Cecilia Bahamón
HIAA0340
April 29, 2011

House of the Tragic Poet: The Actors Mosaic and the Construction of a Roman Identity

> *Per his master's request, the artist masterfully lays out the colored tiles, his inspiration modeled on an elaborate Greek painting. In the scene, actors stand round backstage preparing for their performance. With intrigued* contrapposto *two men lean back in their satyr costumes, a third pauses for a breath, pipes in hand, while a fourth seems to freeze, arms midair as he is helped into his tunic. These four figures look to a seated bearded, elderly man, the director. The older man has a script in his hand and open-mouthed masks at his feet. His ensemble looks at him in anticipation asking: How would you have us play out our identities tonight?*
>
> "Actors Backstage,"* floor mosaic, tablinum, House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii, c. 64-79 C.E. (Figure 4)

The importance of identity in the Roman Empire cannot be over emphasized. According to art historian, Eve D'Ambra, for Romans, identity meant "the construction of a social identity by external forces."[1] In spite of Virgil's directions to the Romans for their arts to be "to pacify, to impose the rule of law, to spare the conquered, battle down the proud,"[2] in many cases Romans chose to construct and express their identity through visual art and architecture. Therefore, through looking at the decorative program of Roman's houses, one can discern a sense of who the owners were, or at least how they aspired to be seen.[3] The House of the Tragic Poet is a "relatively small house" covered with "numerous famous Greek masterpieces."[4] The seeming contrast of the simplicity of the architecture and the prestige of the artwork represented has intrigued many art historians. However, it seems fitting within the Roman psyche to try and project an identity more prestigious than the one the person has. As

* This is an unofficial name given to the floor mosaic in the tablinum of the House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii, for the purposes of this essay.
[1] Eve D'Ambra, *Art and Identity in the Roman World* (London: Trafalgar Square, 1998), 13.
[2] D'Ambra, *Art and Identity in the Roman World*, 10.
[3] Umberto Pappalardo, *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2009), 7.
[4] Pappalardo, *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting*, 178.

Umberto Pappalardo states "every Roman citizen of a certain rank assumed the airs of a king, and it is from this sense of self that all his other social values sprang."[5] Roman wall paintings offered Romans the perfect means of creating their desired identity because painting, "has an unlimited capacity to represent both what is probable and what is only possible or imagined."[6] This paper will explore not a painting, but a mosaic based on a painting, the "Actors Backstage," and analyze the possible decision-making process of the owner of the House of the Tragic Poet in his attempt to construct his own identity as a self-aware, philhellenic, cultured, elite Roman.

The use of wall paintings and mosaics themselves are an excellent means for the construction of a Roman identity, and the owner of the House of the Tragic Poet exploits this fact. In her discussion of architecture and illusionistic painting Donatella Mazzoleni describes the importance of building and decorating houses in Roman Pompeii: "The art of building houses responds to two parallel and complementary needs…the basic need to find a lair [and]…a specifically human need, one that is in some ways stronger than mere instinct: to define one's place with signposts consisting of material objects."[7] It is important to note that unlike more modern notions of decorating one's house with art work, "In ancient times, architecture and painting, as manufactured products meant for domestic use, constituted a unified entity…The separation between 'real' and 'imaginary' spaces was effectively abolished."[8] For example, artists in the Baroque period used *trompe l'oeil* in an attempt to play with the imagination of the viewer and trick the eye into thinking that a room extends beyond a wall, or that a window exists where there is none. However, for Romans, though they too

[5] Pappalardo, *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting*, 7.
[6] Pappalardo, *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting*, 7.
[7] Donatella Mazzoleni, Architecture and Illusionistic Painting in the Roman House," in *Domus: Wall Paintings in the Roman House*, ed. Mark Greenberg, (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2004), 7.
[8] Mazzoleni, "Architecture and Illusionistic Painting in the Roman House," 8.

painted imaginary spaces on walls, they did so in a very different spirit from modern notion of *trope l'oeil*. The wall paintings were less about being playful and more about establishing an elevated Roman identity, creating a larger, more elaborate space so as not to be limited by the confines of architecture. Thus, the inclusion of a wall painting of a villa in the townhouse of Marcus Lucretius Fronto in Pompeii was not meant to serve as a simple illusion of more space but to point to the knowledge of the homeowner who was aware of the importance of *otium*, or cultivated leisure, in Roman society (Figure 1).[9] The painting is not an illusion but evidence in the possession of the townhouse owner that he too is edified enough to appreciate fine Roman culture. The possession of the painting is a very real part of the homeowner's identity.

