



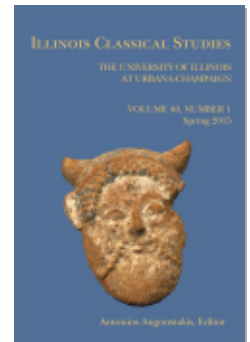
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The Literary House of Mr. Octavius Quartio

PETER E. KNOX

In the most prominent areas of the House of Octavius Quartio, the owner exhibited his interests in Greek and Roman literature and deployed poetic themes according to generic distinctions. The walls of the triclinium are decorated with a double frieze, depicting the life of Hercules and scenes from the *Iliad*. This choice of serious epic themes is consistent with other Pompeian homes. More uniquely, the garden on which this room opens displays scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Pyramus and Thisbe, Narcissus, and Actaeon. The House of Octavius Quartio therefore appears to have been home to a true fan of Ovid.

It is tempting to overestimate not only the general level of literacy in the Roman world but also the level of literary taste. Among the many who have succumbed to this temptation were early visitors to Pompeii who discovered snippets of their favorite classical poets, especially Virgil, scrawled on the walls as graffiti. For example, the ubiquity of Virgilian tag lines in Pompeian graffiti was an inspiration to one of the earliest investigators of Pompeian inscriptions, Christopher Wordsworth, a nephew of the poet. In the early nineteenth century, he wrote rapturously about the taste and sophistication of the denizens of ancient Pompeii: "I should much question whether all the walls of all the country towns in England would, if Milton were lost, help us to a single line of the *Paradise Lost*. Our Pompeiis do not yet exhibit the words of *our* Virgils, nor does it seem probable that they soon will."¹ But Virgilian tags were not the only lines that some Pompeians felt compelled to record on the plaster.² Nor were they the most interesting lines one might cull from Virgil. Even the most optimistic among modern investigators of the literary graffiti must acknowledge that there is something less than inspiring about the number of times one finds a version

1. Wordsworth (1837) 6; cf. Milnor (2009) 289. On Wordsworth's career and his early interest in ancient inscriptions and graffiti, see Pawley (2010).

2. Other surviving poets from whose works Pompeian graffiti artists drew included Homer, Ovid, Propertius, and Lucretius, among others; see the chart compiled by Cooley and Cooley (2004) 220–1.

of *arma uirumque* scratched out on a wall,³ and it is more than likely that these represent little more than the handiwork of idle schoolboys attracted by a blank space.⁴ It is therefore possible to take a very pessimistic view of the ordinary Roman's familiarity with literary texts, and yet that may not tell the whole story.

Virgil had become a school text well before Vesuvius erupted, and we can take it as a given that the story of the *Aeneid* was well known to any Pompeian who had attained even a modest level of education.⁵ And yet, the relative dearth of representations of mythological panel paintings in Pompeii that take the *Aeneid* as their inspiration has puzzled scholars ever since the study of the frescoes began in earnest.⁶ For reasons that will have to remain obscure, the residents of Pompeii apparently did not find the foundation legend of Rome to be suitable material to decorate their homes. But they did enjoy a great many other stories from the mythical past. And so for evidence about what other texts may have been known to readers who lived in Pompeii, texts that were not part of the curriculum, we must look to the evidence of surviving wall paintings that can be directly linked to literary sources.

It will never be possible to arrive at any certainty about the levels of literacy that prevailed in different regions of the Roman world because the data simply do not support such an analysis. And in any case, the situation of a relatively prosperous Italian city like Pompeii may have been anomalous within the broader context of the Latin-speaking West. Estimates of general literacy of no more than 20% do not leave much room for widespread familiarity with literary texts, but they do leave some.⁷ According to a recent catalog, of the roughly twelve hundred homes excavated in Pompeii, 184 have one or more rooms decorated with mythological panels.⁸ That amounts to about 15% of homes in Pompeii, which may not be pure coincidence, and may actually point to some significant penetration of literary culture into the life of the provincial city, if we can hypothesize that in most cases familiarity with the stories represented in these

3. Cf. Gigante (1979) 178.

4. Cf. Harris (1979) 261 and Knox (2014).

5. On Virgil as a school text in antiquity, cf. Clarke (1971) 20, Bonner (1977) 213–14, Kaster (1988) 45, and Morgan (1998) 94–100. On the familiarity of Pompeians with Virgil's works, cf., with caution, Gigante (1979) 163–83.

