Renaissance Homer and Wedding Chests: The *Odyssey* at the Crossroads of Humanist Learning, the Visual Vernacular, and the Socialization of Bodies

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Broadening the interdisciplinary base of study on Renaissance Homer, this essay looks to cassone (wedding chest) painting in the Quattrocento to explore how the textual reception of the "Odyssey" was enriched by the visual arts. As artifacts, wedding chests had a role in the public sphere, though they were destined for the private, and they made the epic available to audiences of nonelites. Nausicaa is a key figure, merging the vernacular courtly love tradition and romance. In working across the fields of literary study and art history, this essay introduces new critical concepts to account for the complexities of Renaissance reception of Homer.

INTRODUCTION

THE STUDY OF HOMER in the Renaissance has become a hub of contemporary scholarship, and with it new avenues of collaboration have opened for classicists, early modern scholars, and scholars of the visual arts.[1] With this widening of the interpretive horizon has come an increased understanding of how the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* circulated in the Latin Middle Ages and how the early humanists struggled to come to know the poems in Greek. Though the ancient epics were studied continuously in a long Byzantine tradition of commentary that was fundamental to education and culture in the East,[2] the pursuit of Greek learning in the West took off only around 1400 with the arrival in Florence of Manuel Chrysoloras, a scholar from Byzantium who taught the language to a number of Italian humanists.[3] This early contact deepened in midcentury

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[1] See Capodieci and Ford; Desmond; Usher, 23–31; Wolfe.

[2] Wilson; Kircher.

[3] Grafton 1992 and 1997; Sowerby; Pontani.

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when the Athenian Demetrius Chalcocondyles moved to Italy and drew such students as Ficino, Poliziano, and Johann Reuchlin. But for the better part of the fifteenth century, Homer remained exotic—not inscrutable, but sufficiently different from Virgil and Ovid as to seem a bit alien.[4]

The challenges posed by the search to know Homer were registered in a personal way by Petrarch (1304–74), who, in his "Letter to Homer," laments his own ignorance of Greek and declares that Penelope could not have waited longer for her husband than he for the ancient bard.[5] When he wrote this letter in 1360, he was finally in possession of a Greek manuscript of the poems. They had come to him a couple of years earlier after a long search. But he had not made much headway in learning the language, to his own great frustration—and he never would. Instead, he leaned heavily on a Calabrian scholar, Leontius Pilatus (d. 1366), to translate the works into Latin. With the support of Petrarch and Boccaccio (1313–75), Pilatus finished a rough word-by-word translation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the 1360s.

This *ad verbum* rendition was a milestone in the history of Homeric translation, rough and craggy though it was, and recent scholars have studied its importance.[6] It pointed the way to what was coming: a Homer who spoke to audiences that valued high standards of Latinity. This is borne out in the retranslations of Leonardo Bruni (1422–24), Pier Candido Decembrio (ca. 1440), and Lorenzo Valla (1440–44), who sought to polish Pilatus's prose. They did so by turning *ad verbum* into *ad sensum* translations, which aimed at higher levels of linguistic grace and clarity. Poliziano followed. By 1475, he had translated books 2–5 of the *Iliad* into lively Latin hexameters, which so pleased Lorenzo de' Medici that he became Poliziano's patron.[7] This heightening of activity led in 1488 to the editio princeps of Homer, which was published in Florence, under the auspices of Chalcocondyles. The 1504 Aldine edition followed. From about 1515 on, Greek editions, Latin translations, and scholarly commentaries would abound. But it took a century to get there.

As this overview suggests, the *Iliad* was the focus of humanist attention. While there was a rich tradition of medieval allegory of the *Odyssey*, which had turned Homer into a theologian,[8] Quattrocento scholars were following in the vein of Latin Troy stories. These had been passed down in the Middle Ages by European rulers to establish dynastic descent from the Trojans via a

[4] Ziolkowski and Putnam; Clark, Coulson, and McKinley.

[5] Petrarch, 148–204.

[6] Ford; Kircher; Herren; Desmond.

[7] Rubinstein.

[8] Lamberton.

translatio imperii.[9] Two of the texts, dated sometime between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, were particularly influential in this tradition: the so-called *Journal of Dictys of Crete* (i.e., *Ephemeridos Belli Troiani*) and the *History of Dares the Phrygian* (i.e., *De Excidio Troiae Historia*). They claimed to be translations of Greek originals, written by eyewitnesses who fought in the Trojan War.[10] The *Journal* and the *History* trumped ancient epic in the Troy stories and provided the basis for the belief that the war could be approached as an actual event on par with those recorded in the chronicles. A culminating text in this tradition was Benoît de Sainte-Maure's massive 40,000-line poem *Roman de Troie* (ca. 1160).

Troy stories and the *Iliad*, however, are not the subjects of the present article. Nor is the allegorizing of Homer or his influential role in shaping the romance epics of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso.[11] Instead, I explore a body of visual art that draws on the *Odyssey*, though only recently has it begun to receive the consideration it deserves. Commissioned by Italian aristocrats in the Quattrocento, this art was part of the lavish domestic settings that showcased their power and prestige. It included furniture painted by some of the most distinguished artists of the time, including Donatello (1386–1466), Paolo Ucello (1397–1475), and Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510). Notable among such works were the wedding chests known as cassoni. These chests were integrally connected with the nuptial procession known as the *domumductio*, which took the form of a triumphal parade through the city from the bride's home to the home of the groom.[12] As artifacts, they had a role in the public sphere, though they were destined for the private. Most of the *Odyssey* cassoni panels that have survived are from Tuscany, particularly Siena and Florence. This region will be the focus of my study, though Bologna, Ferrara, Padua, Milan, and Venice were also heavily invested in Greek letters during the Quattrocento. Four of the cassone panels are from the workshop of a Florentine artist who played a central role in the evolution of the genre: Apollonio di Giovanni. While Apollonio's oeuvre has been a subject of discussion since the 1920s, his *Odyssey* panels have only recently garnered close attention.[13] This article attempts to bring them into sharper focus. It does so by advancing three claims that weave together recent

[9] Keller; Mueller; Coldiron.

[10] Frazer; Dares Phrygius; Dictys Cretensis.

[11] Everson; Cavallo.

[12] Klapisch-Zuber; Tinagli and Rogers, 21–46; Tinagli; Baskins; *The Triumph of Marriage*; Simmoneau and Benoît.

[13] The first comprehensive catalogue and discussion of Renaissance cassoni is by Schubring. Gombrich and Callman each discusses Apollonio at greater length. For more recent treatments, see Hope-Hennessy and Christiansen; Baskins; Miziołek, 2015; Fiorenza, 2011.

Homeric studies in the digital humanities, the resurgence of interest in Renaissance Homer, and art historical studies in the vernacular visual arts.

