

Performing Marriage Rituals: The Iconography of North Italian *Cassoni* 1480–1520



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This essay examines the role played by Northern cassoni, or wedding chest, produced between the 1480s and 1520s in the ritual celebrations of dynastic weddings that cemented the alliances between the Este family in Ferrara and the rulers of neighbouring states. The detailed account of Sabadino degli Arienti of the nuptial celebrations for Lucrezia d'Este and the son of the ruler of Bologna Annibale Bentivoglio in 1487 sheds light on the ritualistic aspects of these celebrations. These included triumphal arches that personified the cardinal virtues and concluded with a pantomime in which the nymph Lucretia, the protagonist and bride's alter-ego, ended up choosing marital love over lust and chastity. It is argued that rather than elicit sentiments of wifely submission in the bride, the tales of heroines that possessed inherently manly virtues depicted on the cassoni aimed at empowering the young elite brides and prepared them to acquire the agency required to exercise political power in their husband's absence.

Cassoni, or wedding chests, formed part of the wedding gifts for the bride-to-be, containing her trousseau. Traditionally, they were paraded along the streets during the ritual procession or *deductio a domo* that accompanied the newly-wed from her

* I wish to thank the anonymous referees for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also grateful to Matthew Firth, editor of this journal, to the staff at the Gemäldegalerie in Mainz and the Jacquemart-André Museum in Paris for their support and assistance.

father's house to that of the groom and often served as a practical and discreet receptacle for the dowry.

Florentine *cassoni* have received considerable scholarly attention. Art historical studies, including catalogues from dedicated exhibitions held at Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 2008 and the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence in 2010, have examined their iconography and determined their symbolic role as part of an elaborate ritual of gift exchange that sanctioned the passage of the bride's *potestas* from her father to the groom and reminded the bride of her wifely obligations.¹

This study defies the traditional Florentine-centred approach to *cassoni* to examine Northern Italian artefacts. It explores the intersection between the iconography of *cassoni* and the ritual celebrations of the dynastic weddings that are described in contemporary accounts and encomiastic writings. It will be argued that the *cassoni* were an integral part of the performance rituals associated with the bride's entry into the city and her arrival at the groom's palace, complementing the theatrical performances that took place during the procession, as well as at the bride's arrival at her new abode.

¹ Among the vast scholarship on Florentine *cassoni*, I shall mention a selection of works, which contain further bibliographic references: Cristelle Baskins, Adrian W.B. Randolph, Jacqueline Marie Musacchio and Alan Chong, *The Triumph of Marriage: Painted Cassoni of the Renaissance* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2008); *Virtù d'amore: pittura nuziale nel Quattrocento fiorentino*, ed. by Claudio Paolini, Daniela Parenti, Ludovica Sebreghondi (Florence: Giunti, 2010); Andrea de Marchi, *Le opere e i giorni: exempla virtutis, favole antiche e vita quotidiana nel racconto dei cassoni rinascimentali* (Signa: Masso delle Fate Edizioni, 2015); *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Andrea Bayer (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008); Ellen Callmann, *Apollonio di Giovanni* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

In Verona, *cassoni* workshops thrived from the last quarter of the fifteenth century until the late sixteenth century, servicing a wealthy clientele from Northern cities such as Bologna, Mantua and Venice. In the first dedicated catalogue of Veronese *cassoni*, Matteo Vinco has classified artefacts that predominantly date between the 1480s and the 1520s, thus suggesting a peak in their production. This period coincided with a series of dynastic weddings celebrated between 1487 and 1502 that cemented alliances between the Este house in Ferrara and the rulers of Bologna, Milan and Mantua, as well as the Papal state.

Renaissance marriage ceremonies had a strong ritual aspect, as studied extensively by cultural historian Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, whose remarks about the middle echelons of Florentine society are partly applicable to Northern cities. Rituals associated with the bride's physical separation from her familial household, the bridal procession until her arrival at the bridegroom's house, and the consummation of the marriage followed a repeated pattern. In the dynastic marriages described in this paper, these rituals were amplified and complemented by theatrical spectacles, jousts and banquets. The bride-to-be's symbolic entrance into the city and her procession to the princely palace were not dissimilar from royal entrances.²

The crucial aspect of these rituals was their public dimension, as the bride was exposed to the scrutiny of the whole community, and the transition to

² As discussed by Diane Y. Ghirardo, 'Festival Bridal Entries in Renaissance Ferrara', in *Festival Architecture*, ed. by Sarah Bonnemaïson and Christine Macy (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007), pp. 43–73.

