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**DOMESTICA BONA ON STAGE IN THE POMPEIAN HOUSE:
ON VIEWING AND READING THE STORY OF
PERO AND MYCON**

MARGHERITA CARUCCI

Introduction

In the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (V, 4, a) in Pompeii, a wall-painting illustrates a woman offering her left breast to an old man, who is lying across her lap to the right; on the top is a barred window from which light enters. The scene is accompanied in the top left corner of the panel by an inscribed text¹ whose letters appear mostly faded but clear enough to inform the viewer that the painted scene represents the story of Pero and Mycon (Fig. 1). The representation of a woman (Pero) suckling an old man (Mycon) may appear almost disturbing and not easily understandable: as a female viewer of post-modern society, I could not help to see in the painted image of that woman the unhappy life experience of my female companions and their being subjected to the control and needs of men. It is without doubt that each work of art communicates different messages, because the act of reading is inevitably influenced by the viewer's social status, gender, beliefs, tastes, values, and expectations.² To find the meanings of ancient images that were significant for the ancient viewers is even more difficult for us as modern viewers, since we are also influenced by the cultural implications of our modern society. Nevertheless, the analysis of ancient images within their original

¹ *CIL* IV 6635 (= *CLE* 2048).

² The various contextual approaches that come under the rubric of the "New Art History" are discussed by P. Burke, "Context in Context", *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (2002) 152–77; R. R. R. Smith, "The Use of Images: Visual History and Ancient History", in T. P. Wiseman (ed.), *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome*, London 2003, 59–102.



Fig.1. Pompeii, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, wall-painting: Pero and Mycon (photo by the author).

spatial, cultural, and social context may highlight some possible meanings of the same images and suggest possible modes of viewing of the ancient viewer.³

This paper will demonstrate how the insertion of the story of Pero and Mycon in the larger social framework of cultural transformations in the early Imperial period, more particularly in relation with Augustan family legislation and ideology, allows a deeper understanding of the painted scene than the traditional reading of the story as an isolated scene visualising a moral lesson for the individual.

The painting of Pero and Mycon

The painting in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto at Pompeii illustrates the story of Pero and Mycon. According to the ancient story, Mycon was unjustly

³ See also R. Brilliant, "Some reflections on the new Roman art history", *JRA* 11 (1998) 557–65; N. B. Kampen, "On Writing Histories of Roman Art", *ABull* 85.2 (2003) 371–86.

imprisoned and condemned to starve to death, but his daughter Pero saved her father's life by visiting him in the cell and feeding him the milk from her breast. The painting, which is dated to the third quarter of the first century AD, illustrates the high moment of the story. The choice of this legendary tale gives rise to a number of questions. Why is this story represented in a domestic context? What message does the scene convey to the ancient viewers? How can the image of a woman suckling her father be placed in the normal lives of the house's inhabitants? Could the painted scene of a daughter with her father say something about family relationships and dynamics in the society of the early imperial time?

The story of Pero and Mycon was very popular in early imperial times. In fact, its representation appears in two more Pompeian wall-paintings showing the same decorative schema: the one in the House of Bacchus (VII, 4, 10)⁴ and the other in the House IX, 2, 5 (Fig. 2).⁵ Further figurative examples of the story in Pompeii are attested on terracotta statues and a pottery fragment, but also in some decorative examples of South Gaulish sigillata.⁶ More illustrative examples must have circulated in Rome, too, since Valerius Maximus speaks of a painted representation (*pictam imaginem*) of the story.⁷ In textual record, the story of Pero and Mycon is first attested in Valerius Maximus, who also refers to another version of the same story, which replaces the figure of the father with that of a noble mother.⁸ The two versions ended up overlapping and creating some confusion. Pliny the Elder, for example, reports the version which has the woman's mother in prison rather than her father, but the writer adds that the mother was of humble conditions and a temple dedicated to Pietas was built on the site of the prison where the story takes place.⁹ The story as the *aition* for the building of the

⁴ G. Pugliese Carratelli – I. Baldassarre (eds.), *Pompei, pitture e mosaici*, vols. I–IX, Roma 1990–1999: vol. VI, 978–80. The painted panel is now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (= MANN 9040).

⁵ Pugliese Carratelli – Baldassarre (above n. 4), vol. VIII, 1052–67.

⁶ A. Santucci, "Micone e Pero: l'iconografia antica", in R. Raffaelli – R. M. Danese – S. Lanciotti (eds.), *Pietas e allattamento filiale: la vicenda, l'exemplum, l'iconografia. Colloquio di Urbino, 2–3 maggio 1996*, Urbino 1997, 123–39.

⁷ Val. Max. 5,4 ext. 1.

⁸ Val. Max. 5,4,7.

⁹ Plin. *nat.* 7,36. The episode of the dedication of the temple of Pietas is discussed by S. Lanciotti, "Un voto di troppo: il tempio a Pietas in Festo e nella tradizione liviana", in Raffaelli – Danese – Lanciotti 1997 (above n. 6), 103–21.