First, while Pilatus's Latin translation of Homer set in motion a circulatory network for the *Odyssey*, the familiarity of the epic in humanist circles probably did not reach a broader, less elite audience. Visual artists, however, would have expanded this community, since the painters themselves would have come to know the details of the story through paths of social and commercial exchange with humanists and aristocratic families. Though the subject matter of the cassoni was classical and though translation proceeded within the context of Latin high culture, the art of Apollonio had a vernacular dimension.[14] He used the antique in order to reference the contemporary, thereby activating a dialogue between the past and present about marriage and the gendering of space. The vernacular character of these cassoni is also apparent in their public display in the *domumductio*, whose spectators would have included nonelites. The visual itself, of course, is a coded field that requires expertise in order to be read. The greater accessibility of cassoni in the context of the times, however, would have opened the *Odyssey* to popular audiences in ways that were previously impossible. It is well known that the study of Homer expanded into a major industry in the sixteenth century and that the artistic expression of his poems moved into such monumental forms as the frescoes by Pinturrichio in Siena and Primaticcio in the Ulysses Gallery at Fontainebleau. But before that time, cassoni were a unique medium of dissemination, embedded in artistic explorations of a fundamental social institution. There was no single author at work in this multilateral process. Even if Apollonio had direct contact with the ancient epic—and it is not certain he did—many other influences would have shaped his painting. A condensed sign of this intermixing is apparent in the identification of the figures on some of Apollonio's chests. Here, "Odysseus" appears as "Ulysses" or "Ulixes," a Greek bearing the Latin form of his name.

Second, driven as it was by Tuscan wedding rituals, the art of the *Odyssey* cassoni, perhaps not surprisingly, focused on Homer's women—notably, Nausicaa. Pale, blonde, and elaborately dressed, she evokes the vernacular poetic tradition of courtly love, thereby mediating between what is spiritually elevated and this worldly. Simone Martini's Maestà in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena (1315) is one of her predecessors—the blessed Virgin as *regina cortese*, the courtly donna of the troubadours.[15] Nausicaa is also positioned in an epic context that aligns her with romance. Apollonio appears to have been endorsing the view of Leon Battista Alberti, his contemporary, who argued in his treatise

[14] Campbell; Keizer and Richardson; Dempsey.

[15] Dempsey, 43–66.

On Painting (*De Pictura*, 1435) that heroic poetry is an inspirational source for narrative painting, a superior art form combining magnitude, copiousness, dignity, and a pleasurable disposition of elements.[16] The *Odyssey* cassoni, then, inhabit a nexus of cultural forces that link visual and literary art with the living world of women, especially as they moved across socially charged boundaries. Just as the vernacular *dolce stil nuovo* (sweet new style) drew both from the French troubadours and French high Gothic courtly culture, cassoni drew on commonplaces from the vernacular *dolce stil nuovo* as well as from mainstream religious painting and classical works of literature.

This leads to the third point. Traditional theories of reception and influence, which tend to focus on relations of cause and effect, source and variant, master text and epigone, are not well suited to the complexity of Quattrocento encounters with Homer, certainly not in cassone painting. The *Odyssey*, in particular, requires forms of interpretation that are more in tune with diffusion and the adaptability of storytelling, for which the epic is famous. Odysseus himself is a narrator who is always revising his own story to bring it into conformity with the rhetorical demands of a situation. In the concluding pages of the essay, I will explore more fully a concept that responds to the fluidity of narrative in the *Odyssey*: the multiform. While this term has been in circulation for some time as a result of the work of Albert Lord, the distinguished classical scholar of epic, it has gained prominence in modern digital scholarship on Homer.[17] A *multiform* is an element of poetic composition integral to the centuries-long tradition of oral performance, from which the ancient *Odyssey* emerged. It may take the form of a repeated phrase ("the wine-dark sea"), a scene (rites of hospitality), or even a narrative (the return tale) that has accumulated meaning and is adaptable to new texts and contexts. Improvisational flexibility over time and through the hands of various makers is its hallmark. In an uncanny way, *Odyssey* chests share a mode of production that aligns them with the multiform, particularly as it has been conceptualized in the Homer Multitext Project at Harvard University, which is creating a web-based compilation of the extant texts of Homer.[18] By triangulating antiquity and the Renaissance, the vernacular and the courtly, and the literary and the visual arts, through the concept of the multiform, I hope to demonstrate that an interpretive tool developed in one field of research can be productively applied to another in ways that lead to fresh insights and new ways of thinking about method.

[16] Alberti, 59–63, 72–73, 81–85.

[17] Lord.

[18] http://www.homermultitext.org.

HOMER'S *ODYSSEY*, THE TRIUMPHALISM OF MARRIAGE, AND FLORENTINE WOMEN

As a result of recent studies of Renaissance cassoni, a considerable amount is known about them. They were elegant pieces, prepared with gesso, elaborately painted on three sides and often under the lid, and sold in pairs. Looking back upon these chests a century after their vogue, the Italian painter and historian Giorgio Vasari says: "The citizens of those times used to have in their apartments great wooden chests in the form of a sarcophagus, with the covers shaped in various fashions, and there were none that did not have the said chests painted; and besides the stories that were wrought on the front and on the ends, they used to have the arms, or rather, the insignia of their houses painted on the corners or sometimes elsewhere."[19] Originally, the father of the bride or another male relative in the house commissioned the pieces, and they held the woman's trousseau. This custom changed in the middle of the century when the groom's family typically assumed responsibility for the commission.[20] Their opulence casts light on marriage in the Quattrocento as a strategic social alliance and financial investment in a system of patrilineal descent where women functioned as gifts between kinship groups.[21] But their placement in the bedroom also connects them with the private sphere and female space, and the subjects painted on the panels would have elicited conversation between spouses, family members, and friends. This is especially the case since the subjects of the chests were often matched with those of wall paintings, or *spalliere*. Unfortunately, no complete bedroom ensembles from this period have come down to us, though two vivid and elegant *spalliere* of the *Odyssey* may be found in the Frances Loeb Lehmann Art Center at Vassar College.[22] They enable one to ponder the experiential side of an important institutional practice and open a window on the performative dimension of women's bodies.

In particular, the *Odyssey*'s epic journey reflects the journey of the Renaissance wedding party itself—notably, the bride's passage from her home to that of her husband's, one that could be fraught with tension between the two families and even between the families and members of the community. Interestingly, Apollonio's representations of the *domumductio* resemble Giotto's fresco of *The Virgin's Wedding Procession* (1304–06) in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua (fig. 1). He was adapting Christian content to a classical subject. The bride in

[19] Vasari, 2:148; quoted in Baskins, 8–9.

[20] Witthoft; Klapisch-Zuber, 213–60.

[21] Kent; Lydecker, 146–59; Tinagli and Rogers, 21–46; Baskins, 5, 60–65; Frick.

[22] See http://emuseum.vassar.edu/, search "Ulysses." *Spalliere* are sometimes erroneously identified in descriptions as cassoni panels.

