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Evidence of the Erotic in the House of the Vettii

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Classics

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Abstract

In this thesis I examine the erotic evidence from the House of the Vettii in Pompeii. I analyze the erotic wall-paintings in the House of the Vettii (located in rooms *b*, *p*, *n*, *t*, and *x*¹) and the erotic graffiti found within the house (located in rooms *v* and *a*). I also consider individual and overarching themes found within the erotic wall-paintings in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the artwork and identify a number of themes in the decorative programme: erotic abandonment, illicit desire, and demigods that use sexual violence against mortal women. While I do not come to any unprecedented revelations in my thesis, mine is the first scholarly work to examine all the erotic evidence from one house.

Keywords

Erotic, Art, Archaeology, Rome, Pompeii, Vettii

Summary for Lay Audience

In this thesis I examine the erotic evidence (evidence which either explicitly or implicitly alludes to erotic or sexual themes) from the House of the Vettii in Pompeii. The House of the Vettii was owned by former slaves and contains many cases of artistic erotic evidence found in wall-paintings/frescoes (artworks painted directly onto the interior walls of Roman houses) as well as literary erotic evidence in the form of graffiti. The erotic wall-paintings I analyze are located in rooms *b*, *p*, *n*, *t*, and *x*¹ and the erotic graffiti I examine are located in rooms *v* and *a* of the House of the Vettii. While previous scholarship has analyzed certain pieces of the erotic evidence from the House of the Vettii, my work is the first to examine all the erotic evidence solely from this house.

Acknowledgments

I consider myself fortunate to have been surrounded by a supportive and truly wonderful group of people during the writing (and re-writing) of my thesis. To begin, I'd like to thank Dr. Kelly Olson for supervising this thesis and for providing unwavering support and encouraging feedback through every stage of my writing. I would also like to thank the entire Western University Classics Department. I am lucky to have been a part of this community for the past six years and while I am sad to leave such a wonderful group of people, I leave knowing I could not have been better prepared to embark on the next stage of my academic and professional career. Thank you to Donna Franker, Fred Shuh, Amanda Franker-Shuh, and Nigel for always supporting me and my aspirations. Mom, thank you for all the many late-night phone calls—they never failed to reassure me that everything would turn out okay. This thesis is dedicated to Keegan Bruce, Cassandra Phang-Lyn, and Shereen Fayed, each of whom has always surrounded me with light and love since I have met them. You all inspire me to reach my full potential every day. A special heartfelt thank you is needed for Keegan for guiding me through every step of thesis writing and formatting I was sceptical about or needed help with; thank you for never giving up on me (despite my technological deficiencies), for making me laugh when I needed it most, and for always making sure I knew I was never alone. Thank you to my committee members, Elizabeth Greene, Alexander Meyer, and Charles Barteet for their thoughtful edits and insightful questions during my defense. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Lewis, without your constant support over the last decade I would not have graduated from high school and now I am about to complete a Master's programme; thank you for seeing potential in me when I was unable to see it myself.

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Chapter 1

1 State of the Field

Sexuality and gender studies, as well as classical scholarship conducted through this lens, can provide significant insight into the wall-paintings in the House of the Vettii.

Beginning in 1971, disdain for former ideologies surrounding sexuality and its expression in society became popular amongst scholars of this generation and also became a sign of liberation.¹

1.1 The History of Sexuality Studies in Classics

Since the 1970s, new approaches to the study of sexuality began to invigorate classical scholars resulting in an increase of scholarship in this field.² Moreover, new cultural approaches to the study of gender and interpretations of gender-roles forced scholars to re-evaluate these subjects within the field of classical studies.³ As a result of this groundbreaking scholarship, there followed an intense interest in ancient sexuality, leading to a transformation in sexual discourse in classical scholarship.⁴ While some classical

¹ Jeffery Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), *vii*.

² Kenneth James Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1978), *viii*.

³ *Ibid*, *vii-viii*. On the subject of sexuality studies in classics (and his book) Dover states: “For some, it was an intellectually liberating event...from the level of anatomical detail to that of philosophical theory, without inhibitions or reservations...To others, however, [it] was a cause of dismay—even somewhat threatening to the decorum of the status quo...” Dover also states that an increase in the awareness of the role of comic drama in ancient civilizations—ancient Athenian civilization in particular—as a social and political foundation resulted in this literary form functioning as a survey for sexual behaviour.

⁴ *Ibid*, *vii*.

scholars found this research to be opening up a new realm of intellectual possibilities, others were appalled by this new perspective.⁵

One of the results of the sexual revolution and the re-formulation of historical categories (both occurring in the 1970s) was the systematic study of ancient homoeroticism.⁶ This newfound scholarly interest continued to grow over the next 50 years. Kenneth James Dover's seminal work on homoerotic practice in ancient Greece was the first scholarly initiative to examine ancient Greek notions of homoerotic psychology and practices with historical and philological methodologies, using evidence from literature, iconography, philosophy, mythology, and religion.⁷ Jeffery Henderson's seminal work *The Maculate Muse* was also published in the 1970s.⁸ Furthermore, with Michel Foucault's work *Histoire de la sexualité* sparking further interest in ancient Greek and Roman sexual ideologies, an increase in scholarly awareness and interest in this subject began and discussion on the role of cultural influence on sexuality was brought to the fore.⁹ This scholarship was in part motivated by the constrictive and manipulative influence of modern-day biases against homosexuality.¹⁰ Dover's research, as a classical scholar, validated ancient sexuality as a discipline within classical studies.¹¹ His work was the first of its kind—an in-depth, unrestrained, and factual examination of same-sex relationships in ancient Greece—creating a new field of scholarly interest.¹² This was the

⁵ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, vii.

⁶ Ibid; Henderson, *The Maculate Muse*, vii; Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). As stated in the foreword of Dover's *Greek Homosexuality*, xv: "Following its much-anticipated publication in 1978, *Greek Homosexuality* was warmly welcomed by reviewers for what it was: the first comprehensive, 'unvarnished' account of same-sex relationship in ancient Greece and one which laid out 'the facts'...Crucially, Dover's standing as a classical scholar...helped to validate ancient sexuality as a legitimate area of scholarly interest. Dover did not just open up questions, he opened up a whole area of scholarship."

⁷ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, vii.

⁸ Henderson, *The Maculate Muse*, vii.

⁹ See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) for more information on how sexuality studies began to intersect with classical studies.

¹⁰ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, viii.

¹¹ Ibid, xv.

¹² Ibid, xv.

first scholarly work to describe same-sex couplings in ancient Greek art and literature and to examine sexual ideologies in ancient Greek art, society, and morality.¹³

Additionally, work advanced in the 1990s by LGBTQ+ and feminist scholarship drew the attentions of classical scholars to analyze the extent to which literature (such as Attic comedy and other genres), embodied the ideologies of the androcentric ancient Greek and Roman societies.¹⁴ Moreover, some scholars note that certain views on sexuality regressed in the early 1990s as a response to “national reversion to sexual conservatism” due to the influence of various governmental policies in Western nations.¹⁵ In 1999, the field of classical studies gained the first monograph-length examination into Roman same-sex relationships and ideologies through Craig Arthur Williams’ *Roman Homosexuality*.¹⁶ This study focused on presenting the realities and representations of same-sex relationships in ancient Rome in order to conduct an examination of masculine ideals in ancient Roman society.¹⁷

¹³ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, xxix.

¹⁴ Ibid, ix. Some of this scholarship includes the works of: Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook, *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Ellen Greene, *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Barbara F. McManus, *Classics & Feminism: Gendering the Classics* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997).

¹⁵ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, x.

¹⁶ Craig Arthur Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-4. In this work, Williams examined prevailing ideologies of masculinity in ancient Roman discourse by studying the “realities of men’s sexual practice” and “sexual practices between males in particular”. Williams states: “When I speak of *ideologies* I refer to the systems of norms, values, and assumptions that were bequeathed to Roman men as part of their cultural patrimony and that enabled them to describe and evaluate individual experience in public contexts—in other words, to give public meaning to private acts. These ideologies were ‘prevalent’ in the sense that, while different belief systems surely existed, these particular systems claimed the publicly pledged allegiance of men who wielded power in ancient Roman culture and whose writings not coincidentally constitute nearly all of the surviving source material; a rejection of these ideologies was tantamount to the abrogation of power, to submission.”

¹⁷ Ibid, 4.

1.2 Expurgation & Classical Literature

Along with the increase in the amount of scholarship written regarding ancient sexuality during the late twentieth century, there was also an increase in the amount of scholarship scrutinizing previous scholarly practices that attempted to purge “obscene” features of ancient art and literature (expurgation). Expurgation has a long history in classical scholarship.¹⁸ The practice of expurgation created numerous absences of words deemed “obscene” and thereby greatly impacted the transmission of classical literature.¹⁹ Words with sexually explicit meanings often were subject to this practice. With the development of Christianity in the late Roman Empire, Christian attitudes began to influence expurgation practices and censorship in classical literature, as evidenced from the first explicit use of expurgation in Byzantium.²⁰ In some cases, expurgation and censorship turned into prohibition and the *Index librorum prohibitorum* was issued in 1559 by Pope Paul IV and not abolished until 1966 by Pope John XXIII.²¹ The *Loeb Classical Library*, founded in 1911, originally aimed to increase accessibility to ancient texts by providing pocket-sized translations, but did not actually succeed in this effort.²² This is due to the fact that some volumes in this collection were printed in ways that negatively impacted accessibility.²³ Books in this collection engaged in obfuscation, excision, non-translation, and retranslation in order to make the so-called “obscene” language used in texts more modest by engaging in the expurgation of words deemed unsavoury.²⁴

¹⁸ Stephen Harrison & Christopher Stray, “Introduction,” in *Expurgating the Classics: Editing Out in Greek and Latin*, ed. Stephen Harrison and Christopher Stray (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 1. Harrison and Stray define expurgation as “the deliberate removal (purging) of offensive matter from texts”.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²² Philip Lawton, “For the Gentleman and the Scholar: Sexual and Scatological References in the Loeb Classical Library,” in *Expurgating the Classics: Editing Out in Greek and Latin*, ed. Stephen Harrison and Christopher Stray (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 175.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

1.3 Expurgation in Ancient Art & Archaeology

The practice of censoring aspects of ancient Greek and Roman culture extended to art and archaeological evidence with sexual themes. These artefacts—deemed too shocking for public sensibilities—experienced censorship resulting in the opening of the Secret Museum within the Naples Archaeological Museum.²⁵ However, the nature of this censorship is often misrepresented resulting in the so-called “censorship myth”.²⁶ In fact, these artefacts were not usually locked away immediately and sparked much scholarly interest despite their overt sexual themes.²⁷ While English accounts of the notorious Secret Museum often take their information from Italian sources, these versions mostly contrast the sexual repression evident from the Victorian era and modern notions of sexual liberation—downplaying Italian accounts of the Secret Museum’s history and the influence of Italian politics on its creation.²⁸ As such, the English accounts created what Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands designate as the “censorship myth”—the idea that artefacts of a sexual nature created the need for censorship and that antiquarians of previous eras were shocked and outraged by these objects.²⁹

While indeed certain elements in the selective choosing of museum collections are based in fact, many accounts nonetheless contain fictitious embellishments or selective evidence.³⁰ Collections of artefacts with sexual properties were created slowly over

²⁵ Kate Fisher & Rebecca Langlands, “The Censorship Myth and the Secret Museum,” in *Pompeii in the Public Imagination from its Rediscovery to Today*, ed. Shelley Hales & Joanna Paul (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 302.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 302-303. Fisher & Langlands state they chose to describe this phenomenon as the “censorship myth” to indicate that although elements of the story behind the creation of the Secret Museum are based in reality, there are elements of fiction as well as “selective use of the available evidence” resulting in an overall unreliable historical account of the creation of the Secret Museum and its reception.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 302.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

time—in some cases to create a foundation for scholarship on sex and ancient sexuality.³¹ Artefacts were cycled in and out of restricted areas over the course of decades and the collections in the Secret Museum were never considered to be complete.³² In fact, once the Secret Museum was created, some visitors still had access to its collections and there was extensive acknowledgement about what was kept in this collection.³³ Additionally, there were deliberate attempts by scholars during this time to create a foundation of scholarship on sex and sexuality.³⁴ Much speculation around the Secret Museum occurred over the course of centuries, including the claim that the term “pornography” was created uniquely to describe the Pompeian artefacts, and that censorship was created solely to deal with them—claims that have been widely disproven.³⁵ Interestingly, there is much evidence that many of the artefacts located in the Secret Museum today were not given a “censored” status prior to 1819.³⁶ However, notions of strictly censored artefacts are still prevalent in scholarship with misinformation including the belief that artefacts can only be ‘scholarly’ or ‘erotic,’ even when these labels coincide.³⁷ Despite evidence challenging the censorship myth, it still exists today primarily to serve as a comparison for analyzing where modern-day viewpoints stand in regard to sexual liberation.³⁸ The myth functions as a necessity to contrast with the opening of the collection to the public.³⁹ Therefore, the censorship myth still exists to create a rich comparison between modern sensibilities around sex and sexuality and those from previous eras, and creates a powerful perception of the Secret Museum, providing visitors with the opportunity to view the same sexually overt objects as past cultures did while simultaneously confronting their own reactions to it.⁴⁰ It was not until April 2000 that the Secret

³¹ Fisher & Langlands, “The Censorship Myth,” 303.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 305.

³⁶ Ibid, 308.

³⁷ Ibid, 310.

³⁸ Ibid, 311.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 315.

Museum was opened to the public in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.⁴¹ The opening of this section was celebrated internationally as an end to the censorship of artefacts displaying sexual themes from Pompeii and Herculaneum.⁴²

Furthermore, until scholarship on sexuality became known in classical studies, it was common practice to attribute all sexual language in graffiti and any sex scenes in art, especially in wall-paintings, to sex-work.⁴³ Due to this misidentification, there have been estimates of over thirty-five brothels in Pompeii simply because it was assumed that some sort of sexual activity must occur in rooms that displayed sexual or erotic decorations, such as sex scenes in wall-paintings or erotic graffiti.⁴⁴ As such, even rooms within the confines of domestic spaces were sometimes labelled as brothels.⁴⁵ However, the ancient Greeks and Romans commonly displayed sex scenes in a variety of media, and this represents a mislabelling of spaces and artefacts.⁴⁶ Theories arose from these miscalculations which resulted in the idea that the viewer was meant to interpret sexual scenes in art as “visual flirtations”—scenes which invited ancient viewers to reflect on who they were by thinking about their desires.⁴⁷

Despite the increase in scholarship on sexuality studies within classics, issues continue to arise.⁴⁸ Due to the powerful effect culture has on defining people’s behaviour

⁴¹ Fisher & Langlands, “The Censorship Myth,” 315.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Caroline Vout, *Sex on Show: Seeing the Erotic in Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 98; Anise K. Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). For example, Vout acknowledges that up until recently, scholars commonly believed there were as many as 35 brothels in Pompeii based solely on the (false) conclusion that sex scenes in art and sexual graffiti must designate place of sexual activity. In her *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World*, Anise Strong also addresses this fallacy, stating that it is impossible to determine if women in sex scenes are sex-workers or wives based on the types of activity they participate in.

⁴⁴ Vout, *Sex on Show*, 98.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 98-100.

⁴⁸ John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art 100 B.C.-A.D.250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 11.

and judgements, in 2001 John Clarke highlighted the issues surrounding labelling items as “erotic”.⁴⁹ By labelling something with a sexual theme as “erotic,” it assumes that the viewer would have been aroused by what they are seeing; however, there is no way to know if that was the case.⁵⁰ Furthermore, what is erotic for one individual might change over the course of that person’s life.⁵¹ Given the public location of most sexual themes in artistic sources, these themes likely did not result in sexual stimulation for the ancient viewer and thus indicates that the images likely were not (or not entirely) erotic, but perhaps had a different function, such as apotropaism.⁵² Alternately, many sex scenes may have been meant to produce aesthetic pleasure and create balance in various rooms.⁵³ These observations changed how scholars viewed sex scenes in art. Additionally, classical scholars studying ancient sexuality have used literary evidence, notably the writings of Ovid, to determine that sexual paintings—paintings which displayed numerous depictions of various sexual positions—were common in upper-class houses.⁵⁴

1.4 An Introduction to the House of the Vettii’s Wall-Paintings: Sex Scenes & Sexual Themes

There has been a great deal of scholarship focusing on the House of the Vettii’s decoration—specifically the numerous, rather decadent wall-paintings—as well as the

⁴⁹ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵³ Vout, *Sex on Show*, 98-100.