Fig. 2. Pompeii, House IX, 2, 5, wall-painting: Pero and Mycon (photo by the author).

temple occurs again in Hyginus,¹⁰ Festus, who says that the temple was built in the area where the young daughter lived,¹¹ and Solinus:¹² they all use Valerius Maximus' story about the father and his daughter, who however are left unnamed (only Hyginus names the girl as Xanthippe).¹³

¹⁰ Hyg. *fab.* 254.

¹¹ Fest. *verb. sign.* 14.

¹² Solin. 1,124, p. 32.

¹³ On the basis of literary record, the story of Pero and Mycon is described as an example of filial devotion toward a father. This motif was elaborated into the more general concept of charity in the Renaissance throughout the XVII–XVIII centuries. Following the printing of Valerius Maximus' work in the late XV century, the story of Pero and Mycon became very popular in art as a visual representation of Roman Charity (*L'allégorie dans la peinture: la représentation de la charité au XVIIe siècle*, Caen 1990; G. M. Fachechi, "L'iconografia della Caritas Romana dal medioevo a Caravaggio", in Raffaelli – Danese – Lanciotti 1997 [above

Inscription

The painted image of Pero and Mycon in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto is equipped with an ecphrastic poem made of three elegiac couplets, which are painted in the top left corner of the panel.¹⁴ The reading of the damaged text of the epigram, which is mostly found in the references cited in note 14,¹⁵ is:

*Quae parvis mater natis alimenta parabat
Fortuna in patrios vertit iniqua cibos.
aevo dignum opus est: tenui cervice seniles
as[pice iam venae lacte replente tument.
admoto]que simul voltu friat ipsa Miconem
Pero: tristis inest cum pietate pudor.*

"The adverse Fortune turned in food for her father the nourishment that the mother used to offer to her little kids. This deed deserves being remembered for ever. Look! On his thin neck the old man's veins are swollen with filling milk. The same Pero draws near with her head and rubs against Micon: sad modesty is mixed with piety" (my translation).

n. 6], 227–45). In fact, the image of a daughter breastfeeding her old father suited well the Christian idea of mercy, as it visualised the words of Christ in Matthew's Gospel (25, 35–6, 40). In the transposition of a pagan motif in the Christian Europe, the tale of Pero and Mycon is charged with a religious meaning. More recently, Rubens' painting of Pero and Mycon appeared in a scene of the film *Girl with a pearl earring* (2003), which tells the story of a maiden and a painter in the Netherlands in the late XVII century. The painting appears in the room of the painter's patron, who is described as a very wealthy and licentious man as a means to emphasise the licentious character of the rich man, who got sexually obsessed with a young servant.

¹⁴ W. Deonna, "La légende de Pero et de Micon et l'allaitement symbolique", *Latomus* 13 (1954) 140–66:146, 356–75; G. Berger-Doer, s.v. Pero II, *LIMC* VII (1994) 327–9: 328 n. 5; W. J. Th. Peters & al., *La Casa di Marcus Lucretius Fronto a Pompei e le sue pitture*, Amsterdam 1993, 334–6; A. Santucci, "Micone e Pero: l'iconografia antica", in Raffaelli – Danese – Lanciotti (above n. 6), 123–39: 125–6; A. Tontini, "L'epigramma CIL IV 6635 (= CLE 2048)", in Raffaelli – Danese – Lanciotti (above n. 6), 141–60; L. Piazzì, "Poesie come didascalie di immagini: tre casi pompeiani", in F. De Angelis (ed.), *Lo sguardo archeologico. I normalisti per Paul Zanker*, Pisa 2007, 181–98.

¹⁵ A different reading is suggested in the Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg, EDH-Nr. HD032538 (Scheithauer): *Quae parvis mater natis alimenta parabat / Fortuna in patrios vertit iniqua cibos / [haustus pulc(h)rum opus] est tenui cervice seniles / ast liquidus venae lacte [repente tumor] / [languentemque] simul uoltu (!) fricat ipsa Miconem / Pero tristis inest cum pietate pudor.*