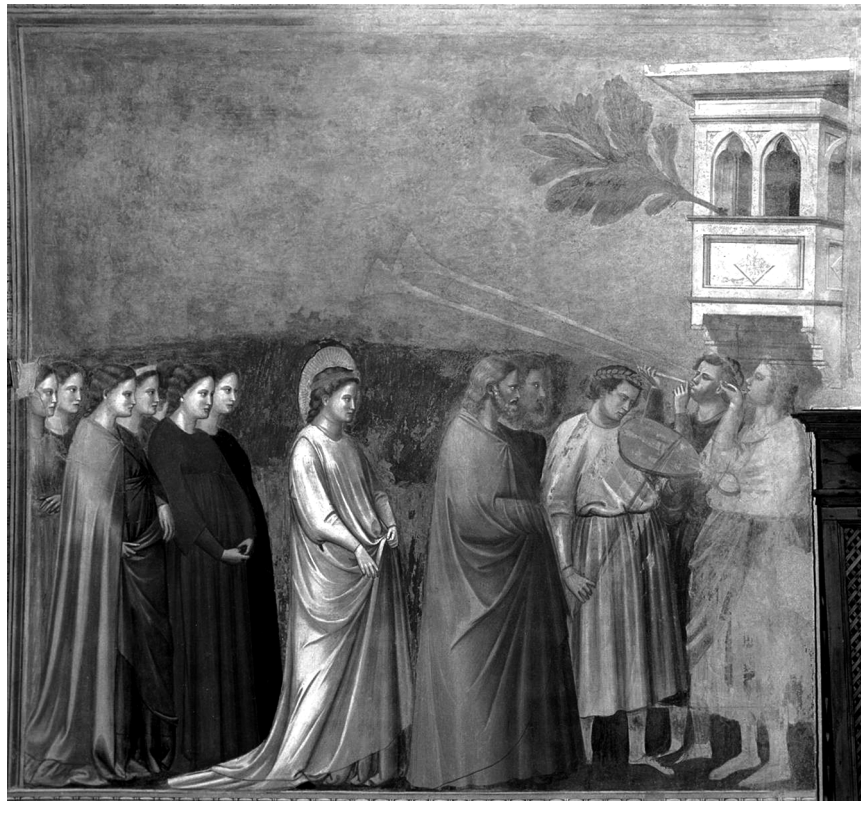

Figure 1. Giotto di Bondone. *The Virgin's Wedding Procession*, 1304–06. Capella Scrovegni (Arena Chapel), Padua. Artwork in the public domain. Image courtesy of the Web Gallery of Art.

the cassoni, however, is dressed lavishly and wears the clothing typical of mid-Quattrocento weddings, which became the object of sumptuary laws enacted to scale back the expense of weddings.[23] The chief point to make here is that these ceremonies, including the dowry system of which cassoni formed a part, were embedded in broader social practices designed to safeguard the lineage and wealth of families. Betrothal was not a simple act, but a long negotiation between fathers and husbands, which inevitably unleashed suspicion and a fear of being cheated. Rituals of Homeric *xenia*, or hospitality, were especially resonant in the context of Florentine marriage and the *domumductio*, which enacted a complex performance of homecoming into domestic spaces that harbored secrets. That cassoni were typically fitted out with a lock that gave them

[23] Witthoft; Klapisch-Zuber, 117–31; Dean and Lowe; Killerby, 23–60.

their initial name—*forzieri*, or strongboxes—brings into play yet other senses of latency since the chest that hid valuable contents was a signifier of the bride herself. She was a potent combination of wealth (the bearer of a dowry and future offspring), but also a vessel of mysteries that could render her suspect in the new household, where she was sometimes unwelcome.

Because these chests coincided with the early stages of the rediscovery of Homer, their Odyssean content was also aligned with the metaphorical voyage of Quattrocento humanists into the strange new worlds of the epic. Over the next two centuries in Europe, such artistic ventures would migrate to large-scale art. As already mentioned, a famous fresco by Pinturrichio, *Penelope with the Suitors* (1509), which originally appeared on the wall of the palace of Siena, is a good example (it was removed and framed in 1843 and currently hangs in the National Gallery, London). But the most spectacular illustration of the popularity of the *Odyssey* in the later Renaissance was the Ulysses Gallery at Fontainebleau with its fifty-eight monumental frescoes of the *Odyssey* by Primaticcio (1504–70). The gallery was demolished in the early eighteenth century because its structure had decayed. But Primaticcio himself painted an oil on canvas of Ulysses and Penelope, which was drawn from the cycle. It may now be seen in the Toledo Museum of Art.[24]

Cassone paintings were on a smaller scale. A panel in the Victoria and Albert Museum, dated 1475 and attributed to an unknown Sienese painter, reveals one of the simpler representations of scenes from the *Odyssey*, with Penelope at her loom and Odysseus arriving back home in a ship.[25] The subject is generic, and there is no sign of the painter's familiarity with the story of how the Phaeacians deposited Odysseus on the shores of Ithaca with chests bearing wealth. Another piece, dated 1450 and attributed to the Sienese painter Guidoccio Cozzarelli, is more dynamic and complex, and is said to portray the departure of Odysseus, which is not narrated in the *Odyssey*.[26]

Apollonio di Giovanni's cassone panels stand apart from these by virtue of their impressive *copia* and the detail of the episodes included. What is known of him is that he was the chief painter of a lively Florentine workshop that he co-owned with Marco del Buono.[27] He was also the illuminator of a handsome Virgil codex now held by the Riccardiana.[28] A *bottega* list discovered in the early twentieth century reveals that from 1446 through 1463, Apollonio and Marco's shop filled orders for 170 pairs of marriage chests by the most pow-

[24] Fiorenza, 2006; Salman.

[25] See collections.vam.ac.uk, search "Ulysses cassone."

[26] Fiorenza, 2011. For the image, see art.rmngp.fr, search "Guidoccio Cozzarelli."

[27] Stechow; Gombrich; Callman, 1–23; Miziołek, 2006.

[28] Callman, 7–11.

erful families of the city—the Medici, the Rucellai, the Albizzi, the Strozzi.[29] This is a substantial amount of work. Of the *Odyssey* panels, the Frick Pittsburgh holds one; the Art Institute of Chicago another; and Wawel Castle in Cracow, Poland, two, the only pair that has surfaced. One suspects, however, that more than four *Odyssey* cassoni were commissioned, given the high productivity of Apollonio's workshop. Numerous elements in this group of four also appear in other subjects treated by Apollonio—for example, those drawn from Virgil's *Aeneid* and those constructed around the Roman triumphs of Aemilius Paulus and Scipio Africanus. He developed an imaginative iconography that bears his distinctive stamp, and it relied upon visual models that could be repurposed as multiforms, which is why his *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* panels resemble one another.

How close Apollonio was to Homer's poem is uncertain. He would presumably not have known ancient Greek, although there is an uncorroborated reference to him as Greek in the reflections of a nineteenth-century art dealer.[30] Did he actively collaborate with humanists who knew the Greek language or a Latin translation of the *Odyssey*? Was he working from an illuminated manuscript of the *Odyssey*, perhaps one that he himself had painted, since there is no evidence of an illuminated *Odyssey* in the Latin Middle Ages? Did the wealthy men who commissioned the chests choose the subject matter of the cassoni, or did educated women in aristocratic homes contribute to their production? The *bottega* list does not supply answers to these questions. There are three telling aspects of Apollonio's cassone paintings, however, that help to frame a preliminary hypothesis: first, women figure prominently in the panels; second, hospitality is a central element of the visual narrative; and third, the Nausicaa episode is a focal point. Homer's epic, of course, is famous for its narrative of a return voyage that is shaped by the intervention of women, both mortal and immortal—Athena, Calypso, Circe, Penelope. While these would have been familiar enough to a Quattrocento audience, their prominence in the cassoni and the centrality of Nausicaa, who does not appear in either Virgil or Ovid's treatment of Homeric material, suggest a much closer bond between the Greek text and the visual image than is found in the two Sienese panels referenced earlier. Apollonio may not have had firsthand knowledge of the *Odyssey*, but his work reveals a deep Odyssean sensibility and command of important details in the epic.

