

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Egon Verheyen, *The Palazzo del Tè in Mantua, Images of Love and Politics*, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 122, 1980, pp.70-1 [Trapp no.1980J.1]

The Palazzo del Tè in Mantua, Images of Love and Politics. By Egon Verheyen. 224 pp. + 72 ill. + 6 plans. (John Hopkins University Press), £15.85

In recent years much progress has been made in our knowledge of the Palazzo del Tè and its history. The publication in 1967, by Professor Verheyen, of a set (now in Dusseldorf) of detailed drawings, of the building, accompanying Giacomo Strada's description of 1567-8, provided invaluable information, and was supplemented in 1971 by Kurt Forster and Richard Tuttle, who analysed the extensive eighteenth-century restorations and alterations. Professor Verheyen's monograph on the Palazzo now offers a welcome conspectus of all the relevant facts and documents. Reexamining the documentary evidence he takes issue with John Shearman's reconstruction of the history of the palace and with earlier authors about their interpretation of its stylistic and historical significance. Here I must 'declare my interest', for though he is very tactful about this matter, I am the earliest (writing in 1934 and 1935) of these authors whose interpretation he is most eager to dispose of. Luckily, after nearly half a century, I no longer have any axe to grind and I largely agree with his criticism.

When I first visited Mantua as a student my head was full of debates about the status and meaning of 'Mannerism' in sixteenth-century art. Being startled by the Palazzo del Tè I was surprised to find that it had not yet been mentioned in these discussions and that in particular Giulio Romano's building designs had been completely neglected. This was before Rudolf Wittkower had published his seminal paper of 1934 on the Laurenziana as a document of mannerist aesthetics, and the question whether or not the term Mannerism could be usefully applied to architecture was still *sub judice*. Julius von Schlosser readily accepted the thesis subject of '*Giulio Romano als Architekt*' and I found to my satisfaction that much of what I had read about the alleged anti-classical style applied to many of Giulio's bizarre designs, while others seemed to me to be almost ostentatiously restrained and classical. I made much of this tension and of what it appeared to signify in psychological terms, though I explicitly rejected the recourse to the 'spirit of the age' as an explanation of these characteristics.

When I revisited the Palazzo after the war, I wondered whether I had not been too portentous about the festive and frivolous decoration of this pleasure house; at the same time I had also been conditioned, through my association with the Warburg Institute, to look at mottoes and emblems I had not even noticed as a student. It soon turned out that Frederick Hartt's eyes had been equally sharpened, and when he published his important article in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* of 1950 on 'Gonzaga symbols in the Palazzo del Tè', a lucky find enabled me to supplement his account with a text explaining the astrological imagery of the *Sala dei Venti*. Soon afterwards I also noticed a motif derived from the *Hypnerotomachia* in the *Sala di Psiche* — a clue not mentioned by Verheyen though it led him to a fresh reading of that cycle (but refusing to recognise Adonis in the youth in the bath).

While my comments remained close to the texts, Frederick Hartt followed the trend of the post-war period in emphasising the allegorical import of the topics represented, seeing in the Psyche room 'A sort of Neoplatonic *ascensio*, from inanimate matter to the godhead' — the very theme that had also been found on more or less good evidence in several of Michelangelo's religious creations.

Professor Verheyen rejects both the psychological and the philosophical bias of these previous interpretations. He rightly points out that some of the irregularities which have been credited to Giulio's anti-classical leanings were simply due to the practical need of incorporating an existing villa in a larger structure. Moreover he has commonsense on his side when he warns us against taking lighthearted jokes as symptoms of deep anxiety. Maybe he goes a little too far here; for though I can sympathise with his reaction against my own reading of the *Sala dei Giganti* in terms of Edgar Allan Poe's nightmare stories, I am not sure that humour need exclude the *frisson* of horror.

I believe the author is also right in pointing to Aretino rather than Ficino as an inspiration of the imagery though here, too, he may occasionally have overshot the mark. He is justified in dwelling on the erotic character of the *Sala di Psiche*, but is this identical with the 'celebration of love and happiness'? The *impresa* of the lizard reads *Quod huic deest me torquet*, in other words it speaks less of the happiness of love than of its torments. The lizard lacks what plagues mortals and immortals — hot blood. This affliction also belongs to the 'nature of love' as it always has been sung by poets and analysed by moralists, and it is also reflected in some of Giulio's less pleasant inventions.

The author is prevented from stressing this aspect because he sees in the mythological stories of Ariadne, Pasiphae and Olympias 'the allusions to the love of Federigo to the married Boschetti'. His book bears the title *Images of Love and Politics* and in pursuing this theme he has sometimes succumbed to another intellectual fashion which is not likely to last — the conception of images as coded messages. Images certainly can be used to convey messages of almost any kind, but in trying to decode them we must also clarify to whom the message is supposed to be addressed. Maybe the psycho-analyst can sometimes afford to neglect this question, for what he wants to decipher are unconscious drives and wishes. But the historian's aims are usually different, and if he opts for the approach to images in terms of meaning he cannot ignore the aspect of communication.

