Mars and Venus and Banqueting Couples

With the rise of Augustus and the Julio-Claudian dynasty, a definite shift appeared in the way Mars’ and Venus’ relationship with each other was perceived. Instead of conforming to the Greek tradition of Ares and Aphrodite being an adulterous pair, as recounted in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, Mars and Venus are portrayed as “the legitimate god-pair” (Lorenz, 150: legitimes Götterpaar) and what’s more “the ideal love-pair” (Strocka, 130: das ideale Liebespaar). Such representations of Mars and Venus can be found in a wide variety of places, but the wall paintings of Campania preserve the greatest number of them.

In studying the wall paintings of Mars and Venus found at Pompeii and Herculaneum, scholars, such as Katharina Lorenz, have identified three composition types which artists followed when creating the paintings: the *lectus*-schema, where Mars and Venus are shown in a bedroom, usually with attendants present, and Mars stands near and touches a seated Venus; the standing-model, where the gods both stand without touching; and the pyramidal-schema, where Mars and Venus are both seated, Venus leaning into Mars. Each of these compositional models, according to Lorenz, seems to have a specific, underlying tone: the *lectus*-schema implies legitimate (i.e. married) love; the standing-model implies cultic functions; and the pyramidal-schema implies erotic love. While I believe that Lorenz’s assertions are, in general, accurate, I feel that the pyramidal-schema paintings can be interpreted not only as implying erotic love, but also as embodying legitimate, conjugal affection.

In my paper, I hope to show that pyramidal-schema paintings of Mars and Venus are related to the compositional schema of paintings of clearly legitimate, banqueting couples, and as such, to show that the paintings of Mars and Venus also have the same implication of legitimacy as the paintings of the couples do. I will focus on the House of Meleager in Pompeii (VI 9.2), which has a pyramidal-schema painting of Mars and Venus and a painting of a banqueting couple in fairly close proximity to each other. By closely analyzing these two paintings, and the considering the other paintings in the area, I intend to prove that the Mars and Venus painting and the banqueting couple painting are clearly related to each other compositionally, and theorize that they might be closely related to each other, and the other paintings, thematically, as well.

Finally, having established that the pyramidal-schema paintings of Mars and Venus can be seen to embody both erotic and legitimate love, I intend to argue that paintings of banqueting pairs which have often been identified as men with hetairai (i.e. non-legitimate couples) could actually be depictions of legitimate couples, embodying both erotic love and legitimate love, just as the pyramidal-schema Mars and Venus paintings do.

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