It is worth recalling the main details of the Nausicaa narrative in book 6 of the *Odyssey* in order to appreciate the paintings on Apollonio's cassoni. In Homer, Nausicaa is nubile. Through the intervention of Athena, she requests

[29] Ibid., 4–6.

[30] Artaud; quoted by Chong, 69.

that her father fit out a wagon in which she and her maids can take the soiled robes of the royal house to wash them in a river by the sea—her brothers will need clean clothes when they marry, which may be anytime. Love is in the air. Having arrived at their destination, the women do the laundry, and after finishing their chores, play ball, in the course of which they disturb the sleeping Odysseus. He has been shipwrecked in his voyage from Calypso's island by a wrathful Poseidon who wishes to deprive him of his homecoming in retribution for the blinding of the Cyclops, Polyphemus. Naked and afraid, he comes out of the bushes where he has hidden himself, a mere leafy branch for cover, and supplicates the young woman at a respectable distance. Rather than running away, Nausicaa greets him courageously, provides him with expensive clothes, and directs him as to how to approach her father and mother, Alcinous and Arete, with his request for safe passage home. In dressing himself, Odysseus effectively enters into the chain of signifiers related to eros and marriage. He wears the clothing of Nausicaa's brothers, his handsomeness is enhanced by the touch of Athena who makes him look godly, and he compares Nausicaa to the goddess Artemis, who is chaste but very beautiful, like a palm tree he once saw on Delos. She extends him hospitality, is dazzled when he emerges in the clothing she has given him, and wonders out loud whether a man such as he could be her husband. Entering the city under cover of a fog sent by Athena, Odysseus makes his way into the palace and supplicates the king and queen for assistance. After preliminary suspicion on the part of the queen, he is welcomed into the palace and treated as a very special guest—almost, one could say, as if he were the groom of the young woman who has cleared the way for him to his own marriage feast.

What is remarkable is how fully Apollonio's cassoni, particularly the Chicago and Wawel Castle panels, visually narrate the whole sequence—and more. In fact, they contain details of events leading up to and following the Nausicaa episode, not all of them contained in the *Odyssey*'s tale of the wanderings. Moreover, Apollonio's choice of an episode from Homer in which fine clothing figures centrally is cleverly interlocked with the function of the Quattrocento marriage chest itself, which is to contain precious objects—notably, fine clothing and woven goods. The Frick panel is simpler and is best examined first (fig. 2). Despite the damage that the piece has suffered, it is possible to discern five major scenes. They are located, more or less, on the same horizontal plane, and all feature women who raise a hand in gestures of grace—all but one, a familiar figure who sits alone at the loom. But she is not the anchor of the piece. The central image is of a celebration, and it orients the scenes before and after it, whose figures are turned in its direction. Women dominate the panel, in number, size, and position. The first is of a loose-haired, blonde Calypso overseeing the building of a boat, her outstretched hand and downward glance suggesting benign

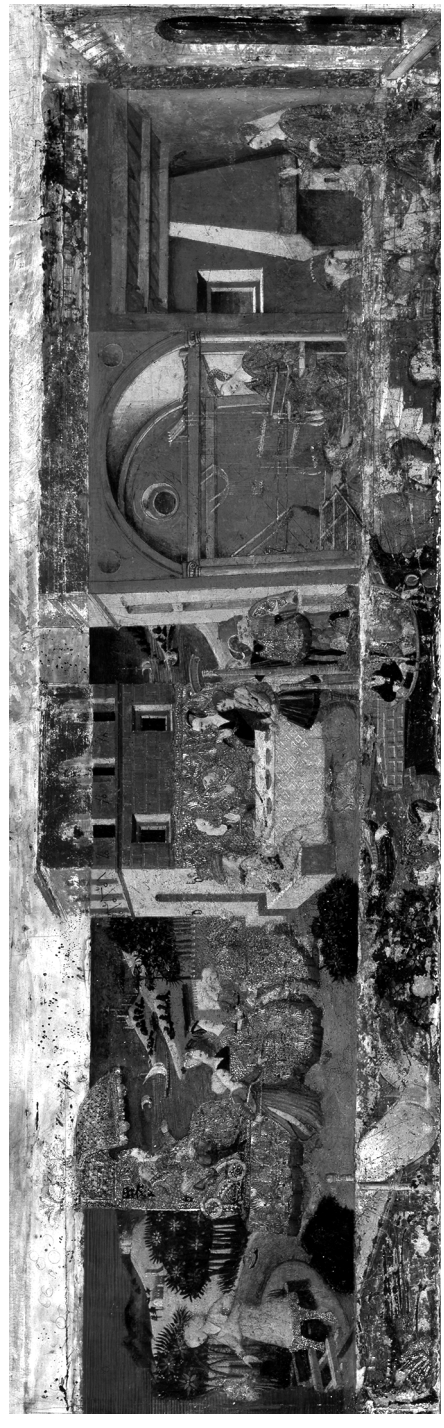

Figure 2. Apollonio di Giovanni. Scenes from the *Odyssey*, 1430–40. Frick Art and Historical Center, Pittsburgh.

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superiority (she may be found again in the first of the two chests housed in Wawel Castle). With her back to the celebration depicted in the middle, she is oriented toward a different world. In the second image, Odysseus is escorted on a carriage in full regal attire, though a bit lost in his clothes, away from Calypso's world and toward a palace, accompanied by a glittering woman who is taller than he is and by her elegant ladies-in-waiting. This can only be Nausicaa, hastening to the Phaeacian court. A simply clothed woman glides in the foreground. It is Athena, her loose hair and dress resembling the divine Calypso's. With wand in hand, she brings dynamism to the scene.

Apollonio has placed Nausicaa in a narrative of marital triumphalism in which bride and groom hasten to a feast positioned liminally between an inside and outside world. Odysseus, provocatively, appears in the role of the bride. Moreover, Nausicaa, with her gold-spun headdress, ivory skin, long neck, and pink lips, is a visual evocation of female beauty familiar from the vernacular courtly love tradition. As already mentioned, art historians have argued the connection between the vernacular as the language of living experience in the world and the visualization of this living experience in painting.[31] Here, the convergence of the antique and the contemporary is marked by the extraordinary fact that Nausicaa steps out of her fictional role as a virgin in *Odyssey* 6 into being a hospitable Florentine bride. In the next scene, the musician, Demodocus, an epic bard in Homer, sings to a stringed instrument, as Alcinous and Arete sit in attendance upon their daughter and Odysseus. Penelope functions as a pivot from festivity into a more contained domesticity: she is configured in two architectural niches on the right, one in which she weaves and the other in which she benevolently overlooks Eurycleia washing the feet of Odysseus as beggar.

