IMAGES FOR THE BRIDE: THE CHASTELAINE DE VERGI FRESCO CYCLE

IN THE PALAZZO DAVANZATI IN FLORENCE

by

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This thesis addresses *The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco cycle in the Palazzo Davanzati, and how it communicated proper marital behavior expected of a fourteenth-century aristocratic Florentine newlywed bride and wife. In this case, the fresco was commissioned by Tomasso Davizzi upon the event of marriage to the intended viewer, Catalena degli Alberti. By placing the fresco cycle within contemporary Italian Renaissance marital imagery, one can see how the images were meant to display the virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience. The story does not provide a strong positive role model for the intended viewer, the bride. The Chastelaine is not married, and she is involved in a secret love affair. However, she is better guided than the Duchess. Therefore, the artist had to utilize contrapposto, or to situate opposites, in order to shape counter-role models for the bride. The Chastelaine was situated as a positive role model and the Duchess as a negative role model in order to communicate the three virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience. The result was a fresco cycle that clearly communicated proper marital behavior for the fourteenth-century Florentine aristocratic bride.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in memory of my grandfather, Wilbur H. Schneider, and great-aunt, Betty Jo Alger.
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I would like to take this opportunity to recognize two special members of my thesis committee: Dr. Tanja Jones and Dr. Mindy Nancarrow. To Dr. Jones, thank you for inspiring me to pursue my interest in this project. Thank you for your guidance. To Dr. Nancarrow, you have been so patient, understanding, and supportive throughout the program. Your guidance and confidence in me throughout the completion of this thesis is invaluable. You inspire me not only as a professor, but as a person of great integrity. Thank you both for believing in me.
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CHAPTER ONE

THE FRESCO CYCLE

The fresco cycle of *The Chastelaine de Vergi* in the Palazzo Davanzati in Florence, Italy is a rare surviving example of secular fourteenth century palazzo decoration. *The Chastelaine de Vergi* was completed c. 1390 by an unknown artist, most likely upon the event of marriage between Tommaso Davizzi and Catalena degli Alberti in 1395.\(^1\) Located in the second-story marital chamber of the palazzo, the frescoes represent the only extant example of a large-scale painted cycle dedicated to *The Chastelaine de Vergi*, a thirteenth century French romance, produced in the fourteenth century. *The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco cycle comprises the upper one-third of each wall in the trapezoidal shaped bed chamber and contains twenty-three scenes from the romance narrative. The bed chamber, *Camera della Castellana di Vergi* (Fig.1), is one of four rooms in the palazzo that is painted with frescoed wall decorations. All of the wall decorations consist of geometric designs and floral imagery; however, the *Camera della Castellana di Vergi* is the only room that also contains narrative imagery.

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\(^1\) Walter Bombe, “Un Roman Francais dans un Palais Florentin,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 53 (1911): 236. The book I purchased at the Palazzo Davanzati in Florence, Rosanna Caterina Proto Pisani and Maria Grazia Vaccari, eds., *Museo di Palazzo Davanzati* (Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa, 2001), assumes that the fresco cycle might have been commissioned on the event of marriage between Paolo Davizzi and Lisa degli Alberti, placing the fresco cycle in a date range of 1350-1359. However, this point has not been proven, and the majority of scholarship situates the origin of the fresco cycle in the marriage between Tomasso Davizzi and Catalena degli Alberti. 1390 is the most widely accepted date, beginning with Walter Bombe’s research in 1911.
The paintings of the Alberti and Davizzi crests in the bedroom represent the marital alliance between the Davizzi and Alberti families. Five years after Tommaso and Catalena married, Tommaso was executed for participating in a mass conspiracy against Maso degli Albizzi, a powerful Florentine ruler.² There is no mention in any scholarship about the death of Catalena degli Alberti or any children she might have had.

There is no surviving written documentation that specifically describes the conventions surrounding trecento or quattrocento frescoed interiors; however, Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) does mention in his treatise on architecture, De re aedificatoria (1452), that faux architecture, battle scenes, poetry, and landscapes are pleasing subject matter for a frescoed room.³ In the Camera della Castellana de Vergi (from the bottom to the top), the walls are frescoed with trompe-l’oeil wall hangings, followed by geometric patterns; and finally, scenes from The Chastelaine de Vergi poem arranged like a frieze, twenty-three episodes separated by columns and arches.⁴ Other contemporary frescoed rooms such as the Stufa da Bagno at the Castle Roncolo in Bolzano (Fig. 2), a camera at the Palazzo Datini in Prato (Fig. 3), and the Camera d’Amore at the Castle of Sabbionara d’Avio in Trento (Figs. 4) contain similar vertical arrangements depicting trompe l’oeil wall hangings, geometric patterns, and either narrative imagery or landscapes in a frieze-like arrangement at the top. Although not all contemporary palazzi and castles are frescoed exactly like the Camera della Castellana de Vergi, there appears

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to have been a common interest in painting trompe l’oeil wall hangings and narrative imagery during the trecento and quattrocento period.

The original text of *The Chastelaine de Vergi* poem was written in French between 1203 and 1288 by an anonymous poet. The *Chastelaine de Vergi* tells the story of the Chastelaine (the castle keeper of Vergi) and a knight who promise to keep their love a secret. The couple’s secret rendezvous occurs in the garden of the castle where the Chastelaine lives. When the Chastelaine lets her dog out into the garden, it signals that it is safe for the two of them to be alone. Unfortunately, a Duchess is also in love with the knight, invites him to her castle, and attempts to seduce him over a game of chess while her husband is away on a hunting venture (Fig. 5). The knight rejects the Duchess, and she vows to take revenge on him. Upon the Duke’s return, the Duchess confronts her husband, claiming that the knight raped her. The Duke’s and the knight’s bond is tested, and the knight must face exile or prove his innocence and reveal his secret lover. After much thought, the knight decides to reveal the secret love in order to protect the relationship between himself and the Duke. The Duchess then seduces her husband in order to discover the name of the knight’s lover. The Duchess plans a party where she alludes to the guests that the Chastelaine has a dog that signals for her lover. The Chastelaine is horrified because the secret love has been revealed and her virtue has been compromised. The heart-broken Chastelaine kills herself with a sword. Upon seeing his lover dead, the knight takes the same sword and commits suicide. The angry Duke then kills the duchess in front of all the party guests because of the tragedy she has caused. The Duke then goes off to fight in the Crusades where he will surely meet his death. Each of these key moments in the French narrative is depicted in *The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco cycle at the Palazzo Davanzati.
This thesis will address how *The Chastelaine de Vergi* narrative was shaped to communicate to its principal intended viewer, Catalena degli Alberti, henceforth referred to as “the bride.” The fresco cycle is unusual because the story was traditionally depicted in manuscripts and on French ivory caskets. I propose that the story was chosen for the subject of a fresco cycle in a bridal chamber because it allowed the groom to finance the presentation of aesthetically pleasing narrative imagery that also prioritized and addressed the social roles and expectations of his fourteenth-century aristocratic Florentine bride, the principal intended viewer of the fresco. I argue that this story was especially suited to address the bride through the use of counter-role models that reinforced the values, morals, and expectations of her public and private roles within the marriage. I further argue that the artist utilized contrapposto, or situated opposites, in order to set clear positive and cautionary negative role models for the bride. The Chastelaine is situated as the positive role model, and the Duchess serves as the negative role model.

Before going further, I would like to point out that the use of contrapposto was vital in order to communicate virtuous behavior to the bride. The Chastelaine is not a perfect role model for the bride because she is not married, and she has a private love affair. These two characteristics do not pertain to the bride because she is married, and she should not be involved in a private love affair. Therefore, situating the Chastelaine as the perfect role model and conveying the main virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience is problematic. However, the implementation of the Chastelaine as a perfect role model turns out to be successful because of the contrasting comparison between the two female characters generated by the artist’s utilization of contrapposto. The Duchess, the negative role model, commits numerous selfish acts which counter to virtue. This cements the Chastelaine as a perfect role model for virtue when the
artist juxtaposes the Duchess and Chastelaine and situates them as polar opposites. The artist’s use of contrapposto in order to situate the Chastelaine as a positive role model for the bride will be further discussed in chapter three.