The popularity of the story of Pero and Mycon in both literature and art in early imperial period suggests that any viewer would have recognised the painted representation of the story without any accompanying explicatory text. Moreover, on the Pompeian wall-painting the figures were also identified by the names painted next to them (today mostly faded away), which would have been sufficient for the recognition of the story. Why was the Pompeian painting accompanied by the inscribed text? Does the text add details that could not be illustrated in the picture? How do words and image interact with one another? Was the juxtaposition of text and image deemed as necessary for the reception of their message by either whom was looking at or whom was reading? Was, for example, the inscribed text designed to be read by the literate reader, while the painted image was for the illiterate viewer?¹⁶ Piazzzi argues that the ephrastic poem may have served to overcome the limitations of art by adding movement and temporal dimension to the represented story: the image of Mycon's veins, which are being filled with milk, and the ambiguous expression on Pero's face revealing both *pietas* and *pudor* could have not been completely visualised in the artistic media.¹⁷ Put in these terms, Piazzzi's argument seems to suggest that for the broadening of its restricted limits and for its complete and correct visualisation the viewing of the image needs necessarily being supported and completed by the text. The scholar's reasoning thus reiterates the traditional assumption that pictures are less valuable and only texts can unlock the meaning of an image or of a story.¹⁸ Rather, the insertion of an elegiac poem in the painted panel, which does not occur in the other recorded illustrations of the same story, may be motivated by the commissioner's desire to display his cultural interests or literary pretensions. That seems to be suggested by the arrangement of the whole panel, which was conveniently placed on the south wall of the room i (Fig. 3). Any visitor entering through the *fauces* (a) and walking along the northern side of the *atrium* would have been able to catch a glimpse of the written lines accompanying the painted scene, if the door of the room was left open. The viewer would have not been able to read the small

¹⁶ For a discussion of the relation between text and image on the Pompeian wall-paintings, see B. Bergmann, "A painted garland: weaving words and images in the House of Epigrams in Pompeii", in Z. Newby – R. Leader-Newby (eds.), *Art and Inscriptions in the Ancient World*, Cambridge 2007, 60–101.

¹⁷ Piazzzi 2007 (above n. 14).

¹⁸ This tradition of logocentrism is discussed in details by M. Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, Cambridge 2009. For a discussion of the relation between image and text in classical antiquity, see also Newby – Leader-Newby 2007 (above n. 16).

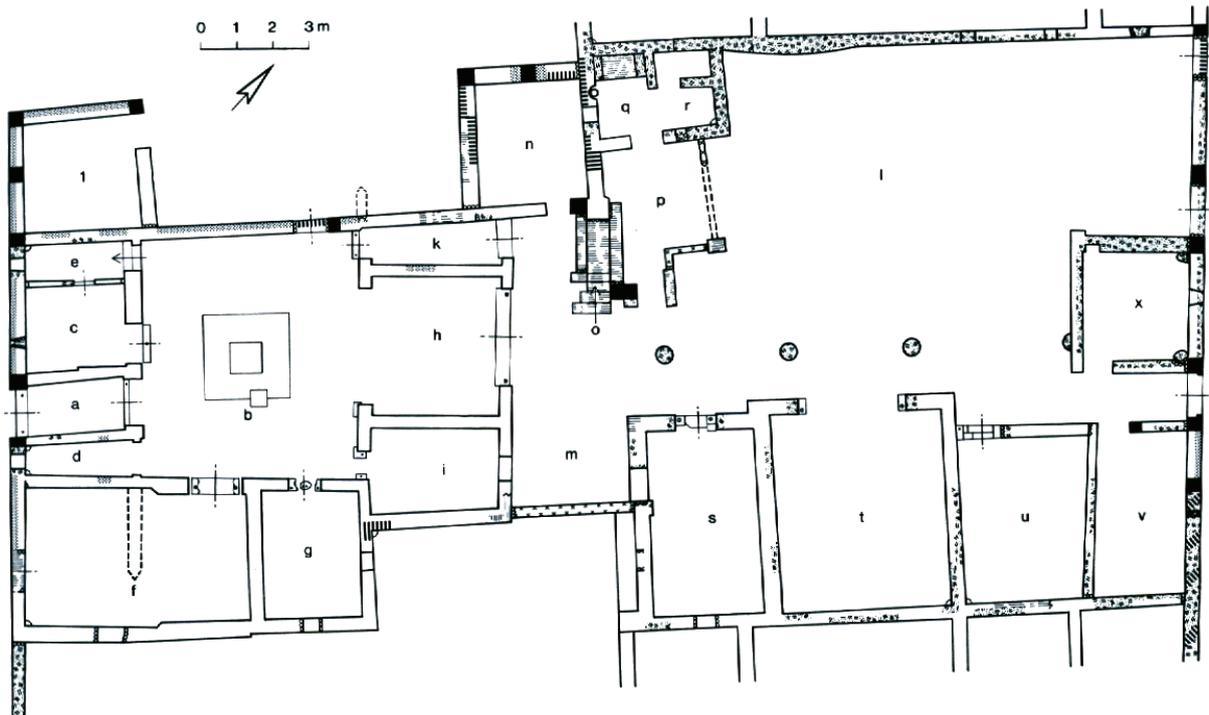


Fig. 3. Pompeii, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, house-plan (adapted from Peters *et al.* 1993 [above n. 14], fig. 113, p.137).

