

**The Art of Power: Ambiguity, Adornment, and the Performance of
Social Position in the Pompeian House**

by

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*For my mother, who sees through ambiguity
For my father, who lives above prestige,
And for Esmé, who is the sort of woman that the rest of us write about.
With my love and unfathomable thanks*

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“There would be little left of me if I were to discard all of what I owe to others.”

-Goethe

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Abstract

In the tumultuous period between 80 BCE and 79 CE, social actors in the Italian Peninsula struggled to effectively articulate their positions in connection to the new political landscape of Rome. For these individuals, power was constructed visually; visual markers from jewelry and wall paintings to monumental temples and arches all acted as materializations of personal and social power intended to express physical presence and to reinforce personal, social, and political boundaries; while such boundaries are a mental construct, they are performed and maintained in the physical world, and thus require such material mediations to be made real. This dissertation asserts that self-presentation creates social realities, and that by examining material evidence associated with such acts of self-presentation—jewelry and depictions of jewelry—we can access and explore social tensions. It offers up a new paradigm for the interpretation of jewelry and depictions of dress practices in the archaeological record of Pompeii, stepping away from a system that privileges words over images to explore the ways in which interactions between adornment and viewership elucidate the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies in Pompeii.

After an introductory chapter, Chapter Two constructs a theoretical framework informed by modern fashion theory to propose a new approach to the study of jewelry in the archaeological record, one that focuses on social function

rather than upon intrinsic value as a central tenet. It thus argues that jewelry forms a material boundary between the self and the other, suggesting that boundaries are at the heart of both the viewing process and of self-presentation. Chapter Three tests these assertions through a close visual reading of Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries, asserting that the realistic depiction of jewelry in the room invites the viewer to conflate reality and depiction, thus creating an opportunity for the viewer to reassess her social milieu. Chapter Four continues this discussion with an examination of the architecture and visual program of the House of the Seven Skeletons, suggesting that while imperial elites in Rome might purchase their social position through familial ties, sub-elites, like the homeowners of such houses in Pompeii, created and maintained their place in the social hierarchy through self-presentation, and that the structure and decoration of their houses allowed them to express and to negotiate their social ambitions. It proposes that depictions of observer figures throughout the house reflect a concern over the dangers of interest in adornments and luxury items, and that the maintenance of conservative dress on such figures invites viewers to self-consciously confront their social realities. Chapter Five considers the dinner party as a space in which such confrontations would have occurred, referencing Petronius's *Cena Trimalchionis* to argue that viewing is not only an internal process, but one that is enabled by group discussion. It suggests that adornment assumes an audience, and that by wearing it, an individual both marks his or her agency and invites comment. Such an emphasis invites a discussion of wealth, and this chapter confronts the disjunction between wealth and status directly, contending that the existence of sumptuary legislation

regulating displays of wealth suggests that those in power felt a need to reinforce it, and that thus the structures of power were themselves unstable in those periods when such legislation was enacted. Chapter Six weaves these threads together, suggesting that in the discussions that are key to interpretation, both of walls and of individuals, laughter is a tool of interpretational censure, one that is used to mark the boundaries between in-group and out-group, and that in the visual programs of Pompeian houses, ambiguity is intentional, meant to enable such group differentiation by privileging knowledge over wealth. The dissertation concludes that jewelry is far more than an indicator of wealth, that adornment practices are themselves a form of socially determined knowledge, that the positive transformative power of adornment should be understood as a catalyst, and that this underutilized corpus of material offers up myriad opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER ONE

Learning to See: Circumventing the Power of Words

The paintings that adorned the walls of Pompeian houses did not exist in a vacuum. While modern viewers are most likely first to encounter these images in isolation—projected onto screens and printed in books—for Pompeian viewers they were part of a rich and complex visual environment. The existence of multiple depictions within a room was an invitation to conversation, opening up the possibility to distinguish oneself through erudition, or embarrass oneself through the lack of it. The knowledge of what was depicted, and what was appropriate to depict, was as much a part of personal prestige performance as the wearing of jewelry or the execution of public duties, and indeed, was in communication with these performative spheres; but unlike these more discernable actions, the interpretive process leaves little evidence. Indeed, the ephemerality of interpretive processes made them an effective tool in times of social upheaval, difficult to access by those on the outside, whether they be outsiders in economic, social, or political terms.

This dissertation is concerned with exploring the ephemeral, the performances of self that allowed individuals from a variety of social spheres to negotiate their world. It does so by emphasizing the interplay between individuals

and groups, highlighting group acceptance and censure as key components in status negotiation. To explore these ambiguous interactions, it focuses on the material record of Pompeii in the period between 80 BCE and 79 CE, emphasizing the unique Campanian character of the city as a background for the Pompeian viewer. Because the viewer in Pompeii would be classified as sub-elite by Roman standards, the Campanian focus of the dissertation allows us to confront the ways in which expressions of power and prestige intersect with aspiration. To ground this discussion, we use depictions of adornments to consider both the ways in which physical appearance could signal social position and the ways in which the inclusion of recognizable contemporary dress practices in depiction invites viewers to reconsider their social realities.

Setting the Stage

The performance of social position is an inherently ambiguous process. It is both dependent upon and controlled by perceptions, on the interpretations of others. Maintained through a complex system of word and deed, of personal appearance and group acceptance, it can be difficult to determine the means by which individuals successfully manipulate the mechanisms that indicate prestige to others. These “others” are perhaps the most elusive and important component in equations of power. They are audience and arbiter simultaneously, and their goodwill may be lost in the space of a moment.

The consequences of angering the Roman crowd could be severe. The period between Sulla’s foundation of a Roman colony at Pompeii in 80 BCE and the

eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE is dominated by shifting social practices, as the leaders of Rome and their counterparts in communities across the Italian peninsula explored the possibilities that an explicitly imperial structure afforded to them. Not all were successful. Julius Caesar's attempts to revise his social standing ended bloodily. Cicero, for all of the care and anxiety he exerted in his attempts to integrate himself into Roman senatorial society, fared little better. Poets, philosophers, and imperial adjuncts all distinguished themselves in their respective fields, and then were exiled or worse for their social missteps. In a system that both required extraordinariness and condemned it, the decisive speech and action that characterized the heroes of the Republic, the plain speech of a Cincinnatus or the quick action of a Scipio Africanus became social liabilities.

Words, the longstanding purview of the educated Roman elite, retained their potency in the long century between 80 BCE and 79 CE. This period produced perhaps the most celebrated wordsmiths in the Latin corpus. From Cicero's impassioned orations, to Catullus' poignant, salacious poetry, to Virgil's Italo-centric verse, to Ovid's thought provoking re-examinations of venerated themes, the ability of words to garner praise and prestige for their authors, even to propel men into new social spheres, is clear. But it is the clarity of words, their relatively ready intelligibility that makes them a potential danger. Ovid blamed his exile from Rome in 8 CE upon *carmen et error*¹, a poem and a mistake, suggesting that even those skilled in their craft might find their abilities to be a double edged sword.

¹ The reference to a poem and a mistake can be found in Ovid, *Tristia* 2.207; the poem is almost certainly the *Ars Amatoria*. The mistake is more difficult to pinpoint. Peter Green's assertion that Ovid was commanded to keep the *error* a secret, and that at least one highly placed public figure was

Deeds were even more problematic. Military victory might pave the way for the assumption of unprecedented power, as it did for leaders from Marius to Sulla to Pompey Magnus to Julius Caesar, but it did not ensure longevity of power. Mark Anthony and Agrippa each spearheaded strategically significant and militarily successful campaigns, but their skill on the battlefield did not supersede their hierarchically subordinate standing. Yet even they fared better than Lucullus, the politician given pro-consular power in the province of Cilicia in order to enable him to confront Mithridates. In the years that he kept command, he added Asia, Bithynia, and Pontus to his territories, only to be ousted by Pompey just in time for him to declare victory in the East.² As Pompey's machinations suggest, the simple act of doing was not enough to ensure accolades.

Increasingly, the actions of a few altered the realities of many, subverting pre-existing mechanisms of power and re-forging the empire's system of governance. In these nebulous times, old methods of maintaining elite identities became increasingly invalid. Subtlety of approach and finesse of execution had come to the fore. Virgil alludes to this shifting structure in the final lines of the *Aeneid*. Far more ingenious than a simple panegyric to Augustus, Virgil's text is rife with "characteristic...melancholy and nostalgia," and that nostalgia is rooted in the Italic warriors that must be defeated in order for Rome to be founded.³ Unlike the

involved is convincing; his suggestion that the conflict was linked to the "factional struggle" between the Julians and the Claudians, and that the *Ars Amatoris* and its purported immorality served as a convenient excuse to exile Ovid without having to refer directly to whatever his actual crime was bears further scrutiny. See Peter Green, "Carmen et Error: προφασις and αιτιαη in the Matter of Ovid's Exile, *Classical Antiquity* 1 (October 1982), 206-207, 213.

² Michael Crawford, *The Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 154-155.

³ Adam Parry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 2.4 (1963), 6.

self-assertive Greek warriors with whom Virgil consistently juxtaposes him, Aeneas is indecisive and uncertain. It is in Turnus, defender of Italic virtues and hero in the mode of Ajax, that the reader finds the vitality of the Homeric leader. His death is the symbolic death of the past heroism that he embodies. It is the culmination of a litany of Italic defeats, wherein the sons (and daughter) of strong pre-Roman Italic communities and the values that they espouse are killed in order to make way for a new world order, one embodied by the vexed figure of Aeneas himself. Far from the heroes of an earlier era who valued action and piety and honor, Aeneas thrives on mediocrity, on uncertainty, and at times on outright deceit.

It is telling that Virgil's text is so often cited as a celebration of the glory of imperial Rome. For on the surface, that is precisely what his poem is. It is only through an intricate and erudite system of allusion that another set of potential meanings is suggested. As Adam Parry puts it, "Virgil continually insists on the public glory of the Roman achievement... but he insists equally on the terrible price one must pay for this glory...human freedom, love, personal loyalty, all the qualities which the heroes of Homer represent, are lost in the service of what is grand, monumental and impersonal: the Roman State."⁴ Through his interpretation of Virgil, Parry states plainly what the bloody political machinations of the late Republic wrought. With the creation of a new world order came the need for a revised system of prestige articulation, the results of which were not always predictable through the application of previous models. This is equally true in the world outside of Virgil's text. As the social structure of Rome itself was reorganized,

⁴ Parry, "Two Voices," 8.

the means of differentiating between social groups, of distinguishing oneself within a group, even the groups themselves, changed fundamentally. With this change, came new mechanisms of social performance. Much like Virgil's text presents subversion through a veneer of veneration, so too did these new methods of prestige articulation operate, of necessity, on multiple levels.

Just as Aeneas is no Homeric hero, the families that came to head the Roman state, the Julii and the Claudii, were hardly the most venerable. The Flavians were citizens of the Roman state, but provincials by the standards of the city nobility. Bloodlines, once perhaps the primary means of establishing and guaranteeing social status, were gradually supplanted by more readily obtainable sources of personal differentiation. With enough money, one could buy all of the trappings of high society, and perhaps even entry into it. Within such a system, how could elites distinguish themselves from non-elites? How could sub-elites compete with their peers? And how could those without the traditional markers of status take advantage of opportunities presented by shifting political and social boundaries?

The answer is easy to state, but difficult to elucidate. It can be summed up in a single word: ambiguity. The very thing that makes systems of status differentiation difficult to understand makes it possible to manipulate them. Subtle manipulations are more palatable than direct interference, and thus more effective. The very thing that makes exertions of power effective makes them difficult to detect and to understand. I am concerned here not with the vast and unbridgeable gap between the emperor in Rome and the field laborer in Liguria, but with the

negotiation of power between relatively similar individuals, particularly the disparity between those with monetary wealth and those with inherited status.

It is here that the performative aspect of selfhood becomes key. Hierarchical position is itself a type of identity, and as such it is understood not only through self-identification, but also through group acceptance.⁵ It is relatively easy to perform a status, but it is considerably more difficult to convince a group to accept that performance. The success of one's performance depends, not upon objects or words, but upon knowledge. Shared understanding of symbols and consensus over interpretation mark group affiliation; misuse of symbols and misinterpretation brand one as an outsider.⁶

Thus the paradoxical nature of our situation becomes increasingly apparent. In any knowledge-based system of differentiation, the modern scholar is at a distinct disadvantage. Even the best educated among us does not have access to the full range of concepts that a Pompeian elite might have drawn upon to indicate his or her social position. We are inevitably members of an out-group. We are spatially, culturally, and temporally removed from the group with which we seek to interact. How, then, are we to bridge this gap?

⁵ For the association between performativity and hierarchical identity see Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For the need for group acceptance of a putative identity see Sian Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 84.

⁶ For the interplay between symbols and group identity see Sheldon Stryker, *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version* (Menlo Park: Benjamin Cummings, 1980).

Introducing the Actors

Because one of our primary purposes is to explore the articulation of individual prestige differentials in Pompeii, we must attempt to identify and set aside modern biases and inconsistencies. First, we must disavow the primacy of the word. The need for this is twofold: 1. By turning to images before words, I believe we begin to align our thought processes with those we seek to understand. As Kelly Olson states, “[Power] depended in part on the appearance of it, on perceptions, on symbols and gestures... most Romans will have experienced power on the visual level.”⁷ Indeed, Michael Squire has convincingly argued that the mental privileging of word over image in modern Western thought stems from the Seventeenth century Protestant doctrine that renounced the use of images in church ceremonies, suggesting that the primacy of words in many scholarly approaches to art on the Bay of Naples reflects modern proclivities more than ancient realities.⁸ 2. By turning first to images, we may begin to separate the socio-cultural zone of Pompeii from that of the city of Rome.

The vagaries of preservation have left us with mismatched data. The bulk of our Latin textual sources from the period were produced by writers who were at least transplants to the city of Rome.⁹ The bulk of our painted domestic visual repertoire comes from a small town on the Campanian coast. Pompeii is a

⁷ Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-Presentation and Society* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 5.

⁸ Michael Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁹ While writers such as Sallust and Catullus were famously intertwined with the Roman city politics of their day, and Cicero actively sought entry into the society of the city, other authors maintained personal ties to the Italic provincial zones. Ovid famously hailed from Sulmona. Virgil may well have had Samnite ties; his mother’s family name corresponds to that of one of the major Samnite clans.

fascinating case study in large part because it is not a fabulously wealthy city; it offers us the opportunity to explore the civic and domestic lives of a subset of the population that receives little attention in text. The practices and situations described by these texts, particularly by historical texts, are those of ultra-elites in an imperial capital. It cannot be assumed that the practices of local elites in a town in Campania directly correspond to those of the imperial circle. The elites, or perhaps sub-elites, of Pompeii are not those of Rome.

Pompeii is a town rife with complexities. Its earliest phases date to the sixth century BCE; the language of its inscriptions from this period suggests that its politics were then dominated by Etruscan speakers.¹⁰ If Strabo is to be believed, sometime in the fourth century, control shifted to Samnites, Oscan speakers from the modern territories of Abruzzo and Molise, who were interested in the area for its strategic value in their ongoing confrontations with Rome (Figure 1.2).¹¹ Although the Samnite heartland was situated due east of Rome, these two centers were separated by the Apennine Mountains, and trans-Apennine travel was notoriously difficult.¹² Although our ancient textual sources do not state so explicitly, it is likely that the Oscan speakers who settled in Campania may have made their way to the region to attempt to secure a more ready path to Rome, one that would facilitate both battle and trade. For, by traveling through the more

¹⁰ Alison E. Cooley and M.G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2004), 5.

¹¹ Strabo, *Geography*, 5.4.8.

¹² The use of the word “Samnite” in literature concerning Pompeii is often somewhat liberal, meaning anything from a period in time to an ethnic group. Even in specialist circles the term “Samnite” itself is a vexed one; for some it refers to inhabitants of Samnium, for others, it can only be applied to members of the Samnite League, for still others it is restricted to those of the Frentani, Carricini, Marrucini, Paeligni or Pentri tribes. For our purposes here, Samnite corresponds roughly to “Oscan speaking.”

navigable southern reaches of the mountain chain, one could cross the peninsula, thence moving directly north from Campania to Rome along a safer route.

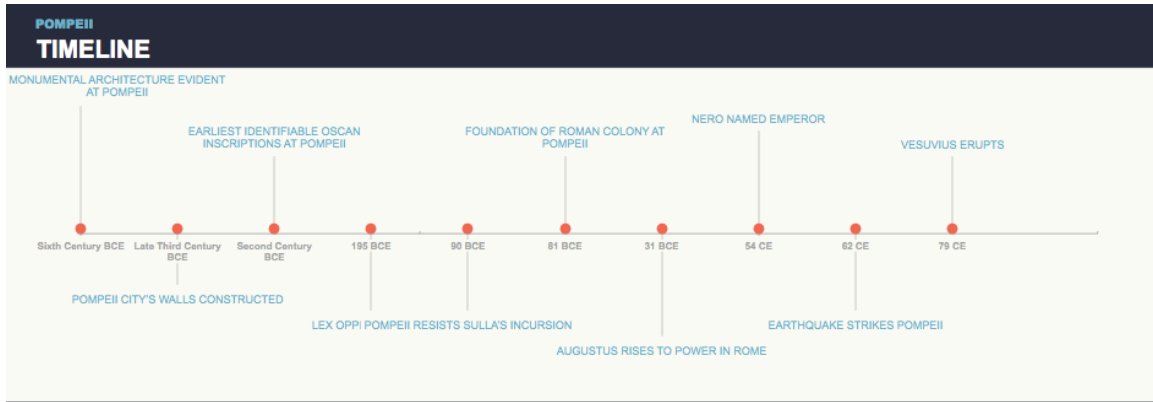


Figure 1.1: Timeline of Pompeian events referenced throughout the text

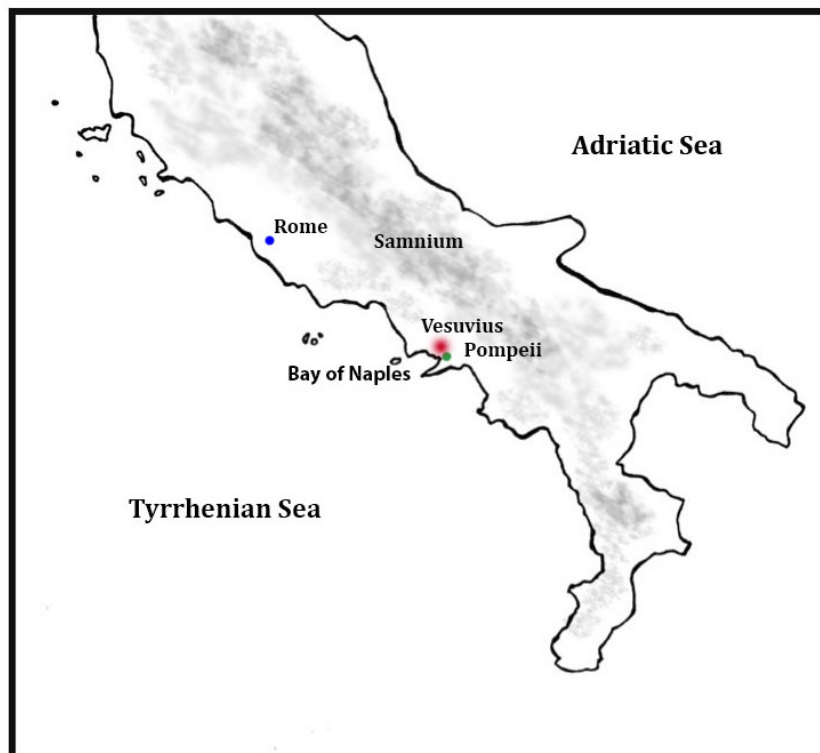


Figure 1.2: Sketch map of Italy notating the locations of Pompeii, Vesuvius, Rome and Samnium. After Prag and Repath 2009, 15.

From the second century BCE, Oscan dominates the inscriptions found in the town, detailing the euergetism of Pompeian officials, many of whom had traditional Samnite names. Like the majority of the Italian peninsula, Pompeii underwent contentious sociocultural shifts in the first century BCE. It was among the cities that opposed Rome during the Social War, and was besieged and eventually taken by Sulla in 89 BCE. With the foundation of a Roman colony at Pompeii in 80 BCE, Pompeii became Roman, at least to the modern scholar. But the integration of Roman colonists into the fabric of the city did not signal the eradication of the city's previous inhabitants, Oscan, Greek, and Italic alike. Cicero notes that some twenty years after the establishment of the colony at Pompeii, tensions between colonists and the town's original inhabitants remained, stating that dissention over voting rights, political campaigning, and access to sidewalks were ongoing, and had been for years.¹³ But while the question of voting rights appears to have been resolved, Pompeii retained much of its pre-colonial character well into its later years. Oscan speakers remained active players in the social life of the town well into the "Roman" period, with some important families from prior to colonization finding their way into high public office once more. Oscan graffiti are scattered throughout the town, the latest of which must have been inscribed after 72 CE, a date given by a coin pressed into the plaster of the brothel wall alongside the inscription.¹⁴ More tellingly, the official weights used to measure grain in the Forum remained on the

¹³ Cicero, *Pro P. Sulla Oratio*, *Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries* 30 edited by D.H. Berry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60-61.

¹⁴ Michael Crawford, *Imagines Italicae: A Corpus of Italic Inscriptions, (Volume 2)*. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies supplement 110* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, 2011), 702-703.

Oscan standard until the reign of Augustus.¹⁵ This influence may well have introduced symbols of its own into the town's communicative inventory.¹⁶ If longevity of inhabitation can be counted among the markers of social status, then "Samnites" may well have been among the city's elite, and would likely have utilized a range of social symbols that may have been intelligible only to themselves, perhaps excluding the very Romans who are so often our ideal in-group.¹⁷

This should not suggest, however, that Pompeii was an isolated zone, cut off entirely from the imperial capital to its north. Wealthy Romans were fixtures along the Bay of Naples. Statesmen and political leaders would have spent their summers in the sprawling villas that dot the coast. The political ramifications of Galba's *damnatio memoriae* of Nero are attested in Pompeian electoral graffiti.¹⁸ The mechanisms of Roman society certainly had proximity enough to influence Pompeii, but I am not convinced they had the pervasiveness to dictate its cultural navigations

¹⁵ Crawford, *Imagines Italicae*, 662-663.

¹⁶ There are few written records from Samnium, and the archaeology of the region is still in relative infancy, giving us little comparative data with which to further explore these thoughts. The recent excavation of a series of archaic and early imperial domestic sites in the Sangro Valley may shed light on the nature of Samnite domesticity, opening avenues of potential exploration for Pompeii.

¹⁷ While it is uncertain if the intent is exclusionary, I believe there may be at least three cases of Samnite influence evidenced in and around Pompeii. The first is in the construction and situation of the temple to Dionysus to the south-east of the town; together with its architecture, which resonates with temples such as that of Hercules Curinus in Sulmona, the fact that worship at the cult was not suspended following the 186 BCE senatorial decree banning the worship of Dionysus in Rome and its colonies is a firm indication of Pompeii's independence from Roman dictates. The second is in the preponderance of Greek text painted on scenes in domestic spaces. If the Samnites of Pompeii kept to the lingual traditions of the Apennine regions, Greek literacy was much more common than Latin literacy. The third centers upon the picturing of Venus throughout the site. She is often identifiable in large part through a set of jewelry that appears to be associated with her only in some areas of the Peninsula. While the association of the jewelry and the goddess is not here limited to Samnium, it is not especially common in Rome itself. I intend to expand on each of these concepts at a later date. For a discussion of the ways in which the introduction of a potential Samnite viewer into our thinking on visibility in Pompeii can nuance our understanding of even very well documented depictions see Neville McFerrin, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Depicting Darius in Pompeii," forthcoming.

¹⁸ Henrik Mouritsen and Ittai Gradel, "Nero in Pompeian Politics: *Edicta Muerum* and Imperial Flaminates in Late Pompeii," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 87 (1991), 154-155.

in their entirety. Yet, if we attempt to use the extant words to explain the extant paintings, or the extant paintings to illustrate the extant texts, we fail to take the complexity of both Roman and Pompeian daily life into account. Similarly, if we wish to better understand these past peoples, it would be foolish to disregard an entire body of information. How, then, are we to resolve this apparent conflict between word and image? By choosing our textual sources carefully, and by giving visual and material evidence attention in their own right.

Lifting the Curtain: Precedents and Influences

Images are inherently multi-valenced, making them uniquely suited as vehicles for the examination of complex concepts. To read an image is to become intimately acquainted with both illusion and allusion, and the combination of the two can easily lead to misinterpretation, or at least variable interpretations. As Vitruvius states, “The fact is that the eye does not always give a true impression, but very often leads the mind to form a false judgment.”¹⁹ Far from being an objective process, vision is almost inextricable from visuality. The apparatus of sight cannot meaningfully be divorced from the process of interpretation. A web of visual influences, dependent upon the viewer’s cultural, social, economic, geographical even physical background, intersect to allow that viewer to interpret an image. The intersectionality that is the hallmark of human identity converges on the

¹⁹ Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, VI.II.2 This statement is made in service of a larger argument in which Vitruvius describes the realistic effects of architectural elements painted on walls, in which the appearance of three dimensionality is achieved on a flat surface. While he does not discuss why such images might be prized, it is clear from his discussion that such effects are desirable, that the point is, in fact, to trick the mind.

interpretational landscape as much as it does on the social; indeed, given the need for external input to allow for interpretation, we might say that the act of interpretation is itself a social performance, albeit a mental one.

In the case of Pompeian wall paintings, the ability of visual evidence to comment on lived experiences may be linked, in part, to the mimetic potential of representational art. The depicted world can look like the real world, but it has the distinct advantage of being representation, rather than reality. A word can only rarely mean the opposite of itself, but an image has the potential to convey multiple, even contradictory, messages. In the highly charged realm of social performance, depictions, with their multiple potential interpretations, become ideal apparatuses for presenting potentially problematic readings of oneself and one's surroundings.

Given the pitfalls of speaking and acting overtly in the late Republic and early Empire, a system that allows for the articulation of power without reliance upon something as concrete as a word must have been a tantalizing option. If one could manufacture and maintain an in-group without the need to overtly articulate its creation, one could avoid the strife that seems almost inevitable when being deliberately exclusionary. This unpleasantness could be avoided by the creation of a visual system that is mutually intelligible to the parties that are intended to be included and only marginally accessible to those intended to be excluded.²⁰ I argue that such a complex visual system is in play in Pompeian houses and is activated by the people that inhabit them. Because patrons could choose to depict subjects that

²⁰ The marginal accessibility is, I think, important. It gives a sense of inclusion, while leaving space for ridicule. The subject of ridicule will be taken up again in chapters five and six, but for now, it is enough to say that it is a clear marker of rejection, and that when one is not so explicitly rejected, but views such a rejection occurring, the perceived value of the group is raised.

were accessible on multiple levels, they could allow for the creation of multiple levels of access and exclusion, capable of distinguishing between multiple levels of viewers. The creation of “mental distance” would have been achieved by restricting complete physical and mental access to all but a select few, thereby creating cohesion between those who know, by separating them from those who do not.

The relationship between depiction and personal prestige depends not only upon what scenes are depicted on the walls of specific rooms, but also upon the viewer’s understanding of his or her relationship to the depicted space. For “the visual” does not only mean “the depicted.” Clothed humans are as much a part of the visual sphere as the walls around them, and their personal appearance could have even more of a calculated effect than the paintings upon their walls. The association between living and depicted, between what is real and what is not, could create a shared “imaginal space,” one that commented on, but did not necessarily accurately reflect the world in which the viewers lived.²¹ Distance makes the articulation of indecorous, dangerous, or seditious topics both possible and palatable. Instead of commenting directly upon reality, viewers could utilize the interpretive space provided by images to give themselves plausible deniability.

²¹ The concept of imaginal space has an interesting and complicated history. Above all, it is *not* imaginary space. From a psychological standpoint, it is an analytical space, “an intermediate space within which transitional phenomena can emerge.” See Murray Stein, *Jungian Psychoanalysis: Working in the Spirit of Carl Jung* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2010), 135. From a cognitive perspective, imaginal space is linked to parietal lobe function, and the ability to problem solve, express compassion, and accurately articulate visual and verbal correspondences. See Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Healing the Social Brain* (New York: W.W. Horton, 2010), 141, 145. The idea has been applied to physical spaces, and representations of physical spaces previously, particularly to Sufi conceptions of space. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 179, 182. I am indebted to my good friend, Noah Gardiner, for pointing me toward this concept.

The understanding of these socially conditioned viewing practices is informed by theories of visuality. While intimately connected to the concept of modernity, at least as a theory, the term visuality refers to the processes by which a viewer interprets what he or she views. Such processes are closely tied to social critique and sedition, and although the term “visuality” might be relatively new the concepts can be tied to a variety of time periods and images, provided we have a good grasp of both what is being depicted and the socio-cultural milieus in which these images were created.²² Herein lies a problem for scholars of the classical period (or indeed any relatively distant historical period.) We are so far removed from this context that we cannot rely on our own socially conditioned viewing processes to interpret. When I look at the walls of a Pompeian house, my initial reading of the space can hardly be similar to that of a Pompeian viewer of the mid-first century CE. To illustrate this point we need look no further than the moral outrage voiced by late nineteenth and early twentieth century viewers at the explicitly sexual nature of many Pompeian wall paintings. But if we do not see as Pompeian viewers saw, then how can we correct this imbalance? If these images can tell us something about the socially conditioned viewing practices of the time in which they were created and viewed, how can we come to understand what they are saying?

We must return to the written word. Indeed, it seems almost inescapable. Even as Tacitus tells us that words can, quite literally, kill, he employs words to

²² For a critique of the association of visuality and modernity as well as a discussion of visuality and social dissent, see Nicholas Mirzoeff, “On Visuality,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 5 (2006), 53-79. For a seminal overview of the concept of visuality itself see Hal Foster ed., *Vision and Visuality* (New York: New Press, 1999).

convey the thought.²³ The question becomes not “Should we use texts?” But “How should we use texts?” We are lucky to be thinking in a time in which a great deal of groundwork has already been done for us. In the case of those wall paintings that depict human figures, be they mortal, mythological, or divine, many of the scenes and individuals depicted have already been identified and named by a veritable army of Neo-Classicists. Because of their work, we do not now have to devote the majority of our attention to identification. Instead, we may think about alternative means of interpretation, and the ways in which texts can illuminate thought processes.

The idea of considering the mental framework around these paintings is built upon the work of Karl Schefold and Mary Lee Thompson, who were pioneers in the programmatic interpretation of domestic wall paintings.²⁴ Their work, which postulates narrative relationships in room decorations, underscores my analysis of the deliberate construction of interpretive spaces. Schefold and Thompson use texts to interpret what is represented in images, turning to written sources when they need to explain what is being pictured. They tend to discuss programs in isolation, with little interest in their place within the house as a whole, but with great attention given to the interpretive possibilities that arise from the image pairings that they identify. Much as the relationship between word and image is relatively

²³ On the subject of killer words, see Tacitus, *The Annals* 16.19.3. This episode is concerned with the death of Petronius Arbiter, itself a double for the death of Seneca at 16.62-64. Both Petronius and Seneca may well have been put to death because of their words, and their final words led to the deaths of others. We will return to Petronius and the words that might or might not have done him in Chapter Five.

²⁴ Karl Schefold, *Pompeianische Malerei: Sinn und Ideenschichte* (B. Schawabe, 1952); Mary Lee Thompson, “Programmatic Painting in Pompeii: The Meaningful Combination of Mythological Pictures in Roman Decoration,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1960).

straightforward in their work, the mental landscape of the putative Roman viewer is somewhat one-dimensional. Once you have identified the things depicted, and their relationship to other things depicted, your task as a viewer is complete. As Richard Brilliant clearly articulates it, in these early studies of narrative, “works of art tend to be imprisoned by the word, as if the visual images had been created primarily as illustrations of some familiar story.”²⁵

Rather than seeking out such familiar stories to associate narrative with image, I turn to textual evidence as an avenue to explore potential thought processes. When trying to think as others thought, it is possible to become lost in the inner workings of one’s own mind. In my process, Latin texts serve as a counterbalance, as frameworks to understand the ways in which a Pompeian viewer might have approached the act of interpretation. In this, I follow Brilliant himself. His work nuances the relationship between word and image by emphasizing the ways in which studies of the narrative structure of literary works can be used to better understand the construction of visual narratives. Such an approach is further explored by a number of contemporary thinkers from Jaś Elsner, who was a key figure in the introduction of theories of visibility to the Classical art historical sphere, to Basil Dufallo, who, like Elsner, uses the poetic concept of ekphrasis as a lens through which to reconstruct a potential mental relationship between the viewing of art and the reading of text.²⁶ Hérica Valladares’s masterful presentation

²⁵ Richard Brilliant, *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 20.

²⁶ See in particular: Jaś Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Jaś Elsner, *Art and Text in Roman Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jaś Elsner, “Viewing Ariadne: From

of the visual implementation of Ovid's theory of mimesis in the House of Octavius Quartio and the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto demonstrates the utility of such an approach.²⁷

Bettina Bergmann's stimulating and erudite discussion of Cicero's use of locations within a house to facilitate memorization and the ways in which the concept of an ideal house has influenced modern thinking on the House of the Tragic Poet offers another approach, one that is paired with the meticulous reconstruction of the house's interior.²⁸ Bergmann's ability to balance a close textual reading with careful consideration and reconstruction of archaeological evidence distinguishes her from many earlier thinkers, Thompson and Schefold included, who at times managed to overlook the house in favor of the art. Her emphasis on the importance of the position of the viewer within the room as well as the ways in which that viewer must move in order to be able to view all of the paintings included in the space is a pivotal first step, without which I would be unable to consider the ways in which the physical appearance of these moving viewers influences the interpretation of the space as a whole.²⁹

My work is indebted to that of those who came before me in innumerable ways, but more specifically, because of their careful study, I am freed from the

Ekphrasis to Wall Painting in the Roman World," in *Classical Philology* 102 (January 2007), 20-44; Jaś Elsner, "Art History as Ekphrasis," in *Art History* 33 (February 2010), 10-27; Basil Dufallo, *The Captor's Image: Greek Culture in Roman Ecphrasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁷ Hérica Valladares, "Fallax Imago: Ovid's Narcissus and the Seduction of Mimesis in Campanian Wall Painting," *Word and Image* 27 (January, 2012), 378.

²⁸ Bettina Bergmann, "The Roman House as Memory Theater: The House of the Tragic Poet at Pompeii," *Art Bulletin* 76 (1994), 225-257.

²⁹ Bettina Bergmann, "Rhythms of Recognition: Mythological Encounters in Roman Landscape Painting," *Im Spiegel des Mythos: Bilderwelt und Lebenswelt*, Edited by Francesco de Angelis and Susanne Muth (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1999), 85.

obligation to find texts that speak directly to images. I will not be using texts about Ariadne to discuss images in which she appears. Instead, when I turn to the written record, it will be in an attempt to consider a range of interpretive mindsets that might have been available to the Pompeian viewer. To this end, I limit the texts that I reference to those written by authors cited in Pompeian graffiti, or to laws that could reasonably have been expected to have been followed by Roman citizens within the town. The primary exception to this is my use of the *Cena Trimalchionis*, which, as our sole surviving source concerned with non-elite dining practices, is too useful a text to set aside.

Putting on the Show

There are as many lenses through which to view Pompeian wall paintings as there are viewers, and to some extent, no matter how careful we are, our own lenses will color our interpretations. I intend to mitigate this parallax error by turning to depictions of adornment and dress practices as my point of interpretational entry. Jewelry has long been a preferred means of visual distinction in part because, in the abstract, it is difficult to misinterpret. The materials that comprise adornments are often intrinsically valuable; size and weight correspond to monetary expenditure and an excess of resources. The wearing of adornment is an expression of the social significance of both the wearer and the purchaser. Its effective deployment constitutes a symbol of elite group inclusion, and as such, it is useful for our purposes.

Personal adornment is a unique category within the set of materials we might use to access the visual vocabulary of social performance. It is evidenced in the material, the textual, and the depicted record. The materials of jewelry, primarily gold and precious stones, preserve well, unlike those of other prestige goods such as perfume and cloth that are more difficult to study archaeologically. Simply put, it is possible to study physical jewelry excavated in Pompeii. The importance of jewelry in the mindscape of the Roman elite is underscored by the amount of writing devoted to it, both in favor of and against its further use. This textual evidence, particularly that of sumptuary legislation, allows us to situate this symbol of status within a temporally specific framework. All of this permits nuanced dialogue to emerge from its appearance in depictions.

Jewelry in the Pompeian Material Record

While it is possible to study physical jewelry excavated in Pompeii alongside depictions of worn jewelry in the wall paintings that adorned Pompeian houses, it is important to note that despite the site's remarkable preservation, the archaeological record is incomplete. This is true of sites in general; even in Pompeii, where we can date precisely the moment at which the town entered the archaeological record, we do not uncover evidence only of that single point in time, nor did the site remain untouched in the period between 79 CE and the start of excavations on the site in 1748.³⁰ As we noted above, the materials that were popular for the jewelry in

³⁰ For a discussion of how sites are more of an accumulation of times than a point in time see Lewis R. Binford, "Behavioral Archaeology and the 'Pompeii Premise,'" *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37.3 (Autumn, 1981), especially page 196.

Pompeii—gold, jewels, pearls—are all valuable and desirable, well into the modern period. This presents us with a multifaceted problem. Jewelry does not only signal wealth, it is wealth in actuality, and the generally accepted value of its materials makes it relatively easy to convert to actual liquid assets if the occasion warrants it. The historian Suetonius makes this point clearly; the short-tenured emperor Vitellius, who was briefly in power during the year 69 CE, pawned one of his mother’s pearl earrings, thus obtaining enough ready money to pay for the expenses of a trip to Gaul.³¹ The commodity value of jewelry would have made it useful to those inhabitants of Pompeii who managed to flee the city as the volcano erupted. Easy to carry and easy to sell, much of Pompeii’s jewelry likely never entered the site’s archaeological record at all.

Those items of adornment that did make it into the record did not necessarily stay there. Pompeians who survived the destruction of the city likely returned to it, attempting to salvage what possessions they could, and certainly jewelry, whether one’s own or someone else’s, would have been a welcome sight.³² Not all jewelry was removed from the site by ancient looters. As the site began to welcome visitors, and without laws prohibiting the sale of antiquities, much jewelry was sold to early tourists as souvenirs.³³ Thus, the jewelry that is now associated with Pompeii is likely a small fraction of the whole. Much of the jewelry was found separate from

³¹ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, translated by Catharine Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 252.

³² For the idea of salvage and looting at Pompeii see Penelope Allison, *Pompeian Households: An Analysis of the Material Culture* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Technology, University of California, 2004), 23-24.

³³ Research in the archives at the British Museum suggests that it may be possible to piece some of this record back together, using a combination of personal papers from museum benefactors and site records. More work on this topic is forthcoming.

potential owners; stray earrings were dropped in shop entryways, and rings were found in seemingly empty houses. And although there are examples of bodies preserved wearing jewelry, we should be cautious in our interpretation of these modes of dress. The day that the volcano erupted was hardly ordinary; the quantities of jewelry worn on some bodies likely reflects the fact that it is easier to wear jewelry off site than to carry it.

Nevertheless, those items of jewelry that can be definitively associated with the site show a remarkable correspondence with depictions of jewelry on site. Such comparative work is greatly facilitated by recent catalogues of both jewelry from the area and of figures in Pompeii depicted wearing jewelry.³⁴ But while these catalogues are an invaluable resource for those interested in jewelry in Pompeii and a practical demonstration of the amount of information available for us to work with, we must be careful when attempting to discuss trends based upon these materials. It is tempting to think that it is possible to attempt to reconstruct the jewelry record of Pompeii, or at least the broad strokes of trends in adornment, by documenting the jewelry depicted in wall paintings.

At first glance, the data seem straightforward. Following the calculations of Antonio D'Ambrosio, Ernesto de Carolis, and Pier Giovanni Guzzo, there seems to be a trend towards greater adornment through time. So, by their count, nineteen figures are depicted wearing jewelry in the images of the Second Style, 127 in

³⁴ For jewelry see Antonio d'Ambrosio and Ernesto de Carolis, *I Monili dall'Area Vesuviana. Ministero per i beni Culturali e Ambientali Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, Cataloghi 6*. (Rome:L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1997); for the catalogue of figures see Antonio d'Ambrosio, Ernesto de Carolis, and Pier Giovanni Guzzo, *I Gioielli nella Pittura Vesuviana. Quaderni di Studi Pompeiani II*. (Rome: Realizzazione Editoriale Clavis, 2008).

figures of the Third, and 329 in figures of the Fourth (Figure 1.3)³⁵. But before we suggest that there is greater wealth or greater luxury in the final years of the city, we must pause to break down the data. One of the primary problems with the traditional four styles of Pompeian wall painting is this: by thinking about paintings as a typology, we implicitly associate them with a chronology, with one style following another in an orderly fashion. But all had to be in play simultaneously in order to be preserved, and it is with that thought in mind that we return to the data. While all four styles were in use simultaneously in 79 CE, the so-called Fourth style was the most popular at the time of the eruption. More paintings survive in the Fourth style than from any other. The fashionability of this type of painting means that, although some homeowners elected to keep earlier modes of painting in play, many chose to paint over previous styles. Thus, much as we do not have a complete record of jewelry on the site, we do not have a complete record of either Second or Third Style painting. To add to yet more data complexity, we should note that some Fourth style paintings also include more figures overall than their Second and Third Style counterparts. Aside from this, the numbers given above do not include depicted jewelry from those paintings that the authors felt that they could not assign to any one stylistic group, nor do they appear to take into account all of the jewelry worn by secondary figures, nor does it differentiate between figures wearing a single ring and figures wearing four necklaces and a diadem. More does not necessarily mean more, at least not in the case of unmediated data.

³⁵ D'Ambrosio, de Carolis, and Guzzo, *I Gioielli nella Pittura Vesuviana*, 12.

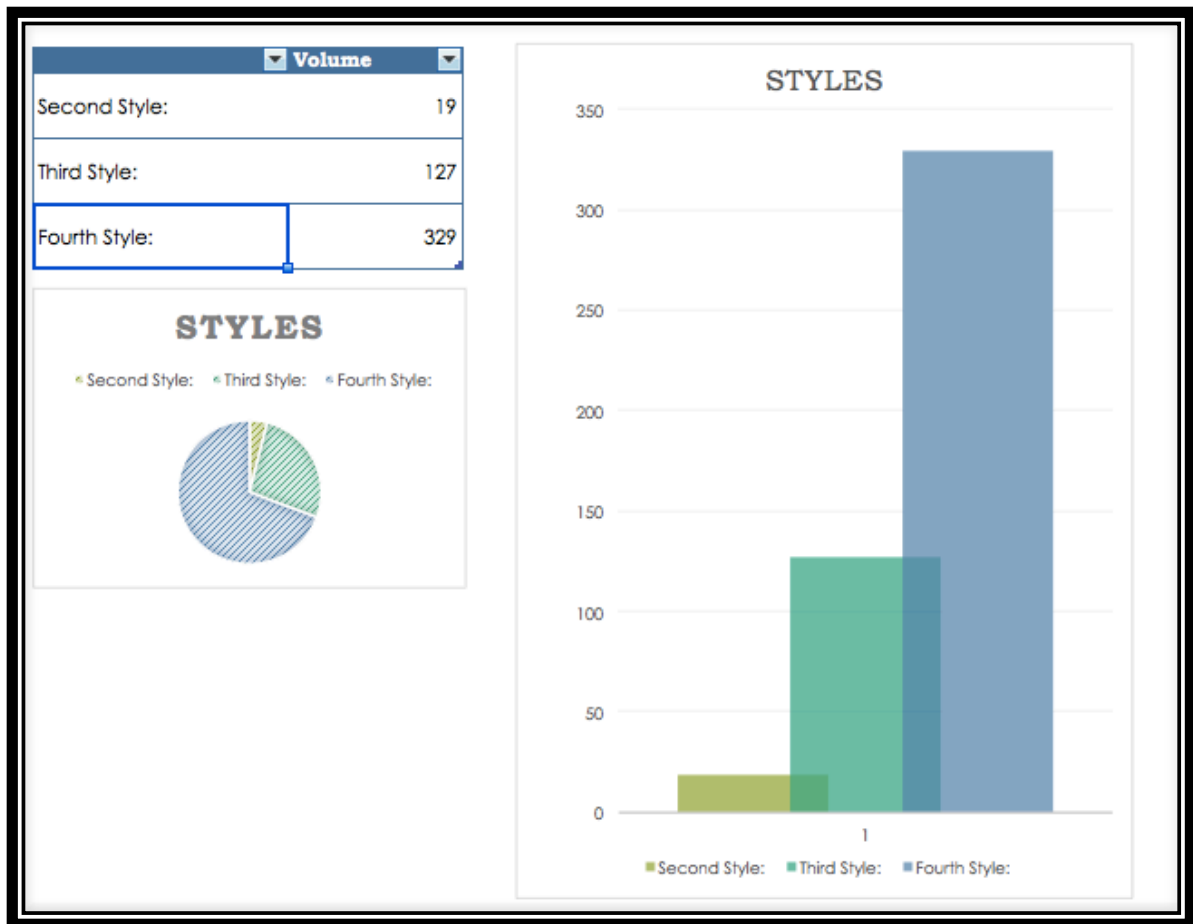


Figure 1.3: Graph depicting the volume of individuals depicted wearing jewelry in Pompeii separated by style. With data from D’Ambrosio 2008, 12.

Rather than becoming discouraged by these interpretational difficulties, we would be better served to see them as a hallmark of the complexity of the material record at Pompeii. More jewelry does not mean more luxury or more wealth in the depictions on Pompeian walls, and as we will see, more wealth does not indicate greater prestige in practice. The data above show that we have a great deal of

material to draw from, but to understand what the material tells us, it must be properly contextualized. This is one of the primary aims of this dissertation.

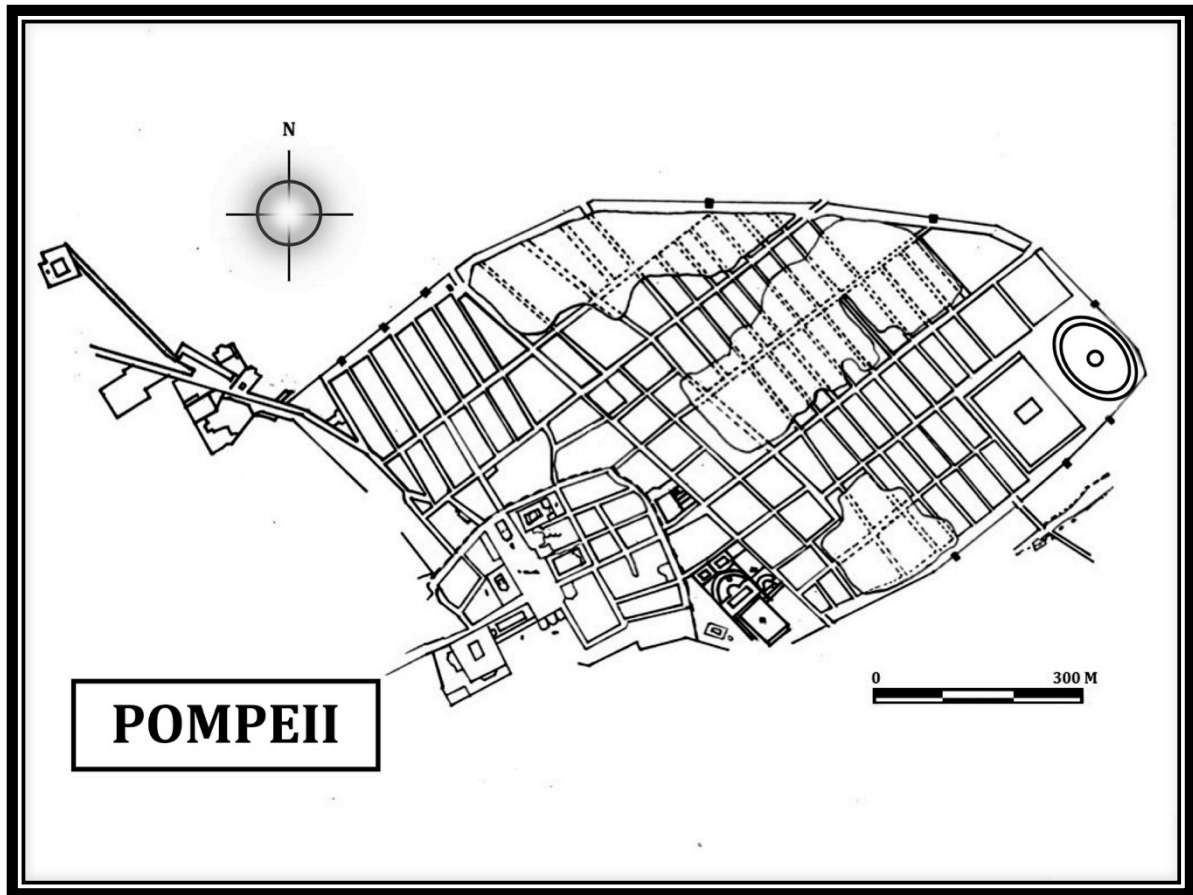


Figure 1.4: Map of Pompeii.
After Cassanelli et al 2002, General Map of Pompeii, p. 58-59.

The Structure of the Dissertation

It is to jewelry and the interpretational possibilities associated with it that we first turn our attention. Chapter Two gives a more in depth analysis of the potentials of fashion theory, presenting overviews of the schools of thought that inform the remainder of the dissertation and are the underpinnings of the theory of adornment that I propose. It begins by reiterating the applicability of fashion theory to scholarly work by arguing that the biases against the notion of fashion arise from nineteenth century attempts to exert control over increasingly independent minority groups. It goes on to present Bernard de Mandeville's theory of trickle down economics to suggest that, while modern scholars think of fashion and its economic ramifications as a later development, the ideas that they tackle had much earlier iterations. This is further underscored by a brief overview of sumptuary legislation in Rome. I then turn to sociology as a major component of fashion theory, presenting broad trends in sociological thought on the question of the social function of dress, before investigating the connections between modernity, semiology and dress as discussed by Charles Baudelaire and Roland Barthes. Once these major thinkers have been introduced, I consider the differences between real and depicted fashion, and the differing theories arising from these two distinct media before reiterating the ways in which Classical scholars have approached the material. Once this foundation has been laid, I discuss terminology, arguing that while Latin has long held a position of honor in texts on fashion, these previous discussions do not engage with the Latin vocabulary itself. This discussion allows me to put forth the terms that will be used in the rest of the text. The chapter

concludes by presenting a new approach to the general study of jewelry, before focusing on previous uses of jewelry in the archaeological record and questioning how this jewelry might provide more information to a careful analyst.

Chapter Three takes up the challenge presented in Chapter Two: to meaningfully integrate jewelry theory into an analysis of wall painting. To do so, I first confront the question of semiological approaches to painting, reiterating the notion of a simple “decoding” of the visual limits our scope. Following Webb Keane, I argue that to nuance this approach, we should attempt to integrate material evidence into the semiological sphere. With jewelry and dress as my primary material evidence, I suggest that previous major schools of reading Room 5 in the Villa of the Mysteries have implicitly based their analyses on dress, and that furthermore, dress has been integral in the process of programmatic reading as a whole. By bringing the interpretation of dress to the foreground as an essential tool for analysis, I suggest that new interpretations of the space are possible. I demonstrate the utility of this approach by focusing on one type of jewelry in Room 5: rings. To discuss rings, I first outline a theoretical approach to this type of jewelry, focusing on materiality and utility as central to understanding the adornment. I go on to discuss rings in a Roman context, before putting forth the notion that the ring in Room 5 represents a signet. Following this close reading of a single type of jewelry, I turn my attention to the depiction of jewelry sets in the space, arguing that the repetition of jewelry both invites the viewer to think of the depicted space in three-dimensional terms, that the apparent realistic nature of

dress depiction in the room conflates viewer and viewed, mythological and real, offering the opportunity for safe association between mortal and divine.

Picking up on the idea of conflation of viewer and viewed presented in Chapter Three, Chapter Four considers the ways in which jewelry and dress may invite comparison between reality and depiction in other spaces. It focuses on observer figures in mythological painting to discuss the ways in which paintings may offer commentary on the practices of the real world. It argues that the dress depicted on these supernumerary figures conforms to the societal norms expressed in Roman sumptuary legislation. To make this point, it discusses the legislation itself, underscoring the idea that this legislation references an ideal not reality by referencing the material record of jewelry in Pompeii. It goes on to provide a close reading of supernumerary figures in the House of the Seven Skeletons to support the assertion that the observer figures adhere to dress norms. As Chapter Three used rings as a focal point for discussion, Chapter Four highlights earrings as the jewelry appropriate to the exterior depicted spaces where groups of viewers are often shown. It argues that the notion of collective viewing suggested by these onlookers is referenced in contemporary Latin texts, arguing that the watchful eye of the public is often charged with anxiety for the viewed, and that viewing itself is a type of performance.

Chapter Five further interrogates the idea of collective viewing as a performance by considering another venue for viewership: the dinner party. It takes Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis* as a central text, introducing the dinner party as a space in which performative viewing likely occurred. It uses Trimalchio's

missteps to argue that while the visual offers a useful sphere for performing status through erudition, that it is as possible to misstep among friends as it is in the eyes of the public. It uses necklaces as a jewelry focal point, arguing that what is acceptable in private could at times be considered transgressive in public. It suggests that transgression is itself a type of status marker, albeit a difficult one to employ effectively. It focuses on freedmen and freedwoman as examples of a group that has wealth but not necessarily status to interrogate the relationship between the two. It concludes by arguing that in some cases, overt displays of wealth could be detrimental to others' perception of one's personal prestige.

If wealth does not necessarily indicate status, then what does? To consider this question, Chapter Six discusses an unusual space—the House of Jason. It reiterates the argument that money itself may have negative social connotations in the early imperial period, and that written sources support the notion that things do not breed excellence. It goes on to offer an analysis of the house as a whole, arguing that the presence of a fountain is a potential indicator of social connections beyond what the humble space itself might otherwise indicate. It then provides a reading of the visual programs of Rooms E and F, arguing that these programs are deliberately obscure, that they privilege knowledge as a primary indicator of personal prestige. It goes on to suggest that in the charged viewing environment of the dinner party, status differentiations are created in real time through the highlighting of difference between individuals. In this setting, ridicule is a tool and laughter is a type of social and interpretational censure. It closes by noting that this censure is used not only to

differentiate between elites and non-elites, but that it might equally be useful to distinguish individuals within otherwise sub-elite groups.

The dissertation concludes by reiterating the role of intentional obscurity in the visual programs of Pompeian houses and its uses as a tool for in-group differentiation, arguing that knowledge, not wealth is a primary indicator of status. It goes on to argue once more against the simple equation of jewelry with wealth, suggesting that adornment practices are themselves a form of knowledge, capable of expert or inexpert deployment much as interpretations are. It concludes by offering further avenues for research, citing the positive transformative power of dress as a catalyst for thought.

CHAPTER TWO

Modes of Self-Presentation in Theory and in Practice

If the processes of social differentiation must be ambiguous to function effectively, how can an external observer comprehend them? By turning to the products of this system: the mental processes that charge objects with social significance may be obscure, but the objects themselves offer an avenue of entry into otherwise elusive constructs. If we seek to understand processes that are by nature ephemeral, we must attempt to determine which extant byproducts of these processes carry meaning and how that meaning is conveyed visually. These forms of communication are themselves signals of personal prestige, and the way in which they are understood and discussed inform participants in social discourse of one's potential social standing as readily as the objects themselves do. Indeed, as we shall see, the potential for discussion may be a better indicator of social position than ownership of prestige goods, which can be bought by anyone with the money to afford them, and copied by those without such excess resources. Objects can mislead as effectively as words, and thus, if the goal of performances of prestige is to both differentiate between groups and to reinforce affiliation within them, then the articulation of personal prestige requires a communicative system that is both

legible to some and inaccessible to others. Hair and clothing, jewelry, cosmetics and perfumes together comprise a package of self-presentation capable of signaling multiple meanings to varied viewers. Such visual communications do not require direct contact between participants; their ability to convey information remotely makes them an effective tool for communication both within and between social groups.

The clothed human body is as much a part of a group's visual realm as the constructions and creations that surround it. The act of adorning the body transforms it. Much like other forms of public art, the dressed body is site specific. While multiples of dress items may be in circulation, they carry different messages on different bodies. These messages may subvert cultural norms, may provide a voice for otherwise societally disadvantaged participants³⁶. But this tool is not easily taken up; as we will see, the visual markers of otherness are often located on the dressed body. As Elizabeth Wilson clearly puts it, "...Despite its apparent irrationality, fashion cements social solidarity and imposes group norms, while deviations in dress are usually experienced as shocking and disturbing."³⁷ The ability to signal and create acceptance or to mark otherness visually is one that has the potential to illuminate social processes encoded in depictions of dress. But while art historians of the ancient Mediterranean region are familiar with the conventions for discussing other forms of decoration as art, the apparatus for confronting the adornment of the human form and depictions of this have been

³⁶ For a discussion of the function of public art more generally, see Paul Clements, "Public Art: Radical, Functional or Democratic Methodologies?" *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 7:1 (2008), 19-21.

³⁷ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 6.

largely neglected. The body itself has been considered at length, but the transformation of the body, the deliberate choice to reconfigure it through the use of fabric, precious materials, and cosmetics, has only begun to be considered.

The study of the relationship between dress practices, physical items of dress and adornment, and their social impact is a burgeoning field; its cannon is still in the process of being defined. Indeed, over the course of the past three decades, interests have begun to shift from a focus on the particulars of garments, on the cuts and folds that make up a dress or the techniques that allow for the creation of a granulated brooch, to the ways in which the existence of these bodily adornments can clarify social realities. Such studies become more difficult as the scholar's sociocultural and temporal proximity to their group of study increases, in part because just as the processes that govern dress are ephemeral, so too are many of the materials that make up garments. Even within the rich archaeological corpus of Pompeii, extant fabric is scarce. Only with jewelry do we have the opportunity to piece together evidence for socially conditioned practices of personal display from the textual, visual, and material records. The study of fashion theory can begin to inform such work, but if fashion theory is in its infancy, then jewelry theory is barely extant. To work towards a theory of adornment, we must start with the principles laid out by previous theorists, using their insights about the relationship between clothed bodies and social structures to define the roles of precious metals and stones in the articulation of personal prestige. The formulation of such a theory and the discussion of its applicability to ancient groups is the primary objective of this chapter.

This chapter re-contextualizes the question of personal adornment, first in the pre-modern period generally, then in the Italian peninsula in the period between the mid-first century BCE and the mid-first century CE more specifically. It begins by discussing the body of literature on fashion and its social implications, arguing that despite the pervasive correlation between fashion and modernity, the practice of socially conditioned and time determinate dressing exists in pre-modern societies. It then turns to the language used to characterize dress practices in Latin textual sources, using the vocabulary of Roman adornment to discuss the intersections between the art of dressing the body and the art of dressing other publicly accessible media. It concludes with a formulation of a theory of fashion specific to adornment, defining the purposes and nature of jewelry and detailing the methodology that will inform the remainder of this work.

'The Apparel oft Proclaims the Man': Theorizing Dress Practices

Like other intentionally constructed visual media, the dressed body is capable of being interpreted on multiple levels using a complex system of socially proscribed rules, allowing communities and individuals to communicate with a wide range of individuals, only a small number of whom would have fully understood the range of potential messages. The ability to comprehend the nuances of dress practices is dependent in large part upon group inclusion. Notions of acceptability, fashionability, and practicality are all determined at least in part by the groups that a person is a part of or wishes to join.