Apollonio's merging of a young Nausicaa in the role of reproductive bride and a mature Penelope who maintains the integrity of the household invites viewers to see them as a doublet—the same woman construed from a narrative perspective that brings temporality into the picture. If the panel is read in this way, it is easier to mitigate the dissonance of Odysseus's marriage to a woman who is not his wife. Both call attention to the predominance of female figures as overseers of a male journey, evoking rites of passage between nature and culture, exotic and domestic, public and private. Together, they capture some of the cunning ascendency over circumstance that is so prominent a feature of the women in the *Odyssey*. Their contraction into a world of Quattrocento narrative painting makes the object on which they appear a sophisticated work of art, in dialogue with antiquity and engaged with the ways it could be made

[31] Dempsey, 42; Campbell.

current.[32] The *Odyssey* cassoni bear witness to this distinctively Renaissance combination of curiosity for knowledge, contemporary ritual, and creative reimaginings of ancient texts. They also suggest that the institution of marriage, though patriarchal, is caught in ideological crosscurrents: male authority is both respected and diminished by the dominance of women, and the bounds of domesticity expand to include worlds in which women are the chief agents. This does not mean that cassoni were the bearers of revolutionary content. But it does suggest that nuptial rites were laden with contesting views of gender and the bonds between male and female on which the family rested. The notion of exemplarity, which is so often appealed to in interpretations of these works of art, is too hidebound to accommodate such complexities. It is better to think of the pieces as sites of dialogical reflection about a deeply sedimented social institution that was in flux.

Compared to the Frick, the Chicago panel is denser in its narrative texture (fig. 3). It is also better preserved. The artist is working with a more refined system of perspective to create a focal point, which highlights a stripped down Odysseus at sea. The forms of International Gothic, the idealizing style best known from illuminated manuscripts, including Apollonio's own *Aeneid*, have a greater corporeality and expressiveness about them. The figures wear contemporary clothes ornamented with gold, and the Greeks sport the high caps typical of Italian representations of Byzantines.[33] But the human body has a greater solidity and muscularity about it than it has in either the Frick or Wawel Castle pieces and suggests the influence of such painters as Andrea Mantegna. This is apparent in the nude figures that dominate the left side of the Chicago panel, which are also set distinctly apart from the ornately dressed figures, mostly female, that occupy the right. The spectator is invited to view the panel from left to right, guided by the puffed-cheek winds. This is what the chest unfolds:

- Troy, abstractly situated on a hill;
- Ulysses presenting Polyphemus with a cup of wine, while the monster gorges on a crew member—an image that presses two narrative moments in the *Odyssey* into one;
- the blinding of Polyphemus—in the *Odyssey*, subsequent to the wine offering;
- Ulysses's escape from Polyphemus's cave using the sheep trick;
- the Sirens singing while Ulysses looks on, tied to the mast of his ship;

[32] Randolph, 24.

[33] Miziołek, 2006, 63.

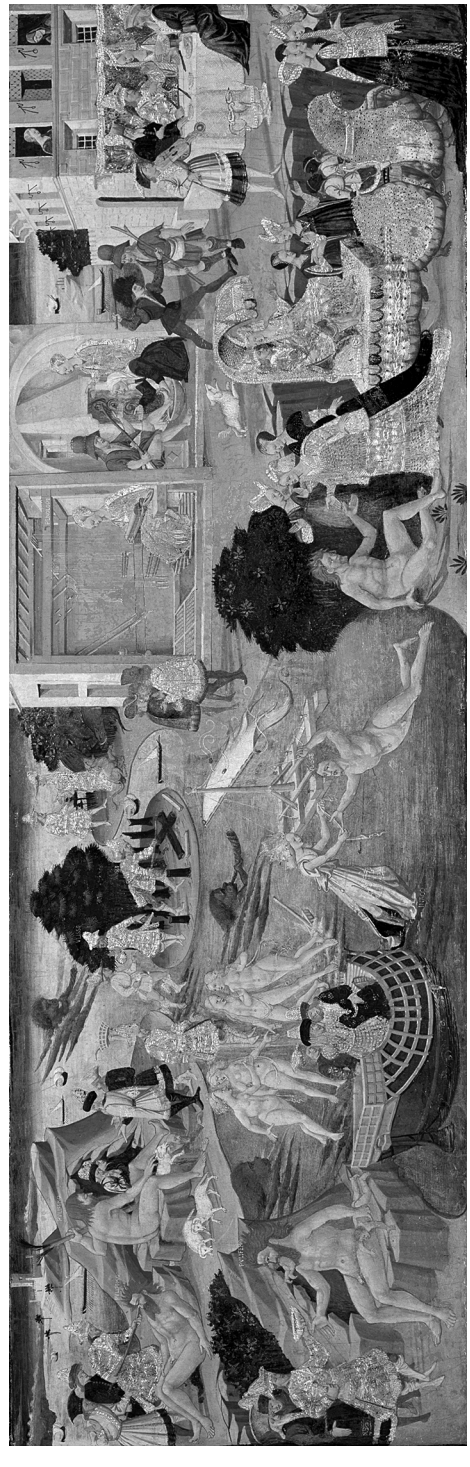

Figure 3. Apollonio di Giovanni. *The Adventures of Ulysses,* 1435–45. Art Institute of Chicago. Photo: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY.

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- Ulysses's encounter with Hermes and his building of a raft, though Calypso does not appear;
- his meeting with Circe who has turned his men into animals, while the moly plant stands suggestively in the background;
- his shipwreck and rescue by a sea goddess;
- his supplication, naked and vulnerable, before Nausicaa and her maids;
- his transport in an elaborate wagon to the Phaeacian court, with two black youths on horses driving the carriage;
- a feast in the court of the Phaeacians where Demodocus plays a lute and sings;
- Penelope weaving at her loom with a few suitors stationed outside her room;
- Eurycleia washing the feet of Ulysses as beggar with Penelope looking on;
- and the quarrel between the beggar and Irus, with Argos the dog nipping from behind.

This panel condenses what the epic renders in multiple books, and it contains four different geographical spaces: Troy, the world of the wanderings, the land of the Phaeacians, and Ithaca. The chronology of events in the Homeric wanderings is more fluid in the painting, but the thematic resonances are strong. A nude Odysseus, who is looking in opposite directions in two back-to-back scenes, divides the painting roughly in half. He is even more exposed than his Homeric counterpart who at least holds a branch. Other refinements are apparent. The Chicago panel is less flat than the Frick. Its panoramic landscape has some depth of perspective and recalls the embedded structure of storytelling in the epic—the wanderings as a flashback. Odysseus relates his story to the Phaeacians, picking up where the internal bard Demodocus leaves off in his accounts of Troy; all of this is framed within a larger narrative composed by Homer. While the Frick panel also includes the bard, it is not as suggestive in its perspectival use of him. Despite the rough chronological depiction of the wanderings on his cassoni, Apollonio may have understood a fundamental feature of the narrative design of the *Odyssey*: that it has a retrospective pattern in which the main character looks back.

The Chicago panel differs from the Frick in other ways. First, the Cyclops dominates the left side of the painting. The scene of cannibalism stands opposite the scene of feasting on the right, an indication that Apollonio was in tune with the theme of *xenia* and its inversions in the story of the *Odyssey*. Occupying the center of the panel, the nude Odysseus reinforces these alignments. Turned toward the left, he faces the unbound, lawless realm of the wanderings, personified by an unclothed Polyphemus and bare-skinned Si-

rens; turned toward the right, he is on the cusp of a transition from a state of nature to a resocialization through clothing, exemplified by a regal Nausicaa, clothed in gold and attended by her equally well-dressed maids. His shipwreck is the hinge on which the pictorial story turns.