⁵⁴ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 91-92; Ovid *Tristia* 2.521-528. Clarke provides a translation of this passage: “surely in your house, just as figures of great men of old shine—painted by some artist’s hand—so somewhere a small picture depicts the various forms of copulation and the sexual positions. Telamonian Ajax sulks in rage, barbarian Medea glares infanticide, but there’s Venus as well—wringing her dripping hair dry with her hands—and barely covered by the waters that bore her.”

sexual themes found in these wall-paintings.⁵⁵ Wall-paintings comprise a significant part of the Pompeian archaeological corpus, and played an important function in the expression of wealth, status, and social aspirations of their owners.⁵⁶ By the second century BCE, wall-paintings had become fashionable in the Roman world.⁵⁷ For two centuries following there was a great deal of innovation in composition, and use of this form of decoration spread through Roman society.⁵⁸ This may have been the product of the lower classes emulating and subsequently copying the artistic preferences of the upper class, which in turn led the upper class to further innovate and experiment in order to maintain social distance from and superiority to their subordinates.⁵⁹ The House of the Vettii was excavated between 1894-5 and was the first house in Pompeii to be fully restored by its excavators.⁶⁰ It is known for its elaborate Fourth Style wall-paintings featuring numerous mythological scenes and characters.⁶¹ Fortunately, the House of the Vettii is one of the few large Pompeian houses undisturbed by treasure-hunters and looters prior to its formal excavation.⁶²

⁵⁵ The House of the Vettii's wall-paintings have been the subject of numerous examinations. Some of these works include: Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*; Barbara Kellum, "Weighing In: The Priapus Painting at the House of the Vettii, Pompeii," in *Ancient Obscenities: Their Nature and Use in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. Dorota Dutsch and Ann Suter, 199-224 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Fred S. Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art* (Belmont: Thomas Wadsworth, 2007); Estelle Lazer, *Resurrecting Pompeii* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009); Eleanor Windsor Leach, *The Social Life of Painting in Ancient Rome and on the Bay of Naples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Roger Ling, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Volker Michael Strocka, "Domestic decoration: painting and the 'Four Styles,'" in *The World of Pompeii*, ed. John J. Dobbins & Pedar W. Foss, 302-322 (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁵⁶ Joanne Berry, *The Complete Pompeii* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 168. Berry states that: "Wall-painting is a very prominent part of the surviving archaeological record of Pompeii, and can be seen in houses and public buildings of all shape and sizes. The walls of Roman houses were decorated to a much greater extent than we are accustomed to today, and wall-painting appears to have become an important method of expressing wealth, status and social aspirations. As such it was closely connected to the issue of traditional Roman morality."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

Themes of power are often portrayed in wall-paintings through sexual scenes. Power is encoded throughout the Roman house in a variety of different spaces depending on how the *dominus* or *domina* interacted with that particular space.⁶³ Mythological wall-paintings specifically help to define important spaces in the Roman house as the owner can display their cultural background through myths or impress guests who would be familiar with these myths.⁶⁴ While mythological wall-paintings frequently depict heroes and gods, their content is usually sexual rather than heroic.⁶⁵ Mythological panels frequently depict violent sexual scenes—in fact, scenes of rape are far more common than battle scenes or scenes of heroism.⁶⁶ Moreover, the presence of sexual or violent themes, and in some cases the presence of both, requires the viewer to interpret gender as a way of illustrating both power and powerlessness.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the wall-paintings in the House of the Vettii exhibit similarities in their display of sexualized figures.⁶⁸ In fact, many of the wall-paintings in the House of the Vettii share themes of concealment or the removal of some type of clothing.⁶⁹ This theme is found in a range of wall-paintings with sexualized figures that either confirm or confuse Roman ideological notions of sexuality; specifically, the distinction between sexually active and sexually passive.

⁶³ David Frederick, “Beyond the Atrium to Ariadne: Erotic Painting and Visual Pleasure in the Roman House,” *Classical Antiquity* 14, no. 2 (1995): 266, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25011023>. For more information on the movement away from the *dominus*-centred house in scholarship, see: Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “Gender and the Roman house,” in *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, ed. D.E.E. Kleiner and S.B. Matheson (Connecticut: Yale University Art Gallery, 1996), 14-26. Penelope Allison, “Engendering Roman domestic space,” *British School at Athens Studies* 15 (2007): 343-350. Lisa Nevett, *Domestic Space in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 89-118.

⁶⁴ Frederick, “Beyond the Atrium to Ariadne,” 266.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 267. According to Frederick, while mythological panels in wall-paintings feature heroes and gods, they typically lack heroic content. Rather, Frederick believes that their content is erotic and often violent: “. . .rape is much more common than scenes of epic battle.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

In this thesis, I conduct an analysis of the erotic evidence in the House of the Vettii. My analysis will primarily focus on room *p*, containing the panels of Pasiphae, Ariadne, and Ixion; room *n*, containing the panels of Dirce and Pentheus; room *x*¹, showcasing three separate wall-paintings of male-female couples engaging in sexual intercourse; the illustration of Priapus in room *b*, and room *t*, containing the wall-paintings of Hercules and Auge as well as Achilles disguised as a woman on Skyros. I will examine these images through the lens of sexuality studies in order to gain the fullest interpretation into both their overt and covert symbolic themes. Additionally, I identify and discuss these themes (erotic abandonment, demigods that use sexual violence against mortal women, illicit desire, and punishment) in order to understand potential messages and symbolism the Vettii were attempting to convey. I will use both previous scholarship and my own insights to reach conclusions on what the sexual wall-paintings in the House of the Vettii symbolized and how they can tell us more about their owners' aspirations. I will also examine the erotic graffiti found in rooms *a* and *v* in the House of the Vettii. While I do not provide unprecedented revelations about the erotic evidence in the House of the Vettii in this work, this is the first scholarly work to look at all the erotic evidence from one house. By examining the erotic evidence from one location, specialized knowledge can be gained on how these remains might have been viewed and interpreted in antiquity.

Chapter 2

2 An Overview of the House of the Vettii

I chose the House of the Vettii for my study because of the impressive preservation of Pompeii.⁷⁰ The extant evidence and its great detail has made the site an excellent source of information on Roman domestic wall-paintings.⁷¹ As such, the site is continually investigated, analyzed, and—importantly—new methodologies are frequently applied to its study.⁷² Additionally, because scholars are becoming more aware of the need to analyze Pompeii through a diversified lens, one that increasingly adds new perspectives,

⁷⁰ Alison E. Cooley and M.G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2004), 5-7. Pietro Giovanni Guzzo, “City and Country: An Introduction,” in *The World of Pompeii*, ed. John J. Dobbins and Pedar W. Foss (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3. Mary Beard, *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1; Robert Witcher, “Pompeii Resurgent,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 1. doi:10.15184/aqy.2019.10. Little is known about the early history of Pompeii. Ancient literary sources seldomly discuss the history of Pompeii before the first century BCE and the overwhelming bulk of the archaeological investigations of Pompeii all focused on the history of the city at the time of its burial in 79 CE. However, we do know from Livy (*History of Rome*, 9.38.2-4) that in 310 BCE the Romans, as well as their allies, raided Nuceria—a neighbouring region located in the Bay of Naples area—during the second Samnite war. The significance of this, which Livy describes to us, is that this area was dominated by a fortified Pompeii and that families that farmed in the surrounding countryside moved to the city for protection. However, archaeological evidence indicates that Pompeii was likely already fortified by the end of the sixth century BCE. Furthermore, Pompeii has a rich history in mythology as well. Hercules, during one of his twelve labours, passed through Italy. During his journey he passed through Pompeii and is said to have given the city its name, derived from the Greek and Latin *pompe* and *pompa*, respectively. While little might be known about the early history of Pompeii, there is much information surrounding its destruction and subsequent preservation. Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE (traditionally, the eruption is cited as happening in August of 79 CE, but recent evidence suggests this date may have been closer to October or November of 79 CE, see Witcher, “Pompeii Resurgent”, 1) and the House of the Vettii dates to this period.

⁷¹ Eric Poehler, Miko Flohr, and Kevin Cole, “Introduction,” in *Pompeii: Art, Industry, and Infrastructure*, ed. Eric Poehler, Miko Flohr, and Kevin Cole (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 1. The House of the Vettii is located in region VI, insula 15 in Pompeii. The house gets its name from its owners, but it would not have been referred to as “the House of the Vettii” in antiquity.

⁷² Ibid. Poehler et al state: “Pompeii is the great laboratory of the Roman archaeologist. The breadth and the detail of the evidence that the city preserves have made it, along with Rome and a handful of companion sites, an essential archetype for Roman archaeology writ large.” Additionally, scholars are becoming more aware of the need to interpret the site thoroughly, making use of its vast resources. This continual reinterpretation allows a great number of perspectives to be used to interpret Pompeii as a whole.

there is a large dataset from which to draw information.⁷³ Not only are some of the best examples of Roman domestic architecture and domestic wall-paintings found in Pompeii, but the level of preservation has made this site an excellent example for Roman wall-paintings and how ancient individuals might have interacted with their house in antiquity.⁷⁴

A vital facet required to sufficiently analyze the sexual themes in the wall-paintings and graffiti in the House of the Vettii is to understand the structure itself. This is necessary since the manner in which the wall-paintings and graffiti would have been integrated into the space impacts their interpretation and how they would have been viewed in antiquity. The House of the Vettii's structure was created by joining two smaller properties together and adapting both structures into one large residence.⁷⁵ The domicile is located in region VI, insula 15, and its owners were likely a pair of former slaves, Aulus Vettius Conviva and Aulus Vettius Restitutus (see Figure 1).⁷⁶

⁷³ Poehler et al., "Introduction," 1. Poehler et al note: "Scholars have become increasingly aware of the need for an approach to Pompeii informed by an increasing number of perspectives and constrained by an ever-growing dataset." They also provide an informative quote from Wallace-Hadrill (1994, 64) stating: "Wallace-Hadrill famously remarked twenty years ago that Pompeii 'is at once the most studied and least understood of sites. Universally familiar, its excavation and scholarship prove a nightmare of omissions and disasters. Each generation discovered with horror the extent to which information has been ignored, neglected, destroyed and left unreported and unpublished.' The present academic generation is the first to have been trained with this quotation as its reality and is the first to understand its pessimism as a call to action." While the takeaway from Wallace-Hadrill's quote is largely pessimistic, the movement it started in Pompeian scholarship was significant, and hopefully, we are currently on a trend that corrects the previous decades of mishandled evidence.

⁷⁴ Clive Knights, "The Spatiality of the Roman Domestic Setting: An Interpretation of Symbolic Content," in *Architecture and Order: Approaches to Social Space*, ed. Michael Parker Pearson and Colin Richards (London: Routledge, 1994), 102.

⁷⁵ Beard, *The Fires of Vesuvius*, 118.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 21. This was determined on the basis of two seal stamps and one signet ring found in the front hall of the House of the Vettii bearing the names of the domicile's owners in combination with political graffiti on the exterior of the house also bearing one of the freedman's names. Possibly, there was a tenant living in the upper floor of the house, as there was an additional seal stamp found in the house bearing the name of an individual referred to as Publius Crustius Faustus.

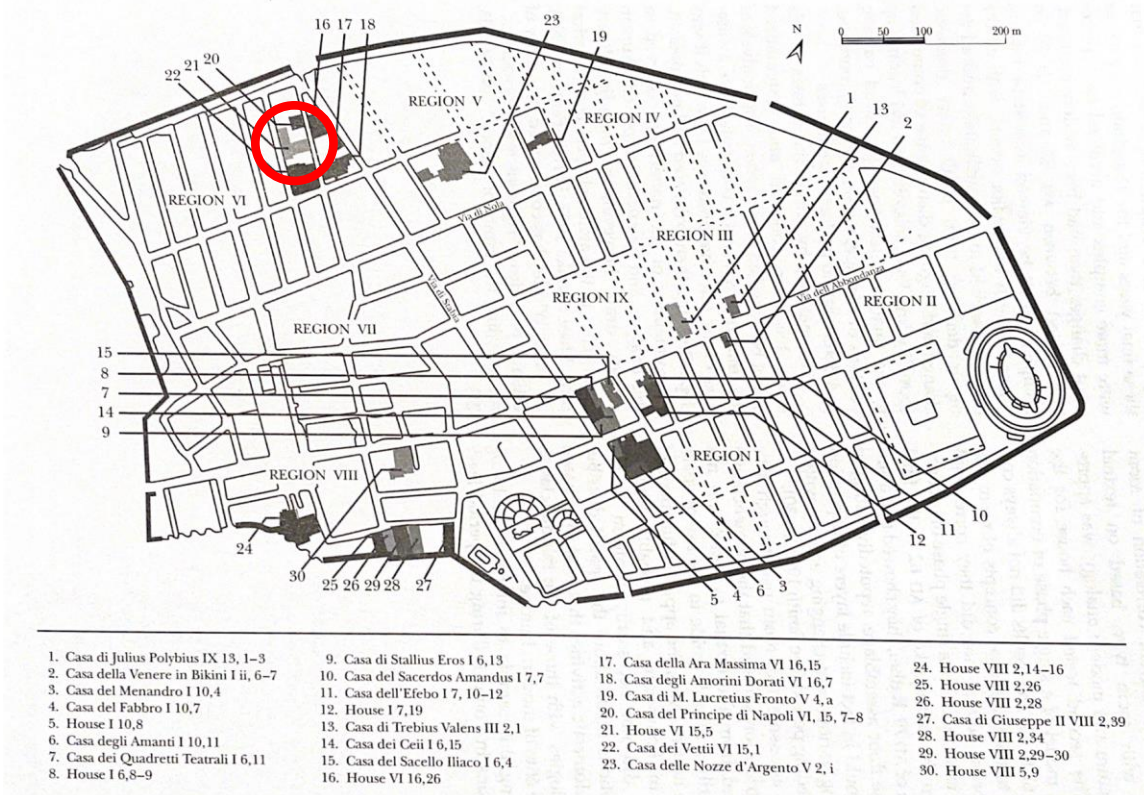


Figure 1: Map of Pompeii, House of the Vettii (circled) is number 22 on the map.

Retrieved from: Penelope M. Allison, *Pompeian Households: An Analysis of the Material Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2004), 7.

The owners of the House of the Vettii were possibly brothers, arriving at their impressive financial status through commercial success once they were freed.⁷⁷ The

⁷⁷ John R. Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy 100 B.C.-A.D. 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 208; Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 155; Stephen Wilson, *The Means of Naming: A Social History* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), 30-31. While it is possible that the Vettii were brothers, it is also possible that the Vettii were not biologically related and were manumitted by the same person. As Wilson states: "Manumission involved a change of name. In the oldest inscriptions freedmen adopt a *praenomen* and the *gentilicium* of their former master with an indication of their status...Around 100 BC, freedmen began to have their own *cognomina*, nearly always their original slave names." While the naming convention for freed persons was practically indistinguishable from the *tria nomina* used by free-born individuals, the freed person's name referenced their former master or patron, rather than the reference a free-born person's name gives to their filiation. Therefore, it is impossible to know whether or not the Vettii were biological brothers or were unrelated, but freed by the same person. Additionally, in ancient Rome slaves could be freed through either formal or informal manumission. Formal manumission provided

Vettii likely made their fortune by growing and selling produce from their estates.⁷⁸ Aulus Vettius Conviva held the highest civic office available for a freedman, an *augustalis*.⁷⁹ While their house is not the largest in Pompeii, its wall-paintings are some of the most opulent and highest in quality due to their elaborate and skilled Fourth-Style decorations—largely expressing the Vettii’s *nouveaux riches* sensibilities through plentiful references to wealth and high status.⁸⁰ The House of the Vettii is one of the most important houses in Pompeii due to the survival of its elaborate Fourth-Style wall-paintings left *in situ* by its excavators and unsold by the King of Naples—a fate, unfortunately, not many other domestic wall-paintings in Pompeii have met.⁸¹ Notably, the Vettii were wealthy enough to fully restore their whole house with high-quality materials after Pompeii’s earthquake of 62 CE.⁸²

By examining the House of the Vettii’s attributes, I will supply the foundation necessary for a greater discussion surrounding the erotic evidence found in the house. To begin, I will discuss the initial excavations performed on the House of the Vettii and will analyze the translated excavation notes. Afterwards, I will examine the House of the Vettii’s construction and the significance of this for my interpretations of the space. Next, I will examine the layout of the rooms in the House of the Vettii as well as how an individual inside the house would have interacted with the space in antiquity. This will be done in order to understand how the wall-paintings would have been viewed as well as to

the slave with Roman citizenship once they were freed. Informal manumission, on the other hand, meant that the freed person was not a citizen and therefore had no citizen rights. According to Bradley: “Informal manumission... was subject to no restrictions of time or process.” It is unclear under which process the Vettii achieved their manumission, but it seems likely they were formally manumitted as Aulus Vettius Conviva was appointed to a civic office and thus would probably have needed some sort of formal recognition that he was indeed a freedman and no longer a slave.