adulthood.³ As I will demonstrate, the performative acts in the form of tableaux vivants, choirs and pantomimes were reinforced by the pictorial narrative of the mythological scenes depicted on the *cassoni*. My analysis is underpinned by Cristelle Baskins's study of narratives of mythological heroines represented on Florentine *cassoni*. Baskins champions a number of heroines from the ancient mythical past, which she estimates account for one-third to a half of the extant *cassoni*.⁴ These heroines embody different models of femininity and antagonism towards their male counterparts, which in some cases result in suicide (Dido, Lucretia/Virginia) while in others guarantee their transitioning into 'normative femininity' (Amazons and Sabine Women).⁵ These masculine traits enable them to transgress into the quintessentially male realms in which 'the victimhood implied by adversity always operates in dynamic tension with feminine heroic agency'.⁶

In the marriage rituals of Northern Italian courts, these coming-of-age rituals were re-enacted and amplified by the pictorial narratives that decorated the bridal apparatuses, including chariots, *bucintori*, *cassoni* and smaller decorative objects that complemented the theatrical spectacle during and immediately after the procession.

The mythological tales depicted on Northern *cassoni* aimed to elicit in the bride not

³ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 187.

⁴ Cristelle L. Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism and Gender in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 11. These include the Amazons, Dido, Camilla, the Sabine women, Lucretia and Virginia.

⁵ Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, pp. 28, 49. On the popularity of Lucretia's rape in the iconography of Florentine *cassoni* see Jerzy Miziolek, 'Florentine Marriage Chests Depicting the Story of Lucretia and the War with Giangaleazzo Visconti', in *Art and Politics: Proceedings of the Third Joint Conference of Polish and English Art Historians*, ed. by Francis Ames-Lewis and Piotr Paszkiewicz (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1999), pp. 31–43.

⁶ Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, p. 11.

only the sentiments of chastity and propriety but also qualities such as prudence and fortitude that were considered inherently masculine. These rituals and the level of community participation were intended to reinforce her newly acquired status and agency to equip her for her new role. This aspect would have been essential for women of the high nobility who needed to achieve an authoritative status that would enable them to take the regency of the state in their husband's stead when needed.⁷

'UNPACKING THE CASSONI'⁸

The practice of providing the bride with a painted *cassone* was already popular in the fourteenth century but reached its peak in the fifteenth century and gradually waned in the sixteenth century, when relief-carved *cassoni* replaced painted ones.⁹ From the first quarter of the fifteenth century, the iconography of *cassoni* became more elaborate. Simple images of couples in amorous poses were replaced by group scenes painted on the front panels that were often also gilded with gesso, according to a technique known as *a pastiglia*.¹⁰ The popularity of painted *cassoni*, which were produced in great numbers to satisfy the demands of the ascending mercantile

⁷ Virginia Cox, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), p. 172.

⁸ The title of this section echoes Adrian W. B. Randolph, 'Unpacking *Cassoni*: Marriage, Ritual, Memory', in *The Triumph of Marriage*, pp. 15–30 (p. 15).

⁹ Cristelle Baskins, 'Triumph: An Introduction', in *The Triumph of Marriage*, pp. 1–14 (p. 1). On the growing demand of domestic furniture by Florentine elite classes in the fifteenth century, see Richard Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 224–30.

¹⁰ Brucia Witthoft, 'Marriage Rituals and Marriage Chests in Quattrocento Florence', *Artibus et Historiae*, 3, no. 5 (1982), 43–59 (p. 43).

classes in Florence and Siena, was already declining at the end of the fifteenth century. In 1568, Giorgio Vasari alluded to the vogue of commissioning painted *cassoni* as long gone. In contrast, in Northern Italy, the production of *cassoni* peaked in the late fifteenth and the first two decades of the sixteenth century.

Vinco's catalogue of Veronese *cassoni* features 159 artefacts produced between 1440 and the 1520s, with most dating from the 1490s until the 1520s.¹¹ Their attribution to a particular artist or workshop is often uncertain, and not all the artefacts listed in the catalogue were produced in Verona. The documentary records suggest that the wedding chests commissioned on the occasion of the lavish dynastic weddings of the offspring of Duke of Ferrara Ercole I d'Este were built and painted in situ by court artists. While attribution to specific artists is often debated by art historians, in this paper, I will make specific references to *cassoni* considered by scholarly consensus to be Ferrarese to demonstrate the inherently performative nature of their iconography. These characteristics reflect the theatricalised rituals that were part of the bride's triumphal entry and were further amplified by theatrical performances staged during the marriage festivities. Northern *cassoni* present many common features, and Veronese artists with well-established workshops, such as Domenico Morone, also worked in other Italian centres. Artist mobility, particularly within neighbouring courts, became increasingly common in the late fifteenth century. Ferrarese *cassoni*, in combination with chronicles and

¹¹ Mattia Vinco, *Cassoni: Pittura profana del Rinascimento a Verona* (Milan: Officina Libreria, 2018).

encomiastic writings, provide a unique insight into the complex theatrical rituals that surrounded the wedding celebrations of the elites.

