

On the inside looking out: gendered space and virtuous femininity in the Pompeian house

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Abstract: This paper considers the question of how to find “women’s space” in the Roman house by looking at a painting of the myth of Pero and Mycon in a small cubiculum off the atrium of Pompeii’s House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto. It argues that the combination of the image with an ephrastic poem functions to draw viewers into the enclosed room, so that they experience the painting from a position of interiority. This echoes the interiority which is thematized in the myth and presented as an important aspect of the virtuous femininity it celebrates. By communicating gendered meaning through both images of place and the viewer’s physical experience, the painting offers a way of understanding women’s space as simultaneously material and representational.

The current scholarly conversation about female space in the Roman house is divided into two camps, not exactly in opposition to each other but each arriving at a distinct conclusion. The first is comprised of scholars, mostly archaeologists, who are looking for material traces of real women, by which they mean people with bodies assigned female at birth who conduct themselves according to the social norms governing women’s behavior.¹ These scholars look not just for female sexed bodies, which are rare in Roman domestic contexts, but for the objects associated with domestic femininity, such as loom weights, perfume bottles, or jewelry. Unfortunately, these objects are quite difficult to “map” precisely for various reasons, but even where the painstaking research required has been done, it has yielded mixed results.² Moreover, those who look to more substantial material remains, like architecture, have also found little evidence to support the idea that there was designated “women’s space” in the Roman house. This lack of gendered specificity in the architectural remains is usually attributed to the interpenetration of male and female lives within the household, and the concomitant flexibility in usage of household space. As Lisa Nevett puts it, “the present-day western concern for providing specialized rooms for particular activities and for allocating separate spaces to different members of the household is a relatively recent phenomenon ... In most societies, at most times, a single space has tended to be multifunctional and to be used by a number of different household members.”³

¹ For an overview of how archaeology generally has approached identifying women in the material record, see Gilchrist 2009.

² Allison 2015 analyzes the utility for the study of gendered space in Early Imperial military bases of brooches, glass bottles, and needles. She concludes that each type of object provides some insight into gendered social practices but cautions against assuming an unproblematic equation of “women” and “women’s things” in the material record. See also Allason-Jones 1995 and Allison 1999.

³ Nevett 2010, 97–98. Cf. her interesting discussion of how Romanization led to a shift away from gendered space in Greek houses: Nevett 2002.

This position is supported by the textual evidence of the ancient architect Vitruvius, who famously argues that ancient Italian domestic space was structured according to status rather than gender:

Cum ad regiones caeli ita ea fuerint disposita, tunc etiam animadvertendum est, quibus rationibus privatis aedificiis propria loca patribus familiarum et quemadmodum communia cum extraneis aedificari debeant. Namque ex his quae propria sunt, in ea non est potestas omnibus intro eundi nisi invitatis, quemadmodum sunt cubicula, triclinia, balneae ceteraque, quae easdem habent usus rationes. Communia autem sunt, quibus etiam invocati suo iure de populo possunt venire, id est vestibula, cava aedium, peristylia, quaeque eundem habere possunt usum.

When [the different rooms] have been laid out in relation to the quarters of the sky, then it must be considered by what rationale, in private houses, places reserved for the owners of the house and those commonly shared with outsiders should be built. For the “reserved” places are those into which not everyone can come without an invitation, such as bedrooms, dining rooms, baths and other places which have related functions. The “common” rooms, however, are those into which ordinary people can come by right, even if uninvited; these are the vestibule, the inner courtyard, the peristyle, and other places which are able to be devoted to the same kind of use. (*de Architectura* 6.5.1)

Vitruvius thus distinguishes the zones of the Roman house by which of them outside visitors – grouped according to their power and influence in the civic sphere – are able to enter. The Roman architect’s idealized domestic space is mapped according to (implicitly) masculine social hierarchies. He has literally nothing to say about Roman women. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill thus concludes, “the house remained for all that a place of men’s work ... The imperatives of the male presence in the Roman house overwhelm, so to speak, those of the female presence.”⁴ Similarly, but more broadly, Shelley Hales reflects the *communis opinio* of these materially oriented scholars when she says “none of the houses in Pompeii appear to have any space that can be identified as female, by virtue of location, architecture, decoration, or content.”⁵

On the other side of the conversation, as it were, are mostly art historians who seek female space through analyses of the representations of women which adorn many of the walls in the city’s large atrium dwellings.⁶ This is another way to think about gender in the Roman house: not to suggest that there were (always) women where there were pictures of women, but rather to see gender as one of the axes of power which serve to frame anyone’s experience of a space. These scholars have thus looked for gender not as a solely material phenomenon, but as something which happens on the level of representation, an ideological formation which manifests itself in the dynamic between viewer and viewed image. This is especially useful since so many Pompeian paintings feature eroticized bodies, both of women and of young men, and are clearly situated according to hierarchies governing who is allowed to see what, where, and how.⁷ Because Pompeian houses are structured according to sets of large open and smaller closed spaces (atrium and cubicula; peristyle and triclinia; etc.), and following Vitruvius’s understanding that barriers were set in place to block outsiders from penetrating too deep into the household, a number of

⁴ Wallace-Hadrill 1996, 112.

⁵ Hales 2003, 125.

⁶ Wallace-Hadrill 1996, 113.