These states of dress and undress, of deprivation and splendor, suggest that Apollonio was experimenting with visual renditions of border crossings. In so doing, he was also experimenting with homecoming in ways that complicated the simpler, patriarchal narrative of Florentine marriage at the time. Women not only take the lead in the panel. Their sumptuous garb is also both ennobling and, one suspects, liable to charges of being overwrought—a display of the very sort that sumptuary law in the Quattrocento was designed to curb.[34] Similarly, the triumphal motif, while an expression of festivity, hearkens back to an ancient Roman memory of the wedding as the victory of a war party, which culminates in a transport of spoils—the bride and her possessions—back home. The mythological archetype of such a triumph was the rape of the Sabines. Thus the pagan and the Christian, the ancient and the contemporary, the mythological and the historical, jostle in the *Odyssey* cassoni.

CASSONI IN THE DOMESTIC SETTING

This brings me to the peculiar forms of viewing that cassoni motivate. In the conjugal bedrooms of wealthy Florentine homes where they were typically placed on the floor, marriage chests would have become part of an environment busy with daily comings and goings, births and deaths, separations and unions. Such transitory contact suggests that images on cassoni were rarely beheld in the sustained ways that might be expected of large-scale painting in the public sphere. People lived with them, and they therefore occupied a space in memory where they would have circulated in the shifting concatenations of everyday life. The very fluidity of the *Odyssey* scenes underscores the freedom of mnemonic associations. But the Chicago panel offers more. If one views it in its current location at the Art Institute of Chicago, where it is undergoing conservation, one can see that someone has been at work on the Cyclops whose eye is punctured both within the scene of the painting and on its surface. This may have been an act of sympathetic mimesis—one in which an external spectator, probably a child, repeats the act executed on the visual plane, and it suggests an intriguing dynamic between the beholder and what is beheld. Because Apollonio's pagan Cyclops resembles Christian images of a cannibalistic Satan, no-

[34] Witthoft.

tably Giotto's in the Scrovegni Chapel (1306) (fig. 4),[35] these scratches point to the kind of intimate interaction with cassoni one might imagine in the domestic setting. Pagan subjects elicit acts that are bound up with Christian prophylactic responses, such as defacing the devil. Restoration will "erase the damage," of course, and yet these traces of the past convey important information about the experiential dimension of marriage chests as they were passed down in time.

In a domestic setting, one would also be able to see the names inscribed on the surface of the Chicago panel: the Latin Ulysses is repeated six times, Polyphemus three, Penelope twice, and Mercury and Ino (Inaco) once each. Nausicaa's name does not appear, nor do those of her parents, Alcinous and Arete, nor the singer Demodocus. The absence of naming in these instances is significant. It marks the point at which the ancient merges most profoundly with the contemporary—the point where Homeric characters become identified with the betrothed individuals in historical time. On the cassone panel, the entire episode of Odysseus among the Phaeacians becomes an idealized reflection of the Florentine marriage ritual, with Nausicaa at the center, taking the lead in conveying Odysseus into a new life. She is a stand-in who can move across the boundaries of time, text, and lived experience.

Nausicaa also participates in the painting's more general exoticism. Two black youths drive the wagon carrying Odysseus and Nausicaa. How did they come to be there? Scholars have studied how the trade in black African slaves spread throughout Europe in the fifteenth century, replacing earlier systems of exchange involving Eastern European slaves, and how Florence was an integral part of this economic network.[36] It also was a city whose rediscovery of an ancient Greek past converged with an influx of cultural attitudes and ethnic perspectives from black Africa. Recent scholars have suggested that the Venetian painter Andrea Mantegna and the marchesa of Mantua, Isabella d'Este, were instrumental in creating a new element of Western iconography that corresponds to images on the Chicago panel: the black attendant who serves a white European protagonist.[37] This image traveled in the ruling houses of Naples, Ferrara, Milan, and Mantua, where black servants were used as human accessories and presented as such. Apollonio's painting, then, offers evidence that the exoticism of black Africans in the Quattrocento was bound up with the exoticism of Homer's *Odyssey*. Once again, this makes the panel an unusually dense nexus of cultural reference, a space where East and West, gender

[35] Giotto's Satan resembles an even earlier mosaic of Satan on the ceiling of the Baptistery of Saint John, Florence.

[36] Tognetti.

[37] Kaplan.

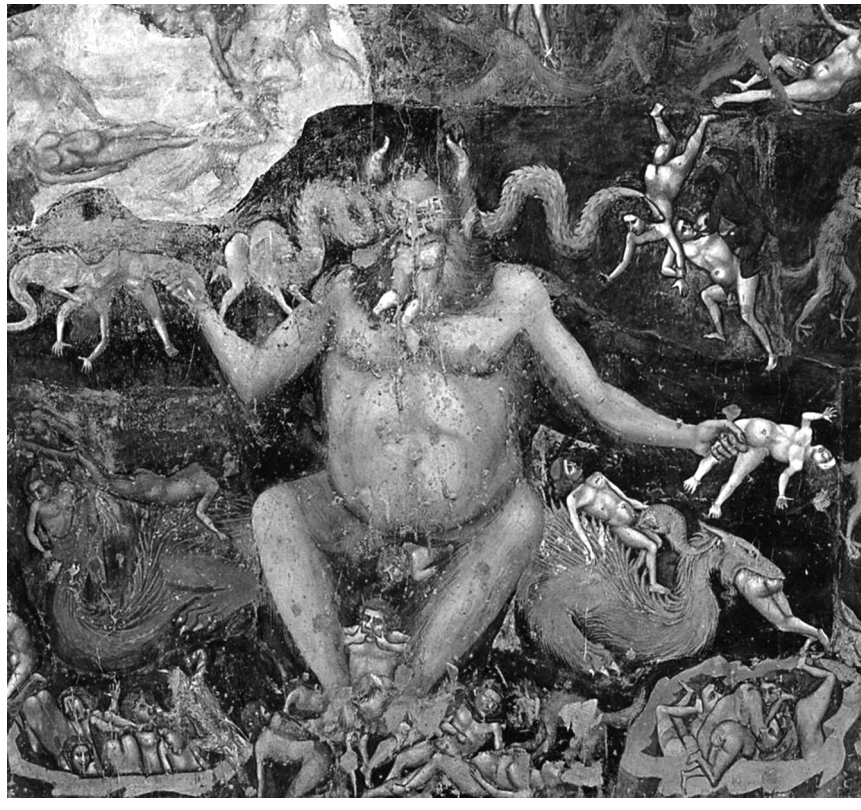

Figure 4. Giotto di Bondone. Satan, *The Last Judgment*, ca. 1305. Capella Scrovegni (Arena Chapel), Padua. Artwork in the public domain. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

and race, divine and human crisscross in ways that both unsettle traditional hierarchies and set other, new ones into motion.