letters of the poem from that distance, but s/he would have immediately associated the appearance of letters painted on the wall with the house-owner's literacy.¹⁹ On a closer look inside the room and in relation with the painted figures of Pero and Mycon, the poem would have also helped the viewer contextualise the representation within a specifically interpretative framework. In the painting of Pero and Mycon, the inscribed text invokes *pietas* and *pudor*, which are significantly placed in the last line as to summarise the moral lesson contained in the story and to emphasise the importance of these two virtues for both men and women. The English translation 'modesty' does not convey the complex meaning of the term *pudor*, which refers to shame or sense of shame. As Kaster shows on the basis of the survey of the occurrences of the word *pudor* in Latin texts, the term was used to denote "a displeasure with oneself caused by vulnerability to just criticism of a

¹⁹ The owner of the House V.4,a in Pompeii has been identified as Marcus Lucretius Fronto on the basis of four electoral slogans painted in the nearby street and on a graffito found in the garden of the house. The appearance of the name of Lucretius Fronto on the slogans and that of Fronto on the graffito has led scholars to conclude that the house belonged to this politically active and rich public figure. Though the identification of the house-owner is not based on secure grounds, the big size of the house, the rich decoration, and the elegiac poem in the *cubiculum* point to a rich and literate Pompeian man.

socially diminishing sort" (shame) but also "an admirably sensitivity to such displeasure, and a desire to avoid behaviour that causes it" (sense of shame).²⁰ In the Pompeian epigram, the term *pudor* serves to reveal Pero's displeasure and sense of failure that may damage her social identity as a woman. In fact, in reference to women, the word *pudor* was limited to a single frame of reference, the sexual. Put in these terms, the *pudor* of women is congruent with their *pudicitia*, or sexual shame.²¹ In Roman society, *pudicitia* is a virtue that is to be on display by means of a range of codes such as dress, gesture, and the use of space and language in order to signal the individual's sexual respectability, which is often about not participating in prohibited sexual activity. The violability of Pero's body may be easily associated with the woman's lack of shame and consequently her conduct may be liable to be severely judged by the external viewer. By contrast, the mention of *pudor* in the painted epigram serves to warn the viewer against any severe judgement of Pero's action of feeding her father: though this kind of behaviour does not meet social expectations, no shameful incest is involved. With reference to the adult elite male, the term *pudor* describes a great emotional range, since men were involved in a wide range of social situations and relations which exposed them to the risk of *pudor*.²² In the epigram, the description of Pero drawing near her father and rubbing against him as a sign of affection seems to suggest that also Mycon may have felt a sense of shame in this kind of uncomfortable situation. Thus the insertion of the word *pudor* in the painted text serves to remind the reader of the fact that, in spite of the disturbing appearance of the scene s/he is looking at, the woman maintains her sexual respectability and the old man is safe from any kind of criticism that may undermine his good standing in society.

In the inscribed text, *pudor* is associated with another value of broader connotations, i.e., *pietas*. In Latin usage, the word *pietas* is used to designate the dutiful respect that one shows toward gods, fatherland, parents, and relatives. The structure of the painted poem seems to emphasise Pero's *pietas* rather than Mycon's. However, the viewer would have recalled the literary reference to the man's unjust conviction, which implies that Mycon was an upright man who performed his duties toward the gods and his fatherland with respect. In reference to Pero, the term *pietas* emphasises the values of affection and compassion that the daughter shows toward her father. Pero thus embodies the values of respect-

²⁰ R. A. Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint and Community in ancient Rome*, Oxford 1997, 4.

²¹ R. Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge 2006.

²² Kaster (above n. 20) 9–11.

ability (as a mother and as a daughter), of filial respect, and loving attachment to a member of her family.

Seen as a whole, the inscribed text and the painted scene of Pero and Mycon serve to provide viewers and readers with an illustration of moral qualities and moral issues which provoke reflection, and to provide role models for them to follow. The whole painted panel, however, was not an isolated picture to be viewed and read as a single work of art. It was rather part of a broader iconographic programme, which suggests further modes of viewing and reading.

Spatial context: architectural and decorative layout

The painting of Pero and Mycon was inserted in a small room (i) of the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto: the chamber (ca. 3.60 x 2.52 m) lay off the *atrium* b and on axis with the *fauces* d. Along with the painted scene of Pero and Mycon on the southern wall, the room was also decorated with the images of two children on either side of the entrance door and with the representation of Narcissus on the northern wall. The room seems to be a *cubiculum* because of its floor covering: a pattern of big marble *tesserae*, white and grey, of geometric shape is interrupted at 1.15m from the back wall, where the bed would have been placed.²³ Above the bed two differently-sized and -shaped windows look out into the small courtyard m.²⁴ The chamber was located in the communal area of the *atrium* (b), which also included two more *cubicula* (c and g), a *triclinium* (f) and the *tablinum* (h), which were all decorated with figured wall-paintings. A visitor entering the house from the opposite *fauces* (a) would have caught only a glimpse of the interior of the *cubiculum* through its open door. In fact, the arrangement of the *cubiculum*'s opening, which is off-centred in relation to the main entrance (a) and opposite a storeroom (d), would have protected the chamber's users from prying eyes. The closing of the door, moreover, would have secured a higher level of seclusion and intimacy within the room. It is difficult to ascertain whether the chamber was exclusively used by the female members of the household, as the small size and the arrangement of the door seem to suggest, or by men, as the location of the room in

²³ A. Anguissola, *Intimità a Pompei. Riservatezza, condivisione e prestigio negli ambienti ad alcova a Pompei*, Berlin – New York 2010, 550 Cat. 125.