Mosaics should not be separated from the discussion of painting in terms of Roman identity. In addition to the link between the two art forms in terms of their similar "foundations [in] colour and design"[10] both paintings and mosaics are equally capable of representing the "probable."[11] For example, even though the dog in the *Cave Canem*[12] mosaic, found in the threshold of the House of the Tragic Poet, is highly stylized in comparison with the rest of the paintings found in the house, the message of the piece is as clear as any frescoed sign (Figure 2). The dog bares his teeth as he lunges forward and jumbles the letters of the warning with his outstretched pawing legs. The probable in this instance is that many houses had guard dogs who would pace the entrance to keep unwanted visitors out (for though the axial plan of Roman houses allowed for extended gazes from strangers, physical access to

[9] Roger Ling. "The Empire," review of Houses and Society in Pompeii and Heculaneum, by A. Wallace-Hadrill, and La Casa di Marcus Lucretius Fronto a Pompei e le sue Pitture, by W.J.T.H. Peters (The Journal of Roman Studies, 1995), 299-300, http://www.jstor.org/stable/301119.
[10] Gian Guido Belloni, *Art of the Western World: Prehistoric Classical Painting (*London: Paul Hamlyn Ltd., 1962), 5.
[11] Mazzoleni, "Architecture and Illusionistic Painting in the Roman House," 7.
[12] Translate: *Beware of the Dog*

certain rooms was far more limited).[13] In addition, the mosaic to be discussed, the "Actors Backstage" was based on a painting, and is therefore little different from the original. Thus one can explore the identity of the houseowner represented by the "Actors Backstage" mosaic.

The Greek roots of the mosaic of the "Actors Backstage" point to a clear Roman appropriation of certain aspects of Greek culture to construct a glorified identity for the homeowner. Though art historian Gian Guido Belloni belittles Roman use of Greek art, describing copied wall paintings as "intelligently executed, but…painstaking and not inspired,"[14] in making such value judgments he completely ignores the reasons behind the desire to own the Greek copies. First, starting in the second century B.C.E., Hellenistic art "provided military victors," who were still a part of the "primitive society of the Roman city-state" a means of expressing their declarations of power.[15] Romans commissioned wall paintings to "advertise their social ambitions."[16] Thus, in the most basic sense, owning a bit of Greek art demonstrated the power of the Roman homeowner. However, the Greeks were not viewed as just another conquered Roman nation to be lumped together with the rest of the uncivilized world that Rome was taming. Romans had a respect for Greek ancestry and even viewed themselves as "heirs to the great empire of Alexander the Great."[17] Perhaps the most obvious example of a proud Roman declaration of Greek heritage is the mosaic of the Battle of Issus, found on the floor of the House of the Faun in Pompeii (Figure 3).[18] The mosaic, a Roman copy of a Greek painting, depicts the scene in which Alexander the Great defeats Darius III.[19]

---

[13] Fred S. Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art*. Belmont (CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 32-34.
[14] Belloni, *Art of the Western World*, 6.
[15] Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 1-2.
[16] Pappalardo, *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting*, 7.
[17] Pappalardo, *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting*, 7.
[18] Pappalardo, *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting*, 7.
[19] Belloni, *Art of the Western World*, Plate 23, 26.