There has been minimal art historical research dedicated to the fresco, and most scholars merely mention the fresco cycle when addressing another example of Renaissance quattrocento domestic imagery. Walter Bombe is one of two scholars that contributed significant research on this subject. In Bombe’s “Un Roman Francais dans un Palais Florentin” in Gazette des Beaux-Arts (1911) and “A Florentine House in the Middle Ages” in Architectural Record (1912), he wrote about the provenance of the palace, and gave further insight into the history of the families that lived there. He was the first to identify the narrative at the Palazzo Davanzati as The Chastelaine de Vergi. He also discovered that the text was translated into Italian by an unknown author c. 1310-1390. Bombe paralleled the Italian version of the poem to a French ivory casket, c. 1326-50, located in The British Museum (Fig. 6), concluding that the visual representation on the casket was similar to the French version of the poem. The Chastelaine de Vergi was a popular theme for French ivory boxes. There are six surviving intact caskets and three plaques that depict the French story. The French story was also illustrated in manuscripts. The Duke of Burgundy Spies on the Knight and the Châtelaine de Vergi in La Châtelaine de Vergi, fourteenth century, in the Bibliotheque de Rennes (Fig. 7) is one of four extant manuscript pages that illustrate this story. Although the story of The Chastelaine de Vergi appears to have been a common subject depicted on ivory boxes and manuscripts, its appearance in a fresco cycle is

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6 Elizabeth Morrison, Imagining the Past in France: History in Manuscript Painting, 1250-1500 (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010), 291.
unusual. Bombe concluded that the fresco was an “enigma,” a mere example of the influence of French medieval stories on Italian or Florentine domestic imagery.  

In Maribel Königer’s “Die Profanen Fresken des Palazzo Davanzati in Florenz. Private Repräsentation zur Zeit der Internationalen Gotik” in *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* (1990), she discussed the popularity of the poem and the arrangement of the narrative in the bridal chamber. Königer proposed that the topic for the marital chamber was chosen because aristocratic Florentines were fascinated with medieval courtly romances. She supported this by stating that the story must have been popular with Italian readers because *The Chastelaine de Vergi* was mentioned in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (c.1470). Königer also delved into the Italian version of the poem, noting that the characters names had been changed. She discussed the placement of the fresco in the bridal chamber, explaining that the length of the walls coincided with representations of time in the story. Longer scenes were placed on the longer walls; short, climatic scenes were placed on the shorter walls. Although Königer stated that she would address the viewer and the didactic meaning of the story, she did so only briefly, concluding that the story was meant to convey to the bride that she should keep out of her husband’s affairs.

To date, scholars have addressed textual and visual sources and the fresco’s narrative structure, the cycle’s didactic function is largely overlooked. *The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco cycle has not been discussed in terms of the principal intended viewer, the bride, who was the “receiver” of the messages encoded in the fresco cycle.  

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8 This thesis relies on language developed by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson and in their essay, “Semiotics and Art History,” *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (June 1991): 174-208. The “sender,” also addressed as the “author” by Bryson and Bal, is a go-between, one who facilitates the sending of the message. Bryson and Bal address this concept as
fresco within the context of contemporary marital imagery, comparing narrative and didactic functions of cassoni (painted marital chests), spalliera paintings (painted wall panels), and ivory boxes to the fresco. I utilize gender theory, historical information, viewer response theory, and narrative studies to explain why this fresco was chosen and how it was shaped to communicate important messages to the bride.

The bride, Catalena degli Alberti, was the intended receiver of the marital imagery that was produced for the bridal chamber. The pairs of cassoni were commissioned for the bride before the marriage took place, and were then triumphantly carried through the street in a public procession to the groom’s house after the exchange of the dowry and marital vows. The cassoni were placed in the bedchamber and were used for storage, seating, and sometimes as temporary beds. Cassoni and spallieri were extremely popular and women were surrounded by the imagery that featured allegorical, historical, and mythological stories in their everyday lives. The figures on these marital items were often painted in contemporary clothing to make the stories more relatable. The placement of the cassoni and spallieri in the bridal chamber, where the bride would have spent the majority of her time, acted as a reminder for proper behavior on a following: “The “author” is not an origin, but just one link in the chain. It is a link that cannot be dispensed with—the narration requires an agent to operate the chain that runs, treatise-go-between-author-work.”

9 I acknowledge that I depend on cassoni and spallieri paintings for this thesis even though they do not exist until fifty years after the completion of The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco cycle in the Palazzo Davanzati. I rely on these examples because it is the best evidence that can be utilized as comparisons to The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco cycle.

10 Mussachio, Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 70.

11 Mussachio, 71.

12 Mussachio, 70.

13 Mussachio, 75.
daily basis.\textsuperscript{14} Women had constant contact with the cassoni while taking out and putting back the many items they stored inside of them.\textsuperscript{15} Spallieri were strategically placed at eye level above the bed, cassoni, and cupboards.\textsuperscript{16} Constant viewing of the scenes represented on cassoni and spalliera during her daily chores allowed the bride to contemplate her prescribed role as chaste wife. Mythological and historical stories on cassoni and spalliera such as the Sabine women, Deianira, Lucretia, and Susanna were extremely popular subject matter that emphasized female chastity.\textsuperscript{17}

In examining the intended viewer, the bride, I will be utilizing reception theories formulated by Stanley Fish (\textit{Is There a Text in this Class?}, 1980) and Wolfgang Iser (\textit{The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response}, 1978). Fish’s and Iser’s theories addressing the relationship between the text and the reader have been adapted to the relationship between art and the viewer by scholars such as Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal (\textit{Looking In: The Art of Viewing}, 2000). For this thesis I rely on Fish’s and Iser’s idea that the meaning of a text is not fixed. Fish states,

Indeed, the text as an entity independent of interpretation and (ideally) responsible for its career drops out and is replaced by the texts that emerge as the consequence of our interpretive activities. There are still formal patterns but they do not lie innocently in the world: rather, they are themselves constituted by an interpretive act.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} Mussachio, 101.

\textsuperscript{15} Mussachio, 127.


\textsuperscript{17} Mussachio, 150.

\textsuperscript{18} Stanley Fish, \textit{Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities} (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 13.
Fish explains texts do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are formed by the interpretation of the reader. Therefore, texts can be interpreted in a variety of ways because each reader interprets a text differently. He goes on to explain that the way people interpret texts is determined by their community’s cultural and historical background, and that the readers are a product of that community. Fish explains:

Indeed it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. The thoughts an individual can think...have their source in some or other interpretive community, he is as much a product of that community (acting as an extension of it) as the meanings it enables him to produce.19

Viewer response theory is a vehicle for understanding why The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco was chosen for the bridal chamber. It also allows one to explore the cultural and historical factors that spurred the commissioning of the fresco. Although the bride was the principle intended receiver of the fresco cycle, she was not the only viewer. The fresco would also have been seen by the groom, the couple’s extended family, and servants at the palazzo. The focus for this thesis is, however, the bride. The responses of other viewers will be reserved for future study.

Gender theory and gender roles pertaining to the Italian Renaissance are also vital to this thesis. I rely on scholars such as Anne B. Barriault (Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany, 1994); Cristelle L. Baskins (“Secular Objects and the Romance Tradition.” In Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy, 1998); Judith Brown and Robert C. Davis (Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy, 1998); Caroline Campbell (Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence: The Courtauld Wedding Chests, 2009); Ruth Kelso (Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance, 1956); Dale Kent (Friendship, Love, and Trust in Renaissance Florence, 2009); Jacqueline Marie Mussachio (Art, Marriage, and Family in the Florentine

19 Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class?, 14.
Renaissance Palace, 2008); and Paola Tinagli (Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity, 1997). Tinagli documents the many private and public obligations of fourteenth-century aristocratic men and women. Newlyweds were pressured by society to live up to certain gender-specific expectations that were reinforced with role models represented on cassoni, spalliera paintings, and frescos.\textsuperscript{20} Obedience and sexual virtue were two main duties and moral responsibilities of the Renaissance bride.\textsuperscript{21} Grooms, meanwhile, were expected to marry well and have children that would bring prosperity to the Republic of Florence and to the family.\textsuperscript{22} Males dominated the private sphere of the home and the public streets of Renaissance Florence, whereas the virtuous woman was kept quietly in the home, attending to the needs of her husband and family.

The likeliest sender of the didactic messages in The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco cycle is, Tomasso Davizzi, the groom. Other candidates include the groom’s father.\textsuperscript{23} Upon the event of marriage, the groom would have had to prepare the bridal chamber, commissioning everything from furnishings to frescoed imagery.\textsuperscript{24} Musacchio states that frescoing the walls to simulate wall hangings was an easy and inexpensive way for a groom to prepare the bed chamber for his

\textsuperscript{20} Paola Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 21.

\textsuperscript{21} Tinagli, 23.

\textsuperscript{22} Tinagli, 22.

