to kill Antiope, either her sister or the first wife of her own husband in Thebes. When Hercules was a baby, his stepmother Juno sent snakes to kill him in his bed. His defeat of the serpents constituted his first heroic feat and proved that Jupiter was his father rather than Amphitryon, an exile of Tiryns living in Thebes who was married to his mother.

As Clarke has noted, the ‘decoration of the Vettii’s house, perhaps the finest of Pompeii’s last two decades, is both rich and iconographically bewildering. Much ink . . . has flowed in attempting to explain its various – and variously linked – iconographical programs’. Mary Lee Thompson argues that both rooms programmatically
contrast divine reward and punishment.\(^\text{82}\) Karl Schefold elaborates upon this, noting, for example, that room \(p\) contrasts two divinely associated sexual offences – those of Pasiphae and Ixion which resulted respectively in the birth of the monstrous Minotaur and centaurs – with the happy union of the god Dionysus and mortal Ariadne.\(^\text{83}\) But to date Theo Wirth has done the most substantive work on the purposeful comparisons and contrasts set up by the paintings in these rooms, and his suggestions have largely been followed by later scholars, such as Richard Brilliant and Clarke.\(^\text{84}\) Overall, Wirth sees a story about the power of the gods, particularly Jupiter and his sons as guarantors of world order. This general theme is articulated by pairings across the two rooms, such as a guilty woman in each (Dirce and Pasiphae), a guilty man (Pentheus and Ixion) – all four punished by gods or their supporters – and a boy or woman saved by a god (Hercules and Ariadne, respectively).

In parallel with these thematic similarities across paintings and across the rooms, Wirth identifies visual similarities as well. For example, he notes that the scene of Pasiphae features a (wooden) cow, that of Dirce a bull. He identifies the Pentheus and Dirce scenes as pendants, with a matching colour scheme and composition, in which a male and a female are punished by figures of the opposite gender in the setting of Mount Cithaeron near Thebes. In room \(p\), the pendants are Ixion and Pasiphae, which both offer scenes of illicit, cross-status love (a human desiring a god and a

Figure 6: Artist unknown, ‘Punishment of Ixion’, east wall of room \(p\), House of the Vettii (VI 15, 1), Pompeii, 62–79 CE (photograph by Michael Larvey, Austin, Texas, with permission of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and the Environment, Special Superintendent of Naples and Pompeii).
human desiring an animal). Wirth finds deliberate contrasts between the rooms, such as the quiet moments depicted in room \( p \) and the highly dramatic presentations in room \( n \). In room \( p \) he finds a set of stories about relations between the sexes, with examples both blissful and unfortunate, taken largely from myths associated with Crete, while room \( n \) draws out a narrative about family relationships, particularly parents and children, as Jupiter saves his son Hercules, Pentheus is torn to pieces by his maenadic mother and Dirce is killed by sons avenging their mother, all stories about the Greek city of Thebes.

These briefly described pages of thick scholarly interpretation attest that the decoration achieved the goal noted earlier of creating lively discussion, and I do not particularly disagree with any of my fellow interpreters. I would not be surprised to learn that many of their suggestions had already occurred to ancient viewers over the course of multiple dinner conversations in this home. Like Fredrick and Koloski-Ostrow, however, I suggest we should also look in these images for how they inscribe key power structures of the household and the community.

The master gaze

As explored earlier, this home may have been owned by ex-slaves when it was extensively repainted following the earthquake of 62 CE, and it is worth considering the implications of this possibility. If we assume, even just for the moment of this article, that the paintings of the house were commissioned by former slaves, we are
I will argue that much of the extensive programme of wall paintings in rooms \( n \) and \( p \) of the House of the Vettii create and project the status of the owners as masters. To find these messages, I will be looking at the comparisons and contrasts called for by the formal compositions and juxtapositions of the paintings themselves. This method of analysing the images and their compositional similarities with nearby images first, and myth or narrative second, was first called for in the House of the Vettii by Wirth, but has been asserted as the most appropriate approach to Pompeian mythological paintings by Bettina Bergmann and Lorenz, as well as in approaching Roman mosaics by Susanne Muth.\(^{85}\)

For example, although scholars from Thompson to Wirth have noted the focus on punishment in the scenes in these rooms, the relationship between punishment and

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**Figure 8:** Artist unknown, ‘Punishment of Dirce’, south wall of room \( n \), House of the Vettii (VI 15, 1), Pompeii, 62–79 CE (photograph by Michael Larvey, Austin, Texas, with permission of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and the Environment, Special Superintendent of Naples and Pompeii).
slavery has not been part of the analysis. At least four of the six mythological panels display torture: Dirce is being pulled apart by a bull, Pentheus by his maenadic female relatives, Ixion is on a rack in the form of a wheel and Daedalus is presenting Pasiphae with the cow costume she will use to satisfy her divinely imposed lust for a bull. This focus on punishment is no accident. As noted earlier, Lorenz has demonstrated that although many individual paintings recur across Pompeii, they are grouped together within rooms in unique ways to create new meanings. In these rooms in this particular house and as outlined by Wirth, two of the scenes are crafted as pendants of each other. In room \( p \), the scenes of Pasiphae and Ixion (Figures 5 and 6), juxtaposed on the north and east walls respectively (Figure 10), each feature a seated female figure, Pasiphae on the far left and Juno on the far right, facing each other across the corner of the room.
A standing male figure occupies the centre of each composition (Daedalus and Mercury), and on the far side rests the instrument of torture, a heifer suit for Pasiphae and a wheel to which Ixion is bound. In room \( n \), Dirce and Pentheus are similarly paired, as will be explored further below. One painting from each set – Ixion in \( p \) and Pentheus in \( n \) – is unique in surviving ancient Italian painting, and details of the compositions of their pendants were changed from iconographic models to make them parallel their partners more closely.\(^{87}\)

Certainly, this concerted focus on punishment may be a message about divine wrath and retribution. What has been missed, however, is the significance of corporal punishment and torture in distinguishing slave from free in ancient Italy. Saller has demonstrated convincingly that Roman authors considered physical abuse in the form of beatings or whippings appropriate for slaves but not for freeborn children.\(^{88}\) The Roman state administered punishment in a variety of ways scaled from most to least degrading and painful depending upon social status; the worst was reserved for slaves and lower-class foreigners, including crucifixion and burning alive.\(^{89}\) Most stark, however, is the fact that a slave’s testimony was admissible in a Roman court only if it had been obtained under torture.\(^{90}\) Thus, corporal punishment – strongly and purposely present in these rooms – had a cultural association with slavery as well as with mythological figures who offended the divine.