Attempts to reconstruct past dress practices are made difficult by distance. The lack of material evidence coupled with disciplinary and cultural biases centered on the term “fashion” further complicate the matter. It is notoriously difficult to define the term “fashion.” It is culturally determinate, and its ephemeral nature resists the act of definition. Like the field of fashion studies itself, it defies constraint. It is much easier to discuss what fashion does than what fashion is. To understand past social practices, we must first confront our own cultural and scholarly biases. This is made more challenging in the case of fashion studies, because while the larger processes underlying self-presentation are complicated, their effects for scholars are clear: fashion polarizes.

Valerie Steele has argued that the word “fashion” has itself become negatively charged, a byword for deception and a synonym to frivolity, making the serious intellectual pursuit of topics associated with it a vexed prospect.³⁸ Yet, the fabrics, metals, and stones, and emulsions that form the basis of visual self-presentation have been readily tackled in more traditional contexts. Jewelry in particular is a mainstay in discussions of the Roman economy, as well as in texts devoted to the question of the expression of ethnicity and local identity. Interestingly, the question of the relationship between jewelry and identity has been explored most readily in the case of the Roman provinces.³⁹ Catalogues of the

³⁸ Valerie Steele, “The F Word,” *Lingua Franca* (1991), 17-18.

³⁹ Kevin Greene, *The Archaeology of the Roman Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 143-149. Texts on ethnicity that refer to modes of dress abound. Aside from the notion expressed above, that thinking on the fringe inspires more creative and elucidating lines of inquiry, it is also important to note that there may be a greater quantity of material to explore in these areas. Britain has produced a number of Roman period hoards, as have France and Romania. This is not to say that there is not a great deal of jewelry within the Italian peninsula, only that it tends not to be so tightly concentrated, necessitating a certain amount of legwork to reconstruct the corpus.

jewelry associated with specific sites and museums provide a rich corpus to explore, but their exploration of larger themes is generally limited to questions of craftsmanship, economy, and ethnicity. But what happens when we attempt to consider the available evidence using a theoretical paradigm designed to handle the complex relationship between human minds, human bodies, and adornment? And why is it that such an avenue of research has not yet taken hold in Pompeii? The answer is in part dependent on methodology. Fashion, with its quick changes, has been associated with modern methods of dissemination. Conceptually, it is tightly bound with the concept of modernity. But close examination of the mechanisms that govern change in style suggest that the theories generated to confront fashion in the eighteenth through twenty-first centuries are equally applicable to the world of Pompeii. To understand how these thoughts are applicable, we must first discuss the ways in which dress practices have been previously discussed.

The signifiers of status and group affiliation preserve better than the ephemeral, situationally based constructs that they help to express. The relative interpretational accessibility of preserved garments and adornments and their representation makes them an ideal avenue of analysis for researchers who are excluded socially, culturally and temporally from the groups that they study. While the construction and modes of production of bodily adornments of all types are elucidating, without a large corpus of material, other sources of information are necessary to contextualize them.⁴⁰ Not only are the parameters of acceptable dress

⁴⁰ Peter Wells demonstrates the utility of a materialist approach to *fibulae* in his book, *The Barbarians Speak*, arguing that changes in decoration and craftsmanship of decorative clothing pins in southern Gaul are indicative of local resistance to Roman authority. His focus on material allows

ever changing, but the terms used to describe types of dress and their social categories are specific to both time and place. The question is not what people wear, but why they wear what they do. The methodologies used to access these practices generally depend on the disciplinary orientation of the researcher, with textual studies being currently the most common. While visual and material avenues of inquiry are becoming more common, the traditional core works concerned with dress theories approach the material from one or more of four perspectives: economic, sociological, theoretical, and historical.

Economies of Fashion

These broad categories encompass many types of writers. Prior to the early eighteenth century, it is rare to see a text wholly devoted to the topic of why people wear what they wear. This is not to say that dress practices and fashionable items of adornment go unmentioned in these earlier periods, but that they are not the point of the works that discuss them. Indeed, theories of fashion, and books explaining these theories, date in large part to the latter half of the twentieth century, with a few notable exceptions, discussed below. For earlier time periods, novels, poems, laws, histories, all provide a potential wealth of information on the question of what people wore and what it meant to them, and the biases of these authors can provide as rich a commentary on the way that clothing and other forms of expression help in the performance of social position. The categories that I have

him to present an evidence-based argument for Gallic resistance that is unattested in the contemporary textual record. See Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

highlighted here demonstrate the inherently interdisciplinary nature of research into this topic, and the discussions of these categories are meant as an introduction to the increasingly large body of material concerned with the role that personal presentation plays in the lives of current and past peoples.

Arguments structured around economies of fashion often draw associations between fashion, wealth, and morality. The tensions between status display and moral virtue are at the heart of one of the most elucidating groups of texts that discuss codes of dress in the pre-modern period: sumptuary legislation.⁴¹ The existence of sumptuary legislation is proof positive of both the social importance of dress practices and of the stresses resulting from them. After all, there is no need to regulate what is not a problem. Sumptuary legislation highlights societal fault lines as much as it delineates acceptable expenditure practices; the association between economics, morality and dress underscores social fears. The primary aim of sumptuary laws is to curtail expenditures on non-essential goods, commonly items associated with status display, particularly clothing and jewelry, to “reduce the number of choices available to an individual by making him/her abide by the law.”⁴² Such laws come into existence under particular circumstances. As Alan Hunt has noted, laws attempting to regulate consumption are put into effect in those societies in which the government believes it has both the ability and the right to regulate what its citizens buy; this right is typically explained in terms of a moral

⁴¹ I am concerned here with the theory of sumptuary legislation and with the types of social information this type of legislation can convey. For a discussion of specific legislation that governed Roman dress practices and its relationship to the depiction of dress in Pompeii, see Chapter Four.

⁴² Valentina Arena, “Roman Sumptuary Legislation: Three Concepts of Liberty,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 10:4 (2011), 464.

imperative.⁴³ This moral component is especially common in the discourse on personal adornment.

The concept of morality is both fluid and temporally specific. For later writers on the topic of fashion and morality, the moral codes referenced are Judeo-Christian. The vices that must be curtailed range from vanity to lust, and both over-adornment and lack of coverage can be actionable offenses. Writing in 1927, Herbert Sanborn theorizes that the short skirt and short hair of the flapper can be explained by “moral turpitude.”⁴⁴ For a Roman audience, the question is one of luxury, *luxuria*.⁴⁵ Emanuela Zanda puts the point succinctly. “Luxury, judged as the first cause of all other moral illnesses, was considered debilitating and responsible for the ruin of societies.”⁴⁶ Although the justification for such laws might have been rooted in morality, they highlight tensions that have more to do with social standing than religion.⁴⁷ By disallowing the use of particular types or quantities of adornment, these laws prevent individuals from purchasing acceptance into the upper reaches of a group while simultaneously condemning the actions of those who place more importance on these types of display.

While sumptuary laws are not limited to personal adornments, the prevalent connection between the desire for jewels and fine fabrics and moral decline in such

⁴³ Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (London: MacMillan, 1996), 77-83.

⁴⁴ Herbert Sanborn, “The Function of Clothing and of Bodily Adornment,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 38:1 (January, 1927), 1.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of specific Roman sumptuary laws and their potential effects on depicted dress, see Chapter Four.

⁴⁶ Emanuela Zanda, *Fighting Hydra-like Luxury: Sumptuary Regulation in the Roman Republic* (London: A&C Black, 2013), 2.

⁴⁷ Zanda associates the decline of feudalism in Europe and the rise of the merchant class with an increase of sumptuary legislation, particularly in late Medieval and early Renaissance England and Italy, see Zanda 2013, 74. Such an association might be equally applicable to the freedman in Rome.

documents has become entrenched in the study of dress practices. Such connections between moral degradation and elaborately adorned bodies, between vice, especially vice attributed to women, and attire is well articulated by Roman authors. As Kelly Olson states, “Emphasis was put on the virtues of unadornment by many authors because Roman discourse made no distinction between aesthetics and ethics.”⁴⁸ Authors from Sallust to Livy condemn expenditure on luxury goods to the extent that mention of such expenditures becomes synonymous with persons of questionable character, particularly those who behave contrary to societal expectations. In her exploration of the role of women in Sallust’s history of Catiline’s conspiracy, Barbara Boyd addresses this directly, suggesting that “*virtus* yields place to *luxuria* as the primary motive for human activity; and *luxuria* is characteristic of women and women-like men.”⁴⁹ Such concerns hold true well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with detractors of fashion going so far as to suggest that to be interested in dress practices is to be mentally deficient and deceitful.⁵⁰

Although the concept of fashion, the adornments themselves, and the people who make use of them all have detractors, it is possible to see the mechanism in a positive light. Interestingly, given concerns over the expense of fashion, some of the first voices to speak out for the positive effects of fashion were what we might term

⁴⁸ Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 94.

⁴⁹ Barbara Boyd, “*Virtus Effeminata* and Sallust’s Sempronia,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 17 (1987), 190.

⁵⁰ For discussion of the association of fashionable people, particularly fashionable women with stupidity and false self-presentation, see Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2-4.

economists.⁵¹ When the satirist and economic philosopher Bernard Mandeville published his *Fable of the Bees* in 1714, his assertion, however satiric, that private vices such as fashion could yield public benefits was met with outright derision, not unlike that met by scholars attempting to approach the topic of fashion as a serious field of study in the late twentieth century.⁵² While Mandeville's detailed discussion of the ways in which fashion can be useful to society is perhaps most famous as an early incarnation of trickle down economics, his discussion of "cloathes" and their purpose, points us toward a key component of dress theory. In Mandeville's formulation, one that is based on his observations in London, class distinctions become blurred when the only reference to them is visual. It is not difficult for individuals to mimic the clothing choices of the upper classes. Thus, each group attempts to mimic the one above it in social standing, while differentiating itself from the one below it, and if possible, preventing them from accessing the forms of social expression available to upper classes. He goes on to discuss the ways in which this sort of social expenditure was condemned by moralists, focusing in particular on the function of adorning the body.

⁵¹ For later articulations of the potentially positive aspects of fashion see Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaedon, 1995), especially "Beauty, Fashion, and Happiness," and "In Praise of Cosmetics." For an expression of the ongoing positive economic ramifications of fashion see Giles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). For an articulation of the potential for positive personal transformation inherent in fashion of the Roman period see Neville McFerrin, "Flirting with Uncertainty: Mutability, Metamorphosis, and Fashionability in the Greco-Roman Imagination," in *Shapeshifting: Transformative Paradigms of Fashion*, edited by Frances Joseph, Mandy Smith, Miranda Smitheram, and Jan Hamon (Auckland: Textile and Design Lab and Colab at Auckland University of Technology, 2015), 1-18.

⁵² Daniel Purdy, *The Rise of Fashion: A Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 21.

In his formulation, clothing originally had “two ends, to hide our nakedness and to fence our bodies against the weather and other outward injuries.”⁵³ While this may have once been the function of clothing, Mandeville suggests that this is no longer the case, that by his day, “handsome apparel is a main point, fine feathers make fine birds, and people where they are not known, are generally honored according to their cloaths [sic] and other accouterments they have about them; from the richness of them we judge of their wealth and by their ordering of them we guess at their understanding.”⁵⁴ This dual formulation of wealth and understanding as indicators of status is key; wealth can be imitated, understanding is more difficult to obtain. The role of understanding in the articulation of social position, and that it eclipses the role of wealth in times of social change, is central to my thesis here.

Together with providing the seeds for modern economic theory and clearly articulating the ways in which status displays function, Mandeville also begins to discuss a shift that eventually overtakes the discipline of fashion. While he does not state so explicitly, his ongoing references to women, to the ways in which wives allocate money to purchase fashionable goods, highlights a connection between women and the question of fashion.⁵⁵ For writers such as Livy, the women themselves were not the issue; their personal desires were secondary to the concern that these desires might lead them to either deplete their husbands’ coffers,

⁵³ Bernard de Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (London: J. Roberts, 1714), 102.

⁵⁴ Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, 103.

⁵⁵ Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, 104.

or resort to immoral action to obtain what they wanted.⁵⁶ With Mandeville, there begins to be discussion of why women might want these things. Similar discussions, separate from questions of the use of women for male displays of power, begin to color the overall discourse for later writers, and this interest remains at the core of inquiries into the twenty-first century.

Sociological Approaches to Understanding Dress

Mandeville's interest in social position, in gendered dynamics of dress, and in the mechanisms through which changes in dress practice occur, like the moral discourses that he refutes, gives insight not into what the men and women of the early eighteenth century wore, but the norms and expectations that influenced their decision making processes. He has little interest in the fabrics and precious metals themselves, nor does he describe at any length particular garments. He cares more for mechanisms than for materials. It is here that we must differentiate between scholars of costume and dress history and scholars of fashion. The questions investigated by these two groups have much in common; both turn to garments and adornments as meaningful categories for exploration. But while costume historians privilege empirical data, for scholars of fashion, concept is key. It is with the shift from costume to fashion that the intersecting issues of class, gender, status, and personal identity come to the foreground. As Yuniya Kawamura states it, "When fashion is treated as an item of clothing that has added value in the material sense, it

⁵⁶ Livy, *History of Rome: Volume IX, Books 31-34*, translated by Evan T. Sage (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1935), 34.4.

confuses the notion of fashion. Fashion does provide extra added values to clothing, but the additional elements exist only in people's imaginations and beliefs."⁵⁷ For Kawamura, fashion is a sociological institution, and she remains more invested in the thought processes behind the fashion system than the materials invested with these ideologies.

This interest in separating physical garments from the invisible mechanisms that give them power is not limited to Kawamura. Her methodologies, explicitly sociological, are not unique. Indeed, the socio-psychological aspects of conditioned clothing practices have been of interest to scholars since the 1920s. With the exception of writers on theories of sartorial fashion, a topic that surged in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s alongside the rise of cultural studies, discussions of the sociological and psychological impacts of clothing are the most numerous set of writings in the corpus of the theory of fashion. The questions posed by these authors resonate with those confronted in the early 1700s by Mandeville. What is the function of clothing? And what infuses it with the power to communicate? But while Mandeville suggests that economy is the driving force behind change in style, proponents of sociological explanations for the elaborate and changing nature of clothing can be explained through examining societal institutions.

In his now seminal article detailing a sociological approach to fashion, Herbert Blumer argues for a broad approach to the definition of what constitutes fashion, suggesting that, as a concept, it is at play in fields as diverse as literature, painting, mortuary practice, and mathematics. Like Mandeville and Kawamura,

⁵⁷ Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies*, (New York: Berg, 2004), 5.

Blumer's "fashion" is not to be correlated solely with adornment, but rather with the phenomenon of time determinate change. As he states it, "Where fashion operates it assumes an imperative position. It sets sanctions of what is to be done, it is conspicuously indifferent to criticism, it demands adherence, and it by-passes as oddities and misfits those who fail to abide by it."⁵⁸ He argues that on the individual level, the adoption of trends is a deliberate and calculated decision, and that the creators of fashion respond not to random stimuli, but to a desire to make material what he terms, "expressions of modernity," that is, the political, artistic, and literary interests of the time. In his theoretical framework, decisions about what to wear are based not on elite decision makers, but upon the ability of garments and adornments to effectively communicate their wearer's desired relationship to the world around them.⁵⁹

Blumer's work stands in opposition to earlier exploration of the topic by Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen. Georg Simmel, a sociologist, characterized the concept of fashion as equal parts imitation and differentiation and thus as part a universal human phenomenon satisfying the desire on the part of individuals to gain admittance into a group while maintaining "individual differentiation;" he suggests that class differentiation is the primary goal of the fashion experience, stating that "the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to

⁵⁸ Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 10:3 (Summer 1969), 276.

⁵⁹ Blumer, "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," 279-281.

appropriate them.”⁶⁰ Its purpose is to identify group affiliation, reinforcing both similarity within groups and difference between them. What is acceptable, even commonplace for one, may be wholly unacceptable in another. In a similar mode, Thorstein Veblen, an economist, focuses again on the institutional structures that yield status markers, coining the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe the relationship between overt displays of wealth and ascribed status in the late nineteenth century. Like Simmel, he is interested in forms of status differentiation; unlike Simmel he considers not only elite and non-elite differentiation, but also intra-elite, intra sub-elite, community, and gendered differences. To discuss these differences he remarks upon a variety of “fashions” in the sense that Blumer uses the term, discussing trends in food, decoration, and drink as part of an interconnected system of display and consumption. But the arena of fashionable clothing is, for him, the richest. As he states, “...No line of consumption affords a more apt illustration than expenditure on dress.”⁶¹ For Veblen, the needless elaboration of women’s dress in particular is a mark of the type of over-expenditure that characterizes the leisure class. Women, in this formulation, consume, becoming objects of status display.⁶² It is not enough, he argues, simply to spend. Rather, spending must suggest erudition, and should illustrate a source of income that does not depend on one’s own labor. An effective dress, then, is not only expensive, it is constructed to indicate that the wearer does not work. In his words, “Much of the charm that invests the patent-leather shoe, the stainless linen, the lustrous

⁶⁰ Georg Simmel, “Fashion,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 62:6 (May 1957), 543.

⁶¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (London: MacMillan, 1899), 77.

⁶² Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 40; Purdy, *The Rise of Fashion*, 261-262.

cylindrical hat, and the walking-stick, which so greatly enhance the native dignity of a gentleman, comes of their pointedly suggesting that the wearer cannot when so attired bear a hand in any employment that is directly and immediately of any human use. Elegant dress serves its purpose of elegance not only in that it is expensive, but also because it is the insignia of leisure.”⁶³ This interest in leisure marks an important distinction within Veblen’s class system. Wealth alone cannot signal status for Veblen, because wealth is not confined to a single elite unit.

The general nature, the broad strokes, of sociological theories makes them an attractive possibility for thinking in multiple time zones. The interest in mechanisms of power makes them particularly applicable to the project at hand, although we must be careful not to transpose the class structures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries back onto Pompeian actors. As Fred Davis notes, we must remain cognizant of the fact that these sociological approaches inform us that clothing is capable of communication but not necessarily what it communicates or how it does so.⁶⁴ To confront these sorts of questions, we require a broader field of data and a willingness to accept the variability and ambiguity of the socially charged dressing process. As we will see, the process of social differentiation in Pompeii’s cultural milieu depends upon a broad range of performances, visible in multiple medias. Blumer’s notion of multiple fashionabilities, Simmel’s interest in the concept of fashion as a tool for differentiation, Veblen’s insistence upon multiple simultaneous and interconnected systems of differentiation, are all applicable to Pompeii in the abstract, but the particulars must be drawn from the site itself.

⁶³ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 79.

⁶⁴ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4-9.

Fashion in Texts and The Concept of Modernity

Much as a sociological approach to fashion theory focuses on processes rather than garments, semiological approaches rely on critical apparatuses that focus on words, rather than depictions or things. In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes manages to outline a complex interplay of sign and signifier referencing only the language used to describe fashion in contemporary Parisian fashion magazines. While his work—one might call it a practical application of semiotics—advances the notion that there is a clear language of fashion, and thus, one could argue, a social institution, it does so without once directly referencing either an image or a physical garment. Barthes' methodology is rooted in text, but his clear distinction between what he refers to as “real” and “described” fashion is an important distinction for scholars of depicted fashion. Barthes suggests that written fashion, that is described fashion, is a code, attempting to translate one system of signs, “real fashion” into another “described fashion.”⁶⁵ This separation of word and thing gives significance to both, just as it recognizes that both language and garments function within their own systems, each of which have their own vocabularies, visual or verbal.

Just as the words used to describe fashion are treated as a phenomenon in their own right, fashion itself becomes a mediator of ephemeral notions of time and space, a physical manifestation of contemporary tensions. When Charles Baudelaire picked up his pen in defense of artifice in 1863, fashion, frivolity and femininity had

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, translated by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), x.

become seemingly irrevocably intertwined.⁶⁶ Reacting against the emphasis on the utilitarian importance of clothing and household goods, one that was championed by many Enlightenment writers, Baudelaire suggests that the beauty and ephemerality of clothing is its most interesting and important feature. As Daniel Purdy summarizes, “For him [Baudelaire], fashion is exciting precisely because it is so fleeting.”⁶⁷ This quick temporal aspect of fashion is, in Baudelaire’s mind, intertwined with the idea of modernity. The quick changing nature of fashion and its association with the concept of modernity has made the study of fashion particularly presentist. While Baudelaire’s now time was in the mid nineteenth century, and his fashion focal point was the crinoline, the notion of exciting changeability, and of site specificity, can be abstracted to other time periods in which humans adorned their bodies for reasons beyond the practical.

There are multiple modernities. Mandeville mentions ancient and exotic cultural groups to prove certain points, but he is not interested in probing their social contexts; his focus is on the now, his now, the early eighteenth century. But the term “modernity” is perhaps most closely associated with the post-industrial period, precisely the time in which the tools of fashion dissemination and increasing availability of partially ready-made garments opened fashion to an ever-widening audience. Leaning heavily on Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, Ulrich Lehmann, in his erudite and thought provoking *Tigersprung*, argues that *la mode* and *la*

⁶⁶ Purdy, *The Rise of Fashion*, 213.

⁶⁷ Purdy, *The Rise of Fashion*, 213.

modernité inform and constitute each other.⁶⁸ This is due in large part to the connection between ephemerality, change, and fashion. There are as many definitions of fashion as there are writers and readers concerned with it, but the notion of fast change has become central to most definitions. To follow Elizabeth Wilson, “Fashion is dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles. Fashion, in a sense *is* change, and in modern western societies no clothes are outside fashion; fashion sets the terms of *all* sartorial behavior.”⁶⁹ The concept of fashion and the concept of modernity are intertwined, and modern fashion theorists are as interested in our present as Mandeville and Baudelaire were in theirs. If images are not provided, the assumption seems to be that they are not needed, that the reader is well-versed in contemporary visual media and material culture.

Art History and Depicted Fashion

When attempting to write about another era’s modernity, images take on a greater importance. Without living examples and visual familiarity, the need to integrate multiple types of evidence and methodologies becomes paramount. While the previously mentioned schools of thought utilize methodologies borrowed from economics, sociology, psychology and literary criticism, fashion historians often turn to art history and its interest in close visual reading to inform their work. The theories of fashion may be referenced by these writers, but they are rarely the primary point. Rather, for these scholars, fashion becomes a tool used to

⁶⁸ Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press), 2000.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 4.

interrogate material objects in new ways, often in an attempt to access ephemeral constructs in historical periods. As I hope the brief overview above suggests, there are a variety of ways to constructively interrogate the relationship between bodies and their adornments. Thus, the art historian attempting to grapple with clothed bodies in previous time periods finds herself utilizing sources outside of her disciplinary norm.⁷⁰ Like described fashion, depicted fashion has a language of its own, separate from that of either described or real fashion; yet, each of these modes of communication must be considered, if one wishes to reconstruct not necessarily what past people's wore, but what these adornments communicate.

While textual sources, from letters to novels to histories have long been integrated into the art historical repertoire, increasingly historians of fashion reference the very sources mentioned above, with discussions of psychological processes finding a home alongside close readings of the depiction of a woman's ring. Such methodologies are informed by scholars of costume studies and dress history, but for later scholars, the question is not so much what people are wearing, or what constitutes fashion, but why people wear what they wear, and how these dress items can help us to better understand the cultures and individuals that decided to depict them.

That the depiction of fashion is itself a worthwhile field of study, that the manner of a fashion object's visual representation can be as interesting as how it was made, is a thought pioneered by Anne Hollander in her 1978 volume *Seeing*

⁷⁰ For a thoughtful discussion of the inherent difficulties in and need for a multi-methodological approach to the study of dress, see Francesca Granata, "Fashion Studies In-between: A Methodological Case Study and an Inquiry into the State of Fashion Studies," *Fashion Theory* 16:1 (2012), 67-82.

Through Clothes.⁷¹ Groundbreaking for its use of fashion theory to discuss art history, the book not only paved the way for subsequent art historians to consider the topic, it also places primacy on the depicted clothing item. She suggests that it is the depiction of dress, rather than items of dress, that determines what people in a given time period perceive as both attractive and acceptable. While she is interested in the way that clothing looks, she is more interested in perceptions surrounding it. Thus, “The way clothes look depends not on how they are designed or made but on how they are perceived...the perception of clothing at any epoch is accomplished no so much directly as through a filter of artistic convention. People dress and observe other dressed people with a set of pictures in mind.”⁷²

This assertion, that the picturing of fashion drives the system, is a bold one. Its broadness of scope, the range of time periods and places she attempts to cover, from Classical Athens to Post World War Two Germany and Russia, have been called into question. It is perhaps not possible that one writer could meaningfully discuss such disparate cultures, and without a complete scholarly apparatus, it is difficult to determine where Hollander came by some of her information, or upon what she bases her ideas. She focuses on a narrow definition of fashion, paying little attention to jewelry, cosmetics, hairstyle or footwear, although she does give space to undergarments. However, despite these shortcomings, her work is interesting to the scholar of Roman dress practices for at least two reasons. It includes Greece and Rome in the trajectory of fashion and dress history, a rarity. And it provides a way to think about dress practices without requiring what Barthes might call “real

⁷¹ Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking Press, 1978).

⁷² Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 311.

fashion.” If “the visual demands that govern change in the art of dress have more authority, more consistent and sustained power over all kinds of fashion, than practical and economic demands,” the art historian has a space in which to speak.⁷³

Confronting Classical Fashion

Hollander is an outlier in many ways. Her work gives uncharacteristic space to the depicted, and she is aware that depictions carry a different weight than worn garments. Her discussion, however brief, of Greek and Roman dress practices is similarly ahead of its time. Surveys of fashion history usually begin at the Renaissance, focusing the bulk of their attention on the eighteenth through twentieth centuries; fashion readers meant as introductory texts do not yet, to my knowledge, include Classical sources. Despite this lack of representation within the typical corpus of fashion history, Classical archaeologists and art historians have increasingly begun to consider dress practices a serious field of study.⁷⁴ This increased interest in clothing of the Greek and Roman periods has arisen in tandem with an increased interest in groups that are under-represented in textual sources, most particularly women, although the discourse on Greek and Roman fashion tends to give equal weight to that worn by men. While historians focused on later periods often have the capacity to meaningfully relate extant worn garments to those depicted and discussed, historians of Classical dress practices increasingly focus

⁷³ Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 312.

⁷⁴ See in particular, Mireille M. Lee, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

their efforts on mediations of dress, and perforce on dress practices rather than on dress realities.

This is not to say that the particulars of what Greek and Roman women and men wore are not of interest. Indeed, we must first confront what people wore before we can question what their clothing and personal adornment might have communicated. The documentary nature of early accounts of Greek and Roman dress practices reflects this desire to categorize types of clothing, but even the most straightforward attempts at definition cannot be entirely divorced from cultural meaning, as is aptly illustrated by early compendia of dress practices. Perhaps the most famous of these, published by Cesare Vecellio in 1590, entitled *De gli habiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo libiri due*, contains 420 woodcut engravings of traditional modes of dress from Venice to Ottoman Turkey.⁷⁵ While most of the engravings focus on depicting types of people, lawyers, prostitutes, anyone with culturally significant clothing, it also includes what Vecellio terms “habito antichissimo de’ Romani.”⁷⁶

The plates that present the customary dress of ancient Romans focus, like those devoted to more modern peoples, on a central figure, isolated much like a botanical or zoological sample, on the center of the bordered page. These figures, eleven in total, are primarily, interestingly, male, with hairstyle, footwear, military adornments, and fabric garments all carefully rendered. The focus is primarily on

⁷⁵ Cesare Vecellio, *De gli habiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del modo libri due* (Venice: Damiano Zenaro, 1590).

⁷⁶ Vecellio, *De gli habiti antichi et moderni*, 7. Interestingly, while he provides examples of contemporary Greek costume, from Rhodian concubines to Macedonian matrons, he does not include ancient examples of Greek dress.

military garb, with clear differentiations made between foot soldiers and cavalry, with patricians as a primary focus. The associated text, disjointed from the images, describes not only what the figures are, but also the sources from which the garments were drawn. Unlike the Venetian prostitutes and Ottoman princes found elsewhere in the book, these figures were drawn neither from life, nor with reference to extant garments or materials. A great deal seems to have been left to the artistic imagination, especially in the case of the two women included, but Vecellio occasionally references specific source materials (Figure 2.1). The *soldato à Cavallo*, we are told, references those depicted on Trajan's column.⁷⁷ Like the often-alien forms of foreign dress, these depictions of ancient Romans are presented as a curiosity, but their very presence merits further mention.⁷⁸

The costume books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the predecessors of the fashion books and magazines that begin to flourish in the late 1700s, and it is worthwhile to note that Vecellio, at least, makes no distinction between the dress habits of his contemporary world and that of the Romans. The separation of the dress trajectory of Rome from that of Europe, and the suggestion that the concept of fashion does not apply to ancient groups, are later interjections.

⁷⁷Vecellio, *De gli habiti antichi et moderni*, 8-9.

⁷⁸ Codices of regional dress practices could, and did, have a much more sinister purpose. The codification of difference, often of difference between colonized and colonizer, presented as an oddity and offered up for amusement, allows the dominant group to mentally reinforce its superiority, often phrased in moral terms, over subjugated others. This insidious practice is perhaps best expressed in the overwhelmingly white dresses depicted in the neo-Classical period, especially when they are juxtaposed with contemporary costume books that depicted women from areas of colonial interest. This is a topic that I intend to develop further.



Figure 2.1: Fanciful depiction of an ancient Roman matron.
From Vecellio 1590, Plate 13.

While my overview of the trajectory of fashion theory and history places modern historians of Greek and Roman fashion alongside our counterparts working in later time periods, Classical dress practices are not generally considered in tandem with those they precede. This is due in part to disciplinary bias and in part to issues of vocabulary. If, as Georg W.F. Hegel suggests, the classical mode of dress is both monolithic and static, then it cannot be fashion.⁷⁹ For fashion, whether we think of it as an invisible construct or as a material good, is largely defined by change. That there was change in Roman dress practices is clear. Indeed, the rapidity of change in women's hairstyles as depicted on coins and in statuary is utilized to create relative dating chronologies. However, despite this time determinate, trend driven, non-functional change in personal appearance, it is still rare to see the term "fashion" applied to the ancient Mediterranean, perhaps because of the pervasive association of fashion with modernity.

But, if every period has its own modernity, then why not project the concept back? The related questions of production and of dissemination loom large, here. Without patterns, factory production, fashion plates, or even the printing press, how could rapid change occur? Some think that it did not. Giles Lipovetsky has argued that there was no fashion before the 1860s.⁸⁰ The rate of change in Rome must admittedly have been slower than what is common in the modern period and especially in our current period of "fast fashion." The rate of change was slower even twenty-five years ago, and yet I do not believe that any reasonable theorist

⁷⁹ Georg Hegel, "On Drapery" in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume 2*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 701-791.

⁸⁰ Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion*, 15-17.

would deny that fashion existed in 1989. Nor would they suggest there was no fashion in 1889, or even 1789, although in each case the modes of production are less mechanized and the means of dissemination slower. The problem seems to lie more with the idea of Ancient Greece or Ancient Rome than it does with the processes themselves.

The ideal of the white draped woman so valorized by Hegel, and so prominent in the fashion plates and heroic art of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, has been perpetuated into the present by designers as diverse as Madame Grès and Alexander McQueen, as well as a veritable arsenal of sword-and-sandal films.⁸¹ But this does not reflect the realities of either ancient Greece or Rome, and it is likely that the scholar-politicians who most benefited from the legitimizing force of the Classical past were aware of this disjunction. Certainly Winkelmann, who was not an unlikely read for an upper class gentleman, is interested in the variety of colors and types of dress depicted, especially in Roman wall painting. The schoolboy repertoire of the period would have included Livy, whose histories relate tensions surrounding dress that resonate directly with those of the time period that seems to have attempted to disavow a multifaceted, multicultural Rome. Indeed, his presentation of the proposed repeal of the *Lex Oppia* is rife with descriptions that suggest the existence of what Barthes might term a “fashion system,” a complex, interconnected vocabulary of actual, described, and depicted

⁸¹ For an overview of modern designers who have used Greece and Rome as both reference and inspiration see Harold Koda, *Goddess: The Classical Mode* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Press, 2003). The question of later adoptions of Greek and Roman dress is of continuing interest to me, in particular depictions of women in British and French fashion magazines of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the use of jewelry purchased from Pompeii to enhance these outfits will be the topic of future work.

adornments capable of communicating multiple simultaneous messages to its contemporary audience.

Although the question of the existence of Roman fashion remains, particularly in the minds of traditional historians of dress, there have been notable forays into this interpretational zone. Much as Vecellio sought to depict the particulars of ancient Roman dress, the question of terms and what they describe have dominated the discussion on dress in the Roman period. In a very similar mode, Alexandra Croom presents an overview of types of dress throughout the Roman Empire, discussing methods of manufacture, modes of wearing, and changes through time, with the explicit purpose of dispelling the notion of a static and monolithic Roman look.⁸² Laudable for its scope, the study is sparse on specifics, often presenting large swaths of time and change within a single paragraph, in service of providing a broad, general survey, primarily based upon textual evidence.

While Croom attempts to survey the literary evidence for dress practices, Kelly Olson interrogates their relationship to social realities. Focusing primarily on women, she draws upon modern fashion theory to argue that Roman women took pleasure in their personal appearance and derived power from it.⁸³ Her work is exceptional within the field of Classical dress studies for the attention it gives to modern theoretical fashion paradigms, and for its seamless integration of these often cumbersome theories into her cogent exploration of the role that women's self-presentation played in the social life in Late Republican and Early Imperial

⁸² Alexandra Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2010).

⁸³ Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-Presentation and Society* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Rome. Her work, however, focuses on texts, and her inclusion of material evidence serves primarily to illustrate her text-based argument. Little thought is given to the nuances of visual representation or to the ways in which different media communicate.

For a more thoughtful approach to the material record, as well as multiple demonstrations of the ways in which the material and textual records can be fruitfully integrated, Judith Lynn Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante's excellent and informative edited volume, *The World of Roman Costume*, remains a standard reference, collecting the work of a wide range of scholars on topics as diverse as the toga and Roman footwear. It remains an important text for those interested in tackling questions both empirical—what sort of shoes did Roman soldiers wear? and theoretical—how can clothing signal ethnic difference in Roman provinces? While some authors within the edited volume are interested primarily in textual sources, there are serious discussions of depictions of dress practices, particularly those seen in sculpture. This bias in medium appears to have been deliberate, as Bonfante argues that “three-dimensional art offers better opportunities than painting for one to study the actual model behind the more or less stylized representations of specific fashions.”⁸⁴ While each of the studies included is elucidating, the format is typical of this explorative paradigm and of the study of Classical dress practices more generally. Within the sub-field of Classical dress, article length works focused on particular types of dress or on specific groups tend

⁸⁴ Larissa Bonfante, “Introduction,” in *The World of Roman Costume* edited by Judith Lynn Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 3.

to be the norm, with few book length discussions of the implications of dress practices published. I know of none that deal exclusively in painted adornment.

'What's in a Name?': Defining Vocabularies of Roman Dress Practices

Latin holds a position of privilege amongst the languages of Western fashion. Its etymological association with French, in particular, means that it is at the root of the majority of the terms used to describe social and time determinate relationships between articles of clothing, adornment, and the consumers of these commodities. Fashion, *la mode*, *habito*, the buzzwords of the past four centuries have their origins in Latin words, but while this connection between Rome and the study of fashion has provided intellectual legitimization for the infant discipline of fashion studies, it should not suggest that the connotations of modern terms hold true in ancient settings. While an understanding of Latin roots may help to underscore potential meanings of modern terms, these words would not have carried the same resonances for a Roman audience.

Vecellio's *habito*, Mandeville's cloathes, Baudelaire's *la mode*, the contemporary English "fashion," all inform us about the culturally proscribed relationships between people and the things they wear. For Vecellio, dress practices are ingrained; not unlike the environmental determinism that was characteristic of later cataloguers of types of humans, his *habiti* both define groups and are constructed to reflect their habits. So, the shoes of his Venetian prostitutes both set

them apart from other groups and perform a function needed by their profession.⁸⁵ Mandeville's *cloathes*, a clear forerunner of the modern English "clothes," preserves the importance of cloth in pre-industrial expressions of fashionability. After Worth, designers may have become the primary markers of clothing's value, but in the long centuries previous, the quality of the material was key. For Baudelaire, *la mode* took on a distinctly feminine, and industrial, tone. Inextricably intertwined with modernity, his terminology also highlights the rise of women as vessels of fashionability.⁸⁶

The terms are specific to a particular time and place, and they reflect the groups that produced them, much as the objects they categorize do. The terms themselves provide insight into the thought processes behind the act of personal adornment. To probe the relationship between individual and adornment in the Roman sphere, the vocabulary of dressing is key. The purpose here is not to list terms that describe particular articles of dress, but to consider those words that are used to discuss the categories into which a Latin speaking audience might have grouped these adornments.⁸⁷ I will introduce my discussion of vocabularies of Roman dress practices by considering how terminology helps us to better understand potential thought processes, before moving on to terms used by Roman

⁸⁵ The shoes, platforms in modern parlance, are particular to this group, Vecellio suggests, because the women both lifted the expensive skirts worn by prostitutes above the filth of the streets and helped to enhance the seductive walk they were known for.

⁸⁶ Jennifer M. Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (New York: Berg, 2004), 180.

⁸⁷ For a useful reference on the names of specific types of clothing and adornment, see Liza Cleland, Glenys Davis and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Greek and Roman Dress from A to Z* (London: Routledge, 2007).

authors of the late Republic and early Empire. I will conclude by providing working definitions of the terminology that I use in this text.

The definition of the modern term “fashion” is both fluid and fraught. Its ambiguity is part of what gives the concept its social charge. As the survey above suggests, the term “fashion” can variously correspond to a category of personal adornment, a gendered status display, a marker of contemporary modernity, a category of commodity, a social institution, and a temporally based trend in a variety of media from architecture to mathematics. The fact that a single word can encapsulate such a range of possible meanings simultaneously makes offering a single definition of the term a challenge, especially as these multiple meanings are in play simultaneously for the erudite consumer. The commodity has value in part because of its relationship to social institutions and time-determinate trends.

This does not help to reduce terminological confusion. The variety of near synonyms for concepts related to fashion further complicates matters. As Malcolm Bernard notes, “adornment, clothing, fashion, dress, costume, style, and decoration” all more or less describe the phenomenon at hand.⁸⁸ He attempts to clarify the distinctions between these terms by turning to etymology, arguing that the Latin *facere*, meaning to do or to make, and its various principle parts, give us an “original sense of fashion,” in which “fashion was something that one did, unlike now,

⁸⁸ Malcolm Bernard, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 2013), 8. For a more nuanced discussion of the etymology of the term fashion and its relationship to modern uses of the word, and the ways that this level of understanding can help to build an interpretive framework, see Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 1-14.

perhaps when fashion is something that one wears.”⁸⁹ While this explanation helps Bernard to advance his theory that fashion is a commodity through which social relationships are constructed, building on Karl Marx’s notion of clothing as “social hieroglyphic,” it presents a distinct problem for scholars of “fashion” in a Roman, or Roman related, context.⁹⁰ Deliberately or not, Bernard’s desire to confront the “original sense of fashion” through Latin suggests that this sense is rooted in Rome.

There is little question that there was time determinate change in style in Pompeii. We have only to look to portraiture to see this phenomenon in action. The shifting hairstyles of Imperial women attest to the quick changing nature of popular taste; it is possible to track similar trends in jewelry and fabric color. But, while the modern concept of fashion is applicable to a Roman context, it does not elucidate Roman conceptualizations of the relationship between people and their customary modes of dress, nor does it help us to understand the ways in which they understood the communicative potential of these practices. To explore that, we must interrogate their terminology, rather than imposing our own.

Fashion in Latin

Dress is a topic that is rarely the primary focus of a Greek or Roman narrative. However, on occasion, clothing can be used to underscore a concept, or to highlight a societal problem; it is from these instances that we can begin to construct a framework to address the question of how the Romans understood clothing and its social function. This vocabulary is twofold. While the words used to describe

⁸⁹Bernard, *Fashion as Communication*, 8.

⁹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1954), 79.

particular types of dress are useful for reconstructing what people were wearing, to interrogate the social function and implications of these items, those texts that center around social anxieties and the breakdown in social institutions prove to be the most insightful. It is in these instances, when the unspoken rules of decorum are broken, that we can begin to understand what those rules entailed.

Although our focus here is not limited by gender, when issues surrounding dress practices are described by Latin authors, women and their potentially negative influences are at the center of the debate. Perhaps the most famous of these debates is discussed by the historian Livy in his multi-volume history of the city of Rome from its foundation to the early first century CE. Of particular interest to Livy is the shift from Republic to Empire; alongside this political transition, he tracks the societal swings that made it possible. Like his late Republican predecessors, to whom we will return in Chapter Four, Livy underscores the increased importance of luxury goods as a harbinger of the declining morals that mark the end of the Republic.

At the heart of this exposition is a clothing story, one that provides a glimpse into the complex social relationship between Roman women and their clothing. As Livy relates the situation, writing two centuries after the fact, the story of the proposed repeal of the *Lex Oppia*, a suite of sumptuary laws passed at the height of the Punic Wars in 215 BCE, prohibiting, amongst other things, the amount of gold and the number of colors a woman could wear in public, highlights the gendered fault lines in mid-Republican Rome. At the center of the story are two opposing forces: the strict morals of Cato the Elder and the desires of the Roman matrons.

Cato argues that the very fabric of Roman society is at stake, that the cupidity of the women of Rome marks a decline in social values that threatens to undermine the stability of the state. In response, the Roman matrons, mentioned only obliquely by Livy, argue that the prohibition against luxury goods is tantamount to a prohibition of female self-expression.⁹¹

The narrative form of this debate as it is preserved in Livy's prose certainly mirrors the tensions of his own time period, as the Julio-Claudians similarly fought to curtail elite expenditures and concerns over the place of women within the social hierarchy came once more to the fore. Livy's histories, written during the latter portion of the reign of Augustus, thus straddle the time period of interest for scholars of Pompeii, and the debate over personal adornments preserved in the discussion of the repeal of the *Lex Oppia* offers a viable starting place for understanding vocabulary that references social connotations of fashionable items. While the intricacies of these laws are useful in their own right, for the moment, we will focus our attention not on what is said, but the terms used to describe the situation. Livy uses five terms to refer broadly to the appearance of the matrons embroiled in the debate: *munditia*, *ornatus*, *cultus*, *mundus muliebris* and *insignia*.⁹² Interrogation of this vocabulary can help us not only to gain insight into the mental frameworks that Latin speakers might have used to structure their understanding of the relationship between personal adornment, self and society, but also directly informs the vocabularies of dress practices that have been adopted in this text.

⁹¹ Livy, *History of Rome: Volume 5*, Translated by Canon Roberts (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1905), 34.4.

⁹² Livy, 35.7.8

Much as there is overlap between modern terms used to describe the process of wearing, between close synonyms such as “dress” and “costume,” Livy directly relates the notions of *munditia*, *ornatus*, and *cultus*, stating that they are all a woman’s *insignia*.⁹³ All four of these terms might fall under the umbrella of *mundus muliebris*, “the world of women.” Yet, the preservation of different words for each suggests shades of meaning much like those preserved by the often confusing near synonyms of modern fashion terminology. Examination of the overlap and dissonance between the terms highlights the ambiguity inherent in the system. Simply translated, *munditia* refers to the state of a woman’s self-presentation. Generally translated as “elegance,” its overtones of cleanliness underscore status divisions. As Kelly Olson notes, the elegant, clean woman is of greater “social worth” than the unornamented and unclean.⁹⁴ The notion of elegance with roots in cleanliness rather than in the obfuscation suggested by perfumes, cosmetics, and over adornment suggests both knowledge and leisure. In order to build a look around cleanliness, one cannot be involved in manual labor, and in order to avoid over adornment, one must understand which types of adornment to deploy and when.

While *munditia* refers to the ideal state of a woman’s dress, and indirectly to the ideal state of the woman herself, *ornatus* can carry a negative connotation. Generally translated as “adornment,” it refers to embellishments of many types,

⁹³ Christiane Kunst, “*Ornamenta Uxoriam*: Badges of Rank or Jewellery of Roman Wives?” *The Medieval History Journal* 8 (2005), 133-134.

⁹⁴ Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 8.

from rhetoric to personal appearance to functions of the state.⁹⁵ As is suggested by the connections between *munditia* and cleanliness, and the terms of the *Lex Oppia* itself, over-embellishment is less than ideal. Some adornment is an acceptable embellishment of what is already admirable, but over adornment marks a potentially undermining expense; the links between desire for adornment and damaging expenditure are particularly linked to women. These excessive desires might mirror excessive desires in other areas, and women prone to over adornment were seen as more likely to engage in extramarital affairs and prostitution, at least in the minds of male writers.⁹⁶ While *munditia* suggests a potentially high social status, *ornatus* is more vexed. A certain amount of wealth is required to obtain adornments, but over adornment is linked more to an *aspiration* towards a higher status than to high status itself. Yet, at the same time, a complete lack of adornment was inappropriate for all but the lowest classes. Too much *ornatus* and a lack of *ornatus* could be equally damaging visual missteps.

There is considerable overlap between the terms *ornatus* and *cultus*. Like *ornatus*, *cultus* covers a broad range of potential meanings. It refers generally to personal appearance, particularly to the trappings that one uses to adorn the body, including jewelry, clothing, headpieces, and the care given to the body itself.⁹⁷ Generally a positive term denoting refinement and comfort, it is at times a marker of civilizing forces. These forces, initially constructive, can, if over applied, become detrimental. If *cultus* shades into luxury, it can engender a softness that is

⁹⁵ Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 7-8.

⁹⁶ Livy, 34.4; Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 85; Seneca, *On Benefits*, translated by Miram Griffin and Brad Inwood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.2.

⁹⁷ Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 8.

antithetical to Roman conceptualizations of effective male citizenship.⁹⁸ This gendered division of meaning, with the negative connotations of a term becoming more evident when applied to women and women's affairs runs through the terminology of fashion in Rome, much as the correlations between fashion, frivolity, and femininity have grown increasingly strong in English.

Although the association between *munditia*, *ornatus*, *cultus* and potentially problematic femininity is strong, *mundus muliebris* is the only term here that refers specifically to women, or indeed specifically to the appearance of humans. *Munditia*, *ornatus*, and *cultus* all might apply to things as effectively as they describe the state of adornment of humans. *Mundus muliebris*, on the other hand, is a class of thing specific to women and their appearance. Translated literally, the phrase means "the world of women," and it refers generally to all of the trappings that a woman uses to enhance her personal appearance, from toiletries to dress to jewelry. The scope of the word *mundus* underscores the importance of adornments in the articulation of women's social position and selfhood. As Kelly Olson puts it, "The phrase 'woman's world' implies that ornamentation comprised the bulk of women's interests, and thus appears to be a telltale marker of the status of women and female adornment in Roman antiquity."⁹⁹ It is also a clear mark of a gendered divide. A woman's world consists of adornment and beauty; her efforts may enhance the prestige of her family, but they are essentially focused on her person. Her work enhances the individual. A man's world is broader in scope; his ideal focus is civic, more outward

⁹⁸ Maria Wyke, "Woman in the Mirror: The Rhetoric of Adornment in the Roman World," in *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, edited by Léonie Archer, Susan Fishler, and Maria Wyke (London: Routledge, 1994), 144-145.

⁹⁹ Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 8.

than inward. Not unlike the relationship articulated by Veblen, in the mind of the Roman man, women consume the resources produced by men, becoming resources themselves.

It is interesting, then, that the final term Livy uses to discuss the relationship between dress and society is more likely to be used to describe soldiers than matrons. Indeed, the correlation that Livy draws between *munditia*, *ornatus*, *cultus* and *insignia* may play upon this dynamic. Much as the notion that a woman's toiletries comprise her world, the idea that adornments could act as a woman's badges of honor is potentially double edged. A man's badges of rank are associated with merit and success; if ornamentation becomes the woman's *insignia* her rank itself is entangled with the potentially negative valences of adornment. As Christiane Kunst argues, "Jewellery reflected the wealth and importance of her husband and family on the one hand, and kept the woman in a physically inferior sphere at the same time."¹⁰⁰ That she has any badge of rank indicates the fact of her social status, while the problematic nature of that *insignia* undermines attempts that she might make to separate herself from spheres of male power.¹⁰¹

Taken together, the related concepts of elegant cleanliness, adornment, personal appearance, women's toilette, and signs of rank make up the mental framework that informs the understanding of the relationship between self-presentation and social performance in the Late Republic and early Empire. While the modern term "fashion," has increasingly been associated with time-determinate change in

¹⁰⁰ Kunst, "Ornamenta Uxoria," 139-140.

¹⁰¹ Sallust's presentation of the problematic and independent Sempronia underscores this notion. Sallust, *Catilina, Jugurtha, Historiarum Fragmenta Selecta*, edited by L. D. Reynolds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5.1.

clothing, if fashion exists on the ancient Italian Peninsula, it refers to a much broader range of materials. Although the concept of modernity underscores much of the discussion of modern fashion terminology, morality and status are at the heart of the Latin vocabulary.

Terminology in this Text

The Latin terms above suggest a thought process that makes little differentiation between the adornment of a wall and the adornment of a human body. This potential for semiotic slippage suggests an awareness of the capacity of multiple visual media to communicate simultaneously, but it also poses a problem for the translator. To accurately communicate the complicated nature of Roman conceptualizations of the potential inherent in dress practices, the terms chosen to express these concepts in English must be similarly nuanced. The problem is doubly complicated by the undertones of much of the related English vocabulary.

“Fashion” preserves much of the vexed complexity of *cultus*. Like *cultus*, fashion refers to both a type of thing, such as a garment, and a description of that thing. It carries with it the constructive force of novelty and the negative connotation of excess and frivolity. But while it communicates the complicated nature of *cultus*, its strong connection to quick change has superseded its functional definition in general modern parlance. It is for this reason, that when “fashion” is used here, it refers to the suite of status markers associated with dressing the body, in the spirit of *cultus*. But fashion is not *cultus*, and to avoid misleading conflation of ancient and modern terms, when a Latin term is either directly applicable or its

specific meaning is needed to explain a line of reasoning, I preserve the original term, leaving it unmediated. It is the English vocabulary that requires further clarification.

In all cases, I strive to choose words that reflect the broad range of categories of thing that might fall under the umbrella of “fashion” in Latin texts. Much as *ornatus* could refer to both words and jewelry, or *luxuria*, luxury goods, might range from painted walls to a woman’s perfume, I have adopted the term “adornments” to refer to the materials used to articulate social position. Most often, the term “adornments” in this text applies to jewelry, but it is equally applicable to painted walls, or women’s hair, or silver dining sets.¹⁰² Its applicability to multiple types of things makes it preferable in most cases to “fashion,” as fashion in recent times has come to refer almost exclusively to things that are worn.

At times, it is necessary to differentiate between walls and women. In these cases, the term “dress” offers a viable correlate to *mundus muliebris*. Unlike *mundus muliebris*, it has the advantage of gender neutrality. While a dress is typically a garment worn by women, “dress” or “dress practices” refers here to the whole of a person’s physical self-presentation and the habits required to maintain it. Clothing, hairstyle, scent, cosmetics, jewelry, undergarments, shoes, grooming, and cleansing habits together make up an individual’s dress.

While these terms seek to preserve the intersectional nature of Latin vocabulary on the topic of fashion, they describe more of what things were used to

¹⁰² Ellen Swift has taken this notion in a promising direction in her book *Style and Function in Roman Decoration: Living with Objects and Interiors* in which she gives equal space to floor mosaics, dining vessels and dress accessories. See Ellen Swift, *Style and Function in Roman Decoration: Living with Objects and Interiors* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).

articulate social position than how these things were used or what their social implications might have been. To delve into these larger questions, a great many more pages are needed. But before we proceed, a final term must be questioned.

'All that Glitters': Jewelry in Theory and in Practice

We have a vocabulary that surpasses our evidence. While it is possible for Gloria Groom to compare the construction of a dress worn by Manet's model with his depiction of the dress, and to inform her visual interrogation with a similarly close reading of contemporary fashion journals and the artist's letters, the vagaries of preservation bias prevent me from undertaking a similar line of argumentation for the garments worn by figures painted on the walls of Pompeian houses.¹⁰³ Yet, some sort of physical material object remains key to the process. For all that depictions of adornment abound, depictions are not reality. And while Anne Hollander has made evocative arguments on behalf of depiction, its very nature suggests that what it depicts may not align precisely with what is real. It is for this reason that I henceforth turn my attention to a single component of personal adornment: jewelry. It is ideal for addressing questions of status and power display in Pompeii because it is preserved for us in three forms: as real jewelry, excavated from the site, as described jewelry discussed in graffiti from the town and in texts read there, and in depiction, on the walls of Pompeian houses.

Theories of fashion can inform our understanding of what jewelry is and how it functions, but as a subset, jewelry conveys different meanings than do other

¹⁰³ Gloria Groom, *Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

aspects of dress. Its ability to do so depends on both its definitions and its uses. As with the broader topic of fashion, to understand jewelry, we must first define it as a category of material. What makes it different from garments? And how do these differences help us to understand what it communicates and how this communication occurs? Because jewelry studies are in their infancy, the theoretical paradigm that I construct here draws as much from observations of the materiality of the things in question as it does from extant theoretical paradigms that have attempted to incorporate jewelry as a distinct category.

Jewelry makes occasional appearances in fashion theory texts, but it is rare to see it treated separately from garments, despite the clear differences between them. Indeed, Wilhelm Lindemann contends that “there has never been an explicit theory of jewelry.”¹⁰⁴ His foray into the topic centers on evolutionary theory and psychology, positing that the need for adornment is an evolutionarily driven action, rooted in the desire to both attract a mate and distinguish oneself from the group, and that the continued importance of jewelry in the modern world is rooted in social memory¹⁰⁵. Frustrated with the “legion” of “virtually unmanageable” art historical and anthropological monographs on the topic of jewelry, he rather focuses on an overarching theory that could apply to any time or place.¹⁰⁶ While his assertion that the definitions and functions of jewelry need to be clearly delineated

¹⁰⁴ Wilhelm Lindemann, “Thinking-Jewellery: A Theory of Jewellery,” in *Thinking-Jewellery: On the Way Towards a Theory of Jewelry*, edited by Wilhelm Lindemann and Joan Clough (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2011), 13.

¹⁰⁵ Lindemann, “Thinking-Jewellery,” 15-17. See also, Tilmann Habermas, “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend: The Psychology of Jewelry as Beloved Object” in *Thinking-Jewellery: On the Way Towards a Theory of Jewelry*, edited by Wilhelm Lindemann and Joan Clough (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2011), 96-107.

¹⁰⁶ Lindemann, “Thinking-Jewellery,” 13.

is well-taken, in his pursuit of his ambitious goal, he finds himself turning to time and place specific examples, much in the way of the art historians and anthropologists before him. Jewelry seems to resist easy categorization and broad generalization, and this difficulty sits at the heart of any endeavors to understand it. Jewelry is a social medium. Its meaning depends on time and place. It is for this reason that, while we can speak in large terms about what jewelry can do, we cannot create a universal theory of its meaning. To attempt to do so would undermine the exact multi-valenced potentials that we wish here to explore. Indeed, the notions of intrinsic value that have dominated the discourse on Classical jewelry highlight the limiting nature of such a broad approach. Rather than attempting here to provide a theory of jewelry, my goal is to underscore the potentials of jewelry as both a medium and a field of study. To do so, I will focus on its function and its materiality, with the belief that these aspects of the medium remain the most consistent across time and space. Once these general parameters have been established, I will turn my attention to the articulation of the functions of Roman jewelry as a cornerstone of my overall endeavor.

Defining Jewelry

As a type of thing, jewelry falls under the general umbrella of “adornments.” But as we discussed above, many things can be classified as adornments, from wall paintings to scrollwork on a sword; indeed, a ceremonial sword could itself be considered a type of jewelry. To understand the nuances of the medium, we must differentiate its function from that of other, related materials. Unlike clothing,

which has a definite function that informs its use, the primary purpose of jewelry is to embellish and to articulate. As Marcia Pointon aptly puts it, “Jewels in actuality and in representation function as a touchstone for emergent and changing concepts of the individual in relation to society.”¹⁰⁷ While jewelry and clothing are both types of personal adornment, they serve different purposes. Clothing conceals and protects the body; its drape and its cut serve to mask or to reveal what lies beneath, while the weight and the texture of the cloth create a sensual interface between the body and the world. Outer garments shield the body from the natural elements, allowing humans to work and live in otherwise adverse conditions. Many undergarments alter the body, physically reshaping it, shifting soft tissue to allow the body to conform to societally specific ideal body types. And although both outer and undergarments have influence and meaning that transcends functionality, they do serve a firm function. Without a coat, skin will freeze; without appropriate undergarments, delicate tissue will chafe. Without jewelry, a person can still work and live, but their relationship to other humans is obscured. Its function is to convey information. As Georg Simmel states, “The personality, so to speak, *is* more when it is adorned.”¹⁰⁸

This adornment is directed toward the outside, and what is communicated has meaning “only because of relationships with other people.”¹⁰⁹ Its potential

¹⁰⁷ Marcia Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 13.

¹⁰⁸ Georg Simmel, “The Psychology of Jewelry,” in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, edited by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: SAGE, 1997), 207.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher, “The Language of Personal Adornment,” in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, edited by Justine M. Cordwell (Berlin: Moutin Publishers, 1979), 7.

meanings are as varied as these relationships; Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher cite ten separate communicative zones in which jewelry operates, noting its use for signaling diverse meanings from indicating political affiliation to facilitating social rituals to enticing a sexual partner.¹¹⁰ While jewelry may reinforce social meaning for the wearer, serving as a physical reminder of gender, status, aspirations, and ritual role, it most often speaks to an audience, even if that audience is at times a private one. Alba Cappellieri states the matter succinctly, “Jewelry is not something worn in the home, it does not have to do with the private world, it is exquisitely public, bound up with the outward representation of the self, with its social masks.”¹¹¹ While Cappellieri makes a distinction between domestic and public display, it is important to note that social masks, and jewelry’s utility to facilitate their creation, are not limited to public spaces; indeed, as we shall discuss, jewelry can be especially potent when deployed for an intimate audience.

However, the audience is key. Jewelry exists to be displayed, and the relationship between the self, the other, and jewelry is central to its meaning. Jewelry mediates encounters with physical bodies, allowing meaning to be conveyed without words. Because it speaks indirectly, and its value is as social as it is material, its potency is not lessened by converting the jewelry from the realm of the real to the realm of depiction. Real jewelry may be more valuable, but depicted

¹¹⁰ The full range of possibilities that they articulate is as follows: 1. Adornment as Aesthetic Experience, 2. Adornment as Definition of Social Role, 3. Adornment as Statement of Social Worth, 4. Adornment as Indicator of Economic Status, 5. Adornment as Political Symbol, 6. Adornment as Indicator of Magico-Religious Condition, 7. Adornment as a Facility in Social Rituals, 8. Adornment as Reinforcement of Belief, Custom, and Values, 9. Adornment as Recreation, 10. Adornment as Sexual Symbol; Roach and Eicher, “The Language of Personal Adornment,” 7-21.