²⁴ Santucci 1997 (above n. 6) 135 identifies the domestic space as a reception room for entertaining clients and dealing business, but the scholar does not fully specify the reasons for her identification.

the communal area of the *atrium* seems to indicate.²⁵ Perhaps, it would be rather better to describe the *cubiculum* as a not gender-specific room, which could have been used by both female and male members of the household, according to the need and to the times of the day.²⁶ The lack of any rigidly gendered distinctions in the use of the *cubiculum* is also suggested by the iconographic motifs of the wall-paintings, which could have addressed both male and female viewers.

On either side of the entrance door are two tondi bearing the busts of a boy and a girl.²⁷ The boy is represented wearing a *petasus* and holding a caduceus, as Mercury's attributes to symbolise his successful future in commercial activities under the protection of the god (Fig. 4). Significantly, the girl painted on the other side is shown without any gender or social attribute: there is even doubt whether the bust represents a girl or a boy, as the short hair and the *chlamys* are contradictory gender signals (Fig. 5). The lack of any distinctive sign with social connotations seems to underscore the lack of social identity of the girl in her childhood: the girl will be assigned her identity in the family and society only when she becomes a wife and a mother.²⁸

On the wall opposite the painting of Pero and Mycon is the illustration of Narcissus, who is depicted in the traditional scheme of a semi-nude youth sitting on a rock and looking at his image reflected in the pool below (Fig. 6).²⁹ The nudity of Narcissus, his elongated body open to be admired, the spear he holds to

²⁵ Because of the representation of the children, J. R. Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy 100 B.C. – A.D. 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford 1991, 159, argues that the room is a *cubiculum* for children. Unfortunately, there is too little evidence about the sleeping habits and activities of children in the Roman house to help us identify spaces exclusively arranged for children.

²⁶ The flexible use of the *cubiculum* is also frequently attested in textual record, which associates the room with a number of activities, from the intimate sleep and sex to the more social reception of guests, according to the times of the day and the class of visitors. See M. Carucci, *The Romano-African Domus: Studies in space, decoration, and function*, Oxford, 2007, 130–4; L. Nissinen, "Cubicula diurna, nocturna: Revisiting Roman cubicula and Sleeping Arrangements", *Arctos* 43 (2009) 85–107.

²⁷ Peters et al. 1993 (above n. 14) 336–9.

²⁸ Moormann (in Peters et al. 1993 [above n. 14] 405, 409) suggests that the images of the children represent two members of the family who died very young, but there is no evidence to support his statement.

²⁹ Peters et al. 1993 (above n. 14) 332–4; J. Hodske, *Mythologische Bildthemen in den Häusern Pompejis: die Bedeutung der zentralen Mythenbilder für die Bewohner Pompejis*, Ruppolding 2007, 252, Taf. 167; K. Lorenz, *Bilder machen Räume. Mythenbilder in pompeianischen Häusern*, Berlin 2008, 223, 428–9.



Fig. 4. Pompeii, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, *cubiculum* i, wall-painting: portrait of a boy (photo by the author).



Fig. 5. Pompeii, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, *cubiculum* i, wall-painting: portrait of a girl (photo by the author).

signify him as a hunter, and the natural landscape are details that all emphasise the erotic content of the painting. This is also heightened by the portrayal of Narcissus as a youth on the threshold between childhood and manhood:³⁰ the image of the adolescent male as the embodiment of beauty and sexual attraction is a recurrent motif in Latin erotic poetry. The adolescence of Narcissus would have produced a more striking effect if seen in contrast to the nearby images of the child in the guise of Mercury and of Mycon as an old man and a baby simultaneously. Placed within the framework of his personal story, the image of Narcissus who falls in love with his own reflection and dies would have also provoked reflection on the broader themes of gaze, subjectivity, eroticism, and viewing in art.³¹ In the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, the visualisation of many of these

³⁰ Ovid (*met.* 3,351–2) describes Narcissus as a sixteen-years old youth, who could have appeared both as a child and a young person.