⁷ Fredrick 1995; see also Severy-Hoven 2012.

scholars have focused on “privileged views”: axes of seeing which allow higher-status people to see more and different things from those with less social power.⁸

This is a very useful and compelling way of thinking about Pompeian domestic mythological paintings, and is supported and enriched by the observation that many of the paintings themselves are deeply interested in the dynamics of the gaze.⁹ On the other hand, it is worth noting that it is something of a departure from Vitruvius, who actually has nothing to say about “viewing” *per se*. For Vitruvius, the issue is real movement into and through a space; while we may perhaps extend his formulation from “going” to “seeing” into the innermost reaches of the house, they are not the same thing. This is not to discount analyses of “vectors of viewership” as a way to read privilege and status in Pompeian domestic spaces. It is rather to suggest that the physical movement of the viewer in relation to the image is also a nexus of power, one which may work both with and against the dynamics of viewing.¹⁰ Jennifer Trimble has explored this issue in relation to the famous statue of Hermaphroditus excavated on the Viminal Hill in Rome. She emphasizes how the way the statue is carved pushes the viewer to encounter it from different angles, and thus to experience different reactions to it: “whatever the initial approach, the sculpture moves its viewers around, attracting and pushing away, always offering a return to the rear view and an invitation to linger there, to look again and again.”¹¹ What Trimble emphasizes here is the fact that viewing is an embodied experience, not just in that we see with our eyes, but in the ways that art has the capacity to affect and effect the body of the viewer. Sex and gender are thus not fixed points but dynamic phenomena, experienced in the body of the person viewing a painting, perceived in the bodies viewed, and navigated in the interplay between the two. In considering the Pompeian atrium house, therefore, it is necessary to be cognizant of the multiple ways in which sexual difference operates, as simultaneously something that people live in the world and something that is communicated and negotiated through representations.¹²

In this paper, I aim to look closely at some examples of space in Pompeii which, I argue, enact their construction of gender categories on multiple levels, through symbolic representation but also through the body and experience of the viewer. I have been influenced in my thinking on this by recent work in feminist geography, which has long emphasized that bodies not only inhabit gendered space but are themselves spatialized in gendered terms:

Bit by bit, bodies become relational, territorialized in specific ways. Indeed, places themselves might be said to be exactly the same: they, too, are made-up out of relationships between, within and beyond them; territorialized through scales,

⁸ As argued in (among others) Fredrick 2002.

⁹ See Elsner 2007a, Elsner 2007b, and Platt 2002.

¹⁰ Bettina Bergmann has emphasized the importance of movement through Roman houses as a way of understanding their artistic program. She connects this with the attested Roman practice of using an (imaginary) house’s decoration as an aide to rhetorical memorization: Bergmann 1994; see also Newby 2002.

¹¹ Trimble 2018, 20.

¹² An idea famously underscored by Joan Scott back in 1986: “I do not think we can without some attention to symbolic systems, that is, to the ways societies represent gender, use it to articulate the rules of social relationships, or construct the meaning of experience. Without meaning, there is no experience; without the processes of signification, there is no meaning” (Scott 1986, 1063).

borders, geography, geopolitics. Bodies and places, then, are made-up through the production of their spatial registers, through relations of power.¹³

Adrienne Rich called the body “the geography closest in” as long ago as 1984,¹⁴ and recent work in feminist geography has “mapped” such gendered journeys as the creation and expulsion of the placenta in pregnancy and the use of frozen sperm by lesbians undergoing fertility treatments.¹⁵ Indeed, the present fight over access to abortion in the United States is an excellent illustration of the ways that the interior of the female body – as distinct from the woman who carries it – can become the object of anxiety, speculation, and legislation. In what follows, therefore, I analyze not just the external space of the Roman house but the ways in which that house maps and is mapped by the gendered body. In this way, I hope to add a different dimension to the ways that we think about the place of women in the Pompeian house.

As in many premodern eras, Roman society – at least in theory – was divided by gender between the civic and domestic spheres: men and manliness were associated with the social world of the military, the law courts, the forum; women and “correct” femininity were located in the household, with the home and family. Thus, one funeral epitaph from Rome sums up the dead woman’s virtues as “she desired nothing more than that her home should rejoice,” while another simply announces, “she kept the house and worked with wool. That is all.”¹⁶ The princeps himself, Augustus, is reported to have exclaimed to a group of senators, “is it not the best thing in the world to have a wife who is chaste, domestic, a housekeeper and a mother of children?” (Cass. Dio 56.3.3). In a more symbolic vein, the Roman agricultural writer Columella follows Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* in insisting that, when the gods created the world, they organized human beings into two different types: one whose nature was suited to “inside” tasks – women – and one naturally ordained to take care of “outside” work, namely men. Lamenting, as Roman authors often did, the decline in contemporary morals, Columella goes on to note, “for both among the Greeks, and then among the Romans almost down to the time that our fathers can remember, domestic labor belonged to the wife, so that the father of the household only withdrew to his home for rest, with every care set aside, from his work in the outside world.”¹⁷

So “housiness” or domesticity was closely associated with femininity in Early Imperial Roman society.¹⁸ Given this, it is surprising that Vitruvius, in the passage cited above, has nothing to say about women in Roman houses. This is in explicit contrast with his description of “Greek” homes, where he carefully describes the architectural manifestations of so-called female seclusion.¹⁹ Nevertheless, I would argue that we may see in his

¹³ Nast and Pile 1998, 4.

¹⁴ Rich 1984, 212.

¹⁵ Colls and Fannin 2013; Longhurst and Melville 2020.

¹⁶ *CIL* VI 15346.

¹⁷ *nam et apud Graecos, et mox apud Romanos usque in patrum nostrorum memoriam fere domesticus labor matronalis fuit, tamquam ad requiem forensium exercitationum omni cura deposita patribusfamilias intra domesticos penates se recipientibus.* (*Rust.* 12. pref. 7)

¹⁸ Note that I do not make the mistake of conflating “domesticity” with “privacy,” as it is clear that modern understandings of the public-private dichotomy have limited utility for understanding antiquity: Milnor 2005, 27–34; see also. Cooper 2007.