¹¹¹ Alba Cappellieri and Marco Romanelli, *Il design della gioia: il gioiello fra progetto e ornamento* (Milan: Charta, 2004), 12.

jewelry serves the same social function as its more precious counterpart.

Understanding of these messages depends in large part on social initiation; like other visual media, jewelry's potential for communication is rooted in its ability to transmit multiple messages simultaneously, suggesting different, even opposing, messages to different viewers. How it is understood depends in part on how and in what settings it is worn; it is a performative medium, and it is to performance that we now turn.

Jewelry and Social Performance

The communicative ability of jewelry stems in large part from the nature of its materials. Cloth is flexible. It generally moves with the body, and regardless of the shape that it is given by buttons, pins, cuts, and stitches, its shape is ultimately determined by that of the body that wears it. This is not true of jewelry; while cloth is itself flexible, the materials of jewelry are most often rigid. Bone, metal, glass, shell, and clay—the primary materials of jewelry—retain the shapes that they are given. As Alba Cappellieri writes, “A jewel is a piece of the body of the person who wears it, forming a part of it, emphasizing it, isolating it, penetrating it, encircling it.”¹¹² This intimate and material connection between person and thing invites interpretational slippage between the two. An earring is both separate from and connected to the body, and as such, it visually defines the boundaries of the physical body, creating a clear division between the self and the outside world. This division is both a challenge and a bridge; even as it separates self from other, it announces

¹¹² Cappellieri and Romanelli, “Il design della gioia,” 25.

the social roles and aspirations of its wearer, and it does so in a widely intelligible manner; even if two groups do not ascribe the same value to a diamond, its refractory properties draw the eye, and the ability to draw attention is itself a form of power.

This ability to action when paired with the rigid physical form of much jewelry opens a wider field of theoretical inquiry. Jewelry suggests a wearer. The existence of space left for the body to occupy—the void at the center of a ring, the loop of a necklace, the line of an earring—invite the viewer of unworn jewelry to imagine the bodily forms it is meant to enhance. In this capacity, pieces of jewelry can act as what Robin Bernstein terms “scriptive things.” By her definition, a scriptive thing “structures a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable.”¹¹³ While the things that Bernstein interrogates are caricatures of race and gender, meant to be posed with for photographs, the theory that she draws upon encompasses a broad cross-section of material culture. Drawing from the work of Martin Heidegger and Bill Brown, Bernstein’s use of the term “thing” has special resonance for work with jewelry. In the context of “thing theory,” an object is “a chunk of matter that one looks through or beyond to understand something human,” while a thing takes on an agency of its own, forcing “a person into an awareness of the self in material relation to the thing.”¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Robin Bernstein, “Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race” *Social Text* 101, 27.4 (Winter 2009), 69.

¹¹⁴ Bernstein, “Dances with Things,” 69-70. For “Thing Theory” more generally see Martin Heidegger, “The Thing” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York:

Both jewelry and clothing are things, borrowing from the terminology of these new materialists. They invite humans to perform, and their materiality suggests particular types of movement. The structure of garments manufactures gestures. Such gestures have the capacity to underscore societal structures and tastes; Baudelaire highlights gestures stating that, “every age had its own gait, glance and gesture.”¹¹⁵ For Baudelaire, the definitive gesture of his age was that of a woman lifting her skirts to step off of a curb.¹¹⁶ The structure of the crinolines popular in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century require the woman to lift them when attempting to negotiate shifts in the ground level, particularly steps up and down, and this need encoded itself in their movements, creating a “period gesture” endowed with erotic potential—it showcased the ankles which were otherwise hidden—and indicative of social standing—the crinoline in this period was hooked to the underside of a corset. Neither could be put on without help, and neither would permit the wearer to engage in manual labor, suggesting an excess of resources in the mode of Veblen’s conspicuous consumption.

These gestures are equally common in the Roman sphere. While Baudelaire’s period gesture highlights the woman’s leg, the period gesture common to Roman women of the late Republican and early Imperial periods draws attention to the face, ostensibly obscuring the upper body (Figure 2.2). In this detail from Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, we see a striding woman holding her *palla*, a

Harper and Row, 1971), 174-182, and Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry*, 28 no.1 (Autumn, 2001), 1-22.

¹¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life, in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 14.

¹¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, “A une passante,” in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, translated with notes by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 188-189.

square of cloth worn draped about the shoulders and heads by Roman matrons. Because the cloth was habitually worn without a pin, perhaps to facilitate removal in interior spaces, the gesture, like that of Baudelaire's crinolined ladies, is a necessity. If the woman did not hold the cloth, the *palla* would slip and her head and shoulders would be left uncovered. Its presence informs the viewer, both of the painted wall and of the living woman, that its wearer is a decorous woman of means.



Figure 2.2: Detail from Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Woman holding her *palla*.

The *palla* hides the breasts, shoulders and hair from public view, preserving the modesty that is essential to outward displays of morality on the part of Roman wives. It also limits the woman's potential to work. If social convention dictates that the *palla* must be worn, and the *palla* is not pinned, then the woman must hold it in place rather than engaging in labor.¹¹⁷ Much as the wearing of crinolines and corsets marked the conspicuous leisure of women in the 1860s, the wearing of the *palla* and the multiple layers beneath it marked the status of women in Rome.

The existence of these gestures highlights the ways in which things can dictate human action. Jewelry, too, is an object with agency. But while clothing exerts its agency over the wearer, jewelry acts more strongly upon the viewer. Its ultimate function is to be viewed, to direct the eye of the viewer to the areas of the body that the wearer seeks to highlight, while simultaneously engaging the viewer's mind in a multi-valenced communication of power, wealth, social status, and sexual availability. The materials most associated with jewelry—precious metals and stones—enhance this communicative interchange. Their reflective qualities and bright colors enable them to draw attention, and that attention is at the heart of the power of jewelry as a medium as well as the performance of power undertaken by the wearer. Paraphrasing Simmel, Richard Klein writes that “women use their first form of property, ornamental jewelry, to seduce, to charm, and to please others with their beauty, chiefly men but also other women. Ordinarily, you don't wear jewelry

¹¹⁷ Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 89.

just for yourself, since most of the time you can't see it or don't notice you have it on."¹¹⁸

The gendered language of Klein's statement is significant, for jewelry has long been at the heart of gendered power dynamics; indeed, the vexed nature of these negotiations allows us to understand the role that jewelry plays in them. The cross-cultural significance of jewelry as dowry and as betrothal gift gives a broad corpus of information on its role, and the negotiations themselves are a commonly noted event in multiple varieties of text, from satire to laws. For Simmel, women deploy jewelry to their own ends, much as men deploy weapons.¹¹⁹ Leaving aside the fact that men are equally capable of making good use of rings, necklaces, brooches, and earrings to communicate a wide range of messages, and the equally pertinent notion that weapons themselves can take on valences of adornment, the notion of deploying jewelry suggests once more that its social meanings are as important as its materials. Simmel states, "As the flash of the precious stone seems to be directed at the other—like the lightning of the glance the eye addresses to him—it carries the social meaning of jewels...which returns to the subject as the enlargement of his own sphere of influence. The radii of this sphere mark the distance which jewelry creates between men...but on the other hand, these radii not only let the other participate: they shine in *his* [emphasis in original] direction."¹²⁰ Simmel understands men to be the viewers of jewelry, while women wear it.

¹¹⁸ Richard Klein, *Jewelry Talks: A Novel Thesis* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 33.

¹¹⁹ Simmel, "Psychology of Jewelry," 206.

¹²⁰ Simmel, "Psychology of Jewelry," 209.

Such an assertion resonates with Roman sensibilities. While men certainly wore jewelry, from rings to bracelets to brooches, women seem to have been the more skilled at deploying it. Seneca's complaints about the frivolity of women highlight the tensions between those who buy jewelry and those who wear it; he states, "Feminine lunacy could not have sufficiently overwhelmed men unless two or three patrimonies had hung in each [of her] ears."¹²¹ Such adornments were troublesome to the men of Rome not only for their cost, but also for what they might represent: a threat to the power of men. The wealth visualized by jewelry might be the woman's own, and it might be bequeathed by her to whomever she wished. As Kelly Olson states, "Wealthy women, like wealthy freedmen, were an uncomfortable and daily reminder of the fact that wealth, status, and gender were not always in accord."¹²² Even if the jewels a woman wore belonged to her husband, the agency afforded by them is invested in their wearer. It gives her communicative control. Not only can she decide to which part of her body to draw the viewer's eye through her choices, her jewelry can interject itself into otherwise closed spheres. Pliny the Elder's assertion that pearls announced a woman's presence on the street, underscores this notion.¹²³ An earring composed of more than one pearl could actually make noise, and that noise could speak in situations when the woman wearing could not.

The transgressive capabilities of jewelry were, and are, equally open to men. The emperor Caligula reputedly wore bracelets and women's shoes, perhaps as part

¹²¹ Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, VII.9.4.

¹²² Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 98-99.

¹²³ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 37.10.

of his continual bid to reinforce his exemption from the mores that constrained the rest of the Roman populace.¹²⁴ By wearing unexpected adornments, he signaled his godlike position. The gods are not bound by the laws of mortals, and neither is the emperor. Similarly, as we shall see, although legislation prevented freedmen and freedwomen from wearing gold and pearls, they found ways to creatively integrate the forbidden materials into their everyday dress, while simultaneously creating a unique aesthetic, one that reinforced their flaunting of the law visually.

Jewelry and the Spector of Wealth

While it is evident that jewelry conveys a wide range of meanings, it would be remiss not to address its connection to wealth. The monetary value of precious stones and metals makes jewelry a capital investment. This investment is its most readily accessible communication. Jewelry does not only indicate wealth, it is wealth. This is especially evident in Rome. Seneca may not have been overstating the potential prices of jewelry when he said that a woman's earrings could be the equivalent of two or three patrimonies. Suetonius corroborates these figures; as we mentioned in Chapter One, the short-lived emperor Vitellius is said to have pawned one of his mother's pearl earrings. With the proceeds, he was able to pay the wages of his troops for a campaign to Gaul.¹²⁵ Thus, for a Roman viewer, the size and quality of stones and metals would be a strong visual correlate for a family's or an individual's wealth. The access suggested by the use of particular stones, especially

¹²⁴ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, translated by Catharine Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 163.

¹²⁵ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 252.

pearls and emeralds, could further mark status by signaling consular and imperial favor, as pearls were introduced to Rome by Pompey the Great following his defeat of Mithridates of Pontus and emeralds became available after the emperor Claudius opened his mines in Egypt.¹²⁶ Indeed, it is at this point that analyses that draw a one to one correlation between jewelry and wealth begin to break down.

Wealth is itself a construct, and one that is temporally and socially determinate. Some standards of valuation of metals and stones are dependent upon external factors, such as chemical and physical properties. The ductility, malleability, color and sheen of gold makes it easier to work into a greater variety of shapes than metals of traditionally lesser value, but this does not mean that its value supersedes that of lesser metals in all situations. While gold had a greater monetary value in late Republican Rome, iron was the preferred metal for rings.

Indeed, for Pliny the Elder, the question of metals is steeped with socio cultural meaning. He states explicitly that gold rings are dangerous, writing “the first person to put gold on his fingers committed the worst crime against human life.”¹²⁷ He relates that the earliest rings worn in Rome were made from iron, worn on the right hand by soldiers to bring them courage in battle. From this grew the rings that the equestrians wore, to mark them as separate from the plebeians. These rings, also made of iron were the precursors to the iron rings worn by

¹²⁶ For Pompey and the history of the Roman pearl trade see R.A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl Fishing, Origins to the Age of Discovery*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998), 87 and Pliny the Elder, *Natural Histories*, XXXvii.6. For Claudius’ emerald mines see Hugh Tait, *Jewelry 7,000 Years: An International History and Illustrated Survey from the Collection of the British Museum* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 88.

¹²⁷ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, translated by John F. Healy (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 287, XXXiii. 4.

Augustus' judicial panels. Gold was instead preferred as a gift for military service, but only to non-citizen troops; similarly, bracelets of either gold or of silver were gifted only to citizen soldiers. He credits Marcus Brutus of Philippi with first adopting gold for rings in Rome, further stating that gold rings were preferred for public settings, and iron for private. From this, he suggests, came the early imperial craze for gold, and while he outlines the variety of types of gold jewelry worn by women, suggesting that the use of gold for them is a badge of rank; importantly, he notes that even into the early imperial period the preferred metal for betrothal rings was iron. On the whole, he gives more space to the fashions in men's rings, citing the uptick in wearing of gems incised with Egyptian iconography and imperial portraiture. Silver is of relatively little interest to him, although he does remark that it was not in common use in Rome until the time of Julius Caesar.¹²⁸

Although aware of the relative monetary values of each of these metals, Pliny's interest is not in their commodity value, but in their socio-cultural valences. And while this may be due in part to the aims of Pliny's text, if our aim is to interrogate potential Roman mindsets, Pliny's emphasis on the meaning of metals is significant. Indeed, Pliny's assertions are indirectly supported by depictions of jewelry in Pompeii. Depictions of jewelry are not bound by the same physical laws that govern real jewelry; the size of stones and the quantity of gold is limited only by the painter's mind and the patron's desires, rather than by access to materials and restrictions of price. If the primary purpose of jewelry was to exhibit wealth, and if wall paintings are part of an aspirational sphere of adornment, then we might

¹²⁸ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 288-291, XXXiii. 5-12, 16. For the reference to betrothal rings see Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, XXXiii.4.12.

expect to see imaginary jewelry; jewelry larger and more expensive than the norm would be common in depiction. The opposite is the case.

It is equally important for modern scholars to attempt to distinguish modern valuations of precious stones and metals from Roman conceptualizations of the value of the same stones. Diamonds are among the most expensive stones in the modern Western world, but they were not codified as a commodity until the writings of Adam Smith in the mid-eighteenth century.¹²⁹ Romans, by contrast, valued color above sparkle.¹³⁰ To the Roman eye, the hue of diamonds was less impressive than the clear white of pearls; consequently, pearls were the more expensive commodity.¹³¹ The properties of metals and stones are intrinsic; their values are not.

Fashions, whether of wall painting, of adornments, or of clothing, are aspirational. Unlike other markers of status, like education and family lineage, the ability to craft personal appearance has the potential to exist outside of ingrained power structures. This makes them a uniquely double-edged mode of communication. In its basest form, its components are available to any who can afford to purchase them; the overt display of excess resources is one of the clearest messages that jewelry communicates. But this ease of initial interpretation is belied

¹²⁹ Pointon, *Brilliant Effects*, 44; Adam Smith, *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms, delivered to the University of Glasgow by Adam Smith, reported by a Student in 1763* (Oxford: E. Cannan, 1896), 157, 178.

¹³⁰ Stella G. Miller, "New Developments in the Archaeology of Northern Greek Jewelry," in *Ancient Jewelry and Archaeology*, edited by Adriana Calinescu (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996), 35.

¹³¹ This may be due to problems of stone working. The clarity of diamonds and their sparkle depends in large part on how they are worked. Pearls do not have to be altered to show their potential. On the question of working diamonds, see Pointon, *Brilliant Effects*, 44. On the Roman preference for pearls see Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 54, and Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 116.

by the complex social underpinnings that give things their value. Those of monetary means but a lack of prescribed status can buy a look, but the effectiveness of self-presentation depends on more than money, especially in those cases in which traditional elite groups lack the wealth of their sub-elite counterparts, as seems to be the case in late Republican Pompeii. In this social setting, modes of dress are part of a social performance that revolves around knowledge differentials and visual cues, partially preserved in paintings that adorn the interiors of Pompeian houses.

In the delicate balancing act between legibility and inaccessibility needed to maintain internal group cohesion, the complicated intersectional space of the Pompeian house adornment is omnipresent. I know of no depiction of human figures that does not include some form of personal adornment. This insistent inclusion highlights both the importance of adornment in the Pompeian mindset and its potential to communicate pertinent visual information to the viewer. What this information is and how it is communicated are the central focuses of the next four chapters.

CHAPTER THREE

Semiotic Slippage in the Villa of the Mysteries

Chapter Two outlined the potentials of jewelry as an interpretational tool and proposed that fashion theory could provide the analytical framework with which to approach this under utilized corpus. This chapter seeks to put these assertions to the test. What does jewelry communicate? How does it communicate? And does it tell us anything that we did not already know? To confront these questions, we turn our attention to the Villa of the Mysteries. Located 400 meters north of the Porta Ercolanese, outside the city walls of Pompeii, the villa contains some seventy rooms, with richly decorated dining halls and *cubiculae* sharing a roof with the apparatuses of productive viticultural enterprise (Figure 3.1). Modern tourists enter the villa from the south, through the long southeast portico, but ancient visitors would have accessed the villa from the east, exiting from the Via Superior into the working portion of the villa. Through the arched entryway, the viewer gains access to a vestibule lined with two benches, on which a visitor could sit and gaze out onto a large peristyle, beyond which the atrium, tablinum, and the lavishly decorated private spaces are situated (Figure 3.2).¹³²

¹³² For an extremely cogent discussion of the overall layout of the villa see Domenico Esposito and Paola Rispoli, "La Villa dei Misteri a Pompei," in *Città Vesuviane antichità e fortuna, Il suburbio e l'agro*

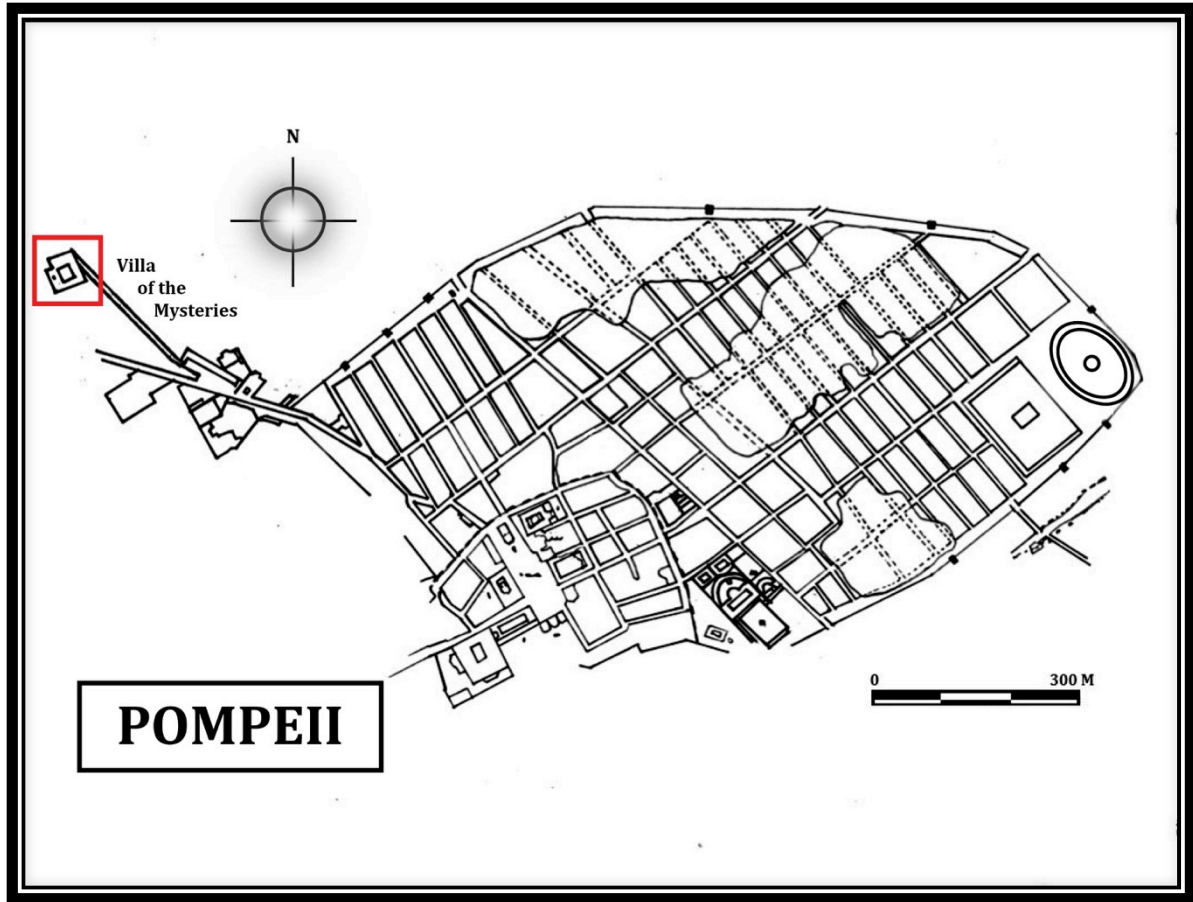


Figure 3.1: Map of Pompeii indicating the location of the Villa of the Mysteries. After Cassanelli et al 2002, *General Map of Pompeii*, p. 58-59.

While the mechanisms of wine production together with the kitchens and service rooms necessary for the maintenance of daily life occupy nearly half of the villa's interior real estate, the bulk of scholarly attention given to the villa has been devoted to its decorative program and its most famous room—the triclinium

di Pompei, Ercolano, Oplontis e Stabiae, edited by P.G. Guzzo and G. Tagliamonte (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2013), 71-77.

encircled with near life-sized figures that gives the villa its name, the so-called Room of the Mysteries, referred to here as Room 5.¹³³

This room is a superlative locus of analysis for our purposes in large part because of the amount of scholarly interest it has garnered; and as we shall see, dress and jewelry have long been implicit players in the debate surrounding the interpretation of the famous murals in Room 5.¹³⁴ By making these implicit analyses explicit, I seek to underscore the utility of an approach that imbues dress and dress accessories with significant communicative ability. In so doing, I confront the relationship between reality and depiction, questioning the ability of Saussure's formulation of semiology to confront material evidence. To consider the ways in which a focus on materiality can nuance traditional semiological thinking, I then shift my focus to the depiction of jewelry in Room 5, focusing on rings to discuss the relationship between reality and depiction, mortal and immortal, in the room. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the function of depicted jewelry and the

¹³³ The function of Room 5 is not uncontested. I follow Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, who in turn agrees with de Petra, in identifying it as a triclinium, in part due to the composition of the mosaic floor, and in part due to the pattern of cubiculum-triclinium-central hall that Wallace-Hadrill identified across multiple contemporary dwellings. For Wallace-Hadrill's discussion of this pattern see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 57 and 113. For the initial identification of the room as a triclinium see Giulio de Petra, "Pompei-Villa Romana presso Pompei," *Notizie degli scavi di antichità*, vol. 35 (Roma: Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1910), 143. For an alternative identification of the room as an *oecus*, see Roger Ling, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 101. The distinction may make little difference in terms of the way in which the room was used by the inhabitants of the house. Vitruvius suggests that the distinction is one of architectural elaboration, and that both *triclinia* and *oeci* could contain dining couches. See Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, 6.3.8-10. For a discussion of the room as a private reception area see Brenda Longfellow, "Gendered Space? Location and Function of Room 5 in the Villa of the Mysteries," in *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompei: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse*, edited by Elaine K. Gazda (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2000), 32.

¹³⁴ Room numbers given here correspond to those used by Amadeo Maiuri. They therefore differ from those used by authors who worked on the villa prior to 1931. When I reference earlier authors here, I substitute Maiuri's numbering system for those given in the texts.

role it can play in the construction of the mental-spatial landscape that is central to the interpretational process, both in the Villa of the Mysteries and in the larger Pompeian sphere.

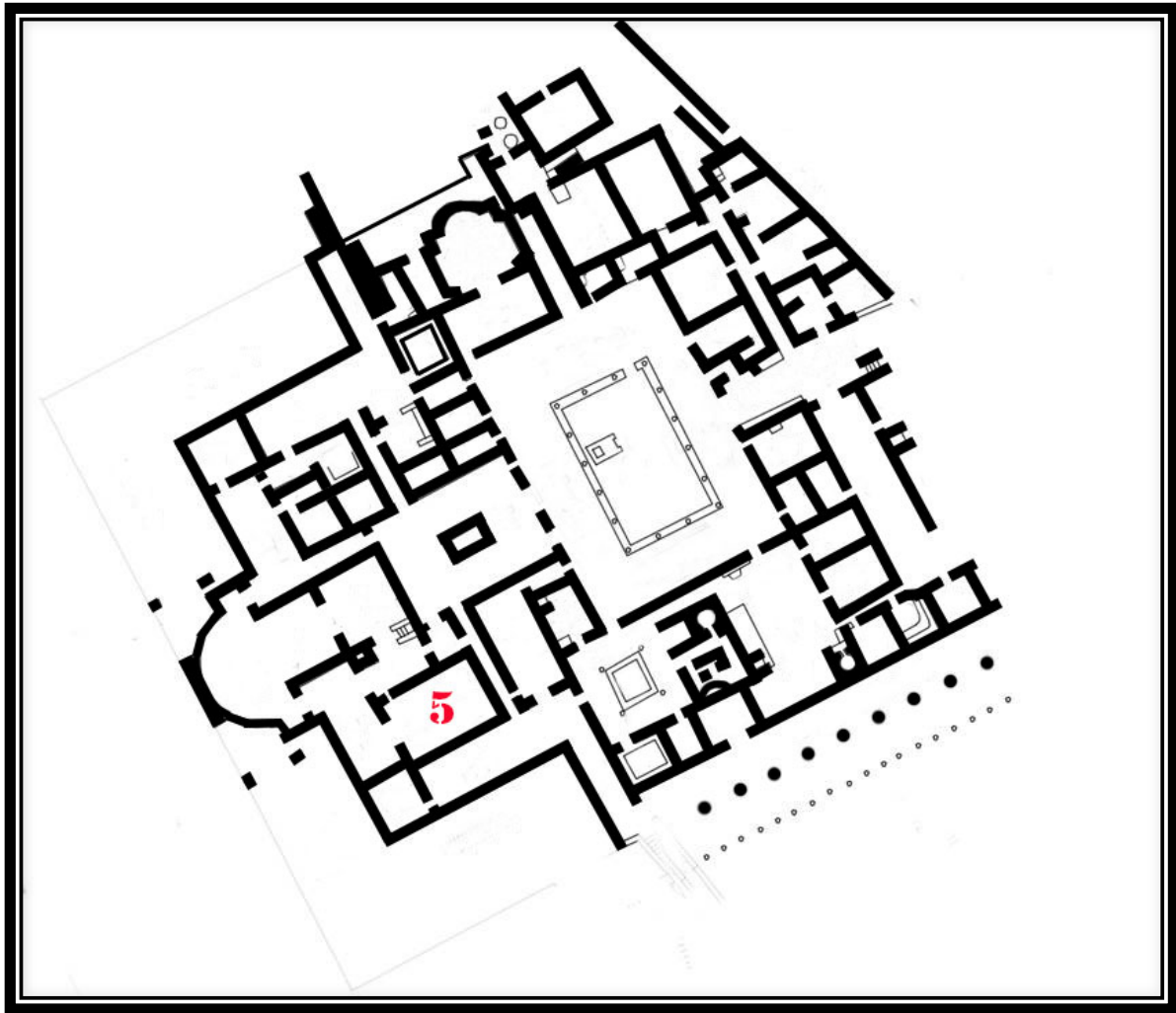


Figure 3.2: Plan of the Villa of the Mysteries with the location of Room 5 indicated.
After Esposito and Rispoli 2013, 70.

Designing Women: A Brief History of Programmatic Reading in Room 5

The visual program of the Villa of the Mysteries captured scholarly attention from the moment in 1909 when the megalographic figures of Room 5 were once again made visible. Yet, as the subsequent century's worth of attention to the space attests, for all that the villa captivates myriad audiences, its messages remain elusive. Indeed, obscurity is integrated into the images that encircle Room 5. We cannot know the text that the boy reads, although we can see that he reads it. We do not know what the satyr sees in his dish, only that he does see it. With such an ambiguous and intriguing environment to contend with, it is unsurprising that the interpretation of this room has remained a dynamic locus of scholarly debate for the past century.

Facts and Figures: Viewing Room 5

To situate this debate, we must first tackle the basics. Recent research suggests that Room 5 was decorated sometime around 60 BCE, a date which is further substantiated by the jewelry depicted in the space. If the earrings depicted are pearl, as their color suggests, they suggest a date no earlier than 61 BCE.¹³⁵ The

¹³⁵ Earlier discussions of the date of the decoration, and of the villa itself, were greatly influenced by Amadeo Maiuri's reconstruction of the villa's phasing. In his earliest formulation, Maiuri postulated that the first phase of the villa was built in the early third century BCE. In his 1931 publication, he proposed that the atrium (64) and the rooms around it were at the heart of this phase. The peristyle was added in a second, Hellenistic phase, and the decorations date to the Augustan period. He altered these dates in the 1947 edition, suggesting that the first phase dated to the period between 200-150, and that the peristyle and the decoration both were added after Sulla's colonization of the town. Domenico Esposito has since convincingly argued against these dates. He argues that the whole of the villa dates to the early first century BCE, and that its owner was likely one of Sulla's officers. He dates the second decorative phase of the villa, that to which he assigns Room 5, to around 60 BCE. For Esposito's discussion of earlier attempts to phase the villa see Domenico

room is located in the south-eastern quadrant of the house, in an area accessible through the atrium, but not visible from it; routes leading to the room are both limited and easily regulated (Figure 3.2). As Brenda Longfellow convincingly demonstrates, the room's physical location suggests that it was "relatively inaccessible to visitors and inhabitants alike and that even informal meetings between inhabitants in that room would probably have been prearranged."¹³⁶ Access to such spaces is granted only to those guests held in high esteem by the owner, and an invitation to dine in the room would be extended only to intimates and prestigious guests.¹³⁷ To look upon the decorations of this space may have been as much a performance of prestige on the part of the guest as the possession of such a well-decorated space was for the villa owner.

The decoration of Room 5 melds the realms of natural and supernatural. Satyrs share depicted space with mortal women; immortals are not separated visually from the scenes they gaze out upon.¹³⁸ All of the twenty-nine depicted figures stand before a bright red background, separated into panels by a dark border and transected at regular intervals by painted decorative pilasters (Figure 3.5). The figures themselves are predominately female, with mythological males interspersed throughout. Just as the lack of compositional differentiation between

Esposito, "Pompei, Silla e la Villa dei Misteri," in *Villas, Maisons, Sanctuaries et Tombeaux Tardo-Républicains: Découvertes et Relectures Récentes*, edited by Bertrand Perrier (Rome: Quasar, 2007), 441-442. For his discussion of the dating of Room 5, see Esposito, "Pompei, Silla e Villa dei Misteri," 450.

¹³⁶ Longfellow, "Gendered Space," 30.

¹³⁷ For a discussion of the relationship between access to private areas of the house and visitor status see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Social Structure of the Roman House," *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 56 (1988), 50-58.

¹³⁸ This aspect of the room was particularly unsettling to G. de Petra, who felt that Dionysus and the woman behind ought to have been situated above the action of the rest of the scene; de Petra, "Villa Romana presso Pompei," 145.

mythological and mortal within the depicted scene encourages the viewer to consider the connections between the two, the scale of the depicted figures and the careful articulation of their adornments invite the viewer's consideration. Because the depicted personages are depicted at near life-size, their adornments, often visible but not necessarily legible, in other Pompeian paintings are of a size to depict detail. These details, as we shall see, are integral to understanding the ways in which jewelry is a tool of conflation, encouraging the viewer to participate mentally in the depicted sphere. My description of the murals thus draws these features to the fore.¹³⁹ Before embarking upon this discussion, I must clarify my approach to dress nomenclature for the space. While some prefer to use Greek dress terms exclusively, I have mindfully chosen to mix Greek and Latin vocabulary to identify the types of dress depicted.¹⁴⁰ The question is one of context. As we noted in the prologue, Pompeii is a complex cultural zone well into the first century C.E. It is unclear whether or not the dress in Room 5 conforms entirely to either Greek or Roman types. As we will see, the jewelry may reflect regional dress norms. For this reason, I have chosen to mix Latin and Greek dress terms here, in an effort to preserve the multi-cultural influences that I see as a defining marker of the region.

Moving from left to right, immediately to the left of the room's primary entrance the viewer encounters a seated woman (1), who rests her chin against her

¹³⁹ In this I follow Margarete Bieber, who to my knowledge was the first to give serious attention to the depiction of adornment in Room 5. See Margarete Bieber, "Der Mysteriensaal der Villa Iamilla," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 43 (1928), 300-306.

¹⁴⁰ Bieber uses Greek terms exclusively. In particular see Bieber "Der Mysteriensaal," 305, where she refers to a woman's mantle by the Greek term "kredemnon."

right hand as she gazes out into the room proper.¹⁴¹ Her left hand sits atop the cushion on which she leans; on her third finger is a finger ring with an ovular red stone and a gold setting and band. She wears a gold bracelet, formed by twisting two round lengths of gold together, on her left wrist. A flat gold bracelet adorns her right wrist; a similar bangle rests on the upper portion of the same arm. A simple gold necklace sits at the base of her neck. The woman's brown hair is parted down the center, and her head is covered by a flowing gold *palla* with a purple border.

The seated woman (1) is separated from the figures on the long north wall of the space by a corner and the room's secondary entrance, a small door that leads to Room 4 (Figure 3.5). The first figure on this north wall is a woman wearing a *peplos* decorated with pale blue vertical stripes (2) (Figure 3.3). She strides from the secondary door, towards the center of the wall. Her curling reddish hair is covered by a delicate *palla*, bordered in purple. She holds the *palla* closed with her left hand. On this hand is a finger ring, worn on the third finger, with a large ovular red stone and a gold band. Amedeo Maiuri's early photographs of the figure preserve detail that is less visible in the room's current state; his photograph of this figure reveals delicately articulated pale vertical markings on the surface of the depicted stone.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ For ease of reference, I have numbered each of the figures in Room 5; numbers correspond to the labeled diagrams that are Figures 3.3 and 3.4.

¹⁴² Amadeo Maiuri, *La Villa dei Misteri* (Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1947), Tavola 1.

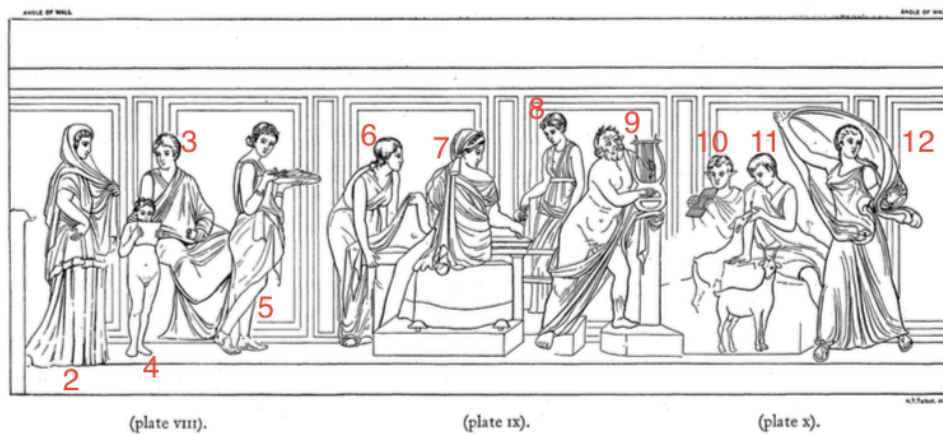


FIG. 24. SKETCH OF THE PAINTINGS OF THE VILLA ITEM, POMPEII (pp. 157, 172).

Figure 3.3: Diagram of North wall of Room 5 with numbered figures referenced in this text. After Mudie-Cooke 1913, Figure 24.

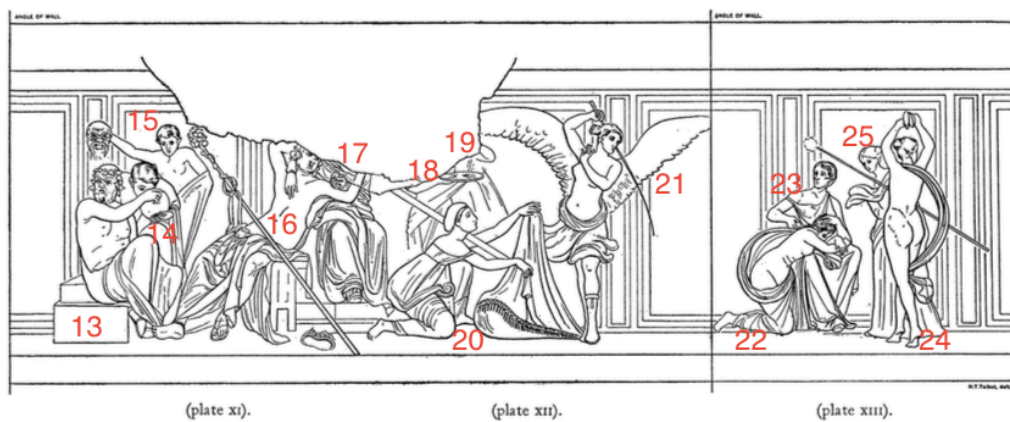


FIG. 25. SKETCH OF THE PAINTINGS OF THE VILLA ITEM, POMPEII (pp. 157, 172).

Figure 3.4: Diagram of East wall of Room 5 with numbered figures referenced in this text. After Mudie-Cooke 1913, Figure 25.

This woman walks towards another seated woman (3), who rests her right hand on the shoulder of a small boy (4), naked but for a pair of boots. The seated woman holds a thin stylus in this right hand; with it she points to the scroll from which the young boy reads. The woman holds a second scroll in her right hand, on which another finger ring with a red stone and a gold band is prominently displayed (Figure 3.6). From her single visible ear dangles a pearl earring, its pale color clearly differentiated from the gold visible elsewhere in the room. The woman's body is covered with a purple *palla*, draped so that her right shoulder is granted mobility, leaving the edges of her finely woven *chiton* visible. Her brown hair, like the boy's, has a definite center part.

Connecting this group to the one at the center of the north wall is another woman (5), crowned with olive leaves, her hair gathered into a loose chignon at the base of her neck.¹⁴³ She holds a platter in her outstretched hands. Two gold bracelets, one on each arm, are clearly displayed. The bracelet on her right arm is in the form of a snake. Its body twists around her forearm, while its tail curls toward her wrist. The reverse side of a similar bracelet is depicted on the woman's left arm. She wears a finely wrought *chiton* with a deep purple *palla* knotted around her waist (Figure 3.5).

¹⁴³ Few details in the room are beyond contestation. The leafy wreaths worn by multiple figures on the north wall are no exception. Bieber reads the leaves as laurel; Bieber, "Mysteriensaal," 305. Esposito and Rispoli, following de Petra, believe it to be a crown of olive leaves; Esposito and Rispoli, "Villa dei Misteri," 77; de Petra, "Villa Romana," 143.



Figure 3.5: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Photo of North wall of Room 5 with figures 2-6.



Figure 3.6: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Detail of Ring worn by woman number 3.

She carries her tray toward a group of three women. The central figure (7), viewed from behind is seated at a table. She wears a *chiton* with knotted sleeves, covered with a pale *palla* that is gathered at her left shoulder. Her hair is covered by one of the most intricate pieces of cloth in the room, a scarf with a border of double blue bands and a knotted fringe. Atop the headscarf rests a wreath of olive leaves (Figure 3.7). Her face, visible in profile, turns toward her right hand, which holds a sprig of greenery above a dish. Her left hand holds a piece of purple fabric aloft. Two women flank this central figure. To her left a woman bends to fit her hands under the tabletop (6). Her uncovered hair is gathered loosely at the base of her neck to fall down her back. She wears a pale *chiton* in a thin fabric; a purple-bordered *palla* is knotted around her waist. To the seated woman's right is another woman with fine features and a delicately pointed ear (8). Her dark hair, like the woman on the left, is gathered at the nape of her neck to drape down her back. Unlike the woman on the left, hers is crowned with an olive leaf wreath. Around her neck is a simple gold chain. While most of the women in the space wear a pale *chiton*, this woman wears deep purple, draped to fall low between her breasts; this variation may mark the woman's garb as a *stola*, an identification that is furthered by the gold and purple belt that stretches across her ribcage. This belt is clearly distinguished from the pale blue *palla* knotted under it. Another scroll is tucked between her *palla* and the *stola* beneath. This woman's hands connect this scene to the next. With her right hand, she pours water from a small jug over the greenery held by the seated woman. Her left is hidden by the rump of the Silenus (9) whose stance similarly bridges the groups on this portion of the wall.

The Silenus leans his weight upon a pillar. His right foot extends back into the previous vignette. A swath of pale blue fabric, caught under his right foot, drapes loosely around his nude body. He is shown in the act of playing a lyre, that he rests upon the top of the low pillar. This musical thread runs through to the next depicted figure, a young satyr playing a pan flute (10). Like the Silenus, he seems to be caught in the act of performing. Seated next to him is a female Satyr (11). Like her male counterpart, she is depicted in a short purple chiton, with a blue draped wrap. Her gender is marked only by the act of feeding the young goat that stretches to reach her (Figure 3.8).

As with the Silenus, the woman next to the female satyr steps into the depicted space of the previous figure. This woman (12), visibly surprised if not frightened, wears a carefully rendered *chiton*, transparent enough that the outline of her breasts is visible (Figure 3.8). Her dark purple mantle billows around her body, held aloft by her outstretched right arm. Her hair is carefully arranged in rows—the so-called melon coiffure. She wears an armband around her left bicep, slightly darker than the color that corresponds to gold elsewhere in the room. If the color is deliberate, that is, not a reflection of the state of preservation of the room, it may represent a copper alloy armband rather than one of gold. On her left wrist she wears a gold bracelet, clearly a brighter shade than the armband above.



Figure 3.7: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Photo of women numbers 6-8 and Silenus number 9



Figure 3.8: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Photo of Silenus number 9, fauns number 10-11, and woman number 12

The east wall of the room, opposite its primary entrance, holds the next set of supernatural creatures (Figure 3.4). On the left, a partially nude Silenus (13), bald and grizzled, crowned with an ivy wreath, his lower body draped with a transparent swath of deep purple fabric, sits atop a low platform, his right leg drawn close to his body. He holds a silver vessel to the side for the young satyr (14) behind him to peer into. A second youthful satyr (15) stands behind the pair. With his right hand, he holds a prophetic head above that of the old Silenus.¹⁴⁴

The next pair is generally identified as the room's central focus. A youthful man (16), stretches languidly across the lap of a seated woman (Figure 3.9). A pale purple wrap is held by a slack knot at his waist. A thyrsus rests against his right hip; its length, together with the figure's outstretched right leg visually connects this scene to the one previous. An anklet of twisted gold encircles his extended right leg. His loose curls are crowned with ivy. He reaches above his head to embrace the woman above (17); his gaze is fixed firmly upon her. She sits atop a high podium. Her right arm, wrist encircled by a twisted gold bracelet that mirrors that worn by her male counterpart, falls to rest against his unclothed chest. Her body is draped in layers of white and purple fabric. She holds a handful of this purple fabric in her left hand. On the third finger of this hand, she wears a ring with a red stone. Unlike its counterparts elsewhere in the room, this stone is not depicted at an angle, making the pale detail on its surface more visible. The upper portion of her body is no longer extant.

¹⁴⁴ While the head is often identified as a theatric mask, I follow Nancy de Grummond in highlighting its prophetic capacity. See Nancy de Grummond, "Mirrors, Marriage, and Mysteries," *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series Number Forty-Seven* (2002), 74.

This preservation issue similarly impacts the two figures in the background of the subsequent group (Figure 3.10). These two women (18 and 19), extant only from the waist down, each wear a *chiton*. One holds a tray covered with greenery. In front of these two women is a third (20). She kneels, leaning forward to lift a deep purple cloth to reveal the contents held in the *liknon* below. She wears a thin *chiton*; it slips to bare her right shoulder. A gold mantle with a purple border is cinched loosely at her waist. Her head is partially covered by a yellow band of cloth. To the right is one of the most controversial figures in the room—a woman with large black wings spread wide (21). She wears a loose skirt of gold fabric banded with purple and tall leather boots. Her upper body is nude. Her softly curling red hair is bound in a chignon at the back of her head. Her right arm, raised above her head, holds a lash. She twists to strike the figure to her right (22).

This figure, the first depicted on the south wall of the room, kneels, hiding her head in the lap of another seated woman (23). The kneeling woman is nude, save for a swath of deep purple fabric that wraps around her lower body and is caught beneath her knees (Figure 3.10). She is barefoot; her hair falls disheveled across her face. She rests her head in the circle of her arms; the woman who holds her strokes hand through her hair. This seated woman looks back at the winged figure. Her dark hair is bound with a strip of fabric. Her *chiton* falls from her right shoulder, while her pale yellow mantle helps to cushion the kneeling woman's head.



Figure 3.9: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Photo of East wall of Room 5 with figure numbers 13-21.



Figure 3.10: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Photo of Southeast corner of Room 5 with figure numbers 17-25.

Directly to their right a nude woman (24), shown from behind, dances on the tips of her toes as she strikes cymbals together above her head (Figure 3.10). Her hair is gathered into a rough knot at the crown of her head. A thin yellow mantle flies over her left shoulder, its ends fluttering. Behind her stands a more sedate woman (25), her reddish hair carefully bound, wearing a deep purple *chiton* that falls in folds to her feet. She holds a thyrsus across her body as she bends to gaze down at the kneeling woman.

A large window dominates this northern wall; it separates the previous scene from the next. To the right of the window a winged youth (26) holds a mirror toward a seated woman (27), who gazes out into the room while a second woman (28) stands behind her, aiding her in setting her elaborate coiffure (Figure 3.11). The Eros is nude, but for a twisted gold bracelet that rests around his right wrist and two similarly torqued anklets that encircle each of his ankles. The standing woman gazes down at the Eros; it is her reflection that we see in the winged youth's mirror.¹⁴⁵ This woman wears a pale *chiton*, barely visible beneath the large purple *palla* that is draped around the whole of her body and held closed by her right hand. Her hair is gathered roughly at the nape of her neck; her neck is itself adorned with a thin gold necklace. In Maria Barosso's watercolor facsimile of the scene, begun in 1925 some five years before Maiuri's photographs of the room, she wears a round earring, probably a pearl, on her visible ear; the area around this ear is damaged in later photographs, including Maiuri's. The earring is no longer visible.¹⁴⁶ She wears

¹⁴⁵ This is especially clear in Maiuri's photographs of the scene; Maiuri, *Villa dei Misteri*, Tavola 13.

¹⁴⁶ For a discussion of Maria Barosso and Kelsey's commission, see Elizabeth de Grummond, "Maria Barosso, Francis Kelsey, and the Modern Representation of an Ancient Masterpiece," in *The Villa of*

a gold bracelet on her right wrist; her right hand holds a strand of the seated woman's hair. The seated woman's own hands dress her long reddish hair (Figure 3.12). Her right hand holds out a strand of hair. Its wrist is decorated with a torqued gold bracelet. Her left hand rests atop her head. Plain gold bands define her wrist and upper arm. She wears a small pearl on her left ear, and a thin gold necklace rests just above the neckline of her translucent *chiton*. A purple-bordered gold mantle drapes around her waist, falling over her knees. The final figure stands to the right of the room's primary entrance (29). Here, a nude winged boy leans, legs crossed, against a pillar, his chin propped upon his right hand. His bow, slung across his chest, marks him as another Eros. Unlike the first, he is unadorned.

Of all of these depicted figures, only one can be given a name. The youthful, unbearded man, partially nude and crowned with ivy with a thyrus perched precariously on his thigh, who gazes up at the seated woman on the wall that faces the room's primary entrance is visually and compositionally equated with Dionysus, the god of wine, inebriation, and fertility (Figure 3.9).¹⁴⁷

the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse. Edited by Elaine K. Gazda (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2000), 129-137. For a consideration of some ways in which Barosso's representation of the space may differ from the original, see Elaine K. Gazda, "Replicating Roman Murals in Pompeii: Archaeology, Art, and Politics in Italy of the 1920s," in *Antiquity Recovered: The Legacy of Pompeii and Herculaneum*, edited by Victoria C. Gardner and Jon L. Seydl (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 207-229.

¹⁴⁷ Much as there are multiple terms that could each accurately describe the types of dress depicted in Room 5, there are multiple applicable names for the god in question. The god of wine might be named Dionysus, as in Greece, Bacchus or Liber, as in Rome, or Fulfens, as in Etruria and Central Italy. I choose to refer to him as Dionysus in part to leave space for a non-colonist owner. For a reading that emphasizes Dionysus's connection with fertility see Drew Wilburn, "The God of Fertility in Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries," in *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse*, edited by Elaine K. Gazda (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2000), 56-57. For the range of names possible see Drew Wilburn, "The God of the Vine: A Note on Nomenclature," in *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse*, edited by Elaine K. Gazda (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2000), 14-15. For a strong statement in favor of a transplanted Sullan owner see Esposito, "Pompei, Silla e Villa dei Misteri," 461.



Figure 3.11: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Photo of South wall depicting figures 26-28.



Figure 3.12: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Detail of woman number 27.

His presence, together with the overwhelmingly female population of the rest of the painting, has been the starting point for previous attempts to read the room's program. It is not my goal here to present a comprehensive overview of the massive corpus of scholarship on the interpretation of Room 5.¹⁴⁸ While I discuss the broad strokes of these interpretations, I am less interested here in what was argued about this unified program than in *how* these arguments unfurled and the implicit role that the depiction of dress played in these analyses.

In Search of a Program: Mystery Cults, Goddesses, Brides, and Mortals

Nearly from the moment of its excavation, interpreters of Room 5 have argued that it should be understood as a narrative unit. In the first published work on the villa, Giulio de Petra stated outright that the space must have a unified and coherent subject matter.¹⁴⁹ But the figures—for all that their gazes capture the viewer, drawing him or her into the scene—resist definite identification. Indeed, much of the attention given to the room over the past century has focused on attempting to name the major players depicted, or at least to determine how and in what order they might fit into a narrative. Possible explanations abound. In 1984, Gilles Sauron identified thirteen separate interpretations, with his own bringing the count to fourteen.¹⁵⁰ Numerous additions have been made since, but on the whole analyses of the murals have focused on one or more of a set of predominant lines of

¹⁴⁸ For a comprehensive bibliography prior to 1958 see Reinhard Herbig, *Neue Beobachtungen am Fries der Mysterien-Villa in Pompeji* (Baden-Baden: B. Grimm, 1958); for more recent bibliography see Gilles Sauron, *La grande fresque de la Villa des Mystères à Pompéi* (Paris: Picard, 1998).

¹⁴⁹ De Petra, "Villa Romana," 143.

¹⁵⁰ Gilles Sauron, "Nature et Signification de la Mégalographie dionysiaque de Pompéi," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 128, no. 1 (1984), 151.

inquiry, highlighting initiation into the mystery cult of Dionysus, bridal imagery, and women's roles as priestesses as major themes, with ongoing debates about the originality and regionality of the depictions interwoven throughout.

Dionysus, as both an identifiable and compositionally central figure is at the heart of the first narratological analyses of the room. His presence, together with the revelation of the contents of the *liknon* on the room's east wall prompted de Petra to argue that the room represents a woman's initiation into the mystery cult of Dionysus. On the left, uninitiated women handle the business of daily life, while on the right, women undergo the tests required for admittance into the cult, with the final figures on the right hand side, and on the west walls, commenting on the contented ease granted to the initiated. The two groups of satyrs and Sileni mediate between ordinary mortals and the elevated realm of the initiated.¹⁵¹

While later scholars did not protest either the importance of Dionysus or the nod at cult practice signaled by the presence of ritual objects, many advocated for a closer reading of the figures in an attempt to, if not accurately identify them, then at least better contextualize them. De Petra's interpretation presented the broad strokes of a story; later authors sought to define the details. Compositional comparanda abounded in the early twentieth century, put forth in an attempt to determine how the pieces of the room might fit together. Of particular interest were the winged woman at the right terminus of the eastern wall, and the seated woman against whom Dionysus leans. For, as Brenda Longfellow argues, "the identity of this figure is generally believed to be key to understanding the content of the frieze

¹⁵¹ De Petra, "Villa Romana," 143-145.

itself.”¹⁵² This thought process is key to gaining insight into the many pages of arguments that put forth parallels that advance a particular theory about the identities of the figures—identity is key to understanding.

This understanding was built upon close readings of composition and of details within it. As Gilles Sauron indicates, Dionysus has readily identifiable visual attributes, and these attributes are included in Room 5. In the absence of such attributes for Ariadne, or Semele, how can they be identified?¹⁵³ Many turn to formal analysis. Thus, when P.B. Mudie Cooke seeks to present the murals of Room 5 to an English speaking audience, she devotes the bulk of her attention to tracking down compositional comparanda to aid in identifying those figures she highlights as key to the mural’s overall message. She turns to a cameo housed in Vienna and a coin minted at Smyrna to underscore the notion that the pair of deities on the eastern wall of the room conform visually to a well-known type arguing that while the coin purportedly depicts Dionysus and his mother Semele, the design was adapted in Room 5 to depict Dionysus and his consort, Ariadne.¹⁵⁴ For Sauron, such attention to formal qualities over details is deleterious. He argues that the only way to apprehend the import of both the figures and the mural itself is to give attention

¹⁵² Brenda Longfellow, “Liber and Venus in the Villa of the Mysteries,” in *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse*, edited by Elaine K. Gazda (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2000), 116.

¹⁵³ Sauron, “Nature et Signification,” 152-153.

¹⁵⁴ The only specific alternation that she mentions is that in the example of the cameo at Vienna, Dionysus has lost both of his shoes. This is not a detail that she uses to help identify the female figure, however, and what alterations might specifically suggest a shift from Semele to Ariadne are unclear. P.B. Mudie Cooke, “The Paintings of the Villa Irem at Pompeii,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 3.2 (1913), 160-161.

to detail.¹⁵⁵ It is in such detail driven discussions that depictions of adornment start to take on greater importance.

When Sauron attempts to argue against the attribution of the female half of the divine couple on the east wall, he turns, not only to composition, but also to dress. He argues that the woman is depicted as a matron, highlighting the presence of her mantle to underscore his assertion. He draws attention to her left hand, suggesting that she grasps the fabric close in analogy to the gesture of modesty that we discussed in Chapter Two.¹⁵⁶ Viewed through Sauron's eyes, the woman is more matron than bride, more Semele than Ariadne. She is not the only mythological figure in the room to receive such attention, nor is Sauron the only writer to apply it. Rather than provide an exhaustive list of all of the occasions in which writers cite differences in depictions of dress between depictions in Room 5 and putative comparanda, which are numerous, I turn instead to another instance in which costume is used directly to identify.

Alongside the goddess and the bride, to which we will turn next, the winged woman on the right side of the east wall has been one of the most debated figures in the space (Figure 3.10). As is the case with the goddess, the thought process behind the attention privileges identification. If she can be named, then perhaps her actions and her role in the larger narrative, can be understood. As Jocelyn Toynbee notes, her two most identifiable features are her wings and her boots. For Toynbee, her boots, together with her short skirt, which Toynbee identifies as a *chiton*, serve to exclude a range of possibilities, helping her to narrow her way down to the most

¹⁵⁵ Sauron, "Nature et Signification," 154.

¹⁵⁶ Sauron, "Nature et Signification," 154-155.

likely identification. Artemis has tall boots and a *chiton*, but is rarely shown with wings. Selene has wings, a *chiton*, and tall boots, but is generally depicted with some variety of crescent, absent in Room 5. Psyche has wings, and sometimes a whip, but again, no boots. Through process of elimination, Toynbee argues that she must be Nike, and she cites dress explicitly as the focal point of her analysis.¹⁵⁷

Dress is at center stage for Toynbee, but despite the importance of the boots in her analyses, she does not describe them. The idea of boots is important. The boots themselves are not. This attitude is typical of those who seek to use adornment to identify. The difference of a fold in a dress is important because it can serve to suggest two distinct goddesses. Depictions of dress matter, but only so far as they give insight into something else. Tall boots are, in Toynbee's mind, tantamount to a compositional detail, included as part of a visual shorthand aimed at aiding the viewer to identify the depicted figure, not because they are capable of conveying information in its own right.

It is as focus shifts towards the non-mythological women in the room that jewelry begins to take on an interpretive role of its own. Margarete Bieber, who together with Jocelyn Toynbee first argued for the interpretational importance of the non-mythological women in Room 5, devotes some seven pages to a detailed description of all of the figures in the room, paying close attention to adornment as a part of her discussion. These careful viewing practices draw her attention to the fact that several women wear a ring on the third finger of the left hand. For Bieber, and for multiple later scholars, this ring is not only a component of the woman's

¹⁵⁷ Jocelyn Toynbee, "The Villa Igem and a Bride's Ordeal," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 19 (1929), 84-86.

dress, it is a ring that carries a social valence. It is a betrothal ring, and its presence marks the wearer as a bride.¹⁵⁸ The presence of jewelry clearly aligned with marriage sparks a line of argumentation that allows Bieber to argue that the two women most often set aside in previous readings of the space—that is the woman seated at her toilette at the end of the south wall and the seated woman depicted to the left of the room’s primary entrance—are adorned, not for initiation, but for marriage. As she puts it, you adorn yourself for weddings, while rituals tend to prescribe simple robes.¹⁵⁹ Her analysis gives weight to the social implications of norms of dress, a fact that ultimately allows her to offer up a new reading of the space, one that sees earthly wedding rites set in parallel to divine marriage and so suggests that the room was intended for use in nuptial rituals.¹⁶⁰

Although the ring opens up new narrative possibilities for Bieber, her focus remains on proposing a narrative. The presence of a bride, or multiple brides in her view, changes the overall meaning of the space.¹⁶¹ Similarly, Sauron is invested in the identity of the goddess because he believes that without the presence of Ariadne, the connection with brides holds less credence, allowing him to argue that we see, not a preparation for a wedding, but key moments in the life of a priestess set in

¹⁵⁸ Bieber, “Mysteriensaal,” 312; for other explicit mentions of the ring see Victoria Hearnshaw, “The Dionysiac Cycle in the Villa of the Mysteries: A Re-Reading,” *Mediterranean Archaeology* 12 (1999), 50; Kinst, “Ornamenta Uxoriam,” 136. Hearnshaw seems to read the ring as a wedding ring, associated with the period after the wedding, while Bieber and Kunst mention its presence without speaking directly of whether it is meant to be a marker of betrothal or of marriage.

¹⁵⁹ Bieber, “Mysteriensaal,” 313.

¹⁶⁰ Alan M. G. Little likewise identifies the space as one set aside for marriages and the preparations surrounding them; Alan M. G. Little, *A Roman Bridal Drama at the Villa of the Mysteries* (Kennebunk: Star Press, 1972), 10.

¹⁶¹ Toynbee disagrees with this reading, instead suggesting that we see successive episodes depicting a single bride-initiate; Toynbee, “Bride’s Ordeal,” 87.

parallel to myths of the life of Semele.¹⁶² But no matter the interpretation advanced by such thinkers, the goal is to fit as many pieces of the puzzle together as possible. Thus, Toynbee's discussion of brides occurs in part because she seeks to construct a narrative that can incorporate scenes that were downplayed by previous writers.¹⁶³ A unified story is the goal, and identifications are the means by which to achieve it.

But as these multiple readings, which are just a sampling of a much greater whole, suggest, the visual evidence lends itself to multiple readings. Writers can use the same evidence to argue contradictory claims. There are multiple potential narratives in play, and these narratives are not strictly linear. Things do not unfold in sequence. Does one start the story with the most visually prominent figures, Dionysus and Ariadne? Or do we read from left to right? The fact that we can ask such questions prompted earlier scholars to reference a lost original, arguing that because the image was adapted, it has lost some of its capacity to communicate. Mudie Cook goes so far as to state that "the work seems too important for a private house, and beyond the capacity of a provincial artist."¹⁶⁴ Such statements, like the desire to seek out a single reading of the space, or a key to unlock that meaning are counterproductive. As John Clarke states, "All strict readings that attempt to pin down the meaning(s) of the mysteries frieze ignore both its sources and its purposes...the magic of the frieze, both in antiquity and today, lies in its very multivalence."¹⁶⁵ Images are capable of communicating multiple meanings

¹⁶² Sauron, "Nature et Signification," 175.