⁷⁸ Ernesto De Carolis, Stefania Adamo Muscettola, Valeria Sampaolo, and Annamaria Ciarallo, “Lifestyles,” in *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City*, ed. Marisa Ranieri Panetta (Vercelli: White Star, 2004), 362.

⁷⁹ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 208. To obtain this position, Aulus Vettius Conviva would have needed to donate a large amount of money for public works. In return for his donations, the emperor would have appointed Conviva to this office.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Paul Wilkinson, *Pompeii: An Archaeological Guide* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 134-135.

⁸² De Carolis et al., “Lifestyles,” 362.

understand the axis on which the house is oriented—another factor impacting movement and viewership in the house.

2.1 The Excavation of the House of the Vettii: History & Notes

The history of the House of the Vettii's excavation provides great insight into the house itself. Excavations started in Pompeii in the year of 1749.⁸³ The initial excavations performed on the site were little more than an operation solely to find interesting artefacts—possibly, at best, for antiquarian interests.⁸⁴ The original excavation techniques were critiqued by eighteenth century visitors to the site who determined that the excavations were conducted haphazardly, but between the years of 1750 and 1764 excavators created the first systematic approach to the excavation of Pompeii.⁸⁵ New methods were explored, detailed plans of the site were created, and the importance of context was realized.⁸⁶ Furthermore, a system for cataloguing finds was developed and the provenances of these finds were marked on maps, another important and positive development in the excavation of the site.⁸⁷ These changes to the methodological framework of the Pompeian excavations had an enormously beneficial impact on the state of preservation and the survival of artefacts found in Pompeii.

Excavations in Pompeii as a whole started in 1863 and were led by Giuseppe Fiorelli.⁸⁸ Fiorelli redesigned the excavations at Pompeii in both archaeological method and procedure, a vital feature to note as it directly impacts the House of the Vettii: the

⁸³ Lazer, *Resurrecting Pompeii*, 6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Pedar W. Foss, "Rediscovery and resurrection," in *The World of Pompeii*, ed. John J. Dobbins and Pedar W. Foss (New York: Routledge, 2007), 34.

procedures designed by Fiorelli were continuously employed for around fifty years.⁸⁹ Michele Ruggiero (1875-1893), Giulio De Petra (1893-1900)—the principal and initial excavator of the House of the Vettii—Ettore Pais (1901-1904), and Antonio Sogliano (1905-1910) continued to excavate, moving in an eastward direction, in a more methodologically-sound approach than their predecessors.⁹⁰ These archaeologists were more intent on preserving the remains found in Pompeii and often recreated the remains *in situ*.⁹¹ The decision to preserve remains *in situ* is the reason why the wall-paintings in the House of the Vettii were not plundered, lost, or destroyed, allowing for this study to take place. The House of the Vettii was the showhouse for Giulio De Petra’s excavations in Pompeii and acted as a model for future excavations.⁹² August Mau, known for assigning the wall-paintings in Pompeii into four distinct stylistic categories, assisted his work.⁹³

The excavation records from the House of the Vettii were published in the *Notizie degli Scavi* of the “Journal of the excavations compiled by the assistants”.⁹⁴ The excavation reports only describe the mythological panels from the wall-paintings and, unfortunately, fail to mention any other scene type.⁹⁵ The excavation notes detail the excavation starting on November 1-5, 1894 to May 20, 1895, initially occurring in room *n*, the room which displays the panels of Dirce, Pentheus, and Hercules as an infant strangling the pair of snakes sent by Hera (see Figure 2).⁹⁶ Other panels found during the November 1-5, 1894 include one of Bacchus, a struggle between Cupid and Pan, and Cyparissus.⁹⁷ Room *c*, commonly referred to as the primary atrium, was excavated soon

⁸⁹ Foss, “Rediscovery and resurrection,” 34.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Cooley and Cooley, *Pompeii*, 213.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

after on December 10, 1894.⁹⁸ Most of the attention of the excavation report focuses on the bronze and iron strongboxes, the locations of which are noted in room *c* on the plan.⁹⁹ Moreover, the excavation report from December 11, 1894 notes two seals displaying the names “A. VETTI RETVSTT” and “A. VETTI CONVIVAES”.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Cooley and Cooley, *Pompeii*, 213.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

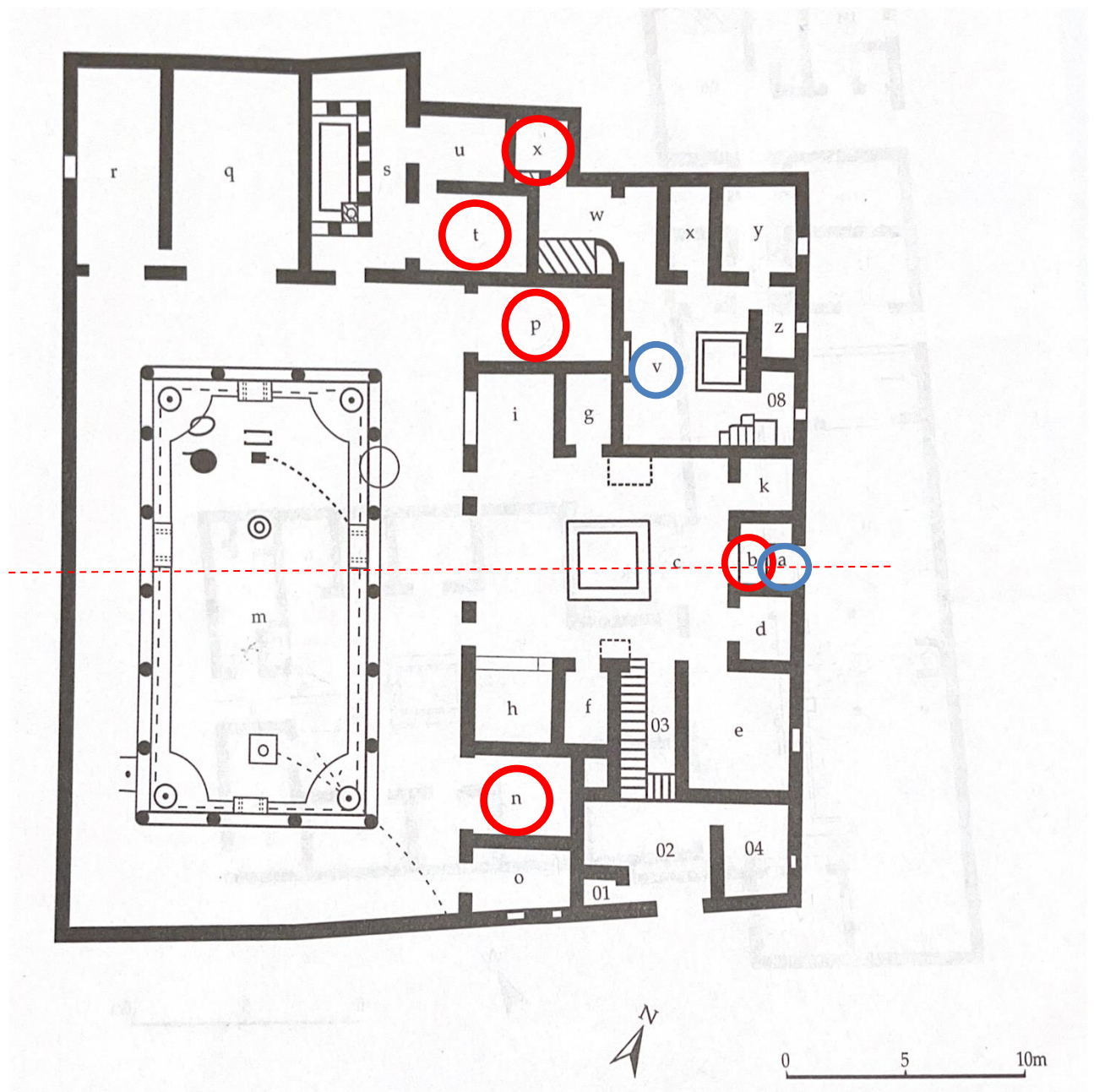


Figure 2: Plan of the House of the Vettii. Circled are the rooms of significance for my research. Room circled in red feature erotic wall-paintings, while rooms circled in blue feature erotic graffiti. Axial division is noted with the dotted red line.

Retrieved from: Penelope M. Allison, *Pompeian Households: An Analysis of the Material Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2004), 216.

2.2 The House of the Vettii: Construction

In the 1870s Fiorelli pioneered a method of analysis—one that is still used today—that compares and contrasts construction techniques and construction materials in houses standing in Pompeii at the time of its burial in 79 CE.¹⁰¹ From this methodological approach, Fiorelli concluded that there were two characteristic groups of houses in Pompeii.¹⁰² The first of these two groups were the houses with *atria* made from local calcareous stone from the bottom of the Sarno, referred to as limestone (but in actuality more like travertine).¹⁰³ The second group were tufo houses, which utilized fine-grained grey volcanic tufo for ashlar façades and architectural detailing.¹⁰⁴ The travertine stone houses tend to be modest, while the tufo houses tend to be grand and elaborate.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, the tufo style of house is mostly associated with Hellenistic architectural details.¹⁰⁶ That said, there is an evolutionary thesis of the Pompeian house that suggests that all Pompeian houses were first built of travertine in a simple and rustic manner and, over the course of around 200 years, were gradually built in the more Hellenistic style suggestive of wealth and power through conquest.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the traditional narrative surrounding Pompeian house development suggests that the addition of a peristyle in the atrium house was an indication of Hellenization in Pompeian houses.¹⁰⁸ This model of the Hellenistic-influenced house is perhaps meant to allude to the gymnasium.¹⁰⁹ Thus, rather than align the house with Hellenistic architecture, the inclusion of a peristyle might be an attempt to make the house more than a domestic space (as the house can now function as a pseudo-public space as well) while simultaneously alluding to notions of *luxuria*, status, and power through conquest—

¹⁰¹ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “The Development of the Campanian House,” in *The World of Pompeii*, ed. John J. Dobbins and Pedar W. Foss (New York: Routledge, 2007), 280.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

themes which the Vettii presumably would have been eager to display in order to showcase their freed statuses.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the addition of peristyles adds opulence and extravagance while at the same time hinting at exotic *luxuria*—another allusion to the wealth and status of the Vettii.¹¹¹



Figure 3: The exterior of the House of the Vettii. Retrieved from: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/roman/wall-painting/a/pompeii-house-of-the-vettii>

¹¹⁰ Wallace-Hadrill, “The Development of the Campanian House,” 287. This may have also served as an attempt to assimilate themselves with upper-class, wealthy, freeborn Romans living in Pompeii.

¹¹¹ Ibid.



Figure 4: Digitally produced reconstruction of the exterior of the House of the Vettii. Retrieved from: <https://sites.google.com/site/ad79eruption/pompeii/regio-vi/reg-vi-ins-15/house-of-the-vettii>

2.3 The Layout of the House of the Vettii: Overall Structure & Individual Rooms

The layout of the House of the Vettii can provide us with significant information that has the potential to impact how the wall-paintings within the house should be interpreted, largely based on notions of viewership, which I will discuss further in chapter three. Because the house was created by combining two previously separate houses into one it has two *atria*, rooms *c* and *v*, as well as a large peristyle, room *m*, at the back, west-end of the property which accounts for 40% of the house's total area (see Figure 2).¹¹² The

¹¹² Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 208.

house's layout has sparked much scholarly curiosity because of its lack of *tablinum*, the study, and the peristyle's unusual axis—notably crossing the axes of the *fauces*, the small entrance hallway into the house, and atrium at right angles.¹¹³ The house creates an illusion of being larger than it actually is due to the strategic placement of columns, with the spacing in between the columns in the peristyle shorter than the ones in the atrium.¹¹⁴ This creates the illusion for a viewer standing in the *fauces* looking through to the atrium that the space is larger than it actually is (see Figure 2).¹¹⁵

The House of the Vettii has an axial division, creating a pseudo-symmetry in the house, despite the asymmetrical nature of the house itself.¹¹⁶ Notably, there are four sets of near-identical rooms along the axis created by the *fauces* and impluvium.¹¹⁷ These rooms, in their pairings, are: *k* and *d*, *g* and *f*, *i* and *h*, *p* and *n* (see Figure 2).¹¹⁸ This division is reinforced by the identical decorative schemes in rooms *i* and *h* as well as the iconographic similarities in rooms *p* and *n*, which I will explore in further detail in chapter three.¹¹⁹ The axis created by these paired rooms creates an uneven division in the peristyle, leaving the space with a shorter north end.¹²⁰ This axis significantly impacted viewership. It created a direct line of sight so that an ancient viewer standing on the street, outside of the house's main entrance, would have been able to see straight through the house into the peristyle where they could view the ornate statues in the garden as well as the elaborate wall-paintings located in this line-of-sight.¹²¹ The exterior of the House of the Vettii was divided into broad zones with a dark red socle and a whitewashed upper

¹¹³ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 208.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* Clarke states: "...the space between the two pairs of peristyle columns is so much shorter than the space between the atrium piers that from the *fauces* the viewer thinks the house is much larger than it actually is. A similar exaggeration of perspective lengthens the perceived visual axis in the House of the Menander."

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Jeremy Hartnett, *The Roman Street: Urban Life and Society in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 147.

section; in stark contrast to the interior of the house, the exterior was bland and had no significant features.¹²²

In total, the House of the Vettii featured four main architectural elements.¹²³ These four elements are: a Tuscan-style atrium, a peristyle, a service atrium, and a smaller, likely private, peristyle (see Figure 2).¹²⁴ A short service corridor was located on the south side of the house and a stable was located at the secondary entrance, with the main entrance located to the east side of the house containing the famed wall-painting of Priapus in room *b*, which I will discuss in greater detail in chapter three (see Figure 2).¹²⁵ After the main entranceway was the atrium, lacking the expected *tablinum*.¹²⁶ Some scholars have suggested this was due to the Vettii's status (as freedmen they possibly would not have had clients for the *salutatio*), or possibly the atrium itself and its *alae* would have functioned for receiving clients.¹²⁷ The atrium is decorated with lavish Fourth Style wall-paintings—all of which would have been visible from the street when the door was open—with the large peristyle lying directly behind, also visible from the street (see Figure 2).¹²⁸ This is significant as a viewer standing at the main entrance would have been able to see the vast amount of opulent wall-paintings in this line-of-sight and would have immediately been able to appreciate the immense wealth of the Vettii.

¹²² Hartnett, *The Roman Street*, 147.

¹²³ Wilkinson, *Pompeii*, 135-136.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*; Penelope M. Allison, "Using the Material and Written Sources: Turn of the Millennium Approaches to Roman Domestic Space," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 2 (2001): 189, <https://doi.org/10.2307/507270>. Wilkinson states: "...without the usual *tablinum* which may suggest that although the Vettii brothers were obviously affluent, as freedmen they did not have clients calling in for the morning *salutatio* but they themselves would go calling. Or the entire atrium, with its two *alae* (adjoining rooms) would have functioned as a place for receiving *clients*." However, as Allison argues in her article, analyzing Roman houses by their typological framework can be misleading. Allison states that: "identification of areas for formal or utilitarian activities, or who is restricted and who is not, requires more specific contextual information and a critically cross-cultural approach to all the potential possibilities for such household organization and interrelationships." Thus, the lack of *tablinum* may not actually have any greater significance as applying one model for all Roman house layouts is ultimately unrealistic.

¹²⁸ Wilkinson, *Pompeii*, 135-136.

Once a visitor had entered the peristyle, the cross axis of the large *oecus*, a “living room”, room *q*, encouraged them to enter the rooms to the right (see Figure 2).¹²⁹ There were two other *oeci* in the House of the Vettii, rooms *p* and *n*, which faced the peristyle as “twin elements” on each side of the entranceway.¹³⁰ Furthermore, the large *oecus* led to both the entrances for rooms *t* and *u*, all situated around the small peristyle *s* (see Figure 2).¹³¹ The slaves’ rooms are thought to have been located around a second smaller atrium, room *v*.¹³² The kitchen, room *w*, was located directly behind what is theorized to have been the slaves’ atrium.¹³³ Because the house was constructed in the early imperial period, greater emphasis was placed on the peristyle (see Figure 2).¹³⁴

While some scholars subscribe to the idea of one model for all Roman houses—and therefore one room function or layout—this does not provide a favourable or accurate interpretation of the House of the Vettii’s organization.¹³⁵ Furthermore, some scholars have interpreted rooms *s*, *u*, and *t* as comprising the house’s *gynaceum*.¹³⁶ Since most of classical scholarship was based on nineteenth century concepts of colonialism and imperialism, interpretations of the ancient world were largely concerned with illustrating the presence of male power.¹³⁷ I do not believe that this area would have been a *gynaceum* (which Roman houses did not have); rather, I think that this space is simply the result of the imperfect joining of the two houses that later comprised the House of the Vettii. Possibly, the preservation of the space indicates the status and wealth of the Vettii as well as themes of opulence and extravagance by having two areas which, in other houses, do not appear in duplicate. However, since scholarship has, in recent years, been more concerned with interpreting Roman society by means of a more balanced

¹²⁹ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 208.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Frank Sear, *Roman Architecture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 116-117.