In the last decade of the fifteenth century, the expansionist threats from France and Venice to the North and the Papal state to the South compelled Northern courts to forge mutually convenient alliances through dynastic marriages. In 1487, Annibale Bentivoglio, son of Giovanni II, the ruler of Bologna, married Lucrezia d'Este, daughter of Ercole I d'Este. The alliance between Milan and Ferrara was strengthened by the weddings of Anna Sforza and Alfonso d'Este (1491) and of Beatrice d'Este to Ludovico Sforza (1492). In 1490, the alliance between Ferrara and neighbouring Mantua was sealed through the marriage of Isabella d'Este and Francesco II Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua. Lastly, following Anna Sforza's death in childbirth, Alfonso married Lucrezia Borgia, the illegitimate daughter of Pope Alexander VI, in 1502.

The nuptials of three of the legitimate daughters of Ercole I d'Este between 1487 and 1492 represented an intense period of preparation of bridal paraphernalia, including *cassoni*. Court artists were commissioned to craft a variety of objects for the wedding celebrations. These included small objects such as jewellery boxes, but also carriages, triumphal arches for the bridal procession and *bucintori*, decorated barges fitted with several rooms that allowed the bride to travel by waterways.

The construction and decoration of the wedding paraphernalia, including *cassoni*, was commissioned to Ercole de' Roberti who, following the death of Cosmè

Tura, had become the first artist at the Este court.¹² In 1479, de' Roberti had opened his own workshop with his brother Polidoro and the goldsmith Giovanni di Giuliano da Piacenza. The presence of a goldsmith is likely to be related to the production of *cassoni*, which were often gilded, and the preparation of bridal jewellery. The *munitioni* register records the expenses incurred for these, along with the names of the artists hired for these occasions. To build and decorate thirteen *cassoni*, the triumphal carriage and the nuptial bed for the wedding of Francesco Gonzaga and Isabella d'Este in 1490, De' Roberti had in his employ the painters Nicoletto del Cuoco, Sigismondo Fiorini and Bongiovanni di Geminiano, the sculptors Domenico di Paris and Stefano and Bernardino di Donna Bona. The iconography of a pair of these *cassoni* has been reconstructed through the information provided by the 1638 inventory of Roman art collector Vincenzo Giustiniani. The *cassoni* depicted the adventures of the Argonauts, including the scene of the Argonauts fleeing Colchis on board the ship *Argo*, that has been attributed to Ercole de' Roberti and is currently part of the Collection of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid.¹³ For the wedding procession of Anna Sforza, who married Alfonso d'Este in 1491, de' Roberti hired the painters Romano di Bonaccorso, Fino Marsigli, Sigismondo Fiorini and Gabrielletto Bonaccioli and the engravers Ludovico Giandusi, Stefano di Donna Bona, Giacomo di Giuseppe,

¹² On Ercole de' Roberti see Joseph Manca, *The Art of Ercole de' Roberti* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Paola Tosetti Grandi, "'Favole tolte da Ovidio e da altri poeti': per tre coppie di cassoni nuziali bolognesi", *Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova*, 79 (1990), 223–54.

¹³ Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, *The Argonauts leaving Colchis*, inv. No. 344 (1934.41), c.1480.

Ludovico Castellani, Bartolomeo dall'Olio and Giovanni da Modena.¹⁴ For the occasion, four triumphal gates were carved in the guise of Roman deities and horses.¹⁵

The sculptor Domenico di Paris, who had decorated the bridal carriages for Eleonora of Aragon, who married Ercole I d'Este in 1473, played a prominent role in the design of the triumphal arches that marked Anna Sforza's entrance into Ferrara. He also decorated the thirteen wedding *cassoni* that Eleonora d'Este donated to her daughter Isabella, whose wedding to the Duke of Mantua, Francesco Gonzaga, was celebrated a few months later. De' Roberti acted again as chief designer on the occasion of the wedding of another legitimate daughter of Duke Ercole, Beatrice d'Este, who married Lodovico Sforza in 1492. De' Roberti is said to have partly restored six *cassoni* and the bridal triumphal chariot that had been partially damaged while stored at Castelvecchio. It is likely that the *cassoni* in question had been prepared for Isabella's wedding and were now revamped for Beatrice. His last documented commissions were the carvings of a bull and two giants for the theatrical apparatuses for the 1502 wedding celebrations of Alfonso d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia.¹⁶

¹⁴ For a detailed treatment of artists in the service of Ercole d'Este complemented by documentary sources, see Marcello Toffanello, *Le arti a Ferrara nel Quattrocento. Gli artisti e la corte* (Ferrara: Edizioni Edisai, 2010).

¹⁵ Toffanello, *Le arti a Ferrara nel Quattrocento*, p. 111.

¹⁶ On Domenico di Paris, see Toffanello, *Le arti a Ferrara nel Quattrocento*, pp. 307–10; Massimo Ferretti, 'Domenico di Paris', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 40 (1991).