In the House of the Vettii’s scenes of Dirce, Pentheus, Ixion and Pasiphae, note that we are not seeing sympathy for the punished or identification with the tortured in these paintings commissioned by masters. These punishments are instead eroticised;
the bodies of those being punished are presented for the viewer’s pleasure. This is particularly clear in the paintings of Dirce and Pentheus in room n (Figures 8 and 7). Just like the Pasiphae and Ixion images, the compositions of these paintings cry out for comparison (Figure 11). They each feature a central, tortured figure, kneeling, with arms outstretched to expose the naked upper body to the view of the spectator.

Mulvey’s notion of the way that the camera fetishises body parts is helpful in unpacking this image, but a focus on gender misleads. One might read the Dirce scene as a fetishising of the female torso, but it is critical to keep in mind that Pentheus is presented in an identical pose on the adjoining wall. Each is flanked and held in place primarily by two figures of the opposite sex, their tormentors, in an outdoor setting.

The assaulting figures in both scenes also look at the vulnerable, nude victims, directing our view. Clover usefully questions Mulvey’s proposition that the only gaze presented in cinema is that of the sadistic voyeur. She explores instead two types of viewing internal to horror – the ‘assaultive gaze’, masculine, predatory and often the first person view of the camera, and the ‘reactive gaze’, usually coded as feminine, the spectator who is assaulted, harmed or frightened by seeing something horrific. Given that in the Vettii paintings those who look at the central, tortured figures are the torturers, it seems fair to call this an ‘assaultive gaze,’ and the external viewer of the painting is invited to share it. A similar display of pain for the pleasure of others is explicit in a mythological panel from room e in the house. On the south wall, a seated
Dionysus and a female figure, probably his wife Ariadne, occupy the centre of the scene, while a small winged cupid and goat-god Pan fight in the foreground, hurting each other for the entertainment of the spectators.93

Within room n, Pentheus and Dirce actually lean toward each other, which, as noted above, required a reversal of Dirce’s position from the iconographic model reconstructed from images of this story in other paintings and media.94 Both a man and a woman are thus shown tortured in an eroticised manner on adjacent walls in this room, in mirror image to the man and woman punished on adjoining walls in room p. The paired paintings purposefully undermine any hierarchy between the genders and instead subordinate both a male and female body to the gaze of the viewer. I argue this viewer is the patron, a patron positioned by this gaze as master, that is, one who orders, observes and even enjoys the punishment of both males and females.

The way Roman notions of sexuality intersect with slavery reinforces this positioning of the viewer as master. In the same way that a male or female slave’s body was treated as penetrable by stick or lash, it was considered open to the master for sexual use as well.95 Slave boys were kept in part as sexual pets.96 The law did not allow a woman dressed as a slave to be considered a rape victim, while a freeborn male citizen was able to sue someone for outrage if that person treated him like a slave in any way, including striking or flogging him, invading his home, preventing him from enjoying public amenities such as baths and theatres, dishonouring his wife, children or slaves or sexually penetrating his person.97 Freeborn citizen children wore a protective amulet, called a bulla, which among other things helped visibly mark them as sexually off-limits, unlike slave children.98

This assumed sexual use of male and female slaves by their master put slaves into a specific sexual category in Roman society, and masters in another, regardless of the slave’s gender. Holt Parker and Skinner have articulated how the Romans who left our surviving literature understood sexuality in ways that do not involve our contemporary notions of heterosexual and homosexual, or attraction to the same or opposite sex. In dominant Roman ideology, sexual activity was considered someone penetrating someone else, and the operative categories which arose from this were active and passive, penetrator and penetrated.99 This was a hierarchical distinction which intersected with other statuses, including gender and age. ‘Doers’ tended to be adult, freeborn citizen men; ‘doees’ were women, but also male slaves, children and non-citizens. To ‘be done’ carried some degree of shame. As Ellen Olienis writes, ‘Penetration is the prerogative of free men, penetrability the characteristic condition of slaves and women; sexual intercourse is an enactment and reflection of social hierarchy, and conversely, social subordination always implies the possibility of sexual submission’.100 Moses Finley first noted the implications of the Roman habit of referring to even an adult male slave as a puer, ‘boy’; it reinforces on many levels a male slave’s lack of manhood, bodily integrity and independent standing in the community.101 In turn, to be a master was to be a doer, to have the capacity to penetrate male and female bodies at will.

I suggest that the insistence on the irrelevance of gender in these paired scenes of torture arises from this relationship between sexuality and power that is not well articulated by what we think of as gender. Interestingly, in looking at British and American horror, Clover sees similar patterns and provides similar explanations. She remarks that horror knows full well that male does not equal female, and yet ‘repeatedly
contemplates mutations and slidings whereby women begin to look a lot like men (slasher films), men are pressured to become like women (possession films), and some people are impossible to tell apart. To understand this slippery presentation of gender, Clover explores Thomas Laqueur’s notion that the pre-modern world exhibited one-sex cultural reasoning and that two-sex cultural reasoning developed in the modern era. That is, in the ancient Mediterranean, according to Laqueur, bodies were understood as falling along a sliding scale of sexual difference, rather than being either one or the other in a binary male/female system. Clover suggests that ‘horror may in fact be the premier repository of one-sex reasoning in our time’.

In particular, she argues that rape revenge films equate entry points into the male and female body, marking all bodies as penetrable and suggesting ‘a universe in which vagina and anus are indeed for all practical purposes the same thing’.