¹⁹ Vitruvius has been widely criticized for this description, which seems to have little to do with the actual architectural practices of the Classical Greeks: e.g., Zaccaria Ruggiu 1995, 289–310; Antonaccio 2000; Milnor 2005, 129–39.

description not just a generalized patriarchal disinterest in women, but a specific model for thinking about gender and Roman space. That is, Vitruvius sees the house from the outside in; the view which we are given is that of someone – implicitly a male someone – entering the house from the outside. This, of course, is fully in keeping with the discourse which prioritizes the story and experience of the (male) civic sphere over the (female) domestic one, a discourse which is alive and well in Early Imperial Rome.²⁰ Thus, even though he does not mention women, Vitruvius is still presenting us with a model of gendered space, one which can be used productively to understand the representational dynamics of the Pompeian house. Vitruvius's view is from the perspective of the "outsider," the one who experiences the house starting from public space and moving inward. If we take seriously the idea that this is implicitly a male perspective, however, it opens up the possibility of a differently gendered reading of domestic space, one which sees the house from the inside out – or, more symbolically, one which understands that inside and outside, interior and exterior, are concepts deeply bound up with ideological formulations of sexual difference.²¹

In order to explore this idea, I would like to look closely at one painting still to be found in situ in a small room off the atrium of Pompeii's House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (5.4.a) (Fig. 1).²² It depicts the story of Pero, a young woman whose father, Mycon, was unjustly imprisoned and condemned to starve to death; the daughter, however, saved his life by visiting him in his cell and feeding him the milk from her breast. Although now badly decayed, we can determine from other examples preserved in Pompeii (e.g., Fig. 2) that the picture in the House of Lucretius Fronto shows the woman seated before a barred window, giving her right breast to the old man lying across her lap. With her left hand she draws her mantle behind and over him, a "veiling" gesture of modesty.²³ A shaft of light from the window illuminates the central couple, focusing the viewer's attention and emphasizing the darkness of the prison interior. It is a remarkable image, and not just because wall paintings of women behaving virtuously are relatively rare, but because it is extremely explicit in its moral message: not only are both main figures carefully labeled to identify who they are, but the picture also comes equipped with a short epigrammatic poem which explains the significance of the painting.

²⁰ As argued in Milnor 2005.

²¹ The association of manliness with penetration – and thus femininity with the ability to be penetrated – has been well established in scholarship on ancient Roman sexuality: for a summary see Langlands 2006, 6–7. A noteworthy example of the phenomenon can be found in erotic poetry of the Early Roman Empire, in the literary motif of the *paraclausithyron*: the story, if you will, is that the poet shows up uninvited to his mistress's house; she refuses to let him in – or her husband or another gatekeeper prevents him from entering – and he sits down upon the doorstep to lament his inability to get inside. Note that "door" or "gate" was an easy metaphor for the female vagina (Adams 1982, 89; see also his discussion of *ineo* [and synonyms] for penetration: 190–91). The penetration motif in the *paraclausithyron* is obvious, as is the gendered division of spaces: the inside of the house associated with the inaccessible mistress; the outside with the poet, his persona, and the public speech represented by his poetry.

²² The scholarship on the house is extensive, but we are fortunate to have the comprehensive volume of Peters 1993. Penelope Allison (1992, 358–66) has added an analysis of the small finds (which are not extensive, nor particularly useful for gendering space).

²³ "un gesto di pudore e timore": Santucci 1997, 125. On clothing as a barrier between the female body and "the outside world," see Davies 2008, esp. 215.



Fig. 1. *Pero and Micon, Pompeii, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (5.4.a).* (H. Valladares. By permission of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment. Reproduction prohibited.)

The text was badly damaged even at the time of excavation, and has deteriorated further in the subsequent years. Here, though, is the poem as generally agreed upon by scholars:²⁴

*Quae * paruis • mater • natus • alimenta / parabat •
 fortuna • in • patrios • vertit / iniqua • cibos.
 ἀεὶ ὄ dīgnūm o[p]us • est. / Tenui • cervice • seniles •
 asp[ice iā]m / venae • lacte •. [---]
 [---]q(ue) / simul • voltu • fri<c>at • ipsa • Micomem •
 Pero: / tristis • inest • cum • pietate • pudor.*

²⁴ Text from Prioux 2013. The text was first published by Sogliano 1900, subsequently edited by Bücheler 1901. It is included in *CIL* 4 (6635), *CLE* (2048), and Courtney's *Musa Lapidaria* (1995, no. 56). For a more extended literary discussion, see Tontini 1997.



Fig. 2. *Pero and Micon*, Pompeii 9.2.5, MANN inv. 115398. (R. Guglielmi/Alamy. By permission of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment - Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.)

The nourishment which the mother was preparing for her little children
Unfair fortune has turned to paternal food.
The work is worthy of eternity. Upon the old man with a thin neck
Now look upon; his veins with milk (flow?)
At the same time, Pero herself strokes Mycon with her face:
There is a sad modesty in her along with piety.

The three elegiac couplets represent a classic *ecphrasis*, which not only describes what is seen in the painting, but explains what interpretation the viewer should ascribe to it. The poem calls on the viewer to see and admire the heroism of Pero, who gives to her father the nourishment made for her own children, and concludes by invoking two great feminine virtues illustrated here: *tristis inest cum pietate pudor* ("there is sad modesty in her along with piety").

Many scholars have noted that the image is visible to the outside visitor to the house's atrium and thus may be seen to display female domestic virtue as part of the decorative program of the house. I, for example, wrote in 2005,

the story places Pero simultaneously in the position of mother and daughter, emphasizing the role which women have as guarantors of the continuing cycle

of generations – reproducing the next while still supporting the last. In this sense, the picture of Pero and Mycon serves to advertise the importance of a strong and virtuous family life to the owner of the House of Lucretius Fronto, a statement about domestic values in the domestic space which the visitor has just entered.²⁵

This is fully in keeping with contemporary ideologies which framed the gendered experience of the public and private spheres, as the domestic virtue of women was an important part of Early Imperial civic discourse. Indeed, it is tempting to connect the presence of this painting, with its explicit focus on pudor, with an electoral programma found in the street outside the house.²⁶ There, Marcus Lucretius Fronto – the supposed owner of the house, due to programmata outside the front door and some graffiti in the peristyle²⁷ – is also praised for his pudor, which is cited as a reason that voters should elect him as aedile. Pudor, of course, was a virtue which both men and women could have, albeit in quite different contexts.²⁸ The fact that the painting and the programma connect its domestic display by a woman with its civic display by a man underscores both the power and the contradictions inherent in the gendered discourses of the time.

