*“Unjustly Tormented by Love”:*

*Eros as a source of artistic inspiration in an unpublished poem for Gian Giorgio Lascaris, alias “Pyrgoteles”*

An artist in the tradition of the classical-inspired sculpture that flourished in the Po Valley and the Veneto from the fifteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century, Gian Giorgio Lascaris (c. 1458–1531) is now less known to scholars than figures such as Pietro, Antonio and Tullio Lombardo, Giovan Maria Mosca, or Antonio Minello, the other main exponents of the same artistic current.[[1]](#footnote-1) While much of the sculptor's relative obscurity is owed to the fact that Giorgio Vasari's *Vite* makes no mention of him, the greatest obstacle to general familiarity with his work is the nearly complete loss of his output. Of the seven creations that sources attribute to him, only one has survived and been identified with certainty: the marble *Madonna with Child* on the façade of the Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Miracoli in Venice (Fig. 1).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Yet despite the little physical evidence remaining of his work, we have ample written proof of the popularity Lascaris enjoyed among the humanists of his time, whose rooms must have been decorated with his output. Their treatises, epistles, and poems nearly always pay homage to the sculptor using the pseudonym “Pyrgoteles” – a reference to Alexander the Great’s gem engraver, whom the artist proudly invoked to demonstrate his study of the ancients, as well as perhaps his own Greek heritage and possible secondary occupation in glyptics.[[3]](#footnote-3) While the most eminent of Venetian intellectuals, Pietro Bembo, lauded a marble bust of Christ that he had probably commissioned from Lascaris himself (c. 1519?),[[4]](#footnote-4) it was a different sculpture by Pyrgoteles that attracted most of the contemporary humanists’ praise in prose and verse. This was the so-called *Venere Mastigophora* o *Flagellifera*,which probably represented the utmost expression of his learned sculptural classicism.

The probable inspiration for two bronze plates by Andrea Riccio of *Venere che punisce Cupido* (c. 1510–1520, Fig. 2), this work was in all likelihood a small marble sculpture that immortalized the goddess of beauty as she prepared to strike her divine son with a whip. According to the author of one of the most thorough studies of the work and literary mentions of Lascaris, the sculpture’s iconography did not reference a specific ancient figurative precedent, but combined suggestions from classical art with literary allusions.[[5]](#footnote-5) Specifically, the choice to portray the whipping of Eros makes the *Flagillifera* akin to Hellenistic-age statues and reliefs showing Venus about to beat the god of love with a sandal. The main textual inspiration for Pyrgoteles’s creation was likely Ausonio’s poem *Cupido cruciatus*, an ekphrasis in verse of a mural painting in which the goddess of beauty punishes the *enfant terrible* of Olympus, striking him with a wreath of intertwined roses for the cruelty and tricks to which even she herself has fallen victim (lines 79–92).

The *Flagillifera* might be the subject of a pair of encomiastic references in the erotic antiquarian tale *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), and Pomponio Gaurico mentions it in the chapter on famous sculptors of *De Sculptura* (1504) as a work that brought fame to its creator. However, the earliest known mention of the sculpture is from a poem in elegiac couplets by the Ferrarese humanist Battista Guarini, first printed in Modena in 1496 as part of his collection of Latin verse, *Poema divo Herculi Ferrariensium duci dicatum. Bucolicum carmen.*[[6]](#footnote-6) In the epigram, entitled *Signum Veneris Cupidinem verberantis*, the voice of the viewer-poet raises a series of questions as to why Venus would want to whip the naked body of little Cupid. Without reaching a definitive answer, the author suggests various possible explanations for the statue’s iconography. He hypothesizes, for example, that the goddess wants to punish her son for having played some role in having her and her lover Mars caught in the act and captured in her jealous husband Vulcan’s net,[[7]](#footnote-7) or alternatively, that she is trying to prove how a whipping could alleviate heartache. Whatever the rationale for the subject matter, the author adds that he fears the wrath of Venus, and still burns with the love unleashed by Cupid, despite the blows inflicted upon him. He ends the poem canonically with praise for the modern artist, superior to the ancients, in lines that describe Pyrgoteles’s work as better than both the *Aphrodite Anadyomene* painted by Apelles and the *Aphrodite of Knidos* sculpted by Praxiteles.