¹⁶³ Toynbee, "Bride's Ordeal," 67.

¹⁶⁴ Mudie Cook, "Paintings of the Villa Igem," 173.

¹⁶⁵ John Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 BCE-AD 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 104-105.

simultaneously, without stating any of them outright. This ambiguous multivalence is at the heart of their functionality. It is also what makes them difficult to approach. To address these difficulties, we must, as Clarke suggests, refocus our thoughts.

Thinking Beyond Words: Theorizing Visual Mindsets

The difficulty that some scholars have in reconciling the room's actual composition with the desire to read figures in sequence is indicative of the difficulties in imposing a mental framework built around words onto a depicted space. It would be folly to suggest that words and images are not in conversation in Pompeii, but images do not behave in the manner of texts. De Petra's desire to restructure the order of images in Room 5, and references to an original and implicitly more logical and better executed, arrangement of the space highlights a breakdown in paradigm as much as it underscores the pro-Greek bias that was so ingrained in the scholarship of the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶⁶ If we ask our brains to think about images as texts, then those points at which these thought processes break down can serve to highlight the ways that images function differently, and if we ask images to act as words, we implicitly become a part of a system that has privileged words over images for centuries.¹⁶⁷ These decisions may not be made consciously. English and Latin speakers piece words into sentences by moving from left to right; those trained in reading such directional languages might

¹⁶⁶ Otto J. Brendel, "Prolegomena to a Book on Roman Art," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 21 (1953), 9-73.

¹⁶⁷ Michael Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

be biased toward “reading” rooms in the same way.¹⁶⁸ It is for this reason that it is useful for us to deliberately distance ourselves from a text-based paradigm when we turn our attention to images, and to objects. Viewers can gain insight into images by focusing on any number of details in an exponential number of orders. Similarly, one must know the definition of a word to understand the meaning it conveys. Certainly, the identification of figures aids to access one layer of visual communication; but even if we could definitively state that the partially preserved woman behind Dionysus were Ariadne, this would not eliminate the questions posed by Room 5.

So, then perhaps the problem lies not in our answers, but in the questions we pose. We have asked the room: who is depicted? The room tells us that the goddess might be Ariadne, or Semele, or Venus, or Demeter. It highlights the juxtaposition between mythological figures and mortals. We have asked the room: what story is depicted here? It tells us that marriage, women, and religious ritual are key factors. As John Clarke has argued, attempts to identify are essentially wrong headed. So, where do we go from here? If we step away from seeking identifications, what then do we seek? Rather than asking what is depicted, or even why these things are depicted, perhaps we should ask: what do these images do? And how do they do it?¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Oscan speakers have choice. Meaning might be built from left to right, or from right to left. If we unconsciously try to reconstruct meaning in the order that we’ve been taught in order to read, this ability to shift direction when constructing a whole could have interesting implications in Room 5, which, as we note, makes different kinds of sense in many different orders.

¹⁶⁹ The emphasis on doing that is present throughout the remainder of this text is indebted to the work of Alfred Gell. See Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). See in particular pages 16-27.

This shift in questioning implies a shift in theoretical framework, one that has gained increasing momentum over the past twenty years. When Roland Barthes first attempted to apply Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics to clothed bodies, he found the matter more complicated than anticipated. Although he originally intended to tackle "actual" fashion, which in his view could incorporate either worn or depicted clothing, he settles on a discussion of written fashion arguing that because actual fashion is already a system of signs, reality and descriptions of it cannot exist as two distinct arenas, as is typical in semiological approaches.¹⁷⁰ Barthes suggests that this slippage highlights a truth. He writes, "Man is doomed to articulated language, and no semiological undertaking can ignore this fact."¹⁷¹ In Barthes way of thinking, words constitute reality.

The distinction that Barthes draws between words and images has itself been called into question by more recent theorists. As Webb Keane cogently states, "the radical separation of the sign from the material world" is one of the most enduring legacies of Saussure's semiotics.¹⁷² Although the search for a narrative in Room 5 was not an explicitly semiological undertaking, the thought processes we discussed above reflect a favoring illustration of a concept over other potential meanings. In Room 5, we see this play out especially around depictions of dress, which are used to advance arguments about something else, rather than discussed in their own right. And although this plays out in depiction in Room 5 and elsewhere in Pompeii, it is equally a problem that we see play out around examples of actual jewelry,

¹⁷⁰ Barthes, *The Fashion System*, x.

¹⁷¹ Barthes, *The Fashion System*, xi.

¹⁷² Webb Keane, "Signs are not the Garb of Meaning," in *Materiality*, edited by Daniel Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 183.

which so often is used to illustrate the notion of wealth or luxury or ethnicity, with relatively little attention played to a broader range of communicative possibilities.

It is here that we are faced with a conundrum. Keane asserts that “social and cultural analysts still find it difficult to treat objects as no more than illustrations of something else, as, say, communicating meanings or identities, it is because we remain heirs of a tradition that treats signs as if they were merely the garb of meaning—meaning that, it would seem, must be stripped bare. As this tradition dematerializes signs, it privileges meaning over actions, consequences, and possibilities.” And we have seen this thinking in action. But to set aside semiology entirely is similarly counterproductive, for it would allow us to assert very little about objects that, by very virtue of their existence in depiction, must carry communicative potential. This problem is not insurmountable; indeed, it may be less of a problem, and more of a cautionary note. While, as Meike Bal and Norman Bryson have noted, semiotics has the potential to illuminate submerged processes just as it can open up new possibilities for interpreting what is pictured, to focus on the submerged to the detriment of the material is to reduce depiction to the realm of illustration. In our excitement at determining one level of interpretation, it is easy to think that we have found a key to a code. Codes may be in play, but “no viewer will stop at the first association. As soon as the mental image takes shape, it becomes a new sign, which will yield a new interpretant, and we are in the process of *infinite semiosis*.”¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Meike Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *The Art Bulletin* 73.2 (June, 1991), 189.

This notion, that mental images and meanings are in flux, even within a single viewer's mind, leaves the outside interpreter in a complicated position. Visual media invite and enact confusion. As we saw in Chapter One, I attempt to confront this confusion by adopting an additive approach to theory. Where one approach stumbles, I attempt to introduce another, not because theories are any better a decoder ring than signs, but in order to help us re-frame our thoughts. Indeed, this may well be the most useful function of any theory—to invite the thinker to come at a problem from a different angle. And that is precisely what I advocate for here. To think about how a multi-valenced viewing process might play out, to consider the ways that ancient viewers might have approached the process of viewing in Room 5, and in Pompeii more generally in later chapters, I turn to materiality, to a close focus on things and their social valences to approach the related questions of *how* jewelry is depicted in Pompeii and what these depictions *do*.

Beyond the Box: Jewelry, Space, and the Social Imaginary in the Villa of the Mysteries

As we saw in the previous section, depictions of adornment in Room 5 have been harnessed to aid in the identification of figures and to offer insight into narrative connections. The length of a skirt might help to identify the winged figure on the east wall, a lack of clothing together with unkempt hair together with the inclusion of cymbals are visual cues suggesting that the dancing woman on the south wall is a maenad. The ring that appears several times throughout the space

has been previously understood only as a marker of marital status. Dress and dress practices have been used in service of a larger interpretive endeavor, but are given little attention in their own right. For all that Margarete Bieber gives a detailed description of dress, she does not think about rings or mantles or bracelets as informative in their own right. They help her to understand something else. But as we saw in Chapter Two, adornment itself is a potentially communicative medium, one capable of helping a wearer to activate a variety of potential modes of self-presentation. Rather than continuing to discuss the theoretical utility of jewelry, I will here undertake a practical demonstration, focusing on the ring that has already been a topic of conversation in the space.

But before embarking upon a discussion of the ways in which close attention to jewelry can nuance our reading of Room 5, I must put forth a point of clarification. The depicted jewelry in Room 5, as elsewhere in Pompeii, adds another layer to an already multi-valenced visual system. The presence of jewelry may at times aid in the very process of identification that I discussed above, while at other times, it serves more to facilitate communication between the realms of depicted and real than it does to add information about painted figures. I focus on the latter set of discursive options. As a thing that is viewed, jewelry is also capable of transmitting multiple simultaneous messages. Understanding jewelry gives us a wider range of possibilities to consider; it should not be taken as a key that will explain all. Indeed, as we shall see, jewelry both reveals and deceives, and it is its ability to do both that makes it useful.

Jewelry in Focus: Rings and Women in Room 5

The gold ring with its red stone described above is the most contentious piece of jewelry depicted in Room 5, in large part because of the importance of rings as a mark of position in and around Rome (Figure 3.13). Within the context of Room 5, the depicted ring has been previously discussed as either a wedding or betrothal ring, but the reasoning behind this assumption is somewhat circular. As Ann Stout has noted, gold rings are ideologically and socially charged; in the Republican period, the use of gold rings was initially restricted to nobles who held the curile office and to their male line, although by the time of the Third Punic War, around 150 BCE, the right to wear a gold ring was extended to equites and military tribunes. By the rule of Tiberius, in the early first century CE, the restrictions were relaxed. In order to wear a gold ring in the early Imperial period, a man had to be freeborn, with a freeborn father and grandfather, and he had to possess at least four hundred thousand sesterces.¹⁷⁴

The rules governing women's use of gold rings are less straightforward. Pliny the Elder writes that the typical betrothal ring was iron, without a stone, but it is possible that he relates conservative options as a moral argument against the excesses of his time, rather than describing the state of affairs in actuality. Tertulian mentions women who possessed gold wedding rings, suggesting that such rings were customary by the second century CE. Stout suggests that this custom predates the literary mention, which is not unlikely, citing the ring depicted in the Villa of the

¹⁷⁴ Ann Stout, "Jewelry as a Symbol of Status in the Roman Empire," in *The World of Roman Costume*, edited by Larissa Bonfante and Judith Lynn Sebesta (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 77-78.

Mysteries as proof of her assertions, which is more problematic.¹⁷⁵ The nuptial association of the room, and of the figure depicted at her toilette in particular, are not in question, nor is a ring needed to understand the room in this way. However, the character of the ring itself is less certain. This uncertainty is due in part to the nature of the depictions of the ring, and in part to the nature of the painting as a whole, with its deliberate creation of obscurity. For we might be more confident in associating the ring with marriage if the left hand of the woman seated at her toilette were visible. A ring was typically gifted to a would-be bride on the occasion of her betrothal, and thus the figure that we believe to be engaged in preparation for her marriage rite would be expected to have such a ring already on her finger. The room, as we have seen, deliberately withholds information from its viewer; it is frustrating, although perhaps not unsurprising, that the woman who might point us in the direction of a resolution to this riddle hides her left hand in her hair.

So, while this ring could certainly be a betrothal ring, this is not the only way to read the piece. If the ring is indeed depicted to suggest an engraved stone, as Maiuri's photos and Barosso's watercolors suggest, this opens up another set of interpretive possibilities. A ring's stone might be engraved for a number of reasons, from the decorative to the apotropaic to the functional, but at its most straightforward, the presence of engraving allows the engraved ring to serve in a capacity that a ring that is left uncarved cannot. Rings with marked stones can act as signets. That rings were used in this capacity in the late Republic and early empire is not in question. Suetonius relates that Augustus used a number of signets

¹⁷⁵ Stout, "Jewelry as a Symbol of Status," 78.

with various engravings, including one with his own likeness and another depicting Alexander the Great. When he became ill in Spain in 25 BCE, he gave one of his signets to his favored general, Agrippa, presumably to mark him as his chosen successor.¹⁷⁶ And although this anecdote relates to the use of signets by a notable elite man, there is no reason to restrict the use of signets to the elite male circle.

Signets were typically used to conduct official business, which we tend to associate with the domain of the *pater familias*, the male head of the Roman household. However, as Richard Saller has noted in his attempts to clarify the terms *pater* and *mater familias*, “the legal discussion of *pater familias* as owner- testator certainly applied to female owners as well.”¹⁷⁷ While Saller is most interested in parsing the terms themselves, in order to determine what functionally differentiates *pater* from *mater*, for our purposes, the idea that female owners had similar legal rights to their male counterparts is the most interesting facet of his discussion.

The term signet refers to a functional category; signets are defined by the way they are used, not necessarily by their appearance or by their material composition. Thus, intaglios are not always signets, but signets are always intaglios. This leads to a degree of uncertainty in the material record; for while any intaglio could be used as a signet, not all were.

¹⁷⁶ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* II.50

¹⁷⁷ Richard P. Saller, “*Pater Familias, Mater Familias* and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household,” *Classical Philology* 94 (1999), 185.



Figure 3.13: Room 5, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
Detail of ring worn by woman number 17.

Thus, in many publications, the term *intaglio* encompasses rings that were likely used as signets, although they are not differentiated as such within these texts.¹⁷⁸ However, in the depicted record—in wall paintings—there appears to be a visual shorthand to signal that a ring is meant to be understood as a signet.

Perhaps the most famous example of a depicted signet from the Bay of Naples region hails from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale; it is worn by an elderly man (Figure 3.14).¹⁷⁹ His hand tilts to make the engraving visible to the viewer. The ring has a gold band and a red stone, on which white paint is used to indicate engraving. The same convention appears to be in play in the Villa of the Mysteries, where once more a red stone with pale demarcated decoration appears to signal that the ring is a signet (Figure 3.13). The connection between red stones and signets is significant, for carnelian, a red stone, was particularly prized for use in signets, because hot wax does not stick to it.¹⁸⁰

If the ring is a signet, then it is likely to be associated with the idea of the power of a head of a household, associated with the ring's owner and its owner's line.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ For examples of this practice see F.H. Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman in the Department of Antiquities* (London: British Museum, 1968), and John Boardman and Diana Scarisbrik, *The Ralph Harari Collection of Finger Rings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977).

¹⁷⁹ Interestingly, there may be a second signet in the paintings from Room H of the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. A woman with a pale *palla* sits alongside a nearly nude male, on her left hand is a ring with a large red stone, on which is visible a faint white line.

¹⁸⁰ George Rapp, *Archaeomineralogy* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2002), 95

¹⁸¹ Signets are a sign of both personal power and of identity, and the concept of personal identity may be at play elsewhere in the mural. Mudie Cooke and Maiuri both note that the faces of the depicted women may be portraits, intended to call to mind actual women, perhaps those who once lived in the space. See Mudie Cooke, "Paintings of the Villa Igem," 173.



Figure 3.14: Room H, Villa of P. Fannius Synistor, Boscoreale.
Detail of ring on “philosopher.” Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

So, if the ring is a signet, and if it appears on more than one woman, as the differences in hair color and mode of dress suggest, then we must ask why. The *mater familias* is not necessarily the owner of a house; she is the female head of house, and she might wear a signet to conduct official business in that capacity. But she might equally wear a signet because it marks her position as owner; a second woman wearing the same signet might do so for much the reason that Augustus wishes to bequeath his ring to Agrippa, to signal connection to the earlier user, suggesting, if not a female line of descent of villa ownership, then perhaps a visual and material connection across generations of women.



Figure 3.15: Herculaneum, Ancient shoreline.
Gold ring with carnelian seal stone.
British Museum SAP 78959. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Catching the Eye: The Visual Function of Jewelry in Room 5

The articulation of the ring encourages the viewer to make connections between depicted women on the walls of Room 5, but as we noted in our description of the space, it is one type of jewelry among several. In both reality and depiction, jewelry draws the viewer's attention. When a living woman wears jewelry, she can deliberately highlight parts of her body; the same is true of the bodies of painted women. Bracelets and rings draw attention to the hands, but, in the case of a living woman, to gestures as well, encouraging the eye to follow the woman's movements. The placement of a bangle on the upper arm is more suggestive, drawing attention to potentially trim arms, and thus the state of the woman's overall physique, but like

bracelets, an armband can draw attention to what it is near as the woman moves. When her arm is extended above her head, the armband is at a level with her eyes. When her arm rests along her side, an armband is at the level of her breasts, drawing the viewer's eye toward them without exposing them. Romans were well aware of these functions of jewelry. Christine Kunst notes that while women were “deliberately given the *ornamenta* to compensate for their dull garments,” over time women developed the *ornamenta* into “eyecatchers,” wearing pieces to attract attention.¹⁸²

Just as jewelry worn in reality can draw the viewer's eye to various parts of a woman's person, it can draw the viewer's eye in depiction as well, helping the viewer to draw connections between figures, and across space. Within the depicted world of the mural, jewelry conflates living and divine (Figure 3.9). The woman who sits behind Dionysus wears a set of jewelry that is visually undifferentiated from that worn by the seated woman who gazes into the room from her position alongside the space's primary entrance. Both wear a torqued gold bracelet, both wear a red ring with a gold band. Both are seated, and draped with voluminous purple-bordered fabrics. Nothing differentiates the mortal from the potential goddess but proximity to the god himself. Indeed, the presence of realistic jewelry, jewelry that we see on mortal women elsewhere in the space, situates this woman in a liminal zone. She embraces a god, but she looks like a mortal. This conflation is especially fitting if the woman is Ariadne, who was not born a goddess, but made one, but the tie to the mortal world would hold true, no matter the goddess

¹⁸² Kunst, “Ornamenta Uxoriam,” 131.

depicted. The realistic depiction of jewelry draws the mythical and the real into communication, showing us a woman who is simultaneously goddess and mortal. Shoshanna Kirk has noted that this sort of blurring of the lines between goddess and mortal is not uncommon in Italian art. As she puts it, “The divide between the 'imaginary' world of the gods and the 'real' world of human experience simply did not exist in the mind of the ancient viewer.”¹⁸³ She goes on to suggest that this concept is particularly applicable to our understanding of Dionysus' female companion, proposing that while she might have been associated with a goddess, she might equally have had a human identity.

This conflation extends into the world of the viewer as well, and once again jewelry is the point of connection. Each of the painted pieces reflects contemporary jewelry, with close correlates found in the Bay of Naples area. Earrings such as those depicted on women throughout the room, round and constructed so that the rounded bead or stone would have dangled just below a woman's earlobe when worn, have been found at Villa B at Oplontis.¹⁸⁴ Twisted gold bracelets such as those worn by Dionysus' companion, the woman at her toilette, the cupid that attends her, and the woman seated to the left of the entrance, now in the Dallas Museum of Art, were excavated in Pompeii, although their exact find spot is unknown.¹⁸⁵ Similar

¹⁸³ Shoshanna Kirk, “Nuptial Imagery in the Villa of the Mysteries Frieze: South Italian and Sicilian Precedents,” In *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse*, Edited by Elaine K. Gazda with Molly Swetnam-Burland, Catherine Hammer, and Brenda Longfellow (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology and the University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2000), 106.

¹⁸⁴ Lorenzo Fergola, *Oplonis e le sue Ville* (Pompeii: Flavius Editore, 2005), 122.

¹⁸⁵ Barbara Deppert-Lippitz, *Ancient Gold Jewelry at the Dallas Museum of Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1996), 113; Although these pieces look very much like those depicted in Room 5, they are dated to the first century AD, a later date than is generally given for the paintings themselves. This disparity highlights a common problem with jewelry in general, and Pompeian jewelry in particular. Because of its value, and its role in women's dowries, jewelry tends to remain a

twisted circlets have often been associated with imports from Cisalpine Gaul.¹⁸⁶ While undecorated gold necklaces, bracelets and armbands are not generally included in published catalogues, which favor fancier examples, decorated versions of bracelets with similar shapes found in Pompeii are documented.¹⁸⁷ Twisted snake bracelets appear to have been popular; several Pompeian examples exist, two as an apparent set from the House of the Tragic Poet.¹⁸⁸ The painter of the bracelets in Room 5 seems to have been well-acquainted with this sort of piece; the curve of the snake's tail almost exactly replicates that from one Pompeian example, now in the Dallas Museum of Art.¹⁸⁹ Many examples of rings with oval stones and gold settings of a shape similar to that at the Villa of the Mysteries exist, with both engraved and undecorated stones. A similarly shaped ring, with an oval setting and stone now in the collection of the British Museum can help us to understand the play of light against the surface of the intaglio that the painting appears to represent (Figure 3.15). While the band shown in this example is simple, more elaborate bands did exist, and it is likely that the side views of the ring in Room 5 are articulated in order to depict such a band.

Just as jewelry connects mythical and non-mythical figures on the walls of the room, it also suggests associations between painted and living women, for the

part of the archaeological record long after its creation, making it difficult to date. In the case of areas impacted by Vesuvius' eruption, the date given to many pieces is that of the eruption itself, without taking into account the fact that the jewelry may have been created at a previous time. This may be the case with the Dallas Museum bracelets.

¹⁸⁶ Francois Gaultier and Catherine Metzger, *Tresors Antiques: Bijoux de la Collection Campana* (Paris: Musee du Louvre, 2005), 123.

¹⁸⁷ Deppert-Lippitz, *Ancient Gold*, 113.

¹⁸⁸ Edward Trollope, *Illustrations of Ancient Art Selected from Objects Discovered at Pompeii and Herculaneum* (London: George Bell, 1854), 50.

¹⁸⁹ Deppert-Lippitz, *Ancient Gold*, 113.

jewelry depicted in the painting, as we have seen, corresponds nicely to contemporary pieces. The pieces discussed as comparanda are not unique, and similar jewelry could very well have been owned and worn by women who would have inhabited the room. If this is the case, then we may see a depiction of a regionally specific mode of adornment. The combination of armband and bracelet, and of simple bracelet and ring, is evident in both contemporary paintings, and in regional examples that antedate the period in question. A painting from the atrium of the House of the Tragic Poet depicting the marriage of Zeus and Hera depicts the goddess wearing a simple gold bracelet and a large gold ring with an ovular red stone on her left hand, which she extends toward her husband. Several figures in the so-called Villa of P. Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale, often compared to Room 5 due to its similarly large figures and red background, wear jewelry quite like that seen in the Villa of the Mysteries. The seated woman playing the cithara wears a gold bracelet on her left wrist, and a ring with a large, red ovular stone and a gold band on the third finger of her left hand. The himation clad woman seated next to the nude man wears a similar ring. The woman who holds the shield wears a twisted armband together with a snake bracelet, both similar to depictions in Room 5. While these similarities in depictions of jewelry across a limited time and space indicate that the jewelry depicted in Room 5 does not only depict the jewelry wearing practices of a single woman, they do not preclude the idea that these similarities arise from the habits of a common workshop. However, the presence of similar pieces on earlier examples from the region, in a different medium, indicates

that, even if these paintings are all the products of one workshop, there is a larger picture to take into account.

Following Molly Swetnam-Burland and Shoshanna Kirk, I propose that much of the jewelry depicted in Room 5 draws on earlier regional traditions. Kirk argues that “the central couple and the bridal adornment scene appear to resonate more or less directly with the visual legacy of nuptial iconography in South Italian and Sicilian vase painting.¹⁹⁰ This resonance reverberates through the details of the composition as well, for several Centuripe vases depict women wearing the combination of bracelet and armband that has been discussed above. In one example from the third century BCE, a dark haired woman at sacrifice stretches her left arm toward an altar. On her arm are an armband of unornamented gold, worn around her bicep, and a simple gold bracelet. A second woman, approaching the altar from the opposite direction, wears an identical pairing of armband and bracelet. In another example, discussed by Kirk as a wedding procession incorporating Dionysiac elements, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a woman stretches her right arm back to engage with the bride.¹⁹¹ On her extended arm she wears a gold armband. It is possible that she may have once had a bracelet as well, but a break runs directly across the wrist on which we would expect to find it. Interestingly, while these women wear some pieces similar to those seen in Room 5, they are also shown wearing elaborate necklaces of multicolored stones, suggesting that the relatively restrained jewelry seen in Room 5 may indeed be a mark of an awareness of tensions over the amount of jewelry it was proper to wear.

¹⁹⁰ Kirk, “Nuptial Imagery,” 111.

¹⁹¹ Kirk, “Nuptial Imagery,” 109-110.

The reference to potentially regional modes of dress, together with the depiction of realistic jewelry draw the women in the room and the women in the paintings together visually. While these connections could be drawn between any women in the space, an especially pointed connection might be made between Dionysus and the woman against whom he leans, and the individuals who might have sat on the couch in front of it.

Jewelry and the Social Imaginary: The Viewer as God(dess)

The individuals seated before this portion of the wall would have been juxtaposed against Bacchus and the woman behind him, appearing to almost become a part of the scene behind them, an effect which would no doubt have been intensified as the night wore on, sources of light changed, and the viewer became more inebriated. In an environment much like that described by Bettina Bergmann at the Villa at Oplontis “representation . . . enters into a dialogue with the world as seen.”¹⁹² This dialogue plays out on multiple levels. For just as the figures in Room 5 speak to each other both conceptually and visually, the walls of Room 5 also appear to speak to the rest of the villa. The red walls, transected by columns, that form the background of the action in Room 5 are a familiar feature elsewhere in the villa, particularly in the peristyle, where a viewer gazing from one side to the other might well be accustomed to seeing living figures walk back and forth across a similar background (Figure 3.16).

¹⁹² Bettina Bergmann, “Art and Nature in the Villa at Oplontis,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supplementary Series Number 47*, Edited by C. Stein and J.H. Humphrey (Dexter: Thompson-Shore, 2002), 102.



Figure 3.16: Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.
East side of Peristyle C, view to the north.

But in Room 5, these figures are not humans but depictions, a fact that might temporarily confuse the incautious viewer, just as a viewer at the Villa at Oplontis might not realize that the views through the walls of the colonnade are painted rather than real.

Within Room 5 itself, such slippages continue. If a man sat on the couch together with a woman, it would be difficult to avoid comparing them to the divine pair behind them, although the impulse to draw such connections might have been stronger in the case of a potential female diner, for she might have worn personal adornments comparable to those worn by the woman depicted behind her, connecting her to the goddess just as it connected the goddess to women elsewhere in the painting. The composition of the painting might also offer up material for

comparison between the world of the painting and the world in which the viewers lived.

Dionysus reclines drunkenly, his partner sits, and it is possible that this configuration references Roman seating conventions. Traditionally, men reclined, but modest women sat upright. However, as Matthew Roller convincingly argues, the idea that women should sit at dinner is more a moralizing stance than a reflection of the actual dining practices of Roman women. In light of this disparity, he goes on to suggest that “any representation of women's dining posture is ideologically invested.”¹⁹³ Roller notes that when women reclined, their posture was easily associated with sexual availability, while their position below a man on the dining couch marked a legitimate sexual connection.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, the idea that women should sit upright and keep their intake of wine to a minimum seems to have been connected in large part to a desire to control women's sexual proclivities. While the seat on which Dionysus and his companion rest does not appear to be a dining couch, the idea of sexual availability may prove to be an interesting investigative avenue. As Roller points out the heavy consumption of wine is linked to sexual transgression, focusing on the lapses of female modesty that occur when women become intoxicated.¹⁹⁵

However, Dionysus' companion does not appear to have over imbibed. It is Dionysus who lolls drunkenly in a woman's lap. If anyone is compromised, it is he. While most figures gaze into the room, taking in the action around him, Dionysus'

¹⁹³ Matthew Roller, “Horizontal Women: Posture and Sex in the Roman Convivium,” *The American Journal of Philology* 124 (2003), 378-379.

¹⁹⁴ Roller, “Horizontal Women,” 402.

¹⁹⁵ Roller, “Horizontal Women,” 403-404.

gaze is firmly fixed on the woman above him. He is unaware of the events around him. Although often discussed in terms of the sexual and societal dominance of men, depictions of Ariadne could just as easily be read as a reference to a woman's power, and the hold that a beautiful woman has on those around her.¹⁹⁶ In Room 5, Dionysus's line of sight reinforces this. It is the god's companion who is composed and proper, while he is intoxicated, and by extension, potentially sexually available. Such a subversion would have thrown the couple depicted in front of this portion of the mural into relief. For just as there is nothing to mark Ariadne as a goddess other than her proximity to the god, if one removed Dionysus's thyrsus, he could be a mortal man. What is acceptable behavior for a god is if not prohibited for mortals, certainly frowned upon. While the comparison between depicted and real elevates the living woman to the realm of the goddess, it suggests that should a man take on the attributes of the god, it might well be to his detriment.

The depiction of apparently realistic jewelry and dress practices helps to blur the boundaries between real and depicted in Room 5. The interactive nature of the space draws such slippage to the foreground, and the size of the depicted figures further encourages the viewer to consider relationships between figures on the walls and people in the room. We have seen here the ways that depicted jewelry can elucidate processes of the performance of personal identities and the

¹⁹⁶ For a discussion of the sexualized nature of depictions of Ariadne, see David Fredrick, "Beyond the Atrium to Ariadne: Erotic Painting and Visual Pleasure in the Roman House," *Classical Antiquity* 14 (1995), 273. If Dionysus's companion in Room 5 is Ariadne, then she is a very different Ariadne than the one Frederick describes, which may be a function of the time, for there seems to be an increase in nudity in the later years of Pompeii. However, this does not suggest that the difference is not significant. Indeed, it would be possible to argue that scenes in which Dionysus observes a nude Ariadne have as much to say about Ariadne's power over the god as they do about the god's power over her.

mechanisms by which the realistic nature of the jewelry depicted incites the viewer to participate in the imaginal space of the viewed, a space that allows for the expression of potentially subversive norms. But is it possible to use jewelry to understand a bigger picture? Finger rings are highly personal, signets even more so. Jewelry, on the whole, because it is an interface between the body and the world is intricately tied to expressions of personal identity. But as we intimated here, dress practices are dictated by societal customs, and for all that they reinforce and bolster personal expressions of prestige and identity, they are intended to be viewed. Jewelry asks for an audience. That audience together with the social strictures surrounding the wearing of jewelry in public spaces are the topics of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Observer Figures and Communal Viewing in Mythological Wall Paintings

As we saw in Chapter Three, careful evaluation of adornments and their material qualities yields a range of interpretive possibilities. By faithfully depicting realistic modes of adornment, the murals of Room 5 invite the viewer to think self-consciously about the act of self-presentation, even as it asks her to project herself into an imaginal space, one that may or may not adhere to the rules of the mortal realm. This conflation of reality and depiction provides the viewer with the opportunity to reframe the relationship between self and societal norms. If goddesses are depicted wearing the jewelry of living mortal women, are they so very different? If norms can be transgressed visually, does this mean that they can be subverted in reality? In Room 5, these questions are invited in part by the gazes of the depicted figures. As a figure glances across the room, it becomes both viewer and viewed. This dual relationship is the subject of the current chapter.

Like the painted figures in Room 5, the living viewers who populated Pompeii are both spectator and spectacle. Again, like the painted figures in Room 5, their manner of adornment helps to shape the way that others interpret them. To consider this interplay, we turn our attention now to other painted depictions of

viewers, focusing on supernumerary figures—depicted observers removed from the action of the painted scene—to explore the ways that viewing processes are pictured and what these depictions can tell us about the Pompeian viewing mindset. To underscore these notions, we turn once more to depictions of dress practices, arguing that, as in Room 5, the familiarity of the depicted practices invites the viewer to self-consciously consider his or her relationship to the related process of observation and display.

We begin by discussing observer figures more generally, considering what it is that they do when they are included in wall paintings. We then turn to a discussion of the House of the Seven Skeletons and the depictions of viewing processes found within, before focusing our attention more firmly upon a single room within the dwelling, the exedra that is the focal point of the south side of the peristyle. As we shall see, the conservative dress practices modeled by observer figures in these images conform to the societal norms suggested by sumptuary legislation and contemporary Latin moralizing texts. To underscore this point, we then focus on the texts themselves, juxtaposing these writings with the material record to stress that the conservative practices suggested by sumptuary legislation reference not reality, but an ideal. We then return to the depiction of observer figures in the House of the Seven Skeletons to ask ourselves a set of questions: What does the maintenance of conservative dress for observer figures suggest about both their role as viewers and their relationship to the living viewers who gaze upon them? And how can the relationships suggested by these panel paintings help us to confront social realities? As we tackle these questions, we will introduce a set of

entwined ideas central to our final chapters, arguing that the mode of collective viewing pictured in the House of the Seven Skeletons underscores the distance between viewer and viewed, both within the paintings themselves and between painted figures and the world of the living viewer. Indeed, the increased distinction between central and observer figures within the paintings, framed in these images as a division between a mythical heroic actor and a mortal audience, may parallel the mechanics of dividing in-group from out-group in the real world, where the act of being exceptional might be as likely to bring danger as glory.

Watching the Watchmen: Observer Figures in Pompeii

As a topic, observer figures are not unlike adornment. Many scholars mention them in passing, but few give them serious attention. Roger Ling, in a manner typical of the treatment of such figures, dismisses them almost entirely. He suggests that they are “a characteristic device to enliven what might otherwise have been too arid a composition.”¹⁹⁷ But if the painter’s only goal is to fill space or to convey a sense of depth, there are other options. As Dorothea Michel indicates, anything from statues to animals could serve a similar purpose.¹⁹⁸ The Pompeian mural artist could have chosen another tactic, and thus the inclusion of non-essential human figures in these mythological scenes suggests that there must be something that a depicted human can do that a depicted statue cannot. Michel, the

¹⁹⁷ Roger Ling, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 123.

¹⁹⁸ Dorothea Michel, “Bemerkungen über Zuschauerfiguren in pompejanischen sogenanntenTafelbildern.” In *La Regione Sotterrata dal Vesuvio: Studi e Prospettive*. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, 11-15 Novembre 1979 (Napoli: Università degli Studi di Napoli, 1982), 543.

first scholar to take up observer figures as a subject in their own right, argues that the figures served to signal a need for closer visual analysis, often by literally pointing to objects of interest within the depicted frame.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, she asserts that this effect is deliberate, a statement of Italic artistic agency that she places in deliberate opposition to the idea that the paintings in Pompeian houses ought to be regarded as copies of Greek originals—the prevailing theory in the 1980s, when she wrote.²⁰⁰

These figures carry meaning, and they do so, in part, due to their appearance. While she asserts that there is something unequivocally Roman about the figures, Michel is less interested in the accouterments of the figures than in their overall effect. Aside from a mention of apparent portrait features, she does not delve into what, exactly, marks the depicted spectators as non-Greeks. But although she does not state so outright, her notion that the inclusion of these spectators increases the living viewer's temporal awareness hints that the contemporaneity of depicted dress—that fashion—is key to the understanding of spectator figures and how they function. Their efficacy depends on their simultaneity; as Michel argues, the fact that these figures look non-Greek draws the viewer and the viewed into temporal proximity, and thus the viewer's awareness of her role as spectator is heightened.²⁰¹

This self-awareness seems to be key to the Pompeian viewing process.

Katharina Lorenz, the only author other than Michel to consider spectator figures as

¹⁹⁹ Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," 541.

²⁰⁰ The whole of Michel's article might rightly be considered a critique of prevailing thoughts on the "Roman copy." But for a summation of her ideas on the topic, see Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," 540.

²⁰¹ Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," 543.

an independent topic in an article-length assessment, suggests that the “Pompeian interest in people observing one another derives from a ubiquitous interest in playing with the possibilities of visibility and exploring the boundaries between representation, staging, performance, and actual being.”²⁰² Stepping away from what she terms the “dangerously intuitive forms of semiotic analysis” that characterize the bulk of previous work on mythological figures in Pompeii, Michel seeks not to describe how the depicted figures relate to texts, but rather to explore the ways that the depicted figures interact with their viewers.²⁰³ In her nuanced evaluation of the subject, Lorenz, attentive to the “aesthetics of reception,” uses close visual readings of depicted Pompeian spectators to explore a range of viewing possibilities, suggesting that not all spectators, either depicted or real, would respond identically to the scenes depicted.²⁰⁴ As she demonstrates, the depicted mythological world is a complex liminal zone, where eroticism, traditional virtues, and problematized genders are negotiated in part through depicted observers.

But while Michel understands these spectators primarily as relatable visual doubles, for Lorenz, the depicted observer is as apt to alienate the living viewer as to picture her in parallel. Although she gives little space to the nature of adornment in

²⁰² Katharina Lorenz, “The Ear of the Beholder: Spectator Figures and Narrative Structure in Pompeian Painting,” *Art History* 30.5, November 2007, 679. While Michel and Lorenz remain the only scholars to have published spectator figures as an independent topic, Michael J. Behen and John Clarke both have made forays into the topic of spectator figures, although neither has published on the topic subsequent to giving conference presentations on the subject. See Michael J. Behen, “Who Watches the Watchmen? The Spectator’s Role in Roman Painting,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 99.2, April 1995, 99 and John R. Clarke, “Viewer and Voyeur in Neronian Painting,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 99.2, April 1995, 332-333.

²⁰³ Lorenz, “Ear of the Beholder,” 665.

²⁰⁴ For a discussion of the aesthetics of reception see Wolfgang Kemp, “The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception,” in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180-196.

these images, as was the case with Dorothea Michel's arguments on the topic of temporality, for Lorenz, difference is established in large part through physical appearance. A viewer presumably understands those figures who conform to her own standards of dress and appearance to be most like her, and as in the Villa of the Mysteries, this conflation of reality and depiction invites the living viewer to project herself into the depicted world. However, conflation is not the only means by which an external viewer can confront the depicted spectator. Subtle variation, drawing attention to differences between external viewer and the depicted spectator might, as Lorenz argues, encourage the viewer to seek out similarity elsewhere in the image, most often in the form of the mythological central figures.²⁰⁵

Regardless of the viewer's reaction to the depicted observer, Lorenz argues that the spectators act as a locus of instability that encourages the viewer to deconstruct the central narrative.²⁰⁶ Through deconstruction and detachment, the external viewer is able to evaluate the depicted scene critically, and in so doing, to confront tensions inherent in her social reality. The temporality of this reality is not necessarily fixed. Because the depicted spectator is as capable of highlighting difference as similarity, the external viewer need not see herself in the depiction to take heed of the internal suggestion to intellectually engage with the mythological scene, to consider a variety of communications beyond the straightforward association of narrative identification and image.

A single image can provide a range of potential readings to a range of potential viewers, and this multiplicity of viewing possibilities is mirrored in the

²⁰⁵ Lorenz, "Ear of the Beholder," 670-671.

²⁰⁶ Lorenz, "Ear of the Beholder," 676.

variety of depicted viewers in Pompeii. Although, as Lorenz notes, depicted viewers are overwhelmingly female, these painted ladies are shown in a number of guises, from the mythological—as in the case of the female satyr in the depiction of Perseus and Andromeda at the Scavo del Principe di Montenegro, to the elderly—as is the woman who gazes down at Venus and Mars in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, to the matrons who gaze avidly at Theseus in the House of the Seven Skeletons.²⁰⁷ To this range of viewers, we can add the men of a variety of ages who join these women in scenes that include multiple onlookers, as well as the voyeuristic men, mythical and mortal alike, who are most often depicted gazing at nude women, particularly Ariadne.²⁰⁸ These viewers are found in a diverse number of locales, from craggy shores to the interior of houses, and there appears to be no gender differentiation between settings. Women are as likely to be found on an isolated mountainside as men, and they might be equally likely to look upon heroic triumphs as the marriage of a mythological pair. And while these spectators do not take part in the actions undertaken by gods, goddesses, heroes, and heroines, they are hardly passive and not at all superfluous. The presence of such figures, physically inserted into scenes that the living viewer can only imagine, bridges the gap between reality and mythology, and in so doing provides a space in which ideas, subversive and normative alike, can be entertained.

²⁰⁷ For the association between women and viewing see Lorenz, “Ear of the Beholder,” 668. Michel articulates viewing as passivity, and because of this also sees it as an appropriate female activity. See Michel, “Zuschauerfiguren,” 559. For the assertion that the satyr in the Perseus and Andromeda scene in the Scavo del Principe di Montenegro is female see Lorenz, “Ear of the Beholder,” 666-670.

²⁰⁸ For an example of a mythical male—a Silenus—gazing at Ariadne, see the painting of Dionysus leading Ariadne away from Naxos in the triclinium of the House of the Golden Bracelet. For another type of male onlooker, see the depiction of Dionysus embarking from his boat onto Naxos in the triclinium of the House of L. Caecilius Jucundus.

Although Michel and Lorenz both think about the viewing process as focused on individuals, with a single living viewer contemplating an image in apparent isolation, both note that groups of viewers, pictured in the act of communication, are not uncommon in Pompeii. And while Lorenz admits that the inclusions of groups of spectators highlight the “public aspect” of some narratives, she is uninterested in implications of what it means to view as a group, or to be viewed by a group.²⁰⁹ But as our interest here is not only in how we can understand Pompeian viewing practices, but also in the ways in which the interactions between adornment and viewership elucidate the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies, groups are key. For power, while it may be held by individuals, and directed against individuals, is preserved in part through the maintenance of a hierarchy within a group. Power, in short, implies connection.²¹⁰ It cannot be created in isolation. And so, we focus our attention here on those depictions of spectator figures that picture the dynamics of group communications.

These groups need not be large, nor are they necessarily all living. The act of viewing human figures itself implies a group of sorts. For even as the external viewer gazes at the depicted spectator, the depicted spectator might well gaze back, creating a connection between the two and, for a moment, an imaginal group. This group is actively engaged in communication. Through gesture and through gaze, the depicted and the real spectator undertake an exchange, one that can, as we saw in the case of Room 5, make the living viewer an object of depicted scrutiny. Even if the

²⁰⁹ Lorenz, “Ear of the Beholder,” 677-678.

²¹⁰ For a discussion of the mechanics of power see Robert A Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2.3 (July, 1957), pages 201-215. For the idea of power as a connection, see in particular Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” 204.

living viewer does not see herself in the depicted spectator, she is equally subject to an external gaze. Within a single instant, an observer might also be observed. This interchange happens most often between at least two individuals. The exception to this assertion deserves his own separate exploration: Narcissus engages with no one but himself, and his demise might well be taken as a warning against over-indulging in non-communicative viewing. Discussion between individuals could be considered a check against a descent into a Narcissian feedback loop of self-aggrandizement. An individual may put forth a personal image, but that image is subject to scrutiny. It is to this interplay that we now turn our attention.

Picturing Group Dynamics in the House of the Seven Skeletons

Excavated in 1868, the House of the Seven Skeletons (VII.2.16) is a well appointed and centrally located dwelling that fronts onto the Vicolo dei Panettiere, a narrow side-street just off the Via Stabiana, one of the town's major thoroughfares (Figure 4.1). It is most commonly referred to as the House of Gavius Rufus, following Giuseppe Fiorelli's assertion that the graffito once painted to the left of the entrance provides the name of its final owner.²¹¹ If Fiorelli were correct, it would be fortuitous, as Marcus Gavius Rufus appears enough times in graffiti throughout the town to give us a general idea of his familial line and situation in life; the family seems to have been active in Pompeian politics. Marcus Gavius Rufus appears to have been an *aedile*, while a Gaius Gavius Rufus ran for *duumvir* in the

²¹¹ Giuseppe Fiorelli, *Descrizione di Pompei* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 187.

last election held before the eruption of Vesuvius.²¹² These political ambitions mark a wealthy family with potential ties to trade; there was a property requirement of 100,000 sesterces to stand for *duumvir*, and *aediles* held responsibility for overseeing the public markets and ensuring that standards in weights and measures were maintained.²¹³ But as Matteo Della Corte has argued, it is “reckless” to simply attribute ownership based on exterior epigraphic evidence, arguing that these identifications are tantamount to guesswork.²¹⁴ Given the uncertainty of the attribution, a problem common to the vast majority of the houses in Pompeii associated with particular individuals, VII.2.16 is here referred to by the less popular designate “House of the Seven Skeletons” to avoid associating it with a putative owner.

We may not be able to name the house’s final owner, but this does not prevent us from exploring the ways in which the structure and decoration allowed this owner to mediate his or her social ambitions, and in so doing, to give context to the set of paintings that will allow us to engage with the complex interplay between viewer and viewed inherent in images that include internal observers. But before we turn to these depicted viewers, it is worthwhile to note that we may be able to speak with greater certainty than is the norm about the sort of viewer that might have engaged with the paintings in the House of the Seven Skeletons. For, despite

²¹² Matteo Della Corte, *Case ed Abitanti a Pompei: Ricerche di Epigrafia* (Napoli: Libreria Detken and Rocholl, B. Johannowsky, 1914), 10-11; Tenney Frank, “The Economic Life of an Ancient City,” *Classical Philology*, 8.3 (July, 1918), 227.

²¹³ James C. Welling, “The Last Town Election in Pompeii: An Archaeological Study of Roman Municipal Politics Based on Pompeian Wall Inscriptions,” *The American Anthropologist* 6.3 (July 1893), 227-228.

²¹⁴ Della Corte, *Case ed abitanti a Pompei*, 9, 3-4.

the fact that a name on a wall does not necessarily signal house ownership, the epigraphic evidence associated with the House of the Seven Skeletons speaks to the kinds of interactions that are at the heart of our project. Regardless of whether or not the house was owned by Marcus Gavius Rufus, the interplay of inscriptions within the house and around the town highlights a social group. Tantalizingly for our purposes, a second name is associated with the house: Marcus Vecilius Verecundus.

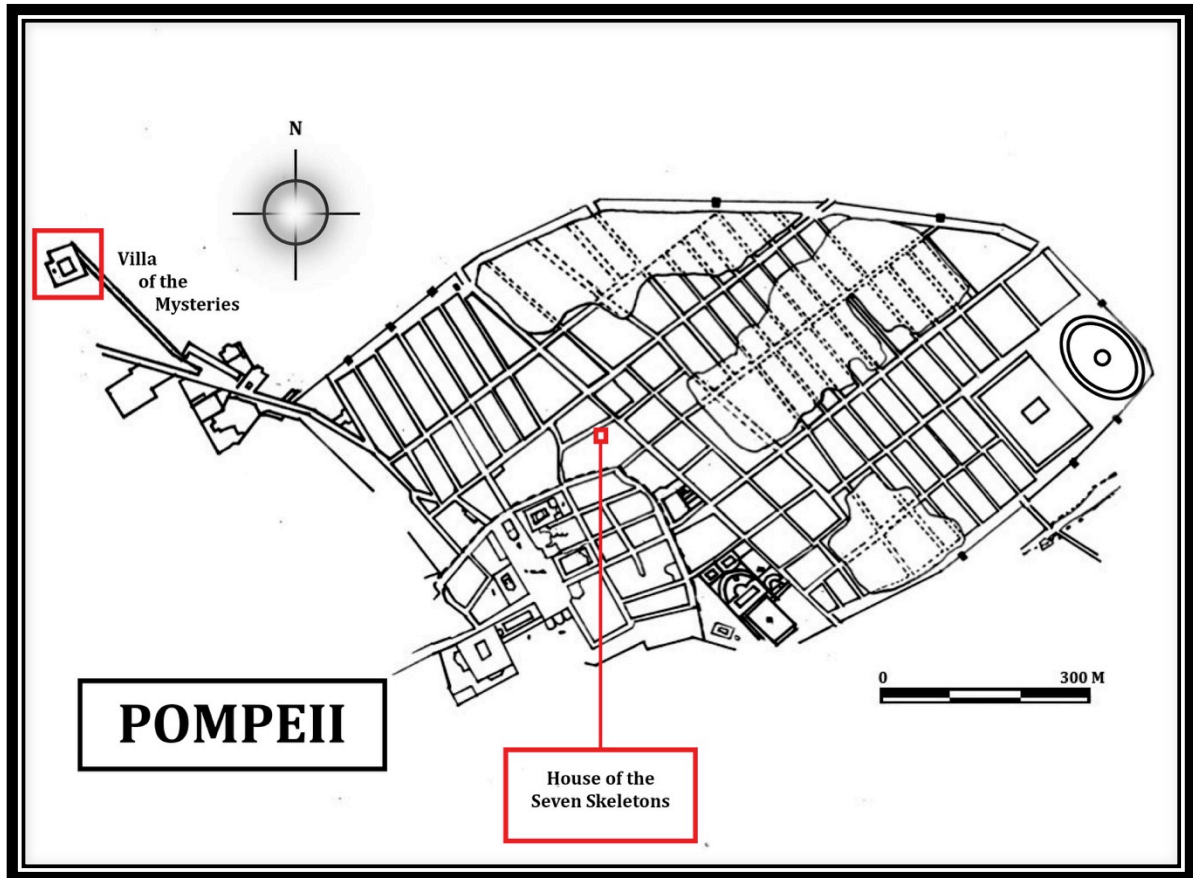


Figure 4.1: Map of Pompeii indicating location of the House of the Seven Skeletons and the Villa of the Mysteries.
After Cassanelli et al 2002, General Map of Pompeii, p. 58-59.

How Verecundus's name found its way onto the peristyle wall of the House of the Seven Skeletons is uncertain. But, as Rebecca Benefiel remarks, "[Ancient graffiti] mark where people spent time. They record social interactions."²¹⁵ The presence of his name within the House of the Seven Skeletons allows us to consider the sort of person that frequented it. Interestingly, the graffito gives not only a name, but the man's profession. It identifies him as a *vestiarius*, a producer and vendor of cloth and of clothing.²¹⁶ This title makes it likely that he is the same Verecundus labeled in a painting at the felt workshop IX.7.5-7, situated just across the Via Stabiana from the House of the Seven Skeletons.²¹⁷ As John Clarke and Walter Moeller both note, Verecundus was likely a seller of high quality fabrics, as the graffito found to the right of the entrance of the workshop at IX.7.5-7 mentions a *tunica lintea aurata*, a linen tunic with gold thread.²¹⁸ If, as seems possible, Verecundus was a visitor to the House of the Seven Skeletons, we have the opportunity to think in real terms about the sort of eyes that might have encountered the adornments within. In his discussion of the painting at IX.7.5, Clarke argues that the choice of self-presentation of Verecundus and his wife is a

²¹⁵ Rebecca R. Benefiel, "Dialogues of Ancient Graffiti in the House of Maius Castricius in Pompeii," *American Journal of Archaeology* 114.1 (January, 2010), 60.

²¹⁶ John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 BC-AD 315*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 109; Interestingly, the city's cloth workers seem to have been major supporters of Gaius Gavius' Rufus's bid for duumvir. See Della Corte, *Casa ed abitanti a Pompei*, 10-11.

²¹⁷ Alison E. Cooley and M.G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2004), 176. There is some question as to the use of space in (IX.7.5-7). Cooley and Cooley identify it as a felt workshop. Walter Moeller believes it to be primarily a retail establishment, citing the presence of racks used to display cloth as an indicator of the purpose of the space, Walter O. Moeller, *The Wool Trade of Ancient Pompeii* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 54. John Clarke points out that, as the interior of the establishment remains unexcavated, it is not yet possible to speak in certainties regarding its nature, but he points out that the space is not large enough to encompass both manufacture and sale, suggesting that perhaps like Caecilius Lucundus, Verecundus controlled several sites around the town, some for manufacture, leaving IX.7.5-7 for sales, Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 111.

²¹⁸ Moeller, *Wool Trade*, 54; Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 109.

telling marker of their social position. Both Verecundus and his wife are pictured surrounded by their wares, and as Clarke puts it, “No elite person would commission such a representation of him or herself.”²¹⁹ Not only does Verecundus picture himself in a manner more in keeping with what Clarke suggests is expected from non-elites, the artist commissioned to depict him in this manner labeled him, making his association with his work undeniable.

We cannot know the particulars of the relationship between Verecundus and the owner of the House of the Seven Skeletons, or even if one existed. But the presence of the name of a non-elite tradesman within the house acts as a reminder. As we attempt to construct a model to allow us to consider the self-reflective impulse sparked by the presence of internal observers in the paintings, it is important to consider a range of interpretive options open to a variety of potential viewers, not all of whom would have presented themselves to the public in commensurate ways. For a Roman elite, work is not a point of pride. For Verecundus, it appears to be. And, as we remark in Chapter One, the social fabric of Pompeii was likely populated more by men and women like Verecundus and his wife than by the sorts of Roman public figures that occupy the pages of the extant texts that have colored our perceptions of social interactions in the Italian Peninsula.

While these sub-elites may have presented themselves in a different mode than the elites that are the focus of many discussions of social position, competition for social position may have been of even greater importance to sub-elite

²¹⁹ Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 111.

individuals.²²⁰ As we shall see, these are the individuals who might well have the most to gain in the uncertain sociopolitical world of the early Empire, and the adornments that they surrounded themselves with were key elements in their unspoken attempts to construct a social identity. Elites and non-elites alike turn to adornments to reinforce their social position, but in the case of non-elites, without an established family name to fall back upon, their assertion of social viability was all the more dependent upon appearances. Nero's family ties purchased his social position; sub-elites bought theirs through skill and maintained it through self-presentation. For emperor and subject alike, this self-presentation assumes an audience, one that must be convinced of the validity of the social performance to garner acceptance. In a real sense, the test of these assertions of social position is viewing, and it is to this critical act that we now turn.

²²⁰ Together with the mention of Verecundus, the neighborhood of the House of the Seven Skeletons also points to an interesting sub-elite setting. The largest house on the block, the Casa dei Marmi, is associated with a Samnite family name and includes the facilities for a commercial bakery while VII.2.18, another house connected to the 79 CE election for duumvir, appears to have been converted at some point to incorporate a workshop. Indeed, the bulk of the houses in the immediate vicinity of the House of the Seven Skeletons seem to be in a sort of process of conversion, with evidence of commerce fitted into rooms that otherwise conform to the expectations of "purely" domestic spaces. It is tempting, to propose a situation in which old families that were disenfranchised after Sulla's invasion of the city re-tooled as entrepreneurs in the early empire, although such an assertion would be very nearly impossible to prove. However, such a situation would parallel the political economics of Samnium proper, where we see some evidence that local elites began to take advantage of the commercial opportunities offered under Augustus, and that these endeavors continued well into the imperial period. See Frank, "Economic Life," 228 for a complete list of the houses on the block and their potential for mixed-use. For a brief discussion of Samnium after Sulla see Edward Bispham, "The Samnites," in *Ancient Italy: Regions without Boundaries*, edited by G.J. Bradley, E. Isayev, and C. Riva (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007), 179-223. For some initial thoughts on production in Samnium in the imperial period see Edward Bispham et al, "Excavations at Acquachiara (Atessa), 2002-2009," *Quaderni di Archeologia d'Abruzzo: Notiziario della Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Abruzzo* (Sesto Fiorentino: All'Insegna del Giglio, 2014), 31-36.

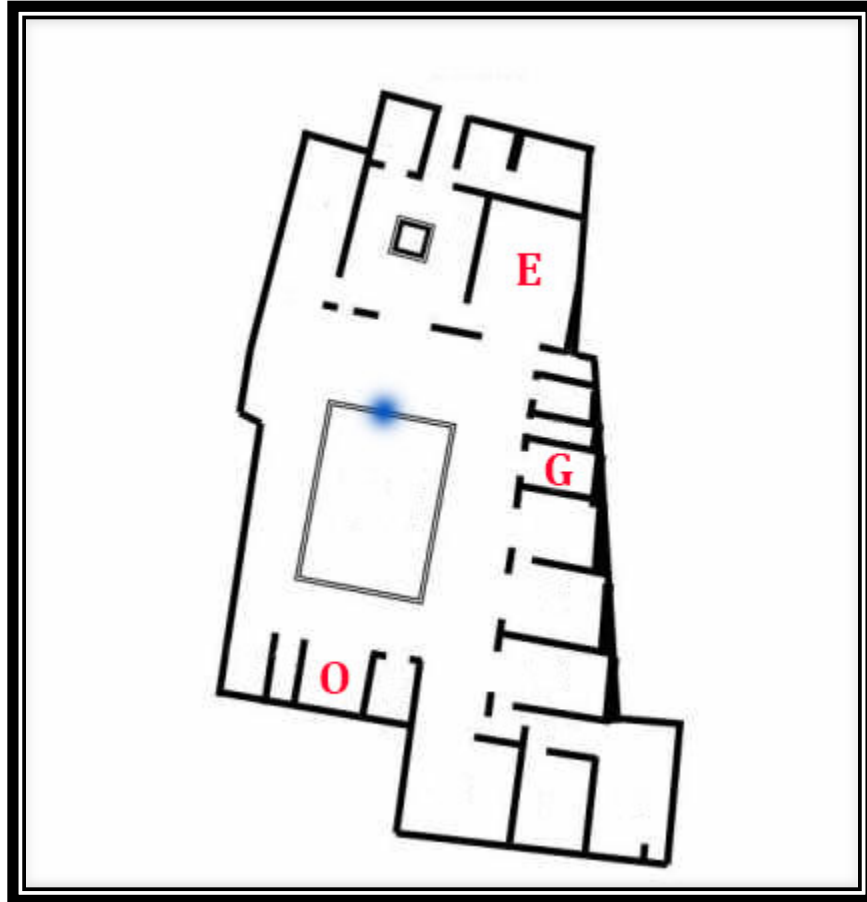


Figure 4.2: Plan of the House of the Seven Skeletons with Rooms E, G, and O, and fountain indicated.

Fragments of a Whole: Preservation, Vision, and Perception in the House of the Seven Skeletons

The House of the Seven Skeletons is a study in attrition. Once described as “one of the most beautiful and ... best preserved” houses in Pompeii, much of the house’s decoration is now missing, a casualty of over one hundred years of exposure

to the elements and problematic collection practices.²²¹ Today, the house is best known for the things that were removed from it, particularly a plaster cast of one of the bodies found within and a painting of a victorious Theseus, fractions of a once vibrant whole. Of the seven skeletons that give the house its cognomen, only one was successfully preserved, itself only the fifth viable cast the site produced using the then novel method of plaster casting pioneered by Giuseppe Fiorelli.²²² The three paintings removed from the house to the National Museum at Naples, Theseus among them, now represent the whole of the preserved program of the house's painted decoration. However, early reports of the house's interior describe an intricate visual program, with multiple rooms decorated with a variety of mythological scenes, several of which are uncommon in the Pompeian corpus. Only traces of plasterwork and faint traces of illusionistic architecture now remain in situ.

The first of these lost paintings was located in a large *oecus* accessible from the atrium, labeled E on our plan (Figure 4.2). Red and yellow panels interspersed with illusionistic architecture framed three areas set aside for panel paintings. At the time of the eruption, the decoration appears to have been a work in progress, with only one painting complete.²²³ The completed painting, depicting Danae the mother of Perseus and Zeus in his guise as a shower of gold with Danae's father

²²¹ Francesco Salvatore Dino, "Domus M. Gavi Rufi," *Giornale degli Scavi di Pompei*, 2, Nuova Serie (September, 1868), 28.

²²² The cast was only partially successful—the left leg was too impacted by lapilli to be preserved—but at the time of its creation, viewers remark that they could see impressions of the man's tunic and a copper ring, worn on the little finger of the man's left hand. The choice of copper is unusual, perhaps marking the man as non-freeborn or non-elite. See Eugene Dwyer, *Pompeii's Living Statues: Ancient Roman Lives Stolen from Death* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 79-81.

²²³ Dino, "Domus Gavi Rufi," 26.