It is certainly true that the image of Pero and Mycon makes a strong statement, and that the composition is simple and striking enough that it would be readable by someone standing well outside the room. On the other hand, what no scholar has discussed is the fact that the most heavily moralizing element of the painting, namely the ecphrastic epigram, would not be visible to that hypothetical visitor to the atrium. Indeed, both the placement and size of the poem require entering the room and approaching the painting closely in order to be able to read it. The poem thus rewards the close approach it requires; it draws you in, enriching the experience of the image both by interpreting its meaning and by urging a closer examination of its fine points. In other words, it adds a dimension of experience to the painting which is only visible from inside the room; it encourages the viewer to leave the open atrium behind and to see the painting from within the much more enclosed room on whose wall it is placed. Although the text is fragmentary, we know that in addition to praising Pero, it invites the viewer to look upon “the face” of the daughter, “the old man’s thin neck,” and the “veins which [shine] with the flowing milk.” These small aesthetic particulars would only be visible to someone viewing the painting from close at hand. It has been observed that there was a shift in wall painting style in the Early Imperial period, which moved from megalography in the Late Republic to a focus on smaller details which required closer inspection.²⁹ Indeed, it may be this shift which is reflected in Horace’s famous (albeit rather opaque) statement that poems and paintings are similar in that some are better when seen from afar and some when seen from up close: *ut pictura poesis: erit quae, si propius stes, / te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes* (“a poem is like a picture: there will be those which take your attention more when you stand nearer, and those when you stand further away”: *Epist.* 2.3.361–62). It is not entirely clear how one might view a poem “from further away,” but the suggestion

²⁵ Milnor 2005, 101–2. See also Piazzzi 2007 and Carucci 2011.

²⁶ *CIL* 4. 6626 (*CLE* 2052).

²⁷ *CIL* 4. 6796: M. LUCRETIUS FRONTO VIR FORTIS ET HO[nestus]. While it is true that identifications of house-ownership through programmata are problematic, the peristyle graffiti seems to solidify the attribution to the Lucretii Frontones.

²⁸ On the differently gendered resonances of pudor in this context, see below.

²⁹ Leach 1988, 5.

that a poem has a visual element, and a painting a literate one, and that different viewing positions reveal different aesthetic qualities, would seem to speak directly to the significance of the Pompeian fresco.

The poem, then, underscores the importance of understanding the painting from a position inside the closed room as well as from the open atrium beyond its door. But that experience of “insiderness” is not just an aspect of viewing the painting, it is also a significant theme or motif in the myth it depicts. The paintings of Pero and Mycon from Pompeii and Herculaneum are very unusual in that they all feature rather detailed windows as part of the composition, which serves to emphasize the architecturally enclosed space in which the myth is set. Although inside spaces do appear occasionally in Roman panel paintings, the oft-cited theatricality of Pompeian frescos means that those interiors are almost always quite porous in terms of space. That is to say, the dining scenes which adorn the walls of the House of the Chaste Lovers, for instance, may well echo those performed on the Roman comic stage – despite the fact that, canonically, that stage only ever presented the spectator with the streetscape in front of three notional houses.³⁰ Similarly, other scenes which are clearly meant to occur inside, such as the cycle of tavern life frescos in the Tavern of Salvius (6.14.36), offer depictions of furniture but no detail whatsoever about the spatial architecture; others, like Dido awaiting Aeneas’s arrival, or Daedalus presenting the wooden bull to Pasiphae, are placed in rather hazy portico-like surroundings, which feature columns and drapery but also open views to the landscape beyond (Fig. 3).³¹ The image of Pero and Mycon, though, not only presents the viewer with a window to the outside, it also emphasizes the difference between the environments through the ray of light which falls on the central tableau. The prison interior is enclosed and dark while the external world is open and bright. As the detailed bars over the window emphasize, however, it is only light which is normally permitted to pass between the two.

Moreover, and more fundamentally, it is the radical and remarkable interiority of the female body which renders Pero’s mission a success. The versions of the myth which are found in Latin texts (such as that at Valerius Maximus 5.4.7) emphasize the fact that every time the daughter visited the prison, the guards would search her thoroughly to see that she did not carry in food, and that they were baffled that somehow her parent did not starve. The point is that they did not conceptualize the food which she could carry within her body, nor could they have taken it from her if they did. Valerius – who tells two versions of the story, one in which Pero’s mother is imprisoned, and one in which it is her father – even uses the curious word *subsidium* for the “aid” which Pero gives her parent (*curiosius observata filia animadvertit illam exerto ubere famem matris lactis sui subsidio lenientem*: “an inquisitive [guard], when he spied on the daughter, noticed that, offering her breast, she was relieving the hunger of her mother with the aid of her own milk”: 5.4.7). The word comes in classical Latin to mean “help” via its use for military support troops, which were set (*sidere*) behind (*sub*) the main battle line. Like reinforcements in a battle, Pero’s milk is hidden away until it may be usefully brought into the light. Indeed, the triumphant “insiderness” of Pero’s female body is, I would argue, underscored by the final line of epigrammatic epigram written on the painting: *tristis inest cum pietate pudor*. Scholars have been divided on how to understand “inest” – is this “a sad modesty

³⁰ On which, see Duckworth 1994, 121–27.

³¹ For the importance of the “mythological landscape” in Pompeian painting, see Newby 2012.



Fig. 3. *Dedalus presenting the bull to Pasiphae, Pompeii, MANN inv. 8979. (PRISMA ARCHIVO/Alamy. By permission of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment - Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.)*

osopher Favorinus, for instance, gives milk's corporeal movements a moralizing spin (Aulus Gellius NA 12.12–14):

an quia spiritu multo et calore exalbit, non idem sanguis est nunc in uberibus, qui in utero fuit? Nonne hac quoque in re sollertia naturae evidens est, quod, postquam sanguis ille opifex in penetralibus suis omne corpus hominis finxit, adventante iam partus tempore, in supernas se partis perfert, ad fovenda vitae atque lucis rudimenta praesto est et recens natis notum et familiarem victum offert?

Just because it has become white from the open air and warmth, is that blood in the breasts not the same as it was in the womb? Isn't the ingenuity of nature clear in this circumstance, that, after blood the creator has formed the entire body of a human being within its innermost parts, it brings itself to the upper regions when the time of birth is coming, is ready to warm the beginnings of life and light, and provides to the children a recognizable and familiar nourishment?