6. Cf., e.g., Helbig (1873) 1–7.

7. This is the more pessimistic estimate of Harris (1989) 259–87; for responses to Harris' book see the papers collected in Beard *et al.* (1991), which do not significantly alter the basic situation he describes, as well as Johnson (2010). In any case a distinction should be made between basic literacy and familiarity with literary texts, on which Milnor (2009) is instructive.

8. Hodske (2007); cf. Knox (2014) 38.

paintings derived from experience in literature. The subjects of those mythological panels strongly suggest that the literary works that left the most lasting impressions upon the inhabitants were not school texts like the *Aeneid*, but stories about gods and heroes taken from the classics of Greek epic and tragedy and Hellenistic narratives of love and change of the type best known in the Roman world from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁹ And in many instances it appears that the decorative schemes in the homes of Pompeii were carefully coordinated to reflect the owner's sensibilities in the arrangement of the paintings. The evidence can only be assessed on a house-by-house basis, while attempting to reconstruct the aesthetics that underlay each patron's choice of décor for his home. Among many potential focuses for such an investigation, one stands out by virtue of its clear attempt to evoke a literary background for its main zones of decoration, the residence that is now known as the House of Octavius Quartio (II, 2, 2–5).

The house is located in the eastern district of the city, not far from the amphitheater. Once known as the House of Loreius Tiburtinus from an early conjecture about the identity of its last inhabitant, it is now generally known as the House of Octavius Quartio, although neither name is likely to have been the actual owner's.¹⁰ The house is perhaps the best example of what Paul Zanker has termed an "urban villa," a type that he identified among Pompeian homes that adopted some of the trappings of the great country villas that dotted the coastline of Campania.¹¹ Much of the property is taken up by its extensive garden (Fig. 1), which is integrated into the floorplan in a singular manner. In place of a tablinum at the far end of the atrium, as is found in the most typical structures, there is a small peristyle that links the atrium with the largest room in the house on its eastern side, a trellised platform that overlooks the garden to the South, and a small suite of rooms to the West. This unique arrangement creates two distinct ambiances: the rooms connecting with the atrium and the peristyle, where the *paterfamilias* would engage with his business; and the more private area overlooking the garden. The physical distinctions in space are reflected also in distinctive decorative schemes, which quite clearly evoke identifiable literary contexts. If we can judge from the execution of the plan of the wall decorations—not necessarily an entirely safe assumption—the owner of this house had a serious interest in literature.

9. Cf. Knox (2014).

10. Castrén (1975) 184 demonstrates that the name Loreius Tiburtinus is a fiction and the house is now more commonly referred to by the name of Octavius Quartio, which was found on a seal in one of its tabernae; cf. Spinazzola (1953) 421–34.

11. Cf. Zanker (1998) 145–56, which incorporates his earlier discussion in Zanker (1979); see, too, Clarke (1991) 193–207 and Nappa (2007) 362–64.

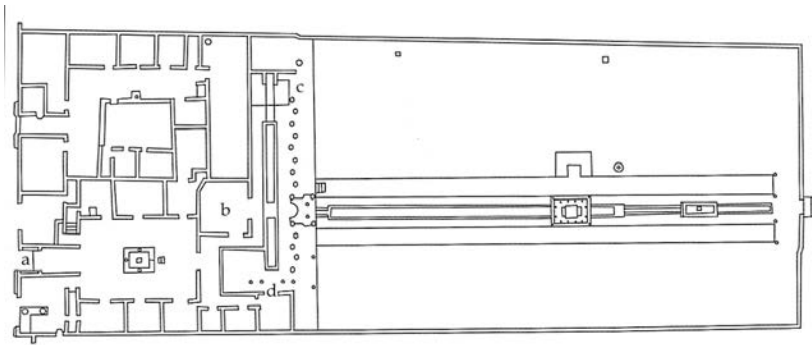


Figure 1: Plan of the House of Octavius Quartio (II.2.2). a) Entrance; b) Triclinium (Double Frieze of scenes from the *Iliad* and the life of Hercules); c) Garden Biclinium (Narcissus; Pyramus and Thisbe); d) “Isis room” (Diana; Actaeon).