Acrisius looking on, is of note for its treatment of the erotic encounter. While other extant examples of paintings depicting the conception of Perseus focus on the sexual availability of Danae, signaled in part by the lifting of her *palla* and the low drape of her tunic that leaves her torso and upper thighs exposed, the scene in the House of the Seven Skeletons inserts an internal spectator in the guise of Acrisius.²²⁴ As Emiliano Brisio notes, Acrisius is more often associated with the next stage of the myth, when he entraps Danae and the infant Perseus in the box to be tossed into the sea. Brisio sees his inclusion in the example in the House of the Seven Skeletons as a commentary on divine power, arguing that the presence of Danae's father highlights the emotive potential of the scene, inviting the viewer to contemplate the inescapability of fate and the applicability of human emotions to mythological settings.²²⁵ But beyond the mimetic potentials of interior spectators, the inclusion of a viewer here highlights an imbalance of power. Acrisius's spectatorship demarcates the limits of his power. He views a fated action, but he cannot circumvent it. His sight gives him the knowledge that he wishes for change, without conveying upon him the capacity to enact it.

Much as the version of the Danae story depicted demonstrates an unusual amalgamation of the anticipated visualization of the mythical structure, one that throws the act of viewing into relief, what is known of the rest of the lost images from the house suggest a simultaneous interest in viewership and erudition. But while descriptions of the painting of Danae and Acrisius suggest that it was, at the

²²⁴ For examples of a more erotic Danae see The House of Ariadne (VII.4.31/51), the House of Queen Margherita (V.2.1), and the House of the Ancient Hunt (VII.4.48).

²²⁵ Emiliano Brisio "Dipinto di Danae ed Acrisio, della Casa di M. Gavio Rufo, *Giornale degli Scavi di Pompei* 1, Nuova Serie (August, 1868), 8.

time of excavation, a well-preserved image, the paintings in the rest of the house did not fare so well. Nevertheless, descriptions of the images suggest that the house was carefully programmed, and that, as we will argue of the House of Jason in Chapter Six, this program is echoed across multiple rooms. The gaze, and the power and peril implicit in it, is a pervasive presence in the house, but much as the paintings insert unanticipated internal viewers, they also depict unanticipated scenes.

While modern scholarship on the house's program is confined almost exclusively to the painting of a triumphant Theseus greeted by a crowd at the entrance to the labyrinth that is now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale at Naples (Figure 4.5), early work on the house gave far greater attention to the painting of Danae discussed above, and to a second painting, once located in what was probably room G on our plan, a cubiculum situated on the west side of the peristyle. If it is the same room, no trace of the original decoration remains, but Emiliano Brisio describes a partially preserved painting that depicted a partially nude woman in flight, pursued by a tall youth in a short green tunic. The image captures the moment at which he begins to overtake her, with his legs transposed upon the dark fabric that covers the woman's lower body. Although the upper portion of the painting was not preserved, Brisio identified it as a scene from the myth of Minos and Britomartis.²²⁶ The story of the ill-fated king of Crete and the nymph Britomartis is transmitted to us from a single source, Callimachus' Hymn to Artemis,

²²⁶ Emiliano Brisio, "Il Mito di Minos et Britomarte," *Giornale degli Scavi di Pompei* 1, Nuova Serie (August 1868), 4-5.

where Britomartis serves as one of several avatars of Artemis herself.²²⁷ Like the goddess, Britomartis seeks to remain unwed, and rather than give in to the advances of Minos, she throws herself off a cliff and into the sea, where she is saved by a fisherman's net.²²⁸ The poem is full of such second-selves, and virgin female companions of Artemis face similar scenarios of pursuit throughout.

At the time of its discovery, as now, the subject was unique within the Pompeian corpus, a fact that Brisio marks up to the paucity of textual references to the myth.²²⁹ Its inclusion within the overall program of the house is noteworthy for, if Brisio's identification is correct, the scene depicts a lesser-known episode from a mythological cycle that is intensely popular in Pompeii.²³⁰ Minos, as the father of Ariadne, is a shadow figure in a majority of the identifiable figure paintings in Pompeii, for as David Fredrick notes, Ariadne is "the single most popular individual subject in Pompeii."²³¹ The addition of Minos as a subject in his own right, rather than as a background catalyst, much like the insertion of Acrisius into the expected

²²⁷ Susan A. Stephens, *Callimachus: The Hymns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 107.

²²⁸ Callimachus, *Hymn to Artemis*, in *Callimachus: The Hymns*, edited with introduction, translation and commentary by Susan A. Stephens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Lines 190-205, page 114.

²²⁹ On the uniqueness of the subject matter in this house see Emiliano Brisio, "Il Mito di Minos et Britomarte," *Giornale degli Scavi di Pompei* 1, Nuova Serie (August 1868), 5. Minos is himself a rare subject, appearing only once elsewhere in the whole of the identified images from Pompeii in a poorly preserved example depicting Minos and Scylla from the atrium of the House of the Dioscouri (VI.9.6), discussed by Wolfgang Helbig. See Wolfgang Helbig, *Wandgemälde der vom Vesuv Vershütteten Städte Campaniens* (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag von Breitkopf und Härtel, 1868), 297.

²³⁰ Without an extant image to refer to, it is difficult to say whether or not Brisio's identification of the image would be accepted today. The rarity of the subject matter makes it somewhat suspect, and his description of the image might equally support any number of alternate identifications, from Atalanta to a more generic Maenad. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to note that just as knowledge of an obscure text could heighten the social perceptions for an ancient viewer, modern scholars at times, in an attempt to highlight their own erudition, overlook a simpler explanation in favor of one that demonstrates the depth of their scholarly knowledge.

²³¹ David Fredrick, "Beyond the Atrium to Ariadne: Erotic Painting and Visual Pleasure in the Roman House," *Classical Antiquity* 14.2 (October 1995), 272.

interchange between Zeus and Danae, encourages the viewer to rethink an oft-viewed myth, and this mental repositioning is echoed throughout the house. For Minos is an invisible actor in the house's most famous painting, that of the victorious Theseus. There would have been no labyrinth without Minos, and no Minotaur without his wife's transgression. This chronologically earlier indiscretion, itself a double of the sort of action pictured in the case of Danae, offers up an alternative approach to confronting the visual programs elsewhere in the house. This process of assembling multiple potential references, all brought to bear on a reading of a complicated mythological representation is paralleled, although not mirrored, in the intertextuality of contemporary poetry, where we see a complicated cross-referencing of earlier works, knowledge of which both underscores the reader's erudition and deepens their understanding of the text itself.²³² In the case of images, which as we remarked in Chapter Three operate quite differently from texts, this cross-referencing occurs in a variety of ways, often simultaneously apprehended. Multiple texts can be referenced within the borders of a single panel painting, as was the case with the image of Danae and Acrisius. Or—as we see in the interplay between the paintings of Britomartis and Theseus, episodes in a narrative connected by a cast of characters—physical architectural walls may separate

²³² It is interesting that there is a potential direct visual reference to Callimachus in the House of the Seven Skeletons, for Callimachus seems to have been something of a favorite of Catullus, and the ability to recognize such references within Catullus's texts appears to have been an important marker of the reader's erudition. Indeed, this might be a fruitful avenue for further research, particularly as a way to construct a semiotic approach that is sensitive to the potentials of images. Much as Pierce's semiology is a viable alternative to Saussure's semiotics in this arena, a post-structuralist emphasis on intertextuality could be a viable means of entry into a complex problem. In the arena of images, intertextuality might well resemble reception studies, much as we see here. On the importance of allusion in Roman poetry see Stephen Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

paintings that could be used to conduct impressive conversations amongst diners at a convivial gathering.²³³

Walls might prevent living viewers from considering a story from multiple angles, and the ability to move around these walls, a freedom of movement within the house granted to a select few, might well be an advantage when piecing together nuanced readings of the intricate visual programs depicted throughout a dwelling. But architecture might reveal as much as it conceals, as is the case with the final missing paintings from the House of the Seven Skeletons. These two paintings, both found in an unspecified room on the left side of the peristyle and described briefly by Dino, seem to have been barely legible at the time of excavation. He suggests that the room's central focus was a painting of Thetis and Vulcan, although he notes that the identification is complicated by the fact that only a small portion of the painting remained. Of more certain attribution is the painting of Narcissus gazing down at his watery reflection from the same unspecified room.²³⁴ The inclusion of Narcissus within the visual program is telling, both for our understanding of the house's visual program, and for the dating of the decoration. As we noted above, the prepared but unpainted panels in the *oecus* suggest that the house was undergoing re-decoration in 79 CE; the presence of Narcissus would suggest a similar date, for the majority of the examples of depictions of the subject in Pompeii date to the period between 62 and 79 CE, as they were installed subsequent to the earthquake in 62 CE.²³⁵

²³³ For a more thorough discussion of dinner party conversation centered on images, and the ways that physical walls impact the connections that can be drawn, see Chapter Six.

²³⁴ Dino, "Domus M. Gavi Rufi," 27.

²³⁵ Hèrica Valladares, "Fallax Imago: Ovid's Narcissus and the Seduction of Mimesis in Roman Wall Painting," *Word and Image* 27.4 (October-December 2011), 378.

Despite the paucity of detailed description or visible extant remains, the presence of these two scenes within the house's visual program underscores the ongoing interest in communication between its rooms. The insertion of Acrisius into the Danae image highlighted the role of the viewer, an interest that reaches its apogee in the exedra that contains the famous image of the triumphant Theseus. Like paintings elsewhere in the house, depictions of Narcissus and Thetis once again draw attention to the act of viewing and the dangerous power of the gaze. But while elsewhere in the house internal observers invite the external viewer to focus on the act of viewing itself in part by distinguishing between the observer and the observed, the imaging strategies applied to Narcissus and Thetis conflate viewer and viewed in a manner not unlike what we observed in the Villa of the Mysteries. But in the cases of these two mythical figures, this conflation happens entirely within the depicted zone. The external viewer looks upon an internal viewer who in turn gazes at him or herself. And it is in these situations that the power of the gaze takes center stage.

In many discussions of the viewing process, the putative viewer is of primary importance, for as Alison Sharrock bluntly states it, "The act of viewing requires a viewer."²³⁶ But of no less significance is the thing viewed, as interplays such as those in Room 5 suggest. The gaze is a communicative process that depends in part upon a distinction between viewer and viewed, and it is this distinction that is at the heart of depictions of self-conscious looking, a category that is constructed around

²³⁶ Alison R. Sharrock, "Looking at Looking: Can You Resist a Reading?" In *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power, and the Body*, edited by David Fredrick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 265.

the inclusion of internal depicted viewers. As we discussed above, the identification of such viewers is dependent upon a central scene wherein some sort of action takes place. Theoretically, as in the example of the image of Acrisius and Danae, the internal viewer is not necessary to convey the import of the scene as a whole. Viewing is a charged activity, and the internal viewer highlights this action, but the removal of the internal viewer would not deter from the identification of the scene at hand. The addition of Acrisius adds a new dimension to potential readings of the painting, and to the viewer's grasp of the import of viewership, but if he were not included, we would still be able to recognize the scene as the conception of Perseus. This is not true of images of Narcissus.

In the story of Narcissus, we meet a viewer who comprehends no distinction between perception and reality. Ideally, the connection between viewer and viewed is made tolerable by distance, whether actual or perceived. Distance is what makes viewing safe. For much as the gaze is powerful, the thing or person viewed, be it in depiction or reality carries its own allure. Narcissus is so enraptured by his image that he gives up his mortal form, rather than look away. His story highlights both the power of the objectified human and the passivity of the viewer, subverting behavioral norms. For before he was an ekphrastic art object, a role that we might more commonly associate with both mortal and mythological women, Narcissus was a hunter. Within the space of a few hundred lines, Ovid masterfully turns expectations on their heads, shifting the balance of power from Narcissus to the image. In the hierarchy of agency, hunters and heroes might most often exert their will on the world around them, but the ability to draw and hold the gaze is itself a

powerful action, one that might well help the objectified person to achieve his or her goals.

In the hands of Ovid, Narcissus is a written work of art.²³⁷ This interest in ekphrasis carries through into depictions of Thetis, the subject of the second painting that Dino places in the room with Narcissus. Although Dino has little to say on the matter, stating only that the poorly preserved painting appears to depict Hephaestus and Thetis, the subject is common enough within the Pompeian corpus to give us an idea of the manner of depiction.²³⁸ In most, the mother of Achilles sits opposite the god of the forge, the hero's shield resting upright between them. For Homer, this exchange is an opportunity for ekphrasis, with over one hundred lines of Book Nineteen of the *Iliad* devoted to a characteristically beautiful description of the decorated shield.²³⁹ For Homer, the shield is a "microcosm," detailing the hierarchy of gods and humans.²⁴⁰ The shield of Achilles appears in multiple iterations and guises throughout Pompeii, but in at least one iteration it is no less ekphrastic than its literary counterpart. In an example from the House of Paccius Alexander, the shield, a martial mirror that reflects, not the world, but Thetis. Like Narcissus, Thetis's reflection makes her a living work of art. In the world of depiction, this is presented as an image within an image, and the goddess gazes in contemplation at herself, her pose interestingly similar to that of figure 1 in Room 5

²³⁷ Valladares, "Fallax Imago," 379.

²³⁸ Dino, "Domus M. Gavi Rufi," 27.

²³⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles (Oxford: Penguin Books, 1990), 483-488.

²⁴⁰ Thomas Van Nortwick, *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled: The Hero's Journey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 149.

of the Villa of the Mysteries.²⁴¹ Like Narcissus, Thetis appears to be captivated by her own image, but while the story of Narcissus is predicated on the fact that he cannot tear himself away from his own beauty, Thetis uses her power as a viewed being to achieve her own goals. For while her beauty and the dictates of prophesy might have trapped her in an unwanted marriage to a mortal, it also allows her to bargain with Zeus and Hephaestus for the armor that will temporarily safeguard the son she loves. Her ability to draw the gaze is not a disadvantage, so long as she deploys it intentionally.

For Dorothea Michel, Thetis and Narcissus perform analogous functions, taking on a role as internal viewer that draws the external viewer's attention.²⁴² But as Hèrica Valladares argues, the mimetic potential of such images depends in large part upon their ability to conflate reality and depiction.²⁴³ We have seen such conflation before. But whereas in Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries, the scale of the depicted figures invites the viewer to project herself into the depicted space of the murals, in the House of the Seven Skeletons the space of the house itself creates a visual double of the depicted world. A living viewer gazing upon Narcissus would have had several opportunities to see his or her own reflection gazing back at them from the several water features he or she would have encountered en route through the peristyle. The fountains and pools that entice Narcissus to rest in depiction are materialized in the atrium and peristyle of the house. Together with providing the visitor the opportunity to contemplate his or her own reflection, the sound of

²⁴¹ For an example of the image, see the *triclinum* of the House of Paccius Alexander (IX.1.7) in Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," Plate 23.

²⁴² Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," 569-570.

²⁴³ Valladares, "Fallax Imago," 383-384.

splashing water, provided by the two fountains that mark the center of the atrium and the entrance of the peristyle garden, creates a multi-sensory experience, enhancing the mimetic potentials of the depicted landscapes within the house, several of which either depict or reference water. We see here the creation of an immersive experience no less potent than that discussed in the Villa of the Mysteries, but one that depends upon multiple senses, and a larger architectural space, to continue the interplay between viewer and viewed, perception and reality.

This interplay between physical space and mimetic potential could have been experienced in multiple parts of the house, but was likely best contemplated at length from one of the rooms that line the peristyle's east and south walls, all of which command a view of both the colonnaded expanse and its central feature, a marble capped fishpond.²⁴⁴ Such features were potent visual reminders of the homeowner's status. As James Higginbotham notes, by the early imperial period, the time to which the decorations in the House of the Seven Skeletons likely date, with the traditional avenues of social advancement closed by the institution of imperial leadership, private settings became a primary locus for social display.²⁴⁵ Together with representing a level of expenditure of wealth and resources beyond the grasp of most, the placement of the fishpond in the house's peristyle reinforces the role that physical accessibility plays in status differentiation within the Pompeian house.

²⁴⁴ James Higginbotham, *Piscinae: Artificial Fishponds in Roman Italy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 201.

²⁴⁵ Higginbotham, *Piscinae*, 63-64.

The gaze gives Thetis power, and it performed the same function for the owner of the House of the Seven Skeletons. For just as the house's depicted program is invested in the interplay between power and viewership, its architecture uses lines of sight to underscore social standing, particularly that of the visitor. With the doors of the house open, the axial layout of the dwelling allows a view straight through from the street across the atrium and peristyle to the exedra that is the focal point of the east wall. But while passersby might be able to see the fishpond, and the water features that surrounded it, only invited guests would be granted the opportunity to interact with it directly, thus marking their privileged status by means of physical access, differentiating them from clients and social inferiors while solidifying the owner's position at the top of this social hierarchy.²⁴⁶ For all but a few, what was visible was simultaneously inaccessible.

Beyond underscoring the wealth and social position of the owner, the water features in the House of the Seven Skeletons further the exploration of mimetic effect seen in its painted program. Dino describes an intricate system of water display, with channels following the line of the peristyle columns fed by a set of lead pipes that also supplied water to two fountains, one in the atrium, and a second in the peristyle itself. To access the east side of the peristyle, and the painting of Narcissus, visitors to the house would first traverse the atrium, with its decorative fountain featuring a marble statue depicting a faun and a dog.²⁴⁷ Reflections, both literal and mental are as evident in the physical space of the house as they likely

²⁴⁶ On the topic of axes of differentiation see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Social Structure of the Roman House," *Papers of the British School at Rome, Volume 56* (Hertford: Stephen Austin and Sons Limited, 1988), 54-58.

²⁴⁷ Dino, "Domus M. Gavi Rufi," 25-26.

were in the images of Narcissus and Thetis. The surface of the water gathered in the marble *impluvium*, rippled with the water falling from the fountain at its center, would still likely have reflected the statue itself, the ceiling of the atrium, and the form of any guest who happened to look down into it.

This notion of visual doubling is further emphasized by a physical doubling, for although the fountain plinths in the House of the Seven Skeletons are no longer *in situ*, the preservation of marble bases suggests that the fountain in the atrium and that in the peristyle were aligned. Visually, this alignment was underscored by the surrounding architecture. A viewer gazing into the house from the street level would have a view through the entrance into an iterative set of columns and fountains. The tufa topped plaster pilasters that define the house's entrance frame the atrium fountain, while the columns of the peristyle stand alongside the second fountain centered on the peristyle's north side. All of these architectural frames bound a final feature, the exedra at the center of the south wall, and the painting of Venus that is its central focal point.

A Room with a View: Defining Boundaries in Reality and Depiction

The interest in reflection, both literal and figural suggested by the conflation of images of Narcissus and Thetis with the architecture of the house plays out in a visual dialogue centered on the interplay between not only reality and depiction, but self and other. When Narcissus fails to comprehend the boundaries between reality and representation, he simultaneously disregards the distinction between interior and exterior, between himself and someone else. In both reality and depiction, this

distinction is maintained in part through viewing. Boundaries are at the heart of both the viewing process and of self-presentation. For, as we noted in Chapter Two, one of the primary functions of jewelry, much like architecture, is to delineate space. Bracelets, necklaces, rings—all form a material boundary between the body and the outside world, one that, unlike cloth is not determined by the shape of the body beneath. But these visual delimitations are also adornments. They draw the eye as much as they mark the physical margins of the body. The decision to wear such adornments is predicated upon knowledge of the self as a viewed entity. Thetis is able to achieve her goals because of her awareness of her own visual effect. Her contemplative gaze as she stares at her reflection in her son's shield draws the external viewer's attention to the act of self-contemplation, which further encourages the living viewer to deliberately consider her relationship to the surrounding world in part by inviting her to think of herself as an image.

The well coiffed Pompeian was likely quite used to self-contemplation of a literal sense. Mirrors were essential components of the dressing process then as now. But for the ancient viewer, the concept of a mirror image might well have carried a different connotation than is true for us today. For while we might consider the image conveyed by a mirror to be an exact, or nearly exact, replica of reality, an ancient viewer would likely have immediately encountered the flaw in this premise. Even modern mirror reflections do not necessarily depict the world accurately. We may conceive of our reflections as semi-scientific facsimiles created by a manipulation of transmitted light, but this is not the case. Mirrors reverse images. They project three-dimensional entities onto two-dimensional surfaces.

And when the surface of the mirror shifts, either because it is held at a different angle or because it is less than smooth, as in the case of water or the polished but imperfect surfaces of ancient metal mirrors, the image it reflects also changes.²⁴⁸ The mirror does not reflect reality, but it does offer the viewer the opportunity to contemplate it, to look at the world—and oneself—from a different angle. As Rabun Taylor puts it, “The mirror...is not a strictly optical, or objective, device; it processes the moral, psychological, and intellectual faculties of the subject.”²⁴⁹ It does so by making the conceptual visual, the result of which is to create the mental and physical distance necessary for critical analysis.

The same might be said of figural images of any sort, particularly those that deliberately recall reality through the inclusion of recognizable contemporary accouterments, such as jewelry. But while these adornments might invite the viewer to consider her relationship to the depicted world, the scale of the depicted figures results in a different sort of mimetic experience than we discussed in the case of the Villa of the Mysteries. The large scale of the megalographic figures of Room 5 makes it easy for the viewer to conceive of them as living actors. And when confronted with figures that are visually and spatially equated with the world of the living, the viewer finds him or herself immersed in the world of the painting. As Oliver Grau puts it, “The illusionary space surrounds the spectators entirely, fixing them into the same place and time.”²⁵⁰ Although human figures remain a mainstay in Pompeian paintings created subsequent to the mid first century BCE, both the

²⁴⁸ Rabun Taylor, *The Moral Mirror of Roman Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

²⁴⁹ Taylor, *Moral Mirror*, 7.

²⁵⁰ Grau, Oliver. “Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality.” *Leonardo* 32.5, Seventh New York Digital Salon, (1999), 365-366.

way in which they are depicted and the visual impact of that depiction shift; for much as fashions in dress change over time, so too do fashions in wall decoration. Nevertheless, the act of observation is no less charged in paintings of the so-called Third and Fourth styles than it is in the immersive space of Room 5—it is simply articulated differently.

The very existence of a category of “observers” highlights that something about the ways in which humans are portrayed on walls has changed; after all, observers need something to observe, and the fact that some depicted individuals can be singled out as non-actors precludes the existence of a clearly identifiable central scene, separate from the depicted viewers who observe it. For while depicted figures in Room 5 do observe, they are not distinct from those who act. Indeed, as we noted in Chapter Three, the desire to identify a central scene—and the fact that the immortal pair which might constitute such a scene are not visually differentiated from the rest of the room’s figures—caused a fair amount of consternation to early researchers.²⁵¹ The implicit expectation of a clearly identifiable central mythological scene suggests why it was that early scholars had such difficulty with the spatial framework of Room 5: they anticipated the familiar structure of the more copiously preserved mythological panel painting in which identifiable mythological characters are pictured in the midst of scenes that in many cases directly reference a narrative. Heroes and divinities undertake the action of the scene. Unnamed mortals observe. There is a clear separation between actors and observers within the pictured scene, and between living viewers and the

²⁵¹ See in particular, de Petra, “Villa Romana,” 145.

depicted figures on the walls. This visual distance is created in part by the size of the paintings in question.

While the painted figures in Room 5 fill the nearly two meter height of the central zone of the mural, those depicted in the mythological scenes popular roughly from the rise of Augustus to the time of the eruption of Vesuvius—the period between 30 BCE and 79 CE—while no less detailed, inhabit a visual field that in most cases measures approximately one square meter.²⁵² Yet within this constrained space, there is much room for elaboration. Figures are situated within carefully articulated landscapes, cityscapes and interior spaces, and their adornments receive equally painstaking attention. Earrings too small to be viewed from the entrance of a room are rendered with enough detail to convey information commensurate to that provided in Room 5, where the artists had a great deal more space to employ. The paintings in the House of the Seven Skeletons may be smaller in scale than their megalographic counterparts in the Villa of the Mysteries, but as we saw in the case of Narcissus, the interplay between the environment of the house itself and the depicted environment creates a parallel experience that invites the viewer to project herself into the depicted zone

Up to this point, our discussion has been based upon lacunae. We now turn our attention to the house's extant paintings. As we noted above, the axial layout of the House of the Seven Skeletons conducts the gaze through a series of framed vistas, all terminating in the exedra at the center of the south wall at the rear of the peristyle (Figure 4.2). This room once held the house's only extant figural

²⁵² Margarete Bieber gives the measurement of the whole of the red ground field in Room 5 as 1.88 m. See Bieber, "Mysteriensaal," 300.

paintings.²⁵³ The entrance of the exedra, like the entrance of the house itself, is defined by plaster pilasters. When the central panels were removed from the room's three walls, the rest of the room's decoration was left in place. The room's black-bordered black and white *opus tessellatum* floor mosaic is relatively intact, with carefully positioned squares, hexagons, and triangles bordered with a series of black and white bands. The careful articulation seen in the mosaic is similarly evident in what remains of the wall painting. Dino remarks that in 1868 the walls were unusually well preserved, with a freshness of color and line that did not survive the intervening years. Aside from the central panels, to which we will turn momentarily, he notes that the room contained two landscapes, several tragic masks, a depiction of *putti* hunting a wild boar, and several human figures who populate a depicted *scaenae frons*, a device typical of the so-called Fourth Style.²⁵⁴

Of all of these secondary decorations, only one is now legible. On the room's east wall, a woman sits in front of a white background, surrounded by traces of illusionistic architecture that recalls that of the stage. Although the color of the wall is degraded, she appears to wear a maroon mantle, bordered in blue. Her hair, partially bound by *vittae*, the thin strips of cloth used to tie the hair of married Roman women, falls in tendrils over her shoulders. Her mantle falls to reveal her torso and right arm, both partially covered by her transparent white *chiton*. A gold

²⁵³ Given Brisio and Dino's descriptions it seems likely that these paintings were removed to the museum at Naples because their state of preservation led the excavators to deem them to be museum worthy. They do not mention that any of the other images were removed from the house, the implication being that none of them were complete enough to merit inclusion in a museum collection. Examination of the extant plaster suggests that the paintings of Minos and Britomartis, Narcissus, and Thetis were left in situ and are now beyond recovery, but a hole of the correct size in the *oecus* off of the atrium may indicate that the painting of Danae and Acrisius was removed. To determine its final home, or indeed if it survived its removal, more work will be required.

²⁵⁴ Dino, "Domus M. Gavi Rufi," 27.

bracelet sits high on the woman's right forearm, as if pushed out of the way to allow her to work—for the woman is depicted in action. She props a panel against her left hand and knee, while she paints with her right. She is one of several female painters depicted in Pompeii.²⁵⁵ Her presence, like the presence of observer figures both invites the viewer to project themselves into the depicted world and foregrounds the mimetic conceit. By picturing the act of painting, the viewer is reminded that the real world and the depicted world are two distinct units, thus providing the external viewer with the requisite distance to undertake critical thought.

The woman perches on the edge of an illusionistic ledge, the trailing edge of her mantle, now barely legible, falls over the border of the depicted architecture, eliding the boundaries of depiction and reality. As elsewhere in the house, architecture is central to the process of conflation. The pilasters that define the room's entrance, themselves reiterations of the pilasters that mark the entrance of the house itself, are immediately echoed in the depicted columns of the *scaenae frons*. This cross communication, like intersecting references to reflection noted above, equates reality and non-reality, and as John Clarke notes, in the case of the insertion of figures into the *scaenae frons*, this correlation highlights both the active role of the viewer and the anxieties inherent in being viewed. For as he notes, "The living figures in these visual representations challenged viewers of different social strata to imagine not statues, actors, or mythological figures, but living people—

²⁵⁵ Perhaps the most famous depicted female painter in Pompeii hails from the House of the Surgeon (VI.I.10), but another less well-known example of a woman painting can be found in the House of the Empress of Russia (VI.14.42). Unlike our example, in both of these depictions, the female painter is the subject of a central panel painting, rather than a secondary figure within the space.

some of them like themselves—on view in the theater.”²⁵⁶ To stand on the stage is to open oneself to public scrutiny, and the carefully depicted dress of the female painter suggests that, as Clarke asserts, she is a mortal woman, one not unlike the sort of woman we might expect to see in early imperial Pompeii.

Her presence primes the brain to think about the complicated interactions between viewer and viewed in new ways, in part by reminding the viewer that even as they look upon the art in the room, someone else might well be looking at them. For even as the ability to draw the gaze imparts a certain measure of power upon the viewed personage, it makes them dangerous. This danger derives in part from deception. Clarke suggests that the abilities that make an effective actor are not dissimilar from the more positively charged skills of the orator. Both stand before an audience; both seek to persuade. But the actor also deliberately sets out to *deceive*, to blur the bounds between reality and fantasy. As the story of Narcissus warns, the mutability of these boundaries is itself dangerous enough. When individuals undertake to take advantage of this mutability, they themselves have the potential to become transgressive.²⁵⁷

It is with this thought in mind that we turn to the three panel paintings that were the room’s decorative focal points. Moving from left to right, the viewer would first have encountered a depiction of Theseus, standing before the entrance of the labyrinth, the Minotaur stretched dead across its threshold (Figure 4.5). But while Theseus is the focal point of the composition, he is not necessarily its most visually arresting component. For, as Dorthea Michel argues, the group of spectators that

²⁵⁶ Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 143.

²⁵⁷ Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 141.

crowd in from the painting's right border are, in a sense, the most emphasized unit within the painting, their presence so dynamic that the myth itself becomes secondary.²⁵⁸ The presence of a group of internal viewers is a consistent element in all of the panel paintings within the exedra. In the room's central panel, the primary action of the depicted scene centers not only viewing, but viewing based judgment. In it, we see three deities: on the left, a god lounges causally, gazing up at a semi-nude youth holding a torch while on the right, a crowned Venus holds her mantle away from her body to reveal the delicate tunic beneath (Figure 4.7). Two mortal attendants accompany the deities situated in the foreground. The woman who waits on the seated god gazes with him toward the youth, while Venus's attendant looks instead upon the goddess. In the room's final mythological panel painting, we are confronted with another meeting between hero and monster, this time the meeting of Pirithous and the centaur Eurytus (Figure 4.3). This meeting is the prologue to the battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs, sparked as much, Ovid tells us, by sight as by wine.²⁵⁹ For it was when Eurytus gazed upon Hippodamia, the bride of Pirithous shown here standing behind him, that the centaur set aside civility and, with his brethren, decided to abduct the women of the wedding party. This image forms a pendant to that of Theseus, linked by subject matter—Theseus and Pirithous were comrades, joining in exploits ranging from the hunt for the Calydonian Boar to the first abduction of Helen —and by composition.²⁶⁰ Like the

²⁵⁸ Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," 545.

²⁵⁹ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, XII:210-244.

²⁶⁰ For more on this see, Irene Bragantini and Valeria Sampaolo, *La Pittura Pompeiana* (Napoli: Electa, 2009), 362 and 366. The Hunt for the Calydonian Boar is one of those instances in which a veritable slew of heroes join together, and so one must perhaps take connections made upon the

crowd of onlookers in the Theseus image, in the depiction of Pirithous and the centaurs, a crowd of centaurs presses in from the right border.

Unlike the paintings in the rest of the house, these panels, by virtue of their removal, are well preserved enough to allow for a close visual reading. As with the murals of Room 5 in the Villa of the Mysteries, by conducting a close visual reading of these images, we will explore the relationships between space, distance, adornment, and exceptionality represented in the space, again focusing on the depiction of jewelry as a means through which to consider the relationships between reality and depiction. Just as attention to jewelry helped to encourage a more materials-based approach to the complicated semiotics of Room 5, it can here serve to underscore the nature of Pompeii as a viewing locale and to suggest the modes of viewing employed in this place.

It would be erroneous to think that jewelry functions in precisely the same way on all wearers and all walls. It is not my intent here to suggest that the complex interactional space of Room 5 is replicated elsewhere in Pompeii; as multiple authors have argued, it is an outlier within the Pompeian corpus. The size of the figures and the interplay of gazes directed across the space, and at the viewer, paired with the realistic depiction of adornment and dress practice together comprise an insistent invitation to think of oneself in interaction with the world of depiction, perhaps even as a participant in it. But, as we discussed in Chapter Three,

basis of this story with a grain of salt. But it is interesting to note the threads that it allows us to draw together within the house. Peleus, the husband of Thetis and father of Achilles, was there. As was Atalanta who, much like Britomartis, is a mythical double for Artemis. Ovid gives the episode nearly 200 lines in Book 8 of the *Metamorphosis*, and it is worthwhile to note that many of the images in the House of the Seven Skeletons have Ovidian echoes, if not Ovidian antecedents.

wall painting and adornment are both dynamic media that prompt dynamic reactions. The goal moving forward is not to argue that the viewer is invited to interact in *this* way in other spaces, but rather to explore the *range* of messages that adornments can transmit in different times and different spaces.

Of Monsters and Men: Dress Practices as a Civilizing Force

The notion of a replicated image that was central to our understanding of the self-reflexive nature of viewing in the peristyle and the rooms that line its eastern side becomes more complicated in the visual programming of Room O. This is due in part to the number of figures depicted in each mythological scene. For while the external viewer might have taken actions parallel to those of the depicted viewers elsewhere in the house, the depicted viewers were relatively sparse on the ground. The addition of *groups* of figures shifts the mental landscape, and the introduction of semi-monstrous beings adds a new dimension to the process of mental projection. For implicit in our previous discussion were two entwined notions: the viewer sees something of herself in the images she looks upon, and the viewer thinks and looks in isolation. The inclusion of realistically depicted adornments, both personal and architectural, asks the viewer to consider her relationship to depicted figures, but a range of viewers might well have a range of responses, might identify both visually and personally with any number of depicted individuals. In some cases, the image itself may attempt to direct the viewer's response, as seems to be the case in the first that we will closely consider: the wedding of Pirithous and Hippodamia, which, before its removal, was situated on the west wall of the room (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3: Room O, House of the Seven Skeletons, Pompeii.
The meeting of Pirithous, Hippodamia, and Eurytus.
Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

While the story of the aftermath of the wedding is a well-known subject in both text and image, the choice to depict the gaze that sparked the battle is singular; in Pompeii, there are no other extant versions of this scene.²⁶¹ The composition is carefully constructed. Pirithous stands just left of the center of the panel. His short

²⁶¹ Bragantini and Sampaolo, *Pittura Pompeiana*, 366.

dark hair is crowned with a thin band of gold. Deep red fabric with a blue border is knotted loosely at the king's waist, with a swath draped over his left shoulder, behind which rests a tall gold scepter. His right hand reaches out to his semi-monstrous counterpart, the centaur Eurytus, who leans forward to grasp the king's arm, his head bend over Pirithous's hand. This gesture of friendship is at the center of the composition, reinforced by the gifts that sit on the ground between the two figures, framed by the two staffs of office that cross above them. For like Pirithous, Eurytus holds a scepter in his left hand, although his appears to be made of wood. Indeed, the two leaders share several common attributes. Both of the leaders display bared chests, the ruddy tone marking their masculinity, but unlike the fabric that partially clothes Pirithous, Eurytus's nudity is left largely unmediated; although the state of preservation makes a definite identification problematic, he may have an animal skin draped over his back, its head set atop his own in a sort of bestial approximation of a crown. This contrast between the carefully crafted materials that mark Pirithous's space and the rough hewn nature of what few accouterments are associated with the centaurs is thrown into sharper relief by the contrast between the feet of the two central figures, the only such extremities visible in the painting. Pirithous wears tall leather sandals; Eurytus has hooves.

The moment shown here is not otherwise attested, for although Ovid mentions the meeting of these two groups in passing, even he says nothing to indicate that the centaurs brought wedding gifts.²⁶² But the centrality of their sylvan offerings, further emphasized by the juncture of the two staffs of office above,

²⁶² Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, XII: 210-244.

highlights its importance within the scene. We are shown what appears to be a peaceful scene; the visual markers call to mind welcome and friendship. Yet, the well-versed viewer knows that this meeting will end in bloodshed, the roots of which are also carefully integrated into the image. For at the heart of this meeting is a second confrontation, one between civilization and chaos, between man and beast.

This contrast is articulated visually by setting artifice alongside nature, a disjunction that literally bisects the image. On the right, a group of centaurs recede into the background through the entrance to Pirithous's atrium. A mountain, which in the Thessalian context of the image likely references Olympus but that might well be correlated with Vesuvius in the Pompeian viewing context, rises behind them. On the left, Hippodamia stands in front of a young girl, simply dressed in a pale yellow tunic. Behind them, a half-wall partially obstructs the view of a colonnade. A column bisects these two halves of the image, itself, like the colonnade, a visual reduplication of the pilasters that mark the entrance of the house and of the exedra, as well as of the peristyle columns, visually connecting the imaginal space of the painting with the physical space of the living viewer. This column marks the boundary between nature and civilization, and the diagonal line of Eurytus's back connects the two; the human half of his body physically reaches across the divide, while his hindquarters are firmly situated in the area of the image reserved for his wild companions. Only his gaze moves beyond the columnar boundary marker; although his face is not perfectly preserved, his eyes appear to rove up Pirithous's arm, fixing onto the form of Hippodamia, who stands just beyond her husband's right shoulder. In this image, as in Ovid's version of the myth, Hippodamia's

physical appearance incites the ensuing battle. And although Ovid suggests that wine helped the centaurs to set aside their humanity, they desired to do so because they were equally overcome by the beauty of the bride. But in the painting, wine is conspicuous in its absence. If disaster is still in the offing, it is sparked entirely by the appearance of Hippodamia.

Visible Hippodamia might be, but she is hardly accessible. Much as the architecture of the house creates inaccessible visibility, Hippodamia's self-presentation prevents visual access to her body, even as it highlights it. Her long pale purple *stola* covers the full length of her figure, while her finely woven *palla* both covers her head and drapes to further obscure her body. Only her right arm, her hands, her neck, and her face remain uncovered. Her jewelry is minimal. A delicate gold band is set into her dark hair. From her ears dangle pendant pearls. Although the preservation is imperfect, her right ear appears to support a set of two pearls, both suspended from a gold bar. This is a well-known type of earring in the Bay of Naples region, of the type that Pliny the Elder refers to as *crotalia*, after the noise that the pearls make when they knock against each other; these are the type of earrings that famously act as a woman's *lictor* as she walks through the streets (Figure 4.4).²⁶³ They clearly connect Hippodamia to the world of first century CE fashion, although bar earrings remain popular throughout the Empire well into the third century, they are introduced in the first; multiple pairs were found in Pompeii.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ Pliny, *Natural History*, IX.61

²⁶⁴ An almost identical pair was found in the House of the Arches; see Antonio d'Ambrosio and Ernesto de Carolis, *I Monili dall'Area Vesuviana* (Roma: L'erma di Bretschneider, 1997) 30, Plate II.



Figure 4.4: Herculaneum, Ancient shoreline.
Gold *crotalia* earrings, originally decorated with pearls.
British Museum SAP 78356-57. © Trustees of the British Museum.

This emphasis on Hippodamia's restrained fashionability is further accentuated by the fan that she holds in her right hand. Like her husband's staff, Hippodamia's fan is a marker of her position. Not only does it suggest that she need not work—that comfort is something allowed to her—but it also reinforces the

connection between her physical appearance and a notional virtue. Much as the wearing of the mantle suggests chastity, the fan is, as Katharina Lorenz puts it “an accessory of composed female beauty.”²⁶⁵ It is a marker not only of leisure, but of her composure. She is in control of herself, if not of the situation. Much like Pirithous’s garment marks his association with the civilized world of humans, Hippodamia’s adornments establish her connection with norms of dress for respectable and virtuous matrons. She does not overtly highlight her physique, and thus at least nominally conforms to the expectations for her new position as a wife.

It is not necessarily bodily covering itself that separates Pirithous and Hippodamia from their more bestial guests; Eurytus appears to wear an animal skin, and several of the observer centaurs seem to wear some sort of vegetal headgear. The desire to adorn the body is evident for even these partially human figures. If we wish to associate dress with civilization, we must be more specific. We find this specificity again in the comparison of Pirithous with Eurytus. In the space where their staffs cross, we begin to comprehend what it is that makes Pirithous civilized, and by extension, safe, and what makes Eurytus both wild and dangerous. It is not the fact that they adorn themselves, it is *what* they adorn themselves with. For the materials that visually signal Pirithous’s position all require working to reach their pictured state. The gold that makes up his staff and his crown, the dyed cloth that drapes around his body, the tooled leather sandals on his feet all represent an output not only of some variety of monetary resources on his part, but of time, effort, and ability on the part of their makers. His adornments require a sedentary,

²⁶⁵ Lorenz, “Ear of the Beholder,” 667.

skilled workforce. They do not only mark his civilized nature, they require civilization to exist.

It is here that the dichotomy between civilization and the wild becomes more complicated. For, while Pirithous may have the trappings of a respectable man, he does not necessarily present himself as one. It may be acceptable for heroes to go about semi-nude while inviting guests into their homes, but such an action could have had dire social consequences for a living host. In a culture as visually oriented as that of Pompeii, and of Rome, a person's carefully crafted physical appearance was an essential component of social communication. As Mary Harlow argues, "[In Rome] outward appearance was important and considered to reflect both the social position and the moral character of the individual."²⁶⁶ External appearances marked both inner virtues and inner vices, and "sartorial deficiencies" might well signal personal shortcomings.²⁶⁷ Pirithous, simultaneously both over and under dressed, is pictured in a socially vulnerable state, for while his physique might mark him as a heroic figure, his state of undress, for an Italic viewer, might carry more negative connotations. His upper torso and his legs are entirely bare; if the drape of fabric that covers his thighs was ever worn as a tunic, it was done so improperly, without either an under tunic or a linen loincloth.²⁶⁸ Its vibrant colors are similarly suspect. For while men in the Italian peninsula certainly had access to a wide range

²⁶⁶ Mary Harlow, "Dressing to Please Themselves: Clothing Choices for Roman Women," in *Dress and Identity: British Archaeological Reports International Series*, edited by Mary Harlow (Oxford: Archeopress, 2012), 38.

²⁶⁷ Andrew R. Dyck, "Dressing to Kill: Attire as a Means and Proof of Characterization in Cicero's Speeches," *Arethusa* 34.1 (Winter 2001), 122.

²⁶⁸ Dyck, "Dressing to Kill," 123.

of colorful clothing options, scarlet, like purple, was considered to be extravagant.²⁶⁹ As Pliny the Elder notes, jewels retain their value, but dyed cloth, in particular purple and scarlet dyes, fade quickly.²⁷⁰ Like the finely woven translucent fabric that comprises Hippodamia's *palla*, its color and delicacy likely a visual reference to Coan silk, the bright color and broad stripe of the fabric Pirithous wears would have been a luxury item, one that could bring a living wearer under scrutiny, at least in the moralistic and satiric texts of the period.

As a mythological king, it is not inappropriate for Pirithous to be pictured thus. After all, he is not Roman, and so to level at him a charge of anti-Romanness is redundant. But given the fashionability of Hippodamia it seems as if, as was the case in the Villa of the Mysteries, depictions of adornments are intended to help connect the imaginal space of the painting to the real space in which the viewer exists, and in the real world, Pirithous's attire is transgressive. It marks him as someone who stands outside the boundaries of traditional Roman conservatism. The texts from which we garner the bulk of our knowledge concerning reactions to fashion in the mid-first century CE do not necessarily reflect the reality of dress practices. Despite the ongoing literary attempts to align luxury with moral and political decline, colorful depictions of cloth abound in Pompeii, and the material record of jewelry is rich enough to suggest that whatever elite Roman writers might say about the moral degradation that accompanied adornment, the women of Pompeii were well-ornamented. On the topic of fabric, the material record is quieter, but it is possible that the deep colors of depicted male clothing reflect a South Italic preference.

²⁶⁹ Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 27.

²⁷⁰ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, IX. 60.

Cicero remarks that the toga was not popular around the Bay of Naples, and that men and youths of the upper class instead preferred dyed tunics.²⁷¹ We are left with a complicated set of intertwining references, in which Pirithous is both over-luxurious, and anti-Roman, although neither notion is necessarily negative in a Pompeian context.

But while the color communicates an ambiguous message, the king's state of undress is more telling. To be unkempt is to be undisciplined, out of control in a way that undermines the assertion that Pirithous is the civilized counterpart to the dangerously savage centaur. And so, we are left with a conundrum. If the external viewer is meant to conflate his lived experiences with the imaginal space of the image, what might he make of his connection to Pirithous? It is almost certain that a male Pompeian viewer would not have assumed that the image suggests that he go about his business in any such unkempt state, and it is unlikely in the extreme that it would have occurred to him to do so, but the fact that Pirithous is pictured thus casts doubt onto what the viewer will find, should he begin to conflate himself with the hero. This problematic connection is furthered by both the depiction of the fabric that Pirithous does wear, as well as Hippodamia's adornments, both of which may well provide a more subtle commentary on what it means to privilege artifice over nature.

By 79 CE, the debate over the spread of luxury in Rome and its environs had been underway for over two hundred years. While authors such as Cicero and Sallust, writing in the mid-first century BCE feared the impact that increased

²⁷¹ Dyck, "Dressing to Kill," 125.

expenditure might have on traditional elites and their control over social hierarchies, by the early imperial period, the traditional structures of power in the Italian peninsula had been so completely transformed that the concerns over the dangers of interest in *luxuria* began to shift their focus, detailing not so much what *might* go wrong as what *had* gone wrong. Whereas once villa owners were blamed for inciting escalating feats of imitation amongst both their peers and the lower classes and the expenditures of young heirs threatened the loss of their patrimonies, increasingly, female avarice with its ongoing connection to sexual promiscuity became a concern.²⁷²

References to the connections between female adornment and promiscuity abound. Livy's Cato suggests that in their desire to obtain *ornamenta* and in their pleasure at their appearance while wearing such adornments, women set aside appropriate behavior, even going so far as to act in ways not dissimilar to prostitutes. He suggests that if husbands fail to provide wives with the accessories they desire, wives might look to other men to obtain them.²⁷³ In the *Mostellaria*, Plautus suggests that even otherwise honorable matrons are undone by the desire to wear gold and purple.²⁷⁴ Not only could chastity fall by the wayside in the pursuit of adornments, jewelry and other adornments could be the payment demanded in

²⁷² For a discussion of the ways in which elite expenditures inspired imitation, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Social Spread of Roman Luxury: Sampling Pompeii and Herculaneum," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 58 (1990), 145-146. For a typical presentation of fears over the loss of patrimony, see Sallust, *Catalina*, 14.2.

²⁷³ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 34.2, 34.4. While Cato the Elder made his famous speech concerning the repeal of the *Lex Oppia* in 195 BCE, Livy's version of the speech can hardly be an exact accounting of the event, and given the correlations between the wording of the argument advanced by Livy's Cato and those presented in texts of the late Republic and early Empire, the contents of the speech as recorded likely tell us more about social attitudes toward dress in the early first century CE than otherwise.

²⁷⁴ Plautus, *The Mostellaria*, edited by E. P. Morris (Cambridge: John Wilson and Son, 1880), 16.

return for sexual acts.²⁷⁵ The high cost of these adornments, especially of jewelry, is of a similar concern. In *Epidicus*, Plautus writes that women wear the value of a whole estate on their bodies as they walk down the street.²⁷⁶ Such sentiments are echoed a century later by Seneca, the emperor Nero's tutor, who equates women's jewelry with whole patrimonies. In one of the more violent formulations of the dangers of adornment, he suggests that ornamentations blind nations and kings, and are purchased with blood.²⁷⁷ He confronts jewelry specifically, stating that "Feminine madness could not have adequately outstripped the masculine version unless two or three inheritances [*patrimonia*] had dangled from each ear."²⁷⁸ Seneca is clear about which earrings could cost such a fortune: those composed of more than one pearl.

Hippodamia's bar earrings take on new connotations in light of the moralistic rhetoric surrounding women's adornment practices. For together with giving a name to the type of earrings that Hippodamia wears in the painting in the House of the Seven Skeletons, Pliny discusses the moral ramifications of the sartorial practice of wearing pearls. With his interest in the ways in which pearls could be obtained, in the geographical sources that produce them, it is unsurprising that in his attempts to detail the dangers of extravagance, Pliny connects the difficulty in obtaining pearls with their dangerous qualities. Like Livy, he considers women to be the instigators of luxurious practices. Their multi-sensory enjoyment of their

²⁷⁵ Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 84.

²⁷⁶ Plautus, *Epidicus*, edited by C.E. Geppert (Berlin: Trowitzsch and Sons, 1865), 226.

²⁷⁷ Seneca, *On Benefits*, translated by Miriam Griffin and Brad Inwood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.2.

²⁷⁸ Seneca, *On Benefits*, 9.4.

adornments is unseemly to him.²⁷⁹ What men took as spoils of war, women wear for their own enjoyment. He goes so far as to say it would be better to have been defeated in battle, than for such behavior to be the result of victory.²⁸⁰ While Pirithous's partial nudity is thematically appropriate, if contextually problematic, Hippodamia's earrings are a more pointed commentary on modes of dress in mid first century CE Pompeii. For, as we remarked above, type of earrings depicted are a first century innovation. They are an anachronism, out of place for an archaic Greek woman. They speak not of the myth, but of the complex social world of first century CE Rome and Pompeii.

The connection between desire for adornment and a lack of chastity so concerning to Latin authors is a concern in the case of Hippodamia as well. For although she is a recognizable mythological character, she is also an internal observer. She is not engaged in the action of the scene, but although she does not engage in the greeting that is the focus of the image, her gaze, like those of the group of centaurs opposite her, encourages the external viewer to follow her line of sight. In Ovid's version of the myth of the ill-fated meeting between the Lapiths and the centaurs, the gaze is sexually-charged, prompting the centaurs to set aside what humanity they have in pursuit of carnal pleasure. But he also introduces another aspect to the event. Ovid's centaurs are themselves explicitly physically attractive.²⁸¹ Much as unkempt clothing could signal character flaws, physical

²⁷⁹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, IX.56.

²⁸⁰ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, IX.58.

²⁸¹ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, XII. 393-428.

attractiveness could be seen as a mark of a person's worth.²⁸² Ovid's careful and poignant description of a dying centaur's beauty encourages the reader to sympathize with him, undermining the primary reading of the centaurs as uncomplicated monsters, and in so doing, destabilizing the central narrative of the clash between civilized virtues and savage vices.

This reversal is signaled in part by the inclusion of contemporary adornment within the Pompeian painting; it is highlighted through the interplay of gazes between internal observers. For Hippodamia gazes not at the central action, but across the frame, fixing upon a centaur. Although the object of her gaze is imperfectly preserved, he, like Ovid's ill-fated and attractive Cyllarus, has a well-muscled torso and thick hair. On his left shoulder, he carries a basket of fruits, a second gift like that at the center of the composition. In his outstretched right hand, he holds a round red fruit, analogous in shape and size to the better preserved pomegranates in the central basket. The gesture and the fruit, with its connotations of fertility and desire, further complicate an already complex narrative. For it introduces the possibility that Hippodamia was aware of the desires of the centaurs, and some might see her attire as evidence that she shared these desires. The depiction captures a moment before the principle action of the story; in that moment, many routes are still open. But the desire that undermines the peaceful encounter is signaled through a glance, while the social connotations of the human dress practices depicted begin to suggest the ways in which the viewer of adornment might bring uncomfortable judgment to bear on the wearer.

²⁸² Dyck, "Dressing to Kill," 121.

Although the depiction of the meeting of Pirithous and Eurytus in Room O shifts the focus of the Ovidian narrative, and might call to mind a number of other texts that reference the aftermath of the depicted moment, given the popularity of Ovid in Pompeii, it is worthwhile to note that his discussion of the centaurs, and of transformed humans generally, is sympathetic. As G. B. Riddehough states, "Ovid is not trying to present the animal point of view as distinct from the human."²⁸³ These partial, or often former, humans offer him the opportunity to consider humanity from a different angle, often by condensing a man or a woman's essential characteristics into a more potent and symbolically charged configuration. And while the centaurs are generally understood as more lustful and less restrained than their wholly human hosts, their distance from the contrivances and luxuries of the human world could well be a positive aspect for an early Imperial viewer. The group of centaurs constitute the bulk of the internal viewers within the image, as Lorenz suggests for internal observers more generally, they are a locus of instability, their presence encouraging the external viewer to deconstruct the narrative and to reframe it.²⁸⁴ While typically, the rugged otherness of the centaurs is a foil for the preferable civility of Pirithous, in the painting from Room O, the complex interplay of gazes within the scene, paired with the unusual inclusion of the centaurs' gifts for the couple, suggests that the trappings associated with Pirithous and Hippodamia do not necessarily mark them as superior to their rustic guests. It is possible to be *too* civilized, to become so enamored of the trappings of society that one sets aside duty in favor of vice. This commentary is echoed on the opposite side of the space, where

²⁸³ G. B. Riddehough, "Man-into-Beast Changes in Ovid," *Phoenix* 13.4 (Winter 1959), 201.

²⁸⁴ Lorenz, "Ear of the Beholder," 676.

Pirithous's comrade Theseus both defeats the Minotaur, and draws a crowd (Figure 4.5). Crowds, as we shall see, are a complex entity, their presence offering equal opportunities for praise and censure; their depiction models a mode of viewing that highlights group dynamics, rather than isolated viewership.

In the Public Eye: Collective Viewing, Consensus, and the Art of Fitting In

The problematics of social perception are an equally potent component of the panel that faces that depicting Hippodamia and Pirithous. As we remarked above, the panel painting depicting the victorious Theseus, removed from the east wall of the exedra, has strong visual and thematic ties to the depiction of Hippodamia, Pirithous, and Eurytus. Theseus was a guest at that famous wedding, and a combatant in the melee that ensued. Much as the image from the west wall depicts a scene disassociated from the most commonly discussed portion of the mythological episode, the choice to depict Theseus after he has defeated his foe marks a departure from the focus of the extant literary treatments of the story. The meeting of the Lapiths and centaurs occurs before the main action of the narrative, the aftermath of the defeat of the Minotaur is an epilogue. Compositionally, the wall painting of the victorious Theseus echoes that of the meeting of Pirithous and Eurytus. A set of clasped arms is situated at the center of the scene, which itself is dominated by a ruddy and virile male body. And a throng of onlookers crowds in from the right. These compositional similarities highlight thematic differences.



Figure 4.5: Room O, House of the Seven Skeletons, Pompeii.
Theseus before a crowd of observers.
Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

For this group of onlookers, perhaps the most often referenced within the Pompeian corpus, is composed not of centaurs, but of humans.²⁸⁵ The predominately female crowd, like the group of centaurs, recedes into the

²⁸⁵ Discussions of the image focus most often on the crowd. While Michel and Lorenz both see the interpretive power of this crowd, others see the image as a poor reflection of a lost original, or at least as a poorly executed composition. For Dorothea Michel's reading of the painting see Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," 544-546. The painting is not of primary interest to Lorenz, although she does remark upon the uniqueness of the crowd's makeup; Lorenz, "Ear of the Beholder," 677-678. John Clarke prefaces his own interesting investigation of images of populated *scaenae frons* with an overview of previous thought on observer figures, using the depiction of Theseus in the House of the Seven Skeletons as an exemplar; Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 136-139. Jaś Elsner also gives the image as an example of the ways in which spectator figures can function, suggesting that the crowd functions as a de facto theatrical audience; Jaś Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 89-91. For a discussion of potential compositional deficiencies see Bragantini and Sampaolo, *Pittura Pompeiana*, 362. For period typical discussion of the relationship between the famous example of the *Theseus Liberator* type in Herculaneum and a putative Greek original see Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, *Storicità dell'Arte Classica* (Firenze: G. C. Sansoni, 1950), 178-180.

background, which is hazily delineated. The crowd's forward progress halts just short of the hero, the corner of the building that houses the labyrinth demarcating the border between Theseus and the throng. Theseus stands at the center of the composition, his nudity a sharp contrast to the conservative dress of the crowd. A scarlet mantle is wrapped around his left arm, against which rests a rough-hewn stick. Two children cling to him. One latches onto his left foot, the child's body huddled against the ground, his gaze fixed on the dead Minotaur, while a second, slightly older, boy grasps the hero's right hand. This partially nude youth, covered only with a pale blue mantle that has fallen open, holds the hero's hand against his cheek in a gesture reminiscent of the greeting that Eurytus bestows upon Pirithous on the opposite side of the exedra. Behind this boy, the bright light that highlights the hero is subsumed by the deep shadow that marks the entrance to the labyrinth. The Minotaur's body stretches out from the shadows, his bull's head caught in the light that surrounds the center of the composition. His arm is flung across his chest, allowing the viewer to contrast his bestial head with his human body.

Unlike the complex interplay of gazes and the several types of internal observer present in the painting of the meeting of Pirithous and Eurytus, in that of the victorious Theseus, we see a more clear division between central actor and observers. The crowd gazes at Theseus and at the Minotaur; neither gaze back. This does not preclude communication, however. For the crowd that looks upon Theseus and the dead Minotaur picture a variety of modes of communication. The elderly man at the front of the group points, his right arm extended, drawing the external viewer's gaze to the body of the Minotaur, performing the signaling function central

to Dorothea Michel's thesis on the function of internal observers.²⁸⁶ As Michel notes, this signaling feature is one of the most expressive ways that the internal spectator interacts with the external. She argues that in the case of this painting, the interaction between internal and external viewers is so strongly emphasized that it could be considered the actual focus of the painting.²⁸⁷

This assertion plays out in the action of the crowd. For although the elderly man's pointing finger is perhaps the most explicit gesture of communication, the whole of the crowd is in the act of both viewing and interpreting what they see. Their depicted actions portray a range of reactions, and model a discursive mode of viewership that underscores the notion that viewing is itself a communicative activity. For the crowd, viewing is communal. Thus, the elderly man both sees and draws the attention of others to what he sees. His animation is not extraordinary within the crowd. A younger woman clasps this elderly man's arm, her mouth hangs open in either astonishment or in the midst of speech. The elderly man himself rests his palm on a young boy's shoulder. Although the man's gesture helps to direct the external viewer's focus, within the painting, he seems to be drawing the attention of the young boy, who holds a thoughtful finger to his lips as he directs his gaze toward the Minotaur, as he is directed.

The close physical contact between these three viewers helps to emphasize both the emotive aspect of looking and the ways in which while looking is necessarily an individual activity, understanding might well be facilitated by engaging in a dialogue. As we remarked above, the existence of internal observers

²⁸⁶ Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," 541.

²⁸⁷ Michel, "Zuschauerfiguren," 545-546.

suggests a group, for the function of these observers appears to be to communicate with the external viewer. The elderly man's gesture speaks as vividly to the external viewer as it does to the boy. This communication between spectators draws our attention to another external viewing possibility. Up to this point we have discussed viewing in solitary terms as a largely mental process. Certainly, the interaction between viewer and viewed starts in this manner. But such a model for viewership does not take into account the social aspect of the viewing process that is both suggested by the space itself and by extant literary sources. For, while the individuals who lived in the House of the Seven Skeletons might have wandered in and out of rooms at will, invited guests most probably entered alongside other guests; should they linger in a room, they likely did so as part of a group. In the presence of others, viewing itself becomes a spectacle.