Breast milk is thus an externalization of the internal substance which originally formed the fetus. But because the baby continues to depend on the mother's body for nourishment after it is born, what was created *in penetralibus* must now also – mysteriously and miraculously – be pushed outside.³³

³² [Hippocrates], *On Glands* 16; Arist. *Gen. an.* 774a1. For a discussion, see King 1998, 34–35, 97; Mulder 2017, 237.

³³ Breast milk as a substance which moves from within to without the body is akin to other fluids on which feminist geographers have focused (e.g., sweat and semen) in order to show that bodies are not simply blank pages on which gender is inscribed. As Longhurst and Melville (2020) write: “paying attention to the visceral fluids and solids (especially in relation to birth) that cross the thresholds that demarcate the inside from the outside of bodies opens up possibilities for thinking geographically about bodies in ways that go well beyond bodily surfaces” (147). The

In sum, then, the painting of Pero and Mycon in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto thematizes interiority, through the “inside” setting of the scene, the language of the ephrastic poem, and the themes of the myth depicted. In addition, however, it enforces it experientially by drawing the viewer into the small, enclosed room from the open atrium. In fact, a similar motif can be seen in another space in Pompeii, one which also features a painting of Pero and Mycon. This environment and the positioning of its paintings have not previously been brought into dialogue with the House of M. Lucretius Fronto, but doing so yields illustrative results. This is a small business-and-house complex in the city’s ninth region (9.2.5: Fig. 4), consisting of a front shop (a),

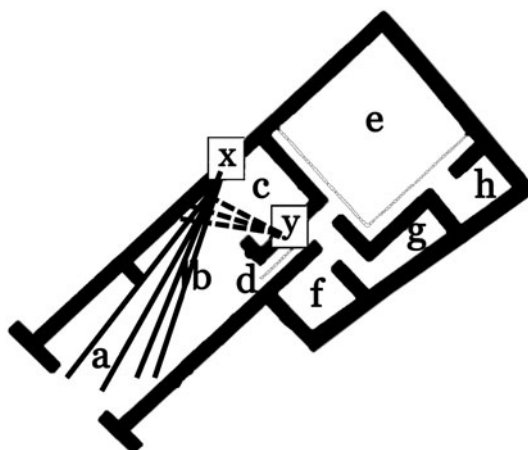


Fig. 4. Map of Pompeii 9.2.5, showing locations of frescos of *Ariadne abandoned* (x) and *Pero and Micon* (y). Possible sightlines to (x) are indicated in solid lines, to (y) in broken ones.

which is open to an atrium (b)³⁴ which in turn gives way to a triclinium (c), behind which is a garden (e), a staircase to the upper floor, and some cubicula (f, g, h). For what is a comparatively small dwelling, the decorative schema is elaborate and of high quality; this is particularly true of the room identified as a triclinium, which featured pretty fourth-style wall paintings, including inset mythological panels on the north and south walls. The west wall featured the door to the “atrium” and shop, while the east wall was almost entirely taken up by a picture window looking out into the viridarium beyond. The mythological centerpieces on the north and south walls of the triclinium, then, provide the only narrative elements – as far as can be determined from the surviving evidence – in the entire house. To the north, or the left as one enters the room, we find an image of *Ariadne abandoned* (Fig. 5): she lies naked on a rocky shore, having just awoken from sleep to find that her perfidious lover Theseus has sailed away; beside her is a weeping eros and a figure sometimes identified as Nemesis, who gestures to the ship on the horizon which bears Theseus away. The pendant painting, on the opposite wall, depicts *Pero and Mycon* (Fig. 2) in a representation which, except for the absence of an ephrastic epigram and names to identify the figures, mirrors that found on the wall of the cubiculum in the House of M. Lucretius Fronto (although in this case Mycon suckles from his daughter’s left breast rather than her right).

The contrast between the two pendant paintings in this space – *Ariadne* on the one hand, *Pero and Mycon* on the other – is unusually evident. Here, though, we have to the left as one enters the room, *Ariadne*, naked and caught in the moment of abandonment

passage of material across the boundary of the skin insists on the spatial difference and relationship between what is inside and out.

³⁴ I offer here the conventional identifications of the spaces, which probably do not reflect the ways in which they were originally used. In this case, the “atrium” is only divided from the front shop space by some small, rudimentary side walls. The “triclinium” has a significant threshold and is distinguished from the rest of the ground floor by its elaborate paintings.



Fig. 5. *Ariadne Abandoned*, Pompeii 9.2.5. (Nachlass Hoffmann, D-DAI-ROM 31, 1744.)

when the lover for whom she betrayed her family has left her behind. Of course, it is true that the myth continues with her discovery and redemption by the god Dionysus, a scene which is depicted elsewhere in Roman painting, but the focus of this particular image (and others built on the same model) is Ariadne's lowest moment, when she realizes that Theseus was only using her to solve the riddle of the labyrinth, and that she has now in consequence lost both natal family and lover. The "consequential" nature of her abandonment is emphasized in this image by the figure of Nemesis,³⁵ pointing to Theseus's departing ship, and more metaphorically by Ariadne's exposed position: having betrayed her "house," she is now left outside and exposed without even a rudimentary shelter from the elements. Even her clothing has fallen away, the drapery forming a V-shape below her groin which emphasizes her (transgressive) sexuality. This type of Ariadne painting thus (to quote David Fredrick) "epitomizes the presentation of the female body in many central panel paintings: [as] the object of the scopophilic gaze and/or the object of voyeuristic violence."³⁶

³⁵ Although this identification is disputed: Elsner 2007a, 93–94 and n. 54.

³⁶ Fredrick 1995, 273.

Within the house at 9.2.5, however, this image contrasts with that of Pero and Mycon on the opposite wall: while Ariadne's body is exposed to the viewer, Pero is almost entirely clothed except for the breast which she covers and holds to the mouth of the old man; while Ariadne lies exposed on the rocky shore, bereft of family and shelter, Pero sits inside the prison nurturing her father. The gesture which she makes with her right hand, as she brings her (or perhaps his) clothing over the naked back of her father, both suggests her desire to protect him and echoes the veiling gestures often seen in mythological paintings of Juno or other married women. This Pero/Mycon painting even provides an "internal viewer" of the two central figures, since this is one of the examples of the image which clearly depicts the head of a guard looking in through the barred window. But given that, within the myth, the guard is the obstacle which Pero's piety is able to circumvent and his gaze here marks the unfortunate moment of discovery of her trick, there may be some reluctance to align ourselves with him; rather, as we, as viewers of the painting along with the guard, peer in at the private moment between Pero and Mycon (note the absorption with one another which their gazes display), we may feel a certain shame in the invasion.