\textsuperscript{23} Anne B. Barriault, Cristelle L. Baskins, and Jacqueline Musacchio state that the groom or the groom’s father could have commissioned cassoni and spalliera for the bridal chamber, so it is entirely possible that one or both of these men had a hand in commissioning The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco. For this thesis, however, I will consider Tomasso Davizzi, the groom, as the main sender of the messages embedded in The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco cycle.

\textsuperscript{24} Musacchio, 91.
bride. The sender of the fresco had particular motives for commissioning this story-to instruct and remind the bride of her marital and civic duties. Decorations such as cassoni, spalliera paintings, and frescoed imagery reinforced ideas of female chastity, fidelity, fortitude, and bravery through the chosen narrative. The sender chose narratives that could be tailored to the specific message that he hoped to communicate to his bride.

Tomasso Davizzi was undoubtedly was familiar with The Chastelaine de Vergi poem. Chivalric romances were extremely popular in Italy, especially during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The French and Italians were tied not only through oral tradition, but also through political and economic networks. As papal bankers for the French court at Avignon, the Davizzi might have learned of the story through their French contacts. French chivalric stories spread to Italy and attained their greatest popularity in Tuscany and Padua. Italian authors saw the French language as a language of status. For example, thirteenth-century Italian scholar Brunetto Latini stated in Li Livres dou Tresor (c.1260-1267) that the French language was plus detiable, and plus commun a tous langages. The Italians were fascinated with chivalric culture,

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25 Musacchio, 91.
26 Barriault, 5.
27 Baskins, 24.
30 Vitullo, 4.
32 Vitullo, 4.
33 Vitullo, 3.
and the French served as a model for their poetry and art.\textsuperscript{35} Italian chivalric romances, based on French poems, were first written in Northern Italy in a language consisting of Old French and a Venetian dialect.\textsuperscript{36}

A document containing the Florentine version of the French version of \textit{The Chastelaine de Vergi}, written in 1861, is located in the Florentine Riccardi Library.\textsuperscript{37} Bombe believed that this document is based on Antonio Pucci’s (1310-1390) version of the poem.\textsuperscript{38} Pucci was a famous Florentine story-teller who supposedly sung poems in the streets. The Florentine version of the story is very similar to the French one. However, there are two main differences: the Florentine version has different names for the characters, and the Chastelaine commits suicide, rather than dying of sorrow.\textsuperscript{39}

Like the cassoni and spalliera, the narrative imagery in the fresco cycle would have been tailored specifically for the bridal chamber by the patron and the artist.\textsuperscript{40} The individual scenes would have been planned out and arranged to fit the space of the bedroom.\textsuperscript{41} The patron and the artist would have collaborated in order to ensure the fresco cycle communicated clearly to the bride, providing her with counter-role models. Marilyn Lavin’s analysis of narratives in \textit{The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches, 431-1600} (1990) allows for a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Brunetto Latini. \textit{Li Livres dou Tresor}, ed. F. J. Carmody, (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1975), 18.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Vitullo, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Vitullo, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Bombe, \textit{“Un Roman Francais dans un Palais Florentin,”} 249.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Bombe, \textit{“A Florentine House in the Medieval Age,”} 589.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Vitullo, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Campbell, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Campbell, 31.
\end{itemize}
structural interpretation of the fresco that highlights the bride’s viewing. Although Lavin’s work pertains to church mural decoration in Italy, the artist of *The Chastelaine de Vergi* used a wrap-around presentation similar to that of many chapels, including Giotto di Bondone’s Arena Chapel, c. 1305. Murals were designed to communicate with the public in order for them to understand the underlying didactic lesson. The arrangement of the design was not only for aesthetic appeal and ease of looking, but also to relay the message in a clear and concise manner, expressing the underlying agenda—whether it be political, social, or religious.42

The scenes from *The Chastelaine de Vergi* in the Palazzo Davanzati are similarly organized. The form is a continuous narrative that works with the trapezoidal shape of the bridal chamber such that the four walls coincide with four pivotal points in the story.43 The first wall, above the entrance to the bedroom, sets up the “background” to the story. This is where the viewer is introduced to the two main characters: the Chastelaine and the knight. The second wall’s theme is the Duchess’s acts and the foreshadowing of tragic events to come. The third wall, across from the entrance to the bedroom, is where the Duke takes action and seems to have prevented a tragedy from happening temporarily. The fourth wall, the shortest wall, is the tragic ending.44

Chapter two focuses on the principle virtues expected of a bride in fourteenth-century Florentine society: chastity, loyalty, and obedience. I suggest how the cycle communicated these expectations to the bride through comparisons with representations of these virtues on cassoni, spalliera, frescoes, and ivory boxes. I distinguish between marital imagery that highlighted a

42 Lavin, 6.


44 Königer, 268.
particular virtue and scenes that addressed several virtues. I identify which historical and mythological stories lent themselves to the didactic gender-specific needs of the bridal chamber, and how these stories reinforced each other through repetition in cassoni, spallieri, ivories, and frescoes.

Chapter three discusses how the story of *The Chastelaine de Vergi* lends itself in communicating the expected virtues of the fourteenth-century Florentine bride through the use of counter-role models. I propose *The Chastelaine de Vergi* was chosen over more popular narratives for the decoration of the marital chamber in part because it offered the sender the opportunity to display counter-role models for the bride. The fresco illustrates a prevailing conception—that women in general are untrustworthy. All women were prone to sin, and they must be well guided by a male member of her family or her husband. The Chastelaine is not a strong positive role model. She is not married, and she is involved in a secret love affair. However, the Chastelaine is better guided than the Duchess. In the fresco cycle, the negative model, the Duchess, heightens the character of the Chastelaine through contrapposto; the few virtuous acts the Chastelaine displays are heightened when compared to dissolute acts of the Duchess. Thus, the Chastelaine becomes a positive role model. The counter models in *The Chastelaine de Vergi* are of particular interest because they allowed the bride to compare and contrast the virtuous Chastelaine to the corrupt Duchess. In order to develop this theory, I will compare and contrast scenes in the cycle in order to show how the story was shaped to clearly communicate virtues that the bride should emulate. The fresco will be considered in the context of communicating the virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience to the bride through the use of counter-role models. I will also show that the fresco served as a warning for the bride: the Duchess’s actions should not be emulated because there are tragic consequences.
This thesis contributes to the existing scholarship on *The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco cycle in the Palazzo Davanzati by offering the first extended analysis of the didactic function of the imagery. The thesis offers that the imagery was shaped by Tommaso Davizzi for the intended viewer, Catalena degli Alberti, in order to convey to her the way a fourteenth-century Florentine aristocratic wife should behave. By situating the fresco among contemporary marital imagery, one can come to understand why the *The Chastelaine de Vergi* was elected for the decoration of a bridal chamber.
CHAPTER TWO

THE FRESCO CYCLE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY MARITAL IMAGERY

This chapter addresses the principle virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience expected of a bride and wife in fourteenth-century aristocratic Florentine society. These virtues were highlighted through shortened forms of biblical, historical, allegorical, courtly, and contemporary narratives and were depicted on cassoni, spallieri paintings, and ivory boxes placed in Florentine bridal chambers. This chapter situates *The Chastelaine de Vergi* frescoes within the context of didactic imagery intended for the domestic interior. Further, it demonstrates the cycle’s uniqueness in its portrayal of the entirety of the story with the inclusion of counter-role models.

Grooms would purchase items such as cassoni, spallieri paintings, and ivory boxes for the marital chamber, to celebrate virtues and family honor. Tommaso Davizzi conveyed the virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience to his bride, Catalena degli Alberti, through *The Chastelaine de Vergi* courtly narrative fresco represented in the Palazzo Davanzati. The stories represented in contemporary marital imagery and *The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco could communicate one or multiple virtues, as seen in the examples provided in this chapter.

The virtues expected of women in Renaissance culture were developed from the idea that when women were not properly instructed by men, trouble and tragedy ensued. This idea is a
religious one, stemming from the book of Genesis. Eve was made from the crooked expendable rib of Adam. Because the rib was crooked, the nature of Eve (and thus women in general) is also crooked. Eve was seen as the weaker sex, someone who was not only physically, but mentally weak. Because Eve was the one who was tempted by the serpent and influenced Adam to partake of the forbidden fruit, men had to be careful to contain women and make sure they were under proper control. A wife that was not monitored properly would pose a danger to her husband, damaging his inherently virtuous nature.