Although some substitute other forms of torture for rape, the paired paintings of Pentheus and Dirce, Ixion and Pasiphae in the House of the Vettii imply a similar universe in which the category ‘penetrable’ counts at least as much as the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’. I would add that an important structural element in the dynamic of one-sex thinking in Roman Italy was slavery. A freedman in particular – but all males raised in a slave-owning household – knew that being male was no guarantee of a dominant status; all children, male and female, slave and free, began life in some sense at one end of the gender/sexuality scale, and then some males moved to the other end over their lifetimes. If we look at these images with Roman slavery and sexuality in mind, that there should be male and female objects of the viewer’s penetrating gaze is in no way surprising. Slave and master were crucial categories, and sex and corporal punishment were activities through which those categories were negotiated and defined. When the owner selected these images of eroticised torture, he was inscribing his own power to punish or to enjoy onto his very walls.

It is worth pausing here to consider the likely function of rooms p and n as dining rooms (triclinia), because the banquet was a place and time of intense contact between slave and free. As is well explored by scholars such as John D’Arms, Katharine Dunbabin and Lisa Bek, the banquet (convivium) was a prominent part of Pompeian life and accommodated architecturally throughout the town. Hosting a banquet advertised social status in terms of the luxury of its provision, its decoration and the way it was enacted. Custom prescribed arrangement of up to three couches, for up to a dozen persons to dine, and assigned positions on the couches delimited social hierarchy. The host literally controlled the pecking order. Guests might include social superiors, who would be given the best seats, peers, on down to the host’s own former slaves. The pleasures of food, drink, sex, conversation and other diversions and entertainments are commonly associated with the convivium in surviving literature and imagery. The banquet was a key locus for a host’s performance of his role in the community as someone with a specific position in the social hierarchy, taste, real estate and other privileges of power.

Reclining on the left arm to dine, as was the fashion for banquets, also required the presence of many slaves to place food and drink close to each effectively one-handed guest, not to mention the slaves or other workers who might be present to perform various types of entertainment. The banquet was thus a place where the service of the enslaved was immediate, physical and ubiquitous. For masters, these slaves would have also been an important audience for the art and performance of the convivium.
Elite Roman authors thought that reclining to dine distinguished the gentleman from the slave and the child. D’Arms, in looking at the banquet from the slaves’ point of view, asks ‘how far did proximity to the tables of the powerful increase their sense of superiority over fellow slaves, and how far did it serve merely to accentuate the distance between their own condition and that of their owners, the privileged consumers of the luxuries and comforts that the slaves dispensed?’

If he was the owner and if he had been a slave, the dining room may also have been particularly important to Vettius Conviva, whose unusual name, Conviva, is related to the Latin term for a banquet, *convivium*. We have no way of knowing if he indeed was once assigned tasks at his master’s table, or if he just had a name that denoted characteristic slave labour. The five rooms of this home suitable for banqueting (*e, p, n, q* and *t*) show great interest on his part, and may even reflect an attempt to subvert his former master’s interest in naming him and create a positive spin on his identification with the banquet; Conviva transformed himself from ‘serving wench’ to ‘host extraordinaire’.

I would argue, at any rate, that the dining room was a place where the distinction between slave and free was highly activated, rather than blurred. As noted earlier, Fredrick interprets what he sees as the destabilising of gender hierarchy in the Vettii’s and other dining room paintings as a banqueting viewer’s temporary assumption of an alternative subject position, an indulgence in passivity or admission of a less than confident social superiority. Looking from the perspective of slavery, the paintings we have seen in these two rooms – with images depicting or alluding to the torture of men and women eroticised for the viewer’s pleasure – instead reinforce the powerful position of the owner over his domain. The images provided a constant (if mythically cloaked) reminder to himself, his guests and his slaves of the power of the owner to torture, a concrete illustration of Paul Zanker’s summative evaluation of Pompeian painting: ‘the society of the early empire projects its fantasies of a happy life onto the mythical figures and then enjoys these projections of the image’. Of course, during a banquet a master actually could perform his privilege in the flesh by punishing any misbehaving slaves or fondling others.

Moreover, if we look for a power hierarchy besides gender which can be represented in mythological paintings – that of human and divine – we see in these images a strict maintenance of power relations. Pentheus, Ixion and Pasiphae all failed to respect someone’s divinity; Pentheus and Ixion tried to subject a deity to imprisonment or sex, only to be tortured themselves as a result. That human/divine might sometimes work as an analogy for slave/free is perhaps clinched by the fourth scene in the series, that of Dirce, who is punished not for disrespecting divinity, but for enslaving a respectable fellow mortal. Such story lines of vengeance for inappropriate enslaving, imprisoning or desiring may have held particular appeal for an ex-slave, but a narrative enforcing a line between slave and free would please any master.

To reinforce the notion of a master gaze in the House of the Vettii, I would like to look briefly at images addressed specifically to the audience of slaves within the house. We have already seen how the mythological scenes of punishment and torture in reception rooms *p* and *n* might be interpreted as emphasising the owners’ ability to dispense corporal punishment on or sexually enjoy their slaves. In the service quarters we find more images reinforcing the master’s ability to control the bodies of human property, albeit in different modes.
As mentioned, two small service areas (v-y and 1–4, shaded in Figure 2) are evident in what survives of the house. The one which concerns us consists of a set of rooms around a small central atrium (v). A built-in hearth, found covered with pots and pans in adjacent room w, reveals its role as a kitchen. As one can see from the plan, the whole section is closed off architecturally from the rest of the house, being accessible only through one doorway from the main atrium. Its decor is quite plain. The differentiation of this area from the rest of the house in architecture and decoration clearly marks its position on the grand/humble axis defined by Wallace-Hadrill in his study of Pompeian houses; guests entering the home would know from these markers that this space was for slaves and other workers. As noted, most of the service area has only the sparsest decoration of plain white or yellow paint. However, in the tiny room to the north of the kitchen (x1), far into the utilitarian part of the house, are found three large scenes of male-female couples engaged in sexual activities (Figure 12).