There is, however, another contrast between the paintings, one which further emphasizes the thematized interiority of the image of Pero and Mycon. These paintings, as I noted, adorned opposite walls of the triclinium in house 9.2.5, but there is one significant difference between them: the painting of Ariadne on the northern wall, due to the absence of internal barriers in the space, would have been visible almost immediately upon entering the shop from the street, and then from a wide variety of positions as one passed through the atrium to approach the triclinium (Fig. 6). The painting on the southern wall, however – that of Pero and Mycon – is blocked from the approaching viewer by a small projecting wall flanking the door. It would only have been visible to someone walking very close to the northern wall as they approached the triclinium or (more likely) once the viewer entered the room. Furthermore, the painting of Pero and Mycon is also slightly inset on its left: it is framed on that side by a small recess, which sets the painting several inches back from the rest of the wall (Fig. 7). This feature seems to be the result of the masonry pier which forms the southeastern part of the room, so that this wall is thicker in the corner than it is further to the west where the painting is found. Taken along with the other elements here, however, it seems possible that the presence of this recess – which adds another element of "enclosure" to the experience of the painting – was part of the reason Pero and Mycon were chosen as the subjects for this wall.

In other words, like the painting of Pero and Mycon in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, this painting too encourages – almost insists upon – the viewer's seeing it from a position of interiority, from inside the room rather than from outside in the shop or atrium. Moreover, it is worth noting that this room, like the prison cell in which Pero and Mycon sit, is fitted with a window; this is, in fact, also true of the room in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto discussed earlier, so that, in both cases, there are certain similarities between the three-dimensional space in which the viewer will find themselves and the two-dimensional space of the painting. On the one hand, therefore, the painting of Ariadne in this triclinium supports what I have argued is a masculine experience of Roman domestic space, as it reveals to the visitor from afar the exposed and objectified female body at its center. The painting of Pero and Mycon, on the other hand, promotes a "feminine" position of viewing, one which invites an internal and intimate experience of the image, endorses identification with the female figure at the center of the myth, and suggests that the penetrative viewing position (that of the guard) is morally compromised.



Fig. 6. Pompeii 9.2.5, view from shop to site of *Ariadne Abandoned* fresco (removed). (K. Milnor. By Permission of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment. Reproduction prohibited.)

Returning to the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, we can similarly consider the relationship between the painting of Pero and Mycon and the other paintings in its small cubiculum space. Whereas in 9.2.5, the painting of Pero and Mycon is largely invisible from outside the room, while *Ariadne* can be seen from many vantage points, in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, it is the former image which can be seen from the atrium and functions to draw the viewer into the room (Fig. 8). In the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, thus, the enclosure of the figures in the painting is not mimicked by the enclosure of the actual painting as it is in 9.2.5. Indeed, in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, it is the *other* decorative features of the room that are only visible once the viewer enters the room. They consist primarily of two elements: first are two small tondo portraits placed on either side of the door which leads to the atrium (Fig. 9); both are children, one a boy who has been given the winged hat and caduceus of Mercury and the other a young girl. These images have been variously interpreted – most scholars see them as the son and daughter of the family, although it has been suggested, mostly on the strength of the divine attributes painted on the boy, that both might be deceased.³⁷ But, significantly, since they appear on the left and right of the entry door, their images frame the view of the atrium, the fauces, and the door to the street as the viewer stands before the painting of Pero and Mycon. In other words, this is the reverse of the “penetrative” view of the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto – this is from the inside looking out, and in that sense it is not surprising that representations of children, whose care is certainly part of the *domestica bona* prized in a good woman, surround the scene.³⁸

³⁷ de Kind 1991.

³⁸ John Clarke (2003, 254–59) has argued that the pictures of the children here should be understood as one way in which the room “project[s] the patron’s values,” as a way of connecting the Lucretii with Augustan ideologies which emphasized the value of childbirth and rearing.



Fig. 7. Pompeii 9.2.5, south wall of "triclinium" showing projecting wall framing Pero and Micon fresco (removed). (K. Milnor. By Permission of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment. Reproduction prohibited.)

Moreover, once the viewer has entered the room to see the Pero and Mycon painting in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, he or she is able to see the pendant painting directly across the room (Fig. 10). This is the position held in 9.2.5 by the Ariadne image. In the House of Marcus Luretius Fronto, by contrast, the pendant painting depicts Narcissus. Of course, there are many different ways of understanding the myth of Narcissus, and its popularity in Pompeian wall painting certainly underscores the ways in which it could mean different things in different places to different people. Here, though, in the context of what I have said about the Pero and Mycon painting, it is hard not to focus on certain aspects of the image: the hero's maleness, his position outside, his nakedness, and, of course, his absorption with his own reflection in the pool of water. While Pero both narratively and visually focuses outside herself, on her father,

Narcissus can only see beauty in his own face – eventually, in Ovid's version anyway, losing his identity as a human being because of his pathological self-focus.³⁹ One might even see a play between the two images on the very idea of interiority, as Pero's heroic female insideness (where she holds the milk which keeps her father alive) is contrasted with Narcissus's narcissism, a form of male interiority which does no one any good.

Critics have suggested that there is a complex play here on the dynamics and morality of viewing, as the story of Narcissus turns on a (fatal) act of spectatorship, while the epigram inscribed on the painting of Pero and Mycon insists on the virtuousness of looking at the image. Hérica Valladares has additionally noted the oddity of the final line of the epigram, which has pudor as its emphatic last word: *tristis inest cum pietate pudor*. As she notes, "it was the experience of being subjected to another's evaluating gaze that most powerfully evoked this emotion (sc. pudor)."⁴⁰ In this reading, the epigram suggests that Pero knows she is being observed, not by the guard – whose head does not, unlike in the other two preserved instances of the painting, appear at the window here – but

³⁹ This contrast is also noted by Elsner 2007b, 155.