³¹ For the discussion of the theme of Narcissus in antiquity, see E. Pellitzer, "Reflections, Echoes and Amorous Reciprocity: On Reading the Narcissus Story", in J. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, Totowa 1997, 107–20; M. Bettini, *The Portrait of the Lover*, Berkeley 1999, 94–99, 230–1; S. Bartsch, "The Philosopher as Narcissus: Vision, Sexuality and Self-Knowledge in Classical Antiquity", in R. Nelson (ed.), *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance*, Cambridge 2000, 70–99; P. Hardie, "Lucretius and the Delusions of Narcissus", *MD* 20–1 (2002) 71–89; J. Elsner, *Roman eyes: visuality & subjectivity in art & text*, Princeton 2007, 132–76. For a wider use of Narcissian themes in modern literature, see L.



Fig. 6. Pompeii, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, cubiculum i, wall-painting: Narcissus (photo by the author).

Narcissian themes may have been facilitated by the spatial arrangement of Narcissus' image, which appears as an isolated scene, set individually in the middle of a yellow wall, to easily focus viewers' attention. On the other hand, the insertion of Narcissus' story in a spatial context, which included other painted scenes and iconographic motifs, prompted viewers to try out different modes of viewing and reading. The scenes of Narcissus and Pero-Mycon, which are conveniently placed on opposite walls, may be seen as simultaneously complementary and contrasting. The two scenes may be connected by the motif of love, which the images of the small winged erotes on either side of the figured panels seem to emphasise.³² They both represent a love story: Narcissus falls in love with his

Spaas (ed.), *Echoes of Narcissus*, New York – Oxford 2000.

³² It is also possible that the erotes may have served a merely decorative function, as the attributes they hold (cornucopia, cantharos, thyrsus, and box) do not seem to be thematically related to the illustrated stories or to the two children.

own image, while Pero shows her love toward her father with an act of filial piety. On the other hand, the figure of Narcissus as a symbol of exclusive self-love appears in contrast with the images of Pero and Mycon as the visual representation of mutual love on which the family is built. The thematic opposition between the individualism of the boy and the close interaction of the daughter and her father is also emphasised iconographically by the illustration of Narcissus as an isolated figure and of Pero and Mycon as a closely embraced pair of figures. Within this intersecting-directional viewing, the fatal death of Narcissus seems to warn the viewer against the danger of moral isolation, while the survival of Mycon and the portraits of the two children state the importance of family relationships for the formation of personal and social identity.

The motif of the family as the thematic link of the pictures occurs again in the adjoining *tablinum*, whose sides walls were decorated with the representation of two mythical couples: Dionysus and Ariadne on one side and Mars and Venus on the other side. The image of the couples, who are represented as joined together and separated from the other accompanying figures, along with the gesture of Mars touching Venus' breast evokes the ideal of *concordia* between *dominus* and *domina* as the fundamental support of every family. The ideal of harmony in the family as the thematic link connecting the scene of Pero and Mycon with other mythical stories occurs again in the wall-paintings of the House of Bacchus (VII, 4, 10) and the House IX, 2, 5, both at Pompeii. In the House of Bacchus, the painting of Pero and Mycon appears in an unidentified room nearby the *atrium* along with the images of Venus and Adonis, which would symbolise here the union of a man and a woman around which the family revolves, and of Hector with his wife Andromache and his son Astyanax as the visual representation of the family as composed of husband, wife, and offspring. In the House IX, 2, 5, the painting with Pero and Mycon was associated with the story of Ariadne abandoned: placed on the side walls of the *triclinium*, the two panels would have been seen as pendants linked by the idea of harmony whose presence or absence may sustain (Pero and Mycon) or destroy (Ariadne) a family.

Social context: family dynamics in the early imperial times

The choice of the story of Pero and Mycon as a decorative motif in association with images thematically linked by the idea of family may have been influenced by some sort of changes in family relations and attitudes in the early imperial society. Placed in a larger social framework, in fact, the story visualises significant

cultural transformations of the early Empire that Augustan laws had promoted. It is without any doubt that Augustan moral reform affected profoundly dynamics of and attitudes toward family and gender roles in the Roman society during the following centuries of imperial experience. As Dixon argues, literary texts, funerary sculpture and inscriptions show that a sentimental ideal of Roman family arose in the late Republic and continued in Imperial times.³³ This ideal of happy, unite, affectionate family was reinforced and invoked in everyday life against the more dramatic realities of frequent divorces, remarriages, and death of children.³⁴ In line with this prevalent sentiment, Augustus introduced a series of laws, which promoted the virtues of marriage, procreation, and large families; this was combined with an increased number of representations displaying family groups, children, and mothers. With its emphasis on the return to family values, the Augustan program also drew much attention to women as significant contributors to the restoration and keeping of the system: their good behaviour within the domestic context was considered as partly responsible for the health of the state. The result was a wider representation of female figures in Augustan society and throughout Imperial times in literature, in inscriptions, in commemorative reliefs as well as in domestic decoration.³⁵ An illustrative example are the sculpted images decorating the Ara Pacis Augustae, the altar that the Senate commissioned in 9 BC to celebrate Augustus' return from Spain and Gaul.³⁶ The sculptures depict scenes of sacrifices to the gods as an image of traditional Roman piety whose timeless value is emphasised by the juxtaposition of scenes drawn from the Roman myth, legend, and history. However, the idea dominating the entire state monument is the family, and more specifically Augustus' family which will ensure prosperity and peace to Rome. On the altar, in fact, Augustus is represented surrounded by the members of his family, which exceptionally includes women and children, to exemplify the values of marriage and childrearing. The message of fecundity and related prosperity is conveyed more clearly

³³ S. Dixon, "The Sentimental Ideal of the Roman Family", in B. Rawson (ed.), *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, Oxford 1991, 99–113.