The walls are divided into the traditional three horizontal and vertical zones by simple, wide red lines; an owl is depicted on the short south wall. The erotic paintings are simply rendered on a pale background, one each in the centre of the other three walls and framed by cursorily decorated thin red lines. They strongly resemble those from the famous brothel farther south near the forum in Pompeii. Although the brothel paintings are crudely executed, they allude to the erotic art found in elite homes that idealise lovemaking and are thus designed to ‘class up the joint’. What are they doing in the service area of this wealthy home?
Clarke suggests that images were painted here as a favour for a master’s favourite, and that the male servant who lived here shared in his master’s view of women as sexual objects. But again I would argue that focusing on gender to the exclusion of other critical and intersecting social statuses can mislead us. Given the nature of the sexual dynamic between a slave and master regardless of sex or gender, of which an ex-slave was certainly aware if not intimately experienced, I suspect there may be something else going on here. For an audience of male and female slaves, who would certainly spend the most time around these images, they may have served as a reminder of one of their servile tasks. Other evidence of slave sexuality and anxiety about the sexual category of enslaved men has been found in this part of the house. An informal inscription tells us of a slave named Eros, ‘Desire’, a not uncommon name for male slaves. Inside the service atrium on the wall near the doorway was carved ‘Eros cinedae’, ‘Eros is a cinaedus’ or ‘Eros likes to be sexually passive’. The note had subsequently been scratched out.

Control over the household staff is expressed in paint in a very different way in the service area. I am speaking of the lararium (Figure 13), located in the small atrium (v). Many homes contained such shrines to household divinities, usually including deities of place, such as the lares, as well as the divine twin of the head of the household, referred to as his genius. At meals and holidays, members of the free family, their slaves and freedpersons made offerings at these shrines, called lararia. Thus slaves and others enacted their dependency upon the master of the house every day by expressing adoration of his genius. In the Vettii shrine, typical images of the Lares and the Genius of the Paterfamilias are depicted. The genius figure in the centre is particularly expressive, included as an object of cult devotion, but depicted in the process of conducting an offering. The image defined the master as one who was worshiped within his house, but who in a larger sense communicated with the gods on behalf of his house. In the Vettii household, the shrine is located explicitly in the area where slave work was performed, a not uncommon yet far from standardised location. I think of it as a similar representation and enactment of dominance as in the erotic scenes, here using religious rather than sexual imagery and practice. The erotic paintings and this image on the lararium shrine are the only figural scenes in the whole of the surviving utilitarian area.

I also want to pause to emphasise that gender is used elsewhere in the house to encode social hierarchies, such as in reception room t, part of the master’s suite off the tiny second peristyle and thus in the most intimate spaces of the house. Much of the elegant decoration in this room has been lost. What survives shows a dark socle and middle zone separated into panels by delicate white lines and illusionary shutters painted as though open to allow a view of a trompe l’oeil garden beyond. Two of what were once three central mythological panels survive: on the south wall a drunken Hercules assaults Auge, a priestess of Athena, and on the east wall Achilles’s disguise as a maiden on Skyros is revealed. (Since Achilles knew he would die young if he fought at Troy, his mother encouraged him to hide from recruiters among the daughters of the king of Skyros. Two endings explain how he was discovered. In one, Odysseus tracks him to the palace and sets out gifts of jewellery and weapons; Achilles’s interest in the male-gendered objects give him away. In the other version, Achilles reveals himself when he rapes the king’s daughter, Deidameia.)
In what survives of the imagery in this room masculinity always wins out, and the male viewer is pleased in just the ways outlined by Mulvey. Auge is presented much as the tortured figures in room n, kneeling, with her clothing falling off to expose her nude torso. She holds up a hand to ward off the approaching Hercules unsuccessfully. He comes from behind her, to the right of the viewer and helping to direct the viewer’s gaze at her exposed body, as do two of the three other figures in the painting. Hercules holds his club between them; his needs clearly will not be denied. In turn, Achilles’s masculinity is not threatened even in a dress. He stands in the middle of what survives of the painting, his clothing falling off to display his maleness. To be clear this does not make him vulnerable, one of the king’s daughters runs from him, her clothing also falling to provide an erotic view of her exaggerated backside. Both stories result in heroic children: princess Deidameia bears Achilles Neoptolemus as a result of her rape by Achilles on Skyros, and Hercules’s rape of Auge leads to the birth of Telephus. In birthing heroes instead of monsters, the scenes may contrast purposefully with the
scenes in room $p$ just around the corner of the peristyle. It is unfortunate that even less of the decoration from the adjoining room, $u$, including none of the mythological paintings, survive to tell us more.

To summarise, the paintings we have surveyed in this home present the owner as master on a number of grounds: not only does he own and display wealth, he maintains mastery over the rest of the household in terms of religion, sexuality and corporal punishment. The scenes of male bodies both tortured and eroticised need not reveal an exploration of alternative, subordinate subject positions, a destabilising of gender hierarchies. They need not be much about gender at all, although gender is used as a discursive hierarchy elsewhere in the house. These scenes are about a social status and lived experience in which being male did not guarantee, and thus could not signify, dominance: slavery. Mulvey’s notions of fetishistic scopophilia and sadistic voyeurism work well on many of these images when they are not tied exclusively to a binary notion of gender: subordinate (slave) bodies are eroticised by the camera angle and costuming and punished by the storyline. These techniques of analysing the way visual narratives encode power are useful, but their theoretical basis in castration in some ways is not, because not all male viewers evade castration, even if masters do. But other images in the house, including ones that play with the boundary between mortals and gods, do not allow even a master who is a viewer to evade pain, objectification or ‘castration’. Here we reach a different problem in Mulvey’s approach from 1975, one also addressed by Clover in terms of twentieth-century horror films and by Fredrick in terms of ancient Italian painting.