Praising men for their dignity and goodness was a prominent idea promoted by writers during the Renaissance. The notions of self-expansion and realization for men were mostly secular, based on the Renaissance humanist perspective and ancient Roman philosophy. On the other hand, the role of women and what virtues they should embody were mostly religious. Ruth Kelso writes, “In renaissance theory [the] woman’s place in the scheme of things depends primarily upon the qualifications seen in her or assigned to her.” These qualifications, or virtues, were essentially Christian: chastity, modesty, and obedience, as well as constancy and prudence—to name but a few.

The value placed on virtue in women was pan-European, but it was applied most especially to the wealthy classes of women. Aristocratic men wanted to make sure that their wives and daughters were not influenced by the potential dangers of the outside world in order to

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46 Kelso, 23.

47 Kelso, 23, 36.

48 Kelso, 23.

49 Kelso, 36.
protect their chastity. It was important for the aristocratic woman to be virtuous and chaste so that she could marry and have children in order for the state and family to be prosperous. On the other hand, lower class women had to work as wet-nurses, maids, and prostitutes. They were exposed to the male-dominated streets of Florence, making them susceptible to dangerous situations that could damage their reputation. The Florentine situation in the Renaissance differed because Italy was divided into city-states. The aristocratic class lived in palazzi, rather than at court, and it was feared that aristocratic women could be more exposed to outside influences. Aristocratic women in Florence during the fourteenth century were largely confined to their homes, and they were controlled as far as where they could go in the public sphere. The separation of private from public spheres with the consequent seclusion of women originated out of the desire to protect a woman’s chastity and to avoid exposure to the dangers lurking in the world outside.

The virtues expected of a Florentine aristocratic wife were expounded in sermons and moralizing literature and novels. Bernardino of Siena, an Italian priest, addressed sexual conduct in marriage in his sermons delivered in Siena and Florence in the 1420s (Prediche Volgari sul Campo di Siena, 1427). He stated that the wife needed to control the amount of sex her husband had with her, and she must remain chaste and modest at all times. Italian humanist and historian Matteo Palmieri wrote Vita Civile (1435-1440) which urged parents to protect their

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51 Musacchio, 84.


53 Rocke, 155.
daughters’ virginity by keeping them at home; otherwise, they might be prone to wickedness.\textsuperscript{54} Leon Battista Alberti also addressed the ideal household and the expectations of an Italian Renaissance wife in his treatise, \textit{I Libri della Famiglia} (1435).

Chastity was certainly the principal female virtue promoted by the Church and in moralizing literature. A chaste bride was one whose chastity and sexual integrity remained intact before as well as after marriage. Before a woman was married, chastity consisted of virginity and separation from the male dominated streets of Florence. Female chastity was the basis of a family’s honor, and it was guarded by her male family members. Women were viewed as essential to making alliances between powerful aristocratic families. After marriage, chastity consisted of the bride’s loyalty and obedience to her husband, along with separation from the public sphere. The bride was also expected to ensure that the sexual acts were performed under the proper circumstances, for the sole purpose of procreation.\textsuperscript{55}

Chastity was extremely important because it ensured the legitimacy of children, especially male heirs. Husbands and fathers had to keep daughters and wives under control precisely because women were viewed as weak, lustful, and inferior to men in all ways.\textsuperscript{56} Baldassare Castiglione reinforces chastity for the legitimacy of a bride’s heirs in \textit{The Book of the Courtier} (1528) when Gaspare Pallavicino states,

\begin{quote}
Therefore… it is wisely ordained that women are allowed to fail in all other things without blame, to the end that they might be able to devote all their strength to keeping themselves in this the virtue of chastity; without which their children
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{54} Rocke, 152.

\textsuperscript{55} Rocke, 156.

\textsuperscript{56} Rocke, 151.
would be uncertain, and that tie would be dissolved which binds the whole world by blood and by the natural love of each man for what he has produced.57

It is clear that a woman’s chastity in fourteenth-century Florentine aristocratic society was worth more than beauty or money. Keeping the sacrament of marriage, producing legitimate heirs, and a woman’s chastity were critical to ensure her security.

Marital imagery reinforcing the virtue of chastity was represented on cassoni, spalliera paintings, and ivory boxes. Francesco di Giorgio Martini’s The Triumph of Chastity (1463-1468), cassone panel, tempera on wood (Fig. 8) was commissioned upon the event of marriage between the Sienese aristocratic Gabbrielli and Luti families in 1464.58 The subject is taken from Trionfo della Pudicizia (1351-1374)59, an allegorical poem written by the contemporary Italian humanist poet Francesco Petrarch. Although there are six parts to the poem, only one scene is represented on the cassone. The Triumph of Chastity emphasized the importance of the sanctity of marriage and the consequences of not maintaining chastity in marriage to the bride.60 On the cassone, the enthroned personification of Chastity rides in a carriage drawn by two unicorns. Dressed in rich clothing, Chastity is located above all of the other figures in the panel seated on a throne protected by a canopy. This representation of Chastity enthroned is similar to contemporary representations of the Virgin Mary sitting on a bed or throne with a canopy; thus, the image referencing Church teachings. The rich procession also references contemporary


59 Trionfo della Pudicizia translates from Italian to English as Triumph of Chastity.

marital procession from the bride’s home to the groom’s home. Chastity’s carriage is drawn by two unicorns, representing virginity. The bound Cupid, on the other hand, has been degraded. He is naked and his wings have been clipped. His eyes are cast downward, and he walks alone towards Chastity’s temple. On either side of the panel are two swans, each holding a coat of arms, one representing the Gabbrielli family, the other representing the Luti family. The panel communicates the superiority of chastity over love, and the two families will be united by the bride’s chastity in marriage.

Chastity also established the way an aristocratic woman was viewed by members of the Florentine republic. The most common insults directed at women centered on their sexual integrity. The way members of fourteenth-century Florentine society viewed a woman shaped her public identity and the way she experienced life. How a woman behaved sexually not only defined her, it also defined the males in her family. Paola Tinagli explains a woman’s chastity was the hub of society noting:

For the families of the Florentine mercantile elite, women’s virtuous behavior was not a separate concern, which regarded a supposedly private and separate sphere of life: together with men’s virtu civili, it was at the root of social life. In the ideal picture of a well-ordered society, both men and women contributed to the stability and to the good organization of the city.


63 Strocchia, 55.

64 Rocke, 151.

65 Latin for “civic virtue”

66 Tinagli, 35.
Master Charles III of Durazzo’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*, painted c. 1400 in Florence (Fig. 9), depicts an ancient Roman story from *Ab urbe condita* I (58-60) by Livy. In the story chastity is demonstrated by a selfless act, sacrificing one’s own life for the good of the Roman Republic and to protect a family’s honor. The panel depicts a shortened form of the story: first, Tarquin is shown on a bed with Lucretia; second, Lucretia writes a letter; third, Lucretia kills herself; and finally, Tarquin leaves the kingdom. Although the painted panel does not show the story in its entirety, the viewer is provided with the main events of the story. The depiction of a woman in a bed with a man followed by a suicide would be warning enough for a bride. The scene would convey to the bride that when a woman’s chastity was compromised, there were consequences. When Lucretia committed adultery (forced or not), she took her own life in order to protect her chastity and her family’s name.67

Ancient Roman stories did not always end as tragically, and the evil deeds of men were addressed. Domenico di Michelino’s cassone panel fragment depicting *Susanna and the Elders*, 1460-1475 (Fig. 10), is an example of chastity prevailing over evil. The painting from a biblical narrative depicts a nude Susanna in a bath being accosted by two elderly men. Susanna reaches out for help, but there is nobody to there to witness the act. The scene is climactic and clear. A woman should not be left alone; otherwise, her chastity is questionable. The enclosed garden references contemporary depictions of the Virgin as seen in Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation*, c. 1438-1447, fresco (Fig. 11) where the garden is indicative of her purity. The dramatic scene communicates the crucial imperative of female chastity. Chastity is the ultimate indicator of purity, and it dictates the honor of the men in a bride’s family.

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67 Baskins, 148.
Loyalty was the second most important virtue expected of a bride. Aristocratic families prioritized group, or clan, over the individual, and women knew that they must act in ways that contributed to the success of their husbands and families. Upper-class men and women were obliged to clans, including other aristocratic families. Loyalty to family and clan was put before individual needs. Aristocratic men had to participate in state administration, and the choices they made had a direct effect on public life because they dominated everything from daily rituals to confraternity processions, guilds, ceremonies, games, and contests. When an aristocratic woman married, she was expected to support her husband and remain loyal to her new clan by serving as a moral exemplar for the public. Scholar Merry E. Wiesner states, “Marriage not only brought a woman into a relationship with her husband, but also with her husband’s family, and often a new neighborhood and community.” Clan loyalty was necessary to maintain family honor and obtain family alliances. Marriages were not for the purpose of love; rather, women were expected to tolerate an incompatible marital partner for the sake of loyalty to family, clan, and ultimately, the Florentine Republic.