The format of a series of questions arising in the viewer’s mind while viewing an artwork of unusual iconography, which underlies Battista Guarini’s poem and is rooted in the ancient Greek epigrams of the *Planudean Anthology,*[[8]](#footnote-8)also characterizes an unpublished Latin poem that Antonio Tebaldeo dedicated to the *Venere Flagillifera.* We find the poem in a section containing works by Guarini in one of Angelo Colocci's *Epigrammatari*, that is, one of the monumental manuscript collections of ancient and modern verse that this central figure of Roman cultural life in the early Cinquecento assembled in the 1530s as a sort of all-time “greatest hits” of Latin epigrammatic poetry:[[9]](#footnote-9)

“Quae cedit Venus est, Amor est qui vapulat, auctor

 Pirgoteles; causam si petis, ira fuit:

Sculptor enim, inmerito vexatus Amore (videret

 Dum se non illi viribus esse parem)

Opprobrium hoc finxit, puero quod convenit, et quod

 Verum.” Haec dixissem, ni tibi credideras.

(“She who strikes is Venus, Love is the one beaten, the creator Pyrgoteles; if you ask the reason [for the work], it was anger: indeed, the sculptor, unjustly tormented by Love (because he saw he was not equal to him in strength), represented this anguish, because it befits a child, and because it is real.” I would have told you these things, if you had not believed your eyes.)

If, as the inclusion of Battista Guarini’s poem in a volume dedicated to Ercole d'Este suggests, Pyrgoteles conceivably sculpted the work during an otherwise undocumented stay in the court of Ferrara,[[10]](#footnote-10) we can be fairly sure this occurred before the summer of 1493. In July of that year, Tebaldeo left his native city, not to return until five years later, and we know that it was his enduring habit to write “spur of the moment” commentary in verse on major events in the contemporary artistic scene.[[11]](#footnote-11) Whatever the exact chronology of the *Flagillifera* and of the epigram published here, Tebaldeo’s couplets show that they are modeled, like Guarini’s, on various texts in the *Paludean Anthology.*

In particular, the ancient epigrammatic style of posing questions about the iconography of the artwork in question is combined here with the memory of four Hellenistic or Byzantine poems on various depictions of the cruel son of Venus. On the one hand, the theme of punishing the god of love “in effigy” is highly reminiscent of the texts now cataloged as *Greek Anthology* 16.194 – an anonymous couplet describing the transformation of a bronze statuette of Eros into a frying pan as a fitting punishment for one who inflames hearts with destructive passions, and 195, by a certain Satyrus who, on the subject of a depiction of Eros chained to a column, argued that the powerful god had already irremediably enchained the artist’s heart. On the other hand, the motif of an intimate sentiment of love as the fundamental inspiration for an artwork – quite popular in anecdotes and in the artistic literature of the early modern period[[12]](#footnote-12) – likens Tebaldeo’s epigram about the *Venere Flagillifera* to two poems on *Eros of Thespiae*, attributed, respectively, to Julianus, former prefect of Egypt, and to Simonides (*Greek Anthology*, 16.203 and 204). Through this literary recollection, Guarini turns his contemporary Pyrgoteles into a sort of neo-Praxiteles: the Planudean epigrammatists asserted that Praxiteles had sculpted his masterpiece as a reflection of his all-consuming passion for Phryne, and had, in fact, perfectly depicted the Eros who caused his suffering, modeling him after his own heart.

In a specular psychological-biographical reflection on the artwork, Tebaldeo interprets the creative act with which Pyrgoteles gave form to the torment of a boy Cupid as a chance for the artist to take revenge on the god who had overwhelmed him and afflicted him with great suffering. The audience for this exegesis of the *Flagillifera* is a generic viewer of the sculpture (addressed in the second person singular) who, the poet imagines, would otherwise be left doubting its meaning. The interrogative format regarding the iconography of a work of art thus references the author’s imaginary partner in conversation, while the author himself claims to have a “knowing eye” able to decipher the visual enigma, which we find – once again – in various epigrams of the *Planudean Anthology*.[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed, while it is fair to be somewhat skeptical of the reliability of Tebaldeo's poetic reading of the *Flagillifera*, his response to Pyrgoteles’s creation provides extraordinary evidence of a cultural phenomenon whose importance cannot be overstated. It is an emblematic example of how the vogue for classical-inspired figurative art, frequently fueled by the discovery of statues, gems, or cameos during digs taking place at the time in various places around the Italian peninsula and reflected most characteristically in the sculpture of the Po Valley and the Veneto, was tightly entwined with an aesthetic sensibility heavily conditioned by the rediscovery of epigrammatic poems in ancient Greek. As enthusiastic readers and often translators of these writings, a great many of which were about artworks centered on themes of human passions (love, madness, and heartrending pain above all else), many humanists also found in the poems a valuable key to understanding the classical-inspired creations of contemporary painters and sculptors. By celebrating these same creations in poems that closely imitated the Greek epigrams, they were shining a light on the foundations of the figurative language of contemporary artists, thereby fostering intellectual endorsement and hence popularity of their take on antique art.