¹³⁵ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 58.

¹³⁶ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 208.

¹³⁷ Allison, “Engendering Roman Domestic Space,” 343.

viewpoint, this in turn affects my interpretation of spaces such as this one in the House of the Vettii.¹³⁸ Therefore, scholarly attempts to interpret Roman domiciles used both analogical and anecdotal literary evidence rather than examining the relationship that exists between the historical and archaeological records.¹³⁹

I will examine the House of the Vettii with previous scholarly approaches to typology in mind in order to approach the subject with a new perspective and one that interprets evidence in a holistic manner. While I will not attempt to categorize each individual room, recognizing that these rooms may serve a different function than what previous scholarship has ascribed to them is nevertheless important because it impacts the way in which I will view and interpret the wall-paintings in the subsequent chapter. The notion of viewership (who the intended audience for these wall-paintings was), directly impacts their interpretations.

Studies of Roman houses frequently employ a typological approach—assigning one model to all Roman houses—especially in regions that depend less on traditional classical scholarship, such as the Roman provinces; i.e., this room is the *tablinum*, this a *cubiculum*, this the *triclinium* and so on.¹⁴⁰ This approach is important to challenge, as the potential function of a given room, and who used it, has a direct impact on who viewed the wall-paintings. While typology is a fundamental approach in archaeology, and does have benefits in certain cases, it also has drawbacks.¹⁴¹ While some rooms are likely attributed with the correct usage, many rooms in Roman houses are labelled based on an intuitive approach that analyzes the characteristics of the space itself (such as room size or location within the house), divorced from any actual physical evidence that might be present.¹⁴² While utilizing architectural typology to label rooms in houses mainly occurs in the study of the houses of the Roman provinces, this approach is also used for houses

¹³⁸ Allison, “Engendering Roman Domestic Space,” 343.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Allison, “Using the Material and Written Sources,” 188.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 189.

in Roman Italy.¹⁴³ With this in mind, it follows that studying the typology of the archaeological and architectural remains can only provide a limited understanding of Roman houses.¹⁴⁴

While a typological approach can be beneficial to formulate large overarching principles surrounding the wealth of the household or for general spatial purposes, it does not provide an all-encompassing, or in some cases even satisfactory, interpretation of the space.¹⁴⁵ This is especially true of spaces meant for formal or functional activities.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, this approach does not take into consideration who may or may not have had restricted access to a certain space and, therefore, requires the integration of contextual information in order to understand the possible functions of different spaces in the house and how they relate to each other.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, there is an implication that the rooms in which individuals were likely to encounter other individuals living in the house—presumably rooms surrounded by open spaces, such as the peristyle—suggests that their layout may have encouraged people to move freely throughout these spaces.¹⁴⁸ Thus, closed spaces or areas that are difficult to access were likely meant to be private and not entered without permission, the significance of which will be discussed in chapter three.¹⁴⁹

The practicality of undertaking a typological approach in interpreting domestic space has frequently led scholars to utilize architectural nomenclature found in literary sources inappropriately, which in turn affects how a given house is interpreted.¹⁵⁰ The use of architectural nomenclature needs to be discussed in regard to the House of the Vettii, as it directly impacts how the erotic evidence will be interpreted in chapter three.

¹⁴³ Allison, “Using the Material and Written Sources,” 189.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Wallace-Hadrill, “The Development of the Campanian House,” 283.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Allison, “Using the Material and Written Sources,” 189.

Because textual nomenclature can be taken for granted by scholars and treated as a fact as opposed to a possibility, certain domestic spaces are labelled as serving one particular function, which constricts interpretation.¹⁵¹ This influences how both so-called Roman atrium houses and Roman peristyle houses have been interpreted.¹⁵²

Furthermore, it has been widely accepted by scholars that the specific type of courtyard house found in Pompeii (such as the House of the Vettii), was the quintessential Roman house as described by Vitruvius in his works.¹⁵³ However, this interpretation fails to consider that Pompeii might benefit from alternate interpretations and studies.¹⁵⁴ It is important to remember that Pompeii was originally a provincial town located in a heavily Greek-influenced region of Italy and did not become part of Rome until five hundred years after it became a walled city and two to three hundred years after the construction of the first atrium houses.¹⁵⁵ For instance, while Pompeian houses with central courtyards—like the House of the Vettii—have long been conventionally referred to as “peristyle houses,” the term “peristyle” was almost never applied to Roman domiciles in written sources.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, it does not seem reasonable or logical to make

¹⁵¹ Allison, “Using the Material and Written Sources,” 189.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 188-192; Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 6.3.7. Allison states: “Studies in the Roman world beyond the Italian peninsula rely more heavily on the archaeological investigation of the material remains and less on the ancient written evidence. Typology, a fundamental approach in the archaeological scholarship, has played a major role in investigations of domestic space in regions whose study has been less dependent on traditional classical scholarship. Because of the nature of the evidence, and past approaches to it, many scholars have restricted their investigations to the study of two-dimensional ground plans of houses... [although some] attributions are highly probable, many are based on an intuitive of ‘common sense’ approach to spatial function rather than on physical evidence or any apparent theoretical framework concerning past domestic practice.” Allison also acknowledges that: “It has long been widely accepted that the type of courtyard house that feature prominently in Pompeii was the ‘typical’ Roman house described by Vitruvius.” Vitruvius describes the peristyle house in very specific terms. According to him, the peristyle itself should: “lie crosswise, and should be one-third wider than they are deep. The height of the columns is to be the same as the breadth of the colonnade of the peristyle.” He has numerous specifications for what qualifies as a peristyle house, but it is unfeasible for all houses of this type to match those specifications entirely and (as Allison point out) it assumes that Vitruvius was the principal authority that all Roman builders followed.

¹⁵⁴ Allison, “Using the Material and Written Sources,” 189.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 191. Allison states: “The central courtyards in these houses can undoubtedly be labeled peristyles, according to scholarly convention, because they tend to have columns, and usually more of them than the

the assumption that a courtyard in other domiciles in the Roman empire, including those in Pompeii, was solely referred to as an “atrium” or “peristyle” based on their similarity to the traditional model of the peristyle house.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, while there are undoubtedly correlations between descriptions of *atria* in the Roman literary and archaeological corpus, any relationship between the two is based in analogy, not in any inherent relationship.¹⁵⁸ Thus, while using Vitruvian nomenclature is undeniably useful for archaeological and historical purposes, the use of such terms presupposes that Vitruvius was the foremost authority whom all ancient Roman builders, and the individuals living in the houses, would have followed.¹⁵⁹ Since there is no way to know whether or not Vitruvian nomenclature was used by the Vettii and other occupants of their house, not to mention whether a particular room’s usage would have been limited based on that nomenclature, I will not refer to rooms based on their typological labels. Rather, I will refer to them solely by their assigned room letters.

This chapter has provided an extensive examination of the House of the Vettii’s structural and architectural features. I analyzed the House of the Vettii’s excavation notes. Next, I considered the construction methods and techniques potentially used in the House of the Vettii’s creation. In my final section, I examined the layout of the house itself and where the rooms were situated within the house and how the axial division of the house impacted the room-layout. By investigating these structural attributes of the House of the Vettii, I have provided the measures necessary for a complete interpretation of the erotic evidence found within the house and have laid the foundation for my interpretations of the wall-paintings in chapter three.

so-called *atria* in Campanian houses, although not always. It has already been observed, however, that the term peristyle was rarely applied to Roman domestic space in the written sources.”

¹⁵⁷ Allison, “Using the Material and Written Sources,” 191.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 192.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 3

3 The Erotic Evidence from the House of the Vettii

The wall-paintings in the House of the Vettii were completed in the Fourth Style of wall-painting and were thought to have been painted by a single workshop after the earthquake of 62 CE.¹⁶⁰ Fourth Style wall-painting is the best illustrated style in the archaeological corpus as it was the last interior decorating fashion to reach Pompeii before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.¹⁶¹ Wall-paintings were intended to produce a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing domestic environment.¹⁶² By the time the Vettii decorated their own domicile, it was common for well-off households to collect reproductions or adaptations of the Greek masters—one manner by which the *nouveaux riches* could display their culture, tastes, and new-found wealth by alluding to symbols of exotic *luxuria*.¹⁶³ The decorative themes in the House of the Vettii's artistic programme, which I will discuss later in greater detail, sought to include as many allusions to aristocratic life and culture as possible.¹⁶⁴ The expertly placed wall-paintings highlight the house's entryway, visual axis, and symmetrical room layouts.¹⁶⁵ This careful planning also included shared decorative themes which contained religious and mythological motifs.¹⁶⁶ That said, for the purposes of my investigation, I will only be looking at the wall-paintings that depict sexual scenes or are suggestive of sexual behaviour. It is important to note that not all sexual imagery contains explicit scenes of sex. My investigation

¹⁶⁰ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 209.

¹⁶¹ Ling, *Roman Painting*, 71. In fact, many older styles of wall-paintings were replaced with the Fourth Style before 79 CE.

¹⁶² Ibid, 135.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 135.

¹⁶⁴ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 210.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 209.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

includes many scenes that are suggestive of sex but are not themselves sexually explicit; for instance, scenes that display themes of sexual desire.

By examining the erotic evidence in the House of the Vettii I will provide a comprehensive investigation of the symbolism of these wall-paintings and the potential implications of the house's sexual graffiti. To begin, I will analyze the wall-painting of Priapus in room *b*, which was located in the House of the Vettii's entranceway. Next, I will examine the wall-paintings in room *n* (of Pentheus and Dirce), room *p* (of Ixion, Pasiphae, and Ariadne), room *t* (of Hercules and Achilles), and room *x*¹ (depicting three explicit male-female sex scenes). Then, I will consider overarching themes and motifs in the decorative programme (erotic abandonment, demigods that use sexual violence against mortal women, illicit desire, and punishment) in order to fully understand the intricacies of the wall-paintings and messages the Vettii might have been attempting to convey through these paintings. Lastly, I will analyze the erotic graffiti found within the house in order to complete a thorough investigation of the erotic evidence within the House of the Vettii.

3.1 Room *b*: Priapus

The wall-painting of Priapus located in the entranceway to the House of the Vettii, room *b*, has garnered significant attention from both scholars and visitors to Pompeii for a variety of reasons, in particular Priapus' inordinately large phallus (see Figure 5). In the entryway of the villa stands Priapus, wearing a Phrygian cap, clad in opulent symbols of *luxuria*, exposing the lower half of his body (a pose that bears similarities to personifications of *aequitas*, which I will discuss shortly).¹⁶⁷ This image of Priapus was, for the majority of the twentieth century, considered so obscene that it was covered with a

¹⁶⁷ Donatella Mazzoleni, Umberto Pappalardo, and Luciano Romano, *Domus: Wall Painting in the Roman House* (California: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004), 334; Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 217.

slatted box which only opened for a select few, mostly male, visitors.¹⁶⁸ He weighs his farcically large phallus on a balance, using a bag of coins as a counterweight.¹⁶⁹ Given the image's conspicuous location in the entryway, it likely served as a protective figure that guarded the house and its inhabitants from intruders or thieves, as images of erect *phalloi* are apotropaic and are meant to guard against the Evil Eye.¹⁷⁰ It is important to note that Priapus is a sexually violent deity, evident from ancient literary sources.¹⁷¹ According to the literary record, Priapus would rape or force fellatio on trespassers and thieves.¹⁷² Therefore, Priapus' presence in the entryway was likely a purposeful choice to protect the inhabitants, their wealth, and the house itself from individuals with nefarious intentions.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Kellum, "Weighing In," 199.

¹⁶⁹ Mazzoleni et al., *Domus*, 334.

¹⁷⁰ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 13.

¹⁷¹ Elizabeth Young, "Dicere Latine: The Art of Speaking Crudely in the *Carmina Priapea*," in *Ancient Obscenities*, ed. Dorota Dutsch and Ann Suter (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 225-280. Young states: "The *Carmina Priapea* is an anonymous collection of eighty Latin epigrams, most likely of early imperial date, that circle around the menacing figure of the ithyphallic god Priapus. Most of the poems are spoken by Priapus himself...who guards garden plots by threatening would-be thieves with rape."

¹⁷² Kellum, "Weighing In," 200.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*



Figure 5: Priapus, located in room b of the House of the Vettii. Retrieved from: Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 217.

In order to fully understand the implications of this wall-painting, it is necessary to understand Priapus' mythological origins. Priapus was originally a Near Eastern agricultural deity that protected gardens from thieves.¹⁷⁴ However, during the Hellenistic period, literary and artistic sources named him the child of Aphrodite and Dionysus.¹⁷⁵ While Priapus still had associations as a protector of gardens and agriculture in the

¹⁷⁴ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 48.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Classical period—making his location at the entrance where people could see through to the Vettii’s garden rather fitting—he also represents fecundity and abundance.¹⁷⁶ In many representations of the god, this is signified by the produce in his mantle, which is lifted to reveal his phallus.¹⁷⁷ The abundance Priapus provided was further visualized in the House of the Vettii by the two money chests the inhabitants kept in the room immediately beyond the entranceway, indicative of their immense wealth.¹⁷⁸ Additionally, the image may have served another purpose as an allusion to aristocratic culture—allusions with which the House of the Vettii was filled.¹⁷⁹ In fact, visual representations of Priapus often appeared in aristocratic wall-paintings, namely in fantasy-scapes and sacro-idyllic landscapes.¹⁸⁰ Thus, this image may have also served as an allusion to wealth and aristocratic culture.

The House of the Vettii, like other Pompeian houses, had a large main entrance and a smaller lateral entrance directly next to it.¹⁸¹ When the main door of the house was opened during the day, passersby would have been able to see through the entranceway directly to the house’s garden, but the image of Priapus would have been hidden from viewers looking in from the street.¹⁸² Only people who entered the house would have been able to see this image of Priapus.¹⁸³ Moreover, it is possible that the Vettii, other inhabitants of their house, and frequent visitors would have found this image humorous

¹⁷⁶ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 48.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid; Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 217.

¹⁷⁸ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 48.

¹⁷⁹ Kellum, “Weighing In,” 199. Given the House of the Vettii’s decorative programme is filled with allusions to aristocratic culture, it would follow that this painting also functioned in this manner in addition to serving its apotropaic functions.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 200. Kellum states: “The visual corollaries to these literary Priapus sentinels [the *Carmina Priapea*] often appear in those quintessentially aristocratic villa fantasy-scapes, sacro-idyllic landscapes. For example, in the painting from the north wall of cubiculum 16 from the villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase, a stalwart, rustic, barebones Priapus guards the periphery...In discussing similar representations, Peter Stewart has declared that when it comes to Priapus, ‘no figure in Roman art or literature is so expressly defined as an outcast from the norms of cult, art, and culture.’”

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 206-207.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

on some levels, as humor and obscenities were strongly associated with each other for Romans regardless of social class.¹⁸⁴

Priapus' act of weighing his phallus may have been a double entendre. In addition to symbolising fecundity and abundance, it might also be a joke since the phallus was described as a weight or *pondus*.¹⁸⁵ Fascinatingly, balance scales, which Priapus can be seen using to weigh himself with on one end (using an overfilled bag of money as a counterweight), were commonly associated with the deity.¹⁸⁶ Balance scales were associated with markets and were utilized to weigh various items; their presence in this image likely symbolized good fortune as well as financial prosperity.¹⁸⁷ Notably, this is one of two representations of Priapus in the House of the Vettii, the second one being a marble fountain statue located in the garden.¹⁸⁸ While both images were apotropaic, they were also both excessively large and formed their own visual axis.¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, the painted Priapus is depicted wearing a pair of high fur boots and a diaphanous yellow tunic with blue-green sleeves (see Figure 5).¹⁹⁰ A red mantle is wrapped around his left arm and he wears a red Phrygian cap.¹⁹¹ The remnants of a gold torque are visible below his beard and complements the gold earring he wears in his left ear and the gold bracelets he wears on both of his wrists.¹⁹² Despite Priapus' modest origins, he is decorated with

¹⁸⁴ Kellum, "Weighing In," 207. Kellum states: "On stage for a select audience, this image marshaled all the humorous assertive power of Priapus, which was performed each time a visitor entered that small lateral door and discovered the god. Varro claimed that '*Obscaenum* 'foul' is said to be from *scaena* 'stage,' and such an etymology seems particularly apt in this instance. Gloriously and outrageously, Priapus was the self-professed obscene god extraordinaire, but that the Roman sense of obscene and ours are not necessarily one and the same must factor into the interpretation of this image. For Romans at all social levels, humor and the obscene were inextricably intertwined." For further examples of how obscenities and humour are tied in ancient Rome, see Varro *On the Latin Language* 7.96 and Cicero *De Officiis* 1.104.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 208-209. This word can also be applied to testicles.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 202.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 203-204.