**Masochism**

Indeed, what should we make of an image which encourages us to identify with a figure in pain? One panel in each of our receiving rooms does not depict violent punishment, but instead presents a character currently beset with challenges but who will ultimately triumph: the struggling infant Hercules on the north wall of room $n$, and the abandoned Ariadne on the south wall of room $p$ (Figures 9 and 3). Each is a mortal later transformed into a god, whose divinity (and thus position in the social hierarchy) was at one time unrecognised. Again we have one male and one female, and their placement in the two rooms calls for comparison – they would be back to back save for the intervening spaces (Figures 10 and 11). Stories of heroic boundary-crossers might be particularly appealing to former slaves, but also to males born free but who still had to make the transition from objectified youth to penetrating adult man. What is problematic about this appeal, however, is its basis in identification with a character in pain or humiliation, sometimes across genders; the threat of ‘castration’ is on display, which Mulvey’s scopophilia and sadistic voyeurism give us no means of understanding.

The Hercules scene (Figure 9) comes closest of all the mythological panels in these two rooms in the House of the Vettii to expressing sympathy and encouraging the viewer to identify outright with the main figure. Hercules is presented as a small child strangling two serpents sent by Juno to kill him. His pose echoes the other paintings in room $n$ with his kneeling, triangular posture and frontal display of his tortured body (Figure 11). However, he leans away from the other paintings, and he holds the snakes, while no one holds him. The onlookers within his scene wonder at his success
rather than orchestrate his demise, including a well-dressed woman and seated man, presumably his mother Alcmene and her husband Amphitryon. Above is positioned a sculpted eagle, part of a monument behind the struggling toddler demarcating his true father, Jupiter. Hercules's situation is dire, a vulnerable mortal child, but his innate status as hero and future god is also revealed and ultimately triumphant. Hercules is used elsewhere in Italian art and Mediterranean storytelling to celebrate social climbers; freedmen serving as priests in the imperial cult of Herculaneum decorated their central shrine 'with paintings of clear thematic import depicting events in the life of Hercules which showed the eponymous mythological founder of the town as an example of social mobility'. The Vettii – as freedmen, or just as adult men – may have identified with the hero similarly. Clover observes a similar pattern in twentieth-century action and war films, in which a male hero often suffers some form of humiliation which he then avenges through the bulk of the movie, although the focal point here is definitely on the moment of threat to the hero.

The scene of Ariadne (Figure 3), which parallels that of Hercules, is much more problematic. On one level, it confirms again that gender as a social and discursive hierarchy is not absent in the house, even if it is not the only one. Although she is a successful, upwardly mobile boundary-crossover, Ariadne is quite subordinated by her femininity, as we have already seen. Two critical moments in Ariadne's life are condensed in the painting. Although Theseus's departing ship can be seen in the background in the central upper portion of the painting, Dionysus appears in the foreground on the left, approaching and gazing at her sleeping, nude form. Ariadne is thus both abandoned and about to be 'saved' and immortalised by active males. Here the hierarchy of gender is powerfully asserted. As explored earlier, the composition and narrative match Mulvey's notions of fetishistic scopophilia and sadistic voyeurism in the male gaze elegantly. The image of Ariadne faces that of her mother Pasiphae across room p, and in fact the viewer has same view of Pasiphae's cow suit as of Ariadne, which visually helps sexualise the Pasiphae scene (Figure 10). On one level this may be a witty if dirty joke about those oversexed Cretan women. On another, it shows that even the less overtly violent scenes in the house may be interpreted as part of a larger story about subjugation via sexuality. But Ariadne’s pairing with Hercules as a mortal who became divine is troubling to Mulvey’s paradigms: the pairing suggests identification with this female figure otherwise thoroughly subordinated.

This ambiguity in the image of Ariadne is pushed even further by another interesting visual effect. On the same wall and to the right of this panel of Ariadne in room p, above the small south doorway, appears an image of the half-goat divinity Pan discovering Hermaphroditus, the child of the gods Hermes and Aphrodite with both male and female anatomical traits (Figures 14 and 15). Ariadne’s pose very much resembles that of the reclining Hermaphroditus, including the right arm raised up over the head in an iconographic gesture which Clarke has identified as signifying 'erotic repose'. She provides the view from behind, Hermaphroditus the (surprising) view from the front. Each figure is also accompanied by a small satyr or Pan, with one arm raised in surprise or delight and positioned just behind the legs of the reclining figure. Note that the Pan who sees Hermaphroditus’ male attribute provides us with a reactive gaze; he turns his head, covering his eyes as though they are being assaulted. We viewers are thereby directed not to objectify Hermaphroditus, and even perhaps to identify with him/her instead.
Another painting of a hermaphrodite is presented to the right of someone leaving room q on the north side of the peristyle (Figure 16). The revealed phalli of the hermaphrodites in these passageways in and out of important reception rooms probably generated apotropaic laughter the same way as the famous painting of the well-endowed Priapus found in the entryway to the house. When this large room was used for dining, the image on the inside of the doorway of room q would have been visible to banqueters, including the guest of honour, and although the setting is clearly pastoral, the postures of Hermaphroditus and his admirer, the rustic god Silenus, here differ from the similar pair in room p. Silenus looks over the shoulder of the erotically reposed Hermaphroditus, gazing into his/her upturned face and appreciating what is revealed in his/her lap. The pair intriguingly mimics depictions of couples reclining at banquet.