Though Belloni considers the piece only in terms of color and composition,[20] it is more important to evaluate the work in light of the desire of the Pompeiian homeowner to own such a piece. Though the Augustan-era house[21] was redecorated by its last homeowners well before the reign of the Greek-loving emperor Hadrian (likely between the earthquake of Pompeii, 63 C.E. and the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, 79 C.E.)[22] the desire to flaunt aspects of Greek culture was already prevalent in higher Roman society. The homeowner of the House of the Faun clearly took pride in the legacy of Alexander the Great and viewed himself as a member of the Roman civilization that adopted his legacy. The motivations of the owner of House of the Tragic Poet are clearly very similar to the motivations of the owner of the House of the Faun. Umberto Pappalardo describes the house owner as a "cultivated man…a lover of the theater and literature, he had numerous famous Greek masterpieces copied onto his walls."[23] While the frescos of the *Iliad* most obviously convey the philhellenic spirit of the homeowner, by virtue of being a copy of a Greek painting, the "Actors Backstage" mosaic also embodies the attitude of the homeowner enthralled by the Greek arts, or at least an attitude that recognized the prestige that such a cultivated cultural display would bring him.

Finally the theatrical subject matter of the mosaic fits the Roman outlook of the owner of the House of the Tragic Poet: both actors and Romans choose the identities they want. For the homeowner, the murals are his costumes. First, theater was loved in Pompeii as a part of Greek cultural heritage, and the subject of the mosaic therefore adds to the homeowner's identity as a Greek-loving man.[24] Pompeiians celebrated the theater in their homes by painting theatrical masks on their walls and worshipping the Greek god Dionysus, god of wine and

[20] Belloni, *Art of the Western World*, Plate 23, 26.
[21] Nicholas Wood, *The House of the Tragic Poet* (London: Nicholas Wood, 1996), 5.
[22] August W Mau, *Pompeii, its life and art* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1907), 313.
[23] Pappalardo, *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting*, 178.
[24] Wood, *The House of the Tragic Poet*, 58.

theater.[25] In addition, love of the theater was not restricted to Pompeii. During the Roman Republic Pompey the Great sought to win the hearts of the people by building a theater in Rome (dedicated in 55 B.C.E.), and at the beginning of the Roman Empire Augustus had the walls of his Palatine Hill home painted to look like a stage (the Room of the Masks, c. 30-25 B.C.E.).[26] However, the mosaic of the actors appealed to the House of the Tragic Poet not for simply philhellenic reasons, but by virtue of the fact that actors are masters of their identity. Actors are constantly striving to produce a new reality. The mosaic depicts a group of six men about to enact a satyr play as the seated old man in the center, the *chorodidascalus*, conducts the rehearsal (Figure 4).[27] The actors and musician pause in their costume donning and pipe playing to listen to the words of the bearded man, faces asking: How would you have us present ourselves today? In his *domus*, the homeowner is both an actor and a production manager, master of his own identity. It is his choice to dress his house in the garb of the educated elite, sporting frescos of Homeric epics and tales of the gods, and a knowing mosaic that states his control over identity.

In conclusion, in the ancient world, a "Roman's house was perceived as an extension of the self" and a symbol of social and genealogical status to the outside world.[28] Art historian Bettina Bergmann cites proof of this bond through pointing to instances of *damnatio memoriae*, which, for the Roman individual, "included the destruction of the home as part of the programmatic eradication of a person's memory."[29] Through his inclusion of the "Actors Backstage," the owner of the House of the Tragic Poet presents himself as a self-aware Roman,

---

[25] Wood, *The House of the Tragic Poet*, 58.
[26] Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art*. Belmont, 73.
[27] Vladimir Janovic, *The House of the Tragic Poet* (Glasgow, Scotland: Bell & Bain Limited, 1988), i.
[28] Bettina Bergmann, "The Roman House as Memory Theater: The House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii," *The Art Bulletin* 76 (1994): 225, accessed April 24, 2010, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3046021.
[29] Bermann, "The Roman House as Memory Theater," 225.