¹⁸⁸ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 211. The statue of Priapus was found disassembled within the house. The statue is half life-size and its phallus had a hole drilled into it so it could expel water into the fountain's basin.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 212. Fascinatingly, the statue lacks the common iconographic symbols of Priapus, such as his beard.

¹⁹⁰ Kellum, "Weighing In," 200-201.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

numerous symbols of *luxuria*, such as his gold jewellery and his *chiridota*, a long-sleeved tunic often associated with effeminacy and moral decay in Roman society.¹⁹³ For Priapus, however, the *chiridota* might not in fact be a symbol of degeneracy, but rather, might be underscoring his virility: perhaps due to Priapus' sexual potency and divinity he cannot be effeminized by the *chiridota* in the same way that mortals could.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, since Priapus comes from the Greek East, both the *chiridota* and the Phrygian cap were appropriate for him to wear given his origins.¹⁹⁵

Priapus is depicted supporting a shepherd's crook, or *pedum*, in his left arm (see Figure 5).¹⁹⁶ The manner in which the *pedum* is placed in this wall-painting suggests that it was meant to enhance and serve as a visual extension of his phallus.¹⁹⁷ Both the *pedum* and Priapus' phallus point towards a basket filled with fruits, including pomegranates, pears, quinces, apples, figs, and grapes.¹⁹⁸ The positioning of the basket suggests it signified an offering to the deity while simultaneously symbolising his fecundity.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, many of the fruits selected for this wall-painting were commonly associated with themes of love, sex, and fertility: grapes with Dionysus and pears, quinces, and apples with Venus.²⁰⁰ The Vettii owed their wealth to success in the wine trade and owned vineyards outside of Pompeii; thus, it is unsurprising that grapes overflow from

¹⁹³ Kellum, "Weighing In," 200-201.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. Kellum states: "Already in the 60s BCE, Cicero described the Catilinarian conspirators as wearing 'tunics down to their ankles and wrists,' and nearly a century later, Seneca condemned Augustus' minister of culture Maecenas for his effeminacy by equating the looseness of his speech with his ungirt attire. However, as is usually the case with Priapus, this garment cuts two ways, for what is the quintessential effeminate attire for mere mortals here frames the unmistakable evidence of his monumental virility." See Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* 6.12, Cicero *In Catalinam* 2.22, Seneca the Younger *Epistles* 114.4.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. Kellum notes that the Phrygian cap might also symbolize the deity's ties to the imperial family. Kellum states: "Since at least the time of the first emperor Augustus, this headgear was a sign of the Trojan ancestry of both the Roman people and the Julian gens. Priapus' Phrygian cap, then, simultaneously marks his foreign origins and his affiliation with the Romans and the first imperial family."

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 201.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 201-202.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

this basket as it serves as a direct visual link to the Vettii's fortune.²⁰¹ Priapus rests his left elbow on a pedestal which simultaneously props up a *thyrsus*—the staff of Dionysus.²⁰² This image, in addition to serving an apotropaic function, functioned as a way for the Vettii to parade their wealth and financial success to anyone entering their house.²⁰³

Interestingly, Priapus' pose carries iconographic similarities to the personification of *aequitas*. The similarities in Priapus' pose with *aequitas* might reinforce Priapus' associations with punishment and position him as a guarantor of justice. Priapus' extension of his right hand holding the balance scale—ignoring his phallus and the money bag—mirrors the personification found on contemporary imperial coinage of *aequitas*; a figure who symbolized fair government and justice (see Figure 6).²⁰⁴ Overall, despite the abundant symbolic possibilities in this wall-painting, it seems most likely that its primary purpose was to ward off the Evil Eye.²⁰⁵ The Vettii favoured striking imagery and wanted to amuse anyone viewing these paintings, as will be evident as I extend my investigation to other parts of the house's artistic programme.²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Kellum, "Weighing In," 204. Kellum states: "It is probably not coincidental that grapes, the fruit of the vine, overflow from the basket of fruit to which Priapus' phallus points."

²⁰² Ibid, 202.

²⁰³ Ibid, 205.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 206; Lukas de Blois, *Image and Reality of Roman Imperial Power in the Third Century AD* (London: Routledge, 2018), 233. Kellum notes: "Ultimately the most common of the imperial virtue types, Aequitas made her first full appearance as a reverse under Galba in 69 CE and was continued by Vespasian and Titus. Her appearance celebrated the 'fairness' of the emperor and his mint in maintaining the financial system and issuing coins that were true to value. Business in Pompeii and other cities and towns throughout the empire were predicated on such standards, reason enough perhaps for the Vettii's appropriation of the personification. It may be, though, that the borrowing was originally in the other direction: Long before *aequitas* became an official virtue of the emperor, the maintenance of local standards of weights and measures in the marketplace had been a priority for local freedmen..."

²⁰⁵ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 174.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 177.



Figure 6: Imperial coinage dating to 68-69 CE depicting the personification of Aequitas. Retrieved from:

http://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=deity_facet%3A%22Aequitas%22+AND+year_num%3A%5B0+TO+79%5D.

3.2 Room *n*: Pentheus and Dirce

While this room does not display any overt sexual imagery, interesting readings can be gleaned when the panels of Pentheus and Dirce are considered in tandem with the panels in room *p*. The full significance of this room’s sexual imagery is not immediately apparent, but this does not detract from this room’s importance to my discussion (it is important to note that only the panels of Pentheus and Dirce are of significance to my discussion; I will not be interpreting the image of Hercules in this room). This room is frequently paired and interpreted in tandem with room *p*, as both display three wall-paintings with thematic and iconographic similarities as well as spatial symmetry in the rooms’ orientation.²⁰⁷ The Pentheus painting is located in the middle of the room on the east wall (see Figures 7 & 8).²⁰⁸ This image depicts the aftermath of Pentheus’ refusal to accept the god Dionysus—maenads tear Pentheus limb from limb under the influence of a wild Dionysiac frenzy.²⁰⁹ The wall-painting of Dirce is on the south wall (see Figure

²⁰⁷ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 224; Theo Wirth, “Zum Bildprogramm in der Casa dei Vettii,” *Römische Mitteilungen* 90 (1983): 449-455.

²⁰⁸ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 225-227; Panetta, *Pompeii*, 362-366.

²⁰⁹ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 225-227.

9).²¹⁰ In this wall-painting Zethus and Amphion—Zeus and Antiope’s sons—are shown punishing Dirce for forcing their mother into years of slavery.²¹¹ Despite the violent and fatal ending that Dirce succumbs to, the story ultimately has a happy ending as Antiope is reunited with her sons.²¹²



Figure 7: Layout of wall-paintings in room n, House of the Vettii. From left to right: Hercules, Pentheus, and Dirce. Retrieved from: Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 362.

²¹⁰ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 225-227.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Ibid.*



Figure 8: Maenads tearing Pentheus limb from limb. Located in room n, House of the Vettii. Retrieved from: Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 366.



Figure 9: The punishment of Dirce. Located in room n, House of the Vettii.

Retrieved from: Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 366.

Interestingly, despite the importance typically placed on central wall-paintings, the quality of the centre wall-paintings in both rooms *p* and *n* is noticeably inferior to the decorative framework that surrounds the paintings (see Figure 7).²¹³ The polarity between the high-quality, refined decorative embellishments and the poorer-quality central pictures likely stems from the fact that preminent painters would not have engaged in making replicas of their paintings in fresco.²¹⁴ Rather, either a lesser skilled painter made copies of the paintings of famed painters or very wealthy homeowners owned real paintings, completed on wooden panels, in addition to commissioning wall-

²¹³ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 232-234.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

paintings.²¹⁵ These paintings do not typically survive in the archaeological record, so it is possible that the Vettii owned paintings of this variety, but they are not preserved.

3.3 Room *p*: Ixion, Pasiphae, & Ariadne

Two of the three scenes in room *p* tell the story of an illicit union between gods and mortals—all of which have a catastrophic ending (see Figure 10).²¹⁶ The first painting in this room illustrates Pasiphae, the queen of Crete and wife of King Minos (see Figure 11).²¹⁷ According to mythology, Minos became the ruler of Crete through Poseidon’s intervention.²¹⁸ Poseidon then caused a bull to emerge from the water and asks Minos to sacrifice the bull to him in return for Poseidon making Minos king.²¹⁹ Minos, however, sacrifices a bull from his own herd in place of the bull sent by Poseidon.²²⁰ In a vengeful rage, Poseidon makes Pasiphae lust after the bull and she ultimately procreates with it.²²¹ This wall-painting depicts the part of this myth in which the famed Cretan inventor Daedalus delivers a wooden cow to Pasiphae to allow her to climb inside it and procreate with the bull.²²²

²¹⁵ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 232-234. Clarke states: “Fine paintings that rivaled those of our own old masters certainly existed, painted on wooden panels or canvas, and they have just as certainly all disappeared. A truly wealthy patron would have owned real paintings rather than depictions of them ‘hanging’ against a fictive background imitating the precious marble revetments and costly aediculae that he could afford to have constructed.” Pliny the Elder discusses paintings of this nature in *Natural History* 35.81-82: “...a panel of considerable size on the easel prepared for painting...taking up a brush [the artist] painted in colour across the panel...” While the incident he describes occurs in Rhodes, it is likely this practice occurred in ancient Rome as well. Additionally, Vitruvius (*On Architecture* 2.9-10) states that, “...paintings were removed and enclosed in wooden frames, and brought into the Comitium as an ornament...” While Vitruvius is discussing paintings that are removed from their original walls and subsequently framed, the way in which he describes this process suggests it was not unusual.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 224-225; Panetta, *Pompeii*, 362-363.

²¹⁷ Mazzoleni et al., *Domus*, 334; Panetta, *Pompeii*, 365.

²¹⁸ Mazzoleni et al., *Domus*, 334.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid. According to Mazzoleni et al.: “The queen [Pasiphae], portrayed as a majestic woman with a hairstyle that was fashionable during Nero’s reign, eagerly accepts his creation.” However, her facial expression seems more calm or curious than eager. The slight raising of her arm makes it appear as if she is motioning for Daedalus to bring his invention to her, but again, her portrayal does not seem as eager as Mazzoleni et al. suggest.

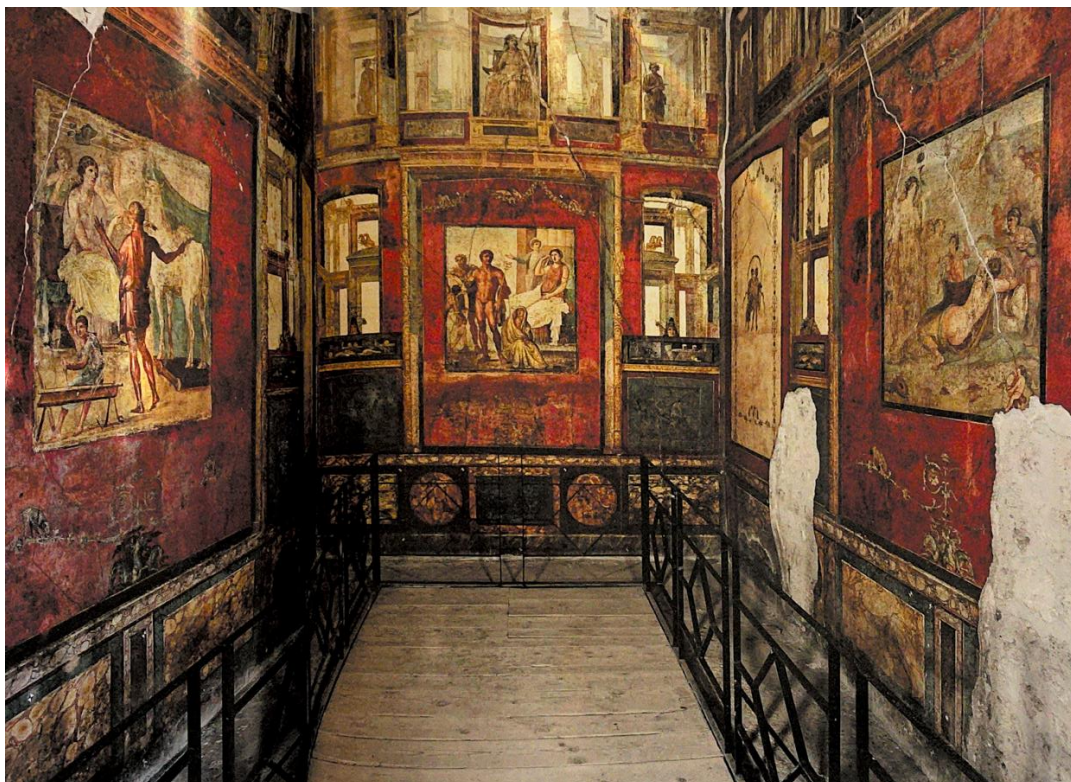


Figure 10: Layout of wall-paintings in room p, House of the Vettii. From left to right: Pasiphae, Ixion, and Ariadne. Retrieved from: Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 362-363.

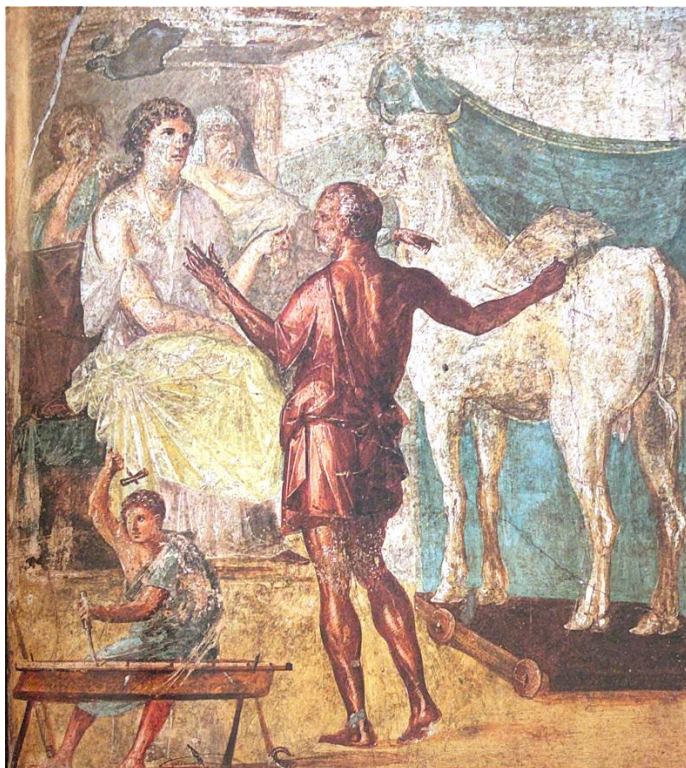


Figure 11: Pasiphaë receiving a cow apparatus from Daedalus. Located in room p, House of the Vettii. Retrieved from: Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 365.

The central picture in this room depicts the story of Ixion, who fell in love with the goddess Hera (see Figure 12).²²³ In this myth, Zeus tricks Ixion into having sex with a cloud in the shape of Hera and then subsequently punishes him for his actions by binding him to a continuously moving wheel.²²⁴ In this image, Hephaestus is depicted tying Ixion to a wheel with serpents affixed to it.²²⁵ In the myth of Ixion, his union with the cloud results in the creation of the centaurs.²²⁶ Hermes is shown overseeing Ixion's punishment and an additional female figure, most probably the goddess Nephele, is

²²³ Mazzoleni et al., *Domus*, 334.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 224-225. According to Clarke, serpents are attached to the wheel. The serpents are quite difficult to make out in the image—just visible in the upper right register of the wheel, appearing as dark red squiggles and not clearly distinguished.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

depicted beneath Hera (who is illustrated on the far right of this scene, sitting on her throne) looking at Hermes imploringly.²²⁷ A third female figure, possibly the goddess Iris, shown pointing towards the scene in a gesture that directs the viewer's gaze.²²⁸



Figure 12: The punishment of Ixion (far left). Located in room p, House of the Vettii. Marisa Ranieri Panetta, ed., *Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City* (Vercelli: White Star Publishers, 2004), 364.