The performance of viewing, like other performances, requires its own audience, but unlike modern Western conceptualizations of appropriate audience behavior, audiences of the act of viewing do not necessarily watch in silence. And when such audiences are present the viewer, much like the internal observers in the crowd that gazes at Theseus, could voice aloud his or her interpretation of the things they look upon. Indeed, to voice his thoughts on the interpretation of wall paintings in his benefactor's house in Naples, Philostratus, writing over a century after the eruption of Vesuvius, conceives of his descriptions as a dialogue. And while this literary conceit might be a nod at a long Greek tradition of pedagogic and philosophical texts, his instructions to his putative audience make it clear that his interpretational process involves a certain amount of discussion. For he speaks not

only to the young boy who is his chosen pupil, but also to a crowd of young men, and he explicitly asks this audience to not only watch him, but to communicate with him. Rather than only listen to him, he exhorts them to ask him questions.²⁸⁸ This desire for an audience for the explication of viewing is echoed by at least one earlier writer. Petronius, writing in the mid-first century CE, also suggests that interpretation is better accomplished through discussion than individually. When the novel's narrator Encolpius seeks refuge from his thoughts in a picture gallery, he first talks aloud to himself, as he names the painters, the subjects and the emotive effects of the paintings he views. But when offered the opportunity to discuss the paintings, he is quick to take it up.²⁸⁹ As John Elsner suggests, the introduction of a second viewer solves the "problem" of attempting to work through the meaning of a painting on one's own.²⁹⁰ And while Petronius's text is satirical, and Philostratus's steeped in convention, the common assertion that interpretation is facilitated by discussion bears further scrutiny.

Such an interchange adds new dimensions to our discussion; for if viewing is not only an internal process, then it, like wall paintings themselves, is subject to interpretation. Theseus, when he is viewed, is physically separate from the crowd that views him, and while in the imaginal space of the painting this separation could be seen as a benign compositional device, in the real world of the external viewer, to take on the role of a performer is a fraught task. For, as John Clarke reminds us, to

²⁸⁸ Philostratus, *Imagines*, translated by Arthur Fairbanks (London: William Heinemann, LTD, 1931), 6.

²⁸⁹ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by William Arrowsmith (New York: Meridian Books, 1994), 88-89.

²⁹⁰ John Elsner, "Seductions of Art: Encolpius and Eumolpus in a Neronian Picture Gallery," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 39 (1995), 35.

be an actor is to be infamous. Like prostitutes, actors display themselves in public, using their bodies to deceive and persuade.²⁹¹ Much as in the case of Hippodamia's depicted adornment on the west side of the exedra made her vulnerable to public censure, the act of stepping into the spotlight by proposing an interpretation of a painting could leave a lone speaker open to critique. Within the imaginal space of the painting, this socially tenuous position is modeled by Theseus.

Theseus stands apart from the crowd both compositionally and sartorially. While the members of the crowd are all modestly attired, Theseus is naked. He is objectified, both more and less than the group that looks upon him. A viewer might share her interpretation with others to garner social prestige, using her words and erudition to separate herself from her peers. Likewise, Theseus's pursuit of fame sets him apart. Theseus is a spectacle; his *fama* depends on being both noticed and commented upon. His deed's short-term consequences are clearly denoted in the image. Two children that otherwise would have died, live. The Minotaur lies dead, his body a visual reminder of the fate they have been spared. Indeed, the presence of the Minotaur's body within this depiction could itself be a comment on both Theseus's desire for fame and the fact that his deeds must be seen by others to be properly lauded. For the Minotaur to be present at the entrance of the labyrinth, the hero must have carried his body with him as he made his escape. Within the narrative of the image, the Minotaur's presence is necessary to help the viewer to identify the hero and thus the mythological context. However within the context of the myth itself, the Minotaur is incongruous, a visible example of the hero's desire

²⁹¹ Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 141.

for recognition. Whether or not he receives the fame he seems to seek is another matter entirely. For while Theseus's actions provide the desired short term results—dead monster, living children—the long term results of his actions are no longer in his hands. Rumor, an unpredictable ally at best, will determine how he is remembered. The decision is out of his hands, a notion that might be conveyed visually through the correlations between the depiction of the hero and that of statuary. His *contrapposto* stance, his gaze into nowhere, the reflection of light off his torso and thigh together with his nudity recall the representation of heroes in marble. Indeed, the clinging children underscore his immobility, for despite their emotional displays, he gazes not at them, but outward. His hand lies limp in the standing child's grasp. He makes no visible attempt at interaction. It is as if, under the watchful eyes of the crowd and in the bright light of the exterior of the labyrinth, he has ceased to impose his will on his environment. His victory over the Minotaur gives him fame, but that fame compromises his agency. For, as the play between the shadow of the labyrinth and the bright light that highlight's the hero's physique reinforces, Theseus is now a figure under scrutiny.

Theseus's differences allow him to seek fame, but they also set him apart, literally in this case, from the crowd. To seek fame is implicitly to dissent, and this dissention is marked by depicted dress practices. For beyond the simple dichotomy of dress and undress that distinguishes Theseus from the crowd, the regularity of dress practices within the crowd is noteworthy. They do not only look different from Theseus, they look *similar to* each other. The two women with visible bodies both wear opaque *pallae*. Both wear small earrings (Figure 4.6). The woman who

grasps the elderly man's arm wears a dark blue *palla* over a lighter tunic and a simple gold band, high on her forearm. Her earrings are likely gold. Her hair is bound with off-white *vittae*. The woman to her right, turns to speak to her, her mouth slightly parted. Her pale purple *palla* covers both of her shoulders, leaving only the top of a pale tunic visible. Her earrings are pale, likely pearls. The three women who press close behind them are visible only from the neck up. None wear visible jewelry, although one also binds her hair with pale *vittae*. This modest dress is paralleled by that of their male counterparts. The elderly man wears a white under tunic. A white swath of fabric covers his torso and right arm, falling voluminously to the ground.²⁹² Its color, volume, and the freedom of his right arm all suggest that it may be a toga. The boy who stands in front of him is similarly attired. The drape of his red toga that he holds off of the ground with his right left hand, leaves his right arm free and his white under tunic visible. The color may indicate that he is not yet of age.²⁹³

The crowd is normative; the modes of dress employed by the painter or painters do not transgress moral boundaries. As we discussed above, the use of expensive dyes and the wearing of overly conspicuous jewelry were moral excesses that could be seen as proof of character deficiencies. Yet this crowd, unlike Hippodamia, conforms to the expectations of moralizing authors, if not necessarily

²⁹² There is some question as to the appropriateness of the length of the sleeves of the under tunic. Jonathan Edmondson suggests that for men such tunics should only extend to mid forearm, and that anything longer is indecorous, or at least not customary in Latium. The wearing of long sleeves is sometimes seen as an effeminate practice, in part because it may be more typical of Greek modes of dress. The longer sleeves here might be a nod at the man's age, for the shortened sleeves may have been a mark of virility. For more on sleeve length see Edmondson, "Public Dress and Social Control in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome," in *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Social Control*, edited by Jonathan Edmondson and Alison Keith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 36.

²⁹³ Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 41, 43.

to the realities of Pompeian dress practices. Indeed, the practices depicted would not be out of place in an idealized Republican Rome. None of the figures wears cloth of multiple colors; the jewelry depicted almost certainly weighs less than the requisite half an ounce.²⁹⁴ Alan Hunt suggests that such adherence to the long defunct *Lex Oppia* may not be anachronistic, for although Augustus's *Lex Julia*, enacted in 18 BCE, is best known for its attempts to encourage marriage and childbearing, it also reenacted earlier prohibitions regarding dress practices, perhaps including those mentioned in the *Lex Oppia*.²⁹⁵ The uncharacteristic inclusion of a child within the crowd offers tangential support for the notion that this early imperial legislation is of interest within the image.

This adherence to convention, while typical of internal, non-mythological observers generally, is suggestive. For none of the figures in the crowd deviate from the proscriptions suggested by the laws. Even if the law in effect in 79 CE did prohibit sartorial excess, sumptuary legislations of any variety are notoriously difficult to enforce. We are better served to conceptualize of them as a moral valuation, rather than a punitive sanction. By choosing to adhere to this convention, the crowd performs consensus. They agree on what sort of clothing is appropriate to wear in public, and following the logic presented above—that in Rome, physical appearances denoted personal attributes—their consistency of external appearance marks a similar inner agreement. They are an in-group, and Theseus, for all of his

²⁹⁴ For a breakdown of the restrictions codified in the *Lex Oppia* and their implications see Zanda, *Fighting Hydra-Like Luxury*, 114-117.

²⁹⁵ Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions*, 20.

exceptionality, is on the outside. As Petronius succinctly states it, “No one can afford to like what differs from himself.”²⁹⁶

It is with such a thought in mind that we pause to consider another mode of discussion pictured within this decorously dressed crowd. Behind the elderly man, a woman in pale purple turns to her right, engaging not with the central scene, but with the woman who stands alongside her. Her mouth is slightly open, and the woman to whom she appears to be speaking, leans toward her, her ear tilted toward the other woman’s mouth, while her wide eyes are fixed firmly on Theseus. This grouping is a double of one seen in the middle of the knot of centaurs that form a viewing group on the opposite side of the room. It seems likely that the reduplication is deliberate; much as the compositional similarities between the two images indicates their programmatic connection, this detail within the composition encourages the viewer to further equate these two groups of viewers. As we discussed, while the centaurs may seem to be the more overtly savage of the two groups depicted on the west wall of the space, close visual reading suggests that these initial appearances could be deceiving. In the case of the depicted crowd of humans, their very normativity may itself be problematic. For if, as Lorenz argues, the crowd depicted here is intended to “extend the scene of Theseus beyond the actual myth and tap into ideals of public social behavior,” then the more private discussion between the two women could be worrying to the hero.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ Petronius, *Satyricon*, 89.

²⁹⁷ Lorenz, “Ear of the Beholder,” 678.



Figure 4.6: Room O, House of the Seven Skeletons, Pompeii.
Detail of crowd of observers.

For even as Theseus's actions invite praise, they open the door for censure. And such censure is spread much as praise is, through rumor. Anxieties over public opinion abound in literature of the Late Republican and early Imperial periods. Catullus rails against the whispering voices that follow him through the forum, and Augustus's carefully crafted public persona is itself a commentary on the power of public opinion.²⁹⁸ But perhaps the most chilling example of the negative power of

²⁹⁸ For Catullus's most vituperative work that deals with perception by another see Catullus 16. For a more quiet commentary on the pervasive feeling of being watched, see Catullus 5. For commentary on Augustus's self-presentation and its connection to public perception, see Shelley Hales, "Men are Mars, Women are Venus: Divine Costumes in Imperial Rome," in *The Clothed Body in the Ancient World*, edited by Liza Cleland, Mary Harlow, and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones (London: Oxbow Books, 2005.) 132.

rumor comes to us from Virgil. In the ambiguous and multi-faceted textual landscape of the *Aeneid* there are few definite villains; Rumor, the monstrous and deformed daughter of Gaia, falls firmly into this category. Her feathered body is covered with eyes, tongues, and ears, allowing her to both perceive and immediately speak of what she encounters. She does not sleep, and she instills fear into the populace “harping on lies and slander evenhandedly with truth.”²⁹⁹ Her whispers are never ceasing, and her aim is explicitly, and aimlessly, malicious. Such sentiments are echoed by Ovid, who describes not Rumor, but her house. His focus is not on architecture, but its inhabitants, and crowds feature prominently in his description. Crowds fill the hallways of Rumor’s house, and these crowds are responsible for blending truth with fiction and with circulating these half-certain tales. He describes the process as additive; simple chatter leads to the spreading of tales to the deliberate manipulation of words. And he warns that while the spread of rumor may seem enjoyable, the only true emotions that can be associated with the practice are fear, sedition, and doubt.³⁰⁰

The spread of rumor then, is a normative behavior of crowds. And if, as the clothing of the depicted crowd that watches Theseus seems to suggest, we are meant to understand them as an ideal citizenry, and if, as their visual conflation with the centaurs on the west wall of the exedra indicates, we are asked to think about them critically, then the probable connection between crowds and rumor is telling. For much as the external viewer might have criticized the excesses of Hippodamia and Pirithous, the external viewer is here confronted with the negative aspects of

²⁹⁹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 260.

³⁰⁰ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, XII: 39-63.

group dynamics. For consensus and group association can both assure a participant of a certain degree of acceptance and social safety. But if even a hero might face the gossip of a crowd, a mortal is certainly subject to the same. Gossip is not socially prohibited, but it is destructive.

The Body as Public Art: Venus and the Dangers of Exceptionality

Theseus's objectification, emphasized visually by correlating his body to that of a statue, sees his agency undermined. But there is another figure in the exedra who appears to turn objectification to her advantage. We turn our attention now to the final panel painting in Room O, the depiction of Venus, Apollo, and Hesperos that is visible from the entrance of the house (Figure 4.7). The painting depicts five figures. On the left, a god crowned with a nimbus and radiating gold rays lounges on a gold seat, his legs stretched before him to rest on a gold stool. His body is draped with blue bordered scarlet cloth, a replica of the cloth that adorns Pirithous on the west wall of the room. His right arm sits against the arm of the seat, his fingers dangling just above a decorative bird. In his left arm, he holds a wooden crook. A woman stands behind his left shoulder, her blue mantle slipping to reveal her left shoulder. Her hair is bound with cloth. Her hands lift a vestment, and they hover behind the god's shoulders as she, like the god, gazes up at the partially nude youth at the center of the composition. This curly haired youth is depicted in the process of descending from a raised podium, his feet poised on the steps that lead to its summit. A swath of red fabric with a pale blue border drapes around his body, leaving his torso, left leg and genitals revealed. In his right hand, he holds a torch.

On the right side of the painting are two women. In the foreground, we see a crowned Venus, lifting her deep blue mantle with its pale blue border away from her body to reveal her sheer tunic beneath (Figure 4.8). Although her neck and face are poorly preserved, she clearly wears a necklace, possibly with pearl pendants. Her gold diadem, although less obviously a mural crown such as that pictured in the shop of Verecundus, identifies her as Venus Pompeiana, the patron deity of the city following Sulla's invasion. Behind her stands an attendant, wearing a pale blue tunic and either pearl or gold earrings. In the background, a podium is topped with a truncated column bound with strips of saffron ribbon. On the left, a second podium is topped with a tripod.



Figure 4.7: Room O, House of the Seven Skeletons, Pompeii.
Apollo judging a contest between Hesperos, and Venus.
Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

There is a certain amount of debate over the identification of these figures. In other settings, where the three figures appear within a *scaenae frons*, the seated god is equated with Dionysus, but given the overall association with light and the possible tripod in background above the figure, Apollo seems a more appropriate identification.³⁰¹ The obscurity of the reference may account for some of this difficulty. For the scene likely depicts a contest between Venus and Hesperos in their guises as the evening and morning stars. For, although the actual celestial body is unchanging, as Cicero notes, before the sun rises, the planet is known as the morning star and after the sun sets, it is called the evening star.³⁰²

Almost all of the figures depicted might rightly be considered internal observers. Apollo, in his guise as judge, is in fact *charged* with observation. His gaze, as befits his task, is situated firmly on the party currently on display, Hesperos. His attendant follows his lead. Venus appears to watch Apollo, her explicitly erotic gesture perhaps is meant to draw his attention as she prepares to take her place at the top of the podium. Her attendant's attention is fixed firmly upon her. Only Hesperos does not engage with another figure within the scene; his distant stare recalls that of Theseus. Once again, it seems as if the act of presenting oneself to the gaze of others has a distancing effect, one that reinforces the objectification of the observed figure. Such objectification is often associated with Venus. Allison

³⁰¹ For a discussion of the difficulties of identifying figures in the image with a brief bibliography, see Bragantini and Sampaolo, *La Pittura Pompeiana*, 364.

³⁰² Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II: 20.

Sharrock describes the goddess as “the most spectacular of art objects.”³⁰³ Yet within the context of the image, Venus exerts her agency as both viewer and viewed; she gazes at Apollo even as she attempts to catch his eye.

Within this setting, Venus’s jewelry offers us a new way of conceptualizing the relationship between viewer and viewed. Elsewhere in the room, jewelry marked both social inclusion and social exclusion. In the case of the female figures elsewhere in the room, it is unclear whether or not they actively sought to become the object of someone else’s gaze. Venus, unlike the women of the previously discussed paintings, seems to actively construct her own public persona. To be viewed is to be discussed, and Venus’s gesture, by drawing attention to her body, suggests that she would not be averse to either. She actively seeks a form of social exclusion; she is explicitly at the heart of a competition, one based entirely upon her physical beauty and her self-presentation. While Venus is also subject to both internal and external gazes, it is from the gaze that she draws her power. Her sexual desirability and her generative capacity, her mythological and political sources of influence, are firmly linked to her appearance. We can compare this source of power to that of Theseus. For like Venus, Theseus’s power is at least partially vested in his body. His strength allows him to accomplish his goals, much as her beauty allows her to accomplish hers. Yet unlike Venus, Theseus’s abilities exist without viewership. He is strong regardless of whether or not anyone sees him.

In Venus’s case, viewing and its attendant objectification are potentially positive outcomes. And the power of the living woman is no less predicated on her

³⁰³ Sharrock, “Looking at Looking,” 266.

appearance. For at the heart of the moralizing texts discussed above is fear. Women apparently have the capacity to spend patrimonies, to turn the fruits of war to their own ends, to destabilize the family unit, and above all, to deceive.³⁰⁴ She does so, much as Venus does, through careful deployment of adornment. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Venus and Hesperos must present themselves partially nude, giving Apollo a potentially less deceptive image of themselves. As Maud Gleason argues, “Sometimes the symbolic significance of clothing lies less in the new identity one puts on after the removal of one’s old clothes than the revelation of the original identity underneath. Like an athlete, one strips down to one’s true self.”³⁰⁵ With the removal of clothing, comes both literal and metaphorical self-revelation. For Venus, the removal of clothing does not, however, reveal an unmediated body. With the removal of her mantle, we see her jewelry, another type of marker of her selfhood.

Given the potential for adornments to underscore a wearer’s agency, even in situations where others might attempt to deny it, it is unsurprising that the moral dictates of Roman society frowned upon excess adornment. But given the potentials of the imaginal space of wall paintings, we might expect these restrictions to be undermined. The rules that dictate the living need not apply to the depicted. However, despite the prevailing sentiments regarding the moral pitfalls of adornment, women in the material record devote considerable resources to the art of personal appearance. There is little doubt that physical attractiveness benefited

³⁰⁴ For more on the connections between adornment and deception, see Chapter Six.

³⁰⁵ Maud Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 156.

both the individual and her familial circle. The ability to choose one's adornments, even from a limited set of options, is a marker of agency, offering women the opportunity to assert themselves, even in those situations in which their voices were silenced and their bodies hidden.³⁰⁶

The heavy *palla* meant to cover women's bodies in public, and so preserve their modesty, is proof of this assertion. As Mary Harlow argues, and the Venus in the House of the Seven Skeletons demonstrates, women had the ability to manipulate the *palla*, thus determining what the viewer could see. Harlow states, "The very basic nature of female dress with its fundamentally simple shaping allowed women a certain freedom about what they chose to outline, expose or hide."³⁰⁷ This interest in manipulated visibility is echoed in the domestic architecture. Houses in Pompeii invite the eye into spaces from which the body is prohibited. While the atrium is open to uninvited visitors, the spaces visible from it, the gardens, peristyles and dining rooms designed to display the owner's wealth, leisure and worldliness are accessible only to those who have been invited in, to intimates and social equals. The public presentation of women on the walls of the House of the Seven Skeletons, as elsewhere in Pompeii, reflects a parallel mindset. The *palla* conceptually serves to preserve the matron's modesty, and the gesture that we remarked upon in both Chapters Two and Three, wherein the woman holds her *palla* closed while lifting the fabric away from her body is a gesture that both reinforces a woman's modesty and invisibility.

³⁰⁶ Harlow, "Dressing to Please Themselves," 41.

³⁰⁷ Harlow, "Dressing to Please Themselves," 41.



Figure 4.8: Room O, House of the Seven Skeletons, Pompeii.
Detail of Venus and her attendant.

But by holding her *palla* away from her body, the woman draws attention to the very thing she purports to conceal. The viewer is invited to consider the body to which access is denied; just as a visitor can see beyond the atrium to the portions of the house into which he or she is not invited, the casual passerby can catch a glimpse of the woman beyond the *palla*, and of the adornments that swath of fabric covers. If the *palla* is a negation of a woman's physical being, an attempt to make her invisible, as Massimo Leone argues, then her adornments are its opposite, a vivid, multi-sensory assertion of presence.³⁰⁸ The *palla* may deny a viewer access to a woman's body, but her adornments assert her presence, drawing the viewer's eye with their sheen and their placement, and speaking up for her when she might otherwise be silent, both metaphorically and in actuality. The clusters of pearls and stacks of bracelets, attested in several Pompeian paintings, would have been as audible to the onlooker as they were visible.

Venus's necklace, and perhaps the crown that marks her particularly Pompeian character, could have been covered by the *palla* that she lifts away from herself. While the gesture itself draws attention to the body that she unveils, her jewelry performs a similar function. Although clothing can obscure the female form, jewelry enhances it by drawing attention to various desirable parts of the woman's body. Earrings draw attention to a woman's face, more particularly her eyes. Headdresses and elaborate hairstyles serve a similar function while simultaneously

³⁰⁸ On the connections between veils and invisibility see Massimo Leone, *Cultures of Invisibility: The Semiotics of the Veil in Ancient Rome.* In *Semio Istanbul 2007, Proceedings of the Congress* (Istanbul: Istanbul Kultur Universitesi, 2007), 1069-1079, and Massimo Leone, "Cultures of Invisibility: The Semiotics of the Veil in Early Christianity," *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 20 (2012), 273-286.

showcasing a woman's hair, an attribute often associated with sexual desirability. Necklaces draw the viewer's attention toward the breasts. Rings and bracelets accentuate hands and arms. Belts and ties draw attention to the waist and pelvic region. All of these help to define a woman's body, and many of them play up portions of her body related directly to her femininity and sexuality. Jewelry helps to spotlight what makes a woman desirable; together with the suite of adornments that range from cosmetics to careful choice of colored cloth, jewelry grants women the ability to both enhance existing beauty and draw attention away from less desirable features and towards more desirable ones. In the hands of a skilled craftswoman, in which number we must certainly count Venus, jewelry is a tool, one that allows her to not only draw the gaze, but to direct it.

We see pictured here the dynamism of the human canvas and the multiplicity of ways that a relatively limited corpus of dress options can be deployed. It is too simplistic to state that the viewer would automatically, by virtue of their respectable self-presentation, align herself mentally with the crowd of onlookers. For Venus, too, wears jewelry that corresponds to real life objects. Like Ariadne in Room 5, she is an interstitial figure, bound to the human world by her adornments while simultaneously transgressing human boundaries with her state of undress. This transgression is not limited to the sphere of goddesses. Here in the House of the Seven Skeletons, Theseus, too, appears heroically nude. Presumably, his heroic status and his mythological import allow him latitude, just as Venus, as a goddess, is bound by neither mortal law nor by Roman morals. The conservative dress of the crowds of onlookers highlights the transgressive nature of these central figures,

marking both their extraordinary nature and their otherness. To be exceptional is to be viewed, and to be viewed is to be distanced.

To take on the mantle of exceptionality is to invite censure. We see this in the highest echelons of the Roman society, and while the repercussions were not as dire for the leaders of Pompeii, there is little doubt. Yet, the very process of social differentiation, the performances within groups that are at the heart of our endeavor here, suggests that a certain amount of exceptionality is desirable. Much as Venus's nudity is both more truthful and less socially acceptable than her fully clothed state, the tensions between the desire to distinguish oneself and fear of censure are intertwined, both extant in attempts at social advancement and power display. The resolution is in the mind, and on the body, of the viewer. One's social ambitions might be served equally well by conformity as by transgression, depending on the nature of said ambitions. If one seeks entry into a group, conformity is key. If one seeks increased influence and prestige within a group of which one is already a member, transgression might well be helpful. But in such cases, a certain sophistication of approach is necessary. This finesse, the ways in which the most effective actors perform their desired roles, is the focus of the space that remains to us. And the room that was at the interpretive heart of this chapter points us in the direction of a social situation in which these intra-group power negotiations took place: the dinner party. Increasingly, in the late Republic and into the early Empire, as the traditional paths for social advancement were cut off, dinner parties became the primary venue for self advancement, but, as we shall see, this opportunity for advancement was not without its difficulties, for, especially in

the case of wealthy but non-elite members of society, social censure could prevent upward mobility. It is to those methods of censure that we now turn.

CHAPTER FIVE

Trimalchio, Social Aspiration, and the Art of the Dinner Party

Adornment assumes an audience. As we saw in Chapter Four, these audiences do not only admire the well-adorned human body. Audiences critique these looks, using personal appearance as a marker of social acceptability. The paintings in the House of the Seven Skeletons depict scenes in which the personal and the collective confront each other. Within the imaginal space of the paintings, this confrontation occurs largely in architecturally mediated exterior spaces. The crowd discusses Theseus on a corner outside of the labyrinth. Apollo judges Hesperos and Venus from their position on an exterior podium. Pirithous meets Eurytus in a liminal domestic space, visually analogous to an atrium. Such paintings present us with an inherent paradox. For although the actions depicted show groups interacting in public or semi-public gatherings, and although some, such as the depiction of Venus discussed previously, might be visible from the generally accessible portions of the house, the intricate mental work implied by programmatic readings presupposes a level of intimate access. With the exception of the *familia*, such a mode of viewership is made available primarily to invited guests. Performances of social position are as multi-valenced as the images that we have

thus far used to access them. The sorts of interchanges that we discussed in Chapter Four may have been depicted in a portion of the House of the Seven Skeletons that was physically inaccessible to all but a few, but the interactions depicted within describe a set of social performances that, had they occurred in reality, would be intended for a broad public audience. In such situations, information exchanges hands in an instant, and the success of a performance could be determined by a single glance. Social peers and social inferiors alike could participate in these street level negotiations of position, but as the crowd of spectators watching Theseus demonstrated, public performances of power might have been most effective at distinguishing between groups of people. As the image suggested, visual similarity could signal group cohesion as well as group membership. But social groups are not monolithic entities, and increasingly, as traditional avenues for advancement became untenable, and new types of social groups came to the fore, individuals sought entry into groups previously closed to them. And while clothing and personal appearance were requisite components for group inclusion, acceptance came only through performance. One had to both look the part and act it successfully. Knowledge, not wealth, was key.

In the remaining two chapters, we shift our focus from establishing what jewelry can communicate to exploring the social spaces in which that communication takes place. To do this, we turn from the realm of imaginal space and mental constructions to the convivial space of the dinner party, in which identity is constructed not internally, but through group negotiation. Rather than discussing general information about how individuals are understood by others, we

turn to the question of how prestige is negotiated within groups, how one individual can distinguish him or herself from other individuals who are essentially similar. To ground these ideas, we turn now to an extraordinary text. Likely written in 65CE³⁰⁹, the *Satyricon*, a fragmentary Latin text that structurally seems to parallel Homer's *Odyssey*, relates the story of Encolpius and his attempts to overcome an offense perpetrated against the god Priapus.³¹⁰ The text is best known for its longest fragment, an almost complete passage that recounts a dinner party thrown by a wealthy freedman named Trimalchio. Unlike the majority of textual accounts of dinner parties, most of which focus upon emperors and elites, the *Cena Trimalchionis* is our only surviving account of a non-elite convivial setting. This makes it an ideal text with which to consider the possibilities for such interactions in Pompeii. To wit, we will engage in a close reading of the text to elucidate the social tensions underlying status display. First, we present the case of Petronius Arbiter to demonstrate the inherent dangers of overt performances of power on the part of elites. We then compare these difficulties to those of sub-elites using the story of Trimalchio's dinner party as a point of access. We nuance this discussion by considering the described adornments of Trimalchio's wife Fortunata and her friend, the freedwoman Scintilla. We will argue that the modes of dress preferred

³⁰⁹ There is some debate over the date of the text, in part because there is some debate over the identity of the author. However, the text must date to the period before 79 CE, for in the text we are told that Trimalchio owns property in Pompeii. For the mention of Pompeii in the text see Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, edited by Martin S. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 53.6.

³¹⁰ While the anger of Priapus that drives Petronius's hero into his trials of the flesh has long been noted as a parallel to Poseidon's anger that sparked Odysseus's travels, Michael Mordine has recently argued that the *Cena Trimalchionis* also contains a set of intricate allusions to the Homeric text. His assertion that the dinner is meant to recall Odysseus's encounter with the Lotus Eaters bears further scrutiny, particularly as it regards the critique of mimesis and illusion that runs through the narrative of the dinner. For Mordine's reading see Michael Mordine, "Odyssean Adventures in the *Cena Trimalchionis*," *Classical Antiquity* 32.1 (April, 2013), 182-186.

by these socially marginal women highlight ongoing tensions between upwardly mobile sub-elites and the traditional upper class. We expound upon this dynamic by considering the place of monetary wealth in Petronius's text, finally proposing that while both elites and sub-elites encounter shifting social expectations in the late Republican and early Imperial periods, the problematization of wealth allows traditional elites to differentiate themselves from their increasingly influential sub-elite counterparts.

Words and Deeds: Petronius Arbiter and the Perils of Direct Confrontation

In 66 CE, Nero's *elegantiae arbiter* threw a party. It was of a type increasingly common during the reign of the last Julio-Claudian emperor, with an end goal somewhat different than that of the typical dinner party performance. The host, Petronius, was not seeking to advance his social position, although he still hoped to get in a final wordplay, one last quip to cement his reputation and subvert the designs of his adversaries. The party, according to the historian Tacitus, was well-attended. Petronius, we are told, carried on witty conversations with his friends, offered gifts to some of his slaves, and had a few more unfortunate servants whipped—all actions well in keeping with expectations for a Roman dinner party. However, rather than reclining against the typical couch, Petronius dined in a bath, the warm water aiding in the process of letting blood from his slit wrists. He bound and unbound his wrists throughout the evening, stemming the blood flow in order to continue his discussions with his guests. When finally he was ready for death, he prepared a document. Like the party itself, and like many parties both before and

after, this document played on the expectations of his audience. For, with death close at hand, one might expect him to write a will. One might even say that this expectation was heightened in the case of a man such as Petronius. For in the same year, Petronius was arrested at Cumae by the emperor's men and charged with treason. In the semi-heroic and well-established tradition, rather than awaiting trial, Petronius, like Nero's tutor Seneca, opted to commit suicide, thus preserving his honor—and his possessions. If his case had gone to trial he would almost inevitably have been found guilty, and his assets would then have reverted to the emperor. Because he elected to commit suicide, a will would have afforded him the opportunity to designate an heir to his estates; given his lavish lifestyle, he was likely quite wealthy, a supposition that is supported by his election to the consulship. Even under Nero, with traditional social and political structures fast eroding, the property requirements for those of the senatorial class remained in effect; by the mid-first century CE, to maintain a position in the senatorial class, a person required an income of one million sesterces.³¹¹ But rather than turn his attention to the question of how to distribute his fortune, Petronius instead wrote a letter to the emperor. In it, he detailed each of Nero's dalliances and indiscretions. When Nero read the letter, he embarked upon a rage-fueled rampage, targeting and killing those women that he assumed had betrayed his confidence.³¹²

Petronius's letter has a dual effect. It highlights his power and the source of that power; it is his knowledge, not his wealth that makes him dangerous to the

³¹¹ Peter Garnsey and Richard P. Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 113.

³¹² The death of Petronius can be found in Tacitus, *The Annals*, 16.18-6.19.

emperor, as Nero's actions attest. And by provoking Nero into such an unmistakable expression of anger, and of fear, he undermines the emperor's already unstable public persona, adding further evidence of instability to an ever-mounting list of offences. Petronius emerges as an almost heroic figure in the text; although he dies, he has the last laugh, for his letter effectively forces Nero into a public display of savagery that is difficult to downplay. The fact that this response is elicited by a list can hardly be coincidental, given the structure of Book Sixteen of Tacitus's *Annals*. Book Sixteen derives its narratological impact in large part from the iterative nature of the lists of the dead; not unlike Book Three of the *Iliad*, wherein Homer conveys the scope of the Trojan War and the devastation that resulted from it by listing Greek troops, Tacitus demonstrates the scope of Nero's power and depravity by providing a seemingly exhaustive list of political casualties.³¹³ That Tacitus makes Petronius a list writer, indeed a writer of any sort, is telling. Petronius resists the dominant world order of his time period, and he uses words to do so. He uses words to attempt to enact social change, and to perform his own power, but the price of his power is his life.³¹⁴

Petronius's knowledge may well have made him both dangerous and powerful enough to threaten Nero, but as illustrative as his death is, it is not the act

³¹³ Indeed, the length that Tacitus affords to the Petronius episode is remarkable. As Holly Haynes points out only the persecution of Thræsea Paetus, the senator who spent years working to oppose Nero's violent impulses and who may or may not have once been involved with a plot to restore the Republic, is given a comparable level of development. See Holly Haynes, "The Tyrant Lists: Tacitus' Obituary of Petronius," *American Journal of Philology* 131 (2010), 70.

³¹⁴ The same might be said of Seneca, another casualty noted in Book 16 of the *Annals*. Like Petronius, Seneca was a member of the imperial circle—he was the emperor's tutor—and like Petronius, Seneca's writings, which were implicitly and explicitly critical of Nero's rule, probably brought him under suspicion. For both, words are their final gesture. Seneca likewise sends a message to the emperor in place of a will. See Tacitus, *The Annals*, 16.62-64.

for which he is best remembered. The facility with words that Tacitus associates with Petronius may have held him in good stead elsewhere, for he was likely the author of the early novel, *The Satyricon*. Incomplete and bawdy, declared by an earlier generation to be “offensive to good taste,” the *Satyricon* offers scathing commentary on the excesses of the early Imperial period.³¹⁵ From the educational system, to the law courts, to religion, to the convivial culture surrounding the dinner party, nearly every social institution of the time finds itself subject to the writer’s scrutiny. The correspondence between activities described in the *Satyricon* and Neronian excesses decried by other authors, the structural similarities between Petronius’s final dinner party and that of the freedman Trimalchio—a likely homage on the part of Tacitus—and a tenth century CE gloss that supplied the name of Titus Petronius as the author of the text have all prompted modern scholars to associate the Petronius described by Tacitus with the author of the *Satyricon*.³¹⁶ For our purposes, such an association is seductive. If the Petronius described by Tacitus is also the author of the *Satyricon*, then his arrest and eventual suicide take on a new potential meaning.

³¹⁵ For the comment on the shocking nature of the text see Charles Beck, *The Age of Petronius Arbiter* (Cambridge: Metcalf and Company, 1856), 4.

³¹⁶ There are also good reasons *not* to conflate these two men. As Holly Haynes has suggested, we might expect Tacitus to at least *mention* the *Satyricon* in his obituary of Petronius. See Haynes, “Tyrant Lists,” 75. But, by the same token, Tacitus does not mention Seneca’s written work in his description of the man’s death, and Pisonian conspiracy or no, his negative portrayals of the current world order in works such as his *Oedipus* might very well place him in the same sort of category as Petronius. A great deal has been written on the attribution of the *Satyricon*. For an overview on the topic and a convincing solution to the problem see Kenneth Rose, *The Date and Author of the Satyricon* (Leiden: Brill, 1971). For a shorter but equally useful account with an extensive bibliography on the topic see Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath, “Introduction,” in *Petronius: A Handbook* edited by Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 5-10.

The treason of which Petronius was accused is not of central interest in our extant textual evidence. Tacitus suggests that it is a trumped up charge, put forth by Tigellius, the head of the Praetorian Guard, because he was jealous of the imperial favor shown to Petronius.³¹⁷ However, if we believe Petronius to be the author of the *Satyricon*, then the charge of treason could have had a more concrete cause. The imperial world order is on trial in the text, its pitfalls highlighted with obscene and derogatory fervor. The text might even attack the proclivities of the emperor himself. Encolpius, the text's unfortunately named narrator, is vocally Greek, and his very Greekness is often a means by which he is undermined. Voraciously sexual, culturally pretentious, and socially ham fisted, it is perhaps not much of a stretch to associate him with the notoriously Philhellenistic Nero. The jealous interest in his youthful paramour Giton, and the grotesque lengths to which he will go to maintain the boy's affections seem to parallel Nero's relationship with his own *puer delicias* Sporus.³¹⁸ If the text were on trial together with its author, it is perhaps not surprising that death was the end result.

Petronius spoke out against Nero, one way or another and he was silenced. In such a system, words are not an effective tool of dissent, no matter how obliquely the relevant text might reference current concerns. Lest we put too much weight on Petronius's words and Nero's paranoia, it is important to note that words proved to be troublesome for other authors as well. Although the precise reasons behind

³¹⁷ Tacitus, *The Annals*, XVI.19.3.

³¹⁸ Caroline Vout sees a direct textual parallel between Suetonius's description of Nero's marriage to Sporus and Petronius's description of Trimalchio's exit from the bath complex prior to the dinner he later hosts, suggesting that the emphasis on the *lectica* in both cases is a deliberate nod at the effeminacy of the elder partner. See Caroline Vout, "The *Satyricon* and Neronian Culture," in *Petronius: A Handbook*, edited by Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), 104.

Ovid's exile from Rome in 8 CE are still the subject of speculation, the poet himself, as we mentioned in Chapter One, laid the blame upon a poem and a mistake.³¹⁹ Reliance upon deeds as a form of dissention was even more disastrous. While plays such as Seneca's *Oedipus* could hardly have endeared him to the emperor, it is his involvement with the Pisonian conspiracy that brought about his death. Cicero's outspoken public denouncement of Mark Antony certainly merits his place on such a list. Indeed, this system of reprisal for words and deeds that destabilize those in power has its roots in an earlier era. While critique of the imperial system was a dangerous proposition, so too were the actions that led to the creation of this imperial reality. In the Late Republic, those who acted outside of accepted bounds of propriety faced harsh social censure. Such censure reached an apex with the death of Julius Caesar. Although others might have lost their offices and perhaps faced exile, as was the case with individuals like Verres, who overreached the boundaries of authority in Sicily and famously faced Cicero in trial, Julius Caesar's systemic transgressions led to the demise of the Republic, and of the man himself. It was no safer to assume power than it was to criticize it. Even emperors were not exempt from punishment for acting indecorously. Caligula took up the mantle of a god, as did Nero. Both were done away with.

The idea that words and deeds could lead directly to social downfall, political ruin, and, if one had the misfortune of being close to a volatile emperor, death, is remarkable for our purposes. As we have discussed, the imaginal space of the depicted world provides an arena in which the viewer can entertain subversive

³¹⁹ The reference to a poem and a mistake [*carmen et error*] can be found in Ovid, *Tristia*, 2.207.

ideas. Tacitus's account of the death of Petronius reminds us why such a space was needed. Petronius's words explicitly challenged social order, but as new groups of social actors came to the fore, the very existence of certain individuals could have the potential to disrupt the traditional structures of power. Some might seek out sedition as a means to recall previous situations in which they could have better negotiated the social world; others might be seditious because of the nature of their being. But whether one sought to critique or sought to fit in, visual expressions of personal prestige and social position might be more palatable than verbal articulations of the same concept. To explore the ways that adornments both personal and architectural were intended to advance, yet sometimes undermined, personal performances of power, we now turn our attention to Petronius's most lasting legacy, *The Satyricon*, and its most famous character, the wealthy freedman Trimalchio.

Negotiating Social Position in the *Satyricon*

Power, Knowledge, and Excess at Trimalchio's Dinner Party

For Petronius, the delicate balance between prestige display and notoriety depends upon the reactions not only of those around him, but those above him. And through his story, we begin to understand the ways in which the structures of power in Rome changed over the course of the early first century CE. For as a consul, Petronius would once have been at the apex of the Roman social hierarchy, but under Nero, this diminished office was afforded a fraction of the prestige value

that it garnered in previous generations. The old paths to social distinction could no longer guarantee success. This is no accident. In order to keep the imperial family strong, positions that once might have been filled by those of the senatorial class were increasingly kept within the circle of the emperor. In such circumstances, kept from “meaningful occupation by the growing self-aggrandizement of the imperial family,” new methods of communicating distinction were required.³²⁰

The shifting structures of power made it necessary for even traditional elites to turn their attention to new avenues of prestige display. For all that Sallust and his ilk denounced the youth of the late first century BCE for their over interest in adornments, suggesting that their concern for their appearance diverted attention that might better be spent on confronting matters of political import, these writers might well have been approaching the problem from the wrong direction. As we have discussed, adornment might be one such method. Thus expenditure on social trappings— from clothing to houses to dinner parties—might be understood not as a distraction from political life, but as an attempt to offset the effects of the changes in political structures. And in such a system, the *triclinium* was as effective a stage as the forum or the speaker’s rostrum. But while access to high political office was restricted not only by monetary resources, but by freeborn status, anyone with wealth enough to purchase the requisite culinary delicacies and to provide an appropriately entertaining setting could make use of the dinner party’s potential for

³²⁰ Andrew Feldherr, *Playing Gods: Ovid’s Metamorphoses and the Politics of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 5.

spectacle and social distinction.³²¹ As the rostrum became more dangerous, and as political offices became increasingly associated with the emperor's intimates, the dinner party continued to be a viable option for status negotiation, but for the traditional elites, the fact that sub-elites, some of whom may have had the monetary resources to outshine their hierarchical superiors, was apparently a matter of some concern.

Petronius's text, in its extant state, highlights these shifting social currents through its focus on a group that came to increasing prominence under imperial rule—freedmen. It is too simplistic to argue that the so-called rise of freedmen corresponds to a decline in elite power.³²² Power is not a finite resource, but an interaction. And as Robert Dahl argues, to simply state that "A has power over B is not very interesting, informative, or even accurate."³²³ For if power is linked to influence, to one person's ability to cause another person to do something, then unidirectional approaches to the concept fail to explore all of the possibilities. Elites in Pompeii and elsewhere may have controlled the process of social mobility by deciding whether or not to accept an individual into their number, but so too did the existence of sub-elites, like freedmen, influence the behavior of elites, as we shall see

³²¹ For a discussion of the ways in which freedmen were prevented from obtaining high public offices, see Henrick Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72-74.

³²² Amadeo Maiuri once proposed such a model, one which has been thoroughly refuted by the work of Henrik Mouritsen. For Maiuri's viewpoint see Amadeo Maiuri, *L'ultima fase edilizia di Pompei*. (Rome: Istituto di Studi Romani, 1942). For Mouritsen's viewpoint see Henrick Mouritsen, "Roman Freedmen and the Urban Economy: Pompeii in the First Century AD," in *Pompei tra Sorrento e Sarno: Atti del terzo e quarto ciclo di conferenze di geologia, storia e archeologia, Pompei, gennaio 1999-maggio 2000*, edited by F. Senatore (Rome: Bardi, 2001), 1-27. For a succinct summary of the debate, see Elisabetta Cova, "Stasis and Change in Roman Domestic Space: The *Alae* of Pompeii's Regio VI," *American Journal of Archaeology* 119.1 (January 2015), 97-98.

³²³ Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavior Science* 2.3 (July, 1957), 203.

in Chapter Six.³²⁴ We might be better served to think not of the “rise” of freedmen, but of tensions between types of prestige displays.

These tensions are woven deep into the fabric of Petronius’s text. As Henrik Mouritsen notes, to attempt to tackle freedmen in the textual record, we must first confront a number of biases. Ancient sources, like the *Cena Trimalchionis*, produced by elites take a negative view of freedmen, deriding them in order to soothe the anxieties of the reader. But even as the modern scholar attempts to negotiate this bias, she is faced with a second set. It is difficult for the modern reader to conceptualize what it meant to be a Roman freedman, for “the former slave entering free society has no modern parallel.”³²⁵ Mouritsen’s statement requires a bit of parsing. For while a modern scholar might think of the social change in America following the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment as a way to consider the entrance of a former slave into free society, in Rome manumission was a component of the institution of slavery. Indeed, as in the case of Trimalchio, former slaves could and did own slaves of their own. To think of Trimalchio only as a socially mobile parvenu is to disregard a major component of his identity, and thus to misunderstand his motivations.³²⁶ Thus, our reading of his dinner party must not only take into account the reactions of elites to Trimalchio, but Trimalchio’s own reaction to elites. To do so, we follow Paul Veyne who, in an attempt to understand the social realities of freedmen, proposes that together with reading Petronius’s text as a satire, we pause to consider what information can be gleaned by thinking about

³²⁴ On the idea of elites as gatekeepers see Cava, “Stasis and Change,” 97.

³²⁵ Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 6.

³²⁶ Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 7.

the story of Trimalchio as a biography—that is, by treating Trimalchio as an individual with agency, rather than as a source of amusement.³²⁷ Such an approach is not alien from the text itself. Trimalchio gives an abbreviated autobiographical speech during the dinner party; furthermore, in a typically ambiguous mode, Petronius takes care to include not only instances in which Trimalchio and his cohort fail to understand elite systems, but also situations in which they seem to subvert them, creating space for a more sympathetic reading of the character.

The *Cena Trimalchionis* is situated in between a bawdy scene of intoxicated lovemaking and one of several episodes in which Encolpius's young lover Giton jilts him in favor of Ascyrtos, Encolpius's former lover and current rival, prompting the visit to the picture gallery that we discussed in Chapter Four. And although these three episodes are loosely linked, the narrative thread of the work as a whole is difficult to trace. The text preserved to us was once part of a much larger whole; the extant portions of the text represent fragments of books fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen out of a likely twenty four.³²⁸ By this point in the narrative, the reader has joined the narrator Encolpius in a number of questionable exploits ranging from a fight in the forum to an orgy, and is well acquainted with the fact that while Encolpius may have pretensions to erudition and refinement, he is chronically short on the funds that would enable him to lead a life of leisure. Uncertain of how to pay for his next meal, Encolpius together with his sometime companion Agamemnon, an

³²⁷ Paul Veyne, "Vie die Trimalchion," *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 16.2 (March-April, 1961), 213-247.

³²⁸ Niall W. Slater, "Reading the *Satyrica*," in *Petronius: A Handbook*, edited by Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath (Malden: Blackwell, 2011), 16.

instructor of rhetoric, find themselves in possession of an invitation to a dinner party. It is against this background, that the reader and Encolpius meet Trimalchio.

Encolpius first encounters Trimalchio not in his home, but through the mediating efforts of gossip. Indeed, Trimalchio's social visibility, his notoriety, is fueled by a careful combination of the speech acts of others and his own self-presentation. Although the two were not previously acquainted, Trimalchio's reputation precedes him. He is, for better or for worse, the sort of person who is discussed. As the depiction of Theseus in the House of the Seven Skeletons highlights, crowds, spectators like those that constantly surround Trimalchio, both create *fama* and hone in upon even minor hints of *infama*. Much as Theseus's heroic defeat of the Minotaur requires spectators to make it a social reality, Trimalchio depends upon discussion to craft his place in society. He does not have the lineage or the offices that would otherwise enable him to obtain distinction. This is made evident by the ways in which others discuss him. The slave girl Quartilla, who first mentions Trimalchio in the extant portions of our text, characterizes him as "*lautissimus*", an adjective that she explicates upon by discussing the size of the time keeping device Trimalchio keeps in his *triclinium* and the specificity of his household staff.³²⁹ These early descriptions of Trimalchio are potentially illustrative, for it is not his actions or his abilities that define him—he is noteworthy to others because of his possessions. He is *lautissimus*—fashionable—but not *lepidus*, or *festius* or *elegans*—charming or witty or discriminating—elements of the set of terms that Brian Krostenko isolates as those indicative of desired qualities for

³²⁹ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 1; Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by William Arrowsmith (New York: Meridian, 1994), 38.

successful social actors.³³⁰ This does not mean that Trimalchio is unaware of the sorts of actions associated with performances—he certainly attempts to be witty—but that the author seeks to separate him from these categories. Indeed, the term *lautissimus* could apply as well to a man's clothes as his characteristics, while discrimination is a particularly human characteristic. It is not surprising, then, that Petronius takes care to define what sort of fashionable thing he discusses.

Trimalchio is *lautissimus homo*, while others might simply be *elegans*. The language of the text itself marks Trimalchio's separation from the expected. This distance is reinforced by the descriptions that surround him. While these details are perhaps humorous in their specificity, they are also indicative of the level of excess that is Trimalchio's hallmark.

Much as Tacitus makes his point concerning the destructive nature of Nero's reign through exhaustive iteration, Petronius underscores the nature of Trimalchio's social presence through a consistent emphasis on descriptions of his possessions. Thus, when Encolpius first sees Trimalchio, the situation described is one of comically conspicuous consumption. As Encolpius and Agamemnon wander through the baths, they come upon a man playing a game with a group of attractive boys, tossing a brightly colored ball to the youths. While the practice itself seems unremarkable enough, it is his manner of play that catches the attention. The man does not bend to pick up the ball when he drops it, rather a slave provides him with a new one, while a eunuch keeps track, not of points, but of the number of balls that have been discarded. This self-aware display of excess resources is reinforced by

³³⁰ Brian Krostenko, *Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3.

the materials of the man's adornments. He is surrounded by color; his under tunic is not white, but scarlet. The balls that he makes no attempts to collect are green. His chamber pot is solid silver.³³¹ In each instance, the material appears to be chosen not with regard to appropriateness or convention. Instead, we see that this man, Trimalchio, opts for the most expensive option possible. For Petronius, this emphasis on wealth and what it buys serves multiple purposes; it highlights what Trimalchio does not have as much as it describes what he does. He has resources, but not *decorum*.

The text rarely denounces Trimalchio outright. On those occasions when it does, the negative assessment seems to be Encolpius's own, in his guise of "Encolpius the protagonist" rather than "Encolpius the narrator." Encolpius dislikes Trimalchio's singing voice and Encolpius finds Trimalchio to be insolent, but the text takes pains to undermine such pronouncements. Trimalchio may be socially problematic—both the language chosen and the situations described make it clear that while Trimalchio has the best accouterments that can be bought, it would be difficult to characterize him as elite. But the text is careful to cast Encolpius in an equally questionable light.³³² This is one of the many complications of attempting to glean information from Petronius's text. No figure is exempt from ridicule. That much is clear. What is less evident is what precisely leaves these figures open to censure. One of the greatest challenges that the text poses to the modern reader is one of humor. It is often clear that something *is* funny, or made fun *of*, but what

³³¹ Krostenko, *Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance*, 39.

³³² On the disjunction between Encolpius the narrator and Encolpius the protagonist, and on the commentary the text makes concerning the latter see Roger Beck, "Encolpius at the 'Cena,'" *Phoenix* 29.3 (Autumn, 1975), 273.

precisely that is can often be ambiguous. As John D'Arms puts it, "There exist no general accepted criteria for distinguishing humor from realism in the *Cena*."³³³ Part of this ambiguity is intentional. The multi-valenced structure of the text balances a complex set of interlocking literary allusions that encourage the erudite reader to consider, and reconsider, the relationship of the story at hand to a multitude of pre-existing textual traditions, all while preserving enough verisimilitude to allow the reader to engage in social criticism.

We see this notion at work in the architecture and decoration of Trimalchio's house. Petronius's presentation of Trimalchio's house blends expansive description of his lavish surroundings with pointed literary allusion. While these descriptions signal Trimalchio's gaudy excesses to the audience, the use of allusion helps the reader to both center the episode in the wider arc of the narrative and, like the introduction of observer figures into depicted scenes, encourages the reader to re-frame her understanding of the import of the images described. As Encolpius and his party enter Trimalchio's house, they are met with a painting of a guard dog.³³⁴ As Shelly Hales notes, the presence of this fictive guard dog and the continued emphasis on dogs throughout the episode is a telling marker, a direct reference to Cerberus, the dog who guards the gates of Hades. As she puts it, "The allusion makes explicit that dining at Trimalchio's is a living hell."³³⁵ The suggestion that dinner with Trimalchio is a sort of descent into the underworld gives us a hint at the

³³³ John D'Arms, *Commerce and Social Standing in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 97.

³³⁴ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 29.

³³⁵ Shelley Hales, "Freedman's Cribs: Domestic Vulgarly on the Bay of Naples," in *Petronius: A Handbook*, edited by Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), 161.

space that the episode might have occupied within a larger narrative. Heroes are defined by what makes them different, by their separation from ordinary men. Trips to the underworld help to mark this distinction. Heroes can confront death without dying, and they can venture into spaces that are closed to other mortals. Heroes wake while others sleep, and they travel to the land of the dead, both formulaic encounters that allow them to obtain privileged knowledge. Trimalchio's house by its very vulgarity, throws Encolpius's knowledge of appropriate modes of display, and the reader's by extension, into relief. Encolpius leaves his party with the knowledge that wealth is not a guarantee of social acceptance and neither is it a stand in for expected behavior, information that Encolpius summarily fails to deploy, as we shall see below.

Programmatic thinking is dependent upon knowledge. As we discussed in Chapter Four, the intricate mental work involved in comprehending the connections between paintings in a space depends upon both information and expectation. Familiarity with the story of Danae and Zeus draws the viewer's attention to the depicted figure of Acrisius, in part because he is out of place in the narrative. Knowledge of the ways that Ovid complicates the relationship between men and centaurs in his version of the story of the Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs could invite the viewer to reconsider the information conveyed by centaurs on the walls of Room O. All of these encounters are mediated by the architecture of the house, its axial visibility and central water features, inviting the viewer to both conflate their world with the imaginal space of the mythological figures and to draw connections between images in different parts of the house. Visitors to Trimalchio's house have

an antithetical experience, both in terms of their experience of the house's visual program and its architecture.

The depicted guard dog that signals the Odyssean character of the episode is the first in a series of wall paintings that adorn the atrium of Trimalchio's house. Much as Trimalchio's dress and deportment signaled to the reader his wealth and disregard for convention, the decorations of his house at first glance suggest a similar interest in self-promotion, and self-creation, over strict adherence to social expectations. At times, Trimalchio cannot conform to societal ideals. At other times, he seems not to fully understand the mindset that informs decoration in other spaces. But it is worthwhile to note that Petronius's description of the decoration of Trimalchio's house does more than provide the audience with the opportunity to laugh at a freedman—it also highlights a mode of viewing that can help us to understand how a viewer might have approached painted domestic decoration.

Encolpius follows the paintings of the atrium in order, moving from panel to panel to piece together a story. Thus, once he has recovered from the encounter with the depicted dog, he turns his attention to the panels beyond. He expects to find connections between the paintings, and he does. Petronius describes panel paintings with "everything clearly captioned."³³⁶ The story that unfolds is that of Trimalchio himself. Encolpius moves from panel to panel, first viewing Trimalchio as a youth, being purchased in the slave market, then the steps of his career, and finally his manumission. The whole of the painting is labeled, and at each step in the process, Trimalchio is aided by the gods, with Minerva, Mercury, and Fortuna, the

³³⁶ Petronius, *Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 40.

particular divine patroness of freedmen, pictured alongside him. The described painting plays upon the reader's expectations. For in the atrium, one might expect to see the lineage of the house, with *imagines*, wax masks of the owner's ancestors, on display. The masks were not only representations of the dead, or "advertising tools of a few families;" instead, they are a representation of the prestige of the house, of the longevity and influence of the familial line.³³⁷ Trimalchio is the first in his line, and while his sons and grandsons might be able to enter fully into the world of freeborn citizens, and in time establish their own lineage, Trimalchio has none. He has no *imagines*, and his past is his own creation. He creates this persona in large part through the decoration of his house, and while the description of these paintings in the text serves many ends, it does not seem to be strange that a patron would use paintings in this manner, although Trimalchio makes the connection more concrete than would most.

While in the eyes of freeborn Romans, Trimalchio is forever an inferior, marked by his previous status, an experience that "destroyed his honor and irreversibly degraded his mind and body," this does not prevent him from crafting a public persona.³³⁸ Indeed, the aim of his autobiographical program appears to be just this. For his story, both depicted and spoken, is heavily redacted.³³⁹ No mention is made of his life before his purchase by his master, nor does he allude to any previous familial connections. Instead, Trimalchio presents himself as a man who made a fortune through a careful combination of wit, perseverance, and luck, a

³³⁷ Harriet I. Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 23.

³³⁸ Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 66.

³³⁹ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 76-77.

notion that he underscores visually through his association with Minerva, Mercury, and Fortuna. This visual message is apparent enough, but its articulation is perhaps uncouth. For while, as we have discussed, ambiguity affords the patron a degree of distance from mythological themes, preventing him or her from falling under suspicion of *hubris*; programs present possibilities. The viewer is invited to entertain many thoughts, some of which might be subversive, but none of which are stated outright. This is not the case in Trimalchio's atrium. The careful labeling of his paintings ensures that misapprehension is impossible, thus attempting to eradicate the very multi-valenced nature that makes paintings a useful communicative tool.³⁴⁰

Trimalchio seems to understand *that* paintings are an important component of a respectable house, but not precisely what these paintings are meant to *do* and how they are meant to do it. Or, if he does understand, he subverts traditions to his own ends. We see this at work in the remainder of his described visual program. The atrium is visually overwhelming, to the extent that Encolpius is only able to give fleeting attention to the remaining paintings in the space. They are apparently difficult to identify, and thus our protagonist seeks out the help of an attendant, who informs him that the paintings between those detailing Trimalchio's life and the impressive *lararium* that dominates the end of the portico are "scenes from the *Iliad*

³⁴⁰ The text imagines a painted narrative as an actual narrative; the insertion of words into the image acts as a reminder of the ekphrasis undertaken in the text. Labels in Pompeian images are a potential avenue for future research, as they appear to attempt to mediate the ambiguity that seems to be at the heart of social performances. Such ambiguity, Petronius would argue, is dangerous; equally dangerous is mimetic quality of illusionistic painting. This is an idea to be explored.

and the *Odyssey*. . . and the gladiator games given by Laenas.”³⁴¹ Together with reminding the reader once more of the Homeric undertones of the narrative, the connection of *Iliad* with *Odyssey* with gladiatorial combat is likely another indicator of Trimalchio’s disconnection from expectations. For, as we have discussed, it is typical for images in a space to have some sort of common thread. And while, as in the House of the Seven Skeletons, it is common to introduce an unlikely third image into a room with a pair of clearly connected scenes, thus inviting the viewer to reconsider his or her understanding of all three imaginal spaces, the games of Laenas seem an incongruous third for scenes from Homer. Shelley Hales suggests that it is the mix of “high and low culture” that jars the reader.³⁴² Certainly, it seems that there is an intelligibility problem. For while Encolpius is hardly an ideal narrator, he elsewhere seems to be tolerably capable of identifying images.³⁴³ His reliance upon an outside interpreter may point not as much to his shortcomings as a viewer as to the disjunction within the program itself.

Yet, as is consistently the case in Petronius’s narrative, Trimalchio’s apparent misunderstanding of elite culture invites the reader to critique not only the Trimalchio, but elite culture itself. As it stands, the program of paintings in Petronius’s atrium seems analogous to one of Lewis Carroll’s impossible questions. What do gladiators have to do with Troy? Why is a raven like a writing desk? While Carroll’s famous question was never meant to have a single answer, its very absurdity prompts thought. The same can be said for houses in Pompeii. As Hales

³⁴¹ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 41.

³⁴² Hales, “Freedman’s Cribs,” 171.

³⁴³ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, 88-89.

notes, the choice on the part of a Pompeian homeowner to portray the amphitheatre riot of 59 CE is equally strange. As she asks, “Why on earth did one homeowner think that the amphitheater riot of AD 59 would look good in his living room? Did he have some personal connection with the riot? Had he started it?”³⁴⁴

To argue any further about the motivations of a fictional character in decorating his equally fictional house is perhaps stretching a point, but much as the inclusion of realistically depicted jewelry in Pompeian paintings invites the viewer to conflate real and imaginal space, Petronius’s layered text, by referencing real world fashions and contexts, encourages the reader to re-frame her understanding of the world around her. As we proposed in Chapter Three, it is more useful to ask not what art represents, but what art *does*. When we ask ourselves what programs do, one of the answers must certainly be: programs invite us to think. While I do not intend to suggest that Trimalchio’s paintings were intended to be representative of an appropriate program, in an interesting way, by misunderstanding the point of putting multiple paintings in a space, he manages to create a visual conundrum that might nevertheless succeed in prompting thought on the part of the viewer, thus, in the end, managing to achieve the goal of programmatic spaces, even if unknowingly. This thought might serve as a cautionary note for modern viewers of Pompeian spaces. Many of the houses in Pompeii were not owned by elites; it is likely that their owners, like Trimalchio, did not manage to garner the respect of their elite

³⁴⁴ Hales, “Freedman’s Cribs,” 171. There might be good reason to depict the fight if one wished to align oneself with a faction –likely the Samnite faction—within Pompeii’s social fabric. There appears to have been something of a long-standing feud between the Nuceriaans and the Pompeians, stretching back into the pre-colonial period, and these tensions might be at the core of the amphitheater riots.

counterparts. Indeed, as is the case concerning Trimalchio's readings of his own display pieces, the programs of their houses might have been subject, on occasion, to misreading. But this does not mean that their programs and their spaces cannot be read, and it does not mean that they failed to achieve their own ends.