FERRARESE CASSONI

Cassoni produced in Northern Italy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries usually had the bride's and bridegroom's coats of arms painted in the middle of the main panel, while the painted story appeared within two round frames placed on the left-and right-hand sides. The iconography of these *cassoni* privileged episodes from Roman history and mythological tales, especially those from Livy and the exemplar stories of Valerius Maximus as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Stories of chaste and virtuous women like Penelope, Lucretia and Virginia, as well as of women capable of acts of heroism, such as Clelia, a Roman maiden who was taken hostage by the Etruscans and managed to escape by crossing the Tiber, were common. Other stories that revolved around a male protagonist, such as the Justice of Trajan and Coriolanus, featured paradigmatic examples of motherly love and women's soothing power in taming man's rage, respectively. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was another rich iconographic source for the *cassoni*. While his tales of transformation also inspired *cassoni* produced in Florence and Siena in the early fifteenth century, as far as one can tell, North Italian artists showed a particular predilection for these stories. Besides the abduction of Europa, *cassoni* artists depicted the myth of Daphne, Atalanta, Ariadne and Medea.

Among the small group of *cassoni* attributed to Ferrarese artists are artefacts that provide exemplary case studies of the celebration of manly qualities in mythical heroines. The first example comes from the story of the Roman general Coriolanus,

who decided to side with the enemy and threatened to destroy Rome. The story was recounted by Valerius Maximus, Dionysius of Alicarnassus and Plutarch. It narrates how, after the unsuccessful attempt by Roman dignitaries, a convoy of matrons headed by Coriolanus's mother, Veturia, and his wife, Volumnia, travelled to Volscian military camp to entreat Coriolanus. These two episodes are illustrated in two tondi that belonged to the front panel of a *cassone* produced c. 1490–1500 now in the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig (inv. I. 1372–73).¹⁷ According to ancient sources, Veturia berated her son and convinced him to withdraw the Volscian troops. To honour the women for saving Rome from likely destruction, a temple dedicated to Female Fortune (*Fortuna Muliebris*) was erected on the spot where Coriolanus yielded to his mother's requests. Valerius Maximus placed this episode among *exempla* for piety (*pietas*). This Roman virtue, which encompasses filial love but also reverence for one's fatherland and religion, will later be incorporated into the cardinal virtue of justice.¹⁸

The episode narrated by Valerius Maximus and depicted on the *cassone* panel is an exemplary case of women's temperance and pacifying power, which are achieved through rhetorical skills traditionally associated with the masculine sphere. Similar accounts that exalt women's rhetorical and negotiation skills and that appear to be equally conspicuous in the iconography of Renaissance *cassoni* are those of the

¹⁷ Vinco, 'Catalogo della "pittura di cassone"', 132–3 (cat. no. 66); Vinco, *Cassoni: Pittura profana*, pp. 161–4 (cat. no. 39.1–39.2).

¹⁸ On the intermittent presence of *pietas* in classical sources, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Emperor and his Virtues', *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte*, 30, no. 3 (1981), 298–323.

abduction of the Sabine Women and the Justice of Trajan. Central to the episode of the Sabine Women is their fundamental role as pacifiers, whose unifying actions led to the establishment of the Roman republic.¹⁹ The Justice of Trajan appears conspicuously on Northern painted *cassoni*. Salvatore Settis argues that one of these artefacts was decorated in Ferrara as part of the wedding gifts for Polissena d'Este and Giovanni Romei in 1468.²⁰ In the Justice of Trajan, a mother whose son has been killed by the son of Trajan faces the Emperor to exact justice. In one version of the story, Trajan compensates her for her loss by allowing her to adopt his own son. This story would have been a suitable subject for a wedding in which the bride was to marry into a family with children from previous unions as a lesson in temperance, acceptance and self-sacrifice.

Manly traits also characterise Atalanta, a mythological heroine whose tales are a popular subject in Northern *cassoni*. As narrated in the tenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Atalanta is an accomplished huntress who has grown up in the wilderness. Confident in her abilities, she agrees to marry the suitor who beats her in a foot race. She dominates the race until she pauses to collect the golden apples that Venus has thrown on her path, allowing Hippomenes to win the race. Unlike many other heroines of the *Metamorphoses*, Atalanta is not the hunted prey but the huntress, and she is associated with Artemis/Diana. Like the Amazons, she is endowed with traditionally male attributes, such as strength, precision and speed.

¹⁹ As argued by Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, pp. 103–27.

²⁰ Salvatore Settis, 'Traiano a Hearst Castle: Due *cassoni* estensi', *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 6 (1995), 31–82.