The atrium and most of the rooms off of it were not as well preserved as the rest of the house,¹² but what we can know of the decorative schemes of those rooms suggests that they were less elaborate and not designed for show.¹³ A possible exception could be the large room, probably a winter triclinium, on the east side of the atrium, but too little survived of its decoration, even before the damage done since the excavations, to draw any conclusions. The better-preserved portions of the house, however, do suggest a carefully designed hierarchy of decoration. The largest and most important room has been generally identified as a triclinium, although it could also have been used as the main place of business, serving the function of the tablinum in a more traditional floor plan. It was accessed by two entries, the smaller one from the west wall of the small peristyle, the larger one from an opening to the south onto the terrace of the garden. The walls of this room are decorated with a double frieze, depicting epic themes associated with Troy (Fig. 2).

Epic friezes of this type, which were more typically associated with the Second Style, may well have been out of fashion for some time.¹⁴ But the paintings in the House of Octavius Quartio are datable to the years after 62 CE and they are

12. It has also recently been in the news after the collapse of a column in the garden, confirmed in a press release by the Soprintendenza Speciale per i beni archeologici di Napoli e Pompei, dated 12 December 2011. The house was excavated in three phases (1916, 1918, and 1933–1935), and, unfortunately, the atrium and some of the rooms off of it were seriously damaged by bombing in the Second World War; cf. Pugliese Carratelli and Baldassare (1990–2003) 3: 45.

13. Pugliese Carratelli and Baldassare (1990–2003) 3: 48–56; cf. Schefold (1957) 50–51.

14. Cf. Croisille (2005) 160.



Figure 2: Double Frieze depicting scenes from the life of Hercules (upper) and the *Iliad* (lower). House of Octavius Quartio (II.2.2). Photo Credit: Alinari Archives, Florence.

roughly contemporary with another unfinished epic frieze in the nearby House of the Sacello Iliaco (I, 6, 4).¹⁵ This suggests that the owner was in fact *au courant* with contemporary trends in home decoration. The smaller, lower frieze (ca. 30 centimeters in height) in the House of Octavius Quartio depicts scenes from the *Iliad*, beginning with Apollo laying waste to the Greek camp with plague and culminating in the ransom of Hector's body. Many details of its interpretation remain obscure, including the way in which the story was sequenced around the wall.¹⁶ Although the precise order of the scenes in both friezes depends upon one's conjectures about what was depicted in the missing portions, it is clear that, at least in the preserved sections, the narrative sequence of the Heracles frieze, which moves clockwise along the eastern wall to the southern, runs opposite to the lower Iliadic frieze, which moves counter clockwise from the south wall

15. On epic cycles in Roman painting, see Croisille (2005) 154–68. On this house in particular, cf. Pugliese Carratelli and Baldassare (1990–2003) 1: 296–98; cf. Simon (1990) 243.

16. The discussion by Aurigemma in the original publication of the excavation in Spinazzola (1953) 973–1008 remains fundamental. See, too, the discussion by Clarke (1991) 203–6 with a diagram of the narrative sequence on 204. For a slightly different hypothesis of how the surviving scenes of the two friezes might have been continued in the lost portions, cf. Coralini (2003).

along the east to the North. What seems clear, and is generally agreed upon, is that the orientation of the friezes has something to do with how they might be viewed by diners in the triclinium. The larger frieze would be viewable from across the room over the heads of other diners, while the lower and smaller frieze could be viewed from closer up.¹⁷

The large, upper frieze (ca. 80 centimeters in height) depicts scenes from the life of Heracles, with special emphasis on his exploits at Troy, freeing Hesione, the daughter of Laomedon, and investing Priam as king. The sequence of events depicted in the frieze is a matter of considerable conjecture and some dispute. The paintings of the upper portion of the north wall, as they would have been viewed by someone entering from the garden, have been completely lost. And the scenes on the west wall on either side of the peristyle entrance are also poorly preserved, although the subjects seem to represent other episodes from the life of Heracles.¹⁸ In the best-preserved sequence, a series of incidents that took place at Troy can be made out. From left to right on the east wall are depicted Heracles and Telamon at the court of Laomedon, Heracles slaying Laomedon, the wedding of Telamon and Hesione with Heracles attending, Heracles alone, and, on the south wall, to the right of the garden entrance, Heracles investing the child Priam with the kingship of Troy. The story must be of great antiquity, since it was known to Homer,¹⁹ but the source followed by the artist of this frieze can only be guessed at.