Loyalty is exemplified by the popular ancient Roman story, Rape of the Sabines, as recorded by Livy and Plutarch in Parallel Lives II (1st century). Bartolomeo di Giovanni’s cassone panel depicting Rape of the Sabines, 1488 (Fig. 12) exemplifies chastity and clan loyalty. The kidnapping of Sabine women by Roman men at a banquet is portrayed on the cassone panel. The composition is full of swirling figures of men picking up or dragging women. Some women cry out for help, while others appear to go willingly. The imagery reminded the

68 Davis, 24.

69 Tinagli, 21.

70 Merry E. Wiesner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe (New York: Cambridge University Press 1993), 60.
intended viewer, the bride, that she must be loyal to her husband and his clan. The Sabine women were separated from their families and joined new ones, just like the Florentine bride on her wedding day. The Sabine women accepted their fate for the good of the tribe, and their example reminded the bride she must accept her fate for the good of her husband and clan.

The Sabines and Romans are shown reconciling in Jacopo del Sellaio’s spalliera panel depicting *Reconciliation of the Romans and the Sabines* (Fig. 13). In the center of the composition, we see a group of women clutch their children closely flanked by Romans and Sabines. The women appear to discuss their future with their Sabine kinsmen and their new Roman husbands. On the left side of the panel, a woman appears to converse with her father, and she gently offers him a chance to hold his grandchild. The two tribes are armed, but the general tone appears peaceful. The women, despite being taken from their homes, remained loyal to their Roman husbands even after reuniting with their former kinsmen. The women represent the virtue of loyalty because they put the needs of their Roman husbands and clan in front of their own, and the result was a prosperous Roman empire.

Paolo da Visso’s cassone panel (1440) depicts the contemporary poem *Teseida* (c. 1340-41) by Giovanni Boccaccio and reinforces these messages. The first scene (Fig. 14) depicts an armed Hippolyta, head of the Amazon tribe, sitting in a carriage surrounded by men. The second scene (Fig. 15) depicts Hippolyta, now stripped of her armor, in the company of Theseus, the king of Athens, and his men. The third scene (Fig. 16) depicts Hippolyta in a dress sitting outside while the men converse inside. Although the viewer is not provided with the entirety of the story, it is obvious that a woman, formerly dressed as a man, has been tamed by men. The cassone panel reinforced the idea that men were in charge of women, and it was a male responsibility to put women in their place. Hippolyta and her tribe embody loyalty, but also chastity. Hippolyta
marries Theseus and submits to her husband. She becomes a disciplined, loyal wife who will bear heirs for the survival of Athens.

The third virtue expressed in fourteenth-century Florentine marital imagery was obedience. Obedience was required of a daughter and bride. Women were perceived as in need of constant guidance because they were viewed as physically and mentally weak.71 From birth, a woman was taught to obey and be submissive first to the needs of her parents, and then her husband and clan. A bride should not complain, rather her role was to remain silent while receiving orders and critiques of her actions.72 Obedience to God and one’s husband was extremely important. Obedience was defined by submission, modesty, and patience in dealing with the ins and outs of everyday life, especially the molding of her ways to fit her husband’s instructions. Francesco Barbaro, a Venetian humanist, wrote De re uxoria (1415) which stressed the importance of an obedient wife. He stated: “The faculty of obedience … is her master and companion, because nothing more important, nothing great can be demanded of a wife than this.”73

After a couple married, the husband instructed the wife on her duties in the household. She was responsible for all domestic duties, from the care of children and household goods to the supervision of the servants.74 In Book III of Alberti’s I Libri della Famiglia (1435), Alberti’s friend, Giannozzo, explains how he instructed his wife so that she would obey him:

71 Tinagli, 23.
72 Kelso, 44.
74 Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli, eds. Women in Italy, 1350-1650, a Sourcebook: Ideals and Realities (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 152.
After my wife had been settled in my house a few days, and the longing of her mother and her family had begun to fade, I took her by the hand and showed her around the whole house. I told her that the loft was the place for grain and that the cellar was for wine and wood. I showed her where things for the table were kept, and there were no household goods in the entire house whose place and purpose my wife had not learnt...I also ordered her, if she ever came across any writing of mine, to give it to me at once...I often used to express my disapproval of bold and forward females who try too hard to know about things outside the home or about the concerns of their husbands and of men.\(^75\)

The bride’s obedience to her husband’s orders was extremely important. The orders were specifically designed by the husband for his new bride upon her moving into his palazzo after marriage. Other family members might have occupied the husband’s home, such as the groom’s mother or sisters, but the household’s peace and prosperity rested on the wife’s shoulders. She was to appease her husband in every way. Ruth Kelso states, “Short of disobedience to God’s commands, obedience meant complete surrender of the woman’s will and desires to her husband’s wishes.”\(^76\) The bride was to be humble towards her husband, take care of the house, and to confront the husband with his sins in a very sweet and gentle way so he wouldn’t commit the sin again.\(^77\)

The spalliera painting depicting The Story of the Patient Griselda by the Master of the Story of Griselda, c. 1493-1500 now at The National Gallery in London depicts a story from Boccaccio’s Decameron (1349-1352) In the first panel (Fig. 17), “Meeting and Marriage of Griselda and Gualtieri,” Griselda is depicted on the left side of the panel as a maid. On the right side of the panel, she changes into rich wedding attire. In the middle, Gualtieri places a ring on Griselda’s finger. The sanctity of marriage implies chastity, loyalty, and obedience. In the second

\(^75\) Leon Battista Alberti, I libri della famiglia, ed. G. Mancini (Florence, 1908), 218.

\(^76\) Kelso, 96.

\(^77\) Rudolph M. Bell, How to Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 243.
panel (Fig. 18), “Griselda’s Trials,” a servant takes away a baby from Griselda’s arms. Griselda is then presented with a document and returns her ring in the center of the panel. To the right, Griselda is seen stripping off her rich clothing. At the far right of the panel, Griselda is seen in a shift walking away. Perhaps this serves as a warning that a woman’s place is not fixed, and she must be obedient or she will lose her position as wife and thus, her honor. The third panel (Fig. 19), “Reunion and Reconciliation,” shows Griselda sweeping and preparing for a feast represented in the far left side of the panel. On the right in the middle ground, Griselda greets the guests of the banquet. In the right foreground, she is seen talking to Gualtieri and guests at the end of the table. In the left foreground, Griselda and Gualtieri kiss and she sits at the banquet table. It appears that the couple has reconciled and the banquet is for Griselda and Gualtieri. In all three of the panels, Griselda has not appeared doing anything disobedient, and she appears to be faithful throughout the story. The informed viewer would know that the groom put Griselda through a series of trials to test her obedience including the exile of her children, a false annulment of their marriage, and stripping her of all her clothes and jewels. The panels relay the message that an obedient and loyal wife will be rewarded by her husband. Gualtieri brings back Griselda’s children at the banquet and proclaims that she can resume her position as wife because she was obedient to him despite her trials.  

The virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience are communicated in marital imagery with scenes from biblical, historical, allegorical, courtly, and contemporary narratives. In all cases, the artist communicated these virtues effectively by highlighting an important or climactic scene.

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78 Barriault, 149.
The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco cycle distinguishes by representing a comprehensive narrative of twenty-six scenes with the inclusion of counter role models, the Duchess and the Chastelaine. Chapter three will show that the counter models are heightened through the use of contrapposto. It will also show how the virtues discussed in this chapter were communicated in an extensive narrative with didactic role models. The imagery in the bridal chamber in the Palazzo Davanzati is extremely important in terms of communicating these virtues effectively in the context of marital imagery for the fourteenth-century aristocratic Florentine bride.