Her pausing the race to collect the apples signifies her preparedness to accept marital love and her societal role, as in antiquity apples were considered a symbol of fertility and commonly used as wedding gifts.²¹

Episodes from the myth of Atalanta are depicted on what was likely the front panel of a *cassone*, now in the Gemäldegalerie in Mainz (Figure 1), which has almost unanimously been attributed to an anonymous Ferrarese artist of the circle of Ercole de' Roberti. The front panel of the Mainz *cassone* depicts two scenes: the triumph of Chastity, and Atalanta and her companions preparing to hunt the Caledonian boar.²² In the first tondo, the personified Chastity is enthroned on a triumphal chariot. Personifications of the seven cardinal virtues were an integral part of wedding rituals, in tableaux vivants that populated bridal procession to the bridegroom's palace, as well as in pantomimes. Sitting humbly in front of her on a low slab is Cupid, who is blindfolded and has his hands tied behind his back to represent voluptuous love.²³

The myth of Hippomenes and Atalanta illustrates five other Northern *cassoni*, which feature the popular episode of the race ultimately won by Hippomenes with the help of Venus, who provided him with golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides as a ruse to distract Atalanta. The first scene in a *cassone* from the

²¹ For the importance of apples in ancient wedding rituals, see Evangelia Anagnostou-Laoutides, *Eros and Ritual in Ancient Literature: Singing of Atalanta, Daphnis, and Orpheus* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), pp. 46–67 and pp. 1–46 for a detailed analysis of the ancient sources of the myth of Atalanta, including Ovid.

²² Mainz, Gemäldegalerie, inv. 230–231. Vinco, 'Catalogo della "pittura di cassone"', pp. 91–2 (cat. no. 38); Vinco, *Cassoni: Pittura Profana*, pp. 165–7 with bibliography (cat. no. 40). Against the scholarly consensus, Vinco attributes the *cassone* to an artist from the workshop of Domenico Morone.

²³ See, by way of comparison, Titian's *Venus blindfolding Cupid* at Galleria Borghese.

Jacquemart André Museum in Paris (Figure 2) depicts Atalanta and her maids watching the beheading of one of her suitors. The female figures have both arms extended, pointing to the right, where a pile of severed heads of unsuccessful suitors rests on a column. The second scene on the front panel details the popular episode of the race between Atalanta and Hippomenes. It also features a subsidiary scene; in the background, a scantily clad Venus offers Hippomenes the golden apples. These scenes are divided by the coat of arms of the Monselice family. The *cassone* has been attributed to a Veronese artist on the grounds that the Monselice coat of arms is also documented in Verona.²⁴

The Monselices were a family of wealthy bankers who had established branches in Ferrara, Mantua and Bologna. They had a strong presence in Ferrara where they appear among the signatories for the establishment of a voluntary association aimed at assisting Jewish families.²⁵ A striking aspect of the Jacquemart André *cassone* is the dynamic representation of the action and, particularly in the first tondo, the artist's attention to gestures that can be likened to theatrical gestures depicted in coeval illustrated editions of the plays of the Roman dramatist Terence, particularly those at the press of the Venetian-based printer Lazzaro de' Soardi, who exerted a monopoly until the last reprint in 1515. The similarities between these gestures and the ones depicted on the *cassoni* are not only limited to hand gestures

²⁴ Vinco, 'Catalogo della "pittura di cassone"', p. 93 (cat. no. 39); Vinco, *Cassoni: Pittura Profana*, pp. 270–2 (cat. no. 86).

²⁵ David B. Ruderman, 'The Founding of a Gemilut Ḥasadim Society in Ferrara in 1515', *AJS Review*, 1 (1976), 233–67 (p. 241).

but also apply to bodily posture.²⁶ These notable correspondences connect the iconography of the *cassoni* to performances that accompanied the bride in the procession, as documented by contemporary accounts of dynastic marriages.



Figure 1: The triumph of Chastity; Atalanta and her maids prepare for the Calydonian boar hunt
Gemäldegalerie, inv. 230, 231 GDKE RLP, Landesmuseum Mainz, Photo by U. Rudischer



Figure 2: Atalanta and Hippomenes Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André – Institut de France, inv. MJAP-
M 1780 © Studio Sébert Photographes

²⁶ For a detailed study of the iconography of printed editions of Terence see Giulia Torello-Hill and Andrew J. Turner, *The Lyon Terence: Its Tradition and Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 196–221.

Art historical studies dedicated to Northern *cassoni* have shown correspondences both in imagery and execution that can easily be explained by the intercultural exchanges between the Este court and the neighbouring cities of Mantua, Bologna, Padua and Verona, as well as by the mobility of artists in search of patronage.²⁷ Nevertheless, Ferrara offers a unique case study due to the five dynastic weddings of Ercole I d'Este's legitimate offspring between 1487 and 1502, as well as to the fact that all the objects built for the bridal procession were decorated by the court artists. These artists were involved in ducal commissions of various kinds, including painting the backdrop of the temporary theatrical buildings that were set up in the ducal palaces and gardens and in the cathedral to stage a wide array of plays, such as adaptations of classical Roman comedy in vernacular, pastoral and religious dramas.