Many of the elements that compose the Frick and Chicago panels may be found in the two pieces housed in Wawel Castle (figs. 5 and 6). But the latter also compellingly display how an overarching visual narrative may be changed in the details—and rethematized. For one thing, the pair of cassoni covers a wider swathe of Homer's story. Not only is the encounter with Circe expanded over the entire right side of the first panel, but the episode of Scylla and Charybdis, which does not appear in either of the other extant works, has been added, though the monsters, cast in the form of a single crayfish-like creature, bear little resemblance to what is found in Homer. The Scylla of the *Odyssey* has twelve feet and six heads on long necks, each with rows of sharp teeth, while Charybdis is a whirlpool that sucks and belches water. Moreover, the entire surface is divided vertically between two major actions, one of which focuses

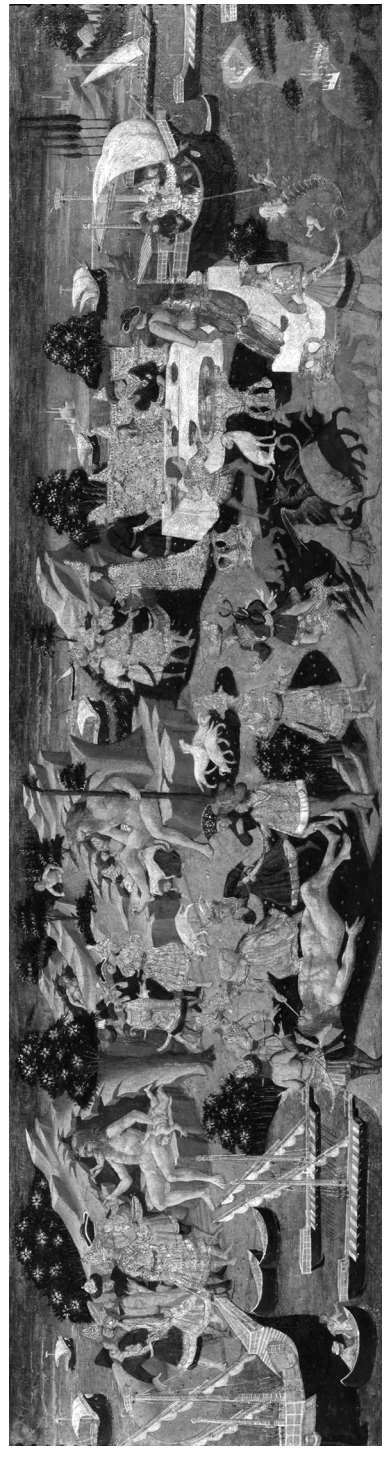

Figure 5. Apollonio di Giovanni, Marco del Buono. *The Adventures of Odysseus* (1). Cracow, Wawel Royal Castle. Photo: Stanisław Michta. © Wawel Royal Castle, Cracow.

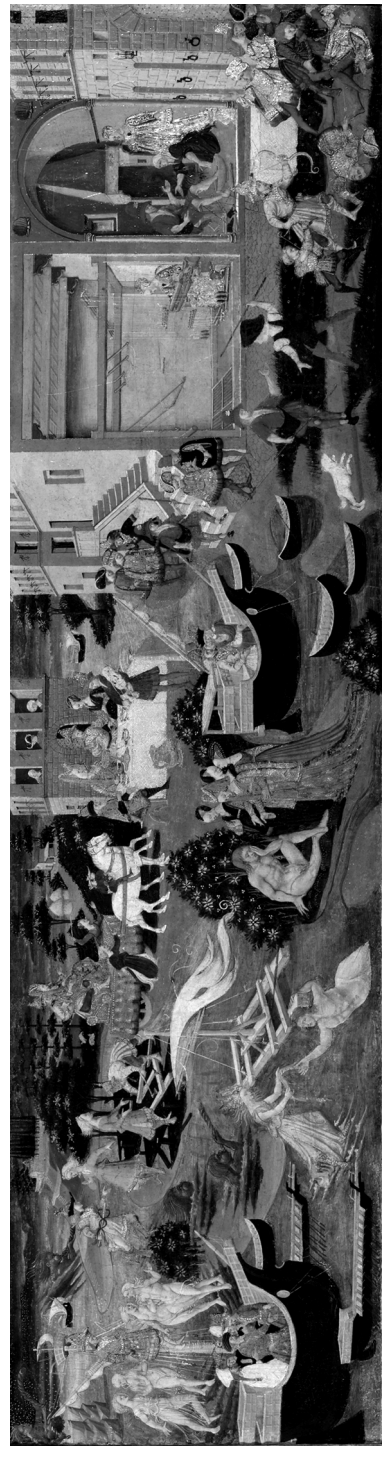

Figure 6. Apollonio di Giovanni, Marco del Buono. *The Adventures of Odysseus* (2). Cracow, Wawel Royal Castle. Photo: Stanisław Michta. © Wawel Royal Castle, Cracow.

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on cannibalism and a violation of *xenia*, the other on feasting and an observance of *xenia*: Polyphemus on the left is counterbalanced by Circe on the right. The triumphal motif does not appear.

Rather, it surfaces in the second panel, which contains the shipwreck of Odysseus in Phaeacia, his transport to the Phaeacian court by wagon, and scenes on Ithaca involving Eurycleia and Penelope—the same scenes that appear on the Frick and Chicago panels. The horsemen driving the wagon, however, are not black but white, and the wedding scene with Nausicaa is less resplendent than in the other works. In addition, this carriage scene has moved up to the left center of the composition where it is juxtaposed with the images of a domestic Penelope on the upper right. The Sirens and Ino dominate the lower left. What is new in the second Wawel Castle panel is a scene in the lower-right quadrant featuring Odysseus, armed with a bow and accompanied by a miniature Telemachus, chasing the suitors out of his home. By presenting father and son in an act of reclamation—taking back the residence that the suitors have unlawfully invaded—the panel accords an agency to men that is less pronounced in the Chicago and Frick panels. The concluding scene of the paired cassoni in Wawel Castle thus restores power to an Odysseus who relies on female intermediaries in the preceding visual narrative. But the chase of the suitors reveals that the artist may not have known about the slaughter in the great hall in *Odyssey* 22—or that this episode of bloodletting might not have been appropriate for a marriage chest. The rearrangement of compositional elements in these panels sets different interpretative possibilities into motion. As the contrasts and similarities of the four paintings emerge, an audience can appreciate not only how a pair of cassoni interacts, but also how they might fit into a conjugal bedroom that includes *spalliere*.

An additional feature of the Wawel Castle panels is worth remarking upon. While the first bears inscriptions, the second bears none. Unlike the Chicago and Frick panels, however, these inscriptions are of geographical places: two of them, Saragusa and Messina, are the names of Sicilian cities, and three, Vulgano, Sivigoli, and Lipari, are the names of small islands to the north of Sicily. All appear visually in the vicinity of Apollonio's Scylla and Charybdis, who already in antiquity were associated with these locations.[38] The naming suggests that patrons had some input in the production of cassoni and that characters in the epic did not always have to be identified by name, since the commissioner could have known the story well enough to discern who they were. The attention to geography also suggests another way in which the historical location of the cassone's production—namely, Italy—could merge with locations in the

[38] Miziołek, 2006, 64–66.

Figure 7. Lo Scheggia (Giovanni di Ser Giovanni Guidi). *Reclining Female Nude* and *Reconciliation between Romans and Sabines*, ca. 1450–75. National Gallery of Denmark. Artwork in the public domain. Image courtesy of SMK website.

epic, thus emphasizing, once again, the bonds between contemporary Florentine culture and the antique.