The last painting in this room depicts the story of Theseus abandoning Ariadne on Naxos after she saves him from the Minotaur (see Figure 13).²²⁹ The painting depicts a happier subject while still conforming to the theme of unhappy love stories by illustrating the moment where the god Dionysus saves Ariadne and makes her his wife.²³⁰

²²⁷ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 224-225.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Mazzoleni et al., *Domus*, 334.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Fascinatingly, the illustration of Ariadne faces the depiction of her mother Pasiphae.²³¹ The viewer shares Ariadne's line-of-sight to Pasiphae's cow apparatus, which guides the viewer's gaze to the wall-painting.²³² Furthermore, Ariadne's wall-painting is amplified by a fascinating visual effect.²³³ Directly to the right of the panel depicting Ariadne in room *p*, above the small southern doorframe, is a representation of the divinity Pan discovering a reclining Hermaphroditus.²³⁴ Ariadne's pose mirrors the reclining pose of Hermaphroditus—including the raised right arm over the head, suggesting erotic repose.²³⁵ This painting of Ariadne provides a view of this stance from behind, while Hermaphroditus' painting provides a frontal view.²³⁶ This may have been a deliberate choice by the artist, as by showing one pose from multiple angles it creates the allusion of movement in the paintings and also provides the viewer with a common visual programme throughout the room. Moreover, Pan provides the viewer with a reactive gaze—his head is turned and he covers his eyes.²³⁷ In the comparisons between Ariadne and Hermaphroditus, it is evident that any gender difference is neutralised.²³⁸ It is possible that the juxtaposition of these figures may also represent the ancient Roman mindset of a male-female gender binary with Hermaphroditus representing the mid-point in the ancients' conception of a gender spectrum.²³⁹ Importantly, in Roman wall-painting, many mythological women served as highbrow symbols for aggression against

²³¹ Beth Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives and the Wall Painting of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii," *Gender & History* 24, no. 3 (2012): 567, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2012.01697.x>.

²³² *Ibid.* According to Severy-Hoven, Ariadne facing towards Pasiphae may be a dirty joke about oversexed Cretan women. It seems also possible that this was done to create movement in the wall-paintings and direct the viewer's gaze.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ *Ibid.* According to Severy-Hoven, Pan covering his eyes likely showed that he was offended by what he saw, leading the viewer "not to objectify Hermaphroditus" and rather "identify with him/her instead."

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 568.

²³⁹ *Ibid.* As Severy-Hoven describes: "If ancient Italians considered humans not sexually dimorphic, but having bodies somewhere along a sliding scale between male and female extremes, the mythological figure of Hermaphroditus illustrates a midway point, a body with both male and female iconographic elements." While this is a highly theoretical supposition, it does provide an opportunity to perform readings into these pairs of images and thus should not be disregarded.

women.²⁴⁰ Ariadne is an excellent example of this phenomenon. She is abandoned by her former lover Theseus, and found by the god Dionysus, whom she marries in some versions of the myth, but in others their union is characterized as a rape.²⁴¹



Figure 13: Dionysus discovering Ariadne on Naxos. Located in room p, House of the Vettii. Retrieved from: <http://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=9163>.

3.4 Room *t*: Hercules & Achilles

While most of the decoration in room *t* is lost, a dark socle and middle zone of a wall survives, divided into panels through the strategic placement of delicate white lines and illusionary shutters painted on the wall.²⁴² On this wall are two surviving mythological panels.²⁴³ The wall-painting on the south wall depicts an inebriated Hercules about to assault Auge, a priestess of Athena (see Figure 14).²⁴⁴ On the east wall is a depiction of

²⁴⁰ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 221.

²⁴¹ Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 549; Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, 1.527-564.

²⁴² Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 564.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Achilles disguising himself as a girl on Skyros, notably the scene where he is revealed to be male.²⁴⁵ The imagery in this room heavily displays themes suggestive of male dominance.²⁴⁶ Auge is kneeling and her clothing falls off of her, exposing her naked torso; her nudity symbolizing the helpless situation she is in and her vulnerability. She holds up her hand to ward off the approaching Hercules.²⁴⁷ Hercules makes his way to her from behind, to the right of the viewer, directing the viewer's sight to her exposed figure.²⁴⁸ Hercules extends his club between the two of them in an overtly aggressive gesture.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 564.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 565-566. According to Severy-Hoven: "In what survives of the imagery in this room masculinity always wins out..." Severy-Hoven postulates that this perhaps signaled the authority of the patrons or simply illustrated the prominent position of power men held in Rome. I think it is also possible that there is another option entirely and instead of these panels representing a larger theme of male dominance, are just representing their respective myths and not alluding to additional symbols of power.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. The extension of the club (in addition to making Hercules an aggressive figure in this scene) likely was meant to serve as a visual extension of his phallus, similar to the effect of Priapus' *pedum*.



Figure 14: Hercules and Auge. Located in room t, House of the Vettii. Retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:IX.5.6_Pompeii.Room_5,_ala,_west_wall._Wall_painting_of_Hercules_and_Auge._Now_in_the_Naples_Archaeological_Museum,_inventory_number_115397..jpg

Achilles, meanwhile, is depicted nearby disguised as a woman on the island of Skyros (see Figure 15).²⁵⁰ Despite his effeminate dress, Achilles is not represented in a feminized manner, he is depicted rather heroically. This is perhaps signalling that Achilles was such a heroic and masculine figure a disguise that would be effeminate for another man in antiquity to wear is in fact emphasizing his masculinity (similar to the effect Priapus' *chiridota* has). Achilles is depicted in the centre of this painting and his clothing falls off of him, revealing his true identity to the other figures in the scene.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 565-566.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

One of the daughters of the king of Skyros, likely Achilles' lover Deidamia (located in the middle ground to the right), appears to run towards him, her clothing also falling to display her exaggerated backside.²⁵² Significantly, both stories share the common feature of producing heroic offspring: Deidameia gives birth to Achilles Neoptolemus and Auge to Telephus.²⁵³ In bearing heroic offspring rather than monstrous offspring, this room may be juxtaposing the subjects from the wall-paintings in room *p*, the greater significance of which I will discuss shortly.²⁵⁴



Figure 15: Achilles on Skyros. Located in room t, House of the Vettii. Retrieved from:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_the_Vettii#/media/File:Achille_a_Sciro2.JPG

3.5 Room x^1 : Male-Female Sex Scenes

Room x^1 provides the most graphic examples of sex scenes in the House of the Vettii (see Figures 16-18). Room x^1 likely belonged to the house's cook, since it was adjacent to the

²⁵² Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 565-566. This is not very surprising given Roman's enthusiasm for women with this body-type.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

kitchen.²⁵⁵ Since this room received its own unique decoration, it is commonly thought that the Vettii held their cook in high esteem.²⁵⁶ There are three explicit sex scenes in this room which were all painted in the same style as the *tabellae* found in the Pompeian lupanar (see Figure 19).²⁵⁷ There is also a small painting of an owl on the southern wall of this room—potentially symbolising good fortune in sex.²⁵⁸

The first sexual scene is on the west wall of this room.²⁵⁹ This painting shows a male figure lying on his back resting on a heavy cushion, propping himself slightly up on his left elbow (see Figure 17).²⁶⁰ The female figure, wearing only a breast band, is shown straddling her male partner with her buttocks resting on the male figure's mid-thigh.²⁶¹ She is shown leaning forward while resting her right hand on the male figure's head while he reaches up to her left shoulder with his right arm.²⁶² All elements in these three paintings are at their simplest: the little clothing the woman wears in this image appears flimsy, the bed's legs are not well executed, and the shadows that appear in this scene are of poor quality.²⁶³ The sex scene on the east wall inverts the position of the male-female pair on the west wall (see Figure 18).²⁶⁴ The female figure is shown reclining on a bed, while the male figure in this scene kneels facing her.²⁶⁵ Her right leg is stretched out along the bed and she raises her left leg up over her male partner's right shoulder.²⁶⁶ The

²⁵⁵ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 220-221; Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 174. According to Clarke, this room likely belong to the cook because: "The odors and heat of cooking certainly permeated little room x¹." However, it is impossible to know who this room actually belonged to, it was most likely one of the Vettii's slaves, but possibly not the house's cook.

²⁵⁶ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 220-221

²⁵⁷ Ibid. Clarke theorizes that if this room indeed belonged to the cook, the wall-paintings may have served as a gift to remind the slave of the pleasures of the brothels. However, it is possible that the slave who lived in this room commissioned these wall-paintings themselves.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 172.

²⁶⁰ Ibid; Vout, *Sex on Show*, 116.

²⁶¹ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 172.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid, 173.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

female figure's face is illustrated in a three-quarter view and displays a calm expression.²⁶⁷ Unfortunately, due to paint losses, only the outline of the male figure's profile is visible.²⁶⁸ The third and final sex scene, located on room *x*¹'s north wall, is almost completely erased due to poor preservation.²⁶⁹

Some scholars initially thought that this room may have also served as a brothel.²⁷⁰ This claim is unsubstantiated, but not impossible. Brothels were not a particularly profitable business in Pompeii due to the low prices necessary to acquire a sex-worker—usually equal to a common cup of wine.²⁷¹ Also, the Vettii would likely have been careful to avoid engaging in any sort of business within their domicile.²⁷² As they were freedmen, this would run the risk of individuals associating them with their servile origins.²⁷³ Furthermore, it seems unlikely that one of the Vettii's slaves turned this room into a brothel. This room is not isolated and if a brothel was functioning out of this room, it is probable that the Vettii would have known about it. Given how status-conscious they seem, if they knew the room was being run as a brothel by a slave against their wishes they would not have ignored it. The detriment of ruining their hard-earned reputation does not seem to be worth the benefit of allowing a slave to run a brothel out of their house. The money earned would have been minimal and it would not have benefitted the Vettii in any significant way. Additionally, the majority of Roman slaves would have wanted to demonstrate loyalty and obedience to their masters, so if the Vettii were against this room functioning as a brothel it would be unlikely to happen, but not impossible.²⁷⁴ Moreover, if a slave were to deceive his owners and run a brothel without

²⁶⁷ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 173.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 174.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid. According to Clarke: Running a brothel “was not a profitable business, considering the low prices commanded by the owners of the prostitutes at Pompeii, generally varying between one and sixteen asses: the usual cost is two *asses*, the price of a cup of common wine.” However, the graffiti located in room *a* is suggestive of one of the slaves in the house working as a sex-worker, so it is difficult to say for certain.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Bradley, *Slavery and Society*, 102. Bradley states: “For great numbers of Roman slaves, over time, there must have been every practical reason to display to their owners the unswerving loyalty and obedience that

their knowing, the anxiety of a surprise inspection from the slaveowner might thwart this.²⁷⁵ On the other hand, perhaps the Vettii did not care enough to stop one of their slaves from running a brothel. Aristocratic society would have viewed the Vettii as servile still, despite their freedmen status.²⁷⁶ Perhaps this resulted in the Vettii letting this particular slave do whatever he or she wanted with their room (for instance, the graffiti found in room *a* of the House of the Vettii is suggestive of a female slave acting as a sex-worker from within the house, which I will discuss shortly).

When the remainder of the house's artistic programme is taken into account—a programme that is filled with overly complex mythological cycles and improbable comminglings of gods and demigods—it is evident that the Vettii were adventurous and eccentric patrons.²⁷⁷ Considering the overall offbeat eclecticism in the House of the Vettii's wall-paintings, this room comes as a shock for both viewers and scholars.²⁷⁸ It is unusual that wealthy patrons such as the Vettii commissioned a painter to decorate a ground-floor room with badly painted, rather explicit sex scenes.²⁷⁹ That said, it is possible that the slave who lived in this room commissioned these wall-painting himself. Slaves had a *peculium*, an allowance, that they could use for conducting a variety of commercial transactions including personal purchases, and ancient sources attest that the material used to create interior and exterior domestic decorations could be adjusted to control the expense of the work.²⁸⁰ There is evidence that slaves had the ability to improve and enhance the *cellae*, or rooms, they were expected to live in, although these

ideally all owners sought from those in their possession.” One of these reasons, for example, was manumission.

²⁷⁵ Bradley, *Slavery and Society*, 103.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁷⁷ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 174. Clarke makes the observation that the House of the Vettii's artistic programme was filled with “overburdened displays of complicated mythological cycles,” which highlighted the Vettii's “adventurous” and “quirky” sensibilities.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Clarke states: “But even given this eccentric eclecticism, in view of both the quality of the house and its decoration, it comes as a surprise that these wealthy patrons commissioned an artist to decorate the ground-floor room next to the kitchen hearth with frank, shoddily painted scenes of couples making love.”

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 159. Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 1.2.8-9.

enhancements were typically modest.²⁸¹ Given the poorer quality of painting in this room, this seems like a plausible explanation of the inclusion of these images in the House of the Vettii's decorative programme.

The wall-paintings in room x^1 were all done on white-ground, likely for financial reasons, and to make the room appear brighter as its only light source was from its one narrow doorway.²⁸² The figures in these wall-paintings were painted hastily and were all completed in a simple colour scheme of porphyry red, red ocher, and yellow ocher.²⁸³ The painter divided the walls in this room into three horizontal zones and three vertical zones using wide red bands.²⁸⁴ However, due to the low height of the ceiling, the paintings take up nearly half of their panels despite being relatively small in size.²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ Keith, *Slavery and Society*, 84-85. Bradley notes: "The size and the furnishings of slaves' cells must have varied according to owners' resources and the abilities of slaves to improve and enhance what they were given. For Trimalchio it was a mark of great affluence (he thought) to be able to boast that the doorkeeper's cell in his house was very grandiose, and certainly some cells could easily house more than one person...But rather modest impressions tend to prevail in the literary record as a whole."

²⁸² Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 170.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 170-172. While Clarke suggests these paintings were executed hastily, it is possible that if a slave commissioned them that they were executed poorly due to insufficient funds, rather than completed quickly.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

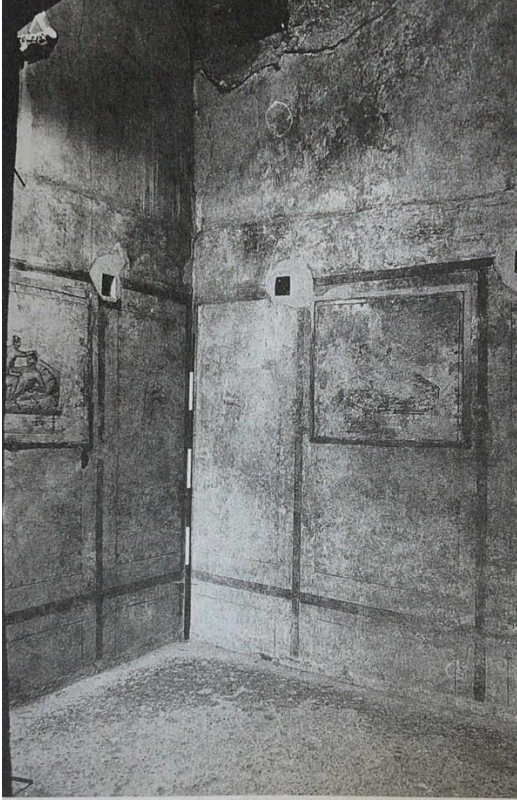


Figure 16: View of room x1 from doorway. The third wall-painting that is indecipherable is visible, as well as decorative horizontal and vertical lines. Retrieved from: John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art 100 B.C. – A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 171.



Figure 17: First of three male-female sex scenes in room x1, House of the Vettii.

Retrieved from: Caroline Vout, *Sex on Show: Seeing the Erotic in Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 116.



Figure 18: Second of three male-female sex scenes in room x1, House of the Vettii.

Retrieved from: John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art 100 B.C. – A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 173.

3.6 Erotic Themes in the Wall-Paintings

It is important to recognize that not all scholars agree that it is right to read deep meaning into wall-painting programmes; however, that does not mean that this is not a fruitful endeavour.²⁸⁶ While some scholars argue that wall-paintings were formulated within a consistent programme that reflected deeply held moral and religious beliefs, other scholars are more cautious and suggest that reading a deeper meaning into domestic wall-paintings should be avoided.²⁸⁷ While it is ultimately impossible to know whether or not the Vettii (or the artist behind the wall-paintings) intended that they contain symbolism or deeper meanings, that does not mean that interpreting the wall-paintings for coded symbolism is without value. Domestic wall-paintings were rarely intended to be only for the personal viewership of their patrons.²⁸⁸ The subjects depicted in these wall-paintings were deliberately chosen to impress viewers and impart lasting impressions on visitors.²⁸⁹ For these reasons, it seems more than worthwhile to analyze these subjects for their meanings and to ask why the Vettii chose these particular images to represent their tastes and home.