The exemplary mythical tales that decorate Northern wedding *cassoni* present different paradigms of femininity. Certainly, these stories can partly be viewed as cautionary tales to remind the bride-to-be of the importance of chastity and demureness. More importantly, however, images of these virago heroines would have been an empowering experience for these young brides.

The visual representation of classical heroines depicted on *cassoni* resonates with the female warriors of Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, which was composed in Ferrara between 1476 and 1490. In the epic poem, Bradamante and Marfisa incarnate the paradigm of the female warrior, who possesses manly prowess

²⁷ Settis, 'Traiano a Hearst Castle', p. 75.

and courage and can rival her male counterparts. These qualities are counterbalanced by feminine traits and delicate beauty, as masterfully described in the fourth canto of the third book of *Orlando Innamorato*, in which Bradamante falls in love with Ruggiero. However, Bradamante's embrace of her female does not contradict her warrior nature. In marrying Ruggiero, as narrated in the *Orlando Furioso*, she does not relent to wifely submission, as she is celebrated as the forebear of the glorious Este progeny.²⁸ Her societal role demands that she is equipped with manly traits, courage, prudence and the rhetorical skills that will allow her to exercise power. At the Ferrara court, Bradamante, albeit a fictional character, would set a powerful example for the new generations of elite brides to aspire to. Boiardo and later Ariosto read parts of their poems to a select courtly audience. Documentary sources reveal the anticipation surrounding these readings and the writing of Book III of *Orlando Innamorato*, particularly from Isabella d'Este, who had recently become the Marchioness of Mantua.²⁹

To give a sense of the centrality of viragos in Northern Italian courts, it is worth remembering that in 1492, Sabadino degli Arienti, an intellectual in the service of the Bentivoglio family, completed his *Gynevera or On Famous Women*, a

²⁸ Margaret Tomalin, 'Bradamante and Marfisa: An Analysis of the *Guerriere* of the *Orlando Furioso*', *The Modern Language Review*, 71 (1976), 540–52, remarks that 'she is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron: the *guerrieradonna gentile*' (p. 540); Eleonora Stoppino, *Genealogies of Fiction Women Warriors and the Dynastic Imagination in the Orlando Furioso* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Carolyn James, 'In Praise of Women: Giovanni Sabadino Degli Arienti's *Gynevera de le clare donne*', in *The Intellectual Dynamism of the High Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare Monagle (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021) pp. 297–316, whom I thank for supplying a copy of this work.

²⁹ Maria Lettierio, *Le ottave di Boiardo nella cultura musicale del Cinquecento* (Rome: Edicampus, 2011), 19.

catalogue of thirty-one medieval and Renaissance women. The dedicatee of the work, Ginevra Sforza, was the influential spouse of Giovanni II Bentivoglio, the de facto ruler of Bologna and mother of Annibale, whose wedding celebrations with Lucrezia d'Este are discussed later in this paper. Many of the noble women portrayed by Sabadino came from the Northern courts of the Este, Gonzaga, Visconti and Montefeltro dynasties, or from the Aragonese court in Naples that had dynastic bonds with them. This work had a precedent in Boccaccio's *Famous Women* but took a novel approach in presenting contemporary or near contemporary women endowed with both feminine and male attributes. Sabadino specifically discusses the pivotal role of these elite women in policy making and warfare as possessing the cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, justice and temperance that are often associated with male rulers.³⁰ The association of these manly qualities with women is unprecedented and is reflected in the theatricalised rituals that surrounded elite weddings in Northern courts.

MARRIAGE RITUALS: A CASE STUDY

The wedding of Lucrezia d'Este, daughter of the Duke of Ferrara, Ercole I d'Este, and Annibale Bentivoglio, the son of Giovanni II, ruler of neighbouring Bologna, provides an ideal case study to tease out correspondences between marriage rituals and *cassoni* iconography. Celebrated at the end of January 1487, this wedding is

³⁰ James, 'In Praise of Women', p. 300.

amply documented. Besides the official account, *Nuptiae Bentiuolorum*, written by Filippo Beroaldo, descriptions of the wedding celebrations survive in Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Hymeneus Bentivolus* in the vernacular, in two works in Latin verse written by Florentine intellectuals in the circle of Lorenzo de' Medici – *Epithalamium* by Angelo Michele Salimbeni and the *Nuptiae Carmen* by Naldo Naldi – and an account by an anonymous Ferrarese author.³¹

The wedding celebrations involved the journey to retrieve the bride from her father's house, the bride's triumphal entry into the city, the presentation of gifts, the religious ceremony, the wedding banquet, an open air ball game, a tourney of the glove, jousts and theatrical performances. Of particular significance for the present discussion are the bride's triumphal entry and the performance of an allegorical play that followed the wedding banquet. Bridal triumphal entries were inaugurated in 1473 in Ferrara on the occasion of the wedding of Ercole I d'Este and Eleonora of Aragon and continued to be performed at increasing cost until well into the sixteenth century.³²