1. On the artist’s biography and career see at least Anne Markham Schulz, *The History of Venetian Renaissance Sculpture, ca. 1400–1530* (London: Harvey Miller, 2017), 2 vols., 1, 199–202, as well as Francesco Piovan, “Notizie di Pirgotele,” in *Lontananze capovolte: nuovi scritti di amici per Raffaella Piva*, ed. Alessandro Pasetti Medin (Saonara [Padua]: Il Prato, 2009), 143–51; Andrea Bacchi, “Riflessioni e novità su Pirgotele,” *Nuovi studi* 9/10, n. 11 (2005): 105–116, and Chrysa Damianaki Romano, “Zuan Zorzi Lascaris Called Pyrgoteles: A Greek Sculptor in Renaissance Veneto,” *Thesaurismata* 28 (1998): 93–125, with further references. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the ancient Pyrgoteles see esp. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 7.125 and 37.8, and Apuleius, *Florida*, 7.5–7. On the modern Pyrgoteles’s Greek origins and possible kinship with the prominent Byzantine émigré humanists Janus and Costantino Lascaris see respectively Damianaki Romano, “Zuan Zorzi Lascaris,” 93, and Raimondo Callegari, “Sculture ‘in horto Bembi,’” *Nuovi studi* 2, no. 4 (1997): 41–62, 49. For the hypothesis that the artist was also active as a gem-engraver see Bacchi, “Riflessioni,” 108–09. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For the poem and an hypothesis of identification of the bust see ibid., 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Damianaki Romano, “Zuan Zorzi Lascaris,” 114–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These literary mentions of the work are quoted and discussed ibid. (for Gauricus and Guarini), 112–14; Callegari, “Sculture,” 162, and Bacchi, “Riflessioni,” 112, n. 3 (for the hypothesis that the sculpture was mentioned in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is the version of the famous mythologic anecdote that we read in Ausonius’s *Cupido cruciatus*, 84–85. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As a consequence of the immigration of scholars from the former territories of the Byzantine Empire, late-Quattrocento Italy had seen the critical rediscovery, widespread manuscript circulation and first edition (1494) of the *Planudean Anthology*, a poetic sylloge (assembled in Constantinople between 1299 and 1301) that at the time was the only known part of what today is the *Greek Anthology*. On this, see esp. James Hutton, *The Greek Anthology in Italy to the Year 1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1935), 1, 29–45, and 91–150; for a list of the poems that were included in the collection see *Anthologia Graeca*, ed. Hermann Beckby (Munich: Heimeran, 1965–1967), 4 vols., 4, 576–86. For relevant examples of ekphrastic epigrams with interrogative structures see, among others, *Greek Anthology* 7.421 and 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. XXXXXX. On this manuscript and Colocci’s other *Epigrammatari* see most recently Nadia Cannata,“Building the Canon in 1530s Rome: Colocci’s Epigrammatari as a Test Case,”in *Building the Canon through the Classics*, ed. Eloisa Morra (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2019), 146–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The hypothesis was first formulated in Leo Planiscig, *Venezianische Bildhauer der Renaissance* (Vienna: Schroll, 1921), 199, and has been more recently revived in Damianaki Romano, “Zuan Zorzi Lascaris,” 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For the chronology see Matteo Largaiolli, “Tebaldi, Antonio,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2019), consulted online: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-tebaldi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/>. On Tebaldeo’s poetry on artistic subjects see esp. Lina Bolzoni, *Poesia e ritratto nel Rinascimento* (Rome / Bari: Laterza, 2008), 51–53, 142–45, 157–67, with further references. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Ulrich Pfisterer, *L’artista procreatore. L’amore e le arti nella prima età moderna* (Rome: Campisano, 2018; original German version: Berlin: Wagenbach, 2014), 25–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a discussion of this concept as well as of relevant examples of epigrams see Simon Goldhill, “The Naïve and Knowing Eye: Ecphrasis and the Culture of Viewing in the Hellenistic World,” in *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture*, eds. Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 197–223. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)