What are we to make of these comparisons between Ariadne and Hermaphroditus, Ariadne and Hercules and perhaps Hermaphroditus and dinner guests? Again on some level gender difference is being neutralised. In part we should see this as a further expression of the one-sex cultural reasoning described earlier. If ancient Italians considered humans not sexually dimorphic, but having bodies somewhere along a sliding scale between male and female extremes, the mythological figure of Hermaphroditus illustrates a midway point, a body with both male and female iconographic elements. Within the framework of Roman ideologies and practices of sexuality and slavery, over
time it was possible for individuals to move along the scale, such as from slave to
freed, or from boy to man. The stories told by Hermaphroditus’s narrative vignettes in
this house explore this possibility, since in each the character assumed to be a passive
object of desire is discovered by a pursuer to be an active, desiring subject.
What differs in these scenes, however, as opposed to the torture scenes described above, is that the neutralising of gender difference does not subordinate male, female and hermaphroditic bodies, but instead encourages cross-gender identification. Clover also finds and investigates this phenomenon, particularly in her study of late twentieth-century British and American rape-revenge films. Although she notes that earlier cinematic rapes encouraged viewers to identify with the rapist to some extent, which fits well with Mulvey’s paradigms, from the mid-1970s increasingly the cinematic view and the narrative of rape-revenge films sympathise with the victim/hero and separate the viewer from the rapist/villain. Since the audience for these films is overwhelmingly young men, Clover observes that ‘the only way to account for the spectator’s engagement in the revenge drive is to assume his engagement with the rape-avenging woman’.

To explain this cross-gender identification and the pleasure it might provide, Clover returns to Freud for answers. She notes that he is not as focused on castration per se as is Mulvey, but rather ‘the fear of standing in a passive or “feminine” relation to another man and the particular sort of “castration” that might proceed from that’. Freud called a man’s assumption of this ‘feminine’ position, masochism.

In his article focusing on the imagery of Ariadne in Pompeii, Fredrick also calls this exploration of marginalised, subordinate subject positions, ‘playing the female’. I’d like to bring into the conversation Clover’s thoughts on its appeal to help expand on Fredrick’s account. Like Fredrick, Clover emphasises the repetitiveness of these stories in horror, and she ties this to the psychological mechanism of ‘repetition compulsion’, ‘whereby a person “deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old [but unremembered] experience”’. Through mediated repetition, the unpleasant experiences are converted to pleasant rehearsals, although the mechanism for how this is accomplished is disputed. Clover points out that this common type of storyline – a pleasure in looking at and sympathising with those in fear and pain – is unaccounted for in Mulvey’s analysis.

Clover leaves open the nature of the past pain mediated by this process, simply generalising that ‘the pleasure of looking at others in fear and pain has its origins in one’s own past-but-not-finished fear and pain’. She theorises that such pain does not necessarily imply trauma, but may be a feature of normal human development. Freud’s notion of masochism has certainly been challenged in its applicability to women, but this reading of how men might use a perception of femininity to express repressed desires and fears within a patriarchal system holds potential. I think we can at least ponder why the patrons of Pompeian wall painting might have been ‘compulsively’ drawn to such stories and images, and in fact we have already done so. Consider first the freedman, a boundary crosser, no longer owned but still owing allegiance and even sexual service to his master. Gender-crossing or movement along a gender spectrum was a particularly apt representation of his experience, and for the freed slavery is an excellent example of ‘past-but-not-finished fear and pain’.

But what if the paintings of the House of the Vettii were not selected by ex-slaves? Psychoanalytic theory, both Freudian and Lacanian, in part asks questions about the implications of the psychosexual development of a person raised in a household and in a society with sexual differentiation, and how we can see these effects in the products created by human beings. Our answers have to change if the men and women in
question were also raised in a slave-owning society and household. Everyone – male or female, slave or free – witnessed a very real difference in status between males with no anatomical differences. It is one thing to say one has the phallus and one does not, but what does that mean, and how might it be represented?

Within the House of the Vettii, I would argue that this is reflected in the way that gender is at play. Male and female are being used to signify, but what they signify is that such signs may fail to categorise a body appropriately. The two hermaphrodites communicate in image and narrative that from one point of view a body may appear feminine (pale in colour, large buttocks, long hair, potential penetratee for male companion), but from another point of view a body may be something else entirely (phallus, potential penetrator of male companion). Both hermaphroditic scenes include onlookers in the process of discovering, physically uncovering and witnessing the hidden male characteristics of their intended objects of desire. As noted earlier, Fredrick observes that many of the mythological scenes in this house play with the process of concealing, hiding and then unveiling. He relates this – quite appropriately – to the power and pleasure of looking, but I wonder if stories of unrecognised gods and of previously unappreciated and unrevealed masculine attributes were not particularly appealing stories to men in ancient Italy, who themselves had a subordinated period in their lives and then experienced a transformation into a new status. The images in the receiving rooms revel in the triumphs of boundary-crossers: the indeterminate Hermaphroditus, abandoned Ariadne, threatened boy Hercules and doubted new god Dionysus.

**Conclusions and implications**

Consider again Koloski-Ostrow and her Mulveyan analysis of a painting of Actaeon. It is hard to imagine what in that ‘film’ of a male mutilated for desiring a female is pleasurable to Mulvey’s twentieth-century male viewer. Now look with the lens of an ancient Italian slave owner. What may have been pleasurable in that ‘film’ to a dominus – a master who sees a lovely young male torn limb from limb because he has merely glimpsed a female above his station? The master fetishistically enjoys the exposed, even dismembered young male body and enjoys the punishment of a subordinate acting out. Is gender destabilised here, or do we need to reconsider our understanding of gender and the gaze within ancient Italian culture?

In an intriguing 2008 article, Jeanne Boydston argues ‘that the primaryness of gender in a given situation should be one of our questions, rather than one of our assumptions’. In making her claim, she lays out both the necessity of and the limitations imposed by conceptual categories:

Categories of analysis are not analytically neutral. They are not mere frameworks for organising ideas. They are frameworks that reflect and replicate our own understandings of the world. The moment we cease to acknowledge that aspect of their work and invest any particular category of analysis with the authority of permanence and universality, we cease to be historians and become propagandists of a particular epistemological order.