It can be difficult to identify evidence for widespread themes within a house's decorative scheme.²⁹⁰ Additionally, it must remain a hypothetical that the Vettii chose the decorative programme for their house by themselves without external influence.²⁹¹ It is possible that a professional painter or iconographer set the decorative programme—a

²⁸⁶ Ling, *Roman Painting*, 136. Ling notes: "...function-related themes are fairly straightforward. What is more controversial is whether there are deeper meanings to be discerned. An extreme position has been taken by the Swiss scholar Karl Schefold who argues from the Pompeian evidence that the subjects within a decoration were normally linked in a consistent programme embodying deep-felt moral or religious ideas..."

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Leach, *The Social Life of Painting*, 7. Leach states: "Within this frame of reference domestic painting, however anonymous, cannot be considered as private, for it was seldom intended for limited personal contemplation but rather to display itself before the many persons whom the owner wanted to impress... Thus, painting was in the fullest sense an aspect of material culture with a function to fulfill."

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ling, *Roman Painting*, 138. Ling states: "...it is difficult to find any clear evidence for a widespread interest in the connections of theme, still less a sensitivity to the moral and religious implications of the subjects represented."

²⁹¹ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 232-234.

practice documented in the Renaissance.²⁹² While there are signs of unity in the House of the Vettii's decorative programme, no single programme can explain the subjects.²⁹³ Rather, there are independent subsystems and thematic harmony between the rooms.²⁹⁴ There are a few possible explanations for the immense display of disconnected images that decorated their house.²⁹⁵ For instance, if the Vettii indeed hired a professional iconographer or let the head of their painter's workshop decide what images to display, it is possible the Vettii were pleased as long as the painter decorated their house in an aristocratic, intellectual style designed to impress viewers.²⁹⁶ It is also important to note that despite these wall-paintings being featured in a domestic context, we cannot fully consider their viewership to be private.²⁹⁷ The chosen subjects were meant to impress visitors, in addition to demonstrating their owners' personal preferences and moral judgements.²⁹⁸

There are numerous overarching themes evident in the House of the Vettii's wall-paintings. These themes include: erotic abandonment, demigods that use sexual violence against mortal women, illicit desire, and punishment. Additionally, some of the themes the Vettii utilize are seemingly used only to provide a direct contrast to other themes. For instance, myths with happy endings are contrasted with myths with tragic endings,

²⁹² Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 232-234; Ernst H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1972), 23-25. Clarke notes: "Sources like the letter of Annibale Caro to the painter Taddeo Zuccaro laying out the iconographic program of the Villa at Caprarola document the practice in the Renaissance, when wealthy individuals often hired a professional to make sure that a correct program would be worked out. The same must have been true in antiquity. In the case of the paintings preserved in houses like that of the Vettii, it is entirely possible that the patron entrusted some or all the details of the decorative program to the architect or head of the wall-painting workshop."

²⁹³ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 234. Clarke states: "...no amount of casuistry or iconographical juggling can unify such a combination of imagery. No single system explains the entire program. Instead we find a number of more or less independent subsystems, like the thematic correspondences between the Ixion room and the Pentheus room...or the Priapus axis from fauces to peristyle."

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid. Clarke notes that, overall, it seems that the Vettii's goal in displaying a large collection of eccentric wall-paintings was to bewilder, amuse, stimulate, and impress their viewers.

²⁹⁷ Leach, *The Social Life of Painting*, 7.

²⁹⁸ Ibid. For instance, imagery could be employed to reference a patron's culture or favourite mythological cycles.

divinities are contrasted with mortals, and in some of the wall-paintings, clothed figures are contrasted with nude figures through careful concealment or revealment by means of clothing.

In both rooms *p* and *t*, there are mythological and divine characters that experience erotic abandonment. The theme of abandonment is one the Vettii displayed throughout their house. In fact, many other wall-paintings in their house featured heroes or gods who were abandoned, but nonetheless achieved greatness.²⁹⁹ Deidamia is an example of a character that experiences erotic abandonment. Achilles, her lover, abandons her when he leaves Skyros to go fight in the Trojan War.³⁰⁰ While he says that he will come back for her, his death leaves her abandoned with their son, Achilles Neoptolemus.³⁰¹ Her abandonment is not depicted in full in room *t*, but it is hinted at by depicting a scene that occurs just before Achilles leaves Skyros. Additionally, in the wall-painting of Achilles and Deidamia in room *t*, Deidamia appears distraught at Achilles' identity being revealed (presumably because she knows that he now must leave her).

Another notable figure who experiences erotic abandonment in the House of the Vettii is Ariadne. The figure of Ariadne in room *p* is depicted after she is abandoned by Theseus and is found by her soon-to-be husband Dionysus.³⁰² While it is unclear what the meaning behind this theme is, it is nonetheless noteworthy as it appears throughout the House of the Vettii. Perhaps the Vettii were symbolizing to the viewers of these paintings that, like some of the subjects of these abandonments, they too were able to achieve financial success and greatness despite their humble origins.

²⁹⁹ Kellum, "Wighing In," 205. Kellum states: "It can be said with certainty that [the Vettii] surrounded themselves with images of heroes and gods who had been abandoned at birth but had then gone on to accomplish great things, and Priapus was first among them." Priapus might also be said to undergo somewhat of an erotic abandonment. He is abandoned by Venus, but his abandonment is not tied to anything erotic (besides his status as an erotic deity, this is about as far as this connection goes). It is still interesting to note the prevalence of the theme of abandonment throughout the house.

³⁰⁰ Statius, *Achilleid*, 1.1040-1074.

³⁰¹ Ibid. In the *Achilleid*, Statius states that Achilles swears fidelity to Deidamia and promises to return to her.

³⁰² Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 224-225.

Another interesting, albeit distasteful, theme in the House of the Vettii is demigods that threaten or use sexual violence against mortal women. This is not unique to the House of the Vettii; divine power was often conflated with sexual power in both ancient Greek and Roman art.³⁰³ In fact, both sex and sexual desire were central to ancient Greek and Roman mythology.³⁰⁴ These images represent the potential destructiveness of divine will as well as abhorrent aspects of sex.³⁰⁵ Also, by depicting violent scenes through the action of gods, it perhaps allows ancient viewers to look at certain subjects through a lens that shows that actions like this are inhuman—reserved for mythological figures such as gods, centaurs, and satyrs.³⁰⁶ Although Priapus threatens sexual violence against thieves and trespassers, he is not a demigod so he falls on the border of this theme, but his presence and sexually violent nature should nonetheless be noted for this discussion.

Room *t* in particular displays the theme of demigods that use sexual violence against mortal women. The two wall-paintings in this room both either allude to or explicitly display male demigods using violence against women. In the image of Hercules and Auge, Hercules is depicted drunk and approaching Auge in a violent manner, about to rape her. This scene is rather disconcerting to say the least. Auge is shown frightened, seeking comfort in someone's arms. Her figure is positioned at the lower left corner of the wall-painting—she is cowering from Hercules as far as the physical frame of this wall-painting will allow. Hercules is depicted extending his club slightly towards her in

³⁰³ Vout, *Sex on Show*, 81-82. Vout acknowledges that imagery of deities (most frequently Aphrodite/Venus, Dionysus, and Jupiter/Zeus) often conflate divine power with sexual power, “the awe-inspiring quality of their imagery as eroticism.”

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 130. Vout states: “Sex and sexual desire were central to ancient Greek and Roman religion.” This theme is prominent in ancient Greek and Roman mythology as well.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 167. Vout writes: “With what sensitivity would we be seeing the gods, if we did not acknowledge the potential destructiveness of divine will?” and discusses the implications of visual pleasure stemming from sadism rather than desire and the destructive nature of this phenomenon.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 177. Vout states: “Consent, coercion, love and sadism are not always where we expect to find them—a revelation that makes the whole topic of violence in ancient art very complex. But, as we are about to discover, the imagery itself does some of its own policing, divulging as it does so what was and was not possible in art as well as life. It is not simply that centaurs, satyrs and gods express what men would like to do, were they outside of the constraints of society. It is that they enable them to look at things they would like to look at, while showing how inhuman these things are.”

an observably threatening and frightening manner. The positioning of his club was likely meant to serve as an extension of his phallus, similar to the purpose of the shepherd's crook in the image of Priapus in room *b*. While Achilles' scene is much less threatening, in fact it lacks any overtly threatening imagery at all, it is still worth noting as during his time on Skyros he has intercourse with Deidamia, which in many versions of the myth is characterized as a rape.³⁰⁷ Both these scenes are suggestive of masculinity overpowering femininity.³⁰⁸ While the scene of Achilles lacks any immediate danger to a female figure, it shows Achilles' feminine dress falling off him—a deliberate sign of masculinity, in some form, overpowering femininity.³⁰⁹ Both scenes also share the commonality of heroic offspring: Achilles Neoptolemus and Telephus.³¹⁰ There is one more notable scene of a demigod displaying sexual violence against a mortal woman in room *p* in the panel of Ariadne. While this scene also lacks any explicit violence, it seems that Ariadne is frightened. She covers her face and turns her body away from the viewer as if she is trying to hide. Dionysus stands to her left and appears non-threatening. However, it is important to note that while in some versions of this myth, their union is referred to as a marriage, in other versions it is characterized as a rape.³¹¹ While violence against mortal women, especially sexual violence, was unfortunately a common occurrence in both ancient Greek and Roman mythology (and society as a whole), it is interesting that the Vettii displayed so many of these themes in their house.³¹² It is possible they chose these myths to allude to aristocratic society and show their viewers that they were cultured intellectuals as they too had knowledge of Greek mythology. It is also possible that they displayed this imagery to showcase the increased power they now had as freedmen.³¹³

³⁰⁷ Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 565-566.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 549. Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, 1.527-564.

³¹² Vout, *Sex on Show*, 172-173. Vout points out that images of sexual violence against women were prominent throughout ancient Rome, for instance a frieze in the Roman Forum [on the Basilica Aemilia] showing Roman soldiers carrying off the Sabine women as well as women "brandished like trophies."

³¹³ Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 541-542. Severy-Hoven states: "...it is productive to contrast this focus on gender [in the House of the Vettii's wall-paintings] with ancient Italian practices of slavery, in which what we conceive of as gender, if used in isolation, might have done a poor job of articulating

While as slaves, they would have been on the receiving end of violence, as freedmen they would have had a much higher status and would not have to worry about this.

A further prominent theme in the House of the Vettii's wall-paintings are illicit desires.³¹⁴ This theme is shown particularly in rooms *p* and *t*. In room *p* there are two notable figures, Pasiphae and Ixion, that display illicit desire. Pasiphae infamously desires a white bull sent by Poseidon, while Ixion desires Hera. Both of their desires lead them to engage in sexual intercourse with a figure or thing that should not be desired. These stories are further tied together as both unions result in the birth of monsters. Pasiphae gives birth to the Minotaur, while Ixion's union with the cloud lookalike of Hera results in the creation of the centaurs.³¹⁵ Both of these myths are also connected to Theseus as he fights in the Centauromachy and slays the Minotaur (he is also the one who abandons Ariadne on Naxos—the final panel in this room).³¹⁶ The *hubris* displayed by Pasiphae and Ixion result in monstrous beings, a warning for individuals to stay within their appropriate limits—and perhaps to serve as a reminder to the Vettii not to overstep in their own societal boundaries. Also, the three panels in this room's connection with Theseus does not seem coincidental. There potentially is symbolism in his double paternity that the Vettii are adopting. Like Theseus, they have a double parentage or heritage of sorts.³¹⁷ The Vettii have their previous heritage/origin of slavery and a second heritage as freedmen. Perhaps the underlying presence of Theseus in this room is alluding to this while also displaying their newfound status by showing they are aware of classic Greek myths that the Roman aristocracy would have similarly been knowledgeable of. Room *t* also features illicit desire through Hercules' lust for Auge. While Auge has no choice in her coupling with Hercules, Hercules is not supposed to have sex with a

relationships of power...The imagery resonates with Roman slave practices; paired scenes of corporal punishment and sexualized violence negate the difference between male and female and focus on the other manes of articulating status hierarchies..."

³¹⁴ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 224-225. Clarke points out that illicit unions are common in room *p*, but does not consider this to be an overarching theme in the house.

³¹⁵ Ibid; Mazzoleni et al., *Domus*, 334.

³¹⁶ Homer, *Iliad*, 1.260-270; Mazzoleni et al., *Domus*, 334.

³¹⁷ Plutarch, *Lives: Theseus*, IV; Plutarch, *Lives: Theseus*, VI. In mythology, Theseus is thought to have two fathers, Poseidon and Aegeus.

priestess of Athena as she is a virgin goddess and her priestesses would have been expected to remain virgins as well.³¹⁸ Yet, similar to Pasiphae and Ixion, he does not restrain himself.

According to some scholars, it may be useful to compare a gender focus with ancient slavery in analyzing these wall-paintings as both feature the various power dynamics that can occur in relationships.³¹⁹ While initially this perspective may seem a bit far-fetched, there are interesting theories proposed that should not go undiscussed. These theories do not seem entirely convincing, but they do nonetheless posit some important questions concerning the House of the Vettii's artistic programme. The imagery in rooms with erotic decorative programmes reminds the viewer of Roman slavery practices as the wall-paintings depict both corporal punishment and sexual violence—reducing emphasis on gender differences and instead focusing on other ways of representing social hierarchies.³²⁰ Many of the wall-paintings in the House of the Vettii combine Greek mythological stories in various ways, each suggesting the status of the owner in the role as *dominus* thereby requiring viewing some imagery in the context of ancient slavery.³²¹ Furthermore, Pentheus, Ixion, and Pasiphae share the commonality of failing to respect a god's divinity.³²² Both Pentheus and Ixion attempted to subject a divinity to sex or imprisonment only to receive torture as punishment.³²³ The contrast between human and divine, which might function as an analogy between slave and

³¹⁸ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 220-221.

³¹⁹ Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 541-542. Severy-Hoven states: "The imagery [in rooms *p* and *n*] resonates with Roman slave practices; paired scenes of corporal punishment and sexualized violence negate the difference between male and female and focus on other means of articulating status hierarchies..."

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ *Ibid.* According to Severy-Hoven, this alludes to a form of "visual mastery" over both male and female figures resulting in the ancient viewer's identification with the suffering of the subjects in the wall-paintings. While I do not find this theory particularly convincing, it is still worth noting for this discussion.

³²² *Ibid.*, 562.

³²³ *Ibid.* Severy-Hoven states: "Pentheus and Ixion tried to subject a deity to imprisonment or sex, only to be tortured themselves as a result."

freeperson, is highlighted by the scene of Dirce, who is punished for enslaving a respectable mortal.³²⁴

The last room I will examine for underlying themes is room x^1 . While it is impossible to determine the status of the women or men depicted in the wall-paintings in this room, it is possible the women in these wall-paintings are sex-workers—not because of what they are doing, but rather the context in which it takes place. That said, it is vital to acknowledge that it is almost impossible to definitively label women as sex-workers in ancient art.³²⁵ Overall, the distinction between a prostitute and a wife in art is indeterminate.³²⁶ Furthermore, it is important to note that the couples in both scenes appear to be making eye contact. Eye contact between couples, especially during erotic scenes, is suggestive of a romantic connection of some sort. Additionally, it is possible that the images in this room were meant to be fantastical.³²⁷ Rather than serve as a sex-manual for the room's inhabitant or as images intended to arouse, these images may allude to a different time period entirely, namely that of fifth century Greece.³²⁸ An interesting possibility for these scenes is that they are meant to reference the Greek sympotic revelries commonly depicted on Attic vases (see Figure 20).³²⁹ The striped

³²⁴ Severy-Hoven, "Master Narratives," 562. Severy-Hoven states that Dirce "is punished not for disrespecting divinity, but for enslaving a respectable fellow mortal."

³²⁵ Vout, *Sex on Show*, 92. There is no iconographic short-hand for sex-workers and the larger context of the work is almost always the decisive factor in whether or not the individual can be declared a sex-worker.

³²⁶ Ibid; Anise K. Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 140. Strong dedicates Chapter 5 (pp. 118-141) to discussing whether or not it is possible to differentiate a *meretrix* (prostitute) from a *matrona* (wife) in Roman art; the answer to which is a resounding "no" for the majority of cases.

³²⁷ Vout, *Sex on Show*, 116-117.

³²⁸ Ibid. Vout advances this theory rather convincingly. I agree that this is a likely possibility for the images in this room and can provide some fascinating (and significant) insights into the wall-paintings in room x^1 .