In fact, while Trimalchio's ability to plan a program may leave something to be desired, he does appear to be conversant in the expectations for some dinner party behavior. With the festivities in full swing, and after many mimetically complicated interjections and discussions, Trimalchio describes his self-proclaimed passion: silver. Although he does not bring forth the silver goblets and bowls that he discusses, the discussion itself is what is useful for our purposes, not because it offers us an opportunity to laugh at Trimalchio, but because it models a mode of competition practiced in the dinner party setting. As we mentioned in Chapter Four, interpretation might well have been a group endeavor in Pompeii, and Trimalchio's discussion of his cup demonstrates for us how this interaction might have been prompted.

Trimalchio, not unlike Encolpius, is eager to display his erudition. Thus, when one of Trimalchio's guests admires an impressive Corinthian bronze platter used to serve drinks, Trimalchio is quick to provide an account, somewhat garbled, about the platter's origins. Rife with punning, the story leads him into another, and then another, until we hear of the man's silver collection. He describes engraved bowls depicting the story of Cassandra who, by his reckoning murdered her sons. He goes on to describe another scene in which Daedalus locks Niobe into the Trojan

Horse. He rates his collection so highly that he states that he wouldn't trade it for "cash down."³⁴⁵

In typical fashion, Trimalchio understands and misunderstands simultaneously. For while we are often in the dark concerning the nature of humor in the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio's interpretational missteps in this scene are clear. Cassandra did not have any children, nor did she murder them. The acts that Trimalchio describes might better be attributed to Medea. And while Niobe did famously suffer through the death of her children, she was not present in Troy, nor was Daedalus. Instead, the depicted scene Trimalchio references could very well be one that is attested to in Pompeii—Daedalus presenting his mechanism to Pasiphae in advance of her copulation with a bull. Thus, once again, the erudite reader is given the chance to compare herself to Trimalchio, and to reassure herself of her greater knowledge and thus, perhaps, her continued superiority. However, the episode is illustrative not only of Trimalchio's lack of information about mythological scenes, it also presents to us a social performance. One does not only look at things at dinner parties, one talks about them, and in so doing, displays knowledge. Indeed, Trimalchio seems to understand that the true social worth of the bowls is not in their monetary value but in their ability to allow such performances. It is very nearly out of character for the freedman to suggest that he would prefer to maintain a possession rather than to obtain "cash down," for as we shall explore below, ready cash is central to Trimalchio's success. Instead, we see here an indication of the utility of depicted scenes in social negotiation. Trimalchio

³⁴⁵ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 56.

understands that such performances are necessary—indeed that they may be more valuable than actual money—but the success of the performance depends on assets that are as yet beyond his reach.

Just as Trimalchio's decorations, and his explanations of them, do not appear to be in keeping with the purposes of such adornments elsewhere, his house itself is a puzzle. The symmetrical nature of the House of the Seven Skeletons does not only give visitors, invited and uninvited alike, lines of sight into multiple portions of the house, it allows them to navigate their way through the space. Trimalchio's house is immediately confusing, even unsettling.³⁴⁶ Its labyrinthine passages and obscured lines of sight leave the visitor confused, requiring a guide to navigate from the atrium into the dining room.³⁴⁷ This gives the owner the ability to dictate which portions of his home are accessible to his guests and which are closed to them, and with that control comes the possibility of power. He can choose to show them the most impressive rooms, and he can keep them from areas he does not wish to share, much as his account of his life highlights his accomplishments with wealth management and downplays his early history, leaving his familial line entirely unmentioned. While for an elite reader, this redacted life history was likely a marker of Trimalchio's social inferiority, we should pause to consider the implications of the text's commentary on control and accessibility. Trimalchio elects to control access to portions of his house, and his past, by the erection of physical barriers. There are more walls than usual in his house, making it difficult to navigate.

³⁴⁶ Hales, "Freedmen's Cribs," 169.

³⁴⁷ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 30.5.

While Petronius's text is not meant to accurately describe an existing house, we do see similar processes at work in Pompeii. In the Villa of the Mysteries, the architecture of the villa prevents direct physical or visual access to Room 5. It is unlikely that a guest could stumble upon it; while they might not have been offered a uniformed slave as a guide into the space, first time visitors likely would have required some variety of escort through the house to join a gathering in the space. And while Room O in the House of the Seven Skeletons was visually accessible even from the street, to be invited through the atrium and into the peristyle would have required a similar invitation. As we discussed, the interest in sight and self-presentation articulated throughout the House of the Seven Skeletons is evident in paintings from multiple rooms of the house, some of which would not have been visible simultaneously. Thus, while rooms could inform each other, only those invited into multiple rooms of the house, perhaps over multiple visits, would be aware of this cross communication. Even in the case of those rooms that were readily visible architecturally, the owner could choose to impede visual access by the introduction of a curtain, or by simply closing a door, thus choosing when and how to allow visitors to interpret the space. Curtains and doors offer opportunities to the owner of a space, allowing him or her to decide which lines of sight to make available at what times. Unlike walls, they can be opened and closed at will. Trimalchio, with his typical non-traditional thinking, expounds upon the theme of accessibility. If big is good, then bigger is better. And if it is a good idea to control access with a curtain, certainly a wall would be a more effective barrier. He understands the function of the curtain, but not the purpose.

If the house is an extension of the self, as Bettina Bergmann suggests, then what does this tell us about Trimalchio?³⁴⁸ As a literary tool, it parallels the freedman's own description of his life. The need for guides, the constant textual and shouted reminders of the behavior that Trimalchio expects from his guests are unexpected to his marginally cultured visitors, part of what makes Trimalchio, for them, an object of ridicule. But, as John Elsner argues, Trimalchio is not the only figure that the text puts on trial. Encolpius's responses to Trimalchio, and thus the reader's, are also called into question. As Elsner puts it, "Not only is culture itself seen through the distorting mirror of satire, but also are all standard responses to culture."³⁴⁹ It is difficult to untangle the web of interlocking commentaries that are at the core of the text. But we can approach the problem through a series of examples. In order for the reader to mock Trimalchio, they must be familiar with the processes he mimics. He seeks decadence because he sees decadence. He buys what is fashionable for precisely that reason—it is fashionable. He throws lavish dinner parties, because lavish dinner parties are useful tools of advancement. So, while the text critiques Trimalchio's mode of performance, it also casts aspersions upon the performances themselves. Trimalchio is a larger than life figure, meant to make visible the mechanisms at play throughout Petronius's social world. If Trimalchio is ridiculous, then so are the social elites he aspires to join. For, as Brian Krostenko suggests, the dinner party "permitted the host to act the part of patron, to

³⁴⁸ Bettina Bergmann, "The Roman House as Memory Theater: The House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii," *The Art Bulletin* 76.2 (June 1994), 225.

³⁴⁹ John Elsner, "Seductions of Art: Encolpius and Eumolpus in a Neronian Picture Gallery" *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 39 (1995), 42.

put his own wealth on display, and to create a microcosm of the social order.”³⁵⁰ If Trimalchio’s party is a microcosm of the order of Petronius’s social reality, then the world is in upheaval.

The Art of Competition: Fortunata’s Jewelry, Elite Anxieties, and The Potentials of Deviance

The decoration of Trimalchio’s house focuses more on expense of materials and upon visual impressiveness than it does on mental processes. Indeed, the materials that surround the freedman are used to provide the reader with insight into his nature. But while the slave girl Quartilla describes Trimalchio as *lautissimus*, the words that he uses to describe others are equally of interest. As we noted above, Trimalchio is interested in the worth of items. The more expensive something is, the more desirable. He expresses the extent of his pleasure in his silver bowls not in terms of emotion, but in terms of money. He wouldn’t trade them, or his interest in them, for ready cash. He applies the same rhetoric to people. As the dinner party progresses, guests take turn sharing stories, with Trimalchio interjecting at intervals in a continual display of one-upmanship. It is in such an interlude that Trimalchio tells a story from his youth, a tale of witches and body snatching that is beyond our purview here. What is of interest is Trimalchio’s description of the boy, a favorite of his former master, who is at the center of the story. To detail his charms, Trimalchio likens him to a prestige object; he is, in

³⁵⁰ Krostenko, *Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance*, 1.

Trimalchio's estimation, *margarita*, a pearl.³⁵¹ Trimalchio esteems the boy as "clever as hell and good as good," and the concept with which he is best able to convey that esteem is through actual valuation.³⁵² This connection between what is good and what is valuable is consistent throughout the *Cena Trimalchionis*. John Bodel postulates that for freedmen, reality is figured, "in precise denominations of hard coin."³⁵³ Thus, when alluding to a dinner guest's wealth, the man is not simply described as wealthy, instead he is "worth a cool half million."³⁵⁴ Given this interest in the monetary value of individuals, it is not surprising to find that jewelry is discussed multiple times throughout the narrative. Much as the wall paintings help Trimalchio to construct his preferred persona, jewelry is a tool used by the women of Trimalchio's circle both to interject themselves into the narrative and to craft themselves as freedwomen.

Trimalchio's wife Fortunata is introduced, much like Trimalchio, through gossip. Indeed, Encolpius turns to his dinner partner with the expressed aim of talking about his fellow guests. Guests were no less a part of the visual milieu of the dinner party than paintings or silver bowls, and Encolpius's exchange with his dinner partner highlights this. Encolpius, seeing a woman bustling around the room, asks who she is. The question itself is somewhat suspect, for if knowledge is the currency of parties, then Encolpius's lack of it is detrimental. While Encolpius has no desire to be a member of Trimalchio's in-group, his lack of knowledge does

³⁵¹ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 63.3.

³⁵² Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 69.

³⁵³ John Bodel, "Omnia in nummis: Money and the Monetary Economy in Petronius," in *Moneta, mercanti, banchieri. I precedenti greci e romani dell'Euro*, edited by G. Urso (Pisa: Fondazione Niccolò Canussio, 2003), 273.

³⁵⁴ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 49.

mark him as an outsider. Nevertheless, the gossip between diners that we see modeled in this scene allows us to add another dimension to our reconstruction of group dynamics in dinner parties. Discussion is a key component of status negotiation within this space, and that discussion might center equally upon other diners as on mythological subjects.

Fortunata, we are told, is aptly named for “she counts her cash by the cartload.”³⁵⁵ She is deeply involved in Trimalchio’s affairs, and he trusts her implicitly. She is shrewd, frugal, and apt to gossip, her sharp tongue a deterrent to those she does not care for. Like her husband, she has an inauspicious background. Encolpius’s dining partner intimates that she may have been some variety of prostitute.³⁵⁶ In some ways, our introduction to Fortunata is a mirror of our introduction to Trimalchio. While both are described to us through gossip, in the case of Trimalchio, the gossip describes his wealth as a stand in for his character. It falls to the man himself to put forth the deeds for which he wishes to be known. Conversely, while Fortunata is described as wealthy, her accouterments go unmentioned. It is her deeds—her sharp wit and sharper tongue—that distinguish her to others.

Yet Fortunata’s own self-presentation depends greatly upon adornments. While she is mentioned in passing at multiple points during the dinner party, it is only with the entrance of Habinnas, Trimalchio’s close friend, that Fortunata joins the party proper. Her re-entrance is heralded by a company of slaves, who announce her, and it is as she joins the party that we receive our first description of

³⁵⁵ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith 46.

³⁵⁶ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 46.

her. While we learn something of Trimalchio's general visage early on—he is both overweight and bald—this description of Fortunata centers almost exclusively on her adornments. She wears a pale green sash, tied high on her waist to allow the viewer to see both her red tunic and her twisted gold anklets. Her slippers are gold. As she sits to talk with her friend, Habinnas's wife Scintilla, she draws further attention to her jewelry by taking it off. First the bracelets, then her anklets, and finally her hair net, which she announced to the party was made of woven gold.³⁵⁷

Her jewelry creates a space for her in a company from which until this point she has been excluded. It announces her presence with as much certainty as the heralds. By taking these adornments off, ostensibly to allow her friend to admire them, Fortunata draws further attention to herself, interjecting an erotic charge to the proceedings by removing these visual boundary markers. While the phrasing of the scene makes it seem likely that such a display was unusual, it allows Petronius to maintain the thematic connection between human worth and wealth. For when Petronius sees that Fortunata is inclined to show off her jewelry, he heightens the spectacle, ordering her to pass it to him so that he may have it weighed in sight of the guests. He is concerned, as is his wont, with monetary specificity. The value of the gold is in its weight, which he declares to be no less than six and a half pounds, a mere fraction of his yearly revenues.³⁵⁸

This interest in the real world value of his wife's adornments may stem from practical concerns. For, as Trimalchio's dinner winds to a close, he tells his guests the story of how he made his fortunes. Although most of his tale focuses on his own

³⁵⁷ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 67.4-67.7

³⁵⁸ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 67.7-67.8.

business acumen, he mentions a setback, shortly after his manumission. He built five ships, all of which sank, and in order to rebuild and re-equip a new fleet, Fortunata sold her jewelry. He recalls that she “sold her gold and the clothes off her back and put a hundred gold coins in the palm of my hand.”³⁵⁹ Fortunata’s jewelry is a form of capital both social and fiscal. Like the pearl Vitellius pawned to make his foray into Gaul, Fortunata’s jewelry is a source of ready money, should the need arise once more. And for freedwomen, the ability to accumulate wealth is itself a marker of the shift in their social status. As Rebecca Flemming notes, in the case of women, there are strong links between prostitution and slavery. What profit results from her activities is not her own. Others benefit from her “initial and recurrent sale.”³⁶⁰ Like her jewelry, Fortunata herself was once a resource.

Fortunata’s initial jewelry was likely gifted to her, either by her master or by a wealthy client.³⁶¹ Indeed, as we have noted before, there are strong ties in the mind of male Roman authors between women’s adornment and prostitution. Respectable matrons might turn to lovers to supply the jewelry that their husbands could not, and over adornment might be the mark that such an arrangement had already been reached. Thus, while Fortunata’s jewelry is useful to her, and to her husband, and while it is unquestionably a marker of their wealth, it also marks her as a potential woman of ill-repute. However, given her previous station, this may not be a concern for Fortunata. Indeed, the amount of jewelry that she wears may also point to the fact that while she was once obliged to work for her earnings, in

³⁵⁹ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 82.

³⁶⁰ Rebecca Flemming, “Quae Corpore Quaestum Facit: The Sexual Economy of Female Prostitution,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1999), 41-42.

³⁶¹ For more on gifts from clients see Flemming, “Sexual Economy,” 49.

whatever capacity this occurred, she need do so no longer. The weight of her jewelry and the nature of her dress would both make manual labor all but impossible. While her actions may resonate with the erotic potentials of her past life, the physical presence of her jewelry suggests that she has moved past it. It now exists to reinforce both the wealth that makes her lifestyle possible and what might be her primary social resource—physical attractiveness. As Anne Haas and Stanford Gregory argue, for women, especially attractive women, beauty is itself a social resource that “gives them a power of display, or referent power, and influence.”³⁶² It is through her physical presence that a woman like Fortunata can elicit reactions from others.

Fortunata’s jewelry is also a locus of competition and an object of envy. She shows it to Scintillia in part, it would seem, to elicit such a response. And she is not disappointed, for upon Trimalchio’s pronouncement of the weight—and therefore the value—of Fortunata’s gold, Scintilla “not to be outdone” offers up her own jewelry for comparison. We are given little description of Scintilla’s clothing, or of Scintilla generally, but as was the case with Fortunata, a description of the woman’s jewelry seems to be adequate to convey information about the woman herself. In the case of Scintilla the jewelry in question is a locket, worn about her neck. When opened, the locket is found to contain a pair of earrings. They are *crotalia*, gold earrings with pearl pendants of the type that we discussed in Chapter Four. Scintilla is obviously proud of the adornments. They were a gift from her husband, and she

³⁶² Anne Haas and Stanford W. Gregory, Jr., “The Impact of Physical Attractiveness on Women’s Social Status and Interactional Power,” *Sociological Forum* 20.3 (September, 2005), 464.

argues that they are superior to those of any other woman.³⁶³ And so then, we must ask ourselves a question. Why does she wear them in a locket, rather than in her ears? What does she gain by keeping them hidden? The answer is at least partially straightforward. Freedwomen were not allowed to wear pearls.³⁶⁴

As we discussed previously, sumptuary legislation is notoriously difficult to enforce. Yet, we see that Scintilla appears to adhere to it, at least nominally. And this is true elsewhere in the text. When Trimalchio makes his grand entrance into the party, carried on a litter, we are given a description of his dress. It reflects a curious combination of the dress expected of slaves and that of freeborn men. His hair, we are told, is cropped close to his head, in a manner expected of a slave. Yet his cloak is scarlet, and on the little finger of his left hand he wore a ring, apparently gold, but actually, Encolpius insists, gilt.³⁶⁵ Trimalchio could certainly afford a gold ring; indeed, he wears a bracelet of ivory and gold that was certainly far more costly. Yet, his own ring is imitation gold, not because he cannot obtain a gold ring, but because, the *Lex Visellia*, passed in 24 CE during the reign of Tiberius, prohibited freedmen from assuming the honors appropriate to freeborn men. The wearing of gold rings, often associated with public office, counted among those honors.³⁶⁶ And so we must ask ourselves two related questions. What did elite lawmakers have to gain from prohibiting Scintilla's pearls and Trimalchio's ring?

³⁶³ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 67.9-67.10.

³⁶⁴ Christiane Kunst, "Ornamenta Uxoriam: Badges of Rank or Jewellery of Roman Wives?" *The Medieval History Journal* 8, (2005), 138.

³⁶⁵ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 32-33.

³⁶⁶ Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 73.

The idea of fashion is inexorably intertwined with aspiration. For people like Trimalchio, expensive dyes, precious metals, and lavish parties are vehicles, a visual means by which to perform social acceptability. With their wealth comes greater visibility, and with that visibility comes the ability to influence public opinion through the benefactions mentioned above. Prohibited from public office, given stiff penalties for attempting to take up a position not his own—hence the lack of a gold ring—Trimalchio would appear to be little threat to elite structures of power. Yet, the very existence of sumptuary legislation suggests that the situation is less than straightforward. For if those in power feel the need to reinforce that power, proposing legislation that curtails the activities of putatively powerless individuals, then the structures of power themselves must be unstable, and luxury has made them so. For, as Alan Hunt posits, “Luxury . . . acts like a solvent, loosening and separating the social bonds conceived as necessary to sustain the community.”³⁶⁷ Indeed, for a society in which appearances matter greatly, the ability to buy luxury goods “brings to the fore potential tensions in self-definition: nothing could be absolute and certain.”³⁶⁸ Wealthy freedmen could buy all of the visual markers of ancestral wealth; only laws could attempt to define the boundaries between freedmen and free born.

³⁶⁷ Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Legislation* (London: MacMillan, 1996), 79.

³⁶⁸ Lauren Hackworth Petersen, “Clothes Make the Man: Dressing the Roman Freedman Body,” in *Bodies and Boundaries in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, edited by Thorsten Fögen and Mireille M. Lee (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 197.

	Volume
250-150 BCE:	4
200-150 BCE:	2
150-100 BCE:	4
100 BCE- 50 BCE:	4
50 BCE- 50 AD:	3

SUMPTUARY LEGISLATION

- 250-150 BCE: • 200-150 BCE:
- 150-100 BCE: • 100 BCE- 50 BCE:
- 50 BCE- 50 AD:


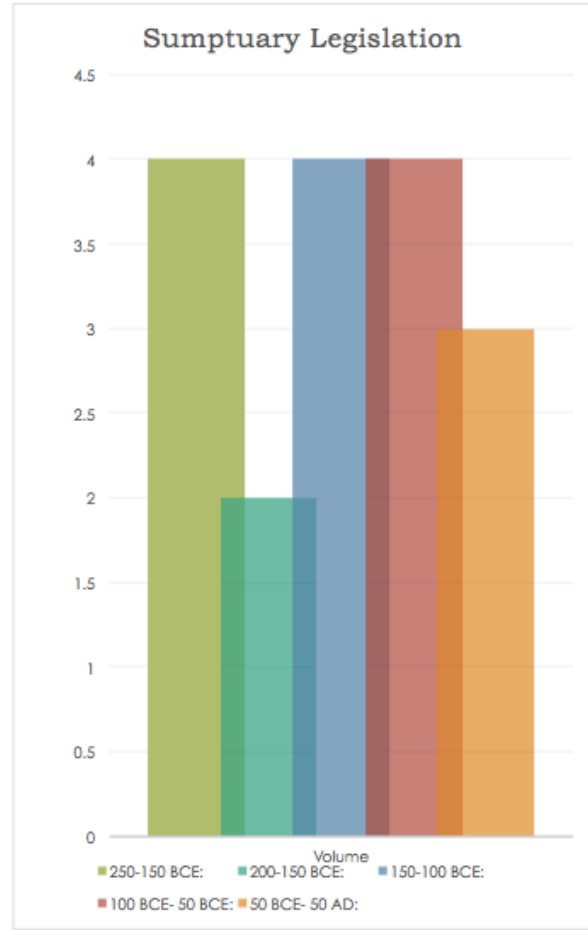



Figure 5.1: Graph depicting the volume of sumptuary legislation enacted in Rome by year. As noted below, there are increases in legislation enacted during times of social change.

Measures such as sumptuary laws are meant to reinforce hierarchies and are often enacted in times of social change (Figure 5.1). For, as Jonathan Edmondson has argued, the wearing of citizen dress is a tool of socialization as well as an “agent of social control.”³⁶⁹ While Edmondson focuses on the toga and the *stola* as

³⁶⁹ Jonathan Edmondson, “Public Dress and Social Control in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome,” 24.

mechanisms of power used to visually differentiate citizens from non-citizens through the creation of visual homogeneity, we could apply the same logic to the regulation of gold and pearls, particularly as these restrictions apply to freedmen. By restricting what it is possible for these men and women to wear, lawmakers attempt to restrict their access to higher echelons of Roman society. Freedmen might be granted citizenship, but they do not have the same rights as freeborn citizens, and this is made clear by such attempts to dictate their modes of dress.³⁷⁰ As we discussed in Chapter Four, in-group status is visually reinforced by similarities in dress practices, and while the decision not to abide by such dictates can be an arresting assertion of personal agency, the intention of laws such as the *Lex Visellia* is to curtail agency, to remind freedmen of their continued social inferiority.

Such laws achieve these ends in part through visual reinforcement. In their attempts to solidify the social positions of a traditional in-group, they create a visual out-group, and the official nature of the negotiation marks those of the out-group as deviants. As Howard Becker argues, deviants are not simply rule-breakers, individuals whose personality and situation in life makes them resist structures of authority. Instead, he proposes that society *creates* deviants. He writes, "Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders."³⁷¹ Laws like sumptuary legislation, and individuals like Encolpius, label individuals like

³⁷⁰ For more on the citizen status of freedmen see Garnsey and Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 120-121.

³⁷¹ Howard Becker, *The Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 6.

Trimalchio, Fortunata, and Scintilla as outsiders. And in the case of Scintilla, the law asks her to wear her difference.

The effects of such sartorial regulations resonate on multiple levels. For by conforming to the visual norms of the group that she wishes to enter, a woman like Scintilla has a means of visually asserting her desire for inclusion. It is this desire that makes deviant acts difficult. For while Scintilla has the material means to transgress, in so doing, she would mark herself as other. Thus, she opts to adhere to convention because her status is uncertain; she is not familiar enough with the workings of her new social station to understand how to circumvent the dictates that accompany it. And as we saw in the case of the Venus in the House of the Seven Skeletons, to take on the mantle of exceptionality is to invite comment, both positive and negative. Because Scintilla is not a member of the group she appears to wish to join, she therefore, must follow convention, lest she misstep in ways that would be impossible to overcome. For “to be a member of a society is often to know intuitively, almost unconsciously, but not to be able to explain, the rules by which a society operates.”³⁷² And Scintilla’s pearls, like Trimalchio’s paintings, might point to the fact that she lacks this intuition.

It is here that we must confront a conundrum. For the legislation that hinders Scintilla might also assist her. The sanctions that sumptuary legislation seeks to impose provide insight into the conservative dress practices of the times in which they are enacted. The legislation describes the desired look. We have seen this look in action. The restrained dress pictured on the women who gaze out at

³⁷² Krostenko, *Language of Social Performance*, 2.

Theseus in Room O in the House of the Seven Skeletons model the mode of dress that is preferred, according to the moral writings of the time. Yet, for all that she is more restrained in appearance than Fortunata, Scintilla seems to react against these laws. And to consider why she would want to, we must consider one of fashion's most ephemeral mechanisms: dissemination. For scholars working on more recent centuries, such discussions center around print media, on the periodicals printed with the explicit purpose of conveying information about the latest trends in color, cut, shape, and look to an extended audience. Indeed, the strong connections between modern print technologies—from the printing press to lithography to photography—and the quick pace of fashion change is one of the factors that has led some theorists to suggest that it is anachronistic to use the term fashion for the ancient world, as such technologies have been deemed necessary for the spread of information concerning shifts in trends. But as we have seen, Pompeian women were as apt to adopt new adornments as their more modern counterparts. Rather than relying upon representations of fashion to picture new looks, the women of Pompeii, and of Rome, likely turned to other women to determine how best to dress. The women of the imperial family were likely models; depicted evidence shows that their hairstyles, spread to the peninsula and the provinces through coinage and statuary, were readily adopted, at least in imagery. But for questions of color and style, it is likely that, even as today, smaller scale trends could be launched by influential women of any level. Scintilla does not only desire to be a member of acceptable Roman society, she wants to remain competitive within the group of which she is already a member. And to achieve that, she must contend with

Fortunata, and Fortunata's pounds of gold. Scintilla looks to Fortunata, and Fortunata's influence heightens her social standing.

Scintilla attempts to give the *appearance* of following the dictates of the law; to onlookers, she would perhaps look like a respectable matron, yet she owns pearls, perhaps subverting the intent of the law. Fortunata on the other hand appears to be in keeping with the law, none of her many gold jewelry pieces appear to have pearls attached, but the extent of her adornment marks her, if not as a prostitute, then as a woman who might be confused with one.³⁷³ Both women transgress social boundaries; both also attempt to adhere to social rules. As Lauren Hackworth Petersen argues in the case of Trimalchio's own confused codes of dress, such confusion is telling. These women, and Trimalchio, are in a state of flux; they were slaves, and now they are not. That very liminality is reflected in their dress. Petersen states, "The freedman body was not fixed, but in a continual process of change and modification; the slave body has become a citizen body."³⁷⁴

And over time, their adornments can take on new meanings. As Webb Keane notes, even when objects have an agreed upon meaning, these meanings need not remain stable. Because objects are open to interpretation, they can also take on new meanings over time, and can so become a locus of innovation.³⁷⁵ And we see such innovation at work on the bodies of Scintilla and Fortunata. Indeed, in Fortunata's case, her capacity for innovation might be heightened by her doubly liminal status.

³⁷³ On over adornment and the confusion that comes with it, see Kelly Olson, "Matrona and Whore: Clothing and Definition in Roman Antiquity" in *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, edited by Christopher A. Faraone and Laura McClure (Madison; University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 199.

³⁷⁴ Petersen, "Clothes Make the Man," 203.

³⁷⁵ Webb Keane, "The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2008), S124.

If she were some variety of prostitute in the past, then it would be even more difficult for her to integrate into society. Yet, as Kelly Olson notes, by the mid first century CE, women of all types enjoyed wearing adornments, leaving onlookers uncertain of whether or not the woman was a chaste matron or something else entirely.³⁷⁶ Much as Trimalchio's nonsense program might be a successful tool for thought, Fortunata's past might give her useful knowledge on how to deploy adornments. Like her husband, Fortunata attempts to set herself apart from those around her, inviting comment both positive and negative. The fact that she can bear this commentary is a mark of her status within her group. If she breaks rules, she is able to because her position within her group is stable. Indeed, the decision to willingly set aside a rule is a mark of power, and a sign that one understands unspoken social codes and their consequences. Knowledge allows for subversion, and it makes such subversion palatable.

Jupiter is Money in the Bank: A Brief Critique of Wealth as a Status Indicator

Petronius's satire enforces elite structures of power, even as it comments on their instability. For all that Scintilla's pearls and finery might help to underscore for her the fact that she now has the ability to choose what she wears, even to subvert the laws that attempt to reinforce her secondary social position, the episode is almost certainly meant to incite laughter, thus reassuring the well-read audience of their superiority. She can buy pearls, but she cannot overcome this external censure. This episode is one of many, all with a similar message. Wealth and status

³⁷⁶ Olson, "Matrona and Whore," 198.

are not synonyms. By creating a clear distinction between the two, Petronius reinforces a long-standing social distinction. As Mouritsen argues, hierarchy is at the heart of Roman society. He writes, “The stability and success of Rome was founded—at least from an elite perspective—on the maintenance of proper distinctions between people of different class and personal ability.”³⁷⁷ For men like Trimalchio and women like Fortunata and Scintilla, such distinctions were a stumbling block. While they might have wealth that far surpassed that of established elite families, the fact that they had once been enslaved marked them as social inferiors. Such distinctions are easy enough to describe, but to maintain them requires a certain amount of mental gymnastics. For, as we have noted previously, power in Rome depended in large part upon appearances, and the creation of a visually arresting public image required resources. But as Trimalchio’s story highlights, these resources were not only monetary. Indeed, over-reliance upon wealth might itself be at the root of the many problems throughout the whole of the *Satyricon*, a critique that attempts to “disconnect wealth and social distinction,” in order to remind the reader that “wealth in and of itself was an empty sign of prestige, significant perhaps to an individual and his peers but not to the elite.”³⁷⁸

What makes a mortal life worth living? What mediates our certain deaths? For Socrates and his dinner companions, the answer is love. For the freedmen who

³⁷⁷ Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 66.

³⁷⁸ Lauren Hackworth Petersen, *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 17-18.

sit around Trimalchio's table, the answer is money.³⁷⁹ The freedmen of Trimalchio's circle highlight money, actual coinage, as the means by which to ensure a comfortable life and a place in the world. Trimalchio concludes his description of his life, and the dinner party itself, with an assertion of the importance of money. He states his point outright: *assem habeas, assem valeas*.³⁸⁰ As long as you have money, everything is fine. Or in William Arrowsmith's excellent translation, "Money makes the man."³⁸¹ For Trimalchio, this statement is truthful. Freed slaves were not eligible to stand for public office, and thus were "prohibited from participating fully in Roman society and rising within its ranks."³⁸² Only through the accumulation of wealth could a man like Trimalchio hope to gain social distinction in his community. For while he was prohibited from holding office, Trimalchio could still act as a benefactor, taking on public works projects and funding spectacles that would gain the approval of the public, setting the stage for his sons, should he have any, to take their place within the ranks of the wealthy freeborn, to whom public offices would not be denied.

Trimalchio's emphasis on and interest in his wealth is entirely logical. But as we mentioned above, interest in money is a point of tension between traditional elites and sub-elites like Trimalchio. For even as Encolpius sneers at Trimalchio's heavy-handed application of his wealth, he still partakes of Trimalchio's food and drink, for otherwise he will go without a meal. A certain amount of wealth is

³⁷⁹ One could very easily write a book on the interesting connections between Plato's *Symposium* and Petronius's *Satyricon*. For a foray into the topic see Averil Cameron, "Petronius and Plato," *The Classical Quarterly* 19.2 (November, 1969), 367-370.

³⁸⁰ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 77.6.

³⁸¹ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 83.

³⁸² Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 18.

necessary. It is how to use that wealth that is the question. Both Trimalchio and Encolpius have difficulties determining which situations require a display of wealth and which depend upon insider knowledge. But in the case of Encolpius such difficulties are more disastrous, because unlike Trimalchio, Encolpius is not hampered by the social stigma of former enslavement. When Encolpius misapplies wealth, we are shown the extent to which the problem of the conflation of wealth and status has become endemic.

Near the end of our extant text, Encolpius, through a convoluted series of unfortunate events, manages to kill one of Priapus's sacred geese. The priestess of Priapus, Oenothea, accosts him, attempting to impress upon him the gravity of the situation. One might think that Encolpius would be well aware of the dangers of incurring the wrath of Priapus. Indeed, it was Priapus who started Encolpius on the odyssey of the flesh that comprises the text of the *Satyricon*. Yet, Encolpius, in a manner not unlike Trimalchio, attempts to give a monetary value to the god's potential anger. Assuming that Oenothea is angered over the loss of the animal itself, Encolpius offers to buy her an ostrich, a gift of greater cost, and thus, to his thinking, greater importance. She answers his offer with a prayer that details the merits of money. The final lines state, "The moral is: money, money, money. It pays to pray: Jupiter is money in the bank."³⁸³ The prayer itself is suggestive. Other heroes might be remembered for their deeds, but in the world of the *Satyricon*, money is the signifier of worth. Yet, this prayer, if it is spoken, achieves disastrous results. Encolpius is punished severely for his attempts to propitiate the gods with

³⁸³ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 159.

cash. The moral might be money, but as Petronius insists throughout, the world is so undone that the moral is meaningless.

Interestingly, unlike Encolpius, Trimalchio seems to be somewhat aware of what is required, although he does not have the depth of knowledge required to demonstrate full group membership, at least in elite circles. He is aware that wit is an essential component of the dinner party performance, although his wit appears to fall short of the mark. Likewise, he knows that it is not enough to own silver bowls, he must discuss their decoration in such a way as to display his erudition. And while he does not meet the standards set by members of the upper class, he does impress those within his circle, and this appears to be deliberate. Trimalchio is certainly interested in garnering the social respect of those in elite social circles, but he is simultaneously engaged in maintaining his privileged position in his own group. His knowledge of elite dining ritual is a tool in this regard, as is the very wealth that appears to be so problematic.

It is too simplistic to reduce Petronius's text to boorish freedmen and sexual escapades. While Trimalchio is gauche and Encolpius remains unrestrained, by considering the situations described from multiple angles, as the text invites us to do through the use of allusion and intertextuality, we are able to afford agency to figures like Trimalchio. By confronting the complexities of the text, we are able to apply a more flexible framework to our understanding of the social operations within Pompeian houses, one which allows us to begin to consider non-elite houses on their own terms, without transporting elite biases into our interpretations. Trimalchio's actions do not always conform to elite expectations, but this does not

mean that he is not a successful social actor. When considering the decoration of houses in Pompeii, and the depiction of dressed persons in those houses, we would do well to view their walls from a similar perspective. While there may be codes of visual conduct that are important to a particular subset of viewers, this should not suggest to us that all patrons conform to the same standards, or that they do so in the same ways. Where deviation is evident, it may be deliberate, rather than a misunderstanding. When we do encounter the unexpected, there is more to be gained from asking what is different and why, and to put forth a new reading of the space based on the evidence at hand, than to state that the patron misunderstood the system.

Trimalchio's social aspirations lead him to seek entry into the upper echelons of society, but his means of access—his wealth—is not sufficient. Yet, within his own group, Trimalchio is the acknowledged leader. The outside world may deride him, but within his circle, his ability to influence is unquestionable. This disparity is a reminder. In-group and out-group differentiations are not the only type of social negotiation undertaken. Within a group, individuals also seek prestige. To maintain in-group hierarchies is as competitive a process as that described between groups. It is to this part of the social equation that we now turn, describing both the mechanism by which Trimalchio was consistently denied access, and the means by which individuals within a group could distinguish themselves. It is not wealth, but knowledge that separates the socially adept from the uninitiated. To see this distinction in action, we will now focus our attention on a final domestic space: the House of Jason.

CHAPTER SIX

Perception, Interpretation, and Censure in the House of Jason

When Encolpius makes his way into Trimalchio's house, he is met with a trick. A guard dog, straining against its leash leaps out at him; it is only as he stumbles back in fright, that he realizes that the beast is no danger—for it is a painting. His inability to differentiate between reality and depiction makes him an object of ridicule.³⁸⁴ This is made clear to him, and to the reader, by laughter. The group's knowledge that the dog is not real, coupled with Encolpius's *faux pas*, allows them the opportunity to assert social dominance over Encolpius in a performance of power that reinforces intra-group bonds in part by excluding Encolpius from the merriment, however brief his intellectual exile. This episode adds a new dimension to our discussion, reminding us—as did the observer figures in Chapter Four—that viewing does not occur in a vacuum. But while Chapter Four posited that Romans might have considered viewing to be a group activity, a supposition that is supported by contemporary accounts concerned with the act of looking, it did not explore the interplay between these viewers, nor did it take into account what happens when viewers disagree on an interpretation.

³⁸⁴ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 29.1-29.3.

As we discussed in Chapter Five, the dinner party provides an ideal situation allowing us to confront these interactions; it is removed from the eyes of the masses, but is a stage for performance amongst intimates, the very people an individual might be most invested in impressing. Such spaces appear to be governed by a modified set of social conventions, as the adornment practices of Fortunata and the tenor of Trimalchio's interactions with his guests seem to suggest; yet even amongst social equals, there exists a desire for distinction, and much effort is put into the process of crafting and maintaining in-group hierarchies. But what is the result of these observations? Where do they lead us? To consider these questions, we turn our attention in this final chapter to the House of Jason.

Trimalchio's atrium highlights a disjunction between acceptable and unacceptable deployment of visual convention, as well as reminding us of the very real distinction between money and status. His labeled insertion of himself into the realm of the gods is not entirely unlike visual programs that we see in Pompeii; in the Villa of the Mysteries, as we have discussed, the use of realistic modes of dress for both mortal and potentially immortal women blurs the boundaries between matron and goddess. Similarly, in the House of the Seven Skeletons, the viewer is encouraged to self-consciously consider the act of viewing through the use of depictions of normative real-world dress practices in mythological scenes. Yet, we presume that these visual expressions are acceptable, for they are repeated throughout Pompeii. What then, distinguishes Trimalchio from the owners of the Villa of the Mysteries?

Such questions are impossible to answer with certainty. But to modern eyes, a key distinction must be in the presentation of the idea. Both Trimalchio and the patron of Room 5 wish to highlight a connection between mortals and immortals that serves to boost personal status. Trimalchio states this connection baldly. His painting is labeled; there can be no doubt that it tells his story. Room 5, on the other hand, is notoriously difficult to interpret with certainty. It is deliberately ambiguous.

The notion of deliberate ambiguity is the bedrock of this final chapter. To explore the concept, we will turn our attention to the House of Jason, arguing that its sophisticated program, unexpected in a house of its size and appointment, suggests a system of status performance that depends not on monetary resources, but on knowledge differentials. The House of Jason is of interest for many reasons, but for our purposes there are two that merit explicit mention. First, several paintings in the House of Jason seem to reflect on the disjunction between knowing and not knowing; thus the paintings in this house themselves appear to interact with the assertion that access to information is a key component of the process of social performance and in-group prestige display. Second, the preserved paintings from the House of Jason refer to stories with multiple extant versions, making the potential valences of these works more accessible to a modern audience, an audience that might otherwise be part of the large group that is without the level of knowledge required to move past ambiguity into understanding.

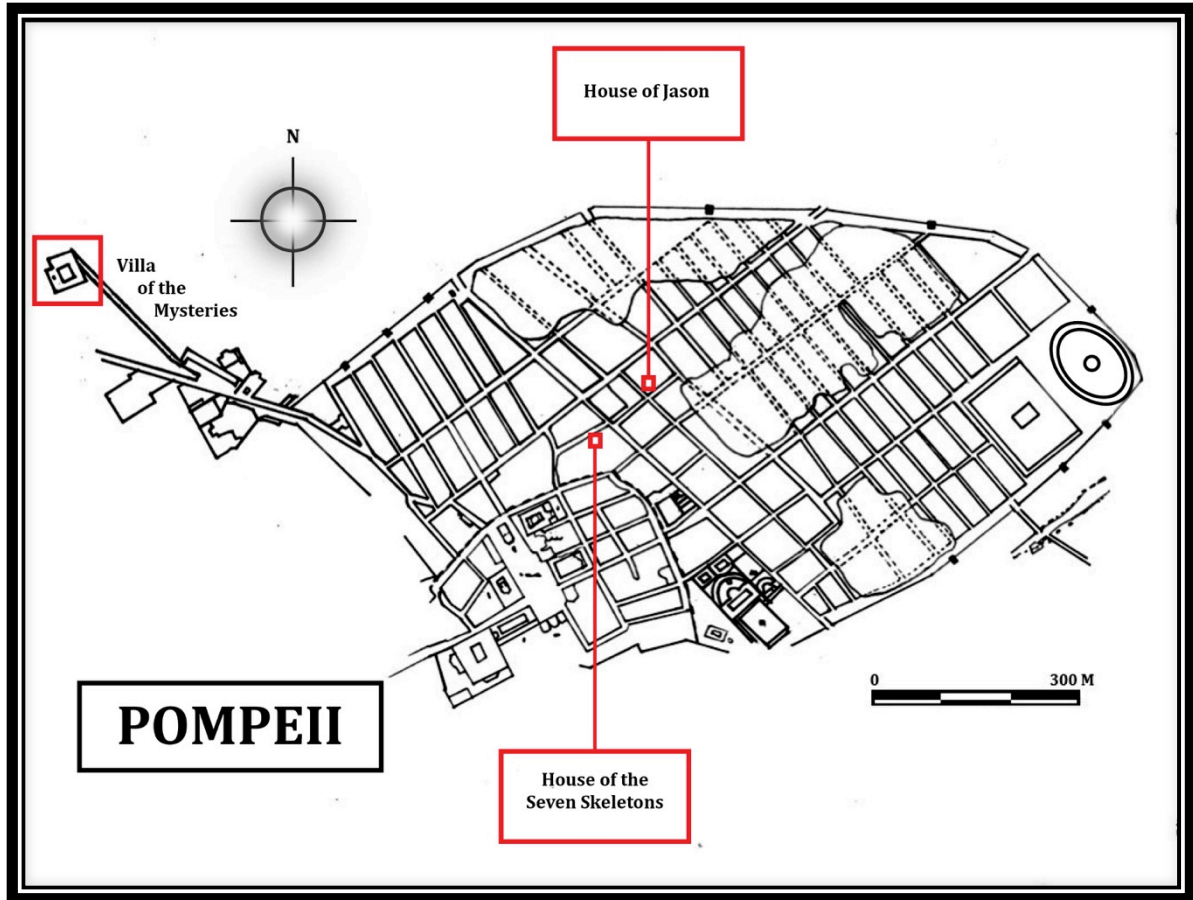


Figure 6.1: Map of Pompeii indicating the location of the House of Jason, the House of the Seven Skeletons, and the Villa of the Mysteries.
After Cassanelli et al 2002, General Map of Pompeii, p. 58-59.

To explore the relationships between knowledge, ambiguity, and the performance of prestige in the House of Jason, we begin by exploring the house itself, arguing that the apparent disjunction between the modest architecture and the intricately articulated visual program of the house can offer insight into the social sphere of sub-elites. We then discuss two of the best preserved programs of the house to suggest that, while superficial semiotics and attempts to illustrate texts with Pompeian paintings and to identify figures using texts can limit the scope of the

questions modern scholars can pose to our material, in the hands of an erudite Pompeian viewer, an understanding of the contemporary literary corpus could be a social asset. We conclude by considering the question of deception, drawing parallels between the jocular interplay of dressed figures in Room E with the use of costume jewelry and cosmetics by women of the real world to discuss the social boundaries of ambiguity and its ability to support the construction and maintenance of a public persona.

Unpacking the House of Jason: Looking Beyond Expectations

Unpretentious and unassuming, the House of Jason (XI.5.18) is nevertheless something of a conundrum (Figure 6.1). On the surface, it might seem an odd space with which to explore the concepts of power display and social performance. The house lacks many of the architectural features that are often tied to the articulation of prestige in the *domus*. It has no definite *tablinum*, no true peristyle no garden (Figure 6.2). Yet although it does not have the scale of the House of the Faun, nor the ornate decoration of the House of the Vetii, it does boast an intricately interlaced series of visual programs that hint at erudition—and its potential correlate social standing—if not wealth. The House of Jason is best known for the eight panel paintings that were removed from it in 1878, and given the poor state of preservation of the surviving plaster in the house, it is perhaps fortuitous that, following the conventions of the time, the panel paintings that once adorned the walls of Rooms E, F, and G were instead housed in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. While these paintings are my primary concern here, they do

not exist in isolation; even given the poor state of preservation of the house, it is useful to contextualize them before turning our attention to interpretation.

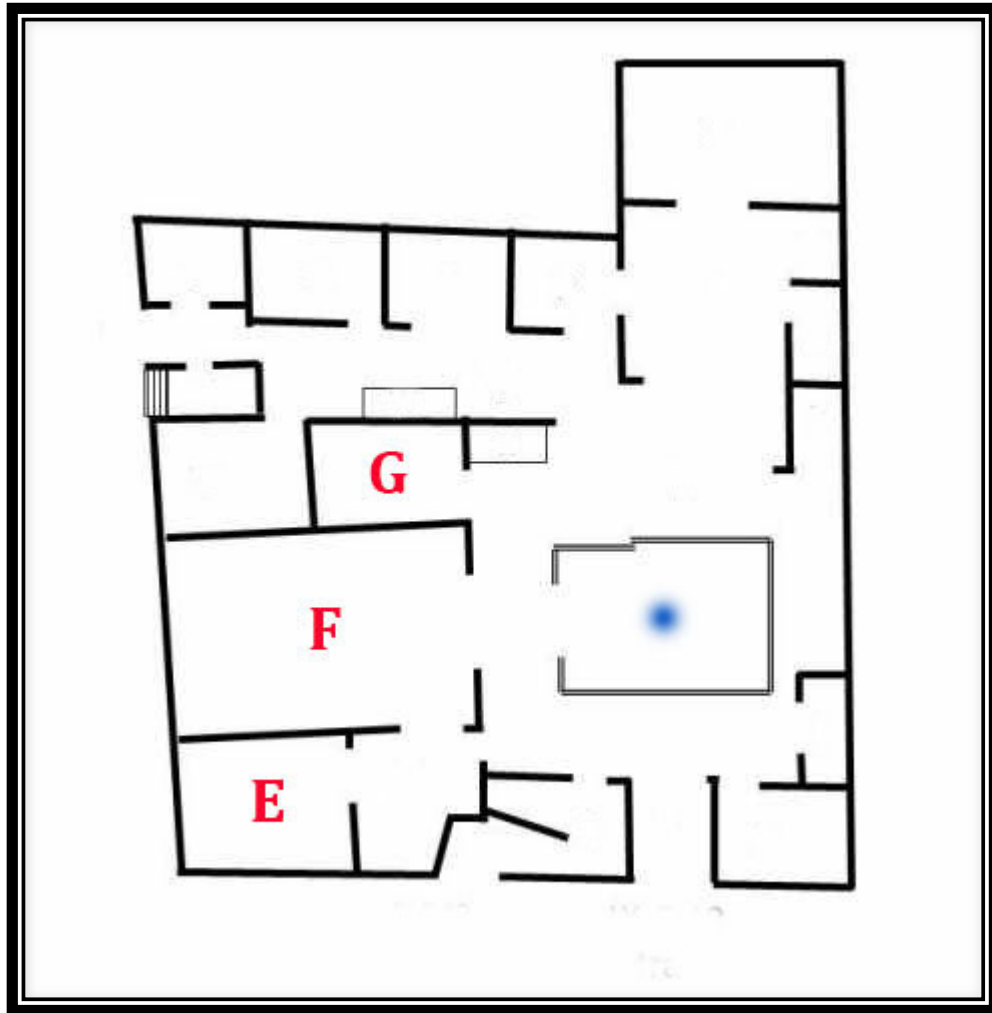


Figure 6.2: Plan of the House of Jason with Rooms E, F, G, and fountain indicated.

After Zevi 1964, Figure 2.

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The plan of the house is a conglomeration of several structures, as evidenced by the multiple extant entrances to the house; its main entrance opens onto an unnamed side road just south of the Via di Nola. The *fauces*, which retain traces of red pigment, open onto Room B³⁸⁵ at the center of which is a rectangular pool with a columnar fountain.³⁸⁶ To the southwest, Room D, which again retains red painted plaster, opens into Room E. Room E, a space generally identified as a *cubiculum* is a remote and intimate space, with two corner windows set high into red walls. The cuts from the removal of three panel paintings are clearly visible in the plaster left in situ. Adjoining Room E, accessible through a doorway in Room D, is a large room, the largest in the house, Room F, commonly referred to as a *triclinium*. Although the red walls of room F are not as well preserved as that of Room E, on the north wall are legible traces of a panel painting, likely depicting Pentheus and Dionysus.³⁸⁷ Of the three panels that would have once decorated this room, it is the only one left in situ. Another decorated *cubiculum*, Room G, is adjacent to Room F; similar in scale to Room E, this *cubiculum* is more readily accessible. Traces of yellow pigment

³⁸⁵ The question of what to call room B remains open. Zevi identifies it as an atrium. Bettina Bergmann clearly states that the house has neither an atrium nor a tablinum. Fausto Zevi, *La Casa Reg IX.5.18-21 a Pompei e sui pitture: Studi Miscellanei 5* (Roma: Bretschneider, 1964). Bettina Bergmann, "The Pregnant Moment: Tragic Wives in the Roman Interior," In *Sexuality in Roman Art*, edited by Natalie B. Kampen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 200.

³⁸⁶ In the *fauces* is also a graffito that reads "Discite dum vivo mors inimical venis." Allison Cooley elegantly translates this as "Learn: while I am alive, you, hateful death, are coming." The foregrounding of death is interestingly appropriate for our purposes, given the extent to which the *Cena Trimalchionis* informs my understanding of the intellectual interplay in the space. For much as Trimalcho's house greets its visitors with a veritable Cerberus, the House of Jason also greets those who enter it with a reminder of death. For the graffito see CIL IV 5112. For Cooley's translation see Allison Cooley and M.G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 78. For the connection between the dog depicted in Trimalchio's atrium, the living dog Encolpius encounters soon after, and the underworld, see Shelley Hales, "Freedmen's Cribs: Domestic Vulgarity on the Bay of Naples." In *Petronius: A Handbook*, edited by Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 161.

³⁸⁷ Karl Schefold, *Vergessenes Pompeji*: Unveröffentlichte Bilder römischer Wanddekorationen in geschichtlicher Folge herausgegeben (Bern: Franke, 1962), 53.

suggest a different color scheme than its counterpart, although again, three panels were removed from its walls at the time of excavation. If there were more figural panel paintings in the rest of the house, they are not now apparent, nor is there evidence, visual or textual, to suggest that others were removed, although this does not preclude the possibility that such paintings once existed. Indeed, the zone designated as “Room Z” that abuts the entrance of Room G suggests that the portions of the house that are not generally discussed, that is everything other than Rooms E, F, and G, might once have also borne decoration.

Although Fausto Zevi labels the space as if it were a room, the extant marble footings suggest that it might have been a *lararium*; indeed, Zevi proposes that the *lararium* was wooden, thus accounting for its lack of preservation.³⁸⁸ However, the presence of brickwork in conjunction with the marble might indicate that the *lararium* was constructed of brick and plaster. This tallies well with the work of George Boyce, who notes the presence of a *lararium* painting in this area.³⁸⁹ Although Boyce seems to suggest that the *lararium* painting was in the *cubiculum* proper, presumably *cubiculum* G, this seems unlikely given the programming of the space. The painting he describes, a stag head hanging from a tree that is flanked by the figure of the genius on the right and an altar with a serpent and a male nude, must have been fairly large, and given that we know that three panel paintings were removed from room g, one wonders where such a painting would have fit. It seems more likely that Boyce describes the area that Zevi designates as “Room Z;” if there

³⁸⁸ Zevi, *La Casa Reg IX.5.18-21 a Pompei e sue pitture*, 11.

³⁸⁹ George K. Boyce, *Corpus of the Lararia of Pompeii, Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome, Volume 14* (Rome: American Academy, 1937), 86.

were paintings in this zone, then it is perhaps not surprising that the upper portions of the *lararium* are missing, as they, like the panels in Rooms E, F, and G, could have been removed at the time of excavation.

Indeed, one wonders what else was removed during the course of excavation, and what these finds could have indicated about both the use of the remainder of the spaces in the house and the nature of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the remaining features of the house do give us some clues regarding its overall character. Room W, separated from the *lararium* by a wall, includes a cistern mouth that feeds to one of the house's side entrances (IX.5.21). Room T, the room adjacent to this side entrance is a latrine. Room P includes a decorative mosaic of a type typically associated with cubicula. Although the plaster in room P no longer retains much more than a few traces of red pigment, the upper courses of the walls are some of the best preserved in the house, with a partially preserved stucco pediment clearly visible. In Room L, the red painted socle is largely intact, and there is evidence above of the edges of painted panels, although no legible paintings remain. Connected to Room L is an alcove, Room N, with red walls footed in yellow, possibly reversing the color scheme of Room O, which would have been visible through Room L. Room N is the second room in the house with a relatively well-preserved upper course; here we see a corner of a plastered arch, with a small, deep-set window bisecting its vertical axis. Room O, identified by Zevi as an *oecus*³⁹⁰, is the final room in the north-east corner of the house, and again features poorly preserved wall paintings; although multiple thickly delineated yellow frames

³⁹⁰ Zevi, *La Casa Reg.* IX.5.18-21, 9.

remain, whatever they framed, if anything, is not apparent, although the size of the frames and the colors used are both very similar to a better preserved example from another house in the insula, the Casa di Lupanare Piccolo (IX.5.14). Room H, in the south portion of the house, adjacent to the primary entrance, is one with a certain function; its masonry hearth identifies it as the kitchen. It, like Room N, has a yellow socle and red walls.

Given the poor preservation of much of the house, it is unsurprising that most scholars choose to focus their attention on the paintings removed from Rooms E, F and G. However, even the small amount of information that can be gleaned from the rest of the house is useful. The two entrances (IX.5.18 and IX.5.21) create two axes; while these two areas of the house do connect, it seems likely that IX.5.21 and Rooms P, R, S, T, and possibly U are part of a commercial space associated with the cistern head in zone W. Indeed, Zevi suggests that the cistern was once connected to a counter.³⁹¹ The potential presence of a counter, the proximity of the staircase to the entrance at IX.5.21, the travertine threshold of the entrance, and the multiple small rooms, all suggest that this space could have been a *taberna*. If it were a *taberna*, it would be the only one present in the insula, a potentially lucrative venture. Although if it is a *taberna*, one wonders what happened to the counter.

In any case, it is evident that this portion of the house is different in function than the portion of the house accessed through the entrance at IX.5.18. This latter area is more clearly residential, and although it lacks several of the rooms one might expect to find in a Pompeian residence, its overall functionality resonates with

³⁹¹ Zevi, *La Casa Reg.* IX.5.18-21, 11.

established models for interpreting Roman houses. While the house is not precisely symmetrical, there is a clear line of sight from the entrance through the multi-purpose central Room B, through Room L, into Room O. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has discussed, differential access to various areas of the house reflects the functions of the Roman social system. Despite the fact that his analysis of axes of differentiation within the house centers upon more properly “elite” residences, particularly those with “the vestibulum-atrium-alae-tablinum complex that lends itself to the morning *salutatio*,” his grand/humble and public/private axes are at work in this less ostentatious structure.³⁹² Some spaces are less accessible than others, and the eye is invited to penetrate spaces into which not all bodies are permitted. Thus, Room B might be open to general visitors, while access to Room O could be more limited. Similarly, access to Room E was also likely limited, as the presence of Room D separates it from the more central portions of the house. Access to both Room O and room E could have been further limited by opening and closing doors, or by pulling curtains to cover the doorways that currently stand open. So, while a viewer today has a clear line of sight from the entrance to Room O, this might not always have been the case. Visual access to Room E, possible from Room B, although not from the entrance to the house, could have been similarly blocked by employing doors or curtains in Room D (Figure 6.3). Thus, while the question of whether or not owners of this space might have conducted a proper *salutation* or have had clients is debatable, it is likely that they expected to entertain uninvited guests, and planned their use of space accordingly.

³⁹² Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “The Social Structure of the Roman House, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 56 (1988), 55.



Figure 6.3: House of Jason, Pompeii.
View from room B, through room D, into room E.

If “the lack of public space” and the “absence of need for elegance of decor” are markers of humble status, then what are we to make of the House of Jason?³⁹³ We cannot argue that the household is an exceptionally wealthy one, but this does not necessarily mean that it was one of low social status. Ostentation might be a marker of wealth or of aspiration, but it is not the only visual marker of status. The preserved paintings from the house, to which we will soon turn, are both finely rendered and thought provokingly juxtaposed. And although the house is not extravagantly appointed, it is clear that the spaces that do not include well-preserved paintings did have painted panels that are no longer extant. There is also the question of the fountain located at the center of the pool in Room B.

The pool, which is perhaps too deep to be termed an *impluvium*, retains evidence of piping, and the column at its center is fitted with a fountain jet. While the pool might once have served a utilitarian function, the fountain does not. The conspicuous consumption of a potentially privileged resource, pressurized water, could well be a mark of the owner’s social standing, especially if the pipe that is now visible at the base of the fountain connects to the public water supply, as seems entirely likely. If this were the case, then the property owners would have had to successfully petition the *aediles* for a water grant. In Rome such grants are often connected with the houses of “principal citizens;” only around ten percent of the houses in Pompeii have pipes that connect to the city’s water towers, suggesting that the situation in Pompeii was similar.³⁹⁴ The fountain would have been visible

³⁹³ Wallace-Hadrill, “Social Structure of the Roman House,” 56.

³⁹⁴ Rick Jones and Damian Robinson, “Water, Wealth, and Social Status at Pompeii: The House of the Vestals in the First Century,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 109.4 (2005), 697-699; without careful

to passersby, suggesting the owner's social status even to those who had no reason to enter the structure.

So while the House of Jason does not speak loudly to us of the wealth of its owners, it does suggest to us that sometime in the period around 30 BCE, the rough time period in which the Serino aqueduct became operational, its owner had the social standing to afford a water feature. This sort of social connection is certainly suggestive of some variety of sub-elite status, and the house's paintings further attest participation in a system of social performance that does not rely upon wealth to express position. In this system, knowledge, of what is appropriate, of what is expected, of the "grammar" of space and images, is a better indicator of social standing. As Wallace-Hadrill states, "There is not one language for the rich and one for the poor: but a common language in which the rich are proficient and the poor dumb."³⁹⁵ The inhabitants of the House of Jason are not rich, but neither are they poor, and they certainly are not "dumb," as exploration of the programs of Rooms E, and F can indicate.

Across the Great Divide: Knowledge and Performances of Social Prestige

Just as differential access to spaces within a house can separate different types of visitors, knowledge differentials can separate different types of viewers. In

excavation of this portion of the house and its surrounding area, it is not possible to say with any degree of certainty whether or not the pipe that leads to the fountain connects to the city water system, although it is also uncertain where else the pressurized water needed to operate the fountain might have come from. Interestingly, the use of pressurized water in fountains in Pompeii is associated with the installation of the Serino aqueduct around 27 BCE, a date that coincides well with the accepted date range (20-30s BCE) for "Third Style" paintings such as those that we see in the House of Jason; for the date of the Serino aqueduct see Jones and Robinson, "Water, Wealth, and Social Status," 696.