In the next chapter, I will propose that The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco cycle was shaped by the artist in order to communicate virtues through the use of counter role models. The counter models in The Chastelaine de Vergi are of particular interest because the positive role model, the Chastelaine, is of weak character. She has a secret love affair with the knight outside of marriage. Chapter three will discuss how the use of contrapposto made the Chastelaine appear virtuous when compared to the actions of the corrupt Duchess. The next chapter will show how the story was shaped to convey the virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience to the intended viewer, the bride, through the use of contrapposto.
CHAPTER THREE
THE USE OF CONTRAPPOSTO AND COUNTER MODELS IN
THE FRESCO CYCLE

As discussed in chapter two, the principle virtues expected of a fourteenth-century aristocratic Florentine bride and wife were chastity, loyalty, and obedience. These virtues were illustrated in narratives depicted on cassoni, spalliera paintings, and ivory boxes that were placed in the bridal chamber. *The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco in the Palazzo Davanzati represented an unusual choice for the decoration of a bridal chamber for many reasons. The Chastelaine is not an obvious choice as virtuous exemplar because she is unmarried with a secret lover. The Duchess is married, but her actions convey the opposite of what a newlywed bride should embody. Through their juxtaposition in the cycle, however, the Chastelaine appears as virtuous alongside the Duchess. This chapter addresses the artist’s use of contrapposto to portray the Chastelaine as a virtuous character when juxtaposed with her counterpart, the Duchess. The Duchess’s behavior, highlighted in twelve scenes, identifies the Chastelaine as an exemplar even though the Chastelaine appears in only six scenes. The unknown artist and the patron, Tommaso Davizzi, most likely worked together in order to clearly convey female virtues and the consequences of immoral behavior to the newlywed fourteenth-century Florentine bride, Catalena degli Alberti, through the arrangement of the visual narrative.

Chastity was the most important virtue a woman could possess. However, the Chastelaine’s chastity is communicated in only one scene, and even then this virtue is not
altogether clear because there is no corresponding action. The Chastelaine meets the knight with a chaperone, but this is not virtuous behavior as such until it is considered in contrast to the Duchess’s unchaste meeting with the knight. Scene two (Fig. 20) depicts the Chastelaine outside of her castle prepared to meet the knight in her garden. The Chastelaine is chaperoned by a servant who pulls the young woman back towards the castle, grasping her right hand. The servant puts her other hand on the Chastelaine’s shoulder, again, pulling her towards the castle. The Chastelaine reaches with her left hand towards the knight, but their hands do not meet.

In the original French text and the Italian translation of the story, there is no mention of a servant who guides the behavior of the Chastelaine in the garden. Rather, the two lovers meet privately. According to both the French and Italian texts, the Chastelaine sends her dog out into the garden in order to let the knight know that it is an opportune time to meet. In the fresco however, the dog takes on a more passive role. To the left of the servant, the Chastelaine’s dog sits on a ledge. The dog in this idyllic scene could represent a number of things: marital fidelity, melancholy, envy, or prudence. Because the Chastelaine is not married, and this scene does not appear to address melancholy or envy, perhaps the dog symbolizes prudence. Prudence would remind the viewer that a woman should “be careful to avoid undesired consequences” or to be “discreet.” This would be rather fitting because the couple promises to keep their love a secret. In any case, it is clear that the artist added the servant to the frescoed version of the tale in order to heighten the appearance of chastity to the viewer. The Chastelaine is attended and guided;


therefore her actions are virtuous. The Chastelaine’s meeting with the knight (even with a chaperone) is not inherently virtuous because they have a mendacious affair outside of marriage. However the Chastelaine appears chaste when compared with the Duchess.

Scene seven (Fig. 21) depicts the knight and the Duchess alone. The knight takes the Duchess’s hand, and the Duchess leads him towards her bedroom. The pair appears to converse, and they make direct eye contact with each other. The physical contact made between the knight and the Duchess is extremely improper. Agostino Valiero, Bishop of Verona, wrote about proper wifely behavior in his *Della istruzione del modo di vivere delle donne maritate* (1577):

> A married woman ought to be wise and know herself. She ought to know that she is subject to her husband and that the smallest thing may stain her honour. For this reason she must show her modesty through her behavior; through her eyes, by keeping them always lowered; through her mouth, by not taking if it is not necessary; through her clothes, by inspiring respect in men, rather than desire…

The physical act, hand-holding and the direct eye contact between the pair represents the opposite of what a chaste, virtuous wife was supposed to do.

Unlike the Chastelaine who is attended and guided by a servant, the Duchess, acts unwisely and her chastity is compromised. The Chastelaine does not make any physical contact with the knight, and she does not meet his gaze. When one compares the Duchess’s actions to that of the Chastelaine, the artist makes it appear to the bride that the Chastelaine’s actions are chaste and virtuous. The Duchess’s actions are not to be emulated by the newlywed bride. Rather, the intended viewer, the bride, looks to the Chastelaine as a model of virtue as a result of the artist’s implementation of contrapposto.

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81 Agostino Valiero, *Della istruzione del modo di vivere delle donne maritate* (Padua, 1744), 19, 21.
The peacock to the left of the Duchess and knight symbolizes several things: eternal life, the all-seeing eye of God, and pride/vanity.\textsuperscript{82} Eternal life and the all-seeing eye of God were usually utilized in religious imagery. A peacock that appears with a woman in a secular image could reference the deadly sin of pride.\textsuperscript{83} It appears fitting that the peacock could reflect the Duchess’s pride because although the Duchess recognizes that she is married, she puts herself in a compromising position regardless of the consequences. The concept of pride refers to a Bible verse from Proverbs 16:18 which states, “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before the fall.”\textsuperscript{84} It appears that the Duchess attempts to use her authoritative role as the Duke’s wife in order to pursue the knight, but he rejects her. The Duchess’s confidence and pride is crushed, and she is determined to seek revenge on the knight.

The identification of the Chastelaine situated as a model of chastity in scene two is heightened by the Duchess’s actions in scenes eight and nine. Scene eight (Fig. 22) depicts the knight and Duchess playing chess in her bedchamber. The bed is situated to the left of the pair, and it is tilted upwards in order to heighten its visibility. The bed in this scene is loaded with symbolism as far as chastity in marriage. The bed symbolized marriage, and it was most often the most expensive piece of furniture purchased for the bedchamber.\textsuperscript{85} The bed also symbolized one of the most important parts of a marriage celebration, the “bedding ritual,” where family members would put the married couple to bed and then celebrate the next morning after the


\textsuperscript{84} Tresidder, 435.

marriage was consummated.  

The mere idea that the bed in scene eight resembles the beginning of a marriage and the continuation of marital chastity throughout the marriage severely contrasts with the actions of the Duchess. The bride could look at her own marital bed and surmise that sex for procreation with her husband was proper chaste behavior as opposed to the adulteress actions of the Duchess.

To the left of the Duchess in scene eight, the knight has his hand on the chess board and appears to be contemplating his next move. The Duchess clutches her hands to her chest and stares at the knight. By the thirteenth century, pictorial narratives of a man and a woman playing chess symbolized love, which also implied unreasonable behavior. A man and a woman sitting together playing chess indicated a “dangerous encounter.” Patricia Simons points out the following: “In the Davanzati frescoes close to the time of the Italian poem, chess signifies evil seduction…The performance of chess itself, between a man and a woman, acts as a sign of sexualized dialogue or erotic exchange.”

In chess scenes such as this one, one player is usually distracted by the beauty of his or her opponent. The result of this can be tragic or triumphant. Contemporary examples of couples playing chess include a painting of Huon de Bordeaux and King Ivoryn’s daughter.

Liberale da Verona’s *The Chess Players*, 1470s (Fig. 23), shows a chess match between the Christian knight, Huon de Bordeaux, and the Muslim King Ivoryn’s daughter. The Muslim

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86 Wolfthal, 15.


89 Simons, 65.

90 Juel, 95.
king offers his daughter’s virginity to Huon if he wins the chess match. Huon struggles during the game, trying not to fall prey to the king’s beautiful daughter. The daughter cannot focus on the game; she becomes obsessed with Huon, and allows her passion for him to overrule reason. In the end, the daughter is rejected by Huon.\textsuperscript{91} Although Huon wins the game, he does not allow his unreasonable passions to overtake his mission as a Christian knight.\textsuperscript{92} Simons states, “This piece of furniture decoration [cassone panel] warns against womanly passion and celebrates masculine, especially upper-class and Christian, control, each epitomized in the stance the genders took over a chessboard.”\textsuperscript{93} Just like the daughter of King Ivoryn, the married Duchess allows her passion for the knight to cloud her judgment, and it compromises her chastity.