It is here that I have great difficulty in accepting the author's suggestions. In discussing the David cycle of the *loggia* he writes again: 'It seems that the choice of the Bathsheba scenes refers to the fact, that like Federigo, David was torn by love of a married woman; that, like David, Federigo tried to kill the lawful husband of his mistress; and that as Bathsheba had conceived by David, Federigo's mistress had conceived by him. It seems almost as if the reference to these events in David's life would legitimise Federigo's own'. Legitimise to whom? His father confessor would quickly have disabused the prince by telling him what Nathan said to David (2 Samuel 12); but in any case to whom could such an outrageous message be addressed and who could have dared to spell it out?

If this and similar readings seem to do violence to historical conditions, others raise the question of how anyone but the prince's analyst could have picked up the allusion the author wants to find there. We know from one of Federigo's letters that, among the *condottieri* he wanted represented in the same Loggia, he looked for a portrait of Gonsalvo Ferrante. Professor Verheyen remembers that there is a passage in the *Courtier* saying that Gonsalvo was proud to owe much of his success to his Queen, Isabella. 'Is it possible' he asks, 'that the selection of *condottieri*... was made with Castiglione's implication in mind, that "remarkable ladies" have inspired the greatest men to their glorious deeds? Is it further possible that the identity of the names of the lady who meant so much for Gonsalvo Ferrante and the one who occupied Federigo's mind was an intended parallel? In 1530 Isabella Boschetti was definitely at the height of her influence over Federigo'.

Now, as far as I can see, Castiglione nowhere says that Queen Isabella 'inspired' anyone. He only ends her eulogy with a reminder that anybody who is anybody in Spain these days was 'created by her' (*ai nostri tempi tutti gli uomini grandi di Spagna, e famosi in qualsivoglia cosa, sono stati creati*

dalla Regina Isabella), and that this debt was proudly acknowledged by Ferrante. On this reading there is no conceivable analogy between him and Federigo, for whatever Federigo may have owed to his Isabella, it was not his position. Granted that if Professor Verheyen here misread Castiglione, it is 'possible' that Federigo did the same, but if the historian decided to consider any such remote possibility he could never start or end.

The author also makes much of the fact that the lay-out of Isabella's presumed apartment in the original villa (which became the Palace) resembles that of Isabella d'Este's famous *studiolo*. 'We must assume that the intention behind this obvious reference was to give visual expression to the well-known fact that Federigo's mistress successfully rivalled his mother'. But must we really? The arrangements are not even identical, but even if they were, who, in going through the place without a groundplan in his hand would have noticed the similarity, and why, even if he had noticed it, should anyone have read it as a message that Federigo's mistress was 'thereby claiming a position which *de jure* belonged to Federigo's mother'?

The example provides a transition from the 'images of love' to those of politics which are indeed interpreted with a similar excess of ingenuity. Take the astrological cycle of the *Sala dei Venti*: its overt message is summed up in the inscription *Distat enim quae sydera te excipiant* a quotation from Juvenal's Satira VII, 194/5 recently identified by Rodolfo Signorini in a note to be published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XLII [1979]. 'For it makes a difference what stars welcome you' (when you come out of the womb). 'The fates', says Juvenal, 'bestow kingdoms on slaves and triumphs on captives', and the cycle also shows us that some die in prison, others are lucky. There is no likelihood, in my opinion, of any of these prognostics being intended to apply to Federigo, least of all the roundel of the gladiators — not a very honorific calling. It seems to me even more far-fetched to suggest that the inscription on the fireplace which styles Federigo Captain General of the Church is a devious allusion to his later 'political choice in favour of Charles V', thanks to which 'his star rose'. Who would be expected to make this connection?

Thus it is with some relief that one reads in the author's account of the ceiling panels of the *Sala degli Stucchi* that 'they appear like an assembly of all possible ancient scenes arranged...for their own sake...no intellectual framework seems to exist which links all of them'; in other words, he does not consider them images of either love or politics.

While I regard the compulsive search for personal allusions as an aberration, no better, (though also no worse) than the previous aberrations the author wishes to rectify, the author is certainly on safer ground when he focuses on the prestige element in the patronage of renaissance princes. No doubt the hastily erected wing of the palace served its purpose well during the visits of Charles V in presenting a picture of affluence and grandeur which was rather at variance with the real position of the Gonzagas. True, even in this sociological bias he inevitably pays tribute to the preoccupations of his generation. To head a chapter 'Federigo as the Ideal Prince' seems a trifle exaggerated. Even if we were to accept the author's reading of the fresco cycles, Federigo is not really exalted in such terms. There is no portrait of the prince in the palace, let alone the kind of pictorial panegyric which Vasari lavished on Cosimo I Medici in the Palazzo Vecchio. The author had the happy thought of concluding his last chapter with a Latin Ode by Niccolo d'Arco composed in 1540 on the duke's death. The themes are mainly the *magnificentia* of the prince as a builder and patron of the arts, a breeder of horses and his own splendid horsemanship. Of the four cardinal virtues, therefore, which traditionally grace the ideal ruler, Fortitude, at the most, could be ascribed to him. Even the eulogist was reticent about his Prudence, Temperance and Justice. But was there not a similar flaw in the artist he

employed? Great as Giulio Romano was as an inventor and impresario, he lacked that quality which distinguished his teacher Raphael and his precursor Mantegna — nobility of mind.

Is it too much to hope, that yet another turn in the whirlygig of fashion will bring this problem back into prominence once more, and that when Professor Verheyen re-visits the palace, perhaps in the early decades of the third millennium, he will also see it with different eyes?