³⁹⁵ Wallace-Hadrill, "Social Structure of the Roman House," 58.

order to consider the interplay between those who know and those who do not, and the ways in which this might have been a relevant dichotomy to the Roman viewers, I propose an interpretation of the extant paintings in the House of Jason that focuses on such concepts. It should be stated at the outset that although we put forward such an interpretation this should not suggest that this is the only valid way to approach these images; indeed, the assertion that there are multiple levels of potential interpretations in play at any time, and that these interpretations are dependent upon the viewers involved, is dependent upon the idea that there are many interpretive options available to viewers.

Bettina Bergmann has discussed the paintings of Room E as “pregnant moments” forever charged with meaning in part because the depicted figures are perpetually poised on the cusp of making monumental decisions.³⁹⁶ While she is interested in moments in time, the following discussion of the paintings in Rooms E and F considers the place of the depicted scenes within larger narratives. By focusing on implications of these scenes, particularly the scenes in Room E, for the heroes within these stories it suggests that the painted scenes in this portion of the house may be connected on multiple levels. We begin by confronting the mechanisms of programmatic reading, asserting the importance of identifying figures within scenes, before discussing the interplay between the paintings of Room E and Room F, considering what interpretive pathways are underscored by the inclusion of the full program of room F into this visual milieu. Throughout the discussion of these rooms, Petronius’ *Cena Trimalchionis* allows us to contextualize

³⁹⁶ Bettina Bergmann, “The Pregnant Moment,” 201.

varying modes of viewing and to underscore the potentially competitive nature of the communal viewing process.

Identification as an Interpretive Tool in the House of Jason

The painting that gives the house its name was once situated on the west wall of Room F (Figure 6.4). It was the focal point of the room, the central panel of the center of the room, facing the primary entrance to the space. A cursory glance at the painting reveals a beardless man with a hairstyle contemporary to the principate; his short hair falls forward over his forehead, his tongued forelock distinctly visible (Figure 6.8). He wears a single sandal and stands alongside a simple table. A female attendant holding a *patera* faces him and peers up at his face. Jason, the one sandaled man, gazes toward another party, a man descending a short flight of stairs, supported by two women. Both the man, Pelias, and the two women, his daughters, look down at Jason, although only Pelias appears to recognize the young hero. Another attendant, this one male, leads a sacrificial bull into the scene from the viewer's left. The scene is one described in the opening lines of *The Argonautica*. The hero Jason, dispossessed of his proper position in the court of Iolcus by his half-uncle Pelias, confronts him as he makes a sacrifice to Poseidon. Pelias, seeing that Jason wears only one sandal, recognizes him as the man prophesied to cause his downfall. In an attempt to circumvent fate, Pelias asks Jason what he would do if faced with a man who was fated to cause his death. Jason responds that he would give him the impossible task of fetching the Golden Fleece. Pelias then sends Jason

off on this very quest, setting in motion a chain of events that does, in fact, lead to his death, although not *precisely* at Jason's hand.³⁹⁷



Figure 6.4: Room F, House of Jason, Pompeii.
Pelias encounters Jason.
Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

³⁹⁷ Apollonios Rhodios, *The Argonautika: The Story of Jason and the Quest for the Golden Fleece*, translated, with an introduction and glossary by Peter Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 43.

The depiction includes elements that are suggestive of a stage set. While Apollonius Rhodius intimates in his *Argonautica* that Pelias' sacrifice to Poseidon would have taken place on or near the seashore, the setting in the painting includes no elements that directly reference a seaside meeting. The table next to Jason is similarly perplexing. If the figures depicted are indeed preparing to sacrifice the bull, as the scene suggests, then an altar would be more useful to them than a table. However, on a stage, a table might well stand in for an altar. If the scene does, at least in part, visually recall a theatrical production, it can be associated with the level of interpretation that might be most available to the average viewer. As only a small percentage of the population could be considered literate, many would gain familiarity with such stories by watching them as plays.³⁹⁸ However, if the painting does depict a scene from a theatrical performance, then it refers to a play that is no longer extant, for the action depicted occurs far earlier than the events of Euripides' *Medea*. In any case, knowledge gained from watching, or hearing about, Pelias' encounter with Jason could lead to an interpretation that both accurately identifies the characters, and places them in their appropriate situational context.

³⁹⁸ On the topic of literacy, it is possible that in Pompeii there would have been a higher degree of Greek literacy than one would expect in other portions of the Italian peninsula. As William Harris has pointed out, multilingualism is often an overlooked component in studies of literacy, and it might be a potentially interesting avenue of exploration in Pompeii, where we know that Oscan remained in use in public settings until the principate, when the weights and measures were changed to match the Roman standard. The use of Oscan, attributed to a pre-Sullan Samnite population might well have been paired with literacy in Greek, if the Samnites of Pompeii kept to the lingual traditions of the Appenine regions, where there are Greek and Oscan bilingual inscriptions dating to the first century BCE. On the question of multilingualism and its effects on literacy see William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 175-176. For a brief discussion of the bilingual tile from Pietrabbondante see Edward Bispham, "The Samnites," in *Ancient Italy: Regions without Boundaries*, edited by G. Bradley, E. Isayev and C. Riva (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007) 204-206.

The proper identification of figures is the inevitable first step in the interpretive process, and it is not to be taken for granted. As we see here, the identification of this scene and its players hinges on a detail—Jason’s missing sandal. If the viewer overlooks this detail, or fails to recognize its importance, then all interpretational hope is lost. Although we modern viewers tend to assume that ancient viewers had greater familiarity with such tales and their depictions, it is entirely possible that they would have gotten it wrong too, on occasion. Indeed, the visual conventions of room E suggest that the accurate interpretation of figures by visitors may not be the goal of the architect of the House of Jason’s visual program.

Dress, Confusion, and Laughter in Room E

As Bettina Bergmann has noted, the paintings of Room E are linked both thematically and visually.³⁹⁹ The three panel paintings in Room E all depict women on the cusp of life altering decisions; moving from left to right, the viewer first encounters the south wall on which is a depiction of Phaedra, handing her attendant the letter that leads to the exile and death of her step-son Hippolytus (Figure 6.5). On the west wall was the room’s most famous depiction, a painting of Medea contemplating her two sons (Figure 6.6). On the north wall was the third painting in the set, depicting Helen and Paris, poised to leave the house of Menelaus, a *putti* gesturing them toward the open door (Figure 6.7). The liminality of the moments depicted is underscored visually through the use of literal liminal spaces. Medea and Helen are both situated next to thresholds, while Phaedra sits in front of a

³⁹⁹ Bergmann, “Pregnant Moment,” 207-208.

window. In the backgrounds of all three paintings are three views into a space beyond, whether that space is visible through open doors or through windows. The vertical space of all three paintings is defined by two white columns. All of these visual similarities invite the viewer both to compare the images, and to think about the similarities between them. But over-reliance upon visual similarity can lead to misinterpretations, because the depiction of figures in this room is deliberately misleading.



Figure 6.5: Room E, House of Jason, Pompeii.
Phaedra and her attendants.
Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.



Figure 6.6: Room E, House of Jason, Pompeii.
Medea contemplates her sons.
Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

There are clear visual similarities of dress and pose between all three paintings in Room E. On the south wall, a central figure, Phaedra, sits back, half-reclined on an elbow (Figure 6.5). Her hair has a central part and is slightly curled. She wears a voluminous purple tunic and a semi-transparent *palla*. Next to her

stands another woman wearing a saffron tunic and *palla*. In the painting of Medea, we again see another seated woman, again leaning on an arm, although Medea leans forward contemplatively. Medea wears a saffron tunic, with a purple-bordered *palla*. Her hair may be partially covered, perhaps in deference to the fact that she sits outside of her house (Figure 6.6). In the final painting, we again encounter a seated figure, leaning back on an elbow in a pose that closely resembles that of Phaedra.



Figure 6.7: Room E, House of Jason, Pompeii.
Paris and Helen.
Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

The figure wears a long purple tunic with a pale blue border and a diaphanous wrap (Figure 6.7). Gold-strapped sandals adorn the figure's feet, and both a gold necklace and gold earrings are clearly visible against the figure's pale skin; indeed, this figure's jewelry is the most clearly articulated of those figures depicted in the panel.⁴⁰⁰ A casual observer could not be faulted for thinking that this figure is a woman. It wears colors that are almost exclusively associated with women, and the inclusion of earrings is unheard of for Roman men.⁴⁰¹ Yet closer examination of the image shows that the figure is not a woman at all, but the effeminate seducer Paris.⁴⁰² While the visual cues tell the viewer that the Trojan prince is a woman, the inclusion of the bare armed, saffron robed Helen, the winged Amor, and a closer examination of Paris' physical features all offer better clues as to his appropriate identification. It is clearly possible to correctly identify the figures, but the room's visual grammar deliberately confuses the viewer, creating a situation that fosters misidentification. That this kind of interpretive blunder would be cause for ridicule is strongly suggested by Petronius.

As we remarked in Chapter Five, Trimalchio is interested not only in displaying his wealth, but his erudition. But as we mentioned, he does not always fully grasp the stories behind the interpretations he attempts to put forward. Thus,

⁴⁰⁰ It is difficult to determine if the other figures depicted in this panel wear jewelry. It would be very odd if none of the women did, and the lack of jewelry on the rest of the figures would certainly then highlight Paris's jewelry all the more.

⁴⁰¹ For female appropriate colors see Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 11-12.

⁴⁰² Bergmann also comments on the visual reversal here. See Bergman, "Pregnant Moment," 207.

as he describes the scenes depicted on his collection of silver, he muddles the identification of the images, inserting Niobe into the Trojan Cycle, and confusing Cassandra with Medea.⁴⁰³ Even if the audience in the dinner party does not laugh at this garbled interpretation, Trimalchio's inability to properly recall who exactly is depicted on which of his dishes, and his clear lack of familiarity with the stories referenced would likely have been humorous to readers of Petronius' text, and would likely have fostered in these readers a sense of intellectual superiority.⁴⁰⁴

The ability to laugh at Trimalchio might well have been comforting; by making him into an object of ridicule, he is relegated to a subordinate role, despite all of his wealth and property. Indeed, these tensions mount and erupt throughout Petronius's text. In the midst of his dinner party, Trimalchio gives a series of written conundrums to his guests; paired with these puns are a series of presents that are themselves visual puns on the texts.⁴⁰⁵ So, for example, the phrase "Something for the dog, something for the feet," is paired with a pair of rabbit-lined slippers for the guest to take home.⁴⁰⁶ After being faced with hundreds of such jokes, Ascyllus, one of the narrator's companions, begins to laugh at the situation, rather than at the jokes themselves. His laughter, which is directed primarily at Trimalchio, is met with ire by the freedmen guests, who see the laughter for what it

⁴⁰³ Petronius, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 52.1-52.3.

⁴⁰⁴ The way in which Trimalchio has confused his characters also suggests that he has never *read* the stories he discusses, although perhaps he has heard them. It is probably important that if he had read about them, he would not have had to turn to any obscure texts. The story of the Niobids is related in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, while the episode with Helen and the horse is told in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*. We thus see that Trimalchio is not versed in even these most essential texts.

⁴⁰⁵ Guests did not have to be able to read to understand the jokes; there was a boy to read the words aloud. There is a boy to do almost everything in Trimalchio's house.

⁴⁰⁶ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by William Arrowsmith (New York, Meridian Books, 1994), 63.

is, an expression of superiority; they confront him outright, highlighting their greater incomes as proof of their own social viability.⁴⁰⁷ Despite the fact that it is clear that Ascyltus is considerably less wealthy than Trimalchio, his ability to identify Trimalchio's behavior as laughable when paired with the act of laughing itself, sets him apart from the freedman. The same outlet is open to readers who can distance themselves from Trimalchio by laughing at him, thus reassuring themselves of their own superiority.⁴⁰⁸ As Anthony Corbeill argues, "Jokes become a means of ordering social realities."⁴⁰⁹ Trimalchio attempts to create a social hierarchy through his jokes, yet even as he invites laughter, he learns that he cannot control it.

Despite the fact that Trimalchio seems to know that interpretation of images is the sort of thing that should happen at a dinner party, he is ineffective at even a superficial reading. If he is not able to identify the images he sees, then it is likely that deeper interpretations and programmatic readings would be entirely beyond him. Viewers of Pompeian houses who made similar mistakes would likely have been laughed at outright, and we will return to social situations in which this might have happened. It is likely that even if these less educated viewers were not openly mocked, that their exclusion from the ongoing interpretive process would have marked them as outsiders. Identification, then, is a requisite first step, but in order to fully engage with the images on Pompeian walls, more knowledge is required.

⁴⁰⁷ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by William Arrowsmith, 63-65.

⁴⁰⁸ For a discussion of the functionality of distancing humor see Arthur Asa Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants: Perspectives on Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 91-94.

⁴⁰⁹ Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 6.

Divergent Narratives and Mental Constructions in Rooms E and F

Knowledge differentials are a theme in the images depicted in the House of Jason, and this is especially clear when Rooms E and F are considered in tandem.⁴¹⁰ Such a reading requires familiarity with multiple literary works, access to multiple rooms within the house, and the ability to spend time contemplating these paintings, perhaps over multiple visits. These requisites suggest both a higher social class and a close connection with the owner of the house. They also allow for a closer reading of the images in question, and as we have seen in the case of the identification of Jason, close attention to detail is necessary.

Of all of the extant paintings, those on the rear walls of Rooms E and F, depicting Medea and Jason respectively, would have been the first encountered by viewers, be they invited or uninvited. It seems fitting to begin our exploration here, where ancient viewers might have begun theirs. The potential interplay between this depicted Medea and Jason centers upon two moments of indecision, and I argue that these scenes deliberately highlight the separation between those who are aware of the potential outcomes of these decisions and those who are not.

In Room F, the question of knowing and not knowing is highlighted visually through the portrayal of Pelias (Figure 6.4). Supported by his two daughters, the

⁴¹⁰ I take it as read that we should consider the relationships between paintings, and that there is deliberate programming happening in these spaces. For this, I am indebted to the work of Mary Lee Thompson and Karl Schefold. See Karl Schefold, *Pompeijanische Malerei: Sinn und Ideenschichte* (B. Schwabe, 1952) and Mary Lee Thompson, "Programmatic Painting in Pompeii: The Meaningful Combination of Mythological Pictures in Roman Decoration" (Ph.D. Dissertation: New York University, 1960).

ruler makes his way down a series of steps, gazing toward Jason. While both of his daughters gaze down at Jason, it is clear that only Pelias takes in the full implications of the figure, recognizing him as the man of prophecy. Pelias' eyes are widened, his mouth set; he is perhaps surprised, but he is also certain. His certainty is underscored by the curiosity of the woman at his left, who cocks her head at the hero. She looks, but is not aware of the implications of what she sees. Just as Jason is unaware of the eventual results of his quest, that in order to regain his position in Iolcus he must rely on a woman who will eventually end his line, Pelias' daughters remain unaware of the part that they will play in their father's downfall. The only figure in the scene that seems to fully understand his fate, other than Pelias, is the sacrificial bull. The animal's gaze mirrors the king's; its eyes are similarly widened, its mouth also set in a line. Pelias and the bull are further connected by color; the shade of the king's skin and the bull's coat are nearly identical. The two figures marked for death are equated visually. However, while Pelias plots to circumvent fate, the bull does not. He will be sacrificed, and he cannot avert this. The bull may be the only figure depicted that accurately understands the inescapable nature of fate and thus his true situation.

As Jason and Pelias contemplate each other in Room F, so does Medea contemplate her ill-fated children in Room E. Assuming that there were no doors or curtains obscuring either of the entrances to Room D, the viewer would have been able to view the two paintings simultaneously. This situation invites the viewer to compare the scenes, and introduces an element of irony into the viewing process. While the viewer is aware of the eventual fate of Jason's house, and while the viewer

can *see* the instrument of his house's demise, Jason is unaware of what is to come. Pelias at least believes that he knows and can control his fate; Jason, by contrast, knows nothing, in either text or image, about the chain of events that has been set in motion with his arrival at Iolcus. Jason's lack of knowledge is highlighted by the presence of Medea in room E. If the depicted Jason had the ability to either look through the wall to his left, or to step back out of his frame, he could look upon the decision that will mark the devastation of his line, a fate perhaps worse than death to the Greek hero. He is tantalizingly proximal to such a realization, but the figure, like the hero in the story, does not make the connection. That is left up to the viewer.

The dichotomy between those who know, or think they know, and those who do not know is further articulated in Room E, in which three women are poised on the brink of monumental decisions. On the south wall, Phaedra considers the note that will set off the destruction of her household. On the west wall, Medea contemplates killing her sons. On the north wall, Helen studies an effeminate Paris and the tryst that will spark the Trojan War. Each of these images depicts a scene with multiple possible outcomes, not just theoretically, but as exist in various extant versions of the stories depicted. The amount of potential knowledge in play has become significantly larger.

It has been suggested that Euripides' *Medea* is the first version of the story in which Medea deliberately kills her sons. Earlier versions, no longer extant in their entirety, tell of a mother who kills her children in an attempt to make them immortal; in another version, angry Corinthian citizens take revenge on Medea by

murdering her sons.⁴¹¹ Phaedra's story is similarly variable. Euripides wrote two versions of the *Hippolytus*, one of which was apparently more risqué than the other, although the particulars of the two plays remain a point of scholarly contention.⁴¹² Seneca wrote a play on the same theme, and its surviving fragments suggest that he connects Hippolytus' death more with cataclysm than with treachery. Sophocles wrote yet another version of the play, and although there are no extant fragments, given the variances between Sophocles' presentation of figures such as Electra, and Euripides' portrayal of the same character, it is likely that his version of the *Hippolytus* represents another different outcome.⁴¹³ Helen's fate is also treated differently by different authors. Although Paris does in fact abscond with Helen to Troy in Homer's epics, she is replaced by a doppelganger in Euripides' *Helen*, and spends the entirety of the Trojan conflict safely ensconced in Egypt.

The scenes depicted in Room E could refer to any of these versions, and it is entirely likely that they are intentionally ambiguous. Not only are the figures themselves in the process of contemplating their actions, thus leaving the future ambiguous, there are multiple written versions of the actions that they might take. The viewer, who if well educated would likely be aware of these multiple potential outcomes, could take each into account, referencing the multiple versions of these stories in any attempts to interpret the images. While the figures in the paintings

⁴¹¹ Richard Rutherford, "Preface to the *Medea*," in *Euripides' Medea and Other Plays*, translated by John Davie with an introduction and notes by Richard Rutherford (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 45.

⁴¹² John C. Gibert, "Euripides' *Hippolytus* Plays: Which Came First?" *The Classical Quarterly* 47 (2001), 86.

⁴¹³ Phyllis Young Forsyth, "Seneca, Thera, and Hippolytus," *The Classical World* 69 (1975), 115.

are unaware both of what comes next, and of their potential fates, the viewer has knowledge of not one, but multiple possible outcomes.

This is interesting in part because of a trope often used to identify a hero, setting him apart from his fellows. The hero has knowledge that others do not. This knowledge can be manifested in multiple manners. Achilles, in many ways an archetypal hero, is aware of his dual fates and has the opportunity to choose between them.⁴¹⁴ He remains awake while others sleep, and is often visited during this wakeful period by divine and semi-divine beings that help him to consider his situation in new ways. Odysseus similarly obtains privileged knowledge when he descends to the Underworld and returns.⁴¹⁵ While the primary examples of this phenomenon are Greek, the trope remains important into the Roman period. Virgil twists the idea, creating an Aeneas who has access to restricted knowledge but is constrained by that knowledge in a way that previous heroes were not. Aeneas, like other heroic figures before him, is guided by prophecy. Like Achilles, his knowledge of this prophesy is imparted to him by a divine being. Aeneas makes a trip to the Underworld much like Odysseus, and like Odysseus, when he returns to the land of the living, he brings with him a revised understanding of life.⁴¹⁶ It is this valence of heroism, the idea that heroes have knowledge that provides a potential point of entry for the elite Roman viewer, allowing him to conceive of himself as part of this

⁴¹⁴ For the idea of the link between heroism and knowledge as well as a general discussion of what it means to be a hero see Thomas Van Nortwick, *Somewhere I Have Never Traveled* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). For instances in which Achilles's heroism is articulated through knowledge see Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagels (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 89, 588-614.

⁴¹⁵ Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 249-270.

⁴¹⁶ For Aeneas's knowledge of his destiny see Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1983), 33-61. For a close relationship between the hero and a divine figure, i.e. his mother, see Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 14-18; for the trip to the underworld see Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 159-192.

mythical hierarchy. And although texts concerned with heroes construct this hierarchy of knowledge around male experiences, a female viewer would have little trouble interjecting herself into this system. For although the heroes must venture into liminal spaces to obtain privileged knowledge, this knowledge is often imparted to them, or withheld from them, by women—goddesses, demi-goddesses, and mythological paramours.



Figure 6.8: Room F, House of Jason, Pompeii.
Detail of Jason.

If the hero is defined at least in part by his knowledge, then the real world divide between those who know and those who do not know has the potential to become even more interesting. A viewer looking at the painting of Jason in Room F knows what the hero does not; indeed, he knows more about the outcome of the story than even those aware of the relevant prophecies do, making the viewer more heroic than the hero himself. The depiction of Jason is interesting in this context (Figure 6.8). His artfully arranged hair with its overlapping forelock, his long, straight nose, and his rounded chin all recall common attributes in the imperial portraiture of Augustus.⁴¹⁷ Whether or not the intent was to draw a deliberate connection between Jason and the emperor is uncertain; it is more likely that the style represents the latest male fashions, patterned after the new imperial look. Much as jewelry aided in the conflation of real and imaginal in other depicted scenes, Jason's hair encourages the viewer to consider the implications of these scenes on his or her reality.

Male viewers sporting similar hairstyles would have the opportunity to conflate themselves with both hero and emperor, surpassing at least one of these referents by virtue of his greater knowledge. His hair might serve him in other capacities as well. Although discussions of hairstyles in Rome and its periphery often focus on women's self-presentation, men are equally susceptible to the lure of fashionability. Much as the fountain in Room B marks prestige by showcasing

⁴¹⁷ Diana Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 62-69. On the unique and deliberate nature, and thus the recognizable nature, of Augustus's imperial portraiture, see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, translated by Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 98-100.

access to a limited resource, displaying that access in an act of conspicuous consumption, fashionability is a state that requires both resources and knowledge; it is thus often directly linked to social position.⁴¹⁸ As we have discussed, fashion can be purchased, blurring these lines. Hence, speed of adoption of new trends is of increasing importance. Early adoption of new trends thus marks another type of access to information, another set of privileged data.

Pushing Boundaries: Fate, Access, and the Role of the Homeowner

In the House of Jason, curtains and doors, access and lines of sight all have the capacity to physically limit the ways in which a viewer might understand the scenes depicted in Rooms E and F. Even more, perhaps, than the keen eyes and erudition needed to avoid drawing the censure of laughter from one's peers, the ability to control *what* is viewed separates the owner from his or her guests. For while the owner might have a more intimate knowledge of the images than those who have not had such an opportunity to interact with them, the ability to control knowledge, to keep parts of a story to oneself, showing only portions to others is a performance that carries a particular set of resonances in Latin and Greek literate contexts. Knowledge does not only create social distinctions within groups, it also separates normal mortals from heroes and heroes from gods.

While a well-educated viewer might conceive of himself as a particularly effective sort of hero, there is another actor in play in the interpretation of domestic space, and this person has even more knowledge than the well-educated viewer.

⁴¹⁸ Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 99.

The patron, assuming that he or she was directly involved in the commissioning of the paintings in the house, has knowledge of the full thought process behind the choice of paintings. Later homeowners, even if they did not plan the programs of the house, have the advantage of time and access. They can see the whole of the house, and they can ponder over the programs indefinitely. The owner is the final authority; he or she has the ability to restrict both visual and physical access to spaces within the house, concealing or revealing images that can add to the richness of interpretation and the fullness of understanding. In this way, as the figure with the ability to decide who has access to what knowledge, and as the final interpreter of events, the homeowner is likened to a divinity, for divinities are the only figures in myths with the ability to fully understand fate.



Figure 6.9: Room F, House of Jason, Pompeii.
Polyxena before the walls of Troy.
Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

The importance of understanding what has been told, of understanding fate, is at the center of two other sets of “pregnant moments” in the house, this time in room F. As we have perhaps given enough time to Jason already, I will now turn my attention to the remaining paintings in the room. On the south wall of Room F is a painting of Polyxena outside the walls of Troy (Figure 6.9). Polyxena, wearing a purple tunic and a purple bordered saffron palla, reclines back toward a purple draped female attendant, her right arm stretched above her head in what appears to be a gesture of sorrow, rather than of seduction. A second woman sits at her feet, while two men, one the bearded Phoenix, and perhaps a more completely clothed Achilles, look on.⁴¹⁹ On the north wall of room F is a poorly preserved painting depicting a nude male, leaning to his left with a *contrapposto* stance reminiscent of the “Lysippan” Hercules, much like Theseus’s stance that we discussed in Chapter Four. To his right a faint outline of a figure reclining with his muscular right arm stretched behind his head is barely legible. Karl Schefold identifies the figures as Pentheus and Dionysus.⁴²⁰ If these identifications are all correct, these images represent another emotionally charged set. Rather than seeing women poised on the cusp of family-unit-threatening decisions, here we see moments of meeting in which fates are decided, and seemingly deterred, although in all three cases, death is inescapable. Jason’s arrival sets into motion a series of events that will lead the daughters of Pelias to commit patricide and for Jason’s own patrimony to be

⁴¹⁹ Bettina Bergmann suggests that Achilles might be depicted here. See Bergmann, “Pregnant Moment,” 201. This is possible if the scene depicted is the one in which Polyxena gives up her jewelry, presumably her dowry, to ransom her brother Hector’s body. If, however, the scene is the one directly prior to her sacrifice, Achilles is already dead. The shield at Polyxena’s side makes it more likely, I think, that the ransoming of the body is being depicted here.

⁴²⁰ Karl Schefold, *Vergessenes Pompeji*, 53.

stripped. Polyxena's meeting with Achilles, whether it happens at the city wall as depicted here or in the hero's tent as suggested in Euripides' *Hecuba*, sparks the hero's infatuation with her, and that infatuation leads to her eventual sacrifice. Pentheus meets and mocks his divine cousin Dionysus, and while he walks away from the meeting, his insolence will eventually be met with his dismemberment at the hands of his own mother. In all three cases, death follows the meeting depicted, and in all three cases, there is, in the story referenced, a brief feeling that that death might somehow be avoided.

As in Room E, there is interesting visual reduplication in this space. Both of the more legible paintings depict exterior spaces that reference monumental architecture. In the painting of Jason, a portico is visible behind Pelias, and through the doorway are indications of more architectural features. In the painting of Polyxena we see a fully rendered city wall, and evidence of further buildings behind it. In both of these paintings, a bearded older man appears to lock gazes with a younger beardless man, while women look on. While we cannot say much about the painting that may depict Pentheus, what is clear is that much like in Room E, the paintings on the north and south walls include figures that mirror each other. In Room F, Polyxena's pose on the south wall is mirrored by the pose of the reclining figure on the north wall. If this figure is indeed Dionysus, then we see the sort of gendered reversal that we already noted in Room E. If this figure is Dionysus, and if he does conform to the type of depictions of Dionysus that we see elsewhere in Pompeii, it would not be surprising to see him pictured with feminine dress attributes. Indeed, if the scene references Euripides' *Bacchae*, we might expect to

see a very androgynous Dionysus. So, if the viewer is familiar with this visual trick of depicting a male figure and a female figure in similar poses and dress on facing walls, he or she might not fall into a misinterpretation of the gender of the figure on the north wall of Room F.

This brings us to another point about knowledge and access. Just as there are levels of spatial access within the house that can segregate invited and uninvited guests, there are levels of intellectual access that might distinguish a guest who had been invited to a house multiple times from a first time visitor. Repeat visitors to the House of Jason would likely be familiar with the visual trick of depicting a male in such a way as to make him read as female. If the viewer had been invited to a dinner party in room F, and then to a more intimate gathering in Room E, his previous experiences in Room F would prime him to read Room E more accurately. Petronius describes a similar system at work at Trimalchio's dinner party.

Together with an emphasis on the visual display of wealth, Trimalchio's dinner party is marked by an effusion of visual puns and tricks, most of which revolve around the elaborate dishes crafted for consumption. Trimalchio often heralds these dishes with an oblique statement, as he does with the first of these foods, a set of peahen eggs. The eggs, set under a carved hen, are part of an exercise in mimicry. Aside from the fact that they are real eggs set beneath a fake hen, Trimalchio declares that he is "half-afraid they may have hatched already." Encolpius, taken in by Trimalchio's statement, hesitates to eat the eggs until he hears another guest speak up. This guest, "obviously a veteran of these dinners," is amused by the eggs, suggesting that they are not what they appear to be. Encolpius,

following the guest's prompting, eats his egg, only to discover that it is not egg at all, but a pastry.⁴²¹ It is only because he is seated near a "veteran" that Encolpius is able to understand the pastry joke.⁴²²

While the peahen episode ends happily enough for all involved, and while in this instance the interpretive conundrum could have been solved with a bit of adventurous eating, this is not always the case. Later in the dinner party, Trimalchio presents his guests with a cooked sow wearing a freedman's cap. The detail does not escape Encolpius, but he is incapable of discerning meaning from it. He finally gathers his courage and asks his neighbor who, predictably, laughs at him. The man, who has been present at Trimalchio's parties before, mocks Encolpius, telling him, "Even your slave could have figured that one out. It's no riddle at all, clear as day. Look: yesterday this sow was served for dinner, but the guests were so stuffed they let it go. Get it? They *let it go*. So today naturally she comes back to the table as a free sow."⁴²³ The joke is lost on those who were not at the previous night's dinner party, leaving them at the mercy of those who were. Just as deep knowledge of texts can separate levels of viewers, so too can situations such as this one separate levels of visitors. Members of a close circle of intimates could express this membership through their knowledge of the particular visual conventions of the house.

⁴²¹ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 43-44.

⁴²² One wonders if Encolpius's continual inability to understand mimesis is as laughable as Trimalchio's misunderstandings of Roman social customs. Although he certainly takes himself very seriously, it seems unlikely that the audience is meant to. After all, his name, loosely translated, means "Crotch," and men named Crotch are probably not meant to be understood as social contenders.

⁴²³ Petronius, *The Satyricon*, translated by Arrowsmith, 49.

A Note on Deception: Paris, Fashion Illusions, and Glass-Paste Jewels

Trimalchio's jokes are intended to bolster his own social position through concealing and then revealing privileged knowledge. Had they achieved their desired effect, Trimalchio would have had the last laugh. Efficacy aside, the scenes described above, and those that surround them, in which Trimalchio's guests are treated to ever more elaborate dishes, all of which convincingly resemble what they are not, heighten the power of the host through what Gianpiero Rosati terms "fake realism."⁴²⁴ This triumph of illusion is, as Rosati recognizes, a form of exerting control over nature.⁴²⁵ This is another hallmark of heroic behavior; heroes exert their will on the world around them. But the ability to truly dominate the natural world, to subvert it to one's own ends, like the ability to know and direct fate, is the purview of the gods.

While the manipulation of perception may liken the host to a god, at least indirectly, the goal of such performances was likely to incite confusion by blending the real with the theatrical.⁴²⁶ Such performances rely on deception, a concept that has long been tied to discourses surrounding fashion. As Alan Hunt states, "To take social appearance at face value is always to take a risk."⁴²⁷ For with careful attention to dress one can both craft a new identity for oneself and deliberately

⁴²⁴ Gianpiero Rosati, "Trimalchio on Stage," in *Oxford Readings in the Roman Novel*, edited by S.J. Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 99.

⁴²⁵ Rosati, "Trimalchio on Stage," 96.

⁴²⁶ Shadi Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 198-199.

⁴²⁷ Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (London: MacMillan, 1996), 66.

conceal another. The deceptive capacity of dress and adornment has long been a locus of anxiety, especially for the male onlooker. Indeed the Latin verb used to reference the application of cosmetics—*fucare*—in its adjectival form describes something that has been falsified. To apply the term to a woman was to insult her.⁴²⁸ Latin texts are rife with references to the deceptive capacity of dress, especially in the hands of female dress practitioners. To adopt *cultus* was, in a sense, to admit that one had something to hide.⁴²⁹ Yet, as the example of Trimalchio’s elaborately illusionistic food puns suggests, the instability of illusion does not only make it dangerous, it also makes it useful.

The “fake realism” that Rosati highlights as a hallmark of Trimalchio’s dinner party performance is at the heart of both illusionistic paintings, which we have discussed throughout, of adornment generally, and of one category of adornment in particular—costume jewelry—jewelry made of non-precious materials crafted to look like their more expensive counterparts. We have encountered such jewelry before; in Chapter Five, we discussed Trimalchio’s gilt ring, and the reasons that he might have been obligated to wear a ring that was not gold. Trimalchio’s sartorial decision in that case was dictated by laws. Yet in the case of the non-precious jewelry evident in the material record of Pompeii, resources, not laws, were likely the primary reason that non-precious stones and materials were adopted. The very existence of such pieces points both to the importance of jewelry in crafting a public persona, and to the importance of a person’s overall look. For while glass paste and

⁴²⁸ Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 81-82.

⁴²⁹ In the case of many Greek sources, beyond our purview here, this fear is tantamount to paranoia. For a particularly clear example see Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, translated by B. B. Rogers (New York: Bantam House, 2006), 396.

glass could be used to craft fantastic pieces, much larger and more elaborate than their more expensive counterparts, examination of extant costume jewelry from Pompeii suggests that the aim was something akin to “fake realism.” The point was to mimic something that could, and probably did, exist, rather than to create something innovative.

Thus a faux gold armband found in Pompeii, featuring an silver medallion of the god Sol, is similar in size and articulation to extant examples of actual gold bracelets from Oplontis. Similarly, a faux gold and emerald necklace from the House of Gratus in Pompeii, composed of linked bronze hemispheres, once gilded, and a central green glass paste stone, mimics a popular style for gold bracelets throughout the region (Figure 6.10).⁴³⁰ While such faux pieces were likely much lighter than their more precious counterparts and would have been distinguishable from them should anyone have the opportunity to touch them, they were crafted with an intent to mimic, rather than to surpass, to join in a pre-existing trend, rather than to set one. Thus, while the cost of the materials does not limit the elaboration of these adornments, they remain relatively sedate in style, because their more expensive counterparts were similarly sedate. We see a similar thought process at work in the depicted record of jewelry in Pompeii, which similarly seems to aim to conform to reality, and expectations, rather than to express aspirations. Indeed, the jewelry depicted in Pompeian wall paintings is often *less* elaborate than many examples from the Pompeian material record. This further underscores a central component of both this thesis and the role of jewelry in Pompeii.

⁴³⁰ For a brief discussion of these pieces see Paul Roberts, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (London: The British Museum Press, 2013), 140-142.



Figure 6.10: House of Gratus, Pompeii.
Gilded bronze necklace with faux emerald.
British Museum MANN 118270. © Trustees of the British Museum.

The depicted realm offers a space in which normal boundaries can be transgressed. It would be simple to paint extravagant jewels and gold on painted figures, depicting precious materials that might be beyond the means of the homeowner in actuality. But if this were the end goal, we might expect to see fantastic designs and bold colors. Certainly it is not beyond the capacity of the artists

in operation in the town to paint imaginary elements. We see this clearly with the inclusion of details like the sea monster that swims alongside Andromeda's rocky prison in the House of the Priest Amandus. But overwhelmingly, the corpus of depicted jewelry corresponds to the expectations set by the material record. We do not see imaginary jewelry, and wealth is not the point.

Herein lies a paradox. Costume is deceptive, but in paint, itself a deceptive medium, adornments must be represented realistically—without deception—to retain their interpretive charge. Faithful representation of realistic modes of dress is key to the mimetic process. We saw glimmers of this notion in the Villa of the Mysteries, where the depiction of realistic jewelry invited us to conflate real and not real; it is precisely *because* this jewelry corresponds accurately to real jewelry that such conflation is prompted. While this force remains in operation in the House of Jason, there is yet another element in play. And we turn now to the depiction of Paris to consider another way that costume, deception, and ambiguity can offer up further avenues of inquiry. His looks are deceiving, and this deception is furthered by the normative nature of the dress depicted. This deception is both deliberate and key.

Before we turn our attention to the depiction of Paris, it is important to note the longevity of the paintings in the House of Jason. For while they were likely installed during the Principate, they remained visible until the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. And as we have noted already, this period was one of great change. In many ways, the Roman government was in free fall. The excesses of the younger Julio-Claudians, perhaps a series of calculated attempts to express the lack of

boundaries on imperial power, showed a new generation of elites that their own ability to meaningfully enact change on a societal level was nearly non-existent. While such concerns would likely not have yet been in the forefront of the minds of viewers in 30 BCE, for viewers of the mid first century CE, would have been intimately aware of both the idealized Republican and Augustan past, and their own problematic present. And as new viewers made their way into the space, and as the social world around these viewers shifted, their interpretations of the images themselves likely underwent similar changes. As we noted in Chapter Five, objects and images that are open to interpretation are loci of instability, taking on new meanings over time.⁴³¹ And so, we return to the depiction of Paris in Room E.

As we discussed above, Paris sits facing a standing Helen (Figure 6.11). His body is swathed with purple-bordered gold fabric. His softly curling hair is gathered back from his face. Compositionally and sartorially, he is the double of a figure situated opposite him in the three-dimensional space of the room. Phaedra also sits, facing a standing nurse. Like Paris, she is modestly swathed in purple-bordered fabric; she sits, reclining back against an elbow, as does the Trojan prince. The visual cues of the space and socially conditioned expectations of dress practices both tell the viewer to read Paris as a woman. An unconditioned or impatient viewer might misunderstand the image, crafting an interpretation that, when discussed, would leave him or her open to censure, lessening his or her standing within the group. Yet even as the painting enables misinterpretation, its ambiguity allows for a multiplicity of readings. For indeed, Paris is not one of the traditional

⁴³¹ Webb Keane, "The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, (2008), S124.

heroes; his preference for the bow, rather than for close personal combat, marks him as a potential coward, if not as an effeminate character. And while the choice of ambiguous dress in the House of Jason might well underscore this facet of the Trojan prince, it also recalls the biases associated with his area of residence.

By picturing Paris as a long-haired, well-adorned *Eastern* prince, the image invites the reader to contrast his mode of dress with a more traditional male look, such as that of Jason, pictured in the adjoining room. As we noted above, while Jason's hairstyle has many potential antecedents, the pervasive public image of the Emperor Augustus makes it likely that viewers would have been visually primed to see a parallel between the short hair of the *princeps*, with its characteristic fork of hair above his brow, and the hairstyle of the hero Jason. If this sort of conflation is possible in the case of Jason, it is equally available to later viewers of Paris, who might make a very different sort of connection between an imperial figure and the over-adorned prince.

The emperor Nero, great lover of illusionistic and theatrical spectacles, was also a great transgressor of social norms. As we noted in Chapter Five, these acts of transgression served to underscore his power, for while men like Trimalchio were obligated to bend at least occasionally to the dictates of society, Nero had the opportunity to re-write them, or at least to attempt to. But like his subjects, Nero was the subject of many critical gazes; in our surviving texts he is perhaps most often criticized for a lack of proper Roman *virtus*; he acts and appears both too Greek and too feminine. Thus, Suetonius relates that he made public theatrical appearances, singing before crowds, and that he was equally likely to appear on

stage as a heroine as he was to present himself as a god.⁴³² Indeed, such episodes are indirect evidence of his “petulancy, lewdness, luxury, avarice, and cruelty.”⁴³³ These attributes for Roman readers and viewers would have been underscored by the emperor’s physical appearance.

While Augustus took pains to appear conservative—Suetonius relates that he was meticulous in his public appearance, even the stripe of his toga had to be deemed appropriately modest—Nero flaunted convention.⁴³⁴ He spent money extravagantly, and this was evident in his personal appearance. He wore his hair long, and often appeared in public wearing loose garments, not unlike those preferred by women.⁴³⁵ While the initial purpose of Paris’s effeminate dress was likely both to trick the viewer and to remind the viewer of his problematic heroism, to the eyes of a Neronian viewer his mode of dress, and the lasciviousness that is at the heart of his story, might well remind them of the emperor. Given the presence of another potential imperial avatar in room F, it might have been possible to craft another sort of programmatic reading, one that allowed the viewer to comment on the problematic nature of Nero’s reign through the guise of a critique of Paris’s story.

⁴³² Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, translated by Alexander Thomson (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), 351.

⁴³³ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 356.

⁴³⁴ On Augustus’s care to present a modest appearance see Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 126.

⁴³⁵ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 379.



Figure 6.11: Room E, House of Jason, Pompeii.
Detail of Paris.

Acting the Part: Propriety and Self-Presentation in the *Domus*

Not even imperial power could make Nero's transgressions, sartorial and otherwise, palatable. But neither could power or status be crafted by appearances alone. Even clear markers of social hierarchy can be circumvented. As the substitution of colored glass for emeralds in the bracelet from the House of Gratus reminds us, one can purchase a look without even the need for wealth, itself an unstable platform for prestige. Yet, even when the commodities used to express social standing are legitimate, they are not a guarantee of acceptance. The visual may be authoritative, but it is not definitive. Catullus expresses this clearly in Poem 22.

The poem begins with a critique of Suffinus, a poet who writes prolifically, using a veritable litany of high-end writing accouterments, but to little effect. Despite his self-importance, his fine trappings, and his practice, Suffinus is simply not very good. Although Catullus openly scorns Suffinus' poems, and suggests that this scorn is echoed elsewhere, Suffinus is presented as a man blissfully unaware of his own inadequacies. In an unexpected turn of events, given the vitriol of which Catullus is more than capable, he concludes Poem 22 by questioning if it is worthwhile to undermine the happiness that Suffinus finds in his work, suggesting that just as Suffinus is unaware of his faults as a writer, so too are most people more or less blind to their own shortcomings.

The question of whether or not to mock Suffinus is an important one for our purposes, and the thought process of the narrator of Poem 22 is telling. For the narrator's first impulse seems to be to judge, and then to make that judgment

known.⁴³⁶ Suffinus' impulses are equally intriguing. In order to be taken seriously as a poet, Suffinus seems to believe that he must assume the trappings of his role. Not only that, if he wants to be perceived as an excellent poet, then his accouterments must similarly be excellent. In this sense, Suffinus' actions align nicely with the modes of operation suggested in the first half of our explorations. Like the owners of signet rings and gold chains, Suffinus puts stock in the visible cues of position, and he uses them to both create a persona interpretable to others and to reinforce his position to himself. But even with all of his fine goods, Suffinus' self-performance fails to convince. He looks the part, but he is unconvincing in the role.

While the performance of power depends on the visual, it ultimately transcends it. Costume can deceive, jewels can be faked, and accouterments—as Catullus and Petronius remind us—are not a guarantee of success. For there is another element in play: ambiguity. By harnessing the intrinsic potential of images, of the visual, to present multiple, even potentially antithetical, ideas simultaneously, the savvy social agent can establish prestige through an intellectual dominance display. Such articulations of power are useful in part because they are both easily undermined—allowing for a continual negotiation of relative power within mostly homogenous social groups—and because they are easily disavowed, should the positions articulated become untenable. This makes it a useful tool for negotiating

⁴³⁶ Interestingly, in the end, he does precisely that. Indeed, Suffinus might well be a pseudonym, perhaps for M. Nonius, although the name Suffinus is unattested elsewhere. In any case, despite Catullus's uncharacteristically forgiving ending, both the poet and his poetry still come under attack. The attack is simply oblique. For the question of Suffinus's identity see Peter Green, *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 310.

tense social zones, from attempts to climb the hierarchical ladder of a social group to speaking out against an emperor's excesses. Because images are inherently multi-valenced, they introduce the possibility of multiple levels of intellectual access and the creation of a knowledge differential. Levels of understanding could then separate an elite, or a mid-level elite viewer from a non-elite or sub-elite viewer, with restriction of access to knowledge acting as the primary means by which elites maintain authority. If access to material resources could not be effectively restricted, access to knowledge had the potential to remain privileged. In such a system, homeowners may choose to depict subjects that are accessible on multiple levels on the walls of their houses. This variable accessibility then deliberately creates ambiguity that can distinguish between various levels of viewers. Power and social position are articulated in part through reference to elements that would not be apparent to all, thus intentionally obscuring part of an image's meanings to all but a select few, creating cohesion between those who know, and separating them from those who do not, as well as allowing the patron to draw connections that might not otherwise be decorous.

It is knowledge—of both literary sources and visual cues—that sets the elite viewer apart from the non-elite, and the intimate friend apart from the casual acquaintance. This knowledge, when applied to a particular sort of painting, one that has been crafted to have multiple interpretive valences that can only be understood through careful examination, signals the viewer's participation of and familiarity with the grammar of viewing and protects him from the censure of laughter. This is the system through which the owner articulates his position and

that of his guests. In the example from the House of Jason, this relationship is closely linked to heroism, with the owner asserting similarity between the educated interpreter and a particular type of hero and between the patron and a god, although this connection is not made immediately evident. Taking this sort of communication into account, we might nuance the idea of obscurity further. It is not only important to choose painted decorations that could be interpreted in a variety of ways, with some interpretations made more accessible than others, it is also important to only *allude* to the patron's privileged status. Indeed, a more direct approach, one that states outright that the owner of a house is godlike, would transgress the bounds of acceptable behavior, having the opposite of the effect intended. We can again turn to Trimalchio as an example of what not to do.

Throughout the *Cena Trimalchionis*, it is clear that Trimalchio does not act appropriately. He parrots the behaviors associated with elites and elite parties without fully understanding them. So, although Trimalchio's party is lavish, the men who converse around his table are not erudite. The topics of conversation tend more toward things that have been seen and experienced rather than towards things that have been read and learned. Such a disconnect is also evident in Petronius' description of the painted decorations in the atrium of Trimalchio's house that we discussed in Chapter Five. Painted on the wall that is immediately visible when Encolpius and his party enter Trimalchio's house is the life story of the freedman himself. The viewer takes in a slave auction, then a painted Trimalchio, being led into Rome by the goddess Minerva; the owner is depicted learning arithmetic, being promoted to steward, and finally being raised up by Mercury in the presence of

Fortuna and the three Fates. Each of these scenes is presented separately, and each is labeled. The viewer then encounters scenes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, although he is hurried along to the dinner party before he has the opportunity to engage with them.⁴³⁷

This is a different viewing experience than the one I have proposed for the House of Jason, and like the rest of Petronius' account of the bawdy freedman, it is one that pokes fun at his flaws. He has misunderstood an elite system of communication; rather than approaching the decoration of his home with the cultural knowledge of a patron such as in the House of Jason, he presents an amalgam of things he has seen elsewhere. There are references to himself, illusionistic representations, and scenes from myth, and in another iteration, all of these themes might be acceptable. However, there is no time to contemplate the relationships between these paintings, and there is no apparent interest in discussing them further.⁴³⁸ Thus, any references he wishes to make have to be overt. Trimalchio takes pains to make sure that his meaning is not obscure, including not only an explicit portrait of himself, but also labels to negate the possibility that his message will be misunderstood.⁴³⁹ He does not attempt to create distinction through withholding privileged knowledge.

Similarly, he makes no attempts to obscure his connection with wealth or divine beings. While the patron of the paintings in the House of Jason may implicitly connect him or herself with divinity through an intricate system of references only

⁴³⁷ Petronius, *Trimalchio's Dinner*, translated by Harry Thurston Peck (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1898), 76-77.

⁴³⁸ For the importance of communal viewing practices and discussion, see Chapter Four.

⁴³⁹ The labels here are interesting, and could merit further study.

fully intelligible to a select few, Trimalchio presents both the tools utilized to gain his position and his relationship with the gods directly. He is depicted in the heroic mode, and he is blatant about it. It is clear that Trimalchio does not actually function within the same system as the patron of the House of Jason, although he seems to attempt to. This is due in large part to the fact that Trimalchio has a wholly different understanding of acceptable decoration, but Trimalchio's lack of understanding of this system only makes him laughable to people who want to exist within it. It is possible that his house and his lifestyle are intended to communicate with a different audience. Trimalchio's guests are much like him; none of them could properly be considered high status, although they are wealthy. They do not have the education or cultural background that appears to be so important to upper class patrons and viewers. They are without pedigree. Therefore, they create a system of communication that works for them, one that provides information rather than withholding it, and one that creates the potential for social standing where there once was none. Although Petronius mocks these figures, they have modified an existing system to meet their needs and the needs of the audience with which they are interested in communicating.

While I have focused here on the figural paintings in the House of Jason, I believe that these ideas of intentional obscurity, both the obscurity that helps to exclude the majority of viewers from an inner circle concentrated around the patron and the obscurity that appears to be appropriate when the patron refers to himself in his home, are applicable to images throughout Pompeii. Yet while these ideas might serve as a starting point for re-considering how many types of painting may

function within a larger system of understanding, these concepts must not be privileged over what is actually happening in the rooms that we evaluate. Not all patrons and viewers will understand this system in the same way, and not all will adopt it. Individual choice remains paramount, and those images that do not appear to fit into this system may prove to be the most interesting.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Further Thoughts: Seeing as We Are

The structure of the early imperial system depended upon a careful calculus that sought to balance societal expectations with the reality of new imperial power dynamics in an attempt to avoid triggering violent reactions, especially from elites who were increasingly denied the opportunity for social and political advancement. Such tense interactions were negotiated visually. Augustus made power palatable by scrupulous adherence to Republican norms, by giving the appearance of modesty while exerting unprecedented influence and ever growing power. His imperial descendants tested the limits of their power by similar means, setting aside even the most fundamental sartorial and social boundaries to prove the limitless nature of their own positions. Yet, for Caligula and Nero, the decision to assume the role of a living divinity proved to be an act too difficult, and too blatant for the Roman populace to accept; this visual boundary seems absolute—mortals cannot assume the visual markers of the gods. Indeed, even after Augustus and Livia's notorious Republicanizing modes of dress—themselves a brilliant political affectation—were set aside, subsequent savvy imperial wives well through the Flavian period adopted modest adornment in their official imperial portraiture. Significantly, while living, they are pictured without diadems, even after the polite fiction that the emperor did

not hold the power of a king was dropped. For a living imperial wife to wear the diadem, the accouterment of a goddess, would be a dangerous offense on par with Nero's construction of his colossal monument to himself. Yet the women of Pompeii, while conversant with these imperial realities, were not bound by their strictures. That they owned diadems is a certainty. That they wore them is more than likely. And the act of putting on what the empress could not is a provocative suggestion of the seditious power of adornment. Indeed, resistance to sumptuary legislation, or to moral dictates, could be understood as a quiet rebellion against the leadership that proposes it. Much as the Venus in the House of the Seven Skeletons is made distinct from her painted observers by her adornments, the jewelry of the women of Pompeii gave them the opportunity to express not only the social position that they had, but also the one that they *wanted*. And just as Fortunata's liminal status gave her a greater ability to transgress boundaries, so did the women of Pompeii have the opportunity to express themselves in ways that might have been more difficult for the more visible women of the imperial court.

Far from a frivolous expenditure, fashion is the art of power. In the complex social performances undertaken by individuals as they seek to situate themselves in their communities, it is the materialization of both position and aspiration. On the dynamic canvas of the human body, metals, minerals, and fibers allow individuals to transform themselves. These daily transformations are an opportunity, affording fashion practitioners the opportunity to attempt to achieve social goals. But for all that adornments offer the chance for both creation and re-creation, on the streets of Pompeii, watchful eyes made note of the sartorial missteps that signaled social

dissonance. Quests for both exceptionality and social inclusion might well flounder in the face of such censure, expressed to in-group and out-group alike through laughter. Laughter, more than a soundtrack of conviviality, thus acts as a check on the apparently limitless generative capacity of fashion—be it on bodies or walls—and on its ability to suggest social position. It is in the charged space of the dinner party that personal appearances and outward personas are put to the test. For it is not enough to purchase costly and aesthetically pleasing decorations, nor can status be conflated entirely with wealth. Display must be paired with knowledge to make performances of social position effective.

But as disastrous undertakings on the highest level of Roman society illustrate, it is possible to transform oneself too effectively, to articulate power and dissent so clearly that one's social performance becomes hazardous. Amongst the elites of Rome, threats to imperial supremacy and stability were swiftly dispatched by exile and death. The stakes for most inhabitants of Pompeii were not so high, the consequences of overreaching not so dire, yet in their homes we see echoes of the tense interplay between aspiration and paranoia so poignantly expressed by Latin authors from Catullus to Virgil to Ovid.

To insist upon personal prestige is to negate it; an outright statement of power invites contradiction, and as Petronius's satiric masterpiece the *Cena Trimalchionis* illustrates, the need to reiterate one's social merits is a mark of exclusion, of the notion that these credentials, however dearly bought, are not enough. In such a milieu, visual communication comes to the fore as an effective means of establishing social position. Although words might have multiple

meanings—and in the hands of master wordsmiths like Virgil, these multiple meanings could be used to construct counter-narratives— words function largely by imposing limits on the range of concepts a single word can convey; however, visual media present a range of multi-valenced communicative possibilities, precisely because they are constantly open to interpretation. Just as adornments both delimit and obscure, marking the boundaries between the body and the external world even as they disguise a body's blemishes, the paintings on Pompeian walls act as an interface between the real world and the imaginal, between physical space and mental, inviting the viewer to consider and reconsider the relationships between self and other, in-group and out-group.

Such negotiations are made safe by the deliberate deployment of ambiguity. It is ambiguity that makes the conservative dress practices modeled by observer figures in Pompeian paintings and extolled by moralistic male writers in Latin texts desirable. If women eschew lavish and overstated dress, then there is no great visual distinction between citizens, underscoring the putative cohesiveness of the group, in many cases the Roman political unit. But while ambiguity can help to provide a means to undermine the effectiveness of displays of wealth, and can enable a variety of people to adopt the visual markers of citizenship, helping to reinforce social norms, it is also a tool in the hands of those who wish to question them. The deployment of deliberate ambiguity, the inclusion of paintings with multiple divergent meanings, allows homeowners to express seditious sentiments and to take up mythological mantles denied even to the emperor, an action that in itself could constitute political and social dissent. These silent markers of resistance

scattered through Pompeii are accessible to us through their material markers, the paintings and adornments that individuals used to construct themselves and their social realities.

This variety of avenue of exploration, one that highlights the ability of adornment to promote not similarity but difference is a tantalizing opportunity for future work. For just as the existence of sumptuary legislation hints not at the power of the legislative body, but of their fear, and of the instability of their power base, breaks with normative dress practices, and the institution of regional and local modes of dress, present a case for Italic disunity in the imperial period. As Peter S. Wells has demonstrated with his corpus of Gallic *fibulae*, the body of data that is adornment is well-suited to confronting these sorts of questions.⁴⁴⁰ And while scholarly attention has been given to the construction of difference and divergent identities in the provinces, the material record of Pompeii, and of Samnium, suggest that similar processes are at work in the Italian Peninsula itself. Preliminary research on the depiction of adornment in the House of the Faun suggests that, just as depicted adornment deepened our understanding of social interactions in the present study, it has much to add to such an approach.⁴⁴¹

Power and aspiration go hand in hand. But as we suggested here, those who attempt to obtain a new social position are often not those who have a voice in traditional media. Women, freedmen, sub-elites—all are silent presences, when mentioned in the texts that have structured our understanding of Rome and its

⁴⁴⁰ See Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴⁴¹ I will expand on this topic in Neville McFerrin, “In the Eye of the Beholder: Depicting Darius in Pompeii,” forthcoming.

environs, they are presented as outsiders, often derided as detriments to the elite male agenda. Indeed, while some women made forays into the male dominated public sphere, Pliny's assertions that pearls acted as a woman's *lictor* in the streets hints at a system in which those without a voice asserted themselves not through action, but through their physical appearance. Adornment made a space for them. Although their voices might be silent, their bodies could convey their desires, their affiliations, and their hopes.

It is fitting, perhaps, that we seek to give a voice to these people by turning to the same media that they used to circumvent societal expectations. While group dynamics and intra-group negotiations of power were our focus here, there is another sort of expression of power that depends upon adornment for mediation. As Alan Hunt argues, even as minerals and metals are aestheticized when they are crafted into jewelry and made into objects of display, they also transfer this aesthetic dimension onto their wearer. He gives an example to make this association clear: "Nowhere is this more apparent than in the complex coupling of aesthetic and sexual significance associated with the female neck and breast as a site of display, both of precious metals and stones, but also of the body itself."⁴⁴² Even as such jewelry delineates a boundary between the body and the outside world, it draws attention to the body it defines. The ability to draw the eye is itself a form of power, one that we only touched upon within this text. But for women, who were consistently and definitively barred from the avenues of political and social distinction open to their male counterparts, dress provides a means of entry into

⁴⁴² Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (London: MacMillan, 1996), 71.

public discourse and to private power. The close interpersonal relationships that are at the core of private constructions of power are equally accessible to us through the medium of adornments, and while our analysis here focused on signets, rather than wedding rings, these expressions of affection and affiliation are another interesting avenue of inquiry, especially when paired with Pompeii's corpus of erotic paintings. In such a study, depictions of Ariadne and Venus take on new significance, as models both of female power and of the tools that crafted it.

Memory and aspiration combine to inform our understanding of clothed bodies. But even as the paintings on Pompeian walls invite us to project ourselves into an imaginal space in which the transgressive becomes accepted, the story of Narcissus reminds us to be wary of the seductive power of illusion and representation. Indeed, the dangerous lure of the mirror, that we only began to hint at in Chapter Four, is yet another entryway into new avenues of thought. For throughout the *Cena Trimalchionis* and in the scenes that follow, Petronius critiques both illusionistic painting and the concept of mimesis, drawing a clear parallel between illusion, decadence, and deceit. Although we touched upon the topic of deceit in Chapter Six, suggesting that the feminization of Paris is a dual commentary on women's wiles and deception, the consistent connections drawn in text and in depiction between Venus, illusion, image, power, and deceit could offer further insight into these elusive constructs.

It is the multi-valenced nature of images that makes them a useful tool of exploration, both for us and for the Pompeian viewer. For many Roman and Pompeian men, fashion was fear: fear of the unknown, fear of the other, and fear of

the uncontrollable. But for women, and for the disenfranchised, fashion was a transformative force, one that provided them with the agency to assert themselves and to confront and undermine pre-existing hierarchies and structures of power. While moralizing texts from the period between 80 BCE and 79 CE liken women to monsters, ravenous in their pursuit of gold and fine cloth, in the imaginal spaces of rooms like Room 5 in the Villa of the Mysteries, jewelry transforms women not into beasts, but into goddesses. In the end, Anaïs Nin's comments on the variability of reactions to the Seine ring true for wall painting as well. Of the Seine, she writes, "She would see it silky and grey, sinuous and glittering, he would draw it opaque with fermented mud, and a shoal of wine bottle corks and weeds caught in the stagnant edges."⁴⁴³ What we see is inevitably dictated by our own mental landscapes, by the memories and preconceptions and education that our brains use to contextualize what our eyes take in. For students of the past, this is both a warning and an insight: we do not see things as they are. We see them as we are.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴³ Anaïs Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1961), 124.

⁴⁴⁴ Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur*, 124.

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