It is clear that the smaller frieze is intended to evoke recollections of the *Iliad*, in spite of some obscurities and possible inconsistencies in the iconography. It is thus a reasonable inference that the larger frieze also reflects a literary source, the narrative of which it reproduces in whole or in part. The juxtaposition with the *Iliad* leads one to consider the possibility of a source in early Greek epic, but that can be no more than conjecture. Both Pisander of Rhodes and Panyassis of Halicarnassus have been suggested as plausible candidates, although the latter is perhaps more likely.²⁰ Only meager fragments survive of Panyassis' *Heracleia*, an epic poem in fourteen books totaling 9,000 lines, according to the entry in the

17. Cf. Clarke (1991) 206: "With the triclinium couches in place, the change from counter-clockwise to clockwise reading order makes sense. Walking from right to left in the unencumbered area of the room, the viewer could follow the narrative to the point where it abuts the latest event depicted, easily recognizable as near to the end of the tale. The rest of the story could be read from one's dining couch . . . and would form ready topics for literary conversation."

18. Cf. Coralini (2001) 165–74.

19. For the earliest sources for Heracles' adventures at Troy, see Gantz (1993) 400–2 and 442–45.

20. Croisille (1985) 93–96. Pisander's *Heracleia* cannot be ruled out as a source, since one fragment does suggest that it included Heracles' exploits at Troy with Telamon (Athen. 11.783c = *PEG* fr. 11), but if the entry in the *Suda* is correct and the poem was only in two books (*PEG* test. 1), it cannot have been a very extensive narrative.

Suda.²¹ There is no surviving evidence that Heracles' adventures at Troy formed part of the narrative, but what little can be known of the arrangement of the poem suggests that there was ample scope for this episode in the later books.²²

Panyassis was included in the canon of epic poets,²³ and it is certainly possible that his epic was still available to a reader on the Bay of Naples in the first century CE where the cult of Heracles was extremely important; witness Herculeaneum, next door to Pompeii. Of course, it is not possible to exclude other candidates, including later poets who treated the adventures of Heracles. The most plausible alternative might be the *Heracleia* of the third-century BCE epic poet Rhianus, who was a poet of some renown.²⁴ But nothing is known of the poem's contents, and even less can be said for the works of Diotimus²⁵ or Phaedimus.²⁶ Although none of these can be ruled out, it is altogether likely that they would have drawn on the earlier and better-known work of Panyassis, which is the most plausible literary reference for the scenes depicted in the House of Octavius Quartio.

The existence of an authoritative source for the story of Heracles and Laomedon also accounts for the appearance of the tale in Latin literature. Ovid uses a brief account in the *Metamorphoses* (11.194–217) to form a bridge to other myths about Troy, including of course the Trojan War. The very brevity of Ovid's version strongly suggests that readers would have been familiar with another account.²⁷ So too does the more extensive narrative included in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, the composition of which took place in the years immediately preceding the eruption of Vesuvius.²⁸ The story of Heracles' rescue of Hesione is told in an extended account in the second book

21. Cf. *PEG* test. 1; Matthews (1974) 21–26.

22. Cf. Matthews (1974) 22. One fragment from book 11 (*PEG* fr. 22) seems to place Heracles in the southeastern Aegean or Asia Minor.

23. Cf. especially Dion. Hal. *De imit.* 2.2, which clearly draws on the same source as Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.54; and see Matthews (1974) 31–35.

24. For the fragments, see Powell (1925) 10–11, Lloyd-Jones and Parsons (1983) 347. The *Etymologicum Magnum* refers to the fourteenth book, but as Powell notes on fr. 3, the testimony of the *Suda* that the poem was only in four books is probably more reliable. If so, then Rhianus' poem was clearly not on the scale of Panyassis' *Heracleia*.

25. The name is attested for a Hellenistic grammarian, an epic poet, and epigrammatist, all of whom may be the same individual; cf. Lloyd-Jones and Parsons (1983) 181–82 and Gow and Page (1965) 270–71.

26. Cf. Lloyd-Jones and Parsons (1983) 316. Athenaeus (11.498e) quotes from the first book of his *Heracleia*, which may have been in elegiacs; cf. Gow and Page (1965) 452–53.

27. Bömer (1980) 288–90 collects information on the background to Ovid's story primarily from mythographical sources, but it is far more likely that Ovid is drawing on a poetic predecessor, and the context leads one to think here, too, of archaic Greek epic.