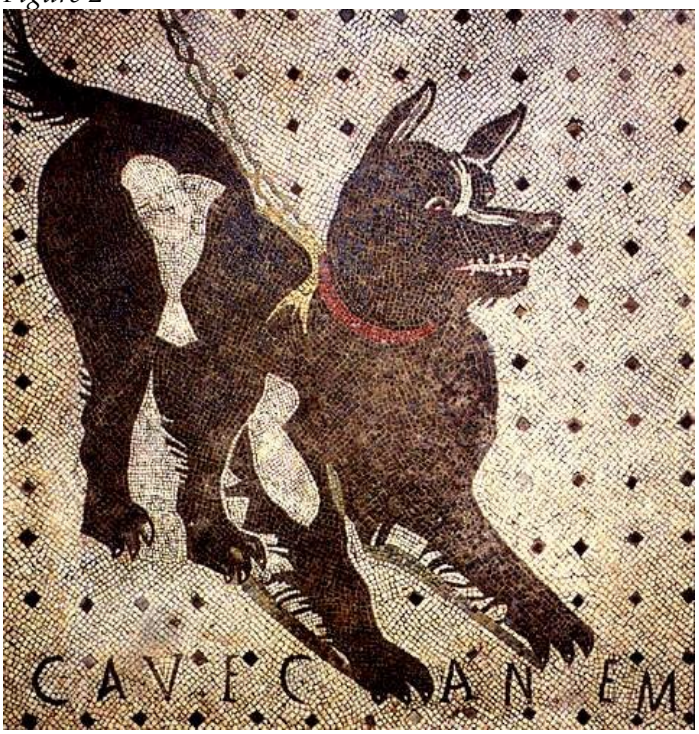
a philhellenic cultured man, and master of his identity. The tessarae of the mosaic can be placed to create the image the homeowner desires: a copy of a Greek painting (one could even claim that the tiles, as actors, are feigning the role of a fresco). Not only is the mosaic based on a Greek painting, but includes actors, favored not only as parts of Greek culture, but as figures capable of creating new self images. In the Roman Pompeii, citizens were actors, struggling to find roles that would present themselves as members of an elite. The owner of the House of the Tragic Poet selected his mosaic and effectively set the stage for onlookers to parse out his identity.

Figures

Figure 1

Fresco of a Villa in a townhouse, c. 50 C.E., House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, Pompeii

Figure 2



Cave Canem mosaic from the threshold of the House of the Tragic Poet, c. 64 C.E.-79 C.E., Pompeii

Figure 3

Mosaic with battle of Alexander the Great and Darius, late 2nd century B.C.E. copy of an early Hellenistic painting, House of the Faun, Pompeii

Figure 4

"Actors Backstage," c. 64-79 C.E., House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii (photo from Nationalgeographic.com)

Bibliography

Belloni, Gian Guido. *Art of the Western World: Prehistoric Classical Painting*. London: Paul Hamlyn Ltd., 1962.

Bergmann, Bettina. "The Roman House as Memory Theater: The House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii." *The Art Bulletin* 76 (1994): 225-256. Accessed April 24, 2010. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3046021.

D'Ambra, Eve. *Art and Identity in the Roman World.* London: Trafalgar Square, 1998.

Janovic, Vladimir. *The House of the Tragic Poet*. Glasgow, Scotland: Bell & Bain Limited, 1988.

Kleiner, Fred S. *A History of Roman Art*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007.

Ling, Roger. "The Empire." Review of *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Heculaneum*, by A. Wallace-Hadrill, and *La Casa di Marcus Lucretius Fronto a Pompei e le sue Pitture*, by W.J.T.H. Peters. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 1995. http://www.jstor.org/stable/301119

Mau, August W. *Pompeii, its life and art*. London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1907.

Mazzoleni, Donatella. "Architecture and Illusionistic Painting in the Roman House." In *Domus: Wall Paintings in the Roman House*, edited by Mark Greenberg, 7-39. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2004.

Pappalardo, Umberto. *The Splendor of Roman Wall Painting*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2009.

Wood, Nicholas. *The House of the Tragic Poet.* London: Nicholas Wood, 1996.

Zanker, Paul. *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990.