⁴⁰ Valladares 2011, 389; see also Kaster 2005, 28–65.



Fig. 8. House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (5.4.a), showing view from atrium to fresco of Pero and Micon. Note that the painting is at present much decayed, and the window to the room was boarded up at the time the photograph was taken. (K. Milnor. By Permission of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment. Reproduction prohibited.)

by the viewer, whose attention is drawn to her by the epigram itself (*aspice*). Indeed, as Valladares again observes, there is a visual parallel between the placement of the epigram on the painting and the window, each a square formation in the upper left and right of the image respectively. Thus, the guard absent from the latter may be understood as having been replaced by the viewer imagined by the former. We should note, though, that Pero's pudor is something which exists almost entirely as an internal emotive experience. As Robert Kaster notes, "the interiority of *pudor*, and its crucial link to one's self-conception, are equally striking ...*Pudor*, for its part, is generated from within: in that respect it truly reflects a person's character, the universe of habits and sentiments formed by countless choices made over time."⁴¹ Although it can be expressed visually by something like a blush, there is no suggestion that this is happening in this painting. The emphasis on pudor in the last line of the epigram thus underscores the peculiar and infinite regression of the interiority thematized by the image: the final gesture of the epigrammatic poem is toward something which actually cannot be seen, as it is hidden inside the character and experience of Pero.

In contrast, then, with that of Narcissus – who fatally mistakes himself for an external object of desire – the painting of Pero in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto makes insideness the site of meaning and virtue. The presence of the epigrammatic poem, only legible from inside the room, draws viewers in so that they must see the painting from the same

⁴¹ Kaster 1997, 4–5.



Fig. 9. House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (5.4.a), view of atrium from cubiculum, showing tondo portraits of children flanking door (H. Valladares. By Permission of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment. Reproduction prohibited.)

enclosed position as that held by Pero and Mycon; once there, they can appreciate the view of the house from inside out, framed by the images of the children who may also have lived there. The epigram itself, moreover, along with the myth it describes, insists on the interior as the primary location of feminine virtue: it is where Pero holds the milk which keeps her father alive, but also where she maintains her pudor, which renders her safe from the viewer's prying gaze. In contrast with the myth's deployment in 9.2.5, where the picture of Pero's virtue is physically hidden while that of Ariadne's vice is on public display, the

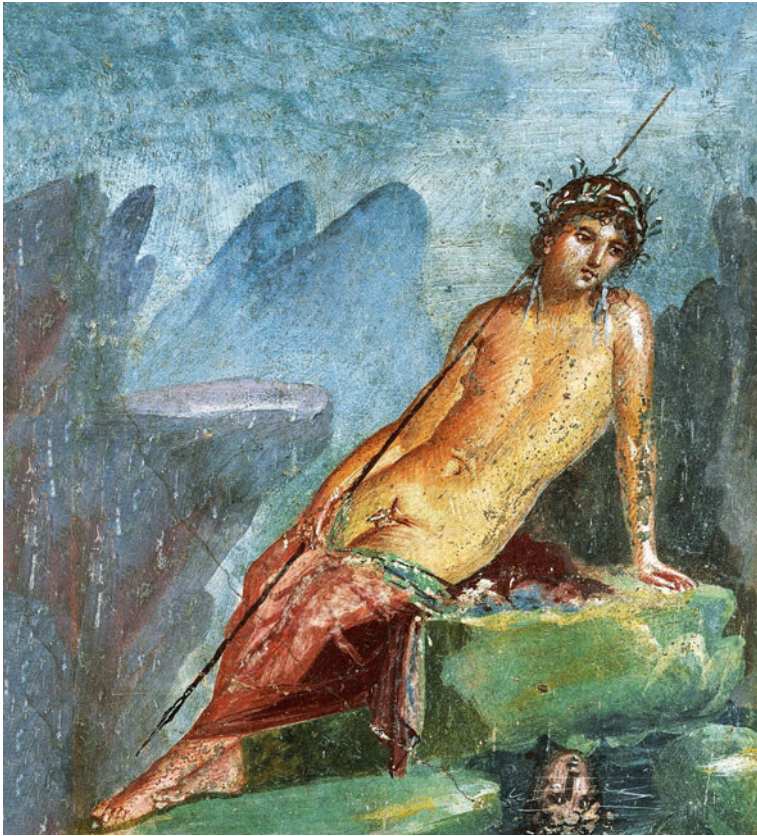


Fig. 10. *Narcissus*, from north wall of cubiculum, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (5.4.a). (Wikimedia commons. By permission of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment.)

House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto makes the painting visually accessible, while still prioritizing the inside position as the richest and most meaningful from which to experience the image.

What does all of this have to do with “women’s space” in the Roman house? As I hope I have shown, Pompeian paintings of the myth of Pero and Mycon are representations of gendered space *in* gendered space; they offer the viewer the opportunity to read his or her experience of the material world through the lens provided by the image. In this sense, we can see these paintings as participating in what Jane Rendell, building on the theoretical work of Luce Irigaray, has called the “choreography” of gender, “a sequence of moves performed by and between men and women in space, at a material and ideological level.”⁴² In other words, the movement of gendered bodies in the world simultaneously constructs and is constructed by the ideological rules which tell people who and what they are based on their biological sex. Like choreography, though, those rules exist at a level of abstraction which sometimes translates imperfectly to the physical plane. If, as I have suggested above, the image of Pero and Mycon genders interiority as female, then the viewer’s own experience of interiority will be, on some level, feminized – especially

⁴² Rendell 2001, 24.

when, as in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, it comes with a view of the domestic interior framed by images of those paradigmatic representatives of domestic life, children.