28. On the date of the *Argonautica*, see Stover (2012) 7–26.

(V. Fl. 2.445–578), with allusions to Heracles’ eventual return to sack the city. Valerius follows mythographic sources in locating the story of Heracles, Hesione, and Telamon in the expedition of the Argonauts;²⁹ but Valerius’ narrative itself must be drawn from a poetic account, which he has rendered in a manner reminiscent of Ovid, whose narrative of Perseus and Andromeda (*Met.* 4.604–803) is also an important intertext here.³⁰

The choice of heroic themes for this room, the largest in the house in a commanding position, is consistent with what we hear from the Romans themselves about the proprieties of domestic décor. In Petronius’ *Satyricon*, when Encolpius enters the reception areas of the house of Trimalchio he asks the *atriensis*, or hall steward, what the subjects of the paintings there are. “The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,” he answered, and then for the joke Petronius adds, “and the gladiatorial show of Laenas” (*‘Iliada et Odysseian’ inquit ‘ac Laenatis gladiatorium munus’*, Petr. 29.9). Epic subjects were also recommended for important rooms by Vitruvius in his chapters on domestic architecture (Vitr. 7.5.2). The owner of this house may also have been imitating fashions set in more august circles in Rome. A portion of Nero’s *Domus Transitoria*, discovered under the *Domus Augustana* on the Palatine in the nineteenth century, was decorated with “with extremely beautiful paintings—small scenes from the Homeric cycle.”³¹ And a room in the same area was discovered with a scene of Heracles investing Priam as king.³² It has sometimes been suggested that the Heracles frieze incorporates imitations of a famous painting reported by Pliny (*Nat.* 35.139) as the work of Artemon, depicting “the story of Laomedon in the matter of Heracles and Poseidon” (*Laomedontis circa Herculem et Neptunum historiam*), located in the Portico of Octavia. Also within the confines of the Portico of Octavia was a celebrated painting of Hesione (*Nat.* 35.114). And her story is also depicted in Pompeii in a panel misattributed to Perseus and Andromeda.³³ From his place on the triclinium couch, the guest of honor in the house of Octavius Quartio could peruse these scenes from heroic epic, but

29. Thus Diod. Sic. 4.42 and 4.49.3–7 in an account that probably derives from Dionysius Scyto-brachion; cf. Rusten (1982) 12–13, 41 and Galli (2014). Diodorus notes that Homer and “certain early poets” (ἐνιοι δὲ τῶν ἀρχαίων ποιητῶν), which surely included Panyassis, did not locate this episode in the Argonautic expedition.

30. Cf. Poortvliet (1991) 239–43.

31. Platner (1929) 195; cf. Richardson (1992) 138 and Nash (1961–62) 1: 375–79.

32. De Vos (1990).

33. Cf. Merkelbach (1994). It is still classified as an illustration of Perseus and Andromeda in Hodske (2007) 180.

when he looked out into the garden, he would be drawn into the more intimate world of Hellenistic narrative.

The view from this room extended through a small covered structure, an *aediculum* set above a fountain below, which framed the long axis of the garden canal. On either side of the *aediculum* are pedestals for statues, now removed, of two of the Muses. As one stepped out into this terraced area, the decorations evoked a different kind of literary experience from the friezes in the large triclinium. Looking to the East, one would follow the line of the euripus, or canal, to its far end. Along its course are pedestals for more statues, mostly of forest animals, also now removed. At the far end is a unique biclinium (Fig. 3). It may have been a place for dining *al fresco* on either side of the canal, which was fed by a fountain at its end; but it may simply have been an area for relaxation—a reading nook, as it were. To the left, on the north side is Narcissus, gazing at his own reflection in a pool; to the right, or south side, Thisbe is expiring over the body of Pyramus. The paintings are not of very high quality, as several critics



Figure 3: Biclinium in the House of Octavius Quartio with frescoes of Narcissus (left) and Pyramus and Thisbe (right). Photo by the author.

have remarked, but the artist took enough pride in his work to sign his name: *Lucius pinxit*.³⁴

Narcissus is one of the most popular subjects in Pompeian décor, with 52 paintings of the Fourth Style in the register of mythological scenes compiled by Jürgen Hodske.³⁵ The earliest source for the story of Narcissus is the Augustan-era mythographer Conon, whose account we know from the summaries by the Byzantine scholar Photius (*Brill's New Jacoby*, 26 F 1 24). Three possibilities suggest themselves as potential literary sources that lie behind this newly popular myth depicted so frequently in Pompeii: either it came to readers through Conon's mythographical handbook; or from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which it figures prominently in book 3 (339–510); or from some lost third source. It seems most likely that, given the popularity of the Latin elegists in Pompeii, the source was in Ovid's hexameter narrative catalog-poem, the *Metamorphoses*.³⁶ The salient feature of Ovid's version is the moment when Narcissus, alone in the woods, falls in love with himself upon seeing his reflection in a forest pool, a scene that calls out all of Ovid's talents in an ironic redeployment of the language of love elegy. And this appears to be the moment captured by Lucius in his version here.