The method Boydston describes for avoiding this trap is to look for anomalies which do not fit neatly into our conceptual categories because here cultural differences and historical processes lie.
I submit that the wall paintings of the paired dining rooms $n$ and $p$ within the House of the Vettii provide a particularly useful anomaly that should encourage us to reconsider deploying gender, or rather gender alone, to analyse the power dynamics encoded in Pompeian wall painting. Paired scenes of eroticised torture pointedly put male and female bodies on display for the host, guests, family and slaves during the social ritual of the banquet. This apparent negation of gender hierarchy arises from the particular ways gender intersects with slavery and sexuality in this historical place and time. Due to the slaves housed within it, the very patriarchal Roman family resists analysis in traditional Freudian or even Lacanian terms; the phallus is a poor signifier in the context of this form of slavery and this form of family. To use Clover’s terms, ‘What film makers [and ancient Italians] seem to know better than film critics [and historians] is that gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane’.\textsuperscript{150} Temporarily assuming a freedman’s perspective helps us see how prioritising gender and pulling it out of its intersections with other important cultural frames can mislead.

In turn, Actaeon is not alone in being inexplicable through ‘a classical psychoanalytic paradigm’.\textsuperscript{151} Clover points out that such wounded male figures are also ubiquitous in late twentieth-century British and American horror films. She describes the ‘extraordinarily popular theme of assaultive gazing that is foiled – thwarted, swallowed up, turned back on itself, and of assaultive gazers who end up blinded or dead or both’.\textsuperscript{152} And she diagnoses the repetition of the theme as a compulsive ‘re-enactment of unremembered experience of unpleasure’.\textsuperscript{153} We have seen how a set of paintings in this house utilises a similar masochistic aesthetic to celebrate, in terms humorous to heroic to grisly, figures whose positions in various social hierarchies were not always recognised or reverenced appropriately, precisely the pain the images may be rehearsing.

Although this would be exacerbated in the case of a slave child, it was a fact of life for all children of ancient Italy (male, female, slave and free) that they were perceived as possible objects of desire by adult men – all were at one time objects of the gaze. For the adult men who patronised and consumed art, to sympathise, however briefly, with a character like Ariadne, Actaeon or Hermaphroditus was to revisit – not imagine – the feeling of the assaultive gaze, and sometimes to foil it.

In analysing classic Hollywood film, Mulvey sets out to ‘highlight the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it’ and explore how ‘mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order’.\textsuperscript{154} ‘These are compelling goals. Ancient Italian painting also coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. In that order, the pater subordinated women and some men, particularly slaves, and led a society in which slavery was a major psychical obsession; moreover, everyone, including these patres, began life as subordinated objects of adult male desire, even though some were more protected from that desire than others. Fredrick begins his analysis of house painting across Pompeii with the observation that as a group the mythological panels feature stories of gods and heroes, but that ‘their content is usually not “heroic”. It is erotic, and within the erotic context, frequently violent’.\textsuperscript{155} This content speaks to the intersections of gender, sexuality and slavery in ancient Italian households. In the House of the Vettii, such images create a world in which Vettius Restitutus and Vettius Conviva were masters, with all the powers and privileges that implied in Pompeian society.
Notes

The author wishes to acknowledge gratefully the insightful suggestions of several anonymous readers of this article at various stages of its development. All translations are my own.


17. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society*, p. 213. Out of the 234 houses Wallace-Hadrill sampled in Regions I and VI, only ten are larger than the House of the Vettii (*Houses and Society, Table 4.1*).


20. The most extensive analysis is found in Peters, who excludes the small side rooms h and i and possibly rooms d, u and x from the attribution to a single workshop.


24. A short, winged wand entwined by two snakes, the caduceus is a staff carried by Hermes, messenger god and patron of merchants and travellers.

25. First reported in *Notizie degli scavi di antichità* 1895, p. 32; see also Sogliano col. 252.


29. *CIL* IV.3509.

30. Notizie degli scavi di antichità 1895, p. 32.


33. I would like to thank my student Dhruva Jaishankar for this last suggestion. In order to be father and son with these names, they would have to have both been slaves of Aulus Vettius; presumably the father Conviva emancipated himself then purchased freedom for his son as well.


41. On the motives for manumitting slaves, see Bradley, *Slavery and Society*, pp. 158–65 and on manumission as a phenomenon, see Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, pp. 83–112. On freedpersons in general, see most

44. By the imperial period, the conditions of the *lex Aelia Sentia* (4 CE) had to be met for an ex-slave to become a full citizen, including a minimum age of thirty years for slaves and twenty years for masters; see Bradley, *Slavery and Society*, p. 156. Exceptions were possible, such as when freeing someone for the sake of marrying them (Gaius, *Institutes*, 1.9).


47. Petersen, *The Freedman in Roman Art*, especially pp. 1–12.


62. For a recent and nuanced analysis of Pompeian painting styles, see Leach, *Social Life of Painting*. A more traditional account is provided in Roger Ling, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The mythological panels may allude to even grander picture galleries in which portable canvases or boards were affixed to the wall. We only know of these through literary sources, for which see Leach, *Social Life of Painting*, pp. 132–52. The true fresco forms of this house are found even in what are taken to be imperial houses and villas, however, so interpreting them as lower-class imitations of the ‘real thing’ would be misleading.


64. Many smaller houses in Pompeii do not have peristyles, even though some are elaborately painted; see Penelope M. Allison, *Pompeian Households: An Analysis of the Material Culture* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, 2004).


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75. For discussions of the possibility of pattern books and how painting workshops functioned, see Ling, Roman Painting, pp. 128–9, 212–13, 217–20; Eric M. Moormann (ed.), Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome 54: Mani di pittori e botteghe pittoriche nel mondo romano (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1995), pp. 61–298 and Penelope N. Allison, “‘Workshops’ and “Patternbooks”’, Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte 24 (1991), pp. 79–84.
86. Lorenz, ‘Die Quadratur des Sofabildes’.
90. Watson, Roman Slave Law, pp. 84–9; Gaius, Institutes, 9.41.12, 9.41.18; Digest, 22.5.22.1.
91. Allison R. Sharrock, ‘Looking at Looking: Can You Resist a Reading?’ in Fredrick, The Roman Gaze, pp. 265–95, worries over the potential gender and thus power inversion in the Pentheus scene. Strangely, however, she compares it to the gender dynamics of a scene next to it in a modern book on Roman painting (The Sack of Troy from the House of Menander in Ling, Roman Painting, pl. XIC), rather than the scenes on the adjoining walls. The Dirce scene from this room is much closer in composition and directly inverts the gender of the characters in the Pentheus painting.