³⁴ B. Rawson – P. Weaver (eds.), *The Roman Family in Italy: status, sentiment, space*, Oxford 1997.

³⁵ N. B. Kampen, "Between Public and Private: Women as Historical Subjects in Roman Art", in S. B. Pomeroy (ed.), *Women's History and Ancient History*, Chapel Hill 1991, 218–48; T. R. Ramsby – B. Severy-Hoven, "Gender, Sex, and the Domestication of the Empire in Art of the Augustan Age", *Arethusa* 40 (2007) 43–71.

³⁶ D. K. K. Kleiner, "The Great Friezes of the Ara Pacis Augustae", *MEFRA* 90 (1978) 753–6.

by the allegorical image of a female figure holding two plump babies amidst lush vegetation, animals, and the personifications of the winds. Although the identification of this figure is not certain (Tellus, Pax, Venus, Terra Mater), the symbolically reproductive body of this allegorical figure would be connected with the really reproductive bodies of the imperial women. In spite of iconographic and narrative differences, on the Pompeian painting too, the image of Pero breastfeeding highlights the reproductive capacity and main role of the female body. A further visual illustration of the virtues of motherhood and childcare as ideals transposed onto the mythological world appears in the *cubiculum* of the House of the Postumii (VIII, 4, 4) in Pompeii, where the wall painting shows the image of a maenad holding the baby Dionysus.³⁷ In all these artistic scenes, women are portrayed as wives and mothers as the only role that they are asked to play within the sphere of their family and society. This ideal of the woman as an obedient daughter, devoted wife, and good mother was not invented in Augustan times: faithfulness to the husband, fertility, and ability to run the household were the traditional virtues that were praised in the old Republic to exemplify the Roman woman. What was new in Augustan times was to put the female *domestica bona* on display in public spaces. In Augustus' programme, the publicity of the female members of his family and the praise of their domestic virtues were strategically promoted to support the creation of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.³⁸ This is clearly evident on the friezes of the Ara Pacis, where female fertility is closely linked to the triumph of Roman imperialism. However, Augustan ideology along with its moral reform promoted by a number of laws on marriage and procreation deeply transformed approaches to and dynamics of the whole Roman society not only within the restricted limits of Rome but also in the broader area of the imperial provinces. In Pompeii, the impact that changes and ideals of the imperial family had on the transformation of gender roles and familial responsibility in the provincial elite is evident in a number of exemplary women, such as Eumachia.³⁹ In the early first century AD, Eumachia, the public priestess of Venus and member of

³⁷ Pugliese Carratelli – Baldassarre (above n. 4), vol. VIII, 465 no. 22.

³⁸ B. Severy, *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire*, New York – London 2003; K. Milnor, *Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus: Inventing Private Life*, Oxford 2005.

³⁹ For a description and discussion of the women's roles in Pompeii, see E. Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text*, Oxford 1994, 330–44; L. Savunen, *Women in the urban texture of Pompeii*, Helsinki 1997; J. J. Dobbins – P. N. Foss (eds.), *The World of Pompeii*, London – New York 2007, 526–37.

the local elite, paid for the construction of a large public building in the Forum.⁴⁰ The architectural layout of the structure, whose function has not been identified, closely resembles the plan of the *Porticus Liviae* on the Severan marble plan. Literary sources inform us that this *porticus* was dedicated by Livia and Tiberius in seven BC, while Livia alone dedicated an *Aedes Concordiae Augustae* nearby in the same year as a visual form of celebration of her harmonious marriage to Augustus.⁴¹ The building of the *porticus* by Livia and her son and the dedication of a shrine to the conjugal *concordia* emphasise the unity and harmony of a specific family. However, because of its political role, the domestic experience of the imperial family becomes for the entire Roman elite an ideal to praise and to make public. Eumachia's association with both the imperial family and Livia, as a model for the elite women who participate in public life, is also suggested by the accompanying inscription above the entrance, which states that the building has been built by Eumachia in her own name and that of her son and dedicated to *concordia Augusta* and *pietas*.⁴² The role of Eumachia, who sponsors a public building in the traditionally male-defined area of the Forum and thus assures the political future of her son, shows how the deep changes of gender roles and family dynamics of the Augustan family affected the provincial society of Pompeii, too. Eumachia's dedication shows close parallels with the painting of Pero and Mycon, such as the reference to *pietas*, which occurs in both inscriptions, and the invocation to the familial harmony, which is visualised in the material appearance of the Eumachia's building and in the physical closeness of Pero and Mycon in the painted panel.