³²⁹ Ibid. Vout states: "...transported back in time to the fifth century BC, where they can sample genuine Greek love for themselves and road-test their new classical bodies. Is this how the sex scenes in the House of the Vettii work? Is the world that they conjure up foreign, old-fashioned, or timeless? Did the frisson they offer life in their familiarity or their perversion?...In what sense are the paintings at Pompeii different? It is not as though they are portable and thus easy to hide, or in particularly private parts of the building, no matter how hard archaeologists have argued for there being limited access to them—either that, or for bad taste on the part of the patrons (usually, as in the case of the Vettii, ex-slaves who have won their liberty and earned their fortune but who are deemed incapable of ditching the bawdiness of their upbringing). The care and kudos associated with the position of paintings in the Roman house make the explicitness of many of them difficult to process. Did they appeal to their owner's vanity, his wit, or his escapism?"

cushion shown in two of the three wall-paintings is a symbol of the Greek symposium. The third wall-painting is indecipherable due to paint losses, but since the other two scenes in this room feature the same cushions, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that the third painting also featured this setting. Given the presence of little else in the scene it is impossible to determine with certainty, but nevertheless the possibility should not be ignored as it greatly impacts interpretations of the wall-paintings in this room. It is possible that if this was meant to reference a Greek vase, the Vettii wanted to transport whoever was viewing this to the fifth century BCE.³³⁰ Rather than bawdy representations of sex, perhaps the Vettii were attempting to conjure up foreign, timeless, classical imagery, thereby appealing to vanity, wit, and/or escapism, rather than sexual desire alone.³³¹ These paintings are certainly not in a particularly private part of the house, and there is no way to determine if there would have actually been limited access to these wall-paintings in practice, as archaeologists have been keen to suggest, although certainly the number of people back in this space would not have been great.³³² If these images were meant to transport the viewer back to fifth century Greece, they may have been placed as a form of escapism.³³³ For both the ancient Greeks and Romans, artwork could function in each of these capacities and provided viewers with the opportunity to view their reality from a third-party perspective.³³⁴

³³⁰ Vout, *Sex on Show*, 116-117.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid, 126. Vout notes that parts of reality are too painful to alleviate and imagination can create spaces where an individual can relax, reconcile their reality, or escape into an alternative reality. Thus, it is possible that this is how the images in these rooms are functioning; however, it is impossible to know for certain.

³³⁴ Ibid.



Figure 19: Example of a *tabella* from a Pompeian brothel. Retrieved from:
<https://www.historytoday.com/reviews/brothels-ancient-pompeii>.

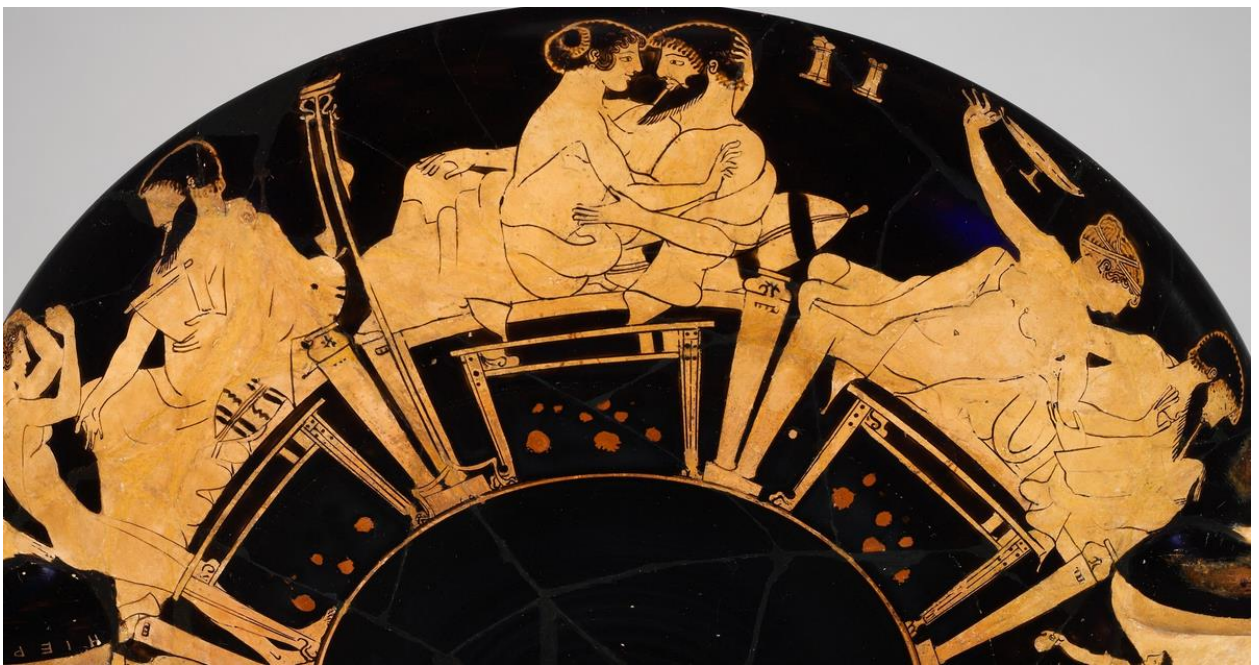


Figure 20: Attic Red Figure vase depicting a symposium. Retrieved from:
<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fvia-appia.tumblr.com%2Fpost%2F134528274887%2Fdetail-of-a-terracotta-kylix-drinking-cup->

with&psig=AOvVaw3fsW4xz9Tm4KxfuwiyCTFd&ust=1643742827049000&source=i
 mages&cd=vfe&ved=0CAgQjRxqFwoTCPDE7cnZ3PUCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAK

3.7 Erotic Graffiti

Graffiti is a prominent form of evidence for Roman sexual humour, sexual services, and erotic discourse in general.³³⁵ It is mostly preserved *in situ* and survives on numerous Pompeian walls.³³⁶ The House of the Vettii has two examples of sexual graffiti. While there is more sexual graffiti located in the streets and alleyways surrounding the house, I will not be looking at these examples since they are not connected to the house itself. This graffiti must be analyzed carefully as Roman sexual humour is complex and we cannot know definitively what the distinction is between colloquial humour and verbal abuse in ancient Rome.³³⁷ There are some issues surrounding ancient graffiti that are important to address—a prominent one being the question of literacy.³³⁸ Because literacy in antiquity was not limited based on gender or social standing, this makes the issue a bit more difficult.³³⁹ It is also important to note that even if someone was illiterate, it is possible they were able to ascertain the meaning of a particular graffito through another person's recitation.³⁴⁰ The first erotic graffito I will look at is located in room ν of the House of the Vettii, on the wall near the

³³⁵ Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64; Craig Williams, "Sexual Themes in Greek and Latin Graffiti," in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 500. Richlin states: "Roman sexual humor is limited to certain settings, places, meters, and forms," graffiti makes up a large portion of evidence for Roman sexual humor and discourse.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 81. Richlin states: "Perception of the simplest level of Roman sexual humor is complicated and hampered by the fact that we cannot directly record Roman verbal and colloquial humor and abuse. This makes it somewhat difficult to determine what were appropriate levels of language for different levels of society and different social situations."

³³⁸ Williams, "Sexual Themes," 501.

³³⁹ *Ibid.* Many slaves could read and write, while many freeborn individuals could not. This makes it impossible to ascertain who these messages were intended for or who authored them.

³⁴⁰ Sarah Levin-Richardson, "*Facilis hic futuit*: Graffiti and Masculinity in Pompeii's 'Purpose-Built' Brothel," *Helios* 38, no. 1 (2011): 60. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hel.2011.0001>. Levin-Richardson states: "...even illiterate viewers could be exposed to graffiti through someone else's recitation."

doorway.³⁴¹ It reads: “*Eros cinedae*” or “Eros is a *cinaedus*”.³⁴² The graffito has been scratched out, but nonetheless remains legible.³⁴³ *Cinaedus* is a term for which no precise English equivalent exists.³⁴⁴ *Cinaedi* were men who wore perfume and curled their hair and also wore bright colours.³⁴⁵ They were apt to be anally penetrated and enjoy it, but *cinaedi* were also said to be overly sexually active with women (especially orally).³⁴⁶ The *cinaedus*’ two defining characteristics were that he had abrogated the outward signs of masculinity, and that he had no sexual self-control, pleasuring everybody.³⁴⁷ Eros was a common name for male slaves and indicates that Eros may have been a slave in the House of the Vettii or a slave in another house or sex-worker that someone in the house visited.³⁴⁸ While penetration was normal for free males, a masculine act, and honourable, being penetrated was seen as normal for females and slaves, an effeminate or servile act, and shameful.³⁴⁹ This graffito may have served as an advertisement for his sexual services, but it also may have served as invective against Eros. Anal penetration, though normal for a slave, was not the only insulting factor in taunting someone as a *cinaedus*.

Sexual material in graffiti is commonly attributed to male writers, despite the inability to truly know the writers’ gender.³⁵⁰ This makes the following inscription particularly interesting as it is commonly attributed to a female writer. Located in room *a* of the House of the Vettii is an inscription that reads: “*Eutythis <<Graec>>a a(ssibus)*

³⁴¹ Severy- Hoven, “Master Narratives,” 564.

³⁴² Ibid. As Severy-Hoven acknowledges, the graffito is attesting that Eros likes to be “sexually passive.”

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Kelly Olson, *Masculinity and Dress in Roman Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2017), 136.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid. There are many possibilities for who Eros was, but all that can be said definitively is he was likely a slave.

³⁴⁹ Levin-Richardson, “*Facilis hic futuit*,” 61-62. Sexual acts were also judged and defined by their ability to pollute an individual who performed them or who had the action performed on them. For example, oral sex was thought to have given the performer the *os impurum*, the “impure mouth.”

³⁵⁰ Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 64. Richlin states: “As with the erotic material, all the sexual humor that has any attribution was attributed to men.”

Il moribus bellis” or “Eutythis, Greek, nice-mannered, for two *asses*”.³⁵¹ Eutythis was likely a female slave living in the domicile and working for the Vettii.³⁵² While it is possible that someone else wrote this inscription in her name or about her, it is also possible that she herself wrote this graffito and was advertising her skills as a sex-worker. If this is true, this would support the idea that room *x*¹ may have functioned as a brothel and was indeed a *cella meretricia*.³⁵³ More likely, Eutythis was a casual sex worker trying to make a bit of money over and above her *peculium*, and advertising this fact in a graffito. If Eutythis wrote this graffito herself, then this is a rare example of female sexual agency in graffiti, making this example particularly significant.³⁵⁴

In conclusion, I have completed an examination of the erotic evidence in the House of the Vettii. Overall, the House of the Vettii’s artistic programme is rather chaotic and was filled with numerous figures and themes.³⁵⁵ I analyzed the wall-painting of Priapus in room *b*, the wall-paintings in room *n* (Dirce and Pentheus), the wall-paintings in room *p* (Ixion, Ariadne, and Pasiphae), the wall-paintings in room *t* (Hercules and Achilles), and the three explicit sex scenes in room *x*¹ (of which only two are legible). Also, I studied the themes in the House of the Vettii’s decorative programme in order to provide the most extensive interpretation of these wall-paintings. I identified several themes in the decorative programme including: erotic abandonment, demigods that use sexual violence against mortal women, illicit desire, and punishment. Lastly, I studied the erotic graffiti found within the domicile. By studying the erotic evidence in the House of the Vettii, I have provided an in-depth investigation of the symbolism of these wall-paintings and, potentially, the messages that the Vettii were attempting to convey through

³⁵¹ Antonio Varone, *Erotica Pompeiana: Love Inscriptions on the Walls of Pompeii*, trans. Ria P. Berg (Rome: «L’ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER, 2002), 143.

³⁵² Varone, *Erotica Pompeiana*, 143. Varone suggests that room *x*¹ belonged to Eutythis and was used as a brothel. However, it is impossible to know certainly.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ See Sarah Levin-Richardson, “*Fututa Sum Hic*: Female Subjectivity and Agency in Pompeian Sexual Graffiti,” *The Classical Journal* 108, no. 3 (2013): 319-345. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcj.2013.0024>.

³⁵⁵ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 234.

their wall-paintings as well as the potential purposes of the erotic graffiti found in the house and their implications. Through this analysis, it is evident that the erotic evidence from the House of the Vettii informs interpretation of the domicile greatly. Much can be learned from the erotic evidence about the Vettii and their aspirations.

Chapter 4

4 Conclusion

I chose to study the erotic evidence in the House of the Vettii's artistic programme and graffiti in order to facilitate increasing discussion in these areas (which surprisingly some scholars today are still apprehensive to debate), despite the very real merit of erotic or sexual evidence, art, and artefacts in classical studies.³⁵⁶ While modern scholarship is much less anxious about the public access to “obscene” materials—materials that explicitly depict sexual images, acts, or writings—than previous scholarship, censorship is still a pervasive problem and is reflected in modern anxiety towards these texts and images.³⁵⁷

Sex and sexuality have a history, one that deserves to be acknowledged as it can greatly affect interpretations of ancient Roman society, culture, morality, and social perceptions of normative behaviours.³⁵⁸ While it is impossible to completely place sex and sexuality back into their original context (as we cannot see first-hand how ancients interacted with these subjects nor can we interpret them in their wholly original environments) this does not diminish the importance or validity of these topics.³⁵⁹ The differences in modern and ancient artistic heritage, moral heritage, theological beliefs,

³⁵⁶ Vout, *Sex on Show*, 232-233. For instance, some scholars still write words with sexual connotations in a different language or their ancient equivalent. Vout says: “The use of the Greek ‘*phallos*’ in place of the Latin ‘penis’ is still misleading, cloaking any hint of flesh with a noun that even in ancient Athens was used of representations of the male sex organ...more often than of the organ itself.”

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 234-236. Global change from ancient society to our modern society makes this impossible. The differences between ancient and modern society and what we interpret as “erotic” unfortunately means we cannot view artefacts of this nature in their entirely ancient contexts. Vout states: “For all that I have worked to put Greek sex back into a world of nude bodies and sympotic culture, Roman sex back into a world of empire and cultural appropriate, and sexy statues and scenes of abduction back into polytheistic world of vengeful gods, I cannot take you back there. We cannot watch the ancients as they stare at the frescoes...Nor can we look as they looked: our artistic and moral heritage, our theology or lack of it, and our attitudes to the self and to each other, make such empathy impossible.”

and social attitudes make adopting an entirely ancient lens unfeasible.³⁶⁰ But we can still learn from these themes.³⁶¹

For the ancient Greeks and Romans, sex was never hidden.³⁶² Art with sexual imagery allows us to examine our relationship with the past, Rome's relationship with other ancient cultures, and their society's relationship with their own legal and moral principles.³⁶³ Sexual imagery was not limited to one medium, location, or social category in ancient Rome; such images and themes were found in all levels and places in society and influenced how the ancient Romans interacted with their environment. Sexual imagery is important to study and should not be considered "obscene," because these images and subjects were found all over Roman society.³⁶⁴

While I did not come to any startling conclusions in this work, mine is the first scholarly piece to look at all the erotic evidence from one house. By analyzing the erotic content from a single Roman dwelling, specialized knowledge and information can be gained regarding how these remains might have been interpreted in antiquity and how their presence informs interpretations of life in ancient Rome.

The House of the Vettii's wall-paintings were completed in the Fourth Style, likely by a single workshop after the earthquake of 62 CE.³⁶⁵ The wall-paintings in room *b* (Priapus), room *n* (Pentheus and Dirce), room *p* (Ixion, Pasiphae, and Ariadne), room *t*

³⁶⁰ Vout, *Sex on Show*, 234-236.

³⁶¹ Ibid. Vout notes that we can trace ancient Roman reactions to nude sculpture from the Republican period to the Imperial period and how this reaction changes with time. Vout says: "In Rome, all of these [nude] bodies [in art] were initially as corrupting as they were captivating—corrupting of Roman conceits and representational rules and of good old-fashioned Republican values of seriousness, shame, moral superiority." Vout also states (regarding the ability to learn from sexual or erotic themes in art): "We learn that the Greeks and Romans were, and were not, like us."

³⁶² Ibid, 237. Vout states: "Greek and Roman sex was never confined to a back room."

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid, 172-173. Vout says: "Martial rape was a live issue in Rome, not just tolerated by virtue of an intellectual loophole...but celebrated in the Forum, where a frieze in a large basilica [the Basilica Aemilia] showed Roman soldiers carrying off the Sabine women. Future wives flee or are brandished like trophies...No doubt the self-consciously classicizing appearance of the frieze mitigated the violence for a Roman viewer."

³⁶⁵ Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 209.

(Hercules and Achilles), and room x^1 (three male-female sex scenes) contained overarching themes of erotic abandonment, demigods that use sexual violence against mortal women, illicit desire, and fantasy. The erotic graffiti in the House of the Vettii may have served as advertisements of sexual services of either an individual living in the house or services from individuals outside the house that people living in the domicile sought out. They might also be invective. Overall, the House of the Vettii boasts a rather chaotic and eccentric decorative programme, one that is filled with explicit and implicit sexual imagery. This artistic scheme, taken together with the sexual graffiti found within the house, can provide information on the inhabitants of the House of the Vettii and life in ancient Rome as a whole.

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