I noted above that there is a likely connection between the pudor which Pero is displaying in the painting (as the ephrastic poem would have it) and the pudor which is claimed for the house's owner by the programma in the street outside. At the same time, the connection between the two underscores the fact that the image could speak to both men and women but in different ways. "Being seen" – and thus, the consciousness of being seen, or pudor – had diverse implications for those whose ideal virtues were domestic in nature and those expected to perform on a civic stage. Kaster notes this distinction:

I see myself being seen literally, since I am indeed the center of others' attention – performing an *entirely creditable* act; but because that act involves the core of who I am as a social being, I see my worth being on the line as it seldom otherwise is ... These cases, it will not surprise, are highly gendered. For women, this mode of self-seeing is the source of the "maiden's blush": receiving a profession of love or proposal of marriage from a suitor, even if not *pudendum* in itself, will cause a woman to be "thrown into disarray by *pudor*" ... because she sees that her core "competence" in a culture – as a chaste yet desirable potential mate – is being tested or put on display. Correspondingly, public speaking and giving testimony are the chief occasions where this mode of seeing is at work for a male.⁴³

Kaster here somewhat glosses over the question of audience, that is, who are the "others" to whose attention my creditable act has brought me? In the case of men, that audience is by and large his fellow male citizens, as it is in the case of the programma advertising Fronto's pudor. Pero's female pudor, by contrast, is generally performed and experienced before a far more intimate audience, which I have argued above is part of the point driven home by the interiority promoted by the painting in the House of M. Lucretius Fronto. In this sense, the ways in which that image centers Pero's experience and perspective might well have made it uncomfortable viewing for a person who had embraced – or wanted to embrace – traditional Roman masculinity.

It is worth noting, moreover, that breastfeeding was an activity which generally seems in elite households to have been performed by freed or still-enslaved women, much to the chagrin of certain ancient moralists.⁴⁴ An enslaved person whose body had been appropriated by her enslavers in this way might well have seen savage irony or offense in the presentation of Pero's nursing as the epitome of virtuous Roman femininity. Indeed, the fact that Pero is presenting to her father "the food which she prepared for her little children" raises the issue of who is actually, in that case, feeding her children – a question which the painting probably does not want us to ask, but which might well occur to an enslaved person who knew the typical patterns of an elite house. As K. R. Bradley observed, as much as some Romans may have formed emotional bonds with the woman who nursed them, "her availability as a nurse depended on her subject, inferior status and her manipulation by a superior party."⁴⁵ The romanticization of Pero's act in the painting, therefore, might be seen from the perspective of an enslaved person as yet another erasure of the real labor which went into maintaining the elite Roman family.

⁴³ Kaster 2005, 59.

⁴⁴ This is the theme of the diatribe by Favorinus quoted above (Gell. *NA* 12.1 ff.) but is an idea often found in discussions of elite mothering: e.g., Plut. *De liberis educandis* 5 (*Mor.* 3c–e); *Consolatio ad uxorem* 5 (*Mor.* 609e); Bradley 1986.

⁴⁵ Bradley 1986, 222.

The experience of the painting will thus differ depending on the viewer's embodied circumstances, whether male or female, enslaved or free, citizen or non-citizen, and so on. It will also differ depending on whether or how viewers choose to resist the stories they are told about sex, gender, and status.

One final point, however. I referred above to the infinite regression of the image's thematized interiority – that is, its emphasis of things that cannot be seen because they are hidden away, like the milk in Pero's body and the pudor of her character. Also unseen in this image, but underscored by the myth, is another potentially radical relationship of women to space. In the narrative behind the painting, there are two men who are fixed in location: Mycon, who cannot move from his prison cell, and the guard, who sees but cannot interact with the central tableau. Pero, on the other hand, is able to move between the world of the imprisoned and the free; in the same way that she represents a kind of bridge between generations, nourishing both children and father, she is also a bridge between the two spheres represented by the two male figures. Movement is, of course, also gendered. Patriarchy likes to see men as the movers, those who are able to shift easily from one place to another and remain master in all of them. Women are ideologically supposed to be fixed in location⁴⁶ – perhaps in order, as Irigaray would have it, to facilitate their consumption as commodities.⁴⁷ Certainly the Roman desire to situate the good woman in the domestic sphere trades on this aspect of patriarchal discourse. The myth of Pero and Mycon, though, offers a different understanding of how virtuous femininity may be mapped onto the world, as something which can move through space, carrying its power invisibly and beyond the reach of men. Pero's movement, moreover, offers yet another contrast with the story of Narcissus, whose inability to move away from the sight of his reflection is the cause of his death and transformation.

The painting of Pero and Mycon in Pompeii's House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto thus ends up subverting its own patriarchal impulse. Most scholars imagine that its placement was motivated by a desire to display the virtuousness of the household to the outside visitor, to underscore the pudor of the paterfamilias also celebrated in the political program in the street outside. This is a sensible interpretation, one which is supported both by what we know of the general Early Imperial culture in which it was created and by the ways in which the language of virtue was mobilized elsewhere by this particular politician. In this sense, the display of the painting attempts to elide the difference between men and women, to use domestic virtue to speak to civic life. The painting, however, refuses to allow this collapse; it insists on the interiority of virtuous womanhood and pulls viewers into the room so that they must experience the house from the inside out. This is not to say that there is a subversive message deliberately built into the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, that someone was attempting to spring a gendered joke on the unsuspecting viewer. It is rather to suggest that the design of this cubiculum, and its relationship to the space of the atrium, gets caught in the complexities of Roman culture's gendered choreography, which wants "the good woman" to be at once invisible and immobile within the domestic sphere and also a powerful public representative of the elite family and its values. This is both a material and a representational issue, one which frames the real,

⁴⁶ "[T]he mobility of women does indeed seem to pose a threat to a settled patriarchal order ... 'the masculine desire to fix the woman in a stable and stabilizing identity' ... may be tied in with a desire to fix in space and place" (Massey 1994, 11). See also Massey 1993, esp. 144–48.

⁴⁷ Irigaray 1985.

embodied experience of Early Imperial men and women, and also how that experience is discussed and pictured. Thus, gender in the Roman house exists in both the geography of actual female people and the imaginary world through which those people moved. By engaging both the viewer's physical movement and their imaginative capacities, then, the painting of Pero and Mycon in Pompeii's House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto offers us a new and different way of finding "women's place" in the Roman house.

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