The role of the Chastelaine as a model of chastity in scene two is reinforced further by the Duchess’s actions in scene nine (Fig. 24). The climax of the Duchess’s seduction is represented in this scene. The Duchess grabs the knight and attempts to kiss him. She grasps his body with her hands, and looks him in the eyes. The knight looks away and attempts to pull free of her grasp. He puts his right hand up in a sign of refusal. The Duchess has taken her advances too far. Florentine humanist, Matteo Palmieri, addressed proper marital behavior in his \textit{Libro della vita civile} (c.1438). He states,

\begin{quote}
Once the bond of holy matrimony has been tied in this way, the husbands will have obligations towards his wife, and the wife toward her husband, and each of them will be required to observe the matrimonial laws. The woman’s greatest and absolute care must be both to refrain from copulating with another man, and to avoid the suspicion of such a repulsive wickedness. This error is the supreme betrayal of decency, it banishes honour, it severs the union, brings with it
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{91} Simons, 65.
\textsuperscript{92} Juel, 95.
\textsuperscript{93} Simons, 65.
uncertainty about offspring, pollutes the family, brings hate, and dissolves any connection.94

The Duchess has allowed her desires and lust to override over her role as a chaste wife. The physical contact made between the knight and the Duchess is extremely improper because it could raise suspicion of her chastity and ruin her honor.

The seduction scene represented in scene nine has a Biblical reference. The book of Genesis tells the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife.95 Joseph is a slave entrusted with his owner’s (Potiphar’s) household. Potiphar’s wife attempts to seduce Joseph, but he refuses her. Potiphar’s wife retains Joseph’s cloak when he flees from her advances. She then presents the coat to her husband and claims that Joseph tried to seduce her. Joseph is then thrown in prison. A chaste religious bride would have known this story from the Bible, and it was also illustrated on marital cassoni, spalliera paintings, and ivory boxes. Biagio d'Antonio’s spalliera painting of The Story of Joseph, c. 1482 (Fig. 25), depicts Joseph pulling away from Potiphar’s wife while she grabs his clothes and tries to pull him back to her. Just like Potiphar’s wife, the Duchess grabs the Duke and tries to get him to sleep with her. This behavior would be the opposite of the exemplum virtus, or model of virtue, a bride was supposed to present. Scene nine and the Duchess’s attempted seduction of the knight along with the biblical reference reinforce the Duchess’s immoral behavior. The unchaste actions of the Duchess, compared to the Chastelaine’s chaste behavior in scene two, reinforce the effectiveness of the artist’s use of contrapposto in order to convey the Chastelaine as a positive role model for the principal intended viewer, the bride.

94 Matteo Palmieri, Libro della vita civile (Venice, 1535), fols 74v-75r.

95 The story comes from Genesis 39:1-32.
The Chastelaine de Vergi fresco cycle identifies the Chastelaine as a model of chastity, but her loyalty appears unclear because she is not married. The French and Italian versions of the story do not mention who was the head of the household of Vergi. However, the Italian text of the story identifies the Chastelaine as the Duke’s niece. There are no scenes in the fresco cycle where the Chastelaine and Duke interact directly with one another. One can assume, however, that because she is related to the Duke, the Chastelaine owes loyalty to him and his household, the family clan. Therefore, the Chastelaine is disloyal to the Duke when she has a secret love affair with the knight. That love affair puts both her chastity and ultimately her clan loyalty in question. There is only one scene where the Chastelaine could be considered loyal. Scene twenty-two (Fig. 26) shows the Chastelaine dying after impaling herself with a sword. She is positioned on the left side of the scene, and the knight is shown impaling himself with the same sword to the right. The Chastelaine’s chastity is ruined because her secret love with the knight has been exposed. Her compromised chastity also jeopardizes the honor of the men in her family, in this case, her uncle. She remedies her actions by committing suicide, and thus, preserving her chastity and displaying loyalty to her family.

The act of suicide in order to preserve one’s loyalty, as discussed in chapter two, was frequently depicted on marital cassoni, spalliera, and ivory boxes. The Chastelaine’s actions reference the ancient Roman story of Lucretia’s virtuous death. Sandro Botticelli’s spalliera painting of The Tragedy of Lucretia, ca. 1500-1501 (Fig. 27), depicts Lucretia committing suicide after being raped in order to preserve her chastity and her family’s honor. To the far right, Lucretia has just revealed to her husband that she has been raped and takes her own life. She swoons backwards while her husband and other figures look on with horror. In the central scene, Lucretia is shown laid out with a sword penetrating her chest. Just like Lucretia, the
Chastelaine in scene twenty-two is shown swooning backward after she has taken her own life. The newlywed bride would have been familiar with the popular story of Lucretia, and the connection between the two stories would reinforce the Chastelaine as a loyal character.

The numerous scenes of the Duchess disloyalty vividly illustrate the importance of this virtue. The ultimate price of disloyalty is made clear when the artist juxtaposes the Chastelaine’s suicide to the Duchess’s death in scene twenty-three (Fig.28). The artist strategically placed the scenes adjacent to each other in order for the intended viewer, the bride, to be able to easily recognize the consequences of the degrees of disloyalty. This scene depicts the moment before the Duke kills the Duchess. The Duke has a knife in his right hand, and he grabs the Duchess with his left hand. The Duchess, now trapped by her unchaste actions, puts her hands up in denial and self-protection. The Duke stares directly at the Duchess, but the Duchess cannot quite meet his gaze. One should note that the Duke and Duchess are parted by a column, and this disrupts the action. One could conclude the column represents a divide between the Duke and Duchess, since this married couple’s bond of loyalty has been broken by the Duchess. Therefore, the Duchess must pay for her unchaste actions. The Duke must also take responsibility for not guiding his wife as well as he should have. To preserve the family honor, the Duke must kill the Duchess.

When one compares the Chastelaine’s actions in scene twenty-two to the ramifications the Duchess suffers in scene twenty-three, it is clear that the actions of both had tragic consequences. The Duchess was willing to sacrifice her loyalty to her husband by pursuing an inappropriate romance. As a result of the Duchess’s jealousy of the Chastelaine and her disloyalty to her husband, the Duchess is apprehended by her husband for causing the deaths of his niece, the Chastelaine, and employee, the knight. The Duke must kill his wife because of
prioritized clan loyalty. In turn, the Duke (his public reputation now ruined) must leave and fight in the Crusades where he will surely meet his death.

The Duchess has no choice as far as whether she lives or dies. Her unchaste, disloyal character has made her reputation irreparable. As a result, she has no choice but to die by the hands of her husband. This scene establishes the Duchess as the ultimate negative role model. One would conclude that it would be fairly easy for the intended viewer, the bride, to establish the Duchess as a negative role model. The Chastelaine’s death, by comparison, appears honorable because it can be compared to other chaste deaths such as that of Lucretia. Situating the Duchess’s death scene next to the Chastelaine’s further heightens the Chastelaine’s chastity and loyalty.

The Duchess’s disloyalty is also displayed in scenes nine, twelve, and thirteen. The artist utilizes these scenes in order to heighten the Chastelaine as a loyal character. The Duchess’s act of seduction in scene nine is not only unchaste, but also disloyal. The Duchess is married, and she attempts to have an affair with the knight. The Duchess puts her own lustful desires before her marriage, and ultimately sacrifices her family and clan’s reputation. The act of adultery, even attempted adultery, posed a threat to the clan because it was believed that offspring’s inheritance and interfered with society’s desire to identify a child’s patrimony.\textsuperscript{96} Disloyal women not only harmed their family, but also their clan and community.\textsuperscript{97}

The Duchess’s disloyalty is also shown in the culminations of scenes twelve and thirteen. In scene twelve (Fig. 29), the Duchess approaches the Duke after he has returned from a hunting venture. She is shown frantically exclaiming to the Duke that the knight raped her. The

\textsuperscript{96}Wolfthal, 161.

\textsuperscript{97} Wolfthal,162.
Duchess is not only lying to the Duke, but also publicizing her affairs in front of her husband’s attendant. The claim that the Duchess makes on the Duke’s employee, the knight, not only puts her at odds with her husband, but it also makes the Duke question the knight’s loyalty. The wife’s duty was to remain loyal to her husband over every other need in order for the family and clan to prosper. In scene thirteen (Fig. 30), the Duke and Duchess meet privately in order to discuss the Duchess’s accusations against the knight. The Duke is uncertain whether or not he should believe his wife, but because she is his wife he must take the matter seriously. He is forced to confront the knight for the sake of his family and clan’s reputation. One can easily surmise that the Duchess is not loyal to anyone but her selfish desires.