95. I use the gendered term ‘master’ here deliberately, since the sexual use of slaves by women owners is strongly condemned in the surviving literature; see Watson, Roman Slave Law, p. 15; and Joshel, Work, Identity and Legal Status, p. 30, n.17. Among other things, it upset the hierarchy between enslaved and free for a free woman to have sexual relations with a male slave, for reasons which will become clear shortly.


102. Clover, Men, Women, and Chainsaws, p. 15.


104. Clover, Men, Women, and Chainsaws, p. 15.

105. Clover, Men, Women, and Chainsaws, p. 158.

106. In Pompeian Households, Allison cautions that rooms in Pompeian houses were used for multiple functions across the day and year and that Pompeian archaeological remains do not well match the room functions and names listed in our Roman literary sources. Nevertheless, that the finely appointed small to medium-sized rooms n and p, located off the peristyle garden and providing views of it, were not at least sometimes used for banquets would be difficult to believe.

Gender & History


From slaves or those like slaves: Columella, On Agriculture, 11.1.10; Petronius, Satyrica, 64; Martial, Epigrams, 5.70; Plutarch, Life of Pompey, 40.7; from boys: Plutarch, Roman Questions, 33; Suetonius, Life of Augustus, 64.3; Suetonius, Life of Claudius, 32; Tacitus, Annals, 13.61.1. These and more are discussed in Alan Booth, ‘The Age for Reclining and Its Attendant Perils,’ in Slater, Dining in a Classical Context, pp. 105–20; see Roller, Dining Posture, for a rich recent analysis of the significance of reclining to dine.


This is the only instance of the name Conviva known to Kajanto in his extensive catalogue of Latin cognomina – it was an unusual name; ‘The Latin Cognomina’, p. 306.

Fredrick, ‘Mapping Penetrability’ and Fredrick, ‘Grasping the Pangolin’.

Zanker, ‘Mythenbilder im Haus’, p. 47.


Ancient storytellers disagree on how Pasiphae came to be punished with desire for a bull; some say her husband Minos offended Poseidon through incorrect sacrifice, others say he offended Jupiter, yet others say Pasiphae herself failed to cultivate Aphrodite; see Diodorus Siculus, Library, 4.77.2. 13.4; Hyginus, Fabula, 40; and First Vatican Mythographer, 47. For a modern account, see Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1955), pp. 293–4.


What the owl may signify is unclear. In classical Greek culture the owl was associated with Athena and thus with wisdom, but at least in elite Roman culture the owl was a bird of ill-omen, associated with death and foreboding; see Pliny, Natural History, 10.17; Vergil, Aeneid, 4.462 and Servius’s commentary; Ovid, Metamorphoses, 5.546, 6.430, 10.452, 15.791; and Lucan, Pharsalia, 5.395, 6.688. Perhaps here it is just meant to indicate a nocturnal setting.

The brothel’s erotic panels featuring male-female couples can be dated to around 72 CE based on the impression of a coin of that date found in the plaster of the brothel; see Clarke, Looking at Lovemaking, p. 199. The panels are visible above eye level along the main hallway in the spaces above the lintels of doorways to the many small bedrooms. All seven are of similar size and are painted on a pale background with a simple red frame.


Clarke, Houses of Roman Italy, pp. 220–21.


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127. See Foss, ‘Watchful *Lares*’, pp. 201–18. In his survey of 154 Pompeian buildings of diverse size, 36 per cent of the built-in household shrines were directly associated with the kitchen area, which in the larger homes was consistently part of the service quarters.

128. Some scholars refer to this architectural unit as a *gynaecaeum*, or women’s quarters; see Amedeo Maiuri, *Gineco e “Hospitium” nella casa pompeiana* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1954), pp. 456–7; de Vos and de Vos, *Pompeii, Ercolano, Stabia*, p. 171; Carratelli, ‘VI 15.1. Casa dei Vettii’, Figure 160. I agree with Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society*, p. 58, however, that there is no evidence or compelling reason to identify this as a secluded or privileged space for women. Roman authors thought of this as a distinctive feature of Greek houses (*Vitruvius, On Architecture*, 6.7; Cornelius Nepos, *Lives*, preface 6–7), although we have difficulty locating *gynaecae* in surviving houses of the Greek world; see Lisa C. Nevet, ‘Separation or Seclusion?’ in Michael Parker Pearson and Colin Richards (eds), *Architecture and Order: Approaches to Social Space* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 98–112. Leach, *Social Life of Painting*, p. 49, is much more correct to identify such a suite of rooms with the Roman term *diaeta*.


131. For examples of historical or literary figures identifying with myths and using them to understand their own situations, see especially Zanker, ‘Mythenbilder im Haus’.


135. For images of banqueting couples, see for example the central paintings on the north and west walls of room 8 in the House of the Chaste Lovers in Pompeii (IX 12, 6–7), Roller, *Dining Posture*, plates VII and II; a panel taken from the Casa di Giuseppe II (VIII 2, 38/39, Museo Nazionale di Napoli 8968), Roller, *Dining Posture*, Figure 8; and an unprovenanced panel from Herculaneum (Museo Nazionale di Napoli 9024), Roller, *Dining Posture*, plate VI.


142. In 1988, Gaylyn Studlar also published a monograph challenging Mulvey on the question of masochism in film: *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Studlar’s approach is nevertheless different. Working towards a notion of the gaze that is not exclusively male, she argues that all film spectatorship is masochistic and grounds masochism in the relationship with the mother during the infantile stage of human psychosexual development.


144. In *In the Realm of Pleasure*, Studlar works to locate the impulse toward masochism in the primal relationship with the mother.

145. Seneca the Elder wrote, ‘lack of chastity is a crime in the freeborn, a necessity in a slave, a duty for the freedman’, *Controversiae*, 4, preface 10.