Narcissus is here paired with a panel of Pyramus and Thisbe, a story that could *only* have been known to Roman readers from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (4.55–166), a conclusion that is confirmed by the absolute conformity of the Pompeian renderings with the iconography of Ovid's account.³⁷ Lucius' painting contains all the identifying elements of Ovid's narrative: Thisbe expiring over Pyramus' prostrate body; a structure to the left that represents the tomb of Ninus where the lovers met; the mulberry tree whose berries changed to black from the lovers' blood; and in the background behind the tree, a lioness slinking off.

At the west end of the canal the pair of figures flanking the entrance to a room under the portico, are, on the left to the south of the door, Diana surprised at the bath, and, on the right to the north of the door, the unfortunate Actaeon being dismembered by his hounds (Fig. 4). This story would also have been best known to a Latin-speaking readership from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (3.138–252). The space is thus framed at both east and west ends of the euripus by episodes from the third and fourth books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and that cannot be

34. Richardson (2000) 147–53; Pugliese Carratelli and Baldassare (1990–2003) 3: 105 fig. 95. For the view that this signature only applies to the painting of Pyramus and Thisbe, see Scagliarini Corlăita (2001).

35. Hodske (2007) 166–71; cf. Valladares (2011).

36. The earlier view that the inspiration for these mythological panels was Greek literature, represented by Helbig (1873) 112–21, has few defenders today. On the reasons for accepting Ovid as the inspiration for this suite of paintings, see Knox (2014); cf. Simon (2007) and Platt (2002).

37. Knox (2014) 38–40; cf. Simon (2007).



Figure 4: West end of the terrace in the House of Octavius Quartio with frescoes of Diana (left) and Actaeon (right). Photo by the author.

simply coincidence. To create a narrative setting for these myths, the back wall facing the canal has been painted with a forested scene, a *paradeisos*, filled with animals for the hunt. Further to the left of this image, presiding over this part of the terrace, were figures of Aphrodite, to the left of the entrance to the triclinium, and on the right, Orpheus, two divinities with strong Ovidian associations. The suggestion of a setting in the wild was further amplified by the placement of sculptures along the canal, now removed to the antiquarium. They included wild beasts in a variety of poses consistent with the hunting scene depicted on the wall, including lions and a hound, but also a reclining river god, which was discovered near the biclinium.³⁸ Among the other divinities discovered along the euripus were a youthful Dionysus and, significantly, an infant Heracles, evoking the literary world of the Theocritean *Herakliskos* and Hellenistic narratives of the infant Heracles, not the epic *Heracleia* of Panyassis. There would be a taste for such stories in this region, where the cult of Heracles (and Dionysus) figured prominently.³⁹ These three stories which frame the garden terrace—Actaeon, Narcissus, and Pyramus and Thisbe—are thus depicted within the countryside,

38. Cf. Tronchin (2011) and Spinazzola (1953) 398–406.

39. Cf. Coralini (2001), as well as Connors and Leonard in this volume.

a setting that this kind of urban villa clearly was designed to evoke and where these particular Ovidian myths were especially at home.

The owner of the House of Octavius Quartio created two quite distinct ambiances by exploiting currently popular literary works. For the more formal setting of the main room, he chose scenes that illustrate epics about Heracles and Achilles. A contemporary interest in these heroes was manifested not only in other paintings attested in Pompeii and elsewhere, but in literary works such as the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus (ca. 75 CE) and later in Statius' unfinished *Achilleid*. For the more intimate and less formal setting of the garden, the owner preferred themes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work at once more playful than the epics that he also read and more suited to the ambiance of the countryside that he sought to create. The owner, whatever his name, was not possessed of great wealth and the artwork that he could afford was not of the highest quality; but his taste in literature was sufficiently sophisticated to reflect his own understanding of the generic hierarchies, which he exploited in decorating his home.

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