Lucrezia's triumphal entry is described in detail by Sabadino degli Arienti. According to his account, Lucrezia had to pass through seven temporary doors that were erected for the occasion after hearing the words of seven women who were seated on a platform mounted on top of each door and represented the seven virtues

³¹ The celebratory texts, with the exception of the *Narratione*, which is mentioned in Francesca Bortoletti, 'An Allegorical Fabula for the Bentivoglio-d'Este Marriage of 1487', *Dance Chronicle*, 25, no. 3 (2002), 321–42 (p. 324), have been edited in *Le nozze dei Bentivoglio (1487). Cronisti e poeti*, ed. by Bruno Basile and Stefano Scioli (Naples: La scuola di Pitagora editrice, 2014).

³² Ghirardo, 'Festival Bridal Entries', pp. 43–73.

of Hope, Charity, Temperance, Justice, Prudence, Faith and Fortitude. The procession that accompanied Lucrezia to Palazzo Bentivoglio followed a route until her arrival to Palazzo Bentivoglio that took her from Porta Galliera (the north gate to the city of Bologna) to the Reno bridge, the Bentivoglio place of cult (the Church of the Madonna of the Galliera), the site of civic political power (Piazza Maggiore) and the commercial hub (Piazza della Mercanzia) to enter the Bentivoglio quarters near the Church of San Giacomo.³³ The itinerary had been carefully planned, and for the occasion Giovanni II Bentivoglio had demolished the buildings in front of the family palace to create a large square that would accommodate games and jousts. The political significance of a procession that took the distinguished guests through the centres of power of the Bentivoglios has been discussed at length by critics.³⁴ The bride's entry into the city and her going through seven doors can be compared to the jubilant reception of a victorious general.

Triumphal arches did not form part of the display for the wedding of Eleonora of Aragon in 1473, but became a customary feature of the bridal display from the late fifteenth century until well into the sixteenth century.³⁵ Positioned at strategic points of the city, they displayed public and private buildings patronised

³³ Annalisa Maurizzi, 'Bologna, 27 gennaio/2 febbraio 1487. Il corteo trionfale e la fabula mitologica nelle nozze tra Annibale Bentivoglio e Lucrezia d'Este', *La Rivista di Engramma*, 86 (2010), 63–88 has mapped the wedding procession's itinerary.

³⁴ See Sergio Bettini, 'Politica e architettura al tempo di Giovanni II Bentivoglio', in *Palazzo Ghisilardi. Il sogno rinascimentale di un notaio bolognese*, ed. by Sergio Bettini (Ferrara: Edisai), pp. 11–32, who discusses at length the Bentivoglios' urban interventions, including the grandiose Palazzo Bentivoglio, equated by Beroaldo to Nero's *domus aurea*, which was destroyed in 1507 by Pope Julius II.

³⁵ Ghirardo, 'Festival Bridal Entries', p. 56.

by the Bentivoglios to the neighbouring court as a tangible legitimation of their power. Similarly, triumphal arches designed by Leonardo da Vinci were erected at Sforza Castle in Milan on the occasion of the wedding of Isabella of Aragon to Gian Galeazzo Sforza in 1490.³⁶ These temporary architectural structures were often adorned by ornamental vegetation, and they were characterised by tableaux vivants of allegorical characters reciting poetry, which created a performance that involved the bridal cortege as much as the onlookers. Thomas Tuhoy rightly remarks that the poetry recited by the performers would have hardly been heard by the public; the music and the cheering coming from the cortege, as well as from the spectators, would have made the visual display the central element of these performances.³⁷ The visual spectacle included not only the tableaux vivants and the triumphal arches but also the wedding procession itself comprising the decorated wedding chariot, the costumes of the accompanying cortege, tailored using the finest fabrics, the cloth canopy (*baldachino*) that provided shade and shelter to the bride during the procession and lastly the *cassoni* carrying the dowry that would be paraded on the street.

Triumphal entries of Roman generals are a recurrent iconographic theme of painted *cassoni*, to the point that Brucia Witthoft remarked that they appear to be

³⁶ Giuliana Ferrari, 'Gli spettacoli all'epoca dei Visconti e degli Sforza: dalla festa cittadina alla festa celebrativa', in Anna Antoniazzi Villa et al., *La Lombardia delle signorie* (Milan: Electa, 1986), pp. 218–43.

³⁷ Thomas Tuhoy, *Herculean Ferrara: Ercole d'Este (1471-1505) and the Invention of a Ducal Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 268; as noted by Ghirardo, 'Festival Bridal Entries', p. 59.