A further artistic example of Augustan ideology, which focuses on the idea of family and shows some parallels with the painted scene of Pero and Mycon, is the *porticus* of the temple of Apollo at Rome. As part of the Augustus' Palatine complex, the *porticus* was decorated with the statues of the fifty Danaids along with the image of their father. The reason why the images of the Danaids, who, at the order of their father Danaus, murdered their cousins-husbands on their wedding night, were inserted in the decorative program of the Augustan complex has puzzled scholars and has been variously explained. The myth may allude to

⁴⁰ J. H. D'Arms, "Pompeii and Rome in the Augustan Age and Beyond: The Eminence of the *Gens Holconia*", in R. I. Curtis (ed.), *Studia Pompeiana et classica in honor of Wilhelmina F. Jashemski, 1. Pompeiana*, New Rochelle 1988, 51–68; Savunen 1997 (above n. 39) 53–6; Severy 2003 (above n. 38) 246–7.

⁴¹ Ovid. *fast.* 6,638.

⁴² *CIL* X 810.

fratricide and civil war, as it is a tale of cousins killing cousins; it may contain a reference to Augustus' triumph at Actium, as the Graeco-Egyptian Danaids recall Cleopatra; the act of the Danaids, who rejects the "foreign" marriage at the behest of their father may mirror Rome's rejection of Antony under the command of the *pater patriae* Augustus.⁴³ Nevertheless, the myth may suggest a further reading, if inserted within the framework of moral reform and family legislation promoted by Augustus. The Danaids' image as dutiful daughters and killers of their husbands at once highlights the difficulties in locating women in public discourse. Nevertheless, it also illustrates the extent to which female domestic virtue may be complementary of male public power and sometimes even more effective than that (Danaus did not kill anyone in his daughters' wedding night).⁴⁴ In spite of disturbing elements in the story which portrays the Danaids as the wives who murder their husbands, the myth emphasises the importance of the female members of the household for the unity of the family. As the Danaids were represented as dutiful daughters, Pero too is an example of a devoted daughter who takes an extreme action (breastfeeding her father) in order to restore the unity of her father's family that the authority of the state had tried to destroy with its unjust sentence of death.

The ideals of family life, which developed in Imperial times, form then the social frame into which the painted story of Pero and Mycon along with its accompanying illustrations in the *cubiculum* of the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto may be inserted. Far from being a disturbing scene, as it may appear at first glance, the illustration of Pero and Mycon is rather a celebration of *domestica bona* on which familial happiness and harmony (*concordia*) are based.

Conclusions

Similarly to the domestic experience of the imperial family, in the Pompeian household the visibility of the virtues of the members of the family (including women and children) in the domestic space was necessary for the construction of the *pater familias*' social identity as a good father and thereby a good citizen.

⁴³ E. W. Leach, "Hypermetra's Querela: Coopting the Danaids in Horace Ode 3.11 and in Augustan Rome", *CW* 102 (2008) 13–32; Milnor 2005 (above n. 38) 51–3.

⁴⁴ Because of the scarce archaeological evidence, we do not know whether the sculptural group included Hypermetra, the only Danaid that spared her husband's life. See A. Carandini, *La Casa di Augusto dai "Lupercalia" al Natale*, Bari 2008, 84–8.

The public display of virtues, which were strictly associated with the domestic sphere, becomes then a means by which the male head of the household could give a correct presentation of his role and social identity to a viewing audience. In the Roman visual culture, the invocation of virtuous femininity and male respectability was materially visualised and communicated through the correct choice of specific iconographic motifs and their location. Thus in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, the story of Pero and Mycon as a representation of filial love was associated with the images of children, who will ensure the continuity of the family's line, and of Narcissus to signify the dangers of excessive individualism and negation of sociality.⁴⁵ The arrangement of these complementary wall-paintings in a *cubiculum*, which could have been variously used by the family (both female and male members of the household) and the guests, enabled the house-owner to display the high moral qualities and unity of his family to a wide audience.

The analysis of the painted scene of Pero and Mycon in its original social context shows that the discussion of a figurative panel within a broader social and cultural framework may suggest further possible meanings of the same scene and allow a deeper insight into the society which produced the artistic image. Surely, the appearance of the story of Pero and Mycon on only three wall-paintings in Pompeii and the restricted number of public buildings overtly displaying female virtues limit the number of comparisons with other figurative examples of *domestica bona*. It is hoped that in the future even more themes represented on the Pompeian wall-paintings will be analysed extensively within their original context for a deeper understanding of Roman imperial society.

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⁴⁵ According to the mythical tale, the adolescent Narcissus ignored the love of many nymphs and youths and consequently the possibility of constructing a family and being a member of it.