There are no instances in the fresco cycle where the Chastelaine displays obedience. The Chastelaine is disobedient to her uncle by having a secret love affair with the knight. Putting herself in a position where her chastity and loyalty could be compromised is disobedient. The Chastelaine is disobedient from the beginning of the story, so it might appear difficult to produce her as a model of obedience. Scene twenty-two shows the Chastelaine committing suicide in order to show loyalty to her clan. This act of self-sacrifice atones for the Chastelaine's disobedient actions. However, this scene is not strong enough to portray the Chastelaine as the epitome of obedience. For the painter and the patron this did not present a problem because the artist gives the viewer plenty of examples of the Duchess’s degrees of disobedience in the fresco cycle. Through the artist’s use of contrapposto, the Chastelaine appears to be an obedient character.

As discussed in chapter two, the father was responsible for his daughter’s training in regards to chastity and obedience. From birth, a noblewoman like the Duchess would have been taught that she would need to be submissive to her future husband. Silence, concession, and
obedience were what God commanded from women. The Duchess does not embody any of these qualities, producing her as a negative role model for the intended viewer, the bride.

Revisiting scene nine, the viewer would know that the Duchess’s attempted seduction not only compromised her chastity and loyalty, but her actions are completely disobedient to her husband. Kelso states,

An obedient wife will, of course, be chaste and modest, having no eye, ear, word, or desire for any other man than her husband; she will be patient under all possible burdens that God and her husband can lay upon her; she will not chatter when her husband wishes to talk or be silent; she will love him, with all his faults, and conform her manners to his…she will diligently look after his house and children, and will therefore not plague him by wanting to gad about; she will, in short, do everything as he would command her without waiting for commands and with good will and grace.

Scene nine shows the Duchess pursuing the knight- she obviously does not adhere to the marital command to forsake all others except her husband. The Duchess is not concentrating on her household and making it a pleasant place to live as an obedient wife should. Rather, her actions cause a disruption in the household which ultimately leads to the four main characters’ demise.

The Duchess’s disobedience is also shown in scene eighteen (Fig. 31). The Duke has found out that the knight’s lover is the Chastelaine, and the Duke promises not to reveal the secret love to anyone. This scene shows the Duke lying down in their marital bed. The Duchess is nude, and she puts her hands up as if she is offended. The Duke reaches out and puts her hand on her back. Although the Duchess’s body does not face the Duke, she turns her head towards him and looks him in the eye. The Duchess pouts and complains to her husband that he should trust her with the secret because she is his wife. The French version of The Chastelaine de Vergi poem describes this point in the story as follows:

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98 Kelso, 44.

99 Kelso, 97.
And when she had thus spoken, she again wept. And the Duke embraced and kissed her, and so ill at ease was his mind, that he no longer could resist his desire to discover unto her the secret. Wherefore he said to her: ‘By my soul, dear lady, I know not what to do, for so great trust have I in you, that I believe me it is not right to hide from you aught that I have knowledge of; but greatly do I fear that you will repeat it. Know then, and I now forewarn you, that if you betray me, you shall die for it.\(^{100}\)

After the agreement is made, the Duke reveals the secret and then the two make love.

Unfortunately, the Duchess does not obey her husband. The Duchess breaks with the understanding that obedience means that she should never reveal what is discussed between herself and her husband.

A common insult leveled at women during the Renaissance was the inability to keep secrets. An obedient wife would “keep her husband’s secrets and give comfort and counsel.”\(^{101}\) Instead, the Duchess decides to plan her revenge against the knight, and hold a banquet where she plans to reveal the knight’s secret lover. Scene nineteen (Fig. 32) shows the Duchess, having left her marital bed, to plan her revenge. The scene is a simple one, but one can tell that the Duchess is walking away from her marital bed. Her arms are raised and lead her forward towards her plans for revenge. The Duchess has decided to disobey her husband, and will bring her whole family and clan down with her. The Duchess’s actions when compared to the Chastelaine’s appear evil, so that by default the Chastelaine appears virtuous to the end of the fresco cycle.

*The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco cycle in the Palazzo Davanzati was created by the artist and husband in order to communicate virtues to the newlywed bride. The creation of the fresco cycle via the use of contrapposto and counter-role models was successful in communicating the three virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience. The Chastelaine’s character is passive and her

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101. Kelso, 104.
actions do not fit the qualities of a strong positive role model; further, her character could not stand alone in order to convey these virtues successfully. Therefore, the artist utilized the non-virtuous character, the Duchess, and situated her as a polar opposite to the Chastelaine. The end result was a fresco that heightened the character of the Chastelaine by showing the Duchess’s endless acts of unchasteness, disloyalty, and disobedience. By utilizing these two characters in this manner, the artist was able to successfully establish and convey to the bride what was considered correct and incorrect behavior according to the social rules for aristocratic women in Italian Renaissance society. These messages were further conveyed through the comparison of the images to other marital imagery of the time period, such as Biblical, ancient Roman, allegorical, and contemporary stories. The social and gender roles expected of a Florentine aristocratic, newlywed bride and wife were ultimately successfully conveyed through the artist’s use of counter-role models and contrapposto in the *Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco cycle in the Palazzo Davanzati.
CONCLUSION

*The Chastelaine de Vergi* fresco cycle in the Palazzo Davanzati is fairly large, comprising one-third of the top wall of the *Camera della Castellana de Vergi*. When I saw the fresco for the first time, I was amazed at how clearly the figures communicated the tragic story. The artist made sure that the figures’ gestures, along with their various actions and reactions were made plain to the viewer. The groom, Tommaso Davizzi, clearly wanted to communicate a message to his wife, Catalena degli Alberti. The overall message was for her to be a virtuous newlywed wife and, eventually, mother. Catalena degli Alberti is thus the primary intended viewer of the fresco cycle.

Through the application of viewer analysis theory and with an understanding of gender roles and rules of aristocratic Renaissance Florence, I was able to come to understand why this fresco cycle was placed in the bed chamber. First, I had to situate the fresco cycle in the context of contemporary marital imagery. From there, I was able to make connections between the fresco cycle and allegorical, ancient Roman, biblical, and contemporary stories on contemporary cassoni, spallieri, and ivory boxes. All of these items communicated one or more virtues that a bride should embody. These virtues included chastity (the most important), loyalty, modesty, obedience, and humility, among others. *The Chastelaine de Vergi* cycle displays the importance of chastity, loyalty, and obedience to the intended viewer, the bride.
The Chastelaine de Vergi story does not offer a clear positive role model for the bride and is thus like many cassoni, spallieri, and ivory boxes with cautionary tales. The Chastelaine is unmarried and she has a secret love affair, one that put her chastity in question. The Duchess, on the other hand, is undoubtedly a clear negative role model. The artist utilized contrapposto and was able situate the Chastelaine as a positive role model. The reason the artist’s use of contrapposto was successful was because the Duchess’s actions are so evil. The Chastelaine’s weak position as a positive role model is heightened when her actions are compared to the Duchess’s actions.

Scenes twenty-two and twenty-three, the climax of the story, are very clear in communicating the three virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience. These scenes juxtaposed side-by-side attest to the artist’s success in the use of contrapposto in order to establish clear positive and negative role models for the intended viewer. The suicide of the Chastelaine is very effective in referencing the ancient Roman story of Lucretia. The Chastelaine appears to redeem herself for her weak character. The comparison of this scene to the murder of the Duchess makes the Chastelaine appear even more virtuous.

Scene nine is very effective in communicating the Duchess’s evil character because it is comparable to the Biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. This scene is located near the second scene where the Chastelaine meets the knight outside of her castle. The Chastelaine’s actions appear chaste because she does not make any physical contact with the knight. However, she is unmarried and has an unpublicized love affair. However, the artist’s use of contrapposto is
effective because the Chastelaine’s actions in scene two do not appear as bad when compared to the Duchess’s actions in scene nine.

The entire fresco cycle communicates another important message. It is a warning to the bride that evil, non-virtuous women suffer grave consequences. When one enters the Camera della Castellana, the suicide and murder scenes (scenes twenty-two and twenty-three) are situated to the right of the fireplace. These images were strategically placed at an angle so that they greet the viewer as he/she walks through the door and into the room. The bride spent a lot of time in the bedchamber praying and raising her children. She was surrounded by these images every day. Entering the bedchamber daily, greeted by the suicide and murder scene, reiterated the dangers of not upholding expected marital behavior.

This thesis contributes to the existing scholarship on the fresco cycle because it offers reasoning why this particular story was chosen for the bedchamber. It also demonstrates that the artist’s use of contrapposto in order to situate counter-role models was effective in communicating the virtues of chastity, loyalty, and obedience. The groom chose to finance this fresco cycle because it was not only aesthetically pleasing, but also because it stressed the importance of expected marital behavior and wifely virtue
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