'martial rather than marital' scenes.³⁸ These scenes of classical triumphal entries mirrored the bridal procession. As Diane Ghirardo has shown, bridal triumphal entries incorporated the classical tradition of Roman victorious generals, medieval royal entries and the decorated floats paraded during civic celebrations.³⁹ Just as Roman triumphant generals used to parade the spoils of war, bridal chariots were followed by mule carts carrying their dowry. For example, Lucrezia Borgia, who entered Ferrara in 1502 as the bride of Alfonso I d'Este, had seventy-two mules to carry her belongings.⁴⁰

The festivities for the Este–Bentivoglio wedding culminated on 29 January 1487, with the staging of an allegorical play described with unusual precision by Sabadino degli Arienti.⁴¹ The storyline is rather simple; a nymph whose name, Lucretia, suggests that she is the bride's alter ego, is being discouraged from getting married by the promiscuous Venus, who is accompanied by Cupid, Infamy and Jealousy on the one hand and the chaste Diana, who promotes celibacy on the other hand. In the end, the nymph/Lucrezia follows Juno's advice and accepts marrying Annibale. Just like many mythical heroines whose tales were depicted on *cassoni* and bridal apparatuses, the bride's alter ego, the nymph Lucretia, transitions into adulthood by choosing marital love over celibacy.

³⁸ Witthoft, 'Marriage Rituals', p. 43.

³⁹ Ghirardo, 'Festival Bridal Entries', p. 44.

⁴⁰ Tuhoy, *Herculean Ferrara*, p. 269.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the allegorical play with particular emphasis on the dance choreography, see Bortoletti, 'An allegorical fabula', pp. 327–35.

Despite the conventional nature of the plotline, the performance would have engaged the audience aurally, but especially visually, through a combination of lavish costumes, dance choreography and moveable stage machinery. The allegorical *fabula* revolved around the bride, who significantly assisted to the performance being seated on a raised wooden platform positioned in the centre of the hall while watching her impersonation embrace marital love, as advocated by Juno, whose epithet Lucina recognised her in antiquity as the goddess of childbirth. The symbolism of the allegorical *fabula* also permeated the dance choreography, including a *moresca* dance in which a young woman holding a flower and a quince (*pomarança*), a symbol of female fertility, danced with eight male dancers. Within the mythical-allegorical setting, the contemporary world was also present in the moveable stage machinery. The scenes were presented in the guise of towers suggestive of the Bologna skyline, which were in turn wheeled towards the spectators 'as if they were dancing'.⁴² As the performance progressed, the fictional character in the allegorical play and the contemporary reality of court life gradually aligned, while the rhythm and pace of music and dance accelerated. This culminated in the final dance, which involved all the spectators who suddenly turned into performers.⁴³ The bride's identification with the nymph and her facing the challenge of choosing or rebutting love were deliberately triggered by the nymph's name. Her immersion into a pastoral setting and the themes of the *fabula* had already begun

⁴² Basile and Scioli, *Le nozze dei Bentivoglio*, p. 81; Bettini, 'Politica e architettura', p. 18.

⁴³ Bortoletti, 'An allegorical fabula', pp. 333-4.

upon her arrival at the Bentivoglio palace when she rested in a room decorated with tapestries with depictions of nymphs and 'celestial and terrestrial animal creatures'.⁴⁴ This immersive experience and the increasing pace of the music and dance would have culminated in the consummation of the marriage. Throughout the performance of the pantomime, the bride sat on an elevated platform in a liminal space between the performers and the audience, enthroned and dignified like the personified virtues depicted on *cassoni* and echoed in the tableaux vivants placed along the bridal procession. Her alter ego, nymph Lucretia, is not a victim of abduction but rather chooses marital love over carnal passion or chastity. Her choice to follow Juno's advice is intellectually pondered and a sign of her agency rather than a display of wifely submission.

CONCLUSION

The dynastic marriages that cemented the alliances between the Este House and their neighbouring city states between 1487 and 1502 comprised a series of immersive rituals. As documented in Sabadino's detailed account of the celebrations for the Este-Bentivoglio wedding, during the procession the bride was exposed to different paradigms of femininity and cautionary tales of heroines who had either rejected male advances or embraced their 'normative femininity'.⁴⁵ These included personifications of the cardinal virtues and visual representations of heroines of

⁴⁴ Basile and Scioli, *Le nozze dei Bentivoglio*, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, p. 28.

antiquity who encompassed these virtues and were reiterated through a theatrical performance. These immersive experiences, amplified by the decoration of the *cassoni*, the chariots and the bridal room, as well as by the music and the cheering crowds, had elements typical of initiation rituals of separation and the journey culminating in the bride's reincorporation into society. The bride's level of participation gradually increased, and the passage through the triumphal arches symbolised her transition from liminality to full integration. In the case of Lucrezia d'Este, her full incorporation into her newly acquired status coincided with her embracing her new identity, symbolised by her stage-double nymph Lucretia. During this initiatory experience, the bride was exposed to exemplary tales of heroines who not only displayed the female virtues of chastity and demureness but also the masculine qualities of courage and fortitude that were essential to successful leadership.



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