A final aspect of cassoni in the domestic sphere is significant. In opening a marriage chest, one not only gains access to material goods, but to yet another dimension of its visual art.[39] Inside the lid, the painter often depicted an unclad male or female figure in a reclined posture, appearing before the viewer who opens the chest and disappearing once the lid is closed, as if the contents of the chest were a bed on which the image rested (figs. 7 and 8). These nudes have been regarded by some art historians as fertility charms, within a visual economy that was linked with the larger family unit.[40] They could also have functioned as a *memento mori*, creating, as they do, the illusion of a body in a coffin—a sarcophagus, as Vasari suggested. Or they may have been frankly erotic, teasing a spectator to come into the recesses of what is ordinarily hidden.

[39] See Baskins's introduction to *The Triumph of Marriage*, 25–28.

[40] Gombrich, 27.

Figure 8. Lo Scheggia (Giovanni di Ser Giovanni Guidi). *Reclining Male Nude* and *Triumph of Romulus and Tatius*, ca. 1450–75. National Gallery of Denmark. Artwork in the public domain. Image courtesy of SMK website.

Death and resurrection, in their multiple senses, are at play in this dynamic of opening and closing. The male nude, for example, could appear Christlike, as does the figure on the lid of a cassone painted by the Florentine Lo Scheggia (fig. 8). But this particular image also resembles the pagan Adonis, who was at the center of an ancient mystery cult of birth, death, and rebirth. Interestingly, this was a cult for women with strong ties to Venus. In the case of the *Odyssey* panels, unfortunately, whole cassoni have not survived. But it is possible to imagine how the women of the exterior would be bound up by clothing in ways that a hidden woman under the lid would not have been, or how the nudity of Odysseus on the front panel would carry different connotations than the image of a nude man inside the cover. In the interplay between inside and outside, the erotic undercurrents of *cortesia*, including a sexualized view of death, are in tension with the more formal display of socialized mating rituals. The chest, then, discloses layers of images and material objects, related by intimacy and bound to memory. It enables one to reflect on how the narrative of the *Odyssey* was being personalized in the act of being rendered intelligible through the medium of Renaissance painting.

MODEL DRAWINGS, MULTIFORMS, AND THE STORIES OF THE *ODYSSEY*

Because he was not working from a tradition of historiated painting of the *Odyssey*, Apollonio had to adapt existing figures and compositions to new visual material.[41] As already mentioned, his Polyphemus closely resembles Giotto's Satan in the Scrovegni Chapel (fig. 4). Others have noted that his Demodocus looks much like another of Giotto's figures: the viella player in the frescoes of the Peruzzi Chapel at Santa Croce who also appears in *The Virgin's Wedding Procession* in the Scrovegni Chapel (fig. 1).[42] Similarly, Apollonio appears to have taken the nude Odysseus of the Chicago and Wawel Castle panels from the Adam in the Creation panel of Ghiberti's bronze doors in the Florentine Baptistery (fig. 9).[43] And Ino, who is in near proximity to him in the painting, is likely to have been modeled on Ghiberti's Eve. As for Mercury, he does not bear the angel wings he grew in medieval art, but sports smaller feathered appendages joined to his feet. This image of the god, it has been suggested, is patterned on a drawing by Cyriacus of Ancona (1391–1452), an itinerant humanist and library antiquarian whose copy of a visually correct Mercury circulated in Florence and is now preserved at the Bodleian Library (fig. 10).[44] One could point to other parallels: adorned horses in pairs, well-dressed men gesticulating in conversation, glittering women, groupings of animals, a remarkable range of hats. The key point is that Apollonio's construction of a repertoire of Odyssean images involved recycling. His workshop would have owned something like a book of models—a collection of loose sheets that provided types from which ensembles could be formed in ways that yielded a unique product. It is even likely that workshops exchanged images, which would make them multiauthored composites constructed over time.

This brings me once again to the uncanny convergence between Homeric epic and Quattrocento cassone painting with which this discussion began. The *Odyssey* took shape in performance-based contexts where elements of narrative composition—at the level of words, phrases, scenes, and entire narrative trajectories—could be repeated, while also admitting alternative expression. The epic ingested material in the centuries-long oral tradition of which it was a part and marginalized or excluded other material, depending on the context of performance and the poet's own creative fashioning.[45] In cases such as the Nau-

[41] Syson and Thornton, 240–44.
[42] Lloyd, 8–9.
[43] Callman, 18–19.
[44] Miziołek, 2006, 68–70.
[45] Bakker, 1–35.

Figure 9. Lorenzo Ghiberti. Adam and Eve panel, *Gates of Paradise*, 1425–50. Florence Baptistery. By permission of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and Tourism; Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence—Archive of Restoration and Photo.

sicaa episode (and also in the Circe episode), there are resonances of an *Odyssey* in which Odysseus married before he arrived back in Ithaca, just as the Ithacan books reveal that Odysseus will embark upon yet another journey after he returns home.[46] The variability of oral composition is reflected in the fluidity of the *Odyssey* world itself, a place in which storytelling takes place continuously, and always with a difference. This is vividly borne out in Odysseus's

[46] In the epic cycle, a collection of ancient stories that told what happened before and after the Trojan War, Odysseus takes a new wife and bears new offspring. The best known of these stories goes under the name of the "Telegony," after a son Odysseus bore while living with Circe. For a fuller discussion, see Nagy, 2004, 1–39; Foley, 115–68.

Figure 10. Copy of drawing by Cyriacus of Ancona. *Mercury*, ca. 1440. MS Canon. Misc. 280, fol. 68^{r}. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

notorious "Cretan tales," fictionalized stories he tells of himself once he arrives on Ithaca, all of them bound by the common thread that he is a traveler who hails from Crete.[47] There may have been an Odysseus in the oral tradition whose home was not Ithaca.[48] If the epic is approached this way, it is clear why Albert Lord, who coined the term *multiform*, found a need for it. In his groundbreaking study of the living tradition of Serbo-Croatian oral epic, he found himself wrestling with the expectation of a fixed text that has an absolute begin-

[47] See Zerba.

[48] West, especially on the *Returns* and the *Telegony*.

ning. What he found was that there are no originals in oral composition, and hence no variants. The Homer Multitext Project, which is digitalizing every scrap of Homer that can be found, has radicalized Lord's insight. Homeric scholars have gone so far as to say that even the "vulgate" text of the *Odyssey*, which is largely the work of the second-century BCE Alexandrian critic Aristarchus, is riddled with alternative readings.[49]

Renaissance cassone paintings of the *Odyssey* worked along a similar axis. Artists ingested elements already in circulation, which functioned like Homeric multiforms. Provocatively, Nausicaa was the figure around which the narrative possibilities hinged: she was the improvised stand-in, the movable feast, or, in web-based speak, the crowd-sourced woman. She could move front and center or slide from the first of two cassone panels to a second. Each of her instantiations was one of a kind, though not an original. As a multiform, she enabled a triangulation between antiquity and the historical present tense, Homer and humanism, the vernacular and the high culture, the literary and visual arts. As a site of multilateral signification, she enabled disparate cultures to bond, if only momentarily, in a kind of metadrama of hospitality and homecoming.

[49] Nagy, 2001.

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